المركز العربي للأبحاث و دراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Understanding Donald Trump's Victory: Some Methodological and Semiotic Considerations

Samer Shehata | Feb 2017

Understanding Donald Trump's Victory: Some Methodological and Semiotic Considerations

Samer Shehata| Feb 2017

Series: Research Paper

_____

Table of Contents

Introduction

Many Americans and much of the world were both surprised and shocked by Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Almost all the polls had predicted Hilary Clinton would comfortably win the election. Pundits were shocked that a candidate who seemed so reckless during the campaign, mired in multiple personal and financial scandals, with no previous experience in elected office, and with a seemingly endless penchant for making bigoted and offensive remarks, could be elected to the world's most powerful office.

Donald Trump's political success in 2016 is part of a much larger global phenomenon: the rise of right wing, anti-establishment, populist politics. Brexit, the Italian Five Star movement, the resignation of the center-left Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, and the increasing popularity of Marine Le Pen's National Front, are all recent examples of this trend.[1]

Many of these parties and movements are founded on anti-globalization, anti-immigrant, and anti-establishment sentiment. In fact, it would be a mistake to approach Trump's success without reference to larger global economic and political forces. The movement of manufacturing and industry from advanced economies to Asia and other developing nations and the consequences of this on patterns of income inequality in Europe and North America fueled anti-globalization sentiment. Similarly, global immigration patterns and the perceived "threat" new immigrants pose to "national" cultures and economies in Europe and the United States resulted in increased right-wing, anti-immigrant politics. And the rise of extremist Islamist groups such as ISIL contributed to heightened Islamophobia in the West and elsewhere.

But just as it would be a mistake to analyze Trump's election without reference to structural changes in the international economy and the transnational wave of right

---

[1] There are also some similarities between the politics described above and India's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte. Russia's Vladimir Putin and Egypt's Abdel Fattah Al Sisi are also examples of populist, ultra-nationalist, rightwing politicians, although neither Putin nor Sisi were elected through free and fair elections.

wing populist politics, it would be equally mistaken to focus exclusively on these factors to the neglect of American domestic politics.

To understand America's 2016 election both global as well as national and structural as well as contingent factors need to be examined. In this context, Azmi Bishara, in a recent essay[2], does an excellent job of examining some of the international and structural factors behind Trump's victory. Bishara analyzes the wider economic and political factors driving the global rise of right wing populist politics. This essay, by contrast, focuses primarily on some of the national and contingent factors behind Trump's victory.

This essay makes four points. The first is methodological and has already been articulated: both global and national as well as structural and contingent factors are essential for understanding the 2016 U.S. election. Second, the fact that almost all the polling including by the *New York Times* and the much-heralded Nate Silver got the election wrong reflects something more profound than simple polling error. It reflects the character of the social world and the limits of prediction in the human sciences. Third, one cannot understand Donald Trump's victory without understanding Hillary Clinton's shortcomings as a presidential candidate. Finally, the semiotic failures of the Clinton campaign have been largely overlooked in the voluminous analysis explaining her defeat. Not only was Hillary Clinton an unpopular candidate, her campaign message was deeply flawed: unmemorable, barely coherent and often referenced Donald Trump. Trump's message by contrast, was simple, positive, and unforgettable.

The Polls Got It Wrong

One of the most intriguing aspects of the 2016 U.S. presidential election is the fact that almost all of the polls got the election wrong. There were several reasons for this in addition to the mistaken polls. Many factors seemed to indicate a Clinton victory. Whether it was the amount of funds raised, campaign infrastructure, party support, or media coverage, Clinton seemed to have a decisive advantage over Trump.

---

[2] Azmi Bishara, "The Rise of the Right and the Adoption of the Clash of Civilizations: When Democracy Spawns the Antithesis of Liberalism", 2016, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, December 31, accessed February 28, 2017 at: http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/77612fb6-cc40-46a3-937b-5445def5e487

Many have decried the importance of money in American politics and election campaigns in particular require huge amounts of cash. This election proved no exception, and on this dimension, like so many others, Hillary Clinton decisively outperformed Donald Trump. According to the *Washington Post*, Clinton's campaign raised over $623 million dollars compared to Trump's $329 million. Clinton also outperformed Trump in terms of the total amounts raised by each candidate's party, joint fund raising, and monies raised by Super PACs to the tune of $1.4 billion dollars compared to $932 million.[3] If money was the decisive factor Clinton should have easily returned to the White House.

