


Book Review

Party Politics
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Kenneth Janda, *The Republican Evolution: From Governing Party to Antigovernment Party, 1860-2020*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022; \$120.00/£100.00 (hbk), \$30.00/£25.00 (pbk), \$29.99/£25.00 (e-book), xviii + 326 pp.: ISBN 9780231207881; 9780231207898; 9780231557160.

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In *The Republican Evolution: From Governing Party to Antigovernment Party, 1860-2020*, Kenneth Janda, an emeritus Professor of political science at Northwestern University, has performed an outstanding service to all who study American political history and particularly the history of the Republican Party. Drawing on his pioneering work in computer applications in political research, he has exhaustively identified and codified the 2722 planks in all 41 of the GOP's party platforms since 1856 and used them to chart the party's transformation over the nearly 170 years of its existence. As the sub-title of the book suggests, the transformation has not been a happy one, as the party has reversed most of its founding principles and become an anti-government force in US politics. However, while Janda's analysis is directionally correct, his analysis has certain vulnerabilities that readers ought to take into account.

Janda identified the changes over time in the party's principles by coming up with four primary headings - Order, Freedom, Equality, and Public Goods - that correspond to the principal benefits of government, as well as secondary headings of Government, Military, Foreign Policy, and Symbolic. He then sorted all of the GOP's planks into 114 categories under these headings. Of the 85 Republican planks on "Taxation" that have appeared since 1864, for example, those that favoured government action to increase revenue are coded under Order, while those advocating lower taxes received a separate code under the Freedom heading. It is a complicated but straightforward system that enables a longitudinal study of change across party platforms over time.

The title of the book is a bit puckish given that the history related here is one of inexorable devolution: the GOP's descent from political party to team to tribe to cult, in

Janda's useful formulation. Natural historians may define evolution neutrally as any cumulative change in organisational characteristics over many generations. But Janda clearly considers the Republican Party's transformation - from a party long dedicated to "promoting national unity while governing for the public good" into an anti-government party united behind the personalist rule of Donald Trump - to be an unambiguously retrogressive development that threatens the viability of American democracy (p.xv).

Not all of the changes in party principle that Janda tracks necessarily correspond to devolutionary developments. As he points out, in some cases parties have scrapped key principles because they became historically and socially outdated. A case might be made that the protective tariff, which had served as a key Republican economic principle as well as a point of patriotic pride for over a century, was abandoned in 1980 because it had become obsolete and counter-productive in a globalizing era.

But most of the changes that Janda documents represent the party falling away from its original principles. As he puts it, the Republican Party that had been founded "to govern the nation according to socially and economically progressive principles... eventually morphed into a reactionary movement aiming to turn back the political clock" (p.143). The party that once fought states' rights now embraces them, and Republicans have actively repudiated their former commitments to social and racial equality, fiscal responsibility, conservation of natural resources, and an improved quality of life for all Americans.

Nonetheless, a singular focus on platforms as "the most authoritative expression of party principles" (p.60) - as opposed to the approach of a scholar like John Gerring who also took account of hundreds of party leaders' speeches - can be misleading when it comes to the timing and circumstances of party change, however accurate it may be as an indicator of the party's ultimate direction. The clearest example of this problem comes with Janda's determination that 1964 marked the beginning of a new Republican Party epoch of ethnocentrism, in which the interests of white Christians would be elevated above those of all other citizens and enforced through an emphasis on social order, anti-intellectualism, and anti-government.

While many political practitioners would agree that this is where the party has ended up, few would agree that this characterisation fits the Republican Party as it existed from the 1960s at least through the 1990s. It is not the case, for example, that the 1964 Republican presidential nominee, Arizona senator Barry Goldwater, “reversed the party’s principles” (p.149). On the contrary, Goldwater had been in the minority of his own party in voting against the Civil Rights Act of 1964 - which more than four-fifths of Senate Republicans supported as compared to only some two-thirds of Democrats. Many Republicans considered his vote to have been not only a repudiation of the party’s heritage but also a critical factor in the GOP’s massive defeat, up and down the ticket, in the 1964 elections. What followed was a party-wide rejection of Goldwater ideas and personnel inside the party apparatus.

