

The Reagan Revolution: Coup or Reform
The Republican Primary Election of 1976

Nathan B. Gilson
History 542 D02: Liberty University

The Republican primary election of 1976 was a historic election. For the first time in the nation's history, Gerald Ford, the incumbent president, had never been elected by the nation. Therefore, Ford was running for election and re-election at the same time. According to Ann Compton:

The party didn't know quite what to do with an incumbent president who hadn't been elected but had been appointed president, and a popular California governor who had tried to run before and was amassing huge numbers of delegates.¹

Incumbents traditionally enjoy a major advantage in a primary election, seldom even being seriously challenged from within their own party. However, in many regards, Ford did not qualify as an incumbent president.

At the same time, California governor Ronald Reagan, who would enjoy a high degree of success in the 1980 and 1984 elections, gained widespread popularity articulating a new conservative vision for the nation during the 1976 election. While the so-called "Reagan Revolution" would not fully define the policies of the Republican party in the 1976 election the way it would in the 1980's and 1990's, its ideological construct was first presented to a national audience during the 1976 election.

The compelling question that naturally rises from a historiographical perspective is whether the Republican primary of 1976 should be considered an unprecedented run on an unpopular, incumbent president. One possible interpretation of the Republican primary of 1976 is that Ford and Reagan were essentially engaged in a primary election where both sought to establish themselves and their policy initiatives for the first time. This perspective treats the

¹ "1976: The Last Time Republicans Duked It Out To The Last, Heated Minute." NPR, <https://www.npr.org/2016/03/13/470271684/1976-the-last-time-republicans-duked-it-out-to-the-last-heated-minute>. (March 13, 2016)

1976 election as though a president had decided not to seek the nomination in the subsequent election, at which point, all candidates would be competing on equal footing. In this interpretation, the Reagan campaign can be viewed as mainly a reformation campaign, where a conservative challenger within the party rose to challenge the ideological paradigm of the party. The primary of 1976 was simply a step within the much larger ideological shift that began with Barry Goldwater's failed campaign in 1964. When viewed this way, Reagan was running against Ford's policies and ideology, but only because Ford was, in Reagan's perspective, not an incumbent.

The other perspective is to view Reagan's challenge in 1976 as a political coup designed to rapidly seize control of the party from the reigns of an unsuitable, incumbent President. Within this interpretation, Reagan would have found Ford's direction and leadership so unsuitable that he felt that Ford needed to be stopped despite his incumbency. The lynch-pin to answering these historiographical questions is the incumbency of the sitting-president: Gerald Ford. It is only then that Reagan's decision to challenge Ford in the 1976 election can be more fully understood.

Historically, even when a vice-president rose to the presidency due to the death of the president as had been the case for Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, Harry Truman, and Lyndon Johnson, there was little controversy at the following national convention. This was not the case for Gerald Ford, as Ronald Reagan mounted a serious campaign that came close to defeating a sitting president in a primary election. Ford's situation also cannot be rightly compared with Roosevelt, Coolidge, Truman, or Johnson, as all four presidents were declared vice presidential candidates in the previous general election, and their presidential running

mates had died while in office. Ford, on the other hand, was appointed by the embattled Nixon to replace the elected vice-president after Agnew resigned. Nixon then also resigned amidst the infamous Watergate scandal, allowing Ford to ascend to the presidency without having been elected as president or vice-president. In order to preserve the integrity of the office, Ford then pardoned Nixon to prevent the scandal from dragging out any longer than it already had. This chain of events certainly had a negative impact on Ford's candidacy, even though he had nothing to do with the scandal itself. Furthermore, as the only President to be sworn in without a single vote from the American public, Gerald Ford's situation during 1976 has no comparison in history.

The first key to understanding the incumbency status of Gerald Ford in the 1976 primary election is to evaluate how various stakeholders, particularly the Ford Campaign, Reagan Campaign, and the national media, viewed Ford's bid for the Oval Office. While individual citizens and citizen groups certainly have input into elections and their issues, the media and political campaigns have a tendency to shape the lens through which those issues are viewed.

