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The Trump spectre

Tapping into anxiety and prejudice, he could lead the US back to a past it had moved on from.

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US presidential candidate Donald Trump. (Source: AP)

Indeed, one can make the point more historically. Given his rhetoric, Donald Trump's rise as a presumptive presidential nominee of the Republican party is not a development America has witnessed since the highly exclusionary last two decades of the 19th century. Trump has won roughly 14 million votes in the Republican primaries, the largest ever in Republican history. July 18 through 21, the Republicans will gather in Cleveland for a national convention and officially pick their candidate for the November presidential elections.

What would have been a straightforward nomination is by now quite fraught. An immense elite-mass divide has emerged. A significant proportion of the party elite acutely dislikes Trump, whereas the Republican base has chosen him above more than a dozen candidates. A campaign to deny Trump the Republican nomination has emerged within the party.

Why does so much of the Republican establishment, not simply the liberal opposition, detest Trump? And why does so much of the Republican base like him?

The objections to Trump take two forms: Style and policy. Trump habitually violates presidential décorum. He has talked about his anatomical proportions, mocked women for menstruation and looks, called Mexicans "rapists and criminals", said that a US-born federal judge was not qualified to pass a judgment on his court case because of his Mexican ethnicity, contended that the father of his nearest party rival, Ted Cruz, had something to do with the assassination of John F. Kennedy, suggested that Hillary Clinton was involved in the death of Vince Foster, a deputy White House counsel during her husband's presidency, and hinted that President Obama prefers Islam over national interest. An unfiltered crudeness, unflinchingly purveyed, appears to be his hallmark. It makes him, say the Republican elite, unfit for the highest office.

The policy disputes are equally serious. In recent decades, the Republican party has been conservative on culture and economics, and muscular on defence and foreign policy. Trump's lack of support for traditional family values, and his opposition to free trade and to cuts in welfare entitlements singles him out as ideologically far

Why, then, is Trump such a darling of the party base?

Surveys show that an unrestrained viscerality is not unpopular with a lot of people. But, more importantly, Trump is tapping into two larger underpinnings of voter behaviour: Economic anxiety and ethnic prejudice.

Globalisation has struck the American economy in a paradoxical way. Goods are cheaper than before, but a large proportion of jobs from the manufacturing sector has gone to China. Those affected by job losses not only want cheaper goods, but also stable employment. The old jobs, however, will not return, for automation is also proceeding at a rapid pace. Re-skilling for a new economic life will be necessary, but such transitions take time. Trump's attacks on China's "predatory trade practices" and his constant assertion that import tariffs would protect American jobs have found a substantial constituency.

This is not necessarily a working class issue. Data show that the median family income of Trump supporters is higher than that of Clinton and Bernie Sanders supporters. The mounting economic anxiety is a function of the uncertainties accompanying globalisation in the work place. They afflict middle classes, too.

The second argument, based on ethnic prejudice, may well be stronger than the economic anxiety. It has taken two forms: Anti-Muslim, and anti-Latino. Trump's anti-Muslim proposals started with a temporary ban on Muslim immigration. By the time the recent Orlando mass shootings took place, he was suggesting surveillance of mosques, profiling of Muslims for security and punitive measures for the community for not informing the police about the activities of potential terrorists.

Historically speaking, this argument is not qualitatively new. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, aimed at restricting Chinese immigration to the US. And Japanese Americans were interned during the Second World War for security reasons. Internment is a form of extreme surveillance. But in 1965, all ethnic or