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SINGAPORE -- The rise of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in American politics has shocked the world. America has consistently projected itself as the country that could be trusted for political predictability and stability. While extremist or fringe movements might emerge in other countries, American political culture, by contrast, would be dominated by sensible centrist figures, like Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton. Astonishingly, one has dropped out of the race. The other remains, but is shaky.

So what happened? Is this just another passing political phenomenon? Or does it reflect a structural shift in American politics? Here, a comparison with Asia might help to draw out some structural issues that drive politics. To put it simply, the politics of pessimism provides fertile ground for fringe politicians like Donald Trump, just as it does for Marine Le Pen of the National Front in France. The politics of optimism which used to dominate American political life has now shifted to Asia. It has led to the election of sensible centrist figures in Asia like Narendra Modi in India ([May 2014](#)), Joko Widodo in Indonesia ([July 2014](#)) and Lee Hsien Loong in Singapore ([September 2015](#)).

“ In the current pessimistic political environments of America and Europe, politicians get punished for truth-telling.

So why have Asian societies drifted to the political center and America -- and parts of Europe -- drifted to the fringe? The simple answer is that societies that are hopeful of a better future want to put their fate in safe pairs of hands, like Modi, Jokowi and Lee. By contrast, societies whose populations fear the future are driven to try out fringe figures.

The Trump-Sanders surge sends a clear signal that Americans are losing faith in



RESULTS

South Carolina Democratic Primary February 27

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SOUTH CAROLINA DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY

Delegates: 59

Candidate	Votes	%
 Hillary Clinton ✓	271,514	73.5
 Bernie Sanders	95,977	26.0

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their political establishment. In theory, America has a government of the people, by the people and for the people. In practice, it has a government chosen by the people to serve special interests, not their interests. This perception of American policies being hijacked by special interests was accentuated by the 2008-09 financial crisis. American bankers almost destroyed the American economy, yet [only one top one](#) went to jail. [Bernie Sanders](#) captures the American anger well when he says, "The sad reality is that the Federal Reserve doesn't regulate Wall Street; Wall Street regulates the Fed. It's time to make banking work for the productive economy and for all Americans, not just a handful of wealthy speculators." [He also notes](#): "If Congress cannot regulate Wall Street, there is just one alternative. It is time to break these too-big-to-fail banks up so that they can never again destroy the jobs, homes, and life savings of the American people."



Tan Jee Kwong via Getty Images

Gardens By The Bay, Singapore. "Societies that are hopeful of a better future want to put their fate in safe pairs of hands." (Getty)

Inequality and long-term unemployment have made matters worse. Sanders has also [stressed](#) that the top 0.1 percent of the American populations own almost as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent. Few white middle-class Americans believe that their children will have a better future. Hence there is a large inchoate anger in the American political system driving the emergence of political extremes.

By contrast, several Asian societies (not all) have [shunned populism](#) and taken economically necessary but unpopular decisions. Modi bravely [removed gas subsidies](#) for consumers with a taxable income higher than 10 lakh rupees -- about 14,600 USD -- per annum. Similarly, Jokowi did the same when he [abolished fuel subsidies](#), with the exception of a small subsidy of 1,000 rupiah -- 0.07 USD -- on diesel. Lee Hsien Loong, has, of course, respected his father's warning against creating budget-busting subsidies. Even Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, despite his political travails, [introduced a tax on goods and services](#) that riled many.

“ Lee Kuan Yew once said, 'I always tried to be correct, not politically correct.' ”

Inevitably, there were some [protests](#) against these anti-populist moves. But none of these leaders changed course. Each of them could see a better future down the road for their societies. Hence, they stuck to doing the "right" thing. Interestingly, many Asian leaders were inspired by Lee Kuan Yew's political legacy. [Lee Kuan](#)



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[Yew once said](#), "I always tried to be correct, not politically correct." He also believed in telling his people "[hard truths](#)," not politically convenient ones.

In the current pessimistic political environments of America and Europe, politicians get punished for truth-telling. Chancellor Angela Merkel is right to say that, aside from Germany's humanitarian obligations, the Syrian refugees also represent a demographic dividend for [an aging Germany](#). She has been punished for telling the truth.

