

Trump and Democracy in America

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When asked whom he would vote for on November 8, 2016, if he were an American, the man responded without a trace of hesitation: “Trump. I am just horrified about him, but Hillary is the true danger.” The respondent was none other than Slavoj Žižek, the neo-Marxist philosopher of the last decade and a pop star of the Internet. It is safe to assume that Žižek could only have been left aghast by his own frivolous endorsement on the morning after the election.

The unspeakable has happened: On November 8, 2016, Donald Trump was elected 45th President of the United States. The New York billionaire, bankrupt, chauvinist, sexist, the man with the baseball cap and the bad manners, a kind of big-mouth Me Inc., is now the most important politician of the (Western) world. Will he have as catastrophic an impact on the world as his Republican predecessor G.W. Bush did? What can be said about the campaign, the election, Trump’s political program, and the state of democracy in America? Is Trump an American phenomenon or does the US merely hold up to Europeans a mirror of their future, as Alexis de Tocqueville once wrote in his famous work *Democracy in America*? Is Trump’s election the revolt of those who have long felt unrepresented by established politics, by the “political class,” by the media, by the public discourses, and by an economic system that is generating increasing levels of inequality? Will right-wing populism now spread across the Atlantic and spill back to Europe again?

The Campaign

One of the core arguments of the theorists of post-democracy, from Colin Crouch to Jacques Rancière, is that elections in the post-democratic age have degenerated into empty rituals. They are not the heart of democracy, but its mere simulation. The policy contents do not matter; and if they do, the “competing” political programs are indistinguishable from one another. As with many a thesis on post-democracy, this one, too, is only half true. Indeed, political programs were not of much significance in this election – neither in the campaign speeches nor in the media coverage. Instead, personal attacks and mudslinging took center stage: “crooked Hillary,” “corrupt Hillary,” who belongs in prison and not in the White House, who lies, cheats, and enriches herself with her husband through her commingling of non-profit foundation and private speeches that generated millions for Bill Clinton in Qatar or from representatives of Wall Street. The Democratic candidate returned the attacks in kind: “Donald” is a sexist, racist, and chauvinist who harasses women, insults Muslims, mocks the disabled, calls Latin American

immigrants rapists, discriminates against African-Americans “like his father did,” and is a chronic tax evader. The history of democratic elections itself reached a new low with the American autumn of 2016.

What does not hold water in the post-democracy thesis is that there are no programmatic differences. The electoral programs of Trump and Clinton were, in fact, quite different. Trump adheres to old neo-liberal formulae: cut taxes so that investors invest, the economy grows, and the jobs come back from Mexico, China, Japan, or Europe. His policy proposals follow the famous napkin sketch with which Reagan’s chief economist Arthur B. Laffer was able to convince the then-president at the beginning of the latter’s term that tax cuts lead not only to investment and GDP growth but also to greater tax revenues. George W. Bush, another economic layman, applied the deceptively simple formula again two decades later. In both cases, the policy led to the greatest rises in public debt that American democracy had ever witnessed. And now, with Donald J. Trump, the fiscal-policy tragedies threaten to repeat themselves as farce.

The welfare state in the US is underdeveloped. There are historical reasons for this: the sanctity of private property, the ideology of the minimal state, the weakness of the trade unions, the lack of a labor party, and the establishment of a particularly rugged, unbridled form of capitalism. One of the successful reforms of Obama’s presidency was the creation, in the face of rabid opposition from the Republicans, of access to health insurance for the lower classes through the “Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act” (2010). For Trump, “Obamacare” is nothing short of a “disaster.” The new president, with the solid backing of his electorate, will do everything it takes to undo even these modest social reforms.

In the realm of foreign trade, Trump’s proposals have much ado in store, if not the risk of an all-out trade war. China, Europe, and the “NAFTA disaster” are to blame for job losses according to the simple worldview of the Republican populist. Free-trade agreements are to be rescinded and products from Asia and Europe tagged with punitive tariffs if they run contrary to American economic interests. It is this strange mix of neoliberal deregulation at home and protectionist threats abroad that the billionaire is offering to his citizens and simultaneously menacing the rest of the world with.

The biggest question marks are in foreign policy. Trump, a complete layman, has shown no recognizable profile up to this point. Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, was clearer – both in word and unfortunately also in deed. She is a hawk among the Democrats, one who supported the illegal, deceitful war on Iraq under George W. Bush and called for the expansion of the UN mandate against Gaddafi’s Libya. The consequence was not only an unmandated “regime change,” but also, as was already the case in Afghanistan and Iraq, the destruction of an entire country’s statehood – a serious mistake with long-term consequences indeed. Power, as the Austrian-American political scientist Karl Deutsch once said, is the “ability to afford not to learn.” On Russia, the then-Secretary of State followed the Cold War logic of “containment”, but also of the continued humiliation of the former world power. Not a far-sighted policy, neither for Ukraine nor for Europe, Germany, or détente in general. Donald Trump expressed sympathies for Putin during the campaign, something that is considered close to a capital offense in the US. Whether this merely amounted to male bonding between authoritarian personalities or signaled the beginning of a new politics of rapprochement remains to be seen with a healthy dose of skepticism.

