Neither the Establishment Nor its Money Can Oust Trump in 2020

written by Darren Barany | October 4, 2019

With Democratic primary campaigns in full-swing and the 2020 election just over a year away, I thought I'd take a look at some of the reports on available data that could shed light on the motives and actions of the American electorate in 2016. In particular, I wanted to consider which observed trends seemed to play a role in the unlikely victory of Donald Trump in 2016 to think about which candidate (or candidates) would have the best shot of beating him in 2020. Of course, just because there was an observable voter trend in one election does not mean it will repeat four years later. Also, it's certainly possible that unforeseen developments or turnout (or lack thereof) from some un-predicted composite of voters could affect things in unforeseeable ways in 2020. So, in short, one never knows for sure. The outcome of the 2016 election is itself an indication of this. This is not an attempt to exhaustively flesh out substance from numbers or a consideration of every possible theoretical contingency. Rather, it's simply a little dip into some data and a bit of reflection.

One significant factor which played a role in Trump's victory was the turnout of improbable voters in 2016 – either first-time voters or those who did not vote in recent presidential elections. Like it or not, Trump inspired these folks to show up for him at the polls. He represented an option for many disaffected voters, a candidate for whom they could cast a protest vote as an expression of their discontent with the political establishment. Since exit poll respondents who identified as first-time voters turned out for Clinton over Trump by a three-to-two margin, one may be inclined to think that these improbable voters didn't help nudge Trump to a majority in the states where he prevailed. In some states, he just scarcely did so, indicating just how volatile and unpredictable those outcomes were. However, this three-to-two margin is a slimmer majority that broke for the Democratic candidate compared to the last two elections. A greater proportion of first-time voters turned out for Obama the two elections before, with a two-to-one margin over his Republican opponent in 2012 and a 2.2-to-1 margin in 2008. Also, there were more first-time voters in 2016 – 15%, an increase from 9% in 2012. So the portion of first-time voters that voted for Trump in 2016, while a minority of such voters, was a larger statistical minority than that of the previous two years who voted for the Republican candidate. Also, more actual voters turned out overall in 2016 than both 2012 and 2008.[1]

A recurring narrative for those who cast their votes for Trump, especially White working class voters, was frustration toward the political establishment. Based on a large post-election poll, White non-college graduates in particular represented a 14% larger portion of voters in 2016 than 2012, and voted for Trump over Clinton 63% to 32%. Another post-election poll by the Center for American Progress found that 50% of Trump voters responded that the most important factor shaping their decision to vote for him was to "shake up the political establishment." A study which drilled down

into a relatively small cohort of 20 white working class men showed that Clinton was broadly seen as the status quo candidate and that voters for Trump were motivated by his self-presentation as a political outsider who was in it to shake up politics as usual. With reservations expressed about both candidates, the men interviewed overwhelmingly either voted for Trump or didn't vote at all. A larger qualitative study of White working class communities across multiple regions of the country indicated the same finding, that for many of these voters, Trump inspired them by tapping into an "insurgent, anti-establishment rage against 'politics as normal.'"

There's obviously more to it than this. With Trump's overtly racist and xenophobic rhetoric in relation to immigration, depiction of American society and values as under attack, and promises of greater prosperity for those who felt left behind, these "dispossessed" voters, as sociologist Daniel Bell once referred to them, were willing to take a chance on Trump, the populist self-styled outsider vowing to shake up Washington, drain the swamp, and "Make America Great Again." Diana Mutz's analysis of a large pool of voter data showed that a sense that "the American way of life is threatened" was a reliable predictor of support for Trump. As dominant groups (Whites, men, Christians, etc.) perceive a decline in their status and privilege, this experience of status threat makes traditional and hierarchical social arrangements more attractive. A report by the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research comprehensively outlined the bases on which Trump came to symbolize "the candidate of change" for voters. Namely, he appealed to those who were apprehensive or fearful of social transformations with regard to the economy, cultural life (LGBTQ rights, contemporary struggles for racial justice, "PC culture," etc.), immigration, public safety with regard to violence and terrorism, and the standing of the U.S. in the world.

