

The Trump Presidency – What does it mean?

by Bert A. Rockman

To the shock and general dismay of much of the American political class and of the journalists who report and comment on their activities – or lack thereof – *Donald Trump* was elected to the Presidency of the United States of America. Only one major newspaper endorsed *Mr. Trump* in the general election. Among those supporting *Hillary Clinton* were the usual suspects but also newspapers that had never previously endorsed a candidate of the Democratic Party. What *Trump* was able to demonstrate was just how irrelevant this elite and these sources of communication had become.

In characterizing *Mr. Trump's* candidacy, the least one might say is that it was the most unconventional in modern political history. During one of the early Republican debates, the conventional wisdom favorite for that party's nomination, *Jeb Bush*, the former governor of Florida and son of one former President and brother of another, railed at *Trump* that "you cannot insult your way to the presidency." But *Trump* did – and by the time he did so, *Bush* was long gone, and so – as a more recent casualty – was the prohibitive favorite in the general election, *Hillary Clinton*.

As a matter of fact, *Hillary Clinton* actually had a plurality margin of close to 2.9 million votes and an approximately 2 % margin over *Trump* in the popular vote. However, the antiquarian mechanism of the Electoral College, devised by the constitutional framers to prevent rash choices that they feared might emanate from a popular vote, was precisely the mechanism that enabled *Trump's* victory – notably the second time in 16 years that the loser in the popular vote won the presidency. The Electoral College divides the votes by states through a formula of one variable (a state's population reflected in the size of its delegation to the House of Representatives) and a constant (the equal number of senators that each state has regardless of its population). Beyond the presidential contest, however, the election in which the Republican Party, having an outsized number of seats to defend in the Senate and with a significant majority in the House of Representatives, successfully retained its control of both chambers. For the first time in

more than a decade, the Republicans now would have a grip on all of the ostensible political institutions of the federal government, and, in addition, strengthened their advantages at the state level.

But what precisely does this mean? Is *Trump* really a Republican or was the party merely a flag of convenience for him? Further, how divided is the Republican Party and what are its various constituencies? The transformation of the American party system and the realignment of the parties continue apace in the second decade of the 21st century amidst large dislocations in the labor market and in the geography of prosperity and decline. The reality is that we do not yet know what all of this means because *Trump* has said so many contradictory things on so many subjects, some of which resonate with Republican ideas and some of which do not. The singular most predictable thing that can be said of *Mr. Trump* is his own unpredictability.

It was clear that much of the Republican governing establishment and the moderate (in temperament), internationalist and collective security wings of the party had become deeply anxious by the rise of *Trump's* candidacy to the party nomination and going forward to the general election. Prominent Republicans, usually not directly in the line of political fire, refused to endorse or even support *Trump*. A long list of Republican national security and intelligence officials publicly opposed him and indicated they would vote for *Clinton*. A number of current Republican political figures and former *Bush* operatives (as well as the *Bush* family itself) withheld their support. A good number of Republican intellectuals were repelled by *Trump* – a list that included iconic conservatives as *George Will*, *William Kristol*, *David Brooks*, *David Frum*, *Jennifer Rubin*, and the journal of intellectual conservative opinion, *The National Review*. But others saw possibilities for their party's agenda whether in blocking a possible President *Clinton* or persuading a President *Trump* to follow his congressional party. These enablers of *Trump's* candidacy, once he was the likely nominee, included the Republican congressional leadership and ultimately, too, fundamentalist religious leaders (an important segment within the contemporary Republican Party), who found reason to forgive *Trump's* seemingly many transgressions including his absence of evident religiosity and his profane conduct.

I. The Rise of the Authoritarian Strong Man

If the 1990s was the decade of democratization across parts of the world that had known little of it, recent years have either consolidated strong man authoritarian regimes that had been elected (*Putin* in Russia, *Erdogan* in Turkey) or given

electoral impetus to ones that threaten institutions, freedom of the press, and soft measures to restrict the rights of opposition. *Orban* in Hungary, the Law and Justice leadership in Poland, *Duterte* in the Philippines, and the Right Wing *Netanyahu*-led coalition in Israel may exemplify this latter type of regime. The potential for such a far right populist authoritarianism is now widespread throughout Europe, most immediately perhaps in France, depending upon the strength of the National Front in the forthcoming elections. In accordance with the Brexit vote in June 2016, a referendum fomented by the Conservative Party's right wing and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which promoted fears of immigration, fear of "the other" and nostalgia for nativism, similar types of political movements and parties in the Nordic countries have been produced as well.

