Debunking Myths about the American Presidential Elections of 2016 and Failures in the Social Sciences

ERIC BECKETT WEAVER

Debreceni Egyetem, Politikatudományi és Szociológiai Intézet, Politikatudományi Tanszék

ABSTRACT

Throughout the campaign and following the elections of 2016, the two major political parties cherished stories about what happened, and why it happened. Some of these stories have some basis in fact, while others are completely mythical, and nevertheless believed. These stories, or myths, arise from the political desires and belief systems of those who tell them. In what follows we will examine these stories in the lights of the facts.

KEYWORDS: *American Presidential Elections, media bias, silent majority, Russian interference, myths, conspiracy theories, popular vote, pollsters, social sciences*

Introduction

Even before the presidential campaign of 2016 began, certain themes resonated in the American public. Some of these themes, such as that of a "silent majority" have deep histories on both the right and the left of the American political spectrum. Others were comparatively new, but resonated with the public because of prior experiences. But whether based on new or old themes, the stories people have been telling since the elections have taken on extra significance because of the election results.

The elections of 2016 will surely be among the most controversial of American history, not least because of the stories told about them by candidates, and rumors that continue to be spread in and by the public. These stories, which have taken a life of their own, have become widely believed myths, and even dearly cherished beliefs, but these stories differ greatly depending on which side the voter stands. The differences are so great that it is in some cases possible to determine an individual's political viewpoints based solely on the stories she or he tells, without ever asking which party the person supported. To outsiders, these stories are so outlandish as to appear to be nothing more than conspiracy theories.

The elections and conspiracy theories of the American left

The first such myth we will address is that of who actually won the presidential election, and is held by those who opposed Donald J. Trump's presidency. Many Americans who oppose Trump more-or-less openly suggest that he came to power because of foreign and domestic conspiracies against the Democratic candidate for President, Hillary Clinton who actually would have or, in some versions, actually did win the election. In support of their belief in a foreign conspiracy, such people point to Russian hacking of the Democratic Party headquarters and the release of Hillary Clinton's and her aids' personal emails by *WikiLeaks*. People who believe that the election was stolen by a foreign power also point to the applause that broke out on the floor of the Russian parliament, the Duma, when Republican candidate Donald J. Trump's victory was announced, and to the all-too-apparent support Trump enjoyed from Russian President Vladimir Putin throughout the campaign. Most recently, one of Trump's appointees was forced to resign because of improper (and possibly illegal) communication with the Russian Ambassador before Trump took office. Other contacts between Trump's people and Russian operatives are also under investigation (Schmidt – Mazzetti – Apuzzo 2017, Shane – Kramer 2017).

But other related claims are made by Trump's critics with no evidence. Such is the rumor that Russian espionage was carried out with great precision by hacking voting machines at the level of individual districts in certain states. To date, not a shred of evidence has been produced to support this or other claims of foreign interference through electronic stuffing of ballot boxes or changing the vote count.

The idea of a domestic conspiracy is related to the publication of emails, and the FBI's investigation of Hilary Clinton for allegedly divulging national security secrets while using her private email address. This charge, and Republicans' insistence that Clinton was a criminal, had served as a drag on Clinton's campaign until July 2016, when the FBI announced it had found that Clinton had committed no crime. At that moment Clinton's poll ratings improved until October 28th, just twelve days before the election, when F.B.I. Director James B. Comey announced that the agency had re-opened the Clinton investigation because of a cache of emails found during the ongoing investigation of criminal sexual misconduct allegedly committed by former Representative Anthony Weiner (Dem.) of New York. Weiner is married to Huma Abedin, the vice-chair of Hillary Clinton's campaign, who separated from Weiner at the end of August, 2016. At the announcement of the re-opening of the investigation, Clinton's poll numbers dropped precipitously until November 6th, just two days before the election, when Comey informed members of Congress that there was no indication that Clinton had violated the law (Apuzzo – Schmidt – Goldman 2016). The fact that President Trump has asked Comey to stay on as F.B.I. Director is seen by some as further evidence that Comey was not carrying out his job, but trying to undermine Clinton. For some, Trump's support of Comey is damning. Some fear

that the F.B.I., which is now investigating ties between the Russian secret services and Trump's campaign team, will cover up Trump's wrongdoings (Zapotosky – Nakashima – Miller 2017).

