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The Trump Campaign: A 19th century populist campaign with a 21st century spin

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The Trump campaign is one people say turned everything on its head so to speak. I disagree. I think the Trump campaign used the age-old tools of political communication in a surprising way, one that hadn't been seen by anyone alive in the US. It was an unusual campaign according to modern times but if one looks back to the past, then one will see his campaign was normal just not in this time period. The time of popular politics one would think is long past, the world saw what happens when populist leaders were elected in the World Wars and throughout the 20th century in South America, the 21st century in Africa. However, popular politics in place around the world are not American politics. During the 19th century, America saw the rise of popular politics, today the United States saw them again. I claim that the Trump campaign can be said to be a campaign out of time. By examining the Trump campaign's use of language, the target audience and actual policy, the effectiveness of this particular campaign strategy comes to light.

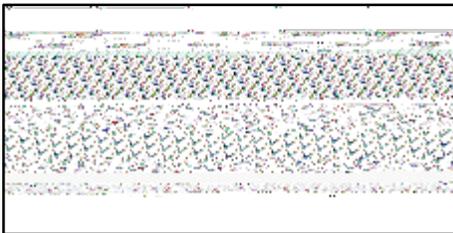
Before examining Trump's campaign I have likened it to campaigns of old, therefore I must establish what characteristics I am looking for. I believe that certain examples while the characteristics they emit could be said to be used by all campaigns it is these characteristics when used in popular campaigns that change the effectiveness of that campaign.

First, presidential campaigns can be split into two groups, those prior to television and those not. Trump's campaign tone was a lot like those prior to television. For example, one of the earliest campaign battles was in 1828, Andrew Jackson vs John Quincy Adams; these two campaigns can be said to be the start of popular politics in America. Jackson's newspaper friends concocted lies about Adams, pro-Adams editors fired back claiming that Jackson's mother had been nothing more than a prostitute. However Jackson's supporters devoted themselves to gaining backing from the political power brokers of the era: newspaper editors. (Perloff 238).

The newspaper would provide a forum for him to attack his opponent. This is but one example of popular politics in action in American history. But it does provide us criteria for campaigns of old, a forum.

Trump’s campaign had this characteristic just a new forum in a different time, Twitter in the 21st century. According to a New York Times article Trump mastered Twitter. It is often said that the media always sets the agenda, and in some ways this is true. The media sets the agenda, especially in times of unrest, for example, November 13, 2015 - the Paris attacks. In essence the media setting the agenda to terrorism/violence and prompting responses from the

then numerous candidates. These are three tweets from “Trump” over the



following day:



The media may have set the agenda but Trump ran with it, building his own agenda by engaging in “policy” talk and then diplomacy, making it the last thought. However, the angry tone of his tweets and the self-congratulatory wording show a confident leader who no matter what is going on can turn the tables to his favor. Even when he suffers backlash from his comments as the Times article puts it the Trump campaign, “by allowing millions of supporters to make his case for him and deflect the controversies he delights in touching off” (NY Times, Michael Barbaro Oct. 5, 2015). It works.

Moreover, “The most frequently used words in his tweets: “great” (more than 700 times), “winner” or “winners” (43), and “loser” or “losers” (34). In all, he has sent more than 28,000 tweets — the rough equivalent of 12 a day” (Barbaro Oct 2015), Keep in mind these statistics are somewhat dated however when speaking on the effectiveness of a campaign then one must go to the thick of it. Twitter is a forum that has at least 320 million accounts as of March 2016 (Social Times). And with Trump’s more than 16.7 million followers the message is easy to get out. With an army of followers Trump has managed to make it so that he is setting the agenda. Because you never know what he is going to do next what he does is news, how he reacts and how others react to him sets an agenda all of its own.

Furthermore, the idea of popular politics in the US cemented until the 1840 Presidential election with William Henry Harrison vs. President Martin Van Buren. This campaign proved that “Any strategy, no matter how goofy, that engaged the electorate was acceptable” (Perloff 238) Basically the campaign was a mess, Harrison brandished himself as the log cabin-hard-cider candidate who, unlike the high-faulting’ Martin Van Buren, was plain, simple, down-to-earth, and very much of, by, and for the people. It is said that thousands would descend on the Whig party rallies, brandishing campaign paraphernalia. Though a mess it was a popular campaign that offers another characteristic, branding along with huge crowds and lots of paraphernalia.

One way to look at this characteristic is to look at the exit polls. These will tell who voted, for which candidate they voted for and why. According to exit polls produced by the New York Times, the average voter for Trump was: Male (53%), White (58%), aged 45+ (53%), white without a college degree (67%), living in a small or rural community (62%) and White evangelical or white born-again Christians (81%). The issue Trump supports choose as most important: immigration (64%) and terrorism (57%). Trump supports mostly characterized

themselves as angry (77%) at the federal government and felt that Trump could bring needed change (83%). The 1840 presidential race was stoking up an audience that was seeing the “world” change before its very eyes. Slavery was illegal, waves of immigrants from East and Southern Europe were threatening to make a demographic shift which would only be paralleled in the 1892 Presidential election. The conditions are very much the same now, the United States is facing a demographic shift that threatens to turn some traditional red states purple or even worse, blue. Relations with a long hated enemy, such as, Cuba, Russia or Korea are in limbo. It seems like what America is standing for is not the values of America. By having a candidate who somewhat resembled them, who appeared just as angry, and wanting of change, the Trump campaign was able to tap into that anger, the frustration with their situation that was felt by many. The Trump campaign went about building an agenda of change, one that would reach this frustrated voter that everyone always pushed to the side.

