

The Democrats, and related parties in Europe, need to recognise that while Donald Trump deserved to lose the US presidential election, Hillary Clinton did not deserve to win. That she could not achieve a smashing victory over an opponent as personally compromised and politically empty as him is a condemnation not only of the condition of the country and its working classes, but on the candidate herself, her programme and the party leadership that she represented, says Professor Anatol Lieven. Clinton has attributed her loss to the FBI statement on her emails in late October. But its main cause was likely the millions of working-class Americans who voted Democrat in 2012 but who this time voted for Trump or stayed at home. And there are wider issues. Twice now in the past 16 years the candidate who won the popular vote has lost the election. The distribution of Senate seats favours a tiny proportion of the population and for a generation, the results of the elections for the House of Representatives have had less and less to do with the national popular vote. In other words, parts of a constitution drawn up by late 18th century patricians and slave-owning landowners may not be appropriate to a 21st century democracy and may indeed not be democratic at all. This is an issue of critical concern for the future of the US political system, to which I will return below.

THE MEANING OF TRUMP

Trump's victory, terrible though it is, has a positive and liberating side for the Democrats, as does the level of support that Bernie Sanders received during the primaries. Ten years ago, the idea that a self-declared socialist could be a serious contender for the Democratic nomination would have been called insane. But Americans are sick of the focus-group approved establishment candidates of the past generation. They are prepared to vote for much more abrasive, even foul-mouthed candidates with radical programmes. Trump is proof of this and future Democratic presidential nominees can do it too. In their different ways, both Trump and Sanders have proved that it is possible to run without being in the pocket either of the party elites or the lobby groups with which they are intimately bound up. Trump won by gambling that, despite the deep anger with him among Republican elites, ordinary Republican voters (and others) would vote for him. A future Democratic candidate running against Trump and his like can make the same calculation about the elites and lobbies that dominate the leadership of the Democratic party.

Trump has taken the gloves off over race and gender. The Democrats should do the same over class. This would, however, require a Democratic revolt against the overclass that has dominated both main political parties and the country for the past generation. Sanders has shown it is possible, and the Democrats have two great advantages in this regard. The first is this approach does not require them to turn half the US population against the other half, or even 95 percent of the population against the remaining 5 per cent. The horribly unequal distribution of the benefits of the American economy that has occurred in the last few decades means that the Democrats can target a programme of punitive economic redistribution against a mere 1 per cent or even 0.1 per cent of the population.

The second Democrat asset in this regard is Trump himself. One could hardly imagine a more unconvincing champion of the interests of ordinary American workers. If he has been able to present himself as such, it is only because Clinton was also a highly unconvincing one, and because Democratic elites have abandoned their former working-class constituents, in terms not only of economic representation but cultural identity. Trump has vowed to reduce taxes on the wealthy, already the lowest in the developed world, still further. The Democrats can run successfully against this, but only if they make a truly radical appeal against the overclass. Ideally, they need as a candidate a representative of the working classes who can also portray himself or herself as a Christian and patriot, such as a decorated veteran from the Midwest or South with

experience in local government.

THE PROBLEM WITH IDENTITY POLITICS

To regain the working-class vote, including the Latinos who stayed at home as well as the Trump voters, the Democrats will have to become more culturally conservative. This should not, of course, involve abandoning the gains in rights for women, gays and ethnic minorities since the 1950s. But it should involve a move away from a politics of identity based on gender or race and the eschewal of more symbolically infuriating issues, especially when these bring no new rights or benefits for the populations concerned. The Democrats should continue to honour Martin Luther King for leading the civil rights movement but also remember that he spent his last years fighting for economic rights and public services for poor Americans of all races.

More than 20 years ago, Michael Lind's book "The Next American Nation" outlined the way that identity politics was distracting attention from economic and social issues: wages, the right to form trade unions, public transport, maternity leave, the condition of public schools and so on, most of which would need to be paid for by higher taxes on the rich. If this has not been a deliberate diversion on the part of the overclass, it has certainly worked magnificently to their advantage, by channeling protest into causes that present no threat to them. And for the cultural liberals in the overclass, ostentatious concern for these issues is a way of feeling good about themselves without having to think about higher taxation.

But concentration on such issues has been anything but cost free. It is not only that many of these issues have served to infuriate even moderate cultural conservatives in the working classes. Perhaps more importantly, it shows a kind of elite frivolity in the face of ordinary people's increasing hardship that is more characteristic of the court of Versailles in the 1780s than what is supposed to be the behaviour of the political elites of a democracy.

