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Donald Trump, the Republican Party and racism

Nick O'Malley

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If there was ever any real doubt as to what US President Donald Trump truly felt about the white supremacist rally that began this violent week he dispelled them with a barrage of late-night tweets on Thursday.

"Sad to see the history and culture of our great country being ripped apart with the removal of our beautiful statues and monuments," he wrote of the statues that the neo-Nazis had rallied to defend on the campus of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

"The beauty that is being taken out of our cities, towns and parks will be greatly missed and never able to be comparably replaced!" he added in a second tweet.

Later, after the attack in Barcelona, he fired off another missive, regurgitating a myth about the American general John Pershing who, according to Trump's fantasy, dipped bullets in pigs' blood during the Philippine-American War and used them to massacre captured Muslim insurgents. This is not the first time this president has indulged publicly in this dark fantasy.

One of the witnesses to the horror in Charlottesville last weekend was the leading American political scientist Larry Sabato, who is director of the University of Virginia's Centre for Politics, and who lives in the pavilion designed by Thomas Jefferson on the lawn that became the focal point of the rally.

Speaking with Fairfax Media he said he was shocked to see young Americans "marching with their little tiki torches, just like Nazis, shouting 'Blood and soil' and 'Jews will not replace us'."

He was not shocked by his president's response though. "Nothing about Donald Trump surprises me anymore."

The rally, says Sabato, was not about monuments, but about race. Those old rebel statues were erected across the South during the 1910s and 1920s as African-Americans had their rights stripped away by the apartheid of the Jim Crow era. They were physical demonstrations of white supremacy.

And it is not coincidence that those who seek to defend them are drawn to the modern Republican Party.

American politics has long been riven by race, with minority Americans voting almost exclusively for the Democratic Party and the Republican Party seeking its majorities by turning out the white working-class vote, a trend that began when the Democratic Party abandoned the Old South and embraced the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

In the wake of Trump's failure to unequivocally condemn the white supremacist protesters, many in the so-called establishment of the Republican Party have moved to distance them from their leader. Three cable news networks this week reported they were unable to book a single Congressional Republican onto their programs to defend Trump's position.

The prominent GOP senator from Kentucky, Lindsey Graham, took to Twitter to chastise Trump, writing, "took a step backward by again suggesting there is moral equivalency between the white supremacist neo-Nazis and KKK members who attended the Charlottesville rally."

The Tennessee Republican Bob Corker told local reporters, "The President has not yet been able to demonstrate the stability nor some of the competence that he needs to demonstrate in order to be successful. He has not demonstrated that he understands what has made this nation great and what it is today, and he's got to demonstrate the characteristics of a president who understands that."

But despite the genuine abhorrence of Trump's comments this week by many in the GOP, some analysts have long argued that the party has been waging a studiously anti-democratic war on minority voters, one that intensified after the US ceased to be a majority white Christian nation sometime over the past few years.

"Imagine being a conservative white Christian in the South," the author of a book called *The End of White Christian America*, Robert Jones, told Fairfax Media on the eve of the election Trump went on to win. "In the past few years they have gone from being in the demographic majority to the demographic minority. They have seen support for gay marriage go from four in 10 [voters] in 2008 to six in 10, so now they feel they are a moral minority too. The pace of change is head-spinning. They feel cultural dislocation, they feel vertigo."

The responses to this vertigo are manifold. Some young men, says Sabato, took to following Trump as though he was a cult leader.

But the GOP took another tack. It devoted its energies not only winning the white vote, but to preventing as many minorities from voting at all.

After the Supreme Court struck down a key civil rights-era voter protection ruling in 2012, Republican governors began introducing laws designed to depress African-American voting.

Most had to do with making voter ID mandatory, which is more likely to block poorer and minority voters. Others pushed through measures to reduce the time polls are open, cutting into weekend voting favoured by shift-workers, low-income voters and African-Americans, who sometimes caravan from churches to polls on the Sunday before election, *The New York Times* reported in 2014.

In Texas and North Carolina same-day voter registration was outlawed, as was a popular measure to sign-up children at high school when they turned 18.

