

The Trump phenomenon: How did we get here?

By Richard Esenberg

No matter how the Trump phenomenon completes its ugly course, it illustrates something alarming in American politics — something disturbing not only within the conservative movement but in the electorate and in how politicians of both the left and right have ignored a substantial segment of the country.

But we in Wisconsin may have shown the way through.

The explanation for Donald Trump's success is not simple, but let's see what we can make of a simple statement. "I love the poorly educated," Trump said, and both the left and the right chortled. That response is understandable. The idea of President Trump would be laughable had it not become a distinct possibility.

The response is also not wrong. The fact that the campaign for the most powerful position on Earth produces front-runners like Trump and Hillary Clinton is a wonderful argument for limited government. It is a stunning indictment of the notion that we should allow much in our lives to be directed by politics and elections. But there is also a trap in dismissing Trump's supporters as fools or haters. To be sure, they are badly mistaken, and there is certainly a good measure of racial resentment, if not racism, in Trump's appeal.



But things happen for a reason. Populism, however ugly and ignorant, needs some real grievance upon which to work.

Trump's invocation of the "poorly educated" was neither the cynical admission of a con artist (although he is that) or simply a statement of solidarity with those who resent our elites. It was a dog whistle directed at those who believe that politics as usual has left them behind.

On the left, there are both sympathetic and unsympathetic explanations for Trump's success. The unsympathetic explanation is that this is all conservatism come home to roost. In this view, the American right has always been about hate and Trump is simply serving it up in larger and undiluted doses.

There are two problems with this explanation. The first is that it assumes a large number of people are motivated by nothing other than hate and ignorance. This is almost always a mistake. The other is that the

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organized right — consisting of movement conservatives — regards Trump as antithetical to everything that they believe in: limited government, individual freedom, free markets.

The more sympathetic explanation sees Trump's support as a conscious rejection of traditional conservative policies. Trump voters, according to this view, have decided that they don't want lower taxes and smaller government. They want redistribution of income but are simply seeking it in the wrong place. Today's Trumpkins could be tomorrow's Sandernistas.

I don't think so. Trump's supporters may not be Randian libertarians, but they don't seem interested in a handout. They may feel that the political establishment has little regard for the working class, but they see the Democrats as a coalition of people who are not like them: racial and sexual minorities, union members, government workers and limousine liberals.

I don't pretend to fully understand what's going on. Part of it may be no more sophisticated than the sad fact that you can fool some of the people for quite some time. But the misguided and tragic support for Trump might also be a response to the failings of politicians on the left and the right.

The left has lost the white working class because of its unconcealed contempt for the great unwashed who cling to their God and their guns. It is beside itself because a football team is named the Redskins, while it regularly makes sport of rednecks. It has forgotten that the American working class is not a European proletariat. Joe and Jill Sixpack understand, at some level, that American exceptionalism has worked for them, even if all of their aspirations have not yet been achieved. Denmark doesn't look good to them.

But, in the wake of the financial crisis and a perception (however unfair) that capitalism failed to deliver,



some Republicans feel the GOP has been indifferent to them. Trump's working-class voters believe that Republicans, like the Democrats, are also on "someone else's side," i.e., business and the wealthy.

It would be easy — and not completely wrong — to say that politicians must accept where people are. But I'd like to believe that reason and evidence still have space to work. And that's exactly what happened in Wisconsin.

In theory, our Rust Belt state should have been, like Michigan and Illinois before us, Trump territory. But Trump lost here on April 5, and it was no accident. While his core supporters did not waiver, conservatives in Wisconsin were largely united behind a single candidate and motivated by a desire not only to choose a candidate, but to save a movement.

No matter what happens nationally, Wisconsin may have

shown the way forward for conservatives. Over the past five years, we have developed a fantastic conservative infrastructure made up of think tanks and advocacy groups that have explained conservative ideas, not just conservative resentment. The activity of these groups has been augmented by conservative talk radio hosts who are a cut above — actually several cuts above — those found elsewhere and nationally. Our conservative politicians have cared about policy, not just the polls.

Here in Wisconsin, we have shown that ideas and reasoned discourse matter. Nationally, I am afraid that conservatives may be facing a time in the wilderness. In Wisconsin, we have demonstrated the way out and have begun to move forward.

I suspect that we have a lot of work to do. 

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