

Where We Go From Here



m elmquist [Follow](#)

Nov 13, 2016 · 6 min read

Progressives went into the 2016 election thinking we were getting a civil war within a crumbling GOP. The election of a strongman whose divisive campaign cut directly against the central promise of American democracy — that all have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — instead signaled a crisis within the republic itself. When the night was over, Republicans controlled the White House, Congress, and a majority of state governments, and progressives were left wondering how we could possibly go on.

Liberals apparently won the culture wars — every aspect of American life has become more liberal over the last decades — but we never reconciled with alienated working-class whites who could no longer recognize an America that increasingly left them behind. Whites voted overwhelming for Donald Trump on November 8th — not, perhaps, because they are overtly racist, though many of them are, but because race is a central organizing feature of American politics.

Life for everyday Americans has become increasingly desperate. It has become better than the foreclosure and unemployment and credit squeeze days of the recession, but it is still not good. More than 40% of American workers are now officially classified as contingent — independent contractors and those working in temporary and part-time positions that do not come with benefits — and they are insecure. So the little guy went for an alleged billionaire who plans to gut the tax base by giving breaks to the wealthiest because CHANGE.

Paradoxically, Democrats probably cannot reach poor whites with appeals to progressive policies that can and do help people in poverty. When Republicans began to pursue the Southern Strategy in the 1960s to peel racist Southern whites away from supporting Democratic politicians pushing for civil rights, the War on Poverty era programs enacted

by Democrats became highly racialized. Food Stamps, Medicaid, and Head Start were seen as government giveaways to minorities and were upsetting to whites. Attitudes about race began to organize other political attitudes around, for example, progressive taxes, crime, and welfare. Sean McElwee, who looked at voter data from January, found that racism and resentment that minorities are taking white jobs was strongly predictive of a preference for Trump.

When Republicans vow to enact tax cuts for the rich, Democrats scratch their heads and wonder how poor people could possibly vote against their own economic interests, *again* (ignoring, of course, liberals who never met a new tax they did not like). Social mobility is relatively rigid in America, but average working class people still see themselves as middle class (88% of Americans do), and then as someday rich people. They vote against estate taxes not because they will ever pay them but because they believe they will someday become wealthy enough that they may.

This is the promise of white supremacy and the appeal of white nationalism. Poor whites see themselves as part of the same society as the rich white men they aspire to be, and that is the America they want to “make great again.” They resent minorities and the liberal elite they believe give undue attention to marginalized groups for threatening that idea of America. “Economic and social pain is understood through the lens of racial animus,” writes McElwee, “White racial solidarity is one of the most powerful forces in American politics; any explanation of Trump’s success, and any movement aimed at opposing him, must take it seriously.”

Make no mistake, this election *was* rigged. It was rigged not by the emotional spectre of voter fraud but by the power structure itself — by widespread voter suppression aided by gutting the Voting Rights Act, a spate of new voter ID laws, closing polling places, limiting early voting, purging voter rolls, and disenfranchising millions of felons and ex-felons. It is no coincidence that mass incarceration disproportionately targets black and brown men and then systematically disenfranchises them. The Electoral College, which was originally created to preserve slavery and later served to delay universal suffrage, is a racist and sexist institution at the very core of our election process. The Electoral College also suppresses turnout and contorts campaigns, as voters in only swing states are seen as important to the outcome.

Republicans are targeting the white working class, as they have since the 1960s, by appealing to white nationalist tendencies. Democrats are seemingly waiting for the electorate to be finally transformed by demographics. But white fears will only grow stronger as they themselves become a minority group. We must finally dismantle the white male power structure that holds so many under the control of so few, and decouple the policy prescriptions we know can aid our social ills from the racism of our society. A rising tide really can lift all boats. As Gloria Steinem writes, “We will all have to learn that the president can only hold a finger to the wind. We must become the wind.”

The promise of America is liberty and justice *for all*, and we will never give up on that promise. There truly is more that unites than divides us. We must recognize that some of us will never be free until all of us are free, that we *are* stronger together, but we have to mobilize. Politicians still listen to their constituents because their jobs depend on it. Your voice counts. Use it. A democracy is a precious thing to have and a difficult thing to keep. It is also a terrible thing to lose. We will not stand idly by while a strongman takes away our rights.

Here's what you can do:

- Be the feminist, anti-racist killjoy wherever necessary — on the street corner, in front of the watercooler, on social media. We will dismantle the racism and sexism at the heart of our culture by bringing it to the attention of those who practice or unconsciously benefit from it, every time.
- Be an ally for marginalized folks who will suffer the most in the coming years. But try to understand and listen to others who do not share your views. We will not change hearts and minds by ignoring those who disagree with us. Stop looking at strangers on the street with the suspicion that they voted for Trump. Smile at them. We're in this together, and we will do it through empathy and love.
- Work to ensure our elections are truly free and fair. Voter suppression happens on the local and state levels — get in touch with your elected officials and let them know you do not support the disenfranchisement of any qualified voter. Support the ACLU, which brings lawsuits that can affect change. Work for motor voter laws in your state.

- Currently ten states and the District of Columbia agree to apportion their electors via the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact. This comprises 165 electoral votes, or more than 60% of the 270 needed to effectively nullify the Electoral College system, with legislation currently pending in Pennsylvania and Michigan. Can you make it happen in your state?
- Work for Ranked Choice Voting, a system where voters can rank their choices in order of preference instead of choosing only one candidate. This ensures that voters who would like to see third parties in office do not unintentionally create a spoiler effect in our winner-take-all system. There are more independents in the electorate than either Democrats or Republicans, and they are increasingly turned off by partisan politics.
- Trump is already spreading lies — that the mass protests against him are fueled by “professional protestors” and that he never said that more nation states should have nuclear weapons. I live in Portland, Oregon, and I can assure you there is no money in activism. Find and fund independent journalism to combat his propaganda.
- Run for office. After all, *anyone* can do it! If you are a woman, EMILY’s List has resources to help. Elected bodies are more effective when they include a diversity of opinion, and elected women are more collaborative and more bipartisan and more likely to enact legislation that benefits social welfare.
- And finally, vote. Hardly half the electorate could be bothered to cast a ballot in this most consequential of elections. Part of this is due to voter suppression, but most of it is due to apathy. My state votes solely by mail, and what you lose in nostalgia for the voting booth you make up for in convenience and turnout. Get that ballot mailed to your door. The elderly have political clout in this country not because they are rich or powerful or particularly many but because they reliably vote. Vote like old people — in every election, on every issue.

Take care of yourselves, and each other. This is a big project, but we’re worth it.