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The Setting

Broadening the Presidential Talent Pool—for Better and Worse

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Every four years, candidates, consultants, commentators, and, yes, political scientists proclaim the historic nature of the current presidential election. America stands at a crossroads, we solemnly intone, and our nation is at a critical turning point. Usually we are wrong. Most elections are ordinary affairs. But not the election of 2016.

From the beginning, 2016 promised to be one of the most wide-open contests for president in all of American history. For only the second time since George Washington was chosen unanimously as the first president in 1788, it was clear from the outset that neither the incumbent president nor the incumbent vice president would be on the ballot. Barack Obama, like George W. Bush in 2008, was barred from seeking a third term by the Twenty-second Amendment's two-term limit, which was added to the Constitution in 1951. Most recent vice presidents have made a run for the presidency, but Vice President Joe Biden announced more than a year before the election that he would not be a candidate.

The 2016 election was also wide open in a different, more significant way. Never before had a major political party nominated a woman, a Jewish American, or a candidate older than seventy-three. Yet the two leading Democratic contenders were former New York senator and secretary of state Hillary Clinton, a woman (not to mention a recent first lady), and Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont, a Jew who was seventy-four years old. The field of Republican contenders was equally unprecedented for that party: it included three candidates with no experience in government (physician Ben Carson and business leaders Donald J. Trump and Carly Fiorina), an African American (Carson), two Latino Americans (Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida and Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas), and an Indian American (Gov. Bobby Jindal of Louisiana). By late summer, after the parties held their nominating conventions, the general election ballot guaranteed that the United States would elect either its first woman president (Clinton) or its first lifelong businessman (Trump). The sum of the two major-party nominees' ages was the largest in history: 139 (Trump was seventy and Clinton was sixty-nine). This guaranteed that on January 20, 2017,

the United States would inaugurate either its oldest or second-oldest newly elected president.

To demonstrate just how remarkable the 2016 election was in the breadth and variety of its pool of candidates, I review the record of the previous two and one quarter centuries of presidential elections to see what answers history long provided to the question of who can be president—that is, what kinds of people have any realistic chance of being elected to the office. I also describe and analyze how that record was transformed by the events of several recent elections, including the elections of 2016. Finally, I briefly assess the ways in which the broadening of the presidential talent pool contributes to and detracts from the presidential selection process.

Who Can Be President? The Constitutional Answer

The first answer to the question of who can be president is in the Constitution, which was written in 1787, ratified in 1788, and implemented in 1789. Article II, section 1, paragraph 5 states:

No person except a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the Office of President; neither shall any Person be eligible to that Office who shall not have attained to the Age of thirty five Years, and been fourteen Years a Resident within the United States.

Why the Framers chose to include this list of qualifications—thirty-five years or older, natural-born citizen, and fourteen years a resident—is hard to explain.¹ The recorded debates on presidential qualifications at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 are meager. The delegates labored through the first three months of the convention without any apparent interest in establishing qualifications for president. Then, on August 20, Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts moved that the convention's Committee of Detail recommend such qualifications. Two days later, it did: the president "shall be of the age of thirty five years, and a Citizen of the United States, and shall have been an Inhabitant thereof for Twenty one years."² On September 4, the newly formed Committee on Postponed Matters offered a revised recommendation, changing "Citizen of the United States" to "natural born Citizen" and "Twenty one years" to "fourteen years a resident." Although no debate or explanation accompanied Gerry's motion or either committee's recommendations, the convention unanimously approved the Committee on Postponed Matters version on September 7.

Why did the delegates decide, late in the game, to insert qualifications for the presidency into the Constitution? Although they never said as much, their actions throughout the convention manifested a consistent principle: a constitution that states qualifications for those who fill an office need not state qualifications for the office itself, but a constitution that states no qualifications for the electors must do so for the elected. In the case of Congress, the need for a qualifications clause for members was agreed on from

the beginning. Conversely, in the case of judges, ambassadors, consuls, ministers, heads of departments, “inferior officers,” and other public officials mentioned in the Constitution, no qualifications ever were stated or even proposed. None were needed, the delegates seemed to assume, because these individuals would be selected by constitutional officials for whom qualifications had been established.

The presidency received more varied but no less principled treatment from the delegates. During most of the convention they remained wedded to the idea that the chief executive should be chosen by the legislature. Because age (twenty-five for representatives, thirty for senators), citizenship (at least seven years for a representative, and at least nine years for a senator), and residency (in their state, in either case) requirements were included for members of Congress, the delegates saw no need to establish any for the president. They believed that constitutionally qualified legislators could be counted on not to select an unqualified president.

By midsummer, however, the tide of opinion in the convention clearly had turned against election of the president by Congress. Although it took until September for the Framers to agree that presidents would be chosen by the Electoral College, one thing was certain: however the president was chosen, it would not be by an electorate for which the Constitution stated qualifications. Hence, the logic behind Gerry’s motion on August 20 to establish qualifications for the presidency, the two committees’ prompt responses, and the convention’s willingness to adopt a presidential qualifications clause without controversy.

Such qualifications would have to be high, in the delegates’ minds, because of a second principle they deemed relevant: the greater the powers of an office, the higher the qualifications for holding that office must be. Just as senators had to satisfy stiffer eligibility requirements than House members, so would the president have to be more qualified than senators: five years older and five years longer a resident of the United States. As for the requirement that the president be a natural-born citizen, it was not only steeper than the unadorned citizenship requirement for legislators, but it also helped to solve a political problem that the delegates anticipated as they considered how to get the Constitution ratified by the states.

The Framers realized that the presidency they were creating was the closest thing in the new constitution to a king. During the summer, rumors spread across the country that the delegates were plotting to import a foreign prince—perhaps even Frederick, Duke of York, the second son of King George III—to rule the United States. So vexatious did the situation become that the delegates momentarily lifted the convention’s veil of secrecy with a leak to the *Pennsylvania Journal*:

[August 22] We are informed that many letters have been written to the members of the Federal Convention from different quarters, respecting the reports idly circulating that it is intended to establish a monarchical government, to send for [Frederick] &c. &c.—to which

it has been uniformly answered, “though we cannot, affirmatively, tell you what we are doing, we can, negatively, tell you what we are not doing—we never once thought of a king.”³

However effective the delegates’ squelching of this rumor may have been, they knew that the mere presence of an independent executive in the Constitution would prompt further attacks on its latent monarchical tendencies. If nothing else, they could defuse the foreign-king issue by requiring that the president be a natural-born citizen.

