

Pointing Fingers Over Trump's Victory

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As the reality of Donald J. Trump's victory in the Nov. 8 presidential election sets in, Democrats and progressives have been trading accusations over who - or what - may have led to this historic electoral defeat.

For progressives who backed Vermont's independent Sen. Bernie Sanders in the primaries, the culprit is clearly the Democratic Party establishment, led by the likes of former Democratic National Committee chairwoman Debbie Wasserman-Shultz and current interim DNC chair Donna Brazile, who they blame for stacking the deck against their candidate and ensuring Hillary Clinton's nomination - despite her considerable baggage heading into the election.



Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. (Photos by Gage Skidmore and derivative by Krassotkin, Wikipedia)

These progressives point to Clinton's [historically low](#) favorability ratings in national polls, and the fact that in a hypothetical one-one-one match-up between Trump and Sanders, polling data [showed](#) early on that Sanders would have likely defeated Trump easily. Trump himself seemed to understand the advantage Sanders had over him in a possible general election contest, [tweeting](#) in May 2016 that he "would rather run against Crooked Hillary Clinton than Bernie Sanders and that will happen because the books are cooked against Bernie!"

Among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, Sanders was clearly more liked, even as Clinton wrapped up the nomination last summer. Gallup polling found in June 2016 that Sanders held 70 percent favorable and 18 percent unfavorable ratings among Democratic voters, while Clinton was seen favorably by 67 percent and unfavorably by 28 percent. In the aftermath of Trump's victory - assisted by the [lowest voter turnout](#) in 20 years - some have argued that enthusiasm for Sanders could have pushed the Democrats to

victory in key swing states that ultimately went to Trump.

To back up these claims, the progressive website *USUncut* [pointed out](#) on Nov. 10 that in five states that Sanders won in the primaries - Indiana, Michigan, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Wisconsin - the exit polling data indicated that the demographic groups that helped Trump reach 270 electoral college votes were also Sanders's key demographics.

"Assuming that Sanders won white, rural rust belt voters in the traditionally blue states that Hillary Clinton lost," Sanders would have won the Electoral College [with a 303-235 advantage](#), according to this analysis.

Yet, while progressives blame the Democratic establishment for pushing an unpopular nominee - who was saddled by a federal investigation into her use of a private email server while Secretary of State, questions related to the ethics of her collecting sizable speaking fees from Wall Street firms, and suspicions over the Clinton Foundation's dealings with foreign governments - establishment Democrats have been largely placing the blame on progressives for failing to unite behind Clinton.

Some commentators have pointed fingers at voters who decided to buck the two-party system and cast a ballot for the Green Party's Jill Stein or the Libertarian Party's Gary Johnson while others have assigned blame to Sanders for daring to mount a primary challenge against Clinton in the first place.

This was the argument of Prof. Gil Troy, who [wrote](#) at *Time Magazine* on Nov. 14 that "Senator Bernie Sanders earned the 2016 'Ralph Nader Award' for the Leftist Most Responsible for Helping Republicans Win the Presidency."

While acknowledging that Trump "cleverly exploited voters' frustrations" and that "Clinton's campaign in 2016 was as rigid and empty as it was when she lost in 2008," Troy nevertheless argues that Sanders' insurgent primary campaign "pushed her too far left to prevent an effective re-centering in the fall."

Troy offers few facts or polling data to back up these claims, instead making broad-based assertions such as "just as Ralph Nader siphoned tens of thousands of votes on Election Day 2000 in Florida from Al Gore, causing the deadlock and George W. Bush's victory, Bernie Sanders' similar vampire effect enfeebled Hillary Clinton."

According to this view, even running a progressive primary election challenge - much less a third-party campaign - is dangerously unacceptable, creating a so-called "vampire effect" that "siphons votes" that rightfully belong to someone else.

The Spoiler Effect

While Sanders remains the target of some criticism for costing the Democrats the election, the real vitriol is leveled at third parties and their supporters.



Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Florida.

According to Eichenwald, the man, who had recognized the pundit from his television appearances, thanked him for his reporting on Trump and expressed disgust that Trump had won. Eichenwald then asked the fan who he had voted for. The man stated that he voted for Green Party nominee Jill Stein, to which Eichenwald replied: “You’re lucky it’s illegal for me to punch you in the face.” According to his account of the interaction, Eichenwald then told his fan to go “have sex with himself.” Typical was the reaction of *Newsweek* senior writer Kurt Eichenwald, who [published](#) an account of an encounter he had with a fan in the Philadelphia International Airport following the election. The individual had approached Eichenwald to praise his work but nearly ended up the victim of a physical assault.

As anyone who has ever voted for a party other than the Democrats or Republicans can attest, this is a pretty familiar reaction. In the United States’ winner-take-all electoral system, a vote for anyone outside of the two main parties is seen as a “wasted vote” that could “spoil” the election, and those who make this decision risk professional and social ostracism.

In this system, third-party voters are vilified to an extent not seen for any other voting demographic – including nonvoters who in fact account for a far greater share of the electorate, and therefore have a much bigger effect in swinging the election.

Yet, this has not stopped many pundits and social media users from piling blame onto supporters of Stein or Johnson, who are deemed reckless and irresponsible for so frivolously casting a ballot for candidates who had no chance of winning – or worse yet, as personally culpable for Trump’s victory and all the disastrous policies that might follow.

“If you vote for somebody who can’t win for president, it means that you don’t care who wins for president,” [opined](#) MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow on Election Night. She later elaborated on this wasted-vote theory, tweeting about a [fanciful](#) scenario in which every Stein vote and half of Johnson’s votes would have gone to Clinton, who might have then claimed enough states from Trump to eke out an Electoral College win, a story repeated by [CNN](#).

In a similar vein, columnist Paul Krugman weighed in by [tweeting](#) in the early morning hours of Nov. 9 that “Jill Stein has managed to play Ralph Nader,” referring to the “spoiler effect” that the 2000 Green Party nominee allegedly had on the election 16 years ago. “Without her Florida might have been saved.”

Flawed Analysis

Setting aside rehashed arguments from 2000, when it comes to Election 2016 independent evaluations of third-party voting have concluded that the effect of this voting bloc was statistically negligible, and cannot seriously be attributed to Clinton’s defeat.



Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont.

A *Wall Street Journal* analysis, for example, [found](#) that Clinton would have needed to win 70 percent of the vote share that went to both the Libertarian and Green parties across eight swing states to claim victory – a highly unlikely scenario considering that the Libertarian Party champions a brand of fiscal conservatism and limited government that traditionally appeals to right-leaning, Republican voters. (Indeed, the 2016 Libertarian Party ticket was headed by two former Republican governors: Gary Johnson of New Mexico and Bill Weld of Massachusetts.)

In another analysis, the *Washington Post* [concluded](#) that in the [five states](#) Trump won by a margin smaller than the combined Johnson/Stein vote, some of them could have been flipped if the entire Stein vote was added to Clinton’s total. In this scenario, the *Post* notes, the outcome might have changed in Michigan and Wisconsin, still however leaving her short of an Electoral College victory.

The paper pointed out however that “this projection rests on the unrealistic assumption that all Stein voters would have voted for Clinton,” conceding that it is impossible to “know how Johnson and Stein backers would have voted if forced to choose between Clinton, Trump and staying home.” More realistically, many would have “skipped the presidential race or [voted for another candidate](#).”

Besides the lack of hard statistical data to back up the wasted vote/spoiler effect claims, they also rest on a flawed assumption that anyone’s votes – whether Clinton’s, Trump’s, Johnson’s or Stein’s – actually belong to anyone else. In fact, many third-party voters are simply fed up with the system itself, and hope that by voting for other options, it might be possible to someday build up viable alternatives to the two-party system.