There are two separate issues related to incumbency which normally factor in a political campaign. The first is related to the resources and media access that a sitting President has, which place him in a particularly formidable position. The President normally controls his own party's leadership and is able to use his position as national leader to command media attention, and manipulate the actual political processes of the nation to some degree, in a way which is advantageous to him. Even more significant is the influence that an incumbent has on the procedures of his own party, since they are internally regulated, and the President is

assumed to be the de-facto head of his own political party. That Ford enjoyed these traditional incumbency benefits is indisputable.

Incumbent Presidents are also in the position of needing to explain the outcomes of their policy decisions over the last four years. While challenging candidates can only point to policy ideas, incumbents can point to policy results. This reality tends to be a double-edged sword, as challengers can, and often do, run on the incumbent's record as much as the incumbent does. It is this aspect of Ford's incumbency that is especially telling, regarding the Ford candidacy of 1976.

Ford had never run for president prior to 1976, so there was some doubt as to whether he would even run in 1976. However, by late 1975, Ford had indicated that he intended to run for election in the 1976 election. On November 11th, 1975, David Broder and Jules Whitcover wrote an article for the Washington Post that seemed to indicate that they believed Ford was an incumbent President.² The article actually went so far as to quote Senator Brooke (R-MA) as noting that if the RNC failed to nominate a Republican incumbent, the election was being handed to the Democrats.³ This clearly demonstrated that at least some of the moderate elements within the Republican Party viewed Ford as an incumbent president, and not as running his own campaign for the first time. However, there may have been a political motive for Brooke so clearly identifying Ford as an incumbent. He may have been trying to discourage a challenge by Reagan, whose policies were not as palatable to the more liberal Brookes, rather than trying to represent his own perspective of Ford's campaign.

² Broder, David S. and Whitcover, Jules. "Ford '76 Unit Emphasizing 5 Primaries: American Party Seeks Candidates." *The Washington Post*, (Nov 11, 1975): A6

³ Broder, "Ford '76": A6

Additionally, Broder and Whitcover treated as noteworthy the fact that an incumbent president would enter every Republican primary.⁴ Incumbent presidents normally did not enter every primary, since they required only a handful of pledged primary delegates to secure their own nomination. As Shabecoff wrote in his November 8th newspaper column, “It is an unusual step for an incumbent President to submit to a substantial number of primary contests.”⁵ His entire article focused on the unprecedented nature of Ford’s re-election bid for President. Clearly, Shabecoff viewed Ford’s announcement that he intended to participate in the primaries as a sign of weakness within his party. Shabecoff even noted the special circumstances leading to Ford’s appointment as Vice President and subsequent elevation to President.⁶ Ford may have been concerned about his chances of winning the Convention without the aid of a large number of pledged delegates. It is also likely that primary elections were growing in significance and redefining traditional party politics of previous political generations.

Finally, the article makes allusions to the fact that the Reagan Campaign (although not officially launched) was much better organized and prepared than the Ford Campaign.⁷ Brooke discussed the organization patterns of both campaigns, and noted it as a significant source of Reagan’s momentum in Massachusetts.⁸ In the article, his quotations make it clear that Brooke believed Ford needed to campaign more actively and vigorously, and not take his nomination for granted. There was a certain pragmatism within the liberal Republican wing that led to their

⁴ Broder, “Ford ‘76”: A6

⁵ Shabecoff, Philip. “Ford Says He Will Enter All of the Primaries in ‘76.” *New York Times* (Nov 8, 1975): 1

⁶ Shabecoff, “Ford Says He Will Enter All of the Primaries in ‘76.”: 1

⁷ Broder, “Ford ‘76”: A6

⁸ Broder, “Ford ‘76”: A6

treatment of Ford's campaign as a different sort of campaign than the standard, presidential re-election primary.

