

# The Paradoxes Of Donald Trump's Victory

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The 2016 U.S. presidential elections must be analyzed in a broader context if we want to understand the outcome. I will look at two levels of that context: the international scene and the U.S. domestic panorama. In accordance with one dominant international trend, countries are defined as exclusionary, protectionist, nationalist, populist, and anti-globalization, or, on the other hand, inclusionary, pro-migration, and pro-globalization. As examples of the former, Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Slovakia have built walls or fences. At the same time, right-wing populist political parties have risen to importance in England, where Brexit was voted in; in Italy, where Lega Nord and Forza Italia have won several local elections; in France, where Marine Le Pen is the front-running candidate; and in Poland and Turkey, dominated by authoritarian governments.

We cannot deny that globalization has created winners and losers. But, above all, since no international governance regulates and imposes normative limits on large multinational corporations, the world's wealth has concentrated in the

hands of one percent of its population, the "Lords of the Universe," mentioned by Piketty, Chomsky, and Stiglitz. This has created fear of globalization and sparked the emergence of populist movements.<sup>1</sup>

In the U.S. domestically, three factors are important: the economy, politics, and the cultural-technological sphere. With regard to the economy, I should underline that the 2008 crisis clearly showed that wealth has been concentrating enormously in U.S. society. According to Joseph Stiglitz, 40 percent of the wealth in the United States is in the hands of 1 percent of the population, while in 1979, that 1 percent only owned 9 percent of the wealth.<sup>2</sup> During the crisis, U.S. Americans realized that the costs and benefits of social cooperation were not equitably distributed and that the gap between the elites and the masses was growing.

We should remember that globalization spurs big companies to seek new markets to be more competitive; this has led capital to emigrate in search of countries where they can pay lower wages, like Mexico and China. This has happened mainly in Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, the so-called "swing states," where unemployment has reached 9 percent.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, Trump stole the narrative of the

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We must not forget that Trump increased his public profile as the celebrity reality-show host of *The Apprentice*, and as someone very familiar with the media, he knows that it does not matter if the news report is good or bad: what matters is that they talk about you. This got him free publicity in the media, which could never stop publishing the scandalous news he generated, since they have lost a great deal of the market to the social network boom. So, paradoxically and unintentionally, they helped Trump win even though today he considers them his enemies and disparages them.

The Internet has made possible a degree of communication with the masses that was unthinkable in the past. As a result, power has been decentralized, as Moisés Naim has pointed out: new actors emerge very rapidly and take on great importance due to the power of the web.<sup>4</sup> Trump is a master of the social networks, and, through Twitter, he maintains direct contact with the masses, allowing him to create a strong populist movement.

On the level of politics, we can see what Fukuyama calls “repatrimonialization,” which means that the economic elites exercise disproportionate power over government.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1960s, when minorities were beginning to demand equal rights, a huge divide began to emerge in U.S. society, a divide that rapidly increased during the 2008 financial crisis and on the election of Barack Obama, the first African-American in the White House. The fragmentation has risen to such a degree that between one sector of society and another, very different ideas exist about what the nation is; and, in this context, the liberals are becoming more liberal and the conservatives more conservative. When analyzing the ideological trends, we can see that 53 percent of Republicans consider themselves conservative and only 34, moderate. Among the Democrats, 53 percent describe themselves as liberal, and 31 percent, moderate.<sup>6</sup> The traditional consensus that favored centrist positions has been broken, as has the dialogue between these two large social sectors. Thus, the imaginary of the kind of society that each one conceives of is not only different, but diametrically opposed.

John Budis argues that in the United States, populist movements emerge periodically when a political crisis is looming: “They signal that the prevailing political ideology isn’t working and needs repair, and the standard worldview is breaking down.”<sup>7</sup>

Obama’s signing into law of the Affordable Care and Protection Act and the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 prompted more mobilization by the right’s most conservative groups. The Tea Party movement rapidly emerged, becoming the Republican touchstone, giving a new face to the conservative movement as it was defined as right-wing populist, anti-elitist, fiscally conservative, and characterized by the tendency to hark back to philosophical and constitutional origins. It is populist to the extent that its narrative sees ordinary people as a noble group and the elite as selfish free-loaders,<sup>8</sup> and in addition, it offers simplistic solutions to complex problems. For example, when it pointed to Mexican immigration as the big threat and cause of all woes, its proposal was to put the brakes on it. These groups’ concerns feed on anxieties around issues of the ethnic and racial changes taking place in the United States, particularly in places where Hispanic migration had not been significant before.

