

An Exceptional Election in a No-Longer-So-Exceptional United States

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INTRODUCTION

Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump have had very different careers. Hillary has more experience in U.S. government: she was first lady during her husband's presidential terms, senator from 2001 to 2009, and secretary of state during the first Barack Obama administration, after running for the Democratic Party nomination in 2008. Donald Trump, by contrast, is a multimillionaire businessman and real-estate investor who has played minor roles in Hollywood's movie industry and, therefore, is not part of the Republican establishment's main groups.

Since January 19 of this year, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump have headed up the polls as the candidates for the Democratic and Republican Parties, respectively. The magnate's absence at the last Republican debate before the primary elections was the main focus of the media the next day, and the most important polling results showed Trump still leading his rivals by 15.6 points. This all marked a trend that would continue until the end of the primaries: Trump was positioning himself as the favorite for the Republican nomination.

For her part, Hillary Clinton, who announced her intention to compete for the Democratic nomination on April 12, 2015, closed the ninth and last debate before the primaries in a growing battle with Vermont socialist Senator Bernie Sanders over issues of public health, education, the economy, and foreign policy.

The presidential primaries and caucuses began in Iowa on February 1, 2016. Even then this election was expected to be



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different, since two of the most important contenders, Trump and Sanders, did not belong to the government establishment, and, in addition to doing politics in new ways, they were winning a growing number of followers. Trump reflected the interests of racist, xenophobic, uneducated, low-income U.S. Americans, who for a very long time had not been represented on the political agenda. Sanders, meanwhile, represented the ideals of the Millennials and the middle class that had suffered the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis and wanted to get the economic system to work, making it more inclusive and distributive.

Hillary Clinton was a case apart. Her initial discourse was based on the continuity of the Obama administration's political agenda. This would be key as the primaries advanced since, while Trump obtained the biggest number of delegates *vis-à-vis* all his competitors (mainly Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, and John Kasich), some Republicans decided that they would vote for Hillary if Trump won the Republican nomination.¹ After the first super-Tuesday, March 1, Donald Trump continued to be a favorite of Republican voters, garnering a total of 315 delegates of the 1 237 he needed for the nomination,

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surpassing Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, who had 205 and 106 delegates respectively. Hillary, for her part, was leading her party with strong support from African-American Democrats in Massachusetts and key southern states like Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

What allowed Trump to become the Republican candidate? According to CNN, from the time the primaries began, 57 percent of Republicans trusted Trump more than his rivals on economic issues. In Iowa and New Hampshire alone, he was 40 percent ahead of Ted Cruz, his closest rival.² In addition, a Harvard University study underlines that Trump was the pre-candidate who was spotlighted most in the media, like CBS, Fox, *Los Angeles Times*, NBC, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. This expanded the possibility of his message getting out and being disseminated more than those of the rest of his Republican and Democratic competitors. In fact, from late 2015 to the end of the primaries, no other candidate received the same coverage in the media week after week.³ However, according to an ABC News survey in early March, only 37 percent of U.S. Americans mistrusted Hillary, giving her a big advantage over her main Republican rival, and only 27 percent of those polled trusted Trump to be president of the United States.⁴ In contrast, a *New York Times* poll done three months later showed that both Trump's and Clinton's popularity ratings were the lowest of potential presidential Republican and Democratic nominee hopefuls in all the decades since polls have been done; fortunately for them, however, they continued to be the favorites among their party faithful.⁵

When Ted Cruz and John Kasich dropped out of the race, Trump's possibilities of actually becoming the Republican Party nominee increased, exacerbating fears in party ranks and sparking a—rather fruitless—search for alternatives. By the end of the primaries, Trump's more than 12 million votes was the highest number in the history of the Republican Party, beating George W. Bush's year-2000 record. However, Trump is also the candidate that has had the highest number of votes against him. This means that a larger number of people went out to vote amidst a significant division inside the party.⁶

The Republican Convention, from July 18 to 21, nominated Donald Trump as its candidate after he won 1 543 delegates. This made him the first businessman inexperienced in public office to get the Republican nomination since Wendell Willkie in 1940.

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occupy the White House for the first time in history. In the final vote count, Hillary garnered 2 842 delegates and Sanders only 1 865, who earned 3 742 686 fewer votes at the primary polls than Hillary. That is, 43.26 percent of the Democratic electorate voted in favor of Sanders's political agenda, which meant that Clinton had to include his main platform planks in order to ensure that disappointed Sanders supporters would vote for her next November 8.

