

## The US Presidential 2016 Election. What they stand for?



2016 Election: The US presidential circus has highlighted the fact that no one knows what the two main parties stand for anymore. For many years, a simple choice between two alternatives dominated the US political agenda. But the 2016 presidential campaign marked a turning point, especially in the loyalties of pro-lifers. Their new support and new thinking means no party can take them for granted any more.

Americans have been steadily sinking into depression in recent decades, but the 2016 presidential election campaign seems to have put this trend into overdrive. I have found it difficult to watch the evening news in recent months without a segment featuring an earnest counsellor offering me tips on how I might “preserve my mental health”. And given the candidates between whom most of us believed we had to choose, this was understandable.

Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump had the highest disapproval ratings of any candidates in history. Each has been plausibly accused of corruption; each cynically chose to speak or act in whatever way would put them in the best position to get elected. Clinton’s team, as classic Washington/New York City insiders, had to manipulate the system in order to defeat a wildly popular Bernie Sanders. Trump’s team, as classic celebrity outsiders, got the equivalent of billions of dollars in free media to drive a racist, anti-immigrant message that appealed to a relatively small percentage of the electorate in order to defeat an overcrowded field and win the Republican nomination.

So, yes, it is understandable that the mental health of Americans continues to suffer. But, at the same time, this election cycle was an important turning point in US politics. When this all comes out in the wash, I believe we will look back at 2016 as the year when we began to demand coherence in our politics.

Since the advent of the “culture wars” of the 1970s and 1980s, a simplistic either-or choice between

two clear alternatives has dominated the political imagination of Americans. On one side was a progressive, anti-war party that wanted to use energetic government to protect the most vulnerable from poverty and violence. On the opposite side was a conservative, pro-war party that wanted government to stay out of our lives, trusting to the autonomy of the economy and the freedom of the individual to preserve American prosperity and well-being.

That simple, binary choice was always hugely problematic – especially when it came to the issue of abortion, when at times it was downright incoherent. After all, you had the pro-life “conservatives” sounding like progressives arguing for big government to interfere in the personal lives of individuals. And at the same time you had pro-choice “progressives” sounding like conservatives in their enthusiasm for autonomy and individual choice, refusing to use government to protect the vulnerable from the violence of abortion. Somehow, Republicans managed to convince the so-called religious “moral majority” to join their small-government coalition in the 1979 presidential campaign to elect Ronald Reagan – and we have been living with the incoherence ever since.

In recent years, however, the US political landscape has been changing. NBC News recently found that more than four in 10 Americans now refuse to identify with either the Democratic or Republican parties. For young people that number rises to an astonishing five in 10. Given the incoherence and muddle of the 2016 election cycle, those numbers will go ever higher.

Consider, after all, what we have learnt about the two major candidates. The Republican is a strip-club owner who made much of his money selling images of women’s bodies on television. He wants a big government plan to replace global free trade. He is deeply sceptical of fighting wars overseas. Meanwhile, the Democratic candidate is widely considered never to meet a war she doesn’t like, favours global free trade over government regulation, and picked a running mate who, for most of his life, identified as a pro-life Democrat.

There may be political parties that bear the name “Republican” and “Democrat” in 2017, but it is no longer clear what they stand for. The 2016 election cycle hit Americans over the head with the fact that the political imagination that has dominated our political discourse is long past its sell-by date. If they are to remain viable parties at all, the Republicans and Democrats will have to reinvent themselves for a time in which the culture-war mentality of the 1970s no longer applies – a time when young people favour LGBT rights, but are increasingly sceptical of abortion on demand; a time when a simple choice between “big government” and “small government” is so obviously incoherent.

This is a very good thing. Instead of voters holding their collective noses while feeling forced to vote for people and parties that do not come anywhere close to representing their views, the US voter is now in a position to demand something quite different. We are in a position to demand coherence. This may mean the viability of third- and fourth-party candidates. Even this time around, with virtually no preparation or infrastructure, Independent candidate Evan McMullin put himself in the position to be the first candidate outside of the two major parties to win electoral votes since 1968. Given the weaknesses of the major parties, 2020 is likely to see serious challenges from outside of the two-party system.

This is especially good news for the pro-life movement. For decades – not least because the Democratic Party has become totally hostile to it – most of the movement has felt forced to throw its

lot in with small-government Republicans as being “our side”. It is a strange side, though, for a movement that is arguing for government to override the autonomy and privacy of individual choice in order to protect vulnerable prenatal children. This side becomes even more strange to take for pro-lifers as it becomes clearer that a very large percentage of abortions are structurally coerced by market forces.

The result has been – you guessed it – incoherence. And profound frustration in the pro-life movement. While the Republican Party does a decent job of passing marginal pro-life legislation at the local level, it has been true to its political philosophy in doing virtually nothing at the federal level. Despite its colossal failure to advance the pro-life agenda, the two-party system has made it safe for Republicans to expect (and receive) pro-life support at election time. Indeed, so strong was the Republican hold over pro-life activists that groups like the Susan B. Anthony List, which supports pro-life candidates, even worked with the Republican National Committee to defeat pro-life Democrats.

The 2016 campaign has marked the beginning of the end of this absurdity. While a few pro-life activist groups – their thinking still dominated by the old, binary imagination – reluctantly supported Trump, no one can say that the pro-life movement as a whole was with the Republican candidate. The influential conservative Catholic academic Robert George, writing in *First Things*, insisted that “Trump is no pro-lifer”. He and George Weigel, writing in *National Review*, went so far as to organise a petition (signed by many pro-life conservatives) insisting that Trump was “manifestly unfit for the presidency”. Russell Moore, head of the Southern Baptists’ ethics and policy wing and an important pro-life leader, never wavered from his #NeverTrump position.

Non-traditional pro-life groups and parties have been bubbling up for some time now, but 2016 has put a very important spotlight on them. The feminists of *Life Matters Journal*, for instance, were recently featured in liberal *Slate* magazine, which correctly described the future of the pro-life movement as “young, female, secular and feminist”.

Groups like Secular Pro-Life, Pro-Life Humanists, the Pro-Life Alliance of Gays and Lesbians, Tradinista!, and the American Solidarity Party all received dramatically more attention in the election campaign as pro-lifers looked around for an alternative to Trump and Clinton. Furthermore, the voices of people of colour – disproportionately sceptical of abortion when compared with whites – are finally beginning to be taken seriously by the pro-life movement. Women dominate the leadership of pro-life organisations in the US, and, unsurprisingly, the unjust social structures that often coerce women into abortion are beginning to take centre stage.

The Trump campaign, of course, stood for pretty much the opposite of this new pro-life trend. He imagined that support for language and policies that took the experience and views of women and people of colour seriously was mere “political correctness”. Descriptions of sexual violence were casually dismissed as “locker room talk”. Racial minorities, especially if they were immigrants, were reduced to “rapists” who “bring crime”.

Only 14 per cent of the electorate voted for either Clinton or Trump in the primaries. The only reason either of them were viable candidates was because many voters still believed they were beholden to a binary either-or choice and because many regarded the alternative to the candidate they were reluctantly supporting was even worse.

But this deeply damaging situation is no longer sustainable. The US electorate, with pro-lifers who will no longer submit to the assumptions of the 1970s to the fore, are demanding a much more coherent politics.

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