

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

A study of how the Republican Party in the United States of America has changed since 2010, and how these changes have affected the party, its politicians, and its politics.

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Abstract

The United States Republican Party has changed significantly over the last fifteen years. While the topics of polarization and partisanship are not new topics within the realm of American politics, they have become especially prevalent with the rise of the “new” Republican Party in the 2010s and 2020s. This thesis aims to examine and discuss the ways the party has changed since 2010, why these changes have taken place, and attempt to give an answer on who is responsible.

This thesis bases itself primarily on the works of Jonathan Karl, Mitt Romney, and Liz Cheney. Their works give significant insight into the inner workings of the Republican Party and the American system of government. The works form the baseline of the research, though they are also supplemented by various others, incorporating works detailing the historiography of polarization and American history. Additionally, the material is supplemented by extensive journalistic material, especially news articles and some research articles.

The thesis discovered that extensive changes have indeed taken place within the Republican Party. While a party rallying behind a candidate is common, the staying power of Donald Trump in the conservative sphere is certainly of note. His grip over the party may have resulted in a political environment where members are strongly advised to follow the “party line”, in that they cannot deviate from being loyal to their leader, or they may face significant opposition and possibly expulsion from the party. These changes may have happened because of political short-sightedness, and a wish to win elections no matter the cost. Answering the question of who is responsible has proven difficult. The responsibility appears to be variously shared by all involved parties, including those who have actively changed the party, those who introduced political agendas which allowed changes to happen, as well as third-parties like the media, by presenting politicians and news in specific ways to garner viewers and attention.

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Introduction

American Politics is a topic which envelops not only America, but the rest of the world along with it. The United States of America is one of, if not the most economically important nation in the world, and therefore it is no surprise that the happenings within its political circles are heard about thousands of miles away. However, since the 2000s, news of American politicians, politics, disagreements, and increasing partisanship have become more and more common in international media. News sites like BBC, though based in the United Kingdom, keep a constant tab on developments in American politics, and social media like Reddit – with its “Worldnews” tab, is almost completely dominated by American political news despite its name. On this topic, there seems to be dominance of news regarding specifically the right-wing of politics in the United States. Especially relating to the presidency of Donald Trump, much national and international media have investigated and detailed the Republican Party, especially the time leading up to, during and after his tenure as the 45th President of the United States. It seems though, according to several well-known and high-ranking figures within the party, that the Republican Party has changed significantly since the early 2010s.

This leads to interesting questions of discussion; Where have all the moderate Republicans gone? Why is the party so unwilling to cooperate on bipartisan legislation, and why are so many Republican politicians still vehemently supporting former President Trump after numerous controversies? These questions are extremely loaded, and difficult to answer in short-form - but they all fit into one larger topic of discussion, which poses this thesis’ research question;

The Republican Party of today is much different from the one 10-15 years ago. What has happened, in what ways is it different, and who is responsible?

This thesis will explore the evolution of the Republican Party, particularly between 2010-2024. Relevant terminology will be explained alongside to help better understand and discuss the topics in question. Firstly, the party itself will be contextualized in American history relating to the historiography of polarization, and the party ideology flip. Then, some of the recent major changes in the Republican Party will be discussed, including debating who and what has spurred these changes, and how they have affected the party. The thesis will focus on the Tea Party Movement and especially the Trump Administration, and detail the opinions and statements of

several politicians involved in its decision-making. It will also compare and contrast the Trump administration to the Reagan administration, looking at distinct differences and likenesses in policies and their legacies, and how their previous experience in showbusiness and celebrity-status affected them. Moreover, this thesis will discuss the events of January 6th, 2021 – while not going into detail about the protest itself, I will be discussing the impact it had, and the future consequences it may have on American politics and several of the persons involved.

After examining the events and happenings which have impacted the party through the 2010s and early 2020s, I will assess the views and opinions of several high-ranking politicians involved, including Mitt Romney, Liz Cheney, Paul Ryan, and others. Then, I will discuss and contrast the possible reasons, both long-past and more recent, as to why the party has evolved into its current state. Finally, I will conclude by considering the future of the party, the upcoming 2024 election, and how the Republican Party and American Politics in general may continue to evolve.

The sources used rely primarily on three works;

Jonathan Karl's *Tired of Winning*, which goes in-depth into political journalist Jonathan Karl's experiences observing Donald Trump and the Republican Party in the wake of the 2020 election, as well as providing a recent look at the innards of the party and the tension between its members.

McKay Coppins' *Romney: A Reckoning*, which acts as a biography on Mitt Romney's political career, with a focus on the time from the 2008 presidential election and Romney's soft retirement in 2023. It details Romney's thoughts on the evolution of the Republican Party, and his feelings towards the changing political landscape and its difficulties.

Finally, Liz Cheney's *Oath and Honor*. This book, authored by Cheney herself, details her experience working as Chair of the House Republican Conference, with specific focus on the time surrounding and after the January 6th insurrection, after which she faced significant pushback, being shunned from the party after her public distancing from Trump.

These works were selected primarily for their in-depth knowledge by their authors; Karl being a well-known investigative journalist in the political sphere while Romney and Cheney were both high-ranking members of the Republican Party with long experience. They were also selected for

being recent works – many of the events to-be-discussed in this thesis are recent or still ongoing, meaning there is, so far, a lack of historical material relating to it. Therefore, these three main works will be used as close-reading material, and will help properly contextualize and detail the events relevant to the thesis. These works will be supplemented by journalistic material, mostly news articles and speech transcripts, which will provide additional basis for examination and context.

Chapter 1

1.1- Polarization and its Historiography

Polarization is a term that gets thrown around a lot, especially in politics. While a more relevant term than ever before, saying it is exclusively a recent development would be mistaken. Political polarization exists not only in the US, but all over the world – and it has done so as long as modern politics has existed. When it comes to American political polarization specifically, Colin Woodard explains in his work “American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America” that the groups which fought in the American Revolutionary War were, in fact, rival “nations” that came together to fight a common enemy, that enemy being the British (Woodard, 2022, 115). Previously, polarization had seared through these various nations, in one way or another – whether it was the Spanish settlers on the West Coast, English in the east, or the French in the north. What Woodard points especially to though, relating to modern political polarization, is the American Civil War.

Woodard claims that the Civil War, while primary motivated by the north’s desire to abolish slavery, is more complicated than just that alone. “Yankee abolitionists argued that the Deep South and Tidewater were autocratic despotisms. Slave lords’ absolute power over those under them, they argued, led to corruption of the family and Christian virtue” (Woodard, 2022, 226). Deep South and Tidewater here refer to the areas of the modern-day Gulf Coast states south of Appalachia, and South Carolina respectively. He continues; “[...] differences in fundamental values polarized [the former-Confederacy and former-Union states] into two hostile blocs separated by buffer states. The result was a cultural Cold War [...]”. (263). This, argues Woodard, is what set the precedent for the modern Polarization seen today. The Confederacy, feeling humiliated in having lost the civil war, held resentment for the states that had made up the Union, feeling that their policies and subsequent victory in the Civil War is what may indirectly or directly have caused poverty in areas of the South such as Appalachia. This disdain for “the other side” has held strong for a long time. The South remains ardently Republican – though this may seem strange, as at the time of the Civil War, the Democratic party was considered the conservative side, at least on the issue of race. The Republican party was formed

in 1854, in opposition to the expansion of slavery at the time, while the Democratic party stood strongly in the South, where slavery had more support.

1.2- The Party Ideology Flip

These earlier points lead to an aspect of American politics which is important to keep in mind; the party flip. The party flip represents one of the origins of the modern “conservative” and “liberal” labels so often used in modern politics. It is important to discuss to achieve a better understanding of how the two major political parties in the United States got their agendas.

For a long while after their inceptions, the Democratic Party was seen as a relatively conservative party on the issue of race, while many Republicans were much more liberal. The South was a stronghold for the Democrats, but policies slowly changed over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, which resulted in a transformation. Senator Strom Thurmond, representing the States’ Rights Democratic Party, ran for president in the 1948 election. After President Truman’s order to integrate all races into the United States Military, the “Dixiecrat” faction of the Democratic party broke off, arguing that such a motion was overreaching, and they would go on to campaign on states’ rights to maintain segregation. Thurmond only ended up winning a few states, all of which in the South, while Truman, representing the Democratic party, won the election overwhelmingly. After this loss, the States Rights’ Democratic Party broke apart and dissipated. Still, the breakup caused weakened support for the Southern Democrats in the years afterwards, and formed a division within the Democratic party – namely those pro-segregation, and those against. Some argue that Thurmond could be seen as the father of modern conservatism (Klein, 2020, 21), and though his view on segregation may be somewhat extreme, he uses many of the same conservative talking points which Ronald Reagan, due to be president some thirty years after Thurmond’s breakaway Dixiecrat party, would do during his campaign and presidential terms – including a smaller government, fear of socialism, and anti-union sentiment.

Especially after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many conservative Democrats in The South switched parties to the Republican side. Thurmond himself would change allegiance to the Republican party that year. Republican Senator Barry Goldwater, who argued against the Civil

Rights Act, caused many traditionally Democratic voters in the South to flock to the Republican party instead. In turn, this caused the Republican Party to shift further to the right, to solidify their voter base. As Ezra Klein puts it;

“The Democratic Party’s embrace of civil rights, and the Republican Party’s decision to unite behind a standard-bearer who opposed the bill, cleared the way for Southern conservatives to join the Republican Party. And that set the stage for all that followed” (2020, 31).

This ended up being the final catalyst for the party swap, and led to the modern interpretation of republicans generally being conservative across the board, and modern democrats being mostly liberal. Of course, there are still moderates and extremists on both sides. Some democrats can be quite conservative, and likewise, some republicans can be liberal in their policy.

1.3- An Introduction to Polarization

Polarization, when it comes to politics, is a term which is brought up time and again. There have been entire anthologies written about polarization in politics, not only in the United States, but the entire world. The media brings it up constantly and consistently, and there is often talk of politics being more polarized than ever. Still, it is important to go through exactly what polarization is, and why it remains such an important term to have a good grasp of when discussing and debating questions of political nature.

Polarization, put simply, is a division. It is the division of persons of different opinions which oppose each other, often to extreme degrees. For something, such as an opinion, to be polarizing means that it, whatever “it” may be, is divisive, and leads groups to form which oppose each other. The term could be applied to almost any group where one’s opinion can be questioned – whether it is a preferred car brand, favorite milk, and, of course, political positions. The term is very often brought up when it comes to American politics specifically. Often, news and sometimes politicians themselves will argue that politics is more polarized than it has ever previously been, though the legitimacy of these claims is of course almost endlessly debatable.

Continuing the topic of polarization, “asymmetrical polarization” is when the polarization in question moves more to one “side” than it does the other. The term often gets brought up when

discussing the party platforms of the Democratic and Republican parties post-2010, and some argue that the Republican party has moved further to the political right than the Democratic party has moved politically left. This, by and large, is one of the major reasons for the shakeup within the Republican party within recent years. Ezra Klein postulates in his 2020 work “Why We’re Polarized” that grouping, and the act of being in or identifying others as a group, is an extremely powerful tool. He argues that politics is a “team sport” (60) and that “You don’t just need support. You need anger” (64). Group identities, and the fear of losing to the other team becomes more important than the politics and policies themselves. Persons can be grouped, or group themselves almost infinitely. Someone may be a Republican, they may be politically active, they may enjoy a sport, they enjoy going to bars after work – all these function as groups. People generally want to interact with those that they feel are the same as them, which can result in these groups becoming isolated. When it comes to politics, it is impossible for a politician to hit every voter base, as there are so many groups that one could never hope to encapsulate them all. A politician’s platform will never (or only very rarely) completely align with a potential voter. Therefore, instead of lifting their own platform up and expressing their opinions, many partake in “the art of shit-flinging”. This term means, in short, that it is easier to get and retain political supporters by talking down on, verbally attacking, and dismissing the opponent rather than making promises and lifting one’s own policies. This occurs in politics all over the world, but is especially prominent in US elections – on every level from city, to state, to federal.

Partisanship is a term which describes a strong commitment to either a party, a cause, a politician, or otherwise related. Partisanship exists within any party, be it political or not. However, like “polarization”, the term “partisan” and “bipartisan” get thrown around all the time in American politics. Several important bills that reach the House of Representatives and the Senate end up partisan, meaning the Democrats vote one way, and the Republicans vote the other. Olympia Snowe, former Republican Senator representing the state of Maine, cited “hyperpartisanship” as one of the reasons for her retirement in 2013. Snowe had long ranked as one of the most moderate Republican politicians and was known for breaking with her party on key issues. While she did end up voting against Obama’s health care reform, the Affordable Care Act, she was clearly passionate about the bill, and Obama recognized that she was a possible bipartisan partner (Jackson, n.d.). She is quoted as saying; “It’s never easy to compromise, but you must. In the past we were able to work out our differences. Today, it’s all about taking to the

next election.” (Politico, 2013); a testament to her goal of working towards bipartisan cooperation.

