



Putting Trumpmania into Context

As we steadily approach the 58th US presidential election on 8th November 2016, it seems that one candidate, in particular, is stealing the limelight. This individual is Donald Trump, a proven businessman in real estate who has stirred up a mixture of both support and hatred due to his controversial statements. His anti-immigration rhetoric, which has targeted the Muslim and Mexican communities, has resonated with large segments of the US population placing him in line to possibly win the Republican nomination. Trump and Obama before him are mere players in a larger political system with the position of the president being a very restrictive role with very little teeth. Once again the mantra of change is being thrown around and a realistic picture of the US political system is necessary.

The reality of the US political system is such that the US President actually holds very little legislative power and is bound by numerous centers of power. The financial sector is a huge stakeholder in the US. Consequently, they play a significant role in elections as candidates obtain finances from them to fund their extravagant presidential campaigns. For instance, in his 2008 campaign, Obama received over 1 million dollars from individuals within Goldman Sachs along with similar amounts from other financial firms. This is done in order to benefit these companies through certain policies which end up creating a net benefit to those individual firms, at the expense of others in society. This was confirmed by a study conducted by Princeton University who analyzed 1,779 policy issues from 1981 to 2002 and concluded that the demands of rich businesses and individuals are implemented more often than those from the average citizen [1]. The US public is a lot more aware of the funneling of finance towards the rich, this is why candidates such as Bernie Sanders are getting significant support.

The position of the US president is limited by a number of actors within the political system, such as Congress itself. The Congress not only write, debate and pass bills for them to be approved by both houses and then the President, the members also act as “policemen” who are able to take the President to account on his policies. In fact, the US president is not a lawmaker in the US, but is instead the one who accepts or vetoes any decision made by the Senate and House of Representatives. If we look at Obama’s term, we can see that he has stood by many of the policies of his predecessor, despite his initial rhetoric being different. For example, Obama may have drawn down US forces, but he continues the US role in maintaining influence and occupation abroad. For this Obama even retained Bush’s Defence Secretary Robert Gates in his first term. The role of the US president is largely transitional, in the sense that it oversees the specific challenges the US is facing at the time, the role doesn’t influence the underlying trends.

When we take a look at past presidents who have taken office, we have seen that they have not kept their promises. For instance, whilst Obama has fulfilled 45% of his campaign promises, he has compromised on 25% of his campaign promises and has

broken 25% of his promises, the most notable being the closure of Guantanamo bay, removing oil and gas loopholes and ending income tax for old people earning less than \$50,000. On the issue of Iraq where Obama was critical of Bush's intervention, Obama maintained Bush's policy of a staged withdrawal whilst also ensuring political stabilization. In fact, he re-intervened in 2014 in response to the rise of ISIS, making clear that the plan all along was to maintain US presence in order to keep Iraq within its sphere of influence. In fact, under Obama's government, the US had to play its hand in multiple issues across the Muslim world including Egypt, Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, Libya and most prominently, Syria.

All of this demonstrates that candidates are not required to stick to their promises, and in many key areas have broken them.

So we must ask the question, why Donald Trump is so popular in the electoral race for US president? Trump like many of his predecessors has tapped into some of the major sentiments amongst the masses. Trumps support is twice as strong among those without college degrees. They are the ones whose jobs have gone overseas, not the college-educated professionals. The steel workers, the coal miners, the autoworkers, they are the ones suffering from trade deals opening up to the globalized economy. Upward mobility, the American dream is not working for them. They feel betrayed by the political leadership of the republicans and democrats and support the wall along the Mexican border to keep Mexicans out.

It is here that Trump has tapped into national sentiment by targeting criticism of America's ills towards Mexicans and Nicaraguans, effectively using racism to deal with economic anxiety. Interestingly Trump can see the problem most Americans have is economic, but he has presented no policies on how he would get Americans into work, aside from building a wall and keeping Muslims out.

Whether Donald Trump makes it to the White House or not, what is certain is the US president is a very restricted role and promoting US interests abroad is something all presidents will engage in, despite their electoral rhetoric.

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- 1) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/15/government-wealthy-study_n_5154879.html
- 2) <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/promises/obameter/browse/>