Marketing a Presidential Candidate as a Consumer Product:  
Mastering the Politics of Resentment in a Traditional Liberal-vs.-Conservative Campaign  
Eric K. Clemons  
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Summary
The greatest single change in the primary campaign of 2016 has been the change in voter behavior; voter behavior is now best described by two attributes that dominate all others. Understanding this has been the basis of Mr. Trump's strategy and is key to countering his campaign.

(1) The first attribute remains voters' location on the traditional left-to-right, liberal-to-conservative social values spectrum.
(2) The second attribute, which is newly significant in this primary, is voters' satisfaction with the status quo and preserving the economic power of the rich versus expressing the resentment of the newly disadvantaged, or voters location on the spectrum from satisfaction-to-resentment.

The two dimensions have very different distribution of voters, which explains the unique behavior of voters in this primary. Along the first dimension, most voters are located in the center of the distribution, but only the liberal and conservative ends of the spectrum have the passion needed to participate in primaries. In the second dimension the greatest passion remains with both ends of the spectrum, but along this dimension the greatest number of voters are located at the end of the spectrum associated with resentment.

Historically primaries were determined by voters on the left-right spectrum, where passion rather than large numbers determined the outcome of r primaries. Since this phenomenon has been most pronounced in Republican voters, Republican presidential candidates have been vulnerable.

Mr. Trump's genius has been in recognizing that in the second dimension, both passion and numbers can now be found together. By focusing on voters' discontent he was able to attract voters who were new to the primary process and was able to attract more voters than candidates focusing on the traditional right end of the left-right.

Understanding the new two-dimensional map of voters' behavior is essential to understanding Trump's appeal and to countering Trump's campaign.

1. Marketing a Political Candidate as a Consumer Product
Marketing a political candidate is a lot like marketing any other consumer product. Consumers will only purchase a beer if the value they receive from it exceeds the price. And consumers will only vote for a candidate if the passion they feel for the candidate exceeds the effort of voting, the perceived “price”.

It’s critical to understand your “political market” and your “political customers”. There is a spectrum from left to right, of course, from socially liberal to socially conservative. This is the
traditional criterion that differentiates Republicans from Democrats. The center of the spectrum is more heavily populated, at least under normal political conditions in stable democracies. But the center is less passionate and less likely to participate in the primaries than the more extreme liberal or conservative voters. The passion of voters in the center is not sufficient to justify the “price” of participation, especially in states with caucuses instead of primaries.

As a result of differences in passion between the center and the extremes, the winner of the nominating process is unlikely to represent the center of either party. And the party that nominates the less extreme candidate has tended to win the presidential elections. See figure 1 in the appendix (online at XXX) to see the distribution of voters along this axis.

In previous years candidates, parties, media, and voters focused on one dimension of political “passion” — social values and the liberal-conservative spectrum. Democrats focused on issues related to individual freedoms, like freedom of choice, and elements of the social contract, like education, health care, and discrimination. Republicans focused on imposing their social values on the nation, opposing health care reform and gay rights, while attacking immigrants and opposing gun control. Since only the most passionate voters participate in primaries and caucuses, and since Republican primary voters were the most ideologically pure, Republicans have recently positioned themselves far to the right to win the primaries. That is, Republican primary voters felt passion for candidates even more extreme and even more focused than those candidates that attracted Democratic primary voters.

As a result Republican presidential candidates have recently lost general elections to the Democrats. Paradoxically, this is because the Democratic voters have been less committed to single fixed ideas than the Republicans, and the candidates who survive their nominating process have had greater mass appeal.

2. A New Dimension, Satisfaction or Resentment

Mr. Trump’s genius has been recognizing that there historically have actually been two dimensions to the Republican voter base and Mr. Trump has changed the nature of competition in the Republican nominating process. The first dimension remains positioning the candidate in the traditional political spectrum of left to right, liberal to conservative. The newly significant dimension is economic satisfaction. Here the Republican party has historically benefitted from its wealthy supporters, the Economic Retentionists. These are wealthy donors and corporations, “who” may or may not espouse the most extreme social values of the party but who oppose what they see as the Democratic Economic Redistributionists, with their focus on education, health care, labor’s right to organize, and higher minimum wage.

The Republican Party has for decades successfully conflating socially conservative values with retaining the economic privilege of the wealthy. As a result, the vast majority of middle and lower income Republicans have been voting against their own economic self-interest. However, much of the Republican base has realized that they have not personally benefitted from sending Conservatives to Washington. This is reflected in their resentment, even their rage, against the Congress and against Washington.

