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- The remarkable economic recovery of the United States from the Great Recession has mainly benefited the top 20–25 percent of American society. Many other people have legitimate complaints, and they are susceptible to demagogic appeals.
- The Republican Party, which gained the support of much of the white working class by stressing social issues, has ignored its current economic distress through ideological rigidity. Donald Trump has grasped this dynamic, and discarded many core conservative principles in his campaign.
- The widespread alienation that Trump has understood and channeled also appears to have psychological and racial components.
- Trump is a master communicator whose tactic seems to be to overwhelm the public with a torrent of lies, making it nearly impossible for fact-checkers to keep pace with him.
- The US media and Trump have had a symbiotic relationship for most of the campaign to date. Since Trump clinched the Republican nomination, however, he has had to field tough questions about his record and his policies. His reaction has confirmed the view of many that he has no respect for democracy and – as President – might well endanger it.
- Hillary Clinton should be the favorite to win the presidential election, but there are several variables which could tip the balance in Trump's favor. Whether Clinton or Trump emerges victorious, the American political landscape will be significantly changed.

The State of the Union: Very good and not so good

Any explanation of the Trump Phenomenon must begin with the fact that there is a widespread desire for change in the American electorate. President Barack Obama said in his January State of the Union Address: “Anyone claiming that America’s economy is in decline is peddling fiction”. To back up his assertion, the President can point to ample data: The gross domestic product has grown every quarter for seven years. The unemployment rate, which stood at 10 percent in 2009, is now down to 4.7 percent.

When Obama took over as President, the US economy was shedding 740,000 jobs per month. Now, with occasional blips, the economy routinely creates more than 200,000 private sector jobs per month. All told, the economy has gained jobs for 74 consecutive months, 14.4 million in all, almost exclusively in the private sector, including 600,000 in manufacturing. During the same period, employment in the European Union has remained static, while the US economy grew 50% faster than the Eurozone’s last year (2.4% vs. 1.6%).

Illegal immigration from Mexico is no longer a major problem. In fact, for the past few years there has been a net outflow from the United States to Mexico. The US stock market is up more than 150% in the Obama years. The housing market in most cities has recovered. Last year, more US-manufactured cars were sold than ever before. According to the FBI, crime rates are way down. Millions more Americans now have health insurance.

It all sounds pretty good, but there are significant exceptions to this rosy picture. Household incomes have stagnated in real (inflation-adjusted) terms for some 15 years. The percentage of Americans working full-time has still not reached the level it was at seven years ago. In many places, the supposed “fiction” of economic decline seems all too real. In truth, America’s remarkable economic recovery has only benefited the top 20 or 25 percent of the population, and middle-aged white communities are profoundly plagued by much more than economic woes. They have seen an increase in children born to single parents, higher rates of addiction and suicide, and shorter lifespans. These phenomena

run counter to trends among other groups in the American population.¹

Meanwhile, the Congress, sharply divided along ideological lines, is in near-gridlock. It has failed to move forward with meaningful legislation on two issues that matter to all citizens, namely college affordability and better healthcare for veterans – and on three issues of great importance to Democrats and many independents, namely gun control, the minimum wage, and reforming how political campaigns are financed.

In short, many people have legitimate gripes, and their emotions are ripe for exploitation by populists. Bernie Sanders sees Wall Street and the “one percent” at the top as the root of all evil. Donald Trump blames problems on illegal immigrants, and provides incendiary characterizations of them. Both Trump and Sanders, and lately Hillary Clinton, have railed against international trade agreements.

One must emphasize that although populism contains many themes that are used both by the Left and the Right, not all populist appeals are the same. Some of Sanders’ ideas may be oversimplified, such as free tuition at public colleges, breaking up the big banks, raising Social Security benefits, and rapidly creating a single public agency for financing healthcare. But despite the usual overheated campaign rhetoric, Sanders has a long track record in elective office as an unimpeachable democrat who would work within the laws of the land and not try to divide the country.

