

PodMag January 2017

Karen Foley:

Hello, I'm Karen Foley and welcome to the January PodMag, the audio news magazine from Arts & Social Science at the Open University.

In this edition we're focusing on the American Presidential Election. Now that the dust is settling I asked Richard Heffernan, Agnes Czajka and William Brown about their thoughts in terms of this as a democratic process, a skilled tactical political campaign and about how Trump as President may fare as leader within an international context.

First though I have a few news items to update you on.

If you like the faculty Facebook page you'll be aware that we've had a co-production with BBC about the Brontes which is called To Walk Invisible. It's had excellent reviews and generated some great feedback on Twitter.

You can catch up if you've missed it on iPlayer but there's also some video on OpenLearn which for those of you who don't know is an excellent source of material that's available to everyone and often enhances things like these programmes.

People's History of LGBT programme currently is in production and it's due to air in the late spring. The production company are collecting stories on a public website right now and they're looking to do a final push to get crowd sourced quirky, sad, funny, emotional stories in. So if there's an image that you can contribute about your life as an LGBT person then you can visit the website which is: peopleshistoryoflgbt.co.uk or email: history@7wonder.co.uk

To keep up-to-date with news make sure you've liked the faculty Facebook page and that you also follow us on Twitter.

So turning now to the American Election I'll begin by interviewing Richard Heffernan to get some understanding about the electoral process works.

Richard thank you for talking to me today. I first wondered if you could outline for us some of the background behind the American Election. So how did Trump become President?

Richard Heffernan:

Trump won the election which was held on 8th November. He won it because he won a majority of electoral college votes. He won 306 votes to 227 votes for Hillary Clinton. He lost the popular vote by 63 million to 65.8 million. So Hillary won in terms of all the people in the Republic voting. In all of the 50 states she won 48% of the vote and he won 46% of the vote. The electoral system in the United States being a Federal Republic is not

based upon becoming president as a result of winning a popular vote coming first in the vote that people cast.

The way you win is by winning a majority of the electoral college votes which are allocated according to a demography population to the 50 states. So, for example, Hillary won California ?? which gave her 55 electoral college votes and Trump won Texas which gave him 36. And Trump won somewhere small, a small state like Wyoming which has only three electoral colleges votes.

So Trump lost the popular vote. He came second in terms of the amount of votes cast because Hillary piled up large majority in places like New York and California and Trump won because he won more states. He won more electoral college votes and he won ones that were expected right up to the wire like Florida, like Ohio, like Wisconsin, like Michigan, like Pennsylvania which were all expected to vote overwhelmingly in some cases for Hillary who was the Democratic candidate.

Karen Foley:

So the voting is very different to the way that it's done in the UK. What does this tell us then about American politics?

Richard Heffernan:

Well America is a federation. So there are 50 states that comprise the union. And the federal government has certain powers and state governments have particular powers and they have a written fixed Constitution that determines which authority they have.

So the way that they elect their president who represents them is the Head of the Federal Executive who is the President of the United State and he is elected according to state power. So every citizen votes but the votes are aggregated differently. So in California everybody votes and whatever the result in California they get 55 electoral college votes. So whoever wins Wyoming gets three. So you've got to add them up across the states. And the reason why Trump won is because he won states he wasn't expected to win like Ohio, like Pennsylvania, like Michigan, like Wisconsin.

And in the kind of battle ground states some ten to 15 states where the campaigns devote their attention that is where Trump made a difference. And he won because he persuaded a lot of people who were expected to vote Democratic who had historically voted for people like Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 that they should vote for him and not for Hillary. So he won and now he has a mandate to govern as the Chief Executive.

Karen Foley:

So it's a very tactical way of campaigning. How powerful do you think he'll now be now that he has actually won in his presidency?

Richard Heffernan:

Well the presidency is quite a weak reed in the sense that he or she is restricted from doing certain things by a Constitution that grants citizens powers and rights that are inalienable. And also by a Supreme Court that enforces those rights.

