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# Was the 2016 Campaign a Travesty?

Assessing Campaign Quality

*A Shorenstein Center Fellow's Paper*

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## Introduction

It is easy to distrust politics, easier to be angered by it, easier still to hate it. Perhaps that has always been true but it seems especially true today. To be sure, there are fine reasons to hate politics since some of history's greatest evils have been mixed in political cauldrons. That was true of theocracies in the past (the Muslim Conquest, the Christian Crusades) and the present (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, etc.). Secular autocrats, people like Genghis Khan, King Henry VIII, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Adolph Hitler have also produced spectacular forms of evil, and dictatorships, or near-dictatorships, continue to populate the globe – in North Korea, notably, but also in Burma, Sudan, Zimbabwe, and even China.

Viewed from this perspective, it is easy to give democracies a pass, but democracies, too, produce evil. Mob rule, oppression by the majority, Machiavellianism, group think, neo-feudalism, media manipulations, violations of the social contract, pork barrel corruption, bait-and-switch taxation, fake news, vaunted elitism, false flag attacks – all are evils perpetuated in even the most enlightened polities. Democracies like the United States have been militarily aggressive in spots throughout the world (in recent years in Germany, Japan, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan) and all this despite the protests of the nation's pacifists. While no true democracy has ever gone to war against another true democracy, tools like blockades, currency manipulation, tariffs, cyber-warfare, and economic sanctions have been used by democracies against one another, the United States very much included.

If one had not already decided to hate politics, democratic elections provide additional reasons to do so. Especially in contemporary times, elections have become endless and expensive, toxic to the human spirit, with unthinking speechmaking and salacious advertising inviting voters to stay home and shut themselves off from it all. In days gone by, political campaigns made Americans upset when only men could vote, but expanding the franchise to minorities and women have made the new enfranchises happy for only a short time. Soon, they too began complaining about campaigns and their gripes only increased when radio, and then television, began covering electoral activity. By the time the Internet rolled around, hating political campaigns had become an obsession for many Americans.

One of the glories of a democratic form of government is that it does not – and cannot – punish people for hating campaigns. Indeed, some argue that screaming about politics is a guaranteed way of preventing leaders in the statehouses from straying too far from the dictates of popular rule. To be angered by politics is to become invested in it, to make citizenly passion a bulwark against political malfeasance. Hating politics is what makes it better.

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But political cynicism can be corrosive. Hating politicians is one thing; hating the work they do – overseeing the business of the people – is quite another. And hating how they are allowed to do it – by being chosen in a free-and-fair election – is not only dangerous but self-punishing. Accordingly, my purpose in this paper is to offer an alternative way of judging campaign quality. I do so by reexamining the premises used to evaluate political campaigns in the past and then ask if these premises serve us truly. Having decided that they are insufficient, I then offer an alternative set of criteria for judging elections, criteria especially attuned to how politics is transacted in a communication-rich environment. Because the new media have entered our lives so fully, I argue, we must ask fresh questions about what politics can do for us as a people.

Surprisingly, there has been relatively little scholarly thought about how political campaigns are best judged, although judging them has been popular among citizens, journalists, and scholars alike. Accordingly, this paper asks two questions: (1) How are political campaigns now being evaluated? and (2) How might they be evaluated differently? Keying on the 2016 campaign, I will argue that much lay dissatisfaction with politics is both misguided and needlessly dispiriting. By looking at what political campaigns can do for us (rather than to us), we can begin to view campaigns through a new set of eyes and sleep better through the long winter of our Trumpian discontent.

I offer this argument for both conceptual and normative reasons. By failing to acknowledge what politics is at root, what it can achieve and how it must function, we will surely become dismayed. But by asking different questions about politics we can begin to reimagine it. Within that reimagining, I argue, political hope abides.

## **Plebiscitary Criteria for Judging Campaign Quality**

If one asked the average American citizen how they judge a political campaign, their answer would be simple: Did my candidate win? If pressed a bit they might add: Did my tribe win? That is, did the Democrats annihilate the Republicans? Did women turn out in sufficient force? Did African-Americans stay at home and hence let “my people” triumph? Were “the illegals” kept from throwing a monkey wrench into the democratic machine? Did young people finally get off their rear ends and put their civics lessons to the test?