On May 23rd, 1976, the New York Times published an article by R.W. Apple, anticipating the expected outcome of six primaries, including Oregon. Based on polling data, Apple predicted that Reagan was expected to beat Ford in all of the primaries except Oregon.⁹ Apple goes on to claim that Oregon was Ford's only chance to avoid an "embarrassing blowout" in the primary elections.¹⁰ There are two things that are interesting to note about this article. The first is the relative non-treatment of the fact that an incumbent president might be defeated by a challenger in all but one primary election relatively late in the primary cycle. One would expect more coverage to be taking place, given the unprecedented possibility that an incumbent could actually lose. Secondly, the article itself refers to Ford by name twice, using the honorary "President" once, while the other simply calling him "Mr. Ford."¹¹ This was most definitely a breach of protocol, and when coupled with the overall contents of the rest of the article, would seem to indicate that Apple saw Ford more as a challenger for the Republican nomination, than an incumbent president.

Therefore, the press was aware of the paradox of Ford's incumbency status and often confronted it head-on. From their perspective, Ford was an incumbent president, but an especially vulnerable one with special circumstances to consider. The fact that Ford had declared so early, entered all of the primaries, and had to actively campaign in order to secure

⁹ Apple, R.W. "Oregon Key Test in 6 Primaries Tuesday: Oregon is Key in 6 States." *New York Times* (May 23, 1976): 1

¹⁰ Apple. "Oregon Key Test": 1

¹¹ Apple. "Oregon Key Test": 1

the nomination were all narrative asterisks that indicated that the national media clearly saw the Ford campaign as atypical.

In a pre-campaign interview on CBS News' *Face the Nation* with Reagan in the summer of 1975, the assumption appears to be pretty clear on the part of Reagan and the press that both Ford and Reagan would be running for President in the spring election of the following year.¹² Reagan was very guarded and careful in his criticism of Ford during the interview, and while it was clear that he had differences with Ford in several key areas, Reagan most often opposed the actions of the Democratic Congress, at one point calling them the "most irresponsible Congress I can think of."¹³ As Reagan would continue to demonstrate throughout the Election of 1976, he was a party man, and was careful to limit his direct opposition of Ford to the primary campaign trail.

International leadership, the size of the government, and its spending were the major themes of the interview.¹⁴ Reagan specifically declined to blame any of these issues on Ford, but he also chose not to directly defend Ford's policies.¹⁵ Based on this interview, it seems clear that the ideology of the Neo-Conservative movement that Reagan would lead was already in place in 1975. Reagan's treatment of this interview in particular makes it clear that while the press wanted to frame his primary challenge as a coup within the Republican Party, Reagan himself was much more concerned with a more lasting revolution that would shift the entire ideology of the party to the right while maintaining the cohesiveness of the Republican Party.

¹² CBS News. "Gov. Reagan Talks Ford on Face the Nation." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SlgmpX8wmg>. (June 1, 1975)

¹³ CBS News. "Gov. Reagan Talks Ford."

¹⁴ CBS News. "Gov. Reagan Talks Ford."

¹⁵ CBS News. "Gov. Reagan Talks Ford."

Reagan's campaign ads also reflect his measured deference for Ford as an incumbent president with whom Reagan clearly had ideological differences. When Ford attempted to highlight the peace of the past two years, and to portray Reagan as a hawk, Reagan's ad responded by directly referring to the Ford ad, blatantly accusing the ad of deceit.¹⁶ Reagan's campaign accused Ford of negative advertising and incivility, attempting to highlight the philosophical differences between Ford and Reagan. At some points, Reagan actually attacked Ford directly as an incumbent, making allusions to the undue amount of power and pressure that Ford is able to place on certain delegations immediately prior to the Convention.¹⁷ Reagan mentioned Pennsylvania specifically by name, as a delegation that the Ford Campaign was manipulating.¹⁸ Despite this, Reagan made it clear that he and his campaign felt as though they would be able to operate within that framework.¹⁹

This is not to say that Reagan was not keenly aware of the paradox of Ford's status as both a sitting-president and an unelected one. One campaign advertisement focused on Reagan as a leader and a winner, clearly to be contrasted with the fact that Ford had not actually won anything outside of his home district in Michigan.²⁰ The ad then focuses specifically on Ford's policies, and suggests a rejection of the status-quo represented by Ford's policies over the previous two years, treating Ford as an unpopular incumbent president.²¹ The Reagan campaign sought to exploit Ford's unique circumstances in a way that they could selectively treat him as an

¹⁶ Associated Press. "SYND 8 6 76 GERALD FORD AND RONALD REAGAN ELECTION COMMERCIALS." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7ZpuFpalis>. (June 8, 1976).