To take one recent example, the Democratic mayor and town council of Bloomington, Indiana have just renamed Good Friday "Spring Holiday" and Columbus Day "Fall Holiday" in order to be more "inclusive," respect "diversity" and avoid supposed offence to non-Christians and Native Americans. (The city is home to a number of prestigious universities and colleges and a solidly blue enclave in an increasingly red state.) On the one hand, there is the narcissistic, self-satisfied idiocy of angering Christians in a state where the Democrats have just lost some of their oldest working-class strongholds and the presidency with them. On the other, there is the irrelevance of these issues to the problems faced by most of Indiana, such as industrial decline, mass unemployment, drug addiction, the collapse of public revenues and services and the break-up of families and communities. Moves like this, or the creation of transgender toilets, are likely to drive many people raving mad or to vote for Donald Trump.

This might also be the case for Native Americans. From 1996 to 2009, through a Democratic presidency and a Republican one, the Cobell vs Salazar case wound its way through the courts in the face of the most cynical stonewalling by the US state and its lawyers. This class action suit by Native Americans alleged that for decades the Department of the Interior had defrauded their impoverished reservations of tens of billions of dollars in oil and minerals royalties held in trust by the department. The Department used every possible legal manoeuvre to avoid a settlement. In the course of proceedings, it was forced to admit that it could or would not provide detailed records of its trusteeship or even up to date reports.

Despite this admission, the case was settled under the Obama presidency for what was widely thought to be a tiny proportion of the money actually owed. This case was never seriously raised by Democratic or Republican senators or by either the liberal or the conservative media. But why should Native Americans complain? Some towns have abolished Columbus Day.

THE FUTURE OF THE US CONSTITUTION

The most important reason why the Democrats need to move away

from identity politics and towards those of class relates to the future of the constitution and the political system. Nothing less than the long-term survival of American democracy may be at stake. It has been widely noticed that, as in 2000, the institution of the US electoral college meant that the Democratic candidate won the popular vote but lost the presidency.

It is being increasingly noted that the Republican majority in the House of Representatives was hugely greater than their majority of the popular vote; and that in several elections over the past 20 years the GOP lost the popular vote for the House by a wide margin while winning large majorities of the seats. This is the product of (entirely legal) gerrymandering by Republican state administrations, which is unlikely to change under a Republican-controlled Supreme Court. Finally, there is the distribution of two senate seats per state irrespective of population, which relative to population gives tiny western white conservative states 10, 20 or even 40 times the Senate representation of large urban states.

So far, the Democrats have ignored this issue, on the grounds that the constitution is sacred, and that Republican opposition means it could not be changed by peaceful and constitutional means (in other words, that they have no stomach for a mass movement like the civil rights one). However this position is unlikely to be sustainable. In the first place, it ensures that even if a Democrat wins the presidency, their ability to bring about new policies can be crippled by the Republican control of other institutions. In the second place, as the Latino population grows in the blue states, so will an awareness of the de facto disenfranchisement of a large part of this population.

And in any case, the continuation of this system will do more and more damage to the prestige and example of American democracy in the world. During the Cold War, Presidents Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy all spoke of the way in which institutionalised American racism was weakening the US in the struggle against Communism. More than 100 years before, Abraham Lincoln and others referred to the way in which the institution of slavery was weakening the democratic appeal of America, and allowing traditional autocrats to denounce Americans as hypocrites. The same is true today. But at the same time, as on these previous occasions, white conservatives can be expected to use every constitutional and probably unconstitutional means to ensure the continuation of a system which serves them so well, and which they also genuinely believe to be sacred.

If the Democrats are forced to adopt the cause of constitutional reform as I believe they eventually will be there are two ways in which they can do this. The first is as an extension of identity politics, in other words an appeal for democratic justice for disenfranchised blacks, Latinos and others. This would be neither untrue nor unjust, but it would be dangerous for national unity and civic peace. It would almost ensure that many moderate whites would join conservative hardliners in a ferocious defence of the existing constitution, which could even lead to violent conflict. The other way would be to launch a movement on behalf of the disenfranchised urban poor of all races, directed against the overclass, linked to a struggle for (colour-blind) economic redistribution, and couched ideologically in terms of American nationalism and the need to renew, reunify and strengthen the nation and the image of American democracy in the world.

In the 20 years since Lind wrote his book, most developments in the US have gone in the opposite direction to the one he recommended. Hopefully, the shock of Trump's election victory (and equally importantly, his defeat in the popular vote) will lead to a radical new course. For more than a decade now, I have been hearing from members of the American and transatlantic establishments that "we must have faith in American democracy." No. When it comes to an increasingly dysfunctional system, we need concrete political reforms.