

Why did Donald Trump win the 2016 United States presidential election?

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The 2016 United States presidential election result took many by surprise. Democratic party candidate Hillary Clinton was tipped to win, with major polls largely in her favour; however, on November 8th, controversial Republican nominee Donald J. Trump became the 45th President of the United States. By using modern data-driven techniques to craft a tailored campaign, Trump and his team were able to tap into the fears, prejudices and insecurities of the voting public, appealing to key states in a way the traditional demographic-based campaigning of his main rival Clinton was unable to match. The historical precedent was in Trump's favour as the post-incumbent opposition candidate; however, the numbers indicate his success was more a result of Clinton underperforming than his popularity. Trump and his team identified key policy areas to maximise their voter potential where it mattered, ultimately losing the popular vote but winning the presidency through electoral college delegates.

Economic insecurity weighed heavily during the 2016 campaign, with trade deals serving as a hot-button topic, distinguishing Trump from both Clinton and his Republican counterparts. The millions of Americans who had seen their factories close and jobs disappear offshore understandably looked toward the candidate who promised to return their jobs to America and discourage further corporations from moving elsewhere (AlterNet 2016, n.p.). In turn, states that had overwhelmingly voted Democrat for decades, for example Pennsylvania, were becoming increasingly distrustful of politicians who claimed to be for the people but failed to connect with the 'white working-class' or tap into their key concerns (Zurcher 2016, n.p.). Hobbs (2017, n.p.) connects the disenfranchisement felt by many who have negatively experienced the inequitable distribution of wealth as a result of globalisation, to the rise in populism around the globe. However, this anger, while justifiable, can be misappropriated by political leaders and channelled toward certain racial, religious or gender groups to fit a particular narrative (Hobbs 2017, n.p.). In conjunction, these leaders may also move to situate themselves as the only candidate who truly understands the needs of the people and, more importantly, characterise all those who question or oppose as an enemy of the people (Hobbs 2017, n.p.). Hobbs (2017, n.p.) was not specifically discussing the 2016 US election; rather, the rise of the demagogue as cautioned by Plato, whom he proposed would use the democratic system to gain power. It could be argued that Trump's rise to power exhibits several, if not all of these hallmarks. As McLaughlin (2017, n.p.) points out, there will always be voters who feel disenfranchised under the current government and who opt to vote for anyone offering change, something Trump was offering. In spite of Republican party concerns, Trump's lack of moderation benefited his campaign as he came to be seen as the anti-establishment candidate (Beaumont 2016, n.p.). Conversely, Clinton's vast experience of over two decades in politics worked against her in an election where resentment against career politicians was high (Beaumont 2016, n.p.). Part of this resentment was borne out of a perception of corruption or favouritism towards lobby groups and corporations, particularly those whose generous

donations funded budding candidates' multimillion dollar campaigns (Beaumont 2016, n.p.). Furthermore, political gridlock in the Senate had left both sides of politics unable – or unwilling – to reach agreement on several key bills, such as healthcare reform and raising the debt limit. This was subsequently seen as evidence that the current political institution was ineffectual and therefore required an outsider to 'get things done' (Beaumont 2016, n.p.), and no one was more of an outsider than the candidate who barely had the support of his own party.

Trump had been expected to announce his candidacy for the 2012 election in opposition to Obama, whom he strongly condemned, publicly leading calls questioning Obama's county of birth and legitimacy as President. However, Trump chose not to directly oppose Obama, biding his time, while the 2012 Republican candidate Mitt Romney's loss was largely equated to his disfavour among Hispanic voters. In response, the Republican party attempted to tap into the Hispanic demographic by collaborating with the Democrats on a 2013 immigration bill, which made it possible for some illegal immigrants to attain legal status. This had the adverse effect of putting the predominately white Republican voter base off-side (VOX 2016, n.p.). Comparatively, Trump's tough immigration stance during the 2016 election primaries appealed to anti-immigration sentiments and set him apart from other Republican party candidates (VOX 2016, n.p.).

