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Why did Donald Trump really get elected?

Abstract

Objectives: Many explanations have been offered of Donald Trump's rise to the presidency of the United States. Most focus on the candidates and events in or around their campaigns. This paper argues that a much-neglected part of the story lies in long-developing structural and historical trends in the U.S. political economy upon which the Trump campaign capitalized.

Research Design & Methods: The paper provides an historical analysis of the structural changes in American political economy that contributed to Trump's rise to power.

Findings: Trump's rise to power was premised on decades-long changes in the U.S. economy, race relations, ideology, party politics and Obama's presidency.

Implications/Recommendations: To understand Trump's rise to power we need to understand the changes in American political and economic life that sowed the seeds for his election.

Contribution/Value Added: Other accounts of Trump's victory focus on short- or medium-term factors. This paper puts them all into longer historical perspective.

Keywords: Donald Trump, American politics, public governance, presidential election, political economy

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This paper explains why Donald Trump was elected President of the United States in 2016. Most explanations of Trump's rise to power focus on the short-term idiosyncrasies of the election. Russian interference in the campaign. FBI Director James Comey's letter to Congress days before the election announcing a renewed investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails. The Clinton campaign's strategic missteps in key swing states such as Michigan

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and Wisconsin.¹ Trump's celebrity and deft media skills, honed to perfection on *The Apprentice*, his reality TV show. His ability to read a crowd and play to its concerns. Clinton's lack of charisma on the stump. I could go on.

A second set of explanations, more scholarly and analytic, focus on medium-term factors. For instance, some political scientists have attributed Trump's victory to his use of inflammatory language on the campaign trail, which rallied his base. However, his ability to do this, it is argued, was only possible because the Freedom Caucus in the House of Representatives, representing the right-wing Tea

¹ Of course, Clinton won the popular vote only to lose in the Electoral College.

Party Movement, blazed a trail of inflammatory rhetoric in the few years leading up to the presidential election. In other words, the Freedom Caucus tilled the soil from which Trump's effective rhetoric grew (Gervais & Morris, 2018).

Certainly, there is some truth to the list of explanations I just mentioned about why Trump won. Contingencies like these always affect elections. But all these arguments miss the point. There were much deeper long-term trends at work that have been virtually ignored so far in the literature. But two stand out. One attributes Trump's victory to changes in the norms of American politics – the decline of civility in political discourse (Dionne *et al.*, 2017). The other points to the declining fortunes of the white working class that might help someone like Trump (Hochschild, 2016; Vance, 2016). There is some truth to this too. But I argue that the long-term trends are far more complex than this. Trump rode to victory on a wave of public discontent that had been building since the 1970s – a wave consisting of four long-standing trends in American society that have gradually transformed American politics, and one big catalyst. The implications of his victory for public governance are becoming clear, and they aren't pretty. I'll get to that later but first let's see why Trump got elected.²

The economy

The first trend was economic. Nearly a half-century of wage stagnation, rising inequality, diminishing upward mobility, mounting private debt, and declining private sector employment, particularly in traditional manufacturing industries, is part of the story. During the late 1960s and early 1970s average wages grew about 2.5% annually. Since then, however, they barely budged. Between 1973 and 2000 median family income in the United States stagnated, inched up a bit for the next few years, but then stalled again (Mishel *et al.*, 2012,

p. 179). This was a particularly tough problem during the latter half of the 1970s and early 1980s when, thanks to two oil shocks, inflation hit double digits only to be brought under control by a severe tightening of monetary policy that threw the economy into a recession.

To make ends meet the average American family had three options. One was work more hours, which many did (Leicht & Fitzgerald, 2014, p. 47). The second was to save less money, or spend money already saved. Beginning in 1975 the savings rate for average American families declined. By 2005, it had slipped below zero – people were spending down whatever savings they had (Rhee, 2013). The third option was borrowing money. From 1973 to 2011 average household debt rose from 67% to 119% of disposable personal income (Mishel *et al.* 2012, p. 405). All of this was necessary for the Baby Boom generation to maintain the same standard of living as their parent's generation. It's even harder for today's young adults. In short, people have had to run faster and faster just to stay in the same place. Many people were unable to do so, which is why American middle-class prosperity has become more of an illusion than a reality (Leicht & Fitzgerald, 2006; Temin, 2017).

