

2016 Presidential Election: The Voices of Voters

The Annenberg Focus Group in Columbus, Ohio

November 16, 2015

Analysis by Peter D. Hart

Hillary Clinton: A Glass Curtain, Not a Glass Ceiling

President Kennedy stated about Columbus, Ohio: "There is no city in the United States in which I get a warmer welcome and less votes than Columbus, Ohio." Kennedy was the last Democratic president to win the presidency without carrying Ohio. It has been and will be the battleground state for 2016. Columbus's Franklin County, the state's capital, is a must-win county for the Democrats. We conducted two focus groups (one all men, the other all women) here one year prior to the election to understand the election's dynamics, but in particular to understand voters' perceptions of and attitudes toward Hillary Clinton. Please note that the timing was three days after the Paris terrorist attacks, and two days after the Democratic debate in Iowa. The composition of the groups purposely was weighted Democratic (both Clinton and Sanders supporters), but six of the dozen participants were Republican or independent.

The assessment of Hillary Clinton is pretty clear and simple—these voters respect Hillary Clinton for her experience, understanding, and knowledge about policy, and especially for being a person who can deal on the international front. She has been tested, and they describe her as having a backbone of steel, titanium, or iron. Nobody underestimates her professional abilities or how formidable she is. Indeed, in talking about the events that President Obama dealt with in the proceeding seven days, 11 of the 12 feel that "Hillary Clinton could do the job." They attribute this to her experience, ability to be tough and not take any "crap," and her know-how. None of the other candidates comes close to measuring up. This may be a case of being the right person for the times. From this perspective one does not get a sense of a glass ceiling preventing Hillary Clinton from becoming the first woman president. Given the times, one would think this is a sure-fire recipe for victory.

Yet, strong reservations also emerge when these voters consider her candidacy. They openly discuss their personal reasons for questioning a

Hillary Clinton presidency. There is a sort of “glass curtain” between Clinton and these voters. Many feel that they cannot relate to or trust her. Even her supporters express uneasiness about their ability to connect with her. We will discuss this momentarily. Since 1980, from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama, voters have chosen the presidential candidate they perceived as more “likable and warm.” These voters perceive a glass curtain or invisible shield between them and Hillary Clinton, through which they can see and study her, but they cannot touch or relate to her.

Finally, one of the objectives of this research was to understand voters’ willingness and interest in electing the first woman president. The focus groups were divided by gender. Support for and interest in having a woman as president is one potential hidden element in the 2016 race. Indeed, women in this discussion expressed positive attitudes toward having a woman president, saying that electing a woman would be a great achievement. They want this not only for gender implications, but also because they believe that a woman (be it Clinton or Fiorina) would bring key attributes to office. Among those attributes, they cite “organized,” “determined,” “good listener,” “multitask-oriented,” “level headed,” and “a strong fighter.” Women describe a woman being elected president as “a breakthrough,” “a historical achievement,” and “refreshing.” As for the speculation about “backlash” among men, it was less apparent (maybe for fear of seeming politically incorrect). Reaction among men was more of indifference and many were nonplused by the idea. As one man put it, “I think it will spark controversy, but it’s something that we need to get over and get past. There isn’t going to be a perfect time to do it.”

This session was conducted three days after the terrorist attacks in Paris, but rather than dominate the conversation, they were almost set aside as voters focused on domestic politics. The views on terrorism almost were too fresh and raw to provide the kind of perspective needed to judge the full effect of this issue on the 2016 election. It appears that Clinton’s perceived resolve added to her stature, and diminished both Donald Trump (too strong or mercurial) and Ben Carson (not ready).

Hillary Clinton

In any quick test when we ask participants to give a word or phrase to describe their feelings about Hillary Clinton, no one is left without a thought, and often the quick reactions are very polarizing and sharply critical. In Columbus, initial reactions by gender did not differ all that much. To some men, Hillary Clinton is “smart,” “honest,” and has “something to prove,” while to women she is “powerful,” “strong,” and “experienced.” However, among both genders, one also hears terms such as “liar,” “questionable honesty,” “not good vibes,” “deceptive,” “controversy,” and “polarizing.” The use of even a single word helps to capture the two sides of the Clinton profile—the professional ability versus the personal character. For the Clinton campaign, none of this would represent new news or some deeper sense of skepticism than before, but it does underscore that even in the wake of a strong period for the Clinton campaign, these attitudes are well embedded in voters’ psyche. An important observation is that voters’ perception of a female president (in general) bringing the quality of “inclusiveness” to the table does not translate to Hillary Clinton; on the contrary, she is perceived as someone who is polarizing and surrounded by controversy.

In politics, linkage is one of the key characteristics voters use to decide whether a person understands them and would fight for their interest. This is much more of a gut feeling than studying a voting record or specific pronouncements. To better understand how a candidate is perceived, we asked voters to tell us who this person might be if they were a family member. This question is posed simply to better understand a voter’s affinity with and relationship to the candidate. In this exercise, women feel much closer to and more supportive of Hillary Clinton than do men. Hillary Clinton is most likely to be perceived as an aunt: for some it is the favorable aunt whom you can enjoy, but to others she resembles the distant, intimidating aunt. Women are more likely to perceive her as a sister figure or a mother. But for men, those choices are hardly mentioned. One female Clinton supporter captures the linkage Clinton is trying to tap into:

"I think a mother, because she has to fight for everything, and she fights for what she has and what she believes in, and you're not going to tear her apart. You're not going to tear her family apart. I have a respect for that."

