

Fighting Back Against the White Revolt of 2016

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December 1, 2016

This essay was written to join the polemic that immediately broke out about the role of race and class in Donald Trump's victory and in future Democratic and progressive strategy.

On the left and within progressive movements there were two immediate responses to Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election. First, shock, frequently accompanied by despair. How could an openly racist, misogynist authoritarian — personally unstable to boot — be elected president? Second, anger with the Democrats for the sort of campaign that they waged. At that point, however, a division emerged around a third point: what, we asked, was the source of Trump's victory? And, even more important, what are the strategic implications?

It is important to approach any examination of the November election with a degree of nuance. As widely noted, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by what now appears to be at least two million votes. The Libertarian and Green Parties received far more votes than the margin of victory in no less than eleven states, including Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin. This election was decided by a razor-thin margin due to the undemocratic Electoral College.

Approximately 55% of eligible voters went to the polls, down from both 2008 (61.6%) and 2012 (58.6%). Trump, then, actually received around 25% of eligible votes. This figure of 25% is quite significant because it appears to be that percentage of the electorate that has, for at least a decade, been fairly consistently reactionary.

Senator Bernie Sanders and several other commentators have attributed most of Trump's success to the fact that he played to allegedly legitimate concerns of the masses. We disagree quite strongly. The vast majority of the Trump vote was the Republican base. These are the voters who have long adamantly opposed the Obama agenda from a staunchly right-wing perspective and, for that matter oppose almost all progressive causes. In various opinion polls what is notable is that for this segment of the electorate, terrorism and immigration are a top concern. It is also worth noting that, at least during the primaries, Trump's base had a median income above both the national median and the median for both Sanders and Clinton voters.

So, while it is true that Trump received 14% more votes from white people with less than a college education than did Romney, and 10% fewer from whites with a college

degree, Trump voters were not mainly poor and unemployed. As Mike Davis points out in a recent blog post, there was no massive defection of white working class voters to Trump. In fact, Clinton won the majority of voters earning under \$30,000 (53% to 41%) and voters under \$50,000 (51% to 42%). These figures are critical to keep in mind when commentators describe the Trump victory as a working class vote. How are they defining “working class”?

Moreover, it is never to be forgotten that Hitler and Mussolini had large support in the working class. The full Nazi party name was the National Socialist German Workers’ Party. Mussolini was previously a top leader of the powerful left wing of the massive Italian Socialist Party. Even had November 8th been a working class revolt—which it was NOT—that could not be looked at in isolation from its politics and color.

Yet, Trump voters as a whole were overwhelmingly white, and herein lies the discussion that truly needs to happen.

Trump’s real triumph was his ability to shift Republican politics to straight racism, misogyny and xenophobia with a potent authoritarian tone, yet still create a winning voting coalition — time will tell how stable — that brought together the core Republican electorate, including right-wing evangelicals, as well as some disaffected former Democratic voters. While many Trump voters interviewed after the election said they made their choice despite concerns about his character, what is remarkable is how many “returned home” to the Republican Party in the face of the continuous string of revelations about the Republican candidate, including his boasts about sexual assault and his obviously erratic behavior. A huge effort to win white evangelicals, for instance, centered on Trump’s promise to create a lasting anti-abortion majority on the Supreme Court. Thus, it would be wrong to suggest that this was something of a protest vote or a “lesser of two evils” choice by Republicans. Trump, as many of them suggested, *articulated what was on their minds*.

The election results must also be understood as Clinton’s failure to fully mobilize the so-called Obama coalition to her side. As we have noted elsewhere, Clinton was not the candidate to lead an anti-corporate and progressive populist insurgency, which is precisely what is needed at this moment.

According to the national exit poll sponsored by all the main news organizations, Blacks, Latinos, Asians, unmarried women, young voters, union households — the core of the Obama Coalition — all voted for Clinton, but in somewhat smaller percentages than they had voted for Obama in 2012. The Black Democratic vote fell from 93% in 2012 to 88%, including only 80% of Black men. The Democrats’ winning percentage among Latinos fell from 73% to 65% (although a poll conducted

by Latino Decisions concluded the real number was 79% for Clinton.*); Asians from 76% for Obama to 65% for Clinton (another poll says 75%); unmarried women from 67% to 62%; young voters' Democratic support declined by 5%; and union households fell to 51% from 58%. The only strongly progressive voter group that increased its vote for Clinton, according to the national exit poll, were lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgender folks. And the hoped for surge of Latino voter participation apparently did not materialize.

