

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME: HOW DONALD TRUMP ASCENDED TO THE GOP
NOMINATION

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Introduction

The United States presidential election of 2016 saw the rise of American business mogul and reality star Donald Trump to the Republican Party's official nominee and winner of the of general election. Some Americans received the unconventional candidate with open arms. Others met the possibility of a Trump presidency with incredulity, disbelief, and even horror. The campaign that began as a long shot for Pennsylvania Avenue has led to a landmark election that divided not only the Left and Right, but also establishment Republicans from the populist-oriented Trump supporters.

In the summer of 2015, right after Trump announced his candidacy, the resounding conclusion was that he was doing fine in the polls, but he would never make it to the Republican National Convention the following July. Nate Silver, founder of FiveThirtyEight, a media outlet that uses sophisticated data analysis software to discern trends in sports, science, economics, and yes, politics, predicted in August, 2015:

“It’s possible that [Trump has] already peaked — or that he’ll hold his support all the way through Iowa and New Hampshire, possibly even winning one or two early states, as similar candidates like Pat Buchanan and Newt Gingrich have in the past. Our emphatic prediction is simply that Trump will not win the nomination. It’s not even clear that he’s trying to do so.”¹

Tom McCarthy, national affairs correspondent at The Guardian, when considering whether Trump could be the spearhead of a new populist movement, concluded “probably not,” especially considering his high unfavorability rating at the time (about -20%).² John Sides,

¹ Nate Silver, “Donald Trump Is Winning the Polls — and Losing the Nomination,” *FiveThirtyEight*, August 11, 2015, accessed October 28, 2016, <http://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/donald-trump-is-winning-the-polls-and-losing-the-nomination/>.

² Tom McCarthy, “Here’s Why Donald Trump Won’t Win the Republican Presidential Nomination,” *The Guardian* (*The Guardian*), October 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/22/donald-trump-wont-win-republican-presidential-nomination>.

Associate Professor of Political Science at George Washington University, said in an Op-Ed for the Washington Post, “it could easily be the case that current polls tell us almost nothing about where the presidential primary or general election will end up.”³ Even GOP campaign advisors Charlie Black and Alex Castellanos predicted that, even though Trump was “tapping into a deep well of voters’ dissatisfaction with Washington... [he won’t] win the party’s nomination for president.”⁴ In the words of Trump himself: “Wrong!” What all of these predictions failed to realize is that Trump’s campaign came in the right place, at the right time.

Since Trump’s rise, pundits and critics have offered myriad explanations for his undeniable success. In this paper, I will my own analysis, which draws on the views of others, and, importantly, which focuses primarily on Trump’s communication and rhetorical style. We have four key ingredients to Trump’s success: 1) a large population of Americans who feel forgotten by the mainstream political establishment 2) fascist-oriented rhetoric designed to appeal to the feelings and concerns of those voters 3) a campaign that has been able to successfully target certain psychological components of the voters, like the “authoritarian father” rhetorical construction of the presidency and 4) Trump’s use of verbal strategies to build support. Trump has created a “perfect storm,” so to speak, of a campaign and candidacy. He is not a Republican, at least not in the parameters we would have assigned to a Republican candidate four years ago. He is an outsider, and that gives him the latitude he needs to touch on the issues that Trump supporters value, which are often at odds with what traditional politicians are willing to say. All the better for Trump.

Trump Supporters

³ John Sides, “Early Polls Don’t Mean Much. It’s Still Possible to Report on Them,” *Washington Post* (Washington Post), July 27, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/07/27/early-polls-dont-mean-much-its-still-possible-to-report-on-them/>.

⁴ “GOP Campaign Strategists: Trump Will Not Be the Nominee,” *MSNBC*, August 23, 2015, <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/gop-campaign-strategists-trump-will-not-be-the-nominee>.

A firm understanding of Donald Trump's supporters is crucial to understanding how his rhetoric appeals to their support. In a presidential race, the audience is the key to winning, so how does Trump appeal to his supporters? Several stereotypes of the average Trump supporter have arisen; namely, he is male, he is working class, he is white, he has a deep-seated fear of Muslims, and he has racist and/or ethnocentric tendencies.⁵ But, are these characterizations fair? Are there any ways to accurately predict Trump support? Many studies on Trump supporters in the past year have lent insight to the veracity of these claims. While, of course, people support political candidates for a variety of reasons, there are some overarching tendencies of Trump supporters that appear to explain why certain people prefer to vote for Trump.

On one account, the "working class" stereotype of the typical Trump supporter appears to be untrue. A poll of primary voters in March 2016 found that the median home income for a Trump supporter was \$72,000 annually, higher than the national median of \$56,000 and the Clinton supporter median of \$61,000. Although it is true that wealthier Americans turn out to vote in the primaries in higher numbers, the relatively high income among Trump supporters appears to debunk the myth that all of them are poor, disenfranchised working class Americans. The same study also found that the median annual income of Trump supporters was the highest compared to the state average in states with high minority populations.⁶ There are a few possible explanations for this: 1) random chance; 2) states with high minority populations are mostly southern states, which have a lot of Republicans anyway; or 3) feelings of racial division among

⁵ Sean McElwee, "Anatomy of a Trump Voter: How Racism Propelled Trump to the Republican Nomination," *Salon*, July 23, 2016, accessed November 13, 2016, http://www.salon.com/2016/07/23/anatomy_of_a_trump_voter_how_racism_propelled_trump_to_the_republican_nomination/.

