

## The Process of Electing a U.S. President and the Role of the Media

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As a proud Greek American, I'm going to speak to you about the role of the media in U.S. Presidential elections, but in a way that merges the best of Greek and American cultures. Greece has the proud history of Plato, Aristotle, The Iliad and The Odyssey, and the creation of pure democracy. The United States boasts hip hop, Steve Jobs, Moby Dick, and Martin Luther King.

The United States has taken the wonderful Greek gift of democracy and put a uniquely American spin on it. So in that spirit, to begin this presentation, I've paired the major U.S. candidates in the 2016 presidential elections with their Greek tragedy counterparts, as well as their hamartia-- the fatal flaw that could keep them out of the White House:

Hillary Clinton is Clytemnestra, proud, efficient, shrewd, and strong, with a "male strength of heart," as the watchman in Agamemnon described her. But will her pride be her undoing?

Bernie Sanders, the counterculture Senator from Vermont, is Prometheus, who stole the divine spark of connecting with youth and progressive audiences, but is doomed not to be relevant in the election.

Donald Trump is Sophocles' King Oedipus, a rich and powerful man who belittles, challenges, and threatens everyone around him. It's this hubris that would be his downfall.

Carly Fiorina, the business executive, is Antigone. Smart and stubborn, but also plain, at least compared to her sister. Remember, Donald Trump said of her looks, "Look at that face!" Stubborn loyalty was Antigone's fatal flaw.

Jeb Bush is Orestes, because of the complicated family issues, his hamartia being the inability to understand his own life, and Marco Rubio, the handsome, glib young Senator from Florida, is Paris from the Iliad, a confirmed pretty boy. His flaw: forbidden love.

Finally, Ben Carson is Odysseus, known for his intelligence and guile. His problem is that he makes up so many stories that you don't know whether what he's saying is fact or myth.

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Now that we've had a little fun, I'd like to get into the nuts and bolts of how an American election works. A couple of years before an election, contenders announce their candidacy and usually hit the road trying to connect with voters, drum up media interest, and collect money for a campaign. We're in that phase now. Each state has a primary or caucus, in which voters select a candidate of their choice. The first two states to have primary contests are Iowa and New Hampshire--two tiny states with outsize influence on the race. The Iowa caucuses are scheduled for February 1, 2016, while the last states to

send voters to the polls do so in June 2016. Typically, whoever wins the most delegates from the states is nominated to represent the party at a convention that takes place over the summer.

That's when the real campaigning begins: after each party has selected a candidate.

When the Founding Fathers drafted the Constitution, they had to make a lot of difficult compromises. One was on whether the President should be elected by popular vote or by representatives in Congress. Smaller states were worried that they would be overpowered by larger states. One way to appease the smaller states was to create two legislative houses: the Senate and the House of Representatives. Each state would have two senators regardless of the state's size. By contrast, the number of members of the House would be determined by population. Because smaller states also felt that their citizens' votes would be dwarfed by bigger states' votes in direct elections, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention agreed to create a body called the Electoral College that would choose the president. The Electoral College contains electors from each state, with the number for each state equal to the number of members in its Congressional delegation: one for each member in the House of Representatives plus two for its Senators. So, for example, Virginia, where I live, has 13 electors, and thus 13 electoral votes. 11 of those electors reflect the 11 members of the House of Representatives, while the two reflect the state's two U.S. senators. When a state population's presidential votes are counted, the electors from that state all pledge their votes to the winning candidate. So it is winner take all, except in two very small states that rarely affect the election results.

To win the presidency, a candidate has to capture 270 electoral votes.

This all sounds very complicated. The media has to explain this process every four years to the American voting public, so don't be discouraged if you don't understand every nuance immediately!

But everyone knows that it's just a few states that make the difference in the Electoral College. Most states are automatically in the bag for the Democrats or the Republicans, so no serious campaigning goes on there. New York? California? Maryland? Massachusetts? Washington? Oregon? All staunchly Democratic for decades. Texas? South Carolina? Utah? Alaska? Indiana? All safely Republican.

Since the winning candidate has to accumulate at least 270 votes in the Electoral College, their handlers and data crunchers know exactly which combination of states they need to win to put them over the top. In the 2016 election, there will be about 10 so-called toss-up states: roughly, from west to east to south, Nevada, Colorado, Iowa, Wisconsin, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida. Those states combined account for about 20% of the US population, meaning that, assuming a normal voter turnout, only one in 5 votes will go towards determining the election. If you look at it even more cynically (political pundits would say more scientifically), we already know how most of the people in those states will vote, so it comes down to perhaps the 10 percent of voters who are undecided.

