

The audacity of Trump: how he won and what we missed

Reuben Steff discusses the outcome of the recent American presidential election.

Donald Trump's victory in the US election was, in significant part, a result of the inability of Democrats, the media and political pundits to view Trump as anything other than an irrational and impulsive firebrand. A less hysterical and emotionally-driven reaction to Trump's campaign would have provided a sounder basis for defeating him. This is because there was a strategic thread running through Trump's bellicosity that practically every Democrat and liberal failed to see. His often contradictory statements on a range of issues bewildered his opponents, diverting attention away from the cunning strategic moves he was making throughout the campaign. This article outlines some often overlooked reasons behind Trump's victory, some of which may surprise.

The first element of Trump's success lay in his choice of personnel. Specifically, after weeks of controversy that embroiled Trump's first campaign manager, Corey Lewandowsky, Trump made a surprising change. On 17 August his campaign announced that long-time Republican campaign manager and pollster, Kellyanne Conway, and executive chair of Breitbart News, Steve Bannon, would be brought on board. Conway would act as Trump's campaign manager, while Bannon was elevated to chief executive. The differing reputations of the two could not have been starker. Conway was widely respected across the Republican establishment as a professional and measured operator. Bannon, on the other hand, was seen as the ultimate outsider and mischief-maker: a man who had presided over the transformation of Breitbart News from a conservative website that characterised itself as 'the *Huffington Post* of the right' into a champion of what is now known as the 'alt-right', a movement that embraces American (often white) nationalism, rejects mainstream conservatism and opposes immigration, multiculturalism and political correctness.¹ To most people, the ideas Bannon represented went against the tide of history, where liberal democracies such as the United States (and New Zealand) embrace openness and tolerance.

To outsiders, the Bannon–Conway tandem seemed the odd-est of pairings, and one destined to generate dysfunction at the



Donald Trump wins the presidency

highest levels of Trump's campaign. But the shakeup was made precisely when it was called for. It followed the nadir of his campaign in the middle weeks of August. At this point Nate Silver's 538 election forecast website (which successfully forecast the results of every US state during the 2012 US election) gave Trump only a 10.8 per cent chance of winning the presidency.² After the rearrangement of senior personnel in his campaign, chance of success would never reach such a low point again.

The personnel change had the effect of shoring up Trump's position and would ultimately sharpen Trump's campaign messaging. For a start, by having Conway on board, it sewed up his flank with parts of the Republican establishment, who had threatened to abandon him in droves. Conway not only performed as Trump's manager but also acted as his surrogate repeatedly on America's largest cable news networks. You could not turn on Fox News, CNN or CNBC for long before Conway appeared and delivered defences of Trump's outlandish rhetoric and positions with a measured and sure tone that conveyed reassurance.

Bannon, for his part, and irrespective of his controversial stewardship of Breitbart News, had his finger on the pulse of the American electorate. In 2014 Bannon delivered a speech via Skype to the Vatican, where he explained that one of the motivating forces behind the rise of populist parties in the West was economic forces unleashed by the tide of globalisation that had been extending across large parts of the globe since the 1980s, and that seemed to work against working class people. Bannon

Dr Reuben Steff teaches New Zealand foreign policy, international relations and security studies in the Department of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Waikato. He spent two and a half years in the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade working on international security and strategic policy and is the author of *Strategic Thinking, Deterrence and the US Ballistic Missile Defense Project: from Truman to Obama* (2014).

Donald Trump made a number of key strategic decisions during his election campaign. Contrary to the common view that his campaign was marked by incompetence and dysfunction, there is considerable evidence that he made adroit decisions at key times. These were overlooked and dismissed by his political opponents to their ultimate disadvantage and defeat. If the Democratic Party hopes to take back the White House in four years' time, and the wider world wants to understand the 'Trump phenomenon', it is imperative that we look at the logical thread that underlies Trump's seemingly irrational behaviour.

stated that through this crisis of capitalism, a centre-right populist movement was emerging out of the working classes opposed to the elites that ran their countries.³ To Bannon, Breitbart News was the platform for this voice in America. Bannon would take this insight with him into the Trump campaign and make Trump's appeal to the working classes of America razor sharp.