In support of the claim that Clinton was on her way to winning the elections, people who believe in domestic and foreign conspiracies point out that Clinton actually received "nearly three million more votes" than Trump, and claim that the election was stolen. In fact, Clinton did indeed get over 2,868,000 more votes than Trump. In percentage terms, Clinton took roughly 48% of the electorate to Trump's 45.9%, while slightly over 6% of votes went to third-party candidates. But this makes little difference because it is electoral votes that count, not popular votes. To win the presidency, a candidate needs to take 270 electoral votes. At the Electoral College, Trump took 304 electoral votes against Clinton's 227, and Clinton conceded defeat as soon as it was clear that Trump had won the electoral vote. This concession ought to have laid the matter to rest.

However, just four years before this election a most prominent individual called into question the Electoral College system. It was precisely President Donald J. Trump who tweeted back in 2012 "The electoral college is a disaster for a democracy" (Wang 2016). These words are now echoed by people who are dissatisfied with Trump's victory, most notably including Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Conway 2017).

Despite the widespread belief to the contrary, there is no telling whether Clinton would have won the election if it were determined by popular votes and not electoral votes. Both Clinton and Trump were among the least popular candidates ever to run for the presidency. Clinton is perhaps the least dynamic speaker to run for the office in modern times. And as Trump and his campaign team pointed out, they designed their campaign to win the most electoral votes. If the rules had been different and the election went to the candidate who won the popular vote, Trump would have spent more time and resources campaigning in more populous states trying to get the majority of the popular vote, rather than the majority of the electors. It is thus certainly untenable to assume that Clinton would have won the election merely because she won the popular vote under this election system (Nelson 2016).

Mapping Results

While Democrats and anti-Trump conservatives can take solace, or find a source of righteous outrage in the fact that Clinton got more votes than Trump, a closer look at the map of election results should disturb them deeply. What appears is a fringe of Democratic blue with a massive center of Republican red. From the perspective of states alone, Clinton took the West Coast including Nevada and Hawaii (but excluding Alaska), the northern Atlantic coastline down to and including Virginia, as well as

Minnesota, Illinois, Colorado, and New Mexico. The rest of the map, however, is Trump country – solid red. If votes are calculated not at the state but at the county level, the map turns even more dramatically red, with the urban regions voting for Clinton appearing as islands and archipelagos in a red Republican sea. With county-level mapping, some states that voted overwhelmingly for Clinton, such as New York, Nevada, Oregon, Washington and Virginia, turn almost solid red with a few blue patches. These blue patches represent urban areas which went for Clinton. The majority of voters live in urban areas, which is why Clinton won these states. But these states' greater landmass is comprised of rural areas, and rural voters overwhelmingly supported Trump, hence the vast area of red on county-level maps (2016 Brilliant Maps). This feeds into the greatest of the myths held by Trump's supporters.

Myths of the American Right – the Silent Majority

A longstanding myth held by those on the American right is that they represent the "silent majority" (a term most famously used by President Nixon). These days the "silent majority" is sometimes used as a code for "real" Americans, that is those who were born in the country as opposed to the more than 40 million citizens – about 13% of the total population – who were born abroad (Dews 2013).[1] According to those who believe in this myth, the left is able to dominate public discourse through a stranglehold on the media, but the majority of Americans are actually conservatives, or even right-wingers. For those who believe this, the elections of 2016 appear to be a vindication, because the Republican Party kept control of both houses of Congress and the Republican candidate won the presidency. But after eight years of Democratic control of the White House, and at the tail end of the great recession that started in 2008, is it really so surprising that the Republican candidate won? The vast areas in which Trump won include the most economically depressed parts of the United States.[2]