Simple enough, you say. Go after the few million swing voters in the 10 swing states. But these aren't a homogenous lot. You have to target various groups that make up this great mass of undecided voters. We're still a year away, and I've heard informed and intelligent commentators confidently conclude that

the specific group they've identified will determine the race. But they each identify a different group: Millennials, African-Americans, Hispanics, illegal aliens, freelance workers, marijuana advocates (seriously!), young Caucasian females, and so on. I put my money on Greek-American female business owners from the Washington, DC, area, but maybe that's just me.

Time for another U.S.-Greece comparison, this time going back almost three millennia to the era of the Greek city states. If there are any scholars of ancient Greece, out there, this is just a loose analogy, so bear with me. Let's say that instead of a network of allied and warring states, the Greek city states were unified as united or confederated states, which each having local laws and culture but subsumed themselves to a larger Greek entity. Continuing our analogy, let's say that citizens have the popular vote, but that there is an electoral college in place, and that the vast majority of the citizens in each state all support the same party or candidate. The candidates can essentially ignore the most powerful city states such as Athens, Sparta, and Corinth, because their votes are known. In fact, only the people in Ithaca, Kos, Pella, Rhodes, and Argos are truly divided, and even then it's only a small percentage of those populations who are undecided. Political operatives at that time might have persuaded their candidate that the election might turn on the Rhodes' builder vote, the Kos fishermen vote, or the turnout of leather tanners in Argos, and put all their resources into that finely sliced demographic. That's where election science and big data have brought us today.

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Let me turn now to the role that the media plays in electing a U.S. President.

A common perception is that the media gets infatuated with a candidate, say Obama before the 2008 election, and carries him to victory. But political analysts and journalists say that isn't true. Multiple studies show that the media impact on elections is minimal. Newspapers, TV, Internet news, talk radio--they are more influenced by campaigns than they themselves influence campaigns. In fact, if you want to know how someone will vote, friend them on Facebook and see who their friends like, or look at the demographics of the neighborhood they live in.

That's not to say that the media is purely passive. Dr. John Kirch, a professor who specializes in elections and the media at Towson State University in Maryland, says that the media sets the issues agenda. The issues that the media talk about, such as Syrian refugees or illegal immigration, are the issues people will feel are important. But here's what's critical: while the media determines which issues are important, they don't determine how people feel about them. Think about it. In the age of thousands of specialty satellite TV and radio stations and Internet sites, everyone can find a media outlet that confirms his or her worldview. No one with other viewpoints is tuning in or being convinced.

You might think that the media's involvement in shaping the presidential race is a new phenomenon, fueled by the 24-hour news cycle, the Internet, and corporate behemoths gobbling up television stations, radio stations, Web news sites, and the like. But, in actuality, the media have been heavily influencing elections since the days of the Founding Fathers.

Colonial American newspapers were filled with angry broadsides against the British, but once independence was won, publishers turned their invective against their political opponents. Each of the two parties that formed, the Federalists and the Republicans, had their own newspapers, and these papers ravaged the other side. For example, can you guess who the publisher of a Republican newspaper in Philadelphia is talking about in this quote? "The man who is the source of all the misfortune of our country is this day reduced to a level with his fellow-citizens, and is no longer possessed of power to multiply evils upon the United States."

The "source of all the misfortune of our country" is none other than George Washington.

George Washington! Who, along with Abraham Lincoln, is the person who tops all lists on who Americans consider their greatest politician and their greatest American!

During the 19th century, there grew to be hundreds of newspapers that reflected the political views of whoever published it. Most were screeds pushing the publisher's politics-- Federalist, Democratic, Republican, Whig, or stances on the hot-button issues of the day, such as slavery and abolition. And the rhetoric was vicious.

In the election of 1884, Grover Cleveland was running on the Democratic ticket, and he was widely respected for his moral rectitude, especially cleaning up the corrupt political system in Chicago. But rumors arose that he had a child out of wedlock, and Republican newspapers ran with the story. They published a cartoon of a woman holding a baby, both of them crying, at the gates of the White House, with the baby reaching for Grover Cleveland. The caption said, "Ma, ma, where's my pa?" (Incidentally, when Cleveland eventually won the election, Democratic newspapers responded to the cry of "Ma, ma, where's my pa?" with "Gone to the White House, ha ha ha!")

