

In the face of Trump's rhetoric of "fear and anger", 2016 is not likely to be another "hope and vision" election

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*Anger and fear? Hope and vision? Both are time-honored approaches used by candidates heading into a major election. July's Republican and Democratic conventions offer combinations galore. This time around, though, **Ron Pruessen** wonders whether the choices made in Cleveland and Philadelphia will do the trick. Will Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton have an uphill battle against electorate exhaustion and/or boredom generated by an already endless campaign, which has been further compounded by the disdain being voiced about both nominees?*

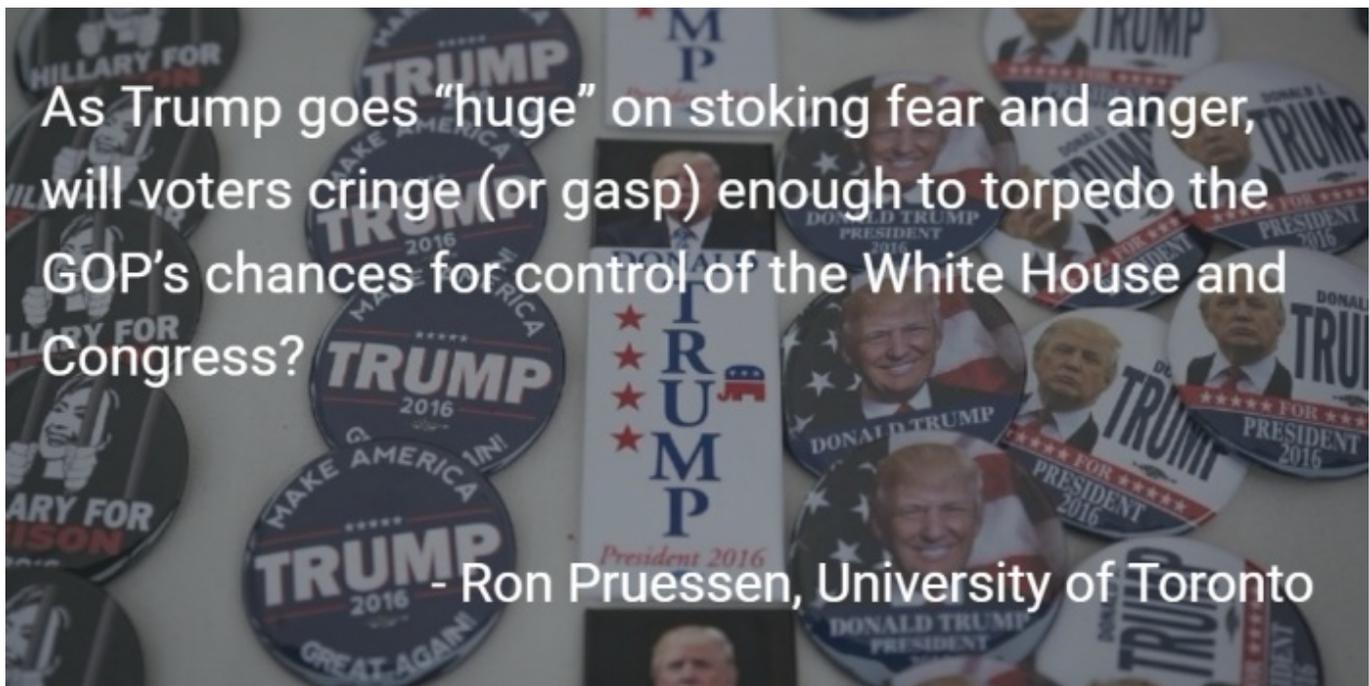


Gladiator season is here. The Rio Olympics are weeks away, but the Republican and Democratic conventions are firing up the US election arena right now. It's not at all clear, however, that there's enough adrenalin – or credibility – to power a satisfying triple header. Rio has the Zika virus, Brazilian political unrest, and previous doping scandals creating doubts. Cleveland and Philadelphia have dark shadows, as well. An unusual number of both Republicans and Democrats are voicing doubts about their nominees – and voters in general may be succumbing to election fatigue and/or alienation. (Only 30 million Americans watched Donald Trump's acceptance speech – compared to 38 million for John McCain in 2008.) Given the nature of modern American campaigning, citizens may be feeling like Brazil-bound athletes who never stopped training after London 2012. If you're not vying for a gold medal, though, intense motivation can degenerate into boredom – or disgust with a political process that has launched current stars.

