

# Why Donald Trump Won the Election and Does it Mean The End To Think Tanks and Policy Advice as we Know it?\*

By Dr. James G McGann

I have been asked to say a few words about the historic election that took place in the US on November 8, 2016 and to discuss the national and global trends that shaped the US presidential election and its implications for national, regional and global governance.

What was behind the election results? What factors contributed to Donald Trump's victory and what does it mean for think tanks, public policy and governance? How are we to understand the US election? How will it impact international relations?

I must reveal that I consistently predicted the results of the election starting 8-10 months before it took place. I am not prescient, or a supporter of Donald Trump but merely a realist who could see some of the trends and significant empirical evidence that made his victory possible. Three years ago I began to track key national and global trends that were influencing think tanks and politics around the world. This trend analysis was featured in the 2014 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report and discussed at length in my new book *The Fifth Estate: Think Tanks, Public Policy and Governance*

<https://www.brookings.edu/book/the-fifth-estate/>

The discontent that shaped the campaign strategies of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump took on a populist orientation and centered on three core issues: Nationalism (Make America Great Again); Nativism (Secure our Borders); and Protectionism (Protect American Workers). Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders both tapped into the deep discontent in a sizable segment of the American electorate. The platforms of these two candidates were cut from the same cloth but are sewn by different tailors. They are both Nationalists, Nativists and Protectionists.

While these became the central issues and themes of their respective presidential campaigns, they do not help us understand the real drivers behind the discontent in the US and many other countries around the

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\*\*This is in part based on a speech that I delivered to 80 Chinese think tank managers in Shanghai, China on November 9, 2016 and article I wrote for the Washington Post last year. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/10/06/for-think-tanks-its-either-innovate-or-die/?utm\\_term=.c4b8bd0b0867](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/10/06/for-think-tanks-its-either-innovate-or-die/?utm_term=.c4b8bd0b0867)

globe. Nor do they help us understand why so many people supported Brexit in the UK, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and Trump and Sanders in the US. The words of Peter Finch "the mad prophet of the airwaves" in the 1980s movie "Network" captures the sentiment of the American electorate. In the film he challenges his television audience to scream "We're mad as hell and we're not going to take it anymore." The rising tide of global populism is driven and best defined as a protest vote against the financial, intellectual and political elites.

To understand the anger, insecurity, fear and frustration of the electorate we must dig deeper. The sources of this discontent are as follows:

1. **Economic Insecurity** fed by globalization that has resulted in a sense of loss for a significant segment of the American population (roughly 60 million people who voted for Donald Trump, roughly 25% of eligible voters);
2. **Physical Insecurity** that is driven by international terrorism and the crime and drugs that plague our decaying urban and rural communities;
3. **Loss of National and Personal Identity** fed by globalization, and ever-encompassing McWorld and massive demographic shifts (no ethnic or racial group in the US is a majority-- Euro-whites are no longer in the majority);
4. **Global Disorder** The transition from a bi-polar to a multi-polar world. In a post bi-polar world we have entered a period where no one and everyone is in charge. Every day, Western values and the post WWII institutions are being challenged by rogue and rising powers;
5. **Crisis of Confidence in Institutions of Government and Elected Officials.** The public increasingly feels that their national government and elected leaders are unresponsive to their needs and concerns. This led to a crisis of confidence and protest vote because sizable segments of the electorate feel some of their basic economic and physical security are not being met. They see a government more willing to help refugees and the privileged 1% than "Native Citizens";
6. **Information Insecurity** The flood of information brought on by technology and the internet and now the "internet of things" has created a sense of anxiety and insecurity for many people. Henry Kissinger once described the challenge of being a policymaker like being at the end of a firehose because of the avalanche of information a policymaker must deal with every day. Today we all feel the same pressure from the endless 24/7 flow of information, news, etc. The insecurity has grown as a result of disinformation campaigns and fake news which eroded

our trust in new and old sources of information and news.

These factors when taken together create a sea of insecurity that drives populism and politicians who tweet simple solutions to complex problems. Tweets mobilize and energize but they don't analyze or realize real change.

It is these national trends that drive and help explain the Brexit Backlash, the rise of strongman Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and Trump's stunning win in the 2016 US Presidential election.

I will now outline some of the global forces that have fed and given rise to the electorates' discontent or what I described as the "Global Populists, Hacktivists and Anarchists Movements" around the Globe in the 2014 Global Go To Think Tank Report:

1. Energizes and mobilizes the public to rail against the system
2. Globalization & its discontents
3. Constant rate of disruptive technological change
4. Short Termism, quick simple fixes
5. Increasing political polarization
6. A call for action not ideas
7. Increased velocity information & policy flows
8. Policy Tsunamis
9. Rise of Global Populists, Hacktivists and Anarchists
10. Disruptive technologies empowers disruptive politics
11. Erosion of trust and support for key national, regional and global institutions

The implications of these global trends and movements have become the engines behind the global populist, nationalist, nativist, and protectionist movements in Europe, Latin America, Asia and North America. These movements will create a series of political, economic and social policy tsunamis that will sweep across the globe and bury governments and political elites in their wake. These social and political movements have some common characteristics. They are all:

