

Trump, Brexit and the Demise of Traditional Left-Right Politics

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As Donald Trump moved closer to securing the US presidency on the night of Tuesday, November 9, 2016, pundits on all channels were at a loss to define or even describe the phenomenon they were seeing unfold on the electoral map. They were stunned by the inaccuracy of the opinion polls, and perplexed by what the election said about their country. As one friend quipped, while Britain voted to leave the European Union, the US has voted “to leave itself”.

But we should not have been entirely surprised. In the background, parallels were made with Brexit – including by Trump himself – although these were not fleshed out. Only a few seasoned commentators began to suggest that this election was part of a more global phenomenon – the appeal of the ‘strong man’, an illiberal ‘white backlash’ against progressive policies, the triumph of a new form of nationalism against open borders for all kinds of flows (goods, people and finance). But these were musings and hunches rather than fully-informed and reflective observations. Those will come in the cold light of this new day. But here are some initial pointers to a deeper analysis, based on comparing Trump’s victory with what we have already witnessed in Europe over the last decade. In essence, US politics has converged with European politics, albeit in its own distinct ways.

The decline of traditional left-right politics

As some pundits mentioned as the polls began to close, beyond the circus of competing political personalities, we have witnessed a sudden lurch forward in the US in the longer-term decline of the traditional politics of left versus right. But what its eventual replacement would look like in the US has been unclear. No longer. We now know that for all the talk of a crisis in the US Republican Party, an equally salient, and more immediately debilitating, crisis has been revealed in the Democratic Party.

Political scientists thought in the 1990s that the traditional class-based, left-right divide in western democracies was being overlaid by a new cleavage between left-libertarians and xenophobic and chauvinist right-authoritarians. The combination of liberalized marijuana laws and Trump’s successful appeal to nativism and evangelicals in the same election epitomizes this new political reality.

Others have used the term ‘opportunity-fear’ axis, in which the new post-industrial and globalized economy had begun to polarize the population between adaptable, well-educated and information- (and opportunity-) rich cosmopolitans, and an increasingly unemployable, poorly-educated, socially and economically-isolated, and fearful, working class.

But however we define this new political cleavage, ‘culture’ was becoming as important as economic status in defining political identity within it – something right-wing parties have exploited handily, but which their left wing counterparts cannot deal with. Barack Obama’s derision of the “guns and religion” culture of the white working class, or Clinton’s “basket of deplorables” comment illustrate the bigger problem.

New political cleavages, new political coalitions

Although the mainstream right has also struggled to build coalitions around the new political cleavages, it is parties of the traditional left – such as the US Democrats, the British Labour Party, the German

Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the historically dominant but now much diminished Scandinavian Social Democrats – that have so far borne the brunt of this change.

Thus, the US Republicans under their Trumpian rebirth have produced a new coalition alongside their more traditional electorate between socially-conservative rural and suburban voters, white, former democrat-voting blue collar workers and evangelicals – an unholy trinity if ever there was one. Take out the evangelicals and replace them with nationalist romantics, and this is the same coalition underpinning the Brexit vote. As in Britain, older white male voters predominate in the new US right-wing electoral alliance, and in theory its internal contradictions render it vulnerable to assault from the left.

But the US Democrats have perhaps even bigger problems, having built their coalition on left-libertarians, knowledge economy workers, ethnic minorities, younger adults and wealthier urban dwellers – a fractured coalition that Obama held together, but which Clinton could not. The more fundamental problem derives from the fact that the big engines that drove the social democratic left parties in the past – labor unions and solidarity across skilled and unskilled workers – had already stalled many years ago, and are now as rusty and dilapidated as the traditional industries on which they were based.

As a result, and as has long been the case in Europe, the US Democrats can no longer rely on a left-voting working class, which is now more easily mobilized by the authoritarian right – a category into which the US Republican Party has fully slipped. As a result, left parties everywhere are increasingly divided between so-called ‘modernizers’, whose policies have alienated many working class voters, and traditional socialists (the Democrats’ Clinton-Sanders split; the rise of the far-left Jeremy Corbyn to leadership of the UK Labour Party), who believe they can win those voters back. In some cases (e.g., the German SPD) those parties have broken apart. That same internal party cleavage will make Democratic Party politics in the US increasingly fractious and hard to bridge.

The electoral basis of the new illiberal political Right – and its fragility

But if the ties that have bound the left’s electorate have weakened, what is the glue that holds together the new authoritarian right-wing coalition? In short, ‘fear of the other’ - fear of radical Islam, bolstered by jihadist attacks in the US and Europe, the refugee crisis of recent years, and the identification of immigration as a clear security risk. This fear – with both cultural and economic dimensions - has become a standard part of the highly successful political script of the European Far-Right, and its exploitation played a decisive role in the Brexit campaign and the US presidential election as well.

That narrative has tapped and manipulated a much greater degree of racism and antipathy to migrants of color in western democracies than imagined by the political liberals running mainstream left-wing parties. Their understandable resistance to politicizing these issues themselves has created a major opportunity for a less politically-correct and in many respects explicitly illiberal political Right, found in separate, more extreme right-wing parties in Europe, but found *inside* the Republican Party in the US.

So where does the US election leave the Republican Party? In charge of the country, with a stronger congressional majority for sure, led by a charismatic populist showman, whose election as President has been welcomed enthusiastically by the European far-right – something which will worry Europeans as much as many Americans. But for how long? Like the post-Brexit British Conservative Party, now divided

between its Leave and Remain camps, Republican leaders will seek to cover up and even bridge the painful divisions created by the election.

For unlike in continental Europe and Scandinavia, where the clash between liberal and illiberal politics divides centrist and extreme right-wing political parties from each other, in the UK and the US those same divisions are found *within* the mainstream right-wing political parties – and portend a turbulent future. If the US and British Lefts have to manage their own internal divisions between moderates and radicals, a much fiercer battle, with potentially much greater fall out, looms between liberal and illiberal politicians and their respective voters on the right. In the process, we will see a further destabilization of our democratic systems.