Clinton also outperformed Trump in terms of what Americans call the "ground game:" the ordinary, mundane, often grueling, unglamorous, day-to-day level of door-to door, retail politics. This includes volunteers canvassing neighborhoods, knocking on doors, and distributing campaign material. It also includes the number of local campaign offices established and the ability to get voters to the polls on election day (often providing transportation for older and poorer voters who might not otherwise be able to get to polling places on their own). On this front Clinton and the Democratic Party also dominated.

This was well described by a Colorado Republican interviewed a few days before the election who said, "The Clinton campaign has been very engaged in building a ground game and turnout operation and have a great deal of existing liberal infrastructure in the state to reply upon. The Trump organization, in contrast, has almost no ground game, has engaged in very little traditional campaign organizing, has done little direct mail or canvassing efforts, and seems to think a handful of rallies and last-minute television commercials can take the place of the hard work of actually asking individual voters to vote for him, and the state party has done very little to fill the void."[4]

---

[3] Anu Narayanswamy, Darla Cameron and Matea Gold, "Money Raised as of November 28," *Washington Post*, last updated December 9, 2016, accessed January 24, 2017 at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/2016-election/campaign-finance/

[4] Steven Shepard, "Democratic Insiders: Clinton's ground game will sink Trump," *Politico*, November 4, 2016, accessed December 26, 2016 at: http://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/democratic-insiders-hillarys-ground-game-will-sink-trump-230718

This was clearly reflected in the number of local offices established by the respective campaign. Clinton far exceeded her rival, opening 489 field offices across the country compared with Trump's 207. In the critical battleground state of Florida alone Clinton set up 68 offices compared with Trump's 29.[5]

Clinton's advantages also extended to the support her party and the party leadership provided.[6] The Democratic Party leadership, including her rival in the primaries, Bernie Sanders, rallied around her in the general election. The situation could not have been more different for her Republican opponent.

In many ways, Trump ran against the Republican Party and won. More than one hundred prominent Republicans including the two former Bush presidents, Mitt Romney, Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powel, Paul Wolfowitz, and dozens of other leaders, including some of Trump's rivals in the primaries, refused to support him in the general election. The lack of support he received from his party's establishment is unprecedented in the recent history of American politics.

Ironically, this proved advantageous for Trump. The brash New York real estate tycoon sold himself as the anti-establishment, anti-Washington D.C. candidate.[7] The fact that so many prominent Republicans refused to support him played into the narrative that he was an "outsider" intent on shaking up Washington.[8]

---

[5] Susan Milligan, "The Fight on the Ground," *U.S. News & World Report*, October 14, 2016, accessed December 26, 2016 at: http://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2016-10-14/donald-trump-abandons-the-ground-game

[6] Another advantage was Clinton's relatively favorable media coverage compared with Donald Trump. Whether accurate or not, most Americans believed Clinton received more favorable coverage. According to a November 3, 2016 Gallup poll, 52 percent of those polled believed there was media bias in favor of Clinton compared with only 8 percent who believed the media was biased in favor of Trump. See "Majority of U.S. voters think media favors Clinton," Gallup, November 3, 2016, accessed March 5, 2016 at: http://www.gallup.com/poll/197090/majority-voters-think-media-favors-clinton.aspx

[7] Much of the popular sentiment in the 2016 presidential election was anti-establishment, including against both the Democratic and Republican Party leadership, and this proved advantageous for Trump. In fact, the favoritism Clinton received from the Democratic Party leadership against Bernie Sanders' insurgent campaign reflected her "insider" status and further damaged her credibility.

[8] The irony of the idea that Trump is an "outsider" and an "anti-establishment" candidate should not be lost on anyone. After all, Trump is a billionaire whose father was a millionaire.

Understanding the Failure of the 2016 Polls

The election outcome was unexpected both inside the United States and internationally. One of the primary reasons for this was the fact that almost all of the polls, with only a few exceptions, predicted Hillary Clinton would comfortably win.

There have been several explanations offered for why the polls were wrong. These have ranged from simple margin of error and sampling error issues, to the effects of polling on voter behavior, and the idea of "preference falsification." The concepts of margin of error and flawed or non-representative samples are relatively straightforward and require no further elaboration.

