

# The 2016 Presidential Election— Identities, Class, and Culture

**MORRIS P. FIORINA**

Series No. 11

*The most qualified candidate in a generation was defeated by the least qualified of all time. That is what misogyny looks like, and, like all bigotries, it will end up dragging us all down.*—Hadley Freeman

*2016 Was the Year White Liberals Realized How Unjust, Racist, and Sexist America Is.*—Slate

*These are good people, man! These aren't racists, these aren't sexists.*—Joe Biden

*You have to accept that millions of people who voted for Barack Obama, some of them once, some of them twice, changed their minds this time. They're not racist. They twice voted for a man whose middle name is Hussein.*—Michael Moore

Nigel Farage in Great Britain, Donald Trump in the United States, Geert Wilders in Holland, Marine Le Pen in France—all would have represented fringe positions in the politics of their countries a decade or so ago. Not today. Although different in important respects, it is difficult to deny that recent elections reflect a general populist impulse now energizing the electorates of the Western democracies. Essay no. 8 noted that explanations of the resurgence of populism fall into two general categories. One category condemns the populist impulse, considering it at best the scapegoating of ethnic and racial minorities in an era of economic difficulty and at worst as a xenophobic reaction to immigration and the resulting diversification of previously white societies. A second category recognizes real economic grievances held by certain

---

Quotations are from, in order: Hadley Freeman, "I've Heard Enough of the White Male Rage Narrative," *The Guardian*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/10/misogyny-us-election-voters>; L. V. Anderson, "2016 Was the Year White Liberals Realized How Unjust, Racist, and Sexist America Is," *XX Factor* (blog), *Slate*, December 29, 2016, [www.slate.com/blogs/xx\\_factor/2016/12/29/\\_2016\\_was\\_the\\_year\\_white\\_liberals\\_learned\\_about\\_disillusionment.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2016/12/29/_2016_was_the_year_white_liberals_learned_about_disillusionment.html); Joe Biden, "White Working Class Not Racist, Sexist," interview with Jake Tapper, CNN, December 11, 2016, [www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2016/12/11/sotu-biden-eaten-alive.cnn](http://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2016/12/11/sotu-biden-eaten-alive.cnn); and James Barrett, "Michael Moore Slaps Down Attempts to Smear Trump Voters as 'Racist,'" *Daily Wire*, November 12, 2016, [www.dailywire.com/news/10742/michael-moore-slaps-down-attempts-smear-trump-james-barrett](http://www.dailywire.com/news/10742/michael-moore-slaps-down-attempts-smear-trump-james-barrett). It should be noted that Michael Moore was all over the map on this issue.



sectors of native populations that are at least partly attributable to immigration, globalization, and other social and economic transformations. This second explanation tends to include an antiestablishment or antielite impulse that blames political and economic elites for not preventing economic difficulties, or at least alleviating them after the fact. And, everywhere, especially in the United States, the target list of the populist impulse has broadened to include cultural elites: the cosmopolitan denizens of our saltwater cities who now find themselves viewed as the opposition by many of those who reside in less urban and more peripheral parts of the country.

### Some Basics

Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by a margin of almost 2.9 million votes, coming within 100,000 votes of Barack Obama's 2012 total. Trump received about 2 million votes more than Mitt Romney did in 2012. In percentage terms, Clinton won 48.5 percent of the vote to Trump's 46.4 percent. Turnout across the nation was about 60 percent of 232 million eligible Americans, a bit higher than in 2012 (58.6 percent).<sup>1</sup> Clinton's margin over Trump was lower than Obama's margin over Romney in thirty-seven states, however. In particular, Trump improved on Romney's performance across the north-central United States, roughly from Pennsylvania to the Dakotas, flipping the battleground states of Ohio, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania (plus Florida in the South). In the aggregate, 2016 voting statistics do not look very different from the 2012 statistics, so—as emphasized in the previous essay—there is no sea change in voting that needs to be explained. But in a majoritarian system like ours, small changes on the margins can have major consequences.<sup>2</sup> Turnout and/or vote choices changed enough for Donald Trump to breach the “blue wall” that many pundits thought all but guaranteed Electoral College majorities for the Democrats.<sup>3</sup> Why?

### Racism and Ethnocentrism

As quotations scattered through this essay and the previous one indicate, for many disappointed supporters of Hillary Clinton the answer is all too clear: Trump's election

---

1 “2012 November General Election Turnout Rates,” United States Election Project, [www.electproject.org/2012g](http://www.electproject.org/2012g).

2 For further discussion of aggregate similarities in the 2012 and 2016 voting, see David Brady and Brett Parker, *Now is the Winter of our Discontent: The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

3 Ronald Brownstein, “Is Donald Trump Outflanking Hillary Clinton?” *The Atlantic*, November 2, 2016, [www.theatlantic.com/amp/article/506306/](http://www.theatlantic.com/amp/article/506306/).

represented a victory for racism, sexism, and deep-seated resentment of liberal social trends. Are some Americans bigots, misogynists, and/or homophobes? Of course. So are some Britons, French, Dutch, Germans—even Scandinavians.<sup>4</sup> But were these motivations more powerful in the 2016 voting than in other recent elections? There is no way to answer that question in this essay. For four decades social scientists have debated the prevalence and power of racism with no apparent consensus, and no amount of studies employing contested measures seems likely to settle the debate.<sup>5</sup> But the claim that racism played a larger role in the 2016 election than in other recent elections must deal with several pieces of unsupportive data.

