

Why did Trump Win? A Post-Mortem on the Post-Mortems

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Region: [USA](#)

Global Research, November 18, 2016

Why did Trump win?

The election post-mortems are coming in fast and furiously, and the range in accuracy is, well.....interesting. Some analyses miss the mark completely (“White America is racist”), others hit a significant portion of it (“Globalization has left the American middle class behind”), and still others get quite close to the bullseye (“This was a vote against The Establishment”) This last theory is the most promising, but it needs some unpacking.

What, exactly, do we mean when we say a vote is directed against “The Establishment”? What particular aspect of The Establishment are we talking about, and why and how has it provoked such a reaction?

It may seem enough to say that The Establishment is hated because it is a group of interests and individuals whose power is entrenched and abusive. This explanation certainly describes regimes that are openly oppressive, such as the ante-bellum slave power. But it fails to account for corrupt oligarchies like ours that cleverly masquerade as representative democracies. After all, Hillary was nothing if not secretive about her political vices. Despite being roundly distrusted she simply pretended otherwise (“No one is interested in seeing my Wall Street speeches”), and the mainstream media let her get away with it. To his own shock perhaps (but not to mine), Bernie became distrusted the moment he endorsed Hillary. Trump was likely trusted only because he told people they were being lied to - about the health of the economy, the benefits of neo-liberal free trade, and (most surprisingly) 9/11.

Think about that for one moment, and let it sink in. Trump’s biggest virtue was that he seemed to be telling the truth on key issues. Talk about the bare minimum becoming the aspirational maximum.

So yes, let us by all means accept a post-mortem analysis that highlights anti-Establishment animus, but it must be one that captures and explains this element of popular distrust. Standard accounts do not. And so I wish to offer a different analysis, one rooted in a paraphrase of a paraphrase of a biblical verse, and it goes like this: “Show me what your news source is, and I’ll tell you who you are.” You see, after fifty years of gestation, epistemological politics have finally and fully come of age. Election 2016 was their formal debut.

“Epistemological politics” is a term that describes a political culture in which people define and orient themselves by the source of their news about the world. In the religious sphere these politics have been around for a long time - for at least as long as people have been reaching for different versions of the Bible. In the secular sphere they began in earnest in

the wake of the Kennedy assassination, when sceptics of the Warren Report's lone-gunman theory searched out and came to credit the findings of alternative investigations into that event. Mark Lane's 1966 *Rush to Judgment* reinvigorated an attitude of popular suspicion of government that had not been seen since before Roosevelt's ascension to power. Once reinvigorated, the new attitude took root and flourished, such that today we have an entire alternative intellectual landscape to wander around in, with outcroppings of alternative history (both ancient and modern); archeology; economics (including economic statistics); financial management; science and medicine; political commentary; and, of course, journalism.

In the 19th century, alternativists came almost exclusively from the ranks of the political left (think Marx). But today's alternativists defy easy categorization. They still occasionally come from the left (e.g. Jill Stein, who during the campaign called for a new 9/11 Commission of Inquiry based on alternative 9/11 research), but more often than not they come from the right (e.g. Alex Jones, Steve Bannon). They may be struggling working-class or comfortable upper-class, religious or atheistic, socialist or libertarian. What they all have in common is a deep, neo-Lockean distrust of official government narratives and the media outlets that endorse and propagate them.

And that, as they say, makes all the difference.

The implications of this can be unnerving - and not just for the likes of Hillary Clinton. If, say, an alternativist comes from the left, she will likely find herself having agonizing (and surprisingly vitriolic) arguments with people who fully share her first-order values. Example: Both the alternative leftist and the state-trusting leftist hate war. But while the former regards the "War on Terror" as a fraud stemming from false flag attacks on 9/11 and a Langley-inspired ISIS, the latter views it as a necessary (if regrettable) response to Muslim extremism born of Western misdeeds.

Example 2: Both the alternative leftist and the state-trusting leftist advocate opening national borders to bona fide refugees. But while the former sees in Europe's current refugee influx an *Operation Gladio*-style destabilization campaign meant to weaken national sovereignty, the latter sees in it a fairly conventional crisis requiring a traditional philanthropic response.

Example 3: Both the alternative leftist and the state-trusting leftist are wary of the Bush dynasty. But while the former sees that dynasty as being in close league with the Clintons since the days of Mena drug-running, the latter clings to a left-right binarism that admits of no such collusion.

And it gets worse - much worse. For as the alternative leftist reels in frustration from her state-trusting counterpart - with whom she shares ever less common ground - she senses a growing affinity with the alt-right. Put simply (and brutally): Gun ownership, home schooling, and anti-vaccine campaigns cease to present as lunacy in a world where the state really is out to get you. Perhaps that explains why (by some estimates) 4 out of 10 Sanders supporters voted for Trump. The bottom line is that divorce over the meta-issue of trust can make for some very strange first-order bedfellows, so much so that we can forget about left versus right, liberal versus conservative. It's one big, fat meta-issue that divides us now.

We should be deeply concerned about this, for two reasons. First, disagreements between

alternativists and “trusters” are not likely to go away any time soon. This is not because they are incapable of being resolved – truly empirical claims are subject to falsification after all – but because for the most part trusters simply refuse to engage in debate. They use a variety of puerile techniques to avoid it. Sometimes they simply ignore alternativists (as when the MSM failed to report on Trump’s headline-grabbing claim – made to audiences during the Republican primaries – that Americans have not been told the truth about 9/11.) At other times they either insult the messenger (“You’re a conspiracy theorist!”) or shoot him (as when Democratic leaders refused to respond to the incriminating material about Clinton contained in the Wikileaks disclosures on the grounds that the emails in question (to and from John Podesta) had been “stolen.”)

Second, unresolved differences over material political facts can end up posing an existential threat to society. Politics is the art of resolving disputes through speech-acts instead of physical acts. Politics dies, and violence begins, when speech-acts cannot rise above the level of a shouting match. And speech-acts cannot rise above the level of shouting if basic facts cannot be agreed. In a small number of cases we can rely on the Supreme Court to resolve factual disputes by judicial fiat. Abortion is one such case, with the Court making the decision for all of us as to when a fetus becomes a meaningful-enough human life to warrant state protection. But the option of judicial fiat quickly runs out; the Supreme Court does not have the jurisdiction to decide whether criminal elements of the U.S. Government perpetrated 9/11, or whether the CIA runs ISIS, or whether the government is purposefully ignoring evidence that hyper-vaccination harms infants and children.

If the 2016 election showed anything, it showed this: An increasing number of Americans are becoming alternativists and answering ‘Yes’ to these questions (or to substantially similar ones.) If trusters want to avoid electoral defeat in the near term, and civil war in the medium to long, they should begin to debate, rather than imperiously dismiss, the people who disagree with them.

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