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The Upshot
ROAD TO 2016

Forget Trump's Noise: Here's What He's Signaling

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Much of the reaction to Donald Trump's call "for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" casts him as a cynical populist who is simply supplying the sorts of proposals an Islamophobic electorate demands. By this view, we're learning about the ugly side of America. But economics offers a different and arguably more optimistic lens for interpreting Mr. Trump's statement. And it suggests that his statement is less a calculated attempt at feeding a demand for bigotry and more an effort to fuel the hunger for authenticity.

Here's the crucial idea: It's not that the American electorate is looking for prejudiced policies. Rather, it's tired of career politicians and is looking for a leader who breaks the mold. I'm not sure exactly what it is that people are looking for, but let's call it authenticity. Every politician could claim to be "authentic," but the truth is, we know that most of them are just saying that to get our vote. This is where the economic theory of signaling comes in.

How can you convince voters that you are in fact the real deal — a trustworthy person who speaks his mind — rather than yet another poll-driven politico? The answer is that you do something that a poll-driven politico would never do, such as making a statement that will alienate many voters. Mr. Trump's call is outrageous, and it's politically risky. But that riskiness can be a feature, not a bug. It's devised to make you infer that he's not like other politicians.

I've long called this the Ventura theory of politics, after the former professional wrestler Jesse "The Body" Ventura, who was elected governor of Minnesota in 1998 as a third-party candidate, after asking people not to "vote for politics as usual." Soon after his election, Mr. Ventura gave an interview for Playboy magazine in which he said that "organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers." It's not a view that I subscribe to, but more important, it's not a view that any electorally minded politician would ever admit to.

Given Mr. Ventura's rising political star, the only explanation for his statement was that he both believed it to be true and was pathologically honest. The statement was politically risky, and offended many voters. Yet that's the point, and from that day onward, I simply believed any statement that Mr. Ventura made, because that single episode made it hard to believe that he was a poll-driven politician.

An economist recognizes this as the theory of signaling. It's the same logic that biologists speculate leads male peacocks to grow beautiful but useless tail feathers. Brightly colored feathers are a useful signal of health, because only a healthy male could afford to divert energy to growing them. A result is that peahens, looking for a healthy mate, are attracted to males with attractive but pointless plumage. Likewise, Mr. Trump's statement wasn't a serious attempt at articulating policy; it was the political equivalent of a peacock's feathers, although rather than try to signal his reproductive fitness, he was trying to signal his authenticity.

The good news in this story is that behavior that appears superficial or thoughtless may actually reflect something more important. A peahen may look shallow as she chases the male with the most colorful tail feathers, but in reality, she's looking for something more serious — a healthy mate. And likewise, it may be that a share of Mr. Trump's supporters are not drawn to his nativist policies, but rather are looking for something more serious, like a politician who is willing to present his authentic self.

The Ventura strategy is a risky one. Believe me, I've tried it, and it means that date night with an economist can be an unusual experience. For sure, I might try to tell my partner that her little black dress looks lovely, but she understands that this is the sort of thing that all men say and so dismisses such compliments. Realizing this, I've tried the Ventura strategy: Begin by saying that her lipstick is smudged, so that she knows that I'm the truth-telling type, and then tell her that I like her dress. I don't think I violate any confidences in revealing that this doesn't always work well.

This simple interpretation of Mr. Trump's antics is that he's betting his campaign on H.L. Mencken's claim that no one "has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people; nor has anyone ever lost public office thereby." Perhaps this explains some fringe of the electorate, but I think that it sells the American people short.

The economic theory of signaling tells a more optimistic story: Mr. Trump's outrageous statements signal that he has some other political virtue some voters value. But if authenticity is more important to voters than specific policies, we're left with an unusual paradox: Some of his supporters may be willing to vote for what his policies signal about his personal character, even as they find these policies repugnant. And if Mr. Trump loses support over the next few weeks, it will reveal the other truth: Risky strategies often fail.

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