First, at the time of the election a clear majority of Americans approved of the performance of a black Democratic president; millions fewer of them voted for a white Democratic presidential candidate. Second, according to the exit polls, whites did not surge to the polls in unusually large numbers; and, if anything, Trump did ever so slightly *worse* among white voters than Romney did in 2012. Moreover, as noted in essay no. 10, the Clinton campaign underperformed in many areas that gave majorities to Obama four and eight years ago. Of 676 counties that twice voted for Obama, almost a third (209) voted for Trump in 2016. On average, these counties were more than 80 percent white. Of course, such observations are subject to the standard ecological inference objection—we do not know *which* county residents voted and for whom they voted. With aggregate data alone there is a logical possibility that white racists who had not voted in 2012 turned out in 2016, while white non-racists who voted in 2012 stayed home in 2016. If those flows were to offset, that would leave the net white vote for Trump more racist but about the same size as that for Romney. Such an argument seems tortured. But more importantly, the data shown in table 11.1 provide little support for it. In the Economist/YouGov panel, whites who did not vote in 2012 disproportionately supported Trump if they voted in 2016, but Clinton held scarcely two-thirds of white 2012 Obama voters, as one out of eight switched to Trump in 2016

---

4 “Populists in Europe (3/8): Danish Ethnocentrism,” May 15, 2014, La Redaction, <http://en.myeurop.info/2014/05/15/populists-europe-danish-ethnocentrism-13847>.

5 The debate has multiple dimensions, starting with how to define racism and then to measure it. For critical discussions of two of the most commonly used measures, see Jesse Singal, “Psychology’s Favorite Tool for Measuring Racism Isn’t Up to the Job,” *New York* magazine, January 11, 2017, [http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2017/01/psychologys-racism-measuring-tool-isnt-up-to-the-job.html?mid=twitter\\_scienceofus](http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2017/01/psychologys-racism-measuring-tool-isnt-up-to-the-job.html?mid=twitter_scienceofus); and Edward G. Carmines, Paul M. Sniderman, and Beth C. Easter, 2011, “On the Meaning, Measurement, and Implications of Racial Resentment,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 634, no. 1 (March 2011): 98–116.



**Table 11.1. How 2012 Voters Voted in 2016 (whites only)**

	<i>Clinton</i>	<i>Trump</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>DNV</i>	<i>n</i>
Obama	64%	13	3	19	1233
Romney	3	78	4	15	897
Other	12	41	28	19	96
DNV	4	10	1	84	339

**Source:**  
*Economist/YouGov Panel*

would lead millions of whites who voted for and approved of a black president to desert a white Democrat.<sup>8</sup>

What about Hispanics? Given Trump's numerous ethnocentric comments, many commentators expected a doubly negative effect—outraged Hispanics would surge to the polls and vote even more Democratic than usual. Surprisingly, the evidence is conflicting. Following the election there was a vigorous debate about how Hispanics voted. The exit polls reported that Trump captured 28 percent of the Latino vote.<sup>9</sup> If this figure is accurate, Clinton's margin among Latinos was slightly *smaller* than Obama's in 2012. The Latino polling firm, Latino Decisions, vigorously disputed this finding, critiquing the methodology of the exit polls and concluding from their own

and one out of five claimed they didn't vote.<sup>6</sup> Trump's gains from that defecting group were eight times larger than those from the 2012 white nonvoters who turned out to vote for him in 2016: white defection contributed far more to Clinton's loss than did a surge in white turnout.<sup>7</sup> All in all, those who believe racism propelled Trump's ascension to the presidency need to construct an argument that explains how racism

6 Only 4 percent of whites who voted for Romney in 2012 switched to Clinton in 2016.

7 Early reports suggest that turnout increased among rural voters in some key states. So in, say, Michigan, where Clinton lost by less than 11,000 votes, turnout could have made the difference, *other things being equal*. Failure of minorities to turn out at Obama-election levels also could have made the difference, as could defections among white Obama voters. Also, to repeat a point made earlier, a shift of a few thousand votes near the 50 percent line can produce major consequences without indicating a major shift in popular sentiment.

8 Despite the misleading title, one very preliminary analysis using a widely used measure of racism reported that Trump voters scored slightly *lower* on the scale than Romney voters. Thomas Wood, "Racism Motivated Trump Voters More than Authoritarianism," *Washington Post*, April 17, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/04/17/racism-motivated-trump-voters-more-than-authoritarianism-or-income-inequality/>.

9 Jens Manuel Krogstad and Mark Hugo Lopez, "Hillary Clinton Won Latino Vote but Fell Below 2012 Support for Obama," Pew Research Center, November 29, 2016, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/29/hillary-clinton-wins-latino-vote-but-falls-below-2012-support-for-obama/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/29/hillary-clinton-wins-latino-vote-but-falls-below-2012-support-for-obama/).

polls that Trump received only 21 percent of the Latino vote in 2016.<sup>10</sup> The exit polls and Latino Decisions reported nearly identical results in 2012, however, when both were presumably using the same methodologies as in 2016, so it is unclear why they would disagree in 2016 but not in 2012. A ABC News/*Washington Post* poll tracking poll conducted November 3–6 reported a figure (25 percent) halfway between the exit polls and Latino Decisions, as did the *Economist/YouGov* poll. Still other analyses support the exit poll figures, concluding that Trump did marginally better with Latinos than did Romney.<sup>11</sup>

Polling minority groups is difficult, as the previous conflicting studies suggest, so the exact Latino vote in 2016 will never be known. But at a minimum, and surprisingly, the aspersions Trump cast on Latinos during the campaign did not seem to put him at a significantly bigger disadvantage among that demographic than other Republicans since George W. Bush experienced.<sup>12</sup> Any additional negative associations attached to Trump appear to have been partially offset by other considerations among Latinos.