The final reason for setting a special citizenship requirement for the president was the office’s power as commander in chief. With troops at his disposal, it was feared that a foreign subversive serving as president could seize tyrannical power or lay down American arms before an invading army. John Jay of New York sent a letter to this effect to George Washington, the president of the convention, on July 25:

Permit me to hint, whether it would not be wise and reasonable to provide a strong check on the admission of foreigners into the administration of our National Government, and to declare expressly that the commander in chief of the American Army shall not be given to, nor devolve upon, any but a natural born citizen.⁴

One cannot be certain when Washington read Jay’s letter or what effect it had. The record shows, however, that on September 2 Washington replied to Jay, “I thank you for the hints contained in your letter.”⁵ Two days later, the Committee on Postponed Matters recommended that the president be “a natural born citizen or a citizen of the U.S. at the time of the adoption of this Constitution,” a sharp departure from the Committee of Detail’s recommendation, made on August 22, that the president merely be “a Citizen of the U.S.”

How does the Constitution’s presidential qualifications clause affect the nation’s choice of its president? Chiefly by eliminating (in the 2010s) about 60 percent of the population from eligibility: the 146 million who are younger than thirty-five, the 11 million who are undocumented immigrants, and the 29 million who are either naturalized citizens or legal immigrants eligible for citizenship.⁶ Partly, too, by muddying the waters of presidential eligibility. “Natural-born citizen” is an especially murky term. At the time the Constitution was written, two meanings could be found in the English common law from which the term was borrowed: *jus sanguinis*, which held that anyone whose parents were citizens was a natural-born citizen, and *jus soli*, which held that one had to be born on a nation’s soil to gain this status. American law is more helpful. The Naturalization Act of 1790, for example, provided that “the children of the United States that may be born beyond the sea, or out of the limits of the United States, shall be considered as natural-born citizens.”

The effects of the qualifications clause were felt in 2016. Trump had risen to national political notoriety in 2011 by challenging Obama’s bona

rides as a natural-born citizen and demanding to see his birth certificate, fueling the so-called birther controversy. In an interview with Bill O'Reilly of Fox News, Trump said that even if Obama had an American birth certificate, "maybe it says he's a Muslim," mistakenly implying that this would make him constitutionally ineligible if it was true.⁷ (It wasn't.) A year after the president released the document in April 2011, Trump tweeted that "an 'extremely credible source' has called my office and told me that @Barack-Obama's birth certificate is a fraud."⁸ Trump claimed he had dropped the issue by 2016, but when asked in January by CNN's Wolf Blitzer where he thought Obama was born, he said, "Who knows?"⁹ In a YouGov poll released that month, 53 percent of Republicans answered "not" when asked if "Obama was born in the United States, or not?"¹⁰ By suggesting that Obama, an African American, was also a foreigner and a Muslim by birth, Trump arguably was stirring three dark strains in American political culture: racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia.

Trump also raised questions about Senator Cruz's eligibility to be president. Although anyone born to a U.S. citizen is automatically a citizen by birth, Trump argued that because Cruz was born in Canada and only his mother was a U.S. citizen, Cruz's eligibility was "very precarious."¹¹ "Ted Cruz is an anchor baby in Canada," Trump added, using a crude term to suggest that Cruz's mother wanted him to be born with Canadian citizenship.¹² Legal scholars found this argument to be "specious," the term used by former solicitors general Neal Katyal and Paul Clement in a *Harvard Law Review* article on the subject.¹³

Who Can Be President? Career Background

The answer the Constitution provides to the question of who can be president is not very useful. About 140 million Americans were constitutionally qualified to be president during the 2010s, according to the most recent census. Far more important historically was an unwritten requirement of experience that included recent, prominent service in government. Nearly everyone elected or even nominated by a major political party for president since the founding has been a current or former senator, governor, vice president, general, or cabinet member.¹⁴ Unlike the constitutional qualifications, this requirement was never debated at the convention, much less codified in law. Instead, it emerged from the habits and preferences of the American people. These habits and preferences were challenged in 2016, especially among Republican voters.

The relative value of each of the traditional career background credentials to would-be presidents has varied over the years in response to changing public expectations. In the early nineteenth century, secretary of state was the leading stepping stone to the Executive Mansion. Starting with Thomas Jefferson, four consecutive presidents held this office between 1801 and 1829. From then until 2012, however, only three secretaries of state

were even nominated by a major party, none of whom were serving at the time and none at all since 1884.¹⁵ Indeed, the only cabinet members of any kind to be nominated for president in the twentieth century were chosen about a century ago: Secretary of War William Howard Taft in 1908 and Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover in 1928. Hillary Clinton's experience as Obama's first-term secretary of state ended shortly after the 2012 election and, like that of Jefferson and the other early occupants of the position, was preceded by several years in elective office, in her case as a twice-elected senator from New York.

Military general was another much-valued credential for candidates seeking the presidency prior to the twentieth century. Washington, Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, and Ulysses S. Grant all became famous throughout the country as generals. After that, only World War II Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower was able to use his army service as a presidential springboard. Gen. Wesley Clark sought the Democratic nomination in 2004 and Gen. David Petraeus was a much-discussed potential Republican candidate in 2016. But Clark's bid foundered in the primaries and Petraeus's prospects were undone by scandal.

What modern cabinet members and generals have in common is that they are unelected officials, most of them inexperienced and often uninterested in political campaigning. This was no barrier in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when party leaders controlled the presidential nominating process and nominees did not campaign publicly to get elected. Subsequently, the rise of primaries, joined to new public expectations that candidates run rather than stand for office, placed cabinet members and generals at a disadvantage. Even former general Colin Powell, who was enormously popular in 1996, chose not to undergo the ordeal of a modern presidential campaign. "I never woke up a single morning saying, 'Gee, I want to go to Iowa,'" Powell told an interviewer.¹⁶ Hillary Clinton, in contrast, was an experienced vote seeker, having campaigned for Bill Clinton, her husband, in more than a half-dozen elections in Arkansas and two for president of the United States, as well as for herself in two successful Senate elections and a nearly successful campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008. Many of Clinton's political problems as a candidate in 2016 actually stemmed from her service as secretary of state, notably her improper use of a private email server and her hesitancy in responding to a mob's fatal attack on the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya.

Except for Taft, Hoover, and Eisenhower, every president elected from 1876 to 2012 was a current or former senator, governor, or vice president. Each of these offices allows candidates to make a distinctive claim about their qualifications for the presidency. Governors, like presidents, have been chief executives. Senators, like presidents, have dealt with national and international issues. Vice presidents, although lacking independent responsibilities, have stood first in the line of presidential succession and, in most cases,

were senators or governors before they became vice president. Even the Libertarian Party, which since its formation in 1972 had frequently nominated candidates with little or no prominent political experience, acknowledged the electoral appeal of traditional credentials by choosing two former governors to head its ticket in 2016: Gary Johnson of New Mexico and Bill Weld of Massachusetts. The added credibility they brought to the party helped to raise the Libertarian vote from its usual 1 percent or less in presidential elections to 3 percent.

