



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



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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.

Provided a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants

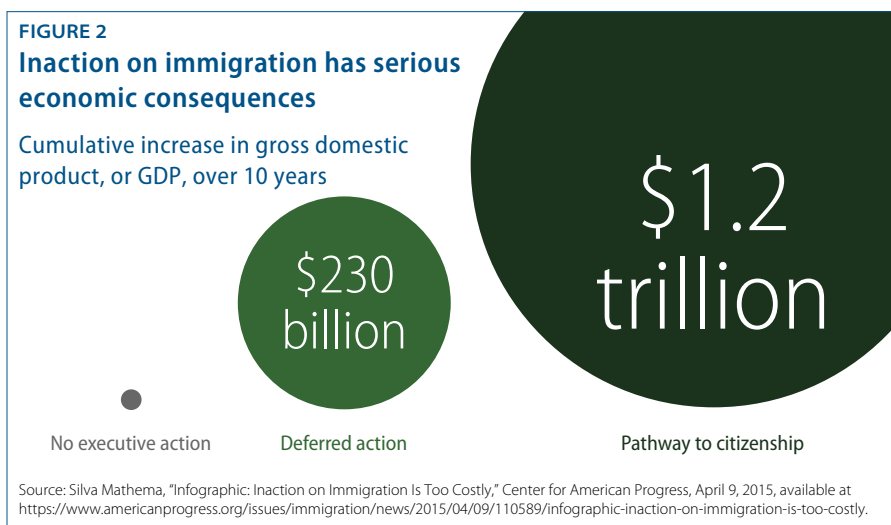
President Ronald Reagan welcomed immigrants as a critical part of American society and strongly supported legal status for undocumented immigrants. He began pushing Congress for immigration reform early in his presidency, succeeding in 1986 with the passage of the bipartisan Immigration Reform and Control Act, or IRCA.³⁷ The IRCA provided legal status with an eventual path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who had entered the country before 1982. By the end of the application period, 2.7 million immigrants had benefited from the program.³⁸ And if his position pushing for and passing such legislation was not clear, Reagan strongly stated his support for amnesty during a 1984 debate, declaring, “I believe in the idea of amnesty for those who have put down roots and who have lived here even though some time back they may have entered illegally.”³⁹ Moreover, in his farewell address, he envisioned an America that embraced immigrants, stating that if the United States was a city with walls, “the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here.”⁴⁰

Despite idolizing Reagan, most of the current GOP field could not be further from his open and humane views on immigration. Instead, the current Republican discussion surrounding immigration is led by Trump, who supports deporting entire families—including DREAMers, young undocumented immigrants who came to the United States prior to age 16—and even advocates ending birthright citizenship, a protection guaranteed by the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as part of solidifying the end of slavery.⁴¹ Many of the other candidates have rushed to align themselves with “The Donald.” For instance, Gov. Walker has characterized his immigration policy plan as “very similar” to Trump’s plan.⁴² Meanwhile, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush⁴³ mimicked Trump’s use of the derogatory term “anchor baby”⁴⁴ to refer to the children of undocumented immigrants from Asia who were born in the United States.

Additionally, a majority of the GOP candidates fervently oppose deportation relief. In particular, they have been outraged by President Obama’s executive orders creating and expanding the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program and creating the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful

“I believe in the idea of amnesty for those who have put down roots and who have lived here even though some time back they may have entered illegally.”
— Ronald Reagan

Permanent Residents, or DAPA, program. According to analysis from the Center for American Progress, DACA and DAPA would help more than 5 million people⁴⁵ and grow the U.S. economy a cumulative \$230 billion over 10 years.⁴⁶ In spite of these benefits, these programs led candidate and retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson to compare President Obama to Russian President Vladimir Putin.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Gov. Bush said the executive order was more like the decree of a “Latin American dictator.”⁴⁸ At one point, Sen. Cruz threatened forcing a government shutdown to prevent Obama’s order by “any and all means necessary.”⁴⁹



Given the 2016 GOP hopefuls’ stance on deportation relief, it is not surprising that many also oppose providing a pathway to citizenship for the current 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States, even though doing so would boost the U.S. economy by \$1.2 trillion over 10 years, according to an analysis by the Center for American Progress.⁵⁰ Gov. Bush called a pathway to citizenship an “undeserving reward,”⁵¹ while New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie stated “this path to citizenship stuff is garbage.”⁵² And during the immigration debate in the Senate in 2013, Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky introduced an amendment that would have effectively stripped the immigration bill’s path to citizenship.⁵³ Not to be outdone, Sen. Rubio not only abandoned the immigration bill he helped to write,⁵⁴ but he also urged President Obama not to enact deportation relief.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, Gov. Walker,⁵⁶ Sen. Cruz,⁵⁷ former business executive Carly Fiorina,⁵⁹ and former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum⁶⁰ have all indicated that they do not support creating a pathway to citizenship.