The composition of voters who stayed home in 2016 and their rationale for doing so are also informative for understanding how the election tipped in Trump's direction. The two most unpopular candidates in the field faced off against each other, and predictably the most frequently given reason for not voting was dissatisfaction with both choices. Eligible voters who did not vote were more likely to identify as independents and Democrats. Independents who did vote were slightly more likely to vote for Clinton. If independents who stayed home and voters who identified with one of the two major parties turned out and voted along party lines, Clinton would have won. Trump would have been edged out in enough states for Clinton to win the Electoral College, especially considering the razor thin margin by which Trump won in swing states like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania. Voters who disliked both candidates who did vote, were more likely to vote for Trump.

A blend of white racial resentment, anti-immigrant xenophobia, and cultural and economic insecurity undoubtedly contributed to many voters' sense of social and political disaffection and to Trump's appeal. Clinton being a standard bearer of the Democratic Party establishment and favorite of the liberal donor class and corporate media did not ingratiate her with those looking to vote against the status quo or to those susceptible to the sort of ethnonationalist appeals and promises of swift and miraculous socioeconomic transformation that Trump was making. However, implicit and explicit sexism directed toward Clinton was unmistakable and also a factor. Outrage and hostility toward Clinton surged from the right. There were certainly legitimate populist grievances in relation to Clinton and the Democratic Party in the run-up to the 2016 election. Though, given the depth of Trump's duplicitousness and corruption, this was a selective hostility. In other words, a level of perceived corruption and cronyism, compromised integrity, or opportunism that is routinely tolerated with more traditional candidates, when apparent with regard to Hillary Clinton, at least for a segment of the electorate, was intolerable. It should be mentioned that the Clintons evoke an almost mythical level of sniveling anger from the right, and it's hard to say to what degree another woman in the 2016 presidential race (of either party) would have produced a comparable level of opposition. Nevertheless, hostility toward women in professional roles indicated that voters were less likely to vote for Clinton (or Jill Stein) in 2016 in particular, a trend which was more prevalent

among whites, men, and Republicans. That said, a vote for Donald Trump or staying home and withholding one's vote for either candidate in 2016 were ways for voters to express their angst. This was an anti-establishment angst, to be sure, but also one mediated by a growing sense of status threat for dominant social groups.

While much is rightly made about the seemingly unconditional support for Trump among his core supporters, his reelection also rests in the hands of those whose support is more apprehensive. A FiveThirtyEight-commissioned SurveyMonkey poll drilled down into more "reluctant" Trump supporters. The survey showed that this contingent represented about 1/5 of his 2016 turnout. Respondents in this group were slightly more likely to be college educated, self-identify as independent, and describe themselves as moderate. Within this category 57% continued to maintain their support just over a year after Trump's term began while 28% weren't sure. The economy was a major determinant in whether these voters maintained their support. They were also frustrated with the media establishment, especially what they saw as "overblown" coverage of the Mueller inquiry. A nationwide poll conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago for the Associated Press observed a similar proportion of voters (18%) who described themselves as "somewhat approving" of Trump. The poll showed that these respondents were more likely to disagree with Trump on key issues like healthcare, immigration, climate change, and gun control. Issues which nudged them toward a Trump vote were their rejection of the political and Democratic Party establishments, the economy, and potential Supreme Court vacancies. However, 64% of them felt that if the Meuller probe found that the president obstructed justice in the investigation of Russian election interference, that it would be at least a "somewhat" serious matter. Now, with the impeachment inquiry into Trump's soliciting of Ukraine's president to investigate Joe Biden, who Trump likely sees as his most formidable political opponent, this sector of potentially wavering supporters of Trump may be even more inclined to be among those who stay home in 2020. Perhaps they'd even vote for a maverick Democrat. However, the impact of Trump's actions on Biden's reputation for these "moderates" remains to be seen. It's important to keep in mind that Hillary Clinton's perceived moral and political corruption and lack of integrity was a recurring justification for those who voted for Trump, even though they were dissatisfied with both candidates.