Over the years, the persuasiveness of the competing claims by senators, governors, and vice presidents waxed and waned. Governors dominated presidential elections in two periods: 1900–1932, when four of seven presidents were governors, and 1976–2004, when four of five presidents were. Compared to state governments, the government in Washington was relatively unimportant during the first period, which preceded the federal government’s rise to prominence after the New Deal, and was unpopular during the second, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and Watergate crisis. Senators, in contrast, dominated the post–New Deal, post–World War II era. In the twelve-year stretch from 1960 to 1972, all eight major-party nominees for president were either senators or vice presidents who had served in the Senate. In 2008, both major parties nominated senators for president: Democrat Barack Obama of Illinois and Republican John McCain of Arizona. Both candidates, however, stressed their independence from congressional “politics as usual.”

The vice presidency became a leading stepping stone to a presidential nomination when the Twenty-second Amendment was added to the Constitution. By imposing a two-term limit on presidents, the amendment freed second-term vice presidents to campaign actively for president themselves. Richard Nixon in 1960, George H. W. Bush in 1988, and Al Gore in 2000 each won his party’s presidential nomination at the end of his second term as vice president. That pattern was interrupted when George W. Bush and Barack Obama chose vice presidents whose presidential ambitions were thought to be in the past and who therefore could serve them free from political distraction. “When you’re getting advice from somebody . . . ,” said Bush, explaining his choice of Vice President Dick Cheney, “if you think deep down part of the advice is to advance a personal agenda, . . . you discount that advice.”¹⁷

In preparation for the 2016 election, having sought the Democratic nomination twice before without ever exceeding 2 percent of the vote in any primary or caucus, Vice President Biden considered running again for president. But he badly trailed Clinton and Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont in fall 2015 polls and was actively discouraged from entering the race by most party leaders and by President Obama. When Biden was slow to take the hint (his son Beau’s dying wish was that he run one more time), Obama sent campaign aide David Plouffe to tell the vice president he did not want to see his career “end in some hotel room in Iowa with you finishing third

behind Bernie Sanders.”¹⁸ Soon after, Biden announced that he would not run. Restoring the previous pattern of vice presidential selection, both Clinton and Trump chose running mates—Sen. Tim Kaine of Virginia and Gov. Mike Pence of Indiana, respectively—who were young enough (Kaine, age fifty-eight, and Pence, age fifty-seven) that a future presidential candidacy was entirely possible for either or both of them.

Historically, presidential candidates from outside government made only an occasional appearance on the national scene. In 1940, seeking to thwart Franklin D. Roosevelt’s quest for a third term, the Republicans nominated business executive Wendell Willkie. In both 1984 and 1988, civil rights leader and ordained minister Jesse Jackson made a determined run for the Democratic nomination. In 1992 and 1996, another well-known business leader, Ross Perot, ran strongly as an independent candidate. None were elected, but a certain *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*–style romance seemed attached to the idea of finding a president outside the usual political channels. The October 1967 issue of *Esquire* magazine, for example, featured a large photograph of industrialist J. Irwin Miller under the heading “This Man Ought to Be the Next President of the United States.” The accompanying article offered a long list of university, corporation, and foundation leaders who were said to have the “honesty, high purpose, and intelligence to be elected president of the United States.”¹⁹

In 2016, the Democrats followed the traditional pattern, limiting their choice to two high-ranking government officials—Clinton and Sanders. Even the announced candidates whose campaigns failed to ignite fit the traditional profile: former governor Martin O’Malley of Maryland, former senator Jim Webb of Virginia, and former governor and senator Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island. “Make a virtue of her longevity,” urged the Clinton campaign’s communications director in an internal memo. “Embrace all the Clinton-ness—the forty years in politics, the decades on the national stage.”²⁰

The GOP went in an entirely different direction. None of the nine former or current governors in the race—including those who held the position in major states such as Texas, Florida, New York, Ohio, New Jersey, Virginia, and Wisconsin—gained much traction for their candidacies. Of the five current or former senators who ran, only Cruz remained in the contest as late as March 16. None of these high-ranking officials led in polls of Republican voters at any point during the twelve months preceding the GOP convention.²¹ In fact, the only candidates who ever did hold the lead in this period were retired pediatric neurosurgeon Ben Carson (briefly) in the summer of 2015 and businessman Donald Trump from that point on.

Trump’s candidacy was initially regarded as a “sideshow” by mainstream media outlets. On the morning of his announcement, “anchors on CNN and elsewhere openly doubted that he would actually run.”²² The *Huffington Post* refused for months to “report on Trump’s campaign as part of [our] political coverage. Instead we will cover his campaign as part

of our entertainment section.”²³ Yet Trump’s attractiveness as a candidate in 2016 stood squarely at the confluence of two roaring political rivers: the mood at his party’s grassroots and his iconoclastic, celebrity-based personal appeal. The ascendant Tea Party movement within the Republican Party that had helped the GOP win control of the House of Representatives in 2010 and the Senate in 2014 was not just anti-Washington, the national sentiment that had elevated governors above senators in most presidential elections since 1976. It was anti-government in all its forms. As someone who had never held public office, Trump could appeal to primary voters as a complete outsider committed to clean up “the mess in Washington” or, in his more vivid phrase, to “drain the swamp.” Trump was already well known as a best-selling author of braggadocious business books, a frequent talk show guest, the host of the popular NBC television series *The Apprentice* and *Celebrity Apprentice*, and an occasional character in blustery World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) staged confrontations. Former Florida governor Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton are “controlled by those people,” declared Trump, referring to wealthy individuals and interest groups. “Trump has none of those people. I’m not controlled. I do what’s right for the people.”²⁴ On the eve of the campaign, in a September 2015 *Washington Post*/ABC News poll, 58 percent of Republicans said they would prefer “someone from outside the existing political establishment” to “someone with experience in how the political system works.”²⁵ “Do you want someone who gets to be president and that’s literally the highest-paying job he’s ever had?” asked Trump, whose Secret Service codename was “Mogul.”²⁶