Having served as a Senator since the 1970s, Snowe ended up not aiming for a reelection, and instead retired – blaming the near-impossibility of working with two opposed parties - seemingly only interested in the next election rather than actually working together instead focusing on “making each other look bad” (Associated Press. Politico, 2013).

While the division between Democrats and Republicans is obvious, there are more such lines of division which become apparent at closer inspection – these being the fringes of each party, and the factions within the parties themselves. Factions like these have also existed for a long time, such as the short-lived Dixiecrat side of the Democratic Party. In modern politics, for example, there exists a portion of the Republican party who are anti-abortion, but also one that is pro-abortion, even though the current Republican party is traditionally anti-abortion. Similar tendencies exist within the Democratic party. As discussed, it is impossible to hit the entire voter base, so politicians often resort to, as Olympia Snowe pointed to, stomping on the other party. The existing internal divisions make it even more difficult for both politicians and voters – freedom of speech and differing opinions is important to uphold democracy, but it becomes substantially more difficult when debates devolve to derision.

1.4- The Tea Party Movement

In 2014, incumbent Republican House Majority Leader Eric Cantor lost his primary election to Dave Brat – a further-right, more extreme republican with only a fraction of the funding. How did this happen? The answer may come in form of the Tea Party movement.

After the stock market crash and subsequent housing crisis of 2008-9, many people in the United States were upset at politicians for not doing more to stop, or at least dampen the crisis. Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer argue in *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* that “[...] the financial meltdown in the fall of 2008 ruined the Republican ticket’s chances”. (2019, 291). George W. Bush, a republican, was the sitting President at the time the crash happened and was in many ways blamed for it. As a result, the democratic opponent Barack

Hussein Obama rose to the occasion, campaigning on change and rebuilding a strong economy. With many republicans feeling that overspending, “big government” and a moderate candidate was responsible for both the economic crash and the election loss, the Tea Party movement launched around 2009. While not a political party, it instead existed more as a faction of the Republican Party. Their major platform was reduced government size and interference, reduced spending, and American exceptionalism. In politics, many Tea Party supporters on the republican side strayed further to the right than their establishment counterparts, which led to the upset in the Cantor v. Brat election.

According to TIME Magazine, Cantor was poised to win the election – with more than ten times the campaign funding, and an incumbent position, it looked like an easy win. However, Brat had something which Cantor and Washington D.C. did not expect to matter as much as it did – support from the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party. Specifically, republican voters were upset at Cantor’s relatively relaxed stance towards the immigration reform in 2013, and his support for the DREAM act, which would let illegal immigrants in the US gain a way to citizenship. “All of it proved too moderate for Cantor’s Richmond district” (TIME Magazine, 2014). The Tea Party wing campaigned heavily in favor of Brat, which resulted in a massive surge of votes. In the end, Cantor lost the election due to waning support from moderate Republicans combined with a massive increase in support for a further-right candidate.

This kind of upset had happened previously as well. In 2012, newcomer Richard E. Mourdock defeated long-time incumbent Senator Richard Lugar in the republican primaries in Indiana. Similarly to the case with Cantor v. Brat, Mourdock ran on a platform which had a fraction of the funding, and significantly less experience in politics. While he did enjoy support from various GOP members, his work with the Tea Party made him explode in popularity. Soon after, his funding was more than enough to cast him into the light of the public. Mourdock ran on a hardline Republican platform, and was infamous for his refusal of bipartisanship. He was quoted as saying; “I certainly think bipartisanship ought to consist of Democrats coming to the Republican point of view” (Bernstein, 2012), flatly refusing to agree with any Democrat point of view on policy. He continued that the Democrats would have to play along if the Republicans won the House, Senate and Presidency, letting Republicans do as they pleased. While Mourdock did win the initial primary, he ended up losing the Senate seat to Democrat Joe Donnelly, putting

an end to his bid for Senate. Still, these two upsets showed the significant power which the Tea Party held at the time. Candidates with little to no funding or previous support were able to win major elections with the support of the Tea Party, as both fellow party members and many Republican voters felt that the incumbent Republican politicians were too moderate, or catered too much to bipartisan cooperation and legislation. The Tea Party allowed these more extreme candidates to gain the spotlight, which significantly increased the attention given to them and subsequently their amount of votes.

Even earlier, the 2010 midterm election had come as a devastating loss for the Democrats. This was the result of a combination of high uncertainty given the recent economic crisis and a general dislike for Barack Obama's policies, including the enactment of the Affordable Care Act – which was very unpopular among Republicans. The meteoric rise of the Tea Party gave way for massive Republican gains around this time, leading to the GOP gaining control of the House of Representatives with a majority of over sixty members (MacAskill, 2010). The Speaker of the House, John Boehner, expressed his disapproval of the Affordable Care Act; “I think it's important for us to lay the groundwork before we begin to repeal this monstrosity.” (MacAskill, 2010). Among the Affordable Care Act, high spending, high unemployment, and the general economic situation post-financial crisis, it was clear that this midterm loss was a death knell for the Democrats at the time – with the Republicans gaining control of the House, partisan politics near-paralyzed the Obama administration. Furthermore, it created somewhat of a rift between Republicans. There were, of course, bipartisan politicians, who were willing to cooperate and work together. However, the Tea Party wing of the party had created a faction of extreme politicians, and has had a lasting influence. Senators Marco Rubio and Rand Paul (representing Florida and Kentucky respectively) were, for example, both elected with the support of the Tea Party, and are both still incumbent.

McKay Coppins notes in his biography of Mitt Romney, “Romney: A Reckoning” that by the time the GOP was gearing up for the election campaigns for the 2012 election, in December of 2010, “[...] something strange had happened [...] - a huge swath of their party had radicalized.” (95). He continues; “Tea Party candidates with outlandish ideas and no political experience were toppling long serving Republicans in primaries.” (96). Coppins argues that a large portion of the Republican Party had been incorporated into the outer-right wing, the majority of which being

represented by the Tea Party movement. Co-founder of the “Tea Party Patriots”, Jenny Beth Martin, said that the reason for the Republicans’ loss in the 2012 Presidential election was “a weak, moderate candidate, hand-picked by the Beltway elites and country club establishment of the Republican party.” (Cohen, 2012). By pinning the blame on Romney, arguing that he was too moderate and too lenient on his policies, the shift to the right had begun, as the Tea Party had intended. Martin was not the only republican to take this stance – many felt that Romney’s relatively moderate policies collided with the image of the conservatism that they believed the Republican Party stood for, leading to a candidate who appeared, if anything, distant and out-of-touch with the average party voter. While he was fiscally conservative and tough on immigration, Obama’s strong campaign and the Republican Party’s internal tension, added with Romney’s infamous unfortunate “47 percent” comment, where he accused almost half of American families of not paying federal income tax and being dependent on government and therefore not wanting to vote for him, resulted in a loss for the republicans.

The Tea Party, while having mostly fizzled out as of 2024, has had a significant impact on American politics - especially on the Republican side. American Politics has always been rife with strategy. Planning election campaign routes, ad campaigns, radio shows, television appearances, and more. It has, however, also suffered more and more from a specific ailment which has only become more apparent in recent years – shortsightedness. Of course, the goal of any politician is to win the upcoming election. Whether it is a local election, federal or presidential, the point is to win. However, this incessant shortsightedness may have rooted itself deep into the GOP especially. Olympia Snowe mentioned it as being one of the reasons for her retirement. Tales of politicians being elected, making huge promises, only to go back on their promises as it turned out to be “election fodder” is a common occurrence. These kinds of stories happen all over the world, and are not exclusive to American politics. However, what happens when a party becomes so obsessed with winning an election that they will do anything to secure victory? What happens when all consequences of the candidate, and their policies, are thrown out the window just to aim for a short-term win? This may be, partly, what caused the meteoric rise of the Republican party’s main candidate for the 2016 election – Donald Trump.

Chapter 2

2.1- The Presidency of Donald Trump

It is undeniable that the election of Donald Trump has had a major impact on the Republican party. Mitt Romney announced very early on that he would not be supporting Trump in the 2016 election; “[...] I am dismayed at where we are now, I wish we had better choices, and I keep hoping that somehow things will get better, and I just don’t see an easy answer from where we are.” (Trudo, 2016). While several Republicans broke off prior to Trump becoming a major force in the party, Romney was one of the first to take a vocal stance against Trump and the more radical faction of the Republican party. Recalling a conversation with Vice President-elect Mike Pence in late 2016, having offered Romney a position of Secretary of State (where Pence said that Romney should publicly apologize and retract his anti-Trump statements), Romney believed this would look “flatly ridiculous” (Coppins, 2023, 187). Still, he agreed to take the position, on his own terms. Romney was criticized for this, but he believed that he could make good use of the position, acting as a mitigator. (187-88). However, this position of Secretary of State never materialized, as Romney “couldn’t bring himself to do it” (189). Citing not wanting to deal with the massive fundamental differences in policy and compromises Romney and Trump would have to make, the job instead went to ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson. Tillerson later went on to criticize the former President as well, arguing that “[Trump’s] understanding of global events, his understanding of global history, his understanding of U.S. history was really limited.” (Atwood et al, 2021), further adding to the list of former aides turned critics.

In August 2017, white nationalists took part in a rally at the University of Virginia. They yelled Nazi slogans, and waved torches (Coppins, 195). After Trump said there were “very fine people on both sides”, Romney “[...] couldn’t believe how far his party [...] had fallen.” (195). Many of the Republican politicians who considered standing up to Trump were also considering retirement – perhaps a more alluring option rather than opposing the now-main force of the party.

Romney’s thoughts on the president likely lingered in the minds of other Republican politicians at the time, regardless of whether they were outspoken or not. Still – grouping within politics is a powerful tool, and many politicians likely used Trump’s platform as a springboard for

themselves. Trump's policy, when there did exist one, rang a bell with many rural, right-wing voters in the US. Many who perhaps considered themselves tired of "the establishment", and career politicians saw Trump, who came as a man from outside the sphere of politics, as a breath of fresh air. He made promises which seemed completely impossible to stay true to, but he did it in such a way that it captivated a huge portion of the Republican voter base. By appealing on a populist platform, he enjoyed an enormous rise in popularity. Populism is a term describing a political platform with focus towards ordinary people, making sure their woes are heard and understood. It has been, and is used by both liberals and conservatives in the United States, though it is often tied to anti-establishment policies. It is a popular method to gain widespread support from average voters, as they feel included in the political platform. Regardless of whether Trump was going to stay true to his promises, he said what many conservatives wanted to hear – he was going to "Make America Great Again".

The phrase has become a centerpiece of much news media since the time during Trump's presidential candidacy, and his time in office. Beginning its usage between 2012-15, "Make America Great Again" is a tone which rang strongly especially with the Republican voter crowd. Some, especially older voters, may have felt that the United States was not as "great" as it was when they were growing up. Indeed, for those who grew up during the Cold War, the image of America's prosperity was likely one of significant nostalgia towards the prosperous 50s and 60s. While there certainly were intermittent tough times economically and socioculturally, there was also significant potential and a strong economy with worldwide envy. Come the 2000s and 2010s, the increasing divide in domestic politics, increase in tension on the global political scene and the stock market crash in 2008 likely rendered these people somewhat disillusioned with the United States. By using the "Make America Great Again" slogan, Trump secured a foothold in this vast, and largely right-leaning voter group. Playing on nostalgia and a desire to return to the strong economy of the Cold War era, he successfully employed this slogan as the headline of his "brand image", which would eventually evolve into the shortened "MAGA".

In his presidency, Trump effectively employed the "MAGA"-slogan. The infamous, or iconic (depending on who you ask) red hat with white "Make America Great Again" text became a common symbol at Trump rallies and in pro-Trump groups. By the left-wing, the slogan has been widely mocked, satirized and parodied. Regardless, the "MAGA Crowd" has become

synonymous with a group of people who largely share the views of Donald Trump, and make up a very large, if not very visible portion of the Republican Party's base. The phrase "Make America Great Again" has become somewhat of an inflammatory statement to some, as it appears to link whoever utters it to Trump. In the later stages and aftermath of his term as President, Trump has also pivoted towards a new slogan, "Keep America Great", telling his supporters to vote for him again and continue to support his political career. These short, snappy and catchy slogans are an effective way to advertise, fund and continue his campaign, and the phrases used have become so engrained with his image and persona that simply writing, uttering or just wearing the phrase as part of a clothing item could, by some, be considered voicing support for Trump.

