

## THE AUSTRALIAN

---

### US election: political charlatans and conjurers wait to exploit vulnerable



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM November 14, 2016

According to a recent poll in the French daily *Le Monde*, 57 per cent of French voters believe democracy works badly, more than a third would like to see it replaced by an alternative and one in five think that alternative should allow a “chief” to override the present checks and balances.

All those proportions have increased dramatically, with dissatisfaction spreading to better educated groups who used to overwhelmingly endorse constitutional democracy. And with 54 per cent of French voters saying they are worse off than their parents were (up from just 17 per cent in 2002), extreme options are no longer off the table.

How those views will affect next April’s presidential elections is uncertain. What is clear, however, is that France’s voters are not alone in their grim assessment of democracy’s performance and prospects.

Americans, emerging battered and bruised from the election campaign, are a case in point.

Few liked the choice they had been offered: nearly two-thirds of voters, a *Wall Street Journal*/NBC poll finds, were either not very satisfied or not satisfied at all with the candidates for the presidency. As for the campaign itself, 60 per cent said it had made them less proud to be American.

And the outcomes hardly fill them with confidence: according to the Pew Research Centre, 61 per cent believe Donald Trump will not set a high moral

standard for the presidency, while about half expect him to improperly enrich himself or his friends and family.

Capping off the gloom, with a majority of Americans believing no progress has been made since 2008 in fixing the country's problems, Pew reports that more than a third of voters — and more than half of Trump supporters — prefer quick if risky solutions to gradual but less dangerous approaches.

Those reactions are understandable. After all, most voters assess the political system by how well it delivers the things that matter to them, with economic security being high on the list. However, far from feeling secure, anxiety seems to have reached new peaks.

For example, a survey conducted by Edison Research for the US Public Broadcasting System last month found that 30 per cent of Americans are “very fearful” that they will lose their job in the next six months. It may be that respondents are being unduly pessimistic; yet it is a pessimism born from a deep recession, a shallow recovery and decades of stagnating incomes.

Equally, the 33 per cent of French voters who believe they face a serious risk of being reduced to poverty in the next five years over-estimate the extent of downward social mobility. But they are sensible to fear the future in a country whose labour market is rigid to the point of being moribund, making joblessness a trap from which there is no escape.

What needs more explaining, however, is the form the reaction takes: the anger that almost everywhere is morphing into growing partisan hatred; the ever-rising stridency of the public tone; and the turn to policies, such as protectionism, that can only make things worse.

For some observers, those reactions reflect an epidemic of populism, spread by demagogues with little integrity and even less sense of responsibility. Others view the phenomenon as an insurrection by what used to be called “the common people” against “elites” that have disregarded their interests, values and aspirations.

No doubt both interpretations have their element of truth. As Max Weber warned long ago, periods of disruption always provide fertile ground for political charlatans and conjurers.

Once the “stupidity and nastiness” of the incumbents has been eliminated, they invariably claim, their magic insights and unique talents will allow them to cure seemingly intractable woes, if only they are given the power to do so. Obviously, their ability to attract attention will depend on the objective severity of the situation. But it is likely to be all the greater, Hannah Arendt suggested, if controversial issues have been swept under the carpet, as demagogues, with their “unerring instinct for anything that ordinary party propaganda did not dare to touch”, will ensure that “whatever respectable society had hypocritically passed over” becomes invested with “major significance, regardless of its intrinsic importance”.

It does not take much imagination to see those insights’ continued relevance. But newer factors are also at work.

There is, to begin with, plenty of evidence that far from being more tolerant, better educated voters tend to hold their opinions more strongly, and so are more likely to view those who hold contrary opinions as ignorant, foolish or malicious. Rising education levels therefore fuel polarisation and reduce the scope for compromise, increasing the risk of political gridlock.

At the same time, in a world where voters get their news and commentary online, “echo chamber” effects, in which people choose to only be exposed to views they agree with, have become more prevalent, reducing the pressure on individuals to test their case.

And the increased scope for anonymous comment the internet offers invites and has provoked a decline in civility that seeps into every aspect of public life, as electronic mobs form, seize the debate and vent their rage.

Last but not least, the sheer proliferation of online sources has created an information environment that is both noisier — so that only the shrillest and most troubling signals get through — and more crowded. That places a premium on extreme simplification, as Trump, the self-described “Hemingway of 140 characters”, quickly recognised and brilliantly acted on.

Those trends are irreversible. And stuck as our societies are in what Arendt called the gap “between the ‘no-longer’ and the ‘not-yet’ ”, they have a long way to run, both in Australia and overseas. For all its shocks and surprises, last week was just a beginning.