The Conway–Bannon strategy played out to great effect, allowing Trump-leaning voters to see in Trump's behaviour what they wanted to see. This was evident during Trump's seemingly bizarre trip to Mexico on 31 August to meet and hold a press conference with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto. Prior to this, Trump had said that Mexican migrants crossing the border have lots about problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.⁴

Despite this earlier rhetoric, Trump was calm during the press conference, leading some to suggest that Conway was making real progress in restraining 'the Don'. However, Trump followed his subdued trip to Mexico by delivering a raucous immigration speech to his followers in Arizona on the same night, during which he reaffirmed his hard-line immigration policy and declared that Mexico would pay for a wall along the US–Mexico border.⁵ This had all the hallmarks of Bannon's influence. In the space of a single day Trump had made an unprecedented trip to Mexico, where he acted with moderation, showing that he was capable of acting presidential to moderate Republican voters hesitant about voting for him, and also showed his base with diehard fans at his Arizona rally that he was not abandoning his core hard-line immigration policy.

Trump would utilise this contradictory approach over and over again throughout the campaign to great effect, reassuring both his moderate and hard-line supporters that he remained committed to them even if his behaviour was, at other times, contradictory. Owing to their success, Conway and Bannon have been rewarded handsomely by Trump, with Conway offered a job as counsellor to Trump and Bannon now acting as Trump's chief strategist in the White House.

A third key member of Trump's team that led him to victory is his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who harnessed social media to the campaign's advantage. Kushner and his digital team utilised low-tech policy videos that garnered 74 million hits.⁶ Micro-targeting inundated Trump-leaning voters with his blunt messaging and enabled the campaign to sell hats and t-shirts with Trump's 'Make American Great Again' slogan, turning people into human billboards. Trump's campaign expenditure is a testament to this, as spending on traditional television and online advertising was marginalised in favour of using Twitter and Facebook to drive the campaign to get the message out and monitor the shifting mood of voter sentiment. Trump's Federal Election Commission filings through to mid-October showed that he only spent half of what Clinton's campaign did, showing the dividends from this unorthodox approach. Again, the mainstream media called this approach untested and likely to fail in the face of the Clinton campaign's formidable 'get out the vote' infrastructure. But as the leader of Trump's data hub, Brad Parscale, said, not only was the data operation used to decide virtually every campaign decision (travel, fundraising, advertising, rally locations and topics of speeches) but also Kushner 'put all the different pieces together. And what's funny is the outside world was so obsessed about this little piece or that, they didn't pick up that it was all being orches-

trated so well'.⁷

The final core person of Trump's team was himself, mocked by celebrities, the source of joke fodder for late night comedy shows and taunted and ridiculed by bloggers and political pundits the world over. The question most of us could not get over was *how could this guy actually win?* We all tuned in to see Trump during the election debates, not because we wanted to see something serious but because we hoped for a spectacle. And boy did he deliver. Facing what was supposed to be the most impressive Republican line up ever assembled, Trump went on the offensive with a series of rhetorical fireworks that involved ridiculing his opponents with school-yard taunts ('little Marco!', 'lying Ted') and declaring that 'politicians are stupid'. But this was only the beginning. The bombastic nature of Trump's rhetoric escalated from day to day, week to week and debate to debate. It came to the point where no single outrageous thing Trump said, and which would have been a campaign killer for a normal candidate, really dented his campaign. Trump, by disregarding with such vigour all norms of political behaviour and political correctness, shifted the public's sense of what was acceptable for a politician to say. He desensitised the public, all the while generating headlines that kept him on the front pages of every newspaper in America and giving his speeches prime time coverage on cable news networks.