When the great waves of European immigration came to the United States in the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century, it coincided with reduction in the costs of publishing, and hundreds of newspapers sprouted in languages such as Polish, Russian, Yiddish, German, and Italian, and these papers could become vehicles for affecting the political choices of millions of people who were new to the United States and had little understanding of how its government worked.

Newspapers' dominant influence on voters began to be chipped away in the first half of the 20th century by radio, then took a big hit in the second half with the rise of television. By the 1970s and 1980s, 70% of people relied on television as their primary source for news.

With the advent of television, image became at least as important as policies and words. Probably the most famous example that exemplified this shift occurred in the 1960 Presidential election. Richard Nixon, the Republican candidate, would be debating John F. Kennedy, the Democratic candidate, and the debate would be the first ever to be televised. It was also transmitted on the radio. Nixon represented entrenched Washington politics, while Kennedy presented a vibrant, young image. Kennedy wasn't given much of a chance: he was young and he was Catholic, and there never had been a Catholic president.

Those who listened to the debate on the radio that night heard the polished Nixon outduel the neophyte Kennedy. But those who watched on television saw a handsome, calm, confident, and tan Kennedy whip a pale, sweaty, and slouching Nixon. It's estimated that half the country watched the debate on TV, while only a few listened on the radio.

Let's fast-forward to the modern day, to the age of the Internet, apps, social media, and big data. As these new media have come to the fore, the old media has stuck around. Newspapers have taken a big hit, but they are still around and they are influential. Radio and cable TV have taken on the role of the partisan newspapers of the 19th century, with voters able to tune in their politics of choice and tune out anything they don't agree with. That explains the popularity of CNN, MSNBC, the radio shows of Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, and their ilk.

The first presidential candidate to master the possibilities of Internet-based media was Barack Obama. You can say that the Internet and big data did for him what television did for Kennedy. One statistic is particularly telling: Obama had 33 million Facebook friends on the eve of the election, compared to Mitt Romney's 12 million.

The Obama campaign made a strategic investment in building a database of potential supporters and in using data analytics and metrics to more efficiently target fundraising appeals and media buys and to enhance the success of its field. Obama earned more money by doing targeted grass-roots fundraising identifying individual donors via data analytics, while Romney relied on Super PACs and their allies (Super PACs are political action committees that can raise funds from individuals, corporations, unions, and other groups without any legal limit on donation size and spend it on any issue they like, but not on a party or a candidate). Obama spent \$132 million more than Romney, which is a sizable advantage.

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That brings us back to the tragic protagonists of the 2016 election

First the Republicans. Probably the biggest phenomenon has been Oedipus, otherwise known as Donald Trump. He's loud, boastful, iconoclastic, and action-oriented. He'll say and do things that no one else will dare, like build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico. He's also turned traditional campaigning on its head. Traditional campaigning is exemplified by Jimmy Carter in the mid-1970s. He was an obscure governor from Georgia with local appeal. He diligently visited little towns, factories, and union halls in Iowa and New Hampshire, getting momentum in the next state to have a caucus or primary. He won New Hampshire and Iowa because the delegates split their votes on other candidates. Once he won those two, he continued his grass-roots campaign, state by state, until he built a true national reputation.

Donald Trump flipped the script on the Carter method. He was already well known businessman and celebrity. Unlike Carter, who was shaking hands in local coffee shops, Trump immediately drew huge crowds and had the media's ear because everyone wanted to hear what he had to say. He's brash, off-color, and exciting. In the past several months, he has started to build a more traditional ground operation in the key states to capitalize on his popularity.

He lords it over the other candidates, making the Republican debates look like a reality TV show. And in essence it is. Elections are at least as much about theater, pomp, and entertainment than they are about policies. So it's fitting that an entertainer is leading in the polls.

But most political analysts consider him just a girlfriend or boyfriend, not a potential spouse. Things are fun and exciting first, but do you really want to bring him home to meet your parents? Trump will always keep a fanatical base, but he's hard pressed to win the Republican nomination when voters start to think seriously: Is this who I want as President? It will be his hubris that takes him down.

