

# United-States: Trump, Racism and the Left in 2016

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**The perilous consequences of a Trump presidency should be a wake-up call for the left.**

Donald Trump's Indiana victory and now unstoppable march toward the Republican presidential nomination underscores the defining feature of this year's general election. Linda Burnham's Notes on the Election [1] cut to the chase:

*"Straight up racism and xenophobia have moved from the margins into the center of the GOP presidential campaign; they are used as a rallying cry to attract discontented voters; and white racial solidarity is exposed as the anchor and heart of right wing politics in the U.S. across the spectrum from ordinary conservatism to rabid white supremacy."*

A victory for the GOP nominee would likely mean right-wing control of all branches of the federal government (combined with the 31 governorships and state legislatures they already control). It would deal a huge blow to progressive policies, social movements, and all of the 99%.

At the same time, divisions within the GOP; revulsion at GOP bigotry and crudeness by an apparent majority of the U.S. people; and the surge of progressive energy that runs from Occupy through the Bernie Sanders's campaign and the Black Lives Matter, Fight for 15 and other social movements means there are good prospects to defeat the right. In fact, there is a reasonable chance of an anti-Trump landslide and the possibility of a roll back of GOP strength in both houses of Congress and numerous state governments. Although the far right has reached the height of its power in recent decades, it is also extremely vulnerable to counter-attack and division.

The perilous consequences of a Trump presidency should be a wake-up call for the left. The possibility of dealing the racist right a major blow should energize and excite us.

## **UNDERLYING DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC TRENDS**

The stakes are especially high because this year's election landscape is not some kind of one-off fluke. Rather, deep shifts in U.S. demographics, economics and politics are making themselves felt and producing a potential turning-point moment.

Since 1980 a conservative bloc using racism as its cutting edge has been hegemonic in U.S. politics. Obama winning the White House and the "Obama Coalition" that put him there reflected substantial demographic change, especially the rising proportion of people of color within the U.S. population and electorate. The Obama wins also reflected a decline in U.S. global power and the futility of Washington's wars; an increasingly crisis-ridden neoliberal economic model, and the growing disaffection of younger voters and single women from the Republican Party. Obama's election and re-election prevented the total domination of the GOP-anchored conservative bloc and put on the agenda the possibility of an alternative governing bloc and policy mix. But the GOP's entrenched power in Congress; the inconsistency of an Obama administration still hostage to neoliberal

economics and key elements of the “war on terror,” and the weakness of the progressive movement and the left meant that (with a few exceptions) political and policy stalemate was the main characteristic of the last eight years. Yet the underlying trends - in particular racial demographic change and an economy that produced rising inequality and decimation of whole sectors of the working class - kept shifting the underlying terrain.

Some voices within the GOP argued for adjusting their agenda and message to somewhat accommodate new realities. They called for addressing the rising political weight of people of color via immigration reform and a new appeal to Latino voters. They spoke to economic discontent with various ‘reformi-con’ proposals. But what happened instead was an explosion of right wing racist populism. Reacting to underlying trends and driven crazy by the election and re-election of the first Black President, millions of hard-pressed whites rallied first to the banner of the Tea Party and then to a skilled racist, sexist and authoritarian demagogue. And the other Republican hopefuls either echoed his message or avoided challenging it on anything but stylistic or personality grounds, or offered claims that Trump was not a “true conservative.”

This motion has produced the central drama and pivot of the 2016 election:

Will the conservative bloc be able to regain full control of the federal government and extend its hegemony via resort to naked racism, xenophobia, authoritarianism and thuggery? Or will this extremist effort to counter underlying trends fail, throwing the right onto the defensive and perhaps into crisis, registering a majoritarian rejection of appeals to racism and averting an administration likely to be disastrous for workers and all the oppressed both within the U.S. and around the world? Can a decisive right-wing defeat build on the momentum from the Sanders insurgency, Black Lives Matter and other movements toward making anti-racism and anti-Wall Street politics central to a new progressive bloc rooted in the country’s “new majority”? Can a landslide repudiation of the biggest threat to democracy most of us have seen in our lifetimes open the door for this bloc to gain enough unity and strength to influence the development of a new governing coalition?

The left has a role to play in this drama. If it effectively takes on that role, we can expand our influence, numbers and cohesion; learn a great deal, and take steps toward formulating and implementing a long-term strategy toward power. (Bill Fletcher makes a compelling case here for why an electoral component is a crucial to such a strategy, arguing that to counter the threat from right-wing populism it is urgent to get key elements of it in place immediately.)