¹⁷ Associated Press. "SYND 10 6 76 FORD, CARTER AND REAGAN ON THEIR CHANCES IN ELECTIONS." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ItvkXw_f48. (June 10, 1976).

¹⁸ Associated Press. "FORD, CARTER AND REAGAN ON THEIR CHANCES IN ELECTIONS."

¹⁹ Associated Press. "FORD, CARTER AND REAGAN ON THEIR CHANCES IN ELECTIONS."

²⁰ Reagan for President. "Ronald Reagan's 1976 Oregon Presidential Primary Promotional Film, 16mm." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idpitNWggHM>. (1976).

²¹ Reagan for President. "Ronald Reagan's 1976 Oregon Presidential Primary Promotional Film, 16mm."

incumbent. When discussing specific policies, Reagan pointed directly to Ford's policies and their results, a typical strategy when running against an incumbent. However, Reagan's campaign simultaneously cast Reagan as the "winner" with a proven record with voters, while Ford's national popularity was the greater unknown.

The Ford campaign also sought to exploit his unique position as an unelected incumbent, although in some circumstances for completely different reasons. Ford had the extremely difficult task of having to distance himself greatly from the Watergate Scandal, as it had greatly damaged the voters' perception of the Republican party. Ford's pardon of Nixon tended to cause many in the country to believe that he was, at the very least, an enabler and at worst, a co-conspirator. Therefore, while technically a sitting president, Ford also could not afford to remind the people of America how he got there. This required deliberate avoidance of running too strongly as an incumbent. Ford was also dealing with a limited term, having been President for less than two years, giving him very little to point to in the way of specific policy successes, since once again, most policies that he could brag about would lead inevitably back to Nixon, a place that Ford could not go.

Ford's advertisements reflect this conundrum. In his interview with the Press on June 6th, Ford is clearly standing on the White House lawn, although the shot is not framed in such a way to call more attention than is due to his current occupancy of that office.²² When Ford's campaign did portray him explicitly as an incumbent, they went out of their way to ensure that he was disassociated with the Nixon scandal. In his "Future" ad, released in February, the ad opens with footage of Ford being introduced as the President of the United States.²³ The clip of his

²² Associated Press. "FORD, CARTER AND REAGAN ON THEIR CHANCES IN ELECTIONS."

²³ President Ford Committee. "Gerald Ford 1976 TV Ad Future."
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBPjedGU_0E . (February 28, 1976).

State of the Union Speech emphasizes honesty and transparency in government,²⁴ a clear attempt to distance himself from Watergate. Ford's "Economic Recovery" ad also begins with the Presidential seal, and is shot in the White House, highlighting economic successes of the previous two years.²⁵ The "Peace" advertisement in the general election shows Ford in the White House, holding discussions while casually rocking in his chair.²⁶ The "Biography" ad seems to almost tack on the fact that Ford has held the highest office for the last two years, rather than treating it as a center-piece of his political career.²⁷

The Ford campaign, in general, seemed to be more comfortable running in the Republican primary as an incumbent than in the general election. His advertisements capitalized on presidential themes and Ford's presidential record more during this time period. This indicates that the Ford campaign felt it had less to hide, and more to gain within the relatively friendly confines of the Republican primary, where Reagan was not willing or able to attack the party at large, and therefore could not attempt to associate Ford with Nixon without collateral damage being done to the very party apparatus he was attempting to take control of. During the 1976 election, Watergate was a Republican problem, not a Ford problem, which meant that it was potentially a Reagan problem as well.

