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How Trump won: The rise of America's false prophet

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White racism alone does not explain the rise of Donald Trump. The deeper social, economic and political causes behind his victory offer a glimpse at how Americans can come together going forward

The election of Donald Trump has perplexed millions around the world as almost all of the polls had predicted a Hillary Clinton victory.

Since then, Clinton's supporters have variously blamed her defeat on the decision by the FBI director James Comey, just 11 days before the election, to announce that he was reopening the investigation on her use of a private email server, or on the release by WikiLeaks of thousands of emails, reportedly hacked by the Russian government.

It is indeed unprecedented that a major party nominee could snatch victory from the jaws of defeat in all three presidential debates. Or win after his refusal to release his tax returns while paying no income taxes for decades, after alienating more voters and minority groups than any presidential candidate in history, or after spewing vitriolic abuse on Republican competitors and Democrat opponents alike.

Such a large number of Trump supporters indulged in the same behaviour during the campaign that many now fear this will translate into hate crimes and state repression, especially against immigrants, Muslims, and African-Americans. According to the most recent FBI report, hate

crimes against American Muslims increased in 2015 by 67 percent, arguably a direct result of the Islamophobic rhetoric unleashed by Trump's campaign.

But there are, too, deep social, economic, and political causes for the rise of Trumpism that need to be explored to understand the outcome of this election.

Even though white supremacist groups have been emboldened by Trump's victory as they have publicly embraced his campaign from its inception, it is not enough to say that white racism is the underlying reason. In the past two elections, the nation overwhelmingly elected a black president with percentages unseen since Dwight Eisenhower's elections in the 1950s.

The white man's revolt

In her book *The Politics of Resentment*, University of Wisconsin Professor Kathy Cramer examined the deep causes of white rage through a series of extensive interviews with hundreds of residents in small towns and rural areas in Wisconsin that are overwhelmingly populated by the white middle class.

In the 2016 election, Wisconsin voted for Trump, which was the first time the state voted for a Republican nominee since Reagan's sweeping victory in 1984. Cramer explains that as these voters expressed their fears, anxieties, and perceptions, they displayed a great sense of resentment towards the so-called elites and political establishment in Washington, in the big cities, and urban areas.

For decades they have felt that they have lost any control over decision-making in their lives and deciding their future, that they have been cheated economically, mocked and neglected. Or as Cramer puts it, these voters feel "a lack of power, money, and respect".

In 1992, white voters represented 88 percent of the electorate. But in 2016, that figure fell to 69 percent. This continuous decline created a perception that the majority is fast becoming a minority in "its own country".

White voter resentment has been brewing since the Reagan years as right-wing talk show hosts offered a false narrative: the decline of America was down to multiculturalism, immigration, political correctness, and government wasting money on welfare for undeserving minorities.

This resentment also fuelled the Tea Party's rise in the 2010 and 2014 elections, even though it was effectively neutralised during the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections by a surge in African-American as well as young or millennial voters energised by Obama's candidacy.

There are 3,144 counties in the US with population densities of 22 percent having small populations of 10,000 or less, 48 percent with populations between 10,000 and 50,000, and 30 percent with populations of over 50,000. Trump won the first category of small-size counties by 15 to one and the midsize by more than two to one, while losing large-size population counties by only seven points because many Obama voters were uninspired by Clinton's candidacy and simply stayed home.

The thrill was gone

However, if Trump won the white vote by more than 21 percent over Clinton (58 to 37), he lost the non-white vote by 50 percent (73 to 23). But this disparity was just not enough to propel

Clinton to victory. Since 1992 there has been a string of blue states that consistently voted for the Democratic nominee, which included 19 states and the District of Columbia.

This firewall was centred on states in the northeast, the midwest and along the Pacific. But Clinton lost three crucial states: Pennsylvania (by 70,000 votes out of 5.8 million), Wisconsin (by 27,000 out of 2.8 million), and Michigan (by 13,000 out of 4.6 million). What these states have in common is the economic anxiety and turbulence felt through the industrial midwest and the 'Rust Belt' states since the 1980s.

However, in the 2016 elections minority and young voters did not show up in sufficient numbers. In 2012, Obama won Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin by 400,000, 300,000, and 200,000 votes respectively while Clinton lost all three by the narrowest of margins.

In Michigan's Wayne County alone, which is heavily African-American, the 2016 turnout was 37,000 less than the 2012 elections. Clinton likely would have won at least 90 percent of those votes, but instead she Clinton lost by 13,000 votes. Many of those voters were also disappointed with Obama, as their lives did not fare much better under his watch. They reasoned, if an African-American president did not do much for us after all the promises, why would Clinton?

Young voters were particularly disillusioned as well after the primaries. They overwhelmingly supported Sen. Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries and felt that the Democratic Party establishment tilted the primaries heavily towards Clinton. Their enthusiasm level was dampened.