2.2- Making America Great: Reagan vs. Trump

The phrase "Make America Great Again" does not originate with Donald Trump. Ronald Reagan, the 40th President of the United States, having served between 1981-89, used the term extensively in his 1980 presidential campaign. At the time, the US was plagued by high inflation, high unemployment, economic stagnation, and difficult foreign policy with the Soviet Union's recent invasion of Afghanistan. Reagan poised he would make America great again, mirroring that of Trump's more recent slogan. Reagan's use of the slogan was a play on nostalgia and patriotism, just as Trump's was. Regardless of one's opinion on America's greatness, past or present, it was strikingly effective – both in 1980 and 2016.

Trump has mirrored Reagan's use of slogans on several occasions, using them several occasions. "Drain the Swamp", originating in the 1800s, was used by Reagan to describe how he would remove bureaucracy in the US government. Trump, in his 2016 campaign, used the term in a more catch-all form, on how he would solve problems within the government. Reagan poses, for many, significant nostalgia and he is generally remembered quite positively, especially by conservatives. Their likenesses make for an interesting comparison, especially in their similarities and differences in policy, and how they are remembered and treated post-presidency. It allows for a closer look into how the republican platform has evolved in some ways, yet stayed the same in others, and how nostalgia plays a role in political agendas and platforms.

Trump mirrors Reagan in more than just the use of these slogans. While their personalities differ greatly, they both had the advantage of catering to a large overlap of the same crowd. Both Reagan's and Trump's rallies were very popular, and they both took a very direct and "strong" approach, showing themselves as a candidate who could fix all their problems. By leaving out much of the political jargon and complicated terms, instead relying on simple messages and easy-to-understand promises, including making jokes and making fun of their opponents (and in Reagan's case, himself), they both garnered huge interest from people who believed they were normal, average men – with an interest in improving their community, and their country – just like themselves.

The reasoning for Reagan's inclusion in lieu of George W. Bush conflates the likenesses between Trump and Reagan. They could both be considered as the faces of their party, enjoying significant control over and support from its members. Bush meanwhile seemed to lack charisma – even with his at-times similar policies to Reagan, his approval ratings gradually fell to lower levels. (Presidential Approval Ratings, George W. Bush, n.d.) Combined with the controversial War on Terror and the 2008 financial crisis, the Bush Administration has gone down in history as a divisive one, within both the Democratic and Republican Parties. Reagan's importance to the topic at hand, relating to Trump and the modern Republican Party, lies in his methods of attracting support and how he formed the party to his liking. Reagan was a dominant leader through the 1980s, having won by large margins in both his presidential elections and enjoying high approval ratings (Newport et al, 2004). He was charismatic, a keen speaker and enjoyed the spotlight. Reagan's way of consolidating power mirrors that of Trump, though perhaps not using quite as extreme of a party line. Arguably their most important likeness is their careers as TV celebrities. Trump, like Reagan appeared to enjoy the attention, and was happy to conduct speeches, interviews, and meetings. Their likability among their voter base cemented them as the image of conservatism in their respective eras, which allows a line of comparison to be drawn between them.

Furthermore, Trump and Reagan's stances on the government mirror each other. Reagan was a proponent of reduced government, arguing that the U.S. government's reach had gone too far and too deep, and that it was incompetent. While Trump was not quite as outspoken about the size of the government, he did certainly express his distrust in it. According to MSNBC, both Trump and

Reagan used a strategy involving appointing heads of departments who were often directly opposed to the departments that they would be leading (Kruse, 2022). That way, they could internally dismantle those departments, whether by defunding, or changing their objective to fit the new agenda. In addition, Trump sought to defund many governmental institutions, though many of these cuts were rejected by congress. The cuts were largely to come from low-income assistance programs, such as Medicaid, SNAP, and The Affordable Care Act. (Kogan et al., 2020). It would have saved portions of the government budget, though it would also have severed what many low-income families consider almost essential lifelines.

Saying that Reagan and Trump mirror each other in several political aspects would not be an understatement. On the other hand, they do differ when it comes to trade policy and immigration. Reagan spoke openly about the benefits of free trade worldwide, as opposed to Trump's idea of protectionism and isolationism. Reagan underlined that free trade was one of the major reasons for the prosperity of the United States, while Trump instead argued that in an age of outsourcing, American jobs must be protected. Both provide valid points, though of course, they appealed to the United States at two very different times. On immigration, both Reagan and Trump took a tough stance – however, Reagan allowed significant amnesty with the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which created pathways to citizenship for illegal immigrants in the United States. Trump has been extremely critical of illegal immigration, notably parading the infamous wall that was going to be built on the border of Mexico. A tough stance on immigration is a classic Republican talking point, and played into his populist policies. Trump's protectionist stance harks back to the isolationism the United States employed in the 1800s and into the 1940s.

The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, which raised import duties on foreign goods, is one example of Republicans wanting to protect American business and production by introducing tariffs on foreign-imported goods. Such tariffs continued, notably with the "Chicken Tax" of 1964 which added a tariff to foreign-produced pickup trucks, as to not impact the American market. Reagan and Trump mirror each other in wanting to protect American business, yet they are different – Reagan was, as mentioned, a large proponent of free trade. Trump did not necessarily oppose free trade either, but was adamant that American jobs needed to be protected, and kept in-country. Pointing to the large-scale outsourcing of many previously American-held jobs that has happened since the 1970s, Trump felt that the job market needed to be protected. He

felt that keeping jobs within America would help the economy by adding (or rather retaining) jobs, which in turn would boost American production, as well as making those jobs attractive to Americans. Republicans have largely followed the lead set by their Presidents, and the line between Reagan and Trump is much the same – Reagan’s free market philosophy was popular among conservatives, as is Trump’s protectionism now – even though they represent a complete turnaround in agenda.

Additionally, decades of neo-liberal policy can certainly be pointed to as part of the blame for the shift within the Republican Party. Though the term had existed long before then, it rose to popularity under Reagan. While the term “liberal” in “neoliberalism” may seem like it would point towards the more left-wing factions, it is a strongly right-wing way of policy. Neoliberalism favors deregulation, small government, and free-market capitalism – all talking points of the Republican Party, especially after President Reagan. Of course, it would be a significant oversimplification to blame the shift in the Republican party and its policy entirely on neoliberal politics, but it can certainly be seen as one of several causes.

Finally, it is also important to point to Reagan’s previous experience in politics. While he did receive some criticism for being a “movie star” more than a politician, Reagan served as the Governor of California between 1967 – 1975. He gained great experience in the political world during his tenure as governor - he was popular, taking up traditionally conservative policies and ideals. In addition, Reagan famously cooperated with many democrats on key issues, which made him a well-liked bipartisan figure. In contrast, Donald Trump had only vaguely dabbled within politics before his bid for president, never having held public office. While Reagan faced similar criticisms, it was clear that he knew the ins-and-outs of politics and had experience as governor. Trump lacked this experience – though this may, in fact, have worked in his favor.

Trump’s lack of experience politically put him in a unique position. Some politicians have received criticism for being “career politicians”, in that their entire working careers are spent within the political system. While this gives them a great understanding of how politics work and politicians interact, some argue that it also somewhat alienates them from the population. Politicians’ salaries in the United States are high, especially for those serving in high-ranking positions in the House of Representatives, or in the Senate. Furthermore, a lack of a ban on politicians trading stocks results in many multiplying their net worth many times over throughout

their tenure. As a result, many working-class citizens feel a certain disconnect from their elected officials. Donald Trump, while having amassed a huge fortune, does not have the moniker of career politician, instead being a contender from the outside. In this way, he may have had a significantly easier time connecting with the average voter. Even given his wealth, many may have felt a candidate without a political career behind them provided a better option, as they may have a more “normal” perspective on politics, not having seen it up close internally before. It also provided Trump with a channel to communicate with his voter base – engaging in populism, and appealing to the voter base’s disinterest and dislike for career politicians.

However, opinions are still deeply split – Reagan is looked back on often very fondly by not only Republicans, but some Democrats too. After serving his two terms, Reagan willingly stepped down, not being allowed to run for another term. Furthermore, Reagan is seen by many as the President who ended, or at least began to end the Cold War. Under Reagan, major steps in international relations were made with the Soviet Union – with President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev striking up a friendship and getting along on good terms even though their ideologies were very different. The Cold War had by the 1980s been a constant background factor for most American citizens for almost forty years at that point, so seeing it begin to end in the late 1980s may have significantly contributed to the positive outlook many have on Reagan from a modern perspective. Likenesses could be drawn to Trump here too – Russia is, as of 2024, one of Europe’s largest worries. While its global political influence may arguably have been overshadowed by China, Russia remains a large, and powerful nation with enormous military force, and access to nuclear weapons. Trump seems to be on good terms with Russia’s President, Vladimir Putin. Trump also attempted diplomacy with North Korea, with some degree of success.

However, there are differences between the two presidents. Reagan was adamant about the importance of NATO, and advocated for nations’ freedom – famously uttering his “Tear down this wall” phrase during a speech in what was then West Berlin (The New York Times, 1987). Reagan’s policies of free trade tie strongly to his advocacy for these freedoms, which would have allowed for larger international trade, and would have boosted the economy. Trump on the other hand is more uncertain about NATO. He appears to accept it in concept, and understands its importance. He however seems to dislike how some member states of NATO do not pay the de

jure required 2% of their GDP towards their defense budget, and has repeatedly advocated for members states to pay their required amount, or risk losing protection (Fowler, 2024). Trump's stance on protectionism of the American economy also likely plays into this – Reagan hoped that a more open international community would improve trade relations, while Trump argues the opposite – that while free trade is good, outsourcing would take jobs away from Americans. Either way, their legacies, both having been at the helm of the same political party, are of divisive opinions and a much-changed Republican Party.

2.2- A Personification of Self-Interest

Trump's actions as politician and President mirror much of the political short-sightedness willingness to do whatever it takes to get elected. As previously mentioned, Trump used patriotism, populism and nostalgia heavily during his campaign. Once the Republican Party realized that Trump was the most likely ticket to defeating the democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, most of the party rallied behind him, understanding that a strong candidate would mean more votes and a larger chance of victory, regardless of the policies and political platform involved.

In “The Rise and Fall of Political Orders”, Richard Ned Lebow points to that before Reagan, Presidential campaigns, speeches, and general rhetoric were aimed much more at the collective – “[it] appeals to the national community and ask(s) everyone to do their part” (Lebow, 2018, 175-203). He continues by claiming that the United States as a society is dominated by greed; “Conspicuous consumption has trickle-down consequences and encourages people to emulate the lifestyles of the wealthy and to compete with one another in the process”. Pointing to the US over-spending in displays of material wealth, and a rise of debt, Lebow signals that the US is or rather has become a very individualist country. It is not uncommon to see these trends in other developed nations, but the US has almost accepted it as its nature. Lebow goes on to say that; *“The Trump administration [has filled] cabinet positions with bankers and businesspeople intent on lowering taxes for the rich and rolling back as far as possible governmental constraints on banking, business, coal and oil.”* (175-203)

Trump, himself a businessman, had much to gain from this. House Oversight and Reform Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney stated that “President Trump is openly enriching himself by encouraging government entities to spend money at his business, and foreign entities appear to frequent his business to curry favor with this administration”. (Kumar, 2020). However, most Republicans allowed this to continue – despite much scrutiny from the Democrats, there may have stood more to gain, both in terms of power as well as financially, from allowing it to continue than was worth giving up.

There are also large swaths of politicians, mostly Republicans, who publicly support or otherwise have supported Trump in his rise through the party. The Freedom Caucus is a faction of Republicans in the House of Representatives, consisting of politicians who are more conservative than the average member of the Republican party. Their goal is “pushing the House GOP leadership rightward on certain fiscal and social issues” (DeSilver, 2015). While not a large group, amounting to 49 members and allies (DeSilver, 2023), it is still a large enough group to have an impact on GOP politics.

