

How to Beat Trump on Immigration

A generous vision of a multicultural world.

By David Brooks Nov. 7, 2019

A wave of anxiety swept through Democratic ranks this week when a [Times/Siena College poll suggested](#) that Donald Trump is leading key Democrats in a bunch of swing states. How the heck is this guy still doing so well out there, after all that has happened?

The short answer is: immigration. Trump, like global populists everywhere, understands that we're in the middle of a vast social experiment. Waves of migration are transforming societies across the globe. The U.S. will have no majority group in three decades. Sweden could be between 20 and 30 percent Muslim by 2050, according to Pew Research projections.

As the saying goes, everybody is now everywhere. We're entering into states of interdependence with all sorts of people unlike ourselves. In the course of this, millions of people perceive that they are losing their country, losing their place, losing their culture.

Trump, like global populists everywhere, tells them: I'll help you regain control.

By contrast, highly educated white progressives tell them: If you want to restrict immigration you're probably a racist. As Eric Kaufmann notes in his book "Whiteshift," 91.3 percent of white Hillary Clinton voters with graduate degrees said it's racist to want less immigration for ethnic and cultural reasons.

Trump then turns around and says: See? These liberal elites want to silence you! They think you're bigots! Game over.

If Trump opponents want to reach these voters, they need a better answer to one of the central challenges of our age: how to create a mass multicultural democracy where people feel at home.

This week I was at a [Faith Angle Forum](#) conference in France with a group of European and American scholars and journalists. I got a glimpse of that better answer.

The Europeans reminded me of something that is taboo here: that immigration is always, at the most personal level, a cultural encounter. It's a person with one language and set of values interacting with a person with another language and set of values. When people meet in this way, they put their opinions, identities and way of life at risk. They might be changed by the encounter. The process is unsettling.

The crucial question becomes: Do the people in the encounter feel secure enough to learn from it rather than to react with anxiety and fear? Right now, we are asking millions of Americans to accept high immigration while they are already living with maximum insecurity. Their wages are declining, their families and communities are fragmenting, their churches are shrinking, government services are being cut, their values and national identity feel unstable.

Of course they are going to react with suspicion if suddenly on top of all this they begin to feel like strangers in their own place.

The lesson is that to create thick pluralistic society, you first have to help people embed in a secure base. That includes economic and health care security, but it also involves cultural and

spiritual security. It involves offering people opportunities to embed in their local culture, to practice their particular faith, to live by local values that may seem alien to you and me.

Only people who are securely rooted in their own particularity are confident enough to enjoy the encounter with difference.

This is the paradox of pluralism: In order to get people to integrate with others you have to help them weave close communities with their own kind. Cosmopolitans never get this.

A person who is firmly rooted can go out and enjoy the adventure of pluralism. This is the second phase of thick pluralism. The person with the pluralist mind-set acknowledges that God's truth is radically dispersed. It is not contained in one tradition and community. The good life is only understood through a holistic journey across traditions.

The pluralist doesn't see society as a competition for scarce resources, but as a joint voyage of discovery in search of life's biggest answers. Pluralism offers us the chance, and the civic duty, to be a daring social explorer, venturing across subcultures, sometimes having the exciting experience of being the only one of you in the room, harvesting the wisdom embedded in other people's lifeways. A key pluralist trait is curiosity, the opposite of anxiety.

Social exploration is a skill. It requires the ability to not merely tolerate difference, but to greet it with a generosity of spirit. Walking into each room confident in your convictions but humbly aware that they are not the only convictions. Being slow to take offense when somebody says the wrong thing, quick to forget the transgressions of others and honest in acknowledging your group's past wrongs.

The conversations at the Faith Angle Forum reminded me that in a pluralistic society, institutions like schools, companies and neighborhoods have to be structured to offer both kinds of experience: bonding experience within your own tradition to create rootedness and also bridging experience that offers journeys of curiosity across different moral ecosystems.

Conservatives tend to emphasize the value of being rooted in place. Progressives tend to celebrate living across difference. Life is miserable, and a nation is broken, unless you do both.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/07/opinion/trump-immigration.html>