

It's Pro-Global Party Time

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There is simply no denying that Donald Trump ran for and won the U.S. presidency in 2016 based upon an anti-globalization campaign. He criticized immigrants, free trade, and “global elites,” and in so doing garnered enough votes to defeat Hilary Clinton, whose own position on globalization was less clear-cut.

Yet it's also true that, in the wake of Trump's victory, many analyses of his campaign have focused on the role of racial politics – and the nerves Trump touched with his aggressive discourse in that regard – rather than on the anti-global aspects of his oratory. Nonetheless, the racial tensions which Trump exploited were verbally aroused in the context of the overarching globalization issue. Most specifically, his anti-Mexican generalizations were part-and-parcel of his larger anti-globalization/immigration agenda.

Other analyses of the 2016 election have suggested that Hilary Clinton's problematic campaign was the key causal variable in allowing Trump to win. Yet while Clinton's campaign may have been a necessary cause of a Trump victory, it was not a sufficient cause. Trump campaigned hard against Clinton *qua* Clinton, but he did so on behalf of an anti-globalization message which he'd begun enunciating long before Clinton became his primary adversary in the presidential competition.

Trump won, simply put, because he ran in deliberate reference to the pressing question of our times: whether to globalize or not to globalize. In choosing the latter option, he mirrored various politicians in other countries who are responding to this epoch-defining issue by reacting against it.

That doesn't mean, however, that Americans as a whole are “turning away from the world,” any more than events in other countries – the Brexit vote, the rise of nationalist politics in Hungary, etc. – signal that the global trend is swinging entirely away from the pro-global option. What it means, in the U.S. context at least, is that the pro-global constituencies have yet to fully rally themselves to the cause.

The key reason for this non-rallying is the fact that the two major political parties in the U.S. are internally split over the issue. A significant portion of the Republican Party is in favor of free trade and robust foreign alliances, while another portion of the party – motivated by economic worries, certain cultural values, etc. – has a more nationalist/traditionalist bent. Likewise, a portion of the Democratic Party is attracted to the liberal internationalist aspects of globalized norms and institutions, as well as to the economic elements of a globalized community, while other segments of the Democratic Party – most notably the labor unions – are wary of liberalized trade.

Or to put it another way: the country is now characterized by four major groups, which are divided between the two parties. Insofar as Republicans can generally be understood to favor “smaller government” and Democrats to favor “larger government,” the four groups can be labeled as follows: 1) pro-globalist/small-government, 2) pro-globalist/big government, 3) anti-globalist/small government, and 4) anti-globalist/big government. In a world in which parties and interests were perfectly aligned, the U.S. would thus have four parties. In the actual U.S. electoral system, however, with its first-past-the-post winner-takes-all presidential elections, voters are destined to be faced, in most election years, with only two real alternatives, since large coalitions must be cobbled together to ensure victory on the first round.

What the Trump victory demonstrated – and this is what makes his presidency truly historic – is that a winning coalition can be achieved by running for or against the globalization trend. It wasn't Trump's staunch commitment to either small or big government that got him elected; indeed, on any given issue he leans in one direction or the other in that regard. Rather, his election indicates that globalization has “trumped” the distinction between large and small government as the key rallying point for the general populace. Henceforth, effective electoral coalitions can and should be built around the globalization theme.

But can we expect the two major political parties to take a strong stand on this topic any time soon? It's doubtful. Although Trump technically ran on the Republican ticket, he did so by hijacking the Republican Party and then compelling it to back him, even while he was resisted by much of the Republican establishment. Hillary Clinton's less determinate stance on globalization, as demonstrated by her shifting positions on NAFTA, is a more likely model for how the two parties will continue to respond to the issue, given the challenges – namely, alienating current constituencies and forging new alliances – which will come from staking out a strong position.

The recent behavior of the two parties' leaders reinforces the plausibility of this prediction. Since losing the presidency, the Democratic leadership has expended enormous amounts of time and energy refusing to accept that it actually lost, when instead it should have been crafting a comprehensive response to Trump's globalization-related challenge. The Republican leadership, meanwhile, has grudgingly fallen in-line behind Trump, while also timidly rebuking him when he outrages some section of the electorate. Neither of these groups has shown a readiness to reorient their parties so as to address the pressing question of our times. Indeed, in certain instances where rank-and-file elected representatives from the parties have sought to stake out a strong globalization-related position, the party leadership has squelched the effort.

Nor are the fast-approaching 2018 midterm elections likely to force the parties to face the facts of a needed reorientation. Regardless of whether the Democrats do well or poorly in the upcoming election, they will probably continue to pin their hopes on “demographic trends,” which do not provide solid ground for generating future electoral majorities. And regardless of whether the Republicans fare well or poorly, the 2018 election will be interpreted as a referendum on Trump, not on the party as a whole. The same will likely apply to the elections of 2020.