The group over time aligned itself as a strong supporter of Donald Trump, with Jim Jordan (R-OH), a founding member of the party, saying that the House Freedom Caucus “shifted its focus from passing legislation to fiercely defending Trump” (Treene et al., 2022). Given the Republicans’ narrow majority, and the fact that all members of the caucus usually vote unanimously means that if they decide to go against the general opinion of the Republican party, they eliminate the Republican majority. They exercise a lot of internal power, and have successfully shifted GOP leadership somewhat to the right. Several very high-ranking Republicans are, and have been members – including Ron DeSantis (R-FL), Mark Meadows (R-N.C.) and the previously mentioned Jim Jordan, and they utilize their positions and power accordingly. Their influence has somewhat faded post-2016, though the recent battle for Speaker in 2023 and onwards has somewhat reignited their relevance. Since their inception, they have shifted to vehemently supporting Trump instead of focusing on policy and lawmaking, but they still exist as an anchor of the ultra-conservative sentiment within the Republican party. A question may still be posed – do they have their own identity at all? Especially after Trump’s defeat in 2020, the Freedom Caucus has gone through somewhat of an identity crisis. Some members have commented on the situation - former House Representative Mick Mulvaney (R-

S.C.), explained that “[The Freedom Caucus] were not designed to be just obstructionists”, (Beavers, 2022) continuing that the Caucus has shifted priorities from arguing for conservatism, to rather arguing against Democrats, in the process losing a significant portion of their own identity. They have seemingly put their own identity aside in favor of deriding the opposition, and now exist as a gathering of hardline Trump-supporters. Whether their reasoning for abandoning their former principles is each member’s personal opinion or not wanting to break from their associates within the Freedom Caucus is debatable, though an inclination towards the latter may be likely.

2.3- “America First”

Another of Trump’s popular slogans was his sentiment of “America First”, quite simply prioritizing the United States politically over foreign matters. The United States has had periods of isolationism before, such as in the late 1800s, and the 1920s – 30s. These periods shielded the country from international disturbances – such as when World War II broke out in 1939, the United States did not directly enter until the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 (though they did provide military armaments and supplies beforehand). Many modern conservatives believe that an isolationist, or rather a protectionist policy, can help prosperity and fuel economic growth. Naturally there is significant economic wealth to be gained by trading internationally, but largely focusing on one’s own country shields it from international political instability. Trump effectively employed this promise in his bid for the presidency. The slogan rang well with rural voters, who felt, among other issues, that farmers were struggling, that inflation was too high, and that too much money was being sent out of the United States to support other countries. Trump argued this money would be better spent domestically, either to give tax breaks, further fund American enterprises and programs, or be cut from the budget altogether. Trump could be said to have used the “America First” slogan as a springboard into the Presidency – at least in some part. To say the slogan is entirely responsible for his election would likely be overestimating it, but it certainly did help popularize him with traditionally conservative voters. After Trump’s election, “America First” became the official foreign policy of the United States.

While Trump did somewhat back down on the completely isolationist policies, he still threatened to have the U.S. leave several international organizations, including NATO.

This “America First” policy is the opposite of what Mitt Romney campaigned on in 2012, where Romney said that he would “champion free trade” (Tau, 2012), similarly to Reagan’s agenda in the 1980s. During Romney’s campaign, he was criticized by further-right conservatives for taking this now-moderate view on trade and incorporating it into his own policy. Senator John McCain (R-AZ), who stood as the Republican nominee against Barack Obama in 2008, held similar positions as Romney in 2012. McCain, a former U.S. Navy Captain, campaigned heavily on producing a global alliance of democracies, and strengthening this alliance by incorporating more democratic nations into it. McCain once remarked that “The United States did not single-handedly win the Cold War; the transatlantic alliance did, in concert with partners around the world.” (McCain, 2008). He campaigned, like Trump, for a strong, well-funded military. However, he also, as apparent, campaigned for a strong international alliance, both militarily and in trade. Trump was adamant about presenting the United States as a world power in way of trade while protecting its internal industries, as well as having a strong military. However, he was much more skeptical about international military alliances, arguing that they create instability and are a drain on the U.S. economy, it being one of the largest benefactors to NATO’s funding (BBC, 2024). Trump’s divisive policies contrast with that of the more moderate faction of republicans, but they were popular with the further-right. With his rising dominance in the party, many republican politicians may have felt that while not ideal, it was better to continue to support Trump rather than be critical and potentially risk losing the further-right voter base.

Still, around 2016-18, some republicans began to distance themselves from their party, for various reasons. Bob Corker, a republican senator representing Tennessee, announced on September 26, 2017 that he would be retiring from his position as senator at the end of his term. He had pledged in 2006 that he would only serve two terms, totaling twelve years. While keeping his promise, Corker argued much like Olympia Snowe that bipartisan politics had become extremely difficult in the Senate, with many politicians doing whatever they could to hold their own party’s line. In an interview with Politico, Corker said; “There’s just not a great deal of problem-solving taking place. The big problems of our nation aren’t even being discussed.” (Ward, 2023). He continued that (at the time) neither of the two leading Presidential

candidates in the 2024 race, Biden nor Trump, were discussing the nation's biggest issues. While he mentioned being glad for the time he spent in the senate, he felt that partisanship was making cooperation impossible, and the short-term race to win the election was clouding political visions of policy and lawmaking. Similarly, Jeff Flake, a senator representing Arizona, became notorious for going against Trump. He announced his retirement from his position as Senator on October 24, 2017, around a month after Corker. Flake spoke at length about "President Trump's "reckless, outrageous, and undignified behavior" and the partisans who try to defend and justify it" in his retirement speech (Coppins, 2017). He continued that he was uncomfortable with the positions he would have to take to continue to support the President, and it would result in a campaign he "wouldn't be proud of" (Coppins, 2017). He was soon after, verbally attacked by other Republicans, who were quick to criticize him and label him as weak. These verbal attacks display the worry of politicians being frozen out of their own party because they refuse to cooperate with the party line.

In July 2017, the Republican Party was set to vote on whether to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Senator John McCain, who positioned himself as an opponent of the bill, ended up voting against repealing it. As a conservative, it was not given in advance that he would vote against the bill. He went on to release a statement, which explained that while he believed the Affordable Care Act should be replaced with a better solution, he could not in good faith support its repealing as it would not offer a replacement. This move took the GOP by surprise – McCain was joined by Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK). The vote ended up 51-49 against the repealing of the act, and effectively ended the Republican healthcare effort (Davis et al., 2017). McCain went on to criticize party-line voting, in which most or all the members vote the same way, instead of acting based on their own opinion. This type of partisan behavior has seemingly made it difficult for party members to act out of line with their party's general opinion, especially under Trump.

Part of the reason why many of the most Trump-critical politicians chose to retire could lie in party-line voting and partisanship, which Senators McCain, Flake and Snowe all criticized. Those most critical to Trump faced the most backlash and pushback from their colleagues, which likely made cooperation and bipartisanship even more difficult. As a result, the remaining members may have been inclined to stay within the party line, and not make any inflammatory

comments which could be interpreted as going against the party's general stance. This may have resulted in the most adamant critics simply leaving the party and/or quitting politics in favor of having to agree with policies they found unagreeable. In addition, it may have pressured would-be critics to instead stay silent, or double down and follow the party line even closer. Those critics who did leave, opened positions which needed to be filled. Many of these positions were then taken over by loyalists, who were less likely to speak out against the party, or against Trump. The consequence is a party which has continuously become more loyalist, and where deviance from the ideological party line is hardly tolerated, if at all. In turn, it results in a party where each member is expected to hold almost the exact same beliefs as its leader.

In 2018, the United States midterm elections resulted in what came to be known as a “blue wave”, with the Democratic party taking back control of the House of Representatives after having lost it in 2011. House Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) regained her position as Speaker of the House, replacing Paul Ryan (R-WI). The Republican Party retained a majority in the Senate, but the large gains made by the Democrats in the House of Representatives came as a surprise to many Republicans. Both parties celebrated their own victories, and with a Democratic majority in the House, it became significantly more difficult for Republicans to pass legislation.

According to Jonathan Karl, Trump was, despite the internal political struggle within Congress and losses in the 2018 midterms, largely uninterested in the daily Presidential routine. He called the bureaucracy “boring politics” and decided not to receive the daily President's brief (Karl, 2023, 105). He continues that the President was so uninterested in political matters that significant time would often pass until he realized his staff were not doing what he wanted (108). His lack of interest made policy difficult, resulting in slow, bureaucratic decision-making. Staffers and members of the administration would be instructed to ignore his tweets, and instead wait for actual orders from either the President or one of his aides. A combination of disinterest from the Commander in Chief, several unwilling members of the administration, and uncertainty of orders made for an administration which certainly made accomplishments – but one also bogged down by its own leader.

Of course, it is important to point out significant positives of the Trump administration as well – such as the easing of tensions in the middle east. The signing of the Abraham Accords resulted in significant gains in stability in the region, promoting diplomacy between the nations. Moreover,

the Trump administration oversaw strong economic growth in the U.S., and saw a reduction in illegal immigration. While the administration did receive criticism for its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, it did handle it significantly better than many other nations, and was quick to respond with vaccines and social distancing measures.

Through the years of the Trump presidency, a crack was forming in the Republican party. The crack certainly predates Trump, as it had existed for decades, and became clearer with the rise of the Tea Party, and even more so with the forming of the party line voting and various Trump-critical republicans retiring. Though some were outspoken, like Mitt Romney, most allowed it to continue forming, whether they knew about it, were willing to speak up, or not. The real catalyst came in form of the 2020 election, once it became clear that Joe Biden would win, and Donald Trump would lose.

2.4- A Rift Torn Open

As the result of the 2020 election became clear, Trump and significant portions of the Republican Party began to dissociate. In *Tired of Winning: Donald Trump and the end of the Grand Old Party* (2023), Jonathan Karl extensively details what happened to the Trump administration and the Republican party in the wake of the election loss. Karl details that Trump argued that his Attorney General, Bill Barr, had “betrayed him” and that his United Nations Ambassador, Nikki Haley, was “disloyal” and announced that her “political career was over” (3). He also did not want to condemn chants for the execution of Mike Pence. Many of Trump’s former aides skipped on the election announcement he was due to make at Mar-a-Lago on November 15 of that year, either giving excuses or not commenting. Refusing to accept a loss, Trump would continue to argue that the election was stolen, that it was fraudulent, and that the counting of the votes should be stopped. Despite the votes having been finalized and the election having been confirmed by electors in all fifty states, including the election being certified as the safest in American history (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), 2020), Trump was adamant that he won several key swing states and that he had, in fact, won.

On December 19, 2020, Donald Trump would tweet “Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!” relating to his own protests that the election was falsified. (Karl, J., 2023,

134). This tweet would instigate one of the most consequential incidents in modern American political history. Come January 6th 2021, thousands of people had amassed outside the Capitol and White House in Washington D.C., upset and angry at the election outcome. Trump himself wanted to be there, but was told to stay at the White House for his own safety (Karl, 2023, 60-63). This thesis will not go into detail about exactly what happened on January 6th that year, but it is important to emphasize the impact it has had on American politics in the time afterwards. While it has been argued that Trump did not instigate the mob to become violent, and that he did not directly tell the protestors to enter the capitol, they eventually forced their way in anyway. The breach resulted in several deaths, including both protesters and police officers. In the time after, the insurrection was condemned by the U.S. Congress, several members of the Trump administration as well as the Democratic Party, in addition to the media. Trump himself was apologetic about the event, stating he never intended for it to become violent, instead telling his supporters to “peacefully and patriotically make [their] voices heard”. (Cabral, 2021). However, he has also repeatedly stated his belief that the election was stolen, and his support for the protesters and their cause. In the time since, he has not let go of his belief that the election being stolen, and continues to argue that he is, or would be the real President of the United States and that Biden holds the Presidency unwarranted.

Liz Cheney, former Republican congresswoman representing Wyoming, felt disillusioned with her party following Trump’s defeat in the 2020 election and subsequent behavior regarding the election certification. With Trump claiming that the election was rigged and stolen, Cheney broke off from many of her Republican party affiliates, and argued that the US was “sleepwalking into dictatorship” (Remnick, 2023). In her 2023 biography, *Liz Cheney: Oath and Honor*, Cheney goes into detail on her thoughts and political career during, and especially after the Trump administration. She also details her impeachment vote, where she voted to impeach the former President. She believed that Trump was solely responsible for the insurrection, and noted a disconnect while partaking in Republican meetings. She writes that especially Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) as well as Andrew Clyde (R-GA), two prominent members of the House of Representatives, were both arguing that the party generally agreed that President Trump did not incite the violence on January 6th, something Cheney personally disagreed with (Cheney, 2023, 122-23). Cheney continues that both McCarthy and Clyde were under considerable pressure from Trump and his affiliates, with McCarthy trying to appeal to the far-right voters in a bid to

gain support, and Clyde appealing to the “freshmen” members, being relative newcomers to the House, attempting to garner wider support within the party. Cheney states;

“It had been clear to me since January 6 [2021] that Donald Trump had to be impeached. [...] When a president behaves the way Donald Trump behaved, and refuses to accept the peaceful transfer of power, he poses a risk that America cannot bear.” (2023, 135)

After having given a statement that she would be voting to impeach Trump, Cheney continues that she received support from Democrats and Republicans alike, including former President George W. Bush, of the Republican Party (137-138). She was certain in her choice, even knowing it could cost her entire career. She also testifies that “had the impeachment vote been by secret ballot, it would have been overwhelmingly in favor of impeachment” (143). This mirrors Mitt Romney’s earlier statements as well, and his belief that many Republicans voted Trump in, and then refused to impeach him to protect their own careers rather than doing what they believed was the right thing. Furthermore, it aligns with the party line, and it could be the case that many republican politicians wanted to impeach Trump, but did not dare vote to do so for fear of retaliation in case of a failure.

