

## INTRODUCTION: POLITICS AND POLICY

By Jeff Gulati\*

The 2016 presidential campaign was by far the most unconventional presidential campaign in recent history that culminated with the unexpected result of Donald Trump defeating Hillary Clinton and becoming the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. While election scholars will be studying the reasons underlying the outcome for years, the early consensus among political analysts and campaign professionals is that the 2016 presidential election was one that broke almost all the rules on how to run a winning campaign and how academics explain and predict election outcomes.

The Republican Party, which has a long history of nominating “establishment” candidates and in many cases had sought the nomination before, nominated a candidate who had not held any position in government including the military and had never run for office (Hetherington, 2018; Mayer, 2018). It was not even clear how long Donald Trump had been a Republican having made campaign contributions to candidates in both parties over the past two decades (Ross, 2015). Mr. Trump’s quest for the nomination was similarly unconventional (Costa, 2017). It began with Mr. Trump descending to the lobby of Trump Tower on an escalator to announce his candidacy coupled with inflammatory rhetoric towards Mexican immigrants (Graham, 2016). He would skip a crucial debate before the Iowa caucuses (Diamond, 2016), spend less on his campaign by Super Tuesday than four of his rivals, and trail miserably in the endorsements by GOP Governors and members of Congress (Currinder, 2018; Hetherington, 2018). Yet he would far outpace the other candidates in the amount of time speaking at the debates and coverage on cable news (Hershey, 2018; Sides et al, 2018).

The Democratic Party, which has nominated a mix of experienced and fresh candidates over the years, nominated one of the most experienced candidates to ever seek the Presidency. Her near lifetime of public service included eight years as First Lady, eight years as the U.S. Senator from New York, and six years as Secretary of State. But she also was the first female ever nominated for President by one of two major parties. This combination cleared the field of any significant opposition at least initially. Her main opposition was Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who had never been elected as a Democrat but rather identified as a democratic socialist independent after previously identifying as a socialist when he was Mayor of Burlington (Hetherington, 2018; Mayer, 2018; Sargent, 2017). While Sec. Clinton’s march to the nomination was never in doubt, Sen. Sanders proved to be a pesky opponent who did not abandon his campaign until the convention. Along the way, he helped to expose the flaws the Clinton campaign would have going forward, such as a lack of enthusiasm among Democratic

---

\* Professor of Global Studies, Bentley University and Associate Editor, *Fusio*. Corresponding email: [jgulati@bentley.edu](mailto:jgulati@bentley.edu).

activists who saw her too cautious and pragmatic and sold out to the establishment. Others were turned off by a perceived entitlement and aloofness and more general likability (Sides et al., 2018)

The two candidates entered the race as the two most unfavorable candidates ever to be nominated by a major party (Holyk & Langer, 2016). Scandals plagued both nominees. But while explicit revelations of Mr. Trump's bragging about assaulting a woman and constant invectives directed towards critics did little to derail his core support, the past scandals of former Pres. Clinton and the ongoing investigation over her possible sharing of classified materials in private emails prevented Sec. Clinton from expanding her support (Nelson, 2018; Sabato, 2017). The electorate's unfavorable opinion would remain high on Election Day with the exit polls showing only 43% of voters with a favorable view of Sec. Clinton and only 38% with a favorable view of Mr. Trump (Mellow, 2018; Sabato, 2017).

The campaigns & elections rulebook seemed to help little in explaining the decisions of the nominees and consequences during the general election as well. Mr. Trump was slow to run television ads and seemed ill-prepared for the three debates, while Sec. Clinton was late to campaign in key Midwestern battleground states including failing to appear at all in Wisconsin (Hetherington, 2018; Sargent, 2017). Almost every pre-election had Clinton winning the popular vote with the Real Clear Politics average of polls showing her winning by a 3.2% margin (Edwards-Levy, et al., 2017). The leading forecasters also predicted a decisive win for Sec. Clinton including a majority in the Electoral College (Campbell, 2016).

The actual popular vote was largely consistent with the pre-election polls and forecasts. Hillary Clinton won 48.2% of the nationwide popular vote, while Donald Trump won 46.1%. Clinton's raw vote margin over Mr. Trump was nearly 2.9 million votes out of nearly 136.7 million votes cast. Turnout increased from 2012, 59.3% from 58% of eligible voters. American Presidents are elected by the Electoral College, however, which Mr. Trump would win by winning the most votes in 30 states. These states included not only the swing states of Florida, Iowa, North Carolina, and Ohio but also three states—Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—that a Republican nominee had not won since the 1980's. The official vote of the Electoral College was 304 to 277 (Schmidt & Andrews, 2018) with the most "faithless electors" (seven) casting votes for someone else since 1960. This would mark the fifth time in American history that the popular vote winner was not the winner of the Electoral College and the second time in the last five elections. Coincidentally, in each case, it was the Democratic nominee who won the popular vote but could not also win the Electoral College.

