

Explaining the Donald Trump Victory

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, NOV 9 2016

Many people on the left in the United States were flummoxed by Trump's successes in the election campaign, the more so by his recent win. Why was he so successful?

As brought poignantly to our attention by the turpitude of this election cycle, the deep rift between the left and the right in the U.S. has grown to the point of political fracture. Are we becoming a "deeply divided society" ourselves?

I live in the American South. North Florida is located at the southern border of what is known here as the "Bible Belt." We do a surprisingly good job of managing the rich (and sometimes intense) diversity among us.

As a political ethnographer of the Middle East, social movements, and courts, I do everything I can to keep my ethnographic eyes *closed* when it comes to American politics. But, the recent election forced itself upon me in some ways.

Some analyses of Trump's successes have focused on the economic factors. Indeed, economic opportunity is polarized in this country; the people at the bottom of the totem pole, economically, have very few real, substantive opportunities to change their economic status, as poverty rates and just-above poverty rates suggest. While some figures are up by comparison to two years ago, economic opportunity has generally worsened since the financial crisis of the late 2000s.

Economic isolation for certain segments of our society is substantial. But I would not say that economic status alone is what drove Trump supporters, at least for those within my frame of reference.

Political corruption was raised often among Trump supporters who I know. Trump gave a speech in Ocala, FL in which he highlighted "corruption and collusion" not only in relation to Hillary Clinton, his adversary, but the national government at large, which he called a "very dishonest system." Libertarian candidate, Gary Johnson, spoke widely about "crony capitalism" and the fact that "politics is for sale" at both the local and national levels in American politics. As a former governor, he spoke rather authoritatively about it.

At the local level, in some corners, anger about the economic state of the country; political corruption; state intervention into people's personal lives; self-serving Congress people, local and state representatives; and the like has been voiced in quiet hush and with increasing intensity over the last several years – at local lumber shops and hardware stores, where everyone comes together.

While gun ownership is down, militia groups remain.

When 700 billion in American tax dollars (one Forbes contributor argues that it was, in fact, a number in the trillions) were used to bail out American banks but did not bail out the American citizens whose mortgages were most affected, I think the left lost much of the grassroots of the country. The government loan program required *-in practice* – that you have \$20,000 in the bank and good credit to qualify. I know. I am a political ethnographer. I did what political ethnographers do best. I called to find out. People bankrupted by the loan crisis did not have \$20,000 in the bank, *nor* good credit. That sort of thing makes people very angry in the part of the country where I live, for

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many of them called in as well.

For many voices here, that is called plain and simple corruption. Many also see it as par for the course. Hence their anger, and potentially, their interest in an outside candidate not yet sullied by the American political system.

What about the “crazy” factor?

“Brash” or “crazy” was a persona that worked for Trump. It has worked for Trump for decades. Some people who supported him said that his personal record on ethnicity and race and immigrants was very positive; that he is married to a new immigrant; that he has a record of hiring immigrants; and so forth. Indeed, for those at the bottom of the economic totem pole in the U.S., there has always tended to be less segregation and more inter-marriage than among the very wealthy. Just read Mark Twain. Trump and his supporters’ rhetoric on immigration, and its (apparent) link to a negative rhetoric on race, may need to be read through a more sophisticated lens to make sense of these factors.

The thing that his supporters seemed to love about Trump’s “crazy” routine is that it got right in the faces of the economic aristocracy and the political aristocracy that they despise. Indeed, it seemed to be treated by some of his supporters in sophisticated manner as a routine – as performativity or political ritual.

If we take one lesson from the recent presidential election, it should be this: We are perilously close to becoming a deeply divided society.

If we continue to leave significant segments of our population behind, economically and in terms of substantive civil liberties *in practice* – that is, a compelling state interest required before local officials busy themselves in the lives of individual citizens who they consider too weak to fight it – we can probably expect repeats of this election cycle in coming years.

In terms of Democratic losses, it could have been a lot worse than Donald Trump. Think of the 1930s, falling, as they did, on the heels of the 1920s with its record levels of income inequality paralleling our own today.

So, what did our grandparents and great-grandparents do to fix the problem? They reduced income inequality. They oversaw significant strengthening of civil liberties. They passed the Civil Relief Act so that Americans could have decent housing. They created Social Security and Medicare. They strengthened the judiciary to take care of civil liberties and check the executive. Now we need all of these as well as significant checks on the judiciary – to empower and protect judges from local corruption – and checks on legislators, *per se*. Judges in this country, controversial though they may be, work very hard every day. Fire legislators who cannot make it to meetings, vote, balance a balance sheet, or refrain from embezzling public funds. It is not rocket science. It is not magic. Fire them. Hire and vote for substance instead of surface, depth instead of good hair spray and foundation.

When Americans stop insisting that our politicians look pretty and not sound like geeks, we may start to get somewhere again.

Mark Twain came to mind many times throughout the recent election cycle. I could imagine him rocking in his chair, smoking his cigar, shaking his head, and chuckling.

I wonder what he would have said?

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