This was especially the case this year, in which the numbers of disaffected voters reached historic proportions. By the time the primaries had been decided last summer, in fact, the two front-runners were the most unpopular candidates seen in a generation, which should have been seen as a warning sign to Democrats who traditionally rely on high voter turnout for electoral success.

According to [a Quinnipiac poll](#) released in June, Clinton had a 57 percent unfavorability rating, while Trump received a 59 percent unfavorability rating. Moreover, according to a [survey](#) by Data Targeting, 55 percent of Americans favored having an independent or third-party presidential candidate to consider. Among millennials – a key demographic for Barack Obama’s victories in 2008 and 2012 – 91 percent expressed support for additional choices this year.

Another poll, [released](#) in September just before the Trump-Clinton debates began, found that 76 percent of Americans favored Johnson and Stein sharing the stage with the two main party candidates in the debates. This, of course, did not happen, with the Commission on Presidential Debates sticking to its strict criteria that independents and third parties need to reach 15 percent in national polling before they are allowed into the debates.

This is perhaps one reason why Americans remained largely ignorant of Stein’s and Johnson’s campaigns, with Gallup [finding](#) that 63 percent were unfamiliar with Johnson heading into the general election, and 68 percent were unfamiliar with Stein.

Voter Boycotts and Voter Suppression

Regardless of the impacts of third-party alternatives – which only ended up receiving a total of 4 percent of the popular vote – the deep disaffection among American voters that was seen in earlier polling seemed to manifest itself in other voting trends on Election Day. This disaffection can be seen in the high number of down-ballot voters who opted not to cast a ballot for president this year.



Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein.

One telling analysis [found](#) that in 14 states, down-ballot candidates received more votes than presidential candidates.

In North Carolina, for instance, about 30,000 more people cast ballots for incumbent Gov. Pat McCrory and Roy Cooper than for any of the presidential nominees. In Vermont, about 314,000 voters cast ballots in the governor's race, and 313,000 for the Senate, while just 291,000 voted for president – a difference of almost 8 percent.

In Oregon, where Democrats Sen. Ron Wyden and Gov. Kate Brown easily won re-election, their races drew about 75,000 more votes than the presidential contest. Other states in which down-ballot voters essentially boycotted the presidential election included Indiana, Missouri, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and West Virginia.

Besides nonvoters, another factor that should be receiving at least as much attention as third-party “spoilers” are the would-be voters who could not cast a ballot due to systematic disenfranchisement, possible voter suppression or other all-too-familiar problems at polling places. As the Brennan Center for Justice [noted](#) on Nov. 14, “too many voters had to contend with long lines, malfunctioning voting machines, confusion over voting restrictions, voter intimidation, [and] voter registration problems.”

The nonpartisan law and policy institute, which has been documenting flaws in U.S. election administration for years, notes that “2016 was not the first election in which these problems have occurred – and that itself is a problem.”

Describing numerous instances of voting problems across the country, the group concluded that “the ways in which elections are administered, including how well they are resourced, can have a negative impact on citizens’ ability to cast a ballot and the confidence the public has in the system.”

Investigative reporter Greg Palast went further than that, contending that “before a single vote was cast, the election was fixed by GOP and Trump operatives.”

He [noted](#) in a Nov. 11 blog post that in 2013, just as the Supreme Court overturned key sections of the Voting Rights Act, Republican operatives created a system called Crosscheck to purge 1.1 million Americans from the voter rolls of Republican-controlled states.

According to his count, in Michigan, the Crosscheck purge list eliminated 449,922 voters from the rolls, while Trump claimed victory in that state by just 13,107 votes. In Arizona, the Trump victory margin was 85,257 votes, while a total of 270,824 voters were eliminated by Crosscheck. The Trump victory margin in North Carolina was 177,008, while the Crosscheck purge list accounted for 589,393 voters knocked off the rolls.

