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Trump's battle against civil rights

The US president is systematically rolling back Obama's policies, but a growing resistance led by women is up for the fight

Political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic have embraced a populist platform that defines itself in opposition to immigrants and the political elites. In the US, President Donald Trump has vowed to pursue a 'zero tolerance' immigration policy and promised to 'drain the swamp', while European leaders in Hungary, Poland, Austria and Italy have couched their pleas for stricter migration controls in Eurosceptic sentiment.

Linda A. Thompson spoke to Lecia Brooks who oversees outreach efforts at the Southern Poverty Law Center, a legal advocacy organisation that was launched as a private law firm in the Deep South of the US in the early 1970s. Although the group still litigates civil rights cases today, its activities have expanding to the monitoring of hate groups and other extremists.

The Southern Poverty Law Center has said that the Trump administration has 'systematically dismantled hard-won civil rights protections'. What signs do you see that civil rights are under pressure in the US?

It feels like President Trump is intentionally going out of his way to roll back any policy of President Obama, particularly civil rights protections developed under his administration. The Trump administration is for instance trying to prevent transgender individuals from serving in the military, which was a settled issued under Obama.

Attorney-General Jeff Sessions also pretty immediately ended these things called consent decrees. Under these decrees, law enforcement agencies consented to have some federal oversight – something instated under Obama to address police violence and the killing of unarmed African Americans. Sessions and Trump decided to do away with that. Meanwhile, Betsy DeVos, the education secretary, is eliminating policies that would guarantee that the needs of children with disabilities are being met in terms of public education. And there

are many more examples. These are basic bread and butter civil rights issues.

How do you view the relationship between Trump's anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim rhetoric on the one hand and US hate groups on the other. How does one influence the other?

His rhetoric encourages bad behaviour. It plays into thoughts and ideas that people have. If you have the person who holds the highest office in the land repeating the same thing that you think, then you think: 'It's OK. He's the president of the United States.' His rhetoric serves to reinforce what they thought was already true and in turn emboldened people to act out to say whatever they want.

How should lawmakers respond to the rise of populists like Trump who define themselves in opposition to other groups – whether the elites, migrants or corporations – and present themselves as the 'voice' of the people?

First of all, I would say that's twisted. Facts and information are manipulated and conspiracy theories are floated as truth. I think that populist leaders are manipulating a vulnerable population, so I don't see them as voices for the marginalised or disenfranchised. They're voices for themselves. They say: 'We're going to take care of you; existing leaders are out of touch and they don't care about you.' They don't care either. People are just trying to get into power – that's my cynical side. Populist leaders just become the next elite.

What is the significance of the popularity of far-right populist movements on both sides of the Atlantic? What does it say about the moment we are in?

It's a result of multiculturalism, of borders becoming more porous and people from all across the world trying to find space, jobs, home, and economic security. People are crossing borders in ways they never have before, and that is pushing and inspiring populism. It's a feeling amongst people that what they knew, what they grew up with, is gone and that their security, their social cachet or place in the world is at risk, and they want to change that.

So you're saying the rise of populist movements is fuelled by cultural rather than socioeconomic anxieties?

It's both. A lot of things were written after the election of Trump about what it was. Immediately, people went: '[Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton] lost all the white working class voters', and they're

suffering economic anxiety. But lots of research has since been done that showed cultural anxiety about displacement of status trumped economic anxiety. If you look at who voted for him across socio-economic groups; it wasn't just working class folks who put him over. It was middle class, upper class and wealthy white people too who are not threatened by [worsening economic conditions].

Some European parties have defeated far-right contenders at the polls by co-opting elements of their anti-immigration, anti-globalisation message. Do you see the pendulum swinging back anytime soon?

It is happening already. That's one of the things that makes me so excited about the women who are running now [in gubernatorial and mid-term elections] because they're not playing that game. [Women like Stacey Abrams in Georgia] are running against incumbent Democrats – who you'd probably refer to as centrists. These Democratic male candidates are trying to get Trump voters and are trying to speak to them more. Whereas the women who are running for office have this attitude of 'We're trying to tear this thing down and make this thing right.'

Trump's election, his Muslim ban, his misogynist comments have fuelled a lot of activism and organising on the ground. Will all this grassroots activism carry us through to the 2021 elections?

I am hopeful because if you look at the Women's March, it's been going on two years. We haven't had this kind of sustained activism since the civil rights movement. People today primarily do their activism online; they don't want to boycott something for more than like a day.

But we are operating from deficit in the sense that we're going to be digging ourselves out of a hole for a long time because we've got to replace all these policies [being instituted under the Trump administration.] And that takes a lot of time.



Lecia Brooks

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Lecia Brooks leads the Southern Poverty Law Center's outreach efforts on key initiatives and social justice issues. As outreach director, she frequently gives presentations around the country to promote tolerance and diversity. She also serves as director of the Civil Rights Memorial Center in Montgomery, AL, an interpretive center designed to provide visitors to the Civil Rights Memorial with a deeper understanding of the civil rights movement.