

The Election Campaign And Trump in the White House Lessons and Implications

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The unprecedented election of Donald J. Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States is a clear lesson on many fronts. Lessons will emerge from an abrasive political strategy that swiftly responded to attacks, spread half-truths, communicated directly with the voters, oversimplified complex issues, discredited the traditional media, and offered no significant policy formulations. Above all, the simplicity of Trump's campaign, which seemed to work, is summarized in isolationist, protectionist, and xenophobic proposals to "Make America Great Again."

As 2017 begins, U.S. Americans, Mexicans, and citizens from other nations are bracing themselves to see how the Trump presidency will take shape and how he will honor campaign promises—and threats. Given this scenario, the primary intention of this article is to examine the initial evidence of Mr. Trump's electoral success, including his use of social media, and to outline what that means for binational relationships, especially for Mexico.

Trump won the Electoral College by pushing an astonishing unconventional campaign that surprised many, including pollsters, media, analysts, and even members of the Republican Party. His campaign had many targets, including Hillary Clinton, Washington's political swampland, border security, especially with Mexico, immigration involving Muslims and Mexicans, and the "aggressive" trade practices of countries like China and Mexico. His statements brought up Mexico many times—no other country was mentioned as often or as intensely. In his speech to announce his candidacy on



June 16, 2015, he included Obama's health care, trade, unemployment, drugs, Saudi Arabia, economic decline, and terrorism.¹

So, first the facts: Hillary Clinton obtained 232 Electoral College votes while Trump won the Electoral College by 306 votes (270 guaranteed a win). However, Trump lost the popular vote by more than 2.8 million votes. The U.S. Electoral College follows a process established in 1779 in Article Two of the U.S. Constitution to settle presidential elections by Congress and by popular vote. Under this format, a candidate can lose the popular vote and still win the presidency through the Electoral College. This was the case of the 2016 election. Trump was able to win the battle states like Ohio, Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Florida, and Iowa, securing him sufficient electoral votes.

The initial announcement of his candidacy in summer 2015 received no significant political traction; rather, it was viewed with suspicion and revolt in the Republican Party, since he was accused of not being a genuine conservative, and with scorn from the media and political analysts. As 17 other Republican candidates emerged before the 2016 primaries, the press and many pundits did not believe Trump

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would win the party's nomination. His unconventional style and unexpected, consistent attacks on women, minorities, immigrants, and gay communities increased conventional skepticism; however, that rhetoric had no impact on his rising popularity. Many analysts and the press overlooked the broad discontent that Trump successfully tapped into, including the strong, white anti-Obama sentiment.

The key to understanding this is that Trump was appealing to and seeking the support of a predominantly uneducated, conservative white population, including Evangelical Christians, who did not vote consistently. Moreover, many of Trump's statements, the topics he dealt with, were primarily sacrilegious because of political correctness, stimulated in a way, over the years by the Democrats. He simply broke that tradition, attacking any topic and all and sundry, to the delight of those conservatives. For many, he represented a breath of fresh air as an unconventional political figure who publicly said what many voters thought in private but did not dare to say openly.

Another element that was very effective for Mr. Trump was the direct linear communication through social media—for free—, specifically through Twitter, where he offered opinions and very simplistic statements. He used his tweets to provide information about his ideas, to attack his political targets, and to discredit the traditional press. When the traditional media, whether print or broadcast (*The New York Times* and CNN in particular), presented information that Trump considered negative about him, he persistently and systematically called them the “dishonest media.” Yet, what has been evident is that Mr. Trump distorted, twisted, and spun facts and truthful information into discrediting attacks, in a public relations strategy to respond to media messages by changing their meaning. It is a textbook case of political propaganda and demagoguery. Given that this election has included far more engagement on Twitter than the 2012 election and that Obama's victory was credited largely to his social media presence, it is not unreasonable to assume that Trump's Twitter activity had a similar effect on his campaign.

