



THE BLOG 07/06/2015 03:24 pm ET | Updated Jul 06, 2016

The Quantum Theory of Presidential Politics



By Marty Kaplan

Future events decide what happens in the past.

That's not science fiction. It's science. Quantum physics, to be precise.

"Quantum physics is a weird world," begins a *Digital Journal* article reporting on a recent experiment by Australian scientists confirming the weirdness of quantum theory. "[W]hat happens to particles in the past is only decided when they are observed in the future." Reality isn't real until you measure it.

This is pretty mind-blowing, but it doesn't just occur in the subatomic world. Future events decide the past in presidential politics, too.

We experience politics as a narrative marketplace, where competing stories clamor for attention. Those stories are unstable. Each day's news requires retroactive adjustments. When a candidate moves ahead or falls behind, when a president's fortunes turn, hindsight requires us to revise the past — to reverse-engineer a new plot that leads inexorably to an event we didn't see coming but that just happened.

Barack Obama entered the national political narrative with his red states/blue states/United States speech to the 2004 Democratic Convention. Best. Orator. Ever. His Philadelphia speech on race during the 2008 campaign was acclaimed as honest and inspirational. You would think those events would have cemented his reputation for eloquence, and for thoughtfulness on racial issues. But during his first term, a counter-narrative captured attention: the Republican talking point mocking him for being clueless without a teleprompter. He was called tone-deaf on race after his "beer summit" with Henry Louis Gates and a white Cambridge cop. This required us to discount Philadelphia as an outlier. Until seven years later, when it turned out to be not a fluke of rhetoric and insight but a harbinger of his performance in the pulpit of the Emanuel AME Church.

Until last month, when the Supreme Court didn't kill the Affordable Care Act, the media consensus was that Obama wasted the only two years that he had a congressional majority by not pursuing immigration

reform, instead spending all his political capital on healthcare reform. A *King v. Burwell* loss would have connected the dots from that supposed miscalculation in 2009 and 2010 to the failed rollout of healthcare.gov in 2013 to a court-sanctioned dismantling of Obamacare in 2015; the narrative of his presidency would have become a tale of political ineptitude. Instead, his June victory reframes the years he bet everything on the ACA as a heroic expansion of access to health care that seven presidents before him could not deliver. In hindsight, the media panic about the website gets retold as a passing embarrassment, not a seal of doom.

The rise of same-sex marriage, the fall of the Confederate battle flag, and the papal climate change encyclical just rewrote the story of the culture wars. For years, tea party rhetoric about the homosexual agenda, the war on gun owners and the climate change hoax were what Republicans routinely pandered to. The cultural right has been depicted as a rising tide since Reagan was president. But now a different story is being told, in which culture warriors fought a divisive, reactionary and losing battle. “Where will this stop?” was long the question the right pushed the country to ask about government’s persecution of religion, government’s secret plan to disarm America and government’s power grab to control the private sector. Now, instead, looking back, the appropriate question to ask about that period has become “What were we thinking?”

Think of how a reality show producer regards the daily haul of video. While you’re shooting, you don’t know who the losers and winners will be, so you collect tape of all the contestants, each of them seen in the whole gamut of moods. When you finally know the ending, you go into the editing booth and find the footage that leads to that outcome. You create decoy subplots to fake viewers out. You ignore some players entirely. You select moments that foreshadow future fiascos and lay pipe for a climactic victory.

But the political commentariat can’t wait for postproduction. Yakkers have to fit each day’s events into narratives that can go either way, and they have to do it in real time. That requires shameless, instantaneous revisionism. You may say tonight that Marco Rubio was the big winner of a debate, and Scott Walker the big loser, but a couple of days from now, when the polls say it was a slam dunk for Jeb Bush, it will be that measurement that decides what happened in the past. Today, Bernie Sanders may be the vanguard of a wave election that will sweep reformers into power, or he may turn out to be as consequential to 2016 as Mike Huckabee; reporters have to accommodate that indeterminacy. Ted Cruz, Chris Christie, Bobby Jindal and Donald Trump may currently be jokes, but if one of them ends up on the ticket, he’ll retroactively become a genius.

Will Obama’s story eventually stabilize? How will he be remembered? As surprising as it is for us to imagine, it’s possible that he may barely be remembered at all.

It turns out that Americans are excellent at forgetting presidents. A paper published in *Science* last year reported on a study conducted from 1974 to 2014 that tracked how Americans have remembered and forgotten presidents. Most people could name nine: the founders (Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison), the Civil War-era presidents (Lincoln, Johnson, and Grant), the World War II presidents (Roosevelt and Truman). But after Truman, as a *New York Times* piece about the findings put it, “memory

about most presidents faded with distance in time; most baby boomers remembered Richard M. Nixon, Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter, but fewer than a quarter recalled Herbert Hoover or Calvin Coolidge. Most Generation X participants remembered the elder President Bush, but fewer than a quarter recalled Dwight D. Eisenhower.”

Most people don’t have enough RAM to recall more than a dozen or so presidents. Presidents well known today, like George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, the study’s authors predict, “will be all but lost to public memory in just a few decades. ... Lyndon B. Johnson, Nixon and Carter will by 2040 be remembered by less than a quarter of the public. After that, it is a steep fall to Millard Fillmore land.”

Our 44th president wanted to be No Drama Obama. But that hasn’t stopped us from turning our experience of him into a story — a melodrama — whose future keeps changing its past, whose ending we don’t know and whose reality will continuously be remade until, inevitably, no one who’s around now will be left to find out what happens next. That’s what’s really weird.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, which just won First Place for Commentary at the LA Press Club’s 57th annual Southern California Journalism Awards. You can reach me there at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/martykaplan

Do you have information you want to share with HuffPost? Here’s how.



Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director