The historians’ view...

Why did America elect Donald Trump?

On 8 November, the billionaire businessman surged to a sensational victory in the US presidential election. We asked four historians to offer their opinions on the causes of Trump’s triumph, and what his presidency will mean for America.

Compiled by Rob Attar

Is this the most surprising election result in American political history?

Adam Smith: It shouldn’t be. After eight years of a Democratic president, with the economy still recovering from a serious recession, the narrow victory of a Republican can was always a likely outcome. US politics is cyclical, outside of the exceptional circumstances of the Civil War or the Great Depression, the parties tend to alternate in ascendency every 8 to 12 years. The surprise was only because the pundits were so utterly convinced that Trump would lose. The polls always showed a tighter race than the media consensus would indicate, and there was plenty of instability evident in the electorate.

Trump’s die-hard supporters who I talked to on election day claimed to be certain of their man’s success, so it wouldn’t have been a complete outsider, with no government or military experience, took over a mainstream political party and deployed it against the very establishment of which it was part. This is the most successful populist uprising in US history: never before has a populist movement captured the presidency, though Andrew Jackson “flattered popular passions”, in seeking the office in 1824 and in reaching it four years later.

To what extent have long-term social and economic trends played a part in the Trump phenomenon and now his victory?

Sylvia Ellis: Combined with demographic change, there are two trends that appear to have impacted upon voting patterns in the US. Trump’s populist approach appealed to those experiencing economic insecurity in the post-industrial world of globalisation. And social changes – the rise of younger and better-educated cohorts with post-materialist and self-expression values – have led to greater social tolerance of different cultures and lifestyles and a growing emphasis on such issues as racial and gender equality and environmentalism.

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In turn, a cultural backlash from those feeling increasingly marginalised by what they term ‘political correctness’ led Trump to find an accepting audience of his blunt
and simplistic analysis of how to make American ‘great’ again.

**SMG** America is a nation where the gap between the dream and the reality has always proved a potent political weapon. Purely in economic terms, Trump has presented himself, and has been widely perceived, as the epitome of the American dream of hard work and economic achievement; the ultimate businessman whose success is literally inscribed on the landscape in New York in the form of Trump Tower, and whose media presence has reinforced his image. The ‘Trump Brand’ is powerfully aspirational for those who feel the margins of American society, who feel disenfranchised from economic and social opportunity in the post-industrial world that most of the developed nations now inhabit.

**RG:** Trump won by exploiting the deep wells of political anger and alienation among those economically hit by globalisation and, above all, automation. The loss of jobs in the Rust Belt of the Midwest over the past two decades, the stagnation of wages, the ever-widening chasm between working-men’s pay and the rewards of corporate chiefs: these have played their part. In blaming their ills on Latino immigants – illegal or not – and in belittling the情境 and African American voices had succeeded over many years in grabbing political attention. At the heart of Trump’s appeal is the view that the political system has been captured by the young and the科尔 white males effectively invited the overtures of an outsider who championed their cause.

How much did longstanding questions of racial and gender equality have an impact on the election?

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**RC:** Historically, the US appears to be more and more divided. But how far the American

**SMG:** The country’s first black president is to be succeeded by a president endorsed by the Ku Klux Klan: of course race matters. Trump’s movement is a reaction against the dominant social and economic trends of the last few decades – trends that have seen America become more racially diverse and more liberal in its cultural and social values. If there is one thing that Trump seems to personify, it is a protest against ‘political correctness’ – and the liberal outrage at Trump’s misogyny, bullying, proud ignorance and implied racism simply reinforced his credentials as an iconoclast to his core supporters. He’s ‘going to shake the plate up’, a Trump supporter told me in Manhattan on Tuesday night.

So did gender matter? Of course it did. Another Trump fan – drunk at 4am in Midtown – joked (at least I think he was joking) that now it would be legal to ‘grab pussy again’. The ultimate anti-politi-c corrrectness triumph was driven by intense, and, to the outsider, baffling hatred of Hillary Clinton. Polls show that 80 per cent of Americans are willing – in the abstract – to elect a female president, yet this campaign showed that women are still subjected to different standards than men.

