

How Obama's welfare legacy helps explain the roots of Trump supporters' rage



In the lead up to the 2016 election, for many, that Hillary Clinton would ride President Obama's popularity into the Oval Office was a foregone conclusion. Why then, did America end up with President Trump? [Anne Daguerre](#) argues that despite Obama's somewhat successful efforts to save the US economy during the financial crisis nearly a decade ago, Donald Trump was able to capitalize on the downbeat mood of many older white voters who felt that Obama had spent public money on undocumented immigrants, minorities, and the young.

A year later, the United States is still reeling from the election of Donald Trump on November 8th, 2016. It's widely known that in the lead up to the election, Barack Obama had expected to turn over the keys to the White House to former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, the continuity candidate. Clinton was an experienced and competent stateswoman who promised to build on Obama's achievements. She had wind in her sails. In September 2016, eight years after the Great Recession, the country looked as if it had finally [turned the corner](#). Poverty rates were down; median incomes were up, especially for ethnic minorities and women.

So, why did voters turn away from Democrats? In her book, *What Happened*, Clinton [blames](#) her defeat on former FBI chief James Comey, who announced he was reopening the FBI investigation into her private email server 10 days before the vote. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders is also seen by some as having contributed to Clinton's defeat by splitting the Democratic vote.

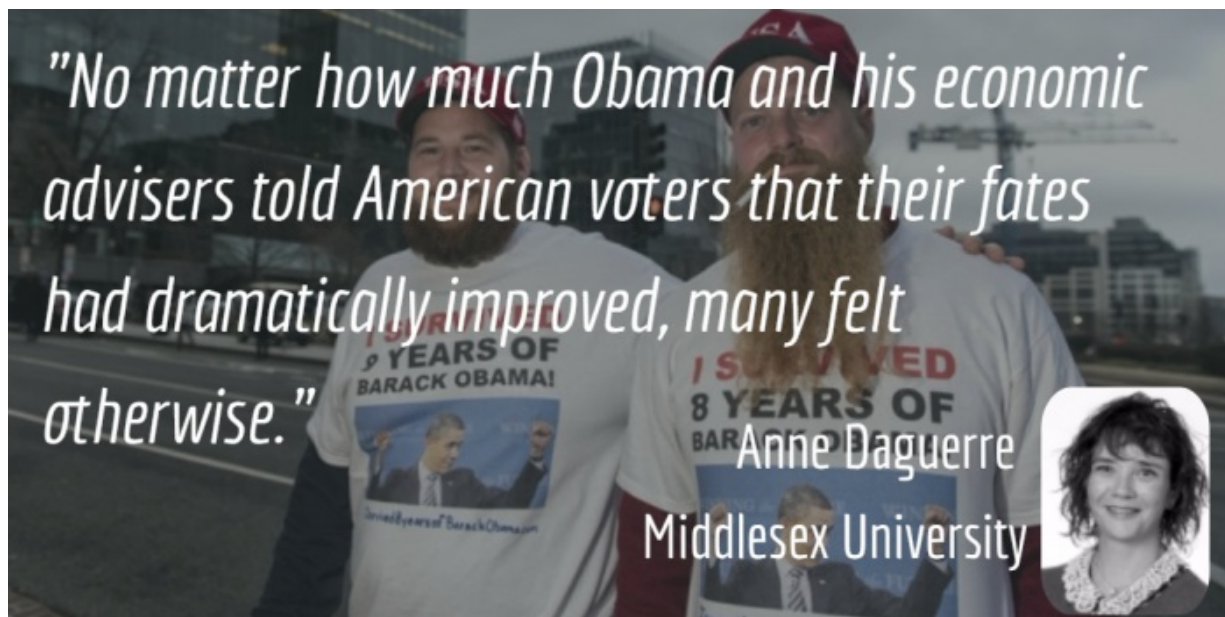
As usual, it's Bill Clinton who nailed the problem on its head. In March 2016, the former president [declared](#) that "millions and millions and millions and millions of people look at that pretty picture of America he [Obama] painted and they cannot find themselves in it to save their lives. That explains everything." Donald Trump won because the Democrats' message of cautious hope fell on deaf ears and despite their efforts to prop up the economy at its time of greatest weakness.

The great disconnect

In the midst of the Global Financial Crisis, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (passed in March 2009) propped up the economy at a time when the country was losing 800 000 jobs a month. There's no doubt the Act prevented the advent of another Great Depression. Its antipoverty measures [lifted individuals most exposed to the risk of poverty](#), especially children (3.2 million), blacks (1.6 million), Hispanics (2.6 million) and other ethnic minorities from Asian, American Indian or other backgrounds (0.6 million).