If pushed further, everyday citizens would surely complain about the costs

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of elections. The “fat cats” are still in the driver’s seat, they might note, so “city hall” will continue to be city hall, a place where the Average Joe is rarely countenanced. Ordinary voters know, implicitly, that PAC spending has soared through the roof and that the blizzard of political ads they are forced to watch have become more and more expensive. As a result, voters do everything they can to isolate themselves from political messaging – by watching Netflix instead of network TV, by neither answering the telephone nor listening to their voice mail, by opening their front doors only to members of the family. For voters like these, the best political campaigns are the silent ones.

Other voters like politics quite a bit – if it meets their entertainment standards. As I have argued elsewhere, late-night television has become a dependable beat for those who enjoy gorging themselves on political cynicism.<sup>1</sup> Stephen Colbert, Bill Maher, Trevor Noah, Seth Meyers, Samantha Bee and others ensure that each campaign event, each heartfelt sentiment, is deconstructed as soon as it is constructed. Occasionally, they even entice politicians onto their shows, thereby helping candidates contribute to their own trivialization if not to their own self-destruction.

As a result, political cynicism has become a lifestyle, one (1) that prizes a patina of information over genuine edification, (2) that substitutes anecdotes – a candidate’s hairstyle, his or her taste in pets – for an understanding of the candidate’s values, (3) that reprises for the uninitiated the inevitability of political corruption, and (4) that assumes that candidates’ motives (which can never be known) are viewed as far more important than what he or she has actually done.

Why are voters drawn to the dark side? For one thing, political cynicism has become communal coinage, a way of fitting-in at almost any social gathering. Cynicism also gives one a lifestyle advantage, a way of saying “I am of this moment,” an especially important adjunct for those feeling passé in the Age of Snapchat. For reasons such as these, political cynicism is also a bully, intimidating people from voting and, perversely, making them feel honorable for having done so. To hate politics today is to love hating it.

Not all citizens feel this way of course. Some still regard voting as a privilege if not a sacred duty. Some citizens look forward to caucus meetings, to watching campaign debates with their family members, to standing in line on a crisp November morning to cast their ballots. Indeed, some voters even go through a period of mourning when the new mayor or governor

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has finally been named. For them, elections are necessary evils because important things are at stake – funding for the new highway, control over the Senate, whether or not the nation goes to war. For them, to love politics is to love the nation of which they are a part.

## Republican Criteria for Judging Campaign Quality

The academic community approaches campaigns differently from the average voter. For scholars, a campaign must be judged by how well it advances the Republican ideal of enlightened self-governance. For example, an important set of studies has been pursued by Harvard’s Pippa Norris and her colleagues.<sup>2</sup> For them, *electoral integrity* is the sine qua non of political life. When examining elections held in a variety of presidential and parliamentary systems, Norris and her colleagues focus on bottom-line issues: Was voter registration handled correctly? How were the campaigns financed? Who oversaw the drawing of political districts? Was it done fairly? Did all political parties have a chance during the election to make their cases and, if not, what explains the differences? Who counted the votes and by what authority? If a political campaign does not measure up to these criteria, Norris and her colleagues contend, it is a sorry enterprise indeed.

A second dominant concern, especially among political scientists, is whether or not the campaign produces *cognitive gains* for voters. The notion here is that campaigns should draw attention to the important issues of the day and thus help voters make thoughtful decisions about what matters to them and for whom they should vote. Temple University’s Kevin Arceneaux has found, for example, that campaigns are good at helping voters capture “fundamental variables” like the state of the economy and the various parties’ stances on policy issues. He also finds that knowledge of this sort predicts electoral outcomes fairly well.<sup>3</sup> Such learning effects, says Arceneaux, are particularly strong among “low information voters,” effects that hold true across a wide array of constitutional democracies.

