



## U.S. Primaries: A Theatre of the Absurd?

**American voters' anxiety over their future is feeding a rise in political extremism. Is this the death rattle of the American Dream?**

For many non-Americans, and Americans alike, the U.S. primaries – the process by which the country's political parties elect their presidential candidates - has become an increasingly bewildering spectacle; a strange, but very worrisome theatre of the absurd. And there are good reasons to worry. The U.S. has always played an important role in maintaining the global world order. But, faced with very troublesome, very regressive behavior, I'm not the first one asking, what's really going on? Why are those Presidential candidates -the ones that take such extreme positions - doing so well?

### **The reality of the American dream**

The allure of these populists may be a reflection of the underlying angst and anger over what has been happening to "The American Dream," a fantasy that has always been an important part of the inner landscape of Americans. This dreamscape views America as a land of unlimited opportunities - a place where almost anyone can be successful if he or she is prepared to work hard. It represents the "rags to riches" story - where a paperboy can become a millionaire. An important part of "The American Dream" is the belief that their children will have a better life than they have had. Not only does this dream represent a quest for security, wealth or material abundance, it also represents stronghold principles of self-actualisation and

personal fulfillment.

But something has gone horribly wrong with "The American Dream." For many Americans, life has become harder, not easier. The belief that each generation will be better off compared to the previous one is **rapidly disappearing**. When we study demographic trends, we can see that the middle class in America has been in steady decline. While the cost of living has been going up steadily, for a large segment of the U.S. population, income, net worth, and the quality of jobs has been going down. To many, a living wage and retirement security has turned into a pipe dream. Years of downsizing, lay-offs, the flight of manufacturing jobs overseas, and the proliferation of low-paid service jobs have changed the job market and conditions of life. Frankly, the new reality is that many people in America find it hard to pay their bills. And the possibility that their children will get ahead in life is no longer a given.

As things are these days, a college education requires the possession of serious financial resources, and many end up with a mountain of debt. Meanwhile, **surveys** show that the rich have become richer. Top CEOs make at least three hundred times more than the median employee. The wealthiest **10% of U.S. households now control nearly 75% of all wealth in the country**. Thus far

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from empowering the lives of ordinary people, technology and globalisation only seems to have undermined the lives of many American people, eliminating traditional blue collar and middle class sources of employment. Social mobility has gone by the wayside.

### **Hitting back at Corporate America**

These social developments have affected the mental state of large segments of the U.S. population. What it has brought about are feelings of unfairness and disenfranchisement. Many Americans are angry with the politicians in Washington spanning across social institutions such as the government, churches, legal system, and **the business world**. The trust that many may have had in their political representatives has evaporated. And the current brouhaha around extremely regressive political positions in the Primaries is a reflection of their anxieties for their current and future state.

We should not dismiss these concerns. Unfortunately, there may be much truth in what many Americans are saying: that their political system is rigged and that their candidates are beholden not to the people but to Wall Street and to large donors. It may be fair to argue that the existence of super PACs (political action committees) suggest that something has gone horribly wrong with the American political system. It's no wonder that so many voters are looking for people not controlled by corporate America and its "special" interests. The rise of populist candidates with their provocative and extreme platform may signify a sense of voters' powerlessness to influence the things that matter in their lives. It explains why anti-establishment political demagogues such as Donald Trump—while offering nothing substantial in the way of solutions to very complex world problems—are rising to the fore.

### **Snake oil salesmen**

In Gaetano Donizetti's famous opera, *L'elisir d'amore* (*The Elixir of Love*), we are faced with a traveling quack doctor, Dulcamara (the self-proclaimed Dr. Encyclopedia), who very successfully sells his bottled cure-alls to the people in the various towns he visits. Presently, in the U.S., for all appearances sake, Dulcamara-like politicians are doing the same. These people thrive on the anxiety, anger, and desperation of the populace. The popularity of such magic elixirs also suggests that "The American Dream" is in its death throes. When we are faced with anxiety about the things that are going wrong in our lives, a predictable (beneath-the-surface) process is to "split" whatever concerns we have into oversimplified good and bad. If such is the case, we look at situations only in "**right or wrong, black and white**" terms. Furthermore, we become

attracted to people who present simple, easily comprehensible pictures of the world around us. People like Dulcumara don't preach moderation. Such people feed off regressive defense mechanisms. They direct unresolved anger about inequality and unfairness towards external groups, holding them responsible for their own victimisation.

In their (conscious or unconscious) attempts at demagoguery, Dulcamara-types are encouraging Americans to interpret evidence in ways that is consistent with whatever desires they have. As effective snake oil salesmen, they want them to believe what they would like to believe. Furthermore, they insidiously encourage segments of the American population to pay only attention to arguments that are supportive of their position, while discounting the evidence that they don't like to hear. **Psychologists call it the confirmation bias**. No wonder that bigotry, protectionism and nostalgia for a past (that may never have truly existed), are raising their ugly heads. In addition, such psychological manipulation becomes also a way of resurrecting whatever is left of "The American Dream."

### **The dangers of wedge politics**

Of course, we could argue, so what - let it be! Every country gets the leaders it deserves. But what's worrisome is that these developments are taking place in a country that has a pivotal role to play in maintaining global world order -at least for the foreseeable future. What would be dismissed as a comedy of the absurd if this kind of circus was taking place in a less significant country, has frightening consequences when it applies to America. For the citizens of many countries, the notion that these Dulcamaras may attain positions of power and leadership becomes a harrowing thought. We should never forget that decisions based on splitting tend to come to a disastrous end - that polarised thinking will only bring trouble. We can only hope when the point of decision has arrived in America, sanity will prevail.

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