

Trump Is Waiting and He Is Ready

‘Alternative facts’ are becoming a reality, which works to the president’s advantage.



By Thomas B. Edsall

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There are three crucial developments working in Donald Trump’s favor in the 2020 presidential campaign.

These include what a group of Harvard economists — Alberto Alesina, Stefanie Stantcheva and Armando Miano — describe in a recent paper as “The Polarization of Reality.”

They write:

Evidence is growing that Americans are polarized not only in their views on policy issues and attitudes toward government and society, but also in their perceptions of the same, factual reality accompanying it.

As a result, “Republicans and Democrats (as well as Trump and non-Trump voters since 2016) view the same reality through a different lens.” In fact, the differences in perception of reality between Trump and non-Trump voters “are wider than between Democrats and Republicans overall.”

The emergence of these conflicting realities explains why Democrats and Republicans “hold different views about policies and what should be done to address different economic and social issues.”

Add to the polarization of reality a related development: A large segment of the American electorate has come to tolerate, and in many cases to willingly accept, politicians who lie. Double talk is key to Trump’s governing strategy.

In their 2017 paper “Liars, Damned Liars, and Zealots: The Effect of Moral Mandates on Transgressive Advocacy Acceptance,” two psychologists at the University of Illinois, Allison B. Mueller and Linda J. Skitka, cite “transgressive advocacy” — which they define as “norm-violating means, i.e., lying, to achieve a preferred end” — as a critical aspect of contemporary political competition:

People’s perceptions of others’ transgressive advocacy were uniquely shaped by their moral convictions. Although honesty was positively valued by all respondents, transgressive advocacy that served a shared moral end was more accepted, and advocacy in the service of a non-preferred end was more condemned, regardless of its truth.

Referring specifically to Trump, Mueller and Skitka write:

A troubling and timely implication of these findings is that political figures may be able to act in corrupt ways without damaging their images (at least in the eyes of their supporters). This was blatantly apparent in the 2016 Presidential election.

The toleration of lying by supporters of political leaders has been central to Trump’s success in marketing provable falsehoods and an alternate reality. The Washington Post’s fact checker, Glenn Kessler, has documented that Trump made 16,241 false or misleading claims in his first three years.

Third, there are the advances in the technology of campaigning that allow candidates and parties to communicate below the radar on social media, especially through Facebook and Twitter.

Campaigns using these technologies capitalize on their ability to mobilize individual voters and to register nonvoters by tracking as many as 3,000 consumer, social and political markers — from gun ownership to Vanity Fair subscriptions — and by making use of chatbots and what are known as generative adversarial networks (a means of purveying fake news) to get out the vote and push donations.

Henry Farrell, a political scientist at George Washington, raised a different set of concerns about lying in a digital era:

Even if there is little evidence that this stuff can be persuasive in terms of getting many people to really change their views, there is some reason to suspect that it can have consequences for their second order beliefs about others' beliefs, and about whether the system is fair or not.

These second order beliefs — “that votes are going to be fairly counted, that the other side is minimally committed to democracy, etc.” — are “important to democracy — we need to believe if we are to maintain our own commitments.” But such beliefs, Farrell argues, are “vulnerable to weaponized bullshit.”

Trump has shown other politicians, Farrell continued, that it is now “far easier to get away with lying and untruth and not lose support from your voters.”

As a result,

efforts by the Democrats to criticize Trump by harking back to norms of civility and truth may be relatively ineffective. Truth has become a partisan football, at least for the moment.

David Karpf, a professor of media and public affairs at George Washington, makes a parallel argument in an article titled “On Digital Disinformation and Democratic Myths”:

The first-order effects of digital disinformation and propaganda, at least in the context of elections, are debatable at best. But disinformation does not have to sway many votes to be toxic to democracy. The second-order effects undermine the democratic myths and governing norms that stand as a bulwark against elite corruption and abuse of power.

An illustration of the effectiveness of the Trump truth-defying operation can be found in an article by McKay Coppins in the current issue of The Atlantic, “The Billion-Dollar Disinformation Campaign to Re-elect the President.”

Using a false name and portraying himself as an unwavering Trump loyalist, Coppins inserted himself into the digital underworld of the Trump campaign and its maze of interlocking websites, data analytics, text messaging and novel electronic paraphernalia.

Coppins, an astute critic of the Trump administration, found he was becoming strangely and unexpectedly disoriented:

There were days when I would watch, live on TV, an impeachment hearing filled with damning testimony about the president's conduct, only to look at my phone later and find a slickly edited video — served up by the Trump campaign — that used out-of-context clips to recast the same testimony as an exoneration. Wait, I caught myself wondering more than once, is that what happened today?

Coppins

assumed that my skepticism and media literacy would inoculate me against such distortions. But I soon found myself reflexively questioning every headline. It wasn't that I believed Trump and his boosters were telling the truth. It was that, in this state of heightened suspicion, truth itself — about Ukraine, impeachment, or anything else — felt more and more difficult to locate. With each swipe, the notion of observable reality drifted further out of reach.

