The 2016 Presidential Election: Reality vs. Myths

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Politics in a democracy requires governance through debate.
- Nurses are an important part of the voting public and we need to assess our own anger, expectations, and values for this election.
- Recognizing four myths during this election season can improve the political conversation.
- This conversation must acknowledge different groups, interests, and opinions and then seek ways to balance or reconcile those interests.
- Using this as a mental model to define our politics rather than succumbing to divisive rhetoric, we can take a major step toward building a better political system.

“Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.”

– Edmond Burke

Let’s start by parting with a central myth that comes to the fore during presidential races: the president is all-powerful. Voters are focusing their blame and hope onto one person and one office, that of the president. It is easy but inaccurate to think the office of the president exerts overwhelming control over the entire nation, the direction of politics, and even the state of the economy. Both Trump and Sanders are encouraging this view – of the president as unlimited in power and influence – through promises of revolutionary political change upon assuming office. Trump has promised to rebuild both foreign and domestic policy through his leadership skills. One of his proposed strategies for immigration reform is to convince the Mexican government to pay for a wall along the shared border. He argues this convincing can be done in 3 days. Sanders has pledged to create a single-payer health care system without providing any details as to how it would be paid for. He is also ready to take on Wall Street. Yet most of his strategies would require support from congress; support he assumes will come from like-minded Democrats who will be elected into office by his message of reform. This trend of making big promises is certainly not new nor is it isolated to Trump and Sanders. Like many past presidential hopefuls, including President Obama, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is also making big promises.

Four Myths to Keep in Mind During Election Time

Nurses are an important part of the voting public and we need to assess our own anger, expectations, and values for this election. We must consider what we can do to improve the political conversation. Doing so has the potential to reinvent our relationships with the people we work with as well as those within our non-work communities. However, to make such an assessment requires some reality checks.

DEBORAH B. GARDNER, PhD, RN, FNAP, FAAN, is a Health Policy and Leadership Consultant, LLC, Honolulu, HI, and a Member of the Nursing Economics Editorial Board.
powers limited only by the hero’s willpower. He proposes the power of the president has taken on such a gloss. Like a child’s belief in superheroes, the public adopts “the belief that the President can achieve any political or policy objective if he tries hard enough or uses the right tactics” (Klein, 2014, para 3). Of course, news commentators and politicians consistently prop up this view of presidential power. So why wouldn’t this notion be popular?

The idea we just need a president who will get things done is much simpler and more appealing than the complex realities of our political system. For all its appeal, this standpoint ignores the roles and powers of congress, courts, American public, private businesses, and foreign governments who can block or limit the goals of a president. Echoing this critique, Bernadetter Meyler, a constitutional law professor at Cornell University, notes: “We think of the President as having great power to fix the economy for example, or fix international conflicts, and to some extent the President has persuasive authority to do things like that. But the President really can’t just turn around and fix the economy in two years for example” (Freakonomics, 2010, para. 81).

Given the fervent media focus on the presidency as well as the new laws being written and examined in congress, it is easy to understand how a Green Lantern myth persists. Ezra Klein, a progressive columnist, argues the constant media focus on the president and new legislation problematically leads voters to believe in unrealistic presidential power (Klein, 2014). Moreover, he says such a focus fails to hold all of the actual players accountable. For instance, when congress fails to pass legislation, often the president is blamed. Similarly, the media gives more attention to new laws than on the implementation of legislation through existing government programs where, as a responsibility residing in the executive branch, the president can be held accountable. Klein notes that while the President is involved in law making, he or she cannot ultimately control the process (Klein, 2014).