Much of this was due to structural changes in the economy. Beginning in the early 1970s many traditional U.S. manufacturing jobs were exported from the Northeast and upper Midwest to the Sunbelt in the South and Southwest where unions were weaker or non-existent and wages and benefits were lower. Jobs were also either outsourced to foreign countries or eliminated entirely by technological improvements like computerisation and robotics. Downsizing became the watchword for many U.S. firms. Not everyone suffered equally. As the shift from manufacturing to a more service-oriented economy proceeded those who managed to get good educations or upgrade their skills, particularly in ways that made them technologically savvy, did alright. But those who did not, notably people from the working class or poor, fared worse (Bluestone & Harrison, 1988; Danziger & Gottschalk, 1997).

² The arguments in this paper are explored in more detail in Campbell (2018).

As a result, inequality increased. Wages grew significantly for those in the top 20% of the income distribution – and especially for the richest 1% – but not for most others. Between 1975 and 2010 the gini coefficient, a standard inequality measure, increased steadily from about .301 to .365 (OECD 2011). In short, the rich got richer, but many others were left behind. These trends were exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis and Great Recession that followed.

All of this translated into two things of political importance. First, people's anxiety about their economic fortunes grew over the years, but especially following the 2008 financial crisis. Even during the run-up to the 2016 election – years after the crisis had subsided – the economy remained the leading issue in many Americans' minds. When asked what they thought the biggest problem facing the country was about 40% of Americans said it was the economy, with Republicans being more concerned than Democrats by a two-to-one margin (Gallup Polling 2016b). Second, and perhaps most important, the possibility of upward economic mobility deteriorated. As we shall see, this was an especially important reason people supported Trump (Mishel *et al.*, 2012, pp. 142–143; Williams, 2016).

Trump tapped the economic angst of millions of Americans and promised to bring traditional manufacturing jobs back to America in industries like steel, automobiles and coal mining. He threatened to renegotiate NAFTA arguing that it had destroyed millions of jobs. He pledged to get tough with China and Mexico to trade fairly with America. And he assured workers that by imposing import tariffs, cutting the corporate tax rate, and limiting immigration the economy would flourish, jobs would be restored, their wages would go up, and the possibility of upward mobility would be improved. People believed him.

Race and ethnicity

The second trend underpinning Trump's victory involved race and ethnicity. Trump pandered to

the worst in people's concerns about race. He blamed African Americans for crime, drugs and other problems in our inner cities, even though problems like these are often more a matter of economic class than race. He blamed Mexican immigrants for taking jobs from Americans even though job loss had more to do with automation and corporate downsizing than immigration. In fact, most jobs taken by Mexicans are those that Americans don't want, and since the Great Recession more Mexicans have tried to leave the country than enter it (Massey 2015; Massey & Gentsch, 2014). Finally, Trump blamed Muslims for threatening people's safety and security even though, according to FBI crime statistics, the threat of Muslim terrorism was miniscule, especially compared to the number of home-grown terrorist attacks in school shootings and hate crimes. Since the 9/11 attacks the Muslim threat has been virtually non-existent. In the last 15 years, Muslim extremists have been responsible for 0.0005% of all murders in the United States. If we include those killed on 9/11 it's still only about one percent (Campbell 2018, p. 69–70; Kurzman 2017). Nevertheless, scapegoating minorities, particularly for people's economic problems, is a long-standing tradition in America. It has grown recently. And Trump was a pro at scapegoating – mixing nationalism, racism and promises of rejuvenating the American Dream into a politically toxic populist brew.

This resonated with Trump's supporters whose concerns about minority groups had been growing for years due to several things. First, Republicans like Richard Nixon pioneered the so-called Southern Strategy in the late 1960s and 1970s – an effort to convert white working-class voters to the Republican Party by hinting that their troubles, notably, a rising tax burden, were due to the Democratic Party's efforts to provide benefits to African Americans (Aistrup, 1996; U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation 2017). This fuelled a white backlash against minorities and the policies allegedly designed to help them that eventually spread from the south to the north (McAdam & Kloos, 2014, p. 119 and chap. 3).