- Anti-establishment
- Anti-elite
- Anti-globalization
- Led by a charismatic leader who promises to take charge and respond to their concerns
- Committed to putting an end to policy gridlock
- A leader who promises to get rid of the "self-serving" and "do nothing" political, intellectual and corporate elites
- Radical/insurgent approach to solve key policy issues
- Provides simple solutions to complex problems

- Nationalist, populist, nativist and protectionist
- Liberal Economic, political and security order is attacked

In a sea of insecurity the electorate will increasingly turn to strong leaders who will be in business suits or casual clothes not military uniforms. Mirroring the popular movement these leaders respond to, these leaders also seem made from the same mold. As a rule, they are outsiders, not politicians or elites. They are self-made businessmen or new age workers and civic leaders who are not part of the establishment. They are pragmatists with a focus on radically restructuring, downsizing and eliminating the role of government. They are “doers”, action and result oriented people who are not bound by established precedents, parties or policies. They believe that action should define a true leader not ideas or evidence. They are smart in their attacks on immigrants and intellectual and political elites who they use as scapegoats. They characterized them as the outsiders and insiders (establishment) who are responsible for all the ills of society. These new leaders are devotees of social networking and the new media. Trump used this to his advantage throughout the campaign by leveraging his 28 million Twitter followers to speak directly to his electorate. And finally, they are Radical Reconstructionist who constantly challenge conventional wisdom, politics and the intellectual establishment.

It goes without saying that we are in for some turbulent times and no nation should feel they are immune from the impact of these global trends or the formable domestic and foreign policy challenges we face. Not Europe, not Latin America, not Africa, Asia, and certainly not North America. The policy challenges our societies face are many and require leadership, careful analysis and difficult choices. This is where think tanks must help politicians and policy makers respond in a constructive way to the domestic and foreign challenges we face. The Brexit and 2016 election marks monumental failure of pollsters, pundits and think tanks to predict the referendum in the UK or the 2016 Presidential election--more importantly to understand and create responsive and constructive narrative. The implication of these events is profound and will have a long term impact on think tanks, public policy and governance. Social movements (Tea Party, 1 percent and Brexit) have been empowered by disruptive technologies which in turn have made disruptive politics possible. Think tanks must understand and respond to these new dynamics.

Traditional measures of impact and policy research are less relevant than ever, and the best mediums for reaching policy makers and the public are in a constant state of flux. This poses an existential challenge for think tanks — but also an incredible opportunity to increase the quality of their output and their ability to reach a larger

audience.

Think tanks, however, still face an operating environment that is full of tensions and disruptions. To successfully navigate it, they must understand the threats and opportunities facing all knowledge-based organizations and adapt to meet the market's new demands. I would contend that the 2016 election graphically illustrates the transformative dimensions of these forces and the profound implications they will have on politics and public policy. What must think tanks do?

First, research must be of the highest quality but must also be timely and accessible in order to effectively engage policy makers, the media and the public. Gone are the days when a think tank could operate with the motto "research it, write it and they will find it" — publishing a white paper and assuming that an influential policy maker would come across it eventually. To have meaningful effect, think tanks must place relevant analysis in the right hands, in the right format, at the right time. This means strategic use of Facebook, LinkedIn, infographics, and video briefs to communicate information and analysis on key policy issues. Policy makers read an average of thirty minutes a day, and they are not reading books or journals. A think tank's objective should be to capture their attention so they direct their staff to read the 300-page book or report.

Second, think tanks must adapt to the growing demand for rapid data and analysis. Our era of constant connectivity brings with it a perpetual flood of information — from television to the blogosphere, from political advocacy to social media campaigns. Think tanks must be nimble enough to adjust to the acceleration and information avalanches that technical change will bring about.

We live in turbulent times that demand rigorous and innovative perspectives on issues and trends; think tanks contribute evidence and quality information to help tame policy tsunamis sweeping the globe. They are uniquely positioned and skilled to critically assess the good, bad, ugly and potentially dangerous ideas and opinions that flood the Internet and airwaves every day. Increasingly, policymakers are turning to think tanks they know and trust to validate their positions on key policy issues, to check facts and sort through the flood of conflicting opinions and information that crosses their desks each day.

To preserve their future, think tanks will need to adopt entrepreneurial and tech-savvy communication strategies while continuing to produce rigorous, policy relevant analysis. With a 21st-century approach, think tanks will survive and thrive for years to come.

In closing, I would like to point out that while American democracy is messy and at times downright ugly, the electoral process has given an outlet for those who feel their voices and needs have not been heard. That segment of the American electorate that have not been riding the wave of globalization but who have been buried by it, are no longer silent. The 2016 Presidential Election has sent a loud and clear message to the establishment in both parties and I expect they will respond in the coming months and years ahead to address some of these concerns. The simple and unfortunate truth is that jobs will not return to these "Rust Belt" communities and our new president will have to deal with this reality. While these are uncertain and unsettling times, the citizens have spoken and an orderly transition of power has already taking place. American democracy while far from being perfect, endures.