## Gender

If it is difficult to make a convincing case that racism and ethnocentrism played an unusually prominent role in the 2016 voting, sexism provides an obvious alternative explanation.<sup>13</sup> Some analysts conclude that gender bias was an important component of support for Trump.<sup>14</sup> Nearly all polls reported that a majority of women intended to vote for Clinton whereas a majority of men generally supported Trump, and the gender gap among actual voters in the exit polls was 14 percent. But as Burden,

10 Gabriel Sanchez and Matt A. Barreto, “In Record Numbers, Latinos Voted Overwhelmingly against Trump. We Did the Research,” *Washington Post*, November 11, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/11/11/in-record-numbers-latinos-voted-overwhelmingly-against-trump-we-did-the-research/>.

11 Harry Enten, “Trump Probably Did Better with Latino Voters than Romney Did,” *FiveThirtyEight*, November 18, 2016, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/trump-probably-did-better-with-latino-voters-than-romney-did/>.

12 For a useful compilation of polling on Latino voting going back to 1960, see Alvaro Corral, David L. Leal, and Joe Tafoya, “Introduction: The 2008 Primary and General Election Campaign,” in *Latinos and the 2008 Elections: Can You Hear Us Now?* ed. David L. Leal, Rodolfo de la Garza, and Louis DeSipio (forthcoming).

13 In common usage, misogyny is the stronger term, implying hatred of women. Sexism is less hostile, even at times perhaps “benevolent.” Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, “The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating Hostile and Benevolent Sexism,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 3 (1996): 491–512.

14 Carly Wayne, Nicholas Valentino, and Marzia Oceno, “How Sexism Drives Support for Donald Trump,” *Washington Post*, October 23, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/10/23/how-sexism-drives-support-for-donald-trump/>.



**Table 11.2. The Gender Gap in 2016**

	<i>Clinton</i>	<i>Trump</i>
Black Women	90%	3
Black Men	83	13
Latino Women	70	23
Latino Men	62	26
White Women	42	51
White Men	31	60

**Source:**  
*Economist/YouGov Panel*

Crawford, and DeCrescenzo caution, “this disparity between the sexes is larger than gaps observed in previous elections, but not by much. It is only three points larger than the gap in 2012 and just two points larger than it was in 2000.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, *women’s* support for Clinton was slightly *lower* than their support for Obama in both 2008 and 2012 (men were lower still). Table 11.2 lists the figures for various subgroups of men and women in the *Economist/YouGov* panel. Black and Latino women voted very heavily for Clinton, a bit more than black and Latino men. White

women also voted more heavily for Clinton than men did. Such figures are consistent with the existence of sexism, but they are fairly typical of recent elections and not significantly larger, which we would expect if sexism were an especially important factor in 2016. Moreover, a majority of white women voted for Trump. Does it make sense to conclude that a majority of white women are sexist? Some commentators say yes—women are victims of false consciousness, as Marxists used to say.<sup>16</sup>

An alternative view is that most women have multiple identities, some of which are more important than their identities as feminists. The popular stereotype (probably promoted more by critics than sympathizers) holds that identification as a feminist is most prevalent among single, white women who are college educated, working full time, and economically secure.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, feminist identity would rank lower

15 Barry C. Burden, Evan Crawford, and Michael G. DeCrescenzo, “The Unexceptional Gender Gap of 2016,” *De Gruyter* 14, no. 4 (December 2016), <https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/for.2016.14.issue-4/for-2016-0039/for-2016-0039.pdf>.

16 In a letter to the editor, a leader of a liberal women’s group wrote condescendingly, “I still find it shocking that women could excuse a presidential candidate whose own demeaning and offensive recorded words were not sufficient to prevent them from voting for him. It must be a reflection of very low self-esteem.” Marcia Herman, “Paths for Feminism after the Election,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2017.

17 Surprisingly, there does not seem to be an extensive descriptive literature on who adopts the feminist identity. Rating “feminists” higher on the ANES feeling thermometer is significantly associated with being female, of course, and also college educated, especially postgraduate education, unmarried, especially never married, and age (over fifty). Although statistically significant, these relationships are substantively weak. Melody Rodriguez, “Women United: Feminist Identification as Measured by ANES Data,” unpublished seminar paper, Stanford University.

among married white women with children (especially male children), without college degrees, whose lives are economically stressed and/or insecure. As Tina Brown writes, “The angry white working class men who voted in such strength for Trump do not live in an emotional vacuum. They are loved by white working class women—their wives, daughters, sisters and mothers, who participate in their remaindered pain.”<sup>18</sup>

Political science studies are not unanimous, but some solid empirical research concludes that sexism is not a major factor when female candidates run for election.<sup>19</sup> And, as discussed in essay no. 10, in the case of Hillary Clinton sexism must compete with other explanations for voting against her, most prominently the perception that she was an untrustworthy, inauthentic candidate. As political scientist Jennifer Lawless commented, “People have vehement reactions to her in one direction or another, and have for 20 years. So I’ve often said that if people are fundamentally opposed to her, I’m not convinced that it’s sexism; it could be ‘Clinton-ism.’”<sup>20</sup>

How can we account for the apparent absence of strong and unambiguous evidence for an increased racial, ethnic, and gender dimension in the 2016 voting, when so many commentators view these as important—if not the most important—explanations of the 2016 voting? Earlier essays, especially essay no. 5, provide part of the answer. The priorities of the political class and normal voters differ considerably. Surveys show that issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation are more important for the former than the latter, especially among educated, affluent liberals.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, liberal activists

---

18 In a further comment that caused considerable outrage, Brown added, “There are more tired wives who want to be Melania sitting by the pool in designer sunglasses than there are women who want to pursue a PhD in earnest self-improvement. And there are more young women who see the smartness and modernity of Ivanka as the ultimate polished specimen of blonde branded content they want to buy.” Many comments on Brown’s article were “removed by a moderator because it didn’t abide by our community standards.” Tina Brown, “My Beef over Hillary Clinton’s Loss is with Liberal Feminists, Young and Old,” *The Guardian*, November 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/12/hillary-clinton-liberal-feminists>.