Second, the Hispanic population grew significantly during the 1990s and 2000s. The U.S. Census Bureau predicted that by 2044 non-Hispanic whites would be a minority in the country (Alba, 2015). This scared Republicans who began worrying that the country's electoral base was tilting more and more in favour of the Democrats. Most Hispanic immigrants and their children were relatively poor and uneducated – precisely the sort of people that tended historically to vote for Democrats (Waldman, 2016, chap. 12). Third, Trump pandered to public misperceptions about the relationship between race and crime. The average American believed that minorities were much more likely to engage in criminal activity than was the case (Ghandnoosh, 2014; Harrell *et al.*, 2014, tables 6 and 8; Ghandnoosh & Rovner, 2017). But Trump catered to their belief that minorities and immigrants were the ones responsible for crime in America.

Finally, was the immigration issue. On the Hispanic side, Trump expressed deep concern especially about Mexicans whom he claimed were streaming across the border creating criminal mayhem and taking jobs away from American workers. Trump's pitch about Hispanic immigrants was well placed. Many of his supporters believed his claims (Abrajano & Hajnal, 2015; Doherty, 2016). On the Muslim side, Trump constantly raised concerns about the dangers of radical Islamist terrorists coming to kill innocent Americans. Nearly as many Trump supporters believed that terrorism was a serious problem as believed that immigration was (Doherty, 2016). Furthermore, many of those who worried about Muslim immigration believed that Muslims wanted to destroy American values and replace them with Islamic Shari 'a law (Potok, 2017). The point is that there were persistent, and in some cases growing undercurrents of racial and ethnic animosity in America that Trump exploited for political advantage.

Ideology

The third trend that helped Trump win was the rise of conservative ideology – what some

call neoliberalism and others call market fundamentalism. Since the 1980s, Americans and many of their leaders have fallen under the spell of conservative economic Sirens promising that the only route to a better world is through tax cuts, less government spending, and fewer regulations on business. This, it is said, will stimulate economic growth, create jobs, help raise wages, and eventually reduce government deficits and debt (Heilbroner & Milberg, 1995). Many also believe that God will help them through whatever personal economic troubles they may be having, but let's not get into that. There is precious little empirical evidence that the conservative mantra necessarily works as advertised or is the only key to success (Blyth, 2013). Nevertheless, Trump preached neoliberalism insofar as tax and spending cuts and deregulation were concerned. There were other aspects of his economic plan that did not fit the neoliberal model, but I'll return to them later.

Several things contributed to neoliberalism's ascendance. First, beginning in the mid-1970s a very conservative group of think tanks, notably the Heritage Foundation, were established in Washington and pushed neoliberal policies (Campbell & Pedersen, 2014, chap. 2). Second, conservatives gave millions of dollars to infuse higher education with neoliberal teachings (Cohen, 2008; MacLean, 2017; Teles, 2008). Third, corporations began lobbying for neoliberal policies (Domhoff, 2014, pp. 15–20; Temin, 2017, p. 18). Fourth, more and more private money flowed into politics thanks to changes in campaign finance laws. Most of the increase was from conservative sources outspending liberals two-to-one and pushing neoliberalism (Cillizza, 2014; Clawson, 1998; Mayer, 2016; Temin, 2017, pp. 79–80). Republicans outspent Democrats in 13 of the 16 presidential elections prior to 2016 (Bartels, 2016, p. 76). Fifth, key segments of the media began pushing the neoliberal agenda. By 2016 the ten most popular radio talk shows in America featured conservatives touting this view (Talkers, 2017). And, of course, Fox News, America's iconic conservative cable news channel, did too.

