

COMMENTARY

Why Did No One See this Coming? How Did It Happen? The 2016 Presidential Election

by L. Sandy Maisel

The 2016 presidential election was humbling for everyone—except for Donald J. Trump. Nearly everyone had it wrong. Most pollsters had it wrong. The pundits had it wrong. The media had it wrong. Hillary Clinton’s vaunted analytical team had it wrong. Donald Trump’s advisors had it wrong. No one—except for Donald Trump—thought that Donald Trump would emerge early in the morning of November 9 as president-elect.¹

In this commentary, I will explore why Donald Trump won, why so few analysts predicted that victory, and what the Trump presidency might mean for policy in the years ahead. But I start with a caveat. I was one of those people who had it wrong. I underestimated Donald Trump during the Republican primaries. I underestimated him in the general election. I did not see his appeal. I think I know why—but—*caveat lector*.

HOW DID EVERYONE GET IT WRONG?

The nation’s pollsters are all reassessing their craft. For some time, pollsters have been concerned about nonresponse rates. Who answers pollsters’ questions? Who does not? Are the two groups systematically different? Pollsters know that response rates are different on telephone polls that are directly dialed from those on robo calls. They know that internet polls have well-understood strengths and weaknesses. Pollsters have not missed election predictions this badly in the

era of modern, scientific polling, so the profession is concerned about whether their respondents represent the electorate accurately.

Part of that concern deals with how they weight their samples. Every pollster knows that, given those who answer their questions, they still must judge who will vote and who will not. They ask filtering questions, to be sure, but they also make assumptions about the final turnout. Donald Trump objected to these assumptions when he questioned pollsters’ choosing which respondents to count. He may have been right.

At one point during the campaign Nate Cohn of the *New York Times* gave the raw data from a *Times* poll to four reputable professional pollsters, asking them to interpret the results. The pollsters’ predictions based on the same data differed, and they differed by more than a percentage point or two. The difference was in assumptions about how many African Americans, Latinos, or women, for example, would turn out to vote. Cohn and other poll aggregators made their judgments based on examining all the polls (and their own opinions of the quality of individual polls). They were concerned because of the variation in the polls, variation based on differing assumptions about turnout. Near the end, however, the polls came together, and that gave everyone confidence.

Wrong. The coalescence of the polls may well have been due to *groupthink*. Pollsters found a common ground, none wanting to be too far away from the

average, but, in fact, they were all off. To be sure, they were within the margin of error of the national popular vote. But we elect our president on the basis of electoral votes won in the states. Pollsters were far off in key states because they all misjudged the turnout among working class white males who took their anger and frustration with governmental policies and turned them into votes for the outsider, Donald Trump.

Groupthink, the need for conformity with a group’s consensus that can lead to irrational decisions, has long been a problem in politics (as in other fields). In 2016, the malady reached new proportions. Pollsters may have succumbed to it. Journalists and pundits almost certainly succumbed to it. The Clinton victory seemed inevitable, so it must be inevitable. The pollsters said so, and thus the aggregators said so. Even though Nate Silver of 538 said that there was a 30 percent chance of a Trump victory, that still meant that Hillary was a two to one favorite to win; Upshot had her odds at 84 percent; Huffpollster at 98 percent. Who wouldn’t bet on those odds? And if the aggregators had her that likely to win, why should the media question that conclusion?

Media groupthink was exacerbated by groupthink among the electorate. Those who favored Secretary Clinton, who thought Mr. Trump did not have the qualifications to be president, who were repulsed by what they saw as divisive appeals during his campaign talked only to those who agreed with their views. They did not know the people who were flocking to the Trump rallies. They did not read the same newspapers, watch the same television news (or television shows), or go to the same movies. They lived in another reality—and nothing in their world told them to reassess what they believed. That is classic

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groupthink—stereotyping the opposition as inferior and not reassessing assumptions—and it led to so many of us being wrong.

So on Tuesday, November 8, we waited for the inevitable—for the first woman to be elected president—except for Donald Trump who heard a different beat.

WHY DID TRUMP WIN?

Now we get to the blame game. At least for the Clinton camp.

Here is what we know. First, Hillary Clinton did not hold the Obama coalition together strongly enough. African Americans supported her, but by 5 percentage points less (88 percent as opposed to 93 percent) than they had President Obama. In addition, fewer African Americans turned out, especially in urban centers of the Rust Belt. No surprise really. President Obama was the first African American candidate with a major party nomination for president; while he and the First Lady Michelle Obama passionately urged their backers to support his chosen successor, Clinton was not Obama. Similarly, Latinos supported Clinton in about the same percentage as they had Obama—and their turnout was about the same. But these numbers also did not meet expectations. Given candidate Trump's rhetoric and the growth in the Latino population, the thought was that Clinton would win a higher percentage of these voters, and the absolute number, in places like Florida, would be higher. Wrong again.

Second, college-educated women did not turn out to vote for Hillary Clinton in the numbers that had been anticipated. In fact, she won the women's vote by only 1 percent more than Obama had four years earlier, hardly a resounding win over a candidate dubbed

misogynistic. Why was this the case? Most of us refused to face the fact that Hillary Clinton was a very unpopular candidate. In early polling, college-educated women were supporting her over Donald Trump, not because they were ardent Clinton supporters, but because they deemed him worse. We heard repeatedly that these were the two least popular candidates ever to run against each other for president. We knew that some people liked Trump, some liked Clinton, and many liked neither. We did not hear much about how those who disliked both were making their decisions. The assumption was that women (and Latinos) would vote for Clinton—and that Trump could not overcome those losses.

