

Trump defies expectations and takes the White House on a wave of populism

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Election night in America has been stunning. The outcome may be catastrophic and transformative for America and the world. The pundits and pollsters consistently reported throughout the long, long US campaign that Hillary Clinton was in the lead in the popular vote, estimated across the average of most national polls.

A Clinton victory had seemed widely plausible. By all accounts the Democrats had a unified convention, a well-funded campaign, an experienced, well-qualified and knowledgeable candidate, the overwhelming endorsement of the mainstream press, the support of a team of heavy-hitters including Barack and Michelle Obama. They also had a popular incumbent president, a low economic misery index, a well organised “get out the vote” ground game, and a consistently winning debate performance.

By contrast, the Republican leadership has been deeply divided, with lukewarm support for their own standard-bearer. Donald Trump was a candidate offering a toxic brew of racist, ill-informed, misogynist, nationalistic and vulgar rhetoric. He offended women, Hispanics, and other minorities, with only a loose association with the truth, no substantive detailed policy platform, no experience of government or the military, less funds than his opponent, and minimal advertising and polling.

Yet President Elect Trump has pulled off a remarkable victory. The outcome is a disaster for the Democrats – with the Republicans holding both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.

What explains the populist earthquake in American politics?

Some factors are clearly specific to this election campaign. The way that the Republican primaries turned into a circular firing squad for the moderate candidates is a key one. The lack of effective new blood competing in the Democratic contests, allowing all the bag and baggage of the Clinton haters to be reignited is another. Events such as the Russian hacking of the DNC and Wikileaks’ endless recycling of the Clinton email story is yet another. And so on.

But the populist earthquake is also part of a far broader picture.

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Like Donald Trump, leaders such as Marine Le Pen, Norbert Hofer, Nigel Farage, and Geert Wilders are prominent today in many countries, altering established patterns of party competition in contemporary Western societies. These parties have gained votes and seats in many countries, and entered government coalitions in 11 Western democracies, including in Austria, Italy and Switzerland.

Across Europe, their average share of the vote in national and European parliamentary elections has more than doubled since the 1960s, from around 5.1% to 13.2%, at the expense of centrist parties. During the same era, their share of seats has tripled, from 3.8% to 12.8%. Even in countries without many elected populist representatives, these parties can still exert tremendous “blackmail” pressure on mainstream parties, public discourse, and the policy agenda. This was most recently illustrated by the UK Independence Party’s role in bringing about the British exit from the European Union, with massive consequences.

The electoral fortunes of populist parties are open to multiple explanations, which can be grouped into accounts focused on:

1. the demand side of public opinion,
2. the supply side of party strategies, and
3. constitutional arrangements governing the rules of the electoral game.

Applying these explanations to the Trump phenomenon, the demand side concerns the cultural backlash concentrated among older white men who want to “Make America Great Again”. This means a vision of an older, small-town America, reflecting traditional values, common decades ago, against more progressive, cosmopolitan and multicultural values.

The supply side concerns how parties compete, and the way that the ultra-conservative Tea Party wing of the Republican party advocated and laid the foundation for many of the populist themes that Trump subsequently echoed. This includes anti-establishment and anti-government views, [birtherism](#), climate change denial, and know-nothingness. The institutional context concerns the weakness of party control over the selection process, and the path that provides for an outsider candidacy, as well as celebrity dominated soft news.

But the explanation of the populist revolution is less important than the consequences of a President Trump. This is not just the choice of another leader like any other, where there are

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genuine party differences on public policies and debate about alternative ways to manage the country. The authoritarian tendencies of his leadership, his attack on basic democratic principles, the isolationist withdrawal of America from the world, are likely to be deeply damaging, to human rights at home and abroad.

Brexit was a disaster for Britain – and Europe. But it was just a seismic tremor presaging a far bigger tsunami. President Trump will be a catastrophe for America and the world.

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