After the party conventions, the panorama has changed in Hillary's favor: since late July, the polls show that her acceptance rating has oscillated between 43.7 percent and 47.8 percent, while Trump's dropped to 41.2 percent in August. These changes have been accompanied by an increasing number of Republicans who have decided not to vote for him. According to the latest CBC News poll,⁷ Trump could only count on 19 percent of the Hispanic vote, a much lower number than the 44 percent that George W. Bush received in 2004. In addition, the highest level income group (those with incomes of US\$100 000 and more), which in the last elections favored Mitt Romney, now favors Hillary Clinton, giving her a more than 7-point advantage.⁸ This has put the Republican candidate in a very complicated position because he would have to change his discourse, promoted months ago, bringing him face to face with a very delicate dilemma: satisfying those who have supported him from the beginning or those who he wants to convince nationwide.

HOW DID ALL THIS START?

The Tea Party—and the irrational right—was mistaken in its diagnosis when it warned, through its buffoonish front man Glenn Beck, that “the Marxist Fifth Column” had returned to power with the victory of Obama. The United States continues to be the same capitalist country it has always been, embedded in the liberal democracy that has steered it for more than two centuries. The danger never existed. However, it is that liberal democracy that is threatened by Donald Trump, better known as “Trumpkenstein.” This by-product of the political decomposition of the political system and

some of its members is the second serious mistake on the part of the Republican Party, thanks to letting itself be controlled by a party-within-the-party, the Tea Party, since 2008, until now an inoperable tumor.

The “inevitable candidate” has now become the rotting fish that spoils the aroma of Republican kitchens. The evil-smelling air now being breathed betrays how complicated things will become for them during the campaign since their candidate —the authoritarian, anti-politics, anti-system, anti-liberal, and, also, xenophobic, misogynist, and incorrigible pathological liar that he is—, despite his simulated attempts, does not want —and apparently will not want— to change his narrative of hatred and resentment. It is very unlikely that this discourse, successful in the primaries and supported by more than 11 million followers, will be upheld on November 8 by the more than 200 million who will come out to vote.

Many political actors, even some from the Republican Party like Paul Ryan, John Kasich, and Mitt Romney, have expressed concern about Trump’s extremism and lack of awareness. They are right in thinking that he cannot be “fixed”: some support him with reservations, and others hold him in contempt. After all, his credentials are of no help. His biographers say that after his two divorces, Trump became resentful and ratcheted up his filthy rhetoric against women, whom he has called “pigs” and “dogs.” This candidate, famous for his innumerable affairs, thinks that “it really doesn’t matter what they say about you as long as you have a beautiful, young ass at your side.” This is no minor matter in a time when the defense of women’s dignity and integrity plays a preeminent role on the agenda of any politician who thinks himself worthy of the term.

With regard to the Islamic community that aspires to entry into the United States, Trump has proposed cancelling their universal right, the right that his country honored when his own German and Scots ancestors used it; not to mention his threat to eliminate family members of Muslims suspected of attacking national security.

Prominent members of the Democratic Party, beginning with President Obama, have accused the detested Mr. Trump of being racist. This happened after, drawing on his well of

resentment, Trump accused federal Judge Gonzalo Curiel, of Mexican ancestry, of having a conflict of interest when he found that the former was guilty of fraud in his handling of the now-defunct Trump University —a typical “brand-X” university. The candidate accused the judge of being resentful because Trump maintains his position of building the border wall. The most ferocious attack came from the senator from Massachusetts, Elizabeth Warren, who, in addition to calling him a racist, said he was a national “disgrace.”

What’s interesting about the political process is that while the Democrats accepted Sanders getting on the Clinton bandwagon after her victory, the Republicans have wanted, without success, to bring Trump down off the bizarre victory bus that he has built for himself out of the reach of Republican control. As the process continues, greater and greater dissatisfaction can be seen among responsible Republicans with their party’s recalcitrant rightwing patriots and Trump’s candidacy; even though they have already accepted the impossibility of taming him and getting him to shift to a more moderate position on the issues mentioned above and others, despite recent proposals of moderation. The fact is that he booby-trapped himself when he moved away from moderation on highly sensitive issues. Trump is Trump’s number one enemy.

The Republican Party fears it is one step away, not only from not winning the White House, but from breaking up and, in passing, hugely damaging the entire political system. Their irresponsibility is enormous and apparently they themselves are thinking—and they will surely vote this way—that the only lifeline for their party and the stability of the entire system is a victory for Hillary Clinton, even though this would mean losing the presidency. This is just how grave the crisis the Republicans have allowed to grow is.

THE ESTABLISHMENT IS WOUNDED

In effect, the damage suffered by the U.S. political system over the last eight years has been severe. Since Obama was elected, there has been an all-out battle for power stoked more by right-wing extremist fanaticism than by political reason. The Republican Party’s terminal crisis is an expression of this. Its polemical candidate is another, although in a more grotesque form. While the Democrats have not suffered a similar decomposition, in the primaries they did go through a process of renovation, largely thanks to the appearance of the socialist senator for Vermont, Bernie Sanders.

The Democratic Party also passed a milestone when its convention nominated a woman as its candidate to occupy the White House for the first time in history.