Why did this result not eventuate? Two reasons. First, Secretary Clinton came to this campaign with baggage, and she never dealt with it. The email scandal never went away. The sense that she felt she should be treated differently never went away. Her campaign was blind to the optics of the Goldman Sachs speeches, of Bill Clinton's airport visit with Attorney General Lynch, of how much she was viewed as part of the establishment elite that placed itself above every day citizens. Second, I believe that FBI Director James Comey's October surprise—his announcement nine days before the election that the FBI was looking into emails found on Clinton aide Huma Abedin's computer—reminded many of the women on whom Clinton was counting about all of these factors, about what they disliked about her. And these college-educated, suburban voters returned to their normal preference, voting for the Republican they did not like more than the Democrat they did not like. To be sure, Clinton still won among these voters, but not by as much as was predicted.

Third, working-class white males (an inexact term used to describe male voters in the exurbs of Midwestern cities) voted in higher numbers and against the Democrat in higher numbers than anyone predicted. Why? I think the reasons are complex. We cannot ignore a certain amount of basic sexism. It is hard to deny that Secretary Clinton was treated differently as a candidate because she is a woman. For some, the historic nature of her candidacy was a plus. But clearly for some, maybe especially those who work in a male-dominated environment and who have not been used to women in positions of authority, her gender was a problem—and they responded to questions about her stamina, her health, her ability to lead in a forceful way.

More specifically, these are citizens who have not benefited from globalization, whose jobs were put in jeopardy by NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) (which they associate with Clinton), but most importantly, who did not feel that the Democratic Party or Secretary Clinton cared about them. The Democratic Party took them for granted, and Donald Trump did not. Party leaders assumed that these voters knew that the Democrats were the party of working people, but the voters' experiences were different. Donald Trump campaigned in their small towns and neighborhoods. Secretary Clinton and the news media flew right over them, never stopping to hear what they were thinking. Worst of all, Secretary Clinton lumped them with extremist Trump supporters as “deplorables.” In these voters' minds, they are not deplorable; they are hardworking people trying to make ends meet in a difficult time who saw the party they had supported ignore them. If an inclusive Democratic Party ignored them, they were willing to be

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excluded. Bernie Sanders understood this feeling of dissatisfaction during the primary season, but the Clinton campaign never crafted a message that included those who were suffering economically as well as those who suffered because of years of systemic exclusion.

We also know that Secretary Clinton won the popular vote by nearly 2.9 million votes. Wow! More than many Electoral College winners, including John Kennedy. But we also know that she won California and New York by a combined 5 million votes—and lost the rest of the country by about 2.1 million. If nothing else, that should tell us something about how different those two states—the headquarters of every major media outlet in the nation—are from the rest of the country. When one adds that Secretary Clinton won over 92 percent of the vote in the District of Columbia, the division becomes clearer. For citizens living in a wide swath of the country, Secretary Clinton was a very bad candidate, the wrong person for the wrong time.

WHAT DOES THIS ELECTION MEAN FOR THE FUTURE?

Remember, reader beware! Many ardent liberals feel that the end is near. Everything that they have fought for—rights for minorities, peace, or the environment, for example—is lost. They are protesting (“Not my president”), signing petitions, and bemoaning every signal (for example, the appointment of Steve Bannon as chief strategist) that the Trump presidency will be as bad as they anticipated.

I understand those feelings and share many of them. To be sure, the years ahead will be ones in which we who share those feelings must look out

for each other, speak clearly when rights are being violated, and continue to fight battles we have fought for many years. But in American politics, battles that have been won must always be re-won, no victory is forever, and vigilance is always needed.

I also am the ultimate believer in the American system of government. For the last eight years, liberals have been restrained and have had to accept partial victories because the system favors moving slowly and gives those who favor the status quo many opportunities to oppose change. Now those seeking to roll back the progress on civil rights, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) rights, the environment, and other issues will be thwarted in their efforts. That is not a positive sign for liberals, but it signals a strategy moving forward. As President Obama said after his initial meeting in the Oval Office with President-elect Trump, Donald Trump is a pragmatist, not an ideologue. To be sure, his rhetoric flamed the worst passions of ideologues of the far right, and I think we have a legitimate concern about the image of America portrayed in off-the-cuff comments by our elected president. But that does not mean all of his supporters share those views—they do not—nor does it mean that he will govern from that perspective. In the years ahead, the job of those who opposed his candidacy is to support him when he moves to the center and oppose him when he leans in the direction of those supporters. The system is designed to help in that strategy.

Finally, we must learn the right lessons from this campaign. In my mind, the key lesson is to listen to voters throughout the nation, to understand the impact of economic inequality on voters everywhere in America, and to find common ground where we are now

divided. To me, patriots are those who believe in American progress and the American promise for all people, not just those with whom we are immediately concerned. Defining greatness in those inclusive terms, not in retrogressive, divisive terms, is the challenge of the coming years. 🐼

ENDNOTES

- 1 To be fair, political scientists who based their predictions on factors known before the two parties' nominations—and who did not change their prediction—foresaw a Republican win. Also American University historian Allan Lichtman made his ninth straight accurate prediction based on 13 true/false questions answered months before the election. See https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/10/28/professor-whos-predicted-30-years-of-presidential-elections-correctly-is-doubling-down-on-a-trump-win/?utm_term=.5ed2b92263b9



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