This is perhaps a much too despairing scenario. Hopefully, the marginal will remain marginalized. But hope alone is not necessarily cause for optimism. Had *David Cameron* understood that there was a real risk of a British withdrawal from the EU, he would not have allowed it to come to a binding referendum. Perhaps if voters who wanted merely to stir the pot were allowed a do-over, they might not have voted for *Trump* – although, in reality, there seems no reason to believe that they would not. *Trump* too was at the margins in the eyes of the American political cognoscenti and opinion elites. But he emerged victorious under the arcane rules governing presidential elections in the United States despite his vulgarity, his narcissism, his confabulations, and the absence of any reflective policy thought.

What binds all of these political movements together is a perception of a culture under attack by foreigners, a nostalgia for simpler times and a more settled economy, a deep base of support in rural and smaller communities especially among less well-educated white people fueled by resentment and anger toward what they regard as a cosmopolitan elite that ridicules them. Fundamentally, *Trump* ran on an "America First", xenophobic, isolationist set of appeals. His campaign was designed to stir anger, and from anger to stir frenzy and hate not only toward the *Auslander* but also toward domestic political opposition. His rabid supporters at political rallies, that were designed to stir them up, shouted to have *Mrs. Clinton* sent to prison, raised their fists at the working press that was cooped up in a visible pen, and sometimes violently set upon protestors. A *New York Times* reporter covering a volunteer militia in Georgia said this of its members in an article that appeared shortly before the November election, "They long for an America they believe has been stolen from them by liberals, immigrants, and 'the

P.C. [Politically Correct] crowd.’ Their America is one where Christianity is taught in schools, abortion is illegal, and immigrants hail from Europe, not faraway Muslim lands.”¹ This is, of course, not characteristic necessarily of *Trump* voters, at least to this extreme, but the *Trump* candidacy with its overt hostility toward immigrants and the perceived elite establishment of cosmopolitans certainly let loose the fascistoid expression of what “Making America Great Again” was all about. What has happened in the United States has happened elsewhere and may happen again in countries that have had long developed democratic political systems. The frailty of liberal democracies is apparent and that is deeply worrisome.

A leading American commentator, *Fareed Zakaria*, recently expressed his concern over what he perceived to be the rise of illiberal democracy in the United States. Where once liberty and law had been intertwined with mass participation, he feared that the two strands were coming apart at the expense of liberty and law.²

Of course, one must distinguish the core *Trump* voters and enthusiasts from those who merely voted for *Trump* as the least bad of the alternatives or, more hopefully, the non-politician who will “drain the swamp” and be an agent of change. And a great deal rests upon what the nature of change is that people are hoping arrives on their doorstep. More nuanced analyses may be available when we eventually are able to access the expansive data that come from the National Election Study (NES), funded by the National Science Foundation.

Still, *Trump* won the most votes proportionately (58 %) of white people in the history of those presidential elections that have had a universalized franchise, beating both the *Ronald Reagan* election landslide in 1984 and the defeat of *Mitt Romney* in 2012. His margin among less educated whites was much higher. *Reagan* and *Romney* had a 20 % margin in the white vote, *Trump* just surpassed that with a 21 % edge in 2016. Race, unfortunately, is at the very heart of political cleavage in America, and this quite literally is not merely a black and white issue.

1 *Zucchino, D.*: Militia Clutches Guns, Wary of a *Clinton* Win, in: *The New York Times*, 05.11.2016, A12.

2 *Zakaria* notes correctly that “what sustains democracy is not simply legal safeguards and rules, but norms and practices ...”. He further adds consequently that “we are now getting to see what American democracy looks like without any buffers in the way of sheer populism and demagoguery.” *Zakaria, F.*: America’s Democracy Has Become Illiberal, in: *The Washington Post*, 30.12.2016.

What then is the constituent support base for *Trump*?

First, despite the skepticism of *Trump* from a number of Republican notables, the Republican electorate essentially came home for his candidacy at a rate nearly equal to that of the Democrats for *Clinton*.

Second, the core of strong Republicans is extremely conservative.³ To be less charitable, one might actually say, radically reactionary. A significant chunk of this segment of the electorate also tends to be quite active politically and exerts a strong pull on the party. In most respects they were very much in tune with *Donald Trump*.

