

POLITICS | A NATION DIVIDED

Rage and Suspicion Reign as Americans, Painfully Split, Cast Their Votes

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NOV. 9, 2016



Dressed as the presidential candidates, Spencer Dumford, left, and Dan Shultz gestured to passing cars and people in the parking lot of a polling place in Manchester, N.H. Credit: Ian Thomas Jansen-Lonnquist for The New York Times

Outside a polling place in the suburbs of Detroit, a shouting match between two women escalated into a parking-lot scuffle, ending with one of them shoved to the pavement.

At a community center in southern Florida, a middle-aged woman handing out Republican pamphlets reached frantically for her pepper spray as a man supporting Hillary Clinton charged at her.

And in Pueblo, Colo., an Army veteran with a .45-caliber pistol on his hip and a notebook in his left breast pocket watched from outside the county election office, scanning the people who came and went for signs of the fraud he was certain he would see.

A divided country looked to its future on Tuesday as millions of people lined up for blocks and waited for hours to cast votes for two candidates about whom the nation, it seemed, could not possibly disagree more.

In many places, instead of hope or even resignation, there was grim despair, seething rage and even physical menace: the jittery scenes of a nation at the end of its proverbial rope.

In Kenosha, Wis., outside the Holy Nativity Lutheran Church, a woman snapped photos of cars with out-of-state license plates.



A Donald J. Trump piñata in the local Democratic headquarters in Kennett Square, Pa., on Tuesday. Credit: Mark Makela for The New York Times

In a “free speech zone” at the University of Florida in Gainesville, a 19-year-old finance major named Hayden Hudson passed out Donald J. Trump stickers, working feverishly, his lips chapped. As he taped homemade “Lock Her Up” signs to a lamppost, other students tore them down. Mr. Hudson recorded them on his phone.

Trump supporters, he said, were “scared to speak out unless someone else does.”

But in deep-red Oklahoma, where Mr. Trump was all but certain to win, fear coursed in the opposite direction. Outside an Oklahoma City church, Khalil Benalioulhaj, standing in a line of hundreds of people waiting to vote, said he had witnessed a white man shout “White power!” at blacks and Hispanics, stopping conversations cold.

“Whenever he passed, there was just silence,” said Mr. Benalioulhaj, 25, an entrepreneur whose father immigrated from Morocco. “Everyone was angry and questioning, ‘Why would someone do that?’”

The election seemed to pit a rising nation — younger, optimistic about the future, diverse in makeup and cosmopolitan in outlook — against a declining one: older and white, resentful of its lost primacy, desperate to win again.

Layered over the familiar fissures of American life — those of race and religion — a new divide yawned, one of education and opportunity.

“There is really a disconnect between the people who feel like they’re aspiring to do well and America is the place that they can do it,” said the demographer and sociologist William H. Frey, “and another group who feel like America has left them behind, and they don’t see a ladder.”

Americans with a college degree were voting for the Democratic candidate, Mrs. Clinton, by a wider margin than any other Democrat in modern American politics, polls showed. They were joined by immigrants and racial minorities hopeful that the ladder leads upward.



Ward Boyd Jr. placed American flags around a polling station in Columbus, Ohio, on Tuesday. Credit: Maddie McGarvey for The New York Times

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Whites with only a high school education — the lifeblood of a work force that once spun cotton or poured steel, working hard toward the promise of a good life — were poised to throw in their lot with Mr. Trump, hoping he could reverse the decline of their lives and, as they saw it, the theft of their prospects.

At a family restaurant in Sturtevant, Wis., Jane Michalek, 53, stabbed a fork into her taco salad, grouching about the steep increase in her health care premiums since she retired three years ago. Her date, Jim Harnden, 55, said a rising tide of leftist politics had left conservative Americans isolated.

“Young people are always socialists,” Mr. Harnden said. “Women are socialists, too. White men really did build this country, and now they’re a minority.”

Most of Mrs. Clinton’s supporters believe that life is getting better for people like them, according to studies by the Pew Research Center. The vast majority of Mr. Trump’s supporters do not.

