

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 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 ascendancy 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 surprise to them. But undoubtedly, in terms of the swerve in the media narrative, this ranks at least with the 1948 election, the one that produced the now famous *Chicago Daily Tribune* headline: "Dewey Defeats Truman."

Susan-Mary Grant: The answer to this depends largely on who you ask. Certainly the media-intellectual complex, if one can call it that, appears not just surprised but aghast. From an outside perspective,

however, Trump's election does not seem all that surprising given the political, economic and social landscape of the United States in 2016. That it has brought to power an apparent establishment outsider does not of itself make it surprising.

One could cite many instances where a 'dark horse' candidate emerged from the confusion of his times. But perhaps the most obvious example would be the election in 1960 of John F Kennedy, America's first Catholic president, who ran against a candidate – Richard Nixon – who seemed the better qualified. Not only was it the closest election since 1916 (when Woodrow Wilson defeated Charles Evan Hughes), but, as in 2016, a variety of personal, media, economic and generational factors determined the outcome.

Richard Carwardine: Not as surprising as the sweeping local and state victories of the secret 'Know Nothing party' – anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic – in the 1854 Massachusetts state elections, when they swept the legislature and governorship. But it certainly makes a claim, even stronger than Harry S Truman's knockout of Thomas E Dewey in 1948, as the most surprising presidential outcome of all. It's a story of how 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.

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



Donald Trump prepares to take the stage in Greenville, South Carolina, May 2015. No president has "been so open in their disdain for constitutional norms", says Adam Smith



A triumphant Harry Truman displays the early edition of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, which (wrongly) declared that Thomas E Dewey had defeated him in the 1948 presidential election

THE PANEL



Richard Carwardine is professor of history at the University of Oxford. His books include *Lincoln: Profiles In Power* (Routledge, 2003)



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Susan-Mary Grant is professor of American history at Newcastle University and the author of *A Concise History of the United States of America* (CUP, 2012)



Adam Smith is a senior lecturer at University College London, specialising in American history. He also presents history series on BBC Radio 4

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 exposure. The 'Trump Brand' is powerfully aspirational for those who feel on 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.

RC: 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 workingmen's pay and the rewards of corporate chiefs: these have played their part. In blaming their ills on Latino immigrants – illegal or not – and in believing that feminist and African American voices had succeeded over many years in grabbing political attention at their expense, some blue-collar 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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AS: 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 culture 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 hard-core supporters. He's "going to shake the place 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-political-correctness 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.

Political dynasties such as the Bushes and Kennedys have had great success over past decades. Is Hillary Clinton's defeat a reaction against dynastic rule?

SMG: I should say not. Although American politics sometimes deploys the dynastic idea, the United States has never been ruled by a dynasty as such. It may reflect an uneasiness with the apparent assumption – and this is very much a recent phenomenon – that a president's wife could or should step out from the 'First Lady' role and seek power in her own right. Women in political power is, of course, historically hardly a new idea, but it is one that the United States seems to struggle with more than many other nations. And despite Hillary Clinton's proven experience as secretary of state, it may be that some voters had her firmly imprisoned in the 'First Lady' box and saw her candidacy as hubristic and opportunist in that context.

Why do you think American politics has become so polarised?

SE: Ideologically the US appears to be more and more divided. But how far the American

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public has adopted extreme positions is still unclear with the majority of analysts feeling that most Americans are politically moderate but identifying more clearly with a particular party so that there are fewer numbers of floating voters. And those parties are less diverse in terms of their composition. There are few liberal Republicans or conservative Democrats anymore, for instance.

The reasons behind this shift are multiple and difficult to ascertain but certainly voters' views go beyond mere politics as research suggests lifestyle choices differ greatly between those voting for the two main parties. The timing of the changes in party allegiance – from the 1970s onwards – implies that race and religion play a large part in the shift, but also that the role of the media (24-hour news led by Fox and MSNBC, talk shows, social media campaigns), gerrymandering in Congress, and extremism in leadership are all possible factors in the polarisation.

AS: It's partly because the institutions that enabled shared conversations have frayed or been destroyed. In particular, people live in their own self-curated and self-reinforcing media bubbles. They receive information that validates their world-view and that makes them feel good. They are no longer so likely to be in social settings – such as public schools, the army, big industrial employers – that bring together different kinds of people.