In this light, it seems odd that the Democrats were actually able to increase the number of seats they hold in both the House and the Senate in 2016. Also, if the majority of Americans are conservatives, how is it that so many of them voted to legalize marihuana and to raise the minimum wage in referenda held in states and localities across the nation (Chandler 2016)? These are not conservative policies,

---

[1] Nixon merely meant those who supported his policies. The term silent majority has since taken on a different, more exclusionary meaning. For examples of the new use of the term for Trump, see: Borchers 2016, Whitaker 2016, Starnes 2016, and Galen 2017.

[2] The point about despair turning voters in impoverished regions away from Clinton, the status-quo candidate, has been made repeatedly, perhaps best of all in *The Guardian*'s documentary series *Anywhere but Washingto*n; and for a local example, see Swayne 2016.

nor are they policies that Trump backed, yet they passed even in areas which voted for Trump.

Voter fraud?

The most obvious problem with the silent majority idea is that a clear majority of American voters cast their ballots against Trump. If the majority of Americans are right-wingers, why did they vote for Hillary Clinton? Diehard believers in the silent majority theory have an explanation for this. Just as the left believes fraud was committed to get Trump into office, Trump's supporters claim that Clinton got millions of votes from people who were not eligible to vote at all. President Trump himself has repeatedly claimed that three to five million illegal aliens voted in the elections – and he first claimed that illegal aliens would vote during his campaign. There are indeed millions of illegal immigrants in the United States – perhaps 11-12 million by some estimates – and it is possible to register to vote without providing proof of citizenship in many states. If Trump's allegation about millions of them were voting were true, it could just be that Clinton received millions of illegal votes. The problem with this theory, however, is that Trump has not provided a shred of evidence to prove it, and neither has anyone else (House – Dennis 2017). This, then, appears to be an indefensible fallback position for those – including Trump – who simply refuse to believe that the majority voted against him. *The New York Times* sees Trump's unsubstantiated claim about illegal immigrants voting as so outrageous, that the paper has called it a "lie" in print (Shear – Huetteman 2017). Yet according to a poll taken before the election, some 84% of Republicans believe there is widespread voter fraud in the United States, and 60% of them believe illegal aliens voted in large numbers in 2016 (Corbett-Davies – Konitzer – Rothschild 2016). Thus, Trump's claim merely reinforces a belief already widely held among Republicans, and the mainstream media's rejection of Trump's claim because it is unsubstantiated, is seen by many such people as further proof of a media bias against Trump, and indirect evidence that the majority of citizens actually back Trump and the conservative agenda.

Bias in the Media

Then there are the predominately right-wing criticisms of the media. At first glance the claim that there was a media bias against Trump appears credible. President Trump and his supporters regularly mention that the media is massively biased against him. As a candidate, Trump depicted the media as elitist and out of touch with the American people. As President, Trump has gone even further. At a news briefing following revelations about connections between his staff and the Russian

government, Trump called the assembled reporters "dishonest people," and accused them of telling lies. Later he tweeted that the media "is the enemy of the American people" (Grynbaum 2017).

During the campaign there did appear to be a bias against Trump in the print media. The majority of major American newspapers which took a stand, on the right and the left alike, endorsed Clinton in editorials before the election (Harrington – Berke 2016). But analyses of the volume and the content of the print media tell a different story. Donald Trump dominated, featuring in more than twice as many headlines than Hillary Clinton. A survey of the content of these stories found that no candidate had a significant advantage. That is, the percentage of negative and positive mentions was roughly equal for both candidates. The difference was only in overall coverage, which overwhelmingly concentrated on Trump (Sides 2016). A survey of electronic coverage gives similar results. In total, over the course of 2016, Trump got 1,477,719 mentions on the major television networks. No other candidate received nearly as much coverage. Hillary Clinton got well less than half as many mentions – just 651,277 (2016 Campaign Television Tracker).