In his acceptance speech at the RNC, Ford immediately identified himself as an incumbent. He very clearly connected his own Presidency with the peace that the nation was

²⁴ President Ford Committee. "Future."

²⁵ President Ford Committee. "Gerald Ford 1976 TV Ad Economic Recovery." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWY3tgSr4NY>. (May 12, 1976).

²⁶ President Ford Committee. "Gerald Ford 1976 TV Ad Peace." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jogttrDTIZM>. (October 8, 1976).

²⁷ President Ford Committee. ""Biography" Gerald Ford 4President 1976 TV Ad." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPSJjwZUmik>. (October 7, 1976).

experiencing, which was a reference to policies that brought about an end to Vietnam.²⁸ Ford also deftly sidestepped his appointment to the presidency, by noting that Congress had approved “overwhelmingly” of his appointment.²⁹ As the people’s representatives, Ford was in essence, claiming that he had been elected by proxy, and was not truly unelected. His speech had one more reference to the Presidency, when he notes an inscription above a fireplace by John Adams. The remainder of his acceptance speech is typical of an incumbent president as well, as he highlighted the successful policies that he had implemented over the past two years.³⁰

That Reagan chose not to even attempt to use Watergate in his own primary campaign underscores the fact that Reagan was trying to redefine the Republican Party in 1976, not destroy it. In his concession speech, which manages to sound in tone as though it was not a concession at all, Ronald Reagan continued to revolutionize the Republican party based on ideological terms, rather than party identity. He stated explicitly the goal of communicating a new brand of conservative principles effectively to independent and democratic voters. While appearing totally supportive of Ford and the Republican platform, Reagan also clearly articulated his views for a strong and vigorous foreign policy.³¹ He avoided specific topics or issues, preferring to focus his speech on the threat of the Soviet Union and the Democratic Party’s platform. The manner in which the speech was constituted and delivered also furthered the redefinition of the Republican party along ideological terms, rather than traditional party

²⁸ Ford, Gerald. "Republican Convention Acceptance Speech." (August 19, 1976).

²⁹ Ford, "Republican Convention Acceptance Speech."

³⁰ Ford, "Republican Convention Acceptance Speech."

³¹ Reagan, Ronald. "Reagan's 1976 Republican Convention Speech." (August 19, 1976).

politics. Ford referenced the tight battle with Ronald Reagan as proof of the conservative principles of competition and free-market economics,³² demonstrating that Ford recognized that Reagan's challenge had begun to significantly influence the ideological trajectory of the Republican Party.

When viewed as essentially trying to redefine the Republican political platform ideologically, one could interpret the Reagan campaign as having been largely successful.³³ The foreign policy plank, which was one of the largest points of contention between Reagan and Ford, actually reflects a great deal of Reagan's ideology. For example, the section of the plank dealing with the Panama Canal states unequivocally that the canal should remain in the jurisdiction of the American government³⁴, a strongly held position of the Reagan campaign. Ford had been successful in using statements by Goldwater that were critical of Reagan's stance on Panama to erode some of Reagan's conservative base,³⁵ proving this was a critical issue of disagreement between the two campaigns. This illustrates that despite the fact that Panama was a definitive foreign policy issue on which the candidates had conflicting views, both candidates' ideology was being taken seriously by the party platform committee.

That the foreign policy plank was essentially a compromise position was illustrated by the policy on Rhodia, since a policy on Rhodesia did not exist within the Republican platform at all despite Reagan having strong positions on US intervention there as well. Still, it is significant that while running against a sitting president, a challenger from within the party would be a

³² Ford, "Republican Convention Acceptance Speech."

³³ Republican National Convention. *Republican Party Platform*. Kansas City, MO: Republican Party, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25843>. (1976)

³⁴ Republican National Convention. *Republican Party Platform*.

³⁵ Gopojan, J. David. "Issue Preferences and Candidate Choice in Presidential Primaries." *American Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 3 (1982): 523-46.

powerful enough force that his ideology and policy ideas would be incorporated into the platform at all. Normally, the sitting President would essentially write the platform for the party.

