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The Anti-P.C. Vote

Thomas B. Edsall JUNE 1, 2016

We know that resentment is driving much of Donald Trump's success — resentment of elites, of the political class, of illegal immigrants, of protesters, of the media — and perhaps most particularly of changes in the demographic makeup of the country that Trump and his followers find unwelcome.

Part of the explanation for the triumph of resentment is political and economic, but one question has nagged at me. What is the psychological mechanism underpinning this resentment?

Six months ago, I wrote that Donald Trump's "presidential campaign was following the path of right-wing working class parties in Europe." In the United States since then, Democratic politicians and the media have struggled to enter the minds of Trump voters, who are evidently enraged by the imposition of norms of political correctness that they see as enforced by "Stalinist orthodoxy."

Trump has capitalized on the visceral belief of many white voters that government-enforced diversity and other related regulations are designed "to bring Americans to submission" by silencing their opposition to immigration — legal and illegal — to judicial orders putting low-income housing in the suburbs, and to government-mandated school integration, to name just a few of their least favorite things.

Trump's supporters, judging from the venom with which they refer to "political correctness," perceive the network of state, local and federal anti-discrimination laws and directives as censorious and coercive.

The furor over political correctness has been brewing for a half century, since the broad rights revolution of the 1960s, which included the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act on the heels of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The 1965 legislation and subsequent measures shifted United States policy to raise the total number of immigrants from Asia, Africa and Latin America and to sharply reduce the proportion of European whites.

The result was unanticipated by the sponsors of the original act, according to the nonpartisan website History.com, which reports that in the 1950s, more than 50 percent of immigrants were from Europe, and just 6 percent from Asia. By the 1990s, Europeans had fallen to 16 percent of the total and Asians had grown to 31 percent.

More to the point:

> Between 1965 and 2000, the highest number of immigrants (4.3 million) to the U.S. came from Mexico, in addition to some 1.4 million from the Philippines. Korea, the Dominican Republic, India, Cuba and Vietnam were also leading sources of immigrants, each sending between 700,000 and 800,000 over this period.

The African immigrant population in the United States grew from 80,000 in 1970 to 1.8 million in 2013, according to Pew. The immigrant population from Middle Eastern countries grew from 235,000 in 1980 to 1.02 million in 2013, according to the census.

Opposition to the surge of non-European, nonwhite immigration is a bedrock of the Trump campaign, a crucial element of his attack on political correctness and a key component of the loyalty he elicits from noncollege, middle- and lower-income voters opposed to liberalized immigration — voters who believe they have been dispossessed.

Trump's successful deployment of the issue of immigration to mobilize voters raises this question: Why is his opposition to immigrants and Mexicans in particular so resonant when immigration liberalization ostensibly has majority support in most polls?

Research conducted by Lefteris Jason Anastasopoulos, a lecturer and data science fellow at Berkeley's School of Information, provides one answer: Support for immigration "may be greatly overestimated."

In an email, Anastasopoulos writes that

> polls conducted by large survey organizations never ask about immigration in geographic context. Instead they ask questions about whether respondents support increasing immigration or granting amnesty for undocumented immigrants in the "United States" overall rather than, say, Dayton, Ohio, or Wilmington, North Carolina, places where immigration has been rapidly increasing over the past few years. This kind of abstract framing tends to push respondents toward giving more "politically correct" answers to standard poll questions about immigration.

The result is

> a significant underestimation of the backlash against newly arriving immigrants and an overestimation of the support for immigration among the public.

The refusal of Democrats and the American left to hear — or to grant some legitimacy to — the grievances of white America as it loses power and stature to ascendant minorities and to waves of immigrants from across the globe undergirds the Trump movement. In the zero sum world of immigration politics, it has proved impossible so far to convincingly affirm the validity of the claims of both sides.

The quest by American liberals and progressives for support, or at least tolerance, of diversity, inclusiveness and multiculturalism is likely to prevail — particularly if the compulsory dimension of compliance is curtailed.

Jonathan Haidt, a professor at N.Y.U., suggested to me that one way to better understand the intensity of Trump's appeal is by looking at something called "psychological reactance." Haidt describes reactance as

> the feeling you get when people try to stop you from doing something you've been doing, and you perceive that they have no right or justification for stopping you. So you redouble your efforts and do it even more, just to show that you don't accept their domination. Men in particular are concerned to show that they do not accept domination.

The theory, first developed in 1966 by Jack W. Brehm in "A Theory of Psychological Reactance," is directly relevant to the 2016 election, according to Haidt. Here is Brehm's original language:

> Psychological reactance is an aversive affective reaction in response to regulations or impositions that impinge on freedom and autonomy. This reaction is especially common when individuals feel obliged to adopt a particular opinion or engage in a specific behavior. Specifically, a perceived diminution in freedom ignites an emotional state, called psychological reactance, that elicits behaviors intended to restore this autonomy.

Haidt applies this to the 2016 election:

> Translated to the Trump phenomenon, I would say that decades of political correctness, with its focus on "straight white men" as the villains and oppressors — now extended to "straight white cis-gendered men" — has caused some degree of reactance in many and perhaps most white men.