Media role

The US media played a major role in the creation of the Trump phenomenon. Personally, I was stunned during a trip to Atlanta early last year when I saw that both Fox News and CNN would broadcast Trump speeches in full during prime time television. This allowed his message to reach millions of Americans who would otherwise not be paying much attention to the election (it is hard for us to understand in an outwardly-focused nation like New Zealand but many Americans do not follow their country's politics very closely). The cable networks, driven by profits, were only too willing to shower attention on Trump, aware of the massive ratings and advertising revenue this would generate. Speaking on the role his channel played, CNN Chief Jeff Zucker publicly admitted that

We probably did put on too many of the campaign rallies in the early months unedited... in hindsight we probably shouldn't have done that as much... We put them on because we never knew what he was going to say. They did also attract quite a bit of an audience.⁸

Rather than realise that this was an enabler for Trump to deliver his message into the deepest reaches of the American homeland, the US media missed the mark.

A typical story of this was released by Politico which, writing about Trump's dominance of the airways, suggested that it had likely 'doomed him'. Yet a study from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government showed that throughout 2015 and in the lead-up to the Republican primaries, major news media delivered an unusually high volume of coverage despite Trump's low polling numbers at the time. Furthermore, Trump received more good press than bad, helping to elevate him to the top of Republican polls.⁹ Other analysts claim that the media coverage he received during the primaries totalled \$2 billion in free advertising. Another study at the University of Wisconsin explained that 'Trump proved himself uniquely able to satisfy the imperative of dominating the news agenda, entering the news cycle... and repeatedly re-entering it, with stories and initiatives so that subsequent news

coverage is set on your terms'.¹⁰

In other words, Trump played the media like a fiddle, and it redounded to his immense benefit. When the media did eventually turn on Trump and began fact checking him and calling him a serial liar, it could not prevent his victory as Trump turned his attention to using social media to get his message out. No doubt, Trump was aided by the fact that a majority of the American populace no longer trusted the mainstream media, with a Gallup poll in September showing that only 32 per cent of Americans trusted the media 'to report the news fully, accurately and fairly', the lowest level on record in Gallup polling history.¹¹ Ultimately, to Trump, any exposure was good exposure, and he manipulated the public's thirst for outrage to his advantage unlike any political candidate in modern times.

Effective campaigning

Another key element of Trump's strategy involved that most fundamental method of electoral politicking — campaigning. Throughout a gruelling 2016 schedule Clinton held approximately 278 rallies and speeches compared to Trump's 302.¹² Trump's speeches were, on average, larger, with the largest rally held by Clinton totalling between 14,000 and 18,000 compared to 28,000 for Trump.¹³ Admittedly, Clinton did have a star-studded line-up of surrogates that included Joe Biden, Michelle and Barack Obama, who fanned out across the country to stump for her, while music stars like Bruce Springsteen and Lady Gaga played shows in her honour. But ultimately a candidate rises or falls based upon their own strengths and US voters did not feel they were voting for Obama's legacy; they felt they were voting for Clinton herself.

What was probably more important was where the candidates chose to campaign, especially in the final weeks. Again, much of the media missed the logic behind Trump's strategy. During this critical period Trump targeted the US 'rustbelt', comprised of the north-eastern states of Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania. The economies of these states had once been home to America's formidable industrial steel industry, but this had been devastated by economic change in recent decades. Trump realised that the memories, sometimes highly romanticised, held by the citizens of these states of a more affluent and hopeful past made them especially susceptible to Trump's message that he would bring jobs back to the American working class and 'Make America Great Again' (this was not much different to the underlying appeal of the Brexit campaign's slogan in the United Kingdom that they would help people 'take back control' from faceless elites in Brussels). Yet the rustbelt states were part of Clinton's 'blue firewall' — a number of states that had voted for Democrats in four out of the last six elections and that were assumed to be firmly in the Democratic camp. Polls taken throughout the election supported this notion, showing Trump trailing Clinton in Michigan and Wisconsin by up to seven percentage points, a seemingly insurmountable lead. Beyond these states were a number of 'battleground states' where the polls were tighter, but Trump was also generally trailing. Trump needed to win, at a minimum, not only the battleground states but also one or two of Clinton's 'firewall' states.

