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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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by T.J. COLES
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“Strategic Extremism”: How Republicans and Establishment Democrats Use Identity Politics to Divide and Rule



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As we know, both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party are bought, sold, and paid for by big business. For that reason, both have a history of avoiding the issues that are common to Americans of all political persuasions. Addressing such issues would undermine the profits of big business. They include free healthcare, living wages, quality work, secure pensions, unionization, etc.

In order to protect the profits of their business investors, both parties focus on the cultural differences between Americans. As campaigning for the election 2020 gets underway, we

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can expect the Trump-led Republican Party to increase its inflammatory nonsense in a deliberate effort to mobilize right-wing voters. We can also expect the culturally “liberal” mainstream media to happily take the bait and make Trump’s cultural illiberalism a big issue. As mega-corporations, they also want to avoid real issues.

Until Trump came along, the Republican Party whipped up support among Evangelical Christians by appealing to “moral” issues like abortion (as if free healthcare, for instance, isn’t a moral issue). Because Trump obviously isn’t a Christian, it would have been harder to sell him to Evangelical voters were it not for his platform of Islamophobia. Trump’s cultural provocations are used as a weapon to motivate Republican voters and conceal his egregious economic policies, like Executive Order 13772 on Core Principles for Regulating the United States Financial System, which seeks to further liberalize damaging financial markets.

Equally, in an effort to avoid core economic issues, establishment Democrats have traditionally appealed to cultural progressiveness, like gay rights.

MORAL DIFFERENCES

Morality is common to all human groups. But the precise expression of morality differs from culture to culture. The subjective and variable nature of morality and values makes it easy to use as a tool with which to manipulate voters.

In 2006, Gallup conducted a survey. The results suggested that 71% of Americans believed that the death penalty is morally acceptable, as is using human stem cells for medical research (61%), sex between unmarried people (59%), doctor-assisted suicide (50%), homosexuality (44%), abortion (43%), and suicide (15%). But when the data are extrapolated for political affiliation, differences emerge. Sixty-three percent of Democrats think that the death penalty is acceptable, 69% stem cell research, 65% premarital sex, 53% abortion, 53% homosexuality, 53% doctor-assisted suicide, and 18% suicide. Compare these figures on moral acceptability to Republicans: Death penalty 82%, stem cell research 53%, premarital sex 50%, abortion 30%, homosexuality 36%, doctor-assisted suicide 45%, and suicide 12%.

Just a year before, Glaeser et al. stated that attracting the average voter yields “high” electoral “returns.” As this is the case, they asked an important question: why political candidates take extreme positions (and remember, this is long before Trump). They refer to this political policy as “strategic extremism.” By 2005, religious attendance

(overwhelmingly Christian) was as good a predictor of Republicanism as income. Interestingly, income as a predictor of Republican allegiance has been predictable since the 1960s, but religious fundamentalism as a predictor has grown in the same period. It is worth recalling that the late-1960s, but particularly into the 1970s, the US economy was deregulated by both Democrats and Republicans, leading to a decline in wages and the middle-class. Voter turnout among the highly religious increased by seven percentage points between 1976 and 1984, during which time Reagan's managers fanaticized the Republican Party.

Glaeser et al. explain: "a politician deviating from the median will gain more from energizing his own supporters than he loses by further alienating his opponent's supporters [sic]." On the abortion issue, the Democrats have moved further left since the 1970s (meaning that their position has been to side with the mother) and the Republicans moved further right (meaning that their position has been to preserve the embryo/foetus/baby no matter what). Team Trump didn't explicitly try to mobilize the Christian right, though they did implicitly by standing on an anti-Islamic platform. Instead, they mobilized the amorphous alt-right: disenfranchised, usually-wealthy but not super-wealthy voters who considered the Republicans too left-wing. Reaching for the far-right in a country of moderates may seem counterintuitive, until we understand how small statistical shifts can result in significant, aggregate changes.

STRATEGIC EXTREMISM IN ACTION

The comparative secularization of Trump's main Presidential campaign didn't affect voter turnout. Pew reports that "white born-again or evangelical Christians and white Catholics, strongly supported Donald Trump," slightly down from Bush in 2004 but slightly up from Romney the Mormon in 2012.

It is doubtful that many Americans who voted Trump actually voted for his Islamophobic, misogynistic caricature. Trump voters tended to be in the middle-to-upper-income bracket (regardless of gender and ethnicity) and were simply voting in their own economic and class interests. But Trump's outrageous behavior generated media attention, which was good for the media because it boosted ratings. It was good for Trump's campaign because the Democratic opposition was emotionally triggered by Trump's antics and ended up looking hysterical instead of responding rationally. The Democrats had little choice because, having gotten rid of Bernie Sanders, the Democratic machine produced Hillary Clinton whose mandate was, like Trump's, to avoid real issues.

It was good for Trump because the more the “liberal” media hated his illiberalism, the more he could rally the support of his core voters who saw him as a political rebel battling the PC establishment.

Being a showman, Trump understands that attention is everything and ideology is nothing. Trump’s book *The Art of the Deal* (1987) reads: “I never get too attached to one deal or one approach” (p. 50); “even a critical story, which can be very hurtful personally, can be very valuable to your business” (p. 51); “if you are a little different, or a little outrageous, or if you do things that are bold or controversial, the press is going to write about you” (p. 56); “I play to people’s fantasies” (p. 58).

After Trump’s advisor Steve Bannon was fired or quit, he gave an interview to 60 Minutes, in which he confirmed that Trump’s illiberalism was designed to throw the opposition into psychological confusion, allowing Team Trump to gain the advantage. The “smart” Democrats, says Bannon, stuck to economic issues on the campaign, while Hillary Clinton played identity politics, which most Americans didn’t care about because almost no one sees themselves as racist (even if they are). “President Trump triggers—triggers—the left and they can’t handle it rationally and so long as they can’t handle it rationally, they’re not going to defeat him,” said Bannon.

Bannon’s alt-right followers only become significant demographically in the context elections because of small statistical changes in macro-systems, especially ones aided by an electoral college system. In an election such John McCain vs. Barack Obama, the alt-right wouldn’t have mattered: Obama had a higher approval rating (52%) than McCain (46%), and after eight years of a disastrous Bush presidency, Americans were hoping for change (Hope and Change). However, by 2016, Hillary Clinton represented more of the same. Most Americans knew Trump would be even worse than Clinton, so they reluctantly voted for Clinton. But just enough mobilized Republicans and far-righters were motivated to sway the election to Trump. In this respect, the alt-right becomes significant. The mainstream media, who overwhelmingly backed Clinton, did much to boost the profile of the otherwise obscure alt-right.

CONCLUSION

With the new socialistic Left gaining traction within the Democratic establishment, the 2020 campaign might see a greater focus on issues of the kind currently on display in the Democratic nomination rounds. This is unlikely because the Democratic Party machine will strive to filter out any challenge to corporate power, instead giving Americans an

establishment figure like Creepy Joe “Nothing will change” Biden. We can expect a ramping up of Trump’s strategic extremism in concert with establishment Democratic slogans like “Make America Moral Again” or, more hopefully, a focus on real issues if a socialistic candidate does successfully battle the Party machinery.

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