Janda is technically correct that the 1960 GOP platform contained fourteen paragraphs on civil rights while the 1968 platform “did not even mention civil rights” (p.170). But even a cursory reading of that 1968 platform shows a party eager to reclaim its Lincoln heritage, pledging a vigorous approach against poverty and other social ills from which “Minorities among us -particularly the black community, the Mexican-American, the American Indian - suffer disproportionately.” The platform vowed “Energetic, positive leadership to enforce statutory and constitutional protections to eliminate discrimination” and expressed “Concern for the unique problems of citizens long disadvantaged in our total society by race, colour, national origin,

creed, or sex.” For good measure, the platform also praised the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and promised to “refine this new law to make our immigration policy still more equitable and non-discriminatory.” Conflating the Republican Party of 1968 with the Christian nationalism of today is reading the present into the past.

Party platforms do often indicate the sentiments of activists as well as the establishment, and can provide a guide to where the party may be heading. But platforms are eminently political documents that need to be read in context - to determine whether, for example, the call for a constitutional amendment to balance the budget or ban abortions represents a widely shared view within the party or whether it’s more of an attempt to appease activists by offering rhetorical support for a course of action that the practitioners know is impossible to achieve.

These caveats aside, Janda’s work offers a useful angle on the Republican Party’s overall trajectory and critical turning points. And most readers will come away persuaded of the need “to restore the GOP as a truly democratic party in a two-party system” - a task that, Janda emphasises, can only be accomplished by Republicans who experience what he calls “a collective epiphany” that makes them want to reclaim the best of their heritage (p.245).

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BOOK REVIEW

The Republican Evolution: From Governing Party to Antigovernment Party, 1860–2020

By Kenneth Janda, New York: Columbia University Press. 2022. pp. 344

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Everyone knows the Republican Party of today is different from the one that first formed in 1854. The question is exactly how it changed and when that occurred. It is to this question that Kenneth Janda turns in his new book, *The Republican Evolution*.

Janda methodically takes on the task of going through every national Republican Party platform since the party's formation, coding each policy and looking to see just how much change has occurred and when those key departures happened. Unsurprisingly, the party has reversed its positions on a great many policies (as have the Democrats) in the past 170 years, but the nature of those changes is fascinating.

Roughly the first half of the book is devoted to this examination of platform planks. The reader learns, for example, that

- Republicans largely advocated for a protective tariff until the 1980s, when they became free trade advocates (until Trump's election);
- Republicans advocated for regulation of business until the 1930s, when they became opponents of regulation;
- The use of “God” and other explicitly religious terms in a platform was rare for much of the Republican Party's first century, even if it has become a necessity today; and
- As recently as 1960, the Republican Party advocated Electoral College reform to make that institution more closely mirror the popular vote, while in recent years the party has viewed such reforms as tantamount to corruption and fraud.

An obvious parallel to this research is John Gerring's *Party Ideologies in America: 1828–1996* (Gerring, 1998), which used speeches by party leaders, rather than platform planks, as its source text. Janda helpfully acknowledges this work and notes where his and Gerring's findings depart from one another, although they are broadly aligned. One important area of difference is that Gerring argued that the Republicans entered a “neoliberalism” era in 1928 and remained there throughout the twentieth century, while Janda views the party as having moved into an “ethnocentrist” era in the 1960s.

The Republican embrace of ethnocentrism—which Janda defines as “appealing to the norms, values, ideology, customs, and traditions of white Christians rather than seeking votes from the general public” (p. 172)—is the main concern of the second half of the book. Janda marks the first stirrings of this in party fights in the early 1960s, when a substantial faction of the party pushed to abandon Black enfranchisement in the name of winning over southern white voters. The Goldwater campaign of 1964, he notes, largely embraced this pivot, as did the Reagan campaign years later. Republicans began going

down this particular path, in Janda's words, "not because the electorate reversed its voting patterns but because the party reversed its principles" (p. 170).

