

The book about baseball that explains Donald Trump's win

By **Sonny Bunch** December 15, 2016

Of all the pieces of pop culture floating around, the one that might best help those searching for an explanation for Donald Trump's victory is a 13-year-old book about baseball strategy: Michael Lewis's "[Moneyball](#)."

That book, you may remember, chronicled the rise of advanced stats in baseball and the exploitation of market inefficiencies by the smaller, less-wealthy Oakland Athletics and the team's general manager, Billy Beane. That exploitation allowed the A's to field a competitive, playoff-bound squad despite usually having one of the lowest budgets in baseball to work with.

My favorite part of "Moneyball" may be the afterword added to the paperback edition in 2004. In it, Lewis runs through all the ways in which "the Club" — that is, the baseball insiders who valued propriety over proficiency — attacked the book and its central subject, Beane. Usually, this manifested in harping on individual pieces of the Athletics' strategy (the team's obsession with on-base percentage as opposed to batting average or its insistence that sacrifice bunts were bad) in a way that missed the forest for the trees.

"The point is not that Billy Beane is infallible, the point is that he has seized upon a system of thought to make what is an inherently uncertain judgment, the future performance of a baseball player, a little less uncertain. He's not a fortune-teller. He's a card counter in a casino," Lewis wrote. "The point is not to have the highest on-base percentage, but to win games as cheaply as possible. And the way to win games cheaply is to buy the qualities the market undervalues, and sell the ones that the market overvalues."

If there's anything that the political market is full of, it's inefficiencies. And the Trump team, to its credit, understood just that. The easy story to tell about Trump is one of a billionaire bully who preyed on prejudice to push the first female president out of the White House. But there's another story to be told, one about an underdog campaign that [raised about half as much money](#) as its opponent and managed to win anyway, in part by disregarding common campaigning strategies and focusing on the inherent inefficiencies of the electoral college.

Political pros were shocked, for instance, that Trump refused to staff up in the states. "While Hillary Clinton touts 51 Florida field offices, Donald Trump has just one," read a [representative headline](#) from the Tampa Bay Times' political editor two months before the election. "The Trump Campaign has a ground-game problem," PBS [reported](#) a few days before that, noting, "Hillary Clinton currently has more than three times the number of campaign offices in critical states than does Donald

Trump.” A late-September piece in The Washington Post skeptical of Trump’s spending (almost accidentally) highlighted the advantages of this strategy for Trump: “The billionaire continued to maintain a small campaign staff, spending just about \$765,000 on payroll in August on 131 staffers, up from about \$500,000 in July, when he had about 82 people on the payroll. Clinton, by comparison, had 789 people on staff last month.”

In addition to largely abandoning a traditional ground game, Trump also ceded air superiority to the Clinton campaign for almost all of the cycle. Trump’s skimpy TV buys were so notable that they modestly impacted local economies: “Donald Trump’s Lack of Ad Spending Is Leaving a Hole in Local Media’s Pocket,” Adweek reported. Eliminating wasteful TV spending eliminated the need for big-money fundraising, another inefficiency.

“I think Trump correctly identified that for him, the endless cycle of personally-raise-big-money-to-run-TV-ads was not the best use of his time,” Logan Dobson, a Republican strategist who consulted on Ron Johnson and Roy Blunt’s successful campaigns this cycle, told me. “He instead had a fantastic small-dollar fundraising program (aided by his personal appeal to low-dollar grassroots donors) and was able to use his time to do what he wanted to focus on — rallies and appearances.”

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And when Trump’s team did advertise over the air, it did so smartly; perhaps the cleverest thing Trump’s team did was target viewers of “The Walking Dead,” a show that preys upon anxieties of invasion and collapse.

The Trump campaign was banking on the idea that ground game, at least as it’s traditionally understood, is a waste of money — a bet against inefficiency that appears to have paid off. But this isn’t the only way the campaign resembled the card-counting Beane that Lewis described. Understanding that the electoral college, rather than the popular vote, decides presidencies, the Trump campaign banked on losing the popular vote and winning the electors.

As Gideon Resnick noted in the Daily Beast, Trump’s top pollster, Tony Fabrizio, recently told Kristen Soltis Anderson and Margie Omero on their podcast that “the campaign modeled a number of ways in which they could lose the popular vote by as much as four percentage points — they are currently down by about 2.5 million votes (nearly 2 percentage points) at this stage — and still win the Electoral College.” Trump’s people didn’t try to run up the popular-vote total in traditional GOP strongholds; doing so would be inefficient, since the popular-vote margin doesn’t matter in the slightest as long as you’re at 50 percent plus one vote. Instead, they focused on cracking the so-called blue wall states of Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania — a strategy that prompted some head-scratching at the time.

Much of the reaction to Trump’s win — blaming the media and “fake news” and James Comey and bigotry, rather than examining Trump’s strategies and thinking about the Clintonland consultants’ myriad strategic failures (not their first, it should be noted) — also, honestly, calls to mind “Moneyball’s” afterword.

“In baseball, they were furious. In the Club, there was no need to read [‘Moneyball’] ... because, well, it was offensive,” Lewis wrote. “What baseball did, instead, was cast about for reasons to dismiss what had happened in Oakland.” Change “baseball”

to “politics” and “Oakland” to “Trump” and, well, you have a pretty solid sense of the past month or so of political discourse. It was a mistake in baseball, one that has become less pervasive over the past decade. Let’s see how long it takes for politicians to see the error of their ways.

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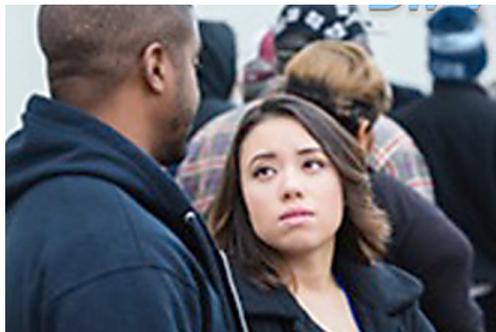
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