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Revolts, Reforms and Divides: An Independent Look at the 2016 Presidential Election

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One of the (very!) few pollsters who got the presidential election right, Patrick Caddell, had this to say the day before the election: "The political battleground is no longer over ideology but instead is all about insurgency."

Caddell points to his polling in early October, which asked for reaction to the following statement: "The real struggle for America is not between Democrats and Republicans but between mainstream America and the ruling political elites." 67 percent agreed, 24 percent disagreed.

On Election Day, the next wave of America's anti-elite political revolt rose up. It repudiated the liberal status quo coalition of Hillary Clinton, dispatched the politically incorrect outsider Donald Trump to the White House, and confirmed that the new divide in U.S. politics is vertical, not horizontal.

President-elect Trump and the Republican Party have a narrow mandate but a broad set of challenges, not least of which are reconciling the economic "deliverables" of his campaign, i.e., his promises of shared prosperity and growth, with a globalized economy that creates and distributes wealth in dramatically uneven ways.

This revolt, merely the latest world event shattering the worldview of so many, had many moving parts. Here are several that I see.

The Formula

Since 2008 and the election of Barack Obama, a new formula for winning national elections has been in play. The formula is Movement + Party Infrastructure = Victory. The Democratic Party, its "demographics are destiny" arrogance notwithstanding, did not win the 2008 presidential. It was forced by a black-led progressive insurgency, powered by independent voters and African Americans, to mobilize its vast infrastructure on behalf of Obama. That combustible combination won the election. While his re-election campaign in 2012 was a far cry from his 2008 movement/campaign, there was enough of an "echo" to power him to a second term. America did not want to expel our first black President from the White House.

Coming into the 2016 presidential cycle, the Democratic Party was shockingly blind to the historical reasons for its prior success. Instead it believed that the winning formula was Party Infrastructure + Identity Politics. But that coalition failed to hit its marks, and a depressed turnout among African Americans, a disappointing level of participation from Latinos, and the continued flight of independents away from the elitist Democrats to the anti-establishment Trump sealed their fate.

In contrast, Donald Trump and the Republican National Committee had their eyes wide open. Armed with their own insights into the winning playbook, their formula rested on the Movement + Party Infrastructure = Victory equation. The populist outcry against the elites and the collateral damage they inflicted on working class Americans, made visible by Trump and Bernie Sanders, was harnessed by Trump in the general election. Combining that with an upgraded RNC infrastructure with the power to mobilize traditional GOP voters, they redrew the electoral map. Crucial to that redrawing were independent voters.

What Did Independent Voters Do on Election Day?

Independent voters made up 31 percent of Tuesday's electorate, the highest proportion since the advent of polling, or roughly 39.4 million voters. 48 percent of them supported Trump, 42 percent backed Clinton and 10 percent supported a third party or independent candidate or did not answer the exit poll question. The independent vote, only eight years earlier a vital component of the Obama coalition, was allowed by Democrats to drift away. More to the point, the partisanship of the Democrats drove them away, to great consequence. In the swing states of Florida, Pennsylvania, Michigan, North Carolina and Wisconsin, independents provided Trump with his margin of victory over Clinton.

Independents—now 43 percent of the country—have been, and continue to be, a restless engine for political and economic renewal. In the Perot era, they were written off by the Liberal/Left as fascists, though the progressive wing of the independent movement—including yours truly—fought hard to build an independent left/right coalition with the Perot movement that lasted until 2000. In the Obama era, independents powered his overthrow of Clinton in the Democratic primaries and sought a place at the Democrats' table but were turned away. Years of partisanship over country, privilege over sharing the wealth, and bureaucracy over democracy sent them looking elsewhere.

Bernie Sanders Could Have Been Elected President

Donald Trump, riding the wave of the populist revolt during the primary season, and benefiting from a fragmented field, captured the Republican nomination. Though his incendiary campaign rhetoric forced his fellow Republicans through a revolving door of denunciation and embrace, that populist appeal anchored and, ultimately, grew his campaign. In contrast, Sanders' political revolution—made all the more difficult by having to go head-to-head with Clinton from the start—was halted by an anti-populist manipulation by the DNC, a super-delegate system that stacked the deck against him, and closed primaries in key states like New York, Pennsylvania and Arizona that locked out independents, including the so-called millennials, sympathetic to his cause. Nonetheless, Sanders came perilously close to a win. His "revolution" in the primaries was propelled by huge margins among independents in Wisconsin (72 percent) and Michigan (71 percent), two states where independents later broke for Trump. Though Sanders lost Ohio and Pennsylvania to Clinton, his margins there among independents were also huge—66 percent in Ohio and 72 percent in Pennsylvania. It is not unreasonable to conclude that if Sanders and Trump had faced each other in the general election, Sanders' deep support among independents would have carried over and could have put the volatile Rust Belt—Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan—in the Democrat camp.

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Political Revolts and Political Reform

A clarion call of the Trump and Sanders political revolts was "the system is rigged." Of course, it is. In fact, it's so rigged that it has even distorted how the political class-which does the rigging-sees reality! "De-rigging" the system is a long and hard road, mainly because the rules have been written to benefit those who make the rules. Perhaps the results of this election will finally propel a serious move to abolish the electoral college, a reform independents have championed for decades.

Still, some significant breakthroughs in the battle for systemic reform took place on Election Day. Here's a quick review. With 63.7 percent of the vote, Colorado passed Proposition 107 to create an open presidential primary system that allows all voters to participate, including the 36 percent who are registered independent. With 52.5 percent of the vote, Colorado leveled the playing field for independents to cast ballots in state and local primaries.

