

## The Trumpocalypse: How did we get here?

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UK prime minister Harold Wilson famously said, “A week is a long time in politics.” Well, it has been two weeks since I expressed my concern that Donald Trump was not being taken seriously enough and that IF he got the nomination his particular set of gifts and the current mood of the electorate could possibly end with him winning in a landslide against Hillary Clinton.

One news site that sends me a daily email has been measuring the likelihood of Trump becoming president in terms of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Two weeks ago they were giving it one and a half horsemen. Today they are giving it only one. What has changed?

In that time the Republican establishment has been airing attack ads on their potential nominee (unheard of in my lifetime). Money is flooding to Ted Cruz from billionaires. The Republican National Committee has been looking at how they can modify the rules of their convention to deprive him of the necessary votes. They have been trying to entice a white knight, Paul Ryan, to be available as an alternative candidate in a brokered convention. And Trump himself has made statements about women and abortion that have hurt his numbers among women. So, the likelihood of his gaining the nomination, while still high, has decreased.

What hasn't changed is the mood of the electorate that has so surprised the establishment of both parties. They never saw Trump or Sanders having even a chance of being nominated. The Democrats have rules in place that give the party elite--senators, congressmen, governors, and party activists--a significant voice to decide the nominee, which does not bode well for Sanders, but if they do not pay attention to the current climate they may regret playing it safe with the establishment's candidate come the election.

A lot has been written trying to explain this mood.

Socio-economist Robert Folsom argues that the mood follows the Dow Jones Industrial Average. In boom years, society becomes collectively more politically correct. He defines that as a “tendency toward inclusion, pluralism, contrition and tolerant speech.” This positive-mood expression was exhibited from the early 1980s until 2000. It was reflected in laws against sexual harassment and hate crimes and valuing diversity in hiring. It was a time of coming together. Then the mood began to shift in a negative direction, becoming more pronounced in 2008 during the global financial crisis. This was exhibited in challenging the notion of political correctness replacing its tendency to be inclusive with a new norm of being exclusive, and the acceptance of polarising, unapologetic and unrestrained speech. This would explain why Trump's political incorrectness has not harmed him. Quite the contrary, it is at the heart of his appeal according to his supporters.

Many, in and outside the Republican Party, believe the Republicans themselves are the Frankenstein that created the monster in their midst.

Pulitzer prize-winning political reporter for the New York Times, Nicholas Confessore, has written that the Republican elite has abandoned its most faithful voters, blue-collar white Americans, who faced economic pain and uncertainty over the past decade as the party's donors, lawmakers and lobbyists prospered. From mobile home parks in Florida and factory towns in Michigan, to Virginia's coal country, disenchanted Republican voters lost faith in the agenda of their party's leaders.

He tells the story of manufacturing executives who had gathered in an Atlanta conference

room last year to honour their senior United States senator, Johnny Isakson, for his tireless efforts on their behalf in Washington. But as the luncheon wound down, Mr Isakson found himself facing a man from a rural county in Georgia. The man, Burl Finkelstein, told him trade policies with Mexico and China were strangling the family-owned kitchen-parts company he helped manage, and imperilling the jobs it provided. Mr Isakson politely brushed him off, Mr Finkelstein recalled, as he had many times before.

So when the Georgia primary rolled around, Mr Finkelstein, along with many others in his town, pulled the lever for Donald J Trump, who made him feel that someone had finally started listening. “He gets it,” Mr Finkelstein said in a recent interview.

Some believe political theories have done a poor job accounting for the [rise of Trump](#), leaving befuddled observers to turn to psychology in search of answers. Recently, that field provided the best explanation yet for his appeal among a sizable segment of the electorate: The boorish billionaire’s appeal isn’t due to his inconsistent conservatism, or his newfound religiosity. Rather, it’s grounded in [authoritarianism](#), an impulse that underlies both ideology and faith.

Political scientist Matthew MacWilliams [wrote](#), “Trump’s electoral strength—and his staying power—have been buoyed, above all, by Americans with authoritarian inclinations.” In an online poll of 1,800 Americans, conducted in late December, he found an authoritarian mind set—that is, belief in absolute obedience to authority—was the sole “statistically significant variable” that predicted support for Trump.

Sociologist Theodor Adorno first described the authoritarian personality in 1950, linking the mind set to simplistic thinking, intolerance of ambiguity, and racial prejudice.

In their [2009 book](#), Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler described authoritarianism’s impact on politics, noting that “authoritarianism is really about order—achieving it, maintaining it, and affirming it.”

This has obvious appeal in a changing, often frightening world. Indeed, research shows there are emotional benefits to holding such beliefs. A [2013 Canadian study](#) found a link between authoritarian values and a subjective sense of well-being.

Much previous research has tied conservatism to [higher levels of perceived threat](#). It’s hard to reconcile how people can both feel threatened and have a strong sense of well-being. On the other hand, a strong sense of social hierarchy (the notion that everyone has their place) can arguably provide a coherent structure that makes the world seem less chaotic—and theoretically more controllable. That could, in turn, promote a sense of well-being.

Religious belief plays a role in authoritarian thinking, as one might expect. In a [new study](#), psychologist Kathryn Johnson noted that taking the Bible literally was linked to prioritising authority-related concepts as obedience, respect for tradition, and a desire for the social order.

MacWilliams expressed concern that continuing incidents of terrorism may bring out the authoritarian impulses of otherwise reasonable people, perhaps adding to Trump’s support. He cited a [2011 study](#) that found “many average Americans become susceptible to ‘authoritarian thinking’ when they perceive a grave threat to their safety.”