Trump did not address the concerns of most voters. He addressed the fears of many white voters. Those fears, again documented in various polls, are both economic and racial. The economic fears focus largely on the *potential* for economic disaster. The great majority of Trump voters were not hammered by the economy. What scares them is that the American Dream is no longer theirs for the taking. They are no longer convinced that their children's lives will mark an improvement over their own. Linked to this fear is that of the changing racial demographics. In a post-election report by Toronto *Globe & Mail* columnist Doug Saunders, what is most interesting is the concern among Trump voters about the changing face of the U.S. Immigration, especially in regions where there were previously few, if any, immigrants, became an inflammatory issue. In short, the white middle class and its upward mobility — the traditional white version of the American Dream — are feared lost forever.

Terrorism needs to be added to this list because, as a category, it, too, was long ago racialized. When the word terrorism is used, the assumption is that it refers to actions carried out by a Muslim, Arab, or some other brown or black person. The reality is that a person in this country is less likely to be killed by terrorism than to be struck by lightning; and, if they are so unlucky, far more likely to be killed by a white supremacist than a Muslim.

November 8th was a revolt by 58% of white voters. It was a revolt spearheaded by a significant, but not very large, segment of the electorate that had been energized by the appeal of white nationalism and right-wing populism. The nature of the appeal is the call for a return to the past; actually the return to a mythical past, in the face of a complex and changing world.

November 8th also represented a slight but electorally crucial demobilization of an important segment of the so-called Obama Coalition, partly by multiple efforts at voter suppression, e.g., the elimination of polling locations in the South, and the removal of voters from registration rolls.

While there is no question but that neoliberal globalization has contributed to the growth of right-wing populism through its destruction of segments of the economy

and its concentration of wealth, that alone does not explain what happened on November 8th when one realizes that African American and Latino workers have been disproportionately hurt by neoliberal globalization yet there is nothing approaching the sort of Trumpist reaction among those sectors.

The right-wing populism of the Trump campaign also rests, in part, on the notion of the American Dream. Trump, as a successful businessman and media celebrity, is an iconic figure. His success, while not derived from his work alone (he was born wealthy), is something that appeals to the largely white sentiment that the average person can make it good, even though Trump is not the average person.

Yet the deeper and darker feature to right-wing populism in general and Trump specifically is that what neoliberal globalization *has* done has been to limit and capture the world's resources and place them in the hands of the global elite. To the extent to which these resources are not available for the billions of souls on this planet there is an immediate question: *how should one divide up what is left over?* The answer provided by right-wing populism is found in identifying so-called legitimate and illegitimate populations. The allegedly legitimate populations should have access to Medicare, education grants, and the like (at least until Congressman Paul Ryan gets his hands on them), and the so-called illegitimate or undeserving populations should be cordoned off, jailed, or excluded entirely from society. This is what one could call either “global apartheid” or the genocidal impulse that exists within capitalism generally and right-wing populism in particular.

The white voter revolt of November 8th occurred under the banner of restoration of the “white republic”; the national “humiliation” — in the words of one author — of the Obama presidency must be removed and what the mayor of a West Virginia town alluded to as “the ape in heels” vanquished as First Lady; the undeserving must be excluded; and the USA must be allowed to do whatever it chooses around the world.

To lead this process, there must be a “Great Man.” And while it would be premature to describe this as fascism, it is not too early to remind the reader that fascism is a *subset* of right-wing populism and that, contained within the Trump movement have been very open and vocal neo-fascists and secessionists who believe that the time is fast approaching for a racial and ethnic cleansing of the U.S. and the restoration of the natural (white) order.