An article from Politico serves to demonstrate this style of agenda building by the Trump campaign. “President-elect Donald Trump declared on Twitter that “Nobody should be allowed to burn the American flag - if they do, there must be consequences - perhaps loss of citizenship or year in jail!”” (Zeitiz Nov 2016) Zeitiz goes on to explain the history of the symbolism of the American flag and the reasoning of its meaning. Trump’s tweets are setting a foundation for patriotic policy. It is just a tweet now, and it probably will not be a law, but it serves to usher in an era of patriotic law. The flag as a symbol is a source of revere and respect of the country. Zeitiz goes on to speak of the people. “Donald Trump, who lost the popular vote, rode to a narrow victory in the Electoral College by stoking the fear and resentment of non-college educated white Americans who **sense that their place in America slipping away.**” (Zeitiz, Nov 2016). That is the demographic the Trump campaign tapped into and now the campaign is

attempting to fulfill promises made. Because Trump is president-elect at this point he has time to build his agenda in accordance with the policy changes promises made and the context of the world as it is now. He branded himself as a champion of those that were frustrated and angry with their lot in America, he became relatable to them by adopting policies that this demographic is likely to support. His policies are undergoing refinement from what they were on the campaign trail. More over because his name recognition was so great it was not that hard to give campaign gear to those supporting him. He knew what to say and how to say it to achieve the effect he wanted.

One final characteristic of the early popular campaigns was that they failed to talk policy. Or as Perloff puts it, “the candidates failed miserably to place important issues on the political agenda”(Perloff. 239). This was one of the flaws of the campaign, not that it seemed to matter. According to an article from Politico, “The Trump campaign has not been a policy-free zone, but it has been a triumph of personality over plans” (Grunwald, July 17, 2016). One must remember that populist campaigns are populist for a reason. They say what the people want to hear and figure out the details later. What popular campaigns lack in policy they make up with the candidates themselves. These are charismatic leaders who can say what they want, do what they want, and still succeed as long as they do not push the morality of their supporters they have a shot. While, the Trump campaign pushed the boundaries of morality for some but they walked the line to the presidency. As Politico put it, “His theory of the election is that policy doesn’t matter much and details don’t matter at all. He’s running on attitude and charisma, on strength and success, on the notion that goo-goo elites made America a loser and that he’s the superhero who can make it win again. For most problems, he has a one-point plan: He’ll fix it.” (Grunwald, July 17, 2016) In fact that was his primary message: “He’ll fix it. He’ll Make America Great

Again” While it might not be, message the voters received, rather they received a message of “I am like you, angry, frustrated, but I can be your solution. I am non-establishment, I’ll do stuff differently but it’ll work.” This message comes across in his most of his advertisements. The ad, *Movement*, for example, uses lines like, “Builder, Businessman, Success” and “Doing what others call impossible.” The ad is basically saying I stand for these things, I’ll make it work because this is what I am. I get stuff done.

Accordingly, these characteristics are what is “needed” to be a popular campaign in the 19th century. However, the Trump campaign is not a campaign of the 19th century. It was a campaign of the 21st century. Perloff when speaking on the 19th century campaigns claims “had this occurred today, it would have all been mocked as image-based campaigning or laughable political branding by a cynical political press”(Perloff 238). Perhaps Perloff is right, nonetheless, it does not mean the campaign strategy was ineffective. Basically the Trump campaign managed a feat that to most political communicators does not make sense. But in looking at the campaigns of old it is clear that it was effective just as effective today as it was then. The campaign reached a demographic of people that heard a message and reacted by making him president. Speak what you will the campaign and how they went about “winning” they won. That is 100% effective in the idea the presidency is a race to the White House and he won. While it was not effective all over the country it was effective enough to win.

That does not mean the campaign could not be improved. Trump’s forum as much as it helped him, it hindered his campaign in that it could annihilate whole demographics of voters overnight. However, because his message was one of anger, change, and strength ultimately any mistakes made could be corrected due to his followers’ willingness to defend the campaign. Another improvement that could have been undertaken would have been[LS1] , to outline his

policy more than it did. His charisma will only take him so far in the White House when actual policy needs to be made, and if you do not have an idea of how to proceed or what the country as a whole (not just your supports) needs, then how will you proceed? The campaign has until Friday, January 20, 2017, to answer these questions. Until then every step the campaign takes will be looked on with caution as there is an unpredictability about it.

It is of no doubt that the campaign will continue to be in the national spotlight. Everything that Trump does as president-elect and eventual as president will be analyzed years down the road. Titles like: How we almost went to war with China, American Economy Booms, and The Brink of War: How World War III almost broke out in the 21st century, or even 2016: Year of the Populist; each title works, it is a matter of the outcome how it will be phrased. Whatever the outcome that will come from this election it will be an eventful four years that will have Americans on their toes at least. In terms of communications: the campaign needs to maintain promises made during the election cycle, keep a front of transparency and give some to the democrats in order to accomplish these new policies.

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