In early July 2021, Cheney met with then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. Headed by Congressman Bennie Thompson (D-MS), Cheney was appointed Vice Chair of The Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the U.S. Capitol (Cheney, 2023, 197-202). She details the testimonies of several officers involved in the insurrection, and how the protesters threatened to kill both the officers as well as the politicians inside the Capitol building. Furthermore, she says that Trump, as well as a large swath of the Republican party, regularly attempted to block the committee from accessing documents relevant to the investigation (238). As time went on, she, and the committee, faced more and more pushback from the Republican party members. At the winter meeting of the Republican National Conference in 2022, Cheney was censured, along with Adam Kinzinger (R-IL), who was also on the January 6th committee. The reasoning given by the RNC for censuring Cheney was “behavior which has been destructive to the institution of the US House of Representatives, The Republican Party, and our Republic” (243). Worded very specifically, the RNC seemed to point the smoking gun towards Cheney and Kinzinger, seeming to brand them as traitors to the entire political establishment.

Cheney is of the opinion that this sentiment came from a party “that had lost its principles and [...] was led by morons” (243). The fact that a political party is willing to censure two of its members because of a disagreement on the president’s conduct is egregious. Naturally, controversy followed, with the RNC having to explain why it was attempting to obstruct the investigation into the events of January 6th. From Cheney’s writing, it is interesting to see the turn which the Republican party made in the time after. During and immediately after the event, many party members either spoke out against President Trump, and some resigned, including several of his administration members. However, as 2021 progressed, several relented and began to downplay the significance of January 6th, and some even started expressing their support for Trump again. Cheney notes that when she asked General Mike Flynn, briefly the National Security Advisor to the Trump Administration, whether he believed in peaceful transition of power in the United States, he declined to answer and instead pleaded the 5th Amendment, for fear of self-incrimination (245). While pleading the 5th is common and accepted practice, pleading it over such a simple question only causes many more to arise. Furthermore, refusing to answer such a simple question may indicate how far some, in this case Mike Flynn, are willing to go to protect their position and status within the Republican Party and political sphere. Flynn also has controversial ties to several Russian companies and persons, and this may also arguably have influenced his decision to plead the 5th.

Continuing in her writings, Cheney is convinced that Trump acted illegally before, during and after the events of January 6th 2021 – inciting the violence, doing nothing to stop it, and continuing to argue that the election was stolen and the Presidency was rightfully his. While she does mention that the Republican Party had seen several degrees of division in the past, she places focus on that Donald Trump, and his actions were a major instigator in the way she believes the party seemingly lost its direction.

In 2022, Cheney lost her reelection bid in her state of Wyoming against Trump-backed candidate Harriet Hageman, putting an end to her career as House Representative. The reason for Trump-critics like Cheney losing primaries and elections is likely tied directly to Trump himself. Cheney is a well-known figure in American politics, and was a respected politician with a long career. Even so, she was not able to win her reelection. Her opponent, Harriet Hageman, has also enjoyed a rich history in politics, yet she does not have as much experience, nor is she as well-

known as Cheney. However, Hageman enjoyed support from not only Trump, but several other prominent Republicans as well – additionally, she was outspoken in her support for Trump, going so far as to call him “the greatest President of [her] lifetime” (Epstein, 2021). Even with Cheney’s long experience in politics and her long tenure in the House, Hageman’s strong backing resulted in a landslide victory against Cheney. Trump spoke outwardly in support of Hageman, and crusaded against Cheney, labeling her as a poor candidate and someone who was against the party’s values. This combination resulted in a very strong showing for Hageman, though it also showcases the current state of the Republican Party – a candidate’s likelihood of winning is almost completely dependent on the approval of the party’s leader. Trump is still a very popular figure amongst many Republican voters, and his outspoken negativity towards Cheney while lifting Hageman up likely contributed significantly to her overwhelming victory. Furthermore, Trump’s outspoken negativity against his critics seems to be popular with his voter base, and may influence their votes as well. As a result, the current Republican Party hinges on candidates which need a personal approval and backing from Trump himself. Candidates who are considered critics or not loyalist enough, are not considered and sometimes shunned. There are Senators who are still incumbent, yet have voiced outward criticism against Trump and the Republican Party, yet they are in thinning numbers, with many retiring or otherwise failing to secure a reelection win.

Paul Ryan, former Speaker of the House, said in an interview with Kevin Kajiwarra of the Teneo corporation that Cheney’s work in the Special Committee on January 6th cost her her career, as well as Kinzinger’s (Cassidy, 2023). Ryan has been involved in politics since the early 1990s, and was elected to the House of Representatives in 1999. Frequently having been pinned as one of the most conservative members of the House, he accepted the position as the 54th Speaker of the House of Representatives in 2015. He soon after established himself as a supporter of Donald Trump’s presidential bid, though there was definitive unease between the two. Ryan’s tenure as speaker was one plagued with partisanship, high government spending, and disagreements with the incumbent President. While relatively supportive in the early days of Trump’s presidency, he eventually began distancing himself, culminating in eventually calling himself a “Never-Again-Trumper” (Lantry, 2022). Ryan put the blame for the losses of the Republican party post-2016 directly on Trump, arguing that he is a divisive force and an “authoritarian narcissist” (Zhang,

2023). Retiring in 2019, he placed the reasoning behind his retirement on his family – wanting to spend more time at home with his wife and kids.

Opinions are divided on Ryan’s tenure as speaker. While his tenure was somewhat controversial, Ryan is remembered as a man who was down-to-earth, deeply interested in eliminating poverty, and a big proponent of major tax reforms. On the other hand, he oversaw large government budget expansions while also forwarding tax cuts, leading to large deficits. He was a proponent of people having freedom of choice, infamously wanting to cut significant funding for Medicare, instead arguing that people should be free to choose between several institutions. However, it could be argued that this freedom of choice would be a cover to defund government institutions and save money. Ryan, having been a cautious supporter, slowly turned around on his opinions regarding Trump – distancing himself, and blaming Trump for losses in elections resulting in a difficult playing field in the Republican Party. In an interview from 2023, Ryan deduced Trump as someone who simply does whatever makes him popular. Ryan continued that he believes Trump “thinks in an authoritarian way” and “he’s [a] culture warrior” (Cassidy, 2023), which he argues is partly why Trump has retained so much popularity within the Republican Party, both from politicians and voters. Much like Cheney, Ryan sees that the Republican party has undergone divisive policies for many years prior to the Trump Administration. Moreover, also like Cheney, he argues that Trump was one of, if not the major reason for the party’s current dissonance and divide.

Overall, seven republicans, along with every democrat in the Senate voted to convict Trump of his actions in the events leading up to, and during January 6th. These include Senators Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), Susan Collins (R-ME), Bill Cassidy (R-LA), Mitt Romney (R-UT), Ben Sasse (R-NE), Pat Toomey (R-PA) and Richard Burr (R-NC). While the vote failed to reach a two-thirds majority required to be passed, these votes came as a surprise, as most Republican senators still voted against convicting the former President. There are similarities between the republican senators who voted to convict – CBS news found that most of them were not up for reelection at the time (Watson, 2024), the outlier being Senator Lisa Murkowski – who has enjoyed strong, long-lasting support in her home state of Alaska. The rest either were due to resign, finish their term, or did not have an upcoming election. They may have felt less of a pressure to follow the party line, and were more able to vote within their own conscience rather

than avoid straying from the party's general opinion as there was less of a risk of being shunned or voted out. Of course, Lisa Murkowski, then-due for reelection, still voted to convict the former President – stating “facts make clear that the violence and desecration of the Capitol that we saw on January 6 was not a spontaneous uprising.” (Watson, 2024), pinning the blame on Trump. In her reelection, she saw a very close battle against Trump-backed Kelly Tshibaka, but ended up winning with a small majority. Murkowski's lasting popularity in her home-state, as well as her previous strong results in primaries and senate elections, likely helped her retain her position as Senator – however, the battle was still close, which showcases just how much power Trump holds in the Republican Party, even backing a first-time candidate.

John Bolton, former United States National Security advisor, recently released a memoir in early 2024. In this memoir, he details his experience serving in the Trump administration between 2018-19. While originally believing that the hardships of serving as President would bring discipline to Trump, Bolton confides that this did not happen. Trump became “consumed by self-interest” (Mohammed et al., 2024), and Bolton continues, having said he believes Trump is unfit to be president. Having served in Trump's cabinet, these are scathing words. Many politicians, party members and socialites have detailed their disdain for Trump, but words like these coming from Bolton, who worked so closely with him, are telling.

Of course, it is possible to go on for an entire anthology about individual Republicans who have spoken outwardly against the Trump and the Trump administration. However, Mitt Romney, Liz Cheney and Paul Ryan all bring forward a more interesting premonition – that there may be many Republicans who do not support Trump, but do not dare to say anything. Whether for fear of losing their position, status, or something else entirely, is up to question. It does however still pose an important discussion. When politics devolves from actual policy-making to preservation of self, can the average voter still trust their elected officials? This kind of question is much too deep to even begin to answer in a satisfying manner – however, it still may be part of the cause for the discontent and dislike of politicians, especially career politicians, in the United States. Wanting to preserve one's position within a party is only natural, but when this preservation comes before actual policy, it causes disconnects between the elected officials and their voters, as well as between the politicians themselves. Fellow party members go from simply having differing opinions to becoming enemies, and those who speak out against the party line are seen

as threats to not only the party, but to the other politicians in the party. In that way, politicians can unite against dissidents, simultaneously getting rid of those with differing opinions, and proving their loyalty to make sure it does not happen to them. Romney, Cheney, and Ryan all make this argument – that there certainly are Republicans within the party who are inherently against Trump, such as them, but unlike them, they do not dare say anything for fear of being exposed, ousted, and replaced. They would rather keep their position, and so they stay quiet and follow the party line.

2.5- The Media

The media, especially in form of news and social media, has been an increasingly large influencer of opinions on any side in politics the past few years. Many people get their news not only from news channels on TV, but from websites, with thousands to choose from. While the topic of the media's involvement is not directly tied to the strain within the Republican party, the inclusion of media in this thesis is tied to its effect on voters, their opinions, and how it influences those voters, and how the media itself handles and presents news to the public.

Websites like Facebook, Reddit, X (formerly Twitter) and others largely claim to stay neutral, but are still themselves influenced by parties which stand to gain support. These social media sites often devolve into echo chambers, such as the relatively far-left Reddit, and the comparatively far-right Truth Social. News sites range from mostly-neutral to extremely partisan – sites like BBC try to report in an objective manner, while newsrooms like the infamous InfoWars lean far-right, among others.

Many people get their news from the media, whether it is a news channel on TV, a news site, social media, or otherwise. These sites may use specific wording, bias or other methods to influence the opinions of the persons watching. In this way, people largely hear what they want to hear – by using half-truths, specific language to present only parts of a case, or misinformation, almost any case can be spun to appear in favor or against any candidate. For example, Trump's own social media site, Truth Social, has identified itself as nonpartisan – yet according to Public Citizen, several posts displaying criticism of the former President resulted in the users involved being banned from the platform (Hunt-Majer, 2022). In this way, media sites

run the risk of creating echo chambers, where only opinions that do not deviate from what is accepted by the majority user platform are accepted and allowed on the site. This is a similar situation to the Republican Party, where would-be Trump critics may have chosen to stay silent and accept the majority's opinion – unless they want to go the way of Liz Cheney, who lost her position in the House of Representatives for speaking out against the party line.

Fox News has for a long time been one of the largest media supporters of the Republican Party, including Trump. However, Fox News has taken a shift as well in recent years. Originally fully supporting Trump through the campaign process and eventual election, as well as through his presidency, the relationship between the former President and the media giant turned colder around 2021. To begin with, this may have been an attempt at distancing the news network from Trump's allegations of the election being stolen. The relationship has mellowed out somewhat since then, but it is still shaky, with Fox likely attempting to balance their base with both republicans who do support the former President, and republicans who are more skeptical, to gain the largest audience possible.

