

Interpretations of the Trump Election

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Yes, the Trump election was a surprise, and a nasty one to most of us. Aside from the substantive results, political scientists were perhaps most disappointed in the failures of their predictions. In this paper, drawn from my chapter in Bill Crotty's volume (Crotty, 2017), I try to evaluate principal explanations of the election results, each citing different causes and examining different time periods.

1. The Fundamentals.

A prominent explanation largely ignores campaign events. Political science predictions take a longer perspective, typically relying on complex statistical models. These forecasts were more accurate than almost all of the polls, including those reported one day before the formal vote (Campbell November 2016).ⁱ

The scholarly models essentially agree that elections are decided by conditions in place before the campaign. They use a variety of data, including presidential approval ratings, nomination primaries, different measurements of economic conditions months before Election Day, early polls, and the length of time that the incumbent party has held the White House. In 2016, nine of eleven major studies predicted Clinton's lead in the national popular vote. However, by neglecting the Electoral College and variations among the state votes, they generally failed to predict Trump's victory. One scholar did continue his perfect record of election predictions, but also erred in his prediction of the popular vote, using simpler evaluations of the historical setting (Lichtman 2016).

One prediction error was particularly poignant – Alan Abramowitz's correct but repudiated analysis. In the past, this distinguished scholar had developed a parsimonious model with only three independent and pre-campaign variables: the state of the economy, presidential popularity, and the number of terms served by the incumbent party. He then correctly predicted Trump's election: "these results indicate that Donald Trump should be a clear but not overwhelming favorite to defeat Hillary Clinton: there should be about a 66% chance of a Republican victory."

But then Abramowitz, on the verge of an audacious but correct forecast, apparently blanched. Going beyond his own model to add new variables, he retreated to the consensual opinion: “the GOP had [not] nominated a mainstream candidate and that candidate had [not] run a reasonably competent campaign. Therefore, despite the prediction of the Time for Change model, Hillary Clinton should probably be considered a strong favorite to win the 2016 presidential election” (Abramowitz, 2016, 659-60).

2. *Structural Effects: The Electoral College*

We know that Clinton actually won the election by the usual democratic measure, the popular vote, besting Trump by nearly three million votes, while losing the electoral vote 232-306. So we might conclude that the Trump victory is only an unfortunate but artificial result of the distortions of the Electoral College.

Clinton’s geographical reach was limited. She achieved pluralities in only twenty states and the District of Columbia. Seemingly, her campaign usually required ocean water to succeed, carrying most of the Atlantic Northeast and all but Alaska on the Pacific coast, but only two states in the former Democratic stronghold of the Midwest and three newer friendly territories in the Rocky Mountains. But Clinton lost votes almost everywhere, when compared to Obama, as statistically measured by a correlation of .96 between the state-by-state outcomes in 2012 and 2016. Those losses were national, not parochially regional, switching six states and a decisive 100 electoral votes. In effect, the combat lines of party foxholes between the parties remained, but the demarcations had moved a small but determining margin to the right.

We can easily imagine other outcomes, if we mathematically (and perhaps magically) construct other outcomes. The simplest reconstruction would be to change the system to direct popular vote – as Clinton supporters would now want. However, it’s not that simple. If there had been a different system in effect, campaign behavior would also be different. Trump has said that he would have devoted more attention to states that he lost decisively, such as California and New York, probably changing his total vote and possibly making him the majority choice. Clinton’s vote would also change as she would devote less effort to states she actually lost narrowly, such as Florida and Pennsylvania.

So, who would win? We will never know.

The narrow margins in 2016 raise questions about the institution of the Electoral College itself. Is it now inherently biased against Democrats and the foundational principle of majority rule? Or, as Trump might have asked, is the system rigged? Perhaps that assertion is true, because the institution gives extra power to small states, since each state's electoral votes are based not only on its population but also include two additional votes for each state, reflecting each state's equal number of two members in the Senate. Is it fair that 85,000 voters in Wyoming choose each of three electors, while it takes 252,000 Californians to make the same decision?

Suppose we took away these two "senatorial" electors from each state? Then there would be 100 fewer electoral votes, now a reduced total of 438. That would not change the 2016 result. Trump would now have 246 and Clinton 192, a reduced margin, but still a clear Republican victory. This imagined scenario does not support the argument that small states have an inherent and always unfair advantage in the Electoral College.