One particularly popular explanation for the failure of the polls to predict Trump's victory is the idea that American voters simply lied: they lied to pollsters about how they would vote on election day. The idea behind this seemingly probable theory is that some people were likely too embarrassed to admit supporting such a controversial candidate. Similar to the idea that no one wants to admit to being racist, this explanation posits that voters were embarrassed, ashamed, or afraid to admit supporting Trump for fear of being thought of negatively, and as a result, did not accurately report their preferences when asked.

Another explanation posits that the polls themselves affected voting behavior by lulling Clinton voters into complacency while simultaneously rallying Trump supporters to the polls. This argument holds that because almost all the polls put Hillary Clinton comfortably ahead, many of her supporters falsely assumed she would win and, as a result, stayed home on election day. Conversely, the argument posits that Trump supporters were so alarmed by the polls indicating a Clinton lead that they turned out in greater numbers to prevent her victory. In this explanation, the act of polling (and releasing the results) affected voting behavior and the election outcome.

However, the fact that the overwhelming majority of polls got the election wrong reflects something more profound than these theories purport to explain. It would be incorrect to conclude that the polls were wrong simply because of one-time errors or technical issues. The "failure" of the polls to predict the 2016 U.S. election reflects the inherent difficulty of predicting social outcomes. In fact, even if we were to accept the explanations offered about preference falsification and the idea that polling itself affected voting behavior, this would in itself be an admission of the impossibility of polling to accurately and consistently predict human behavior. One could never, for

example, sufficiently take into account when people would lie to pollsters (or how many people would lie) or when polling itself would affect results to be able to accurately incorporate such information into polls in order to produce correct predictions.

The underlying issue is that the social sciences are fundamentally different from the natural sciences and we must fully acknowledge this. This is not to say that the human sciences are "inferior" or less developed than the "hard" sciences – somehow still in their infancy – but that the social world is profoundly unlike the natural one in a way that makes accurate prediction of complex social phenomenon impossible (not to mention the idea of covering laws which somehow exist outside of time and space and govern human behavior).[9]

The problem is not so much that the polls were wrong but that the metric of success for the human sciences should and can be prediction. Here it is also important to remember that the "failure" to predict the 2016 U.S. presidential election is simply the most recent of many polling failures. The world was equally stunned in June 2016 when the British voted to withdraw from the European Union. Most polls leading up to the vote indicated that Britain would remain in the EU. The polls also failed to predict the Conservative Party's victory in the 2015 U.K. general election. Here again, the polls failed.[10]

---

[9] It is also worth pointing out that predicting an election is infinitely less complex than predicting a revolution or the outbreak of civil war, for example. And even at this, social science often "fails." The most profound differences between the natural and human sciences concern the ideas of agency and meaning in social life (i.e., the meaning that actors attribute to their actions as well as meaning, interpretation, and symbols, more generally). Neither are applicable to the natural sciences. Agency and meaning are irrelevant for understanding the movement of atoms or the weather, for example. It is agency – our ability to act in the world and affect change – in addition to the fact that many social phenomena (i.e. revolutions) are the outcomes of an incredibly large series of *contingent* events, that make prediction, understood in the manner of the natural sciences, impossible.

[10] Chris Hanretty, "Here's why pollsters and pundits got Brexit wrong," *Washington Post*, June 24, 2016, accessed March 5, 2016 at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/06/24/heres-why-pollsters-and-pundits-got-brexit-wrong/?utm_term=.6a61559fab26. See also, David Cowling, "Election 2015: How the opinion polls got it wrong," *BBC*, 17 May 2015, accessed March 5, 2016 at: http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-32751993

Suffice to say that these are not one-off failures but reflect the inherent openness and unpredictability of the social world.[11] It is because of individual agency and historical contingency that accurate predictions about significant phenomenon in the social world (revolutions, for example) are impossible. In fact, when one thinks of the hundred-plus years positivist social science has been trying to develop "scientific" theories (which include prediction), one can only conclude that the endeavor has been a failure. And when one adds to this the decades of experience refining scientific polling techniques and the hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of polls that have been conducted, the enormity of the failure becomes overwhelming.[12]

The failure to predict Trump's election victory reflects the inherent limitations of predictive social science, including polling, and we would be better off recognizing this and understanding the actual character of the human sciences. It was Hegel who wrote that "the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk."[13]

No Trump without Hilary

Let us now turn to the specific characteristics of the 2016 U.S. presidential election – or to the level of national and contingent factors discussed above. The main point here is that one cannot understand Donald Trump's victory without understanding Hilary Clinton's shortcomings as a presidential candidate. After all, elections are rarely choices between an ideal candidate and an imperfect one. Elections are usually limited choices between two flawed candidates. And Hillary Clinton was a deeply flawed candidate.