⁶ Nate Silver, "The Mythology Of Trump's 'Working Class' Support," *FiveThirtyEight*, May 03, 2016, <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-mythology-of-trumps-working-class-support/>

Trump supporters. Given data from other polls examined below, the third option seems to be an accurate, though incomplete, explanation.

The American National Election Studies 2016 pilot study found that “Trump supporters might be motivated less by positive feelings about Trump and more by negative feelings about groups they dislike that are motivated by the perception of threats to their identity as white people in America.”⁷ Given the results of the study, this conclusion appears to be accurate. Trump supporters have significantly lower positive feelings towards Hispanics, Muslims, transgendered people, gays and lesbians, and feminists than the supporters of other Republicans. Furthermore, they have significantly higher positive feelings towards whites than the supporters of other Republicans. Trump supporters evidently harbor more feelings of racial and cultural resentment to perceived “outgroups” than other conservative voters. Trump’s communication style, as will be discussed in detail later on, reflects this divisiveness.

When considering social factors, education level correlates with Trump support more than others. Specifically, the lower one’s education level, the more likely he or she supported Trump, regardless of race, gender, or other characteristics. In August, a Bloomberg poll showed that voters with a college education supported Clinton 59 percent to 34 percent, an enormous 25-point lead. Trump, on the other hand, led voters without a college education 52 to 42 points. For men without a college education, Trump beat Clinton by a massive margin - 76 percent to 19 percent.⁸ In a later poll, conducted in late-October 2016, Bloomberg found that Clinton had

⁷ “Trump Supporters Have Cooler Feelings Towards Many Groups, Compared to Supporters of Other Candidates,” The New West: The Official Blog of the Western Political Science Association., May 16, 2016, accessed October 28, 2016, <https://thewpsa.wordpress.com/2016/05/16/trump-supporters-have-cooler-feelings-towards-many-groups-compared-to-supporters-of-other-candidates/>.

⁸ John McCormick, “Education Level Emerges as Sharp Dividing Line in Clinton-Trump Race,” *Bloomberg*, August 12, 2016, accessed October 28, 2016, <http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-08-12/education-level-sharply-divides-clinton-trump-race>.

successfully gained support among less-educated voters, although the overall trend still rang true: education level had an inverse relationship with Trump support.⁹

Many progressives criticized Trump for his apparent lack of accountability regarding facts and “the truth.” This criticism, though valid, misses the mark. According to David Foster in his work “Pulling at Our Heartstrings: The Republican Party's Use of Pathos in Their Presidential Campaign Rhetoric as an Explanation for Their Success in Recent Presidential Elections,” facts are much less relevant than emotion in politics. For Republican voters especially, passionate arguments about morals and values tend to be more appealing than evidence-based policy.¹⁰ This tendency does not suggest that Republicans are liars overall; indeed, one can make an emotional argument that is still true. However, by and large, Trump’s statements are objectively false.¹¹ But that does not seem to matter, at least not to his supporters. Politifact, a fact-checking media outlet that analyzes the veracity of claims made by politicians and public figure across the political spectrum, notes that 71% of the comments made by Trump are only “mostly false” or worse. Interestingly, Trump’s key rival in the primaries, Ted Cruz, also had a relatively high “mostly-false”-or-worse rating at 65%. To put these numbers in perspective, Jeb Bush, the Republican “establishment candidate” in the primaries, sits at 31%.¹² In 2016, it appears that, all other things equal, Republican voters actually preferred the less truthful candidates.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Foster, David E. "Pulling at Our Heartstrings: The Republican Party's Use of Pathos in Their Presidential Campaign Rhetoric as an Explanation for Their Success in Recent Presidential Elections." *Kentucky Journal of Communication* 29, no. 1 (2010), pp. 2.

¹¹ “Donald Trump’s File,” Politifact, <http://www.politifact.com/personalities/donald-trump/>.

¹² Ibid

Trump supporters may have this apparent disregard for truth because they are more likely to dismiss such evidence-based attacks as coming from the intellectual elite - a group that they feel is incompatible with their way of life. To poorly-educated white voters, who support Trump at a higher rate than voters with a college degree,¹³ the intellectual crowd represents control of the establishment, which they do not believe is committed to protecting their interests. “White people without a college degree are much more likely to see a rigged system, to see the forces of globalization acting against them and they don’t feel like they have control over their own destiny.” said Michelle Diggles, a senior policy analyst at Third Way, a liberal think tank that “examined the splintering of white voters.”¹⁴ When Donald Trump says things like “when I take the oath of office next year, I will restore law and order our country,” or “We Will Make America Strong Again. We Will Make America Proud Again. We Will Make America Safe Again. And We Will Make America Great Again,”¹⁵ he makes such voters feel reassured that their interests are not being forgotten in the rapidly changing world. This tactic to reach these “left-behind” Americans is effective because other politicians simply haven’t successfully reached this demographic of people. Surprisingly, even though Trump is a member of the ultra-elite, wealthiest class of Americans, he has managed to reach lower-educated and economically isolated white voters unlike other candidates in recent history.

