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# The United States Needs a Post-Election Peace Plan

I study fractured societies from post-war Côte d'Ivoire to post-Arab Spring Tunisia. Here's how the next president can heal a divided electorate.

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NOVEMBER 7, 2016

For the first time in its modern history, the United States is going to need a post-election reconciliation plan — something typically reserved for countries emerging from deeply divisive conflicts.

On Nov. 9, between 55 million and 70 million Americans will wake up absolutely horrified at the results of the presidential election, whether it's President Clinton or President Trump. But unlike past campaigns, millions are not going to be simply disappointed; they may well be unwilling to accept the results.

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One sign that all is not well with the U.S. body politic: An October Public Policy Polling **survey** in Florida asked voters whether they believed that Hillary Clinton was actually a demon. Some 40 percent of Donald Trump's supporters said yes, and 19 percent said they were unsure. Admittedly, many of those respondents were probably joking — or perhaps simply registering their unprecedented hatred for the Democratic nominee — but the existence of that question at all shows the degree to which 2016 has been an abysmal year for American democracy. Of more serious concern, a **recent poll** suggested that 41 percent of American voters believe the election could be “stolen.” The Republican nominee himself has not only suggested that the election has been rigged but has simultaneously painted Clinton as the “founder of ISIS,” someone who should be “locked up,” and repeatedly called her the “devil.” And last week, former Illinois Rep. Joe Walsh **implied** that he would lead an armed revolt if Clinton wins the election.

Thankfully, most Americans still disavow political violence. Yet in **surveys**, a small but vocal minority consistently agrees with statements like: “Some of the problems citizens have with government could be fixed with a few well-aimed bullets.” The risk that we will see electoral violence in the United States has surged. This election cycle has not only seen instances of peaceful protests turning violent but also the normalization of violent rhetoric in American political discourse. Making matters worse is the challenge presented by the Trump campaign's mainstreaming of racism, xenophobia, and religious intolerance. The two threads combined horrifically on Nov. 1, when arsonists **burned** an African-American church in Mississippi and painted “Vote Trump” on the damaged walls.

Add it all together and few people would be shocked to see isolated incidents of post-election violence this year, something that would have been unthinkable during the 2012 contest between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. Even if there is no violence, the fact that it is possible and predictable should be sufficient justification for taking the need for a reconciliation plan seriously.

If Hillary Clinton becomes President Clinton, she's going to have a dual problem: quelling the risk of political violence from people who think she is potentially a demon (or at very least the winner of a "rigged" election) while trying to find a way to position herself as the president of all Americans, including tens of millions who have openly backed the most race-baiting, racially divisive politician in modern U.S. history. Conversely, if Donald Trump becomes President Trump, he's going to need to find a way to win over groups that find him revolting either because he insulted or peddled racist tropes about them (Muslims, African-Americans, and Latinos in particular) or boasted about sexually assaulting them (women). What the new resident of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. will need, in other words, is a peace plan.

I study rigged elections and political violence in the developing world, from Madagascar to Thailand, from Tunisia to Côte d'Ivoire. Never did I think that my expertise in some of the world's most broken political systems would be relevant in understanding democracy in my own country. But this year is different. Suddenly, understanding why Côte d'Ivoire succumbed to bloody political violence in the wake of its deeply flawed 2010 presidential election is relevant to avoiding falling into that same trap in the United States. And learning from Tunisia's reconciliation process after its remarkably peaceful post-Arab Spring transition to democracy could be vital to avoiding four years of further political dysfunction and division in Washington.

These two case studies, in particular, from very different parts of the world offer crucial lessons on how to approach post-election reconciliation in the United States.

First, Côte d'Ivoire offers a cautionary tale that the Trump campaign should take more seriously. In 2010, incumbent Ivoirian President Laurent Gbagbo **lost** his re-election bid. Rather than accept the results, he cast aspersions on the election's integrity and called on his supporters to take up arms in his defense. Some loyal militias did exactly that. Fighting only ended after thousands of people had been killed. Gbagbo eventually was arrested and transported to the International Criminal Court for prosecution. His opponent took office in the end, but the country was deeply damaged as a result.

The United States is not headed toward another civil war, and Trump is not going to end up in The Hague. But when a major presidential candidate says the system is "rigged" and tells the public that he will keep them "in suspense" as to whether he will accept the election result, it sends a critically destabilizing signal that too many will take seriously.

So, the first step to reconciliation is a simple one. Should Trump lose, responsible Republicans must immediately congratulate Clinton and state unequivocally that they accept the results, even if Trump does not. Democrats, including Clinton, should of course do the same if Trump wins — as they have universally indicated they will. Republicans also need to work with a President Clinton, if she wins, to restore Americans' faith in their electoral institutions. American democracy cannot thrive or survive when electoral integrity is incorrectly viewed through a partisan lens; the main type of election rigging in the United States is gerrymandering, and both parties are guilty of it. If these foundational steps do not occur, then Washington will look a lot more like Abidjan than it should.

If Clinton wins, she needs to find a way to reach out to what she called “the basket of deplorables” — without legitimizing their most deplorable ideas. Clinton will have to reconcile with an electoral base of mostly white, non-college-educated men, at least some of whom have reveled in the most toxic aspects of the Trump campaign. It may be a controversial statement, but many of Trump's supporters are, in fact, racist. Surveys have shown that many, though not most, of Trump supporters believe that **black people are less intelligent** and more violent than white people. Forty-three percent of Republicans said Trump was “**right**” to complain that a judge with Mexican heritage was inherently biased because of his race.

