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Divergent Messaging: How Propaganda Can, and Cannot, impact the American Conscience.

The presidential elections of 2008 and 2016 have as many fascinating parallels as they do divergent differences. Each of these elections involved movements of 'change and innovation' clashing with 'experience and tradition' – with the movement of change winning both elections. Both had demographically historic nominees, aggressive and tireless campaigning, and both were *projected* to be blowout victories; here, however, the parities end. While 2008 ended as expected, with Barack Obama clinching a decisive victory, the 2016 election ended in nail-biting fashion, with Donald Trump achieving a remarkable political upset by beating Hillary Clinton, with historically close margins in swing states. The developments of communication and campaign strategies that occurred in and between these elections are equally comparable: both elections were marked by the rising influence of social media, and the winners of these two elections were the ones that, by popular consensus, better managed the growing internet-landscape. That said, the discrepancies between 2008 and 2016 are equally important. In 2008, the internet was hailed as an exciting, and informative medium to participate in the democratic process. In the aftermath of 2016, the mood had shifted dramatically, as worry grew that the internet was a harboring place for fake news, and outright propaganda. There was – and is – increasing belief that the internet had corrupted the democratic process in 2016, by swaying

votes not with rational discourse, but with lies and misinformation, often planted by foreign interferers. Is this belief justified, however? I do not believe it is. In this essay I will argue that while misinformation, fake news, and even outright propaganda, has had a growing impact on American politics, the impact is small – nigh negligible – with regard to swaying individual votes; rather, these communication techniques should better be understood as impacting the democratic process writ large, by creating toxic internet-environments, increasing partisanship, and increasing pessimistic sentiments. Certainly, the internet has dramatically changed politics in The United States, in many ways for the worse, but the core reasoning for why voters choose candidates had not changed between 2008 and 2016, even as the medium with which they discuss their choices has.

To understand the impact propaganda has on elections, one must first understand the medium with which it spreads: the internet. By 2008, the internet had become a central medium for political engagement. According to Pew Research center, by the spring of 2008 – well before the election had reached its most dramatic point – 40% of Americans had used the internet to learn more about politics, and 8% of U.S adults had donated to campaigns through online means[16]. Barack Obama's decisive victory is largely credited to him taking advantage of this novel frontier. Stanford Business notes that Obama raised over 500 million dollars on campaign contributions from online donations, with most individual donations totaling less than $100[1]. They further note that Obama's YouTube content garnered 4 times as many views as did his opposing candidate's, John McCain. It then seems no coincidence that 2008 had then-unprecedented levels of turnout from young voters, who were more tech-savvy than older voters, and consequently more likely to engage with Obama's large online presence. In 2016, the influential effect of social media was under greater scrutiny. Pew research polling taken after the

election found that 17% of those polled had changed their opinion on a particular candidate through social media[4]. Pew Research also included excerpts given from those polled, one individual, for instance, wrote this: “I thought Donald Trump was leaning one way on an issue and a friend posted something that was opposite of what I believe. This caused me to think less of him than I once I did.” While social media’s influence appears very dramatic, these examples do not appear the least bit undemocratic. Increasing political interest, engagement, and discourse would seem to facilitate healthy democratic participation. Although these same polls do also hint at the corrosive effects of the internet. The same Pew Research polling from 2008 found that 60% of those surveyed believed there to be misinformation on the internet that is too widely believed. And further Pew Research polling from 2016 found that 59% of respondents thought political debates online were “stressful and frustrating.”[6]

While propaganda and misinformation were evidently feature of concern in the 2008 election, it remains a central focus when discussing the 2016 election, largely due to the then-widespread popularity of social media. Using the internet to debate and discuss topical issues is perfectly in line with democratic values, however social media also became a festering ground for fake news and echo-chambers, which have had a pronounced effect on the political climate. Most vividly undemocratic is foreign meddling in the 2016 election; it is widely acknowledged that Russian operatives planted and promoted false stories promoting Trump across social media. Stark as all this is, there is ample evidence that fake news did not sway a statistically relevant number of voters. A Vox EU study, for example, found a negative correlation between using Twitter and voting for Trump[12], contradicting the narrative that social media use inclined one towards voting for Trump. Another study by the Journal of Economic Perspective estimated that in 2016 the average Facebook user saw and remembered 1.14 fake news articles in the months