Not only was she flawed, she was also profoundly unappealing. In fact, Clinton recorded the highest unfavorability ratings of all previous presidential candidates, except for Donald Trump, in the history of US election polls. 60 percent of registered

---

[11] One could mention the "failure" of social scientists to predict the collapse of communism, the 2008 financial crisis, or the 2011 Arab uprisings.

[12] Of course, this is not to say that social science or polling has not been useful or informative. The point is simply that it cannot and should not aspire to accurate prediction along the lines of the natural sciences.

[13] G.W. F Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Allen W. Wood (ed.), H.B. Nisbet (trans.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 23. Hegel's point was that understanding only comes after the fact.

voters polled by ABC News in late October 2016 held an unfavorable view of Clinton. Trump's unfavorability rating in the same poll was 58 percent.[14] Both candidates were unpopular among a majority of Americans and Trump's unfavorability ratings were often slightly higher than Clinton's. The point here is that the choice Americans faced in the 2016 presidential elections was not between a perfect candidate and an unpopular one. Rather, it has been likened to a choice between cholera and the plague.[15]

Why did so many Americans view Clinton negatively? There are numerous reasons for this. For many, Clinton was the ultimate "insider." She was "the establishment" candidate representing the East Coast, Washington D.C. political elite.

The former Arkansas first lady, former first lady of the United States, former New York senator, and former secretary of state had a remarkably long political career. Her husband was elected Arkansas governor in 1978 and she became active in educational reform in the southern state. Hillary lived in the governor's mansion for four years before moving to an even larger mansion in the nation's capital.

In 1993, Bill Clinton was elected president and Hillary became First Lady. She lived in the White House for eight years – until 2001– and during this period she was active in national politics, championing health care reform and other issues.

When Bill Clinton left the presidency in 2001 Hillary immediately ran for elected office. She won a New York senate seat the same year and held the seat through 2009 (she continued in the senate after losing the 2008 democratic presidential nomination to Barack Obama). And when Obama became president in 2009, he appointed Hillary as Secretary of State, a post she held for four years.

---

[14] Gary Langer, "Deep Unfavorability for Clinton, Trump Marks the Election's Sharp Divisions," ABC News, October 31, 2016, accessed January 25, 2017 at: http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/deep-unfavorability-clinton-trump-marks-elections-sharp-divisions/story?id=43177423

[15] Noureddine Jebnoun deserves credit for this turn of phrase. It is important to also point out that the electorate was sharply polarized and this continues after the election. For example, the ABC News poll mentioned above revealed that 97 percent of Trump supporters saw Clinton unfavorably while 95 percent of Clinton supporters saw Trump unfavorably.

In other words, by the time Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy in 2016 she had been active and visible in national politics for no less than 38 years.[16] For Americans desperately seeking political change, she represented "more of the same."[17] Clinton epitomized "the system" and thus many viewed her as part of the problem with American politics and not the solution. Her "experience" turned out to be a liability.

Not only was Clinton the quintessential political insider, Bill and Hillary Clinton were thought to have benefitted financially from their insider status. When Hillary left the White House in 2001, she famously claimed she was "dead broke" and "in debt" (much of the debt was a result of legal fees incurred during the Whitewater real estate investigation). But by 2014, *Forbes* estimated the Clinton's net worth to be $110 million dollars. Much of this was accumulated as a result of book deals and speaking fees. Hillary received an eight-million-dollar advance for her first memoir entitled *Living History*. She received a fourteen-million-dollar advance for her memoir as Secretary of State entitled *Hard Choices* (Bill also made millions in book deals).[18]

But Hillary also parlayed her political experience and insider status into tens of millions of dollars in speaking fees. In 2013, for example, she gave thirty-six speeches for a total of $8.5 million dollars, averaging about $225,000 a speech. The talks usually lasted no more than two hours and her clients were often Fortune 500 companies, including Goldman Sachs, Fidelity Investments, and Citibank.[19] For many Americans,

---

[16] A rumor circulated during the campaign that Hillary had not driven a car in over three decades. Whether this was true or not is irrelevant. The fact that Hillary Clinton and her husband had been part of the political elite for so long made this potentially believable. To regular Americans, this seemed outrageous and completely disconnected from their own lives.

