Republicans' white supremacist problem is a threat to America

Carol Anderson

The party has reinforced racism, homophobia and misogyny to tilt the electorate as far to the right as possible

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he Republicans have a problem. A white supremacist problem. Decades ago they made a crass political calculation to use the Southern Strategy and ride white
resentment and patriarchy to untold power and glory. Instead, they ended up with Donald Trump. He is a man who wallows in a white supremacy so virulent and toxic that it has provided the blueprint and the targets for mass murderers.

The Republicans’ road to perdition required mastery of coded racist policy language, such as “welfare queen”, “forced busing” and “law and order”, to lure disaffected white people out of the Democratic party and into the Republican party. The Southern Strategy was so ruthless in its lurch to the right that it actually neutralized the moderates and drove the majority of African Americans out of the party.

Yet it turns out that white supremacy can only go so far. In its unvarnished Trumpian form, it has become so repulsive that the Republican base is rapidly shrinking, Senate leadership is facing valid questions about the Republican commitment to US national security as the president cozes up to a nationalist regime in Moscow that launched a “sweeping and systematic” cyberattack on the United States, and there have been a slew of retirements by congressional representatives who were rising stars and supposed to be the next generation of the party’s leadership.

The party of Lincoln’s electoral cul de sac was mapped out by the Republicans’ contempt for democracy and, especially, fear of the broader American public’s access to the ballot box. Despite numerous warnings about the consequences of doubling down on racism, homophobia and misogyny in an increasingly diverse and liberalizing nation, the Republican party ignored those broadsides and chose, instead, to hollow out, shrink and tilt the electorate as far to the right as possible. “I don’t want everybody to vote,” bellowed Paul Weyrich, the co-founder of the conservative Heritage Foundation. Those marching orders were dutifully supported by a series of supreme court decisions that gutted the Voting Rights Act, sanctioned voter roll purges in defiance of federal law and ignored the racism embedded in extreme partisan gerrymandered districts. As a result, a range of Republican-sponsored voter suppression policies now scars the American landscape in a concerted effort to politically silence the majority of the people.

The Brennan Center recently reported that within the past two years, 17 million
Americans have been purged from the voter rolls. Worse yet, states that had previously been subject to oversight under the Voting Rights Act, because of proven rampant discrimination, aggressively removed registered voters at a rate “40% higher than the purge rate in jurisdictions that were not covered by Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act”. This, of course, is in addition to the 16 million eliminated from the rolls between 2014-2016.

In short, 33 million Americans were just electorally erased. To put this in perspective, that is the equivalent of the combined populations of New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, San Antonio, San Diego, Phoenix and Dallas, as well as the states of Wyoming, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, and Idaho. Gone. Not surprisingly, these massive removals are error-ridden and concentrated in precincts that tend to have higher minority populations and vote Democratic. Similarly, other voter suppression techniques, such as poll closures, deliberate long lines on election day, voter ID laws and extreme partisan gerrymandering all weigh disproportionately on minorities and urban areas.

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Photograph: Mark Ralston/AFP/Getty Images

For the Republican party, it had to be so. As of July 2018, even with all of that purging, there were 12 million more Democrats than Republicans in the United States. Democrats are 40% of registered voters compared with just 29% listed as Republicans. In fact, the percentage of Americans who identified as members of the Republican party dropped by 5% in four short years. And independents lean
overwhelmingly toward Democrats.

Those sheer numbers and the Republican party’s hardcore refusal to jettison white supremacy as its operating code has led to policy choices that exacerbate the range of crises facing the nation. It’s not just a tax bill that coddled the 1% and threatens the financial stability of the safety net for everyone else. It’s also the way that seemingly race-neutral issues, such as guns, climate change, protecting our elections from foreign interference and ensuring access to quality affordable healthcare, especially for those with pre-existing conditions, carry such a threat to a party whose membership is nearly 90% white and fearful that “those people” will gain access to “free stuff”, take their guns and lead the nation down the road to socialism. These concerns might feel patriotic to the party’s adherents, but they are anything but.

With moderates neutralized while the nativists are emboldened, the Republican party has intensified an agenda that includes hostility to civil rights, the environment, reproductive rights and the constitutional separation of church and state. And that list of ignominy is coupled with downright cruelty to non-white immigrants. All this hatred has been wrapped in a fig leaf of legality by demolishing Senate rules and confirming nearly 25% of the federal judiciary without any real vetting except a stamp of approval by the Federalist Society.

The Republicans, therefore, continue to resort to voter suppression because that kind of policy frame simply cannot resonate with the majority of American voters, who are concerned that there have been more mass shootings (292) than days in the year (216), anxious that 12.5bn tons of Greenland’s ice melted and poured into the ocean in early August alone, angered that in 2016 the Russians hacked the election systems of 50 states to call into question the very legitimacy of the vote and democracy, and furious that refusal to expand Medicaid and provide access to Obamacare has cost more than 15,000 lives.

The Republicans’ white supremacist problem is, indeed, lethal. It extends far beyond “the freak show of the Trump presidency”, however, and threatens to devour not only to the party of Lincoln, which is bad enough, but America itself.

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