leading up the election[2]. Assuming these articles were about as persuasive as the average campaign ad, the study estimates that fake news on Facebook would have swayed vote shares by 0.001%; that is a statistically irrelevant figure, and would remain irrelevant if these articles were five times more persuasive than estimated, and five times more prominent on other social media platforms. Regarding Russian interference, while their meddling with the election is of serious concern for national security, its actual effect on the election is heavily disputed. A study published from Nature Journal argued that, while the exact volume of content planted by Russia was shockingly high, the total impact of such content was incredibly limited, with an estimated 1% of users accounting for 70% of all exposure to Russian propaganda[7]. The study further finds that the vast majority of exposure was concentrated among highly partisan republicans – voters who were very likely going to vote for Trump anyway. Now, none of this is to suggest that this propaganda is harmless, nor that toxic internet environments have not, in many ways, corroded politics, but we should be precise when understanding what is being corroded. Trump did not win in 2016 because millions of Americans bought into Russian disinformation. And as shall be shown, although the battlefield for politics had shifted to social media, the weapons used by candidates – such as campaign ads – have remained largely the same. And the motivational factors for the electorate appear largely unchanged.

The dramatic role of social media in modern campaigns may overshadow the centralizing importance traditional campaign strategies, namely TV ads, still have. Across the four major campaigns, McCain, Obama, Hillary, and Trump spent billions of dollars on advertisement spots. Analyzing these ads reveals the exact limits of social media, as they reveal what remains permanently pressing to the American electorate, even as social media changes the landscape.

Obama's historic 2008 victory was won, in large part, through concrete and relevant messaging. Obama's campaign ads framed McCain as too closely aligned with the, then very unpopular, Bush Administration. In 'Fundamentals', McCain is quoted as saying that he still believes that "the fundamentals of our economy are strong." The ad ends with the memorable line, "How can John McCain fix our economy… if he doesn't understand it's broken?"[9] Another ad titled 'Same' connected McCain to Bush's foreign policy, legislation, and economic ignorance. Obama is pitched in this ad, as he was throughout his entire 2008 campaign, as 'The Change We Need.'[15] McCain's campaign clearly knew these sentiments were pressing for the American people, and worked to counter the narrative Obama's campaign team were creating of a prospective McCain administration. In 'Original Mavericks', McCain and his running-mate Sarah Palin were framed as the *real* agents of change Washington needed, as stories are shared of each of them fighting unpopular GOP policies[13]. Another ad, 'Celeb' Framed Obama as a disingenuous celebrity, whose popularity contradicted his ineffective economic plans[5]. On election day however, Obama's narrative won out, and much as his victory was aided by the internet, it was grounded on concrete issues. Politico reported on the day of the election that, per AP exit polls, the economy was the #1 issue for 62% of polled voters[10].

Eight years after his decisive victory, Obama's winning messaging was used against his own party by Donald Trump. Change as the internet did, the motivational factors for the American electorate did not. Trump's campaign messaged fervently on the economic damage a prospective Clinton Administration would result in. In 'Two Americas', Clinton's plans for the country are framed as crushing the middle class, raising government spending, and destroying the job market, as being 'more of the same, but worse'; Trump's plans, however, are framed as being beneficial for the economy, as providing 'change that makes America great again.'[18]

Interestingly, the Clinton Campaign did not use much of their campaign ads to message on the economy, and change was hardly mentioned at all. In fact, Hillary Clinton's political career was celebrated in ads such as 'All the good[3]' and '30 years of experience.[17]' Clinton's attack ads targeted an issue that was *thought* to be a major issue of the election: Donald Trump's rhetoric. In 'Mirrors,' Teenage girls are shown listening to offensive and derogatory comments made by Trump throughout his career in the public-eye, all while sentimental, homey music plays in the background.[11] Another ad, 'sacrifice,' employed a similar strategy by displaying offensive remarks Trump made regarding the military.[14] All these ads attempted to draw an emotive disconnect between Clinton and Trump: while Clinton had a career of public service to be proud of, Trump only served himself. In the end however, to the surprise of most analysts, Trump's hard messaging on objective issues won out against Clinton's personality politics. Per CNN day-of exit polling, Trump was trusted slightly more (48%-46%) with regard to handling the economy; couple that with the fact that 62% of polled voters also thought the country was going in the wrong direction[8], and it is not hard to see why Trump won. Ideologically distinct as Obama and Trump are, it is interesting to see how they both leveraged the same issues to win the White House. Though they both utilized social media (Trump's twitter presence was, and is, a core part of his general ethos), their most prominent messaging remained focused on concrete issues relevant to everyday Americans.

As should be clear, the advent of the internet has seriously changed how political issues are debated, but it has not changed what issues matter. Both Obama and Trump campaigned, and won, on issues that were as important in the 2010s as they were in the 1980s, 70s, and 60s. Concerned as we should be on the impact propaganda has on the democratic process, we should rest assured the issues central to American politics are largely immune from propaganda

techniques. Americans know when the economy is doing poorly, and, for the most part, have had a good sense of when change is needed in Washington. No amount of propaganda can change their minds on those realities.

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