While there are many features of the 2016 presidential election that were unconventional and unexpected on the surface, there was considerable evidence preceding the campaign that it would be a close election and that a Republican victory was not at all improbable. President Obama's approval rating on Election Day was 53%, respectable given a highly polarized electorate but not nearly enough to guarantee a Democratic victory. But even the Vice Presidents of popular Presidents Dwight Eisenhower

and Bill Clinton were unable to win a third term for their party. Since 1952, moreover, only once has one party won three consecutive presidential elections. An improved economy during Pres. Obama's two terms was certainly a plus for the incumbent party, but leading economic indicators were only modestly positive and there remained considerable anxiety and discontent among the electorate over the direction of the country. Among the nine leading election forecasting models that focused on election fundamentals (i.e., presidential approval and the economy) rather than the nominees or the fall campaign, only four predicted a clear Democratic majority of the two-party vote, while two predicted a clear Republican majority. The remaining three predicted a very narrow win for the Democrats (Campbell, 2016).

Despite talk about the historic or unprecedented nature of the election and unconventional candidacy and campaign of Donald Trump, the voting patterns of most American voters at both the individual and groups levels followed similar patterns found in recent presidential elections. The electorate remained evenly divided, with 33% of Americans identifying as Democrats and 31% identifying as Republicans. And as is typically the case, almost all Democrats (89%) voted for the Democratic nominee and all Republicans (88%) voted for the Republican nominee. The significance of partisanship for most voters is illustrated best by noting that Mr. Trump won 46% of the popular vote although only 38% of the electorate had a favorable opinion of him. Furthermore, only 38% of voters said he was competent to be President, only 35% said he had the right temperament, and only 33% believed him to be honest and trustworthy (Mellow, 2018; Sabato, 2017).

Independents narrowly voted for Mr. Trump (46% to 42%), but they also had voted for the Republican nominee Mitt Romney (50% to 45%) in 2012. What changed from 2012 was that 6% of voters voted for third-party candidates. So while quite a few partisans had concerns about their party's nominee, it was not enough to make them vote for the other party's nominee and instead opted for one of the other candidates (Mellow, 2018; Sabato, 2017).

Similar to 2012 and other recent elections, whites overwhelmingly voted for the Republican nominee and non-whites voted for the Democratic nominee. There was concern among Republicans that the increase in the Latino population and Mr. Trump's rhetoric and immigration proposals would further erode the GOP's share of the vote from Latinos. But while Mr. Romney lost among Latinos by 44%, Mr. Trump lost by just 36%. Mr. Trump also closed the gap among African Americans to 80% from 87% in 2012 for Mr. Romney. And among whites, Mr. Trump maintained the 20% advantage for the GOP from four years earlier (Mellow, 2018; Sabato, 2017).

While the gender gap has been a feature of American politics since 1980, there was reason to expect that the release of a recording of Mr. Trump bragging about his ability to get away with assaulting women and the frequent instances of using demeaning language towards women and many others would make the gap more pronounced in 2016. Instead, the gap remained statistically unchanged from 2012. The gaps between white women and white men also remained unchanged. A further look reveals signifi-

cant differences between men and women, however, and among women. Sec. Clinton actually lost ground among African American men and Latino women. She also lost ground among unmarried men, while gaining among married women. She also won a slim majority (51%) of college-educated white women. But she was supported by only 34% of white women without a college degree (Mellow, 2018; Sabato, 2017).

This review of exit poll data provides only a rudimentary understanding of why Donald Trump was able to win the presidency despite the weakness of his candidacy and also why Sec. Clinton was unable to capitalize on his weaknesses. The first article by Michael Acampora, "Authoritarianism and Populism in American Politics," goes beyond crude demographics as a way to explain candidate support. Using a political psychology perspective in analyzing the electorate, he finds that Mr. Trump was able to broaden the GOP's appeal to right-wing populists, who he categorizes as "outsiders" and are socially conservative but financially insecure and desire a strong leader. In addition, he maintained the traditional Republican base of upscale conservatives, which he categorizes as "traditionalists," even though they supported other candidates for the nomination. The two groups had much more in common, mainly a high disapproval of the current President and his more internationalist worldview. This was not the case for Democrats, where he finds that the two major groups were deeply divided over the highly salient issues in 2016 of trade and globalization.