The Congress is elected separately to the president and has to work with the president to make laws. Now Trump is a Republican and Republicans have majority in the House of Representatives and the Senate which represents the United States in the federal government in terms of the legislature. But they are independent and autonomous of him and very few of them ever thought he would become president or backed him to become president. So he's not guaranteed a majority in the Congress.

So Trump will have to work with the Congress. He will be restrained but he will be able to pursue a Republican agenda not least in terms of appointing conservative judges to the federal bench, the Supreme Court which determine many things such as reproductive rights and responsibilities and so on.

So he has a mandate but he has an opposition in the Democrats on Capitol Hill. He also has a lot of people who are slightly uneasy. He's also got a lot of people in the media, intellectual elites, in the universities who are adamantly opposed to him. So he has some difficult days ahead. And we'll have to see whether he is as forthright in terms of trade, in terms of immigration policy as he said he would be. But he has a mandate and we'll have to see how he discharges it. But the presidency, unlike the British Prime Minister, for example, who is guaranteed a parliamentary majority and therefore can pursue an agenda pretty much with the support of the parliament, Trump is not guaranteed the support of Congress.

Karen Foley:

Thanks Richard. That's given us a great insight in to the process.

I now talk to Agnes Czajka about the tactical aspects of the campaign.

I must thank you for talking to me today. I really wanted to focus on your views here about what the American Election shows us about the relationship between electoral processes and society. So firstly I wanted to ask you about the extent to which you think the outcome is part of Trump's. you know, very clever strategic election plan or whether you think that people voted for him because they didn't feel they had a viable alternative?

Agnes Czajka:

That's a really good question. I actually think it's a bit of both. I think Trump ran a very strategic – and very impressive in many ways – campaign. A campaign that appealed to a lot of different people. A campaign that brought people, you know, in to politics that would not necessarily be involved in politics that showed people that they had a place in politics who perhaps didn't think that they did. But I think a lot of the Trump vote was also a vote against Hillary for better or for worse. There are many people who would have normally voted for the Democrats who felt like Hillary Clinton just wasn't an option for them. They were voting against sort of the Clinton legacy. They were voting against

the family that they saw as being sort of an elite family in politics who have controlled political office for far too long, sort of a dynasty. And they wanted to vote for a candidate that positioned himself as an outsider to that.

Karen Foley:

You mentioned that he had a very clever strategic campaign and you were very impressed by that. I think what he did so well was bridge this gap between a politician and the people. And he spent a lot of time aligning himself and his values to certain groups of society that he was hoping to vote for him.

Can you tell us about that relationship between leader and the people and how that plays out in Democratic elections?

Agnes Czajka:

Sure. I mean I think in American politics this is something that is talked about quite a bit. You know, the question of whether people want a leader who is like them, who sort of seems like he's a part of the masses. He's a part of the people. Or whether people want a leader who is different than them, who is, you know, more intelligent than them, more cultured, more well-read and so on. And I think a lot of the Trump campaign hinged on showing that Trump is one of the people. That he is not a part of this traditional political elite. That he is an outsider to politics and that he can, because of that, represent the interest of outsiders who feel like they have been disenfranchised.

And of course I think it's quite interesting that Trump actually is not really an outsider in many ways. He is extremely wealthy. He's part of a very privileged class. But somehow as part of his campaign he managed to convince people that he was one of them. And I think the victory that he got has a lot to do with that.

Karen Foley:

And now of course that he's in power there's a sense about honouring some of those promises he may have made with those particular groups of people. Do you think he's going to deliver on that or do you think this is part of the election process that people are quite happy to forget about?

Agnes Czajka:

I'm not sure if he will deliver on that. I might be a bit cynical. I don't think he will. And I don't think he can actually. His politics while appealing to sort of large chunks of American society were also very deeply polarising. And the election itself was very deeply polarising to American society. It revealed existing polarisations in American society. It revealed the sort of sexism, the racism, the homophobia, all these kinds of things that we all sort of knew existed but perhaps weren't as visible.

And all of these sort of polarisations that came to the fore I'm not sure if Trump is capable or even wants to try to sort of bridge these kinds of gaps between various groups in society. I think from what we have seen following the election were the kinds of appointments that he's thinking of making with the kinds of advisers that he's been

bringing on. It's not the kind of people that seem to be able or want to try to bridge these kinds of gaps and try to build bridges between various groups in society. In fact it's quite the opposite.

