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POLITICS

Splits Plague Both Parties as Fall Primary Campaign Starts

Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders gain traction as polls show a move away from the establishment



The rise of Sen. Bernie Sanders, left, and Donald Trump in the Democratic and Republican primary races have surprised some party insiders and voters. *PHOTO: CRAIG LASSIG/REUTERS; DANIEL ACKER/BLOOMBERG NEWS*

By **PATRICK O'CONNOR** and **JANET HOOK**

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HOOKSETT, N.H.—The 2016 White House race barrels into the fall feeling at times more like a reality-television spectacle than a presidential campaign, with a crop of

unconventional candidates upstaging their politically pedigreed rivals.

This split between the outsiders and their more traditional counterparts reflects a deeper rift in the country between those who continue to trust government and the elected officials who run it, and the ever-growing share of Americans who don't and pine for someone new.

Both parties enter the post-Labor Day phase of their primaries with lineups that have taken on an unexpected shape. The 2016 field was billed as one of the most accomplished in a generation, particularly on the Republican side, so the rise of celebrity real-estate mogul Donald Trump in the GOP contest and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders in the Democratic race have come as a surprise to some party insiders and voters.

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Yet the underlying dynamics spurring some form of a voter revolt took root years ago and they continue to spread through a dissatisfied electorate. The outsider candidates dominated the summer; this fall will test whether the political veterans can sell voters on the benefits of their experience or succumb to the exasperation fueling their rivals.

Gallup polling shows a steady erosion of confidence in government institutions. The last time more Americans thought the country was headed in the right direction rather than the wrong one was January 2004, according to Wall Street Journal/NBC News surveys. In the latest survey, Americans who were pessimistic about the future of the country outnumbered optimists by 2-to-1.

“I have no trust in the government,” said Keith Whigham, a 68-year-old retired insurance-claims adjuster in Greensboro, N.C., who listed Mr. Trump as his top GOP

pick in a Journal poll conducted at the end of July. “The little guy has no shot. Everything is rigged for the big shots.”

A year ago, bipartisan majorities said they would replace every single member of Congress, including their own, if they could, according to a Journal poll weeks before the 2014 elections. The same share of voters said they would rather support a first-time candidate over one with experience. Independents were particularly resistant to veteran politicians.

This anti-insider bias is weighing on the once-presumed front-runners, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for Democrats and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush for Republicans.

Mrs. Clinton continues to lose ground in polls that once showed her dominating her party’s field, trailing Mr. Sanders in three recent surveys in New Hampshire. Even Granite State residents who attended Clinton events over Labor Day weekend expressed doubts about her candidacy.

“I haven’t connected with her,” said Amelia Jones, 58, a 6th-grade science teacher. “She’s too much of a long-term politician.” Karen McCarthy, 53, expressed concerns about “inbreeding” in presidential politics, citing the Clintons and the Bushes, and said that while she hasn’t settled on a candidate, she called Mr. Sanders “the opposite of the dynasty.”

Mrs. Clinton’s candidacy is also shadowed by Vice President Joe Biden’s private musings about his own presidential ambitions. At the close of a speech at Labor Day events in Pittsburgh on Monday, a bystander shouted: “Run for president!” To which Mr. Biden replied: “No, I’m not—I gotta talk to my wife about that.”

The upheaval is more widespread in the GOP. The party has been at odds with itself for much of Barack Obama’s presidency, and Republican primary voters are now leaning toward candidates who lack political experience, including Mr. Trump, retired pediatric neurosurgeon Ben Carson and former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina. A Monmouth University poll released last week showed combined support among GOP voters for those three candidates at 52%.

“Trump has absolutely changed the dynamic. Everybody likes what he’s doing, poking his thumb in the eye of the establishment,” said Mark Meckler, an influential tea-party activist. “The question is how high emotions are running at the time people walk into the voting booth.”

Many conservatives are incensed that Republican leaders in Congress have failed to fulfill some of their top promises, including a repeal of the Affordable Care Act, despite regaining control of the House in 2010 and the Senate last year.

“I don’t feel they have stood up for Republican principles,” said Guy Hampson, a Republican in Portsmouth, N.H., who turned out for a recent event with Ohio Gov. John Kasich.

The stylistic differences between the insider and outsider camps will be on display this week. On Wednesday, Mr. Bush is expected to unveil his tax plan, and Mrs. Clinton is set to outline her support for the internationally negotiated Iran nuclear deal. The same day, Mr. Trump and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, who has tried to appeal to antiestablishment voters, will headline a rally in Washington, D.C., opposing the Iran agreement.

The fall congressional schedule could inflame this tension, including fights over measures to extend the country’s borrowing limit and fund the government. The latter is entwined with a potentially fractious brawl over government money for Planned Parenthood that may not resolve itself until December.

The establishment still boasts advantages: much deeper ties to parties’ big donors who bankroll presidential elections and the grass-roots networks that drive turnout. Their policy expertise also tends to be an advantage in a long race in which candidates are asked to navigate a range of policy questions.

And veteran strategists point to the 2012 GOP primary as a cautionary note for candidates leading in the polls early. Businessman Herman Cain, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and then-Gov. Rick Perry of Texas each took turns leading in polls during the preceding fall, only to watch early front-runner Mitt Romney eventually claim the nomination.

“We shouldn’t mistake consideration for conclusion,” said Republican pollster David Winston, who worked for Mr. Gingrich in 2011 and is unaligned in the 2016 race. “This is an electorate that is going to take time to really think this through.”

Claire Lyons, a New Hampshire retired financial consultant who turned out recently to hear Mr. Kasich, said she worries a lot about Mr. Trump. “He’s just stirring the pot,” she said. “He brings up valid points, but he’s like a spoiled child. I’m hoping he’ll die down and bow out.”

Mr. Trump’s rivals harbor the same wish, and yet strategists advise that the candidates

take notice of the messages being sent by voters about a desire for candor and willingness to upend the normal rhythms and trade-offs of politics.

“I anticipate that this Summer of Trump will wane,” said Matt Borges, chairman of the Ohio Republican Party who is a Kasich ally. “But if we aren’t taking some instructive lesson from what we are seeing, we are not doing ourselves any favors.”

Ultimately, the race will test voters’ appetite for unpredictability.

Rex Heitz, a workplace safety consultant from Warner, N.H., who attended an event for Mr. Kasich, said interest in Mr. Trump and others reflects “dissatisfaction with the dysfunction of government. But when the rubber hits the road, experience is going to be important to me.”

—*Carol E. Lee and Peter Nicholas contributed to this article.*

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