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Election 2016: A Political System In Crisis

By Nile Bowie
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The outcome of strangest and most consequential election cycle in recent American history will soon be upon us. Regardless of who becomes the next president, this election will forever be synonymous with the rogue candidacy of Donald Trump and the demographic shifts that have emboldened the right.

Though it may be a close election, it is widely presumed that public antipathy towards Trump – the first major party candidate who is near-universally opposed by both major parties – will tilt

the odds in Hillary Clinton's favour. Nonetheless, Trump's support base of primarily white, blue-collar Americans will be a major factor for the political establishment to contend with in the years ahead.

These voters are frustrated by their economic marginalisation wrought by neoliberal trade deals and economic policies and are contemptuous of traditional political elite, their internationalism and liberal identity politics. For these voters, fear of immigration is entwined with the precarity of being working class, their troubling prejudices notwithstanding.

Economic disempowerment and political disenfranchisement have accelerated under President Obama, to the detriment of the American middle class. White, blue-collar Americans have witnessed the offshoring of their jobs and the erosion of their status in society, and Trump has masterfully stroked their resentment and discontent by playing on their fears of Muslims, immigrants and minorities.

Trump's views often contain unusual contradictions and seem to be delivered impromptu. What remains consistent are his authoritarian views on crime and justice, vows to close the borders to refugees, Muslims and economic migrants, scepticism of overseas 'democracy promotion' and America's role in international alliances, foreign policy views both isolationist and belligerent and of course, his distinctive megalomaniacal hubris.

Trump's real problem with the Washington establishment is that he isn't part of it. His campaign represents an insurgent faction of the oligarchical class that aims to displace and replace the standing political elites. Bipartisan opposition to Trump is grounded in the belief that he would be an unreliable proxy and a liability, someone too narrow and unpredictable to manage the common affairs of the ruling class and the US deep state.

Moreover, the US establishment is not interested in being led by such a contentious figure, who would draw protest and public opposition in a way that more conventional establishment candidates largely do not. For example, Trump's rhetoric on immigration seems to engender more public outrage than the immigration policy under Obama, who has deported more people than any other president in history.

That being said, Hillary Clinton is a more dangerous candidate in many ways. Trump understands that the political system is rigged and the economy is oriented to serve various elite interests, a message that resonates across the political spectrum, even with anti-Trump segments of the electorate. As a hated political outsider not tied directly into the power and the money structure of the political system, there would be no shortage of gridlock and checks on the authority wielded by Trump in the unlikely event that he becomes president.

By contrast, Clinton wields enormous political influence inside the corridors of political and corporate power through personal relationships and connections. Policy and legislation shaped by donor money, lobbyist groups and special interests have been a hallmark of the Clintons' time in public office. The very fact that she is standing for office while being investigated by the FBI, having committed actions that would have ended the careers of other politicians and government employees, speaks for itself.

It has been reported by various sources that the FBI's recent decision to reopen the investigation into the Clinton email scandal less than two weeks before election day has been motivated by an internal backlash within the agency's rank and file, forcing FBI director James Comey's hand as a means of addressing internal critics who believe he buried the Clinton probe for political reasons.

Clinton's email scandal is not the real issue. She has spent her political career ruthlessly advancing the interests of high finance, the military industrial complex and corporate America, with dramatic repercussions for minorities and the marginalised inside the United States, and the civilian populations of countries targeted for US military intervention and destabilization during the her time as an influential first lady, senator and secretary of state.

Clinton has spent her long career advocating hawkish US military supremacy and banking deregulation, expanding the private prison industry to the detriment of impoverished African-American communities, dismantling the social safety net that marginalised families rely on, and enabling the consolidation of corporate power through secretive trade agreements. On the campaign trail, she has characterised her work as advancing the interests of women and families.

The Clinton campaign has repeatedly evoked the historic struggle for civil rights and aspirational rhetoric of 'breaking glass ceilings' in the interest of a faux-feminism which prioritizes the equal opportunities of women to lead the nation's highest office, while at once tone-deaf to the consequences faced by women and families on the receiving end of executive policies. The Democratic Party has become a parody of moral posturing, self-relishing its candidates with rhetoric that has no connection with policies in reality.

It is the party of establishment insiders and corporate donors who openly engineer the presidential nomination process to favour their preferred candidate by virtue of the undemocratic super-delegate system. Bernie Sanders, whose campaign inspired millions of Americans for good reason, has proven himself to be tepid and cowardly in the face of practices that have proven beyond doubt that the Democratic Party establishment conspired against him.

Bernie's campaign centred around a rather modest, comparatively tame centre-left progressive platform that did not seriously question US militarism and the values of American exceptionalism. For the Democratic Party at large, the Sanders campaign represented a concession too far. The Clinton campaign even had the impudence to directly hire disgraced Democratic chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz after leaked emails exposed her partisanship.

Rather than addressing the political substance of revelations uncovered by WikiLeaks, the Clinton campaign, backed by Obama administration officials, has reverted to neo-McCarthyism by labelling opposition voices as surrogates of Russia, explicitly accusing Moscow of meddling in the US election process. Accusations of Russian interference without accompanying evidence are at best a short-sighted means of deflecting responsibility for the corrupt actions of the Clinton campaign and Democratic Party insiders.

The next American president will have to confront the realities of strained relations with Russia. Clinton is known for her public enmity toward Russian President Vladimir Putin and would at best perpetuate the status quo of mutual distrust and limited cooperation. At worst, her policies could risk a military confrontation with Russia should she pursue the establishment of a no-fly zone over Syrian airspace, which she publically advocated during the presidential debates.

Trump is the most prominent American political figure to advocate détente with Russia, openly breaking with his neoconservative running mate Mike Pence. Trump has criticised Clinton for supporting anti-government insurgents in Syria and called for jointly targeting ISIS with the Russian, and by extension, Syrian militaries. Trump, being very critical of Iran, also signalled he was willing to fight against ISIS on the same side as Tehran.

He has also offered support for the establishment of a safe zone inside Syrian territory, potentially in cooperation with the Syrian government and its allies. Both candidates would pursue a different policy approach from the incumbent administration in Syria, but Clinton's no-fly zone holds greater potential to deepen military hostilities between major powers. Clinton has generally been critical of Obama's foreign policy in Syria and elsewhere for not asserting US power strongly enough.

Despite the differences in style and demeanour, the range of policies offered by the entrenched two-party system is limited to varying shades of centre- to far-right. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are the least trusted and most unpopular presidential candidates in modern history. Despite the public disillusionment with major party candidates, it remains to be seen whether American voters will cast ballots for third parties such as the Libertarian Party or Green Party, which are seeking to garner 5 percent of the popular vote to become eligible to receive public campaign funding.

More likely than not, American voters will cast their ballots 'against' Trump by voting for Clinton and vice versa, fueling the cyclical politics of the lesser evil that have been a feature of American presidential elections for decades. More than any other US election in recent history, the candidates represent the rot of an American political establishment marred by scandal, hypocrisy and the relentless pursuit of hegemony. To advocate one over the other is ultimately defeatist.