Stood up to the NRA to establish background checks

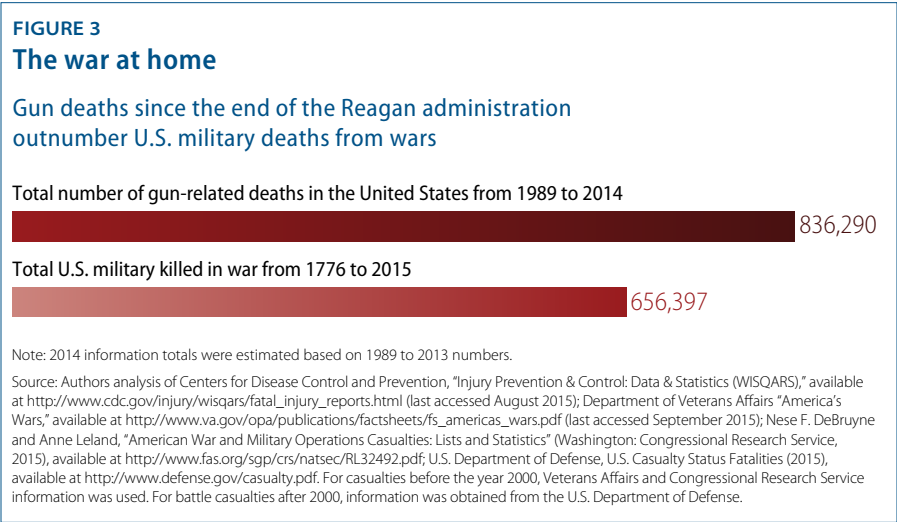
The assassination attempt on President Reagan, which permanently disabled his press secretary, James Brady, left a lasting impression on the 40th president. In 1991, 10 years after the incident, Congress considered the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, which required federal background checks for firearm purchases from gun dealers. While Reagan was no longer in office, he was the bill's most important supporter, arguing in a *New York Times* op-ed that the assassination attempt “might never have happened” if this legislation was law at the time.⁶¹ The bill, which also included a five-day waiting period before handgun purchases,⁶² became law in 1993 despite the objections of the National Rifle Association.⁶³ Additionally, Reagan supported a ban on assault weapons, another position opposed by the NRA, explaining that “an AK-47, a machine gun, is not a sporting weapon or needed for defense of a home.”⁶⁴

The current slate of Republican presidential candidates would no doubt cringe if President Reagan were to ask them to go against the wishes of the NRA. The NRA possesses enormous influence over the current GOP candidates. Almost all of the Republican candidates proudly tout A grades from the gun rights organization.⁶⁵ Those who do not yet have the NRA's coveted A grade have been working hard to get into the organization's good graces: Gov. Christie refused to sign several gun safety bills, including a weapons ban for which he had originally called,⁶⁶ and Sen. Rubio introduced a Senate bill to repeal the District of Columbia's gun laws.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, former Sen. Santorum was named one of the “top 5 politicians in the pocket of the NRA” in 2013.⁶⁸

The majority of the 2016 contenders also oppose closing loopholes in the current background check system, which enable criminals to evade the system and purchase guns online, at gun shows, in parking lots, and just about anywhere else. The background check system is a policy that the NRA has long fought. And while Reagan dared go up against the NRA to advocate for the original background check bill,⁶⁹ Sens. Rubio, Cruz, and Paul—as well as South Carolina

Sen. Lindsey Graham—all voted in the NRA’s favor on a 2013 Senate bill to expand background checks in the wake of the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, joining a minority of senators who used the filibuster rules to block the legislation.⁷⁰

In the years since Ronald Reagan’s presidency, there were a total of 836,290 gun-related deaths in the United States—341,049 people have been murdered with guns and another 495,241 have died in gun suicides and accidents.⁷¹ Together, those numbers exceed all the combat deaths of American soldiers in all the wars in U.S. history.⁷²



