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THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE QUESTIONABLE US PRESIDENCY

THE TRUMP ERA MIGHT LAST LONGER THAN EXPECTED

The 2020 US presidential election could be a close call with a narrow margin of victory. Many key factors underlying Donald Trump's 2016 electoral success are still active and might suffice to win over a very polarized electorate in an extremely ugly election.

Donald Trump's success in 2016 resulted in much surprise and dismay. Many circles on both sides of the Atlantic still treat Donald Trump's rise to power as an outlier case. This assumption leads to an expectation that the coming elections will inevitably favour a correction. Yet this could turn out to be a false hope in a world increasingly out of sync with liberal hopes and expectations.

Many of the emerging campaigning techniques championed by the Trump team will not simply vanish. New social media-centric algorithmic tools based on the manipulation and timing of the affective flows sweeping across the electorate are only going to improve with the rise of artificial intelligence. The necessary fuel continues

to be provided by an increasing fixation on issues of identity politics such as migration, guns, and race.

The controversies surrounding President Trump's tweets, taunts, and deeds have remained almost daily occurrences. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the intense drama seems to be working for Trump. One main reason for this new normal could be the shift towards expressive voting. Instead of voting to bring about changes in the name of the general public good, the voters express their allegiance to a political camp. This is similar to supporting a sports team. By voting, one can satisfy the need to belong and to express solidarity with one's community.

A key fact that bolsters Trump's chances in 2020 is that the majority

of the likely voters are still overwhelmingly white – around 73% in 2016. A winning coalition can be based on tactics that manufacture, agitate, and stimulate underlying identity cleavages. This explains why Trump is sticking to the “build the wall” style of anti-liberal rhetoric. The simplistic us-versus-them slogans can appear to be more expressive and feel more “genuine” than the moderate yet more complex unifying themes.

On the other hand, the Trumpian themes also mobilize the opposition. The key question is whether that mobilization is broad enough to drive those voters to the ballot boxes who are less likely to vote in the first place. Trump's logic may be that a strong anti-Trump reaction might make the Democrats

choose too extreme candidates and thereby further highlight the very same identity issues that have worked in his favour.

The approval rating is an early but weak indicator of re-election chances. Trump's rating has been historically low for a president. Currently, his approval is hovering around 43%, and disapproval 53% among all voters. However, Trump is more popular among the likely voters, where approval versus disapproval is more or less even. Moreover, among the supporters of the Republican Party, Trump's approval is at a historic high.

The blowback to the 2016 presidential and congressional election is likely to happen in the November 2018 congressional mid-term elections. In a generic poll where voters' intentions are surveyed based on parties instead of candidates, the Democratic Party currently enjoys a 6% advantage over the Republicans. However, the impact of Trump's re-election chances are not necessarily significantly hampered by losing the Congress. Trump likes to campaign as an anti-establishment figure who runs against the liberal elites.

The ongoing collusion investigations are a key unknown factor that might impact Trump's chances, and land people close to him or even the

man himself in deep and troubled legal waters after the presidency ends. They might also lead to an impeachment process that can derail a presidency or his candidacy. However, it should be remembered that an impeachment process can make a president even stronger, as showcased by President Bill Clinton's high approval figures during his impeachment process.

Moreover, Donald Trump's 2020 re-election campaign is likely to lack the effective and active election-meddling operation that took place in 2016. There are several reasons for this. It is clear that the American people are angry about any foreign meddling in their elections. This is a sentiment shared across the political spectrum. What is more, the meddling technique is now well known and detectable. However, poisonous campaigning can still be effective. Liberal and progressive alike commonly highlight the unblemished and virtuous character of their leading candidates à la Obama 2008. They like to fall in love with their candidates. This relationship is easier to poison than the existing Teflon-like identification between Trump and his supporters.

It is not impossible for Donald Trump to be a moderately strong candidate in the 2020 presidential

elections. The economy is likely to continue to grow. Unemployment rates are likely to be at historic lows. However, the elections are not going to be smooth sailing for Trump. Moreover, he is up against uncertainties and risks which, if realized, might make him a deeply flawed candidate who also faces opposition from his own party. However, this prognosis is eerily similar to those before the 2016 elections, when Trump won.

Overall, Trump remains a relatively unpopular president. His unconventional campaigning style does not aim to win the hearts and minds of a majority of people. What he aims at is winning through solidification of his enthusiastic base and by poison tactics that suppress the vote for any opponent. He could still win in a contest between unpopular candidates, as demonstrated in 2016. One thing is not in question: the 2020 election is going to be an ugly take-no-prisoners type of annihilation game. /