For China and Europe, however, things may get uncomfortable. The US may well demand from Europe a greater share of financial contributions to NATO, armaments, and military operations. The targeting of European businesses for legal action – a popular form of American industrial policy – could enter the next round under Trump. Whether Trump will attempt to fight China’s authoritarian-statist policy of goods and capital export remains to be seen. Here, the US may well come to appreciate once again the meaning of “imperial overstretch.”

On Democracy in America

Donald Trump has won the election. Further, the Republicans have the majority in both the Senate and the House. The semi-democratic winner-take-all system with the archaic electoral college was what made this threefold victory possible. Hillary Clinton won, as did Al Gore against G.W. Bush, a razor-thin majority of the popular vote, which then translated into a clear defeat under the electoral college system. While Trump is set to win 290 electoral votes, Hillary Clinton is project to receive just 232. This is no less than an institutionalized distortion of the fundamental democratic principle of “one person, one vote.” The turnout at the presidential election stands at a meager 57.6 percent; the turnout figures for the Congressional elections, which are traditionally even lower, are not yet available.

Pippa Norris, the renowned scholar of democracy and elections at Harvard University, has examined for many years the integrity of elections in democracies and autocracies. In her ranking of 153 countries, the US finishes just 52nd, while Germany ranks 7th. Ahead of the US are countries like Croatia, Greece, Argentina, Mongolia, or South Africa. Reasons for the lower integrity of US elections include the massive influence of wealthy private donors on electoral campaigns and programs, the frequent gerrymandering, the voter registration system that de facto discriminates against lower classes and African-Americans in particular, the extremely low turnout in Congressional elections, the winner-take-all electoral system itself, and the shamefully low number of polling booths in a technologically and economically advanced country like the US. Indeed, long queues like those in Bangladesh are a common sight in US elections.

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American democracy is known for its extensive “checks and balances.” Checks on power, in particular, are strongly developed: Congressional majorities are not automatically of the same party as the president; under the US federal system, the federal government has a relatively weak position vis-à-vis individual states; the Supreme Court is one of the most powerful constitutional courts in the world. Gridlocks between the presidency and the congress made the US political system quite often ineffective during the last two decades. This, however, is about to change. Congressional control of the executive will be initially weak if Trump succeeds in bringing the Republican Party establishment in line after his previous falling-out with the latter. Republicans control the House with 239 seats against 193 seats for the Democrats. Even in the Senate the GOP has the majority of 51 seats against 48 with one independent. If it comes to the single states Republicans supply 34 governors against 18 on the side of the democrats (three independents). Trump has also made it clear that he will nominate a hand-picked conservative candidate for the Supreme Court vacancy. The current political constellation, then, means fewer constraints on President Trump than was intended in the Constitution. Even though the nation is evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, the paradoxical outcome of these elections gives the Republican president more executive and legislative power than any president has ever had since the 1920s. Now, one party is set to control almost all the power in the political system. In this context, extra-institutional checks such as the “mainstream media” (Trump) and the civil-society watchdogs will have to take on the important role of

monitoring those in power. What cannot be expected in the coming years, however, is a boost for democracy and tolerance in the American polity.

Is Trump a Right-Wing Populist?

Is Trump actually a right-wing ideologue or is he merely a demagogic populist campaigner who could be reined in by institutions, by his advisors, and by public opinion once in office? To begin with, Trump is considered fairly resistant to advice; moreover, counterbalancing institutions are less effective in populist times and with a presidential majority than what constitutional theory would have us believe. More important is the question: Who are the voters behind Trump? Will they drive Trump towards populist policies? What do they mean for democracy? Initial analyses suggest that Trump has disproportionately large shares of the vote among male, less educated, white working class, and non-urban voters. The white working class has turned populist and Republican. They are and they consider themselves to be among the losers of economic globalization and belong to the socio-economically lower half of American society. Neither Brexit nor Trump's electoral victory would have been possible without gaining the electoral support of disaffected working class voters from the rust belt or depressed regions. A large share of Trump voters represent the America that is demographically, economically, and culturally under threat. Of course, Trump could also draw on higher-educated business people who expected lower taxes and higher incomes. It is doubtful, however, that the economic situation was the driving motivation behind the Trump vote. The strongest predictors of voting behavior have been education, age, race and ethnicity in these elections. In other words: It's not the economy, stupid!

