

To know and not to know

Understanding an election requires stories. Last night, our stories proved inadequate.

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Last night was an hours-long national wake for our collective illusions. If the shock of Donald Trump's victory in this year's election accomplishes nothing else, it has put an end to some of the just-so stories we've heard and told about our country and its politics. Even the most severely analytical number-crunchers need stories and assumptions for their work, and it turned out that they were wrong—all of them, even the people conducting Trump's own internal polls. The electorate they had so carefully and rigorously modeled turned out not to exist.

But this is no less true of the narratives that almost all observers have embraced. The astonishing polarization of the electorate has been explained, over a long time but increasingly in the Obama years, in terms of what now seem to be hopeless projections of any commentator's own priorities.

Democrats were accused by conservative writers of alienating rural and evangelical voters by their embrace of increasingly uniform and uncompromising positions on abortion and their inversion of culture-war wedge issues. However fair the accusation, it can hardly explain how conservative Christians turned out in record numbers for a candidate whose opposition to legal abortion was late and embarrassingly pro-forma, and whose personal and public life appears to be nearly perfectly amoral.

Liberal commentators pointed, again fairly, to the host of new voting restrictions imposed by state governments, aimed squarely at suppressing the votes of minority and young voters, and to the riptides of racial and gender resentment that were always close to the surface in Trump's own appeals and in the words and actions of many of his supporters (which notably included the KKK). Those factors undeniably played a role, and it can only be concluded that a large majority of white voters are

at least comfortable with the racial backlash Trump promoted.

But those same factors can't account for the large number of white voters in the upper Midwest and the Rust Belt who delivered healthy margins to Obama—and then abandoned Clinton. Nor for the fact that white women gave Trump a majority of their votes despite manifest evidence of his misogyny.

Leftists may be more inclined to blame insufficient attention to economic concerns. But Clinton ran on a more economically progressive platform than Obama ever did—and in any event, the relationship between economic hardship and support for Trump is far from clear.

If any of these stories had held up, last night's results—however dreadful for Clinton supporters and Trump-resisting conservatives alike—would have been [less fundamental and astounding](#). But they didn't. Something more than all of this was going on, something that has been and will continue shaping our public life.

It may be as simple as a kind of epistemic depravity—actual news and events retreating to the corners of our media diets, partially or fully replaced by fake news sites and Facebook comment threads. This left people impermeable to the information that (picking one of any number of possible options) one candidate had been accused by a dozen women of sexual assault.

Yet even this contains a residue of self-flattery. I was one of those who found elaborate and even virtuous ways to deceive myself. I pick up my *Chicago Tribune* from the driveway every morning like an old man; I curate my Twitter feed with ideologically diverse and interesting voices; I listen to real news and avoid cable shouting. But all of this, it seems, just buried me more deeply in incomprehension.

And this problem is sure to get worse. The consequences of the Trump victory will be as unevenly distributed and as unevenly known as the causes. When anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant violence spikes, as it likely will, a lot of us won't know it—and too many won't really care. When a vindictive narcissist takes the helm of an unimaginably powerful surveillance and security state, we can be sure any outrages that follow will be at least half invisible.

This event has the feeling of a door locked from the inside. Yesterday it was possible to imagine that things would be if not well then at least normal, within the range of expectations we've become accustomed to in an age of color-coded election maps

and gridlock. Not anymore. Recommitting to those tattered institutions that acquitted themselves somewhat decently offers some purpose. Subscribe to a newspaper that does actual reporting and investigation. Take the needs of educational institutions at all levels seriously. Sit through (or preach) the kinds of sermons you don't really want to hear. Try to stop living on the endowment of habits and institutions built up in a less cynical age.

But if any of that offered hope, this wouldn't have happened. What really will happen next, what reaction this reaction will prompt, is unknown and unknowable.