But even if voters understand the issues and keep abreast of the latest campaign developments – the issues dominating the debates, how the new taxing authority will affect neighborhood schools, which newspapers endorsed which candidates – they can still make poor electoral decisions. As a consequence, some scholars emphasize the importance of *correct voting*, being able to decide which candidate will advance one’s own self-interest. Liking Candidate A’s countenance, for example, can mislead a voter who fails to research that candidate’s past voting record. Political scientists Richard

Lau, David Redlawsk and their colleagues have done important work in this area, finding that being presented with distinct ideological choices in a campaign, having sufficient media access, being part of an active political network, and being able to spend time with a candidate in one's immediate locale can greatly affect the "firepower" of one's ballot.<sup>4</sup>

Realpolitik is a good thing but so too is a campaign's ability to promote *open-mindedness* among voters, according to Cindy Kam.<sup>5</sup> This is a kind of "social learning" effect in which people come to better understand their fellow citizens – what issues are important to them and how they prioritize policy alternatives. Especially intense campaigns, says Kam, exacerbate these effects, chipping away at pro-incumbent biases and helping citizens understand the pros and cons of this solution vs. that solution. Thus, not only do good campaigns make voters more open-minded about issues but they teach voters about one another, an especially important effect in a large and diverse polity like the United States.

While learning is important, one must also consider what is being learned. Especially in a heavily mediated age, for example, it is possible for voters to learn silly and irrelevant things – how well a political candidate plays golf, which candidate perspires under the Kleig lights, how attractive a candidate's family is, why he or she has a raspy voice. Democratic theorists therefore insist that the ideal campaign increases *regime support*, a renewed commitment to the fundamental values undergirding the polity. All too often, political campaigns do quite the opposite, making people cynical about politicians and encouraging them to view democratic governance as a fraud. Well-funded and irresponsible campaign donors, obnoxious political operatives, and tell-all news shows featuring the unseemly aspects of politics can lower people's feelings of efficacy, their overall trust in government, their commitment to the sanctity of public service, and the importance of affording equal opportunities for all.<sup>6</sup>

Presidential scholar Bruce Buchanan identifies another measuring tool – whether or not a campaign results in *policy signaling*.<sup>7</sup> Because they are typically calendrical, campaigns create regular opportunities to assess where a country has been and where it is going. Good campaigns, says Buchanan, crystalize national priorities, ratify emerging consensuses, and prepare the electorate for the implementation of new policies following the election. Using these vantage points, Buchanan finds that the 1988 presidential election performed less well than its successor. In 1992, says Buchanan, the presence of economic anxiety, political backlash, and a multiplicity of candidates (George Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ross Perot) helped the nation

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clarify what it wanted and then choose a candidate who would move it in the desired direction.

A seventh and final Republican value is particularly important in a heavily mediated age – Did the campaign benefit from *press oversight*? From the beginning of the Republic, cheaply produced pamphlets, tabloids, and random postings have dotted the American landscape, exposing the political shenanigans of the day. The amount of campaign coverage has exploded since then but whether or not its quality has increased is an open question. In many ways it is also an irrelevant question since, with the rise of social media and always-online news coverage, there is no doubt that the American people are now being inundated with campaign news. Indeed say, Frank Esser, Jesper Strömbäck, and their colleagues, the mediatization of politics has transformed all Western democracies, reawakening populism in some quarters, changing the agenda for public discussion in others, framing some issues positively and others negatively, and causing political parties to alter long-standing practices because of new media exposés.<sup>8</sup>

It is hard to disagree with any of these criteria for judging campaign quality. If a given campaign were somehow, magically, to meet all seven standards, a nation would surely be well served, having gotten people into the voting booth, having produced informed, open-minded voters committed to the polity’s fundamental values, profiting from the work of a responsible press, and nudging the nation into new policy directions that also benefits the voter. Laudatory though these goals are, however, they are also highly idealistic, so we need to think harder about what campaigns can actually do.

In the remainder of this paper, I offer a less Platonic set of measures for judging campaign quality, measures suited to (1) a robust, contestatory democracy operating within (2) a robust, contestatory media environment. Preposterously perhaps, I will argue that the 2016 presidential contest was well-wrought, achieving important things despite its obvious infirmities. In arguing thusly, I will hew to the advice of the good St. Augustine: “God judged it better to bring good out of evil, than to suffer no evil to exist.”