It's also because racial and cultural issues have been for many years now the primary signifiers of partisanship rather than, for example, economics or foreign policy. 'Values' cannot so easily be compromised,

unlike the level of a tariff, tax or public subsidy. So 'values' voters – and that includes liberals voting for abortion rights and gay marriage just as much as conservatives voting against those things – naturally see themselves as a tribe defined in opposition to another tribe. There's much more to be said, but that's the short version.

SMG: I don't think, from a historical perspective, that American politics has become unusually polarised in 2016. Here it is important to look at the numbers, because Trump's victory was not ushered in by a 'silent majority' of the economically disenfranchised, however much the rhetoric surrounding it suggests was the case. If you want to look for polarised politics, go back 150 years to the election of 1860. There was polarisation, and it resulted in a civil war that cost more than 600,000 American lives and as many long-term wounded. The United States is not at that point (although it is worth adding that, sadly, some of the racial issues that pertained in 1860 continue to play out today).

Have their been similarly divisive presidential elections in the past?

RC: Very few have generated such bitterness and poison. The election of 1800 was a bruising contest, with Adams Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans each convinced that their opponents' victory would imperil the young nation and its historic mission. The four-way party contest of 1860 had a profoundly divisive *outcome*: Lincoln's election on an anti-slavery platform prompting the exit from the Union of the slave states of the lower South. That campaign was marked by name-calling, pitting 'Black' Republicans against 'Slave Power' Democrats, but since the convention of the day was for candidates to sit silently at home while others led the charge, there was little trading of personal insults among the presidential hopefuls themselves.

SMG: Apart from the very obvious divisions of 1860, you could cite the election of 1824, the only one to be decided by the House of Representatives because none of the candidates achieved a majority of the electoral vote.

The widely disputed election of 1876 that resulted in the 'Compromise of 1877' is



Protestors put their own spin on a Trump campaign slogan, September 2015. "Very few [presidential elections] have generated such bitterness and poison," says Susan-Mary Grant



Hillary Clinton, flanked by her husband, Bill, makes her concession speech following her shock defeat at the ballot box, 9 November



Women protest against the Vietnam War. The 1968 election brought tensions over the conflict to a head

another example. This was possibly one of the most divisive elections in United States history. Fought 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 the dispute over Florida's electoral votes – was undoubtedly divisive.

SE: Yes there have. 1896 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 populist appeal and was again 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 assassinations (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?

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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.

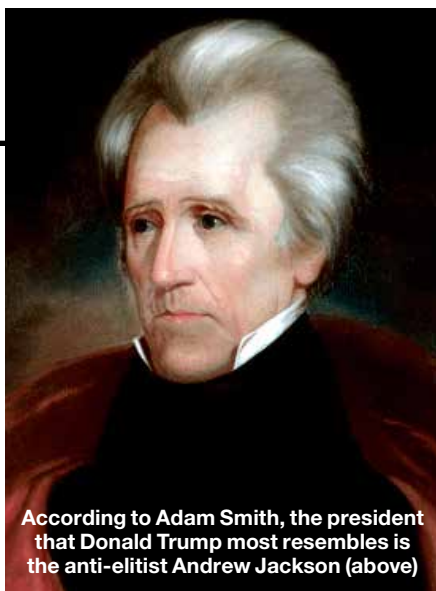
SE: Not really. There have been numerous populist candidates before – William Jennings Bryan in 1896; Theodore Roosevelt in 1912; George Wallace in 1968; Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996 – but none of them resemble Trump closely. Perot was another billionaire businessman to stand but he ran as an independent 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

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SYLVIA ELLIS



According to Adam Smith, the president that Donald Trump most resembles is the anti-elitist Andrew Jackson (above)

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

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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 of all the presidents and one who, despite his vast wealth and long history of engaging with the political establishment he professed to despise, was able to portray himself as anti-establishment.

The role of social media and mass media will also be seen as important. But, in time, Clinton will also 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 by winning the popular vote. Electoral change may also be on the cards.

RC: It would be folly to make predictions at this stage, when we don't know how far Trump will live up to his promises. Will there be trade tariffs, the dismantling of Obamacare, the fracturing of Nato, the mass deportation of illegal immigrants? It is certain that future historians will see the election as aggravating a profound cultural divide. But some will surely point to the qualified endorsement of Trump and what he was thought to stand for. Some wise commentators are noting that it is important not to inflate Trump's triumph: this was not a Reagan-style sweep. **H**