



# The Triumph of Despair

**Subtitle: How cynicism won, hope lost, and frustration has shaped the modern political era.**

**Sub-Subtitle: By the way, we haven't even reached 'Peak Despair' yet, so brace yourself.**

**Sub-Sub-Subtitle: Things are fine though.**

by Tess Kovach

The middle class is squeezed, moderates feel left out of the political dialogue, confirmation bias is run-amok in a social media and mainstream media environment that permits culled newsfeeds, the rich are getting much richer, the poor are getting the shaft, Americans believe their country is in decline, anger is boiling over into an ugly political scene for the 2016 election - *also* things are going mostly pretty good.

I committed a [tweetstorm on how the middle class is getting squeezed](#) and the super-rich are winning several weeks ago, and I think you can forgive a paragraph of statistics illustrating that point. First, America's richest 1% have [captured about 95% of all income gains](#) since the Great Recession began in late 2008. Second, the aggregate net worth of the top 7% of households [rose by 28%](#) during just the first two years of the recovery. Third, in 2014 median household income was \$53,657 - that's 8% lower than 2007 when it was \$57,357. Fourth, in 1979 the share of households earning a middle class income was 60.8%, [today the middle class constitutes a minority](#) of Americans. Fifth, the median income of upper income households [has increased 47% since 1970](#). But for the poorest class [it has dropped 28%](#) since 1970.

Democrats have been squealing about these statistics for decades. The Democratic Party is practically built on the back of statistics like these - evidence that the poor and the middle class are in need of economic opportunity, income equality, and the ability to compete in the capitalist marketplace without getting fleeced. But there's just one giant catch for the Democratic Party: elections need financing, and that means the party must befriend at least one or two sectors of rich people in order to win seats in the legislature, or even the Presidency. This requires, by necessity a horribly mixed message that is confusing to voters. The party breeds relatively reliable moderate or liberal candidates who carry with them the baggage of at least one rich benefactor industry who muddies the waters and makes the liberal electorate suspicious of their intentions. Take former Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu

as one example. Any politically aware news-reader knows that a Democrat in Louisiana immediately begins with a disadvantage in a statewide race where the demographics and social ideation strongly benefits Conservatives. Grassroots money is not exactly going to pour into the Landrieu campaign from all over the state, she has to compensate by befriending some type of industry and catering to their interests in order to get money from political action committees, corporate shareholders, etc. She can be accused of selling out her values for doing so, and perhaps accurately. But she doesn't win unless she does it. She makes a political calculation that her win, and thus a majority in the U.S. Senate for her party, and a boost to her own career to boot, is the greater good, and the befriending of that industry - while it looks unseemly and might be done with a cough - is the best option on the menu of options. So, surprise (!) that's precisely what red-state Democrats do all the time. They sell out to some cadre of rich in order to give themselves and their party a fighting chance. Landrieu [chose the oil industry](#), which donated a collective amount of almost a million dollars to her campaign. Kay Hagan in the red state of North Carolina chose the Pharmaceutical industry and banking industry, which together donated [more than a million dollars](#) to her campaign. Mark Pryor in the red state of Arkansas chose the investment banking and Wall Street sector, [which donated \\$1.1 Million](#) to his campaign.

It is easy for non-politically-engaged Democrats to be confused by this. Isn't their party supposed to be for the little guy? Isn't their party supposed to fight for the poor and middle class? They ask themselves this and then watch their own candidates sticking it to the little guy on some pretty big issues, and declare them squishy. They taste despair in the air - a sense that both parties are bad. Some of them refuse to vote for their party nominee, cynically declaring them "just as bad as the other party." And thus, some pretty good intentioned voters step away from politics altogether, making the outcomes disastrously worse. Had they been slightly more strategic minded, they would realize a liberal true believer has a snow-ball's chance in hell of being elected without money. But here we aren't talking about the people who are politically strategic or who worry about things like "electability", instead we are talking about those who just want what they want, get frustrated when they don't get it in pure form, and are prone to throw their hands in the air in agony when someone in the party begins to look like Hillary Clinton - carrying battle scars of compromise and triangulation because she cares more about the big picture and winning some victories than she does about being pure and thereby winning nothing.