However, there was a gap between the administration's socio-economic achievements and their perception by the American public, for two reasons. The first problem was the structurally weak economic recovery. Between 2009 and 2015, earnings remained stagnant. Second, because of fiscal austerity, job losses were especially pronounced at the state and local government levels.

In politics, the memory of bad times hangs over people's perception. Because progress was slow and barely perceptible, the Obama administration's attempt to resurrect public confidence in the efficacy and legitimacy of public intervention was severely undermined. The administration's argument that it prevented the advent of a Great Depression felt tame and disappointing to many Americans, and that's what many remembered on polling day last year.



“Survivors” by [Blink O’fanaye](#) is licensed under [CC BY SA 2.0](#)

No matter how much Obama and his economic advisers told American voters that their fates had dramatically [improved](#), many felt otherwise. In fact, the more they were told they ought to feel better and optimistic about their future, the angrier they got. They felt left behind and that was that.

Migrants and ethnic minorities as scapegoats

In the lead up to the 2016 election, Donald Trump was able to capture the country’s morose mood. As I explain in my new book, [Obama’s Welfare Legacy](#):

Just as Obama had been the salesman of a more perfect union that would conquer its divisions, at times glossing the gaping inequalities and deep poverty that had continued to plague America, Trump presented a dark vision of ‘carnage’ and human loss in America’s former industrial heartlands. (p. 5).

Trump’s solution to this great disconnect was to close off the frontiers and keep immigrants and refugees off benefits such as food stamps and Medicaid. Trump exploited the idea that the American welfare state had been made more generous for undeserving minorities – not the welfare queen of times past, the emblematic [African American single mother denounced by Ronald Reagan](#) – but illegal immigrants and Syrian refugees.

Welfare chauvinism in America

Racial animosities in American politics are not new. What’s been referred to as the [‘racialization of entitlement’](#) has been a dominant theme in welfare reform with the transformation of Aid to Families with Dependent Children into Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in 1996. The law widened the gap between immigrants and citizens, banning access to low-income programmes such as TANF, food stamps and Medicaid to individuals with less than 5 years residency in the United States.

This ‘tough on immigration’ line was extremely important to the Republican Party identity in the 1990s, but had become relatively marginal in conservative thinking in the 2000s. Paul Ryan, the House Speaker, has always wanted to devolve the [entire responsibility for low income programmes such as Medicaid and food stamps through block grants](#) to the states. For Ryan, the issue is not whether immigrants receive benefits without being entitled to them. In an ideal world, federal benefits should no longer exist, period. Not surprisingly, such proposals do not resonate with the public in hard times, as was plainly the case when Barack Obama became President of the United States. But Obama’s policies were portrayed as benefiting ethnic minorities in general and children of illegal immigrants in particular. This has become a fixation point for some. Donald Trump wrote in his 2015 book [Great Again](#) that:

each year 300 000 children are entitled to all the rights and privileges entitled to American citizens because their mothers entered this country illegally by walking over the border for a day in the south or by flying in from another country under fraudulent documentation (p. 28)

The Tea Party backlash against Obama’s social policies

The election of Barack Obama as the first African American US president in history helped crystallise a political backlash among older, mainly white Republican voters. These voters coalesced along the Tea Party in 2009 and 2010, opposing Obama’s main signature domestic policy achievements. [Tea Party supporters disliked social reforms that seemed to benefit ‘undeserving populations’](#). They objected the most to spending public money on constituents with ethnic and age profiles that were fundamentally different from theirs. Donald Trump is the successor of the Tea Party. In August 2016, in a speech on immigration reform, Trump [declared](#):

The Center for Immigration Studies estimates that 62 percent of households headed by illegal immigrants used some form of cash or non-cash welfare programs, like food stamps or housing assistance. Tremendous costs, by the way, to our country.

In the United States cultural and distributional conflicts between white older people and ethnic minority young people, between the “gray and the brown” have been particularly [acute](#) in recent years. Hillary Clinton writes:

There’s a tendency towards seeing every problem as someone else’s fault, whether it’s Obama’s liberal elites in the big cities, undocumented migrants taking jobs, minorities soaking up government assistance – or me. (Clinton, 2017, p. 276-277).

In the age of the diversity explosion, when most children will soon be racial minorities, a white, older America fears being replaced by younger minority ethnic groups in the not so distant future. Make no mistake: the populist wave that brought Donald Trump to power is alive and well.

This article is based on Anne Daguerre’s new book, [Obama’s Welfare Legacy](#)

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/2zUQEfM>

About the author



Anne Daguerre – *Middlesex University*

Anne Daguerre is an Associate Professor in Work Employment and Welfare at Middlesex University, London and an alumna of the Woodrow Wilson Center. A specialist in welfare reform, her current research makes comparative study of the US and the UK.