

Heed the message

What can Trump's victory teach Labour about winning elections? *James Morris* says we need to look at the big picture



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American political campaigns always teach the world two types of lesson – lessons about political positioning and lessons about campaign technique. The key message from Clinton's failure is that the latter should never determine the former. She may have only lost by a few thousand votes in key places, but with Trump weighing down the Republican ticket, he should never have got close.

We should look at Clinton's failure and Trump's success for clues as to what might help Labour but we shouldn't think there will be anything we can simply copy. It is also important not to see the election as an endorsement of Trump. The Republicans won in spite of him, not because of him – their Senate candidates did better than their presidential candidate in the battleground states of Florida, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Ohio and North Carolina among others. Clinton won the popular vote by 2 percentage points.

Micro-targeting vs the big picture

The Democrat campaign took what Obama did with data and doubled it. Obama's big data gurus had convinced the political world that campaigns are won through micro-targeting, Facebook ads and field campaigns. Clinton put huge emphasis on data, modelling and targeting, using the same consultants and overruling people in her campaign who wanted a more overarching message and less salami-slicing.

The electoral argument for such an approach was similar to that offered by proponents of the 'progressive consensus' in the UK or those who pushed the '35 per cent strategy' and its variants before 2015. The idea is that there is a big enough coalition of voters out there, and the role of the campaign is to identify its constituent parts and motivate them to come to the polls.

Just as the progressive consensus idea seems to have inexplicably survived its drubbing in 2015, so the Clinton campaign is holding on to its idea that motivation was all that mattered. Robby Mook, the campaign manager, recently told a gathering at Harvard that Clinton lost because her team didn't win enough young voters – despite

winning close to 60 per cent of them and despite the big swing away from the Democrats amongst white working-class voters in key states.

With Clinton's base being made up of systematically disadvantaged groups, and Trump running a horribly divisive campaign, her focus was on social inclusion: 'stronger together' was her closing slogan. Where Obama let his race speak for itself, Clinton actively campaigned on the fact that her election would be a first. She even had a glass ceiling at her putative victory party. Sadly, it was never smashed.

When more traditional research techniques questioned the focus on togetherness and identities, they were overruled. The dial groups we ran which track voter sentiment to speeches as they happen, found that it was when Hillary focused on economic change that she soared in the debates – both with her core target groups and white working-class voters. Her poll numbers were highest when she



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