

Michael J. Boskin, "Four Lessons From Donald Trump's U.S. Election Victory" –from *The Economist*, December 13, 2016

Donald Trump's surprise election as the 45th president of the US has spawned a cottage industry of election postmortems and predictions in the US and abroad. Some correlate Trump's victory with a broader trend toward [populism in the west](#), and, in particular, [in Europe](#), exemplified by the UK's vote in June to leave the European Union. Others focus on Trump's appeal as an outsider, capable of disrupting the political system in a way that his opponent, the former secretary of state and consummate insider Hillary Clinton never could. There may be something to these explanations, particularly the latter. But there is more to the story.

In the months preceding the election, the mainstream media, pundits and pollsters kept repeating that Trump had an extremely narrow path to victory. What they failed to recognize was the extent of economic anxiety felt by working-class families in key states, owing to the dislocations caused by technology and globalization.

But, as I [highlighted](#) two months before the election, those frustrations were far-reaching, as was the sense of being ignored and left behind – and it was Trump who finally made that group feel seen. That is why I recognized the possibility of a Trump upset, despite Clinton's significant lead in the polls (five points, just before the election).

And an upset is what happened. Trump narrowly won states that Republicans had not won in decades (Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania), and won big in usually closely contested Ohio.

In fact, Republicans secured a broad victory. The party retained control of the Senate, even though more than twice as many Republican seats were up for re-election than Democratic seats, and it lost just a handful of House seats, far fewer than the 20 predicted. Moreover, the Republicans now control 33 governorships, compared with 16 for the Democrats, and have expanded their already large majorities in state legislatures. Now talk has turned from the impending implosion of the Republican party to the repudiation, disarray and bleak future prospects of the Democrats.

Since the election, Trump has moved quickly to assert himself. Republicans, even those who opposed Trump during the campaign, have coalesced behind him. Meanwhile, the Democrats in government – most notably Barack Obama

– have largely echoed Clinton’s gracious [concession-speech injunction](#) that Trump should be given an opportunity to lead.

The US election’s unexpected outcome holds four key lessons, applicable to all advanced democracies.

First, growth beats redistribution. Clinton’s barely discussed economic plan was to expand Obama’s left-leaning agenda, so that it looked more like the socialism of her opponent in the Democratic primary, Bernie Sanders. Higher taxes for the wealthy, together with more “free” (taxpayer-paid) services, was, she argued, the best route to combating inequality.

Trump, by contrast, hammered home messages about jobs and incomes. Though the media almost exclusively covered his most hyperbolic and controversial statements, it was largely his economic message that won him support. People want hope for a better future – and that comes from rising incomes, not from an extra government-issued slice of the pie.

The second lesson concerns the risk of dismissing, let alone condescending to, voters. From the start, Clinton was not broadly liked. Revelations during the campaign – for example, that, in a [2015 speech](#), she had said that “deep-seated cultural codes, religious beliefs, and structural biases have to be changed” to secure women’s reproductive and other rights – reinforced fears that she would push too progressive a social agenda.

Recognizing these shortcomings, Clinton tried to win the election by making Trump unacceptable. But her [remarks](#) that half of Trump’s supporters belonged to a “basket of deplorables” – that they were racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic – reinforced the impression that she and her party looked down on Trump voters as morally contemptible and even stupid. Such statements could well have pushed some undecided voters to decide against Clinton.

The third lesson is that a society’s capacity to absorb rapid change is limited. When technological progress and globalization, not to mention social and cultural change, outpace people’s ability to adapt, they become too jarring, disruptive and overwhelming. Many voters – not just in America – also fret over terrorism and immigration, especially in combination with these rapid changes.

Add to that concerns about America’s growing opioid epidemic and a tedious and intolerant form of political correctness, and, for many, change did not

look like progress. If democratic political systems do not find ways to ease transitions, provide shock absorbers, and accept heterodox attitudes and values without condemnation, voters will push back.

The final lesson relates to the danger of the ideological echo chamber. The repeated claim by shocked Clinton voters that no one they knew voted for Trump reveals the extent to which too many people – Republicans as well as Democrats – live in social, economic, informational, cultural and communication bubbles.

Falling trust in national media, combined with a proliferation of internet communication, has created a world where the news people read is often created with the goal of “going viral”, not informing the public; the result can barely be called news at all. Moreover, the information people see is often filtered, so that they are exposed only to ideas that reflect or reinforce their own. (The corollary with this online world is that, as Trump and Clinton discovered, we are all just one hack away from YouTube or WikiLeaks, cable news or talk radio, fame or infamy.)

These developments undermine people’s capacity to engage in informed, rational discussions, let alone debates, with those who have different perspectives, values or economic interests. Even universities, which are supposed to foster knowledge-sharing and spirited debate, are now suppressing it, for example by spinelessly rescinding speaking invitations to almost anyone that some group or another considers objectionable. When we fail to engage in such debates – when people choose “safe spaces” over tough discussions – we lose our best chance of building consensus on how to solve at least some of our societies’ pressing problems.