Much of Trump's economic plan was vintage neoliberalism. One reason so many voters believed this was that it was a familiar story that politicians had been preaching more and more for decades as they came to accept the neoliberal paradigm (Mudge, 2011). Another reason was that people were simply ignorant of the facts. According to a study from the University of Maryland, when it came to political issues like these Fox News viewers, the clear majority of whom were conservative and likely Trump supporters, were the most misinformed audience of any major news network (Brock *et al.*, 2012, pp. 13–14). A third reason was that Trump's plan was simple and easily understood, especially compared to Clinton's complicated economic plan. Trump lived by the KISS Principle – Keep It Simple, Stupid. He was a pro at packaging his message in a few simple thoughts that resonated with crowds. She was not (Allen & Parnes, 2017, p. 323; Stone, 2017, pp. 28–29, 265). Finally, he framed it all in ways that resonated with many people's suspicions of big government. Since the 1960s Americans had grown increasingly wary of big government, relative to big business or big labour, as a threat to the United States. In the mid-1960s about 48% of the public held this view but by 2014 it had reached 72%, often because people felt that the federal government threatened individual rights and freedoms. And among Republicans the numbers skyrocketed from 41% to 92% who believed this (Gallup Polling, 2015). Moreover, since 1970 more Americans felt that their taxes were too high rather than either too low or just about right (Gallup Polling, 2017a). The story was similar for government spending. Since the mid-1970s most Americans have almost always favoured small government with fewer services. The difference between Republicans and Democrats was pronounced and grew. By 2015, 80% of Republicans favoured smaller government as opposed to 31% of Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2015a). The reason was that the public worried that big government was wasteful, corrupt and inefficient. Again, the difference between

Republicans and Democrats was substantial (75% vs 40%) (Pew Research Center, 2015a).

Two caveats are in order. First, neoliberalism is not a monolithic paradigm; it is a menu of policy options from which policymakers pick and choose (Campbell & Pedersen, 2001, pp. 269–273). One way in which Trump deviated from the neoliberal package was his pledge to revisit America's commitment to free trade agreements like NAFTA, the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the World Trade Organisation. Neoliberalism, after all, strongly favoured free trade.³ How did he reconcile this contradiction? When it came to free trade Trump was particularly hard on China and Mexico. Remember that one of his complaints about NAFTA was that Mexico was taking American jobs. Rarely did he mention Canada, the third NAFTA partner. In other words, he justified his anti-NAFTA anti-free trade plan by blending issues of race and jobs. The same could be inferred from his remarks about trade with China, and by extension the rest of the South American and Asian participants in the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Similarly, Trump's anti-immigration policy was at odds with neoliberalism's belief in the benefits of the free movement of labour unfettered by government intervention. But, as we have seen, he also framed this issue in terms of race, protecting working and middle-class jobs, cracking down on crime, and protecting American values.⁴ So Trump's commitment to neoliberalism was a mixed bag, but one that still appealed to his political base.

³ Judis, 2016, chap. 3. Interestingly, except for the WTO Trump had very little criticism of the other Bretton Woods institutions – the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank – which laid the foundation for the post-war international economic order and eventually the Washington Consensus, itself a kind of international variant of neoliberalism.

⁴ Trump also objected to NATO, or at least wanted its members to pay their fair share to support it. This had nothing to do with neoliberalism. It was a manifestation of his opposition to neoconservatism, which, among other things, advocated that America encourage “regime change” in countries it did not like. Neoconservatism should not be confused with neoliberalism.

Second, some might argue that Trump was not a neoliberal at all because he promised to protect Social Security, the government's old age pension program, and Medicare, the government's old age health insurance program. But virtually all American politicians, regardless of their economic philosophy, make such claims because these are enormously popular programs with the public. To threaten them publicly is almost always a sure-fire way to get voted out of office. Neoliberals like everyone else understand this. Moreover, some might argue that Trump was not a neoliberal because he promised not only to repeal Obama's health insurance program, the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), but also to "replace it with something better." However, he never laid out a clear vision during the campaign about what he would replace it with and when he took office he left it up to Congress to devise a replacement, which they never did because they failed to replace it in the first place. Trump was serious about repealing Obamacare, as most neoliberals were, but not about replacing it.

