



October 28, 2016

## How Trump's risky spending plan might pay off

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

In a presidential race, there may be nothing more revealing about a candidate's philosophy than the way they spend their money. In most elections, the spending is similar on both sides — everyone in politics has the same ideas about what works, and they are just tinkering on the margins. But, as the latest campaign finance reports show, the 2016 election once again provides divergent paths for two very different candidates.

Unsurprisingly, Hillary Clinton is running a traditional campaign that mimics the contemporary races run by Bush and Obama, as well as their defeated opponents. Clinton's team has focused is on raising big heaps of money from donors, which are then spent primarily on television ads. Her other big outlay is personnel — presumably at this stage this is not for paying off advisors, but rather for developing a strong “ground game” — teams of employees in the swing states who will work with volunteers to get voters to the ballot box and drive up her turnout.

Ever since Al Gore's surprise popular vote totals in 2000, turnout has been a major focus. Bush's 2004 campaign and both of Obama's victories witnessed widely praised canvassing operations, resulting in higher than expected results for the two candidates. Hillary Clinton's team clearly believes a strong ground game will be key to her efforts. Strong early voting numbers suggests that this strategy may be working.

Trump's campaign report points to a very different race. Unlike every nominee in recent years, he has not focused on big money donations — most of his money has been raked in from smaller donors through online and direct mail solicitations. The big money bundlers that have ruled the political sphere this century for the most part do not seem to exist for Trump.

Along the same lines, while he has repeatedly said that he will be spending big on campaign ads, the money has not primarily gone to TV advertising. Instead, he has split the money between TV and online ads. The online ads help drive small dollar figure donations, but they are general not seen in and of themselves as important as blanketing the television airwaves.

The other part of his campaign spending is what truly stands out — though it would not be out of place decades ago. He has seemingly rejected the importance of a ground game. Trump's campaign has barely opened offices in key states, and seems to be dependent on the state party to handle turnout questions. Instead, he has spent millions on travel and campaign merchandise.

According to the Washington Post, he has spent more on hats than on polling. Campaign signs and buttons may be indicators of support on the local level, but contemporary political figures consider them of minor importance for a national campaign.

One possible reason for Trump's campaign focus may be found in the theory that he is trying to use the election to grow his own business. Expanding his online presence and gathering the contact info of donors will help him expand his basis for future sales pitches. We've seen plenty of past candidates sell their donor contact information to other candidates in the future. There is no reason to think that Trump would not take a similar tactic.

Beyond any monetary benefits, the strategy seems to fit in with the throwback nature of Trump's entire campaign. Until recently, he has been intensely interested in free media, something that worked wonders for his primary race, but went against the grain of modern political thought.

Unlike Clinton, he has taken a very broad approach to the race. Clinton has followed accepted wisdom in going after the 10 or so swing states and essentially ignoring the rest of the country. Trump had spent significant time speaking in states that he is almost certain to run away with, like Mississippi, as well as states that he would only win if the election is a total blow-out in his favor, like his native New York. Trump, essentially, is trying to nationalize the race, while Clinton is focused on making it a series of specific, state-by-state fights. This may explain some of the travel expenses that he is charging to his campaign.

2016 has developed into one of the strangest races in memory, and the difference in spending habits between the two candidates is a great example. While no one can be surprised that Clinton has run a race that we would have seen anyone else run, Trump's focus on merchandise and travel reveals a candidate who doesn't believe in one of the tenets of modern campaigns — TV ads — and instead prefers an older-school campaign. We'll see in November if he may be right.

*Commentary by Joshua Spivak, a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College in New York. He blogs at the Recall Elections Blog. Follow him on Twitter @recallelections.*