Throughout Trump's campaign, there were contentions he ran on a tide of fear-mongering, racism and white supremacy. Political researcher James Cahill (2017, n.p.) argues Trump's initial surge in popularity when he questioned Obama's legitimacy in 2012 is evidence his victory was not economically motivated. AlterNet (2016, n.p.) also suggests the rhetoric of economic insecurity does not explain Trump's success with white people in high-income areas, nor his lack of appeal to low-income areas populated by people of colour. If support were truly based on economic concerns and American jobs, Trump should have found broad support amongst all low-income demographics. Instead, figures supplied by the United States Census Bureau showed it was counties with a lower university educated population that were more inclined to support Trump, irrespective of income status (Silver 2016, n.p.). The inverse applied to Clinton, with higher educated counties swinging toward the Democratic candidate, even in states that favoured the opposition overall (Silver 2016, n.p.). During his campaign, Trump's limited policy proposals were largely exclusionary, calling for mass deportations of illegal immigrants, blanket bans on Muslim immigration and a wall along the Mexican border (AlterNet 2016, n.p.). Trump also promised to crack down on crime and lauded praise on the police force, at a time when Black Lives Matter protests were breaking out across the country in response to the multiple unarmed black men killed by the police (AlterNet 2016, n.p.). The appointment of (now former) Breitbart head, Steve Bannon, to campaign CEO did little to quell allegations of white supremacist sentiments within the Trump campaign (BBC 2017, n.p.) [*Ed. Bannon's position at the White House has since been terminated, and he has returned to work at Breitbart*]. Bannon had spoken in favour of the white nationalist movement 'alt-right', known predominately for its anti-immigration, anti-semitic and anti-feminist stance, as well as its broad dismissal of the existence of inequalities facing people of colour and LGBT+ communities (BBC 2017, n.p.). Breitbart, however, has described the group as an 'intelligent... taboo-defying... youthful' group who are preserving 'the Western European and American

way of life' by saying what other conservatives were 'afraid' to (Bokhari & Yiannopoulos 2016, n.p.). Breitbart was also unabashed in its support of Trump, defending him against his dissenters and endorsing the billionaire business mogul for President (Dooley 2016, n.p.). The political candidate helped to rationalise and legitimise anxieties towards a variety of groups such as immigrants, Muslims, people of colour, and feminists, who threatened the status-quo (AlterNet 2016, n.p.). Trump's rhetoric played on fear and provided voters with a perfect 'other' to blame for their current situation. AlterNet (2016, n.p.) suggests Trump's election was, in part, a manifestation of the underlying misogyny in American society, highlighting voter dismissal of multiple sexist remarks made by Trump, including a recording in which he promotes the sexual assault of women. This suggested that many American citizens, while perhaps not overtly misogynistic themselves, seemed to be willing to accept misogyny as a cultural norm.

In this case, it is important to consider not only why Trump won the election, but why Clinton lost. McLaughlin (2017, n.p.) suggests Clinton in fact lost more votes than Trump won, highlighting Trump's weak improvement of 3.4% on Romney's 2012 performance, compared to the historical average of 38.3% for a post-incumbent opposition candidate. The Democrats had been consistently losing votes since Obama's 2008 victory, with neither the 2012 re-election, nor the 2016 Clinton campaign, able to garner the same kind of support as the preceding election. This indicates that Trump's victory spoke more to the repudiation of the Democrats (McLaughlin 2017, n.p.). Clinton's lack of appeal to voters was not helped by the email scandal that plagued her campaign. The FBI's reopening of investigations into the usage of her personal email account just eleven days before the election likely influenced undecided voters to vote against her (Beaumont 2016, n.p.). Trump won 306 Electoral College delegates to Clinton's 232; however, the race was still closer than it may have appeared, with Trump winning four key states by a margin of less than 1.2% (Beaumont 2016, n.p.). Overall Clinton received 2.86 million more votes than Trump but approximately 80,000 fewer than Obama in 2012 (Beaumont 2016, n.p.). There have only been five elections in US history that resulted in a candidate winning the popular vote but losing the presidency, the last of which being the controversial Gore / Bush election in 2000 (Beaumont 2016, n.p.). Despite general perceptions many Americans were so disenfranchised they abstained from voting, eligible voter turnout was at sixty per cent, an increase of 1.4 per cent from the previous election (Beaumont 2016, n.p.). While Clinton garnered favour in the more populous states of Texas, California and New York, Trump gained significant ground in the American mid-west, clinching several states formerly won by Obama, earning critical Electoral College delegates in the process (Beaumont 2016, n.p.). It was Trump's appeal to voters in less educated counties that saw him gain the most ground, with the Republican party claiming victory in several counties previously held by Democrats, some as far back as 1984 (Silver 2016, n.p.). As qualified for the position as Clinton may have been, her inability to connect with voters or effectively communicate her policies left many potential supporters unable to articulate what she actually stood for (AlterNet 2016, n.p.). Trump, however, had no such problems, ensuring his message was received by potential supporters.

Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, has been widely credited with running the Trump campaign, with Forbes magazine going so far as to emblazon their front cover with the words 'This Guy Got Trump Elected' across his portrait (Bertoni 2016, n.p.). Venture capitalist and PayPal cofounder, Peter Thiel – who was one of the only Silicon Valley residents to publicly endorse Trump – spoke highly of Kushner's role in the campaign, stating, 'It's hard to overstate and hard to summarise Jared's role in the campaign ... If Trump was the CEO, Jared was effectively the chief operating officer' (Thiel cited in Bertoni 2016, n.p.). Kushner initially assisted his father-in-law's presidential bid by researching policy positions on taxation and trade, in what was a comparatively underfunded and undermanned campaign (Bertoni 2016, n.p.). As the campaign progressed, Kushner became an invaluable power broker, facilitating partnerships between the controversial candidate and parties who did not want to be seen publicly working for the Trump campaign (Bertoni 2016, n.p.):

People were being told in Washington that if they did any work for the Trump campaign, they would never be able to work in Republican politics again. I hired a great tax-policy expert who joined under two conditions: We couldn't tell anybody he worked for the campaign, and he was going to charge us double (Kushner cited in Bertoni 2016, n.p.).

The unorthodox campaign began with little to no resources before Kushner brought in speech writers and policy experts, while taking on the responsibility of organising Trump's schedule and campaign finances himself (Bertoni 2016, n.p.). Kushner's Silicon Valley connections, coupled with his understanding of social media and its potential for real-time feedback and micro-targeting, led to an increase in revenue and support (Bertoni 2016, n.p.). Within three weeks of Trump securing the Republican nomination, Kushner commenced work on a 100-person data centre, focused on campaign strategy, fundraising and message tailoring (Bertoni 2016, n.p.). By approaching the campaign like a business, with a focus on return on investment, Trump and Kushner were able to maximise their voter potential for over US\$200 million less than their main rival, Clinton (Bertoni 2016, n.p.; FEC 2016, n.p.). By using existing data mapping tools including Cambridge Analytica and Deep Root, they were able to identify which policies to promote during which television programs, where to travel and what topics to discuss at which location (Bertoni 2016, n.p.). Cambridge Analytica employ the psychological analysis model 'OCEAN' (openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, neuroticism) to data collected from social media platforms such as Facebook, to create detailed and highly accurate profiles of individuals and regions (Grassegger & Krogerus 2017, n.p.). This meant that instead of making broad assumptions based on demographic research, Trump's campaign was able to deploy a multitude of precision targeted messages, grounded in psychometrics (Grassegger & Krogerus 2017, n.p.). All of this culminated in over 100,000 targeted advertisements per day and approximately US\$250 million in funds raised across four months (Bertoni 2016, n.p.). The campaign may have been run on fear and anger, but it was through data and an entrepreneurial approach that the presidency was won.

There is no single reason that explains why Donald Trump won the 2016 election; rather, a series of interweaving catalysts explain why voters chose to put their faith in the controversial

businessman. Trump identified and exploited fears and insecurities within the American populous of which the rest of the political system was either unaware or in denial. His unconventional campaigning saw him employ a modern, data-driven approach grounded in entrepreneurialism at a time when voters, for a variety of reasons, were feeling increasingly disenfranchised by conventional politics.

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