My point is simply this. Trump espoused neoliberalism where he thought it would appeal to his base. His neoliberalism was inconsistent. But politicians are often inconsistent in this regard.⁵ In fact, once he took office, his only major legislative victory was a massive neoliberal tax cut, which virtually every congressional Republican supported even though it dramatically increased the government's budget deficit. Trump and the neoliberals had long objected to deficits when

⁵ Lots of Republican presidents have deviated from their conservative economic principles. Dwight Eisenhower built the interstate highway system – a massive government spending project. Richard Nixon famously declared that "we are all Keynesians now" and flirted with wage and price controls to check inflation. Ronald Reagan passed an enormous tax cut in his first year in office only to raise taxes later when the federal deficit ballooned. And Trump's inconsistency was on display again when, despite reports of repeated sexual philandering with porn stars and others, he courted Evangelical Christians with appeals to "family values" and by promising to appoint anti-abortion justices to the Supreme Court.

Democrats generated them. Now they were suddenly silent, demonstrating again the inconsistency and political expediency of their views.

Political polarisation

The economic, racial and ideological trends I have been discussing flowed together contributing to a fourth trend – rising political polarisation. The ideological gap between Republicans and Democrats had been widening gradually for decades (Abramowitz, 2013; Campbell, 2016; Dionne, 2016; Edsall, 1984; Pew Research Center, 2014). By some accounts polarisation nowadays is greater than it has ever been since Reconstruction over a century ago (Campbell, 2016, p. 140, chaps. 1 and 5; Edsall, 2012, pp. 140–141). But why? First, since the 1970s, both political parties shifted to the right thanks in part to the rise of neoliberalism. But the Republicans embraced this ideology much more fervently than the Democrats and, as a result, moved farther to the right (Pew Research Center, 2015a).

Second, economic trends were at work. Organised labour had been a steadfast Democratic Party supporter since the 1930s. But beginning in the late 1950s the labour movement grew weaker thanks to the decline of manufacturing, the rise of outsourcing, and other economic trends. Hence, the unions' ability to support Democratic candidates favouring liberal working-class interests was waning (Frank, 2016, p. 51). At the same time, business interests grew more conservative politically because they faced increasing global competition and were less willing to accept expensive Democratic social programs paid for with high taxes (Edsall, 2012, pp. 69–72; 1985; Ferguson & Rogers, 1986; Judis, 2016, p. 43). The moderating political voice of America's business elite began to fade out (Mizruchi, 2013).

Racial trends also mattered. Thanks to the Southern Strategy and subsequent white backlash, by the early 2000s, conservative, white, married people viewing themselves as paying taxes to finance programs for underserving minorities

constituted much of the Republican Party's base. Meanwhile, racial and ethnic minorities as well as women, poor people dependent on government services, and comparatively liberal whites comprised the Democratic Party's base (Edsall, 2012, p. 41; Edsall & Edsall, 1992; Campbell, 2016, p. 158; Judis, 2016, pp. 36–37). Public opinion polls reflected this in questions about discrimination and supporting affirmative action. By 2014, there was a sharp partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats on this issue. Sixty-one percent of Republicans believed that discrimination against whites was at least as big a problem as was discrimination against blacks. Just as many Democrats disagreed. Tea Party Republicans felt particularly strong about this with 76% believing that whites were discriminated against at least as much as blacks. Moreover, white Republicans out-numbered white Democrats three-to-one in believing that too much attention is paid nowadays to issues of race (Johnson, 2017, p. 173; Pew Research Center, 2016). To some observers, "One of the central sources of continuity linking the Republican Party that emerged under Nixon in the late '60s and early '70s with the [Republican Party] of today is a sustained politics of racial reaction" (McAdam & Kloos, 2014, pp. 104, 254–255). In other words, the white backlash assumed a politically partisan flavor that further polarised the two parties.

Immigration helped fuel racial polarisation in politics too. By the late 1970s there was a growing population of new immigrants, which intensified the competition for college admissions, jobs, and promotions. Compounding the problem was that this was happening just as the economy was beginning to suffer from the effects of stagflation, globalisation, and rising international competition, so the supply of opportunities did not keep pace with increased demand. In particular, conservative white men saw themselves competing against minorities (Edsall, 2012, pp. 68–72). Both explicit and implicit anti-Hispanic and anti-black attitudes increased accordingly (Agiesta & Ross, 2012). Rising anti-Muslim sentiment also emerged in the wake

of the 9/11 attacks. Racial and ethnic scapegoating was on the rise. The important point, however, is that all of this further exacerbated racial and ethnic polarisation between the Republican and Democratic Parties as the Democrats attracted a growing minority population and the Republicans became increasingly white (Abrajano & Hajnal, 2015; Abramowitz, 2013, chap 2).