On the other hand, Trump’s populist rhetoric and radical proposals are calculated to inflame passions and pit citizen against citizen. Moreover, implementation of his nativist policies would violate moral norms, threaten the rule of law, and endanger the American model of tolerance, inclusion, rationality, and liberty. This Briefing Paper will explore how Donald Trump has been able to confound nearly all the experts by turning traditional Republicanism on its head, stoking economic and racial fears, abandoning traditional modes of campaigning, utilizing

1 Ashley Gold, *Why is death rate rising for white, middle-aged Americans?*, BBC News, November 4, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34714842>. Accessed 28.6.2016.

mercenary or craven media, and shamelessly abusing the truth.

Channeling discontent: the abandonment of traditional conservatism

Is Trump's appeal simply a function of economic inequality, of the "haves versus the have-nots"? That is certainly an important component. After winning the allegiance of millions of "Reagan Democrats" – most of them white, blue-collar, and Southern and/or rural – largely on social issues, the Republican Party stubbornly declined to take their economic interests into account. Republican orthodoxy calls for small government, low taxation, tight money, deregulation, free trade and cost-saving reforms to entitlement programs. Unfortunately, trickle-down economics has not been kind to the American working class, including working-class Republicans.

But this is only one part of a complex story. First of all, the takeover of the Republican Party by demagogic populists is the result of a long-term strategy and unfulfilled promises. Right-wing politicians have whipped up their followers by promising to abolish big government or restore traditional values, and they have wildly over-promised, saying that they would be able to hog-tie Obama by way of shutting down the federal government, threatening not to raise the national debt ceiling, and repealing Obamacare. None of it worked, not even the 15-day federal government shutdown in October 2013. One result has been grassroots Republican frustration with establishment Republicans.

If insufficient resistance to what Republicans label Obama's liberalism created a sense of betrayal, why in a field of 17 candidates did Republican voters choose the least conservative one, even over the most radical, anti-government conservative, Ted Cruz?

Trump has expressed sympathy for a single public agency for financing healthcare, an idea far to the left of Obamacare. Trump lists healthcare as one of the federal government's three main responsibilities. He also lists education, which mainstream Republicans believe should be left to the states instead. He even praises the work of Planned Parenthood, except for its provision of information on abortion.

On foreign policy and the central question of retaining America's global pre-eminence as leader of the free world, sustainer of Western alliances, and protector of the post-World War II order – Trump takes a much weaker position than does Hillary Clinton.

Clearly, then, policy positions cannot explain Trump's success in the Republican primaries. Something else is obviously at work. Most of it involves pulse-reading of the voters and a determination not to be bound to traditional factual and ethical standards.

First of all, Trump recognized that while many Americans may oppose the welfare state in theory, in practice most of them like it.

Second, Trump has demagogically exploited genuine fear, caused first by the attacks of September 11, 2001 and subsequently by the highly publicized grisly deeds of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and radically motivated "lone wolves" such as the perpetrator of the murder of 49 people in a gay bar in Orlando, Florida in mid-June 2016.

Third, Trump is a great showman, a celebrity with a remarkable *Fingerspitzengefühl* for what his audience relates to. And his Republican opponents were slow to recognize him as a threat, and then incredibly clumsy in reacting to him.

The roots of alienation: psychological, economic, and racial

There are also interesting psychological explanations for the alienation at the root of Trump's appeal. One is offered by Anand Giridharadas,² who concludes, "If anything unites America in this fractious moment it is a widespread sentiment that power is somewhere other than where you are". The Republican establishment thinks the grass roots have the power, but the grass roots think the reverse. The unions think the corporations have the power, but the corporations think the start-ups do. Regulators think Wall Street has the power, but Wall Street thinks the regulators do. The Pew Research Center asked Americans, "Would you say your side has been

² "The Anxieties of Impotence," *International New York Times*, January 16, 2016.

winning or losing more?’. Sixty-four percent of Americans, with majorities of both parties, believe their side has been losing more.³ People seem to underestimate their own power or suffer from what Giridharadas calls the “anxiety of impotence”.