Mr. Trump has muddied his discussion of conservative social values, and it is not clear what his positions truly are. He did not rely on the most extreme and passionate end of the conservative
spectrum to carry him through the nominating process. He has moved away from the Retentionists, at least in public discourse. He has lost the active support of many wealthy donors and corporations. But he has engaged a new political force, the politics of Rage and Resentment. The middle class and the lower middle class have declined in wealth, security, and political importance, and they know it. Mr. Trump has become their candidate and they have become Mr. Trump’s base.

Mr. Trump has been exploiting and benefitting from the politics of economic resentment. His tens of millions of potential voters would not consider themselves socialists or against any of the core values of Capitalism. They have historically voted Republican, but they have recently figured out that they have been abandoned by the Retentionist Republican establishment.

Mr. Trump has captured the right of center anti-retenionists, basing his appeal on resentment, even rage, of the newly disadvantaged. Mr. Trump’s simple promise to “make America great again!” really is a promise to the vast number of newly disadvantaged American workers to make them great again. See figure 2 in the online appendix to see the second dimension.

3. Interaction of the Two Dimensions

The two dimensions interact in complex ways. There are relatively few truly content voters; the mass of the voters are now both passionate and frustrated. This is true both of Democrats and Republicans. But the massive of voters are still more centrist, and less extreme, either as liberals or as conservatives. This produces a not-so-content, and no-longer-so-silent majority in the angry center. See figure 3 in the online appendix to see how both dimensions interact.

4. Mr. Trump’s Gamble

By selecting Governor Pence as his running mate, Mr. Trump is betting that passion is additive, and that he can combine his appeal to the centrist resentful voters with Governor Pence’s appeal to the most socially conservative elements in the Republican base. If he is correct, he may indeed win. He is not planning a campaign that offers voters a platform that appeals to voters who are more resentful and more conservative; he is offering a ticket that appeals to voters who are more resentful or more conservative.

5. Secretary Clinton’s Best Response

The strategy that would enable Secretary Clinton to win has at least four parts. The first four will help position her in the densely populated Resentful region of voters.

First, Secretary Clinton can claim the center on the liberal-conservative left-right axis, while continuing to court the dissatisfied voters that the Sanders campaign attracted in their millions. This is not easy for Secretary Clinton because unlike both Senator Sanders and Mr. Trump, Secretary Clinton is the ultimate insider. Secretary Clinton cannot win by matching Mr. Trump’s appeal to resentment and rage, but she can counter it by appealing to the passionate and resentful voters by offering the hope of economic growth and at least some economic redistribution, as Sanders has done. Secretary Clinton needs to show that she goes beyond Mr. Trump’s understanding of the voters’ pain, but can actually promise to fix it. Secretary Clinton can offer a new New Deal. Secretary Clinton can provide a plan to make her listeners great
again. This would start to neutralize Mr. Trump’s appeal to the most resentful and disadvantaged voters.

Second, Secretary Clinton can continue to neutralize Mr. Trump’s appeal to resentful voters by demonstrating that he has no plan, just sound bites. Secretary Clinton can counter Mr. Trump’s powerful but simplistic sound bites, statements, and tweets. His campaign offers superficial resonance with the voters’ anger, but offers them no hope for their own improvement. In particular, she can demand that Mr. Trump be specific. How will he make his listeners great again? America is great and to deny that is unrealistic as well as unpatriotic. But America is not yet fair to all Americans. Forcing Mr. Trump to be specific is best accomplished in the debates, where she will have a chance to reach the largest number of undecided voters.

Third, The Clinton Campaign should show that that Secretary Clinton will make most voters better off than they are today. Mr. Trump’s proposed actions will not make his supporters better off. Rage is not a solution and revenge is not a solution. Abusing groups that are even more disadvantaged than Mr. Trump’s supporters will not make his supporters better off and is not a solution. The Clinton Campaign should target the voters who flocked to Senator Sanders because like Mr. Trump he understood their resentment, but unlike Mr. Trump he had specific plants to address their concerns. Secretary Clinton and Senator Warren have already started this.

6. In Conclusion

This needs to be seen as an election about economic rights and economic improvement of the middle class, not about rage and the damage already sustained by the middle class.

It is an election between two candidates, one competent and proven, the other less so. It is not about which of the candidates we like better.

It is also an election between two Platforms and two Tickets. The Republican Platform and Ticket now embrace the most extreme social values of the most conservative elements of the Republican Party. The Democratic Party Platform and Ticket are not yet clear, but the more balanced and Centrist they are, the easier the Democrats’ way forward will be.