In the final weeks Trump made campaign stops in the Rustbelt states. The media seemed baffled by this move, casting it as a desperate and misguided play by Trump. They asserted that, in light of the polls, he would be better served to go after the bat-



Campaigning at the Iowa State Fair

tleground states. But this missed the point that there was always a higher probability that some of the battleground states would tilt towards Trump. So with time running short it was imperative that Trump take a gamble and try wrenching rustbelt states out of Clinton's firewall, without which he could not win *even if* he won the battleground states. In other words, it was absolutely strategically the right move for Trump to target the rustbelt. The erroneous accusations that Trump's campaign was misguided in its decision-making was characteristic of the Democrats' approach time and time again throughout the election, and even Obama would go on to criticise Clinton's campaign strategy after the election when he stated that

good ideas don't matter if people don't hear them... We have to compete everywhere. We have to show up everywhere... I won Iowa not because the demographics dictated that I would win Iowa. It was because I spent 87 days going to every small town and fair and fish fry.¹⁴

Persuasion power

The final key part of Trump's strategy lay in his power of persuasion. For over a year now Scott Adams, creator of the syndicated Dilbert cartoon, but also a trained hypnotist who understands the power of persuasion, had been applying his expertise to the US election. He explained that Trump displayed potent skills, labelling him 'the best persuader I have ever seen. On a scale from 1 to 10... Trump is a 15'.¹⁵ According to Adams, our emotions underlie the vast majority of our decision-making, which we like to think is rational and based on facts. After witnessing Trump's behaviour over a year ago, Adams predicted that Trump would win the election. Using what he called the 'Master Persuasion Filter', Scott meticulously catalogued the rhetorical 'tit for tat' of the campaign between Trump and his opponents, showing at each turn how what appeared to be absurd statements often had a logic behind them. Consider Trump's labelling of his political opponents. Marco Rubio was dubbed 'little Marco'; Jeb Bush became 'low energy Jeb'; Ted Cruz got tarred with 'lying Ted' and, of course, Hillary Clinton got stuck with 'crooked Hillary'. Like characters in a play, Trump cast his opponents as characters in the most simplest of fashions. And boy did the labels not only stick but behind them lay a simplistic method that operated on our cognitive biases. For example, consider Jeb Bush, part of the Bush



First day at the White House

dynasty that produced two US presidents over the past 30 years. Mild mannered, Bush comes across at first like a rational chief executive that would not be easily flustered during crises. Surely a man the people could elect. Immediately after Trump labelled him as ‘low energy’ what we then saw in Jeb confirmed the label. Bush *did* look like a man devoid of excitement, charisma or energy who was attempting to match the ‘high energy’ of Trump, which he clearly could not. The label stuck. Low energy equated to someone the American people were not going to vote for in a very loud American election.

The same went for ‘crooked Hillary’. This lent itself perfectly to Trump’s labelling strategy. By labelling Hillary as a ‘crook’ for months on end — a person who is dishonest or criminal — it primed us to see her this way at a time when an email controversy was dogging the Clinton campaign. Once the label was used, it created a ‘confirmation bias trap’, and thus even the admission by FBI Director James Comey that Clinton had not acted criminally could not change the perception amongst large parts of the voting public that Clinton was dishonest. No other candidate in the election, besides Trump, had such an excellent grasp of these tactics.

