

US Presidential elections are generally predictable, circus-like affairs. Republican and Democratic candidates throw their hats into the ring, and there are rarely surprises about who will run. Voters are treated to speeches, photo opportunities, TV debates and a daily diet of focus group tested sound bites. This time it's different.

There are currently fifteen Republican candidates in the race. Of those, Donald Trump, the man who for years has either been ignored or treated with disdain by most of the political elite has, so far, maintained a commanding lead. Ben Carson, a retired neurosurgeon who touts not being a politician as one of his main attractions, is second, but his recent remarks about Muslims have earned him the label of bigot. The one-time bookmakers' favorite, Jeb Bush, the brother of former President George W. Bush, is languishing in the middle of a large group of hopefuls, and New Jersey Governor, Chris Christie, who was once a strong contender, is nowhere.

Of the six Democrats who have declared their intention to run, Hilary Clinton is in the lead, but she is having to deal with some legacy issues; while Secretary of State she was heavily criticized for her handling of the terrorist attack on the US Embassy in Benghazi, and the criticism grew even more shrill when it emerged that she had used her private email server for official correspondence while in office. Although, not illegal, it has raised concerns about her judgment. Her most serious contender right now is, Bernie Sanders, the maverick left-wing Senator from Vermont.

For communicators, voter enthusiasm for anti-establishment candidates is a challenge; even for those working for the front-runners, who frequently ignore the advice they are given and often experience "brain-to-mouth" moments. Conventional wisdom, if it is indeed wisdom, has been turned on its head; "The Donald", as Mr. Trump is known, has made derogatory remarks about Mexicans and women, but they have had little, if any, effect on his popularity ratings.

Support for anti-establishment candidates is not limited to the US. The landslide victory that Jeremy Corbyn won in the recent the UK Labour Party leadership election is a case in point. So, for different but no less worrying reasons, is the wave of popular support for France's Marie LePen.

It is clear that US voters are fed up with their politicians and want change. For communications professionals trying to develop strategies to deal with threats and support their candidates' positions, the challenge is immense. Initially, Republican candidates ignored Trump, arguing that his views were so extreme he would quickly lose support. This hasn't happened, and we are now seeing more aggressive attacks on both the man and his beliefs. For Democrats, Hilary's own problems have meant voters are focusing on her, rather than her policies. Getting the message out is proving difficult.

Any effective communication strategy needs to be carefully researched, have compelling messages and be flawlessly executed. So far, none of the candidates has managed to ignite the electorate with their rhetoric, with the exception of Donald Trump who is proving to be the ultimate brain-to-mouth candidate and his unfiltered remarks are striking a chord with Republican heartland voters.

This election is could be more compelling than the Games of Thrones.