

How Could Millions of Americans Look Past the Lies, Corruption, Crimes & Still Vote for Trump?

Mark Masterson, November 13, 2024

We've just witnessed an event that defies all sense and logic, an event that has shaken this country to its core. After years of scandal, chaos, and broken promises, Donald Trump has been reelected president of the United States.

And while many people across the country are recoiling in shock, we have to pause, take a deep breath, and ask ourselves some uncomfortable questions.

How did this happen? How could millions of Americans look past the lies, the corruption, and the unbridled narcissism and still cast their ballots for Trump? These are questions we can't afford to ignore. The answer lies not just in the ideological battles of left versus right, but in a long-simmering economic rage that Trump, for all his flaws, managed to harness once again. If we really want to turn the page on Trumpism, we need to listen to the people who put him back in office and address their grievances head-on.

The HOLLOWED-OUT Heartland

Let's go back to 2015 for a moment, when I traveled through America's heartland—states like Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina—to talk to everyday people about their lives and concerns. These states had been economic powerhouses at one time, the industrial backbone of the nation. But by the mid-2010s, their prosperity was a distant memory. Steel mills had closed. Auto plants had shut down. Jobs that once provided a solid middle-class life were now outsourced or automated out of existence.

When I asked the people I met about the upcoming 2016 election, the answers were surprising. They didn't talk about Hillary Clinton or Jeb Bush, the presumed front-runners. They talked about Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump—two men who, on paper, couldn't be more different. But for these struggling Americans, the appeal was the same: both Sanders and Trump promised to “shake things up,” to challenge the establishment, and to confront what they saw as a “rigged system” that left them behind.

That word—rigged—came up again and again. To these voters, “rigged” wasn't just a talking point; it was a description of their lives. They saw Wall Street executives who got bailed out while ordinary homeowners lost their homes. They saw CEO pay skyrocket while their own wages stagnated. They watched politicians kowtow to big donors and corporations, while the needs of their communities went ignored.

The “Rigged System” and Its True Meaning

These weren't just Republicans or Democrats, liberals or conservatives. They were a cross-section of middle- and working-class America, from union members to small-business owners, farmers, and factory workers. The only thing they had in common was a feeling that their lives had become harder and that the future looked bleak.

When they talked about a “rigged system,” they meant a government and an economy that seemed designed to protect the wealthy and powerful while leaving the rest of America to fend for itself. They meant a political class that treated Wall Street like its top constituency, that let big corporations get away with paying little in taxes, and that did nothing to stop the relentless march of factory closings and wage stagnation.

In a small town in Missouri, I spoke with farmers who were furious about “factory farms”—massive corporate operations that they said abused the land and monopolized the food supply. In Cincinnati, I met small-business owners still reeling from the 2008 housing crash, asking why Wall Street got a bailout while they got nothing. Across the Midwest, I heard from voters who were tired of seeing politicians prioritize corporate interests over their communities.

The anger was bipartisan. It was also incredibly potent. In 2016, Sanders tapped into it on the left, and Trump did so on the right. The two of them struck a nerve that Clinton and Bush—pillars of the political establishment—couldn't even reach.

Trump's Success: A Political Rorschach Test

Fast-forward to today, and the story hasn't changed. Despite all the indictments, scandals, and lies, Trump managed to tap back into that anger. He managed to convince millions of struggling Americans that he, once again, was their champion. And that anger, that sense of being left out and left behind, drowned out every other issue, every scandal, every outrage.

Many commentators and pundits want to blame Trump's reelection on dark forces like white nationalism, nativism, and internet-fueled conspiracy theories. But that's not the full picture. Trump's success reflects a rebellion against a political and economic establishment that has failed to deliver on its promises for decades. Trump's voters aren't all bigots or internet trolls. Many of them are regular Americans who have seen their jobs disappear, their towns decline, and their sense of security evaporate. And they're furious.

Now, Trump is a demagogue. He's a master at directing that fury toward scapegoats—immigrants, minorities, and anyone else he can use as a distraction. But the fury itself is real. The betrayal they feel is real. These Americans believe, with good reason, that the system is indeed rigged against them.

The Real Issue: Big Money and Economic Power

The biggest problem in American politics today isn't left versus right, or red states versus blue states. It's a system that favors the wealthy and powerful at the expense of everyone else. Corporations and wealthy donors bankroll campaigns, influence legislation, and shape policy in ways that ordinary people simply can't.

These corporate interests have gutted small towns and communities by outsourcing jobs, exploiting tax loopholes, and pushing wages down. They've used their power to crush unions, deregulate industries, and monopolize markets. And the political establishment—Democrat and Republican alike—has let them get away with it.

Trump exploited this problem, even if he didn't actually do anything to solve it. His 2016 slogan, "Make America Great Again," was a promise to these voters that he would bring back good jobs, stand up to corporate power, and protect American workers. Of course, he didn't deliver. But for many voters, the alternative was a Democratic Party that seemed to stand for little more than business as usual.

Lessons for Progressives and Democrats

So where does that leave us? Democrats can no longer afford to ignore the anger that fuels Trump's success. If they want to turn the page on Trumpism, they need to address the real, systemic issues that drive this anger.

First and foremost, they need to get serious about campaign finance reform. The Supreme Court's Citizens United decision opened the floodgates for corporate money in politics, and until that changes, it's hard to see how regular people can have a real voice in the political process.

Democrats also need to start standing up to corporate power. For too long, both parties have been complicit in allowing corporations to grow too big, too powerful, and too unaccountable. It's time to enforce antitrust laws, tax the ultra-wealthy, and make sure big companies pay their fair share.

Progressives need to show that they're willing to invest in American workers—through better wages, stronger unions, and more support for small businesses. They need to address the trade policies and tax policies that have gutted the middle class, and they need to make sure that the benefits of economic growth are shared by everyone, not just those at the top.

A Call to Listen—and Act

Trump's reelection is a wake-up call. It's a reminder that millions of Americans feel betrayed, forgotten, and left behind. They're angry, and until that anger is addressed, Trumpism will continue to haunt us. It's not enough for Democrats to condemn Trump's lies and scandals. They need to confront the forces that made his lies resonate in the first place.

If we don't take this anger seriously, if we don't address the economic insecurity and inequality at its root, then we're going to keep losing ground. Trump may be gone one day, but Trumpism will remain until we face the hard truth: America's system is broken, and the people know it.