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Trump Walks the Political High Wire



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President Trump is going to miss Hillary Clinton. Last November, both Trump and Clinton had enthusiastic supporters. But most voters cast negative ballots against one or the other. And some voters, called “double negatives” by pollsters, disliked both of them so much that they picked what they saw as the lesser of two evils or threw their support to Libertarian Party nominee Gary Johnson or the Green Party’s Jill Stein. (It’s worth keeping in mind that Stein’s vote count exceeded Trump’s victory margins in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, the three states that effectively determined the outcome of the election). Now that Trump doesn’t have a foil in Clinton, it’s all about him.

Trump’s style seems more about subtraction and division, despite the fact that politics is supposed to be about adding and consolidating support. His well-received address to a Joint Session of Congress last week could have been a nice bit of addition. But his momentary triumph was rendered moot by ongoing controversies involving Russia and his intemperate tweets on Saturday accusing President Obama of tapping his phone.

Since about a week into his presidency, Trump has generally held an approval rating between 40 and 45 percent in the Gallup Organization’s daily tracking poll, with disapproval bouncing between 50 and 55 percent. (There was one sharp drop in mid-February when his approval rating dropped to 38 percent and his disapproval jumped to 56 percent.)

If Trump continues to obsessively stoke his base while thumbing his nose at everyone else, his approval ratings will likely stay pretty much where they are. The lines already are hardening. Those who like him are sticking with him, while those who don’t are becoming even more disillusioned.

Accusing Obama of ordering a wiretap during the campaign can be seen as an effort to give supporters an alternative explanation should recordings or transcripts emerge of conversations between campaign staffers and people working on behalf of Russia. Under this scenario, the hope is that the focus would be on nefarious behavior by the Obama administration. Some Trump backers already are calling it a scandal as big or bigger than Watergate, yet there is little if any evidence supporting Trump’s allegation. Using Obama as a foil instead Hillary Clinton could detract attention from any suspicious contacts with Russia. Of course it could be dismissed as just something else he’s made up, like voter fraud, crowd sizes, and the national crime rate.

We now live in a trifurcated media environment: a constellation of conservative media sources online, talk radio, and cable; an analogous grouping of liberal media outlets; and broader mainstream outlets in the middle, although zealots on both sides see the mainstream as in cahoots with the opposition.

Whether on the Right or on the Left, ideologues and partisans will believe and put up with nearly anything as long as it's remotely plausible and involves some nefarious activities by the other side. More voters than ever are living in ideological and partisan bubbles, ignoring or “defriending” anyone holding positions contrary to their own. For political leaders, keeping their political base intact is critically important. Arguably, Republicans were successful in doing so for the last four years, enabling them to win a presidential race with less than a plurality of the vote. They simply aroused a hyper-enthusiastic base in enough of the right places to get 303 electoral votes. As long as the base is with you, you are within striking distance of winning, this theory goes.

But it's hard to look at Donald Trump and his presidency through any conventional lens or apply any normal yard sticks to him. Whether part of a grand plan or improvisation, statements and behavior that would have ended the careers of other politicians have made it possible for him to prosper. Trump's strange political alchemy works despite the fact that it seems to defy logic and political gravity. Walking on a high wire may seem crazy to the rest of us, but it's just a day at the office for the Flying Wallendas, and for them, things have worked out pretty well. (I know one member of the Wallenda family, and she's bright, impressive, and perfectly normal.) Trump, like the Wallendas, thrives on the oohs and aahs of his audience.

So while many of us can watch things that Trump does with shock and even horror, we need to keep an open mind about the outcome. As he showed during the presidential campaign, he can be crazy like a fox. But for any other politician contemplating a Trump-style campaign, I advise extreme caution. He's a political daredevil like no other, and it remains to be seen whether he'll turn out like Evel Knievel. In other words: Kids, don't try this at home. It may or may not work for him, but it surely won't work for anyone else.