It is no secret that fear sells – and it gains more clicks, too. It has become increasingly difficult since the adoption of the internet to find truly neutral sources, and more and more sites pander to either specific political parties or groups. Even so, the generally right-leaning Fox News has toned down in its coverage of Trump and has instead focused more on Biden – with Fox being swung towards the Republican side, most of the coverage towards Democrats is spun negatively, which harks back to the previously mentioned “shit-flinging”. With Trump embroiled in controversy regarding January 6th 2021, as well as the more recent New York City lawsuit in early 2024, it may be in Fox's interest to mention Trump less directly, and instead focus on his opponents. Still, even Fox has on occasions a somewhat different stance, instead publishing several articles supporting former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley, who was also running for the Republican ticket in the Presidential primaries. Furthermore, Fox News anchor Chris Wallace was quoted saying that he found his employment at Fox “unsustainable” and “uncomfortable” after viewers of Fox began to question the legitimacy of the 2020 election, much to Wallace's dismay (Grynbaum, 2022). After these statements, he said he would not be renewing his contract hosting Fox News Sunday, and he took up a position at CNN instead.

The election in 2020 is one of, if not the most controversial in American history. Roger Stone, an American conservative political consultant, is one of the most notable persons involved in the “stolen election” controversy. Previously serving as an advisor to Trump, Stone is a very controversial figure himself – being one of the figureheads of the group “Stop the Steal” (Kuznia et al, 2020), he has been involved in numerous legal issues and is one of the proponents that Trump won the 2020 election. In a documentary by Danish journalist Christoffer Guldbrandsen, Guldbrandsen explains that in his opinion, politics in America, according to Roger Stone, in its contemporary state could be interpreted as “the loudest liar wins” (Smith, 2024). He goes on to explain that Stone saw Trump as “ungrateful”, yet also as a “strong politician”, before going on to say that “Roger was agitating very strongly for an aggressive reaction” in the wake of the election loss in late 2020. Stop the Steal has garnered much media attention, not only from this documentary. The fact that a plot to undermine and change the result of arguably the safest election in American history ended with many of those involved being pardoned, sets a precedent that illegality is not a question of the crime committed, but rather who was involved, their significance to the political machine, and their personal connections.

Chapter 3

3.1- Opinions and Other Opinions

So far, many opinions of high-ranking American politicians have been explored – most of which seem to pin the blame on either Trump and/or the Republican Party. Still, not everyone argues that Trump is the driving force behind the rift. In her book *Uncivil Agreement*, Lilliana Mason argues that;

“Trump’s campaign did not tear the Republican Party apart; he spoke directly to the social groups that have aligned with the Republican Party in recent years” (2018, 80).

Mason continues that Trump made the move of not really having any specific policy, rather catering to what conservative voters wanted to hear at the time. A populist strategy, it is enormously powerful when it comes to gathering votes in upcoming elections. This was exacerbated by the media, of which the conservative flank rallied behind Trump once it became clear that he was the GOP’s primary choice. However, Mason also makes it clear that Trump relied heavily on partisan politics, using his position to garner support throughout the party and, in a way, stand “united” against the democratic party with himself as leader.

Mitt Romney commented that “With Trump, the media barely had time to react to the latest outrage before he served up a new one.” As for himself, he felt that he had such a high position that one single slip-up could be the death knell for his entire political career. (Romney, 2023, 166). He may be indirectly referring to his own “47 percent” comment where he accused almost half of Americans of not paying taxes while also receiving social security, which some argue cost him the 2012 election. Trump’s unique position left him as a good option for the Republican Party, as he was generally popular with the voters. Furthermore, Trump was seen as somewhat of an anti-establishment, if not a novelty vote. Hillary Clinton, a career politician, was largely unpopular with rural voters who instead wanted direct action and to be seen. Trump gained an advantage by appealing directly to these voters, garnering a large portion of the nation’s rural areas which hold significant electoral college votes.

Additionally, some Republicans argue that it is in fact the Democrats who are responsible for the polarizing situation in the Republican Party and American politics. According to Pew Research,

both sides have significant portions of voters which argue that the opposing party poses a threat to democracy (Doherty, 2014). They continue that since the early 2000s, both parties have moved further towards each end of the political spectrum, and more people view the opposing party more unfavorably. This may have created a type of polarization where the parties are not only opposed to each other, but the voters and politicians increasingly view their opposition as enemies instead of opponents. This may lead to increased attack strategies, where more aggressive policies are brought forward and paraded – not only to promote one’s own party, but to oppose the other.

The media has likely played a role in this development, though politicians are just as guilty. Pew Research has found that Americans are consistently more polarized than they were in the past, more have a negative view on politics as a whole, and more get exhausted simply thinking about politics. (Pew Research Center, 2023). The most common word found to be associated with American politics, was “divisive”, coming from both sides (2023). Finally, the report found that 86% of Americans feel that the two major political parties are “more focused on fighting each other than on solving problems” (2023). Generally, contemporary Americans are more opposed to the rival party, though they are also more opposed to the two major parties in general. Bipartisan policy has become more difficult, as both parties, to a degree, have taken a line where a major part of their campaigns and policy revolves around opposing the other. It devolves into a spiral, where politicians want to increase their voter base by “flinging shit” at the other party. The population is incentivized to see the other party more negatively, which in turn gives the politician more leeway to further “fling shit” with less risk of losing voters. This sort of spiral may have caused an increase in polarization overall, and led to a political climate where policy is less important than opposing the other party.

Though the partisan situation may seem dire, there have been recent signs of bipartisanship. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, also known as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, had to be renegotiated several times to include proposals from both major parties. Nonetheless, it was eventually passed in late 2021, which enacted sweeping policies in areas such as access to clean water and internet, and with renewals to infrastructure within transportation and the electric grid. While somewhat controversial for its initial high budget, the passing of the bill and its support from both parties proves that even with the seemingly extreme polarization currently occupying

the Democratic and Republican Party, they are able to cooperate and function leading to bipartisan solutions, even if their relationship is strained, both internally and externally.

3.2- Who Is Responsible?

Throughout this thesis, Donald Trump has been pointed to as a major destabilizer in the Republican Party, and within American politics in general. However, pointing to Trump alone would be too hasty. Rather, it would be more of an inclination to point towards the decades, if not centuries of preceding policy which has shaped the Republican Party, and American politics, into what it has become today.

In their book *It's Even Worse Than It Was*, Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein point especially to the year 1978, and the election of House Representative Newt Gingrich (R-GA), as a major catalyst for the way the American political climate has developed. They continue that Gingrich's mission was to "unite his Republicans in refusing to cooperate with Democrats [...] while publicly attacking them". (33). Mann and Ornstein argue that this strategy, at the time considered radical, would come to define the future political modus operandi of the Republican Party. He would continue to deride Democrats through the 1980s, calling them "blind to communism (35) and using verbal attacks to upset voters, turning their attention away from the Republican party and directing their anger towards the opposition. In the 90s, he successfully convinced much of his party to vote against many of then-President Bill Clinton's new policies (39) and went on a campaign to convince both his fellow party members as well as the voters that Congress was corrupt and needed to be figuratively "blown up" (39). Concluding, they point to that while Gingrich may be responsible for much of the dysfunction in modern American politics, he is not solely responsible. Rather, they figure that the deep polarization between the Republicans and Democrats is rooted in a large mix of long-standing issues – including gerrymandering of voter districts, the New Deal program and Vietnam War, ideological sorting (where people are drawn to neighborhoods and cities where other citizens share their opinions and the party ideology flip. The asymmetrical polarization seen more recently, they argue, is more of a result of wanting to oppose the other party (52), in addition to the new media revolution in the 1990s and 2000s allowing for more screen time among the impressionable

population. As screen time went up but time spent on a specific channel went down, the media needed a new way to keep people's attention. They indicate that it evolved into more of a focus on "sensationalism and extremism" (62), which may have contributed to increased asymmetrical polarization. Most people like to hear what they want to hear, and do not particularly like being challenged on their fundamental opinions.

While Mann and Ornstein seem to point quite strongly towards Newt Gingrich and his presence between the 70s to the 90s, it is still relevant to point even further back in time. Senator Strom Thurmond has been noted as one of the fathers of modern conservatism, especially between the 1940s and the 1980s (Klein, 2020, 21). He was the figurehead of the Dixiecrat faction of the Democratic Party, which would eventually cause many Southern Democrats to flock to the Republican Party instead, securing the South as a republican stronghold and manifesting the conservative view on race policy. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, at his most notable in the mid-1950s, is often associated with the American fear of communism during the Cold War, which modern-day Republicans have repeatedly likened Democrat policies to. Indeed, resorting to the likening of arguably mildly-left wing policies as "socialist" and "communist" is a popular trope to denounce arguments against the left. The United States has historically, since the late 1910s, taken a hardline stance against communism with very limited exceptions. United States law even forbids members of foreign communist parties gaining citizenship, and that persons whose interests are considered detrimental to the United States may be denied entry altogether. Since the "Red Scare" of the Cold War the fear of communist agents has been a real worry for some Americans. While *de jure* communist nations still exist today, the threat of the Soviet Union has long since collapsed – and the threat of communism is largely gone, too. However, the modern accusations of left-wing policies as being socialist may be tied closer to "shit-flinging" than any real worry – it moves focus away from Republican policy and instead towards the negatives in the opposition, strengthening the Republican voter base and reducing the risk of anyone switching allegiance. Still, regardless of whether the utterers of supposed communist tendencies in the Democratic Party use their accusations as election fodder, scare tactics, or are genuinely worried, this method of tactic is not new.

Another tone which has continuously popped up throughout this thesis is the tendency of increasingly short-sighted political plans, and rallies not for policy's sake, but rather simply to

get elected. It ties strongly with Newt Gingrich's plan of non-cooperation, and it may have resulted in the election of leaders who rally not for their own beliefs or anyone else's, but rather simply work to get elected and subsequently remain in power. It would be a cliché to say that power corrupts, but one would be hard-pressed to find a public leader figure who would willingly step down from their post if not for some scandal, with few exceptions, such as those who retired or did not seek reelection in the wake of the insurrection on January 6th, 2021.

The structure of the American political system, unlike the methods of governing found in Europe and much of rest of the world, is based around the "First-past-the-post" voting system. This way of electing representatives, whether it be in local elections or the presidential election, essentially means that a voter votes for a person, as well as the party they are attached to. The system, objectively, should work quite well, with voters getting to pick the candidate they prefer. Still, there lies a risk that voters end up not voting for the party at all, but simply the person alone. This intertwines strongly with identity politics, as voters will pick whoever they feel resembles themselves, and their ideas, most. While it is a functional system that has existed for almost a quarter millennium, the idea of people voting for a person rather than a party also runs the risk of the formation of cults of personality. U.S. House Representative Jamie Raskin (D-MD) stated that the Republican party has devolved into "a cult of authoritarian personality in league with autocrats and kleptocrats and dictators" (Pengelly, 2024). He continues that "the Republicans break but they can't bend. In other words, there's no ability to accommodate other views because everybody has to follow Donald Trump, like a monarch." This ties closely to the point on the party line, where deviants are not accepted and are instead pushed in line, or pushed out of the party entirely.

As mentioned previously, Lilliana Mason argues mostly against Trump being directly responsible for causing a divide in the Republican Party. However, persons such as Mitt Romney and Liz Cheney argue that he is directly responsible. Lilliana Mason confides that while Trump is not directly responsible, he did appeal to emotion, mostly anger. This can be closely linked to identities and grouping. For example, according to House Representative Jack Kingston (R-GA), it was important for the Republican Party to establish a "brand", for example being against Obamacare (Mason, 2018, 49). Brands are inherently, and purposely supposed to be recognizable. It is likely that most people in the western hemisphere would recognize the logo of

a corporation like Google, Coca-Cola, or the Ford Motor Company and be able to name it. In this way, the Republican Party may have organized itself as a brand, in the hopes of becoming inherently recognizable (or at least more than they already were), around supporting Donald Trump. This strategy seems to be effective, and may have helped the Republicans win the 2016 election. However, what they may not have counted on, was Trump becoming such a massive force within the party afterwards. A would-be short-term plan by the incumbent party members to generate publicity and a certain image of their party over time turned around, leading to the man they put forward as the image of their party completely taking control of it, instead of being controlled more by outside forces.

In this sense, Trump is not directly responsible. Instead, the internal choice to employ Trump as the “brand image” for the Republican Party may have turned out differently than some members would have liked, with the resulting internal opposition as well as resignations, and subsequent party line. One way to see it is that Trump himself, while not directly responsible, was allowed to take precedent as the leader of the Republican Party, using his position to consolidate power. He was not stopped by the politicians who put him there, perhaps for fear of losing their own positions and power. As a result, he garnered internal support, and became the image of the Republican Party, advocating for the removal of anyone in opposition. A culture of fear may have spread, resulting in a reluctance amidst republican politicians to speak out – for fear of losing their position.