American citizens are thus faced with two options: either accept the fact that the two major parties in the country are unwilling to address the most pressing issue of the era, or... consider creating a new party. Normally, of course, establishing third parties is a fool’s errand in American politics. But these are not normal times. One is reminded, for instance, of the pre-Civil War era, when the two main parties in the U.S. – the Democrats and the Whigs – were unprepared to handle the urgent challenge facing the country. Thus the Republican Party was established, born out of necessity in order to tackle the issue of bringing emancipation to all Americans.

Were a pro-global political party now to be established, it would not only find natural constituencies among that large section of the Republican Party which is eager to engage economically and strategically with the rest of the world, and among that large section of the Democratic Party which wishes to retain the moral leadership that the U.S. has heretofore displayed on behalf of human rights and democratic norms; it would also be highly attractive to large swaths of younger voters who are fully at-home in a world in which distance has collapsed, daily correspondences are global, and the concept of the foreign seems foreign. Furthermore, these multiple voting constituencies would not need to be culled exclusively from the coasts or exclusively from the interior of the country, but would – in crossing current party lines – cross geographic lines. Moreover, if this pro-global party were to stake out a moderate position on the “size of government” issue, then its chances of electoral success might be quite good.

But could it really win? Who knows. Regardless, there is a logical, moral, and political imperative to try. And examples of success can already be seen in other countries. The 2017 election of Emmanuel Macron in France is Exhibit A. In that instance a pro-global presidential candidate, dedicated to preserving France’s historic role in “leading the Enlightenment,” created an entirely new party when the extant major parties – the *Républicains* and the Socialists – appeared incapable of addressing globalization-related issues in a meaningful manner. An explicitly anti-globalization party – the Front National – thus wound up becoming Macron’s primary competitor, and Macron carried the day.

Of course the key difference between the French presidential election system and the U.S. system is that the French have two rounds of voting rather than just one. And indications are that if the French had had the U.S. election system, then the Front National candidate – Marine Le Pen – might have won the first-and-only round. Yet she was defeated in the final round, after a withering debate experience in which her anti-globalization arguments collapsed under the focused rhetoric of Macron’s more modern perspective. In the subsequent parliamentary election, in turn, Macron’s brand new political party swept into power.

Lacking a two-round election system, the U.S. is less likely to witness a similar sudden transformation. Any pro-global party that gets established in the U.S. may therefore need to last multiple election cycles before achieving electoral success. But that's not a terrible fate. And indeed, there are three ways for a pro-global party to win.

First, it would be a commendable "win" if such a party, by being brought into being and attracting some attention, were able to inject a few core ideas into the mainstream political discourse. Moving the public dialogue past knee-jerk reactions to the word "globalization" would be an honorable achievement, and well worth the effort.

Second, it would be all the more laudable if a pro-global party were able to prompt the major parties to explicitly adopt coherent positions on the globalization topic. This could transpire in a variety of ways. One model, for instance, is offered by the Libertarian Party. Although the libertarians have had negligible electoral success, many of the ideas they espouse have found support in the Republican Party over time.

Third, and most impressive, would be if a pro-global party managed to draw enough votes from existing major and minor parties to actually win elections at the local, state, and ultimately national levels. Given the degree of popular disaffection with the two main parties, and given the importance of the globalization topic, this outcome is within the realm of possibility.

Of course if a pro-global party were to successfully siphon off large blocks of voters from the other parties, the natural corollary would be for an anti-global party to simultaneously take shape, either based off of one of the current dominant parties or created whole-cloth from an anti-global coalition. And it's of course possible that, once formed, such an anti-globalization party would enjoy electoral successes. Trump's victory demonstrates the reality of this potential outcome. But that would hardly be the end of the world for those who support a more pro-global U.S. political orientation, since at least electoral successes by the opposing team would help clarify the core issues facing the American people.

And the core issues are these: 1) the world is stitching itself together in profound and accelerating fashion, and the U.S. can either engage proactively in that reality or attempt to halt/reverse the process, and 2) the U.S. is the world's largest economy, it wields the most powerful military, and its cultural influence is unparalleled, thus it must play the lead role in either crafting or constraining the globalization trend.

Ultimately, it's likely that the American people will recognize the logic of crafting globalization rather than seeking to halt it, since it's Americans who've played the primary role in bringing globalization into being in the first place. It's Americans, after all, who've led the charge in spreading democracy across the planet, in promoting the free-market model of capitalism, and in launching key industries – for automobiles, airplanes, the internet – which have shrunk distances between peoples. Most importantly, it's Americans who – despite various counter-trends along the way – have provided the world with an example of a political community forged out of peoples heralding from all the regions of the world.

In sum, globalization is a particularly American mission, and arguably the best thing that can come out of the present state of American politics is for the pro-global populations in the country to recognize the steep cost of inaction, and thus to rally themselves on behalf of the genuine American identity: an identity of daring, innovation, and inclusiveness, rather than of fear, backward-glancing, and division.