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Where did Trumpism come from?

The best way to understand the deep problems facing US democracy is to look at the Republicans' steady march to the right

In November the United States will hold its most critical election in generations. The presidency of Donald Trump has revealed and intensified deep problems in American society and democracy. Should Trump and the Republican party emerge victorious, the damage done may well become irreparable.

Understanding how the richest and most powerful country on earth became associated with dysfunction and decline is a crucial task for anyone who cares about the US or the future of democracy. Generally, explanations fall into two camps.

The first is 'bottom-up' and focuses on structural economic trends. This approach emphasises how the rising inequality, declining mobility, increasing precarity and growing divergence between dynamic metropolitan and declining rural regions generated by capitalist development over the past decades has changed the preferences and priorities of citizens, leading to dissatisfaction with democracy and support for right-wing populism.

Others in this camp stress socio-cultural developments. From this perspective, rising immigration, the mobilisation of minorities and women and dramatic shifts in attitudes have led many citizens — particularly if white, uneducated, religious and living inland — to feel 'strangers in their own land', resentful of 'elites' who purportedly disdain their values and traditions and of immigrants and minorities who supposedly take resources and opportunities from them, leading them to support populists who attack the *status quo*.

Another approach is however 'top-down' — focusing on the choices and behaviour of powerful political actors. In the American context, this means emphasising how (actual) elites, and the wealthy in particular, have turned the Republican party into a vehicle dedicated to protecting their own interests, at the cost of deeply polarising society and

undermining democracy.

‘Immense shift’

Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson are among the most prominent proponents of this perspective. Their just-published book, *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality*, expands upon their previous work and that of other scholars and is probably the most damning version of the argument.

Hacker and Pierson stress the long backstory of right-wing populism in the US. An ‘immense shift’, as they put it, preceded the rise of Trump, who must be understood as ‘both a consequence and an enabler’ of his party’s steady march to the right. As with other scholars of American politics, Hacker and Pierson emphasise how much further the Republican party is to the right than its ‘sister’ parties in Europe—more like the French *Rassemblement national* than Britain’s Conservatives. (The Democrats, meanwhile, retain the profile of a fairly typical centre-left or even centrist party).

How can the Republican party implement policies so clearly at ‘odds with the broader interests of American society’ without facing a backlash?

The economic preferences of the plutocrats driving this shift diverge greatly from those of most voters, even Republican voters: Hacker and Pierson stress, again as do other scholars, that a majority of Americans actually have centre-left economic dispositions. Nonetheless, over the past decades the Republican party has consistently pursued a right-wing, ‘plutocratic populist’ economic agenda. Reflecting this, two of the most *unpopular* Republican policies of recent years — the 2017 reform cutting tax to corporations and the persistent attempts to gut the Affordable Care Act or ‘Obamacare’ — only received majority support from party donors with incomes in excess of USD 250,000 per year.

How can the Republican party implement policies so clearly at ‘odds with the broader interests of American society’ without facing a backlash? More generally, how can the party reconcile its support of an economic system that generates great inequality with the need to gain votes from those disadvantaged by it? Hacker and Pierson argue that this is simply the long-standing ‘conservative dilemma’ — how can elite privileges be maintained once mass suffrage exists?

Distract attention

For them, the answer is clear: to gain the votes necessary to win elections, elites need to distract voters' attention away from the negative consequences of the economic policies they favour to focus on social and cultural issues instead. 'The Republicans,' Hacker and Pierson argue, have 'used white identity to defend wealth inequality. They undermined democracy to uphold plutocracy.'

This strategy involves fear-mongering about immigrants, fanning resentment against African-Americans and other ploys to make white, and particularly white working-class, voters feel as though their values, traditions and identities are threatened. As Hacker and Pierson put it, 'This fateful turn toward tribalism, with its reliance on racial animus and continual ratcheting up of fear, greatly expanded the opportunities to serve the plutocrats. Republican voters would stick with their team, even when their team was handing tax dollars to the rich, cutting programs they supported, or failing to respond to obvious opportunities to make their lives better.'

Republican elites were aided in their ability to organise and mobilise angry white voters by 'aggressive and narrow groups' specialising in 'outrage-stoking' and the 'politics of resentment', such as the National Rifle Association and the Christian right. They were also aided by the rapidly growing 'outrage industry' of right-wing media, which proved extremely effective at 'escalating a sense of threat'. And if all this proved insufficient to garner a majority, Republicans resorted to dirty tricks, 'from voter disenfranchisement to extreme partisan gerrymandering, to laws and practices opening the floodgates to big money'.

Trump and the plutocratic populism he represents threaten to destroy American democracy.

For Hacker and Pierson, in short, the best way to understand the deep problems facing American democracy is to focus on how Republican elites consciously 'capitalized on pre-existing prejudices in pursuit of political gain'. In the absence of 'elite manipulation and outrage-stoking', they argue, American citizens might well have been 'receptive to more moderate policy stances and strategies'.

European perspective

Let them Eat Tweets does an excellent job of helping us understand the American story. If, however, we take a European perspective, some *lacunae* appear.

Many of the factors stressed by Hacker and Pierson are absent or attenuated in western Europe, yet similar outcomes have occurred. There we have not seen the same exploding inequality, declining social mobility and so on caused by the plutocratic policies pursued by the Republican party, yet rising xenophobia, nativism, right-wing populism and democratic dissatisfaction have eventuated. Nor have west-European populists been able to rely on gerrymandering, voter intimidation or the immense private sums available to their Republican counterparts to manipulate electoral outcomes, yet they have managed to gain support and even in some cases political power.

In addition, the absence of the left from this analysis occludes some crucial dynamics. Hacker and Pierson correctly argue that the success of the Republican party and right-wing populists more generally depends on shifting voters' attention away from economic to non-economic issues and from class to ethnic identities. But is it possible to understand how this has happened without focusing on parties of the left as well—and, in particular, on the watering down of their (left-wing) economic profile and the concomitant increasing attention paid by them to non-economic issues and non-class identities over past decades?

Moreover, while it is true that the right-wing *economic* policies pursued by the Republican party diverge from the centre-left economic preferences of a majority of voters, it is also true that a majority of US voters have preferences on social and cultural issues which diverge from those advocated by the Democratic party—as demonstrated by the same surveys on which Hacker and Pierson rely. This is also true for European voters, a majority of whom are to the right of social-democratic and other left parties on social and cultural issues.

Trump and the plutocratic populism he represents threaten to destroy American democracy. Yet if we want fully to understand the problems facing the US, as well as other democratic countries, we need not only more excellent analyses of particular cases but also broader comparative work, which can help uncover the myriad factors behind and multiple paths to democratic dissatisfaction and populism across the world today.

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