¹³ John McCormick, “Education Level Emerges as Sharp Dividing Line in Clinton-Trump Race,” *Bloomberg*, August 12, 2016, <http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-08-12/education-level-sharply-divides-clinton-trump-race>.

¹⁴ Lauren Gambino, “‘I love the poorly educated’: Why White College Graduates Are Deserting Trump,” *The Guardian*, October 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/16/white-college-graduates-donald-trump-support-falling>.

¹⁵ “Full Text: Donald Trump 2016 RNC Draft Speech Transcript,” *Politico*, July 21, 2016, [Http://www.Politico.Com/story/2016/07/full-Transcript-Donald-Trump-Nomination-Acceptance-Speech-at-Rnc-225974#ixzz4OPe0CnKB](http://www.Politico.Com/story/2016/07/full-Transcript-Donald-Trump-Nomination-Acceptance-Speech-at-Rnc-225974#ixzz4OPe0CnKB)

Donald Trump himself further encourages the isolation from mainstream and established forms of media by suggesting that such organizations are in collusion with the Democrats or Hillary Clinton herself. This allows him to construct an echo-chamber of his own ideas, and allows him to write off any criticism as a constructed effort to derail his campaign. He said at a campaign event in October 2016: “The media, you have to remember, is an extension of the Hillary Clinton campaign...they so poison the minds of the public by writing false stories. I believe they are more crooked than Crooked Hillary. That’s a lot.”¹⁶ At another event the same week, he urged his followers to “forget the press, read the internet, study other things, don’t go for the mainstream media.”¹⁷ By reinforcing his construction of reality and simultaneously denouncing other sources as not credible and “rigged,” he further isolates the dogmatic nature of his campaign from mainstream criticism.

To Trump supporters, not only is the media in cahoots with the Democrats, the entire elite political establishment is as well. At the 2016 Republican National Convention, Trump said, “A number of these reforms that I will outline tonight will be opposed by some of our nation’s most powerful special interests. That is because these interests have rigged our political and economic system for their exclusive benefit.”¹⁸ Using such words, Trump strategically positioned himself outside of this scary “establishment” and on the side of the people. To Trump, there are two camps in America: the bad guys, who are the politicians and elite that are purposefully running the nation into the ground, and the good guys, those who are smart enough

¹⁶ David Smith, “Trump Says He Would Impose Term Limits for Members of Congress,” *The Guardian*, October 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/18/donald-trump-congress-term-limits-clinton-final-debate>.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ “Full Text: Donald Trump 2016 RNC Draft Speech Transcript, *Politico*. <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/full-transcript-donald-trump-nomination-acceptance-speech-at-rnc-225974>.

to see beyond the sphere of influence of the liberal media and “crooked Hillary.” To his audience, he is the martyr, the savior who is coming to make all of the powerful people accountable for their actions.

Many have been surprised by Trump’s success despite his frequent use of xenophobic rhetoric and policy recommendations. After all, the United States is historically seen as a melting pot, a place for the “tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”¹⁹ It seems strange, then, that Trump gained so much momentum after comments that generalize large groups of people, particularly Mexicans and Muslims. In announcing his presidency, he said:

“[Mexico is] sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with them. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists.”²⁰

He also said that the judge overseeing the lawsuit against Trump University represented an “inherent conflict of interest,” since the judge was of Mexican heritage, though he was born in the United States and an American citizen. When pressed to clarify the reasoning behind the comment, Trump responded, “He's a Mexican. We're building a wall between here and Mexico.”²¹ Trump implied that the mother of a slain Muslim-American soldier was not allowed to speak at the Democratic National Convention while her husband delivered a speech in support of Hillary Clinton. “She probably, maybe she wasn't allowed to have anything to say,” Trump

¹⁹ Emily Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” 1903.

²⁰ “Full Text: Donald Trump Announces a Presidential Bid,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/>.

²¹ Theodore Schleifer, “Trump Defends Criticism of Judge with Mexican Heritage,” *CNN*, June 05, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/03/politics/donald-trump-tapper-lead/>.

said, apparently suggesting she was forced by her husband to keep quiet because of their religion.²²

The above are only a small sampling of the type of rhetoric that Trump employed against certain groups. The support for these comments is perhaps more simple than anger at “job-stealing immigrants,” anti-terrorism ideals, or even rampant racism. His xenophobic rhetoric appeals to a basic instinct in people: the fear of difference.²³

This instinct is no surprise, given that in America, “The stronger the perceived ethnic threat, the more nationalist attitudes and exclusionary reactions develop within the dominant culture.”²⁴ By establishing this generalized scapegoat, the idea that Mexicans or the Chinese are threatening American business and way of life, Trump gainfully appealed to said nationalist attitudes and establishes himself as the protector of American singularity. He was popular among a subsection of the population that lives in fear of the “other,” whomever that may be. In a survey of 897 South Carolina Republican primary voters earlier this year, 60% of respondents supported banning Muslims from entering the United States; 20% supported banning homosexuals from entering the United States; 47% supported a national database of Muslims in the United States; 23% supported the Japanese internment policy during the Second World War; and 25% believe Islam should be illegal in the United States.²⁵ These numbers suggest that there

²² Philip Bump, “Donald Trump Responds to the Khan Family: ‘Maybe she wasn’t allowed to have anything to say,’” *Washington Post*, July 30, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/07/30/donald-trump-responds-to-the-khan-family-maybe-she-wasnt-allowed-to-have-anything-to-say/>.