Katie Gilroy's, "When P\*SSy Grabs Back: An Examination of the Gender Gap in the 2016 Presidential Election," analyzes data from the last three American National Election Studies to understand how gender and the other demographic variables discussed above work in combination with each other and how the effects of these gender interactions have changed since the last two elections. Her more in-depth and sophisticated analysis largely confirm the conclusions drawn from the exit polls. But she also finds that a gender gap among Hispanics for the first time and that Hispanic female Democrats were especially loyal to their party. Lastly, she finds in pre-election polling that the gender gap was especially volatile over the course of the campaign and in response to campaign events. This would suggest that many independent and Republican women were unwilling to express support for Mr. Trump at times but in the end, they voted in the way that best aligned with their worldview.

The third paper in this special issue, "Agenda Setting: The Barriers to Preventative Healthcare Issue Attention in the United States Congress," by Jennifer Corso, reminds us of how elections and who gets elected matter for public policy. The 2016 presidential candidates took very different positions on important and divisive issues such as immigration, trade, health care, abortion, and guns to name just a few. The first two years of the Trump Administration resulted in a number of policy reversals from the previous administration and the appointment of over 100 new federal judges and two Associate Justices to the Supreme Court. But Corso's detailed and novel analysis shows that social context and public demand also matter by motivating legislators to be proactive in terms of problem-solving. She finds that the members of Congress who pay the most attention to preventive health care policy alternatives are those elected by constituencies with the most fitness centers and greater access to fresh produce.

This special issue closes with Ryan Amelio's "Measuring the Effect of Demographic, Economic, and Political Factors on Voter Turnout in the 2016 Presidential Election." While his research largely confirms past research on the relationship between demographic variables and voter turnout, Amelio also finds that women were more motivated to vote in 2016 than in the past. Another important contribution is that he finds that a high number of ballot initiatives up for a vote on Election Day decreases the probability of voting once the number exceeds eight. Together, this provides us with a better understanding of the 2016 elections and its consequences as well as insights into future elections. They also demonstrate why it is important for today's voters to be informed and participate in the electoral process. In a highly divided electorate, every vote counts and collectively matters immensely on the how this nation is governed.

## References

- Campbell, J. (2016).** Forecasting the 2016 American national elections: Introduction. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 49(4), 649-654.
- Costa, R. (2017).** Donald Trump and a GOP primary race like no other. In L.J. Sabato, K. Kondik, & G. Skelley (Eds.), *Trumped: The 2016 election that broke all the rules*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Press.
- Currinder, M. (2018).** Campaign finance: Where big money mattered and where it didn't. In M. Nelson (Ed.), *The election of 2016*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage CQ Press.
- Diamond, J. (2016, February 3).** Trump says skipping debate might have cost him in Iowa. *CNN.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/02/02/politics/donald-trump-iowa-new-hampshire/index.html>.
- Edwards-Levy, A., Jackson, N., & Velencia, J. (2017).** Polling in the 2016 election. In L.J. Sabato, K. Kondik, & G. Skelley (Eds.), *Trumped: The 2016 election that broke all the rules*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Press.
- Graham, D.A. (2016, June 16).** What the press got right about Trump's candidacy. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com>.
- Hershey, M.R. (2018).** The media: Covering Donald Trump. In M. Nelson (Ed.), *The election of 2016*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage CQ Press.
- Hetherington, M.J. (2018).** The election: The allure of the Outsider. In M. Nelson (Ed.), *The election of 2016*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage CQ Press.
- Holyk, G., & Langer, G. (2016, August 31).** Poll: Clinton unpopularity at new high, on par with Trump. *ABCnews.com*. Retrieved from <https://abcnews.go.com>.
- Mayer, W.G. (2018).** The nominations: The road to a much-disliked general election. In M. Nelson (Ed.), *The election of 2016*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage CQ Press.
- Mellow, N.E. (2018).** Voting behavior: Continuity and confusion in the electorate. In M. Nelson (Ed.), *The election of 2016*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage CQ Press.

**Nelson, M. (2018).** The setting: Broadening the presidential talent pool—for better and worse. In M. Nelson (Ed.), *The election of 2016*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage CQ Press.

**Ross, C. (2015, June 3).** Donald Trump donated heavily to Democrats, especially during election which put Reid and Pelosi In power. *Daily Caller*. Retrieved from <https://dailycaller.com>.

**Sabato, L.J. (2017).** The 2016 election that broke all, or at least most, of the rules. In L.J. Sabato, K. Kondik, & G. Skelley (Eds.), *Trumped: The 2016 election that broke all the rules*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Press.

**Sargent, G. (2017).** “Feel the Bern:” Hillary’s agonizing loss and the future of the Democratic Party. In L.J. Sabato, K. Kondik, & G. Skelley (Eds.), *Trumped: The 2016 election that broke all the rules*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Press.

**Schmidt, K., & Andrews, W. (2016, December 19).** “A historic number of electors defected, and most were supposed to vote for Clinton. The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com>.

**Sides, J., Tesler, M., and Vavreck, L. (2018).** *Identity crisis: The 2016 presidential campaign and the battle for the meaning of America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.