Third, a significant source of the *Trump* electorate reflected the politics of white resentment (also very much in play in Europe), the proportionate decline in the white population and the belief, that the others are being privileged at their expense, however ironic that belief may be historically. This view is especially notable outside of metropolitan urban areas where, as in Europe too, the complexion of the population becomes much paler.

Fourth, many of the smaller communities and rural areas lost traditional jobs and were suffering from economic and cultural dislocation. *Trump* found a convenient culprit in what he termed “bad trade deals” and promised that he would bring these jobs back. He can do no such thing. It is not clear if *Trump* understands anything about economics or has simply found a convenient and simplistic source for these economic troubles. Over the past 30 years, American industrial output has doubled but its workforce has declined by about 40 %. Technological change is at the core of these job losses and a society that prizes efficiency but derides social insurance will certainly do little to alleviate the pain caused by what *Josef Schumpeter* referred to as the “creative destruction” of capitalism.

Fifth, *Trump* was able to nail down the fundamentalist evangelical vote despite his own distinctly non-evangelical lifestyle, his misogynistic statements and behaviors, and his apparent lack of religious familiarity.

Sixth, *Trump* was able to play to those in declining industries, especially coal and oil, and to blame their decline on regulations from Washington and international climate accords. The reality, however, is that the market has resulted in decreased demand for coal as cleaner burning fossil fuels have displaced it. And as with other industries, less depends on workers and more on machines.

3 *Aberbach, J. D.*: Understanding Contemporary American Conservatism, New York/London, 2017.

Seventh, the *Trump* slogan to “Make America Great Again” was clearly a play on nostalgia and a world that has long since passed and was hardly great for people of color or for women, whose opportunities in life were greatly restricted. It was a model of reactionary politics but precisely the kind of change that resentful whites, especially males, saw as positive.

Finally, the firearm factor, which is much more of an issue in sparsely populated areas of the country than in its densely populated parts, was emphasized by *Trump* to bring out constituencies that firmly believed that *Clinton* would take away their guns. Gun owners skew heavily Republican.

Many of these specific elements of the coalition that provided *Trump* with his Electoral College victory are, in fact, compounded and mutually reinforcing. The normal model for coalition-building in a two party system is to build disparate parts. That was *Clinton's* strategy aside from the fact that she did little to attract votes in the hinterland. *Trump's* strategy was to double down on the angry white rural and small town base of his support – a base that also has fueled similar movements in Europe. Anger and fear are great motivators to turn out to vote and for political mobilization in general. That was what *Trump* was banking on, and, possibly to his own surprise, got. As the political sociologist, *Seymour Martin Lipset* noted in his classic book, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*, mobilization of sporadic participants is characteristic of right wing populist movements.

While many puzzles still remain in *Trump's* path to the presidency, the next set of concerns have to do with how his personal characteristics are likely to influence the style and content of his presidency.

II. The Trump Presidency

The obvious cliché here is that we know the past but not the future. So, we have seen elements of *Trump's* behavior but do not as yet know how these may interact with his new responsibilities or his party.

1. Cabinet Appointments and Policy

Not exclusively, but for the most part, *Trump's* early appointments to key roles in the cabinet, to White House agency and advisory roles, and to controversial non-cabinet agencies have skewed far right. Many nominees appear to be at odds with the mandate of the departments or agencies to which they will now be given authority if confirmed by the Senate. A good many are inexperienced in government as well as in the subject matter of their portfolios. In some respects, the first

round of *Trump* appointees looks somewhat like the first round of *Ronald Reagan's* – people who believe that the regulatory role of government should be thwarted not enhanced, and that companies, especially those in the fossil fuel business, should be completely unshackled. The newly appointed Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency has spent most of his career taking the agency to court to prevent it from issuing regulations. Similarly, an Attorney General has been nominated who has a less than stellar record on civil rights and a strong punitive inclination. A Secretary of Education has been nominated who appears to be strongly in favor of private interests taking over the education system. The nominee for Labor Secretary has been actively endorsed anti-worker rights. In sum, with the exception of President *George H.W. Bush* who valued government – if not necessarily an expanded role for it – these nominations look a lot like those that might be expected by Republican presidents from *Reagan* onward, and we should therefore anticipate policies that will radically depart from the administration it has replaced.

That much might, with some differences in nuance and style, look like an administration that most (but not all) of the leading Republican contenders for the nomination would have appointed. It is where the party's center of gravity is these days, which is rather far right.

