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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

President Trump: An Attempt to Understand the Background

Policy Analysis Unit | November 2016

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Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

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Introduction

Trump's victory in the presidential election on November 8 came as a complete shock to many within the US and abroad, as if the statistical likelihood of such an outcome had been ignored. One of the reasons for the size of this shock can be attributed to the fact that US opinion formers, including mainstream media pundits, polling organizations and think tanks, simply ruled out the possibility of the Republican candidate coming to power. Indeed, up until the very last hours before voting ended, opinion pollsters were claiming that Trump was trailing his opponent, Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton. This assumption was rooted in the way that Trump presented himself throughout the campaign as an unreasonable and unqualified candidate, and supported by evidence from the exit polls of early voters, some 41 million citizens, a majority of whom had backed Clinton.

Many had believed that Trump's repeated, callous and uncouth outbursts against women and a variety of ethnic and religious minorities had made him unelectable. At first glance, it seemed implausible that a large section of the American electorate would cast their ballots for a disgraced populist whose platform substituted racism and hate in place of concrete, actionable substance. In the end, Trump disappointed all these observers by securing 279 electoral college votes out of a possible 538 (with 270 needed to win). Trump emerged victorious because he was able to capture Electoral College votes from key "battleground states", which have historically tended to trade loyalties between the Democratic and Republican parties, such as Michigan, Florida and Pennsylvania. Trump's crowning moment came when he humiliated Clinton by taking her former home state of Arkansas, which is also where her husband been governor prior to his two-term presidency (1992-2000). So how exactly did the candidate who nobody took seriously one year ago turn himself into the forty-fifth president of the US?

White Anxiety

Since he officially announced his presidential bid in the summer of 2015, Trump has been able to build support among a white working class which has yet to recover from both the economic shock of the 2008 financial crisis, as well as the older trend of the export of manufacturing jobs outside the US. Trump was able to reach out to this disenfranchised group by playing not only on their economic woes, but also on racist concerns about being overwhelmed by immigrants and ethnic minorities. With statistical indicators appearing to show that whites would become a numerical minority within the

US in less than three decades, and the election of Barack Obama, the first black president, to two presidential terms, many white Americans came to view their dominance of culture and politics as under threat. Such racial anxieties go a long way to explaining how Trump was able to gain the 10 electoral college votes of a historically progressive, but overwhelmingly white, state like Wisconsin. A similar story unfolded in a state like Pennsylvania. In contrast, Clinton was unable to fire up the Democratic Party's traditional base, particularly women and ethnic minority voters.

Culture Wars

Trump also owes his victory at least partially to the cultural divisions between Americans living in rural areas and those in urban cities: voters who live in cities with 50,000 or fewer inhabitants were more likely to vote for the Republican candidate, as compared to those living in larger cities and who were more likely to cast their ballots for Clinton. A similar divide exists for Americans living on the coastal states and those living in the interior of the North American continent, and in particular in the Midwest states. At the heart of this cultural division lay the socially liberal attitudes of voters living in large cities on the coast, which stand in stark contrast to the conservative values of their compatriots who live in the rural hinterland. Questions such as same-sex marriage and abortion rights were flashpoints in the battle between these two points of view.

Protesting against the Clinton Establishment

Large numbers of voters supported Trump as a way of protesting a supposed liberal elite on the east coast, centered in the metropolises of Washington, DC and New York City. That elite is widely seen to be detached from the grassroots and mired in financial and administrative corruption—or so Trump claimed. An earlier expression of the anger at the elites was Bernie Sanders, who competed with Clinton for the chance to represent the Democratic Party in the presidential elections. Large numbers of Sanders supporters refused to vote for Clinton, regarding the former Secretary of State as an embodiment of everything they resented, or did so without any enthusiasm (so-called “depressed voters”). Although many former Sanders supporters likely did not vote, and others cast blank ballots, it is also apparent that Trump was able to win many Sanders supporters over, particularly among the working class.

These sentiments were likely particularly sharpened by the person of Hilary Clinton, who was First Lady between 1992 and 2000, then a Senator for the State of New York until 2008, before finally serving as a member of Obama's cabinet up until the time she contested and won the Democratic primaries for the 2016 presidential election. The many years spent under the limelight have only deepened the perception of the Clinton family as a whole, and Hilary Clinton in particular, as being unaccountable and the beneficiaries of a large fortune which they have been able to amass in dubious ways. Clinton's image was not helped by various scandals, including her use of an unencrypted email server to conduct state business, and a litany of other infractions which were revealed in the run-up to polling day, in addition to perceived personal culpability for the September 2012 assassination of a US Ambassador in Benghazi, Libya. These question marks over her character meant that nothing could help the former Secretary of State, despite endorsements from Obama—the most popular ever incumbent at this point of his presidency – and various other Democratic Party heavyweights such as former President Clinton, First Lady Michelle Obama and Vice President Joe Biden.

Trump Rhetoric

Although Trump's rhetoric may have appeared to America's elite to be simple, shallow and inflammatory, his cleverly deployed oratory achieved its aim of inflaming the passions of the 'man on the street'. The sociological trend uncovered here includes a striking paradox: poor, socially conservative rural voters are able to identify more clearly with Trump than middle class Americans living in urban centers. A billionaire real estate prospector, Trump was able to successfully present himself as a man of the people by using common speech, and his supporters do not countenance the idea that Trump, given his lack of airs and pretensions, might be a liar. Trump has exploited this skillfully, in addition to portraying himself as the victim of a wide-scale conspiracy to smear him with financial and moral scandals, some of which have been resurrected after years of obscurity. This perception amongst his supporters was only enhanced by the widespread opposition to Trump in mainstream media outlets, including all of the nationwide broadcasters and major newspapers. Trump went so far as to suggest that the liberal conspirators would attempt to rig the election to prevent his arrival in the White House. These inflammatory accusations compelled leading figures within the Republican Party to rally around their candidate after having previously refused to be associated with him.

Trump's belated adoption by the Republican Party machine allowed him to secure the backing of millions of crucial voters, including an estimated 30% of the Latino vote in Florida, where many Cuban Americans had previously come out for Marco Rubio, a Republican Senator defeated by Trump in the Republican primaries. In the end, Rubio was able to reclaim his seat in the Senate—both Houses of Congress were contested on the same day as the presidential election—just as Trump was able to overcome misgivings prompted by his anti-immigrant attitudes to lock in the 29 electoral college votes which Florida commands.

Conclusion

A range of factors contributed to Trump's surprise success on November 8 and the demise of a seemingly inevitable Clinton presidency, but perhaps one element that should not be discounted is the historical tendency of the American electorate to prevent one political party from dominating a particular branch of government for more than two cycles. With the Republican Party now comfortably controlling both Houses of Congress, it is possible that Trump will have two smooth years of rule before the Grand Old Party has to face mid-term elections. Yet he will also have to repair the damage caused by the vitriol of his campaign, which has highlighted the divisions within the American public like never before. It is a campaign which has shown how well established democracies are not immune from their own convulsions, if the right individual can come along and exploit the fault lines. What remains to be seen is the composition of the team which will make up the Trump administration: perhaps the new demagogue in Washington will find it possible to strike a path which deviates from the vote-winning script he wrote for himself.