

Abstract

Political insurgents periodically captivate and polarize the American public, provoking extensive media coverage of underdogs with a mission to upend the political system as we know it. The 2016 presidential election contained two remarkably popular insurgent campaigns. While Donald Trump's capacity as president to reshape the Republican Party in his own image is expected, it has been less apparent how Bernie Sanders has had such an impact on the Democratic Party in the years following his loss in the Democratic nomination contest. Employing a comparative-historical methodology with two other cases of presidential insurgencies in the post-McGovern-Fraser era, I develop a theoretical framework for understanding the process through which insurgents can effect major durable changes on a party. Ronald Reagan's loss in the 1976 Republican nomination contest allowed him to ascend to the presidency in 1980 and usher in a new era of conservatism for the Republican Party, while Edward Kennedy's 1980 insurgent campaign against President Jimmy Carter failed to prevent growing neoliberalism within the Democratic Party. In addition to furthering knowledge of insurgent politics and how parties change, this research seeks to contribute to growing scholarship on the importance of revising our understanding of what it means to "win" and "lose" in American campaigns and elections.