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Trump and the Rise of the Unprotected

Why political professionals are struggling to make sense of the world they created.



Donald Trump supporters at a Nevada caucus, Feb. 23. PHOTO: ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES



By

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We're in a funny moment. Those who do politics for a living, some of them quite brilliant, are struggling to comprehend the central fact of the Republican primary race, while regular people have already absorbed what has happened and is happening. Journalists and politicians have been sharing schemes for how Marco parlays a victory out of winning nowhere, or Ted roars back, or Kasich has to finish second in Ohio. But in my experience any nonpolitical person on the street, when asked who will win, not only knows but gets a look as if you're teasing him. Trump, they say.

I had such a conversation again Tuesday with a friend who repairs shoes in a shop on Lexington Avenue. Jimmy asked me, conversationally, what was going to happen. I deflected and asked who he thinks is going to win. "*Troomp!*" He's a very nice man, an elderly, old-school Italian-American, but I saw impatience flicker across his face: *Aren't you supposed to know these things?*

In America now only normal people are capable of seeing the obvious.

But actually that's been true for a while, and is how we got in the position we're in.

Last October I wrote of the five stages of Trump, based on the Kübler-Ross stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Most of the professionals I know are stuck somewhere between four and five.

But I keep thinking of how Donald Trump got to be the very likely Republican nominee. There are many answers and reasons, but my thoughts keep revolving around the idea of protection. It is a theme that has been something of a preoccupation in this space over the years, but I think I am seeing it now grow into an overall political dynamic throughout the West.

There are the protected and the unprotected. The protected make public policy. The unprotected live in it. The unprotected are starting to push back, powerfully.

The protected are the accomplished, the secure, the successful—those who have power or access to it. They are protected from much of the roughness of the world. More to the point, they are protected *from the world they have created*. Again, they make public policy and have for some time.

I want to call them the elite to load the rhetorical dice, but let's stick with the protected.

They are figures in government, politics and media. They live in nice neighborhoods, safe ones. Their families function, their kids go to good schools, they've got some money. All of these things tend to isolate them, or provide buffers. Some of them—in Washington it is important officials in the executive branch or on the Hill; in Brussels, significant figures in the European Union—literally have their own security details.

Because they are protected they feel they can do pretty much anything, impose any reality. They're insulated from many of the effects of their own decisions.

One issue obviously roiling the U.S. and Western Europe is immigration. It is the issue of the moment, a real and concrete one but also a symbolic one: It stands for all the distance between governments and their citizens.

It is of course the issue that made Donald Trump.

Britain will probably leave the European Union over it. In truth immigration is one front in that battle, but it is the most salient

because of the European refugee crisis and the failure of the protected class to address it realistically and in a way that offers safety to the unprotected.

If you are an unprotected American—one with limited resources and negligible access to power—you have absorbed some lessons from the past 20 years' experience of illegal immigration. You know the Democrats won't protect you and the Republicans won't help you. Both parties refused to control the border. The Republicans were afraid of being called illiberal, racist, of losing a demographic for a generation. The Democrats wanted to keep the issue alive to use it as a wedge against the Republicans and to establish themselves as owners of the Hispanic vote.

Many Americans suffered from illegal immigration—its impact on labor markets, financial costs, crime, the sense that the rule of law was collapsing. But the protected did fine—more workers at lower wages. No effect of illegal immigration was likely to hurt them personally.

It was good for the protected. But the unprotected watched and saw. They realized the protected were not looking out for them, and they inferred that they were not looking out for the country, either.

The unprotected came to think they owed the establishment—another word for the protected—nothing, no particular loyalty, no old allegiance.

Mr. Trump came from that.

Similarly in Europe, citizens on the ground in member nations came to see the EU apparatus as a racket—an elite that operated in splendid isolation, looking after its own while looking down on the people.

In Germany the incident that tipped public opinion against Chancellor Angela Merkel's liberal refugee policy happened on New Year's Eve in the public square of Cologne. Packs of men said to be recent migrants groped and molested groups of young women. It was called a clash of cultures, and it was that, but it was also wholly predictable if any policy maker had cared to think about it. And it was not the protected who were the victims—not a daughter of EU officials or members of the Bundestag. It was middle- and working-class girls—the unprotected, who didn't even immediately protest what had happened to them. They must have understood that in the general scheme of things they're nobodies.

What marks this political moment, in Europe and the U.S., is the rise of the unprotected. It is the rise of people who don't have all that much against those who've been given many blessings and seem to believe they have them not because they're fortunate but because

they're better.

You see the dynamic in many spheres. In Hollywood, as we still call it, where they make our rough culture, they are careful to protect their own children from its ill effects. In places with failing schools, they choose not to help them through the school liberation movement—charter schools, choice, etc.—because they fear to go up against the most reactionary professional group in America, the teachers unions. They let the public schools flounder. But their children go to the best private schools.

This is a terrible feature of our age—that we are governed by protected people who don't seem to care that much about their unprotected fellow citizens.

And a country really can't continue this way.

In wise governments the top is attentive to the realities of the lives of normal people, and careful about their anxieties. That's more or less how America used to be. There didn't seem to be so much distance between the top and the bottom.

Now it seems the attitude of the top half is: You're on your own. Get with the program, little racist.

Social philosophers are always saying the underclass must re-moralize. Maybe it is the overclass that must re-moralize.

I don't know if the protected see how serious this moment is, or their role in it.

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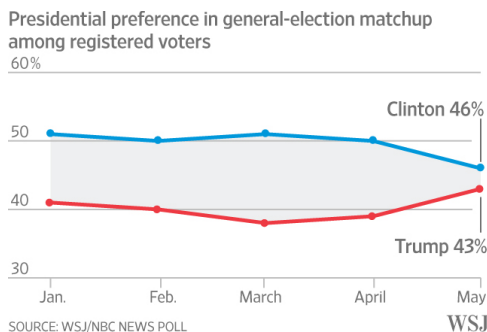
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