Another psychological explanation for the intensity of Trump’s appeal comes from Jonathan Haidt, a professor at NYU, who looks at something called “psychological reactance”. Haidt describes reactance as “the feeling you get when people try to stop you from doing something you’ve been doing, and you perceive that they have no right or justification for stopping you. So you redouble your efforts and do it even more, just to show that you don’t accept their domination. Men in particular are concerned to show that they do not accept domination”.⁴ With regard to support for Trump’s most controversial proposals on immigrants, Haidt says: “It’s as though a button is pushed on their forehead that says, ‘In case of moral threat, lock down the borders, kick out those who are different and punish those who are morally deviant’”.⁵

There is also an undeniable racial aspect, or at least undertone, to this alienation. Sometime in the middle of this century, non-Hispanic whites will fall below 50 percent of the US population – still a large plurality, but no longer the majority that has obtained since the birth of the Republic. What is perhaps less well known in Europe is the degree to which American life in and around its urban centers has already become seamlessly multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious. Despite several recent and deeply troubling incidents of police brutality, in general this remarkably heterogeneous society of 325 million people functions quite well. In this respect the US is a far better country than it was in the 1950s and 1960s.

This demonstrable progress is reflected in attitudinal differences between the races. A wide and growing optimism gap has opened between poor and middle-class whites and their counterparts of

other races – and the former are the congenital *pessimists*.⁶ These attitudes explain why so many whites – including many who are not suffering economically – are rallying to the fearful and angry rhetoric of Trump’s campaign while blacks and other minorities are sticking with the incrementalism of Hillary Clinton. Many Trump supporters believe that the US can return to being a simpler, homogeneous country, which actually never existed.

Communication skills unencumbered by the truth

Another reason for Trump’s success is his formidable marketing and communication skills. Trump began the nomination campaign with the huge advantage of much greater name recognition than anyone other than Jeb Bush. Some 20 million people watched his reality television show *The Apprentice*. On top of that, Trump has proved to be a genius of the new communications technology, especially social media. He began his campaign with 3.4 million followers on Twitter, a vehicle which suits his personality perfectly: rapid-fire, stream of consciousness, rather than logically explained policies. He now has nearly 9 million followers.

Trump has marketed himself brilliantly, using slogans like “The Silent Majority stands with Trump” to convey a totally fallacious impression that he is getting the votes of most of the electorate. In actual fact, at the conclusion of the primary and caucus season his total represents less than 5 percent of eligible voters and less than 45 percent of all votes cast in the Grand Old Party (GOP) primaries. In all, Trump garnered 13.4 million primary votes, compared to Hillary Clinton’s nearly 16 million.

Although not a great strategist, Trump is a skilled tactician. To cover up his astonishingly meager knowledge base, he routinely switches the topic of conversation if he is unfamiliar with the issue at hand. He has used this tactic especially well in discussions of foreign affairs, about which he is woefully uninformed.

Trump’s most important tactic, however, is lying: he steadfastly refuses to be hindered by facts. *Politifact*

3 Hannah Fingerhut, *Winners and Losers in Politics*, Pew Research Center, November 25, 2015.

4 Thomas B. Edsall, “The Anti-P.C. Vote,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2016.

5 Amanda Taub, “A Lesson From ‘Brexit’: On Immigration, Feelings Trump Facts,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2016.

6 Carol Graham, *Unhappiness in America*, Brookings, May 27, 2016.

found that 76 percent of the 77 statements by Trump that it analyzed were either mostly false, false, or “pants on fire” false.⁷

Trump utilizes outright lies in the service of a racist, xenophobic, fear-mongering agenda. His reaction to the Orlando massacre in mid-June was typical. Totally ignoring the meticulous work of the US Customs and Border Protection, he falsely asserted that immigration to the United States from Islamic countries was unscreened and unrestricted; made the outlandish claim that Hillary Clinton wants to allow “hundreds of thousands” more Middle East migrants and “radical Islamic terrorists to pour into our country”; implied that the Orlando mass murderer, who was born in New York, was from Afghanistan; repeated his call for a temporary immigration ban on all Muslims, extending it to all citizens of countries “with a proven history of terrorism” against the US and its allies; and, continuing his sordid history of spinning conspiracy theories, strongly hinted that President Obama sympathized with the terrorists. Trump’s tactic seems to be to overwhelm the public with a torrent of lies, making it nearly impossible for fact-checkers to keep pace with him.