The Republicans, because of their internal party divide require a slightly more complex analysis. There is a significant portion of the party who look at the same statistics in the paragraph above about the squeeze of the middle class (or even if they don't know the statistics they accurately feel the squeeze to be real) but they have been persuaded by the other half of their party to either (1) blame the wrong evildoer, liberals, for the squeeze, or (2) to abjectly ignore economic issues and vote on social issues instead. In the first category of persuasion, the one where conservatives are hoodwinked into blaming the wrong culprit, we

can place the enormously witty phenomenon of Donald Trump, who regularly paints immigration, foreign policy "weakness", and unfamiliarity with "business acumen" among national leaders as the reason the economic decline of the middle class. Some have mastered the art of painting liberals as the culprit merely by pointing to the President and saying he was "in charge" during a rise in poverty, as if one of the three branches of government could reasonably be "in charge" of an economic trend-line that could only be solved by congress anyway. But an electorate with low civics education isn't thinking about separation of powers. They aren't sophisticated enough to internalize factors like legislative gerrymandering or campaign finance causing policy outcomes that favor the rich. They buy, hook-line-and-sinker, the concept that liberals "catering" to middle class "competition" like immigrants, families on SNAP benefits, or just "the poor" generally, have ruined it for the middle class. It's a simplistic argument, and it is appealing precisely because of its simplicity. It's the type of argument you can put on a bumper sticker: "Work Harder: Millions on Welfare Depend on You"; "Republican: Because I Have A Job". These are the folks who believe America is in decline because of even further false or simplified arguments that are tailor made for a low-education crowd, like the old standby, "China owns most of our debt!". It doesn't matter that by far most of our national debt is owed back to Americans in the form of treasury bonds, money borrowed against the Social Security Trust Fund, Etc. - the argument is appealing for its simplicity, the idea that we are being out-competed on a global scale because some low class leaches are dragging us down. It's also a mesmerizingly empowering message to working class blue collar Americans: you are the only thing keeping us afloat at all. The divide and conquer strategy employed by economic conservatives, who have successfully turned working class members of the electorate against other working class members of the electorate (with slightly darker skin?) and exploiting any sense of otherness or suspicion or prejudice has worked brilliantly. It's the strategy of despair. Make people desperately angry - but just at the wrong crowd. If you can't make them angry at liberals, then at least make them think politics is nasty, and then they won't show up. Make it harder for them to vote at all by adding ballot access rules. Make them think government is inept, and they will stay away from the polls altogether: while simultaneously the wealthier classes, more educated and strategically thinking, will of course go vote and vote for their own economic class. fun times!

Back in November of last year, professor and blogger Freddie DeBoer [flagged a quote](#) about the modern political climate from Slavoj Zizek that has been stuck in my mind for months:

*I had a kind of epiphany moment when, a year or so ago, when they organized grassroots Republicans, the first wave of the Tea Party... I was sitting in a hotel room, jumping between two channels on TV: one was Fox News. The other one was PBS. On Fox News, it was a live transmission of a Tea Party event in Texas, where a singer was singing a anti-Washington, anti-state expenditures song. On PBS, there was a documentary on the great leftist icon Pete Seeger. I was shocked at how the words — although the political meanings weren't — were almost the same. Both were singing about we small, ordinary*

*people, we are exploited, big bad guys, bankers in Washington, Wall Street and so on....  
This is the tragedy. This is the tragedy at its purest.*

The working class of both persuasions, conservative and liberal, are enraged by basically the same things. One places the blame in the right place, but when looking for solutions they agonize over purity instead of actual political wins. The other places the blame in the wrong place, [precisely because](#) of some [devious messaging by economic conservatives](#) who benefit from a system that is rigged in their favor. The combat between two parties at loggerheads has forced out left leaning republicans and conservative leaning Democrats not just in elected office but also among the electorate. That causes a feedback loop: the only folks doing the voting and participating are those on the wings of the political spectrum, making the combat even more intense, even more fierce - culminating into moments we have not seen until recent political history. For example, the debt ceiling crisis which never used to be a crisis, the inability to pass a normal budget in congress leading to occasional government shutdowns, outbursts that break all norms of decorum such as the "you lie" moment at the State of the Union a few years ago. And it has led to Donald Trump as well - a non-politician attempting to do the ultimate attempt at turning the have-nots against each other despite his fabulous wealth and entrenchment in the class that seems to be winning everything these days.

But then as a balm to all that, we can remember a few things to calm us down and relax a little. First, despite economic elites obviously winning both in terms of policy outcomes and in terms of electioneering, most of us would prefer to be alive now than at any other time in history. Women have more economic opportunity than ever, jobs are becoming more abundant and the unemployment rate is quite low, gas is cheap, and there is public service loan forgiveness for student loans. Fewer wars are being fought globally than any other time in world history, and the threat of terrorism is ridiculously overemphasized. The safety net for the poorest Americans has not been ripped to shreds, and is at least mostly still functional and available for those who need it the most. While incomes are not rising, poverty is at its lowest level globally than it has ever been, and domestically more people are living in cities - making efficient living a lot easier. Life expectancy, while not rising as fast, is still rising. Once deadly diseases like Measles and EBOLA are in their death throes due to technology and advancement. Gay marriage is now legal, and even gay military service as well. I am 27 years old, and I would not have wanted to be working in my industry twenty years ago where it almost certainly would have been 95% men, and even if I could have broken in at the entry level, I likely would have been paid half of a male counterpart. I can do things about that now. I am empowered in the modern world. So, despite everything being pretty bad, things are also pretty darn good.

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