



Donald Trump on the campaign trail. He swept the white, working class demographic, and benefited from a media “echo chamber” that “systematically underestimated Trump support.” Wikipedia photo

The Triple-E Rebellion that Carried Trump to the White House

Edward Greenspon

While November 8, 2016 will go down in history as the scene of a stunning upset, it should not have come as that much of a surprise, writes veteran journalist and Public Policy Forum President Ed Greenspon. Donald Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton can be attributed to a perfect storm of three Es: Economics, education and echo chambers.

Nine days before Americans went to the polls, I moderated a debate in Toronto between former Vermont Democratic Governor Howard Dean and former Pennsylvania Republican Senator Rick Santorum, both once candidates for their party’s presidential nominations. The event, sponsored by the Simon Wiesenthal Center, occurred on the weekend after FBI director James Comey released his controversial letter announcing the re-opening of the investigation into Hillary Clinton’s emails.

Dean, a normally temperate man, was agitated. At one point, he said if Trump won, 50 percent of Americans were going to think they'd been cheated. Santorum shot back that the other 50 per cent already felt that way.

Such is the state of play in the republic to our south, a nation of consequence to the world because of its roaring historic success and of special consequence to Canada by virtue of geographic destiny. In recent decades, its democracy has become increasingly polluted by polarization, weakening the pluralistic notion that you win some and lose some and accept both outcomes gracefully in the knowledge the other side will do the same next time out.

In the wake of the result, I think we can look to three factors, all starting with the letter e: economics, education and echo chambers.

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Economics' Dead End Kids—In Canada, the relatively new term “inclusive growth” speaks to the need of policymakers in advanced economies to think in terms of both how to promote growth and how to make sure the fruits of growth, particularly opportunity, are fairly distributed. Inclusion is not mere redistribution; it's also an attentiveness to any systematic exclusion and alienation of elements of the population.

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White males with low education levels are not the worst-off Americans by any measure. But many have fallen out of the middle class and harbour resentment at their loss of economic and social standing alongside an anxiety about diminished opportunities for their children.

They are a wounded cohort, with a shockingly long list of social pathologies. In the month before the election, Princeton University labour economist Alan Krueger published a paper called *Where Have All the Workers Gone?* His research found that a large share of American men between 25 and 54 suffer from physical pain, sadness and stress in their daily lives. Nearly half those not in the labour force take pain medication on a daily basis. “Prime age men who are out of the labor market report that they experience notably low levels of emotional well-being throughout their days and that they derive relatively little meaning from their daily activities.”

They are also highly prone to be the victims of gun deaths, particularly suicides; they are heavy users of opioids; they suffer high levels of obesity; their life expectancy is actually shrinking.

That this heartbroken heartland vote went 67 to 28 per cent for Donald Trump shouldn't be beyond comprehension. In a September *Globe and Mail* op-ed, former Privy Council

Clerk Kevin Lynch and I wrote that establishment leaders like Hillary Clinton bore responsibility for chronically failing to find policies to address this group's understandable sense of exclusion and grievance. “Nationalistic fervour is forever in wait for such policy disappointment,” we wrote.

Trump support correlates to race. One exit poll on election night showed the long-term trend line for the Democratic nominee in the 143 whitest counties in the U.S. had declined from 42 per cent in 2000 to 21 per cent in 2016.

But the drivers are more complex and more sociological. An August analysis by Gallup economist Jonathan Rothwell, based on 87,000 interviews, led him to posit that rather than suffering disproportionately from economic decline themselves, Trump supporters tended to come from places where their neighbours endured the kinds of hardships described above and the children of these communities were trapped by low economic mobility and few prospects.

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Education: Not Horatio Alger's America—For the wealthiest country in the world, the United States has descended into a remarkably mediocre education system. Starting in grade school, insufficient attention has been paid to public education, reinforcing class-based divisions and locking in advantage and disadvantage.