And yet democracy works best when electoral victories do not result in vindictive and exclusionary governance. Citizens need to have a stake in the political system; they need to feel represented. That doesn't mean accepting racism, or misogyny. But if Trump or Clinton voters feel completely abandoned or excluded in a system where “compromise” has become a dirty word, they may simply fight to undermine the system itself. To avoid that, establishment politicians — in the United States and around the world — need to incorporate people with unsavory views, whether it's racist Trump supporters, **ex-guerrillas** in Colombia, or members of the authoritarian old guard in Tunisia.

In 2011, when Tunisians began to build a new political future after toppling a long-standing despot, they eschewed vengeance and embraced reconciliation. Their problem wasn't racism, but it was no less toxic: Tunisia's new leadership had to decide what to do with former members of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's regime, many of whom had even been complicit in torturing some of the members of the nascent post-dictatorship government.

Mature Tunisian statesmen decided to incorporate the old guard while dismantling what it stood for. The new political order put democracy center stage, condemned torture, and changed the rules of the political game without banning veteran politicians from playing. In that way, they realized that the key was to give those with unsavory views a reason to buy in to the new order while still keeping reactionary views out of Tunisia's future. At one point, the new political coalition even went so far as to voluntarily give up power and allow a technocratic caretaker government to help with the transition. In doing so, they co-opted ex-authoritarians rather than alienating them by shutting them out. Over time, people with starkly different backgrounds and worldviews developed not only working relationships but, in some instances, friendships, too. And the Tunisian people were indispensable allies in weeding out authoritarianism with a soft touch: When one **high-level member** of the old regime ran for president in 2014, he received just 1.27 percent of the vote. Voters rejected his candidacy, but, crucially, he was given a stake in the process.

Beyond the elections, even those who did not vote for the new regime were invited to help shape it. The new regime also took criticisms of itself seriously and went to great pains to demonstrate that the overblown fears of its rivals — that it would turn Tunisia into a staunchly conservative and exclusionary Islamic republic — were misplaced. Those savvy moves saved democracy in Tunisia.

Tunisia is far afield from the United States geographically and even further afield politically. But its experience highlights a lesson that some divided societies have thankfully learned: Extending an olive branch to partisan rivals with even the most abhorrent views is crucial to not only peace but also the long-term vitality of democracy.

Clinton's "basket of deplorables" comment **wasn't factually inaccurate in many ways**, but it was indicative of a candidate who has a long way to go in finding the finesse necessary to become the bridge-builder America sorely needs.

Tunisia's old order committed human rights violations, but millions of people still backed it. All of them were still Tunisians; the Arab Spring didn't change that. Likewise, voters who are deeply uncomfortable with the pace of demographic change — and the darker complexion of the U.S. electorate in particular — are still Americans. So are people who believe Clinton to be the devil incarnate. And while the government can pick and choose its policies, it cannot pick and choose its citizens.

In a functioning democracy, the winners take office, but they still must try to improve the lives of the electoral losers. Clinton is already signaling that she aims to do that, as her policies to make child care and college more affordable will inevitably benefit many Trump supporters if enacted. But that isn't likely to be enough. Trump supporters are extremely anti-establishment, largely because they believe the government no longer works for them. A Clinton victory with a few baubles thrown in seems unlikely to create a buy-in for Trump voters. She'll have to do more.

There is no time to waste. The aftermath of a hugely divisive ballot is often the most volatile period, as Election Day acts as a touchstone for anger and resentment. If Clinton wins, she must learn from Tunisia. First, take the darkest fears of your opponents seriously — but show how they are misplaced. In this case, that means appeasing those who want to lock her up by immediately laying out concrete steps to ensure that her administration is the most transparent in U.S. history by appointing a Republican lawyer to serve as a senior White House advisor on ethics and public disclosure compliance. To defuse the claim that she does not care about white working-class voters chewed up and spit out by the rough edges of globalization, Clinton should also spin off some of the functions of the Employment and Training Administration at the Department of Labor and create a new and better-funded Office of Inequality and Trade Dislocation. Trump voters left behind by globalization won't love Clinton, but they may grow to grudgingly accept her if they have more money in their pockets under her administration.

Second, she needs to reach out to Trump supporters by giving them, finally, the policy-based campaign they deserved. She should immediately hold a series of town hall meetings and listening sessions in the staunchest pro-Trump areas of the country — asking people for their ideas while still making clear that racially divisive policies are a non-starter. This may require some uncomfortable conversations: Giving the Trump voters who supported “the wall” a forum to express their concerns over immigration, for instance, may raise hackles in some quarters. But in post-conflict reconciliation, the simple act of listening can often be an effective pillar that can turn alienation into popular engagement. Transitional justice efforts from Uganda to the Philippines have hinged on listening to victims, who often fear being ignored and forgotten.

Whoever wins on Nov. 8 will soon preside over the most divided electorate in modern U.S. history. The same old politics that have gotten us here no longer suffice. Before America’s Civil War, Abraham Lincoln warned that a “house divided against itself cannot stand.” We are not yet on the brink of a civil war, but the house is clearly divided. The repairs need to come from the next White House and fast.

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