²³ Colleen Elizabeth Kelley, *Post-9/11 American Presidential Rhetoric: A Study of Protofascist Discourse* (New York, NY, United States: Lexington Books, 2007), pp. 9.

²⁴ Emily Ironside, “Constituting Enemies through Fear : The Rhetoric of Exclusionary Nationalism in the Control of “un-American” Immigrant Populations,” in *The Rhetorics of US Immigration : Identity, Community, Otherness*, ed. Lisa Corrigan (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), pp. 157.

²⁵ “Trump, Clinton Continue to Lead in SC,” *Public Policy Polling*, February 16, 2016, http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/2015/PPP_Release_SC_21616.pdf.

is a deep-seated fear of difference within the Republican party, and further research shows that Donald Trump's supporters represent an even more radical faction of Republican voters.

The above numbers are only averages of South Carolinian Republican voters. When comparing responses between supporters of different candidates, a rift within the Republican party is clearly demonstrated. Of supporters of the moderate John Kasich, 31% support banning Muslims from entering the United States; 7% support banning homosexuals from the United States; 21% support a national database of Muslims in the United States; 12% support the Japanese internment policy during the Second World War, and 15% believe Islam should be illegal in the United States. If we examine Trump supporters' numbers on the other hand, we see a much different image of the Republican party. Eighty percent support banning Muslims from entering the United States; 31% support banning homosexuals from the United States; 62% support a national database of Muslims in the United States; 32% support the Japanese internment policy during the Second World War, and 33% believe Islam should be illegal in the United States.²⁶

Of course, these numbers should be discerned carefully, given the limited reach of the survey, the timing (soon after Trump's infamous "Muslim ban" proposal), and it only being administered to South Carolina voters, a historically conservative region of the country. That said, despite these limitations, one could clearly see the distinction between the mainstream Republican voters and the Trump voters. Given the apparent ethnocentric tendencies of these people, Trump can and did employ a variety of rhetorical and psychological strategies to appeal to their support.

Fascism

²⁶ Ibid

Trump has mobilized the working class in ways unseen in recent history, much to the credit of fascist rhetoric. While many tend to associate fascism with WWII-era Hitler and Mussolini, the elements of such a system and discursive style can be present in any society at all ends of the political spectrum. That is, elements of fascism, though associated with fervent conservative politics, can be present in both right- and left- wing candidates. Characteristics of fascism that Trump portrays include: scapegoating/nationalist ideology, punishment for those who wish to challenge power, constant propaganda, and organization around a constructed reality.”²⁷ It is important to keep in mind that fascism is an expression of reality, not inherently criminal in and of itself. In other words, one can use fascist-toned communication strategies without actually being a fascist. For instance, “Build the wall,” and “Make America Great Again,” are both phrases associated with the Trump campaign that I argue have fascist undertones. Simply because Donald Trump used fascist propaganda to appeal to his supporters does not imply that he is equivalent to Adolf Hitler.

While it’s true that fascism tends to be perceived as an inherently evil phenomenon, many fascist-oriented politicians fail to be recognized as such (people typically don’t support self-proclaimed fascists) and are thus able to form successful political movements. After all, fascist rhetoric is designed to appeal to people on a visceral level rather than intellectual.²⁸ Kelley’s 2007 *Post-9/11 American Presidential Rhetoric: A Study of Protofascist Discourse* suggests that the 2004 Bush-Kerry presidential campaign relied heavily on the use of fascist

²⁷ Colleen Elizabeth Kelley, *Post-9/11 American Presidential Rhetoric: A Study of Protofascist Discourse*, pp. 7.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 9.

rhetoric. In fact, the use of fascism to appeal to supporters in the United States goes back to at least the formation of the Ku Klux Klan.²⁹ Kelly concludes that fascism is:

“An amalgam of different but soluble conservative, national-socialist, and radical Right ingredients, merged together by common enemies... It is not a static condition or thing, but a succession of processes and choice: seeking, following, forming alliances, bidding for power, then exercising it.”³⁰

Donald Trump’s campaign has managed to capitalize on some Americans’ perceived common enemies of outsourcing, immigration, globalization, or modernity in general, with its promise to “Make America Great Again.”

Scapegoating tactics, an effort to construct and reinforce this notion of a common enemy, appear frequently in Trump’s speech, whether he is calling for a ban on Muslim immigrants or claiming China is actively conspiring to steal American jobs and industry. These statements are typically generalized and function more as sound bites instead of real policy recommendations. They serve not to satisfy the logic of voters, but to appeal to the emotions and fears of his supporters. Take, for example, his opening lines in the first presidential debate: “Our jobs are fleeing the country. They're going to Mexico. They're going to many other countries.”³¹ The use of such a strong verb, “fleeing”, heightens the direness of the economic situation in the United States in a way that has strong emotional appeal to his supporters.

