

Donald Trump's 2016 presidential run, explained

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Donald Trump is one of the dozen or so Republican candidates vying for the presidency in 2016. True to his celebrity background in the entertainment industry, Trump has a talent for garnering attention — and he's taken the GOP field by storm.

Donald Trump is a celebrity candidate who Republicans fear will cost them the White House

Billionaire Donald Trump surprised everyone by surging to the front of the Republican primary pack this spring. He shocked again this summer when he maintained that frontrunner position in the polls through the first presidential debate. And then he kept up the momentum and won a fight with Fox News.

For the Republican Party, this is a nightmare scenario. Even if Trump doesn't win the party's nomination, the longer he sticks around — offending all manner of voter from Latinos to women — the more damage he risks inflicting on the party. This year was supposed to be different from 2012, when sideshow candidates stole the spotlight repeatedly. A strong field of governors, senators, and rising party stars are lined up for a serious contest. But instead, Trump has hijacked the early months of the campaign, and the establishment is terrified he'll stay in the race or, worse, run a third-party campaign that will damage the eventual nominee in the general election.

Trump isn't the first unexpected, seemingly unelectable candidate to rocket to the top of the polls in a Republican primary. In the 2012 election, congresswoman Michele Bachmann, businessman Herman Cain, and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich each had their 15 minutes in the sun. And all of them eventually lost momentum. But so far that has not happened to Trump.

Instead, so far, Trump has been Teflon — unwilling to be embarrassed or apologize for his gaffes. He started a feud with Fox News's Megyn Kelly, called Mexican immigrants rapists, and mocked Sen. John McCain's time as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. He got in a fight with Fox News, and Fox News blinked. And Trump is still polling solidly in first place.

Still, it's very unlikely that Trump will win the GOP nomination. He's won over a sizable portion of the Republican base with his calls for an immigration crackdown. But he will have a difficult time convincing a majority of his conservative bona fides, considering he has a long history of policy heterodoxy and support for liberal positions.

For now, though, he's a real threat to establishment Republicans who want to head into the general on strong footing.

Donald Trump is threatening to drag the Republican Party far to the right on immigration

Donald Trump makes outrageous statements about immigrants. It's why his supporters love him, but it's also a reason many establishment Republicans hate him.

Trump made waves after his presidential announcement in June, when he said of Mexican immigrants, "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists." (In fact, data drawn from the past several decades shows that immigrants, documented and undocumented, from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala are *less* likely than native-born Americans to commit crime.)

Trump has a long history of racist rhetoric against African Americans, Japanese people, American Indians, and others. But his comments about Mexican immigrants were a particularly high-profile insult against an increasingly powerful Latino demographic. Trump's businesses took some financial hits from the controversy; he was dropped by several former partners including Univision, Macy's, and ESPN.

Mainstream businesses are wary of offending Latinos — as is the mainstream Republican Party. And after Mitt Romney lost the Latino vote badly in 2012, Republicans had good reason to avoid saying anything too

inflammatory about immigration in the 2016 primary. Republican leaders, from Republican National Committee chair **Reince Priebus** to **fellow candidates** Jeb Bush, Chris Christie, and **Rick Perry**, have criticized Trump's rhetoric.

But many Americans — including a segment of the Republican base — are deeply anxious about the perceived threat that immigrants pose to American culture, and in Trump they've finally found a candidate that voices their concerns. As Trump repeated his accusations about immigrants, he got more popular; as he got more popular, he continued to build out an anti-immigrant platform.

In August, he backed up his rhetoric with a policy platform: He would build a border wall and pay for it by raising fees on Mexican immigrants (as well as confiscating money sent home by unauthorized immigrants), and he would sharply reduce *legal* immigration — including high-skilled immigration, which many businesses and Republicans think needs to be expanded. He also started calling for the mass expulsion of unauthorized immigrants and their 5 million US-born children. Those children are currently given US citizenship at birth, but Trump says "lawyers" are advising him to **challenge birthright citizenship in court** and get their citizenship taken away.

While other Republicans distanced themselves from Trump's comments about immigrants being rapists, they've embraced many of his policy ideas. Scott Walker has said his own immigration plan is "very similar" to Trump's. And a majority of Trump's competitors in the presidential campaign, including **Walker** and **Ben Carson**, agree with him that the US needs to get rid of birthright citizenship.