So I think that it's difficult to see how he will be able to actually, you know, deal with the polarisation that in many ways he created as part of his election campaign.

Karen Foley:

Agnes Czajka thank you. That's been a really interesting interview.

Agnes Czajka:

Thank you.

Karen Foley:

Finally we look at the implications in terms of international relations and I talked to William Brown about this.

Will, thanks for talking to me today. I'd like to begin by asking you about the implications of the American Election and how this impacts our relations with major powers like Russia and China?

William Brown:

Hi Karen. Well that's a very important question in particular because America's relations with other countries formed an important part of Donald Trump's election campaign. And if the early indications are followed through what seems to be in prospect is of a quite significant shift in the balance of US policy. With attempts to make a rather more co-operative and friendly relationship with Russia about which Donald Trump has spoken very approvingly. But in contrast a more difficult relationship with China.

Particularly over economic questions Trump has been very critical of the balance of benefits from the trading relationship with China. He argues that the cost to American jobs and has threatened to impose tariffs on Chinese imports and so forth. Which would be a significant change from two or three decades in which the US has sought ever closer economic relationship with China.

There are also strategic and security concerns in the South China Sea and the question of the future of Taiwan also promises to be a difficult one with Trump already antagonising the Chinese by speaking to the Taiwanese leader.

Karen Foley:

So what then are some of these wider implications in terms of prospects for things that require international co-operation? I mean thinking about things like climate change and trade?

William Brown:

Yeah. Well I think Trump's stance of putting America first, which is kind of guiding ideas on international relations, do make the question of international co-operation a tricky one. I think if there are more antagonistic relations with countries such as China then it also brings in to question wider areas of co-operation over economic matters particularly in the trade arena but also climate change. Which is an issue where the US and China have struggled for a long time to come to some kind of agreement over how to tackle climate change.

And Trump has signalled a shift in US policy there. He's very critical of the Paris Climate Change Agreement. And I think more broadly the kind of process that we saw really from the end of the Cold War onwards where there were concerted efforts to develop institutions of international governance not only on climate change but over trade, over the nuclear issue. A stance which says we're always going to put America first does make that kind of whole project of international co-operation rather more difficult.

Karen Foley:

So with so many potentials for conflict what are the implications about how foreign policy is actually conducted in the US?

William Brown:

Well I think this is going to be an interesting thing to watch Karen. On the one hand there is the kind of way that Trump operates which is the kind of shoot from the hip approach to making policy statements, often via Twitter. And if that's carried in to office that's really going to be rather unprecedented. He seems, in the transition phase, he seems perfectly willing to make pronouncements on Twitter over quite sensitive and important policy issues. And yet America has a very extensive and institutionalised process for governing foreign policy. So it will be interesting to see how that plays out. Whether Congress and the establishment in the State Department in the Pentagon and so on restricts Trump's room for manoeuvre on foreign policy issues or whether he will continue in the current vein of really kind of charting his own path somewhat off the cuff it would seem.

Karen Foley:

What do you think will happen?

William Brown:

Well I think Congress will prove some kind of constraints on Trump particularly over I think economic issues where a large section of the Republican Party is much more, the Republicans control Congress obviously, much more committed to free trade principles than Trump appears to be. So that may serve as some kind of constraint.

And it also depends on how the team that Trump puts together comes together and whether they are able to, and in what ways they can, influence his position on a whole series of issues.

But I think the uncertainty also is important because many of the US allies are looking with some concern I think at how US policy is unfolding. It may at the moment at least make America look like a rather less predictable ally than it has been for some time.

Karen Foley:

No, absolutely. And a very interesting space to observe certainly over the next couple of months. William Brown thank you so much for that interview.

William Brown:

OK thanks.

Karen Foley:

That's all we have time for in this month's PodMag. We'll be focusing on OU students in the next edition but if there's something you'd like to include then please get in touch, PodMag@open.ac.uk

Bye for now and thanks for listening.