Two months before the election, Trump had more Twitter followers than Clinton, with 11.6 million vs. 8.88 million respectively.² However, it was clear by then that Trump was

wining the social media war and that he was directing the news in his favor—for free at no cost, as he paid nothing for his Twitter account (@realDonaldTrump). His dominance of Twitter and how it helped his campaign is shown simply by his reluctance to use conventional methods of political communication and to rely instead on the free, immediate, visceral social media platforms. In a way, he let millions of supporters make his case for him and deflect the controversies he provoked.³ Just simply, the Twitter “likes” for Mr. Trump came to 776 000, while Mrs. Clinton received 578 000, a difference of nearly 200 000 or 34 percent more than the Democratic hopeful.⁴ During the campaign it was normal to expect a tweet at 3 a.m. about anything he wanted to communicate, causing a disruption of the normal news cycle.

The characteristics and factors involved in Trump's successful use of a one-way system of communication will be the subject of future research by political scientists and communications scholars. It is unclear how, as president of the United States, he will communicate with the U.S. public. What is clear now is that he has used his tweets as a way to deliver edicts, threats, and distortions of information. He repeatedly changes, dismisses, and switches facts to favor his positions. He discredits the media, public officials, corporations, and President Obama when they come out with information that does not support his political perspectives.

An initial analysis of Trump's tweets confirms he writes mostly in an angry mode. Trump owns an Android phone, which helps determine which tweets he wrote himself and which were put out by his campaign manager. One analysis of Trump's tweets shows that he writes with more “emotionally charged” words, like “badly,” “crazy,” “weak,” or “dumb.” He is also less likely to use hashtags, photos, or links in his tweets.⁵ *Politico Magazine* published an interesting graphic analysis of his Twitter history, focused on the 10 top words he used. Not surprisingly, they are: “I. You. Great. Trump. My. @realDonaldTrump. #Trump2016. He. We. Thank.” Also, the analysis shows that the words “great,” “weak,” “failed,” “nasty,” and “light-weight” were some of the adjectives most used in his tweets.⁶

Slate Magazine also analyzed Trump's tweets for patterns and to explain his strategies. It identified a mode of persuasion that initially appeals to logic, followed by an appeal to his own credibility, and then a strong appeal to emotion. The tweets are structured as a statement of fact (which may not be true), followed by an insult (usually), and are loaded with emotional appeal. Another of Trump's tactics is to put him-

self at the center of every issue by creating the impression that he is critical to every aspect of life.⁷

Something unclear is the role of Steve Bannon, who has extensive experience in manipulating information into “news” and creating what is called “fake news.” Bannon is the past director of *Breitbart News*, a far-right website source of conservative information, opinion, and commentary that uses a model to show untruthful or false information as real. During the election, fake articles like “The Pope Endorses Trump,” “Hillary Clinton Bought \$137 Million in Illegal Arms,” and “The Clintons Bought a \$200 Million House in the Maldives” circulated first on this website and then around Facebook getting thousands of likes, shares, and comments. He has been appointed President-elect Trump’s chief strategist, and we can expect there the same level of information manipulation that Mr. Bannon is known for. The implications, however, would be more dramatic and have a greater impact.

Breitbart News is a website used as a platform for the “alt-right.” The alternative right or “alt-right” is a conservative movement that has been identified with white supremacy, racism, nativism, anti-feminism, homophobia, and neo-Nazi principles and followers. The site’s qualitative content consistently displays the style used by Mr. Bannon and his team, which, again, is expected from the Trump administration. Also, Google and Facebook have been accused of being responsible for letting fake news expand during the 2016 presidential election. After the balloting, Google announced it would ban websites that peddle fake news from using its online advertising service. Similarly, Facebook updated its Facebook Audience Network Policy, which already says it will not display ads on sites that show misleading or illegal content, including fake news sites.⁸ How both companies will be able to monitor information coming from the administration and/or U.S. government agencies under Mr. Trump remains to be seen.

