



OPINION: "Why are all those politicians yelling at me?"

by Stephen Hansen

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EDWARDSVILLE - On Election Night in 2012, Republican strategist Karl Rove famously objected when Fox News declared that Ohio had been won by President Barack Obama. Incredulous, Rove argued that the projection was wrong and that with 20 percent of the vote still to be counted, Mitt Romney would ultimately carry Ohio.

Rove was mistaken. What he failed to factor into his calculations was the ability of the Obama campaign to get an unusually large number of voters to the polls. That turnout was the difference between victory and defeat. Just as in 2012, voter turnout will determine who will win the election in 2016.

Both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump understand the importance of motivating their supporters to vote. Each campaign wants to rally their supporters and get them to the polls. At the same time, both campaigns are trying to cast enough doubt on the other candidate so as to demoralize his or her supporters and discourage them from voting. Neither campaign is trying to persuade voters to change their minds.

If the candidates seem to be yelling at us, it's because victory depends upon which candidate turns out the greatest number of voters.

In the past, political parties adopted a kind of military style to get voters to the polls, and the language of elections reflects that style. From the "opening gun of the campaign," the political party "fielded" its candidates led by the "standard bearer." "Campaign headquarters" amassed a "war chest" to help precinct "captains" turn out the "rank and file." The political party's "strategy" was to close "ranks" and "mobilize" voters.

Technology has changed the means and some of the language of political campaigns, but the purpose is still the same — turning out the party faithful to vote.

Instead of precinct captains going door to door, political parties rely upon television advertisements and social media. Tweets, emails, robo phone calls and broadcast advertisements are the new forms of political barnstorming. They have replaced the town square rallies, parades, motorcades and train whistle stops as campaign techniques.

Clinton's and Trump's campaigns are working hard to rally their supporters and to discourage those of their opponent.

The Clinton campaign calls Trump "dangerous Donald," "inept" and "unhinged."

"Trump doesn't have the temperament to be president," Clinton has declared. One television advertisement shows children watching Trump rail against Muslims, women and immigrants.

Attacking Trump as racist, sexist, unbalanced and self-serving is all designed to make Republican voters question whether they can honestly vote for Trump. None of these efforts are intended to convert Republicans to Clinton. Rather, the hope of the Clinton campaign is to cast enough doubt so these voters will just stay at home.

The Trump campaign is making a similar effort. Labeling Clinton as “Crooked Hillary” and calling her a “liar” are meant to call into question her character and credibility. “Can you really trust her?” the Trump campaign asks rhetorically. Again, the hope is not so much to convert Democratic voters to Trump, but to demoralize those voters to the point where they don’t vote at all.

These attacks also serve the purpose of rallying the faithful. For ardent Trump or Clinton supporters, cries of “Crooked Hillary” or “dangerous Donald” act as a reminder that the other candidate is so bad that you absolutely must go to the polls and cast your ballot to prevent a national disaster. Issues are secondary to this appeal.

Both Clinton and Trump are counting heavily on turnout. Clinton is relying on strong local organizations to assure a high Democratic voter turnout. Trump is using social media and public rallies to motivate his voters, trusting that these techniques can replace the time-honored tactics of precinct captains and local telephone banks.

Complicating this year’s election is the fact that we are in the process of a voter realignment. A voter realignment greatly confuses the usual political calculations for rallying the party faithful. Many voters change party affiliation. Party loyalty is weakened, and a number of voters simply quit voting altogether. The usual strategies to bring out voters, consequently, often aren’t as effective. Doubts about their ability to turn out voters are why the candidates sound so shrill in their campaigns this year.

You can be sure that on Election Night, the campaign “headquarters” and the party “standard bearers” will be carefully watching how well they “mobilized” the “rank and file.” None of them want another Karl Rove moment of having miscalculated the ability to get out the vote.

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