



Right of Reagan

How the Extremism of Today's Republican Presidential Candidates Sets Them Apart from Their Conservative Idol

By Charles Posner, Molly Cain, and Anna Chu September 2015

Introduction and summary

On September 16, the Republican presidential candidates will gather at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California, for the second debate in the 2016 Republican primary process. It will be an opportunity for the candidates to pay homage to President Reagan, who to this day remains an idol and a paragon of conservatism to Republicans even though he left the Oval Office in 1989—nearly three decades ago. A 2012 Gallup poll showed that 90 percent of Republicans viewed Reagan as an outstanding or above average president, more favorably than any other recent president.¹ And this year, 30 Republican governors signed proclamations recognizing February 6 as Ronald Reagan Day.² As presidential historian Douglas Brinkley explained, Reagan has “become a folklore president.”³

Clearly, part of the Reagan mystique is tied to the fact that he found a way to achieve something elusive to subsequent conservatives on the national stage: the ability to appeal to independents and Democrats and win the popular vote in presidential elections. Republicans have achieved this feat just twice in the seven elections that have followed the Reagan presidency. In fact, President Reagan enjoys an overall high favorability rating—60 percent of Americans approve of Reagan, more so than any of the current GOP candidates.⁴

How did Ronald Reagan appeal to Americans beyond his conservative base of supporters? Part of the answer is that President Reagan was able to mix pragmatism with conservatism. And at critical moments on critical issues, Reagan took positions that are anathema to the leaders of today’s Republican Party—advancing sensible immigration reform, supporting pollution control, curbing nuclear arms, closing tax loopholes for the wealthy, and advocating gun background checks. As president, Reagan passed immigration reform with a path to citizenship for millions of undocumented immigrants.⁵ He also passed a landmark treaty on the climate⁶ and raised taxes 11 times.⁷ He even negotiated with America’s main adversary, the Soviet Union, signing a treaty with the communist nation to reduce nuclear weapons.⁸

FIGURE 1

President Reagan is far more popular than the current GOP field

Percent of people who views candidate favorably versus unfavorably

	Favorable	Unfavorable
Ronald Reagan	60 percent	30 percent
Donald Trump	36 percent	54 percent
Jeb Bush	32 percent	41 percent
Marco Rubio	41 percent	27 percent
Scott Walker	25 percent	26 percent
Rand Paul	23 percent	41 percent
Carly Fiorina	27 percent	15 percent
Ben Carson	35 percent	15 percent
Chris Christie	27 percent	45 percent
Ted Cruz	28 percent	34 percent
Mike Huckabee	32 percent	34 percent
John Kasich	25 percent	12 percent

Source: Public Policy Polling, "JFK, Reagan, Clinton most popular recent ex-presidents," September 15, 2011, available at <http://www-publicpolicy polling.com/main/2011/09/jfk-reagan-clinton-most-popular-recent-ex-presidents.html>; Quinnipiac University Poll, "Biden Runs Better Than Clinton Against Top Republicans, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; Trump GOP Lead Grows As Clinton Dem Lead Shrinks," Press release, August 27, 2015, available at http://www.quinnipiac.edu/images/polling/us/08272015_Ueg38d.pdf.

To be clear, President Reagan would never be confused as a progressive. Indeed, he championed many destructive, conservative policies that are often embraced by contemporary Republicans. His philosophy of trickle-down economics, still pervasive in today's GOP, has repeatedly failed to help anyone except the highest-income earners.⁹ Meanwhile, Reagan's false narrative of the so-called welfare queen poisoned the public's view of people who receive public assistance and still exists today. He also weakened a number of initiatives intended to help the environment, including gutting President Jimmy Carter's clean energy and energy efficiency efforts and rolling back fuel-economy standards.¹⁰ Additionally, as part of the Iran-Contra scandal, Reagan violated an arms embargo with Iran and sold weapons to the country in exchange for the return of American hostages. He then lied to the American public and denied the deal ever took place.¹¹

Yet while President Reagan can hardly be described as a progressive, he also was not a pure ideologue who was unwilling to negotiate and work across the aisle. His former chief of staff, James Baker—who was quoted recently in an Eno Center for Transportation publication recalling the Reagan years—explained it well: "If Reagan told me once, he told me fifteen thousand times—I'd rather get 80 percent of what I want than go over the cliff with my flags flying."¹² In practice, this philosophy meant that President Reagan adopted more moderate, bipartisan stances on several

"I'd rather get 80 percent of what I want than go over the cliff with my flags flying."