Adam Kinzinger, who sat on the Special Committee on January 6th together with Liz Cheney, pointed a finger to his Republican party-mates during his retirement speech in 2022, arguing that the refusal to acknowledge the insurrection, the censure of both him and Cheney, and the following controversy was doing it no favors (Sweet, 2022). Additionally, he also criticized the Democratic Party. (2022). He contested that not only the republicans have created such a culture of fear, but the democrats have as well. It has been proven that democrats have funded far-right candidates in the GOP to undermine the more moderate candidates and erode overall support (Linskey, 2022), and Kinzinger said that undercutting more moderate republican figures to destabilize the GOP, and subsequently bolstering support for democratic candidates, is a dangerous tactic that undermines democratic system of government. Kinzinger continued, placing specific focus on warning; “I fear that this great experiment will fall into the ash heap of

history.” (Linskey, 2022). Kinzinger is clearly worried about the future of the United States, making it very clear in this retirement speech. The practice of funding extreme sides of the opposing party in order to cause disarray and disorganization is a controversial and uncertain tactic, which is why he criticized the Democrats who partake in this practice for undermining the foundation of democracy. The previously-mentioned “art of shit-flinging” has been commonplace in politics for a long time, but actively trying to sabotage opposing campaigns by out-spending them to destabilize them is another short-term tactic that may result in worse long-term losses than short-term gains. As Kinzinger points out, destabilizing the opposing party could set a dangerous precedent, where more moderate candidates in both parties are pushed out in favor of more extreme and hardliner candidates which only serve to make bipartisanship even more difficult.

The reasoning for Kinzinger’s decision not to seek reelection was a multitude of pressures. Firstly, the declining population of his representative state of Illinois was grounds for a redrawing of the district maps, which would have reduced his chances in an election. Furthermore, his presence on the January 6th investigative committee, together with Liz Cheney, resulted in a difficult relationship with the rest of the Republican Party – and in the same vein, Kinzinger testified that he received several death threats targeting himself and his family, due to his work on the investigation. (Rai, 2022). While he did not specifically mention the death threats as a reasoning for his resignation, he did point out that America needs to “wake up”, and that such threats are disturbing and incite violence. Whether the threats were a major reasoning for his unwillingness to seek reelection or not, seeing a politician have their lives threatened because they refused to follow the party line is disturbing and certainly should never be normalized.

Back to policy and political terms, there is the idea of a “rallying point”. For example, after the September 11th terrorist attacks struck the United States, both democrats and republicans united around carrying out retaliatory strikes on the terrorist cells responsible. It gave way for an unprecedented era of bipartisanship, with focus being placed on efficiency, cooperation and an aim to act in the best interest of the people and nation. However, such a rallying point no longer exists. Even during the presidential election in 2012, it was difficult to find a rallying point around policy, with the occupation of Middle Eastern having become a subject of controversy.

Romney and McCain did not campaign much on populist issues, instead focusing on classic “right-wing” policy. While steadfast in line with their party’s opinions, this approach failed to garner much attention, perhaps leading to voter fatigue. Trump instead used inflammatory language, populist talking points, and took an approach which struck a note with the rural working class especially. In this vein, he managed to grab their attention, and pose himself as a leader to rally behind. Subsequently, he made himself the rallying point of the Republican party, and became a dominant figure of conservatism.

One could make the claim that the war in Ukraine could act as a political rallying point, but this is contested and controversial – with Democrats largely supporting aid packages for Ukraine, and Republicans being opposed. Democrats argue that Ukraine, being the second largest country in Europe and one of the largest producers of agricultural products, is an important trade partner in the international community. Moreover, its close ties to the west cement it as a future NATO-member, especially in the context of the war. However, many Republicans argue that funneling vast amounts of American money into a foreign country’s military undermines American sovereignty, and would be better spent on domestic policy, or simply cut from the budget altogether. It is a very different situation from the War on Terror, where the party seems to take the same stance as Trump. Whether it is rooted in wanting to protect the American economy or simply oppose the Democratic Party is up for debate, but it is still a notable example of how the idea of a rallying point has changed and may not be as much of a uniting factor in politics as it previously was. The U.S. Senate voted to approve a \$95bn aid package to Ukraine in April 2024, so while there seems to be an agreement between both democrats and republicans, it is a sensitive issue and is contested especially among republicans.

Regardless of who is pinned for the blame, Trump’s dominance has changed the Republican Party as a whole. It could be likened with Bill Clinton’s changing of the Democratic Party in the 1990’s. After having lost three consecutive landslide elections to the Republicans in 1980, 1984, and 1988, the Democrats were faced with possibly being considered out of tune by the general population. While it had been attempted before, Bill Clinton arose to the occasion, presenting himself and his party as “New Democrats” – still culturally liberal, but more fiscally conservative. This opened the door for extensive bipartisan legislation, including tax cutting policies, freedom of religion, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Enjoying support from many politicians in congress, Clinton molded a large faction of the Democratic Party into these “New Democrats” – while the faction still exists, it is in a much less dominant form as of 2024. Still, Donald Trump, similarly to Clinton, also molded his party into a faction largely of his own design. Saying “I alone can fix [the system]” (Jackson, n.d.). By putting himself on such a pedestal, he was able to consolidate power. Similarly to Bill Clinton, Trump presented himself as someone unlike the other politicians who were in power and was instead willing to publicly point out his opinion that the party was out of touch with the average voter. Though at his speeches during his campaign in 2016 he mostly pointed towards the failures of democrats, especially his opposition Hillary Clinton, he mostly presented himself as a voice for the American People, in his own words.

3.3- Election '24 and The Future

As of May 2024, the United States will be in the midst of gearing up for the 2024 election. The democratic platform has naturally selected Joe Biden as its frontrunner, and the republican platform seems poised to select Trump as its candidate once again. The primaries are still ongoing and Trump remains a very dominant force in the party, enjoying a significant following both from politicians and voters.

The United States House of Representatives appears to be in significant turmoil as of April-May 2024. Representatives seem to be quitting left and right, with Ken Buck (R-CO) calling it quits after repeatedly trying to convince his colleagues that Trump in fact lost the 2020 election, to no avail. Similarly, Mike Gallagher (R-WI) also announced his intention to retire at the end of his term, perhaps having been pressured to do so after refusing to vote to impeach President Biden. Continuing, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) recently filed a motion to oust her colleague, Speaker of the House Mike Johnson (R-LA), because he endorsed a bipartisan bill to avoid a government shutdown. Generally, the House seems extremely conflicted on what to do – with Trump likely to be officially selected as the GOP’s nominee for the 2024 election, the House seems to be struggling to find a stable path forward, with many representatives quitting, and reducing the Republican majority in doing so. The battle for Speaker of the House is by itself one of much turmoil – there appears to be significant policy differences which make picking a

speaker very difficult. Internal factions, little cooperation from democrats, and an ongoing identity crisis between the moderates and ultra-conservatives appears to make the selection process difficult.

Those Republicans who do remain, regardless of individual policy differences, are largely in support of Trump. Ronald Brownstein, a journalist and correspondent, argues that the parties are deadlocked, with both still having strong support and neither willing to back down or cooperate with the other. He also argues that the accusations against former President Trump likely will not result in any consequences, as his support from the GOP is solidifying and increased polarization is resulting in voters who are unwilling to migrate to the other party (Brownstein, 2023).

Additionally, the Republican “Project 2025” has been a topic of debate. The project aims to replace the existing structure of government with one more aligned with Trump’s values. With that, they aim to reduce the size of government, as well as limit congressional power to consolidate more power to the President, though they also seem to want to reduce the amount of power the government has overall. (Mascaro, 2023) The republicans involved in the project have long been critical towards federal workers, both those directly involved in politics and not, complaining that “[federal government jobs] are stacked with liberals intent on halting Republican agendas” (2023). Therefore, one of the aims of the project is to replace the workers in federal government positions with Trump-aligned allies, and ensure that the White House counsel is in agreement with the President’s agenda. The project itself, purposely or not, presents itself in a rather authoritarian way. It consolidates power to the President, aims to defund efforts within misinformation and wants to give less space for the press in the White House. Of course, this project is a collection of proposals, and former President Trump is not directly affiliated with it. Instead, it is aimed more openly towards any would-be conservative candidate, and establishes itself as more of a “how-to” manual that could, in theory, be used to change the structure of government. Either way, its authoritarian undertones are difficult to ignore, and it seems to want to significantly undermine the democratic process by making sweeping changes to consolidate power towards and favor the incumbent president.

Indeed, a different Republican Party is rising. Many of the more moderate candidates, and even some more conservative ones, have disappeared in favor of loyalists to Trump. There certainly still exists politicians in both the House and Senate who put their own opinions in favor of

protecting their career – but they are falling away, albeit slowly. The party itself is not necessarily more conservative – for example, when Liz Cheney was replaced in 2021 by Elise Stefanik (R-NY), the party found itself with an ideologically less conservative member, yet one more Trump loyalist. While Cheney was more ideologically conservative, Stefanik consistently voted more aligned with Trump, and more closely followed his values. The choice of replacing Cheney with Stefanik speaks volumes about former President Trump’s lasting influence on the Republican Party, with Cheney’s policies being generally more conservative, yet she was still ousted. Stefanik remained the preferred candidate, because she was outwardly pro-Trump.

Similarly, Trump supported football player Herschel Walker, as well as physician and TV-personality Mehmet Oz in their bids for Senate in 2022. This may have been an attempt at reigniting what placed Trump into the spotlight in the first place – using an “outsider”, who had not had a career in politics and was instead a pop-culture phenomenon. These candidates had little to no previous experience and no tenure in politics other than Oz serving on the President’s Council on Sports, Fitness, and Nutrition between 2018-22. They may have been selections which Trump had hoped would inspire the same feelings that people had seen in him in his Presidential campaign. Both Walker and Oz seemingly lacked their own policy, often mimicking or copying policies forwarded by Trump. Walker seemed to have very little policy content and seemed uncertain, while Oz appeared to have turned around on several of his opinions, including attacking his opponent for having business ties to China, even though he had previously enjoyed a partnership with a Chinese software company (Levinthal, 2022). This may have been a way to parrot Trump’s policies to better fit with the party line, as to not stick out and secure the voter base more effectively. Of the attempted senate runs, neither succeeded – both were relatively close battles, but Democratic candidates Raphael Warnock and John Fetterman defeated Walker and Oz respectively. The “red wave” that Trump predicted would sweep midterm elections in 2022 never happened - it is curious that the Republican Party continues to pick Trump-backed candidates, even after sustained losses in various elections. Alf Tomas Tønnessen argues that “Trump-supporting candidates were strong, but vulnerable” (Meyer et al, 2024). They often enjoyed a large media presence, and a celebrity status. However, they seemed to lack real policy, had unclear opinions on key issues and could not secure an election victory.

Trump has on several occasions been criticized for exhibiting authoritarian behavior, consolidating power around himself, and taking a “sole leader” position within the party. The Republican Party appears to largely have accepted this, gathering in line and rallying behind him, accepting his senate candidate endorsements, and largely agreeing with many of his statements. As previously stated, whether this is due to personal opinions of the members or a fear of ruining their career due to their disloyalty, in the way of Cheney and Kinzinger, is up for debate. Still, it is surprising that the Republican Party – a party which speaks so passionately about freedom of choice and American values has decided to rally behind such an authoritarian figure.

To see Trump’s dominance in a recent historical context, it makes for an interesting discussion to examine Nikki Haley in 2024 vs. Ted Cruz in 2016. Before Trump had established himself as a leading nominee for the Republican ticket in 2016, Ted Cruz was considered one of the main candidates for the Presidency. While initially slow to gain traction, his campaign quickly became a top-runner in the primaries, and would eventually collide with Trump’s campaign on Super Tuesday, when most states held their primaries. He won his home state of Texas, as well as a significant portion of the Mountain States. However, Trump took a majority in most states overall, including the entire West Coast, and the South. Still, competition from not only Cruz, but Marco Rubio and John Kasich was strong. It is a very different situation compared to the 2024 primaries. It is not uncommon for a political party in the United States to run the same candidate twice if they are still eligible for another term in office, but Trump’s influence is enormous – even with the controversy in the wake of his Presidency and especially the Capitol insurrection in 2021, he remains the figurehead of the Republican Party. There was much discussion in the lead-up to the primary candidate selections in 2024, notably controversy around whether Donald Trump would be allowed on the ticket or not, especially regarding his legal indictments, in addition to his own statements in his belief that he won the 2020 election – which would make him ineligible for a 3rd term, thus being unable to run in 2024. Still, regardless of his controversy, he has remained popular, and due to Biden’s largely accepted victory in 2020, he appears eligible. Trump’s only major opponent was Nikki Haley, after all other candidates withdrew very early on. Come Super Tuesday, Trump posted a lead over Haley, who proceeded to withdraw her nomination as well, leaving Trump as the sole Republican Primary candidate.

