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Not all 74 million Trump voters can be racists

Trumpism isn't just going away after the US elections. And we finally need to understand why

Read this article in German.

Donald Trump will have to leave the White House in January. Although there will be a few skirmishes in the US courts in the coming weeks to sort out whether some votes were legitimate or not, the outcome won't change. No sooner had the main US broadcasters declared Joe Biden the winner than some experts began writing the epitaph of the entire populist right. Sociologist Ivan Krastev spoke of a 'devastating blow for Europe's populists'. And former EU Council President Donald Tusk exulted that 'Trump's defeat can be the beginning of the end of the triumph of right-wing populism in Europe too.'

But not so fast. First of all, a look at the political map reveals a few sobering facts. In France, Marine Le Pen is already on the starting blocks for the 2022 presidential elections. In Great Britain Boris Johnson's chaotic government is still heading for a No-Deal Brexit. In Italy Matteo Salvini's nationalist Lega Nord is ahead in the polls. In Poland the ruling PiS (with the support of the constitutional court) recently restricted women's abortion rights. And in Hungary Viktor Orbán continues to wreak havoc unhindered. Things don't look much better outside Europe either. Despite his catastrophic handling of the corona crisis and over 150,000 deaths, Jair Bolsonaro is, according to polls from September, more popular in Brazil than ever before.

There is no denying that right-wing populists have achieved unprecedented success over the past decade and have made it into the highest offices. With the election of Donald Trump as the world's most powerful man, this phenomenon probably reached its peak in 2016. Four years later, Trump has been defeated; but what lessons can be drawn from the election for the battle against right-wing populism?

Trumpism is here to stay

After an initial fright, as the vote count progressed, the following narrative crystallised among many in the media and on the centre-left spectrum. Never before has a candidate in the US presidential election received as many votes as Joe Biden. His nationwide lead over Donald Trump is more than six million votes. Nor is the lead in the electoral college a narrow one. The tyrant is defeated. So, everything is fine, right?

No; there are also downsides. Donald Trump got over ten million more votes in this election than four years earlier. Just how close the election was in the decisive swing states can be seen from the following: according to the latest count, in Arizona, Georgia, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, the share of the vote that went to the Libertarian Party candidate Jo Jorgensen was bigger than Biden's lead over Trump. If a few thousand of these votes had gone to Trump, he could have been in charge for another four years.

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The sobering and, for many, shocking observation remains that, despite a pandemic with well over 200,000 dead because of the Trump government's mismanagement, his abundantly documented lies and chaotic administration, his cruel migration policy and his destructive behaviour following the death of George Floyd, the voters have not turned away in droves from the Republicans after four years of Trump. On the contrary, he was able to win over millions of people who in 2016 voted for another candidate or did not go to the polls.

It’s not just racism

How could this happen? MSNBC presenter Joy Reid put the election results down to ‘a great amount of racism and anti-blackness’. Charles M. Blow took the same line in his article, citing the ‘strength of the white patriarchy’ as the reason for the outcome.

The idea of the backward white Trump voter is however not accurate, as a look at the structure of the electorate reveals. The President succeeded in significantly broadening the Republican voter base. Since 1960, no Republican presidential candidate has been able to win a higher share of non-white voters (one in four voted for him). Among Afro-American men, it was almost one in five, and among African American women, Trump was able to double his share of voters from four to eight percent.

He gained ground among Latino voters and white women, more than a third of Asian Americans put their cross next to Trump's name, and he was also much more successful among the LGBTQ community (28 per cent) than four years ago (14 per cent). Even people of colour are not immune to the lure of right-wing populism.

Although the pain and anxiety caused by Trump's relatively strong performance is quite understandable, an explanation based solely on racist structures seems insufficiently complex. After all, it is only eight years since Barack Obama scored a landslide victory over Mitt Romney. The idea that almost 74 million Americans are supposed to be racist, or at least willing to swear unquestioning blind allegiance to a thoroughly racist system, is in any event a very bold argument. There are four aspects that offer a better explanation.