Trump’s audacity

Was there strategy behind Trump’s ascent or was it dumb luck? Let us consider the following: after every Trump campaign shake-up, Trump’s opponents loudly declared his campaign was marred by general incompetence; after every outrageous statement that gave Trump free media coverage, his opponents asserted that it made him unelectable; after every campaign stop in Clinton’s supposed ‘blue firewall’, his opponents stated that it would have been prudent for him to campaign elsewhere and that he was wasting his time. In other words, during all these calculated steps, Trump’s opponents disregarded them as impulsive and likely to fail. They viewed them through a traditional political lens that no longer applied in an era of popular angst and during an extraordinary election.

Behind the baffling swings in Trump’s behaviour and non-traditional approach to campaigning, and which will no doubt lie behind his approach to governing, lies a logic that has worked well for him so far. That is the audacity of Trump. If the Democrats hope to take back the White House in four years’ time, and the rest of us watching from afar want to understand the populist

phenomenon which could conceivably come to our own shores in time (especially if New Zealand is shaken by economic turbulence in the near future), it is imperative that we understand that there is a logical thread that runs through Trump’s seemingly irrational behaviour. In other words, even if it appears that Trump is a buffoon who was lucky enough to somehow rise to become the most powerful human on the planet, our best bet is to try to see beyond Trump’s outlandish comments to the stratagem of a man of considerable cunning.

NOTES

1. BBC News, ‘How Breitbart became Donald Trump’s favourite news site’, 14 Nov 2016 (www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37109970).
2. Fivethirtyeight, ‘Who Will Win the Presidency?’, 8 Nov 2016 (projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2016-election-forecast/).
3. J. Lester Feder, ‘This is How Bannon sees the Entire World’, 16 Nov 2016 (www.buzzfeed.com/lesterfeder/this-is-how-steve-bannon-sees-the-entire-world?utm_term=.rxwloaVGG#.mbGj2YMKK).
4. Adam Edelman, ‘A look at Trump’s most outrageous comments about Mexicans as he attempts damage control by visiting with country’s president’, 31 Aug 2016 (www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/trump-outrageous-comments-mexicans-article-1.2773214).
5. Politico, ‘Full text: Donald Trump immigration speech in Arizona’, 13 Aug 2016 (www.politico.com/story/2016/08/donald-trump-immigration-address-transcript-227614).
6. Steven Bertoni, 22 Nov 2016, ‘Exclusive Interview: How Jared Kushner Won Trump the White House’ (www.forbes.com/sites/stevenbertoni/2016/11/22/exclusive-interview-how-jared-kushner-won-trump-the-white-house/#6e311b715b84).
7. Ibid.
8. Hadas Gold, ‘Jeff Tucker has no regrets’, 14 Oct 2016 (www.politico.com/blogs/on-media/2016/10/jeff-zucker-cnn-no-regrets-229820).
9. Thomas E. Patterson, ‘Pre-Primary News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Race: Trump’s Rise, Sanders’ Emergence, Clinton’s Struggle’, 13 Jun 2016 (shorensteincenter.org/pre-primary-news-coverage-2016-trump-clinton-sanders/).
10. ‘Shock Trump win Triggers Media Soul-searching,’ *Straits Times*, 10 Nov 2016 (www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/shock-trump-win-triggers-media-soul-searching).
11. Art Swift, ‘Americans’ Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low,’ 14 Sep 2016 (www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx).
12. Candace Smith and Liz Kreutz, ‘Hillary Clinton’s and Donald Trump’s Campaigns by the Numbers’, 7 Nov 2016 (abcnews.go.com/Politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trumps-campaigns-numbers/story?id=43356783).
13. Ibid.
14. Lucy Pasha-Robinson, ‘Barack Obama suggests Hillary Clinton didn’t work as hard on campaign trail as he did,’ 15 Nov 2016 (www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-elections/president-obama-hillary-clinton-us-election-didnt-work-campaign-trail-a7418001.html).
15. Scott Adams, ‘The Persuasion Reading List,’ 24 Sep 2015 (blog.dilbert.com/post/129784168866/the-persuasion-reading-list).