## The Case of the 2016 Presidential Election

“Friends stopped talking to one another. Husbands and wives broke up. Parent groups at schools frayed as people looked anew at neighbors and said ‘I thought I knew you.’”<sup>9</sup> For many, the 2016 presidential campaign was horrific. Columnist Leonard Pitts, Jr. explains why: “Donald Trump is a lying, narcissistic, manifestly incompetent child man who is as dumb as a sack of mackerel.”<sup>10</sup> “This is a fundamental rewriting of the map,” said CNN’s John King on election night,<sup>11</sup> and the pollsters, it seems, were to blame: “It’s a debacle on the order of Dewey defeats Truman” opined the University of Virginia’s Larry Sabato.<sup>12</sup> “A lot of people feel more emboldened – because someone like Trump is in the White House – to speak their minds on topics that formerly had been taboo,” observed secessionist Michael Hill.<sup>13</sup> “People feel it is not their country anymore,” noted the University of Georgia’s Cas Mudde, and “to a certain extent, it is not their country anymore.”<sup>14</sup> “I don’t care what [Trump] says, you’re attacking Muslims here,” declared Iowan Steventjie Hasna, “and that’s not American at all. We stand for American values and that’s the exact opposite of what he stands for.”<sup>15</sup>

The post-campaign rhetoric of 2016 ranged from the heartfelt to the histrionic. A sense of urgency filled the air and broad, cultural questions emerged: What did the campaign say about us? Who is an American, really? Will the center hold? The country’s very essence, its comprehensiveness, seemed at stake:

*“In my opinion, unless the country gets back together, things just can’t work the way they should.” (Queen Jones, retired teacher’s assistant, Mount Pleasant, N.C.)<sup>16</sup>*

*“The most troubling outcome could be our willingness to retreat deeper into self-interested and self-idolizing divisions that pay little attention to our ‘other’ neighbors.” (Thabiti Anabwile, church planter, Washington, D.C.)<sup>17</sup>*

*“The results of the 2016 elections bring to mind the words of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who once condemned the slaveholder-dominated American government as ‘a covenant with death and an agreement with hell.’” (Manisha Sinha, college professor, Storrs, CT)<sup>18</sup>*

Eight years earlier, things were different; the country had validated its birthright. One might have expected former Secretary of State Colin Powell to be upbeat about that election (“The world wondered, can America really do this? Aren’t they too divided? Can they really pull something like this off? And we said to the world, yes, we can, and we did.”),<sup>19</sup> but a broader sense of coherence also existed. If America was on the brink of collapse in 2016, the nation had found its storied self eight years earlier. Everyone,



it seemed, felt the change:

*"[Barack Obama's] campaign of hope and change really stuck with folks, and you see it in the designs that are being fed back. It's as if folks are already nostalgic about this time." (Amy Maniatis, marketing executive, San Francisco, CA)<sup>20</sup>*

*"The inauguration represents a tangible example of the American spirit, testimony to the indisputable fact that our nation is the greatest on earth." (Patrick Gendron, attorney, Bryan, TX)<sup>21</sup>*

*"I really didn't think the country was ready for an African-American president, but they fooled me, for which I'm glad. We have really come a long way." (Merlin Bragg, administrative assistant, Linden, NJ)<sup>22</sup>*

Two different elections, two different countries? To be sure, many Americans felt uneasy when Barack Obama became president in 2008 but the 2016 campaign seemed different, as if half the citizenry had suddenly emerged full-form and crazed, demanding that their nation be returned to them. These denizens of the dark – racists, sexists, homophobes, nationalists – seemed to be constituents of a nation reinvented.