# *Think Tanks & Civil Societies Program*

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## About TTCSP

### **Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program**

The Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) of the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania conducts research on the role policy institutes play in governments and civil societies around the world. Often referred to as the “think tanks’ think tank,” TTCSP examines the evolving role and character of public policy research organizations. Over the last 30 years, the TTCSP has developed and led a series of global initiatives that have helped bridge the gap between knowledge and policy in critical policy areas such as international peace and security, globalization and governance, international economics, environmental issues, information and society, poverty alleviation, and healthcare and global health. These international collaborative efforts are designed to establish regional and international networks of policy institutes and communities that improve policy making while strengthening democratic institutions and civil societies around the world.

The TTCSP works with leading scholars and practitioners from think tanks and universities in a variety of collaborative efforts and programs and produces the annual Global Go To Think Tank Index that ranks the world’s leading think tanks in a variety of categories. This is achieved with the help of a panel of over 1,900 peer institutions and

experts from the print and electronic media, academia, public and private donor institutions, and governments around the world. We have strong relationships with leading think tanks around the world, and our annual Think Tank Index is used by academics, journalists, donors and the public to locate and connect with the leading centers of public policy research around the world. Our goal is to increase the profile and performance of think tanks and raise the public awareness of the important role think tanks play in governments and civil societies around the globe.

Since its inception in 1989, the TTCSP has focused on collecting data and conducting research on think tank trends and the role think tanks play as civil society actors in the policy-making process. To date TTCSP has provided technical assistance and capacity building programs in 81 countries. We are now working to create regional and global networks of think tanks in an effort to facilitate collaboration and the production of a modest yet achievable set of global public goods. Our goal is to create lasting institutional and state-level partnerships by engaging and mobilizing think tanks that have demonstrated their ability to produce high quality policy research and shape popular and elite opinion and actions for public good.



## **The Lauder Institute of Management and International Studies**

The Lauder Institute of Management and International Studies offers an M.A. in international studies and conducts fundamental and policy-oriented research on current economic, political, and business issues. It organizes an annual

conference that brings academics, practitioners, and policy makers together to examine global challenges such as financial risks, sustainability, inequality, and the future of the state.

## **University of Pennsylvania**

The University of Pennsylvania (Penn) is an Ivy League school with highly selective admissions and a history of innovation in interdisciplinary education and scholarship. Its peer institutions are Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, Brown, Dartmouth, and the University of Chicago in the US and Oxford and Cambridge in the UK. A world-class research institution, Penn boasts a picturesque campus in the middle of Philadelphia, a dynamic city that is conveniently located between Washington, D.C. and New York, New York. Benjamin Franklin founded the University of

Pennsylvania in 1740 to push the frontiers of knowledge and benefit society by integrating study in the liberal arts and sciences with opportunities for research and practical, pre-professional training at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Penn is committed to meeting the full-demonstrated need of all undergraduates with grant-based financial aid, making this intellectually compelling integration of liberal and professional education accessible to talented students of all backgrounds and empowering them to make an impact on the world.

## **TTCSP Recent and Forthcoming Publications:**

Think Tanks: The New Knowledge and Policy Brokers in Asia (Brookings Press and Asian Development Bank Institute, 2019) <https://www.brookings.edu/book/think-tanks/>

Trends and Transitions in Security Expertise from Deterrence to Climate Change and Back Again (Routledge, 2017) <https://www.routledge.com/Global-Trends-and-Transitions-in-Security-Expertise-From-Nuclear-Deterrence/McGann/p/book/9781138304000>

Think Tanks, Foreign Policy and the Emerging Power Policy Networks (MacMillan, 2017) <https://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9783319603117>

Think Tanks and Emerging Power Policy Networks (MacMillan, 2017) <https://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9783319719542>

The Fifth Estate: Think Tanks Public Policy and Governance (Brookings, 2016) <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/chapter-one-the-fifth-estate.pdf>

Think Tanks and SDGs: Catalysts for Analysis, Innovation and Implementation (TTCSP 2015) <http://www.lulu.com/shop/james-mcgann/think-tanks-and-sdgs-catalysts-for-analysis-innovation-and-implementation/paperback/product-22563604.html>

How Think Tanks Shape Development Policies (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) <http://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/15244.html>

Security Expertise Practice, Power, Responsibility (Chapter 6) (2014 Routledge) <https://www.routledge.com/Security-Expertise-Practice-Power-Responsibility/Berling-Bueger/p/book/9781138819115>

Think Tanks and Global Policy Networks, Chapter in an edited volume (Routledge, 2013) <https://www.routledge.com/International-Organization-and-Global-Governance/Weiss-Wilkinson/p/book/9781138236585>

Global Think Tanks, Policy Networks and Governance (Routledge, 2010) <https://www.routledge.com/Global-Think-Tanks-Policy-Networks-and-Governance/McGann-Sabatini/p/book/9780415779791>