Many states ban convicted felons from voting even after they have completed their sentences, a measure that blocks over 6 million African-Americans from ever participating in their democracy.

As these efforts to disenfranchise a certain class erupted, even some conservative intellectuals began voicing their distrust of democratic system entirely.

David Harsanyi, a senior editor at conservative journal *The Federalist* and author of the book *The People Have Spoken (And They Are Wrong): The Case Against Democracy*, wrote an op-ed for *The Washington Post* last year in which he advocated for "weeding out millions of irresponsible voters who can't be bothered to learn the rudimentary workings of the Constitution, or their preferred candidate's proposals or even their history." That way, he said, "we may be able to mitigate the recklessness of the electorate."

In an essay for *The New Republic* called *The Right is Giving Up on Democracy*, the writer Jeet Hee, noted that the Silicon Valley billionaire and Trump fan Peter Thiel has fretted about the minority vote for years. Like many other members of America's libertarian movement, he believes that the Democratic Party seeks to buy off or even "enslave" voters by giving them access to free education and healthcare. "The 1920s were the last decade in American history during which one could be genuinely optimistic about politics," Thiel once wrote in a blog for the libertarian Cato Institute. "Since 1920, the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women - two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians - have rendered the notion of 'capitalist democracy' into an oxymoron."

These efforts at minority voter suppression have been bluntly admitted to by Republicans on more than one occasion.

Todd Allbaugh, 46, a staff aide to a Wisconsin Republican state politician, quit his job in disgust over the issue and abandoned the party in 2015, writing in a Facebook post: "I was in the closed Senate Republican Caucus when the final round of multiple Voter ID bills were being discussed. A handful of the GOP Senators were giddy about the ramifications and literally singled out the prospects of suppressing minority and college voters. Think about that for a minute. Elected officials planning and happy to help deny a fellow American's constitutional right to vote in order to increase their own chances to hang onto power."

Way back in 2012 a senior Republican state representative Mike Turzai infamously boasted in a committee meeting that a new voter ID law was "gonna allow Governor Romney to win the state of Pennsylvania."

Sabato says there is a racial thread that binds the voter suppression activities of the establishment GOP with the animus of the Trump fans of the alt-right, though he suspects that the former is driven more by practical politics than determined racism.

Though both sides might fear being overwhelmed by minorities and allied educated whites, their interests diverge.

The emboldened alt-right harnessed for Trump by his chief strategist Steve Bannon is driven by a culture war and fears the destruction of Protestant white culture being destroyed. This can be staved off only by massively restricting legal and illegal immigration to America. It is no surprise anti-immigration measures were the pillars of Trump's election campaign.

The GOP establishment does not actually want to limit immigration, which its big-business donor class supports due to its need for labour. The problem it faces is that these cheap workers eventually wind up becoming citizens and voting against their party.

This can help explain the energies the party establishment has spent in pursuing voter suppression and the increasing tension between the the Trump-Bannon insurgency and the Republican

establishment. One group wants minorities of the country, the other wants them out of the voting booth.

Trump has now made it clear where his sympathies lie. He has spent the week raging at the chief executives who abandoned his business advisory board and the Republican senators who defied him.

After buckling to internal pressure and making a statement against racism on Tuesday - Sabato calls this Trump's "hostage video" - he has returned to angry defiance.

Asked how this will play out over the coming years, Sabato says he sees little prospect the Trump machine will be derailed at the 2018 midterm election, in part because of the Republican Party's success in gerrymandering Congress. Districts in the most competitive states have been re-drawn by Republican governors in such a fashion that even Democrats win the vote overwhelmingly, they stand little chance of taking the seats.

A report by the Brennan Centre for Justice and the University of New York's law school earlier this year found "clear evidence that aggressive gerrymandering is distorting the nation's congressional maps", advantage and posing a "threat to democracy." The net advantage that the Republican now holds by doctoring district maps is 16 to 17 seats in Congress.

Asked if Trump's deep unpopularity might ensure a Democratic victory in 2020, Sabato said it was just too far off to speculate.

Besides, he said, the Democrats might ruin their chances with a deeply unpopular candidate.