In his analysis of the United States, Samuel Huntington also pointed to Mexican immigration as the main problem due to what he said was this minority’s trying to protect Spanish, therefore putting in danger one of U.S. nationalism’s bases: the dominance of the English language. Also, by becoming the largest minority, with 34 million Hispanics and their high growth rate,<sup>9</sup> they threatened the dominance of whites.<sup>10</sup>

This conservative movement opposed taxation and immigration. A 65-or-older, scantily educated, unemployed worker who had lost his job due to technological advances or to globalization saw immigrants as a clear threat. He believes that immigrants enjoy the benefits of the welfare state, making his taxes go up, and that their demands for social assistance put white workers at risk.

The narrative of Trump’s campaign was clearly populist: he championed an anti-establishment, anti-media, anti-elite, anti-corruption, anti-globalization, anti-NAFTA, anti-TPP movement; the return of jobs to the United States;<sup>11</sup> tax cuts and fewer regulations; and reducing the number of migrants, especially Mexicans and Muslims. In short: he offered change. That is, he knew how to listen to conservative malaise and, due to the fear of change stemming from globalization and the cultural change caused by immigration, was able to unify white

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Republican and Democratic males. People voted for that change despite all the insults he proffered in his campaign: white females (42 percent), educated white males (58 percent), Latinos (29 percent), and Asians (29 percent).<sup>12</sup>

As president, Trump is fulfilling his campaign promises. To date, he has issued several executive orders to set government policy, with important consequences that have disturbed some sectors of the population, but have met with approval from his voter base.

Benedict Anderson defines a nation as the imagined political community. It is imagined because even the members of the smallest nation never know all the other members. Despite the differences among its members, the nation is conceived of as a horizontal, profound brotherhood that goes beyond social classes: citizens are capable of dying and killing for that imaginary creation, since, in the last analysis, we must underline the cultural roots of nationalism. While nationalism inspires love and the will to sacrifice oneself for the nation, it also creates fear of and hatred for the “other,” the different. The idea of nation brings together the conception of a past and a future, of the history and the destiny of a community.<sup>13</sup>

In an era when people are talking about globalization, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism, surprisingly, there is a resurgence of nationalism in the United States. Paradoxically, a member of the elite, of the so-called “1 percent,” used a national-populist, isolationist narrative to convince the electorate that he would work in favor of the interests of the masses. When looking at the U.S. social context today, we could conclude that two very different types of political culture have been consolidating there.

In an attempt to capture its essence, we can say that the Republicans’ political culture is attempting to involve religion in public life, and the Democrats are the guardians of the separation of church and state: not only do they defend the individualism they profess, but they are also concerned about a more egalitarian distribution of wealth, and therefore, favor higher taxation on the rich to create safety nets for the poorest sectors of the population. The Republicans, for their part, argue that taxes slow economic growth; Trump has already offered a big tax cut for business. The Democrats are

demanding that corporations be socially responsible. Trump promised to eliminate 75 percent of regulations on corporations.

The Democrats have taken on board the idea that global warming is the threat of this century and are pushing for environmental protection. The conservatives do not believe in climate change. This includes Trump, who issued an executive order to build the gas pipeline to Canada that had been slowed due to ecological concerns.

The Republicans say that the government should not be restricted in its struggle against terrorists and are against recognizing terrorists’ human rights. Trump has come out in favor of torture and extreme, wider-ranging interrogation methods; he has criticized international institutions in general and multilateral negotiations in particular. The conservatives are against abortion, same-sex marriage, and the recognition of transsexuals’ rights.

Positions are clearly diametrically opposed with regard to the Supreme Court. The Republicans are more originalist in their interpretation of the Constitution; that is, they argue for a literal application of the law, while the Democrats think the law should be reinterpreted to make amends to the minorities. So, we can see that the liberals’ imaginary community is inclusive, multicultural, in favor of human rights, women’s rights, the lesbian-gay community, the Afro-American minority, immigration, bilingualism, and redistribution of wealth, and seeks to create a more just society and world. In short: they are for dialogue among countries and the supremacy of soft power.

Basically, we can only explain the Democrats’ electoral loss as perhaps due to their moving away from their social base by presenting an image that was too liberal for the average U.S. American. That is, this imaginary community is the image created by a super-liberal elite that stopped listening to the voice of its social base.