The reality, of course, is that Donald Trump won the presidency in a squeaker. A few more miners in western Pennsylvania, a few more industrial workers in Michigan, and the U.S. would have had its first female president. That, too, would have been heralded as apocalyptic by some, the full-flowering of the American planting by others. As Washington Post columnist Robert Pierre observed, "Whether Donald Trump is impeached or serves out a full term or two, what happens with our nation depends more on how we deal with one another in our divided nation. Barack Obama is who we are. Donald Trump is who we are."<sup>23</sup>

Americans have always cast a furtive eye on one another. Fourth of July celebrations try to paper over that fact but the 9/11 tragedy, and the church bombings, and the Nazis marching remind us it is true. If, as Walt Whitman said, we as individuals contain multitudes, things are even more plentiful for the nation-state: Religious freedom as long as it is Christian. Public disclosure demanded, a prying press denounced. Patriotism yes, socialism no, unless the latter includes free health care. Refuge for the world's oppressed...as long as they stand in line.

Donald Trump stirred up all these contrarities. He was an iconoclast who worshipped Wall Street, a renegade who lived in Trump Tower, an Evangelist who never went to church. Trump was a Democrat at times, a Republican more often, but a fellow devoid of political discipline. He had

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the attention-span of a gnat and no moral depth but he appealed to seniors hooked on Fox News. Trump promised to drain the swamp but he dined with lobbyists. He wanted the unions to rebuild the roads but tried to make the Supreme Court reactionary. Multitudes met their match in Donald Trump.

In many ways, though, the 2016 presidential campaign was fairly normal. Two establishment figures squared-off, tempers were lost, outrageous statements were made, and then it was over. All U.S. elections involve such soul-searching because identity is such a malleable thing in a nation housing 350 million people with a short fuse. So Americans conduct a fresh introspection every four years: Truman populism, Nixon globalism, Carter moralizing, Reagan nationalism, Clinton progressivism, Bush belligerence, Trump protectionism. All these changes invited controversy.

But wasn't the 2016 presidential election especially dispiriting? Judged by conventional standards, perhaps so. In their book *Evaluating Campaign Quality*, Sandy Maisel, Darrell West, and Brett Clinton cling to the Republican criteria previously discussed: Did the campaign focus on fundamental issues? Did voters know what was going on? Was the discourse civil? Did the campaign inspire greater trust in government? Did the media referee the contest appropriately?<sup>24</sup>

Judged by these standards, the 2016 campaign did not measure up well. As ABC and the *Washington Post* reported in August of 2016, candidates Clinton and Trump were considered the most disliked candidates in the thirty years the poll had been conducted.<sup>25</sup> Each day, it seemed, a new low was reported in the press, with the candidates saying things (especially Trump) and muttering things (especially Clinton) that had never been said or muttered before in a presidential campaign. The campaign was rancorous from beginning to end – within the Republican Party, within the Democratic Party, and within the populace itself. Can anything possibly absolve Campaign '16?

## Dialogical Criteria for Judging Campaign Quality

I believe that the 2016 presidential campaign was far too complicated – and far too important – to be dismissed easily. In many ways, I shall argue, it was a fine contest, especially when assessed via standards suited to the contentious environment brought about by new communication realities. With the rise of social media, for example, individual voices (Alex Jones, for example) now comingle with institutional voices (ABC News, for example).

While the Plebiscitary and Republican criteria for judging campaigns are surely important, we need to imagine what campaigns might become in a media-rich environment and not apologize for having done so.

Too, although some conventional news sources have suffered economically (regional newspapers, for example), others like *Slate*, *BuzzFeed*, and *Breitbart* have sprung up to take their places (albeit with much narrower political agendas). Political parties that had been routinized in how they spread the word (door-to-door canvassing, for example), now employ online modalities (text messaging, Facebook, and Change.org, for example) designed to make mass dissemination feel intimate. In short, while the Plebiscitary and Republican criteria for judging campaigns are surely important, we need to imagine what campaigns might become in a media-rich environment and not apologize for having done so.