2. Temperament and Political Consequences

Beyond that, however, we have this incoming President's massive personality and temperamental characteristics that provide a fog of possibilities rather than a clear vision. *Jennifer Rubin*, a conservative columnist for the *Washington Post* and a staunch critic of *Trump* identified several of these characteristics and how they might interact with policy choices. She noted the novelty of a president who has

- (1) a lack of impulse control and available 24/7 social media,
- (2) no governing experience and a White House staff lacking such experience,
- (3) no familiarity in most policy areas,
- (4) created a campaign strategy dependent on lies about himself, the world, and his opponents, and is prone to buy into conspiracy theories and unsubstantiated rumors,
- (5) no interest in reading,
- (6) wedded himself to a chaotic management style,
- (7) retained an international business that creates massive conflicts of interest and
- (8) defied nepotism rules by placing some of his family among his inner circle of advisers.⁴

4 *Rubin, J.*: Will Chaos be the Defining Trait of the *Trump* White House?, in: *The Washington Post*, 23.12.2016.

Given these characteristics, which I think constitute a largely consensus view among *Trump's* abundance of critics, what do they portend for *Trump's* behavior especially insofar as they involve international interactions? As I intimated before, the broad answer is, as *Rubin* suggests, unpredictability.

Darrell West, a political scientist at *The Brookings Institution* in Washington, speculates that there could be four different versions of *Trump* as President.⁵ The first is that he could be a *traditional Republican* – and there are elements of this in his plan to cut taxes especially disproportionately for the most well-off, to support the repeal of Obamacare (the Affordable Care Act), to deregulate business and banking, and to privatize many public functions as well as to support the fossil fuel industry. On the other hand, *Trump's* friendly posture toward the *Putin*-autocracy in Russia and its irredentist policies toward its neighbors, his skepticism toward collective security, including NATO, and his stated preference toward protectionist trade policies runs against the grain of traditional Republican orthodoxy. Equally, although *Reagan* and *George W. Bush* produced big tax cuts for the very wealthy (now a Republican mantra) and spent wildly – *Reagan* on a defense build-up and *Bush* on two wars – *Trump* goes even further on the spending side with his announcements of a big defense build-up and extensive infra-structural commitments. It will be interesting to see how these budgetary commitments are at all reconciled since they were neither by the *Reagan* nor the latter *Bush* presidencies. An early guess would be to bet on extravagant budget deficits, inflationary pressures, and a weakened currency. And it will be especially interesting to see how Republicans in Congress react to large deficits generated by a president of their own party. Judging by what happened under *Reagan* and *G.W. Bush*, deficits only occur apparently under Democrats.

A second scenario that *West* postulates is *Trump* as a *popular rogue* whereby he emphasizes his populism and support for maintaining existing social insurance protections. It is possible that *Trump* could take this path but unlikely given the far right nominations he has made so far. He will, however, likely jump into situations where he can lay claim to saving jobs even though his interventions actually achieved little. But he can and already has claimed credit for preserving jobs that were not going to be lost anyway or were temporarily maintained only through heavy subsidies, usually by a lower level of government. *Trump's* industrial policy is apt to be a highly particularistic venture, laden with reality televi-

5 *Ingraham, C.*: The Four Ways a *Trump* Presidency Could Turn Out, According to an Expert in Political Upheaval, in: *The Washington Post*, 16.11.2016.

sion publicity.

A third scenario that *West* proposes is the *failed presidency* model. There are, of course, many possibilities here. First, *Trump* comes into office with the lowest approval level on record and a deeply polarized public, much of which greets him less with skepticism than with profound contempt. Unless he makes good on promises that are largely implausible, his support will likely narrow rather than broaden. He may, however, get a boost from the 2018 midterm elections that are likely to strengthen further his party's grip on Congress. *Trump's* business empire, of which he has ceded the management to his children rather than divesting himself from it, is likely to produce deep conflicts of interest, charges of crony capitalism, and worse forms of corruption. In this respect, *West* likens *Trump* to the two-time but ultimately failed Italian Prime Minister, *Silvio Berlusconi*. He likely will continue to conceal his financial affairs and business operations and be unresponsive to demands for transparency. In the campaign, this was his strategy, and he obviously got away with it. Another potential set of sources for failure lie in *Trump's* towering and monumentally sensitive ego (the only ism to which he adheres apparently is narcissism); his lack of curiosity and skepticism toward the intelligence community and experts who might tell him anything that he does not want to hear; and his impetuous and frequently petulant tweets. Any number of scenarios can be imagined that could lead to serious crises on which he is utterly untested but unlikely to respond with any form of nuance. Whether such failures would be recognized either by his party or by his fervent support base is another question.

