

ELECTION CIRCUS IN THE UNITED STATES

By

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In my opinion, serious political scholars and commentators are finally beginning to zero in on the root causes of the election circus in the United States. And, it is not "the economy stupid".

No, it's all about the culture.

Such strange bedfellows as the Economist and the Toronto Star agree it is not the economy although economic woes are still being touted by many politicians as the primary cause of all the problems. The economy is doing quite well thank you and despite some weaknesses together with concerns about the world economy there appears to be a wide consensus that the economy will continue to do well in the near term. David Olive in the Toronto Star cites a number of statistics to support his theory that America's best days are still ahead and that the United States will continue to dominate the world economy.

For the most part, economic issues have become a side show in the current debate because it is the myriad of cultural issues which now occupy centre stage.

And, it is becoming quite clear that a significant number of Americans cannot handle the huge disruptive changes in the United States' culture and that this is the real problem creating the chaos in the current electoral environment.

It is true, of course, that there are important economic concerns which still need to be addressed.

As Olive reminds us, for instance, there are a sizable number of Americans who fear they are losing their country to outsiders particularly to people from low wage countries who have stolen American jobs. This is a legitimate concern for those affected and needs to be dealt with.....although the solution appears elusive.

But, deeper down, many Americans, particularly white people who continue to retain more historic values, believe that many of their traditionally held values and individual freedoms are being taken away from them by younger people and newcomers with different cultural customs and values.

The white population in the United States is fast becoming a minority and white men in particular are afraid. It is predicted that, by mid-century, people of colour will constitute the majority of the American population and this will make the problem even worse.

Faced with this sudden and dramatic shift in demographics, those people who adhere to many of the outdated historical values, such as supporters of the Tea Party, are most upset. They feel strongly that many of their former cultural freedoms and privileges are being taken away from them or are being badly trodden upon.

For instance, they can no longer openly engage in racial behaviour, ostracize or discriminate against gays, enforce trade restrictions, enjoy total freedom to bear arms, impose restrictions on religious freedom, to name a few.

Faced with this reality, a vocal and often powerful minority is fighting a rear guard battle.

To this point in time, it is mainly being fought at the State level. Many state legislatures have recently enacted many rash laws. The southern states in particular are leading the charge. For example, recent laws enacted at the state level allow people to carry concealed weapons without a permit and also allow students to take guns into class. Very recent laws allow merchants and others to refuse service based on religious beliefs. Other states have passed laws severely restricting voting rights using discriminatory criteria. Several states have passed laws imposing restrictions on the procedures used in abortions. Two states have even passed laws regulating who can use public bathrooms.

As I said, so far the actual changes have been made at the state level. However, now that the federal election process is in full flight, the cultural rhetoric is alive and well and taking the oxygen out of the room in both federal campaigns.

Messrs. Trump, Cruz and Sanders are all passionately advocating many positions which are squarely aimed at restoring threatened cultural values in order to appeal to the disenchanting and fearful voters. Tough immigration restrictions, banning Muslims, revoking Obama care, permitting torture, providing free education, relaxed gun laws,

eliminating whole government functions such as the taxation department, restoring military dominance, and introducing trade barriers are all promises being made by these candidates.

These are also the red meat issues at every candidate rally.

Further, prior to the campaigns, most of these issues had some hawkish advocates but there was not wide spread or organized unrest. Apart from a handful of protesters such as the Occupy Wall Street movement, the concerns about these issues was somewhat muted. It was the candidates who decided to take the lead and to make these issues center pieces of their platforms and, therefore dramatically heightened the atmosphere of anxiety. When they started to publicly push these issues they were not leading from behind. Admittedly, they struck a chord but they have also succeeded in putting the issues on the public agenda in a way which prevents reasoned debate and discussion. These issues are now more rallying cries designed in many cases to inflame and instill fear in the voting public.

This leads me to my last point.

There is no way that the candidates can deliver on these promises. When, in the aftermath of the election, the public realizes these were empty promises from politicians who knew they couldn't deliver, the public could very well over react. At the very least, the integrity of the whole electoral system will be severely damaged with unforeseen consequences.

So, I think it has become increasingly clear that the cultural issues are dominating this election. In this sense, it is a very critical election in American history because it truly is a fight for the hearts and souls of the American voters.