As an explanation, some analysts point out that Trump was simply more newsworthy than Clinton. He shocks and disturbs, but his entertainment value is unquestionable. One of Trump's critics, *Fox News*' (then) reporter Megyn Kelly, mentioned that ratings would soar whenever Trump appeared on a television show, and that as a result reporters were tempted to simply allow him to speak without interruption (Kelly 2016a). Kelly also made the thus-far unsubstantiated claim that some media hosts would inform Trump about the difficult questions he was going to get in upcoming interviews (Wemple 2016, Kelly 2016b). A similar allegation about Clinton has proven to be true. CNN's reporter Donna Brazile resigned from the network after *WikiLeaks* revealed that she had given debate questions to members of Clinton's campaign team before the debate (Grynbaum 2016).

While the quality of Trump and Clinton's coverage was about equal, and although editors of the quality daily papers backed Clinton, there was a clear tilt in the overall volume of coverage towards Trump. The difference in social media was also unbalanced. Trump got 4.9 million mentions on Twitter to Clinton's 2.7 million. Thus, there was a clear bias in volume for Trump, even on social media. Indeed, some claim that analysis of social media was better at predicting Trump's victory than more traditional polling methods (Perez 2016).

The Failure of Pollsters Alone, or of the Social Sciences in General?

This brings us to the last of the stories told about the 2016 elections – the failure of pollsters to predict the results of the elections. Indeed, in the last week of the campaign most polls showed Clinton had a lead, though Trump was gaining ground

in most of them as well. Only two major polls, the *LA Times*' poll and *The Investors Daily Briefing* survey, showed Trump leading. Most infamously, the aggregate of all major polls done out by Nate Silver's *RealClearPolitics*, gave Clinton a three point lead the day before the election. This was a clear failure. Debate will go on for some time to come dissecting reasons for social science's failure to predict this election, as well as the results of the Greek elections of 2015, the Brexit referendum, and the Colombia Peace plebiscite (e.g. Jamrisko – Dopp 2016, Kirk – Scott 2016). The entire polling profession is re-examining old assumptions and methodologies, and this seems likely to bring major changes to sociology and political science alike in years to come.

While pollsters came out with egg on their faces, one man shone. The historian Allan Lichtman, who has correctly predicted the results of the presidential elections since 1984, used his unique method to predict many months in advance that Trump would win the elections, and stuck with his prediction regardless of changes in the polls (Stevenson 2016). An examination of Lichtman's method, and his unrestrained criticism of pollsters, may well contribute to a much-needed renewal of the social sciences. Yet here again it is worth repeating that Clinton actually did win the popular vote, and in that sense – and in that sense alone – pollsters did not get it so wrong.

This is, however, is no reason for satisfaction in the social sciences. Other than complacency, one thing above all can prevent a rejuvenation of the field – the uncritical repetition of partisan myths about popular opinion, and the meaning of the 2016 elections.

Closure

Regardless of the state of the social sciences, however, these myths will live on. Without a thorough investigation of the facts, and their presentation to the American public, these myths will continue to provide the distorting lenses through which Americans view reality. Regardless of the findings, the FBI's investigation of the alleged penetration of the American political system by Russian agents, and bi-partisan congressional examinations of what actually did happen in 2016 could be decisive. And here social sciences could again prove their worth by carrying out unbiased examinations of what really happened. If the results of these investigations are widely accepted as true, the myths from 2016 will not disappear entirely, but might shrink into amorphous themes that could resonate for all Americans regardless of political affiliation.

