

# How Trump made hate mainstream

“We’re going to build a wall!” This is by now probably the most notable sentence of the 2016 American Presidential election. Donald Trump, with his own brand of hate, rudeness and brash political statements has completely turned an election, a party and a whole country onto its head.

Barbara Tasch

In the very first speech of his campaign, his presidential announcement on June 16, 2015, the Republican nominee said that Mexican immigrants were “bringing drugs ... bringing crime ... They’re rapists.” He finished the sentence by adding that “some, I assume, are good people.” From the very beginning of the American election cycle, Donald Trump was dismissed and mocked. His claims about Mexicans were thought to be enough to end his campaign before it ever really began. Journalists, political commentators, politicians (Republicans and Democrats alike), academics, and pundits decried his hateful, racist speech.

Almost a month after his first speech, on July 18, 2015, Trump made a second slew of comments that had the ruling political class and mainstream media think his campaign was over. Trump said of Arizona Senator John McCain, who was a prisoner during the Vietnam War, “He’s not a war hero. He’s a war hero because he was captured? I like people who weren’t captured.” Again everyone from his fellow running mates to veterans decried his comments as outrageous and disrespectful. (On a side note: Trump avoided conscription through a series of student and medical deferments.)

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Three months later, Trump came under fire again for ridiculing a disabled reporter. Serge Kovalski, now a reporter for the *New York Times*, suffers from a congenital joint condition. What had he done to deserve the ridiculing? It was at the time when Trump was alleging that he saw thousands of people celebrating the 9/11 attacks in New York. In 2001 Kovalski

wrote an article for the *Washington Post* noting that “a number of people [who] were allegedly seen celebrating the attacks.” After Trump mentioned him and his article to defend his baseless claims, Kovalski said that he did “not recall anyone saying there were thousands, or even hundreds, of people celebrating.” Again, associations, journalists, politicians, celebrities all decried Trump’s comments and behaviour. Surely this time, Americans would not forgive him? The insults, the campaign, and Trump’s increasingly high polling numbers continued.

In December 2015, Trump then came out with what many have denounced as his most ridiculous, divisive and outright fascist idea: Ban all Muslims from entering the United States of America “until our country’s representatives can figure out what is going on.” In the statement announcing his policy, Trump wrote that “it is obvious to anybody the hatred is beyond comprehension.”

Paul Ryan, one of the top men of the Republican Party and the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, said Trump’s proposed ban was not “conservatism”. It was not what “this party stands for, and more importantly, it’s not what this country stands for.” Throughout his many absurd statements and ridiculous outbursts, Trump kept being mocked for being vulgar, rude and unfit to be president. Nonetheless, after every speech and announcement,

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something happened that no one had foreseen: the reality TV star really struck a chord with a vast part of the American public.

What most of the media and pundits did not understand and to a certain extent still do not understand, is that to Trump's supporters, much of the "mainstream media" and "mainstream politicians" had for decades silenced and ridiculed most of their ideas, beliefs and deep-seated fears, labeling them backwards and racist. So they gobbled up and reiterated their hero's words: the man who had finally allowed them to speak their minds.

### **"The establishment" pushes back, Trump supporters double down**

As the election ran its course, many Trump supporters who were interviewed, started opening up about how much they agreed with Trump even on his most vile statements and openly discriminatory proposals. It became clear how much he was fuelling their own hatred. The pinnacle of those comments probably came from a man at a rally in Cincinnati, Ohio: "If she's in office, I hope we can start a coup. She should be in prison or shot. That's how I feel about it. We're going to have a revolution and take them out of office if that's what it takes. There's going to be a lot of bloodshed. But that's what it's going to take. (...) I would do whatever I can for my country."

This is what Dan Bowman, a 50-year-old contractor and ardent Trump supporter, told reporters from *The Boston Globe*.

While not all of Trump's supporters are officially calling for a revolution and assassinations if their leader is not elected, many of their comments are equally shocking and despicable.

Once his increasing support became undeniable, some of his opponents gave up, and dropped out of the race. Others embraced what seemed to make him so popular: his outspoken racism, xenophobia and sexism disguised as his very own "American blue collar" brand of "telling it like it is." Many Republican candidates started emulating his rhetoric, especially his scapegoating of immigrants. A few even jumped on the bandwagon of one of Trump's main promises: deport the 11 million people who are living in the US illegally. Although all of them were far more vague than Trump, he is the reason this type of rhetoric was not just tolerated, but almost expected from Republican candidates.

All the while the media, enjoying the ratings, clicks and retweets doubled down on their Trump coverage reporting his every insult, slur and hate-packed comment. As his supporter base grew and his rallies multiplied, a number of extremely disturbing images emerged. On a number of occasions, protesters were

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Presidential candidate Donald Trump in a residential backyard in Iowa. (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 Tony Webster via flickr)



pushed around, beaten up and spat on by people in the crowd, (many of whom were African Americans). A journalist was punched. Trump cheered the violent crowds on, encouraging them. The focus of the media, sheer sizes of the crowds at his rallies and imitation of his fellow running mates gave Trump and his hate all the validation his supporters needed to feel like they too could now speak up – and act up.