Trump’s freewheeling comments on a whole range of issues and rival candidates impressed many voters as evidence of “authenticity,” undiluted by normal political constraints. Exceeding the bounds of previously accepted political rhetoric, Trump dismissed Republican opponents Cruz as “Lyn’ Ted,” Rubio as “Little Marco,” and Bush as “low-energy,” and labeled Democrats Clinton and Sanders as “Crooked Hillary” and “Crazy Bernie”—all of which delighted his massive crowds and the hordes of blue-collar Republicans who supported him in the primaries. So did Trump’s promises to halt illegal immigration from Mexico, which he said “is sending people that have lots of problems. . . . [T]hey’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”²⁷ In addition to promising to “build a great, great wall on our southern border” and “have Mexico pay for that wall,” Trump demanded repeal of the North American Free Trade Agreement and a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.”²⁸ Of the “at least 11 million people that came in this country illegally,” he said, “They will go out.”²⁹ In the global war on terror, Trump declared, “Torture works. . . . Water boarding is fine, but it’s not nearly tough enough.”³⁰

To the white working-class voters who had gradually been moving from the Democratic Party to the GOP since Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968, the Republican leadership’s longstanding support for entitlement

reform, restrictions on abortion, an assertive foreign policy, and free trade was tolerable at best, objectionable at worst. These voters had supported nominees such as McCain, Romney, and the Bushes despite, not because of, the party orthodoxy on these issues. They cheered when Trump said that Social Security and Medicare “are here to stay” and “I’m not going to cut [them] like every other Republican,” declared that “millions of women are helped by Planned Parenthood,” claimed that former Republican president George W. Bush “lied” about weapons of mass destruction as a pretext for waging war against Iraq in 2003, and favored protectionist trade policies.³¹ With their income, security, and social status in gradual decline, blue-collar whites applauded Trump’s attacks on the “political correctness” that they saw as conferring privileged status on racial and ethnic minorities. As for Trump’s wealth and professed willingness to pay for his own campaign, these were widely interpreted by grassroots Republicans as evidence that he could not be bought.³²

Trump’s inexperience as a candidate who had not been vetted in previous campaigns was tested in the general election when the electorate included Democrats and independents as well as Republicans. Only 23 percent of Democratic voters and 40 percent of independent voters said they preferred “outside” status to political “experience.” When Trump attacked Clinton in their third debate by saying, “The one thing you have over me is experience, but it’s bad experience, because what you’ve done has turned out badly,” Clinton rejoined, “He raised my thirty years of experience. . . . On the day when I was in the Situation Room, monitoring the raid that brought Osama bin Laden to justice, he was hosting ‘Celebrity Apprentice.’ So I’m happy to compare.”³³ As Trump’s performance demonstrated in all three fall debates, during which he had to hold the floor for a combined two hours as compared with the relatively few and scattered minutes that were his share of the multicandidate Republican primary debates, his knowledge of public policy appeared skin deep at best. Indeed, the one aspect of the presidency Trump seemed to look forward to—the one most closely related to his business career—was negotiating deals with foreign leaders.³⁴

None of these limitations prevented Trump from being elected president. Many voters cut him the kind of slack concerning language and behavior that they more readily accord to celebrities from the entertainment world (not to mention the world of professional wrestling) than to career politicians. “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose voters,” he claimed, an exaggeration that contained a grain of truth.³⁵ To be sure, election day exit polls showed that among voters who regarded having “the right experience” for the office as “the most important candidate quality” in making their choice, 90 percent supported Clinton. By contrast, only 8 percent of those voters supported Trump. But among the roughly twice as many people who placed the highest value on electing the candidate who would bring “needed change” in government, 83 percent voted for Trump, compared to the 14 percent who voted for Clinton.

Remarkably, 20 percent of those who said Trump lacks “the temperament to serve effectively as president” voted for him, along with 21 percent of those who said he is not “honest and trustworthy” and 18 percent of those who said he is not “qualified to be president.”³⁶

Who Can Be President? Social Background

Even among those potential presidential candidates with the requisite career background to be taken seriously, a further set of criteria long defined the field of eligible contenders: the social background characteristics traditionally associated with presidents.

From the first presidential election in 1788 to the fifty-fifth presidential election in 2004, every president—indeed, every major-party nominee for president—was white. In addition, all were men and at least nominally Christian. All were older than forty and younger than seventy at the time of their inauguration. Taken together, barriers of race, gender, religion, and age prevented more than half of the adult population and a large share of its political leaders from being seriously considered for the presidency.

Not every lesson from this long history was discouraging even at the time, however. Starting in the latter half of the twentieth century, a host of other longstanding social barriers to the presidency fell. In a book published on the eve of the 1960 presidential campaign, the distinguished political scientist Clinton Rossiter offered a catalog of historically grounded “oughts” and “almost certainly musts” for would-be presidents that included: “northern or westerner,” “lawyer,” “more than forty-five years old,” “less than sixty-five years old,” “Protestant,” “a small-town boy,” and “a self-made man.”³⁷

None of these barriers remained standing by year’s end. In November 1960, forty-three (not forty-five) year-old John F. Kennedy, a rich (not self-made), urban (not small-town), Roman Catholic (not Protestant) candidate with no law degree, was elected president. Subsequently, from 1964 to 2012, southerners Lyndon B. Johnson, Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush won seven of thirteen presidential elections. Five of the nine presidents in this era—Johnson, Carter, Reagan, and both Bushes—were not lawyers. Reagan was divorced (“an ought not to be” on Rossiter’s list of the country’s unwritten rules). The class backgrounds of these presidents could not have been more varied. The Bushes were born into wealth; Johnson, Carter, and Gerald R. Ford grew up in middle-class families; and Nixon, Reagan, Clinton, and Obama were sons of the working class. Obama was African American. Two women, Democratic representative Geraldine Ferraro of New York in 1984 and Republican governor Sarah Palin of Alaska in 2008, were nominated by their party for vice president in this period and one, Hillary Clinton, nearly won the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008. In 2016, Ted Cruz said that if he secured the GOP nomination, his running mate would be Carly Fiorina.³⁸

Barriers typically fell during the half-century beginning in 1960 in one of four ways, most of which were relevant to the 2016 election: vice presidential succession, changing social tolerance, facing the issue, and positive bias.

Vice Presidential Succession

Vice presidential succession to the presidency was one means of toppling social barriers to the presidency. After Whig Party nominee Zachary Taylor of Louisiana was elected in 1848, no southerner was nominated for president by a major party for more than a century. Intense opposition among southern whites to the nationally popular civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s made it seem even less likely that either the Republicans or Democrats would nominate a southerner any time soon. The vice presidency, however, was a different matter. Kennedy of Massachusetts added Johnson of Texas to the ticket in 1960 to help carry the South. Three years later, Johnson succeeded to the presidency when Kennedy was assassinated. Defying regional stereotype, the new president became an ardent champion of civil rights. By the time Johnson ran for a full term in 1964, anti-southern prejudice had nearly vanished from the electorate. Jimmy Carter of Georgia, Bill Clinton of Arkansas, and the two Bushes of Texas won six of the eight presidential elections between 1976 and 2004.