One other probe. Are the parties treated equally in terms of winning these electoral votes? Does it take more Democratic popular votes? We can calculate the number of popular votes that brought one electoral vote to the parties in 2016, in the nation as a whole and in states of varying populations and, consequently, different numbers of current electoral votes. In Table 1, I examine the results in four different kinds of states, based on their population size.

Parties do have advantages in some places. Democratic efforts are more "efficient" in the smallest and largest states, Republicans in those of middle-sized populations. Overall, there is no significant variation in party effectiveness or consistent harm to the Democrats. In fact, on average, it takes somewhat fewer ballots for that party to win electoral votes than do Republicans. The problem for the Democrats is that they win fewer states, and that their popular majority in 2016 was "wasted" in overwhelming victories in places such as California; that state alone provided almost twice her national popular majority.

Put another way, the Democratic problem is that the United States is not a single country but, in presidential elections as in the real constitutional world, it is a federal system in which states are given significant roles in the choice of the leader of the nation. America is a diverse nation that defers to cultural differences that span a continent from secularist Washington to evangelical Georgia, and a republic that is deliberately hostile to rule by a presumed Democratic party "firewall" of only 19 states on its geographical fringes.

Acknowledging these differences was part of the “federal bargain” that created the Constitution itself, evident as well in the composition of the Congress and the existence of equal state votes in the Senate. It is one of the virtues praised by Alexander Hamilton in *The Federalist*, a safeguard, he wrote, against national “cabal, intrigue, and corruption” that might characterize a single national election. (Hamilton, *The Federalist*, No. 68, 364). Perhaps the federal system is outdated and America should be a unitary state, with a single leader, male or female, responsible only to a mass majority, perhaps even to the “tyranny of the majority” feared by Alexis de Tocqueville. Until the United States decides to make that extraordinary change in its institutions, the Electoral College does not threaten its democracy.

3. *Campaign Effects.*

Political professionals stress short-term influences. Their focus is particularly on events during the intense period of the campaign itself, the months between the national party conventions and Election Day.

Clinton herself is the most prominent example of this school of thought. In a conference call with major contributors, she blamed her defeat on FBI Director James Comey’s late pre-election letters. By again raising the issue of her emails, Clinton said, that issue was revived to her detriment, halting her momentum toward victory. When Comey then closed the investigation only two days before the election, she argued, he inspired Trump voters to surge to the polls.

While we cannot recover the thought processes of the voters, this explanation has major flaws. Empirically, Clinton’s lead was already eroding before Comey’s intervention, and few poll respondents stated that it had influenced their votes. More fundamentally, it seems improbable that the FBI Director’s brief announcements would change preferences shaped over a long campaign. More likely, the effect was not persuasion but rather reinforcement of choices that had been made already, and indeed already cast by many in early voting. It is still more doubtful that the second Comey letter, again exonerating Clinton of criminal liability, would increase Trump’s turnout. Why would Clinton’s detractors become energized by her vindication?

Some analyses of Clinton’s defeat criticized other aspects of her campaign. With the advantage of flawless hindsight, Monday morning quarterbacks now know, for example, that she might have won by devoting more time and advertising in the last weeks to the upper Midwest. But, overall, Clinton ran a good if inevitably imperfect campaign. She targeted good

combinations of states, raised far more money than her billionaire opponent, dominated television ads, ran a superior national convention, and triumphed in the critical presidential debates. All she lacked was votes.

4. *Voting: A Basket of Deplorables.*

When we turn from the campaign to the voting booths, other interpretations come to the fore. A particularly dark analysis made its way into the minds and hearts of many Clintonites, who were not only disappointed, but depressed virtually to clinical levels by the Republican victory. Clinton had warned in the campaign that as many as half of Trump's acolytes could be classified as "baskets of deplorables," using their votes to express malign hostilities toward women, immigrants, homosexuals, and ethnic minorities. As the returns came in, Democrats reiterated this damning explanation. The editor of the liberal *New Yorker* ably articulated the sentiment:

The election of Donald Trump to the Presidency is nothing less than a tragedy for the American republic, a tragedy for the Constitution, and a triumph for the forces, at home and abroad, of nativism, authoritarianism, misogyny, and racism. Trump's shocking victory, his ascension to the Presidency, is a sickening event in the history of the United States and liberal democracy. On January 20, 2017, we will bid farewell to the first African-American President—a man of integrity, dignity, and generous spirit—and witness the inauguration of a con who did little to spurn endorsement by forces of xenophobia and white supremacy (Remnick 2016).