It's not hard to understand why they're doing this: Trump is at the top of the polls, and immigration is a big reason why. But whoever wins the Republican nomination will have to compete for Latino voters in 2016 — and if the Republican nominee endorses Trump's proposals in 2015, the Democratic nominee is unlikely to let voters forget about that in 2016.

Donald Trump inherited a New York real estate firm and turned it into a multibillion-dollar empire

Donald Trump is rich. Really rich. In fact, if his **estimate of his net worth — \$10 billion** — is correct, he might be the richest candidate to ever run for the White House. (It's worth noting, however, that **Forbes has questioned the validity** of that number). But whether his riches clock in at \$10 billion or \$4 billion, there's no denying that Trump's name is quite literally a brand, and a popular one at that. This gives Trump a huge edge over lesser-known Republican rivals, and allows him the freedom to speak his mind without worrying about losing donor support.

Recently, Trump released a **mammoth 92-page financial disclosure** to the Federal Election Commission. Although his exact wealth cannot be determined from the report, it still provided illuminating details, such as the **\$8.6 million Trump brings in from operating a skating rink in New York City**. He also has between \$5 million and \$25 million **sitting in a Capital One bank account**.

People tend to think of Trump as the poster child of the rags-to-riches American dream. That, however, isn't entirely accurate. Trump's father was a well-to-do real estate developer in New York. The Donald's namesake real estate empire, in fact, was inherited from his dad.

That's not to say that Trump hasn't made it on his own. In the '80s he made a killing on **ultra-luxury apartments and hotels**, with eponymous addresses studded across Manhattan and Atlantic City. By the '90s, the downturn in the housing market caused Trump to run into debt, but he managed to hold on to his wealth through savvy use of corporate bankruptcy law, plus his own fame. As **Forbes's Clare O'Connor** put it, "Trump's name and image have undoubtedly helped him survive each bankruptcy and come out on top. He's able to demand a high percentage of reorganization equity based on the value his brand brings to a casino or hotel operation."

Then, in 2004, Trump made the switch to television, where **his hit show *The Apprentice*** garnered 20.7 million viewers. He has also penned

several bestsellers, including *The Art of the Deal* and *Think Like a Billionaire: Everything You Need to Know About Success, Real Estate, and Life*.

Trump's high-profile business career and TV show mean that he benefits from huge amounts of name recognition — a must-have in a field crowded with more than a dozen other Republican candidates. At least as of **April**, most Republican candidates were fairly unknown. Trump doesn't suffer from that problem.

Trump's celebrity status also means he can talk candidly to his base in ways other candidates can't. He doesn't need to court billionaire donors with reined-in speeches focused on nitty-gritty policy decisions. As a former political donor himself, he's also made some **incisive points** about the reception he received in Washington and how money can buy influence.

"I was a businessman. I give to everybody," Trump said during the Fox News Republican primary debate on August 6. "When they call, I give. And you know what? When I need something from them, two years later, three years later, I call them. They are there for me. And that's a broken system." Now Trump is his own billionaire donor — and with that money comes the freedom to speak his mind, no matter how controversial the topic. This gives his supporters the impression that he is a straight talker: Because he's the only one pulling the purse strings, the words he says are his own.

Donald Trump's domestic policy is a grab bag of issues that cater to the Republican voter

Trump's stances on domestic policy are in line with mainstream Republican positions: He checks off all the expected boxes on Common Core, abortion, and same-sex marriage. It's unclear how many of his stated positions are based on sincerely held beliefs, or if they are merely a way to attract supporters. He's flip-flopped on a few issues when it's been politically advantageous, and he's stayed lukewarm in his support for others.

In particular, Trump has changed his mind on the issue of abortion. Since 2011, he has identified himself in **interviews and at conferences** as pro-life. This wasn't always the case, as he had **previously written** in 2000 that despite qualms, he supported "a woman's right to choose." Trump **is upfront about the fact** that he used to be pro-choice, but says what changed his mind were anecdotes from friends who, after delivering an unwanted baby, found instead that their child was the "apple of [their] eye." The switch was greeted with praise but also skepticism from conservative bloggers, who found it **difficult to reconcile** Trump's traditional values with his serial monogamy and playboy lifestyle.

On the subject of marriage, Trump has **said** on the air that he supports "traditional" marriage, but that he can see how people might be skeptical of his stance, given his two previous marriages. In the past, Trump has tried to explain his stance on marriage by comparing it to his opposition to a new style of **less attractive golf putters**, admitting that there isn't much of a rationale behind his opinion but he's just a "traditionalist."