Concerns with corruption and that the system is "rigged" are not unfounded. Much has been written about the influence of money in politics. Also, as touched on in the paragraph above, Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, joining the board of Burisma in Ukraine and making millions due to his father's connections while VP, is just one example of the moral corruption (though legal) that has been largely normalized among elites who nimbly pass through the revolving door between politics and business. Such influence-peddling has rightly frustrated Americans. This culture of legitimate grift in a society that is so rich yet unequal is fundamental to understanding the cynicism and despair which led to a Trump victory. Everyone knows Donald Trump and his family are no strangers to these sorts of conflicts-of-interest and ethically problematic connections, which is why it is essential for the Democrats, if they want to beat Trump in 2020, to nominate someone largely seen as an honest outsider to the political establishment. Joe Biden isn't that.

Notably, there has been a recent rise of independent and progressive figures in the Democratic Party, like Bernie Sanders in 2016 and midterm Congressional candidates in 2018 like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar (among others). Bernie saw an unlikely burst of support, especially among young voters, and he unexpectedly positioned himself as a viable contender to Hillary Clinton, pushing her to the left of her usual policy positions contributing to perceptions of her as disingenuous and morally corrupt (e.g. her alignment with Wall Street firms, entrenchment and loyalty to the intelligence and Pentagon systems, support for past wars, support for the Patriot Act, past opposition to marriage equality, support for Bill Clinton's neoliberal assault on the safety net, support for the 1990s crime bill that accelerated the mass incarceration of poor, black, and brown

people, etc. etc.). Omar and Ocasio-Cortez, along with other progressive congressional contenders, won their primary races and ultimately seats in Congress. The appeal of such insurgent progressives and their bold policy ideas has shifted the entire conversation among Democratic presidential hopefuls during the string of recent primary debates. This has upset the establishment. Various billionaires, Democratic Party donors, and prominent centrist Democrats have warned the party of its embrace of "political extremes." Michael Bloomberg and Starbucks mogul Charles Schultz even publicly considered running as independents on pro-business, centrist tickets if the Democrats failed to nominate a centrist. Bloomberg came close to running in 2016 as well. Such actions are cynical, alienating, and patronizing, implicitly communicating that voters should just let the big boys who know better tell them what's best. The public be damned, and if they don't listen, the billionaires and donor-class will get involved directly.

With the leaking of private Democratic National Committee (DNC) emails in the summer of 2016, it was evident that top officials in the DNC were disparaging Sanders, despite presumptions of impartiality. This was seen as a clear indication of preference for the centrist, establishment candidate, Hillary Clinton. This internal DNC documentation revealing that the Party was operating to move Clinton forward as the nominee actually damaged the Democratic Party's chances at winning the election. Many (across the political spectrum) saw this a just another piece of evidence that the game was "rigged" and that Clinton was the presumptive favorite even before the process had a chance to fairly shake out. Aside from centrists already in the Dem/Clinton camp, to many from the center out to the hard right of the political spectrum, this disenchantment translated to a vote against the establishment either by staying home or turning out for Trump – a decision for many voters that was only solidified in the week before the election. These "late-deciders" who voted broke for Trump by 11% in Michigan, by 17% in Florida and Pennsylvania, and 29% in Wisconsin, representing yet another significant trend in relation to Trump's unexpected victory by such slim margins in the swing states.