Signed a multilateral international treaty to reduce pollution

President Reagan negotiated the Montreal Protocol, a treaty widely seen as one of the most successful global environmental treaties in history.⁷³ The Montreal Protocol aimed to save the ozone layer by phasing out nearly 100 dangerous gases, thereby protecting people from ultraviolet radiation.⁷⁴ In the years leading up to the agreement, scientists sounded the alarm about ozone depletion, which escalated in 1985 with the discovery of a giant hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica.⁷⁵ Reagan heeded these scientific calls, becoming a surprise champion of the treaty given his zeal for deregulation.⁷⁶ In fact, his closest aides wanted him to fight the treaty. Instead, President Reagan vigorously backed the Montreal Protocol⁷⁷ and lauded the historic cooperation of the international community on the treaty to “protect a vital global resource.”⁷⁸

While the original goal of the Montreal Protocol was to address ozone depletion, a side effect has been a significant cut in the pollution that contributes to human-made climate change. Current research suggests that global warming “might be twice as bad” were it not for this 1989 treaty negotiated by President Reagan.⁷⁹ In the years that followed the signing of the pact, observers have noted how effective the protocol was in reducing greenhouse gases. As a *New York Times* analysis described in 2013, “the evidence suggests the protocol has done far more to limit global warming than the better-known treaty adopted for that purpose, the Kyoto Protocol.”⁸⁰

Reagan’s ability to go against his political advisors and act when confronted with significant scientific evidence—in this case, that industrial chemicals were depleting the ozone layer⁸¹—is completely counter to the current crop of GOP presidential hopefuls who either deny or ignore the overwhelming scientific evidence that climate change is human made. Indeed, Sen. Cruz has compared climate activists to “flat-Earthers”⁸²; Sen. Paul calls climate science “not conclusive”⁸³; and Trump has called climate change a “hoax.”⁸⁴ Sen. Rubio believes that there is no proof that humans are responsible for climate change because “there’s never been a moment the climate isn’t changing.”⁸⁵ Ohio Gov. John Kasich joins Rubio in suggesting there is no need for action since the notion of climate change is “based on some theory that is not proven.”⁸⁶

Moreover, the current group of 2016 GOP contenders likely would not support a treaty such as the Montreal Protocol, which relied on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, or EPA, to issue regulations that protect the environment. Instead, many in the current GOP presidential field have tried to weaken the EPA's role. Under the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan, the EPA has issued rules to curb carbon emissions in order to protect public health and combat climate change. These rules are estimated to create climate and health benefits of up to \$93 billion by 2030.⁸⁷ In contrast, Gov. Walker said he would sue the government over the EPA regulations.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, Sen. Cruz has tried to repeal all federal climate change regulation and prevent the federal government from regulating greenhouse gas emissions.⁸⁹ For his part, Sen. Paul has also called the EPA's efforts to reduce greenhouse gases "illegal" and vows to repeal them.⁹⁰ Not to be left out, Sen. Rubio says "with certainty" that efforts to reduce carbon will have a "devastating impact on our economy."⁹¹ On the contrary, two independent studies⁹² estimate that President Obama's new Clean Power Plan will create 300,000 jobs⁹³ when the plan is fully implemented.

Negotiated to reduce nuclear proliferation

While President Reagan was tough on America's enemies, he was willing to negotiate with the Soviet Union, one of the United States' staunchest adversaries during his time in office. In fact, he held multiple summits with the Soviet Union's General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. The two men met five different times; on their third meeting, each side made concessions in order to sign the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces, or INF, Treaty, eliminating certain categories of nuclear missiles.⁹⁴ According to the Reagan Foundation, "the unlikely pairing of a devoted anti-Communist advocate of capitalism with a dyed-in-the-wool Marxist resulted not only in the most significant arms reduction treaty in history, but in a permanent change in U.S.-Soviet relations."⁹⁵

As president, Reagan also upheld treaties made by previous U.S. presidents. Talks between the United States and the Soviet Union on the issue of armament control resulted in two agreements: the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, or SALT, I under President Richard Nixon in 1972, followed by SALT II under President Jimmy Carter in 1979.⁹⁶ Although SALT II was never ratified by the Senate after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, Reagan declared that as president, he would not violate the treaty's terms if the Soviets agreed to keep to them as well.⁹⁷