19 Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless, *Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

20 Linda Feldmann, “Hillary Clinton’s Challenge: Sexism or ‘Clinton-ism?’” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 30, 2015, [www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2015/0930/Hillary-Clinton-s-challenge-Sexism-or-Clinton-ism](http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2015/0930/Hillary-Clinton-s-challenge-Sexism-or-Clinton-ism).

21 Various referred to as “limousine liberals” or “gentry liberals” in recognition of their prioritization of nonmaterial issues. Joel Kotkin and Fred Siegel, “The Gentry Liberals,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 2007, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/dec/02/opinion/op-kotkin2>.





are quick to see racism and sexism at work (i.e., “dog whistles”) where less politically involved people see more innocent explanations. Mainstream journalists and media commentators are part of the political class and so tend to share these tendencies.

### What Happened to the RAE?

Essay no. 6 discussed what political commentators variously refer to as the Rising American Electorate, the New American Majority, or the Coalition of the Ascendant—the notion that demographic trends are inexorably moving the country in a Democratic direction.<sup>22</sup> Such trends suggested that the “Obama coalition” would only grow larger in the coming decades. Most importantly, projections from birth rates indicated that the country would become majority-minority by 2044; Latinos in particular would become an increasingly large proportion of the electorate.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, declining marriage rates suggested that the number of single working women would increase and rising educational levels indicated that the voting power of socially liberal young college graduates would grow. To some Democrats these trends suggested that majority party status was inevitable. The only question was: How soon?

I noted possible problems with the RAE thesis in essay no. 6. First, it depended on two critical *ceteris paribus* assumptions. The first was that the groups rising in number would maintain or even strengthen their Democratic allegiances. But over the span of decades a group’s political allegiances can change. Catholics, for example, were heavily Democratic before 1968, less so afterwards. As a group’s cultural or economic positions change, its political positions follow. Moreover, the parties can reorient their platforms. If demographic trends are working against a party—Republican in this case—one should expect that eventually the party will change its platform to meet the challenge. Of course, given Donald Trump’s position on immigration and his remarks about women, there is no indication as yet that such a Republican reorientation is under way.

A second assumption was that emphasis on the RAE would not cause a loss of support among whites who came to see the Democratic Party as representing the interests of other racial and ethnic groups at the expense of whites. The 2016 voting may have

---

22 Ronald Brownstein, “The Clinton Conundrum,” *Atlantic*, April 17, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/the-clinton-conundrum/431949/>.

23 US Census Bureau. Using a narrower definition, the Pew Research Center pushes the date of a majority-minority country further out to 2055.



demonstrated the fragility of this assumption. As David Dayen comments, “Democrats comforted themselves with the emergence of a new majority of women, Latinos, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, gays and lesbians, immigrants, and Muslims. . . . placing such a big bet on so fragile a coalition looks to have been unwise. It left behind people who voted twice for Obama in the process.”<sup>24</sup>

More recently, demographers have pointed out a more fundamental problem: census figures exaggerate the most important demographic trend underlying the RAE thesis—the growth in minorities. The definition used by the US Census Bureau maximizes the number of minority group members by classifying anyone who does not have two Anglo-white parents as a minority.<sup>25</sup> But interracial and interethnic marriage rates have risen sharply and are expected to continue to do so. Research to date indicates that some of the children of such marriages will identify as white, and few of them consider their mixed-race heritage a disadvantage.<sup>26</sup> So the future proportion of Americans who identify as minority rather than white is lower than common calculations indicate. Consequently, how much the increasing diversity of the country will produce increasing support for the Democrats is even more uncertain than the first two assumptions suggest.<sup>27</sup>

### **Class Conflict: The Revolt of the Masses?<sup>28</sup>**

No election in recent decades has seen so much attention paid to the “working class.” Accelerating with the splintering of the Democratic Party in the mid- to late 1960s, the importance of social class as an electoral cleavage slipped behind cleavages based on race and ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.<sup>29</sup> But for many commentators—on both sides of the political spectrum—the 2016 election witnessed

<sup>24</sup> David Dayen, “The ‘Deplorables’ Got the Last Laugh,” *New Republic*, November 9, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/138615/deplorables-got-last-laugh>.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Alba, “The Likely Persistence of a White Majority,” *American Prospect*, January 11, 2016, <http://prospect.org/article/likely-persistence-white-majority-0>.

<sup>26</sup> “Multiracial in America,” Pew Research Center, June 11, 2015, [www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/06/11/multiracial-in-america/](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/06/11/multiracial-in-america/).

<sup>27</sup> For the most comprehensive study of mixed-race Americans, see Lauren Davenport, *Politics Beyond Black and White: Multiracial Identity and Attitudes in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>28</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1932).

