Understanding the Conditions Leading to Trump's Victory

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Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election on November 8 came as a complete shock to many in the United States and abroad, as if the statistical likelihood of such an outcome had been ignored. One of the reasons for this jarring upset can be attributed to the fact that the shapers of US public opinion, including mainstream media pundits, polling organizations, and think tanks, simply ruled out the possibility of the Republican Party candidate garnering enough votes to win. Indeed, up until the very last hours before voting ended, pollsters were claiming that Trump was trailing his opponent, Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton. This assumption was supported by evidence from exit polls of early voters--some 46 million citizens--a good number of whom had backed Clinton.

Many believed that Trump's repeated callous and uncouth outbursts against women and 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 candidate inexperienced in public office--a populist whose platform promoted racism and hate without concrete, actionable substance. In the end, Trump disappointed all these observers by securing 290 electoral votes out of a possible 538 (with 270 needed to win). He emerged victorious because he captured the Electoral College votes from key "battleground states" that 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, where her husband had been governor prior to his two-term presidency (1993-2001).

So how did the candidate, whom nobody took seriously one year ago, become the 45th president of the United States?

White Anxiety

Since he officially announced his presidential bid in June 2015, Trump was able to build support among a white working class that had yet to recover from both the economic shock of the 2008 financial crisis and the continuing export of manufacturing jobs outside the United States. He was able to reach this disenfranchised group by playing not only on their economic woes, but also on racist concerns regarding the influx of immigrants and the growth of ethnic minorities. With the election of Barack Obama, the first black president, to two presidential terms, and statistical indicators showing that whites would become a numerical minority within the United States in less than three decades, many white Americans came to view their cultural and political dominance as

under threat. Such racial and xenophobic anxieties go a long way toward explaining, for example, how Trump was able to gain the ten electoral college votes of a historically Democratic Party-leaning, though overwhelmingly white, state like Wisconsin. A similar story unfolded in Pennsylvania. In contrast, Clinton was unable to fire up the Democratic Party's traditional base, particularly women and ethnic minority voters, enough to win the election.

Culture Wars

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

Protesting Clinton and the 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 voiced by Senator Bernie Sanders, who competed with Clinton in the Democratic Party primary. Large numbers of Sanders supporters refused to vote for Clinton, regarding the former Secretary of State as an embodiment of everything they resented. Some of them, so-called "depressed voters," voted for her, though unenthusiastically. Although many former Sanders supporters likely did not vote, and others cast blank ballots, it is apparent that Trump was able to win over some of them, particularly among the working class.

These sentiments were likely sharpened by Hillary Clinton, who was First Lady between 1993 and 2001, then a Senator from the State of New York until 2008, then Secretary of State (2009-2013) during Obama's administration. The many years spent in the limelight and as a presidential candidate in 2008 and 2016 called attention to what some perceived as questionable policy decisions, especially her use of an unencrypted email server to conduct state business when she served as Secretary of State. Although a congressional investigation found no wrongdoing on Clinton's part regarding the 2012 attacks in Benghazi, Libya, which resulted in the death of four Americans (including the US Ambassador), Clinton nonetheless faced many obstacles. In the end, even strong endorsements from Obama and other Democratic Party heavyweights such as former President Clinton, First Lady Michelle Obama, and Vice President Joe Biden, did not help.

Trump Rhetoric

Although Trump's rhetoric may have appeared to America's elite as simple, shallow, and inflammatory, his cleverly deployed oratory achieved its aim of inflaming the passions of the "man on the street." A striking paradox became apparent—that poor, socially conservative rural voters were able to identify more clearly with Trump than could urban, middle class Americans. Although a billionaire real estate prospector, Trump was successful in presenting himself as a man of the people by talking in a common vernacular and projecting an image without airs and pretensions, which led his supporters to believe him. He also portrayed himself as the victim of a wide-scale smear campaign that highlighted financial and moral scandals. Widespread opposition to Trump in mainstream media outlets, including by all broadcasters and major newspapers nationwide, served to strengthen the zeal of his supporters. 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 went so far as to suggest that liberal conspirators were rigging the election to block his chances at the presidency.

Trump's belated adoption by the Republican Party machine allowed him to secure the backing of millions of crucial voters, including an estimated 30 per cent of the Latino vote in Florida, where many Cuban Americans had previously supported Marco Rubio, the Republican senator defeated by Trump in the primaries. In the end, Rubio was able to reclaim his seat in the Senate and Trump was able to overcome misgivings about his anti-immigrant attitudes, locking in the state's 29 electoral votes.

Conclusion

A range of factors contributed to Trump's surprise success on November 8 and the demise of a seemingly inevitable Clinton presidency. The historical tendency of the American electorate to prevent one political party from dominating a branch of government for more than two cycles may have played a role here. With the Republican Party now comfortably controlling both the House and the Senate in the US Congress, it is possible that Trump will have two smooth years of rule before the Grand Old Party faces midterm elections. Yet he will also have to repair the damage caused by the vitriol of his campaign, which highlighted divisions within the American public like never before. Trump's campaign has shown how well-established democracies are not immune from internal convulsions, if the right individual comes along and exploits the fault lines. What remains to be seen is the composition of the team that will make up the Trump Administration. Perhaps the new US president and the leaders he chooses will succeed in striking a more realistic and constructive path, one which deviates from the vote-winning script he put forth as a candidate.

* This Assessment Report was prepared by our colleagues at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) in Doha, Qatar.