Since Johnson, no vice president has succeeded to the presidency as the result of a presidential death—a remarkable record considering that from 1841 to 1963 presidents died in office an average of once every fifteen years. On October 28, 2015, the previous record for the longest period in American history without a presidential death—fifty-one years, eleven months, and five days, set during the founding era—was broken.³⁹ What accounts for the current era of presidential longevity? Regarding natural death, the marathon nature of the modern election process all but guarantees that whoever wins is in good health, despite a Trump campaign ad's farfetched claim that "Hillary Clinton doesn't have the fortitude, strength or stamina to lead in our world."⁴⁰ And if the strains of office wear down the president, the best medical care is always at hand. As for assassination, the security that surrounds the presidency has gotten tighter and tighter, shattering the old axiom that anyone willing to die in the effort could get close enough to the president to fire a fatal shot.

Changing Social Tolerance

The second way social barriers have fallen is through growing social tolerance. Like being a southerner, being divorced was long considered a disqualifier for the presidency. As recently as a half-century ago, when Democratic nominee Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson was defeated in 1952 and 1956, and Gov. Nelson Rockefeller of New York unsuccessfully

sought the Republican nomination in 1964 and 1968, divorce proved an insuperable obstacle to presidential candidates. In 1980, however, Reagan was elected president with scarcely a hint that his divorce from actress Jane Wyman should be held against him. Society's tolerance for divorce had grown so great during the late 1960s and 1970s that it was no longer a barrier by the time Reagan ran.

Trump's path to the White House in 2016 was unobstructed by his two divorces. He paid a greater price in the general election for his many degrading comments about and behavior toward women—conduct about which Americans had grown *less* tolerant in recent years. Before entering politics, Trump had a long history of making dismissive remarks about women in public forums such as shock-jock Howard Stern's national radio show. (He even agreed with Stern's characterization of daughter Ivanka as "a piece of ass.")⁴¹ In September 2016, a Clinton campaign ad showed young girls looking in the mirror over audio recordings of Trump making remarks such as "she's a slob," "she ate like a pig," and "a person who is flat-chested, it's very hard to be a 10." The ad concluded: "Is this the president we want for our daughters?"⁴² Most astonishing, in a video-recorded 2005 conversation with *Access Hollywood* host Billy Bush that became public in October 2016, Trump bragged that when he saw beautiful women, "I just start kissing them. . . . And when you're a star, they let you do it. They let you do it. . . . Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything."⁴³

Concerning religion as a social barrier, in 2000, Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore chose Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut as the first non-Christian nominee for vice president. In election day exit polls, 72 percent of voters said they thought Lieberman's Jewish religion would make him neither a better nor a worse vice president, and of the remaining 28 percent, twice as many thought it would make him a better one.⁴⁴ In February 2007, only 7 percent of respondents to a Gallup poll said that they would not vote for "a generally well-qualified person for president who happened to be Jewish." But more than half—53 percent—said they would not vote for an atheist.⁴⁵ Eight years later, the resistance to a Jewish president remained at 7 percent and the share opposed to voting for an atheist fell to 40 percent, with 76 percent of younger voters and 64 percent of Democrats (but only 45 percent of Republicans) willing to support a nonbeliever.⁴⁶

In 2016, Bernie Sanders became the first Jewish candidate to win a presidential primary or caucus by sweeping to victory in New Hampshire and going on to win twenty-two more contests, finishing a strong second in the battle for the Democratic nomination. Sanders's Jewishness proved no obstacle. Nor, at least among Democrats, did his expressed decision to be "not actively involved in organized religion" as an adult or his answer to late-night television host Jimmy Kimmel's question about whether he believed in God: "What my spirituality is about is that we're all in this together and it's not a good thing to believe that as human beings we can

turn our backs on the suffering of other people. This is not Judaism.”⁴⁷ In a general election, however, Sanders’s self-identification as a strongly secular person might have cost him substantially more votes than his Jewish upbringing.

Looking ahead, additional historical barriers to a major-party nomination for the presidency may be cracking in the face of changing social attitudes. In 2015, 74 percent of Americans said they would be willing to vote for a “gay or lesbian” candidate for president, up from 67 percent in 2011. Among younger voters and Democrats, the proportion was even higher: 85 percent and 84 percent, respectively; among Republicans, it was 61 percent. As a result of the 2016 election, one openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) senator and six LGBT representatives were serving in Congress—all of them Democrats. Oregon elected the nation’s first bisexual governor, Democrat Kate Brown.

In the same 2015 poll, 60 percent of respondents said they would be willing to vote for a Muslim for president. Again, the numbers for young voters (76 percent) and Democrats (73 percent) were considerably higher than for other groups, and that still left 38 percent of all voters (and 55 percent of Republicans) whose views were consistent with Republican contender Ben Carson’s statement that “I would not advocate that we put a Muslim in charge of this nation.”⁴⁸ Three Muslims, all of them House Democrats, were elected to the 115th Congress. One might reasonably forecast that if present trends continue (always a dangerous assumption), at some point in the future, as younger cohorts replace older ones in the electorate and more members of these historically disfavored groups win prominent elective office, the nation will regard without prejudice its first atheist, LGBT, and Muslim candidates for president.

Facing the Issue

Facing public prejudices squarely was the strategy John F. Kennedy employed to overcome widespread prejudice against a different religious group, Roman Catholics, in 1960. Although adherence to Protestant Christianity was a requirement for office in several states at the time of the nation’s founding, the Constitutional Convention voted unanimously that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” In practice, however, all thirty-four presidents from Washington to Eisenhower had been Protestants, at least in name.