— Woman voter

By contrast, as one male put it:

"She is my wife's sister: extremely opinionated, is graceful at times and totally available to rip your head off at other times."

-Man voter

Secretary Clinton's personality seems more distant than close. To add another dimension to the same personality question, we ask voters what fictional character Hilary Clinton might be. To one woman, she is Olivia Pope (star of *Scandal*):

[Hillary Clinton as Olivia Pope] "She is always cleaning the messes up and doing everybody's stuff and trying [to be] diplomatic and to do what's right for the country, no matter what the cost."

-Woman voter

Others say she would be Lando Calrissian from *The Empire Strikes Back*:

[Hillary Clinton as Lando Calrissian] "He tries to do the right thing. He can run an entire city. People might not always agree with the way things go, but he makes the best decisions he can at the time."

-Man voter

But maybe the "Hillary and Bill" allusion was captured by one Sanders voter who stated, "She reminds me of the wife on *House of Cards*." Again, it is important to understand that these respondents have no idea what the questions will be, so this represents their quick visceral sense of what they perceive based on the campaign up to this point.

In the end, one is left with a very divided profile of Hillary Clinton, admiration and respect for her professional abilities, knowledge, and strength. Compared with the total field of other candidates, she is head and shoulders above the competition. But the comfort level with her personally has not advanced much from the day she first contemplated seeking the presidency in 2016. The answer to the question of whose cards you would most like to be holding at this stage is simple: Hillary Clinton. The answer to the second question of whether this hand is strong enough to prevail is far less certain.

Conclusion

Every election has its own fingerprints and its separate set of dynamics. In looking back at the 20th century, I can think of or find no election where the year leading into the presidential election has been so unusual as 2015. The combination of “war” abroad and racial and social strife at home makes one think of 1967. But unlike ‘67, this year the GOP (the challenger) is in turmoil. The GOP is searching for a candidate who can both unite the party and lead the nation through challenging times. On the face of it, one year out, it is difficult to see an Ike, Nixon, or Reagan among their lot. It feels more like a “black swan” year of 1964, in which the GOP could go outside its comfort zone to select “a true believer” versus an establishment choice. The Democrats on the other hand, are really more “united and accepting” of their frontrunner than they have been in 40 years. In this respect the two parties have had a role reversal. All of this should suggest that the Democrats are well positioned to achieve one of the most difficult feats in American politics (have a two-term president succeeded by his own party).

In a micro way, 2016 feels like it should be a Democratic year (the GOP is without a natural nominee, and it remains a party with a tremendous gulf between the establishment and its electorate on social issues). But, and there is always a but, listening to these voters in Columbus, Ohio, reminds one of the challenge ahead for the Democrats in 2016. These voters remain very unhappy about the direction of the country. President Obama receives passing grades (B’s to D’s) from these voters, and there is no sense that the Democratic nominee could run on a platform to keep the good times rolling. It is unlikely that the chant at the 2016 Democratic convention in Philadelphia will be “Four More Years.”

Hillary Clinton receives admiration and respect for her professional skills and background, as well as a desire to have a balanced leader such as her, with real resolve and a strong backbone. At this time, with these Ohio voters, there is a gulf for her to cross in order to connect with voters. One does not sense that they are rooting for her, but rather, they are hoping she stumbles so they can find a way to relate to her. The irony of her candidacy is that she is always referred to by her first name “Hillary” (as is also the case with “Jeb”)—yet, for each there is neither the kinship nor the connection that other presidential candidates had who have been mostly referred to by their last name.

In the end it comes back to the voices of the voters that underscore the challenge ahead.

For Tai:

"I like her [Clinton's] experience. I like just how she's handled herself through the controversy."

For Dustin

"I think she's graceful under fire. I think she's thoughtful, confident, and I think she has the experience."

And for Kamon:

"She's resilient. She's unwavering...she hasn't let anything stop her so far."

But for Scott:

"I honestly just want to see that she can be down to earth, she can have that conversation because politics isn't all about standing up, being serious and showing off how smart you are. It's about being human and showing that I can be empathetic and I can have a conversation with somebody that is different...you can say something without having to come across as I know everything or I'm super intelligent. Just talk to me. Talk to me like I'm a person."

Hillary Clinton has often referred to the "glass ceiling" she is trying to break through. These voters also are trying to break through, but for them it is a glass curtain. Currently, many feel they can see and hear her, but they do not think they can relate to or touch her. In their words, she is remote and distant. Whether it is her voice, manner, attitude, or language, there is a gulf. At this stage, one year before the election, the challenge facing Hillary Clinton is to find a way to relate to voters and more important, provide voters a way to relate to her.