The domestic issue that Trump comes down fairly strongly on is education. He has stated in an **interview** that he "absolutely" thinks curricula should be determined at the local level, rather than with national standards like Common Core. "I think that for people in Washington to be setting curriculum and to be setting all sorts of standards for people living in Iowa and other places is ridiculous," he said. He has also mocked other Republican contenders, most **notably Jeb Bush**, for their support of national Common Core standards.

Donald Trump opposes Obamacare, but supports helping the poor and old get health care

Like most other Republican contenders, Trump is staunchly against Obamacare. But while he has evolved to take a more conservative stance on health care, he has continued to be a supporter of Social Security and Medicare — two programs beloved by older Americans across the political spectrum. This latter stance sets him apart from other GOP contenders in the 2016 race.

With Obamacare seen as anathema to the right, Trump has come down against universal health care, or at least the president's plan for it. He has called Obamacare a "**lie, a filthy lie**" and suggested that Congress repeal it as soon as possible and replace it with **something** "far less expensive — both for the people and for the country." In particular, Trump has claimed that under Obamacare, people's insurance deductibles went "through the roof," and that coverage was hard to find.

However, Trump wasn't always so conservative. Back in 2000, he **supported** universal health care as a national necessity: "I'm a conservative on most issues but a liberal on this one. We should not hear so many stories of families ruined by health-care expenses." He suggested that the US model its health-care system on Canada's, arguing that the ability to treat more patients would be worth risking lower salaries for doctors.

But while toeing the party line on Obamacare, Trump has simultaneously come out in support of Social Security and Medicaid, two other entitlement programs that run against the Republican ideology of small government. During his speech at a **Republican leadership summit** in New Hampshire this April, Trump criticized other Republicans — **including** Chris Christie, Scott Walker, and Jeb Bush — who, he claims, want to "do a big number" on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.

Why support Medicare but not Obamacare? It might have something to do with demographics: Social Security and Medicare are programs that benefit older retirees — and that's a group that **skews Republican**. These programs are also long-running and incredibly popular: According to a **2012 study by Pew**, older Americans of all political leanings were more likely to oppose changes to Medicare. Basically, old people in the US want to keep their benefits, and Trump isn't going to want to lose supporters just for the sake of ideological consistency.

Donald Trump is skeptical of climate change and opposes investment in green policies

Rounding out his Republican image, Trump is famously skeptical of climate change, a stance that likely appeals to his primary base. According to the Pew Research Center, only **one in 10** self-identified conservative Republicans believe in human-induced climate change. The same study also found that Republicans are much less likely to support investment in alternative energy sources.

Trump is a vocal **climate change denier** on Twitter, calling the scientifically backed theory a "total hoax." He has previously tweeted his support for **fracking** and has also opposed renewable energy sources such as **solar** and **wind** power. Instead of focusing on renewable sources of energy, Trump has, in the past, suggested that the US **steal oil fields** from countries in the Middle East as "spoils" of war.

Trump has a personal investment in the issue of wind turbines, which he has called an "**environmental & aesthetic disaster.**" Earlier this June, he **lost a case** against the Scottish government, which he accused of illegally licensing an experimental wind farm to be built near his golf resort in Aberdeenshire. Apparently, Trump feared the wind turbines would detract from his gold courses and, therefore, his profits. Previously, Trump tried — and failed — to **block another wind farm** from being built on the Shetland Islands off the coast of Scotland. Despite the loss, Trump's organization issued a statement **maintaining his opposition** to the "destructive proliferation of wind turbines" around the world. (In the end, Trump actually got his wish, and the wind farm was blocked, **thanks to environmentalists** who showed that the turbines could damage the habitat of the protected freshwater pearl mussel.)

Donald Trump likely plans to flex his muscles on foreign policy

Trump seems to have a fairly hawkish stance on foreign policy, although he has not explicitly detailed what his positions would be as president. In the past, he has heavily criticized Obama's foreign policy, and it looks like

much of what he means by his slogan, "Make America Great Again," is to increase the US's involvement in world affairs.

Trump has advocated taking a harsher stance against ISIS, but has so far declined to specify what exactly he would do as commander in chief. In an **interview** on Fox News this May, Trump rationalized his secrecy, citing a desire for surprise. "If I run, and if I win, I don't want the enemy to know what I'm doing," he stated. All he would reveal is that his plan, whatever it is, will defeat ISIS "quickly and effectively," and that it's "foolproof."