Such themes include that of a media bias, which is even now shared by the American right and left alike, in different manners. This could have the effect of making average Americans more conscientious and cautious media consumers. Another such theme is that of the silent majority of decent Americans whose voice is

not adequately represented by the current political system. The third, related, theme is that of the need for a reform of the voting process in individual states across the nation. While Democrats and Republicans disagree about what is going wrong (illegal aliens voting – majorities losing the election), the grassroots of both parties agree that the wishes of the majority of Americans should be respected, and are not adequately served by the current system. The final theme is the perennial one of foreign intervention in the political process, which could serve to unify Americans, otherwise divided in so many ways, to agree to set aside their differences and stand against a commonly perceived external threat.

Bibliography

2016 *Brilliant Maps* County Map. http://brilliantmaps.com/2016-county-election-map/ (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

2016 Campaign Television Tracker. http://television.gdeltproject.org/cgi-bin/iatv_campaign2016/iatv_campaign2016 (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Apuzzo, M., Schmidt, M. S., and Goldman, A. (2016): Emails Warrant No New Action against Hillary Clinton, F.B.I. Director Says. *The New York Times*, 6 November. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/07/us/politics/hilary-clinton-male-voters-donald-trump.html (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Borchers, C. (2016): The Donald Trump campaign takes its "silent majority" case to the media. *The Washington Post*, 6 October. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/10/06/the-donald-trump-campaign-takes-its-silent-majority-case-to-the-media/?utm_term=.391c8dfd37de (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Chandler, A. (2016): Minimum-Wage Increases: Another big winner on election night. *The Atlantic*, 9 November 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/11/minimum-wage-2016/507158/ (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Conway, M. (2017): Ruth Bader Ginsburg: I'd like to change the Electoral College. *Politico*, 7 February. http://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/ruth-bader-ginsburg-electoral-college (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Corbett-Davies, S., Konitzer, T., and Rothschild, D. (2016): Poll: 60% of Republicans believe illegal immigrants vote; 43% believe people vote using dead people's names. *The Washington Post*, 24 October. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/10/24/poll-60-of-republicans-believe-illegal-immigrants-vote-43-believe-people-vote-using-dead-peoples-names/?utm_term=.7ad93f035b96 (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

TEMATIKUS TANULMÁNYOK – Demokratikus választások

Dews, F. (2013): What Percentage of US Population is Foreign Born? *Brookings Now*, 3 October. At: https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2013/10/03/what-percentage-of-u-s-population-is-foreign-born/ (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Galen, R. (2017): The Silent Majority Stands with Trump and DeVos. *Washington Examiner*, 1 February. http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/the-silent-majority-stands-with-trump-and-devos/article/2613658 (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Grynbaum, M. M. (2016): CNN Parts Ways with Donna Brazile, a Hillary Clinton Supporter. *The New York Times*, 31 October. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/01/us/politics/donna-brazile-wikileaks-cnn.html (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Grynbaum, M. M. (2017): Trump calls the News Media the "Enemy of the American People". *The New York Times*, 17 February. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/business/trump-calls-the-news-media-the-enemy-of-the-people.html (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Harrington, R. and Berke, J. (2016): Here are all the major newspapers that have endorsed Hillary Clinton for president. *Business Insider*, 7 November. http://www.businessinsider.com/hillary-clinton-endorsements-newspaper-editorial-board-president-2016-2016-9/#the-washington-post-hillary-clinton-has-the-potential-to-be-an-excellent-president-of-the-united-states-and-we-endorse-her-without-hesitation-3 (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

House, B., and Dennis, S. T. (2017): Trump Says Undocumented Immigrants Cost him the Popular Vote. *Bloomberg Politics*, 24 January. https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-01-24/trump-again-claims-undocumented-immigrants-cost-him-popular-vote (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Jamrisko, M. and Dopp, T. (2016): Failed Polls Call into Question the Profession of Prognostication. *Chicago Tribune*, 9 November. http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/ct-presidential-polls-failed-20161109-story.html (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Kelly M. (2016a): *Fox News*. 4 November. http://mediamatters.org/video/2016/11/04/megyn-kelly-criticizes-wall-wall-media-coverage-trump-foxs-competitors/214329 (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Kelly, M. (2016b): *Settle for More*. New York: Harper