Though the primaries are still ongoing, he is almost certainly going to be selected, as there are no other viable options which could hope to achieve the same popularity in such a short time.

Trump is much more dominant within the party in 2024 than he was in 2016, then being seen as somewhat of a novelty and an outsider candidate. Now, Trump is seemingly the sole leader, and there exists a near cult of personality surrounding him. The party has evolved from being a gathering of politicians with similar, yet somewhat differing opinions on conservatism – feeling that their conservative policies were the best way for the country to move forward, but with some play in exactly how to go about doing so. Today, it seems like the entire party rallies behind one single person, and any dissidents are attacked, ousted, and thrown out of the party. Going back to Jeff Flake’s retirement speech in 2017, where he verbally attacked then-President Trump, Flake pointed out that “Sustained incumbency is certainly not the point of seeking office, and there are times when we must risk our careers in favor of our principles” (Nilsen, 2017). This point could be applied to both major parties, but the Republicans especially have been struggling with members stepping against the status quo, and subsequently either falling in line, quitting, or being pushed out. If Trump ends up winning the 2024 election and is elected president, it will be extremely interesting to see what will happen in the 2028 election, when the Republican Party can de jure no longer select Trump as their candidate for presidency - not to mention how he may continue to shape the party during his incumbency.

One such case illustrating Trump’s current power within the Republican Party is that of New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu. Sununu was an early supporter of Nikki Haley, but quickly turned on his opinions once Haley announced the end of her bid for presidency. During an interview with ABC news in April 2024, Sununu said that while he still thinks the criticism of Trump made in the days after the January 6th insurrection is valid, he supports Trump’s candidacy and added that for the average American, “Trump’s pending trials have become akin to reality TV” (Ali, 2024), saying that many voters either do not care or are supportive of Trump regardless of the charges and trials. Having previously said that Trump should end his bid for Presidency if he is convicted in any of these cases, Sununu has changed his mind. Of course, someone changing their opinion is not abnormal – what does seem unusual however, is the sudden timing. Once Haley dropped out of the race, Trump became the only candidate. Sununu

may have seen how Liz Cheney's career in the House of Representatives suddenly came to an end once she spoke out against Trump, therefore he quickly made clear his full support for Trump, perhaps as to not appear to deviate from the party line. This may hint towards Trump's influence over the Republican Party and its members, and one could ask the question whether Sununu's opinion on supporting Trump is his own, or just the one he "needs" to have. It could be a situation where candidates need to be in support of Trump, or face the end of their political career.

The conservative voter base seems to mostly accept the "new" Republican Party. There have certainly been migrations by voters going from republican to democrat in the wake of the events of January 6th 2021 and its investigation, but there have certainly also been migrations from democrat to republican, especially among black and Hispanic men (Contreras, 2024). The fact of the matter is that even with the changes in the Republican Party over the last ten-fifteen years and the increasingly divisive political climate in the United States, both major parties still retain a very large following and a dedicated voter base with Trump trailing Biden closely in the polls. Why the voter base appears to accept this divisive climate could make for an entire thesis on its own, but one could argue that the increased polarization and subsequently more difficult cooperation, more partisanship, and a general distrust in elected officials leaves voters with little options. There is a lot of discourse regarding the options when voting, especially online, where many seem deeply unhappy with both major parties. For many, voting for a third party is not a viable option either, as a vote outside the major parties only acts as "giving" a vote to the major opposing party, since the third party is unlikely to win. As a result, there seems to be an implied feeling of a lack of choice, where neither party is the ideal candidate but there is no other viable option available. This all results in a political climate which bears significant fatigue on all sides.

The Democratic Party is forwarding the incumbent Joe Biden for the second time – who, while popular among liberals, is in his 80s. Biden's moderate platform could make for significant bipartisan legislation, but some argue that he is too old to act in confidence, and that he should be replaced with a younger leader. The Republican Party is forwarding Donald Trump for the third time – the brand image, and leader of a much-changed party in which he has, with the help of others, consolidated power around himself. It remains to be seen how the 2024 elections play

out, but it will be of interest to see what happens to Trump. If he wins, he will certainly continue to reshape the party, likely intending to continue as the conservative figurehead. If Biden wins, will the Republican Party continue to keep Trump as its de facto leader, or will they act on the would-be losing streak and replace him, like they did with Mitt Romney and John McCain? Regardless, the coming time will be exciting, and seeing how the Democratic and Republican Parties will deal with the election results, whatever they may be, will be fascinating and will certainly influence their choices of future candidates and their policies for years to come.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, much of the material discussed indeed points to a changed Republican Party, one much different from just fifteen years ago. The most apparent change is arguably the dominance of Donald Trump. After his entry as the party's figurehead image during his bid for presidency in 2015-16, he has yet to leave its position as de-facto leader. Having lost the election in 2020, much to his dismay, the GOP finds itself now running with Trump as its preferred presidential candidate once again in 2024. Whether they will be successful remains to be seen, though it will certainly be an exciting, and likely eventful election.

The changes over the last two decades do however not begin with Trump, nor do they begin within those decades. Senator Strom Thurmond has been noted as the one of the fathers of modern conservatism, and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich has been pointed to by scholars as an originator of the strategy of verbally attacking and intentionally refusing to cooperate with the opposition, in the way of "shit-flinging". It is however also important to note preceding and related issues, such as the party flip which caused the Southern Democrats to flock to the Republican Party, and the Civil War, which led to long-time resentment and polarization between the North and South. These historical events lay at least part of the foundation of the long history of polarization in the United States, and their effects have lasted for centuries.

Moving into the 21st century, Mitt Romney was arguably one of the most prominent Republican politicians of the 2000s and 2010s. Having lost the Presidential election in 2012 to Barack Obama, Romney was seen a relatively moderate conservative. He incorporated several traditionally progressive ideas into his policies, and called for cooperation between the major parties. John McCain ran on a similar platform in 2008, with similar results. These moderate strategies and their resulting election losses may have spurred the Republican party to take a more radical approach. The rise of the Tea Party faction around the 2008 financial crisis, and subsequently more radical candidates coming out victorious over well-established figures in Republican primaries, may have led to a desire to appeal to a crowd which was tired of "establishment" figures and career politicians. Seeing the strong results of the Tea Party candidates, the GOP may have gone through with Trump's nomination to escape from their losses with Romney and McCain, abandoning their moderate platforms. At the time, Trump was

almost a novelty, and an outsider-candidate, much like Ronald Reagan. Trump shared many traits and policies with Reagan. Both celebrities, they used patriotism and nostalgia, while humorously deriding the opposing party to gather support and votes. Trump notably differed in his stance on trade, preferring American protectionism to Reagan's free market policy. Reagan is remembered with significant nostalgia as the president who improved stagnating economy and began to put an end to the Cold War. It may still be too soon for conservative voters to feel nostalgic towards the Trump administration, though how he will be remembered is fascinating premonition.

Nonetheless, Trump's dominance over the party would strengthen throughout his presidential term, though the GOP may not have predicted just how dominant he would become. The "MAGA crowd" represents a significant portion of the voter base, and the GOP is unlikely to want to let that established and loyal crowd go, even if it means giving up more moderate policies in favor of more extreme and partisan politics.

While both the Democratic Party and Republican Party have always had politicians relatively aligned with their major policies, Trump's influence seems to have enacted a strict party line. Almost all policies must be shared by all members of the party, or they must face expulsion. While Trump has faced critics in the past, long before his presidency, the critics from within the political sphere became very apparent in the wake of the insurrection at the United States Capitol, on January 6th, 2021. Liz Cheney, then chair of the House Representative Conference, outwardly criticized Trump, arguing that his acts were dangerous to democracy and that the country was "sleepwalking into dictatorship" (Remnick, 2023). Cheney was later appointed Vice Chair of the January 6th Committee, which aimed to investigate the events that led up to and transpired that day. For her efforts, she was effectively cast out from her own party – facing pushback and criticism from Republican colleagues, who argued she was a traitor. Her career in the House of Representatives ended when she failed to win her reelection in 2022, losing to the Trump-backed Elise Stefanik. Stefanik's political positions are overall more moderate than Cheney's, yet she is fully supportive of Trump – this could indicate that the current Republican Party may not be interested in real policy among its candidates, but rather wants politicians who will follow the leader unquestioningly.

Several other Republicans who previously worked in politics have also called it quits over the current state of the party. Adam Kinzinger, who was on the January 6th Committee with Cheney,

chose not to seek reelection for multiple reasons, one of which being that he had received death threats for daring to oppose Trump. Other examples include Representatives Ken Buck and Mike Gallagher, both retiring after facing pressure from Republican colleagues, and Senators Jeff Flake and Bob Corker, both not seeking reelection for similar reasons. Former Trump aides have also turned critical, including former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and National Security Advisor John Bolton, among others. Seeing many republicans continue to follow the party line under Trump regardless of the resignations and critics, with some turning on past opinions to better fit the republican narrative presented by Trump is indicative of an apparent fear of being ousted, and one may begin to wonder if continuing with Trump at the helm despite the losing streak in various midterms and presidential elections is a good move. Either way, the party may be more inclined to reconsider, or continue, depending on the result of the 2024 election.

Simply asking the question “who is responsible?” presents an impossibility. Throughout this thesis, many people and movements have been pointed to for various changes that have swept the Republican Party; Strom Thurmond, Newt Gingrich, the Tea Party Movement, Mitt Romney, and of course Donald Trump, to name a few. These men and movements are all, by some measure, responsible for various changes – whether by influencing the political platform directly, bringing a new policy or strategy to the table, or by forwarding candidates and winning elections. While many politicians, such as Cheney and Romney, have pointed towards Trump as the largest reason for the direction Republican Party has taken and its current state, scholars like Lilliana Mason instead argue that Trump is not directly responsible – instead arguing that he did not tear the Republican Party apart, he instead used a platform of conservative populism as a springboard into the republican political sphere, which conservative politicians saw as an opportunity to win the election. From this perspective, the blame lies with the those who allowed Trump to take the nomination and the presidency. This not only includes politicians, but also other key third-party actors, like the media. Fox News support of Trump likely helped him become, as well as stay a household name in the conservative sphere. Moreover, various social media outlets are surely responsible for at least some degree of the day-to-day polarization seen especially on the internet. Nonetheless, it could be the case that the GOP had not envisioned Trump’s current dominant grip over the party, but they did win the presidential election in 2016, netting the win they wanted at the time.

Some argue that the umbrella of responsibility is not exclusive to republicans either. Adam Kinzinger has pointed to democrats funding far-right candidates in the GOP to destabilize it, and democrats have been criticized for refusing to cooperate in partisan legislation just as much as republicans. It is possible to put the “blame” on various persons involved to varying degrees, but in the end, the responsibility lies with everyone, and no one. No one person is solely responsible – every historical actor has a degree of responsibility over how they have presented themselves, and how they have acted when faced with choices. In this way, Donald Trump is just as responsible for the current state of the Republican Party as the politicians who allowed him to gain such a dominant position, as well as those who allow him to continue to keep it. Similarly, the persons of the past who laid the groundwork for these events to transpire are responsible too. In this way, no one is truly directly responsible, instead it is an amalgamation of historical events and the acts of everyone involved that conflate the blame. The varying degrees of responsibility held by various key actors, from Trump to Romney to Gingrich, could likely be debated endlessly, though that would yield a discussion which would be, while interesting, ultimately fruitless.

Though the situation in American politics seems more polarized than ever, there is also some measure of bipartisanship. The passing of Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill of 2021, the recent aid package to the Ukraine, among others are signs that bipartisanship does still exist between the two parties, and they are willing to cooperate. Whether it will continue during Biden or Trump’s second term remains to be seen, but the recent and current cooperation certainly point towards it being a possibility.

To conclude, the Republican Party has indeed gone through many changes over the last decade and a half. These changes include a change in leadership, going from swapping candidates at each attempt at the presidency, to being dominated by Donald Trump. Its policies have arguably become more partisan, and its politicians follow a party line, perhaps for fear of their colleagues turning on them. Those responsible for these changes are many, and the responsibility is rooted in the key actors who made the decisions which allowed it to happen – and these actors are not only contained within the timeframe from 2010-2024, but reach far back to the history of the United States. Whether one person is “more” responsible than another is debatable, but the conflation of history has led to the current state of the Republican Party. While the party, and

American politics in general may seem more divided than ever, there are signs of bipartisanship, with recent bills enjoying significant support from both democrats and republicans. How both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party will continue to evolve is a compelling thought by itself. What types of candidates they will rally behind, how these candidates and their associates will lead and develop their parties, and how they will change the political sphere is an interesting prospect. It all amasses to possible discussions that will surely stay as exciting and relevant as ever.

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