

Misunderstanding Trump

BY BUNN NAGARA

A key aspects of his winning chances, and his rivals' declining hopes, is his opponents' inability to understand his strengths – which is their continuing weakness.



Art of talk: Trump addressing a rally in California - EPA

THE US political establishment continues to be caught off-guard by Donald Trump's ever-ascending campaign, which is impacting on the Republican and Democratic establishments equally.

Yet Trump's success so far should not be a surprise if opponents and punters had not been so smugly dismissive of his chances. They underestimated him and are now reaping the consequences of their misjudgements.

First, rivals and critics misunderstood the basis of Trump's popularity. They disliked his style and persona, finding them distasteful with good reason, but confused these with his public appeal.

They haughtily branded his approach "populist" but failed to understand that he was also popular. They could not understand the link between populism and popularity, which for Trump works uniquely in his favour.

They also wrongly argued that he had nothing to say on foreign policy. It has only now begun to dawn on observers that Trump is known mainly for his foreign policy postures: making allies pay more for security, a temporary ban on Muslims entering the US, building a wall on the Mexican border and making Mexicans pay for it.

His opponents have also contended that Trump's understanding of foreign policy is merely superficial or simply mistaken. Yet, he continues to astonish by winning even more popular support.

Earlier in his campaign Trump was characterised as an equal-opportunity offender. He did not discriminate against any one group by discriminating against all groups.

He would trample on the political correctness of left and right, then beat his chest on the vanquished niceties of Democrats and Republicans. And his popular appeal soared further.

If Trump manages to do this without the pomp and heraldry of the Washington elite, as he continues to, it may explain why this elite is out of touch with voters. Much of his grassroots appeal derives from a refusal to conform to Beltway conventions and a proud declaration of this refusal.

Another early criticism that failed to stick was that Trump was not an orthodox Republican. But he could become a contender in the Republican fold, which gave him the platform to promote his campaign.

Again his critics fail to understand that it does not matter if he is not an orthodox Republican. What mattered was winning – first the party nomination, then the presidency.

Voters themselves are not as firmly divided along party lines as party bosses tend to think. There were “Reagan Democrats” and there continue to be voters on the fringe of one party and on the verge of another.

A common blind spot among Trump’s critics is that he happens to appeal to “traditional” Republican supporters and also some Democratic ones. Critics remain stumped by his success because they refuse to acknowledge his strengths that blur or transcend party lines.

Still another dismissive and mistaken denial of Trump’s prospects is the criticism that his grasp of issues is shallow. But that did not stop Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush from winning the presidency.

Much in the misplaced and misleading views of Trump’s critics was on display following his speech on foreign policy in Washington on April 27 hosted by the Center for the National Interest.

It was said to lack content yet again, but as compere Zalmay Khalilzad put it earlier, the speech was to provide a picture of Trump’s “foreign policy philosophy”.

Still, critics tried to evaluate the details or pick apart the factoids as if it were a blueprint, concluding that it was too general and contained inaccuracies and inconsistencies. And once again, none of that made any difference to Trump’s supporters.

A smarter assessment of the speech would compare it with Trump’s previous speeches. Here he was more mellow and measured, having doused the fire of earlier rhetoric without fully abandoning the rhetorical.

In a word, Trump appeared to be what many wanted him to be: more “presidential”. This solidified his support base while pleasing many on the fence.

In a play for bipartisan support, Trump called for “a new rational American foreign policy” that could be supported by Republicans, Democrats and close allies abroad. He said the US needed to put “America first”, but the realist tone was described by critics as “isolationist”.

A source of Trump’s strength is his ability to be polemical in a way that connects directly to the concerns of the average citizen. Critics wrongly dismiss this as simple populist rhetoric but he is making points and raising questions that other contenders fail to do or choose not to.

He connects resoundingly with Joe Public at gut level, but Washington insiders disregard this at their own peril as mere gutter talk. And he continues to benefit electorally at their expense.

Being blunt and brutally frank, whether or not he has all his facts right, also helps him to project an image of honesty and openness. It is not something that Hillary Clinton, for example, does because it does not come naturally to her – and people sense it.

In another instance of his open bipartisan approach, he likened the victimisation of his campaign by the system to Bernie Sanders' predicament. Clearly both are not their respective parties' Establishment favourites, regardless of their level of support, but again party apparatchiks rejected the assertion.

Sanders himself embodied the smug misperceptions of Trump by saying he hoped and prayed Trump would be the Republican nominee, implying that a Democrat would then win the presidency because many Americans would not support him. Increasingly that appears to be an error of judgment.

An Associated Press report from Washington two days ago found that Congressional Republicans are now warming to Trump and switching their support to him.

This includes Congressmen and Senators who had opposed or otherwise not supported Trump before, including some – Mike Kelly, Orrin Hatch, Bill Shuster, Jeff Miller and Tom Rooney – who had until recently supported his rivals.

This is the trigger Trump needs to escalate his campaign and seal his party nomination. Such a move on Capitol Hill is likely to snowball in his favour.

It is not solely a result of Trump's appeal, of course. His closest party rival, Ted Cruz, has personal liabilities that senior Republicans themselves are starting to turn against.

Yet another of Trump's strengths his critics ignore at their cost is his ability to change course abruptly and deftly without causing a ripple. His previous controversies concerning women and minorities may easily be forgotten once he speaks against his previous disparaging comments on them – another inconsistency his supporters will not mind.

At root, Trump's position on foreign policy – or any other policy – is a patchwork in progress. A decisive moment for him would be his choice of running mate, but until then his campaign will press on regardless without being affected by that consideration.

A key aspect of his campaign that his rivals need to consider, but still have not, is the vote bank created by his appeal to US nationalism. His championing of the national interest is unmatched by anyone, and none of his rivals even seem to want to approach it.

Again, they may have reason to regret that. It is now a core election issue in the US, and no campaign has developed it as much as Trump's.

Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.