With 52.1 percent of the vote, Maine became the first state in the nation to enact a Ranked Choice Voting system for all elections, a reform designed to mitigate the spoiler taboo of voting for independent candidates. Campaign finance reform initiatives passed in two states.

But the most cutting-edge breakthrough came in South Dakota where Amendment V, an initiative to adopt a statewide nonpartisan elections system, polled 44.5 percent. Though this initiative campaign—led by a rowdy cross-partisan group of local leaders—did not pass in this round, it broke this issue through to a new threshold and created a new roadmap for winning in the future. Previously, initiative campaigns for nonpartisan elections—from New York City in 2003 to Oregon in 2008 and 2014, to Arizona in 2012—had been stuck in the low 30's, bombarded by negatives from party poobahs and "good government" types on both sides of the aisle. In South Dakota, with significant "matching grant" and political support from the premiere support organization for this reform—Open Primaries—an unprecedented local coalition travelled the rural and urban byways of this redder than red state. Their message was one of fairness, inclusion and accountability, and they nearly made it over the finish line. Amendment V polled 39,000 more votes than Hillary Clinton.

The Black Vote Shrinks, the Black and Independent Alliance Stalls

Key to a Clinton victory strategy was high turnout among African American voters, a mainstay of the Democratic Party coalition. However, not unlike what white blue collar Americans face in the dislocations caused by globalization, the poverty and unemployment in inner city communities have become more harsh and relentless. Political loyalty to the Democratic Party has become

more strained, a third of younger black voters identify as independents, and, in plain English, Hillary Clinton is not Barack Obama. Exit polls appear to indicate that 1.3 million fewer black voters cast ballots this year, as compared to 2012 and 2008. While Clinton polled 88 percent of those voters (Obama polled 93 percent in 2012 and 95 percent in 2008), that over a million fewer African Americans came out to the polls was part of the death blow to the Clinton coalition. It's worth noting that the volatile coalition of blacks and independents (we sometimes call it the Black and Independent Alliance) which raised up Obama in 2008 deserted the Democratic Party in 2016. Whether and how it regroups and re-emerges is a poignant question for both communities and a challenge for their leaders as well.

The Minor Party Vote

While the combined vote for the top three independent candidates—Gary Johnson (Libertarian), Jill Stein (Green), and Evan McMullin (Independent)—was showing at 15 percent a month ago, the vote for minor party candidacies collapsed. Johnson is at 3.2 percent (over 4 million votes), Stein at 1 percent (over 1 million votes) and McMullin—only on the ballot in 11 states—had hoped to win Utah outright but managed 21 percent of the vote there. The Johnson vote is the third highest minor party/independent presidential vote since 1992. Ross Perot polled 19.8 million votes that year and 8.1 million in 1996, followed by Ralph Nader's 2000 run which polled 2.9 million votes.

While this kind of collapse is not atypical for minor party campaigns, it has a different feel and meaning today. Largely, it would seem to signal that while America's mass populist revolt is searching for a home, moving from platform to platform, the minor parties have not found a way to connect to it. No small part of this disconnect is the fact that the minor parties continue to sell an ideology, at a moment when the populist revolt is largely a rejection of ideology and partisanship. It is less about issues than it is about power. Pat Caddell's findings at the top of this report underscore that trend.

Still, the venomous antipathy towards voting for independents within the mainstream media continues to amaze. On Election night, Chris Matthews told viewers on MSNBC that voting for a minor party candidate in this election was equivalent to supporting the Vichy government in France during World War II which, nominally neutral, was actually allied with the Nazis. He quickly withdrew the remark, but his co-panelist Joy Reid offered a friendly amendment, saying that her voting age children had a circle of friends who thought it was "chic" to vote for an independent. Fascist or fashionable, take your pick. Both Matthews and Reid believe that political correctness and voting for the establishment are the inviolable building blocks of an enlightened America. No wonder they never saw the revolt coming.

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The Latino Vote

The Democrats believed that Clinton could muster a broad and deep majority among Latinos. 65 percent of Latinos nationally supported Clinton, while 29 percent cast their votes for Trump. In 2012, Obama won 71 percent of the Hispanic vote, while Romney secured 27 percent. The hoped for "demographics are destiny" Latino tide did not occur. And, interestingly, in New Mexico, 12 percent of Latinos voted for an independent candidate. In Arizona, where 41 percent of Latinos are registered as independents, 9 percent of the Hispanic vote went to independent candidates. The Latino vote is very much in play in this era of realignment, potentially a force for nonpartisan structural reform that will increase its political power in more fluid coalitions.

Contradictions and the Divide

If the voter revolt was both luminous and conflicted, it also revealed a country filled with contradictions. Donald Trump opposed any mandated increases in the minimum wage, but two of the five states that passed an increase in the minimum wage went for Trump. Even though Trump campaigned against undocumented immigrants and for building a wall at the border with Mexico, exit polling showed that 70 percent of voters want a pathway to legalization for undocumented. Consistency and certainty, hallmarks of more stable times, are rapidly disappearing.

In Hillary's concession speech, the morning after the election, (ironically the best and most intimate speech of her campaign), she said that this election showed us that the country is more divided than we thought. I don't agree. In this election, dominated as it was by the major parties, the vultures in the major media and the three-ring circus of campaigns, we saw how the parties and their support institutions prevent Americans from crossing the divide and creating new ways of coming together.

Many progressive people are upset and fearful about the results, worried that if the liberal coalition is now on the ropes, the country will turn irrevocably to the right. Best, perhaps, to have a look at the ways that the liberal coalition—with its insistence on identity politics and the blame game that accompanies them—fostered an environment in which a turn to the right was inevitable. Let us now be released from these ideological and authoritarian chains and seek new ways to build a new, independent, multi-racial, anti-establishment American majority.