

The Anatomy Of Trumpocracy: An Interview With Noam Chomsky



Noam Chomsky

With its spate of right-wing rulings this week, the Supreme Court has paved the way for Donald Trump and the Republican-dominated Congress to intensify their attacks on human rights, workers and the country's democratic institutions, dragging the US deeper into the abyss.

US political culture has long been dominated by oligarchical corporate and financial interests, militarism and jingoism, but the current Trumpocracy represents a new level of neoliberal cruelty. Indeed, the United States is turning into a pariah nation, a unique position among Western states in the second decade of the 21st century.

What factors and the forces produced this radical and dangerous shift? How did Trump manage to bring the Republican Party under his total control? Is Trumpocracy a temporary phenomenon, or the future of American politics? Is the Bernie Sanders phenomenon over? In the exclusive Truthout interview below, world-renowned scholar and public intellectual Noam Chomsky, Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at MIT and currently Laureate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Arizona, tackles these questions and offers his unique insights.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, while many in the country and the world at large watch aghast as Donald Trump's nightmare of white supremacy continues to unravel the United States, it still remains something of a puzzle as to what propelled Trumpism to political prominence. For starters, why did voters turn to Trump? Who are the people that make up his hard-core base, and how do we explain the

fact that he has essentially taken over the Republican Party without any serious opposition?

Noam Chomsky: Part of the solution to the puzzle is Obama's performance in office. Many were seduced by the rhetoric of "hope" and "change," and deeply disillusioned by the very early discovery that the words had little substance. I don't usually agree with Sarah Palin, but she had a point when she ridiculed this hopey-changeey stuff. A fair number of Obama voters, mostly working people, switched to Trump. These developments were already clear by the time of the 2010 special election in Massachusetts to fill the seat of Senator Kennedy - the liberal lion. Virtually unknown Scott Brown won the election, the first Republican elected to the Senate in [more than] 40 years in this liberal state. Analysis of the vote showed that even union members hardly supported his liberal opponent because of anger at Obama: the way he handled the housing-financial crisis (bailing out the rich, including the perpetrators, while letting their victims hang out to dry) and much else, including provisions of his health care proposal that working people saw, with justice, as an attack on health programs that they had won in contract negotiations.

Quite apart from Obama's disappointing policies, he and the [Democratic] Party were victims of the intense racism that is deeply rooted in large parts of American society. The visceral hatred of Obama cannot be explained in other terms.

But there is far more than that. For some time, candidates for Republican primaries who emerged from the base have been far off the traditional spectrum. The establishment was able to suppress them and gain their own candidate, but that didn't change the basis for their support. For years, both parties have drifted to the right — the Republicans off the spectrum of normal parliamentary politics. Their dedication to wealth and corporate power is so extreme that they cannot get votes on their actual policies — which are now being revealed to us daily — and so have had to mobilize a voting base on issues unrelated to their service to their actual constituency. These include religious fundamentalism — a major phenomenon in the US unlike other developed societies — white supremacy, xenophobia and other latent anti-social attitudes that tend to break through to the surface during periods of disillusionment and distress. This is partly a matter of "search for scapegoats," the actual sources concealed in the usual manner of propaganda; thus, the public vastly exaggerates the number of immigrants, even more than in Europe. In the current period, these malignant tendencies are

natural consequences of the harsh neoliberal policies that we have discussed before. We see much the same in Europe, for similar reasons.

Trump has had overwhelming support among whites and less educated sectors, but for the most part, his mass voting base is relatively affluent and privileged. [A recent Pew poll of Trump approvers found two-thirds are either college graduates, women or nonwhite, the last group apparently not many.](#)

Trump's roughly 90 percent support among Republicans is actually not unusual for an incumbent party at this stage in office — about the same as Obama among Democrats, though the fervor and passion are different, presumably reflecting the general atmosphere of anger, hatred and fear. And frightening. Recognizing the great differences, I still can't repress childhood memories of hearing Hitler's Nuremberg rallies on the radio, not understanding the words, though the mood was unmistakable.

For the actual Republican constituency of wealth and corporate power, these are glory days, so why object, even if his antics sometimes cause some grimaces? The core constituency of Evangelicals is solidly in Trump's pocket, thanks to the crumbs thrown their way. Many working people maintain the illusion that Trump cares about them and will bring back lost days of steady jobs in mining and manufacturing. Even those realistic enough to dismiss this act at least see someone who is standing up to the "foreign devils" who have been "robbing us," and in particular, the cultural elites that regard them and their values with contempt, just "deplorables." Mostly farce, but [also] much successful propaganda, with enough elements of truth to be persuasive — for a while at least.

It's revealing to take a closer look at attitudes of the huge Evangelical community. According to a [study by the Public Religion Research Institute](#), "In 2011, only 30 percent believed that personal immorality was consistent with an ethical performance of official duties. Today, 72 percent of white evangelicals — up an astounding 42 points — believe that the two can go together."

No comment needed, but instructive.

Trump himself seems to be having the time of his life. He's constantly in the limelight, his loyal base worships his every move, he's free to defy convention, to insult anyone he chooses, to disrupt the international economic and political order

at will — whatever comes to mind next, knowing that he’s the biggest thug on the block and can probably get away with it — again, for a while, at least.

I don’t think it’s quite fair, however, to call him a liar. Lying presupposes having a concept of truth, and being in a situation where telling the truth matters. We don’t say that three-year-olds are lying if they say they saw a dragon outside, or an actor in a play. It’s also not clear that it’s tactically useful to tot up the random falsehoods that pepper his tweets and orations. That just fires up his worshipful base, providing more evidence that the hated liberal elites are trying to destroy the one guy in the political arena who is dedicated to defending the common folk — who he is shafting, with delight, at every opportunity.

