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Trump's election victory is the latest example of the paranoid style in US politics



*What can the US' recent electoral history tell us about Donald Trump's victory in the 2024 election? **Michael Storper** writes that every US election since 1968 has turned on a combination of the incumbent's popularity and the Republican and Democratic parties' narrative of, and campaigning on, a values-culture-identity proposition. Looking back to the writing of Richard Hofstadter, he shows how the Republican Party has been able to win elections by using the paranoid style to weaponize fears about the "other", including racial resentment and anti-intellectualism, together with anti-incumbency. The challenge now for Democrats will be to improve civic education, embed a narrative of social and economic liberalism, and to rebuild social capital across America's communities.*

Donald Trump's victory in the 2024 US elections has generated much Left-wing handwringing, and neo-populist critique, about the Democrats' policies having been too globalist and neo-liberal. One trope is "the Democrats didn't offer enough working-class policy." Another is that Republicans won working class votes because of a distorted internet disinformation bubble and working-class voters mis-informed about policies but swayed by values. Issue polls show that majorities of Americans disagree with many key Republican policy positions. In 2004, **Thomas Frank** argued a version of the latter in his best-seller *What's the Matter with Kansas?* but has recently incorporated some of the former. These are important points, but they don't unlock why this situation persists as a long-term equilibrium of American electoral life. A longer-term perspective can help with this task, based on insights from Columbia university historian Richard Hofstadter (1916-1970), who **published *Anti-intellectualism in American life*** in 1963 and *The Paranoid style in American Politics* in 1964.

Every US presidential election since 1968 has turned on a mix of: the popularity or unpopularity of the incumbent, for largely cyclical reasons; the party's narrative of its values-culture-identity proposition; and how the candidates use the values/identity proposition in their campaigns. Hofstadter's two classics shed light on these features.



“Coexisting Signs” (CC BY-NC 2.0) by VCU CNS

Most voters have been – and still are – disengaged

In every election, including the most recent one, a bit more than half the voters are not very engaged, have little knowledge of the powers of the presidency, nor of presidential policies, and vote on whether the incumbent is popular or not. A good deal of whether he is popular has to do with luck of the business cycle, world affairs and legacy issues that the president can do little about. Most such voters have weak party identities. The problem for them is that by voting this way, they buy policy packages they may not understand or agree with (the “Trojan Horse” problem). The recent 50-48 percent **popular vote victory** of Donald Trump was heavily favored by an anti-incumbency advantage with that 50-60 percent. This is where anti-intellectualism comes in. Being told by the experts that Donald Trump’s policies or politics were reactionary or scary or that things weren’t President Joe Biden’s fault simply fell on deaf ears. Hofstadter shows us that this isn’t anything new. About 20 percent of voters had a strong interest in some policy positions of the two candidates, but they are outweighed by short-term or disengaged voters.

Hofstadter also helps us understand the values narrative advantage of the Republicans in this election landscape. Somewhere between 40-50 percent of all voters are strongly influenced by the contrasting values propositions (or the perceptions of them); thus, hard-core social conservatives and hard-core lifelong identity Democrats are each no more than 25 percent of the electorate, with also some of these more policy than identity oriented.

Changing party cultures and an evolving paranoid style

Until about 1964, the parties differed on their view of the role of the state in economics, a split that dated from the New Deal in the 1930s. But both parties were socially and racially conservative, and both were invested culturally and policy-wise in Cold War anticommunism. This began to change when the Democrats chose the side of racial justice, with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, leading Pres. Lyndon Johnson to **famously quip to an aide** that, “we may have lost the south for your lifetime – and mine.” He meant the loss of anti-Republican Southern (“Dixie”) Democrats. But he didn’t see the coming loss of the white working class in the North. From 1964 to 1968, racial politics, burgeoning student opposition to the Vietnam War (and the draft), and a mix of various new social liberalisms, forced their way into the values mainstream of the Democratic Party.

Thus, in the 1968 election, the white working class in some northern states **first went Republican**. This was before the deindustrialization of the North or increasing income inequality (consequences of globalism and neo-liberalism), factors frequently cited today as reasons for working class Republicanism. Nixon effectively weaponized anti-student and racial resentment to get elected twice, against the backdrop of protests of a doomed, costly and unsuccessful war, and urban decline and violence. He ramped up the paranoid style. In 1968, the South voted for the George Wallace’s American Independent Party, though Texas remained Dixie Democrat. These states were added to the new Republican map in later elections, along with more northern industrial states.

The paranoid style had its left-wing version, too. The prosecution of anti-communism through domestic surveillance and repression and the infiltration of dissident groups (FBI) and ill-fated foreign wars generated movement politics within the Democratic party and led to an “us versus the establishment” politics on the left. But the weaponization of paranoia and internal enemies by presidential candidates has been systematically more important and more effective when conducted by the Republicans than the Democrats since then. Anti-intellectualism was also increasingly folded into the values wars, by the Republicans but not by Democrats. The fact that Roosevelt or Kennedy were relatively “intellectual” didn’t hurt them back then. The Carter election marked the change, because **Carter** was tarred with being too “thoughtful” (read: “intellectual”), which was synonymous with weak. Ronald Reagan perfected the combination of the “enemy list” style with anti-expert discourse, wrapped up in a sunny friendly package.

We can draw these threads together. In the elections since 1968, anti-incumbency dominated in 1976 (post-Watergate, Vietnam catastrophe, beginnings of deindustrialization under Gerald Ford, successor to Nixon); 1980 (energy price crisis; Iran hostages under Carter); 1992 (end of Reagan boom, new taxes on working class); 2008 (economy in free fall from Bush financial collapse); 2024 (unpopular Biden inflation and immigration).

