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# Donald Trump: A Populist in the White House Background and Perspectives

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**In November 2016, populist candidate Donald Trump unexpectedly won the U.S. presidential election, and on 20 January 2017, he will take Barack Obama's place at the White House. On the campaign trail, Trump has lied, offended minorities, made racist and sexist statements, used provocative and crude slogans, defamed his opponent Hillary Clinton, and damaged the democratic process through unfounded allegations of voter fraud. What explains Trump's success? And how can he govern after such an inflammatory campaign?**

To understand Trump's election victory, one has to be familiar with three issue areas that have been dividing the United States for decades. These areas are demographic change, values, and the economic development of the country. First of all, the demographic structure of the United States is changing rapidly, which some groups of voters perceive as a loss of their own power and control. While over 80 percent of the population were white in 1965, that share had fallen to approximately 65 percent by 2015 and is forecast to be as low as 46 percent in 2065. This demographic change represents the end of the major European influence on the history of the country. Normally, that should not matter at all, for everyone professing their support of the nation's values can become an American citizen regardless of origin. Yet, particularly among whites and – most importantly – older white men, there is a vague fear of and defensive attitude towards this development. This may also be due to the fact that white men have been losing influence since the 1960s because of the emancipation of women and minorities – even though this process has made the country fairer and more representative than ever before.

Second, there is an irreconcilable conflict between conservatives and liberals over social norms. The surge of liberalisation in the 1960s and 1970s rapidly led to a conservative countermovement in the 1980s and 1990s. This so-called "culture war" between liberals and conservatives is still raging today. It focuses on issues such as family planning and gender roles ("family values"), abortion law, same-sex marriage, and school curricula (sex education, creationism vs. evolutionary biology). The social conservative camp is strongly influenced by religious values. Since the 1980s, white evangelicals – put simply, these are born-again Christians following a very conservative interpretation of the faith – have become a viable political force in the US. Three quarters of them believe the country has taken a turn for the worse since the 1950s.

Third, the gap between those who prosper and those who feel left behind economically is widening. The United States is the world's most powerful and innovative economy precisely because of its global connectivity. It recovered faster and better from the financial and economic crisis of 2008 than other highly industrialized nations. Unemployment is below five percent, and wages are on the rise. Still, some people feel the economy does not work for them. This is particularly true of people living in the country's former industrial centres, where millions of jobs have been lost over the past 25 years. The reason for this

development lies not just in the relocation of jobs to other countries, but also in efficiency increases and ongoing industrial automation. Although millions of new, well-paid jobs were created simultaneously, these jobs have benefited primarily university graduates. Blue-collar workers without a university degree or high school diploma, on the other hand, are on the losing side. Consequently, the income gap between both groups has been growing ever since the 1980s.

### **Political Division and the Crisis of the Republican Party**

Over the past years, Democrats and Republicans have emblematised and exacerbated the rifts in the three problem areas rather than overcome them. The Democratic Party lost its white constituency in the South because of the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. Subsequently, it developed into a party for minorities, progressives, the coastal elite, blue-collar workers, and labor unions. The Republican Party, on the other hand, became the party of white Southerners and, since the 1980s, has been the home of social conservatives and economic liberals propagating small government, deregulation, tax cuts, privatisation, and globalisation. Both parties have had a hard time satisfying their voter coalitions. After all, blue-collar workers, a core constituency of the Democrats, were not necessarily progressive with regard to values, whereas economic liberals within the Republican Party did not necessarily share social conservative convictions. Theoretically, that should have forced the two parties to make compromises. In practice, however, the exact opposite could be observed. Both parties attracted votes by mobilising people on the fringes of the political spectrum, thus drifting ever further apart. While Republicans courted whites and social conservatives, Democrats focused on minorities and declared diversity to be their ideal – an ideal that took on strange forms during recent debates about transgender restrooms. Even though Democratic and Republican positions on economic policy converged in the 1990s (e.g. in regard to free trade and small government), the Republican distrust of government has developed into an ideology since then. While in 1994, 64 percent of Republicans were more conservative than the median Democrat according to a survey by the Pew Research Center, this percentage increased to 70 percent in 2004 and even to 92 percent in 2014. For Democrats, a similar development can be observed. In short, it became increasingly difficult to strike compromises, although the political system in the United States depends on compromises. The more the political stalemate worsened, the more public discontent with Washington grew.