Palast notes that “the electoral putsch was aided by nine other methods of attacking the right to vote of Black, Latino and Asian-American voters ... including ‘caging,’ ‘purging,’ blocking legitimate registrations, and wrongly shunting millions to ‘provisional’ ballots that will never be counted.”

He also points to the discrepancies between the exit polling data and the final results in several battleground states, noting that exit polling is historically “deadly accurate.” Despite this, Palast notes that in 2016, the exit polling was off the mark in at least four key swing states.

According to the exit polls, Clinton [should have won](#) Florida, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, but at the end of the day all of these states went to Trump. Accounting for a total of 74 Electoral College votes, these four states would have been more than enough for

Clinton to have flipped the election.

And of course, this all assumes that the Electoral College is legitimate in the first place. The fact remains that Hillary Clinton [received](#) more than one million more votes nationwide than Donald Trump, and the only reason he is assuming the White House is due to the arcane and controversial system of allocating votes through the Electoral College.

This has led to [increasing calls](#) to [abolish the Electoral College](#) altogether based on the idea that elections should be determined on the principle of one person, one vote.

Needed Reforms



Libertarian Party presidential nominee
Gary Johnson.

Needless to say, to many around the world – not to mention many within the United States – these elections are looking less like free expressions of the people’s will than they do down-and-dirty slug fests in which either side is willing to claim a victory at any cost.

This election was observed by two international organizations in fact, and while their final reports vary to considerable degrees, both the Organization of American States and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe both criticized the tone of the election and highlighted numerous structural deficiencies in the way the United States chooses its leaders.

The OAS final report [identified](#) the following issues as representing key areas for improvement in the U.S. electoral system: taking measures to avoid long lines at polling places, broadening cooperation between states to compare information and avoid possible duplications in voter registries, expanding the practice of redistricting through nonpartisan commissions, addressing the impacts of the Supreme Court’s decision to eliminate parts of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, establishing better campaign finance rules, and jettisoning the divisive campaign rhetoric that has turned off so many voters from the process.

The OAS also noted the unusual practice in the United States of simultaneously mandating voter identification while not providing this required identification to eligible voters.

“Practically all countries in the region provide at least one free form of national identification to their citizens, which is used for electoral purposes,” [said the OAS](#). “In the U.S., 32 states currently have laws in force that require voters to show some form of prescribed identification to verify their identity before casting a vote.” However, these states do not make this identification readily available to citizens, contrary to good electoral practice.

This is also a weakness that the OSCE pointed out in [its report](#), noting: “Voter identification rules are politically divisive and vary across the states, with 32 states requiring photo identification. A high volume of litigation regarding voter identification continued up to Election Day, generating confusion among voters and election officials regarding the application of rules. Efforts to ensure the integrity of the vote are important, but should not lead to the disenfranchisement of eligible voters.”

The 57-country organization also noted the undue obstacles faced by minor parties and independents trying to compete in U.S. elections.

“The number of signatures required and the signature submission deadlines vary from state to state, which made it cumbersome for third party or independent candidates to register across all states for presidential elections,” the OSCE pointed out. “Both the Green Party and Libertarian Party challenged ballot access requirements in several states, with success in a few instances.”

The organization, which has been monitoring elections in the United States since 2004, regretted that since previous election observation missions, a number of its “priority recommendations remain unaddressed.” It pointed out that “deficiencies in the legal framework persist, such as the disenfranchisement of citizens living in various territories, restrictions on the voting rights of convicted criminals and infringements on secrecy of the ballot.”

Rather than focusing on who is to blame for Trump’s victory in Election 2016, Democrats, Republicans, progressives, independent conservatives, third-party supporters, minorities, and good-government groups might be better served coming together and finally taking seriously the task of electoral reform, beginning with addressing some of the key recommendations of impartial international observers.

Perhaps then, this perennial debate and the endless exchange of recriminations might finally come to an end.

Nat Parry is the co-author of [Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush](#).

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