

The new politics of class war point to a frightening future

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Two years ago almost to the day, I sat at a coffee shop in Washington, D.C., talking about the upcoming U.S. election with a good friend who was an editor at a major political monthly. Though never a fan of George W. Bush, I suggested that the President might be a transitional figure, his administration essentially holding back a tectonic populist, rightward shift in American politics. I told my friend I was fearful of what could come next. He looked me squarely in the eye and said simply: “That's not what frightens me. What has me terrified is the right-wing backlash that will come when a more liberal, left-leaning administration takes office in January, 2009.”

I've since come around to his way of thinking. Barring some unforeseen event, Barack Obama can count on victory in Tuesday's election. He is running a considerable lead in the national polls and even in the electoral college, and he appears to have mobilized huge numbers of younger and African-American voters who will push him to victory in the key swing states. He has the money – more than \$150-million raised just in September – to counter virtually any negative advertising. But his job once in office may be harder than he anticipated.

When people like Colin Powell say Mr. Obama is a “transformational figure,” they're suggesting that an Obama administration can somehow heal the deep divisions within the American electorate and move the country forward, the way Franklin D. Roosevelt did during the Great Depression. And certainly projected Democratic majorities in Congress make that kind of transformation appear plausible.

I wish that would happen. But I doubt it will, and the reason is simple: The divisions run too deep. The realignment that propelled and kept FDR in office is not happening today. American politics is distinguished today by shifting

electoral coalitions, candidate-centred elections, and what some political scientists call de-alignment. America isn't just suffering from political polarization, but a burgeoning economic divide and class war.

Since 1980, the year Ronald Reagan was first elected, the U.S. economy has been undergoing a shift more thorough and massive than the rise of industrial economy a century and a half ago. Since then, 20 million jobs in the creative sector have been created, and the ranks of what I call the creative class have grown to 40 million – nearly a third of the work force. That group has become powerful in American politics, and it is squarely behind Mr. Obama. New York Times columnist David Brooks recently reported that Republicans have all but lost creative professionals working in law, medicine and high technology.

Republican strategists have exploited this shift to their party's advantage, beginning with the ever-prescient Kevin Phillips's identification of the “silent majority” of white working-class voters in 1968.

The rise of the creative economy generated a shift in social values. Tolerance, diversity and self-expression became prized. Diversity and self-expression became necessary for the creative economy to flourish and function.

As it grew and became more concentrated in locations such as San Francisco, New York, Seattle, Boston and Washington D.C. – what we now know as blue America – the working class fell further and further behind. Globalization shipped jobs overseas, while institutional supports that led to higher working-class incomes during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s – powerful U.S. companies and powerful unions – were simultaneously being undercut. The great genius of former Bush political strategist Karl Rove was to seize upon the church as the one remaining constant in the lives of working Americans and to use it to his political organizational advantage.

The rise of “hockey moms,” “Joe Six-Pack” and “Joe the Plumber” in this election cycle testifies to this growing sense of unease. This is the kind of economic split that Mr. Obama tried to capture with his infamous “bitter-gate” statement, which he now says he regrets. But what can we expect from people who know that the economic system is leaving them behind?

This class divide is overlaid on America's economic and political geography, with the U.S. economy being driven by centres of innovation such as San Francisco, Seattle, Boston, and Washington D.C.; finance, entertainment and media cities such as New York and Los Angeles; and university-anchored tech centres such as Austin, Tex., Boulder, Colo., and Raleigh-Durham, N.C.

My team and I looked at the state-by-state polls and compared them to our measures of the creative economy – a broad index of technology, talent and tolerance. Blue states had a higher median creativity index score than red states (.68 versus .38). Mr. Obama leads John McCain among those with a postgraduate education 59 to 36 per cent; among those with a college education 50 to 44 per cent; and among 18-to-29-year-olds 65 to 31 per cent.

As Republican congressman Tom Davis recently opined, U.S. politics, including in his own district in northern Virginia, is being reshaped as high-tech economies lean more Democratic: “Economic development works.” He decided not to seek re-election.

These class divides will only deepen. Fear and anxiety will probably get worse. And a strange kind of reactive populism, much worse than anything we have seen before, could be on the rise. Unless Mr. Obama can fashion a broad, inclusive appeal that extends the benefits of the creative economy to working and service economies, the bitterness he himself acknowledged, in a moment of candour, will grow deeper.

If you think the stock market has been volatile, get ready for an extended period of volatility and conflict in American politics.

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