The display of Party elites and donors working to sway opinion away from popular policy proposals like Medicare For All and a Green New Deal indicates a tone deaf elitism that will take work and time to challenge and change but in the meantime will make the Democrats' road to beating Trump in 2020 more difficult. In an April 2019 *New York Times* piece, it detailed an event organized by a former Democratic Party official, Leah Daughtry, where she held a closed-door event in San Francisco in March 2019 with 100 wealthy liberal donors. She described her affect on attendees as having "freaked them out" by warning that Sanders may be among the top candidates come convention time. Many Party-insiders and centrist donors see the recent progressive ascent as a threat and are organizing to obstruct it. David Brock, a polarizing party operative has been enlisted to organize the 2020 anti-Sanders operation. Brock is somewhat infamous. He coordinated networks of social media trolls to attack Sanders supporters in coordination with the pro-Clinton super PAC, Correct the Record, during the runup to the 2016 election. Before aligning with the Democrats and Clinton, he waged a viciously misogynistic campaign to discredit Anita Hill's accusations of sexual harassment against Clarence Thomas shortly after Thomas' Supreme Court confirmation hearings.

ThinkProgress, website and appendage of the think tank Center for American Progress (CAP), ran a smear video against Sanders earlier in the year when his most recent tax returns showed that he'd become a millionaire from the sales of his books. CAP was started by John Podesta, former chief of staff for Bill Clinton and campaign chair for Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign. Neera Tanden is the current head of the think tank and is a fierce Clinton ally. Under her direction, she has noted that CAP is focusing on addressing antagonisms with "millennial agitators" in the Party and working on pitching watered down, more market-based versions progressive initiatives like Medicare For All.

Warren has also been a target of concern recently. A recent CNBC story reported that Wall Street and other corporate Democratic Party donors are threatening to "sit out the presidential campaign

fundraising cycle" or even support Trump if Elizabeth Warren is the Democratic nominee. The report noted Warren's criticism of big banks and corporations, support for a wealth tax, and her recent surge in the polls against Joe Biden. One wealthy donor noted, "I want to help the party, but she's going to hurt me, so I'm going to help President Trump." To more disenchanted voters in the political center and right (regardless of party affiliation) who are rightly concerned about their economic and social well-being, all this is just more evidence that Democratic promises to address their problems are empty. For many on the progressive left, it shows a willingness of the ruling-class flank of American liberalism, Democratic Party bosses, and wealthy donors to risk empowering an ascendant proto-fascism instead of even considering modest policy alternatives to neoliberalism or taking seriously popular demands for economic, gender, sexual, racial, and climate justice.

Trump has his work cut out for him, especially now as he's embroiled in the Ukraine scandal and facing the impeachment inquiry in the House. His reelection, to some extent, relies on a delicate balance. He needs to continue to signal his usual toxic blend of coded and not-so-coded racism, elitism, misogyny, and anti-LGBTQ bigotry to his MAGA hat-wearing base while not pushing away his reluctant, more moderate supporters. His winning key swing states again in 2020 is, in part, dependent on this juggling act. He also has to maintain enough legitimacy for his supporters overall as more and more information is revealed about the depths of his criminality and corruption. However, there's still a lot of time between now and November 2020.

If the Democratic Party and American voters more generally want to defeat Trump, an establishment candidate awash in establishment money isn't going to get the job done. Democratic primary voters need to make sure an establishment outsider seen as honest and smart with a track record of advocating in good faith for the public is the nominee in 2020. Either an honest, consistent, progressive populist like Bernie Sanders or a liberal, policy savvy, advocate like Elizabeth Warren are the best shot for the nation at defeating Trump at the polls. Of course, we don't need a populism that appeals to the lowest tendencies of our society and empowers forces of hate. Rather, a principled candidate running on bold policy initiatives which address injustice without appearing to be delivering finely tuned, focus group-tested sound bites could peel away some of those disgruntled, anti-establishment voters that turned out for Trump in 2016. Warren and Sanders, though different, can do this.