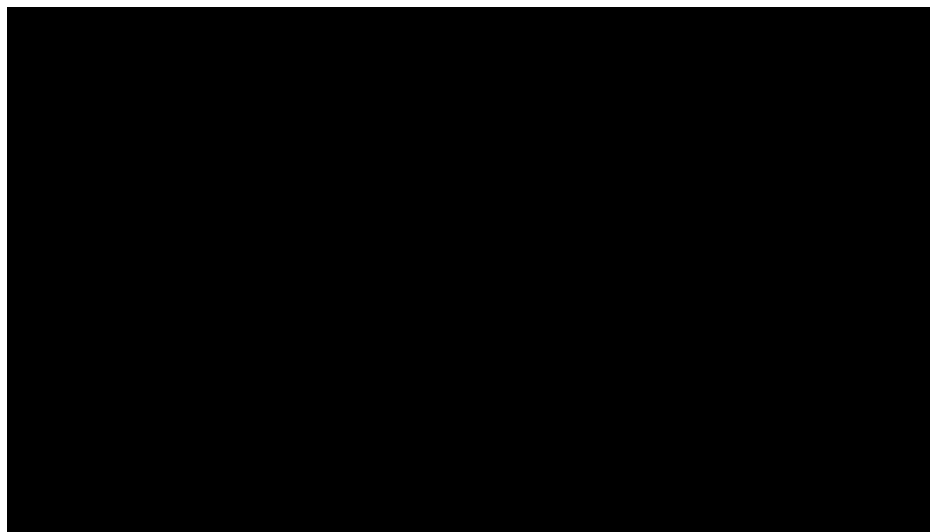


To campaign for an immigration initiative in the referendum, the right-wing Swiss People's Party uses political posters depicting a white sheep kicking a black one over the border. (SVP)

Even more amazingly, the normally sensible Swiss might actually vote in a measure that could subject any foreign resident to [automatic deportation](#), if convicted of offenses ranging from murder to two lesser offenses, such as speeding, committed within a 10-year duration. There's even [political posters](#) like the one above depicting foreigners as black sheep.

Can populism be killed in the West? Yes, it can. To do this, the dominant negative narratives in the media need to be balanced with positive narratives. The average Western citizen believes that the world is going off the rails. The media only tell this story. Yet, objectively speaking, the world is not being derailed. Military conflicts are on a long-term declining trend. Poverty is diminishing. Middle-class populations are exploding all around the globe. New markets are emerging. After the current downturn, a better future beckons. In short, with the right leadership, Western countries, like the rest, can hope for better futures.

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John Bass

The idea that Barney represents some kind of extreme in the world of politics, is completely laughable. Singapore, where this article was written, is a shining example of combining social and individual identities into a wonderfully successful economic/ social machine. Barney would hardly register as even a 'middle of the road' progressive candidate in most well educated, modern nations.

Like · Reply · 4 · Feb 25, 2016 11:24pm



Lilian Coretchi

I do not want to dissappoint you, but, Yes, Hilary is going to win, because she represents the real threat to the Establishment! The Establishment understands it and that is why they came up with an unknown, impecably blank nominee and a very mouth watering candy as a platform in the shape of Sanders in order to rob the people of their vote, but this time it ain't going to work, it is the silent revolution backing Hilary!

Like · Reply · 3 · Feb 25, 2016 3:39am



Carl Harrison

Are you auditioning for the Onion?

Like · Reply · 15 · Feb 25, 2016 3:56am



Lilian Coiretchi

Carl Harrison ?

Like · Reply · Feb 25, 2016 3:59am



Ian Thijm · President Raj Time and Cycles Inc at Self-employed

She is the crooked establishment, Did you buy into Hillary Lies, you should be outraged believing such garbage

Like · Reply · 5 · Feb 25, 2016 4:57am

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Jordan Burke · Dallas, Texas

South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, all are cohesive societies for the most part and there are few threats to their culture as it is.

For the most part dont have an ever increasing number of Foreign people flowing into their country and are more homogenous. Thats why no one has a populist candidate, because they arent seeing their culture getting gradually eroded away. Cohesive societies dont squabble as much over identity politics.

Like · Reply · 2 · Feb 26, 2016 4:36am



Ian Thijm · President Raj Time and Cycles Inc at Self-employed

It is amazing that CNN, Huffingtonpost, Yahoo, etc. do not mention:

1. Bernie is leading nationwide by 6%! according to the reliable Reuters
<http://usuncut.com/.../bernie-leading-by-six-in-reuters.../>

2. The pope considers Bernie the most "Christian" candidate!
<http://stubbillnews.com/2016/02/21/pope-sanders-christian/>

Like · Reply · 5 · Feb 25, 2016 4:56am



Anna Amissah · Short Hills, New Jersey

Polarization means that one only considers facts he/she likes to believe.

Although I am thankful for Bernie for making Hillary a better candidate, Bernie doesn't have a strong relationship with minorities. His numbers for free college don't add up. His single payer healthcare system is a bit unrealistic in light of what we understand what the Republicans are like.