It’s an intriguing spectacle, and not a little worrisome.

Trump loves to present himself as an “art-of-the-deal” president. Exactly what kind of deals has he made so far that can justify his claim to being a master negotiator?

There are no deals with others of any note, but there are real accomplishments. The most heralded one is the tax bill, a very welcome gift to the actual [corporate] constituency, with the side benefit of expanding the deficit and thus offering the opportunity to dismantle the limited social programs, which are [deemed] a nuisance, dispensable, since they raise the taxes of the actual constituency and do not benefit them. Steps are already underway to weaken these programs further. That includes the steady dismantling of protections provided by the hated “Obamacare.” I’ve often wondered whether the term itself might have caught on because of implicit racism; we didn’t call Medicare “Johnsoncare.”

A scathing [report of the \[UN\] “Special Rapporteur \[Philip Alston\] on extreme poverty and human rights” on his mission to the United States of America](#), recently released, was well-timed — and may have been the immediate reason for the US withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council, which discredited itself by revealing improper truths about ourselves, just as the World Court discredited itself — and was roundly condemned by elite opinion — for daring to condemn the US for international terrorism (“unlawful use of force”) in the murderous Reaganite attack on Nicaragua.

Other gifts to the actual constituency are being offered regularly. Elizabeth Warren’s Consumer Financial Protection Bureau is being rendered toothless.

Betsy DeVos is making it easier for the for-profit colleges she cherishes to cheat students, part of the concerted corporate-led campaign to dismantle public education, one of the real contributions of the US to contemporary civilization. The Department of Labor's fiduciary rule, designed to ensure that financial advisers act in the best interest of clients, has been sent to the ashcan, along with Dodd-Frank restrictions on the actions of banks, which are already enjoying record profits with more to come as the effects of the tax scam are felt. Bulging profits were heralded as a spur to investment, of which there is scarcely a trace as they are used to enrich the rich still further.

In general, things are proceeding quite well for "those who matter," though they have some concerns that Trump's erratic trade policies might infringe on the interests of the investor class.

I've skipped foreign policy, and have omitted so far, the most important accomplishments — astonishingly, commonly ignored by the opposition party and media commentary. Pride of place goes to the quite successful efforts to escalate the very severe and not remote threat of global warming. Expansion and modernization of the huge military system and provocative actions at the Russian border are not far behind.

In brief, there are no meaningful deals, though there surely are impressive accomplishments.

How do we explain the fact that Trump continues to cause chaos on all fronts, both domestically and internationally, and yet his popularity remains at quite high levels?

As I mentioned, Trump's popularity among Republicans is unusually fervent and high, though not uniquely so. The affluent are doing fine. The economy is continuing the slow growth under Obama, though wages are barely rising and job security is low. Apart from the business world, concerned that the wrench thrown into the global trading system might harm profits, the elements of his constituency that I ran through above for the most part apparently don't care much about the chaos, or even seem to enjoy seeing their leader offending elites and the damned foreigners.

Midterm elections are rapidly approaching. Do you see a "blue wave" coming? And if it happens, will it be sufficient to move Trumpism to the dustbin of history?

If the Democrats could get their act together, overcoming the schism between the donor-oriented New Democrat Party management and the increasingly activist and social democratic base, they would have a decent chance to take over Congress. That seems questionable, at the moment, though they should make some gains. But whatever gains there might be would not rid us of Trumpism, or its European counterparts. These have grown out of a mixture of authentic grievances and social pathologies — the latter surfacing in part because of the grievances. These are rooted in socioeconomic policies and bitter and so far, quite successful one-sided class struggle. None of this can easily be cast to the dustbin of history.

In some ways, as you have previously pointed out yourself, the most impressive aspect about recent developments on the US political landscape was the Bernie Sanders phenomenon, which represented a clear indication that the base of the Democratic Party had moved unmistakably to the left. Is the Sanders phenomenon — or at least the elements that gave rise to it — over? And how difficult is it for a new political party to emerge that advocates a progressive economic, social and foreign policy agenda?

The Sanders phenomenon was striking in two ways. One, as you mention, is the sign that the popular base of the party has moved to the left and gave impressive support to a candidate with social democratic, New Deal-style commitments — a breath of fresh air in the current state of affairs. The second was the sharp break from a long political history of pretty much bought elections. The phenomenon is by no means over. Sanders emerged as the most popular political figure in the country. In a functioning democracy, his voice — which continues to be loud and clear — would reach a wide public through mainstream media. Not here, where it is scarcely heard. Nevertheless, the offshoots of his campaign, [Our Revolution](#), are doing important work, joining others in creating what might become stable and effective popular movements.

The barriers are not insuperable, but to overcome them will require large-scale and effective organization based on popular mass movements. A lot has to be done to overcome the demolition of unions and atomization of society during the neoliberal years under the Thatcherite slogan “you know, there’s no such thing as society” — unwittingly echoing Marx’s bitter condemnation of authoritarian rulers who want to turn society into “a sack of potatoes,” isolated individuals incapable of confronting concentrated economic and political power. The US political system

has serious flaws, among them very high structural barriers for forming a new party. The last political party to have reached the mainstream is the Republican Party, but those were very different days. Where there is proportional representation, new parties can find a place in the political system, and have a chance to become major players — the British Labour Party, for example. In the US, even formal balloting procedures, run by state legislatures, virtually restrict participation to the two parties. Furthermore, the political parties are not membership organizations; rather, they are candidate-producing machines.

There are serious tasks ahead for those who aspire to a livable world.

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