Thus, a final scenario, but a disconcertingly plausible one, is that emulating his friend, *Mr. Putin*, *Trump* will seek to be an *authoritarian president*. It is clear that incipient authoritarian regimes seek to do three things to enhance their control over the levers of power. One is to intimidate the traditional press. A second is to make it extremely difficult for opposition forces to regain a foothold in wielding governmental power. A third is to intimidate individuals or organizations from expressing themselves in opposition to the leadership. All of the countries I have noted as either having consummated authoritarian regimes or are potentially on that pathway, have had their current leadership curtail the freedom of the press and the rights of the opposition. In the not very distant American past, President *Richard Nixon* was impeached and resigned over activities that breached the norms of liberal democracy. But there is much less chance that this would happen today since some parts of the Republican Party have already acquiesced in breaching these norms in the form of voter suppression laws, the

drastic evisceration of the powers of a newly elected Democratic governor in the state of North Carolina by a super-majority Republican legislature and signed off by the outgoing Republican governor, and the unwillingness of the Republican majority in the U.S. Senate to hold hearings or bring to the floor judicial nominations made by the *Obama* administration, including one now longstanding vacancy to the Supreme Court. In other words, the effort to build a permanent majority by skewing the political game marks the erosion of liberal democracy. In particular, *Mr. Trump* has not merely called out the press in general but also has named those who have irked his delicate sensibilities. And he has especially used these cries of media unfairness to him to rally his supporters. He has even taken away the credentials of notable news organizations to cover his rallies. There is talk amongst his advisers that traditional White House-Press relations will be altered, and that there may be no daily briefings. It is also unlikely that we will see *Trump* hold a news conference that involves questioning by reporters.

3. American and White Nationalism

To the extent that *Trump* has a measure of consistency, it is likely to come from his core base of support which is essentially less educated, isolationist, ultra-nationalist, rural, small town, and white. In the 1930s, the America First movement which largely sprang from the American prairie and Western mountain states, provided a hint of what this could mean eight decades later. At the very least, one should expect much less collective cooperation from security to international agreements and more rigid barriers toward new immigrants coming from the Middle East or among Muslims, and also from Central America.

How much *Trump* can change on his own accord remains to be seen. For some of his initiatives, his own party may not be on board. For others, legal precedent and bureaucratic or judicial resistance may hinder him. How much effort he pours into getting his way depends upon his persistence. But how persistent he is depends upon his depth of belief. By all accounts, whether for good or ill, his belief system outside of his continued need for adulation, appears to be remarkably shallow. He has expressed diametrically opposite positions sometimes in the same speech or answer to a question.

The one stable source that may fuel what he needs to do is his core base of support which is based on white identity and America First nationalism. The grand promises that *Trump* has made are unrealistic. At some point, either his core support has a case of buyer's remorse or has beliefs so powerful that they will continue to support him for what he says rather than for what he does. As a noted

political scientist, *John Hibbing*, points out, experiments show that people who are threat sensitive, especially to threats “posed by out-groups and in-group norm violators” are attracted to candidates who emphasize threat.⁶ It is possible that cognitions such as these override the actual delivery of results. Or, to put it a bit differently, a good many people could be living in a post-fact world which cannot be a positive development for liberal democracy or for that matter the sustainability of civilized societies.

Ultimately, there are only two predictable elements about *Mr. Trump* and his mainly amateurish team. If knowledge is a constraint on decision-making, *Trump* will be largely unconstrained and thus unpredictable. The second is that flattery has a chance to get someone somewhere with *Trump's* enormous vanity. *Putin* seems to have figured this out; others are likely to follow. For better or worse, the U.S. is likely to shoulder much less of a leadership role in the foreseeable future in anything that involves a collective good. Internally, the fabric of liberal democracy and the institutions that support it will be under further but hopefully not irrevocable stress. The great adventure (or apocalypse) begins soon enough.

6 *Hibbing, J. R.*: How People's Sensitivity to Threats Illuminates the Rise of Donald *Trump*, in: *The Washington Post*, 23.12.2016.