Presidentializing Incivility: Trump and the Expansion of Presidential Opportunity

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No government or military experience…fine.
Don’t read (beyond Twitter)…fine.
Refuse to release your tax returns…fine.
Encourage violence at your campaign rallies…fine.
Degrade women about their “looks”…fine.
Mock disabled persons…fine.
Belittle political opponents and defame their families…fine.
Brag about groping and touching (potentially sexually assaulting) women…fine.
Openly lie to the American public…fine.
And the list could go on…

The above is not meant to disparage but to demonstrate the current harsh reality of the American presidency. US citizens voted in a candidate that displayed these qualities. Further, the list poses significant questions for politics more generally, such as: what role should credentials and experience—governmental or non-governmental—play in evaluating potential leaders; should leadership candidates adhere to contemporary customary norms; and, perhaps most importantly, is there a level of dignity and civility that politicians, and especially leaders such as presidents, should abide by? Mr. Trump’s candidacy and election victory have established an identity politics beyond the typical demographic characteristics we tend to associate with party politics. Ultimately, Trump has presidentialized incivility, and in doing so has vastly expanded presidential opportunity.

After Barack Obama’s 2008 election, commentators from around the globe proclaimed that his victory opened the doors ever wider, not only to the American dream, but to the presidency. That anyone, no matter their background or skin colour, could ascend to the highest office in the land. For America it was a transformational moment: a Black President…finally. After all the years of subtle—and at many times overt—racism in the United States, someone came along that shattered traditional conceptions of the American “president,” which had been middle aged or elderly white men until that point.

There remains little doubt that Barack Obama’s ascension to the presidency was a watershed moment, not merely for the African American community, but for the country as a whole. Obama’s 2008 victory was a decisive repudiation of George W. Bush’s time in office; a time where the President of the United States often appeared oblivious—and therefore easily manipulated—on matters of domestic and foreign policy. Obama was the opposite of George W. in terms of detail, policy knowledge and international worldview. Where Bush would quip, Obama would lecture; where Bush led with his gut, Obama led with his head. This is where, we thought, the American presidency was headed: to brainy government and thoughtful foreign
policy, as opposed to “shooting from the hip” (in large part, Hillary Clinton was also a rebuke to the latter style of governance). Boy, oh boy, were we wrong.

Eight years later, the opportunity to become the President of the United States has expanded, perhaps even more widely than it did after President Obama’s two victories. It has expanded to the point that even outsiders with no government or military experience, and a collection of incendiary policy ideas, can now reach such heights. This newfound expansion embodies significant differences compared to Obama’s victories, or even Mrs. Clinton’s nomination. The latter two examples fit traditional models of identity politics, expanding presidential opportunity based on demographic characteristics. These characteristics dominate how we discuss identity politics and expansion of opportunity: Obama as first Black president; Hillary as first female presidential candidate. Such characteristics do matter: just like Obama’s two victories, Mrs. Clinton’s historic nomination and victory in the popular vote demonstrate that women can readily compete for America’s highest office. And yet, Mr Trump’s victory opened up the identity politics of the presidency in a radically different—more sinister—manner: embracing an “outsider” status and brazenly disregarding presidential customary norms.

Just think of what Barack Obama had to do to get into the White House:

- Hold impeccable academic credentials (BA – Columbia University; JD – Harvard Law School)
- Whilst at law school, was editor-in-chief of the Harvard Law Review, the most prestigious law journal in the country
- Lectured constitutional law at the University of Chicago Law School for over twelve years (1992-2004)
- Served in the Illinois State Senate for eight years (1997-2004)
- Served in the United States Senate for four years (2005-2008)

No doubt, these are impressive credentials for a presidential candidate; they are also some of the more traditional qualifications associated with the presidency. Trump, meanwhile, held distinctively unconventional credentials: he managed a vast real estate enterprise that his father left him in a most generous position to run. Additionally, by being the glossy, uncompromising boss that employees dare not challenge, he also starred in a hit American reality television show: The Apprentice. Trump was also never formally associated with the Republican Party, besides speaking at a couple CPAC conferences and being a registered Republican in time for the 2016 election (he has also been a registered Democrat for much of his life). Thus if there was ever any distinguished “route” to the presidency, Trump certainly broke it.

Beyond holding “presidential” credentials, Trump’s victory shook one of the core tenants of America’s political system: that no matter the party, a degree of civility and common decency adorns the presidency. This means that not only is there a certain amount of respect given to the person holding the office, but also the individual is supposed to uphold presidential values (some such values can be found here). Previously, these standards displayed themselves even before individuals attained the office. Whilst undergoing the gruelling presidential campaign, candidates have commonly acted in a manner that was seen to be “presidential.” Generally this has
been understood as respecting your opponents, complying with contemporary norms (e.g., releasing your tax returns), and upholding the idea that the job requires a commitment to the general public—not just your core contingent of voters. Such customary norms were shattered with Trump’s victory.

Therefore, expansion of access to the presidency after Trump’s election not only concerned credentials; it also dealt a serious blow to the customary norms we associate with the office. Mr. Trump’s candidacy displayed little—if any—of the dignity and civility required to hold America’s highest office. Ironically, his lack of respect for others and reckless behaviour appear to have won him the position. Post-Trump, is there any incentive for future presidential candidates to display decency and civility, given that doing so may hinder their prospects of success? Has the presidency been opened up to someone like Kanye West, or some other vastly inexperienced celebrity? Probably so.

But, how much do dignity and civility in politics really matter? This is a difficult question to answer succinctly, but in democracies it is fair to say it matters a great deal. The whole idea of democracy is based on the acceptance that different viewpoints abound, and within reason, those perspectives should be respected—even vigorously protected. In parliamentary democracies such as the United Kingdom the acknowledgement that no one leader (or party) has unfettered power is constitutionalized in mechanisms such as the “loyal opposition,” which requires a degree of civility amongst the government and the opposition. And yet the most disconcerting aspect of Trump’s candidacy, and subsequent presidency, has been his fierce, combative defiance to any hint of opposition to his policies or worldview. Such an attitude presidentializes incivility, and threatens the quality of American democracy.

Perhaps the only comfort at this point to those who still hold value to the American presidency is that Barack Obama, and even his predecessor, George W. Bush, understood the gravity of the position (so, too, did virtually all the presidents before them). Trump, meanwhile, has repeatedly displayed a slipshod attitude towards the position; and it is this indifference which may ultimately be his downfall.