While the 18-29 age voters comprise 19 percent of the electorate, Obama won 60 percent of this crucial segment in 2012 while Clinton received only 55 percent of their votes. As a sign of this disenchantment, in the 2016 elections more than 4.5 million, mostly young voters, voted for third party candidates than in 2012.

Those hit the hardest

Globalisation, the expansion of multinational corporations and unrestrained capitalism have all contributed to the squeeze on the middle class in the US traditional, small-scale and above all local industries have suffered tremendously. Economically, blue-collar workers, especially in the Midwest, have been hit the hardest by policies they feel have only benefited the wealthy.

The inequality gap in the US has been the highest in more than three decades, with the income of America's top 10 percent now averaging nine times as much as the income of the bottom 90 percent. Americans in the top 1 percent average over 38 times more income than the bottom 90 percent, while the nation's top 0.1 percent are taking in over 184 times the income of the bottom 90 percent.

Currently, the richest 10 percent of families in America own 51 percent of the wealth in the country (up from 20 percent in 1989), while the poorest 50 percent own less than 1 percent (same level as 1989). Traditional jobs that used to define the middle class such as manufacturing, mining, or logging are rapidly disappearing and replaced by low-wage jobs in the service industry that are unstable and don't lead to a middle-class life.

A recent Al Jazeera documentary uncovered why many Trump voters in these decaying small towns and cities overlooked all his scandals and shortcomings in a desperate last ditch hope for an economic saviour who will, in all likelihood, prove to be a false prophet.

Many of these voters have swallowed the bait and blame immigrants, particularly Latinos, for their economic misery, a tactic exploited by Trump throughout his campaign, and symbolised by his promise to build a wall along the Mexican border.

The threat of public ignorance

In his 2012 book *Strategic Vision*, former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski remarked that one of the most troubling dangers threatening US global dominance was "public ignorance" and the increasing lack of "skilled labour", which are direct results of the decline of public education and the transformation of many media organisations to becoming entertainment outlets. In this election, Trump won 67 percent to 28 percent among voters without university degrees.

But perhaps one of the most important outcomes of the 2016 election season, with long-term ramifications for both major parties, is the repudiation of a significant segment of the electorate of the so-called "political establishment" of both parties. It is a term used to describe powerful elites, political professionals, and major business and corporate executives, who have been holding power and exerting influence in Washington, New York, and big cities for decades.

While in the primaries, Trump decimated his Republican opponents including Jeb Bush, the ultimate insider and representative of the Republican establishment, the Democratic establishment was equally defeated in the general elections as the Clintons represented it for the past three decades.

A crucial segment of the American electorate is clearly fed up with the establishment and is willing to throw them away for a candidate who is not only a demagogue, but also a political novice, who has never held an elected office and has limited understanding of the workings of democracy or a constitutional government.

One person, one vote? Not quite

Even though Clinton received three million votes fewer than Obama did in 2012, she still had more than 1.4 million votes more than Trump. Yet, Trump was elected because of an archaic system called the electoral college that allocates a certain fixed number of electoral votes for each state to that state's winner regardless of the size of the popular vote in the state.

For the second time in 16 years, more Americans voted for the losing candidate (Gore won by a half million votes against Bush in the 2000 elections). In this system, not all votes are equal. Small states, dominated by whiter, conservative, and more Republican-leaning voters, have more voting power than more populous states.

For example, while Wyoming, with less than 600,000 people, has three electoral votes, California, with its 40 million residents, has 55 votes. In other words, every three votes in Wyoming equal 11 votes in California, which is clearly undemocratic and defies the notion of "one person, one vote, in one country".

This problem is compounded by the fact that Republicans now control all levers of power in the government: the presidency and both chambers of Congress, the House and the Senate, as well as their ability to appoint and shape the Supreme Court for decades.

With two senators elected in every state, there are 52 Republicans to 48 Democrats currently elected to the Senate. There are 18 states represented by 36 Democrats and 20 states represented by 40 Republicans, while the remaining 12 states are split with one Republican and one Democratic senator.

But the Democratic states have 36 million more people than the Republican states, yet the Republicans are the majority, and control the agenda and all the appointments including all senior cabinet positions, judges, ambassadors and military generals.

A silver lining

Furthermore, an astonishing 100 million eligible voters did not bother to vote in the 2016 elections. These potential voters see no hope and no real change.

More than five million of them voted in the previous two elections, but were disillusioned after two terms of Obama with very little meaningful change in their lives. They have been shut out of the political process but must be engaged and brought in. The Occupy movement of 2011 that was inspired in part by the Arab Spring must be brought back to fight for its future.

While the US has a history of electing unqualified or dangerous people to high office, it also has a rich history of resisting repression and government overreach.

If there is one silver lining in this election, it is that there is, for the first time in more than a half century, a clear path to building a grassroots movement of all races and classes capable of fighting for their rights, resisting the forces of ignorance, racism, exclusion and repression, and striving for a better future.

Such a movement should be able to bring together not only those who were left behind or betrayed by the establishment, but also those who were also deceived by false messiahs.

As Martin Luther King Jr once said, "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."