I feel that a person would stand an even greater chance of beating Trump if they transparently addressed the Democratic Party's elitism and its shameful pursuit of large donor, special interest, and Wall Street support at the expense of the interests of the Party's base and of the American public. This would be damaging for the Democratic Party machine as it currently exists, but would deeply ingratiate the candidate with voters exasperated with politics as usual and be good for the party and country in the long run. Trump upended the GOP machine by taking on politics as usual, and he's, well, Trump. Imagine if a progressive with integrity who wasn't self-serving or stoking social divisions within the populace gave it a shot. Joe Biden is not the person for the job. Sanders could take on Democratic machine given his vast grassroots funding base and still prevail. This would be trickier for Warren, and it could come across as largely rhetorical and superficial, given reports that she's quietly assuring Democratic Party insiders behind the scenes. This makes Sanders the more broadly appealing candidate in 2020 if we're thinking beyond just traditional Democratic voters. Though, either can potentially win. Taking on the establishment in either capacity could even inspire more Democrats and independents to show up on Election Day, which, if trends repeat from 2016 (and there's no guarantee that they will) would favor the Democratic candidate. As for the potential of centrist and conservative Democrats sitting out the election if a progressive gets the nomination, Trump should provide enough of a unifying force to bring enough of them out either way. After all, centrist and conservative Clinton supporters were keen on disparaging Sanders supporters in 2016 based on the notion that they did not turn out to support Clinton in the election.

Hopefully Democratic establishment loyalists will walk the walk in 2020 if Biden fails to win the nomination of their party.

If we look at current data, the major and most recent polls based on the RealClearPolitics (RCP) average, show that Biden has a +7.7% advantage against Trump in the general election, compared to a +4.8% advantage for Sanders and a +4.0% advantage for Warren. Given that, it's tempting to conclude that, of course, Biden would be our best shot at beating Trump. However, consider that this time in the last presidential election cycle, Clinton showed a +5.0% advantage based on the RCP average. By the time of the election, that spread thinned out to +3.2%. Sanders terminated his candidacy in July 2016 and endorsed Clinton, but polling through May and early June of that year showed that he was favored over Trump with a +10.4% advantage. There's no way of knowing if that lead would have held through November would Sanders have been the nominee, as polls at this juncture are not so predictive, something for which 2016 has provided a sore lesson.

Trumps' most recent woes will hopefully discourage his voters whose support and inclination to come through for him on Election Day are far from certain. Anything can happen between now and then, but Biden is not up to the job of facing Trump, and there's no telling how things will shake out with the Ukraine scandal in relation to either of them and how that might impact Biden as a candidate. In this atmosphere, a democratic candidate who is visibly and genuinely concerned with and shows a track record of addressing the environmental crisis, poverty, healthcare, war and violence, unchecked corporate power, social injustice, and the corruption of the political establishment may compel those who somewhat approve of Trump but are averse to voting Democratic to sit this one out or perhaps even vote for the Democratic candidate in the next presidential election.

Though there are substantive difference between them and given what we know at this point in time, only a Sanders or Warren candidacy, despite their differences, can defeat Trump in 2020. Biden's policy history is problematic, and his establishment pedigree and frequent mentions of his time as Obama's VP will only take him so far in a general election campaign. While they shouldn't, optics do matter, and he's not the Joe Biden that brashly trounced Paul Ryan in the 2012 Vice Presidential Debate. Donald Trump will bluster and shout, and a soft-spoken Biden who is easily flustered and needs time to fish for words will be soundly dominated on the public stage in such a venue, and he will appear weak, all else equal. Not to mention, Biden's strategic shift to the left may play in a similarly disingenuous way in the run-up to the general election as Clinton's did in 2016, but as mentioned above, this discrepancy may be somewhat mitigated since he wouldn't face the implicit and explicit sexism that Clinton experienced. Sanders more than Warren can run insulated from the corrupting forces of the DNC and Democratic Party establishment in terms of public perceptions of his integrity and motivations, but that establishment can continue to make things hard for Sanders (or any candidate who doesn't play ball). Warren or Sanders would offer a much stronger show of force against Trump and are largely understood by voters, regardless of politics and party, as having integrity, grit, commitment, and a genuine concern for the public – things that Trump can't compete with.

[1] A larger portion of eligible voters voted in 2008 than 2016, but more actual voters turned out in 2016.