Scholars have already begun academic research to better understand how and why Mr. Trump won the election; but also how Clinton and the Democratic Party lost track of their political message. It is difficult to grasp the notion that the Democratic Party’s traditional political influence on blue-collar workers, especially of those in manufacturing, was coopted and won over by Trump’s political machinery. As mentioned above, some of the apparent reasons are the high voting rate of disfranchised, white populations, which include traditionally Democratic, unionized workers. Also, it is important to understand how a billionaire like Trump persuaded working-

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class U.S. Americans to vote for him, allowing him to win swing states like Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. It is essential to understand how those voters overlooked Mr. Trump’s major personal flaws and ultimately voted for him. Again, part of the explanation is what a reporter from CNN heard from a Trump supporter, who said that his news source was Facebook.⁹

The Latino factor is important to mention here. It was not, as many anticipated, the magic bullet for electing Clinton. As expected, Latinos voted for her, but in smaller numbers than they did for Obama in 2012, by almost 6 percentage points, 66 percent versus 71 percent respectively. So, more Latinos decided to switch political parties despite the insults and offenses Trump hurled at most of them. The reality is not hard to understand, and it is illustrated by Pew Research Center research: Latinos living in the United States, as U.S. citizens, vote according to their personal interests.¹⁰ And those are closely aligned with those of other U.S. Americans: health care, jobs, terrorism, and social security. The traditional Latino voter cannot be taken for granted in terms of loyalty toward the Democratic Party and Mexico.

Another important lesson to be learned from Trump’s success is the significance of good methodology for surveying likely and eligible voters all over the country and from all backgrounds. This election showed major flaws in almost all polls as they under-sampled large groups of voters including rural whites, who were decisive for Trump’s win. Their prediction models missed these voters’ opinions and attitudes. The same lesson should be learned by the news media, which concentrated most of its reporting and stories in urban areas that traditionally lean Democratic, avoiding large pockets of white towns. Journalists and reporters need to go the rural/agricultural areas, remote towns in the Rust Belt, the Deep South, the Plains, and the Southwest to do in-depth interviews and learn how people there live and think. The press needs to understand white populations better, those who have lost their economic compass since the 1980s and who have been hit hard by the 2008 Great Recession.

Moreover, another important lesson from the 2016 presidential election is that traditional or conventional assump-

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tions about how the U.S. electorate votes have now been debunked. Unionized workers, Latinos, and other minorities cannot be taken for granted by the Democratic Party. White conservatives, who were reluctant to vote in the past, seemed to have mobilized. Suburban, college-educated U.S. Americans are not as liberal as many pollsters and the media assumed; in fact, evidence exists that many women with college degrees voted for Trump. Conservative values, personal economic conditions, and the fear of terrorism were more important in this election than party affiliation. Also, the unintended consequences of Obama policies like the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), which increased medical insurance costs for the middle and working class, turned into a major liability for the Democrats.

Under these conditions, should Mexico brace itself for the worst? Yes, but not really. The major challenges will involve the undocumented Mexican immigrants now living in the U.S., who could be deported massively. This could have real consequences for the Mexican economy if it is forced to absorb millions of citizens who will need jobs. In terms of trade, Trump forgets that Republican members of the House and the Senate are pro-market, capitalism, and trade policies. The United States' considerable dependency on cross-border supply chains with Mexico, if affected negatively, would have harmful impacts all across the U.S. Yet, new investments in Mexico could potentially be reduced or curtailed, and if that happens, it will have another negative impact. Trump is not promising the penalization of Mexican companies; his threats have focused on U.S. corporations, and that will be a major government intervention in the market.

Could and should NAFTA be reviewed? Yes, absolutely, it should be updated and upgraded. This would offer Mexico an opportunity to influence negotiations and to seek remedies for imbalances and sectors that have been left out, such as energy. It is time to review manufacturing practices and all-partner benefits, border cooperation and collaboration, transportation, human rights and the environment. Mexico needs to take both border and regional security more seriously in order to implement the proper measures to become an actor and not a spectator. This is an opportunity to bring

to the table all the topics that affect the everyday interdependent relationship between the U.S. and Mexico, which Trump clearly does not understand.

The big thing everybody is wondering is how much of what Mr. Trump said during the campaign was pure political rhetoric and what the actual policies and governmental deliverables are. As of mid-February 2017, almost one month after Trump moved into the White House, many of his political campaign promises have been issued as Presidential Executive Orders. However, many of those have been challenged in court and placed under judicial stay. Confusion has resulted and the process of checks and balances has been set in motion to confirm their legal validity. ■■■

NOTES

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- ⁵ David Robinson, "Text Analysis of Trump's Tweets Confirms He Writes Only the (angrier) Android Half," *Variance Explained*, August 9, 2016, <http://varianceexplained.org/r/trump-tweets/>, accessed December 3, 2016.
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