Many of the current Republican presidential candidates have failed to adopt Reagan's stance toward negotiations on matters of national security. Instead, when asked for his plan to deal with Iran, Gov. Walker said, "I will put in place crippling economic sanctions on Iran and I will convince our allies to do the same."⁹⁸ Former Gov. Huckabee said he would "keep all options on the table, including military force, to topple the terrorist Iranian regime" if he were president.⁹⁹

The Republican presidential candidates have not been respectful of the negotiating authority of the current administration or mindful of the respect that should be paid to precedent. In the middle of President Obama's negotiation with Iran, Sens. Cruz, Paul, and Rubio were among the 47 Republican senators who actually signed an open letter to the leaders of Iran advising them that the president has no authority to

negotiate with them.¹⁰⁰ This unprecedented hardline partisan strategy undermines the authority of the executive branch to negotiate with other countries and impedes the path toward a peaceful resolution.¹⁰¹ And instead of respecting treaties signed by predecessors, many Republican presidential contenders are making it a top priority to undo the current Iran deal. Gov. Walker, Fiorina, and Sen. Rubio have all committed to terminating the Iran deal on the first day of their presidency.¹⁰²

Grew the federal government

Although he is known for wanting to shrink the size of the government, President Reagan actually grew the government in many ways while he was in office and financed that growth through deficit spending.¹⁰³ For instance, under President Reagan, the federal workforce increased by about 324,000 employees to almost 5.3 million people.¹⁰⁴ The growth in federal employees under Reagan is typically misattributed to the buildup of defense during the Cold War; in fact, only 26 percent of the growth in federal employment was due to the increase in the size of the armed forces.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, Reagan doubled the U.S. Department of Education's budget¹⁰⁶ even though he campaigned on eliminating the department.¹⁰⁷ Reagan also created a new federal department, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.¹⁰⁸

Current Republican presidential candidates, in the words of Reagan's biographer Lou Cannon, are following "caricatures of Reagan" as a budget hawk and opponent of any sort of spending growth.¹⁰⁹ In reality, government spending and the deficit grew under Reagan. During his presidency, spending as a percentage of the gross domestic product, or GDP, was 1.7 percentage points higher than today's 40-year average.¹¹⁰ Under Reagan, federal spending ballooned,¹¹¹ and the national debt nearly tripled from \$907 billion in 1980 to \$2.6 trillion in 1988.¹¹² Debt as a share of GDP grew 5.76 percent on average each year under Reagan, far outpacing the historical average of 0.28 percent growth in the debt-to-GDP ratio per year.¹¹³

Despite the fact that President Reagan ultimately embraced the necessity of spending to meet national priorities, including deficit spending, today's GOP candidates have clung to the destructive ideas of severe austerity and a balanced budget amendment. A balanced budget amendment would prevent the federal government from ever passing a budget with a deficit, even if additional spending was needed to stimulate the economy in tough economic times. Instead, Govs. Bush,¹¹⁴ Kasich,¹¹⁵ and Huckabee¹¹⁶—along with Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal¹¹⁷—and Sens. Cruz¹¹⁸ and Paul¹¹⁹ all support enacting a balanced budget amendment, which would hinder the government's ability to enact necessary countercyclical economic policy.

In addition to adopting unworkable stances on the budget overall, many Republican presidential hopefuls have irresponsibly slashed spending on critical priorities for both the country overall and American families specifically. For example, while President Reagan doubled the Department of Education's budget, many Republican governors have either slashed or proposed slashing education spending in their states. Gov. Walker proposed a \$300 million cut to the University of Wisconsin system, a 13 percent reduction in funding.¹²⁰ Meanwhile, Gov. Jindal proposed slashing between \$200 million and \$300 million in funding for Louisiana's state universities.¹²¹ Republican governors' willingness to cut education instead of considering tax hikes for the wealthiest taxpayers flies in the face of what the American public wants. A Public Policy Polling survey from August 2015 commissioned by the Center for American Progress showed that by a margin of 59 percent to 19 percent, Americans prefer raising taxes on the wealthy to balance the budget in lieu of cutting funding for education.¹²²