One Man One Vote

The second myth is voters directly select their political party’s presidential candidate or “The one man one vote value.” Voters are struggling with the reality of their limits to influence which candidate their party will back for president. A contested convention, one where no single candidate has secured a majority of delegates before the convention, is looking possible for both major parties. Because there has not been a contested convention since 1948 for Republicans and 1952 for Democrats, many voters do not understand how this party process is designed (Schulthesis 2016). Voters are understandably frustrated upon learning the selection process allows state delegates to vote for a candidate of their own individual choice after the first ballot. In short, in a contested convention for either party nominee, it is the delegates who ultimately select the candidate and not the voters back home.

Both Democratic and Republican parties use elaborate processes to choose the party nominee. Designated years ago, these nomination processes give party leaders considerable control over which candidate is endorsed and, considering the nominee gains access to the party’s political infrastructure and financial support, has the best chances of competing for the presidency. The Democrats also created “superdelegates” as part of their nomination process to ensure “electable candidates” win the nomination (Winship, 2016). In other words, although the logic used in determining “electable candidates” is unclear, the Democratic Party establishment ensures it makes this determination over voters. Sparking questions of fairness and equality, these processes leave many voters feeling they have no real voice in the electoral process (Peters, 2016).

Compromise Is a Dirty Word

A third myth is that compromise is not a legitimate way for elected leaders to meet political or policy goals. Despite the inevitable need for compromise and negotiation to make decisions in our democracy, the willingness to make concessions to opposing positions seems to be losing ground. As David Brooks (2016), a conservative columnist for The New York Times, aptly puts it:

We live in a big, diverse society. There are essentially two ways to maintain order and get things done in such a society – politics or some form of dictatorship. Our founding fathers chose politics. Politics is an activity in which you recognize the simultaneous existence of different groups, interests and opinions. You try to find some way to balance or reconcile or compromise those interests, or at least a majority of them. You follow a set of rules, enshrined in the constitution or in custom, to help you reach these compromises in a way everybody considers legitimate. (para. 1 & 2)

Brooks observes there has been a rise in groups seeking to delegitimize compromise and deal making. They do this by condoning “all or nothing” legislative decision-making, especially if it helps to gain political power. This has led to the election of legislators with little political skill or experience. It has also created such deep divisions between the two major parties that political success means blocking any legislative progress by the other party. Brooks refers to this desire for total victory for themselves and their doctrine as political narcissism. This form of politicking makes for a more dysfunctional government, which, in turn, only increases public distrust.
A Spectator Sport

The fourth and final myth is *you can’t make a difference in this current political mess so simply stand back and watch it unfold*. This is an especially pernicious myth for a number of reasons. Not doing anything still has a political impact – it’s simply less likely to be the impact you would like. Staying passive or inactive simply to avoid the frustration of failure or limited success will not actually address the source of frustration. And as broken as the system may be, plenty of citizens are having an impact as they work to address issues ranging from campaign finance reform to voter ID laws.

Each of the myths discussed demonstrates a need to be cautious about the stories we hear and the ones we tell ourselves. Consider asking yourself, where and what are my frustrations truly focused on? What type of leadership skills and values do I want to see demonstrated in elected officials? On the issues you consider a priority, what are the facts leading me to this perspective or is it an interpretation? Keeping the myths in mind, be wary of political leaders who use apocalyptic rhetoric – who treat disagreements as scenarios of good versus evil – or who suggest they have the superpower of bringing about change single-handedly. When the next opportunity comes for you to vote, consider looking at the candidate’s record of advancing or passing legislation, not just opposing it. If an official is against some legislation, is any space left for negotiation and what specific alternative strategies are being proposed?

Politics in a democracy requires governance through debate. Brooks’ description of this debating activity recognizes the conversation must acknowledge different groups, interests, and opinions, and then seek ways to balance or reconcile those interests. This description provides a lens for us to consider in our discourse. It is a simple guide for identifying our values, the type of dialogue we need, and recognizes the importance of consciously choosing how we use our power. Using this as a mental model to define our politics rather than succumbing to divisive rhetoric, we can take a major step toward building a better political system. While we can’t replace the existing system overnight, we can start to build a better one.

REFERENCES


