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How Did We Get Here? What Lies Ahead?

By Anthony DiMaggio
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Now is as good of a time as any to reflect on what has happened in this historic election. As far as I see it, making sense of this election requires exploring three questions: 1. What has happened to the Democratic Party? 2. What factors drove the Trump victory? and 3. What is likely to happen moving forward?

First, the Democratic loss. There's no two ways about it – this was a huge, and embarrassing loss for a party that's clearly fallen out of favor with the mass public. Hillary Clinton and the Democratic establishment were badly exposed in this loss, and the party is in the middle of a

full-on meltdown. The country was told that Trump had little to no chance of winning, and that Hillary was a shoe-in to be our first female president. Obviously, that was a fiction that few challenged considering all the polls that consistently predicted Clinton would prevail on November 8th.

Looking back, it should be obvious that the Democratic Party's Achilles Heel was its near-complete failure to prioritize the issues of economic inequality, jobs, and the aiding of America's working class, middle class, and poor. The Dems had ample opportunity in Obama's first two years in office to adopt a platform committed to limiting Wall Street power and aimed at serving the public via reforms promoting re-unionizing of the nation, introducing universal health care, and instituting a living wage. To put it simply, the party blew it big time, and it's come back to burn the party badly, with Clinton now serving in the public mind as the ultimate symbol of Wall Street power and greed.

If the Democratic Party wants to have any chance of remaining relevant in the future, it needs to completely clean house and redefine itself, removing the snake pit that passes for party leadership – including the Pelosis, Reids, Clintons, and Wasserman Schultzs of the world. For the party to have any chance at redemption, it needs to adopt a new New Deal or a new War on Poverty-style initiative, that on multiple fronts cultivates greater support among Millennials, the young, and other disadvantaged groups. Young Americans represent the only hope for the party's future sustainability, and the refusal to prioritize the needs of this group will guarantee the Democrat's irrelevance in future elections.

Second, we need to understand the reasons why Trump won. This requires recognizing the uniqueness of this election on multiple fronts. Trump's victory was just as much about the Democratic Party's implosion as it was about the triumph of Trump's "outsider" political campaign. The Republican victory was *not* driven by the party's ascendance among the public at large. If anything, the party is in big trouble looking ahead. Despite significant U.S. population growth from 293 million in 2004 to 325 million by 2016, total voter turnout for Republican presidential candidates in this period is as follows: 2016: 59.6 million votes; 2012: 60.9 million votes; 2008: 59.9 million votes; and 2004: 62 million votes. This translates into a net loss of 2.4 million votes (or a decline of four percent) over 12 years, despite 11 percent U.S. population growth during this same period. As bad as that looks for Republicans, Dems have been hurt even more as the overall percent of Americans voting fell dramatically. The party's total votes received for presidential candidates fell from a high of 69.5 million in 2008, to 65.9 million in 2012, down to 59.8 million in 2016. This represents a 14 percent decline in Democratic voting over just 8 years. These findings suggest that Donald Trump didn't take this election from Clinton so much as Clinton gave it away to Trump.

Outside of the Democratic Party's collapse, we need to examine why tens of millions of people voted for Trump. There is no single magic bullet answer to this question, and anyone who claims to have one is not giving you the full story. On the one hand, it seems silly at this point to deny considering a mountain of polling data that much of Trump's support originates from a noxious blend of sexist, racist, and xenophobic beliefs. I've documented this reality in previous writings, and we do ourselves little good by burying our heads in the sand and pretending that Trump is some modern-day Marxian hero, fighting a corrupt capitalist elite to the benefit of an

enlightened, populist working class that is free of prejudice, hatred, and spite. This herculean image of America's working class is heavily propagandistic.

Having addressed the socially reactionary and ugly aspects of Trump's victory, there is also the reality that this campaign came to symbolize mass public anger at the economic status quo. This anger, at its core, is quite rational, even if Trump is a highly questionable spokesman for the cause. On the one hand, there is little evidence that Trump's *primary* campaign succeeded due to economic populism and voter rejection of corporate globalization. I presented exhaustive evidence earlier this year, drawing on numerous national surveys, showing that Trump's primary victories were not the result of economic frustration and anxiety, as seen in concerns over poverty, joblessness, a weak economy, and the rising costs of health care and education. Rather, Trump's support was statistically associated with issues like immigration, terrorism, gun control, opposition to addressing global warming, and other Republican bread and butter issues.

Despite the above findings, it now seems undeniable that somewhere along the way following the primaries, Trump's economic message caught on among mass segments of the public who had been harmed greatly by the neoliberal, pro-business, corporate globalization agenda. His populism didn't speak much to Republican primary voters, who instead embraced his reactionary social and cultural agenda. But Trump's economic populism did catch on among the masses by election day. This part of his campaign was clearly captured in the *New York Times*' exit polling data. Staring Americans in the face were the following findings:

- * 79 percent of voters who agreed that the condition of the nation's economy is "poor" voted for Trump, while 55 percent of those feeling it was merely "fair" did the same.