Emotion and fear are two central factors to the use of fascist rhetoric. Both powerful feelings can be triggered by allusion to some fact or fiction that highlights a perceived reality, or a “central fiction.”³² The veracity of such statements are rarely relevant, because they appeal to

²⁹ Ibid, 6.

³⁰ Ibid, 27.

³¹ Aaron Blake, “The First Trump-Clinton Presidential Debate Transcript, Annotated,” *Washington Post*, September 26, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/09/26/the-first-trump-clinton-presidential-debate-transcript-annotated/>.

³² Ibid, 9.

guttural biases inherent in certain humans. To the almost half of Americans who are against abortion,³³ when Donald Trump says things like “if you go with what Hillary is saying [about abortion], in the ninth month you can take the baby and rip the baby out of the womb of the mother just prior to the birth of the baby,”³⁴ they immediately align with that view on an emotional level, even if his statements do not reflect the objective reality of late-term abortions. Likewise, to the voters who are primarily concerned with the lack of manufacturing positions due to outsourcing, Trump appears to be their saving grace when he comes along and says:

“Our jobs are being taken out. NAFTA, one of the worst deals ever. Our jobs are being sucked out of our economy. You look at all of the places that I just left, you go the Pennsylvania, you go to Ohio, you go to Florida, you go to any of them, upstate New York, our jobs have fled to Mexico and other places. We're bringing our jobs back.”³⁵

This scapegoating method allows the disenfranchised, or those who feel disenfranchised, to easily blame an outsider (NAFTA or Mexico) and put their faith in another powerful figure who promises to correct the economy and moral compass of the country to “Make America Great Again.” In America, where millions of voters “buy in” to this constructed reality, Trump’s success as a candidate is not only explained, but simply obvious.

As stated above, another defining element of fascist rhetoric is the punishment of outsiders, or those who question the leader’s dogma. Although Trump cannot technically punish those who question his power yet, as he has not assumed official office, he has certainly advocated for or alluded to violence against dissenters of his ideology. He has called for

³³ “Americans Choose ‘pro-choice’ for First Time in Seven Years,” *Gallup, Inc.*, May 29, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/183434/americans-choose-pro-choice-first-time-seven-years.aspx>.

³⁴ “Full Transcript: Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump’s Final Presidential Debate,” *Vox*, October 19, 2016, <http://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/10/19/13336894/third-presidential-debate-live-transcript-clinton-trump>.

³⁵ *Ibid*

punishing women who seek abortions,³⁶ though he did later recant the statement. He suggested that violence against protesters at rallies is “what we need more of” after a man was punched in the face.³⁷ He maintained that all undocumented aliens in the United States are “subject to deportation.”³⁸ These harsh, automatic punishments for those who question authority suggest that Trump supporters have a binary view of law and order, and that they tend to see the country as in a constant “state of war.” Take, for example, this policy recommendation regarding immigration on Trump’s official campaign website:

[As president], I will immediately terminate President Obama’s two illegal executive amnesties. All immigration laws will be enforced - we will triple the number of ICE agents. Anyone who enters the U.S. illegally is subject to deportation. That is what it means to have laws and to have a country.³⁹

These campaign materials represent this inherently binary view of the world. In Trump’s America, the law should be firm, resolute. And those who break the laws, regardless of context or severity, must face the prescribed consequences. For example, in his first debate, he positioned himself as the “law and order:”

“Well, first of all, Secretary Clinton doesn’t want to use a couple of words, and that’s law and order. And we need law and order. If we don’t have it, we’re not going to have a country.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Matt Flegenheimer and Maggie Haberman, “Donald Trump, Abortion Foe, Eyes ‘punishment’ for Women, Then Recants,” *The New York Times*, March 31, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/us/politics/donald-trump-abortion.html>.

³⁷ “Kate Sommer-Dawes, “All the Times Trump Has Called for Violence at His Rallies,” *Mashable*, February 1, 2016, accessed October 30, 2016, <http://mashable.com/2016/03/12/trump-rally-ignite-violence/>.

³⁸ “Immigration,” *Donald J. Trump for President*, August 31, 2016, accessed October 30, 2016, <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/policies/immigration>.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Aaron Blake, “The First Trump-Clinton Presidential Debate Transcript, Annotated,” *Washington Post*, September 26, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/09/26/the-first-trump-clinton-presidential-debate-transcript-annotated/>.

This viewpoint is reminiscent of fascism,⁴¹ but also authoritarianism, an essential characteristic of Trump's rhetoric that will be discussed forthcoming.

During the three presidential and one vice-presidential debates, many news outlets and political organizations were "fact-checking" candidates' statements in real time. Other publications, like Politifact, have a central mission of reviewing public figures' statements and comparing them to the available evidence. While these efforts appeal to logically-oriented people, evidence suggests that most voters choose their candidate based on emotion, not logic.⁴² This fact harkens back to the idea of a "central fiction" used in Trump's fascist rhetoric. Trump constructed a reality in which the country's problems can be solved by generalized policy measures, like building a wall at the Mexican border, or simply imposing tariffs on imports. Such simple fixes both appeal to the isolationist and ethnocentric tendencies of fascism. The facts do not matter. What matters is that Donald Trump arrived to speak to those who feel left-behind and forgotten. He reinforced and bolstered their perception of the world, rejects the establishment politicians who appear to be out of touch, and promises corrective action.