Like · Reply · 7 · Feb 25, 2016 5:59am



Ian Thijm · President Raj Time and Cycles Inc at Self-employed

Anna Amissah All of congress is Up for re-election, we just have to vote them out!. Also ALL of Europe and every developed country in the world, including Canada has Universal Healthcare, Only USA think it is impossible to do so, they are living in the middle ages! and listen to Dr Cornel West Interview, where he explains Hillary is the Milli Vanilli of Politics <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIHc84VYALQ&feature=youtu.be>

Like · Reply · 1 · Feb 25, 2016 9:20pm



Washington Irving · University of Alberta

Anna Amissah And Hillary has better relationships with minorities? That ones she was calling animals in in 96? Or the ones she was race-baiting when she ran against Obama?

Like · Reply · Feb 27, 2016 7:14pm

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Kenji Matsumoto

The writer of this article has to be joking if he believes that Narendra Modi is a moderate. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party is a nationalist party and have used the power of the state to silence its critics. Singapore is a single party state governed since independence by the Peoples Action Party. Who use the courts as a weapon against the opposition true libel and slander cases. Censorship is also used against the press which is tightly controlled in the city state.

This writers populism looks a lot like authoritarianism.

Like · Reply · 2 · Feb 26, 2016 9:37am

Like · Reply · Feb 25, 2016 6:07pm



Paul Ma King · Manchester, United Kingdom

Kishore Mahbubani is right! America is on a decline, China is rapidly overtaking them & they know it. That make America very dangerous! If Donald Trump gets elected it will be very bad for America's image in the world & bad for the world. A Trump administration will mean tensions with China, Russia & the Islamic world, and American protectionism. I hope Hillary Clinton win but it will be tight.

Like · Reply · 20 hrs



Louige Damion · Security Guard at Göta Källare

whatever the outcome in the (Globally speaking) less and less important US, The rise of Asian super powers such as China and many more, will truly be interesting to watch and experience since there is a new and much more attractive political and B2B formula which states that the best policies are those that are drawn and actuated in the interest of their countries whole citizenry. The beloved western styled Chicao boys ways of Americanized Corporatism idea of gaining as much as possible for a few elitist clicks which traditionally is the goal for Conservative groups is by far less seductive for normally intelligent citizens with a healthy doze of Critical thinking Education such as the one here in Sweden, Norway and many Asian countries.

Like · Reply · 1 · Feb 25, 2016 5:30pm · Edited



Dilip Kare · Director at Adarsha Institute of Management Goa

Prof. Mehbbobani: I am a great admirer of LKY, but I don't think he should be brought into the discussion involving real democracies. He could afford to tell his people the hard truth because he had a life-time job. Others you have mentioned above do not have this luxury!

Like · Reply · 1 · Feb 25, 2016 3:56pm



Ellicott VA

As much as I dislike the entire group of candidates, the only hope for America seems to be Hillary. Let me try and break it down for you. Trump is a bombastic brander that basically exaggerated his life into always being bigger and better than he actually is. He is a quintessential megalomaniac that will be disastrous with real power. Cruz is a conveniently ideological power hungry and untrustworthy and not to mention innately annoying human. Rubio is a convenient fraud in every respect of the word. Everything he says is practiced and he is somebody that can't be trusted to run a 10 man comp... [See More](#)

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Abe Ruther

"an old buffoon who is a declared socialist"
You say socialist like it's a bad thing.

Like · Reply · 1 · Feb 25, 2016 4:31pm



Sue Donovan · Archbishop Walsh, Irvington, NJ

Abe Ruther You didn't read the next part:

"Still cunning enough to portray honesty and integrity while doing all the political shenanigans on the sly. Also, too old to last a term."

Show me how Bernie can accomplish ANY of the things he promises and he will have my vote. Please don't bother to spit out his campaign rhetoric since I've checked his proposals and they are a bit light on the details. Not to mention the fact that the POTUS doesn't make laws, Congress does. With a far right Congress, he will be no more able to make changes than Obama.

Revolution? More like a tempest in a teapot.

Like · Reply · 1 · Feb 25, 2016 7:51pm



Abe Ruther

Sue Donovan
How do you know he can't accomplish anything? Why don't you go join the Republicans? Because the Democrats haven't achieved anything in the last 4 years. Well, since we can't do anything, lets all join the Republicans!

Your logic.

Like · Reply · 1 · Feb 25, 2016 10:17pm

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Elliot Klein · CEO at Karmic Joker Enterprises

I think the author needs to be a little more specific in his reference to Asia as the beacon of hope. Yes, three countries now have leaders that seemingly are progressive and compassionate. But that is only three out of many, not Asia in general. One need not even mention N. Korea or until a few months ago, Burma (yes, I refuse to call it Myanmar). But look at Thailand, Cambodia, Laos for terrible leaders and crumbling societies. China is only succeeding because their leaders have allowed the greed of US corporations to use their citizenry as slave labor to manufacture cheap, poor-quality prod... [See More](#)

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