Kennedy’s strategy, unusual in an era when entering presidential primaries was generally regarded as a sign of political weakness, was to enter several in order to convince the leaders of his party (many of them Catholic themselves) that a Catholic could win. In the midst of his crucial primary campaign in overwhelmingly Protestant West Virginia, Kennedy told a television audience in May 1960: “When any man stands on the steps of the

Capitol and takes the oath of office as President, he is swearing to support the separation of church and state.”⁴⁹ In September, again with cameras rolling, he addressed the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, declaring: “I do not speak for my church on public matters; and the church does not speak for me.”⁵⁰ In 1958, 24 percent of Americans said they would not vote for any presidential candidate “who happened to be Catholic.” Soon after Kennedy was elected, that number fell to 13 percent and, by 1969, to 8 percent. By 2011, it was a negligible 7 percent.⁵¹

The candidate who faced the most difficult religious challenge after Kennedy was former Republican governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, who first sought his party’s nomination in 2008 and won it in 2012. In a 2007 Gallup poll, 24 percent said they would not vote for a Mormon. Kennedy’s mission as a Catholic in 1960 had been to convince voters that his religion did not matter. Romney’s challenge was different: to persuade white evangelical Christians, who expect candidates to speak freely about their faith and constitute a large share of the Republican primary electorate, that he was one of them. In a much-publicized speech in December 2007, Romney declared, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind.”⁵²

Age was another unwritten barrier to the presidency, less so for younger candidates than for older ones. The Constitution includes a minimum age requirement for the presidency but places no limit on how old a president can be. The voters had a different take on the matter. An August 2007 Gallup poll offered a national sample of Americans a long and varied list of social and career characteristics of potential presidential candidates and asked if each “would be a desirable characteristic for the next president to have, an undesirable characteristic, or if it wouldn’t matter much to you either way?” Of the twenty characteristics on the list, a majority of voters identified only two as undesirable. One was employment as a “government lobbyist.” The other was being “70 years of age or older.” Although an identical 52 percent of voters found both characteristics to be undesirable, 19 percent said lobbying experience was desirable, compared with only 5 percent who said this about age.⁵³

Unlike other social background characteristics, commentators felt comfortable raising doubts about John McCain’s age when he sought the presidency in 2008. (McCain was seventy-two). “McCain’s Age Is a Legitimate Issue” was the headline of one typical article; another was titled “Is McCain Too Old to Be President?”⁵⁴ Pundits trotted out actuarial tables attempting to prove that men of McCain’s age and medical history were likely to deteriorate or die during the four to eight years that he would serve as president.⁵⁵ Comedians added to McCain’s woes. David Letterman, for example, said, “He’s the kind of guy who picks up his TV remote when the phone rings.”⁵⁶

McCain worked hard to overcome, through words and actions, the political stigma of age. He chose to hang a lantern on his problem with

humor, joking that he was “older than dirt” and leaving “the old soldiers’ home for one last charge.”⁵⁷ More seriously, his campaign days were long and vigorous, and he asked voters to regard age as a proxy for experience. “My friends, I’m not the youngest candidate,” he told a Wisconsin primary crowd, “but I am the most experienced.”⁵⁸ In the end, McCain overcame enough of the concerns about his age to win the Republican nomination.

Concerning race, after two centuries of being closed to African Americans, the doors of the White House at last were ready to be opened when Obama announced his candidacy for president in February 2007. Americans had grown accustomed, at least notionally, to the idea of an African American president. “Colin Powell’s flirtation with a presidential run was a critical turning point in this shift in white attitude,” noted sociologist Orlando Patterson, “effectively priming the nation for the possibility of a black candidate.”⁵⁹ Steeply increasing numbers of constituencies with white majorities had elected African Americans to office, including Illinois, which sent Obama to the Senate with 70 percent of the vote in 2004.⁶⁰ In a February 2007 Gallup poll, 94 percent of voters said they were willing to support a “generally well-qualified” African American for president, a number that had risen sharply since 1937, when only 33 percent said they would.⁶¹

Most political experts assumed that Obama’s main challenge in seeking the Democratic nomination would be to win votes from whites. Yet his candidacy initially was greeted with greatest skepticism in the African American community. “You can’t take black people for granted just ‘cause you’re black,” warned activist philosopher Cornel West.⁶² The forty-two-member Congressional Black Caucus initially split down the middle between Obama and Hillary Clinton, with older members from the civil rights era, most of them representing majority black districts, supporting Clinton.⁶³ African American voters initially favored Clinton as well, by 46 to 37 percent in a November 2007 *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll.⁶⁴ Like the older black leaders, they doubted that Obama could receive enough white votes to be elected.⁶⁵ Consequently, Obama approached the January 2008 Iowa caucuses knowing that he needed to win the overwhelmingly white state to demonstrate that whites would vote for a black man for president. He succeeded, finishing first by a healthy margin. Right after Iowa, both candidates’ internal polls showed Obama garnering support from 75 to 80 percent of African American voters.⁶⁶ In the crucial January 26 South Carolina primary, Obama won nearly 80 percent of the black vote.

If Obama rallied black voters by first winning the votes of whites, he won these white votes with a three-pronged strategy that was part substantive, part rhetorical, and part symbolic. Substantively, Obama based his campaign on issues that transcended race, such as tax cuts for the middle class, expanded health care, and his early opposition to the war in Iraq. He downplayed issues that white voters tended to associate with black political leaders, such as poverty, urban blight, and affirmative action. Rhetorically, Obama emphasized the value of national unity. In his keynote address to

the 2004 Democratic National Convention, which introduced him to the American people, his theme had been: “There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.” Symbolically, Obama featured images of the white mother and grandparents who had raised him in his commercials, and never spoke, as Clinton sometimes did when referring to her gender, about the historic importance of electing the nation’s first black president.

Obama’s efforts to transcend race in his own campaign met their sternest challenge on March 13, 2008, when video recordings of some of his Chicago pastor’s incendiary sermons were aired. Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s declaration on the Sunday after September 11, 2001, that “America’s chickens are coming home to roost. . . . God damn America” was shown endlessly on broadcast and cable news programs and on the Internet.⁶⁷ Overriding his campaign advisers’ judgment, Obama chose the path Kennedy had taken in 1960 to address voters’ concerns about his religion: he faced the issue directly in a speech. On March 18, Obama declared that Wright had “expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic.”⁶⁸

Both candidates in the fall 2008 general election campaign between Obama and McCain worked to tamp down age and race as issues. Obama stopped referring to McCain’s “half-century” of public service, a thinly veiled reference to his advanced years. McCain consistently rejected his supporters’ advice to run attack ads linking Obama to Reverend Wright and publicly corrected a voter at a town hall meeting who said she “can’t trust Obama . . . he’s an Arab.” “No, ma’am,” McCain repeated four times. “He’s a decent family man, citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues.”⁶⁹

McCain’s age was a political burden on election day. In exit polls, 39 percent of voters said that age was a factor in their decision, and 66 percent of them voted for Obama. In contrast, race proved no obstacle to Obama’s election. From 1968 to 2004, an average 39 percent of white voters had supported Democratic candidates for president.⁷⁰ In 2008, Obama won 44 percent of the white vote.⁷¹ He did especially well among whites younger than age thirty, earning 54 percent of their support.

