

A look at the U.S. elections

La Pietra Dialogues: Elections experts analyze the results

BY CARMEN GERMAINE (ISSUE NO. 173/2012 / NOVEMBER 22, 2012)

In November 16 and 17, New York University (NYU) Florence's La Pietra Dialogues held its fifth annual political conference, U.S. Politics: Elections Experts Analyze the Results, discussing the recent U.S. presidential election. As strategists and advisors from both the Republican and Democratic parties analyzed what happened during the campaign, taking stock of what worked and what didn't during an election that saw an unprecedented use of funds and social media, the distinguished panel of speakers provided invaluable insight into the workings of the American political system.

Much attention was given throughout the conference to Republican candidate Mitt Romney's campaign strategies, as speakers examined where the Romney campaign came up short. According to Robert Shrum, NYU professor and senior advisor and strategist to the presidential campaigns of Al Gore in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004, one important factor was that Mr. Romney's team 'misunderstood the composition of the electorate.' The Romney campaign failed, Shrum said, to account for the increase in minority voters and leaning too heavily on a white voter base, which is quickly shrinking.

Other strategists generally agreed that President Obama had the advantage in his campaign's use of social media, a tool of growing importance in modern elections. As Alex Castellanos, a Republican strategist, former Romney advisor and co-founder of bi-partisan public affairs firm Purple Strategies, explained, the 'Obama campaign's technical and social media ground game was a leap forward,' as it made use of different media and technology in ways no campaign had before in order to unite their voting base.

Another topic of discussion was the dramatic increase in campaign spending and the use of 'Super PACs,' following the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to strike down limits on political spending. Both sides spent vast sums on advertising campaigns, but it remains to be seen exactly how effective that spending was. Effectiveness aside, Steve McMahon, a Democratic media consultant and co-founder of Purple Strategies, posited that spending is a trend that will not only continue but accelerate unless Congress does something to stop it.'

The use of polling was another significant factor in this election, as the dramatic variance in poll results led to both parties feeling certain they would clinch the election. The rise of pollsters and analysts like the New York Times' Nate Silver has led to greater appreciation of the role of polling in understanding and predicting election results. Joel Benenson, Obama's pollster and strategic advisor in both his Presidential campaigns, explained that 'there's an art and science to polling ... you have to ask the questions that allow you to get beneath the surface.'

After all the analysis, however, perhaps the most pressing question for both parties is how to move forward over the next four years. With the changing demographics of the American electorate, both parties will have to reconsider their approach as voting blocs they could previously rely on become fragmented. This question is especially important to the Republican party, which will now look towards the 2014 congressional elections and, of course, the 2016 presidential race.

Also at the conference were Democratic strategists Bill Carrick and Michael Donilon, counselor to Vice President Joseph Biden; among the Republican strategists were Kevin Madden, senior advisor and spokesperson for the Romney 2012 campaign, and Steve Schmidt, senior advisor to John McCain's 2008 presidential campaign. Beppe Severgnini of *Corriere della Sera* and Paolo Valentino, senior foreign policy columnist also at *Corriere della Sera*, were among the European observers present.

At the end of the conference, it was apparent that this election marked dramatic changes in American politics, in both the composition of the electorate and the way campaigns are run. Going forward, the lessons of this campaign will prove vital to the future success of both parties.

More information about the conference and the panelists can be found at www.lapietradialogues.org