The book then pivots to a focus on Donald Trump's presidency, which Janda views as having blended the party's existing (and ramped up) ethnonationalist program with something of a personality cult. (At several points he compares Trump to Jim Jones's People's Temple Christian Church.)

The focus on Trump is, of course, appropriate and necessary, although it does go a bit outside the book's data. The Republican 2016 platform was written at a time when Trump and his supporters were not yet in full control of the party's infrastructure, and the party famously declined to write a platform in 2020. Janda cites a number of conservative political observers who view Trump as having taken over the party and imposed radical changes on it, although Janda's own research in this book suggests that much of the transition had already occurred decades before.

One could quibble a bit with some of Janda's platform coding choices—he, for example, codes opposition to public financing of campaigns as "restricting elections"—but overall, he provides a very credible and transparent approach to examining just what the Republican Party has believed throughout its existence.

If there is a concern with this book, it's the disconnect between its first and second half. The first half is very strong, descriptive work; it also shows that there has not been one singular moment of Republican Party transformation, but rather several periods of shifts on a range of issues. But the second half of the book is far more normative in nature and singles out the party's changes under Trump—largely outside the data range for the first half—as being a dramatic shift from the party's previous practices and something that should be reversed.

The book would make a very useful addition to classes on party, ideology, and social movements, and it provides plenty of useful grist for discussions among undergraduate and graduate students.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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REFERENCE

Gerring, John. 1998. *Party Ideologies in America: 1828–1996*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.



The Republican Evolution: From Governing Party to Antigovernment Party, 1860– 2020

By **Kenneth Janda**

Columbia University Press, 2022, 344 pp.

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REVIEWED BY JESSICA T. MATHEWS

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Political analysts and commentators have variously traced the prehistory of the Donald Trump era to the rise of Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich in 1994 or to the presidential runs of the populist Pat Buchanan from 1992 to 2000. Janda looks further back in time and relies on history as written by the Republican Party itself, in the planks of each of its party platforms since 1856. He analyzes 2,722 party platforms, in which he finds ideas about what he calls the four principal benefits of government—order, freedom, equality, and public goods—and several secondary groupings, including military and foreign policy. The data set he produces allows him to construct what he sees as the Republican Party’s passage through three eras: an “illustrious nationalism” from 1860 to 1924, a neoliberal era from 1928 to 1960, and an ethnocentric era beginning in 1964 that favored white Christians over others and turned abruptly away from support of the federal government. He uses survey data to identify transitions and changes in voter behavior as the party morphed from a looser tribe into what it is now, something more akin to a cult. Janda makes no secret of his own preferences, aiming to “help restore the party to its former grandeur”—that is, to the nationalist spirit of its first era. But his analysis of the usually ignored planks of the party platforms reveals that the party’s current incarnation has very long roots indeed.

While many political practitioners would agree that this is where the party has ended up, few would agree that this characterisation fits the Republican Party as it existed from the 1960s at least through the 1990s. It is not the case, for example, that the 1964 Republican presidential nominee, Arizona senator Barry Goldwater, “reversed the party’s principles” (p.149). On the contrary, Goldwater had been in the minority of his own party in voting against the Civil Rights Act of 1964 - which more than four-fifths of Senate Republicans supported as compared to only some two-thirds of Democrats. Many Republicans considered his vote to have been not only a repudiation of the party’s heritage but also a critical factor in the GOP’s massive defeat, up and down the ticket, in the 1964 elections. What followed was a party-wide rejection of Goldwater ideas and personnel inside the party apparatus.

