



Activity 2: The Overall Structure of an Essay – Suggested response

In modern USA elections it has been argued that elections are far more based on the candidate and their personality than policy and ability. Indeed, it has been argued Abraham Lincoln would not have been able to run due to his looks; however, the true candidate-centred nature of the campaign has been called into question over recent times with many claiming the process is no longer decided on meritocracy and ability.

The candidate-centred aspects of the election arise from the very beginning of the intra-party primaries. The success of a candidate in getting their name recognised and on local media, especially in swing states, leads to these accusations. With book publications and air time these candidates try and become as recognised as they can, at the expense of talking about any policy. This was most startling in 2007-8 when a relatively unknown ex-Illinois senator Barrack Obama made his bid to run, his dependence on local media to carry his name to gain the crucial votes in the primaries. This shows the candidate-centred nature of the process is inherent to the campaign and in the election throughout.

Furthermore, arguments of this kind arise from the candidate-focused nature of the campaign. The inter-party campaign sees the focus put on the respective candidates, with the buying of the best spin doctors and campaign managers to put sole focus on their candidate's ability to make speeches and seem "presidential". From Reagan's photo opportunities in front of the Statue of Liberty, Clinton's appearance on the Aresno Hall Show to Trump's appearance on Jimmy Fallon mocking his hair, the campaign is able to not only put focus on the candidate but show their more affable, humorous side. Additionally, the campaign is able to draw attention to the candidate's history and ability, "selling" them to the American people. This has been seen with presidents focusing on their Washington Experience, from Kennedy, up to modern day Governors such as Bush Jr and Clinton and their popular touch, showing that the campaign is personality-based shows. Indeed, it was Trump's personal campaign team that decided to "let Trump be Trump" in the campaign, ultimately securing him the presidency. This displays that in modern campaigns the election of the president is far too candidate focused, having lost any policy focus.

In extension to the above points there have been arguments made, that a candidate is made or broken on television in America, showing it's too candidate focused in nature. From live televised debates to so



called poll ratings and adverts played by their campaigns, with all the focus shifted onto how good, or how bad a candidate is, could be reinforcing the fact it is too candidate focused. Presidential nominee Obama's success was seen to come after his 2008 debate success against John McCain leading to a boost in polls and another contributory factor to his win. Conversely this was seen strongest with the Willie Horton advert of 1988 from Bush Sen. campaign, showing his rival Dukakis as a weak candidate on crime and punishment, coupled with his weak response to a question posed about violence against his wife and children, in debate we saw his chances at the presidency shatter. This all shows that with most Americans watching these events, the campaign is clearly too candidate focused for the election of the president.

However, for all of this it must be remembered that when looking at the process of electing a candidate, it may not be too candidate focused with evidence given from previous elections that other factors play as important a role in the elections as candidates. Elizabeth Dole's famous remark "money is the message" has come to show that perhaps the campaign is not too candidate focused. In modern election history, bar a few anomalies, the candidate who wins is the candidate who raises and spends the most money in the election. Obama, Bush Jr and Clinton all lay testament to this, with Obama's 2008 focus on small individual donations (setting the record for the most raised by small individual donations) a major contributor of his win. Furthermore, the Supreme Court's modern day ruling in Citizens United v FEC saw the linking of freedom of speech and expression to campaign finances lead to the rise of Super PACS and the so-called shadow campaign. This has led to more attack ads, more issue advocacy ads leading to a diminishing of importance of the candidate with the importance of money in modern day elections showing the process of electing presidents is not too candidate-focused.

Furthermore, regardless of the candidate, events during the campaign can dictate anything. The so called "October Surprise" and making the most of advantages in elections can have far more of an impact on the process of electing a president than the candidate themselves. In 2016 Clinton was seen as, on the whole, the better candidate to control the country than Trump, however the re-opening of the FBI email investigation days before the election day could have been one of the major reasons why she lost the election. Additionally these surprises can certainly have a positive impact with President Obama trailing in some polls in the final few weeks of the 2012 election the Hurricane Sandy disaster (with even Republican Governor of New Jersey, Chris Christy, thanking Obama personally for his actions for the state) won him



huge praise, and put rival Romney at a major disadvantage and ultimately saw Obama re-elected. These all aim to demonstrate that the actions of the time can help or ruin a candidate regardless of the candidate as it can build up or break down the chances of a candidate winning which is completely removed from their image or the shallow nature of the campaign as it does show their true character almost.

Yet, what is most important when considering the process of electing a president is the Electoral College system. Without success in this the candidate has not a chance of winning, positive image or otherwise. Indeed, Clinton did win the popular vote in 2016 but because of her vote share she did not in the popular vote, and as such did not win the presidency. The process of electing a president clearly all comes down to the Electoral College system and if a candidate is unsuccessful in that, regardless of image of presidency in the months and year or so leading up to the election it is impossible for them to win, ultimately removing the cult of personality from the election in the final hurdle. This shows finally that the process cannot be too candidate-centred as at the end if the candidate cannot win the Electoral College they cannot win.

Overall, this displays that on the whole the process for electing a president is not too candidate-centred. In recent years it certainly has shifted more towards that and away from ability to govern, but on the whole, there are mechanisms in place from the time of the founding fathers, and modern day barriers to stop a president being elected solely on his character.