To be sure, the roots of political polarisation are complex. A variety of institutional changes were also in play. These included new campaign finance laws, gerrymandering, attempts to prevent certain groups from voting under the guise of stopping voter fraud, expanding the whipping systems in Congress, and the advent of more contentious and partisan presidential primary systems. But the ideological, economic and racial trends I have discussed were crucial in elevating political polarisation to a very high level.

All of this set the stage for Donald Trump – a narcissistic pitchman extraordinaire. He promised to be the best job creator God ever gave America. He promised to build a wall along the southern border to keep out the Mexicans. He promised to crackdown on Muslim immigration to prevent terrorism. He promised to cut through the Gordian knot of polarisation in Washington by making deals no one else could make, and if that didn't work, launching a fusillade of executive orders to blast through the congressional logjam. He promised that his deal-making prowess would also help rewrite America's trade agreements, and repeal and replace Obamacare. In short, Trump promised to Make America Great Again, a core campaign slogan he repeated ad nauseam framed in all sorts of nationalist, racist, xenophobic and occasionally sexist language. But there is still more to the story.

The catalyst: Barack Obama and gridlock

By 2008, the political differences between Democrats and Republicans had reached a tipping point. If the right catalyst came along, polarisation could turn into full-blown political gridlock. That

happened when Barack Obama became president. Republican congressional leaders immediately plotted to block anything he might propose in order to make him a one-term president (Franken, 2017, pp. 235–236, 246; Campbell, 2016, pp. 236–237). Then in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis he launched the most aggressive economic stimulus since the Great Depression, pumping nearly a trillion dollars into the economy – mostly to help Corporate America and Wall Street rather than Main Street. He also signed the Dodd-Frank Act, a major increase in government regulation of the financial services industry. And on top of that he pushed health care reform – Obamacare – through Congress. All of these were massive government interventions that ran against the neoliberal grain, consequently infuriating lots of Americans and giving rise to the conservative Tea Party Movement (Abramowitz, 2013, pp. 9–12; Tesler & Sears, 2010, 155–158; see also López 2014, pp. 205–207). Once the Tea Party’s Freedom Caucus emerged in the House of Representatives, any significant policymaking ground to a virtual halt. Things were not much better in the Senate.

Policymaking gridlock set in. By the middle of the Obama presidency between 60% and 70% of important legislative proposals stalled in Congress (Binder, 2014). Administrative and judicial appointments were blocked and, as a result, the number of vacancies in the administration and judiciary soared during Obama’s presidency, especially during his second term. Members on both sides of the aisle agreed that they had never seen things this bad, largely because the confirmation process had become extremely contentious (Shear, 2013). In his final year in office, the senate confirmed only 30% of Obama’s nominees to the federal bench, much fewer than it did for the previous two-term presidents Reagan (66%), Clinton (50%), and Bush (68%), all of whom, like Obama, had to contend with Senate confirmation hearings controlled by the opposition party (Wheeler, 2016). Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell’s refusal to meet with let alone convene confirmation hearings for Merrick Garland, Obama’s

nominee to the Supreme Court, epitomised gridlock.

The use of the filibuster – a legislative tactic to block congressional policymaking – became more common too. Historically, it was used to kill legislative proposals that didn’t have strong bipartisan support, but on Obama’s watch McConnell used it to slow down or torpedo things that did have bipartisan support. The use of the filibuster skyrocketed during Obama’s first year in office (Franken, 2017, pp. 229–230). The filibuster became a stealth weapon used by Republicans during the Obama years to obstruct even legislative matters that used to be routine and widely supported. This was unprecedented in the Senate’s history (Mann & Ornstein, 2012, pp. 88–90).

It’s no surprise, then, that people became fed up with Washington politics. Public trust and satisfaction with government declined significantly after 2001.⁶ And the public’s approval rating of Congress plummeted during that time from about 50% agreeing that it was doing a good job to just 17% by 2016 (Gallup Polling, 2016a). Obama’s approval rating (48%) was lower on average than any president in over 30 years (Gallup Polling, 2017b).