<sup>29</sup> Despite popular perceptions, the importance of income as an electoral cleavage did not decrease during this period. If anything, it increased. See Morris P. Fiorina, with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2010), 135–38.



a revolt of the masses. *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni writes, “The arc of this election has been one of disillusionment, bending toward disarray. Trump’s initial window of opportunity was so many Americans’ belief that Washington, Wall Street and the media had been irredeemably corrupted by self-interested elites.”<sup>30</sup> On the other side of the political spectrum, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Peggy Noonan writes about those whom she calls the “protected”:

The protected make public policy. The unprotected live in it. The unprotected are starting to push back, powerfully. . . . [The protected] are figures in government, politics and media. They live in nice neighborhoods, safe ones. Their families function, their kids go to good schools, they’ve got some money. All of these things tend to isolate them, or provide buffers.<sup>31</sup>

Antielitism has a long history in the United States, of course, more so than in some European countries like Britain where the “upper” classes historically had been accorded “deference.” Essay no. 9 discussed the contemporary recurrence of a number of the social and economic dislocations the United States experienced in the late nineteenth-century populist era. Antielitism then focused on economic elites—the trusts, the moneyed interests, those who (in presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan’s words) “would crucify mankind on a cross of gold.” And it was only a short move from there to an attack on the politicians who were controlled by the economic elites.

In the contemporary era, the crash of 2008 precipitated the Great Recession. Irresponsible and even fraudulent financial practices were all too apparent, but economic elites responsible for them paid only a token price. Then Treasury secretary Tim Geithner may be correct in asserting that the bailouts were necessary to save the economy, but it was not necessary for him to pressure AIG to pay off Goldman-Sachs 100 cents on the dollar, then to pressure Attorney General Eric Holder to quash criminal indictments in the HSBC case.<sup>32</sup> The bailouts and resulting deficits

---

30 Frank Bruni, “Why this Election Terrifies Me,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/06/opinion/sunday/why-this-election-terrifies-me.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/06/opinion/sunday/why-this-election-terrifies-me.html?_r=0).

31 Peggy Noonan, “Trump and the Rise of the Unprotected,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 25, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-and-the-rise-of-the-unprotected-1456448550>.

32 Michael Corkery, “AIG Bailout Keeps Dogging Tim Geithner,” *Deal Journal* (blog), *Wall Street Journal*, January 7, 2010, <http://blogs.wsj.com/deals/2010/01/07/aig-bailout-keeps-dogging-tim-geithner/>; William K. Black, “The Second Great Betrayal: Obama and Cameron Decide that Banks Are Above the Law,”

contributed to the rise of the Tea Party and then the Democratic Party's electoral debacle in 2010.

The status quo election of 2012 may have suggested that the populist moment had passed, but the 2016 campaigns suggest otherwise. Popular resentment seemed to shift its focus away from economic elites and more in the direction of political elites who had failed to control or even abetted the actions of economic elites. Bernie Sanders and Trump attacked outsourcing, free trade agreements, tax provisions, and other economic policies supported by both parties that hurt some Americans. Sanders charged that the Democratic Party had become too dependent on Wall Street for financing, with resultant inattention to the economic distress experienced by many Americans. The establishments in both parties attempted to squelch the Sanders and Trump insurgencies—successfully in the case of Sanders, failing completely in the case of Trump—but in both cases reinforcing the grievances of their supporters and adding to the perception that party leaders were allied to a corrupt status quo. Some commentators, including *Washington Post* writer Marc Fisher, see this as the fertile soil in which Trumpism grew:

Trump ran against the elites and won. . . . He defined the election as a people's uprising against all the institutions that had let them down and sneered at them—the politicians and the parties, the Washington establishment, the news media, Hollywood, academia, all of the affluent, highly educated sectors of society that had done well during the time when middle-class families were losing their bearings.

. . .

All he had to do, he said, was connect directly to the pains, fears and frustrations of a nation that had been smacked around by globalization, terrorism, rapid demographic change, and a technological revolution that enriched and enraptured the kids with the stratospheric SAT scores, but left millions of Americans watching their jobs fall victim to the latest apps, overseas outsourcing, robots, and a stunning shift in the nature of commerce and community.<sup>33</sup>

---

*New Economic Perspectives*, December 17, 2012, <http://neweconomicperspectives.org/2012/12/the-second-great-betrayal-obama-and-cameron-decide-that-banks-are-above-the-law.html>.

33 Marc Fisher, "How Donald Trump Broke the Old Rules of Politics—and Won the White House," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-donald-trump-broke-the-old-rules-of-politics—and-won-the-white-house/2016/11/09/f3190498-a5e1-11e6-8fc0-7be8f848c492\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-donald-trump-broke-the-old-rules-of-politics—and-won-the-white-house/2016/11/09/f3190498-a5e1-11e6-8fc0-7be8f848c492_story.html).