There is a historically proven undergirding to Trump’s demagoguery. He has perfected the tactics pioneered three decades ago by his fellow Republican Newt Gingrich in the US House of Representatives: demonize the opposition; de-legitimize government and debase its institutions; deny the government adequate funding (“starve the beast” is the preferred Republican metaphor), making it nearly impossible to come to grips with social problems; then say how terrible everything is; and angrily declare that it was the establishment experts who got us into this mess. Anybody – but especially Donald Trump – would be better.

The role of the media

There is a nexus between Trump’s communication and marketing skills and the role of the news media. Whether intentionally or not, the US media and Trump have had a symbiotic relationship for

most of the campaign to date. Trump’s sensational statements attract television viewers and sell newspapers. By mid-March 2016, the news media had given him \$1.9 billion in free publicity,⁸ which was 190 times as much as he paid for advertising and far more than any other candidate received.

A second media failing at the outset was wrongly treating Trump as some sort of joke. Many reporters felt that if they quoted Trump, his campaign would self-destruct because of his outrageous nonsense. It didn’t happen that way.

One reason the media failed to take Trump seriously was because of a third failing: journalists were largely oblivious to the pain among many working-class Americans and thus didn’t appreciate how much his message would resonate with them.

A fourth and immensely serious mistake by the media was the failure of television reporters, until recently, to challenge Trump’s repeated, outright untruths such as the Islamic State’s supposed control of Libyan oil, or concocted lists of Islamic terrorists supposedly infiltrated into the US as refugees, or even Trump’s alleged opposition to the second Iraq War. Largely deprived of the real facts for months, Trump supporters have overwhelmingly come to trust him, endlessly repeating the refrain that “he tells it like it is” rather than what it actually is: “he tells it like he wants it to be”.

Since Trump clinched the Republican nomination in May, he has come under increased media scrutiny, having to field tough questions about his record and his policies. His reaction has confirmed the view of many that he has no respect for democracy and, as President, might well endanger it. Earlier in the year Trump said he would “open up” libel laws – in other words undermine the freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment to the US Constitution. Recently, he has barred from his events journalists representing respected news organizations including the *Washington Post*, *Huffington Post*, *Politico*, *Foreign Policy*, *Univision*, the *Des Moines Register*, and others.

7 Dahlia Lithwick, “Words Matter to Donald Trump,” *Slate*, June 14, 2016.

8 Nicholas Confessore and Karen Yourish, “\$2 Billion Worth of Free Media for Donald Trump,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2016.

E. J. Dionne has written:⁹ “Trump represents the triumph in politics of what scholars of post-modernism call ‘transgressive’ art, which violates boundaries, including moral strictures, and commands attention through its shock value. Trump is now the transgressor-in-chief”. Many voters are so alienated that they just want “to shake things up”. Or to bring it down to the basest level; much of Trump’s support reflects the “middle finger vote” – an emotional, in-your-face rejection of the establishment, of the insiders, of all the real or imagined forces that they feel are keeping them down.

Can Trump be elected President?

Predictions made more than four months in advance of the elections on November 8, 2016 – before either major party has even held its nominating convention – are only marginally better than astrology, especially in a year in which nearly every piece of conventional wisdom has been proven to be inaccurate.

One factor could totally upset calculations: if the FBI decided to recommend a criminal indictment of Hillary Clinton for her use of a private email server while she served as Secretary of State. Most legal experts, however, consider an indictment highly unlikely, and for the sake of argument this author will assume they are correct.

Another wild card would be significant disruptions in July of either the Republican convention in Cleveland or of the Democratic convention in Philadelphia, or of both. Here the probabilities are somewhat higher, if still unlikely. Trump and Clinton will probably both be nominated without major controversy.

With those assumptions, the odds favor a Clinton victory. First of all, in the all-important Electoral College she begins with a decided edge in reliably Democratic or “blue” states, having only to hold onto them and win a few “battleground” states like Ohio, Florida, and Virginia in order to secure victory.

Second, Clinton will benefit from President Barack Obama’s steady rise in approval ratings over the past year. He now polls better than Ronald Reagan did at the same point in his second term. The President, and popular Vice President Joe Biden, will both campaign energetically on her behalf.

Third, on most issues polled, Clinton ranks higher than Trump, the big exception being who would be more likely to bring change to Washington, D.C.

