

Who Can Win America's Politics of Humiliation?

Trump or Biden?



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About four years ago, without asking anybody, I changed my job description. It used to be “New York Times foreign affairs columnist.” Instead, I started calling myself the “New York Times humiliation and dignity columnist.” I even included it on my business card.

It had become so obvious to me that so much of what I'd been doing since I became a journalist in 1978 was reporting or opining about people, leaders, refugees, terrorists and nation-states acting out on their feelings of humiliation and questing for dignity — the two most powerful human emotions.

I raise this now because the success of Joe Biden's campaign against Donald Trump may ride on his ability to speak to the sense of humiliation and quest for dignity of many Trump supporters, which Hillary Clinton failed to do.

It has been obvious ever since Trump first ran for president that many of his core supporters actually hate the people who hate Trump, more than they care about Trump or any particular action he takes, no matter how awful.

The media feed Trump's supporters a daily diet of how outrageous this or that Trump action is — but none of it diminishes their support. Because many Trump supporters are not attracted to his policies. They're attracted to his *attitude* — his willingness and evident delight in skewering the people they hate and who they feel look down on them.



President Trump at a campaign rally in Latrobe, Pa., last week. Anna Moneymaker for The New York Times

Humiliation, in my view, is the most underestimated force in politics and international relations. The poverty of

dignity explains so much more behavior than the poverty of money.

People will absorb hardship, hunger and pain. They will be grateful for jobs, cars and benefits. But if you make people feel humiliated, they will respond with a ferocity unlike any other emotion, or just refuse to lift a finger for you. As Nelson Mandela once observed, "There is nobody more dangerous than one who has been humiliated."

By contrast, if you show people respect, if you affirm their dignity, it is amazing what they will let you say to them or ask of them. Sometimes it just takes listening to them, but deep listening — not just waiting for them to stop talking. Because listening is the ultimate sign of respect. What you say when you listen speaks more than any words.

I've seen firsthand the power of humiliation in foreign policy: Vladimir Putin's macho act after Russia's humiliation at losing the Cold War; Iraqi Sunnis who felt humiliated by a U.S. invasion force that pushed them out of Iraq's army and government, stripping them of rank and status; Israeli Sephardic Jews who felt humiliated by Ashkenazi Jewish elites, something Bibi Netanyahu has long manipulated; Palestinians feeling humiliated at Israeli checkpoints; Muslim youth in Europe feeling humiliated by the Christian majority; and China questing to become the world's dominant power, after what Chinese themselves call their "century of humiliation" at the hands of foreign powers.

When George Floyd was being held down by three policemen, one with a knee on his neck, as he pleaded for his mother and onlookers filmed on their phones, he was not just being restrained — he was being humiliated. Resistance to the daily humiliations of racism has fueled the Black civil rights movement from its inception to Black Lives Matter.

In a much talked-about new book, "The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?" Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel (disclosure: he is a close friend) says "the politics of humiliation" is also at the heart of Trump's appeal.

"Trump was elected by tapping a wellspring of anxieties, frustrations and legitimate grievances to which the mainstream parties had no compelling answer," Sandel notes. These grievances "are not only economic but also moral and cultural; they are not only about wages and jobs but also about social esteem."

Unless Biden finds a way to speak to the sense of humiliation felt by many working-class voters, Sandel warns, even Trump's failure to deal with the pandemic may not be enough to turn these voters against him. The reason? "Resentment borne of humiliation is the most potent political sentiment of all," Sandel explains.

Sandel argues that the polarized politics of our time, and the resentments that fuel it, arise, paradoxically, from a seemingly attractive ideal — the meritocratic promise that if you work hard and go to college, you will rise. But this ideal sends a double message.

"It congratulates the winners but denigrates the losers," he writes, because it creates the impression that a "college degree is a precondition for dignified work and social esteem" — while devaluing the contributions of those without a diploma. This has led many working people to feel that elites look down on them, creating the conditions for the "politics of humiliation" that Trump exploits.

"Elites have so valorized a college degree — both as an avenue for advancement and as the basis for social esteem — that they have difficulty understanding the hubris a meritocracy can generate, and the harsh judgment it imposes on those who have not gone to college," Sandel says.

"One of the deepest political divides in American politics today is between those with and those without a college degree. In the 2016 election, Trump won two-thirds of white voters without a college degree."

Trump, who himself had been looked down on by New York City elites, understood that the familiar fight between Democrats and Republicans over how to grow the pie and how to distribute the pie was ignoring a deeper sentiment

among many white working-class Americans.

These traditional Democratic voters felt that liberal elites were looking down at them, new immigrants were superseding them and foreigners were laughing at them. And Trump became the fist in the face that his voters threw back at all of them.

“Biden is right that Trump botched the pandemic, violated constitutional norms and inflamed racial tensions — all good grounds for throwing him out of office,” argues Sandel. “But Biden could win this argument and still lose the election.” He must find a way to show that he understands those who feel disrespected and are drawn to Trump for that reason — even though most of his policies don’t help them.

How? Sandel and I put our heads together and thought, well, maybe Biden should go on a tour of Trump country, focusing on rural counties and towns in the Midwest, and just listen to Trump’s base, both to learn and as a sign of respect.

Then, at the first presidential debate, Biden should ignore Trump and his buffoonery and speak about what he had learned by talking to likely Trump voters.

Biden could talk about where he agrees with them and where he disagrees with them and why — the ultimate sign of respect. That is how Biden can get at least some Trump devotees to see that “working-class Joe from Scranton” — not “Billionaire Don, born with a silver spoon in his mouth”— is the one who really hails from their side of the tracks and can be trusted (a very important word) to look out for them.

When it comes to politics, a lot of people don’t listen through their ears. They listen through their gut, and Biden, more than any other Democratic leader today, has the ability to connect there.

Trump’s goal in this campaign is to separate Biden from Biden voters by making it as difficult as possible for Biden voters to vote. Biden’s goal should be to separate Trump from Trump voters by showing that he respects *them and their fears* — even if he does not respect Trump.

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