

Trump Vs Clinton: A Post-Mortem

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, NOV 19 2016

On the morning after the US 2016 presidential election I gave a talk about the results to students and staff at UWE Bristol. We gathered early in the morning, not long after Clinton had conceded and Trump had made his victory speech. Being used to addressing rooms full of people as an academic, somehow this time felt different. On my way to the room I passed American colleagues who were in visible shock and non-American colleagues who were less emotional but still shaken. It felt much like the morning of Brexit.

The talk I gave did not focus much on the result – as there was little to say other than summarise it. Instead I decided to write the talk the day before, ignorant of the results, and shape it around insights gleaned from the state of US politics.

The first point I made was about the decline of the Republican Party. Despite appearances they are a party comprised of an uneasy coalition of groups that seem to have less and less in common. These include the tea party, libertarians, the Christian right, neoconservatives, paleoconservatives – and many more. Many of these groupings were welcomed into the party to help widen its electoral base – a short term tactic to stave off demographics that are shifting in a way that will be disastrous for the Party in the years to come.

Trump's entry into that uneasy coalition has led to another short term Republican victory, but promises even more instability in the years to come for the Party. He may be a genius that harnessed populism and an old Reagan slogan ('make America great again') to be a saviour for the Republicans and allow them to defy demographics. But, he is more likely to prove a destroyer by shattering the thin threads that hold the party together with unhinged populism. Further, Trump's coalition has mainstreamed some extreme voices like those at Breitbart and the alt-right, and also a vast army of internet-anarchist-trolls loosely described as 'truthers' or conspiracy theorists and personified by figures like Alex Jones. I fail to see how that will bode well for the harmony of party politics. Once the gloss comes off the victory of the 2016 election, cracks will show and the Republican motto 'strong and dignified' will seem even more far-fetched than it is today.

On the other hand, the Democrats do not fair much better. They have lost their heartland, the working class. The Clintons and Obama embody the problem in their steadfast adherence to the philosophy of neoliberalism. To the person on the street this results in loss of jobs, stagnation of wages and decline of towns and cities that once prospered. Meanwhile, they see rising qualities of life in developing nations and middle classes flourishing overseas, such as in China. Justifiably, many people feel that they are being left behind. By selecting Hillary Clinton the Democratic Party misfired badly. They misfired even worse when they actively suppressed Bernie Sanders – as exposed by Wikileaks. With Clinton defeated, the Democrats must work hard to win the base of their own coalition back – and make sure that their other supporters stay loyal to the party. They will need a new economic policy, new leadership, and root and branch reform to ensure they get it right as their fight is now generational due to the state of Capitol Hill and the Supreme Court.

In larger terms, America is also in trouble internationally. US hard and soft power is waning badly and Russia and China are becoming more dominant than ever. Meanwhile, the US' traditional allies in Europe undergo their own political and economic crises and try to fight off the possible dissolution of the euro currency and perhaps even the European Union.

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It may be a time of great uncertainty and anxiety in western politics, but 2016 has proven that politics *can* engage a generation. This was evident at the talk that inspired this post where debate was rigorous and well informed. Yet, in a wider sense what today's voters need to (re-)learn, and embrace, is *empathy* with others. It has become common over the past ten or so years for people to self-select their reality. People 'like' or subscribe to sources / people / views / channels that ends up putting them in self-reinforcing bubbles – rarely hearing anything that would upset their selected view of reality. This election exposed this more than ever. To get past it, people must engage in debate again and turn their rage and shock into political dialogue. Empathy must be employed by anti-Trump supporters to understand why Trump won, and why people voted for him. It must begin by listening without prejudice. Those on the Trump side need only think back to how they felt over the last 8 years to understand how they might empathise with others outside their bubbles. This understanding will be crucial to preventing more election cycles like the one we have just had where no one seemed to listen to each other and watching television news was genuinely stressful. It is no wonder that despite this election being so high profile many voters tuned out rather than voting, and turnout fell to 58% of the electorate.

If we don't re-learn the skills of debate, empathy, and being able to disagree with someone respectfully (without resorting to a shouting match or running away to a safe space) then politics as we know it is dead and 2016 is the year it died. The internet has exposed mankind's every quirk and given space to every viewpoint. There's no putting that cat back in the bag. So, all political parties in the western world – especially in the US – need to build new coalitions and develop new mechanics to engage and represent their electorate. It must start with listening to people, going right back to basics and discarding set norms and models of the past such as conservatism or neoliberalism. The old left-right spectrum does not represent how people think any more. Economic models based on the divisive and somewhat empty notion of 'globalization' are unhelpful and must be discarded as a relic of the 1990s. If party politics fails at this task, as exposed in 2016, then the only people who will be able to rise above the acrimony will be populists like Donald Trump. Americans might not have much first-hand experience of the dangers of right wing populism – but we know it well in Europe.

About the author:

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