

Wanted: Good Change Leaders

Washington, DC; June 21, 2021: Over three decades, I've advised twenty winning global presidential campaigns. Around the world, each time we won, we advised a Change Candidate, ran a Change Campaign, and won a Change Election. From the Philippines' Cory Aquino in 1986 to South Korea's Kim Dae Jung in 1997, from Mexico's Vicente Fox in 2000 to America's Barack Obama in 2008 to America's Joe Biden in 2020.

Yes, in 2020, even “inside-the-Beltway” Joe Biden was a Change Candidate representing change from Donald Trump. Today, globally, in almost every election, change is on the ballot—even if it remains largely un-delivered by leaders and governments. And change almost always wins.

But great danger lurks out ahead. Today, advising global presidential campaigns, we face a new adversary: Bad Change Leaders in the form of right-wing authoritarian populism. Over recent years, Bad Change Leaders have won power—from Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro to Hungary's Viktor Orban, from Poland's Jaroslaw Kaczynski to Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan to America's Donald Trump.

Fueling these Bad Change Leaders is a new trend. Today, around the world, the working class is increasingly angry and turning toward rightist extremism. In Britain, India, the Philippines, and America, for example, working classes have turned from traditional and reliable support of “leftist” candidates to leaders on the political right—and often the extreme right. And, in America, the poorer you are the more likely you are to vote Republican. In 2020, 44% of counties with a median household income below \$40,000 voted for Joe Biden—while 55% voted for Donald Trump.

This trend of lower income voters moving to the political right is now global—we see it in Asia, Europe, and Latin America. And consider this: In the U.S., if the 2020 election represented a repudiation of Trump, it did not represent a repudiation of Trumpism. In fact, the Republicans actually gained seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and solidified state house victories in politically important states like Arizona, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, and Pennsylvania.

This global trend is not new. In 2016, Donald Trump rode the same kind of anti-establishment wave that had brought Brexit to the U.K. several months earlier. And further back, in 2014, my partner Scott Miller, along with pollsters Pat Caddell and Bob Perkins, began a “We Need Smith” research project to spot early populist trends. Importantly, in America, this research found the real struggle is not between Democrats and Republicans—but rather, between mainstream America and the ruling political elites.

Even before Covid-19, some five years of “We Need Smith” polling revealed 68% of voters see America on the wrong track. And, importantly, this research showed “radical change” beats the “old way” 78% to 19%.

Increasingly, angry voters believe the power of ordinary people to control America is getting weaker every day as politicians of *both* parties fight to protect their own power and privilege. They blame middle class stagnation on Washington crony capitalism and corruption. And they blame both parties for an epic collapse of competence.

For nearly a decade, these angry and alienated voters have been looking for a Good Change Leader—a hypothetical “Candidate Smith”—who could challenge a dysfunctional status quo, solve problems, and make their lives better. And today, the “We Need Smith” research portends an antidote to U.S. and global right-wing authoritarian populism.

Think about the 2020 Biden campaign’s strategy. Biden won, narrowly, by mixing promises of change with arguments about competence—symbolized in “Build Back Better” messages and programs. And now, six months into his term, President Biden’s currently high popularity is born of a Covid-19 distribution plan, impressive execution, and persistent if imprecise economic assistance. This is the Biden Administration’s “Big Thing.”

The lesson is Good Change Candidates need to run on and then actually deliver “Big Things” to beat back right-wing authoritarian populists. In America, these Good Change Candidates must steer clear of Doctor Seuss, culture wars, and “faculty lounge” terminology. They must defeat the out-of-control layers of federal, state, and local bureaucracy, streamline government, and create crystal-clear lines of authority—letting actions speak louder than words. Hard as

it is, Good Change leaders must find ways to make limited Government Great Again.

Going forward, the best way to fight extremism of all kinds is a mixture of change, competence, private sector partnership, strategic discipline, and the ability to trick and cajole parts of government to do what is best for the people.

In the U.S., and around the world, much is at stake. And Good Change Leaders are our last best hope.

David Morey, Chairman of DMG Global, has helped direct twenty winning international presidential campaigns—including that of Joe Biden. He is a best-selling author and considered one of the world's pre-eminent insurgent strategists.

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