But other research throws doubt on that claim. A [2015 study](#) looked at public attitudes in the U.K. following the July 7, 2005, terrorist attack on the London Underground. It found opinions did temporarily shift rightward, with a short-lived increase in anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments, and a lessening of support for the concept of fairness for all.

Importantly, however, the researchers found the participants’ views about obeying authority

did not significantly change in the wake of the tragedy. This defied their prediction, and suggests attitudes toward authority figures are held deeply, and not significantly swayed by day-to-day events.

That may signal a ceiling to Trump's support. Fear does activate our instinct to protect our own, but it doesn't necessarily make us want to submit to the whims of a strongman.

A friend of mine, Wayne Brittenden, a New Zealander who has worked for the BBC as a political journalist and produced many independent documentaries, and most recently did a segment on National Radio called Counterpoint for a number of years on Sunday mornings, argued that I need to look further back in history for an explanation of the Trump phenomenon. He is about to publish a paper on how the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 created the slippery slope that brought us to this point.

Robert Taft, a conservative Republican senator from Ohio, was the son of the President William Howard Taft. Fred Hartley was a conservative Republican congressman from New Jersey. Their act was a frontal assault on the union movement.

After World War II, 25 per cent of the workforce was unionized, and with the war now over, their promise not to strike so as not to impede the war effort had expired. As a response to the rising union movement and Cold War hostilities, the bill was a response by business to the post-war labour upsurge of 1946. During the year after V-J Day, more than five million American workers were involved in strikes, which lasted on average four times longer than those during the war.

The Taft-Hartley Act was seen as a means of demobilizing the labour movement by imposing limits on labour's ability to strike and by prohibiting far-left radicals from union leadership. Large business lobbies including the National Association of Manufacturers promoted the law.

The Taft-Hartley Act prohibited a wide variety of strikes, boycotts, picketing, closed shops requiring union membership, and monetary donations by unions to federal political campaigns. It also required union officers to sign affidavits with the government declaring they were not members of the communist party. States were allowed to pass "right-to-work" laws that outlawed closed union shops. Furthermore, the executive branch of the federal government could obtain legal strikebreaking injunctions if they deemed that an impending or current strike imperilled national health or safety.

That such a bill came from Republicans, who represented business interests, was not surprising. What was surprising is that a majority of Democratic representatives of the House and 21 of 42 Senators supported the bill. This was a major repudiation of their traditional role as supporters of working men and women. President Truman, who had remained silent about his position prior to the vote, did veto it. His veto was over-ridden with considerable Democratic support—106 out of 177 Democratic representatives and 20 out of 42 senators voted to override the veto making it the law. While having vetoed it, Truman would use the Act twelve times to break strikes.

While I don't know yet what Wayne's paper will argue are the implications of the Taft-Hartley Act, I see two in particular. It laid the groundwork for implementing neoliberal economic theories which required making labour a commodity by breaking labour's capacity to act collectively for their own interests. Neoliberalism touts individualism because individuals feel and are, often in fact, powerless against organised corporate interests. The Taft-Hartley Act has resulted in the undermining of the working class. Economist Robert Reich in his book *Saving Capitalism* explains how:

- In the 1950s a schoolteacher, baker or mechanic could earn enough to buy a house, purchase two cars and raise a family but this is no longer possible unless they are willing and able to borrow substantial sums of money.
- CEOs of large corporations now earn more than 200 times the average worker's income compared with 20 times 50 years ago.
- The richest 1 per cent of Americans now receive more than 20 per cent of the country's income compared with 9-10 per cent in the 1950s and 1960s
- Politicians pay more attention to the needs of large corporations, compared with individuals, because these corporations are successful lobbyists and make huge political donations.

He argues that corporate and financial elites have huge political influence and have been able to dictate the way the US economy operates. These elites have actively reorganised the rules of the “free market” for their own benefit.

The second implication is that the Act marks the beginning of the working class losing faith in the Democratic Party to represent their needs. This, ironically, led to blue collar workers abandoning their party to vote for Reagan. As Reagan was the front man for selling neoliberalism to the American public, it was a devastating decision by the working class. After thirty years of neoliberalism supported by both parties they now feel abandoned. Politicians who are not part of what to them is a rigged system are going to be appealing.

Noam Chomsky, an American linguist, philosopher, social critic, political activist and author of more than 100 books, recently commented that this reaction is not just an American one, but international:

*The US is not immune to the general decline of the mainstream political parties of the West, and the growth of political insurgencies on the right and left (though "left" means moderate social democracy, in practice) – it is one of the predictable consequences of the neoliberal policies that have undermined democracy and caused substantial harm to most of the population, the less privileged sectors.*

How all of these factors will play out in the nomination process and the election I have no way of knowing, but I don't think they are going away anytime soon. My concern is that if the establishment powers-that-be are able to quash this rising insurgency this time, even more people will lose faith in democracy. I think about the large number of young people who have for the first time decided to engage in the electoral process. If they come away from the experience feeling that they have been cheated, they will find other ways to express their frustration. We may face very turbulent times ahead.

I am also concerned that we may be too complacent about these forces here. We are no more immune to them than the US. When democracy becomes something to be manipulated in a cynical manner undermining our trust, civil society is in peril. Our two major parties are both beholden to neoliberalism. Our labour laws are just as draconian as the Taft-Hartley Act. Our politicians divert us from real issues regarding the common good with flag referendums while they enact policies the majority oppose. Our government has promoted our country becoming a tax haven for the very rich without blushing. This should not be a concern just for us as Unitarians with our strong belief in democracy and passion for social justice; it should be a concern for all New Zealanders. The conditions are ripe for a Trump being in our future.

From your vantage point how many horsemen are on the horizon? I see two and a half.