**RG:** Even more so. Women in political power is, of course, historically hardly a new idea, but that’s the short version.

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**RG:** It’s partly because the institutions that resulted in the ‘Compromise of 1877’ is another example. This was possibly one of the most divisive elections in United States history. Caught between Rutherford B Hayes and Samuel J Tilden, it was decided by what was widely perceived to be the illegal awarding of Electoral College votes to Hayes. And, of course, the 2000 election that saw George W Bush triumph over Al Gore – after the supreme court stepped in to resolve a dispute over Florida’s electoral votes – was undoubtedly divisive.

**SMG:** Are there any previous presidents or presidential candidates who resemble Trump?

**SE:** Yes there have. 1966 and 1968 spring to mind. The first dominated by the currency question and the second by race and the war in Vietnam. George Wallace’s third party challenge in 1968 was another popular appeal and was a backlash against the racial change of the decade, including the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. That election period witnessed demonstrations (Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy), demonstrations against the war, and clashes between protesters and police at the Democratic Convention in Chicago.

On a similar note, are there any previous presidents or presidential candidates who resemble Trump?
AS: There’s been no president quite like Trump: none who have been so open in their disdain for constitutional norms, nor so lacking in either political or military experience, nor so at odds with their own party. Reagan was mocked for his ignorance but he was a two-term governor of a huge state and had an impressive roster of advisors and the support of think tanks. Trump has none of that.

The president that he most resembles is Andrew Jackson, an Indian-killer and victor of the battle of New Orleans against the British, who won election in 1828 on a tide of anti-elitism. Jackson’s supporters lauded his alpha-male characteristics while the establishment at the time was aghast at his untutored disdain for protocol.

SE: Not really. There have been numerous populist candidates before – William Jennings Bryan in 1896; Theodore Roosevelt in 1912; George Wallace in 1968; Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996 – but none of them resemble Trump closely. Perot was another billionaire businessman to stand but he ran as an independent and did not benefit from the party apparatus as Trump has. Trump’s willingness to say exactly what he thinks – without any apparent restraint by his party or team – is unique.

To what extent is this a watershed moment for the Republicans and Democrats?

RC: The result poses a massive challenge for Democrats, who have lost much of their ‘natural’ constituency of white blue-collar voters. It was said that Trump couldn’t win because of his over-dependence on this constituency, but – now that he’s made those inroads – the Democrats have much to do to win back voters whose fears and anger they have failed to address over the last 20 years.

Republicans will face the question: are we Trumpers? Many, probably most, of the Washington party establishment are not. How this plays out as Trump shapes his administration is beyond confident prediction, but we can be sure that the strains will show.

AS: This was not a realigning election. The groups who for the past 30 years have voted Republican continued to do so. There is no evidence that Trump brought more people into the party. He polled about the same number of votes as Mitt Romney in 2012, as well as fewer votes than Hillary Clinton. What he did manage to do, though, was to mobilise Republican voters more effectively than Clinton managed to mobilise Democratic voters in enough states to tip the balance his way in the Electoral College in a low-turnout election. In that important sense this was not a watershed election. However, it has given the Republicans more power than they’ve had since the 1920s.

This is the first time since Hoover’s victory in 1928 that a Republican president has come into power with a clear Republican majority in both houses of Congress. He will now be able to shape the supreme court in a conservative political direction for a generation. And Republicans control two thirds of state governments. It is possible, then, that this is a tipping point election – one in which the ascendant party has an opportunity to re-shape the political landscape. But it may also turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory, especially given the narrowness of the party’s win, and the long-term relative decline of the party’s core supporters – white people – as a proportion of the electorate.

How do you think historians of the future will look back on this moment?

SE: It is too soon to tell in many ways. Once all the voting data has been digested and the Trump presidency has begun, they will at the very least identify this election as one of, if not the, most divisive in American history. It will also be the election that saw Americans choose their oldest and richest president in almost 100 years.”

ADAM SMITH

In time, Clinton will be seen as a feminist icon. She may not have broken through the glass ceiling but she has put one hell of a crack in it.

SYLVIA ELLIS