The role of values voting since 1968

Values voting combines with incumbency and policy voting to shape elections and has played a role in key elections since 1968. Republicans are much more open and clearer about their culture-values

proposition, and their values narrative is consistently more favored in a rather center-Right country. In the 1970s, a popular sitcom, *All in the Family*, captured the new working class disaffection with social liberalism through its main character, Archie Bunker.

In 1980, though Reagan had anti-incumbency on his side, he also actively articulated a values narrative of anti-government, anti-labor, anti-intellectual (student) sentiment and racial conservatism. He then acted on the anti-labor part of it in his policies but was not punished by working class voters. In 1988, the first Bush used racial conservatism and fear effectively against his Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis. In 1994, Newt Gingrich institutionalized Republican scorched earth paranoid grievance politics in the wake of the “**Republican Revolution**”. The second Bush was widely reviled until he invented a war in Iraq and was therefore able to pursue an anti-working-class domestic policy agenda.

Republicans’ success with the paranoid style

In this light, Trumpism is not new. Perhaps Trump’s crassness, vulgarity and cruelty are new, and that they do not meet with universal rejection is a new troubling element of the values space. But the adverts of many Republicans since 1968 have used troubling emotional triggers just as much or more than the media placements of the recent Trump campaign. One can think of the “Willie Horton” racist ads of Bush 1, the “swift boating” of John Kerry (a war hero made into a traitor) in 2004, and many other times the Republicans have successfully used fear and grievance, race and disloyalty to “American values,” and “the educated enemy.” The Republican playbook since 1968 is the paranoid style of the “other.” It is a successful moving target for them, with immigrants successfully added to social liberal others, even as baseline racism and anti-gay sentiment have declined.



“Donald Trump, former president” (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) by Phil Mistry / PHIL FOTO

Some will question the idea that the Republicans have a deep values advantage by citing the elections of Bill Clinton in 1992 and Barack Obama in 2008 as victories for the Democratic

progressive social values coalition. But the first Clinton election was against an unpopular incumbent. The idea at the time that Clintonism was an endorsement of social liberalism (with his accomplished independent wife, Hillary Clinton), was wrong in retrospect. The proof is that he was quickly ring-fenced in the 1994 midterm elections by Gingrich-ism. Clinton did win re-election in 1996 because he benefited from a huge incumbent advantage: the most favorable economic and political circumstances of any president in more than half a century (end of Cold War, 90s boom). Obama's election in 2008 was in the context of financial free-fall and the Iraq war's fabricated origins and chaotic unfolding. And, like Clinton, he birthed a strong reaction, the **Tea Party**, and suffered mid-term reversal. Though Obama did achieve the pro working-class policy of Obamacare, it never gave the Democrats a consistent electoral boost from working class voters or regions. Thus, Obama did not signal a post-racial, more liberal America. Moreover, he betrayed working class America by allowing massive foreclosures in the financial crisis. He won on a fluke the first time, got re-elected because of good cyclical luck and a weak Republican candidate, and left the Republicans with a reinforced paranoid and anti-intellectual narrative of betrayal by the elites.

It is often **argued** that the Democrats have marginalized themselves by choosing to become the party of the urban college educated. But Democrats were going with the growth: the college graduate percentage climbed from about 15 percent in Nixon's time to about 38 percent today. The problem is that their formerly growing habitat is no longer expanding. The Thomas Frank problem enters here. It is not because, as so many journalists and pundits claim, the Democrats abandoned pro-working-class policies. They may not offer much, but since the 1960s, they are the only party that has attempted (however inadequately) any such policies, despite Obama's betrayal on foreclosures. In any case, they have failed to secure electoral majorities to legislate these policies. This is because working class voters are socially more conservative than the Democrat core constituency, electing Republicans. Democrats have been unable to please both constituencies at the same time. Hence, their needed political coalition appears sociologically impossible.

Why does the values narrative of the Republicans seem to be more appealing than that of the Democrats? Americans are more socially conservative on average than in other high-income western countries. Jonathan Rodden, a Stanford political scientist shows in his 2019 book, **Why Cities Lose** that over more than a century, Democrats have the advantage in dense, large, urbanized places. American geography has massively shifted away from density and away from its urban core strongholds of the mid-20th century: from Frostbelt to Sunbelt, and from urban to suburban; and from urban-industrial to rural conservative. In these environments, it is easier to sell libertarianism and anti-governmentalism than it is in dense cities. Los Angeles was a Republican city until the late 1960s.

Medium-term challenges for the Democratic Party

Density and urban complexity tend to change people's minds about interventionist government. LA is one of the most Democratic cities today. This is why some Southern cities are becoming purple and may become solidly less conservative with time. But geography is a long-term process, and the social structures of a lot of the country's regions mean that the life of social conservatism has legs. As **Kathy Cramer** shows in *The Politics of Resentment* (2016), much of the working class that used to live in dense urban places, with institutions such as unions for their political information, now lives in more rural places where their local institutions, such as hunting clubs and churches, lean conservative. Thus, urbanization, education, and historical reckoning with racial oppression do not automatically time-stamp deep conservatism.

This long-term perspective suggests three medium-term challenges for the Democrats. First, improve civic education in general, to increase the percentage of the population that votes, and that has some idea of the parties and policy buckets they are effectively voting for. Unfortunately, civic education has been a hard sell for the Left, considering it conservative by nature. Second, embed social and economic liberalism in a proudly pro-American pro-western values narrative that celebrates both individual striving and solidarity. And third, rebuild social capital institutions in the far-flung communities where socially conservative institutions now dominate, and work to unplug the demonizing or simple ignorance of what social liberalism and the social market economy are all about.

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