

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Reflections on the 2016 Presidential Election

The impact and the implications of the 2016 presidential election are coming into focus. The results were surprising and defied all of the conventional wisdom before the election. Every major polling entity got it wrong and every projection I know of was off significantly regarding the Electoral College. [As has occurred several times in our history, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, rather decisively, but lost in the Electoral College. One presidential historian, Allan J. Lichtman of American University, predicted Trump's victory, as early as September of this year. Using his historically-based model, Lichtman has predicted the winner in the last eight presidential elections.]

Permit me several thoughts and reflections about this election:

- First is a series of observations about the religiously-based variable in voting this year. Hispanic Catholics, Jews and other faith groups voted heavily for Clinton, while white Catholics and mainline Protestants were more divided in their voting choices. Evangelicals (broadly defined) make up 26% of the American electorate and 81% of them voted for Donald Trump. Catholics, who make up 23% of the electorate, supported Trump over Clinton by a margin of 52 to 45%. In fact, white evangelicals and Catholics voted for Trump at even higher rates than they voted for the last two Republican presidential nominees, John McCain and Mitt Romney. The white evangelical vote was so critical to Trump that had no white evangelicals voted, Clinton would have won in a landslide, 59 to 35%. The 81% evangelical vote for Trump is especially astonishing, given the character of Trump. Evangelicals mocked and railed against Bill Clinton's sexual escapades, yet voted overwhelmingly for an equally immoral casino owner, who has been married three times, boasts openly of his sexual harassment and groping of women, and uses profanity and gutter language, which evangelicals have consistently criticized. As Robert P. Jones, chief executive of the Public Religion Research Institute, has argued: "Trump has really changed the[evangelical] political ethic. It's moved from a principled basis to a more utilitarian ethic, where the ends justify the means." In short, evangelicals must face squarely the charge of inconsistency and hypocrisy. Evangelicals cannot ignore this or run from it.
- Second, why did 81% of the evangelical electorate in America vote for Trump? Discussions with evangelicals indicate that several key points drove them to voting for a man who only a few years ago would have been abhorrent to them: They see Trump as someone who will tilt the Supreme Court back to a more conservative judicial philosophy in interpreting the Constitution. They see Trump as someone who will

defund Planned Parenthood in terms of its receiving federal tax revenue. They expect him to protect businesses that refuse to provide services for same-sex weddings. They expect him to rescind parts of or all of the Affordable Care Act (i.e., Obamacare). But major counties in the old industrial heartland of America (e.g., in Scranton and Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania and in key industrial counties in Ohio and Michigan) did not vote for Trump based on these issues. They voted for Trump based on class and economic issues resulting from the global economy and the results, as they see it, of immigration. Arguably, economic discontent of the long-suffering, long-neglected working class was perhaps more responsible for the energy of the Trump phenomenon than anything else. It was culture war issues (evangelicals) and class war issues (the industrial heartland) that explain Trump's victory in the Electoral College. This is the new coalition Trump has put together to win the Electoral College. Whether it will hold for the future is uncertain at this point.

- Third, regardless of personal feelings about Trump, he is now our president. As Senator Ben Sasse so persuasively argued, “we root for him, and especially for his steady hand as commander in chief. We pray that God grants him wisdom and discernment in his new calling . . . [A]s we hope for his personal effectiveness and success, we should all still argue for principles we believe in.” Allow me to list several salient issues facing President-elect Trump:
 1. The international order that has prevailed under American leadership since 1945 is coming apart. Three revisionist powers are seeking to achieve regional dominance and not only diminish, but also expel US influence in the world—Russia, China and Iran. World instability and near chaos in some regions are upon us and we need for Trump to be wise, discerning and forceful when needed.
 2. The economic anxiety and cultural disorientation in America are real and must be addressed. Trump made stupendous promises during his campaign to both evangelicals and to the neglected working class. Both explain his election and he must address those expectations. But he must also remember that this nation is made up of blacks, Hispanics and Asians, most of whom did not vote for him, but are nonetheless citizens. They see him as a personal threat and a real danger to them. He must neutralize those fears, for he will be the president of all the people.
 3. Within the US, there are crucial public policy matters that can no longer be ignored: The last four presidents have had a similar policy toward Social Security—do nothing! President Trump cannot continue this do-nothing policy. This trust fund is in crisis. Similarly is the Medicare crisis, which is also headed toward a train wreck. Infrastructure issues in America he has promised to address, but how he will pay for the nearly one trillion dollars he plans to spend is nebulous at best. Finally, the Affordable Care Act is a failure as public policy, but nonetheless health care reform is an absolute necessity in America and must be addressed.

I could go on obviously with other major issues he will face as president. Whether you voted for him or not, it is our collective duty to pray for him daily. Much depends on him being gracious and forceful, merciful yet firm.

Before the election, Max Lucado wrote: "I have a prediction. I know exactly what November 9 will bring. Another day of God's perfect sovereignty. He will still be in charge. His throne will still be occupied. He will still manage the affairs of the world. Never before has His providence depended on a king, president, or ruler. And it won't on November 9, 2016. 'The LORD can control a king's mind as he controls a river; he can direct it as he pleases'" (Proverbs 21:1 NCV).

See Ben Sasse in the *Omaha World Herald* (13 November 2016); Laurie Goodstein, "Evangelicals Believe Trump Will Keep His Promises," in the *New York Times* (12 November 2016); Julie Zauzmer, "Hopeful and Relieved, Evangelicals See Trump's Win as Their Own," in the *Washington Post* (15 November 2016); and Jennifer Schuessler in the *New York Times* (18 November 2016).