
Who Stormed the Capitol? Future Retirees

By Kerry Pechter Thu, Feb 11, 2021

Everyone at the Capitol on Jan. 6 will be a retiree. To understand their anger, and its implications, I attended a Brookings Institution webcast this week on 'rage and reconciliation'.



Most of us have seen (and re-seen) footage of angry (mostly white) men laying siege to the US Capitol on January 6. Despite the shouting and the symbolism—Confederate flags, ‘Camp Auschwitz’ t-shirts, buffalo-horn headpieces—the wellspring of their rage—if rage is the right word—isn’t clear.

Presumably, most of them pay FICA (Federal Insurance Contributions Act) taxes every two weeks or so. With luck, most will retire someday. And they’re probably counting on Social Security and Medicare benefits when they do.

So their attitudes toward government and their outlook on the future are relevant to us. To learn more about the rationale for the rage, I attended a Zoom webinar on Wednesday called “Reconciling and Healing America: Addressing US Polarization and Extremism.” It was hosted by the Brookings Institute in Washington, D.C., and Brookings president John Allen moderated.

‘A poisonous way to legislate’

“There are incentives to be 100% divided,” said Joe Straus, a former Speaker of the 150-member Texas House of Representatives. “Most people who run for the state legislature or for Congress run in districts that were drawn to elect one party or the other. For that reason, most races, even races for the US Senate, aren’t all that competitive. Most candidates have more to fear in the primary than in the general election.

“In my case, I usually didn’t have a Democratic opponent in the general election, and the biggest criticism I faced was that I wasn’t conservative enough. One product of this system is that two of the most recognizable laws passed in the past 10 years, the Affordable Care Act and the 2017 tax bill, both were passed without a single vote from the other party. That’s a poisonous way to legislate,” Straus said. He cited the media’s role in reinforcing negative perceptions of the opposite side.

Brookings vice president Darrell M. West then led a group conversation with three Brookings fellows: Elaine Kamarck, Camille Busette and Carol Graham. Each specializes in one or more subcategories of politics, economics, sociology or psychology.

‘My America is white and Christian’

“Donald Trump won 2,547 counties that accounted for 29% of US gross domestic product,” Kamarck said. “Joe Biden won 509 counties that accounted for 71% of GDP. That’s a dramatic difference.” It occurred, she added, because “over the past century, Americans have concentrated on the coasts. As a result, people in states like California, Texas, New York and Florida are under-represented in American politics.”

This data implies that people in so-called Middle America are politically *over-represented* on a per capita basis—which is ironic, if they feel relatively disenfranchised.

Kamarck explained that two structural elements of our Constitution accounted for this imbalance: the Electoral College, with its winner-take-all disposal of a state’s electoral votes, and the Senate, with its allocation of two Senate votes per state, no matter how sparsely or densely populated.

Ironically—a word that was relevant throughout this discussion—Republican voters are also significantly richer than Democratic voters, on average. “Joe Biden won among people earning less than \$30,000 a year, less than \$50,000 a year, and less than \$100,000 a year. Donald Trump won among people making more than \$100,000 a year and more than \$200,000 a year,” Kamarck said.

Demographic statistics helped clarify the picture. “Biden won 64% of first time voters, many of whom were young or of color, and Trump did better among older voters,” she said. She also cited anecdotal evidence from individuals she spoke to. “One woman told me, ‘This is no longer my America. My America is white and Christian. And what’s happening today isn’t what I think America should be.’ So there are cultural as well as economic divides. And that makes it difficult to know what to do about it.”

‘Messiness comes with a multicultural society’

Building on Kamarck’s observation on the role of the Electoral College and Senate, Busette described those institutions as “chaperoning” political discourse in the US, in the sense of limiting or stifling its range. Americans may be clashing violently because they lack venues or habits for clashing peacefully, she believes.

“We don’t have a structure that engages the popular voices in the polity. We have the rise of the South, which means the rise of Black people. But we don’t have processes or structures that allow us to be comfortable with a large amount of community engagement without those guardrails. We have a hard time, as a polity, accommodating the kind of messiness that comes with a multicultural society. We have high degrees of polarization, but we don’t have a narrative that allows us to accommodate many kinds of experiences and to deal with problems as they come up.”

She empathized with white blue-collar workers—to a point. “If you’re white and you lost your job in Youngstown, you have no narrative. We have a narrative about success in the US: You do it by yourself. You pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.”

But she added that white working class folks too often believe a high school education should be enough to make it in America. “Forty years ago, they benefited from non-equitable policies, but now they have to do more in order to be competitive in the marketplace,” she said.

Minorities are more hopeful

White males are sensitive to rhetoric that piques their anger because they’re suffering, agreed Graham. They are dropping out of the workforce, living with their parents, and succumbing to opioid addiction at higher rates than people of color. They often have poor physical and mental health, and tend not to migrate geographically to pursue job opportunities.

“Deaths of despair are actually less prevalent among low-income minorities than among low-income whites,” she said. “Minorities are more objectively disadvantaged, but they tend to be more hopeful, more optimistic, more resilient and report less stress than low income whites.

“Low-income minorities believe strongly in the importance of higher education, but low-income whites are often skeptical about higher education. They think, because their fathers had good working class jobs, that there’s no need for them to go to college.” She tied this belief to their skepticism of scientific evidence about climate change and pandemics.

When blue-collar jobs provided a “stable and respectable middle-class existence,” white males with high school educations could enjoy the narrative of the American dream,” Graham added. That narrative implied that “if you’re poor, you’re a loser who didn’t try hard enough. In counties that voted for Trump, a higher percentage of people said they’ve

lost hope in the past five years. They want to make America the way it was again. But obviously that's not possible," she said.

How much do the Brookings observations help explain what happened on January 6? The people who invaded the Capitol seemed jubilant, justified and empowered rather than despairing. Or were they just wearing the battle-masks of desperate people? Certainly there were many types of people at the siege, with different grievances and degrees of grievance.

Everyone at the Capitol on January 6 was a future retiree, if not a retiree already. In the meantime, they are taxpayers and voters. People who mistrust government will probably be more receptive to arguments to convert Social Security to private investment accounts.

More troubling are the Brookings experts' reports of wasted human capital across America's dominant demographic. Absence from the workforce, lack of education, lack of good physical and mental health—these don't portray a group of people working to their potential, contributing to qualified plans, paying social insurance taxes, or progressing toward a secure retirement.

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