Focusing on a campaign's capacity for dialogue, I offer the following supplementary candidates for judging campaign quality:

- Did the campaign expand communication networks? Harry Truman's train trek in 1948; televising of the national conventions in 1952; live presidential debates in 1960; fresh political ads in 1972; satellite up-links in 1980; digital canvassing in 2008.
- Did the campaign foster partisan rumination? The Goldwater revolution of 1964; the McCarthy Challenge in 1968; Reagan's "third term" in 1988; the emergence of "new Democrats" in 1992; Bush-denialism in 2008.
- Did the campaign inspire serious moral interrogation? Vietnam and civil rights in 1968; the Watergate purgation of 1976; women's rights in 1984; the Willie Horton ads of 1988; sexual impropriety in 1996.
- Did the campaign introduce new voices of leadership? An Army general in 1952; a movie actor in 1980; an African-American preacher in 1984; a businessman in 1992; a female governor in 2008; a Mormon in 2012.
- Did the campaign stimulate subaltern activists? 1964: Voting Rights, NOW; 1968: AIM, Greenpeace, NARAL; 1972: Disability Rights, STOP-ERA; 1984: The Christian Coalition; 1992: Intersex Society, CPAC; 1996: Drudge Report; 2008: The Tea Party.
- Did the campaign energize new voting constituencies? The Catholic voting bloc in 1960; McGovern's youth brigade in 1972; AIDS activists in 1980; Evangelical Republicans in 1984; African-American turnout in 2008.

In many ways, then, the 2016 campaign served the needs of democracy and did so surprisingly well.

- Did the campaign widen the policy agenda? The Russian threat in 1956; the space race in 1960; the War on Poverty in 1964; Soviet decline in 1984; Middle East adventurism in 2000; national health care in 2008.
- Did the campaign foster international rapprochement? The possibility of the United Nations in 1944; post-war reconstruction in 1952; China and Nixon in 1972; potential for Middle East accords in 1976; the prospect of NAFTA in 1992.
- Did the campaign increase economic evangelism? Strong post-election years: 1965, 1969, 1989, 1997, 2005. Weak post-election years: 1949, 1957, 1981, 1003, 2001, 2009.

When examined via these criteria, the 2016 campaign looks rather good. For example, new ways of engaging the citizenry were found – cable channels got their share of the debates; stand-alone news sites (e.g., *Politico*, *The Guardian*, *HuffPost*) had some bite; vigorous social media outlets brought new consumers into the mix. Partisan rumination starkly increased for both political parties, as Trump vanquished 15 other Republicans and as Bernie Sanders gave Hillary Clinton a run for her money. Moral interrogation unquestionably took center stage for Republicans (Trump’s treatment of women, the biases of “fake news,” Russian interference in the election, the savaging of immigrants) and for Democrats (Benghazi, Hillary’s emails, “baskets of deplorables,” and the reemergence of Bill Clinton’s liaisons.)

The talent pool obviously expanded in 2016, as the first woman ever nominated by a major political party in the U.S. took on a corporate titan-turned-TV-star. New voters were found in the Rust Belt by Republicans and in Texas and Georgia by Democrats and new battleground states emerged (Virginia, Nevada, Colorado, West Virginia, and North Carolina). The campaign also brought old-but-new debates out in the open – health care, immigration, global trade, tax reform, MeToo – but the campaign failed miserably when it came to furthering international rapprochement (largely because of Mr. Trump, a trend he continued once in office). In the economic short term, at least, GDP growth, unemployment levels, and the Dow all sent positive signals during 2017 and 2018 and the American people, wisely or unwisely, began spending more money.

In many ways, then, the 2016 campaign served the needs of democracy and did so surprisingly well. The women who marched wearing pink hats on January 21, 2017, the day after Donald Trump’s inauguration, would have been sitting quietly somewhere else if Hillary Clinton had become

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president. Similarly, blue-collar workers who had been down-sized and ostracized would not have turned out to vote unless Donald Trump had given them hope. As former White House advisor Eric Liu reports, the 2016 campaign triggered a “systemic immune response in the body politic, producing a surge in engagement among” Trump opponents.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, says Shaun Harper of the Center for Race and Equity in Education at Penn, one might even express a “painful gratitude” for Donald Trump’s ability to galvanize a Democratic counter-force in 2018 and 2020 headed by young people, African-Americans, Hispanics and other marginalized groups; the “gift of Trump,” says Harper, has the capacity to change American politics for years to come.<sup>27</sup> Agreeing, columnist E. J. Dionne observes, “it’s hard to imagine a president more likely to inspire Obama Nostalgia than Donald Trump.”<sup>28</sup>

