

My Penny's-Worth the Day After the Election

By Steve Bloom

November 9, 2016—I offer my thoughts about the election for a penny, discounting 50 percent from the usual two-cents worth. I don't feel as if I am in a position to demand full price. Although I was not the only one confidently predicting a Clinton victory for the last several months, it seems to me that all of us who were making that prediction need to give ourselves a reality-check based on the actual result. I remember having a similar sense, of the need for a critical self-reflection, last time I was stunned by the outcome of an election—in 1990, when the Sandinistas were defeated in Nicaragua. Tuesday night shook my world with a similar force. If others are honest I think you will acknowledge something similar.

At the same time, I tend to think that I may be even more in need of a critical re-examination of assumptions than others, because my prognostications were based on a deeper analysis than just the published opinion polls. The published opinion polls fooled many. But my thinking was rooted in expectations about how bourgeois politics in the USA actually work: that there is a ruling class which, in its substantial majority, wanted Hillary Clinton to be elected president. The ruling class, I believed, would therefore do whatever was necessary to defeat Trump and give Clinton the victory. Indeed, this seemed to be precisely what was happening in early October when the Washington Post published its revelations about Trump groping women. "Yes," I said to myself, and to others. "The world is working just the way we expect that it ought to work."

But then it didn't.

Commentaries on the election from a left perspective have begun to appear. Most of them that I have seen say useful things about the deep anger of ordinary people and the failures of the Democratic Party. Such elements are, certainly, a factor in the vote. But these specific aspects *should*, also, have been obvious in the weeks and months leading up to November 8. Their effects should have been registered in the polls. Why, then, did so many of us get it wrong? Why did the polls get it wrong? That is the deeper question that I think it's important for us to ponder.

The only compensation I have for being so smug over the last several months was that the ruling class elements who wanted to guarantee Clinton's victory were likewise feeling smug. They *thought* they had done what they needed to do to achieve their goal. They were fooled by the same polls that fooled the rest of us. My thinking about ruling-class intentions wasn't wrong. What was wrong was that both I and the ruling class severely underestimated what was needed to defeat Trump and ensure a Clinton victory.

Let me suggest that one thing ought to be clear at this point: Trump's victory did not take place because elements of the radical/revolutionary left failed to rally around a vote for Clinton. The fundamental causes were far more significant than that. What were those causes? Why did they remain so deeply hidden in the weeks and months leading up to election day? I do not pretend that I can give a full explanation, but I do want to share some thoughts, hoping to make a contribution to

the broader conversation we obviously need to have. Specifically, I want to share a personal observation which, I think, has some relevance.

I spent four days, starting last Saturday, travelling through rural Pennsylvania (visiting five prisoners in three state prisons in those four days) arriving back home Tuesday evening—in time to cast my vote for Jill Stein. This was Trump-Pence country. So it wasn't particularly surprising, or alarming, to see lawn sign after lawn sign promoting the Trump ticket as I travelled. I have to admit that I was a bit surprised on Tuesday morning (election day) when in a stretch of less than 30 miles I passed two small groups of enthusiastic Trump supporters (all white males in both groups) cheering and waving signs. Well, OK, maybe I shouldn't have been surprised at that either.

Then, this morning, as I was driving to Long Island from Brooklyn for a job in the wake of the vote, trying to come to terms with what had happened, I was struck by something else. Here I am, living in New York City, the heart of Clinton country. As I looked at the other cars on the road, however, I realized that there was not even one sporting a Hillary Clinton bumper sticker. Since most residents of NYC do not have lawns, this is the equivalent of the lawn signs in rural Pennsylvania, which were so numerous. (Most residents of NYC probably don't have cars either. But the lack of bumper stickers still seems like a meaningful measure. Back in 2012, and before that in 2008, you would see Obama bumper stickers everywhere as you travelled in and around the city.)

What does this signify? I think it gives us a hint about why things turned out the way they did, and why the forces at work weren't visible on the surface. It is surely the case that many (most?) voters in this election cast their ballots for one candidate or the other because they wanted to defeat the opposing candidate, not because they particularly wanted to support the person they voted for. But it is also true that both candidates had a core group of dedicated supporters. Trump's dedicated supporters were, I think, more enthusiastic than Clinton's—if we judge by what I will term “lawn sign consciousness” or “bumper-sticker consciousness.” Trump's message resonated actively with a layer of privileged white voters, who understood that “Make America Great Again” meant “recapture the dominance and privileges you enjoyed when the USA was the undisputed economic, military, and political power in the world.” These were surely the types who participated in the road-side rallies I witnessed on election day.

What similar appeal did Clinton have for anyone? She was, clearly, a candidate about whom very, very few were truly enthusiastic, even her core supporters. She did not generate much enthusiasm from her most obvious natural constituency, women, among whom she polled no better than Obama did four years ago.

I would like to suggest that this element—the level of enthusiasm for the respective candidates—would have been hard to measure in opinion polls leading up to November 8. It was probably one (at least one) of the invisible forces at work, no doubt affecting the relative turnout of Trump's and Clinton's core constituencies at the polls in key states. And for anyone who had a deeply positive, gut-level response to Trump's pro-empire message, including women, all of the scandals and misogyny would be of strictly secondary importance. Thus the ruling-class strategy did not have the effect I and they both expected.

I heard one commentator say some weeks ago that Trump was the only Republican candidate that

Clinton could expect to defeat. It was probably also true that Clinton was the only Democratic candidate that Trump might have defeated. I assert that the lack of even a “bumper-sticker” consciousness in support of Clinton, in a city like New York, sheds some light on the reason why. Of course in NY it didn’t matter. But in key states that Trump carried and that Clinton might have, this is probably one element that contributed to the outcome.

In any case here we are, and the obvious conclusion is the same as it would have been had Clinton won. All the commentaries from the left take the same approach: We will need to mobilize a genuine people-power alternative if we want anything good to happen in the next four years.

I do believe that now, having so badly miscalculated in the election itself, those elements of the US ruling class which wanted a Clinton victory will use every lever they have—most obviously in Congress—to make sure that the most destructive (for them) potential of a Trump presidency does not come to pass. Here it is noteworthy that the establishment leaders of the Republican Party remain in opposition to Trump’s program on key questions. Still, this is of small comfort to people like us, since the programmatic points on which Trump and the Republican establishment do agree (along with most of the Democrats in Congress on many of the same questions) are hardly intended to serve the interests of the 99 percent.

So the key variable will surely be how mass movements like Black Lives Matter, or for immigrant rights, or against ecological destruction, or organized labor react to these events. What strategy do those who want to prevent any further erosion of abortion rights choose to follow?

Along the same line here is one final thought for your penny: Jacobin, in its editorial comment on the election says: “it’s horrifying to contemplate the ways that [Trump’s] triumph will serve to strengthen the cruelest and most bigoted forces in American society.”

Maybe. But I’m inclined to think that this effect will be no more significant than the supposed new era of improved racial consciousness and race relations that was predicted by so many as a result of Obama’s victory in 2008. These kinds of realities tend to be influenced by the movement of big social forces. They can be measured by election results, but the election results themselves don’t usually move the meter much one way or the other—not even the victory of Donald Trump. True, we can expect those in the Alt-right and KKK to *try* to take advantage of a Trump presidency, thinking that what has happened will put those of us who are prepared to mobilize against racism on the defensive. Whether they succeed, however, depends primarily on how those of us who are inclined to mobilize against racism respond to what has just taken place.