The Trump campaign, free of any serious primary challenge, has the resources — in time and money — to focus on one candidate and a single coherent message. The campaign and the movement it represents will be able to spend 2020 in a drive to imprint on targeted voters its preferred view of reality, the strengths of its candidates and the liabilities of opponents.

As the Washington Post pointed out on Jan. 3,

President Trump's political operation headed into 2020 with nearly \$200 million on hand, according to party officials, giving him a financial war chest that vastly outstrips the resources of his Democratic opponents.

In terms of preparing for the general election, time and money are just what the Democratic candidates — embroiled in what may turn out to be a long and costly fight for the nomination — do not have. When the party finally settles on a nominee, he or she can expect a huge surge in donations. But as both John McCain and Mitt Romney discovered in 2008 and 2012, receiving cash late makes it virtually impossible to catch up in the time-consuming process of constructing a campaign's digital infrastructure.

In addition, as Coppins points out in his Atlantic essay, the Trump campaign and the right generally are determined to discredit and vilify the media:

What's notable about this effort is not that it aims to expose media bias. Conservatives have been complaining — with some merit — about a liberal slant in the press for decades.

In the Trump era, Coppins continues,

instead of trying to reform the press, or critique its coverage, today's most influential conservatives want to destroy the mainstream media altogether.

Coppins cited a July 2017 speech at the Heritage Foundation by Matthew Boyle, the Washington political editor of Breitbart:

The goal eventually is the full destruction and elimination of the entire mainstream media. We envision a day when CNN is no longer in business. We envision a day when The New York Times closes its doors.

Boyle goes on to declare:

Journalistic integrity is dead. There is no such thing anymore. So, everything is about weaponization of information.

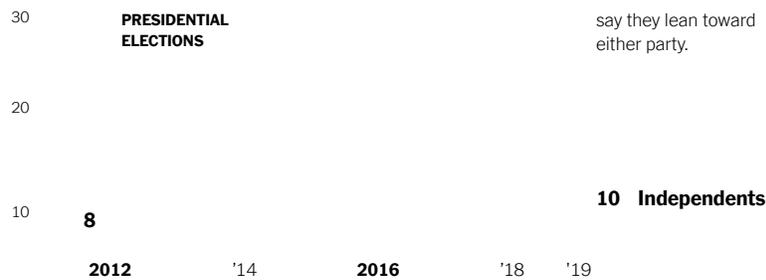
One clear signal to Democrats of the effectiveness of the Trump campaign can be found in Wisconsin. Partisan trends there, in a battleground state where Trump is making an all-out effort to repeat his 2016 victory, are revealing. Surveys of Wisconsin voters released by Marquette University Law School in January show a steady movement over the past nine years to the right.

Marquette compared the percentages of self-identified Republicans and Democrats over the five years from 2012 to 2016 with the percentages in the four-year period from 2017 to 2020. In the earlier period, Democrats held a five point advantage in partisan identification, 48-43. In the more recent period, Republicans pulled slightly ahead, 45-44, as the accompanying chart shows.

Democrats Are Losing Their Edge in Wisconsin

Partisan makeup of the state's electorate, 2012-19.





By The New York Times | Source: Marquette University Law School Poll

This trend has accelerated in recent months. The Republican advantage held during the first eight months of last year, but in the most recent seven month period, from August 2019 to the present, Republicans have pulled ahead by four points, 47 to 43.

There is an additional way to explain why so many voters are willing to tolerate Trump's lies: that on the issues that matter intensely to Trump's most loyal white supporters, Trump defies norms of political correctness by telling his backers what they firmly believe is the truth — their truth — about race, crime and immigration.

In this view, when Trump vilifies immigrants (as The Washington Post put it “Trump's most insulting — and violent — language is often reserved for immigrants”) or calls Baltimore a “rodent infested mess,” he is the populist right's truth teller, and in this scheme politically correct liberals who denounce his comments are the liars.

A 2019 study, “Tell it like it is: When politically incorrect language promotes authenticity,” found that “being politically incorrect makes communicators appear more authentic — specifically, less susceptible to external influence — albeit also less warm.”

The three authors — Michael Rosenblum and Juliana Schroeder, both at Berkeley's Haas School of Business, and Francesca Gino, of Harvard Business School — conclude that

speaking politically incorrectly makes observers more likely to infer that the communicator's beliefs are truly held and therefore makes them feel more certain about how the communicator will behave in the future.

Trump's lies and his defiance of politically correct norms have enabled him to capitalize on a groundswell of anti-elite populist animosity — an animosity that Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, authors of “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism,” call

counterrevolutionary retro backlash, especially among the older generation, white men, and less educated sectors, who sense decline and actively reject the rising tide of progressive values, resent the displacement of familiar traditional norms, and provide a pool of supporters potentially vulnerable to populist appeals.

The 2020 election will determine whether this retro backlash has run its course or whether Trump's malign and mendacious political skills, together with the prominence within the Democratic Party of a vociferous left cadre, will return the 45th president to a second term.

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