As such charges indicate, the notion of “elites” today has broadened to include cultural elites—people who work in academia, the professions, the entertainment industry, the media, and the higher levels of government, most of whom have advanced educations, if not always exceptional incomes. This appears to be something relatively new, perhaps because the cultural elite a century ago likely would have been a subset of the small economic elite. Most Americans then engaged in manual rather than mental labor and very few went to college—few Americans even graduated from high school, let alone college.<sup>34</sup>

The first indications of a backlash against cultural elites became apparent in the 1960s with the third-party candidacy of George Wallace. The economy was fine and for a time only got better as the Vietnam War ramped up, but racial disorders and the rise of the counterculture made the “pointy headed intellectuals” who excused them a target. So were anarchists, a “catch-all term that could mean students, liberals, the press, militants, etc., depending on the occasion.” In an eerie foreshadowing of Trump’s rhetoric, Wallace threatened, “I want to say that anarchists—and I am talking about newsmen sometimes—I want to say—I want to make that announcement to you because we regard that the people of this country are sick and tired of, and they are gonna get rid of you—anarchists.”<sup>35</sup>

The spread of mass education (today about 30 percent of the over-twenty-five population has a bachelor’s degree) and other social and economic developments have spawned a large upper-middle class whose tastes and lifestyles often differ from those lower on the economic ladder. Although they generally deny it, many of those in the new class feel a degree of condescension or disdain for the middle and lower-middle-class people who populate the heartland.<sup>36</sup> As Andrew Sullivan writes:

---

34 US Census Bureau, “A Century of Change: America, 1900-1999,” <https://msu.edu/~bsilver/pls440/century.html>.

35 Quotations from Marianne Worthington, “The Campaign Rhetoric of George Wallace in the 1968 Presidential Election,” [www.ucumberlands.edu/downloads/academics/history/vol4/MarianneWorthington92.html](http://www.ucumberlands.edu/downloads/academics/history/vol4/MarianneWorthington92.html).

36 Yes, this is a subjective judgment by someone who grew up in the epicenter of Trump country but has been fortunate to live life as one of Noonan’s “protecteds.” See also Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996); Christopher Hayes, *Twilight of the Elites: America after Meritocracy* (New York: Broadway, 2012); and Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Much of the newly energized left has come to see the white working class not as allies but primarily as bigots, misogynists, racists, and homophobes, thereby condemning those often at the near-bottom rung of the economy to the bottom rung of the culture as well. . . . They [the white working class] smell the condescension and the broad generalizations about them—all of which would be repellent if directed at racial minorities.<sup>37</sup>

The 2016 election gave such people the opportunity to strike back.<sup>38</sup>

As suggested in essay no. 10, the mainstream media's strong opposition to Donald Trump may well have helped him. Much more than in earlier decades, today's media are concentrated in the wealthiest locales in America. New York is not on the list of cities bypassed by the recovery and the Washington, DC, area is recession proof in addition to being wealthy.<sup>39</sup> Why should condemnation of Trump by such fortunate people carry any weight with voters living in Michigan or Pennsylvania?<sup>40</sup> And did Democratic elites really think so little of such Americans to believe that Katy Perry,

---

37 Andrew Sullivan, "Democracies End When They Are Too Democratic. And Right Now, America is a Breeding Ground for Tyranny," *New York* magazine, May 1, 2016, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/04/america-tyranny-donald-trump.html>.

38 Another indication of cultural condescension was the spate of articles, many barely rising above the psychobabble level, explaining that loss of social status among white men led them to support Trump. After the election, blogger Glenn Reynolds suggested that the furious reaction to Trump's victory indicated that the shoe had been transferred to the other foot—educated supporters of Clinton now were the ones suffering status anxiety: "Now that Trump has won, people are, in fact, a lot less respectful of the traditional academic and media and political elites. Trump didn't just beat them, after all. He also humiliated them, as they repeatedly assured everyone (and each other) that he had no chance. It's a huge blow to the self-importance of a lot of people. No wonder they're still lashing out." Glenn Reynolds, "New Status Anxiety Fuels Trump Derangement," *USA Today*, January 5, 2017, [www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/01/05/gentry-liberals-trump-college-campuses-elite-glenn-reynolds-column/96155458/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/01/05/gentry-liberals-trump-college-campuses-elite-glenn-reynolds-column/96155458/).

39 Jack Shafer and Tucker Doherty, "The Media Bubble is Worse than You Think," *Politico*, May/June 2017, [www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/25/media-bubble-real-journalism-jobs-east-coast-215048](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/25/media-bubble-real-journalism-jobs-east-coast-215048).

40 The elite media seemed to take a surprisingly long time to recognize this. After Trump had been in office nearly a month, Chris Cillizza wrote, "Trump understands something very important: For his supporters, the media represent everything they dislike about American society. The media is composed, to their mind, of Ivy-League-educated coastal elites who look down their noses at the average person, dismissing them and their views as stupid and ill-informed. For people who feel like their voices weren't and aren't heard in politics—or culture more broadly—the media is the perfect scapegoat." Duh! Chris Cillizza, "Donald Trump Delivers a Series of Raw and Personal Attacks on the Media in a News Conference for the Ages," *Washington Post*, February 16, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/16/donald-trump-delivers-a-series-of-raw-and-wild-attacks-on-the-media-in-a-press-conference-for-the-ages/?utm\\_term=.875b89150fcf](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/16/donald-trump-delivers-a-series-of-raw-and-wild-attacks-on-the-media-in-a-press-conference-for-the-ages/?utm_term=.875b89150fcf).