Not only have Republican candidates embraced dogmatic views on spending and slashed funding for important priorities, some are so irresponsible that they are willing to shut down the entire government to further ideological stances. In 2013, congressional Republicans led by Sen. Cruz forced a government shutdown over an attempt to defund the Affordable Care Act. Economists estimate that the shutdown cost the economy \$20 billion.¹²³ Showing complete disregard to the high costs of a government shutdown to the economy, Sen. Cruz is mulling another shutdown, this time over demands to defund Planned Parenthood.¹²⁴ Sen. Paul has also engaged in provocative budget rhetoric over Planned Parenthood, declaring, "if President Obama wants to shut down government because he doesn't get funds for Planned Parenthood, that would be President Obama's determination to shut down government."¹²⁵

Last but not least, many 2016 GOP presidential hopefuls want to cut vital government agencies, unlike their claimed mentor Reagan, who created a new federal agency and grew the Department of Education's budget. Former Texas Gov. Rick Perry, who just dropped out of the 2016 presidential race, is probably the most famous for his blind allegiance to cutting federal agencies, thanks to his unforgettable gaffe during a 2011 GOP presidential primary debate in which he failed to remember the name of the third of three agencies he proposed cutting. After visibly struggling to recall which it was, he sheepishly uttered, "oops."¹²⁶ But he is not alone. Sen. Graham,¹²⁷ Sen. Paul,¹²⁸ Gov. Huckabee,¹²⁹ and Sen. Cruz¹³⁰ have also all called for the destruction of the Department of Education. Sen. Rubio has also signaled that he would be open to cutting the Education Department as well.¹³¹ Meanwhile, Sens. Paul and Cruz want to abolish the Internal Revenue Service,¹³² while Gov. Walker wants to gut the Environmental Protection Agency.¹³³

By a margin of 59 percent to 19 percent, Americans prefer raising taxes on the wealthy to balance the budget in lieu of cutting funding for education.

Closed tax loopholes favoring the wealthy and raised taxes

President Ronald Reagan is known as one of the fathers of trickle-down economics, a theory that has largely favored the wealthy few at the expense of the middle class. For example, after Reagan passed the Economic Recovery Tax Act, which disproportionately cut taxes for the wealthy, income inequality exploded.¹³⁴ Reagan, however, did not refuse to raise taxes from time to time. As president, Reagan also closed tax loopholes that favored the wealthy after he saw how his tax cut increased the deficit. In 1982, President Reagan worked with then-Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill (D-MA) and Democrats in Congress to pass the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act, or TEFRA—the largest peacetime tax increase in American history.¹³⁵ TEFRA, as Reagan advisor Bruce Bartlett described it, raised the top income tax rate and the tax rate on capital gains and dividends.¹³⁶ A hike in the tax rate on capital gains and dividends falls primarily on the wealthy few, as middle-class families receive very little income from capital gains and dividends—only 6 percent of middle-class market income comes from business income, capital income, and realized capital gains compared to more than 50 percent of income for the richest 1 percent.¹³⁷ As Reagan later explained, tax loopholes “sometimes made it possible for millionaires to pay nothing, while a bus driver was paying ten percent of his salary, and that’s crazy.”¹³⁸

Indeed, historian Douglas Brinkley explains, “Ronald Reagan was never afraid to raise taxes. He knew that it was necessary at times.”¹³⁹ In total, Reagan signed 11 bills that raised taxes a combined total of \$132.7 billion over the course of his presidency¹⁴⁰ He ended up raising taxes seven out of the eight years he was in office, including a tax increase to fund Social Security.¹⁴¹

Tax loopholes
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— Ronald Reagan

FIGURE 4
President Reagan's tax increases

All tax increases signed into law by President Reagan, 1981–1989

Tax increases	Billions of dollars (net effect from passage to 1988)
Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982	57.3
Highway Revenue Act of 1982	4.9
Social Security Amendments of 1983	24.6
Railroad Retirement Revenue Act of 1983	1.2
Deficit Reduction Act of 1984	25.4
Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985	2.9
Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985	2.4
Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986	0.6
Continuing Resolution for 1987	2.8
Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1987	8.6
Continuing Resolution for 1988	2
Total cumulative tax increases	132.7

Source: Office of Management and Budget, *Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 1990* (Executive Office of the President, 1989), p. 4-4, available at https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/docs/publications/usbudget/bus_1990.pdf; Bruce Bartlett, "Reagan's Tax Increases," Stan Collender's Capital Gains and Games, April 6, 2010, available at <http://www.capitalgainsandgames.com/blog/bruce-bartlett/1632/reagans-tax-increases>. Numbers represent the net effect of the tax increases from passage to the end of the Reagan presidency in 1988.

