

Kelley, Colleen Elizabeth. *Rhetoric of Divisive Partisanship: The 2016 American Presidential Campaign Discourse of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump*. Lexington Books, 2020

Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump are two names that barely seem to make sense in a sentence together. When thinking of them, our first instinct may be to imagine two ends of a spectrum with them placed on the most extreme end of either side. However, the 2016 election cycle saw an unprecedented collusion between Sanders and Trump—possibly inadvertently—in defeating Hillary Clinton. Colleen Elizabeth Kelley explores this unlikely alliance in *A Rhetoric of Divisive Partisanship* by breaking down their “twin” campaigns, raging rhetoric styles, paralleled voter bases, and anti-establishment principles. She also expands on the implications of this divisiveness for the “trajectory for the twenty-first century American democracy” (113).

Kelley begins by comparing the effectiveness of both Sanders and Trump before the 2016 Democratic and Republican primaries in tapping into the growing fury for the establishment and career politicians. She explains that by embracing their roles as “others” or “outsiders” immune from Washington’s toxic influences, both candidates “targeted essentially the same base: Americans who felt threatened by a disappearing middle class” (16). In so doing, they successfully mobilized thousands of Americans who had never participated in the democratic system before and set themselves up as deities who alone could rescue their respective marginalized and victimized bases by revolutionizing politics. Kelley quotes Leonard Pitts Jr., who claimed that Sanders and Trump had “not voters, but believers, receive[d] not support, but faith” (1).

The effectiveness of this rhetoric was demonstrated when Hillary Clinton’s lost the election on November 8, 2016. The divisiveness of Sanders’ platform split the Democratic party as she battled attacks from both him and his base, even after the Democratic primary. While Sanders and Trump had very similar core bases—white men—Hillary Clinton was alienated from their support due to unceasing ad hominem shots. Kelley contends that Sanders acted as a facilitator for the ascension of Donald Trump by not encouraging his base to see her as the lesser of two evils. Instead, “during a speech delivered a week after the presidential election to a packed auditorium of college students, Sanders rallied his still-fervent base with a ‘tough-love’ vision for the future of the Democratic Party in which not only was he the hero but Hillary Clinton appeared, by way of innuendo, as the villain of his story” (58). According to Kelley, “though he personally—albeit indirectly—ultimately endorsed Hillary Clinton after she won the Democratic nomination, much of Sanders’s ‘revolutionary’ base held fast to the idea that the party establishment had stacked the deck and rigged the primaries to make sure she won” (58). Meanwhile, Trump was continuously firing anti-political attacks at Clinton, neglecting policy positions entirely at times, which gave Clinton little chance to climb back into the good graces of the two parties’ bases. Ultimately, the lack of support from both sides of the aisle cost her the election, making an “unorthodox partnership” out of Sanders and Trump (11).

Beyond the fury-filled rhetoric, Kelley also highlights the blinding similarities between the policy positions of Sanders and Trump. At first glance, as Sanders was running on the Democratic ticket and Trump on the Republican ticket, it could be assumed that they stood in absolute opposition to each other. However, their main complaints were centered around the same ideas: “Both Sanders and Trump agreed that American politics has been corrupted by ‘big money’ which unfairly and heartlessly disadvantaged their constituents. Sanders demonstrated his independence from corporatism by funding his campaign from small donations; Trump demonstrated his freedom from the ‘big banks,’ certainly ironically, through relying on his enormous personal wealth to self-fund. Both also spoke directly to their combined base’s fear of an America in decline

and challenged core elements of a failed bipartisan consensus that ‘exploded’ in recession. In addition, both offered ‘muscular’ economic policies which included indicting fair-trade policies which took away the jobs and wages of working-class Americans... On foreign policy, both Sanders and Trump opposed the invasion of Iraq while ‘mainstream’ members of their parties supported it” (22). By ending on a note of caution for “the future of American elections,” Kelley asserts that Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, through their equally divisive rhetoric, taught us that future campaigns must rely heavily on savvy methods of social media, admirable candidates must strive for “dialogic rather than divisive voices,” and that going forward, leaders on the public stage must embrace respect for democracy by “a rhetoric of civility, decency, and justice” (122).

*A Rhetoric of Divisive Partisanship* is an irrefutable wake-up call to where the new norm of divisive rhetoric in politics is leading American democracy. Written through the lens of neutrality and objectivity—a refreshing rarity in today’s polarized world—Kelley offers an intriguing and necessary read into twenty-first century politics and the significance of campaign rhetoric and behavior in shaping the nation.

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