American history certainly provides ample evidence of racism, misogyny, and hostility toward immigrant groups and gays – including slavery and segregation, disenfranchisement of women, the Know-Nothing party, and violence against homosexuals. Even today, hate groups have considerable support. The Trump campaign was not overtly based on such malignant appeals, but it was slow to reject backing from such groups as the Ku Klux Klan; its rallies did include lewd disparagement of Clinton, encouragement of calls to "Lock Her Up," and enthusiastic calls to deport Mexican-Americans and restrict Moslems.

Racism and sexism did spur the Trump movement. Whites who denied the existence of racial inequality or who saw women as seeking to control men were considerably more likely to

vote for Trump, as shown by Professor Brian Shaffner. But these attitudes were not the only influences. Economic insecurity also played a role: “Ultimately, the competing narratives about why Trump performed so well among whites are not competing at all; they are complementary” (Shaffner 2016).

Despite these expressions of truly un-American attitudes, it is difficult to believe that they were the controlling bases of Trump’s victory. Large majorities of the electorate endorsed egalitarian positions, including citizenship for undocumented aliens and equal rights for women, blacks, and homosexuals. In actual voting, Americans have elected increasing numbers of minorities and women, including four new women senators in 2016, chose Barack Obama twice as president, and endorsed marriage equality for gays. Whatever may be hidden in white Americans’ hearts, the nation has become more tolerant in its acts.

5. Voting: Retrospective Judgment

An alternative - and the simplest - explanation of the election is that the voters thought it was “Time for a Change,” the typical electoral response after two presidential terms by one party. This sentiment was the most frequent call of the voters, gaining a plurality among choices offered in the national exit poll, with Trump winning six of every seven voters emphasizing this characteristic - the only one on which Trump rated higher than Clinton, as detailed in Table 2.

This Trump vote can be seen as simple “retrospective voting,” a common defense by political scientists of the “rationality” of the voters. Busy with their own lives and looking for obvious clues to the complexity of the world, according to this construct, voters can reasonably judge the results of government – keeping the incumbent party in power if they are satisfied, opting for the opposition when unhappy. However, retrospective voting is not as simple as it may seem. In a striking and acrid challenge, two scholars warn that the theory “fails to do justice to the very considerable logical and informational difficulties,” and “may be no more sensible than kicking the dog after a hard day at work” (Achen and Bartels 2016, 92-93). The judgment of the electorate is often inarticulate, limited to the choices presented. As the authoritative V.O. Key put it:

The voice of the people is but an echo....no more than a selective reflection from among the alternatives and outlooks presented to them....Even the most discriminating popular judgment can reflect only

ambiguity, uncertainty, or even foolishness if those are the qualities of the input into the echo chamber. If the people can choose only from among rascals, they are certain to choose a rascal (Key 1966, 6-7).

In 2016, the electoral message was certainly negative, but also inarticulate. Both candidates were seen unfavorably, as rascals for different reasons. Clinton detailed policy proposals, but her basic defense of the incumbent party was rejected. Trump was even less popular, and provided only vague and often contradictory pledges for the future. Trump's mandate was only for a flag salute, his empty hope to "make America great again."

Yet even that vacuity carried a message, one of anger, expressed by some as a desire to return to bygone America, by others as hope for progress toward a restored nation. That message was the source of the strong support won by Trump among white men of the working class, as detailed in the demographics of the vote. Inarticulate, it did convey a call first expressed forty years earlier in a classic film, *Network*: "You've got to say my life has value. Stop and yell, 'I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take that anymore.'" Neither Trump nor the film's fictional television anchor provided policy content, leaving that task to another day: "I don't know what to do. We'll figure out what to do later." But both the real and the imagined celebrities were effective in their protest.