During Barack Obama's presidency, the Republican Party slipped into crisis because its right wing radicalised and became uncontrollable. The underlying conflict centred on the three familiar issues: demographic change, values, and the economic situation of the country. Obama won the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections thanks to a coalition of blacks, Latinos, women, university graduates, and liberals from urban centres. Whereas Republican leaders wanted to tap into new voter potential and attract minority votes, the right-wing grass roots demanded that the party oppose social change. They also questioned the legitimacy of the first black president of the United States. From 2011 onwards, Donald Trump loudly voiced his opinion that Obama was not a U.S. citizen (the so-called "birther movement"). Simultaneously, fierce resistance developed against any kind of immigration reform that would provide illegal immigrants with a way of legalising their status – in spite of the fact that deporting all 11 million undocumented immigrants was considered virtually impossible. The social conservative grass roots, on the other hand, felt they were being abused as "voting fodder" because the Republicans did not reverse the change in values as they had promised. The legalisation of same-sex marriage in all states in 2015 is just the most recent example of this. At the same time, the Tea Party movement emerged within the Republican Party, opposing any kind of government intervention such as Obamacare, government bailouts or debt-financed stimulus programmes, which had prevented the U.S. economy from collapsing after the financial crisis. The movement accused the Democrats of threatening the liberty and economic well-being of the common people with their "socialist agenda". Moreover, it ranted about the Republican "establishment", which it considered too willing to compromise, and swept many of the establishment's members out of office during the 2010 congressional elections.

While the Republican Party had been mobilising voters on the right for years, it failed to live up to the expectation that it would stop the social and normative change. There was a very simple reason for this failure: It was impossible. From an economic perspective, the United States is suffering from the lack of both a modern welfare policy and an activating labour market policy, both of which would be necessary to cope with structural change within the economy. Neither of these policies exists because many in the United States view the government as part of the problem, not as part of the solution. This attitude has taken on a life of its own within the Republican Party, without opening up any perspectives to those who struggle economically. While the Democrats discussed economic and social injustice under Obama and intended to push on with social reforms, they had little leeway because of the political stalemate. Furthermore, many white low-wage workers perceived the Democrats as a party for minorities that redistributed wealth for the benefit of others. This situation laid the groundwork for Trump's populist campaign.

### **Donald Trump's Winning Strategy**

Trump managed to present himself as the champion of those afraid of "losing their country" through a process of social, cultural, and economic change. His promise to "make America great again" ultimately means nothing else than taking the nation back to the past. He has catered to angry voters, fuelled fears and resentments, did not bother about the facts, and offered simple slogans instead of solutions. And it was his ranting and raving that apparently gave him credibility. Many voters supported Trump not despite the taboos he broke and the simple answers he provided, but because of them. Others followed him regardless of his populist propaganda just to prevent Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton from winning the election. Both of these facts are worrying.

Trump discredited minorities and thus assured those voter segments who are plagued by fears of loss that the country belongs to them. His message to his white, mostly older and male supporters from rural areas was that they were the "true Americans" and would soon take control of their country's destiny (again). Moreover, he built relationships with the so-called "alt-right" movement, a melting pot for racists, white supremacists, and conspiracy theorists. After wooing the alt-right with the debate about President Obama's birth certificate, Trump made Stephen Bannon, the then executive chairman of the right-wing "news" website *Breitbart*, the chief strategist of his campaign. Trump's racist and inflammatory rhetoric, his promises to build a wall between the United States and Mexico and to relentlessly deport all illegal immigrants served the interests of that group perfectly. He promised to the social conservatives to break the influence of the "immoral liberal elite" and to restore the "true" character of the nation. Even though they share neither Trump's lifestyle nor his former political views, 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for him. Trump managed to win this voter segment by portraying himself as the candidate of radical change and promising to appoint ultra-conservative judges to the Supreme Court to repeal the 1973 abortion legislation. Also, he chose evangelical Mike Pence as his vice-presidential running mate.