- * 78 percent of those saying their "family financial situation" is "worse today" than in the past voted for Trump.

- * 65 percent of those who said the "effects of trade with other countries" has been to "take away jobs" voted for Trump.

My failure to find evidence of such economic anxieties during the primary season wasn't for a lack of trying, as I scoured national surveys in search of the missing link between economic frustration and Trump voting to no avail. The now well-known April Gallup survey clearly showed that Trump's primary supporters were not motivated by economic populism, and they were not more likely to have lost their jobs to outsourcing. Rather, most were middle to upper middle class types with above average incomes, little to no experience with being unemployed, and were largely well-to-do. Primary voters are typically more affluent, and Trump's supporters were no exception. They had largely signed on to Trump's nativist cultural agenda. But Trump's appeal had clearly broadened by year's end. No longer can the Trump vote simply be written off as the paranoid delusions of an impassioned group of reactionary hicks, troglodytes, and yokels. There is a very real economic component to Trump's success, as seen in the public's growing anger at a winner-take-all economy that fails to serve the interests of anyone not in the top 1 percent of income earners.

The voting public's embrace of Trump is a dangerous gamble, however. On the one hand, it's informed by a legitimate anger at the political-economic status quo and a system that has horribly failed the masses. On the other hand, those who claim Trump will "Make America Great Again" are projecting their hopes onto a candidate who is as maverick as they come, and who has no experience in working toward effective policy change in Washington. It's impossible to predict with certainty just what he'll do when he gets in office. Furthermore, he has given little indication that he cares about helping America's poor, despite a lot of populist sounding rhetoric about the lost greatness of the working class. As far as I can tell, there are numerous possible outcomes that may lie ahead regarding Trump's future, each of which is plausible based on specific aspects of his personality. None of them are encouraging in the least.

Trump as a Reality TV Circus Clown

It may be that Donald Trump has little interest in the arduous work of governing a nation of 325 million people. In this scenario, think of him as a Jerry Springer ringmaster, presiding over a comic tragedy masquerading as presidential politics. To be blunt, "The Donald" may be completely and utterly full of shit when he says he wants to be president of the United States. Trump's now infamous hedonistic personality profile, detailed in the pages of the *New Yorker* magazine, and depicted by his former biographer and ghostwriter, paints a picture of a shamelessly narcissistic, egocentric maniac who only cares about basking in the public eye, and as lacking the conviction, interest, or stamina to govern. He doesn't care if the attention he receives is positive or negative. So long as it's attention, that's all that matters. Every media interaction is driven by a lust for public attention, while avoiding or downplaying real political proposals that challenge Washington establishment politics. Each press conference represents a chance to self-aggrandize, at the expense of substance, politics, and the nation itself. I am struck by the very real likelihood of this outcome, based on the message implied in the *New Yorker* profile that Trump may suffer from ADHD. As Trump's biographer made abundantly clear, Trump is either unable or unwilling to focus on substantive issues for more than a few minutes at a time, seeing them as pointless and as a waste of effort.

The image of Trump as a scatterbrain who is uncommitted to serious political reform coincides well with reporting from this last July that Trump reached out to fellow Republican John Kasich to offer him the position of Vice President, while also offering him full control over domestic and foreign policy formulation in the White House. When asked what that would leave for Trump to do, the Trump campaign reportedly responded that he would be responsible for "making America great again," whatever that means. This version of a Trump presidency is certainly possible. Americans familiar with the carnivalesque nature of Trump's reality television career know that he is a relentless and shameless self-promoter, who quickly grows tired of people and situations he believes are boring or stale. It's likely that his run for the presidency is the latest stage in a narcissistic career, one in which he takes advantage of the prestige of the office to further his public profile, while making numerous national and international connections to enhance his businesses' profitability. In this scenario, Trump lacks any interest in governing, and becomes a figurehead and rubber stamp for the Republican Party's reactionary, pro-business agenda. Essentially, it would be the Mike Pence presidency, not the Donald Trump presidency. There is obviously precedent for such a thing, considering the astounding power exercised by Vice President Dick Cheney during the George W. Bush administration.

If the Pence-Trump presidency becomes a reality, none of Trump's proposals for helping working class Americans will be allowed to pass through a Republican Congress – save those that serve the agenda of America's plutocratic elites. Supporters of Trump will no doubt reject this scenario as wholly wrong and inconsistent with the spirit of his campaign promises, but Trumps' abdication of presidential authority is a distinct possibility, and it would not surprise me considering the superficialities endemic in the world of narcissistic reality television.

Trump as a Populist Pariah

It's possible that Trump means it when he says he wants to "Make America Great Again," and that he'll work to try and implement his reactionary populist vision, as seen in his newly announced "First 100 Days" agenda. In this scenario, Donald Trump represents a cross between Ross Perot's opposition to "free trade," and Archie Bunker-style bigotry that demonizes non-whites as a subhuman "other." This part of Trump's persona is well known to the public, as documented in his promises to "build a wall" between the U.S. and Mexico to keep the Mexicans from stealing our jobs, raping our women, and corrupting the citizenry with drugs.