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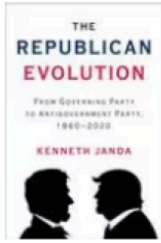
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The Republican Evolution: From Governing Party to Antigovernment Party, 1860–2020

Author: Kenneth Janda

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John Bruton, *The Republican Evolution: From Governing Party to Antigovernment Party, 1860–2020*

Author uses policy platforms prior to US presidential elections since 1856 to show how the parties swapped electorates

When I was the EU ambassador in the US, from 2004 to 2009, I devoted much of my working time to meeting members of Congress. Simultaneously, I devoted much of my recreational time to studying US history and the Civil War of 1861 to 1865. What struck me most forcibly was the extent to which historical divisions, dating back to the pre-Civil War era, influence voting patterns in congressional elections today.

While the issue over which the Civil War was fought, slavery, was abolished in 1863, geographic patterns of political allegiance dating from the Civil War survive to this day.

The big change is that the two big parties have swapped supporters. Districts that supported the confederacy in the Civil War supported the Democrats at the time but now support the Republicans.

A major turning point occurred at the Democratic Convention of 1948 when Hubert Humphrey persuaded delegates to put a pro-civil-rights plank in their platform for that year

Another turning point was the Republican Convention of 1964 when Barry Goldwater got his party to endorse policies that would minimise the federal government's role in the economy. Traditionally, Democrats had supported states' rights. Now that policy has been adopted by the Republicans, as we are seeing on the abortion issue.

Voting patterns dating back to American Civil War can still be observed at local level, within states. The areas of the south where slavery was prevalent, and which were Democrat in the 1860s, are solid Republican today. The prevalence of slavery was influenced by the type of farming that predominated locally. Cotton growing required a lot of labour, so cotton-growing areas had a lot of slaves. Mixed farming areas required fewer, if any, slaves.

Mixed farming was practised in the eastern part of Alabama, so that part of the state tended to support the Union and favoured the abolition of slavery. A similar pattern can be discerned in Tennessee. This can be observed in the political geography of the southern states up to the present day, with Democrats winning support in the areas that were Republican in the 1860s, and vice versa.

In the post-Civil War era, the Democratic Party supported states' rights. This was because it did not want federal laws to be used to grant civil rights, notably voting rights, to African Americans. In contrast, Republicans insisted on a strong role for the federal government in promoting voting rights and land redistribution.

Gradually, Republicans moved into the political territory previously occupied by the Democrats. As Democrats won new voters among the expanding work forces in the industrialising northeast, the Republicans had to look elsewhere for votes, notably in the previously solidly Democratic states of the old confederacy.

The Republican Evolution: From Governing Party to Antigovernment Party, 1860–2020 attempts to quantify the timeline, and the turning points, in this journey of the two big parties into one another's heartlands. Kenneth Janda uses the policy platform published before each presidential election since 1856 to illustrate how the parties swapped electorates.

Little attention is given by the European media to the content of the policy platforms of the two US parties. There is a widespread assumption in Europe that, once the election is over, the planks in the platform will be ignored. Some planks may indeed be ignored afterwards, but, generally speaking, the pre-election platforms are a good guide to party behaviour after the election.

The wording of particular planks in the platform is often hard-fought. An attempt to renege on a plank in the party platform would be resisted strongly by the interests within the party who had had it included in the first place. Bargaining can lead to very long platforms. For example, the Democratic platform for 2020 ran to more than 42,000 words. In contrast, for the first time in more than a century, the Republicans had no platform at all in 2020.

The outgoing president, Donald Trump, wanted to be seen to do things differently from his predecessors. He did not have the attention span to wade through a 60-page document. Neither did he want to be constrained by any document composed by party "elites", for whom he had no time. This was a signal of his authoritarian tendency, which has since become more and more obvious.

Another topic the book touches on is the forces which have made American politics much more polarised. A major contributor was the decision, in 1987, to abolish the "Fairness Doctrine", by which the US Federal Communications Commission required cable networks to present political issues "honestly and equitably".

There is much fascinating, even entertaining material in this book. It would reach a wider audience if substantially rewritten to add some colour.

John Bruton is a former taoiseach and former EU ambassador to the United States