Fourth, and most importantly, is the apparent inability of Trump to refrain from self-destructive, incendiary comments. The blatant racism he displayed in asserting that a federal judge could not be objective in a case about the now-defunct “Trump University” because his parents had immigrated from Mexico was simply too much for many leading Republicans, although only a handful withdrew their support of Trump’s candidacy. Another such episode could precipitate an outright revolt within the GOP.

On the other hand, Trump has several arrows in his campaign quiver. The first is Clinton’s unpopularity, which although not equaling his own dismal ratings, nonetheless indicates the fragility of the Democratic campaign. Trump will hammer away at Clinton’s alleged character flaws, hoping to create a kind of moral equivalence in voters’ minds.

A second, and related, factor would be a serious political or economic calamity, which Trump could demagogically associate with Clinton. As noted earlier, the Orlando mass murder in mid-June provided him with the opportunity to claim that he could handle Islamist terrorism better than the Obama Administration has, or than Clinton would. Trump’s conspiracy theory ranting, popular among Republican primary voters, may, however, prove to be counter-productive in the general electorate.

A third, and somewhat counter-intuitive advantage for Trump may be fringe party candidates. Former New Mexico Republican Governor Gary Johnson, the Libertarian Party nominee who will be on the ballot in all 50 states, seems to be siphoning off more votes nationwide from Clinton than from Trump. The same holds true, albeit to a lesser extent, for the Green Party candidate Jill Stein. Meanwhile, despite ongoing talk about a candidate being nominated as a “respectable conservative” alternative to Trump,

9 E. J. Dionne Jr., “The irony of celebrity populism,” *Washington Post*, May 1, 2016.

at the time of writing this Briefing Paper, none has as yet emerged.

Fourth, if newly enacted “anti-fraud” election laws, thinly disguised measures to suppress voter registration in several states governed by Republicans, are not overturned by federal courts in time for the election, hundreds of thousands of young, poor, and minority voters who lean Democratic may be disenfranchised.

A fifth, and pivotal, variable is enthusiasm. Trump has brought millions of heretofore unengaged working-class people into the political process. If they turn out *en masse* on November 8, and if Clinton fails to inspire youthful voters, many of them Sanders supporters, to go to the polls, several battleground states, and the election, could go his way.

Central to Clinton’s strategy is to disqualify Trump as too dangerous and risky to be commander in chief and to be seen herself as a credible leader for exasperated middle-class Americans. The election may boil down to whether fear of a Trump presidency is a stronger motivator than distaste for a Clinton one.

A changed American political landscape

Whoever wins, this campaign will radically alter the American political landscape. The Republican Party will likely migrate from its traditional conservative ideology to populism in order to appeal to its base in the lower socio-economic strata of the population. In the main, the Republicans who are currently most opposed to Trump have higher incomes and are well-educated. A Republican Party under Trump might see a rise in its share of the white working-class vote by drawing in disaffected Democrats, but it will also probably see an exodus of white-collar professionals and of women – especially of suburban, well-educated women – at least in the vote for President.

The Republican base will remain in the Deep South and mountain and plains states. Formerly Republican-inclined but now increasingly demographically diverse ones like North Carolina, Georgia, Colorado, and Nevada will evolve like Virginia into “purple” states that lean Democratic in national elections.

Trump’s Republican Party will also, if possible, be even more alienating to non-whites, who represent the largest source of potential growth in the electorate. At least in the short term, the party will be defined by a nativist ethno-nationalism at home and an anti-interventionist retreat from America’s obligations abroad.

On the other side of the political spectrum, Sanders’ passionate youthful supporters will continue to agitate for his leftist, populist program, even in a Hillary Clinton administration. The Democratic Party will move farther to the left on Sanders’ issues like the minimum wage, Medicare, Social Security benefits, regulation of banking, international trade agreements, and tuition at public colleges and universities.

This parallel metamorphosis of the two leading political parties in the US would seem to indicate a continuation of the polarization that currently paralyzes Congress. A Hillary Clinton presidency with a Democratic Senate majority might be able to craft a few compromises like more spending on infrastructure projects with a Republican House of Representatives under Paul Ryan. But overall a smoothly functioning federal government is difficult to envision.

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