The Authoritarian Father

We've established that Trump employed fascist rhetoric throughout his campaign. But how does he appeal to his supporters on a psychological level? George Lakoff, a Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley, recently published a piece outlining the ways in which Donald Trump constructed rhetorical and psychological strategies. Lakoff notes that Americans tend to view their country in familial terms, and that we

⁴¹ Colleen Elizabeth Kelley, *Post-9/11 American Presidential Rhetoric: A Study of Protofascist Discourse*, pp.8.

⁴² Foster, David E. "Pulling at Our Heartstrings: The Republican Party's Use of Pathos in Their Presidential Campaign Rhetoric as an Explanation for Their Success in Recent Presidential Elections," pp.9.

have two schemas for president: the “nurturant parent” (liberal) and the “strict father” (conservative).⁴³ Trump, of course, aligned with the strict father narrative. Such a figure sees the world through a binary lens and believes that actions produce consequences commensurate with the scope and magnitude of the actions. Externalities are irrelevant, so morality will see positive consequences and immorality will see negative consequences. In other words, if people are poor, “that means they are not disciplined, and therefore cannot be moral, and so deserve their poverty.”⁴⁴ The strict father family lives in an extreme meritocracy, a form of personal authoritarianism that resonates with his supporters. In Lakoff’s words, Trump assumed this strict father/authoritarian personality because “he wants to be the ultimate authority in this authoritarian model of the family that is applied in conservative politics in virtually every issue area.”

Authoritarianism, like fascism, is a term that tends to be associated with oppressive governments and dictatorships. However, also like fascism, authoritarianism can be manifested on a much more individual level. The trait is “characterized by a desire for order and a fear of outsiders... People who score high in authoritarianism, when they feel threatened, look for strong leaders who promise to take whatever action necessary to protect them from outsiders and prevent the changes they fear.”⁴⁵ In fact, a study by a PhD student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst found that, among all other factors tested, people with authoritarian tendencies were more likely to vote for Trump than any other factor that was included in the

⁴³ George Lakoff, “Understanding Trump,” *George Lakoff*, July 24, 2016, <https://georgelakoff.com/2016/07/23/understanding-trump-2/>.

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Amanda Taub, “The Rise of American Authoritarianism,” *Vox*, March 01, 2016, <http://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>.

survey.⁴⁶ This makes sense, because Trump was the self-proclaimed “law and order” candidate, the one who said that he will “make America safe again.”⁴⁷

Given the strict-father/authoritarian viewpoint of Trump, a fear of “others” (like Muslims), is an integral, and perhaps defining, factor of his supporters. Lakoff says:

The basic idea is that authority is justified by morality (the strict father version), and that, in a well-ordered world, there should be (and traditionally has been) a moral hierarchy in which those who have traditionally dominated should dominate. The hierarchy is: God above Man, Man above Nature, The Disciplined (Strong) above the Undisciplined (Weak), The Rich above the Poor, Employers above Employees, Adults above Children, Western culture above other cultures, America above other countries. The hierarchy extends to: Men above women, Whites above Nonwhites, Christians above nonChristians, Straights above Gays.⁴⁸

This innate hierarchy coupled with the authoritarian, strict father mentality helps to explain why Trump supporters had such apparently xenophobic views regarding Muslims, Mexicans, Chinese, etc. Each group is seen as having committed an immoral misdeed (terrorism, illegal immigration, and stealing jobs, respectively) and thus deserves to be punished for such a misdeed. Trump, the strict father, promised to punish Muslims by banning them from the country, Mexicans by building a border wall, and the Chinese by imposing import tariffs. Moreover, the offenses of these groups were seen as especially abhorrent because they upset the natural moral hierarchy rooted in the strict-father mindset. Trump appealed to these beliefs and was therefore an attractive candidate to those who see the world through this interpretation of reality.

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ “Full Text: Donald Trump 2016 RNC Draft Speech Transcript,” *Politico*, October 30, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/full-transcript-donald-trump-nomination-acceptance-speech-at-rnc-225974>.

⁴⁸ George Lakoff, “Understanding Trump.”

Trump's acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention (RNC) highlights the authoritarian, hierarchical father mentality. He suggested that the established politicians in Washington have disrupted the natural order of the United States, which should be held above all other countries:

“The most important difference between our plan and that of our opponents, is that our plan will put America First. Americanism, not globalism, will be our credo. As long as we are led by politicians who will not put America First, then we can be assured that other nations will not treat America with respect.”⁴⁹

Donald Trump, as the candidate to put “America first” asserted that he would restore the natural hierarchy to the country. Furthermore, as the authoritarian father, he would keep the country safe from violence and undesirables, such as undocumented immigrants who, according to Trump, are “being released by the tens of thousands into our communities with no regard for the impact on public safety or resources.”⁵⁰ Trump painted a violent image of the United States and suggested to the American people that, in order to protect ourselves, they needed to vote for him:

“Americans watching this address tonight have seen the recent images of violence in our streets and the chaos in our communities. Many have witnessed this violence personally, some have even been its victim... I have a message for all of you: the crime and violence that today afflicts our nation will soon come to an end. Beginning on January 20th 2017, safety will be restored.”⁵¹

Trump not-so-subtly suggested that, with his accession to the presidency on Inauguration Day 2017, peace will be returned to the nation. Just like a good father, he will protect his family (the American people) by getting rid of the threat to the home (crime, violence, and foreigners). These words are also authoritarian because he was directly attributing this predicted precipitous

⁴⁹ “Full Text: Donald Trump 2016 RNC Draft Speech Transcript,” *Politico*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

⁵¹ *Ibid*

fall in violence to his election. Trump is not going to bring the “law and order.” He, as the authoritarian father, *is* the law and order.

Trump’s Verbal Strategies

Lakoff also frames Trump’s communication in terms of psychological “tricks” that prey on people’s subconscious tendencies and aversions. One specific mechanism Trump used is repetition. In Lakoff’s words:

“[Repetition works because] words are neurally linked to the circuits that determine their meaning. The more a word is heard, the more the circuit is activated and the stronger it gets, and so the easier it is to fire again.”⁵²

So when Trump repeated a claim over and over, regardless of if it has been disproven or criticized, it became internalized by his supporters. Abby Ohlheiser, reporter at the Washington Post, wrote a story in September 2016 that called on Trump’s repetition of “loser” in his tweets. Ohlheiser notes that, at the time of the story, Trump had used the word 170 times since joining Twitter.⁵³ In repeatedly using the word “loser,” Trump firmly cut the world into two parts, the winners and the losers. Doing so again reinforces, as discussed above, the strict-father, hierarchical view of the world. Trump positioned himself and his supporters rungs above the “losers” on the proverbial hierarchical ladder, “punishing” them for whatever misdeed they committed (imagined or not).

Furthermore, the use of repetition was evident in the grammatical construction of his speeches and debates. Take, for example, his common refrain: “Look what is going on over in

⁵² George Lakoff, “Understanding Trump.”

⁵³ Abby Ohlheiser, “A Look at the 170 Times Donald Trump Has Tweeted about the ‘losers,’” *Washington Post*, September 22, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/09/22/a-look-at-the-170-times-donald-trump-has-tweeted-about-the-losers/>.

_____” or “_____ are doing a terrible thing to us.”⁵⁴ Trump repeated this phrase multiple times, even though he often did not expand on the specifics of what, exactly, is happening. He relied on the audience's perception of the situation, knowing that they would jump to the narrative he created regarding that specific situation. For example, if Trump said “Look what is going on over in Mexico,” the listener will come to his or her own decision about what is actually going on, even if Trump never revealed it. It may be outsourcing of labor; it may be sending undocumented immigrants over the border in droves to steal American jobs. In any situation, Trump’s understanding of his supporters allowed him to repeat such generally framed comments effectively.

In the first Presidential debate of 2016, Trump used the “look at [insert location/issue]” phrase a total of nineteen times. In many of these cases, Trump either finished his sentence with several keywords that may or may not complete a grammatically correct sentence, or expanded on the idea in a generalized manner. These generalizations were not shortened explanations of policy or political situations that would be expected in a debate, but minimal elaborations designed to evoke emotion and position Trump as an authority on the issue. This linguistic tactic distinguishes him from his opponent, Hillary Clinton, and most other conventional politicians. Take, for example, his comments on the national budget:

“When we look at the budget, the budget is bad to a large extent because we have people that have no idea as to what to do and how to buy”⁵⁵

It is untrue that none of our legislators, especially those trained in economics, have any idea as to how to handle the national budget. Most people likely realize this. But as Trump repeated his

⁵⁴ “Transcript of the First Debate,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/27/us/politics/transcript-debate.html>.

⁵⁵ Ibid

“Look at _____” refrain, it gave people a simple, straightforward answer to their national budget concerns. It also triggered them to draw upon their perception of the national budget, which has been constructed by Trump and other conservative voices to be a negative perception. So, Trump asks, why are we in so much debt? Well, it is clearly because of incompetent Washington, and we need an outsider like Donald Trump to fix it. Through repetition of this phrase, Trump expressed this implied answer with ease.

Such implicit arguments are a key factor in Trump’s rhetoric. He often constructed his points in a roundabout fashion, stating a premise, using an anecdote, and not always explicitly stating a conclusion. However, the point of his arguments were still clear. This rhetorical strategy is called an “enthymeme,” which is roughly the verbal communication equivalent of syllogism. An enthymeme is “a means of proof within which the rhetor places probable premises together in order to establish a probable conclusion.”⁵⁶ The premises can be implicit or explicit, but the conclusion of the argument is typically implicit. Take the following quotation from the first debate, which uses the “Look at _____” refrain:

“And when I look at what’s going on in Charlotte, a city I love, a city where I have investments, when I look at what’s going on throughout various parts of our country, whether it’s — I mean, I can just keep naming them all day long — we need law and order in our country.”⁵⁷

Trump implored the audience members to consider the current affairs in Charlotte, assuming they are aware of what is happening in that city. For reference, at the time of this debate, Charlotte, North Carolina, was in the midst of both violent and nonviolent protests surrounding the shooting of a black father. He also made the implicit argument that the listeners disagree with

⁵⁶ Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, 5th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2011), pp, 351.