Beyoncé, and Madonna would sway their votes?<sup>41</sup> *The Atlantic's* Caitlin Flanagan made an intriguing argument that even the heavily anti-Trump tenor of late-night comedy shows actually helped Trump:

Though aimed at blue-state sophisticates, these shows are an unintended but powerful form of propaganda for conservatives. When Republicans see these harsh jokes—which echo down through the morning news shows and the chattering day's worth of viral clips, along with those of Jimmy Kimmel, Stephen Colbert, and Seth Meyers—they don't just see a handful of comics mocking them. They see HBO, Comedy Central, TBS, ABC, CBS, and NBC. In other words, they see exactly what Donald Trump has taught them: that the entire media landscape loathes them, their values, their family, and their religion. It is hardly a reach for them to further imagine that the legitimate news shows on these channels are run by similarly partisan players—nor is it at all illogical. No wonder so many of Trump's followers are inclined to believe only the things that he or his spokespeople tell them directly—everyone else on the tube thinks they're a bunch of trailer-park, Oxy-snorting half-wits who divide their time between retweeting Alex Jones fantasies and ironing their Klan hoods.<sup>42</sup>

People who enjoy elite status tend to lose touch with the interests and concerns of nonelites. Progressive Mike Gecan writes, “Many Dems either don't know how to relate to people with moderate or mixed views or they don't want to. They prefer rock stars and celebrities to bus drivers and food service workers. They like cute sayings and clever picket signs, not long and patient listening sessions with people who have complicated interests, people who might not pass the liberal litmus test.”<sup>43</sup> In a similar vein, the rant by former MSNBC commentator Krystal Ball is worth quoting at length:

---

41 One poll of Ohio voters found that celebrity endorsements could be harmful to candidates' support. Beyoncé's endorsement made 20 percent of voters less likely to vote for Clinton and Lena Dunham's endorsement made 12 percent of voters less likely to vote for Clinton. On the other side, Ted Nugent's endorsement made 13 percent of voters less likely to vote for Trump. “The BGSU Poll,” Bowling Green State University, [www.bgsu.edu/bgsupoll](http://www.bgsu.edu/bgsupoll).

42 Caitlin Flanagan, “How Late-Night Comedy Fueled the Rise of Trump,” *Atlantic*, May 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/05/how-late-night-comedy-alienated-conservatives-made-liberals-smug-and-fueled-the-rise-of-trump/521472/>.

43 Mike Gecan, “How Democrats are Getting Played,” *New York Daily News*, February 2, 2017, [www.nydailynews.com/opinion/democrats-played-article-1.2961872](http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/democrats-played-article-1.2961872). Gecan is co-director of the progressive Industrial Areas Foundation.

They said they were facing an economic apocalypse, we offered “retraining” and complained about their white privilege. Is it any wonder we lost? One after another, the dispatches came back from the provinces. The coal mines are gone, the steel mills are closed, the drugs are rampant, the towns are decimated and everywhere you look depression, despair, fear. In the face of Trump’s willingness to boldly proclaim without facts or evidence that he would bring the good times back, we offered a tepid gallows logic. Well, those jobs are actually gone for good, we knowingly told them. And we offered a fantastical non-solution. We will retrain you for good jobs! Never mind that these “good jobs” didn’t exist in East Kentucky or Cleveland. And as a final insult, we lectured a struggling people watching their kids die of drug overdoses about their white privilege. Can you blame them for calling bullshit? All Trump could offer was white nationalism as protection against competing with black and brown people. It wasn’t a very compelling case, but it was vastly superior to a candidate who enthusiastically backed NAFTA, seems most at ease in a room of Goldman Sachs bankers and was almost certain to do nothing for these towns other than maybe setting up a local chapter of Rednecks Who Code.<sup>44</sup>

While recent political commentary suggests the importance of sentiments like those expressed in the preceding quotations, evidence needed to evaluate them is hard to come by—surveys include measures of racism and sexism, however imperfect—but to my knowledge our major databases include few time series measures of class identity or resentment.<sup>45</sup> Blunt indicators—education, income, occupation— are the measures most commonly used by those who study class.

In the aftermath of the election, political commentary emphasized the divide between the college educated and those with no degrees. The exit polls reported that college graduates cast a majority for Clinton, nongraduates a majority for Trump. White college graduates cast a narrow plurality for Trump, however, as female graduates cast a majority for Clinton and men for Trump. The *Economist*/YouGov panel study allows a finer breakdown (table 11.3) that reveals some additional significant nuances. The common observation that among whites only women college graduates cast a majority

---

44 Krystal Ball, “The Democratic Party Deserved to Die,” *Huffington Post*, November 10, 2016.

45 The major exception is the GSS item “subjective class identification,” which I am currently analyzing. Recognizing the (hypothesized) reemergence of class cleavages, the 2016 ANES does include class measures, but the absence of such measures in past surveys hinders our capacity to understand the contribution of class to the 2016 election. For a good discussion of the myriad issues surrounding the study of class differences in voting, see Jeffrey M. Stonecash, “The Puzzle of Class in Presidential Voting,” *The Forum* 15 (2017): 29–49.





**Table 11.3. Class Voting in 2016 (whites only)**

	<i>Clinton</i>	<i>Trump</i>	<i>n</i>
Men—High School	15%	80	192
Women—High School	26	69	328
Men Some College	26	63	391
Women Some College	37	53	497
Men College Grad	35	55	348
Women College Grad	46	49	353
Men Postgrad	45	48	235
Women Postgrad	58	36	231

**Source:**  
*Economist/YouGov Panel*

for Clinton overlooks an important distinction: Hillary Clinton at best broke even among white women with only four-year degrees; only among postgraduate women do we find majority support for Clinton. Interestingly, despite the attention focused on less-educated whites, the gender gap if anything is largest among those with postgraduate degrees, where men broke evenly or even slightly for Trump. The sobering reality for the Democratic Party is that it did not just have a problem with white working

class men in 2016; it appears to have lost the white middle class—men and women—as well, albeit more narrowly.