Overall, President Reagan's cumulative tax cuts were roughly twice the size of his cumulative tax increases, and his tax policy still disproportionately favored cutting taxes for wealthy Americans.¹⁴² But his willingness to raise taxes on the wealthy stands in contrast to today's GOP. While Reagan acted to close tax loopholes for millionaires, numerous 2016 GOP presidential hopefuls have proposed policies that overwhelmingly benefit the wealthiest Americans. For example, while Reagan raised the tax rate on capital gains and dividends, Sen. Rubio proposes eliminating all taxes on capital gains and dividends, a move that would disproportionately benefit the wealthy.¹⁴³ Rubio's plan would also add \$2.4 trillion to the deficit.¹⁴⁴ Sen. Cruz has also indicated support for eliminating the capital gains tax.¹⁴⁵ Gov. Bush recently announced a tax plan that includes a number of large tax giveaways that overwhelmingly benefit the wealthiest Americans: It cuts tax rates on capital gains and dividends, lowers the top income tax rate, slashes corporate taxes, and eliminates the estate tax.¹⁴⁶ Gov. Bush's tax proposal, in fact, would save him \$773,677 per year based on his 2013 adjusted gross income of \$7,274,764.¹⁴⁷ Not to be left behind, Sen. Paul's tax plan disproportionately benefits the wealthy; according to the conservative Tax Foundation, Sen. Paul's tax plan would cut taxes for millionaires far more than it would for middle-class Americans.¹⁴⁸

Not only do many of the GOP presidential candidates support tax policies that favor the wealthy few, they have also adopted extreme tax policy stances that leave little room for compromise. Out of the 16 declared candidates, 13 of them have signed Grover Norquist's "Taxpayer Protection Pledge,"¹⁴⁹ meaning they will refuse to support any legislation that includes a net income tax increase,¹⁵⁰ even if it would only affect the wealthiest corporations and individuals and even if revenue were needed to meet critical national priorities.

Conclusion

In the run-up to and during the Republican debate at the Reagan Presidential Library, the GOP presidential hopefuls will all rush to praise the late Ronald Reagan as their conservative hero and attempt to position themselves to take up the 40th president's mantle. But a closer look at President Reagan's record and the positions of the current crop of GOP candidates reveals not just the hypocrisy of the GOP presidential hopefuls, but also how far to the right of Reagan they and the Republican party have moved. The current Republican candidates for president may say that they love and revere Reagan, but when it comes to compromise and their individual positions on issues such as guns, immigration, and others, their political stances make it clear that are nothing like the "Gipper"—a political leader who could and did, in some instances, leave ideology on the bench when it came to the good of the country.

About the authors

Charles Posner is the Policy Manager at the Center for American Progress Action Fund, where he conducts actionable quantitative and qualitative analysis with a focus on making it relevant on the state level. His previous work at CAP Action includes research on election administration, voting rights, and provisional ballots. Prior to joining CAP Action, he worked at Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and Democracy Corps, specializing in U.S. political issues, and with Organizing for America in Ohio on campaigns to overturn a voter suppression law and protect collective bargaining rights for public-sector unions. Posner graduated with a bachelor's degree in political science from Brown University. He hails from Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Molly Cain is a Research Associate in the CAP Action War Room. Prior to joining CAP Action, she interned with the Office of Sen. Chris Coons (D-DE) and tutored economics for Stanford University's Athletic Academic Resource Center. Originally from Delaware, Cain earned a bachelor of arts in economics and public policy from Stanford University.

Anna Chu is the Vice President of Policy and Research at the Center for American Progress Action Fund and brings experience working on a multitude of economic campaigns. She also served as the policy director for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee during the successful 2012 cycle in which Democrats added two seats to their Senate majority. As policy director, Chu oversaw and managed all policy issues for the committee and Democratic Senate candidates. Prior to working at the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, Chu was the policy advisor for the House Democratic Caucus, where she managed several congressional task forces. She previously served as a federal law clerk and worked as an associate at Paul Hastings. Chu graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, and earned a law degree from the University of Southern California.

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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.

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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.

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