6. *The Voters' Message*

Trump's appeal was not personal, nor his victory a specific policy mandate. By the middle of October, close to two-thirds of likely voters held unfavorable views of the Republican, thought he lacked the "personality and temperament to serve as president," and believed he "probably has made unwanted sexual advances on women" (Clement and Balz, 2016). After the vote, he earned mediocre or failing grades from seventy percent of the nation for his conduct during the campaign (far worse than Clinton), the only election winner to lack majority approval (Pew Research Center; November, 2016).

Trump's appeal was a reaction to circumstances, not a personal endorsement, by

"a white working class whose economic interests and experience diverge fundamentally -- in terms of culture, class, and history -- from those of soccer moms in Bethesda, suburban independents in Fair Lawn, and wired

cyberprofessionals in Silicon Valley....The failure of activist government... has persuaded forgotten-majority voters that government is more a part of this values-experience disjunction than the solution to it. The direct and long-lasting result is the sour and skeptical attitude toward government that has become so common today ([Rogers](#) and [Teixeira](#) 2000).

These voters heard Trump as the voice of their grievances, economic and social. Some regretted the loss of male and white dominance in a nation increasingly diverse and egalitarian. More broadly, their protest reflected economic changes that had brought severe class differences to the United States. The richest tenth of the population had held 35% of the total nation income; its lion's share was now half, a return to inequalities before the New Deal (Piketty 2014, 24, 294-96). Yearly income shows a similar decline. Since 2000, median real income of white males without college degrees declined 16%, more than wiping out gains for the previous quarter of a century (Bernstein 2016). The relative loss of income was paralleled by a loss of future opportunities, as the American dream of social mobility across generations faded. Once, the U.S. led the world in providing educational opportunities; now it provides less than almost every industrial country. Less than a third of Americans have a higher education level than their parents. (Porter 2014). Class anger should be no surprise.

Trump was the willing beneficiary of these grievances. He blamed Obama and Clinton for the economic decline of the working class, directing his attacks to trade agreements and immigration. And his gains were augmented by the inattention of the Democrats. Unintentionally, the party had undermined its electoral base. From the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 to the defeat of Hillary Clinton in 2016, the white share of registered Democrats fell from 76% to 57%, the share of loyalists among persons without college education fell from 55% to 32%, and the share of those with a religious affiliation declined from 90% to 71% (Pew Research Center, September 2016).ⁱⁱ

The change in its base was evidenced by its campaign. The erstwhile "party of the working class" never used that phrase in its 2016 platform, instead focusing on the indeterminate "middle class." It similarly avoided reference to "labor unions," substituting the vaguer phrase "unions." "Whites" were cited only as relatively advantaged in comparison to racial minorities.

More attention was given to the LGBT community: a total of 22 mentions, including eight for the small proportion of transgendered persons. The Democratic emphasis had shifted from economic class appeals to those based on multi-culturalism and group identity (Democratic Party Platform 2016). The shift was summarized in Clinton's campaign slogan, "Stronger Together." That motto invoked only a worthy inclusive process, not substantive content. Voters taught a hard electoral lesson: "If you are going to mention groups in America, you had better mention all of them. If you don't, those left out will notice and feel excluded" (Lilla 2016).

Each of these interpretations provides insight into the election results. Full explanation requires years of analysis, but we are unlikely to find a single cause of Trump's unexpected triumph. Small change in any of the multiple causes would change the large final effect. If Obama were just a shade more popular, if Democratic turnout were just marginally greater in Philadelphia and Detroit, if Comey were a trifle more discreet, if Clinton smiled more, if Trump faced one more accusation of sexual assault, if X, or if Y or if Z., then Clinton not Trump would be president. Indeed, "all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death."

Eventually, we will probably see the election of 2016 as a perfect political storm, an improbable combination of odd events with an implausible outcome. We can learn one - perhaps only one - lesson from the election of 2016, the falsity of what Amos Twersky termed "creeping determinism," the error of historians who "imposed false order upon random events" (Lewis, 2017, 208). The United States was not fated to choose Trump; it still remains free to determine its political destination.

Notes

ⁱ Thomas Edsall (2016) suggests that some Trump voters, for reasons of “social undesirability,” hid their intended votes when responding to live telephone interviewers.

ⁱⁱ In all of these comparisons, change was considerably greater in Democratic demographics than in the nation generally.

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