Social democracy is popular among Americans

First, it is often assumed that members of minorities who have personal experience of discrimination automatically vote for left-wing parties. However, the reasons for individual voting decisions are much more complex. Latinos often have very conservative views on issues such as the right to abortion. Demographic groups cannot be regarded as monolithic. 'Despite what many progressives seem to think, minorities don't just sit there stewing in their Otherness all day,' writes Antonio García Martínez.

Voters are individuals with different views and attitudes, not mere representatives of the population group they have been ascribed to. And they make decisions based on the political choices available and their personal preferences. The critique of identity politics is here explicitly not directed at attempts to improve the situation of disadvantaged people, but rather at a world view that sees social developments and conflicts primarily through the lens of group identity. In the battle against right-wing populism, sweeping generalisations about electoral groups are not helpful; what matters is to address people's actual, and not their presumed, interests.

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Second, there is a common misconception regarding the reasons for people's voting decisions. The term 'demagogue', which is often used for right-wing populists, implies that the voters support them out of ignorance. However, this paternalistic view fails to take into account

moral terms ('If You Vote for Trump, You're a Racist') doesn't work.

that there are often rational grounds for their voting choices. For example, the PiS in Poland improved living standards for millions of people with an unprecedented welfare state programme. In their short essay, Eszter Kováts and Weronika Grzebalska set out with impressive clarity the reasons why women in particular, perhaps surprisingly, support the Polish and Hungarian right-wing populists. And there are also rational grounds for Trump's election: for example, during his term of office, the unemployment rate fell to a 50 year low – which particularly benefited those without a high school diploma.

In the US, it is classic social democratic issues that are popular with voters. According to exit polls conducted by Fox News – not a source suspected of pushing a left-liberal agenda – 72 per cent want a public health plan, also known as Medicare for All. Democratic Party candidates for the House of Representatives who support Medicare for All did significantly better in the elections than their party colleagues who oppose it. In Florida, a state Trump won, 60 per cent of the citizens voted for a phased increase in the minimum wage to USD 15 per hour. Colorado voted for paid leave for childbirth and family emergencies. This should come as no surprise: measures that secure or improve people's standard of living are widely supported.

Demonisation doesn't work

Third, it is clear that even Trump's unbelievably poor handling of the pandemic did not seem to make much difference. In a country with hardly any effective social security, many citizens have more profound urgent existential needs than dealing with the coronavirus. With them, Trump's promise to avoid a lockdown and to keep the economy running at all costs was effective. 82 per cent of Republican voters surveyed cited the economy as their chief concern. Here it is helpful to think of the economy not as an abstract term, but as the backbone of prosperity and job security. Robert Misik already stated at the Vienna state elections that 'social Democrats and other progressive parties will only win at this time if they are seen to embody people's need for security'.

Similar developments can also be observed in Great Britain. The reform course initiated by Keir Starmer – turning away from ideological identity politics pursued under Jeremy Corbyn, emphasising security and a left-wing economic policy – is beginning to bear fruit. According to recent

polls (hopefully more accurate than those in the US), Labour stands fully five percentage points ahead of the Conservatives.

Fourth, the relationship between social elites and the general population is striking. There are millions of people in the US who are fed up with the moral entreaties of the coastal elites with their preachy political jargon. Especially in the interior of the country, people feel patronised and culturally scorned by the liberals. 'Political correctness is thinking you're better than somebody else—it's correcting someone,' says Elissa Slotkin, who represents the Democrats in the House of Representatives. 'People do feel looked down upon.' The simple language of populists like Trump is closer to the reality of many people's lives. For 80 per cent of the American population, political correctness is a problem.

After both Trump elections, one thing is now finally clear: the demonisation of right-wing populists in purely moral terms ('If You Vote for Trump, You're a Racist') doesn't work. Similar approaches failed already when Boris Johnson was elected Prime Minister and against right-wing parties like the AfD in 2017 in Germany's federal elections. Of course, right-wing populists must be criticised. If you want to win the battle against them, however, rather than stigmatising voters and pushing leftist wishful thinking in the form of identity politics you need concrete policies that will measurably improve people's lives: decent wages, compensation schemes for short-time working, unemployment and health insurance, affordable housing and so on. Especially when it comes to social policy, centre-left parties surely have a variety of tools in the policy box.



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