Weinberg states that the process of writing the 1976 platform had to incorporate the ideological differences between Reagan and Ford, and to attempt to reconcile them if possible, since the platform itself was adopted prior to the selection of a candidate.³⁶ The RNC platform was also written in a publically available format and neither candidate had extensive influence in the writing of the platform. The temporary alliances that formed around specific issues seldom divided along candidate lines, which led to a more homogeneous platform in 1976 than many other conventions, where a majority candidate might have more influence.³⁷ There was not even an attempt by either candidate's delegation to influence the process.³⁸ This again points to the reality that Ford did not fully enjoy the status that an incumbent seeking re-election would normally be awarded at the end the primary season. It is also without doubt that the compromise platform is, in part, due to the contested nature of the 1976 RNC as well. While Ford seemed to be in a stronger position when the platform was adopted, a Reagan nomination was still a possibility, and in order to preserve the unity of the party, the platform needed to be at least partially compatible with his ideology as well as Ford's.

Reagan's campaign was also indicative of a rightward shift within the Republican party which had begun to be visible during the Goldwater campaign of 1964. The Solid South had already begun to swing away from the Democrat Party. In order to quantify this measure, Black and Black specifically evaluate gubernatorial campaigns, noting which had become more competitive in the previous decade. They concluded that as elections had become more

³⁶ Weinberg, Martha Wagner. "Writing the Republican Platform." *Political Science Quarterly* 92, no. 4 (1977): 655-62.

³⁷ Weinberg. "Writing the Republican Platform."

³⁸ Weinberg. "Writing the Republican Platform."

competitive in the South, it was becoming more politically significant to Republican candidates.³⁹ Reagan was by far the more popular candidate in the South during the primary campaign, revealing that a new coalition of conservative Republican voters was beginning to form.⁴⁰ The turning point of the Reagan campaign occurred in the South, where he won in North Carolina, largely on the issue of foreign policy.⁴¹ While supporting Goldwater, Reagan had given a speech in Florida cautioning the nation not to turn over control of the Panama Canal, and this message played well in the South.⁴² As a result of his victory in North Carolina, Reagan's candidacy gained its legitimacy, especially after having lost the first five primary contests.⁴³

North Carolina gives some insight into Reagan's attitude toward his own primary challenge. After losing five primaries, many Republican insiders pressured him to drop his campaign in the interest of party unity.⁴⁴ They cited the facts that he was running against a sitting president, had lost the mandate from the voters, and was struggling to raise funds as reasons to withdraw.⁴⁵ Ford's campaign directly pressured Reagan at that point to terminate his campaign, emphasizing the risks of dividing the party and highlighting Ford's incumbent status and victories as the best reasons for him to be the Republican candidate.⁴⁶ What is significant at

³⁹ Black, Merle, and Black, Earl. "Republican Party Development in the South: The Rise of the Contested Primary." *Social Science Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (1976): 566-78.

⁴⁰ Black. "Republican Party Development in the South."

⁴¹ Brands, H. W. "Reagan's '76 GOP Nomination." HistoryNet. <http://www.historynet.com/ronald-reagan-gop-nomination.htm>. (December 4, 2015)

⁴² Brands, "Reagan's '76 GOP Nomination."

⁴³ Brands, "Reagan's '76 GOP Nomination."

⁴⁴ Brands, "Reagan's '76 GOP Nomination."

⁴⁵ Brands, "Reagan's '76 GOP Nomination."

⁴⁶ Brands, "Reagan's '76 GOP Nomination."

this time is Reagan's response, as he reportedly stated that he was willing to carry on his campaign as long as possible.⁴⁷

One possible explanation is that Reagan was simply speaking in optimistic campaign language, and since North Carolina was demographically different from the first primaries, he wanted to wait to see if the South would support his more conservative message before he prematurely threw in the towel. The other possible explanation is that Reagan greatly valued party unity, but only if that party would be united behind a message of conservative principles. As his comments to *Meet the Press* and subsequently at the RNC would prove, Reagan was more than capable of being a Republican Party man when the times called for it. That he declined to do so despite early losses seems to indicate that Reagan still honestly believed that he needed to present a more conservative alternative to the American people than Gerald Ford.