More recently, Trump has **elaborated** slightly on his plan by stating that should he become president, he would bomb Iraqi oil fields that are in the hands of ISIS. However, **according to two military analysts** for CNN, most of the ISIS-controlled oil fields are in Syria, not Iraq. The analysts warned that bombing Iraq would only serve to delay the country's recovery.

In the case of Iraq itself, however, Trump has supported a less aggressive approach. In an **interview on *Fox & Friends***, he said that knowing what we know now, he would not have approved of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. "We shouldn't have been there, and once we were there, we probably should have stayed," Trump said.

In the case of Russia's **invasion of Ukraine last year**, Trump has criticized Obama for his weak stance against Russian President Vladimir Putin. During an **appearance** on the *Today* show, Trump called for heavy sanctions against Russia in order to "show some strength."

Trump's **political idol might be Putin**, whom he believes he will have a "great relationship" with. "You can get along with those people, and get along with them well," he said of the Russian government.

Donald Trump attacked John McCain's military record, and yet still gained in the polls

When Donald Trump disparaged Arizona Sen. John McCain's military record, the backlash from Republicans was swift. Many commenters and observers — including **Vox's Jonathan Allen** and the **Upshot's Nate Cohn**— suggested it would be the turning point in Trump's popularity.

But Trump has had many such turning points this summer, and so far has come out unscathed. His inability to be embarrassed or apologize is a trait that stood him in good stead in his reality television career. It turns out it's even more valuable in a presidential campaign.

Trump **said of McCain**, "He's not a war hero. He's a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren't captured," during a recent campaign event in Iowa. McCain spent **five years as a prisoner of war** in North Vietnam, battling through torture and solitary confinement.

Trump's comments drew an immediate, bipartisan rebuke. Jeb Bush **tweeted** that "all our veterans — particularly POWs have earned our respect and admiration" and criticized Trump for his "slandorous attacks." Democrats also weighed in to support McCain, including **Secretary of State John Kerry**, who has had a rocky relationship with McCain in the past. The **Des Moines Register** called for Trump to withdraw from the race, on the grounds that he "certainly" disqualified himself "by questioning the war record of John McCain, the Republican senator from Arizona." But although voters were **less likely** to say they have a favorable opinion of Trump after he criticized McCain, he surged to his biggest poll lead yet — **24 percent** of likely Republican primary voters.

The McCain gaffe was the entire Trump campaign in miniature: It was over-the-top and ridiculous — and yet it didn't end up dragging Trump down. It made clear that Trump isn't playing by the normal political rules, and the people who like him end up liking him even more as a result. "You cannot embarrass Donald Trump," Vox's Ezra Klein **wrote**. "You cannot back him down with questions that make other candidates buckle. And the crowd loves him for it. They love him *because* he does not back down. The fact that Trump doesn't back down is the core of Trumpism."

Donald Trump picked a fight with Fox News — and won

Fox News inflated the Trump bubble for weeks, and then decided it was time to pop it. At the Fox **debate** on August 6, moderators targeted Trump with questions meant to embarrass him. This escalated into a **full-on feud**

between Trump and Fox, but instead of Fox prevailing (as it almost always does), Trump came away the winner.

The episode shows the surprising strength of Trump's candidacy. Fox News is a juggernaut within the Republican Party. It seemed impossible that Trump would win a fight with the network. But he did. And that suggests the conventional wisdom — that the Republican Party establishment will eventually contain Trump and force him out of the race — might not be correct after all.

Debate hosts Megyn Kelly, Chris Wallace, and Bret Baier went after Trump with a series of pointed questions: Would he pledge not to run as a third-party candidate? (He would not.) Would he defend his misogynistic remarks? (He would.) Would he give evidence for his assertion that the Mexican government is sending criminals to the United States on purpose? (He would not.)

After the debate, Trump **criticized Kelly** in a series of increasingly angry tweets and saying on CNN that there was "blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her ... wherever." Then he did something to really threaten the network: He quit going on Fox shows.

And Fox backed down. According to New York magazine's Gabe Sherman, Fox faced a barrage of pro-Trump emails. CEO Roger Ailes called Trump to assure him "fair and balanced" coverage, and Kelly glossed over the issue on her own show.