Racism was partly responsible too. Obama’s election itself was marked with racist overtones as people, including Trump and others in the so-called birther movement, charged that Obama was born in Africa and, therefore, ineligible for the presidency. According to Michael Tesler and David Sears’ analysis, “Barack Obama’s candidacy polarised the electorate by racial attitudes more strongly than had any previous presidential candidate in recent times.” (Tesler & Sears, 2010, p. 9) Moreover, Tesler and Sears found significant spillover effects – all else being equal, any policy issue for which Obama took a public stand could become polarised according to people’s racial predispositions. Post-election

⁶ Concerns about having been misled by the George W. Bush administration after 9/11 about the grounds for starting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan contributed to public distrust.

surveys and panel data showed that the impact of racial resentment did not diminish once Obama took office (Tesler & Sears, 2010, pp. 92–93). One indication was that the highly racialised voting in the 2008 presidential election was repeated four years later (Johnson, 2017). Another indication was that 38 states eventually introduced legislation that many people believed was intended to inhibit voting by minority groups (López, 2014, p. 160). Finally, over the course of Obama's presidency the percentage of all Americans who believed that racism was a big problem in their country doubled from 26% to 50%. Nearly three-quarters of African Americans and more than half of Hispanics agreed (Pew Research Center, 2015b).

The broader point, however, is that Trump pandered to the problems of polarisation and gridlock just like he pandered to economic, racial and ideological trends. First, he told one reporter, "I'm going to unify. This country is totally divided. Barack Obama has divided this country unbelievably. And it's all, it's all hatred, what can I tell you. I've never seen anything like it...I will be a great unifier for our country." (Diamond, 2015) Second, he promised to "drain the swamp" and utilise executive orders to cut the Gordian knot of gridlock. Third, he occasionally resurrected the birther issue, which most people thought had been laid to rest but that helped energise the Tea Party Movement. Fourth, he attacked Obama's handling of the financial crisis. Despite his support for the stimulus when it was first launched, once he announced his candidacy in 2015 his staff denied it. Fifth, he lambasted Dodd-Frank for making it "impossible for bankers to function," adding that this made it difficult for Main Street to get the loans it needed to create jobs (Fortune Magazine, 2016). He promised to get rid of it. Finally, as noted earlier, he promised to "repeal and replace" Obamacare.

The rise of Donald Trump

Exit polling by CNN shows that Trump's campaign promises resonated with the fears and

anxieties of the American public, which stemmed from all the things I have described (CNN, 2016). His campaign represented the tip of an iceberg that had been developing for decades. Consider the economic trends first. Roughly two-thirds of people who worried that the economy was in poor shape, and two-thirds who believed that international trade takes away American jobs voted for Trump. So did about two-thirds of those who felt that life for the next generation would be worse than today.

Trump pandered effectively to people's racial concerns too. He won 58% of the white vote while Clinton won a whopping 74% of the non-white vote. People who frowned on racial diversity in America were much more likely to vote for Trump than people who looked kindly upon it. Trump's disparaging comments about African Americans certainly contributed to his loss of the African-American and Latino vote – he won only 8% and 29% of their votes, respectively. Finally, 84% of those who felt that undocumented immigrants working in the United States should be deported voted for Trump.

Ideas and ideology were important too. Trump won 81% of the conservative vote – people who believed in limited government and the free market. His promise to overcome political polarisation and gridlock resonated with voters too. Fifty-eight percent of those who felt dissatisfied or angry with the federal government went for Trump while 76% of those who felt enthusiastic or satisfied with it supported Clinton.

Voters' dissatisfaction with Obama's presidency was evident too. An overwhelming 90% of those disapproving of Obama's presidency voted for Trump. And 83% of those who believed that Obamacare had gone too far supported Trump. Lingering concerns about the financial crisis also came into play. Seventy-eight percent of those worried that the financial situation of the country was worse than it was four years ago voted for Trump.

In short, Trump took advantage of economic, racial, ideological and political trends that had

been growing for decades – a perfect storm that increased the possibility that someone like him could come out of nowhere and capture the White House. Some Americans who voted for him believed what he said; others saw him as an alternative to the failed political establishment; and the rest hoped that his election would provide them with entrée to power and influence in Washington.