As another example of the shifting constituency of the Republican party, Reagan's campaign in 1976 was significant in redefining the Republican party in Texas based on ideological, rather than party terms.⁴⁸ Reagan ran his campaign in a deliberate manner to emphasize the ideological differences between himself and Ford, and to essentially define a different type of conservatism which was, in some ways, separate from the Republican party. According to Murphy, what is most significant about Reagan's victory in Texas was his "ability to champion big business and yet come off as a populist."⁴⁹ Traditionally, the populist movement had been strongly opposed to big-business, and had sought vigorous government intervention against businesses they believed were threatening to their own political interests. During the late 19th and early 20th century, the laissez faire economic model, as championed by

⁴⁷ Brands, "Reagan's '76 GOP Nomination."

⁴⁸ Murphy, Paul V. *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 1 (2011): 272-73.

⁴⁹ Murphy, *The Journal of American History*, 273.

conservatives, had normally allowed business to operate with little to no government intervention. This would seem to place “Reaganomics” squarely at odds with populism. What Reagan was able to do in Texas and across the country, was to incorporate the populist spirit which had been prevalent in the South, by redefining the enemy of the middle class as big government, rather than big business.⁵⁰ Reagan’s argument shifted the populist political perspective from being essentially liberal and seeking to find new ways of creating government intervention, to an essentially conservative movement that wanted to limit the power of the government itself.⁵¹

Reagan, the Solid South, and populism, were not the only forces which were beginning to redefine the Republican party; the Republican voter himself was changing. Among exit poll results, Reagan pulled his vote most highly from conservative voters, and his support among moderate and liberal republicans went down predictably.⁵² Conversely, Ford pulled most of his votes from liberal republicans, and less from moderate and conservatives.⁵³ One of the best explanations for Reagan’s ultimate loss of the primary election was due to his sporadic performance of non-economic conservatives, while non-economic liberals still supported Ford consistently.⁵⁴

During the 1976 primary election, in the four states that had open primaries, Reagan benefitted greatly by the voting of unaffiliated voters.⁵⁵ Reagan held a 54% to 46% advantage over Ford among independent voters; Ford held a significant (66% to 34%) advantage over

⁵⁰ Murphy, *The Journal of American History*.

⁵¹ Murphy, *The Journal of American History*.

⁵² Gopoian, "Issue Preferences and Candidate Choice." (1982).

⁵³ Gopoian, "Issue Preferences and Candidate Choice." (1982).

⁵⁴ Gopoian, "Issue Preferences and Candidate Choice." (1982).

⁵⁵ Hedlund, Ronald D. "Cross-Over Voting in a 1976 Open Presidential Primary." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (1977): 498-514.

Reagan among registered Republicans.⁵⁶ In those four states which had open primaries, this proves that Reagan generated the most enthusiasm from outside of the traditional party machine. The margin of votes among Democrats was slightly favoring Ford (52%) to Reagan (48%),⁵⁷ which would be expected from the more liberal candidate. This demonstrates that while essentially more conservative, Reagan's message was incorporating voters who were not traditionally Republican. These voting patterns also point to the impact of Ford's incumbent advantage of controlling the Republican machine during the primary season. Finally, it is worth noting that Ford only managed a slight margin among Democrats, despite being more ideologically left. These "Reagan Democrats" as they would come to be known, were a significant voter group in subsequent elections.

The selection of the liberal senator, Richard Schweiker (R-PA) as Reagan's vice-presidential candidate, was the downfall of the Reagan campaign. Rather than courting delegate votes from the more liberal northeastern states, it ended up souring conservative delegates who were a large reason for Reagan's earlier success.⁵⁸ The Mississippi delegation, which could have blocked Ford from receiving the nomination, did not and Ford was nominated by a very narrow margin.⁵⁹ In this political gambit to balance the ticket, the Reagan Campaign appears to have made a serious miscalculation: they failed to account for how significant and powerful the conservative coalition they had forged during the campaign truly was.