— Ronald Reagan

important policy positions than those of today's conservatives. In fact, Reagan championed the notion that the GOP should be a "big tent" and considered opposing points of view.¹³ This report surveys six issues on which Reagan adopted a common-sense, bipartisan stance—political positions that the current presidential contenders would find abhorrent. During and after his presidency, President Reagan:

- **Provided a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants:** In 1986, Reagan supported and signed the Simpson-Mazzoli Act, which provided a pathway to citizenship for 2.7 million undocumented immigrants.¹⁴
- **Stood up to the National Rifle Association, or NRA, to establish background checks:** The NRA is a gun rights advocacy and lobbying association that many Republicans dare not cross. Reagan, however, stood up to the NRA and strongly supported the establishment of national background checks for gun purchases, as well as a ban on assault weapons.¹⁵
- **Signed a multilateral international treaty to reduce pollution:** In the face of scientific research showing that chemical gasses were depleting the protective ozone layer, Reagan signed the Montreal Protocol, an international treaty that phased out nearly 100 of these dangerous gases.¹⁶ Many of these ozone-depleting chemicals are also greenhouse gases. Current research suggests that global warming "might be twice as bad" today were it not for this 1989 treaty negotiated by President Reagan.¹⁷
- **Negotiated to reduce nuclear proliferation:** While Reagan stood firm against the nation's enemies, he also was willing to negotiate with the Soviet Union, the United States' greatest rival at the time. He even signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with the Soviet Union, eliminating an entire category of nuclear missiles.¹⁸
- **Grew the federal government:** Contrary to his public image as the champion of small government, Reagan actually grew the federal government during his tenure in office. Under his watch, the federal workforce increased by about 324,000 workers to almost 5.3 million people.¹⁹ Additionally, he doubled the U.S. Department of Education's budget²⁰ and even created a new federal agency, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Much of this federal spending was funded through deficit spending.²¹
- **Closed tax loopholes favoring the wealthy:** While Reagan is known as one of the fathers of trickle-down economics, he also favored closing tax loopholes that benefited the rich.²² Furthermore, he raised taxes to reduce the federal deficit.²³

Given President Reagan's iconic status, it is not surprising that GOP presidential hopefuls desire to be seen as the next successor of Reagan's conservative mantle. Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker explains that "Reagan's influence is a key part of who I am today" and goes so far as to say that he only remembers his own wedding anniversary because it falls on the same day as Ronald Reagan's birthday.²⁴ Florida Sen. Marco Rubio calls Reagan's rise to national prominence "a movement that transformed America."²⁵ Texas Sen. Ted Cruz has asserted that Reagan won two presidential elections by sticking to his conservative principles and, in a 2014 *New Yorker* interview, said that "every time" Republicans compromise "we lose."²⁶ Donald Trump, who has combatted the Republican establishment on numerous occasions, recently stated that the Reagan administration was the last time "you felt proud to be an American."²⁷ Yet despite the current crop of GOP presidential hopefuls' worship of Reagan, they have missed or ignored Reagan's record of bipartisan compromise and his ability and willingness to work across the aisle. Instead, on issue after issue from immigration to spending to climate, the GOP candidates have staked out uncompromising, ideological positions that stand far to the right of President Reagan.

Whether it is a lack of courage, common sense, or the capacity to lead the conservative base instead of being led by it, today's Republican candidates demonstrate almost universal intransigence on the issues on which President Ronald Reagan chose to lead. Unlike Reagan, the vast majority of the 2016 GOP presidential contenders:

- **Oppose a pathway to citizenship for 11 million undocumented immigrants:** Creating such a pathway would boost the U.S. economy by \$1.2 trillion over 10 years.²⁸
- **Fear standing up to the NRA:** Those currently serving in the Senate have blocked legislation to expand background checks.
- **Pay little mind to scientific research:** Instead, they either deny that climate change is real or ignore the science behind it. Moreover, they have strenuously opposed the Obama administration's effort to regulate pollution, going so far as to threaten to sue the government over the Clean Power Plan, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's landmark proposal to regulate pollution.²⁹

- **Have adopted an unyielding stance on national security:** Former Gov. Mike Huckabee (R-AR) has gone so far as to threaten to topple Iran using military force.³⁰ Many of the candidates also have stated that they would not uphold the current Iran nuclear deal,³¹ and some even signed a letter to Iran’s leaders questioning President Barack Obama’s authority to negotiate with them.³²
- **Have embraced uncompromising positions on the federal budget:** Many of the candidates oppose any deficit spending, even in the face of pressing national need. Moreover, some—such as Sen. Cruz—have demonstrated astounding fiscal irresponsibility, going so far as to shut down the government in 2013 in order to pursue their ideological stance of repealing the Affordable Care Act.³³
- **Oppose any legislation that would increase taxes:** Many of the candidates have signed Grover Norquist’s “Taxpayer Protection Pledge.”³⁴ They promise not to raise taxes even if the increase only affects the wealthy and corporations or even if revenue is needed to fund national priorities. Instead, they propose tax plans that overwhelmingly benefit the wealthy³⁵ while ballooning the deficit.³⁶

A willingness to negotiate and work across the aisle to achieve pragmatic, bipartisan solutions is not the only thing differentiating President Reagan from the current GOP presidential candidates. The current GOP hopefuls’ adoption of intransigent, far-right positions also means that they will have difficulty appealing to the broader American public. And while the “Gipper” found success at the polls, come Election Day, the current crop of GOP contenders will find themselves joining that long list of forgotten candidates who were unable to appeal to a majority of the American people.

The following report takes a closer look at the bipartisan, commonsense positions President Reagan adopted on six issues that are in direct conflict with today’s GOP presidential candidates. Despite the folklore, it is hard to imagine any of these candidates claiming fidelity to Reagan and his principles in a way that the 40th president could embrace.

Our Mission

The Center for American Progress Action Fund is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute and advocacy organization that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, The Center for American Progress Action Fund can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

Center for American Progress Action Fund

