

The Great Progressive Repudiation

Voters might like President Obama, but they have soundly rejected his agenda.
By David French — NATIONAL REVIEW November 9, 2016

A remarkable thing just happened. The presidential candidate that voters believe less, like less, and think less qualified [won the election](#). In other words, rather than endure four more years of elite progressive rule, the American people chose to gamble on a reality-television star with well-known and openly notorious character flaws. That's how much they were ready for change.

Let's be very, very clear: This election ultimately wasn't about defeating the "establishment." It was about defeating the *progressive* establishment. The Republican establishment — the hated "GOPE" — ends this year with more power than it's enjoyed in a century, and perhaps since Reconstruction. Mitch McConnell is more powerful. Paul Ryan is more powerful. The Republican party will control the White House, Congress, judicial nominations, and the vast majority of the states. The Republican party runs the United States.

The GOP presidential landslides of 1972, 1980, 1984, and 1988 were inconsequential by comparison, resulting in divided government and with Democrats far more ascendant at the state level. By contrast, there is now a Republican governor of *Vermont*. And if you think that Trump carried down-ballot Republicans to victory, think again. He undoubtedly helped secure victories in states such as Indiana, Missouri, and Pennsylvania, but in Ohio, North Carolina, Florida, and Wisconsin, the Republican Senate victor won *more* votes than Trump. In close losses like Nevada and (perhaps) New Hampshire, the GOP Senate candidate also out-pollied Trump.

Tea-party Republicans won. Establishment center-right Republicans won. And they won not just because Republican voters turned out — GOP turnout wasn't particularly heavy, and Trump is likely to win roughly the same number of votes that Romney did — but because Democrats stayed home by the *millions*.

In 2012, Mitt Romney received almost 61 million votes. With 98 percent of precincts reporting, Donald Trump has slightly over 59 million votes. Clinton is winning the popular vote count by roughly 200,000 votes but has so far turned out 6.5 million fewer voters than Obama did. In other words, GOP voters kept voting while millions of Democrats voted with their feet — they walked anywhere but the polling place. In spite of an avalanche of apocalyptic anti-Trump rhetoric, an astonishing number of Democrats didn't find Hillary Clinton or her progressive agenda worth lifting a finger (literally) to support.

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This is a direct rebuke to progressive hubris. It turns out that the progressive elite's preoccupations with identity politics, social shaming, and radical sexual change don't motivate their "coalition of the ascendant." In the past eight years, the progressive movement has doubled down its attacks on churches and in recent years directly confronted American law enforcement. It has attacked free speech, the free exercise of religion, and gun rights — secure in the belief that history was, as they put it, on their "side."

The result was clear: The Democratic party lost ground with America's poorest voters. Citizens making less than \$50,000 per year propelled Obama to victory over Romney. Exit polling shows that Trump improved the GOP showing by 16 points with voters making less than \$30,000 per year and by six points with voters making between \$30,000 and \$50,000, which more than offset Democrat gains with the middle class.

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I have written at length (and stand by every word) about my problems with Evangelicals who were willing to overlook Trump's character flaws to vote for him. But the progressive elite should take stock of a politics that is so relentlessly hostile to American Evangelicals that they turn out for Trump, a thrice-married philanderer who appeared in *Playboy* videos and who (now infamously) bragged, "You can do anything" with beautiful women, because "when you're a star, they let you do it." And not only did Evangelicals favor Trump, but they gave him a [greater margin of their vote](#) than they gave even George W. Bush. In a widely shared piece circulated days before the election, my friend Kelly Monroe Kullberg [asked Christians](#) to vote for Trump as an act of "self-defense." They did, and in doing so, they have made Democrats face their reckoning for an eight-year-long assault on religious liberty, an assault so malicious that it prominently featured an attempt to force *nuns* to pay for abortifacients.

Moreover, even nominal Democrats proved immune to apocalyptic progressive political rhetoric. Much has been written about how the Democratic tendency to "cry wolf" immunized Republicans against charges of racism, sexism, and homophobia. But it turns out that progressives inoculated even their own minority base. Trump got a higher percentage of the black *and* the Latino vote than Mitt Romney did. There was a seven-point swing in the black vote against Hillary and an eight-point swing in the Latino vote. When Joe Biden said that Mitt Romney would put black voters "back in chains," there's nothing more (or worse) you can say about Trump.

Hillary Clinton was a terrible candidate, no doubt, and Democrats would be right to finally (and quickly) banish both Clintons to the fringes of the party. After all, their tawdry scandals and self-obsessions have now arguably cost the Democrats two winnable presidential elections — one in 2000 and the other in 2016. But the results of 2016 can't be divorced from the results of 2010 and 2014. The electorate might still like the man named Barack Obama, but they don't like his agenda, they don't like his allies, and many millions don't like progressive bullies.

It is now up to the Trump administration — and Republicans across the country — to offer a contrast, to be worthy of the responsibilities they've been given. We cannot and must not replace progressive hubris with populist authoritarianism. The heart of the Never Trump position was the assertion and belief that Trump was not up to the task, that his character and temperament were so deficient that he was not fit to lead. That proposition is about to be put to the test. As I said last night, I pray that we who opposed both Trump and Hillary are proven as wrong about his character and conduct in office as we were about his political prospects. The GOP enjoys a historic political and cultural opportunity. May it steward that opportunity better than the progressives who came before.

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