

Reality television played a key role in taking Trump from apprentice to president

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Credit: University at Buffalo

There are many factors that account for Donald Trump's 2016 presidential election victory, but Americans would be doing a disservice to their understanding of the country's political system by ignoring Trump's 14-year starring role as a reality television personality, according to Shira Gabriel, an associate professor in the University at Buffalo Department of Psychology.

Gabriel is lead author of a forthcoming study to be published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* which is the first to scientifically

examine how viewers' parasocial bonds with Trump, formed through his [television](#) shows, "The Apprentice" and "The Celebrity Apprentice," contributed to his being elected to the nation's highest office.

"I strongly believe that Donald Trump would not be president if it weren't for his being on The Apprentice and The Celebrity Apprentice," says Gabriel. "It's not the only factor, but this was a close election and knowing what I know about the strength of parasocial relationships and based on what we found through this research, I believe that he wouldn't be in office if it weren't for these television shows."

Because of the strong human need to form relationships, people form parasocial bonds with characters that they see on TV.

People can form parasocial bonds in many ways, but television is a particularly potent multisensory medium that is capable of immersing viewers into the experience. In a way, Gabriel says television mimics reality in that relationships develop slowly over time in regular intervals. Since the human brain did not evolve to distinguish between real friends who we seek week after week in real life and characters who we see week after week on TV, these bonds can feel very real.

"Viewers feel like we know these people when in a parasocial relationship. They feel interested in their lives and feel happy when good things happen to them," she says. "Logically, that doesn't make sense, but we still feel connected to them when we spend time with them - and it's a relatively healthy and common thing to do."

Gabriel is an expert in parasocial relationships and has been doing research in this area for the past decade. She says these relationships are real to people psychologically and have actual psychological outcomes.

Her research suggests that many television viewers formed those bonds

with Trump due to his appearance on 14 seasons of "The Apprentice" and "The Celebrity Apprentice."

Those bonds led voters to like Trump; to believe the promises he made, and to discount the negative stories about him which surfaced during the campaign. The bonds also influenced voting behavior: the more people watched Trump on his television programs the more likely they were to form bonds, which then predicted voting for him, according to the study's findings.

Trump's win was a surprise to many people based on research conducted in the final weeks of 2016.

Gabriel and her collaborators Melanie Green, an associate professor in UB's Department of Communication who specializes in media effects, and Elaine Paravati, a PhD student in Social Psychology became interested in examining Trump's unexpected victory through the lens of parasocial relationships.

Using an online survey, they recruited 521 voters and measured their current attitudes about Trump, as well as their voting behavior and their experience watching Trump's two television shows.

"The mass of shows is amazing," says Gabriel. "Fourteen seasons of hour-long episodes that presented Trump as a calm, infallible decision-maker, who listened to others but came to his own conclusions, greatly emphasized his success."

Politicians can't buy the kind of exposure with campaign ads that reality television provides, according to Gabriel. She says viewers know campaign ads are designed as persuasion tools. So they approach ads with an inherent skepticism.

"But these shows weren't presented as campaign ads," she says. "They were presented as reality shows that gave us a glimpse into a real process for our entertainment. The defensiveness we exhibit when we're being pitched wasn't there for 'The Apprentice' and 'The Celebrity Apprentice.'" Viewers who developed a parasocial [relationship](#) with Trump liked him, according to Gabriel. That predicted believing many of his promises, as if trusting the word of a friend. At the same time, the study's results suggested viewers were less likely to believe negative stories about Trump.

"This makes sense," says Gabriel. "It's how we would behave with real relationships. For example, if you had a friend, in real life, for 14 years and saw evidence, again and again, that he was a great leader and decision maker, exhibiting wise and sound behavior, you would be likely to discount negative things said about that friend because you would feel as if you knew him better."

In addition, this research helps explain the surprising Trump voters, those who crossed party lines to vote for him. The effects were strongest with voters who weren't lifelong Republicans. For those people, parasocial bonds were an especially strong predictor of voting for Trump. In other words, the study suggests that some voters who would not have voted for Trump for political reasons, felt that they knew him and liked him due to "The Apprentice" and voted for him because of that.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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