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There are parallels here to right-wing populist parties in Western and Eastern Europe. The established political forces, the media, the progressives, the better-to-do, and the chorus of "reason" are all too often content with merely representing their own interests and their cultural modernity. Conservative fears of a "loss of Heimat [homeland]," of the city district, of the familiar culture, of the nation, of state sovereignty, of the meaning of borders, or of traditional conceptions of marriage have been countered not only with the unforced force of the better argument. All too often, the response of cosmopolitans, feminists, postcolonial thinkers, and opportunists has been one of moral condescension or even exclusion from official discourse in cases where "incorrect" terms or ideas were expressed. All too often, a cosmopolitan spirit with a sanctimonious sense of morality has dominated the discourse. The "critical critique" (Marx) had once been a defining characteristic of the left. Now, the cultural "left" with its political correctness and sense of moral superiority acts to restrict the parameters of critique. The liberal establishment is so myopic and self-satisfied that it has totally misjudged the fear and anger in the rest of society, condemning anyone who is angry or fearful as an anachronistic relic of the past. Just as Brexit supporters are said to be from the world of yesterday and to not understand today's world of supranationalization, the voters of right-wing populist parties are held to be the moral and cultural laggards of society. In Western Europe, right-wing populist entrepreneurs have captured in these "laggards" some 10-30 percent of the electorate. In Poland and especially in Hungary, right-wing populism has shown its ability to win majorities – and now in the US, the supreme global democratic power. Yet not all voters of Trump

are anti-democratic racists, sexists, and chauvinists and not all belong to the lower classes. What is disturbing all the same is that Candidate Trump benefited rather than suffered from his use of intolerant slogans against the establishment, against the “political class in Washington,” against “those at the top,” and for “change.” Symptomatic was the closing rally of the Democratic campaign on November 7th in Philadelphia: with Obama, the First Lady, ex-President Bill Clinton, Bruce Springsteen, and Jon Bon Jovi, it featured an impressive array of the establishment on stage – none of which prevented the majority of Pennsylvania voters from voting for the outsider, Donald Trump. Even money could not buy Hillary the electoral victory. She spent two or three times as much money on her campaign as Donald Trump on his. More than 200 newspapers officially endorsed Hillary Clinton as their presidential candidate, while only six rather obscure gazettes called for a Trump vote. In the end, this only reinforced Trump’s self-stylization as a political outsider pitted against “them” in Washington.

We, the better-to-do and the established of civil and political society, have become sedate, complacent, and deaf toward “those at the bottom” – economically as well as culturally. The working class has gone over to the right-wing populists. We have come to defend existing conditions, whereas the right has taken up our former battle cries of change. The electoral success of Donald J. Trump must therefore also be interpreted as a warning sign. A representative democracy must represent each and every one to the extent possible. It must also permit reactionary or conservative criticisms that transgress the supposed bounds of political correctness. This should not detract from our determined advocacy of freedom, equality, and the cultural progress of the past decades. On the contrary: these must be defended. However, preaching from above, moral intransigence, or the discursive exclusion of the “non-representable” only plays into the hands of the right-wing populists.

Appendix

The Electorate of Donald Trump

General Trend:

White citizens with lower education and lower income voted for Trump

Gender

Men	53% for Trump (41% for Clinton)
Women	42% for Trump (54% for Clinton)

52 % of white women voted for Trump

80% of older male black voters voted for Clinton

93% of black women voted for Clinton

Ethnic Composition

Black	88% for Clinton (8% for Trump)
White	58% for Trump (37% for Clinton)
Hispanic/Latino	65% for Clinton (29% for Trump)
Asian	65% for Clinton (29% for Trump)

Income

Under \$30,000	53% for Clinton (41% for Trump)
\$30,000 - \$49,000	51% for Clinton (42% for Trump)
\$50,000 - \$99,999	50% for Trump (46% for Clinton)
\$100,000 - \$199,999	48% for Trump (47% for Clinton)
\$200,000 - \$249,999	49% for Trump (48% for Clinton)
\$250,000 or more	48% for Trump (46% for Clinton)

Education

High school degree or less	51% for Trump (45% for Clinton)
Some college/associate degree	52% for Trump (43% for Clinton)
College graduate	49% for Clinton (45% for Trump)
Postgraduate study	58% for Clinton (37% for Trump)

Other Trends:

White voters with college degrees voted 49% for Clinton vs. 45% for Trump

White voters without college-degrees voted 67% for Trump vs. 28% for Clinton

Age

18-29	55% for Clinton (37% for Trump)
30-44	50% for Clinton (42% for Trump)
45-64	53% for Trump (44% for Clinton)
65 and older	53% for Trump (45% for Clinton)

Religion

Protestant or other Christian	58% for Trump (39% for Clinton)
Catholic	52% for Trump (45% for Clinton)
Jewish	71% for Clinton (24% for Trump)
Other	62% for Clinton (29% for Trump)
None	68% for Clinton (26% for Trump)

N= 24,567.

“Edison Research” via telephone and survey

Sources:

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