University graduates are less than one

third of the population. The OECD has reported that U.S. graduation rates rank 19th out of 28 countries, dropping from first in 1995. As other countries put a heavy public policy emphasis on education, the U.S. political system somehow cannot muster. Moreover, educational mobility has also plummeted (so-called downward mobility), which the OECD warned two years ago poses risks for health, community engagement and trust in governments, institutions and other people.

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Whereas about half of young people in OECD countries have at least matched their parents’ level of education, a larger number in the United States—29 percent of men and 17 percent of American women—actually have less education than their parents. That’s more than 10 points worse than OECD averages.

In his post-election analysis, FiveThirtyEight.com’s Nate Silver honed in on education as the single most important election variable. He calculated that in the 50 highest-educated counties in the U.S., Clinton did better than Obama did in 2012 by nine percentage points on average. But in the 50 lowest-educated, she ran 11 points behind Trump. By controlling for income, he says this is how Trump won the election.

Silver also surmised that low education levels rewarded Trump’s populist appeals to emotion over Clinton’s

more cerebral approach and the rise of a Trump news media machine. “Education levels have strong relationships with media-consumption habits, which may have been instrumental in deciding people’s votes, especially given the overall decline in trust in the news media,” Silver writes.

Echo Chambers: Polarization by the people for the people—The 2016 presidential campaign marked the first true social media election in the United States. Facebook has quickly grown into the dominant global purveyor of news and it designs its algorithms to reinforce ‘likes’—or, if you prefer, prejudices. Its decision in June to tweak its algorithm to feed users more news from friends and less from established media organizations unsurprisingly led to a lowering of standards of truth.

Well before the election, the Public Policy Forum was looking at the effects of echo chambers and filter bubbles for a study scheduled for release in late January 2017. Echo chambers tend to be self-selecting; individuals choose to spend their time watching Fox or visiting Breitbart.com. Filter bubbles are more insidious in that, whether they might care or not, most Facebook users have no idea they are fed a narrow view of the world that does little to distinguish truth from fiction and even excludes dissonant friends.

Trump supporters weren’t the only ones living in filter bubbles. So were the readers of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Atlantic*, *Slate*, *FiveThirtyEight* etc. They inhabited a liberal filter bubble that systematically underestimated Trump support.

More problematic still, the political right, which had long ago abandoned trust in established media, were either indifferent or unequipped to separate fact from fiction within their filter bubbles. And so the age of fake or post-factual news was born into a ready environment.

The significance of the confluence of these developments cannot be over-emphasized. Fox News may never have been fair and balanced, but at

least it was rooted in some interpretation of reality. In the classic characterization by political philosopher John Milton “truth and falsehood could grapple.” But place them in separate echo chambers and they have no common space in which to wage a battle for hearts and minds. All this has a corrosive effect on the commonweal.

In sum, the economic pain that propelled the non-college educated white male political rebellion of 2016 is legitimate and was reinforced by years of policy neglect by Republicans and Democrats alike, ranging from lack of adjustment policies to a weakening public education system to an elite affinity for the political and cultural worldview of the east and west coasts.

We were forewarned many times over. In 1994, former Republican strategist Kevin Phillips wrote a best-seller called *Boiling Point: Democrats, Republicans and the Decline of Middle-Class Prosperity*. He characterized the 1992 defeat of the first George Bush as a product of middle class decline and suggested the attendant populist anger was not a one-time phenomenon. It would continue until prosperity was restored under government policies deemed to be fair. In their 2012 book “It’s the Middle Class, Stupid!” Clinton acolyte James Carville and Clinton pollster Stan Greenberg echoed the same themes.

The evolution of the internet gave these marginalized political actors a means to escape the elite consensus of the east coast establishment media, discover one another and build a movement off the base of their pain and hostility. Factual truth took a beating, but the participants in the internet insurrection apparently found home truths for their self-narratives of anger and abandonment. **P**

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