Regarding economic matters, he attracted blue-collar workers from the Democratic voter coalition and mobilised former non-voters. He assured those who were frustrated with the economic situation that the economy would work for them, too, if only politicians, rich people, corporations, lobbyists, the financial industry, illegal immigrants and foreign low-wage workers weren't putting them at a disadvantage. Trump thus identified alleged scapegoats and promised simple solutions. He plans to restore manufacturing jobs through protectionism and to kick-start the economy with an infrastructure investment programme, tax cuts and economic deregulation. In fact, just under 80 percent of voters who consider the economic situation of the country as well as their own financial prospects to be poor, voted for Trump.

Trump won the election by exploiting existing rifts and making promises he will not be able to keep. Regarding issues of society and values, he pushed the Republicans further to the right and mobilised voters with extreme positions. However, neither will the United States revert back to a country of whites, nor do the social conservative demands have any majority appeal. Regarding economic matters, Trump suggested

that structural change did not have to be dealt with but could be reversed. That is an illusion. As a matter of fact, the protectionist approach favoured by Trump bodes catastrophe for the economy, whereas the (lower) middle classes will not benefit from his tax plans either. What the United States needs is reforms towards a social market economy. This, however, is not up for discussion.

### **From Candidate to President: Options and Scenarios**

In light of this situation, what will be Trump's options as a President? What if he turns out to be unable to live up to the expectations of his supporters? The lesson learned from his campaign is that his opponents took Trump literally and therefore not seriously. His supporters took him seriously, but not literally. It is thus quite conceivable that Trump may be able to retract his wildest promises without facing any consequences: He has changed his mind on locking up Hillary Clinton; instead of a wall, he may just build a fence at the Mexican border (parts of which already exist anyway); rather than all illegal immigrants he will start by expelling just criminal offenders. Some of his voters were however convinced precisely by his extreme demands. Trump will have to muddle through. He will compromise in order to be able to act, but at the same time he will cater to those who voted for his extreme agenda with concessions, grand gestures and inflammatory rhetoric. This is the pattern that has emerged since he won the election. Trump picked Reince Priebus, Chairman of the Republican National Committee, as Chief of Staff and right-wing firebrand Stephen Bannon as chief strategist at the White House. This way, he is getting both the party establishment, which he will need in Congress, and ultra-right voters on board. Trump is acting conciliatory in order to leave the door open for cooperation, while at the same time keeping the most extreme among his voters in line through provocative statements – such as the baseless accusation that millions of illegal immigrants had voted for Hillary Clinton. He is accepting praise for having prevented air conditioner manufacturer Carrier from moving 1000 jobs to Mexico. But the methods he used – a 7 million US dollar tax relief package and threatening a possible loss of orders from the defence sector – are not a sustainable model for the future. Besides, the appearance of success was misleading: 300 of these jobs were never threatened, 600 will be cut anyway, and another plant with 700 workers will close after all.

Ultimately, this "muddling through" is likely to escalate the existing political rift. Trump is going to have to compensate for his unkeepable promises with extreme rhetoric and recriminations against others – just like the Republican Party did before him. Even if he restrains himself – Trump's presidency is likely to mobilise the liberals across the country, just like the conservative right gained strength by opposing Obama. This will intensify the more Trump caters to the white, social conservative, rural, anti-globalist voter segment – thus alienating the diverse, progressive, urban, prospering, internationalist part of the population. This does not bode well for the future.

Is there any positive impetus to be expected from Donald Trump in the long term? Among other things, he directed his campaign towards people and regions that are not well off economically. It is a fact that their interests were mostly disregarded by politicians in past years. While Trump has touched on this sore topic, he has presented no answers: Protectionism, deregulation and tax cuts for businesses and the wealthy will not help low-qualified workers. At least, Trump will confront the Republican Party with the fact that he intends to invest into infrastructure on a massive scale and maintain some elements of Obamacare. This will reignite the debate within the party about the proper role of the state. Ideally, Trump may contribute to the Republicans reevaluating their distrust of government, which has been growing into an ideology since the 1980s and does more harm than good for the country. The many current obstacles make this less than likely, however. But one thing is certain: With a populist in the White House, the United States is facing some difficult times.

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