### **Hate is one of those things that travels well**

Trump is an extreme example of how quickly the established order of things can barrel toward disaster when someone is opportunistic enough to exploit the most deep-seated fears of a nation for personal gain. Trump's own wealth and the media's thirst for scandalous headlines also meant that neither the Republican Party nor its big donors had a way to control the presidential nominee (that is not to say that no big donors or organisations [such as the National Rifle Association] had an influence on him.)

Yet in 2016, the phenomenon of the rude and hateful politician is not one that is restricted to the US. One of Europe's most fervent Trump supporter, UK Independence Party leader and Brexit architect Nigel Farage, is also an expert at scapegoating, and his target is the same as Trump's: immigrants.

In fact, with the refugee crisis, the European continent as a whole has seen a resurgence of far-right parties led by individuals pandering to the public's worst fears. The Prime Minister of Hungary's comments about refugees were strongly condemned

throughout the continent, as he warned that they were "poison" and that they were a threat to Europe's safety and survival. Now, over a year after the biggest refugee crisis since World War II started shaking the continent, a small but increasingly growing group is hailing him as one of the only people who has the true interest of Europeans at heart. Although still not everyone agrees with him, as Luxembourg's Foreign Minister proved when he called for Hungary to be excluded from the European Union because of "massive violation" of EU fundamental values.

The current worldwide trend though is one of nations turning inward, as surrender to hate and fear gets easier to exploit whenever crisis occur.

### **"Take back control of our border"**

Farage's favourite tagline during the Brexit campaign – something he has been lobbying for almost 20 years – was that Britain had to "take back control of [its] borders." This not only plays into the fears that many people have (and which have been hugely exacerbated by the refugee crisis). So boldly defending blatantly racist ideas, signals a few things. First of all, those politicians have made it acceptable to share those views – especially since the political rallies show they are definitely not isolated (remember how much Trump brags about the number of people attending his rallies) – and eventually act on them.

But more than that, the politicians' stubbornness, and to a certain extent rudeness, does not signal ig-

Trump's plane arriving in Mesa, Arizona ( CC BY-SA 2.0 Gage Skidmore via flickr)



norance or vulgarity, rather it projects an image of someone who is a staunch patriot and will fight for their country no matter what. Someone who does not care if they ruffle some feathers or make some people uncomfortable – to the public what they are really doing is representing the people and political correctness be damned.

### The Brexit aftermath

Although less rude than his American counterpart, Farage has not shied away from openly blaming certain ethnicities and religions for every possible ill his country faces. The aftermath of the Brexit vote showed that for many Brexiteers, the words of their leader definitely had an impact on how people express their views and on what they think is acceptable and now permissible behaviour. The number of hate crimes in the UK has drastically increased since the June 23 vote. People are being physically assaulted in broad daylight, have hateful notes and feces pushed through their letter boxes and are screamed at by complete strangers on the streets. These assaults were generally accompanied by exclamations on the part of the attackers such as “We voted leave what are you still doing here.” This leaves little room to interpretation when it comes to the motive behind the assault. Although associations, support groups and local police chiefs have been sounding the alarm bell on this for months now, official figures released by the Home Office in October confirm the disturbing trend: there has been a 41% increase in racist or religiously motivated offences following the EU referendum in June.

### A legacy already established

Even if Trump does not win on November 8, the damage left in the trail of his campaign, the war he waged for months against common sense, American values and everyone who disagreed with him, will not disappear with him. If Trump loses, he might not be seen again (he promised this was his plan), his empire might go down with him, but all the hate that he unleashed with his campaign will not die that day.

Trump in the US, Orban in Hungary, and Farage in the United Kingdom have been pinned by many as the reason for the recent outpouring of hate in countries that have preached openness and tolerance, countries that have lived in peace for so long. Yet, they are just the voice, or to put it more crudely, they are the pin that bursts the abscess of repressed rage. Racism, hatred and a feeling of being treated unfairly and ridiculed by the “elites” has been simmering in certain communities for a long time. Those politi-



Nigel Farage – UKIP leader and Brexiteer (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 European Parliament via flickr)

cians simply took advantage of something that was already there, and allowed it to be seen and heard, but they are not the basis for it.

Yet what they have done is not undoable. They have opened a Pandora’s box of everything that civil society in our Western countries has deemed unacceptable – racism, islamophobia, anti-semitism, homophobia, sexism, xenophobia. And now that the people who for their entire lives have kept those ideas hidden and shared them in whispers, have been permitted to speak out loud, they will not be silenced again without fighting for their rights to continue to speak up.

In recently unearthed tapes from 2005, Trump talks about sexual assaults on women. He says that he gets to “grab them by the pussy” and that women let him do it because he is famous. In his reaction to the tape, the presidential candidate has said that those were “just words”, that he would never treat women like that. Since then, 10 women have come forward to recount instances in which Trump sexually assaulted them. This latest controversy is probably the most potent example that hate speech is never just speech. Hate speech quite inevitably spills over into action. Now, shortly before the Americans vote in what is probably the most important election they will ever get to vote in, Hillary Clinton is polling ahead, but nobody is sure about exactly how the election is going to pan out. The “candidate of the silent majority” keeps surprising even the most sceptical pundit out there – especially as the orange clown gets increasingly unhinged as the race comes to a close. ♦