### **CENTRAL GOAL AND MESSAGE: CRUSH THE RACIST RIGHT**

At this point, Trump is clearly an underdog in November, regardless of whether his opponent is Bernie Sanders or, far more likely, Hillary Clinton. Yet Trump’s ability to overwhelm the extremely well-funded anti-Trump forces in the Republican primaries underscores why it would be a grave mistake to underestimate his political skills or base. Moreover, if there are ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks leading up to the election that are not met with a powerful antiwar progressive response, he could become even more dangerous.

And this is crucial: A narrow defeat for Trump is not enough. The progressive potential in this election can only be realized if (1) the indictment of GOP racism is kept central to the national political debate (attempts to push it to the background are already well underway); and (2) the right is not just defeated but crushed at the ballot box and in public opinion. Street protests, messaging that reaches millions and yes, mobilizing votes for the Democratic nominee, are all required to accomplish this.

A landslide against the right can reverberate on every level. Besides changing the balance among

elected officials it can demoralize and marginalize the most thuggish racists and scare every district attorney or police commissioner who coddles such perpetrators.

In addition to making an immediate difference in the lives of millions, thrashing the right is the immediate step needed to open a path toward more democracy (ending racist voter suppression for starters) and the reconstruction of an inclusive working class-based movement. It could demoralize and further divide the far right against itself and its elite conservative allies and intensify the disarray within the Republican Party.

Every progressive has something important to contribute to achieving this goal. And if all progressives pitch in there will be a valuable cross-fertilization of ideas and experiences between activists who have participated in electoral and those who have avoided it. (That cross-fertilization was a valuable feature of the 1980s Rainbow Coalition in its best moments.)

Organizing around a 'crush the racist right' message also provides the best springboard for linking activists who have been immersed in Bernie Sanders exciting campaign and those who have deep roots in the non-corporate sectors of the pro-Hillary camp, the Latino and Black communities first and foremost, thus breaking down some of the racial divisions that have cropped up during the primary campaign. The union-based formation called for by Peter Olney could be an especially useful ongoing structure to enable different sectors to consolidate ties beyond their "silos."

Trying to shape the prism through which the country views the stakes in this election may push many of us out of comfort zones and strongholds. In my reading of past experiences when faced with an extreme right-wing threat, the left does not grow mainly by stressing its critique of the more backward elements who, for their own reasons, are opposed to the most blatant racists. Rather, even when we are forced to fight on electoral terrain not of our choosing, the main determinant of left growth is whether or not we are at the forefront of calling out the flag-bearers of white supremacy and contributing maximally to their defeat.

This approach means neither prettifying nor demonizing Hillary Clinton. This election is not mainly about Hillary. It's about whether or not the conservative bloc, with racism at its core, will renew its lease on hegemony or be thrown back.

Further, it is not too early to begin thinking about how progressive momentum can be sustained beyond November 7. In 2008, conservative leaders formulated a plan to undermine Obama's presidency within hours of the election results coming in, while too much of the left was content with savoring a milestone for the country. No matter who wins on Election Day 2016 the consequences will be dire if anything similar happens this time around.

If Trump wins, the mobilization of across the board opposition will need to begin immediately. And if the right is beaten by whatever margin, change in our direction will take place only via a multi-level battle plan. An immediate challenge will be to push for maximum results in areas where there is the greatest possibility for progressive headway (immigration reform, curbing racist police abuse, rolling back mass incarceration, raising the minimum wage, addressing climate change and so on) while gearing up for all-out confrontation with an incoming administration on the life-and-death issues where Hillary is most backward (foreign policy, war and peace, blank check support for Israel, coddling the 1%).

Undoubtedly the approach suggested here will encounter resistance from many on the left, since we all share the goal of a political revolution against an establishment of which Hillary is certainly a part. But getting a perspective rooted in an assessment of underlying trends and their political manifestations may help prepare us for how hard and protracted the struggle for basic change is,

and how uncomfortable alliances and compromises are necessary on this bumpy, unmapped road. Obviously there will be disagreement and sharp debate. But if our differences can move from the level of internet flame wars and name calling to substantive contention over what social forces are in motion and what the left can do to move from the margins to the heart of mass politics, it may benefit us all.

**Max Elbaum**, May 6, 2016

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## **P.S.**

\* Posted by Portside on May 9, 2016:

<http://portside.org/2016-05-09/trump-racism-and-left-2016>

\* Max has been a racial justice and peace activist since the 1960s.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] ESSF (article 38297), [United-States: Notes on the Election](#).