Kirk, A. and Scott, P. (2016): How wrong were the polls in predicting the US election and why did they fail to see Trump's win? *The Telegraph*, 17 November. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/09/how-wrong-were-the-polls-in-predicting-the-us-election/ (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

TEMATIKUS TANULMÁNYOK – Demokratikus választások

Nelson, L. (2016): Trump claims he could have also won the popular vote, if he wanted to, *Politico*. 21 December. http://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/trump-electoral-college-win-tweets-232879 (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Perez, S. (2016): Analysis of social media did a better job at predicting Trump's win than the polls. *Tech Crunch* online, November 10. https://techcrunch.com/2016/11/10/social-media-did-a-better-job-at-predicting-trumps-win-than-the-polls/ (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Schmidt, M. S., Mazzetti, M., and Apuzzo, M. (2017): Trump Campaign Aids had Repeated Contacts with Russian Intelligence. *The New York Times*, 14 February. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/14/us/politics/russia-intelligence-communications-trump. action=click&contentCollection=Opinion&module=Trending&version=Full&region=Marginalia&pgtype=article (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Shane, S. and Kramer, A. E. (2017): Trump Team's Links to Russia Crisscross in Washington. *The New York Times*, 3 March. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/03/us/politics/trump-russia-links-washington.html (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Shear, M. D. and Huetteman, E. (2017): Trump Repeats Lie About Popular Vote in Meeting With Lawmakers. *The New York Times*, 23 January. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/us/politics/donald-trump-congress-democrats.html (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Sides, J. (2016): "Is the Media Biased Toward Clinton or Trump? Here is some actual hard data". *The Washington Post*, 20 September. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/09/20/is-the-media-biased-toward-clinton-or-trump-heres-some-actual-hard-data/?utm_term=.6b4d6fd07987 (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Starnes, T. (2016): A Loud Cheer for the Silent Majority that Lifted Trump to Victory. *Fox News*, 9 November. http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2016/11/09/loud-cheer-for-silent-majority-that-lifted-trump-to-victory.html (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Stevenson, P. W. (2016): "This Professor has Predicted every Presidential Election since 1984". *The Washington Post*, 12 May. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/05/12/this-professor-has-predicted-every-presidential-election-since-1984-hes-still-trying-to-figure-out-2016/?utm_term=.a6ff7c17df38 (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Swayne, M. (2016): Trump did better where 'deaths of despair' were highest. *Centre Daily Times*, 8 December. http://www.centredaily.com/living/liv-columns-blogs/article119636503.html (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

TEMATIKUS TANULMÁNYOK – Demokratikus választások

Wang, A. B. (2016): Trump in 2012: "The electoral college is a disaster for a democracy." *The Washington Post*, 9 November. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2016/live-updates/general-election/real-time-updates-on-the-2016-election-voting-and-race-results/trump-in-2012-the-electoral-college-is-a-disaster-for-a-democracy/?utm_term=.bc442d2b9424 (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Wemple, E. (2016): Megyn Kelly: "TV hosts" colluded with Trump to fake tough coverage. *The Washington Post*, 21 November. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2016/11/21/megyn-kelly-tv-hosts-colluded-with-trump-to-fake-tough-coverage/?utm_term=.497ea1138028 (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Whitaker, M. (2016): Editorial: Rural America and a Silent Majority Powered Trump to a Win. *NBC News*, 9 November. http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/2016-election-day/analysis-rural-america-silent-majority-powered-trump-win-n681221 (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)

Zapotosky, M., Nakashima, E., and Miller, G. (2017): FBI Director James Comey to stay on in Trump administration. *The Washington Post*, 24 January. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/fbi-director-james-comey-to-say-on-in-trump-administration/2017/01/24/033d3bc8-e246-11e6-a453-19ec4b3d09ba_story.html?utm_term=.831d38d20862 (Last accessed: 15 March 2017)