Remarkably, Donald Trump, who was more than a year older than Hillary Clinton in 2016, implicitly raised the age issue by questioning his rival’s “stamina.” He repeated the charge that “She doesn’t have stamina” in four consecutive sentences during their first televised debate and then, days prior to the third debate, insisted that both candidates “take a drug test,” the implication being that Clinton was relying on performance-enhancing drugs to overcome her supposed lack of endurance.⁷² Trump, who tweeted that stamina is “one of my greatest assets” and claimed in an interview that he saw “a person who is thirty-five years old” when he looked in the mirror, persisted in charging that Clinton was too frail to be president and implying that she was too old.⁷³

Positive Bias

A fourth historical barrier-buster in presidential elections has been positive bias. Although Kennedy's religion cost him some votes among anti-Catholics, it also won him support among Catholics proud to see one of their own contending for the presidency. In general, anti-Catholic voting hurt Kennedy in the South, and pro-Catholic voting helped him in the much larger and more populous North.⁷⁴ Similarly, Romney benefited in some ways from his Mormonism: he won strong support from the 2 percent of Republican voters who are Mormon, as well as raising substantial contributions from Mormon donors, especially in Utah.

As the first African American major-party nominee for president in 2008, Obama secured 95 percent of the black vote, up from Sen. John Kerry's 88 percent share in 2004. This prize turned out to be all the more valuable because black turnout surged from 11 percent of the electorate in 2004 to 13 percent in 2008. Obama also won 66 percent of Latino votes, a thirteen-point improvement over Kerry's 53 percent showing. The pattern was repeated when Obama sought reelection in 2012 and won 93 percent of the black vote and 71 percent of Latino votes.

Hillary Clinton's campaigns for her party's presidential nomination—nearly successful in 2008 and entirely successful in 2016—were distinctive because she is a woman. In surveys taken from 1937 to 2007, the Gallup poll found that Americans had become increasingly willing to vote for a “generally well-qualified” woman for president. In 1937 and 1945, only 33 percent said they would consider doing so, but that number rose to 52 percent in 1955, 66 percent in 1971, 73 percent in 1975, 80 percent in 1983, and 88 percent in 2007.⁷⁵ About 8 percent of voters in 2015 still said they would not vote for a woman, but their numbers were offset by the many women and some men who were eager to elect the first woman president. In part, this was because the ranks of women meeting the public's career background criteria for president had grown. As recently as 1976, no women served in the Senate and only one was a governor. By 2008, there were nine woman governors and sixteen woman senators, including Clinton, whom New Yorkers elected to the Senate in 2000 and reelected in 2006. By 2015, twenty-seven states had been led by a woman governor and twenty senators were women.⁷⁶

Feminists, however, argued that Clinton faced unfairly high hurdles when seeking her party's nomination in 2008 because of her gender. Facebook had a group with tens of thousands of members called “Hillary Clinton: Stop Running for President and Make Me a Sandwich.”⁷⁷ “Gender is probably the most restricting force in American life, whether the question is who must be in the kitchen or who could be in the White House,” argued Gloria Steinem in a much-quoted article.⁷⁸ Clinton herself protested against “the incredible vitriol that has been engendered” against her “by people who are nothing but misogynists.”⁷⁹

Clinton handled the gender dimensions of her campaign for the 2008 Democratic nomination in two basic ways. One was to embrace her identity as the first woman with a serious chance to be selected. Calling on voters to break “the highest and hardest glass ceiling in America” by choosing her, Clinton said in campaign speeches: “As I go by, shaking hands and meeting people, I often hear a dad or mom lean over to a little girl and say, ‘See, honey, you can be anything you want to be.’”⁸⁰ But Clinton’s other gender-inspired strategy was to claim leadership qualities traditionally associated with men, especially strength. For fear of appearing weak, she refused to join other candidates who had voted in Congress to authorize the war in Iraq in 2002 by saying that she had made a mistake. “Apologizing would have been especially difficult for a female candidate,” said one top Clinton campaign aide. “It would have made her look weak and vacillating.”⁸¹ In the end, Clinton lost the nomination to Obama but came very close. She ran strongly among older white women, but younger women and African American women mostly supported Obama. Just as Clinton was not the candidate of all women, however, neither was she just a woman’s candidate. Indeed, every group of Democratic primary voters preferred her to any of the white male candidates in the race.

In 2016, Clinton again faced overt displays of gender bias. Some attendees at Trump rallies sported “Trump That Bitch” T-shirts and Trump himself, after his second debate with Clinton, sneered, “she walked in front of me [and], believe me, I wasn’t impressed.”⁸² In her second bid for the presidency, Clinton decided to emphasize rather than downplay her gender, telling *Time* magazine, “This really comes down to whether I can encourage and mobilize women to vote for the first woman president.”⁸³ In campaign speeches, she argued, “One of my merits is I’m a woman, and I think that makes a big difference in today’s world.”⁸⁴ Clinton wove women’s issues into most elements of her policy agenda, including paid leave for new mothers, equal pay for women, and incorporating women’s rights into the nation’s foreign policy agenda. “If fighting for women’s health care and paid family leave is playing the ‘woman card,’ then deal me in,” she said.⁸⁵ Clinton’s website featured merchandise such as a “Make Herstory” T-shirt and “A Woman’s Place Is in the White House” throw pillows.⁸⁶

Clinton faced obstacles related to her gender in both the nomination contest and the general election. As in 2008, her main rival for the 2016 Democratic nomination ran more strongly among younger women than Clinton did, once again frustrating older feminists such as Steinem, who charged that young women were supporting Sanders because “the boys are with Bernie,” and former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, who said, “There’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other.”⁸⁷ Younger women, wrote *Washington Post* digital producer Molly Roberts, “see it as inevitable that one day a woman will occupy the [office] that is oval-shaped. So the necessity of having that occupant be Hillary Clinton, or of having that moment occur in 2017, feels less urgent.”⁸⁸ To them Clinton

was flawed by not having risen to national prominence on her own but rather on the basis of her service as first lady in her husband's administration, as well as by her status as a wealthy white woman, which in newer theories of "intersectional" feminism made her gender less meaningful politically because of her privileged race and class.⁸⁹ "It's not good enough for someone to say, 'I'm a woman. Vote for me,'" said Sanders soon after the election. "What we need is a woman who has the guts to stand up to Wall Street, to the insurance companies, to the drug companies, to the fossil fuel industry."⁹⁰ Others suggested that Clinton's "I'm With Her" campaign slogan was too much about her ambition to be the first woman president and too little about the concerns on voters' minds, thereby opening the door for Trump's counter appeal: "I'm With You: The American People."⁹¹ Nevertheless, older women solidly supported Clinton in the primaries, enabling her to run more strongly overall among women than men against Sanders in every primary by an average of 11 percentage points.⁹²