The candidates will keep going, of course. They wouldn't have gotten this far without a tapeworm hunger that spawns adrenalin – and no presidential nominee has ever died along the road to Election Day. (William Henry Harrison did to typhoid fever only thirty-one days after his 1841 inauguration – the bacteria likely emerging from a fetid swamp close to the White House. Pluck your own Washington metaphor out of that!) So Clinton will forge on in spite of e-mail missteps. (Allusions to "Tricky Dick" Nixon, anyone?: "Would you buy a used server from this woman?") And Trump will keep crisscrossing the landscape in his Darth Vader-like helicopter – in spite of hostility and/or aloofness by rivals and GOP elders, in spite of his wife Melania's plagiarism. (Couldn't the Trump Corporation crew have at least found some Nancy Reagan text to cut and paste?)

But what about voters? Will they have the stamina to engage with the campaign until November – enough faith in the electoral process to resist apathy or alienation? Will this be another replay (or even worsening) of an old American pattern – given the way voter turnout rates of 80 percent in the late 19th century have shrunk to 50-60 percent averages over the past century?

The candidates will obviously try to fan any fading embers – and they will be vigorously aided by media empires looking for drama and ratings. The Cleveland convention made it clear that one script will be especially favored: prodding fear and/or anger to summon up adrenalin. Trump and company used Orlando and Nice, Dallas and Baton Rouge to quicken voter anxiety beyond Cleveland's Quicken Loans arena. Legal and illegal immigrants from Latin America and Muslim countries remained special targets ("Build that wall!"), even if less explicitly highlighted than Democrats accused of treasonous neglect of law enforcement and terrorist infiltration. (One call for Hillary Clinton to face a firing squad, but many for jail time.)



Democrats – in their Philadelphia convention and beyond – will certainly push back by depicting Trump himself as the great national and global danger. That is already well underway, of course, with Senators Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and even Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg joining the chorus.

The fear/anger/adrenalin formula is time-honored. In the midst of the McCarthy era, Dwight Eisenhower rallied voters by criticizing the Democrats for supposed weakness on communism; Lyndon Johnson used television images (the girl, the daisy, the mushroom cloud) to paint Barry Goldwater as reckless; Richard Nixon gave voice to a “silent majority” infuriated by antiwar protesters and hippies; George H. W. Bush turned to “Willie Horton” ads to lambaste Michael Dukakis as “soft on crime”; etc.

The strategy doesn’t always work, to be sure – witness the failed efforts to make much of John F. Kennedy’s Catholicism; Bill Clinton’s philandering and financial finagling (OK, there’s life in that meme yet); and Barack Obama’s birth certificate. But candidates always seem to see more opportunity than risk in agitating voters. November’s election results may actually give insight into whether there is a line that is dangerous to cross. As Trump goes “huge” on stoking fear and anger, will voters cringe (or gasp) enough to torpedo the GOP’s chances for control of the White House and Congress?

But what about the “hope and vision” option – which is as time-honored as “fear and anger”? (Obama’s “Yes, we can”; Bill Clinton, an actual “Man from Hope” [Arkansas]; Reagan’s “Morning in America”; plus the New Frontier, New Deal, New Freedom, and Square Deal banners unfurled throughout the 20th century.) It’s not a very likely option in 2016. Trump may imagine he’s stepping up with his “Make America Great Again” and “America First” slogans (as plagiarized as his wife’s speech, of course). But Trump’s vision is too dark, too Game of Thrones-ish to qualify. Clinton will try very hard and she will leave an impressive rhetorical record. But with the important exception of those excited about finally seeing a woman in the White House, voters will likely be in a skeptical (or bored) mood. Obama has drawn beautiful water from this particular well, but leaves office in a “what might have been” mist. He has had very real achievements, but obstructionist Republicans and his own inevitable human limitations have helped push the pause button on the “hope” script.

In the meantime, the “winter is coming” storyline rages on.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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