Implications for public governance

Public governance in America has been upended by all of this. Trump's victory institutionalised a new form of politics in America. Traditionally, American politics pitted left-wing liberals, who favoured more taxes, government spending and regulation, against right-wing conservatives, who favoured the opposite. But Trump's contempt for free trade, his desire to restrict immigration, and his promise to step away from multilateral treaties signalled the arrival of a new political cleavage – those for and against globalisation. This threw a monkey wrench into both major political parties. Now the Republican and Democratic parties are split over globalisation issues too. Notably, the Sanders wing of the Democratic Party favours protectionism, but the Clinton wing does not. On the Republican side, the Trump wing favours protectionism, but the more traditional and moderate wing does not. Suddenly, politics has become more complicated in ways that exacerbate polarisation and gridlock.

Trump's victory has also amplified a movement away from fact-based politics and policymaking. Trump set a new low in American politics for distorting the truth and lying. He lied repeatedly on the campaign trail, making false statements over 70% of the time according to reputable fact checkers. Once in office, he continued to lie, notably accusing, without a shred of evidence, Barack Obama of tapping his phones during the campaign. The Washington Post calculated that since taking office he has lied publicly on average 6.5 times per day, often in his numerous online tweets. His inability to accept the facts is remarkable. For example, he has repeatedly denied that the Russians

interfered in the 2016 election, although all his national intelligence agencies and congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle agree that they did. The problem is twofold. One is that Trump's disregard for the truth may very well exacerbate the public's distrust in its political leaders. The other is that if we can't agree on even the most basic facts, we are doomed to policymaking based purely on ideology and the uninformed whims of policymakers. This is very dangerous. Reflecting on the Treaty of Versailles just after the First World War, John Maynard Keynes, the brilliant twentieth-century economist, warned that fact-less, uninformed policymaking can lead to disaster. He was right. That ill-conceived treaty helped foment the Second World War (Keynes, 1920). What does this mean for America's position in the world today? A detailed response is well beyond the scope of this paper, but a few words are in order. Trump's disregard for the facts about climate change contributed to his decision to pull the United States out of the Paris Climate Agreement. His disregard for the facts about free trade contributed to his decision to pull out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. It also contributed to his move to impose tariffs on China, Mexico, Canada, and the European Union. Coupled with his knack for insulting foreign leaders, friend and foe alike, not to mention his threats to disregard America's commitments to NATO and other multilateral agreements, America's position of world leadership is being badly shaken. Germany's Chancellor, Angela Merkel, was blunt about this following her first major G7 summit meeting with Trump when she said that Europe couldn't count on the United States anymore and "must really take our destiny into our own hands." Since the Second World War the United States has played a pivotal role ensuring a modicum of stability in the world. Under Trump it appears that America is abdicating that leadership role. Trump's willingness to start trade wars is just one indication of the destabilising effect his presidency is having. I fear that there will be more.

In this regard, public governance at the international level has been upended too. And the situation

has been made even more unstable thanks to Brexit and the rise of right-wing populism in Poland, Hungary, France, Germany, Denmark and many other European countries, much of which stemmed from trends similar to those we have seen in the United States – economic restructuring, immigration, racism, xenophobia, political polarisation and the tilt toward neoliberalism. Consider the populist insurgency in Britain. Brexit was largely a backlash against the European Union’s open borders, especially for the free movement of people – allegedly immigrants who were taking jobs away from British workers. Such sentiments were strongest in the deindustrialised areas outside of London. Similarly, in Denmark, anti-immigrant populism found its most fertile soil in the rural areas of Western Jutland and among workers who feared that immigrants were, again, taking their jobs and sponging off the generous Danish welfare state. The parallels between these countries and Trump’s America are striking and resonate with trends others who have studied populist insurgencies have identified (Judis, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Structural trends like these provide fertile soil for the growth of extremist politics, populism, nationalism and demagoguery that can rip a country apart and set them on collision courses with each other.

Considering all this, it is easy to believe that the political foundations of the post-war international order have been shaken. Hopefully, they will not crumble. If they do, as Keynes might have warned, it could be disastrous.

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