However, despite his campaign's radicalism, far from dismembering the party, it unified it and also ensured that Hillary incorporated into her platform three issues that can transform the United States: stricter measures for Wall Street, the cause of the worst recession of the modern era; free university for important sectors of youth; and a hike in minimum wage, which could go up to US\$15/hour. In the end, Sanders supported Clinton's candidacy and committed to working to defeat Trump. This did not happen in the Republican Party. At the Republican Convention, Ted Cruz took the podium and not only did not support Trump, but encouraged his followers to "vote their conscience": in other words, not vote for Trump. In another demonstration of rebellion, the governor of the key state of Ohio, John Kasich, did not even attend the Republican Party Convention in Cleveland.

Not only has the balance of power in the party been lost, but the Republican Party has also lost its political center, which maintained it as a credible, moderate conservative party. On the other hand, equality in the voting system leaves much to be desired. A good number of states headed by the Republican Party have imposed voting constraints among potentially Democratic voters like African-Americans and Latinos, but this process stopped thanks to a Supreme Court decision. Congress, for its part, continues to reproduce a profitable but delicate relationship for U.S. democracy between special interests and politicians during their campaigns and after they are elected. It should be noted that with unhampered regularity, the National Rifle Association purchases important groups of politicians from both parties, who they suborn through campaign funding and other perks that they then demand be repaid by votes for indiscriminately freeing the purchase and use of firearms. Or, they demand members of Congress oppose any measure—many highly favored after the tragic incidents of gunfire deaths— even suggested by the federal Executive or other political actors to curtail arms sales to people on the FBI's and other security agencies' blacklists. This is just one of the many alarms going off warning of threats against the essential democratic spirit of the U.S. legislature.

All this shows the point to which the U.S. political/electoral system is in a crisis of systemic legitimacy; this crisis that leads us to think that our neighbors are facing a huge challenge that will force them to rapidly implement a profound reform in this area. Given Trump's onslaught and the regressive tendencies his candidacy represents, we get the feeling that thinking about and wanting his defeat in the battle with Clin-

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ton constitutes an opportunity for the political system to regenerate. In fact, the U.S. moment is so critical—and the growing Republican dissidence that has tended to support Clinton would seem to confirm this—that only Clinton with Sanders's support and that of the decent political class as a whole will be able to reform both the tainted political/electoral system and the economic model—which is anything but distributive, given that one percent of the population continues to own the majority of the country's wealth.

This may well be a historic opportunity, thanks in great part to the emergence of Trumpism, to recover the essential values of U.S. liberal democracy and in passing completely heal its actions in the face of the extremely complex and varied dangers faced by the international system. It is paradoxical, but true: only the establishment can save the establishment. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Among these were Rosario Marín, Carlos Gutiérrez, John Negroponte, Rubén Álvarez, Jane Hull, Robert Blackwill, Merom Brachman, David Durenberger, Scott Evertz, Joel Flory, Fred Goldberg, Cindy Guerra, Matt Higgins, Carla Hills, Richard Holwill, Angus King, James Kunder, Jennifer Pierotti Lim, William Sanchez, Timothy P. Stratford, Shirin Tahir-Kheli, Pete Teely, Daniel Twining, John McCain, and Matthew Waeman.

² M. J. Lee, Sara Murray, Jeremy Diamond, Noah Gray, and Tai Kopan, "Why I'm Voting for Trump," CNN Politics, January 28, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/27/politics/donald-trump-voters-2016-election/index.html>.

³ Thomas E. Patterson, "News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Primaries: Horse Race Reporting Has Consequences," Harvard Kennedy School, July 11, 2016, <http://shorensteincenter.org/news-coverage-2016-presidential-primaries/>.

⁴ ABC News and *The Washington Post* Poll: Clinton versus Trump, "Challenges for Trump vs. Clinton: Favorability, Attributes and More," March 9, 2016, <http://www.langerresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/1176a2ClintonvsTrump.pdf>.

⁵ Karen Yourish, "Clinton and Trump Have Terrible Approval Ratings. Does It Matter?" *The New York Times*, June 3, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/03/us/elections/trump-and-clinton-favorability.html?action=click&contentCollection=Election%202016®ion=Footer&module=WhatsNext&version=WhatsNext&contentID=WhatsNext&moduleDetail=undefined&pgtype=Multimedia>.

⁶ Real Clear Politics, 2016, <http://www.realclearpolitics.com/>.

⁷ Éric Grenier, "Donald Trump Losing Support from Reliably Republican Demographic Groups," CBC News Politics, Canada, August 19, 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/grenier-uselection-demographics-1.3724980>.

⁸ At the time of this writing, several polls, including those of Quinnipiac and Reuters, put Clinton 10 and 7 points ahead of Trump respectively. Real Clear Politics, August 25, 2016, <http://www.realclearpolitics.com/>.