⁵⁷ “Transcript of the First Debate,” *The New York Times*,

what is happening to Charlotte; i.e., he assumed that the listeners are unsympathetic to the protestors. He went on to suggest that similar violent protests are a problem in much of the country (so much, that he could name places “all day long”), which implies that this is a massive problem facing our nation at the moment. His explicit solution to the problem was that we need “law and order.” The implicit solution that emerges via enthymeme, on the other hand, was that we need *Donald Trump* to instill that law and order. An even deeper analysis of the statement would suggest that Trump dismissed the larger Black Lives Matter movement as unlawful.

Trump’s use of repetition not only reaffirmed these issues to his supporters, but also established implicit arguments that appeal to them. He didn’t have to make a grammatically coherent speech to appeals to his supporters. Trump simply knew what sort of issues they supported and then placed himself at the “fixer” of those issues. Willing to go farther than most mainstream politicians would, he spoke in non-politically correct terms and still saw great success as a politician. His use of enthymemes was one of the ways that Trump established himself as the country’s savior - or the rhetorical authoritarian father whose job is the protect the “family.”

Lakoff also touches on the importance of framing, which he explains is a way for Trump to write off falsities and scandals through the use of rhetoric. For example, Trump referred to Hillary as “crooked Hillary” and called for her to be imprisoned for her role in the Benghazi attack and her use of a private email server.⁵⁸ “People unconsciously think of [Hillary as a crook], even though she has been found to have been honest and legal by thorough studies by the right-wing Bengazi committee (which found nothing) and the FBI (which found nothing to

⁵⁸ “Transcript of the Second Debate,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/10/us/politics/transcript-second-debate.html>.

charge her with, except missing the mark ‘(C)’ in the body of 3 out of 110,000 emails).”⁵⁹ This framing, reinforced through repetition, ensured that Trump’s supporters saw Hillary and all of her actions as those of a crook who deserved punishment.

Trump’s use of framing was also a crucial method to minimize scandals. In early October 2016, the Washington Post released a video of Trump speaking in lewd terms about what can be objectively described as sexually assaulting women. During the three minutes of audio and video, Trump can be heard explaining that he tried and failed to have sexual intercourse with a married woman, often kisses women without consent, and brags about grabbing women by the genitals.⁶⁰ These comments would have likely been a campaign-ending scandal for previous candidates, given, for example, the public’s response to Mitt Romney’s “binders full of women” comment in 2012. Trump, however, framed the lewd remarks as “locker-room talk,”⁶¹ essentially claiming that the words had no substance and that most American men are guilty of the same crime. In this way, he framed the comments to be much less offensive than if taken at face value. And, again, we see the subtle use of the strict-father schema in this response: if all men say things like this, including the many men who are fathers, it can’t possibly be immoral and thus Trump should not be punished.

Conclusion

In the end, there is nothing particularly special about Trump, the man, that has pushed himself to winning the US presidential election. Another candidate with similar stature, money, and speech could probably have run a similar campaign. Trump has no history in politics, which

⁵⁹ George Lakoff, “Understanding Trump.”

⁶⁰ David A. Fahrenthold, “Trump Recorded Having Extremely Lewd Conversation about Women in 2005,” *Washington Post*, October 8, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html.

⁶¹ *Ibid*

actually seems to have benefitted him rather than hurt him. (That said, one can argue that ties to politics aren't necessarily disqualifying from running an "outsider" campaign - see the relatively successful presidential runs of both parties' runners-up Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders as evidence.) What is special about Trump is that he had the financial means, social visibility, and rhetorical savvy to exploit the Republican party in a way it did not see coming. People know Donald Trump, and Donald Trump had enough money to partially self-fund a highly visible campaign.⁶² Interestingly, this suggests that Trump's elite socioeconomic status not only did not *prevent* him from assuming the role as an outsider candidate, but was in fact a necessary component in such an endeavor.

We come again to the, "right place, right time" motif. What made this year "the year" for Donald Trump to win the presidential election? In the United States at this moment, there is a large population of people who feel left behind and are angry at Washington. They are apprehensive towards outsiders and respond well to scapegoating tactics that paint foreigners in a negative light. They also construct their world, and the American presidency, through the lens of the "authoritarian father" framework. Donald Trump, already well-known and with plenty of money to spend on publicity, managed to exploit these social elements in a way other Republican candidates could not. Intentionally or unintentionally, his verbal and physical presence at rallies, debates, and campaign events struck a nerve with millions of Americans and propelled him to and past the 270 necessary electoral votes to win the election. Regardless of Trump's success or lack thereof in his presidential bid, he has unearthed discontent in the Republican Party that will have to be reckoned with in elections to come.

⁶² Lauren Carroll, "Is Donald Trump Self-Funding His Campaign? Sort of," *Politifact*, February 10, 2016, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2016/feb/10/donald-trump/donald-trump-self-funding-his-campaign-sort/>.

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