Many younger women rallied to Clinton in the general election, in large part because of Trump's over-the-top rhetoric and behavior. To be sure, Trump raised legitimate questions about Clinton's efforts—as "one of the all time great enablers!"—to discredit women who had affairs with her husband during the 1980s and 1990s.⁹³ (She called Monica Lewinsky a "narcissistic looney tune," for example.)⁹⁴ But Trump had been all too prone over the years to refer to women as "fat pigs, dogs, slobs, and disgusting animals" and, after Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly called him out on this in an early primary debate, said that Kelly had "blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever."⁹⁵ "Look at that face!" Trump said of Republican rival Carly Fiorina. "Would anyone vote for that?"⁹⁶ In the aftermath of his first debate with Clinton, Trump launched a barrage of tweets attacking a former Miss Universe about her weight. Concerning Clinton, he said she was "too disgusting" for taking a bathroom break during a Democratic primary debate, claimed "she got schlonged" by Obama in the 2008 election, and sniffed, "I just don't think she has a presidential look."⁹⁷ "If Hillary Clinton were a man," he added, "I don't think she'd get 5 percent of the vote."⁹⁸ "Donald thinks belittling women makes him bigger," Clinton said in their final debate. "He goes after their dignity, their self-worth, and I don't think there is a woman anywhere who doesn't know what that feels like." "Such a nasty woman," Trump replied.⁹⁹

In the end, exit polls showed that 54 percent of women voted for Clinton, even as 53 percent of men voted for Trump. Her margin over Trump among all women was 12 percentage points. This was about the same margin that Obama secured in 2008 (13 points) and 2012 (11 points), which led some observers to argue that Clinton did not benefit "much—if at all—from group solidarity among women."¹⁰⁰ This interpretation provoked angry reactions from some feminists. "What leads a woman to vote for a man who has made it very clear that he believes she is subhuman?" wrote *Slate* associate editor L. V. Anderson. "Self-loathing. Hypocrisy. And, of

course, a racist view of the world that privileges white supremacy over every other issue.”¹⁰¹

In truth, Clinton’s 48 percent share of the overall popular vote—3 points below Obama’s share in 2012 and 5 points below his share in 2008—meant that in relative terms she outperformed Obama among women voters. She did especially well among African American women (94 percent) and Latina women (68 percent). College-educated white women gave her 51 percent of their votes, compared with the 46 percent they cast for Obama in 2012. And despite her defeat in the general election, Clinton benefited enormously from Democratic women’s support in breaking the “glass ceiling” that had prevented all previous women from securing a major-party nomination for president.

Conclusion

The nomination of the first woman candidate for president by a major party in 2016—like the election of the first Catholic president in 1960, the first African American president in 2008, and the first southern president in more than a century in 1964—represents an altogether sensible broadening of the talent pool from which the United States draws its chief executives. So does growing public receptivity, as measured by public opinion polls and by nominations and elections to other prominent political offices, to the possibility of choosing future presidents without regard to their religion, age (as opposed to health), ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Historically, these and other artificial barriers have excluded large numbers of potentially excellent presidents from consideration on the basis of social characteristics unrelated to their ability to do the job. Vice presidential succession, changing social attitudes, positive bias, and facing the issue—sometimes in combination—seem likely to be the vehicles of change in the future, just as they have in the past.

To be sure, Hillary Clinton’s nomination did not represent unalloyed progress. Many voters were rightly uncomfortable with the dynastic implications of her candidacy. If Clinton had been elected in 2016 and reelected in 2020, it would have meant that by the end of her second term, the United States would have been governed by a Clinton or a Bush—four people from two families—for twenty-eight of the previous thirty-six years. (The same would have been true if Jeb Bush was nominated, elected, and reelected.) Few if any mature democracies have been led for such a long period of time by so small a number of families. But many less stable ones than the United States are familiar with the pattern of spouses or children of rulers succeeding them in power, constituting the functional equivalent of a ruling family—the Bhuttos in Pakistan, the Peróns in Argentina, the Bandaranaiques in Sri Lanka, the Arroyos in the Philippines, and so on.

The presidency was created in 1787 as a republican office, not a monarchy. But old habits die hard; in a sense, Americans have always been closet

royalists. Almost certainly, more Americans can name the sons of Prince Charles than their own senators. In this sense, the United States may have dodged a bullet in the form of de facto royal families when four of the first five presidents, including George Washington, had no sons. The one exception was John Adams, whose son John Quincy did become president—a cautionary event if one fears that political dynasties could all too easily have formed at the outset of the republic. Since then, the Harrison, Roosevelt, and Bush families have produced more than one president, and the Clintons came close. Looking ahead from the vantage point of 2016, however, most of the prominent women on the American political stage are, like British prime minister Theresa May and German chancellor Angela Merkel, leaders who have risen to eminence without family connections, including Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Gov. Nikki Haley of South Carolina, whom Trump appointed as ambassador to the United Nations. As a result of the 2016 elections, four additional women entered the ranks of Democratic senators, raising their number to sixteen and, when added to the five Republican female senators, to a record high of twenty-one women in that chamber.

The recent broadening of the presidential talent pool to include candidates lacking in governing experience is a more worrisome matter. Virtually without precedent in American history, the public's growing openness to political novices in the presidency originated in the late twentieth century, when frustration with government led many voters first to devalue service in Washington and then (especially among Republicans) to look askance at any experience in governing at all. Reforms of the political parties that devolved control of nominations from party leaders to primary and caucus voters, as well as the court-ordered easing of ballot access laws that made it easier for independent candidates to file for election, accelerated this process.

Trump's presidential candidacy came less than a quarter-century after the independent campaigns launched in the 1990s by another celebrity business leader, Ross Perot. Perot, like Trump, led in the polls for a period of time. Like Trump, Perot caught fire with his appealing performances in a debate setting. But like Trump, too, once Perot's snappy one-liners were exhausted in his first televised encounter with general election opponents Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush in 1992, the shallowness of his understanding of the challenges a president must address became all too apparent.

Despite Trump's claim that "I can be as presidential as anybody who's ever lived. I can be so presidential if I want," president of the United States is not an entry-level job.¹⁰² A candidacy based on appeals such as "I'm not part of that mess," "My success in business (or academe or the media or some other realm) proves that I can lead the government," "I'll pay for my own campaign," or (Trump's own words), "Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it" may sound good but are ungrounded in reality. Presidents need a

distinctive array of skills if they are to lead effectively.¹⁰³ Skills of political rhetoric and bargaining seem to be developed best by running for office and serving in government for a period of years. The same can be said of the subtle but vital capacity to sense the public's willingness to be led in different directions at different paces at different times. The challenges of administrative management are different in government than in the corporate or academic world. Success in the private sector may speak well of a person and usually requires some of these skills. But only politics and government require all of them.¹⁰⁴

Notes

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