“No one cares. People are scared,” said Pamela Bojtos Lent, 52, a Democrat from Brownsville, Pa., who cast her vote for Mr. Trump with her children and grandchildren in mind. “As bad as it is now, if it doesn’t go to the flip side, what happens next? They’re all going to work in fast-food restaurants.”

In the wake of a campaign that exposed rich seams of misogyny and prejudice marbled through American politics, the prospects for any kind of national harmony looked bleak on Election Day. Most voters said in a New York Times/CBS News poll just before the election that the campaign had left them disgusted. In exit polls Tuesday, the idea of either candidate's taking office made most voters concerned or scared.

Many Americans came out to vote against someone, not for someone.

"I'm down here to vote against Trump," said Estraya Ingel, a middle-aged blackjack dealer in the Centennial Hills neighborhood of Las Vegas, where the city's sprawl tapers into the former horse ranches and scrub brush of rural Nevada. A worn brown vinyl purse hung from her left arm, and she stared down at the cracked pavement. The daughter of Mexican immigrants, Ms. Ingel said she had never failed to vote since turning 18.

"I don't really like either of them," she finally said. "I don't think either of them are great for me and my family, but Trump is too much — too awful." Even in the event of a landslide, polls before Tuesday suggested, either candidate would be the most unpopular president to take office in modern history.

Tuesday's voting seemed to send shudders through fault lines long in the making, now bursting clearly into view.

Bryan Enriquez, a student from South Florida, said the prospect of a close popular vote made him feel alienated from his own country.

"It's something that's going to be very narrow, and that makes me sad," said Mr. Enriquez, 24.

"It's so weird and eerie to see that people buy into this stuff," he added of Mr. Trump's supporters. "I don't like to judge anybody, but they're ignorant."

Never before have Americans lived in a country so socially and geographically segmented.

About half of Americans now live near people more politically like them than not, whether in conservative rural towns or sprawling liberal cities. Few Trump supporters report having close friends voting for Mrs. Clinton. Many Clinton supporters are more likely to see Trump voters on television than in person. Social media feeds are powerful echo chambers, with partisans for each candidate unfriending or trolling their opposites in steadily more strident terms.

Each side views the other, warily, as closed-minded.

Amid the wounds and anger, some Americans tried to move past the campaign. As the polls opened in Wisconsin, the Rev. Kathy Monson Lutes opened the doors of Trinity Episcopal Church in Janesville, a longtime union town where General Motors once employed thousands of workers. She had never urged her congregation to vote for one candidate or the other. But on Tuesday, for the first time on an Election Day, she held a daylong prayer vigil.

As it wore on, she sat inside with the doors open, listening to the Beatles. Some congregants came in to pray, others to sit in silence.

“People are afraid because they’ve been told to be afraid,” Ms. Monson Lutes said. “I think the reason I was moved to do this had to do with helping people to place their fear in a place of hope.”

But elsewhere, fear triumphed. In the days before Election Day, on the borders between Mrs. Clinton’s America and Mr. Trump’s, many Americans seemed uneasy with the very act of coexistence.

In the parking lot behind a Food Lion in a North Carolina strip mall, outside a county Republican headquarters that had been vandalized with anti-Trump graffiti, a handful of antigovernment gun-rights activists stood watch against further pranks, handguns strapped to their thighs.

In Punta Gorda, Fla., a 69-year-old Trump supporter who voted last week lurked around his polling place for an hour afterward, looking behind the voting machines to make sure there were no markings connecting them to a company that conservative websites had linked, erroneously, to the liberal financier George Soros.

And in Los Angeles, Cari Bjelajac, a fitness instructor, tried to put herself in the mind of Mr. Trump’s supporters. She failed. She did not live in their country, she concluded. And they did not live in hers.

“Regardless of who wins,” Ms. Bjelajac said, “there is going to be a large group of people, I’m not listening to a word they say.”

Reporting was contributed by Emily Cochrane, Jonathan M. Katz, Kimberley McGee, **Kay Nolan**, Ryan Schuessler and Julie Turkewitz.

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A version of this article appears in print on November 9, 2016, on page P4 of the New York edition with the headline: Anger and Suspicion Dominate as a Divided Nation Floods the Polls.