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# What Trump Can Learn from Prime Minister Modi

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Being an Indian immigrant in America during the 2016 elections was a surreal experience. I'd been in this country for less than two years, yet felt a stronger connection to its people than I'd felt in any other country. Sitting in my room in England before the heat of the campaign, I watched a certain celebrity billionaire announce his candidacy for President and, like a lot of people across the globe, I dismissed it as a publicity stunt bound for obscurity. Just as my family moved to Houston, the discourse of the election took a nasty turn. It's worth mentioning that whether or not you are a proponent of Obama's policies, his projection of what America stood for on the world stage made it a more welcoming place for immigrants like me. To me, America was Obama. I believed that I could not only make America my home, but also contribute a page to its illustrious history. So, when the Republican nominee for President — the one who made a crusade against immigrants his campaign centerpiece — was announced, I felt an obligation to get involved. I phone banked for the Hillary campaign and engaged with voters across my precinct.

But, when I would come back home or attend Indian events or even scroll through Facebook comments, I was taken aback to see that far too many of my fellow American-Indians were warming to the idea of a Trump presidency. To them, he resembled a man they were far more familiar with — Prime Minister Narendra Modi. And the Trump campaign played this to their strength. In December of 2016, a thirty-second advertisement was released where the then-candidate attempted to liken himself to Modi by using his famous campaign slogan “Ab Ki Baar, Modi Sarkaar”, replacing “Modi” with “Trump”. Apart from it being an



attempt to pander to a Hindu population that supported Modi. To be sure, there are a number of similarities between the two men that can deceive the naked eye into thinking they are of the same right-wing breed. But the dichotomy of how the two leaders operate, think, and enact policy makes for a situation where one can truly learn from the other.

Much like Modi, President Donald Trump came to power promising to dramatically change the system from within, reduce bureaucratic waste, and save taxpayer dollars — “drain the swamp,” to put it eloquently. In his three years in office, Modi managed to fundamentally alter the work culture of a government caught in its own red tape. In his Independence Day address (somewhat akin to the U.S. President’s State of the Union address), Modi said, “We have to leave this ‘Chalta Hai’ (anything goes) attitude. We have to think of ‘Badal Sakta Hai’ (can change),” hitting out at the very Indian nonchalance that asserts itself in every walk of life and is seen as the enemy of betterment. Thankfully, the American federal government has not been mired in the same level of corruption, ineptness, and utter unpopularity as the Indian central government.

Whereas Modi set an example of efficiency and dedication through his own discipline while in a role of public service, the Trump presidency appears to be in greater turmoil with each passing day. Reports of White House aides “controlling” and “restraining” the President from engaging in reckless acts have become routine. Tennessee Senator Bob Corker famously calling the White House an “adult day care center” embodies the utter chaos surrounding the executive branch. Trump’s style of ego-fueled, impulsive, and reactive decision making is even better exemplified in his endless tweets that often pose policy dilemmas for the nation’s civil servants. Despite both men promising similar transformative changes to government, only one has taken substantive steps towards realizing his goal. From Modi, Trump can learn how to exemplify the change you wish to see by putting words into action. By adopting a style of leadership more consistent with his goals and promises, and by prioritizing the interests of a nation over all else, Trump can learn valuable lessons from his Indian counterpart.

When examining the concept of “outsider politics”, both Trump and Modi can be considered prime case studies. But the truth is, Trump’s image as an outsider who “said it like how it is” seemingly nullified his lack of experience in public office. The mainstream media, the DNC, and Hillary Clinton herself droned on about his incapacity to handle the presidency and it did nothing but help his case in key counties. Not long ago, Narendra Modi was also considered a political outsider amongst the New Delhi political elite. Indeed, his popularity was restrained to his home state of Gujarat where he was Chief Minister for thirteen years. His nationwide, cult-like following during the General Elections and his ultimate ascension to the Prime Minister’s office sent political shockwaves across New Delhi. This is where their two stories diverge. Modi, despite his image as a political outsider, had led a life entirely devoted to public service even before formally

entering politics. As Chief Minister of Gujarat, he pioneered the “Gujarat model of development” which incentivized economic growth by cutting red tape, investing in infrastructure, and adopting business-friendly policies. His aim as Prime Minister was to implement a similar model across India.

Trump, on the other hand, came into office a billionaire businessman who had spent his years living a life of luxury. Without any experience in public service, much less politics, his status as an outsider came at the expense of expertise and competency. By appointing controversial figures such as (the now fired) National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, or (the recently departed) White House chief-strategist Steve Bannon, or his (as-of-yet-not-fired) son-in-law Jared Kushner, Trump made some crucial errors. Modi, while possessing a respectable level of expertise in policy matters himself, filled his cabinet with political outsiders regarded as respected decision-makers who could enact his reformist agenda. Trump’s mismanagement of power was a direct, yet predictable, consequence of a lack of experience—one that is reflected in unfocused, unreliable, and incoherent foreign and domestic policies.

David Litt, a former speechwriter for President Obama, classified the world of decision-makers into children and adults: “Children demand adoration; adults earn respect. Children find worth in what they acquire; adults find worth in the responsibilities they bear.” It is evident that Trump and Modi both represent similar ideals to their voters. But it is also evident that one fits Litt’s definition of a “child” and the other, an “adult.” By attempting to learn from Modi, Trump can not only enact his own agenda more efficiently but also drastically improve his public image. To be more presidential, he just might have to take a page from the Prime Minister’s book.

*Global*

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