For its part, the imaginary community of Trump and his followers is an exclusionary society that fights for the dominance of WASP values, to afford no privileges to minorities, to put the brakes on Muslim and Mexican migration, return to protectionism, give big advantages to the big corporations, bring back industries that had lost importance due to technological advances, and establish the primacy of the United States in a world by threatening with hard power.

If culture is the root of nationalism, it is obvious that these two political cultures have two very different narratives in their imaginary communities. Not only are they incapable of establishing a dialogue, but they are complete opposites.

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Therefore, the nationalism growing in one of them seeks to impose the model of its imaginary community on a very different real society. This division was clearly expressed during the last election campaigns: Donald Trump won the Electoral College, but Hillary took the popular vote by three million ballots.<sup>14</sup>

Times of great uncertainty are approaching for U.S. democracy and the world. The traditional checks and balances of the U.S. political system may be rather ineffective over the next two years. Congress is dominated by the Republicans and the Supreme Court, by conservatives.

We should remember that democracy does not assure us that the best option will be chosen, but rather that the most popular candidate has been elected. In the case of the complicated U.S. electoral apparatus, it does not even assure us that the winner was the one with the most votes. However, legitimacy emerges from the confidence in the role of the Electoral College, backed by the population, while, according to the rules of its federalism, it gives similar weight to all states, big and small.

Paradoxically, although Founding Fathers Jay, Madison, and Hamilton designed an Electoral College to prevent a demagogue from manipulating the masses, it was precisely that institution that gave Trump the win because social phenomena always bring with them unexpected consequences. However, that federalism is also the force that has begun to act against some of the president's executive orders: governors and mayors have already resisted obeying the ones they think violate the Constitution.

U.S. District Court Judge James Robart, a Republican from Seattle, struck down the ban on citizens from seven Muslim countries from entering the United States. He argued that, according to the Constitution, no one can be discriminated against for religious reasons. Civil society, for its part, has begun to organize and to demonstrate against some of President Trump's decisions. Spearheaded by women, a movement has emerged defending the interests of environmentalists, women, Afro-Americans, Mexican immigrants, Muslims, and the lesbian-gay community, and against protectionism, among

many other issues, although there have also been pro-life demonstrations in support of the president.

As democrats, we hope that what prevails domestically and among the international community will be the deliberative and fruitful dialogue in favor of a consensus that every society needs for its own benefit. I think that it is precisely in the framework of federalism that the conflicts derived from the desire to impose a contrasting imaginary community will be expressed most sharply. This is because that system protects diversity, minorities, and the states *vis-à-vis* the federal government and is an important guarantee of the checks and balances of the U.S. system.

John F. Kennedy wrote *Profiles in Courage*, a book that underlines the importance of making certain difficult decisions even if you must go against the dictates of your own party, as long as you do the right thing. Checks and balances work when you have leaders with the courage to respect them. ■■■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014); Noam Chomsky, *Who Rules the World?* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2016); and Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality* (New York/London: WW Norton & Company, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Stiglitz, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Gallup, "Real Unemployment-Department of Labor (U-6)," <http://www.gallup.com/poll/189068/bls-unemployment-seasonally-adjusted.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> Moisés Naim, *The End of Power. From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States. Why Being in Charge Isn't What It Used to Be* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Lydia Saad, "U.S. Conservatives Outnumber Liberals by Narrowing Margin," [http://www.gallup.com/poll/201152/conservative-liberal-gap-continues-narrow-tuesday.aspx?g\\_source=conservative%20votes&g\\_medium=search&g\\_campaign=tiles](http://www.gallup.com/poll/201152/conservative-liberal-gap-continues-narrow-tuesday.aspx?g_source=conservative%20votes&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles).

<sup>7</sup> John B. Budis, *The Populist Explosion. How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> The nation's Hispanic population totaled 56.6 million as of July 1, 2015, up by 1.2 million, or 2.2 percent, since July 1, 2014. This growth is due largely to natural increases, <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-107.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges of America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Up to here, Trump offered the same thing that Bernie Sanders did, which also explains Sanders's surprisingly successful campaign. In contrast with Trump, however, Sanders championed a left-leaning populism when he proposed wage hikes and medical care for the entire population.

<sup>12</sup> CNN, "Exit Polls," <http://edition.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls>.

<sup>13</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 3 ed. (New York: Verso, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> CNN, "2016 Election Results," <http://edition.cnn.com/election/results>.