[17] During President Obama's speech endorsing Hillary Clinton's candidacy during the Democratic Party Convention in July 2016, Obama declared, "I can say with confidence there has never been a man or a woman – not me, not Bill, nobody – more qualified than Hillary Clinton to serve as President of the United States of America." He joked, adding, "I hope you don't mind Bill, but I was just telling the truth." Obama might have been correct about Clinton's experience, but for American voters yearning for change, Clinton's experience (meaning, time in politics) was not seen as an advantage but as a liability.

[18] Daniel Gross, "How Hillary and Bill Clinton Parlayed Decades of Public Service into vast wealth," *Fortune*, February 15, 2016, accessed March 5, 2016 at: http://fortune.com/2016/02/15/hillary-clinton-net-worth-finances/

[19] Ibid.

this was doubly outrageous – the fact that she made such huge sums in such little time and that much of the money came from Wall Street and the "big banks." During both the primaries and the general election many questioned whether Hillary could be trusted to defend the interests of the American people vis-à-vis Wall Street, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis, after she had significantly benefitted from the financial industry.

And then there were the never-ending scandals: Whitewater, Hillary's response to Bill Clinton's indiscretions, the Clinton Foundation, Benghazi, and the email scandal. Whether real or imagined, there was a perception among many Americans that Hillary was untrustworthy. Trump incessantly reminded voters of this by constantly referring to her as "crooked Hillary." Whether there was truth in any of these or other alleged scandals was irrelevant. Rather, the perception that Hillary Clinton was dishonest was relatively widespread.

There was also the feeling that Hillary was a politician in the worst sense of the term: someone who would say and do just about anything to get elected. Yet ironically, Hillary was in another sense a terrible politician, quite the opposite of her husband. She lacked "people skills" and seemed out of touch with average Americans. She was uncomfortable interacting with regular people, struggled to connect with ordinary voters, and her public appearances often seemed rehearsed. Hillary did love politics. She lived and breathed politics, but as a "policy wonk" and not as an elected politician.

There was also the perception that Hillary felt entitled to be president. Voters got the impression, in part as a result of her constant talk about her qualifications and experience, that she believed she *deserved* to be president. After all, her resume was impressive. Obama himself said during the Democratic Party convention in July 2016 that "there has never been a man or a woman … more qualified than Hillary Clinton to serve as President." But Hillary seemed to think that her impressive resume, her time in public service, and her qualifications, entitled her to the presidency. This did not sit well with American voters, however.

Voters rightfully resented this. Being elected president, after all, is not primarily about qualifications or previous experience. It is not an ordinary job where candidates apply and are selected (ostensibly) based on their skills and experience. The relationship between voters and candidates is different. Candidates ask citizens for their trust and the privilege of representing them. And at this, Hillary Clinton failed.

Of course, there were other factors that likely contributed to Clinton's defeat. Many have claimed that gender played a role. Some have described Trump's victory as a form of "white-lash:" a bigoted reaction by segments of the American electorate to the first African-American president. And still others have claimed that it is always harder for the incumbent party to retain the presidency after holding it for two consecutive terms.[20]

Donald Trump's victory was undoubtedly the result of multiple factors. But as has been argued above, the primary reasons for Hillary Clinton's loss were not external to her but concern her lack of appeal as a candidate.

Ultimately, Clinton seemed condescending and elitist to many, self-interested and insincere to others. The former first lady of Arkansas and the United States and former Secretary of State proved difficult to relate to for Americans in a way that Donald Trump, ironically, was not.[21] All of this indicates there was nothing inevitable about Trump's road to the White House. It was not simply the result of a wave of right wing populist politics sweeping the globe or structural economic changes and their consequences. The specific characteristics of the 2016 U.S. presidential election played an important role in determining its outcome. In other words, there is no way to understand Donald Trump's victory without understanding Hillary Clinton's shortcomings. Stated differently – there is no Trump without Clinton.

Campaign Messages Compared

There has been a tremendous amount of analysis of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. However, one aspect of the election that has received insufficient attention is the campaign messages produced by Trump and Clinton. Clinton failed to present a

---

[20] Some have described this phenomenon as the "eight-year itch:" the desire for change among the electorate after one party holds the White House for two consecutive terms. The evidence supporting this hypothesis, however, is far from convincing. See John Patty, "The Eight Year Itch?," *Washington Monthly*, April 11, 2015, accessed January 30, 2017 at: http://washingtonmonthly.com/2015/04/11/the-eight-year-itch/

[21] Although a billionaire, Trump's plain-talking, anti-intellectualism was something that millions of Americans could relate to. He was also seen as honest, willing to speak his mind without regard for "political correctness" or whether his ideas got him in trouble.

powerful, positive, and coherent message to voters while Trump's message, by contrast, was simple, clear, and highly effective.