In both the workplace and academia, Haidt argues,

> the accusatory and vindictive approach of many social justice activists and diversity trainers may actually have increased the desire and willingness of some white men to say and do un-PC things.

In this atmosphere, according to Haidt,

> Trump comes along and punches political correctness in the face. Anyone feeling some degree of anti-PC reactance is going to feel a thrill in their heart, and will want to stand up and applaud. And because feelings drive reasoning, these feelings of gratitude will make it hard for anyone to present arguments to them about the downsides of a Trump presidency.

Trump's anger at being policed or fenced in apparently speaks to the resentment of many American men and their resistance to being instructed, particularly by a female candidate, on how they should think, speak or behave.

On April 26, Trump wheeled out a spectacularly offensive attack on Clinton, perhaps designed to provoke the response it got. He accused her of playing "the women's card" when "she has got nothing else going. Frankly, if Hillary Clinton were a man, I don't think she would get 5 percent of the vote."

Hillary rose to the bait. Three days later, appearing on Jake Tapper's CNN show "The Lead," she countered:

> I have a lot of experience dealing with men who sometimes get off the reservation in the way they behave and how they speak. ... I am not going to deal with their temper tantrums, or their bullying or their efforts to try to provoke me. He can say whatever he wants to say about me, I could really care less.

Trump responded on Sean Hannity's Fox News show on May 2. What Clinton said "was a very derogatory statement to men," Trump declared. "It was almost as though she's going to tell us what to do, tell men what to do." He continued, "It was a real put-down."

The kind of messages that provoke reactance and a defiant or oppositional response, according to one study, include "imperatives, such as 'must' or 'need'; absolute allegations, such as 'cannot deny that ...' and 'any reasonable person would agree.' "

In this context, and to understand the negative reaction of Trump supporters to Clinton, take a look at some of Clinton's recent comments on Twitter, which could be construed, by those so inclined, as admonitory:

"I don't think a nation can be great that turns its back on the poor and the unfortunate."

"We've got to do more to raise families' incomes. We can start by raising the federal minimum wage."

"We're stronger together. When we embrace immigrants, not denigrate them. When we build bridges, not walls."

Trump has made Clinton his foil of choice.

On Dec. 21, 2015, Trump told an audience in Grand Rapids:

> Even a race with Obama, she was gonna beat Obama. I don't know who would be worse, I don't know, how could it be worse? But she was going to beat — she was favored to win — and she got schlonged, she lost, I mean she lost.

Two days later, on Dec. 23, Clinton counterattacked in an interview in Fairfield, Iowa with The Des Moines Register:

> I really deplore the tone of his campaign, the inflammatory rhetoric that he is using to divide people, and his going after groups of people with hateful, incendiary rhetoric.
>
> Nothing really surprises me anymore. I don't know that he has any boundaries at all. His bigotry, his bluster, his bullying have become his campaign. And he has to keep sort of upping the stakes and going even further.

When Trump escalated his attacks on Clinton more recently, she took a different approach: "I have nothing to

say about him and how he's running his campaign." When pressed further, she sought the high ground:

> I'm answering him on what I think voters care about. I'm answering him on the differences between our records, our experience, what we want to do for our country, how important it is to try to unify the country.

Jesse Graham, a professor of psychology at the University of Southern California, suggested that the fact that Clinton is a woman plays a role in this dynamic, noting that many Trump followers respond to Clinton in a fashion similar to that of

> 8th grade boys reacting to their homeroom teacher. But I think this has more to do with her gender than with any particular behaviors on her part — in other words, there are some who would respond to any woman running for president as an 8th grader in homeroom who resents the teacher.

Simon Hedlin, a public policy researcher, noted that

> since reactance is driven by perceptions rather than by facts, this works well in Trump's favor, considering his often cavalier relationship with the truth.

Perhaps more significantly, Hedlin noted that he and Cass Sunstein, a Harvard Law professor and former top aide in the Obama administration, conducted research that shows that some people will reject a policy or action that is to their advantage when they feel pushed or forced into making the "correct" decision.

In other words, reactance can foster a totalizing loyalty that does not respond to reasoned fault finding. This might help explain Trump's seeming immunity to criticism from his adversaries. His followers feel that they have experienced a "diminution of freedom" and believe that Trump can "restore their autonomy."

He has won a unique admixture of support, based in part on what might be called an anti-rational or irrational loyalty but also in part on his recognition of legitimate grievances among his adherents that many other politicians belittle or deny. This loyalty, as Republican candidates found during the primaries, is far wider and deeper than anyone not sharing it expected.

The general election will determine how far this loyalty has spread through the populace. Trump has not yet faced the inevitable disclosure, as his opponents muster facts and figures, that he cannot deliver all that he has promised: water in California, the elimination of the national debt, lifting the economy's annual growth rate to 6 percent, bringing back the coal industry and the complete obliteration of the Islamic State.

Clinton remains the favorite, but she faces five months of treading water in a shark tank. She has yet to discover a compelling rebuttal to Trump on political correctness, and it will be difficult for her to placate opponents of immigration while holding her advantage with her base. Nonetheless, although her bite is not as lethal as Trump's, she will soon have almost the entire Democratic Party in her corner, including a cadre of operatives whose specialty is drawing blood.

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