The 2016 presidential election also opened up new intellectual pathways. Populist Republicans were inspired to rally against their Establishment overseers and insurgent Democrats sharply questioned (via Bernie Sanders) their party’s ideological homogeneity.<sup>29</sup> Presidential campaigns energize the electorate and the 2016 race was no exception. As these remarks are being penned, most Americans are angry at something – at the President’s detractors, at the aimlessness of the Democratic Party, at one of the cable news channels. This sort of anger is the very stuff out of which democratic engagement is fashioned. Anger enlivens the mind and fosters creative problem-solving. Anger helps people identify their enemies as well as their friends. Anger thrusts citizens out of their homes and into the streets. When the nation is especially lucky, anger sends people into the voting booth to seek revenge.

Campaigns begin with hypotheses and end with data. In the aftermath of the 2016 campaign, for example, we learned once again that health care is expensive, that Russia is not benevolent, that China manipulates its currency, that NATO is not untouchable, that across-the-board tax cuts are dangerous, that the separation of powers is real, that all politics is local, that government bureaucrats can foul-up any revanchist scheme, that judges have their jobs for life, that the Senate has its traditions, that Twitter is fun but that signed legislation is what really counts.

Campaigns, in short, confront us with our institutions. Institutions, those big, unwieldy, globular things that frustrate so many – new presidents included – are there because a democratic people has designed and nurtured them across the years. Despite the hurly-burly of political campaigns, institutions change slowly if at all, so it is worth remembering that, despite

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the joys and miseries of 2016, the institutions that existed in January of that year will still be functioning when the campaign machine hums again four years hence. That fact will be depressing to anarchists but anarchists, after all, are consigned to lives of endless disappointment.

Using rhetorical criteria to reevaluate the 2016 campaign sheds light on the conversations campaigns can foster but also exposes the limitations of key political players. It became clear during the 2016 campaign, for example, that the Tea Party had no foreign policy, that Young Republicans could not get out the vote, that the folks in Black Lives Matter did not understand coalitional politics, that Wall Street prognosticators were often quite wrong, that pollsters were fallible, that the press's imagination was limited, and that proponents of Identity Politics had no theory of economics. Elections, in short, keep us humble and that is beneficial, even for a loud and blustery people like those inhabiting the United States of America. To hate political campaigns is a bad thing with the potential to be a good thing. To ignore political campaigns completely or to think they are beneath you, on the other hand, is patently suicidal.

## Conclusion

In *Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive*, I define civic hope as an expectation (1) that enlightened leadership is possible despite human foibles, (2) that productive forms of citizenship will result from cultural pluralism, (3) that democratic traditions will yield prudent governance, (4) but that none of this happens without constant vigilance and constant struggle.<sup>30</sup> The book details how that commodity is produced by ordinary citizens at the grassroots level when writing letters to the editor of their local newspapers. Based on a series of surveys and interviews over a twenty-year period and based on a detailed content analysis of some 10,000 such letters written during presidential elections between 1948 and the present, the book concludes that real civic hope is a hard-won quality inspired not by citizens exchanging pleasant looks with one another but by debating the issues of the day. The letters quoted in the book show voters going toe-to-toe because the political values at stake were so important to them. Argument – fierce, contentious argument – held them in one another's embrace. They did not have to like one another to get along but they had to get along to sustain a nation. Dialogue made that happen.

And so it is with political campaigns. The world is aglow when your candidate wins; tears are shed when he or she is vanquished. But there

are two things worse than losing a campaign: (1) never having entered the lists and (2) never having had your say. It is wonderful when citizens learn a great deal during campaigns. It is grand when they emerge feeling better about their democracy, clearer about the nation's policy priorities. But none of these feelings means a whit unless arguments have been exchanged – forcefully, passionately. From this perspective, the 2016 presidential election was a grand success. Everyone said something and everyone felt the full force of democratic anger at one point or another. Things will change because of that election and then things will change again at some future time. Full-throated democracies never stop. Campaigns are but an interlude.

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