If asked, most Americans could recount Trump's campaign slogan well before election day on November 8, 2016. It consisted of four simple words: "Make America Great Again." The message was positive, forward looking, and focused on the United States.[22] It was also highly memorable. Clinton's message, by contrast, was neither simple nor coherent. Nor was it memorable.

The Clinton campaign employed three slogans: "Stronger Together," "I'm With Her," and "Love Trumps Hate." The fact that multiple slogans were used likely reduced the effectiveness of any single message sticking with voters. What is even more noteworthy is that all of Clinton's campaign messages either explicitly or implicitly referred to her opponent. In one sense, the messages were more about Donald Trump than Hillary Clinton.

"Stronger Together" was an implicit reference to the idea that Trump was a divisive candidate. He was anti-immigrant, anti-Mexican, and famously anti-Muslim. He was also accused of sexism and sexual assault at various times during his career. "Stronger Together" sought to project the idea that America was stronger when Americans were united rather than divided. Although the slogan did not explicitly mention Trump, it would be impossible to understand its meaning without reference to him.

"I'm With Her" also implicitly referred to Trump. In the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential contest, "I'm With Her" implied support for Hillary and *not* her male competitor. Although the message gestured toward feminism – "I'm with the female and not the male candidate" – it implicitly referred to Clinton's opponent in a way that Trump's campaign messaging never referred to Clinton.

Clinton's last slogan – "Love Trumps Hate" – is the most explicit reference to the New York billionaire. The slogan –a play on the meaning of the word "trump" – proclaims love to be more powerful than hate and equates Trump with hate. Although somewhat

---

[22] There was one aspect of this message which was less than positive, however. The slogan "make America great again," implied that the U.S. had lost some of its greatness and that a corrective effort was required to restore this lost greatness. In this sense, the message implied something negative about the current state of affairs but the nationalist tone of the message drowned out this implicit negativity.

witty, the slogan again focuses on Trump and makes no reference to Clinton or the United States.

Not only did Hillary Clinton fail to produce a single, persuasive, or memorable message, her slogans arguably focused on her opponent more than on her.[23] Furthermore, her slogans did not "sell" Hillary Clinton: they did not proclaim her strengths or her vision for the United States. Rather, like much of her wider campaign, they focused on her Republican rival. In fact, much of the Clinton campaign's more general message to voters in 2016 was that Donald Trump was irresponsible and unqualified to be president (the implication was, that she was better). The problem with this approach, however, is that rather than "selling" oneself (or even better, selling "hope" or "the future"), the argument put forward is – "the other candidate is bad and I'm not as bad." This is hardly a positive, convincing, or effective message. It is the equivalent of trying to sell Coca Cola by claiming that it is not as bad as Pepsi.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that there was nothing inevitable about Donald Trump's 2016 U.S. election victory. Although Trump's ascendency must be understood as part of a larger global wave of right wing, populist, anti-globalization, and anti-establishment sentiment, his victory was not simply a result of these larger global and structural factors. Rather than being "overdetermined," Trump's victory was a contingent outcome, made possible by multiple factors at both the global and national levels. It was also the result of both structural and contingent factors: changes in the global economy, for example, as well as the specific dynamics between the Democratic and Republican candidates in the U.S. election.

This paper has also tried to reflect more deeply on the failure of the overwhelming majority of polls to accurately predict the election outcome. It argues that the "polling failure" should not be understood as the result of technical errors (i.e., simple margin of error or sampling issues) but reflects something more profound about the character of

---

[23] One only needs to compare Clinton's 2016 messaging with Barak Obama's 2008 campaign. Obama's slogans of "hope" and "yes we can" were positive, memorable, and future-oriented and most importantly, did not focus on his opponent.

the social world, with significant implications for how we understand the human sciences. Finally, the paper also tried to provide a concrete argument about the national-level and contingent factors that were, in part, responsible for Donald Trump's election victory (along with the global and structural factors mentioned previously). It has thus been as much about method and semiotics as it has been about the 2016 U.S. presidential election.