Ironically, the fact that Ford was a sitting president, and therefore was in the position of an incumbent entering the convention, had a lot to do with his eventual victory. During

⁵⁶ Hedlund. "Cross-Over Voting in a 1976 Open Presidential Primary."

⁵⁷ Hedlund. "Cross-Over Voting in a 1976 Open Presidential Primary."

⁵⁸ "1976: The Last Time Republicans Duked It Out To The Last, Heated Minute." NPR.

⁵⁹ "1976: The Last Time Republicans Duked It Out To The Last, Heated Minute." NPR.

primaries, there are very few regulations that dictate what is and is not able to be done in order to secure a nomination, and most of those regulations are controlled by the party itself.⁶⁰ Ford controlled the rules and procedures of the RNC, and therefore, his status granted him a large advantage.⁶¹ Entering the convention, Ford preferred not to resort to using all means at his political disposal to garner the necessary votes to secure his nomination,⁶² but he ended up needing them.

The Justice Amendment, passed by Ford's supporters, locked 939 of his delegates on the first ballot to ensure that they would not support Reagan.⁶³ After the convention, Robert Nakamura insinuated that Ford's manipulation of his power as an incumbent who controlled much of the convention proceedings bordered on, or crossed, an ethical line.⁶⁴ As one example, Reagan delegates were assigned hotels as far as 70 miles away.⁶⁵ Additionally, they were seated at the back of the hall, where an overhanging balcony enabled Ford supporters to dump trash on them and reduced their visibility.⁶⁶

Although Reagan attempted to amend the rules in his favor, with a rule known as 16-C, his attempt failed.⁶⁷ This rule change would have favored Reagan, as it would have given him an opportunity to speak directly to the convention prior to the nomination. Therefore, although Ford did not control the platform or the convention as much as his campaign may have liked,

⁶⁰ Shirley, Craig. "How Gerald Ford Beat Ronald Reagan at the Last Contested GOP Convention." Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-gerald-ford-outmaneuvered-ronald-reagan-at-the-last-contested-gop-convention/2016/04/22/6bed14ec-07cf-11e6-b283-e79d81c63c1b_story.html. (April 22, 2016).

⁶¹ Shirley. "How Ford Beat Reagan."

⁶² Shirley. "How Ford Beat Reagan."

⁶³ Shirley. "How Ford Beat Reagan."

⁶⁴ Shirley. "How Ford Beat Reagan."

⁶⁵ Shirley. "How Ford Beat Reagan."

⁶⁶ Shirley. "How Ford Beat Reagan."

⁶⁷ Shirley. "How Ford Beat Reagan."

they did have enough control to manipulate the proceedings in ways that clearly favored their candidate.

The primary election of 1976 was a key election for the Republican Party. Gerald Ford was an especially vulnerable, sitting president due to the circumstances which had led to his appointment. Reagan clearly seized on this political weakness, and it is debatable whether or not Reagan would have challenged Ford had the latter been elected in 1972, given Reagan's willingness to fall in line behind the front-running Republican candidate. Reagan's conservative message was a revolution from within the Republican ranks that would ultimately shift the party's ideology and constituency. His policies were the final fulfillment of the unconsummated Goldwater campaign promises of 1964.

Despite the fact that he was challenging a sitting president, Reagan's campaign was aimed at the ideological foundations of the Republican party itself. Ford was the representative of the establishment status-quo, and therefore was an ideological rival, but it was not Ford specifically that Reagan was running against. Reagan was attempting to reform the ideology of the Republican party, rather than attempting to lead a coup to wrest control of the party from its leadership. During the failed campaign of 1976, Reagan successfully realigned the populism of the Solid South with his own conservative principles. He also shifted the party away from its own isolation-prone progressive wing to a more strongly interventionist position more in line with his personal beliefs. Within this historiographical context, while the Reagan campaign of 1976 was a failure, the Reagan Reformation of the Republican Party in 1976 was a success.

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