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Race, Wealth and the US President Elections

By Dedrick Asante-Muhammad
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Most professional pundits have been stumped by the 2016 presidential primaries. The rise of a populist billionaire with no political experience as the leading Republican candidate and a democratic socialist as the main rival to Hillary Clinton has both the political establishment and the media establishment searching for answers. In my conversation with Algernon Austin, author of “America is not Post-Racial: Xenophobia, Islamaphobia, Racism and the 44th President,” we identified the racial and economic circumstances which has brought our nation to this point.

In this discussion, Mr. Austin and I talked about how the election of President Obama did not bring forth a new era of harmonious relations between white Americans and people of color. Instead, it has sparked a conservative white populist backlash that has grown throughout the tenure of the country’s first Black president. Immediately following the election of Obama, the backlash manifested itself in a tea party movement that swept the Republican congressional elections of 2010. In 2012, we saw the re-election of President Obama, despite a record low level of white votes for a successful presidential campaign. Today, we see a Trump insurgency born from the tea party movement that promises to keep Latinos, Muslims and African-Americans in their place.

These political risings are rooted in the deep-seated white supremacy of this country and a decade of demographic and economic change. As the country slowly moves toward becoming a nation that is no longer majority white, the white populace also faces increasing economic

insecurity with less promise for a better tomorrow. White anxiety over racial and economic insecurity has always been a volatile combination in the United States.

The white angst about economic insecurity is ironic when we identify who has suffered the greatest economic loss since 2008. Even though most people of color had far less wealth than whites to begin with, they lost more of their wealth during the Great Recession. Currently, the unemployment rate of African-Americans is at about the rate of whites at the height of the Great Recession, while current white unemployment levels are at what most economists consider full employment.

The white economic populism that followed the Great Recession has not been strictly a conservative reaction. The Occupy movement and the Bernie Sanders' campaign were strongly influenced by a white economic populist response to the Great Recession and growing economic insecurity. Yet white progressive economic populism has also failed to take the lead on racial economic inequality and racial inequality in general. It took the Black Lives Matter movement to place racial inequality at the forefront of the political discussion in the Democratic primary.

There have been thoughtful proposals such as CFED's call for Presidential Action Needed to Close the Racial Wealth Divide and Global Policy Solution's Policy Agenda for Closing the Racial Wealth Gap, that address growing economic inequality and its racialized effects but no candidate for the US presidency has emerged as a spokesperson for this type of analysis. Throughout much of the United States history, racial and economic inequality has been a source of division but it can bring people together.

In the late 1960s Dr. King began a Poor People's Movement and in the 1980s Jesse Jackson's based his presidential run off a "rainbow coalition", both these movements recognized the intersection of racial and economic inequality and saw that these issues can only be addressed together. The challenge for the 2016 presidential election is for a political force to emerge that can unite the electorate in addressing our racial and economic divisions. Thus far the nation is failing to meet this challenge.