This leads to a final point inherent in the election results. A backdrop to the campaign has been the emergence of the Movement for Black Lives, largely in response to the police killings of unarmed African Americans. This movement shook the U.S., and Trump took advantage of it in order to play to the deep-seated fear within white

America of a supposedly ever-present threat of Black violence. Much like Richard Nixon, the appeal to law and order, reiterated throughout the campaign, was a call to put further restraints on African Americans in particular. No one could miss the coded and not-so-coded language.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

After the initial shock, spontaneous anti-Trump protests began to spread as despair turned to anger. While this has been understandable and positive, it is far from sufficient. This is precisely why an accurate analysis of the election is essential in order to develop longer-term strategy. Our suggestions are as follows:

1. The top of our agenda must be to defeat Trump and Trumpism. We need to make him a one-term president, and build the forces over a longer period of time to decisively defeat the far right in all branches of the federal government, most states, and in workplaces, neighborhoods, and the streets. Defending communities that Trump attacks and building progressive power are crucial to defending our peoples and defeating Trump. But, barring extreme circumstances, he will ultimately need to be taken down at the polls.
2. Even with the technical defeat of Clinton, what is clear is that there is a “new majority” inexorably coming into existence. This progressive new majority crosses racial and ethnic boundaries and needs to be galvanized into a major force in the streets, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods — and in the Democratic Party and elections.
3. Freedom and justice will not spontaneously emerge, however, from demographic shifts in the United States. One need only identify apartheid and apartheid-like societies to see that demographics alone are not enough. In 2016 far too many racial justice forces and organizations sat passive during the presidential election and we have too few in the field that can truly reach hundreds of thousands, let alone millions of people. We need to step up big time if we are going to get the huge movement at the polls, and throughout the society among people of color (and whites) that will be needed to defeat the plans of the incoming Trump administration.
4. Race neutral economic populism alone will not win back those whites (workers and others) who turned to Trump allegedly because of the economy. If, for them, economics was the key, they would have voted for Jill Stein or, in the primary, Bernie Sanders in their millions. The fact that they did not, but instead turned to a rich, white, misogynistic, racist, xenophobe, tells us that something else was at play. We must try to break off the section of the Trump base that cares about economics, the environment, misogyny, peace, and anything else available: but if we ignore racism, such concerns are likely to remain tinged by the frameworks offered by Trump and

right-wing populism. Given their big victory, this is not likely to show quick results. A key starting point will be to amplify the organization and influence of whites who already reject Trumpism. Unions will be one of the key forces in this effort. While they pretty much universally threw down against Trump, voters from union households chose Clinton by only 51% to 43%.

5. The sort of left populism that we need is one that truly takes on neoliberal globalization, including but not limited to trade deals. It must actively oppose privatization, deregulation, casualization, and anti-unionism, not to mention the impact of an increasingly automated society.

6. That same left populism must challenge the racial differential that permeates all facets of society. Unity against neoliberal globalization will not come from ignoring race and gender disparities, but instead by working together to overcome them. This was the weakness of the Sanders campaign and many other populist and semi-populist initiatives.

7. The fight for power will necessitate a renewed effort for voting rights. 2016 was the first presidential election since the weakening of the Voting Rights Act. As noted, more than 800 polling places were closed in the South prior to the election, sites that overwhelmingly served communities of color. This may help to explain at least some of the voter drop-off. Surely legalizing voter ID and other voter suppression rules will be at the top of the Trump/Republican agenda once they get hold of the Supreme Court.

8. State-by-state, we will need to build progressive united fronts based in the constituencies of the “new majority” and expand from there. Such united fronts will have both an offensive and defensive set of tasks, with the aim of defending communities and democracy, defeating the Republicans and gaining of power for populations that have been historically excluded and those under threat of new exclusions by an increasingly authoritarian society.

The first steps in our journey begin with accurately assessing what actually happened on November 8th and realizing that this election result is part of a growing right-wing populist trend that has been churning in our soil since the 1960s, with roots that go back to the arrival of the first European settlers. This fight will likely take center stage for years to come, and is being fought out throughout Europe as well. Literally, the future of the people of the world is at stake.

**Latino Decisions was founded by veteran political scientists Gary Segura and Matt Barreto. They argue that their survey included a much larger number of Latino voters*

than did the national exit poll and the sample was specifically designed to take account of the many different Latino nationalities. In addition, they say a much larger percentage of the Latino Decisions survey interviews were conducted in Spanish than in the national exit poll.

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