### A Final Thought

During the campaign, Trump made a number of highly implausible claims: he would build a great wall between the United States and Mexico, which Mexico would pay for; he would deport 11 million illegal immigrants. Such claims were ridiculed by the mainstream media who jumped to the conclusion that anyone who supported Trump on the basis of his campaign promises must be a gullible yahoo. But I think that Trump-country journalist Salena Zito got it right in one of the most frequently quoted comments of the campaign: “When he makes claims like this, the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally.”<sup>46</sup> Polls showed that voters did not really expect Trump to carry out his more outlandish promises.<sup>47</sup> Apparently, though, they were not put off by the direction he wanted the country to take.

46 Salena Zito, “Taking Trump Seriously, Not Literally,” September 23, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/trump-makes-his-case-in-pittsburgh/501335/>.

47 In an early-September ABC News/*Washington Post* poll, 76 percent of respondents said they did not believe Trump would build the wall and make Mexico pay for it. And polls showed that even a majority of Trump voters did not favor deporting all undocumented immigrants.

Such sentiments suggest that political scientists might take another look at a controversial theory—directional voting. Briefly, standard models of electoral competition assume proximity voting—a citizen votes for the candidate closer to her on the issues. The directional voting theory holds that between two candidates on opposite sides of the neutral point (or status quo), citizens vote for a candidate on the same side as they are, even if the candidate’s promise far overshoots the voter’s own position.<sup>48</sup> A voter on the right (left) prefers any candidate on the right (left) so long as the candidate’s position stays within some broad “range of acceptability.” While the argument sounds implausible at first, one could motivate it by positing that citizens understand that they are not voting for a dictator. No matter what the president wants to do, his actual achievements in a system of shared powers with checks and balances inevitably will fall short. Hence, voters far more moderate than Trump on immigration, the environment, LGBT issues, and so on might still support him because they estimate that his administration’s results will likely move the status quo toward them rather than away from them. Earlier studies report inconclusive empirical support for the theory, but 2016 may offer a favorable context in which to revisit it.<sup>49</sup>

---

48 Steven A. Matthews, “A Simple Direction Model of Electoral Competition,” *Public Choice* 34 (1979): 141–156; George Rabinowitz and Stuart Elaine Macdonald, “A Directional Theory of Issue Voting,” *American Political Science Review* 83, no. 1 (March 1989): 93–121.

49 Jeffrey B. Lewis and Gary King, “No Evidence on Directional vs. Proximity Voting,” *Political Analysis* 8, no. 1 (1999): 21–33.





### *Essay Series*

*An Era of Tenuous Majorities: A Historical Context*

*Has the American Public Polarized?*

*The Political Parties Have Sorted*

*Party Sorting and Democratic Politics*

*The Temptation to Overreach*

*Independents: The Marginal Members of an Electoral Majority*

*The (Re)Nationalization of Congressional Elections*

*Is the US Experience Exceptional?*

*A Historical Perspective*

*The 2016 Election—An Abundance of Controversies*

*The 2016 Presidential Election—Identities, Class and Culture, Issues*



The publisher has made this work available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial license 3.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0>.

Hoover Institution Press assumes no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Copyright © 2017 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University



## About the Author



### MORRIS P. FIORINA

Morris Fiorina is the Wendt Family Professor of Political Science at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. For more than four decades he has written on American politics with particular emphasis on elections and public opinion. Fiorina has written or edited twelve books and more than 100 articles, served as chairman of the Board of the American National Election Studies, and received the Warren E. Miller Career Achievement Award from the American Political Science Association Section on Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Behavior. His widely noted book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (with Samuel Abrams and Jeremy Pope) is thought to have influenced then Illinois state senator Barack Obama's keynote speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention ("We coach Little League in the blue states, and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states").

## Series Overview

In contrast to most of modern American political history, partisan control of our national elective institutions has been unusually tenuous during the past several decades. This essay series argues that the ideologically sorted parties that contest elections today face strong internal pressures to overreach, by which I mean emphasizing issues and advocating positions strongly supported by the party base but which cause the marginal members of their electoral coalitions to defect. Thus, electoral losses predictably follow electoral victories. Institutional control is fleeting.

The first group of essays describes the contemporary American electorate. Despite myriad claims to the contrary, the data show that the electorate is no more polarized now than it was in the later decades of the twentieth century. What has happened is that the parties have sorted so that each party is more homogeneous than in the twentieth century; liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats have largely passed from the political scene. The muddled middle is as large as ever but has no home in either party. The growth in the proportion of self-identified independents may be a reflection of the limited appeal of today's sorted parties.

The second group of essays develops the overreach argument, discusses the role of independents as the marginal members of an electoral majority, and explains how party sorting produces less split-ticket voting. Rather than most voters being more set in their partisan allegiances than a generation ago, they may simply have less reason to split their tickets when almost all Democratic candidates are liberals and all Republican candidates are conservatives.

The third group of essays embeds contemporary American politics in two other contexts. First, in a comparative context, developments in the European democracies are the mirror image of those in the United States: the major European parties have depolarized or de-sorted or both, whereas their national electorates show little change. The rise of anti-immigrant parties may have some as yet not well-understood role in these developments. Second, in a historical context, the instability of American majorities today resembles that of the late nineteenth century, when similar significant social and economic changes were occurring.

Two final postelection essays will wrap up the series.

---

These essays naturally draw on the work of many people who have contributed to a very active research program. I thank colleagues John Aldrich, Douglas Ahler, Paul Beck, Bruce Cain, James Campbell, Shanto Iyengar, Matthew Levendusky, Sandy Maisel, Paul Sniderman, and Guarav Sood, whose questions forced me to sharpen various arguments; and David Brady in particular for almost daily conversations about the matters covered in the posts that follow.