Recognizing the savage racism that defines Trump's social and trade agendas, he may still be sincere in his proposals to repeal NAFTA, abandon the Trans-Pacific Partnership, designate China a "currency manipulator," and implement tariffs on foreign goods to pressure U.S. companies from relocating abroad. A central problem with the "Trump as a populist pariah" scenario is that there is zero chance that Republican majorities in Congress will allow any of these proposals through, due to their threats to corporate interests and profits. Short of Trump circumventing the legislative process and governing dictatorially through executive order, there is no reason to think that his trade proposals have a snowball's chance in hell of being implemented. How precisely will these policies be passed through a rightwing Congress that worships at the feet of corporate plutocratic interests? Whether Trump understands it or not, a president – at least one bound by checks and balances – is quite limited in what he can accomplish, especially when Congress wants to hamstring him. Obama learned this lesson all too well with a Republican congress determined to undermine him at every turn. Should Trump go the route of executive order to implement his trade agenda, his "solution" to the problem of corporate globalization will be worse than the problem. Trading democracy for dictatorship is a non-starter for any sane American – regardless of the promised payoff.

Trump as a Modern-Day Caligula

Americans would be unwise to discount the possibility of a proto-fascist or fascist president. We've seen enough of Trump's pathological, serial lying and moral depravity to know that he could seek to become a dictatorial, "great man" in the history of American politics, ruthlessly suppressing his political opponents, and embracing a dictatorial style that frames criticisms of the president as treasonous. As a Roman emperor, Caligula's time in power was short lived, and Trump's may be too if he seeks to go the authoritarian route. Caligula became an infamous figure in western history due to his toxic mix of egotism, authoritarianism, and sexual debauchery. Historians associate his rein with deprave sexual acts, ranging from rape and incest to extreme sexual promiscuity and the forced prostitution of women. These traits all fall within Trump's wheelhouse, whether we are talking about his creepy sexual advances toward his

daughter, his reported sexual assault and harassment of countless women, his multiple affairs (and attempted affairs), and his instrumentalist approach to valuing women, judging them based on perceived sexual attractiveness, and treating them as possessions to be used and discarded.

The Caligula metaphor applies beyond Trump's sexism. The much-maligned Roman emperor became infamous for ruthlessly crushing his political enemies. Declaring war on the Senate, Caligula organized numerous trials against his detractors, accusing them of treason, later presiding over their convictions and executions. Trump undeniably has an authoritarian streak, for example engaging in extreme politicization of the investigation of Hillary Clinton's emails. Greatly concerning was his cavalier announcement during debate two, that Clinton would "be in jail" if Trump wins. He has made this promise, prior to any formal presentation of charges, and independent of any trial or any formal presentation of evidence against her. Trump's supporters' chants of "lock her up" reflect a collective hysteria on the part of the reactionary right in their a priori demonization of political opponents. Forget that the FBI has now twice concluded that no charges should be brought against Clinton. This has prompted Trump to go after FBI director James Comey, depicting him (absurdly) as in the tank for Hillary. There is little reason to believe based on Trump's previous comments that he will end his attacks on Clinton, despite the FBI's failure to present evidence of illegality in "email gate."

One could add to Trump's witch hunts his years-long attack on Barack Obama, who the right alleges is a secret Kenyan, anti-American plant who threatens America's national identity and security – a la the deplorable and racist "birther" conspiracy. And Trump's attacks on Obama and Clinton are just the tip of the iceberg. His penchant for encouraging violence against political detractors at rallies raises legitimate fears about how he will deal with political dissent when he has actual political power. Will groups like Black Lives Matter be criminalized and declared terrorist organizations under a Giuliani Department of Justice? Trump's promise to pay the legal fees for those who engage in felony assaults against Trump critics was a disgusting display of proto-fascism. These incidents suggest that this "president" has little commitment to the rule of law, or to the protection of dissent. His numerous calls to repeal First Amendment protections for journalists, and his support for violating the First Amendment religious rights of Muslim Americans via deportation and the forced closing of mosques should disturb anyone committed to basic civil liberties and a pluralistic society based on tolerance and celebration of diversity. In short, to frame Trump as a real danger to American freedoms is not hyperbole. It reflects a reasonable fear of his actions as commander in chief, extrapolating from his statements and actions on the road to the White House.

Trump comes into office shrouded in a fog of controversy. And that's putting it lightly. Based on what we've seen in this election, he appears to have lost the popular vote, despite winning the majority of electoral votes. This failure represents a major scandal in and of itself – the second of its kind in the last decade and a half. This scandal alone is reason to be skeptical of conservative claims that Trump enjoys a public mandate to implement his political-economic agenda. Like Bush before him, it is unlikely that Trump will let this lack of a democratic mandate get in the way of his plans for the nation. Whichever of the three scenarios above is most accurate, the likelihood that Trump's presidency ends up strengthening American democracy and the raising of the living standards of the masses is unlikely. None of the above scenarios provide cause for

optimism, and I don't know any sane or compassionate person who is excited about a Trump presidency moving forward.