Odysseus, also known as Ben Carson, is a similar case of an outside candidate laying the blame at the feet of entrenched interests.

Carson's Q rating has shot up, but most journalists would probably say that that's not due to the media. Todd Gillman, who covers the Republican nomination process for the Dallas Morning News, puts it like this: Conservatives are thinking, it's unfathomable that we haven't stymied Obama in every single way. It must be the fault of entrenched and corrupt Republican politicians like Mitch McConnell and John Boehner, who represent the Republican majorities in both houses of Congress. Gillman says that there's nothing media driven by that dynamic. In fact, Carson doesn't get the level of media attention or scrutiny commensurate with a frontrunner, Gillman says. In the several Republican debates held so far, Carson hasn't been treated as a frontrunner because the media doesn't believe he has legs. Once the media decides that he IS a front runner, they will kick into high gear. Professor Kirch of Towson State adds that far from trying to bolster candidates at this stage, journalists are trying to narrow the field because of a lack of resources.

And Carson has been cracking under the mild scrutiny he's received so far, specifically concerning claims that he was offered a scholarship to West Point. The only way that you can say that the media has boosted Carson is that it hasn't done its traditional vetting of candidates yet--it hasn't stepped in and said: He's not ready to be President.

So Carson is Odysseus: smart, wily, questing. But can we be sure that those stories about the Cyclops and sirens were true?

It would take all day to analyze the other dozen or so candidates, but the one who has a good chance to emerge from the hurly-burly is Paris, or Marco Rubio.

He's handsome, smart, well spoken, and has solid Conservative tea party credentials but he is seen as not too dogmatic or extremist. He's also a self-made man, the son of Cuban immigrants who struggled to make a life in America. Americans love these types of stories. And he can appeal to the burgeoning number of Latino voters in the United States. If he's truly Paris of the Iliad, we should soon see him stealing Chelsea Clinton away from her husband and hiding out in the Florida Keys.

Among the Democrats, until a few weeks ago, Hillary "Clytemnestra" Clinton was the presumptive candidate, and she still probably is. But the excitement has come from the promethean Senator Bernie

Sanders, who has famously called himself a "democratic socialist." Incidentally, identifying yourself in any way with the word "socialist" is a good way for a politician to kill his chances in the United States.

Sanders is tapping into the same anger as Trump and Sanders, but from the left. He's finding support from Democrats who don't care for Hillary or think she's vulnerable, as well as progressives who think she's part of the establishment. But of the many members of the national media I've talked to, nobody believes he has staying power. Like Trump, he's iconoclastic and speaks his mind. Where Trump attracts angry adults, Sanders attracts angry millennials and college students.

The media didn't make him, though. Professor Kirch points out that the political TV show Meet the Press was more interested in his views on Hillary than his impending decision to run for president. Pundits said Sanders wasn't going anywhere, so the media wasn't interested. He only began getting coverage when crowds started showing up at his speeches. So he had to do traditional, retail-style campaigning to get noticed by journalists.

But some people say this year's "outsiders"-- Carson, Trump, Fiorina, and Sanders--are different. And there is historical precedent for outsiders winning the White House. But listen to the previous job title of the last 20 presidents: Senator, Governor, Governor, Vice President, Governor, Governor, Vice President, Vice President, Senator, 5 Star General, Vice President, Governor, Secretary of Commerce, Vice President, Senator, Governor, Judge, Vice President, Senator, Governor.

No doctors. No CEOs. Not a single person without military or political experience. In fact, out of the 43 men who have held the title of US President, 5 were founding fathers, 17 had most recently been Congressmen, 13 had been state governors, 5 had other high level government positions, and 3 were war heroes.

When it comes to their presidents, Americans bemoan the entrenched hierarchy, howl for outsiders and newcomers, then vote for what's safe and comfortable. H. Ross Perot, a businessman, was the darling in 1992. But his third party candidacy garnered less than 20% of the popular vote. Even Obama, who was a phenomenon, likely wouldn't have had the political bones to win the Oval Office had he not been a US Senator.

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That brings me to the end of my time today. But as you know, no Greek tragedy is complete without a chorus to comment on the action. Aristotle said the chorus should be regarded as one of the actors and share in the action. Ladies and gentlemen, please be my chorus today. Feel free to ask questions, comment on, challenge, or amplify what I've said in this past half hour or so.

Thank you very much.

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