

THIS STUPID ELECTION CAMPAIGN

My wife and I have been on the road since mid-August, trying to avoid what we were pretty sure would be the dumbest election campaign in our lifetimes. It went well at first, because we had little internet connection, and were out and about in other countries. Now we have settled in for October in a place with good internet and a bit more time on our hands, and this ridiculous campaign is washing over us in great gouts of ugly and stupid.

Along the way, we have talked to different people about the state of things in the US. A typical event involved two women from the UK, one of whom lived in Uzerche, a small town towards the south of France. When they found out we are from Chicago, they started in on Trump. What's wrong with you people, they said, almost in unison. I asked what's wrong with the UK, voting for Brexit and dumping on Jeremy Corbyn. In Menton, France, we talked to a pharmacist who asked about Trump; we asked about Marine Le Pen, and he started in on Hillary Clinton as a barely acceptable politician. So we asked about Hollande and the rising Sarkozy.

In one group I asked why there were no young politicians in France. People insisted that there were, but each person they named follows closely in the tracks of an old politician. Hollande has been a terrible disappointment to the lefties, adopting neoliberal policies and claiming that France needs massive labor law reforms. Some members of this group follow Canadian politics, and they made the point that Justin Trudeau looks more like Obama every day, as he reveals himself as a typical neoliberal now that he is in office.

It puts the election in a different framework for me. It isn't just us. Everywhere we travel, people are fed up with politicians. But when we point to their own politicians, they all tell us

that Trump is totally different from their right wingers. They think he's bizarre, and the fact that he won the nomination of a major party is a sign that something is seriously wrong with the US.

Something is wrong with us as a nation. The scene in the video between Ted Cruz and a Trump supporter sums up the problem for me. Cruz thinks he is the leader of a movement, encapsulated by the Congressional Freedom Caucus, that wants to rip up the old ways of doing things and insists on the purity of its cause. He's talking to a guy he thinks supports his Movement, and he thinks he can reason with the guy. But the entire point of the Freedom Caucus is to ignore facts and logic. That guy is the Freedom Caucus in a hoodie and dark glasses. There isn't going to be a debate, and there is no interest in facts and logic.

Hillary Clinton faces that same nihilism in its pure form, Donald Trump. Facts are irrelevant, and logic is irrelevant. He says whatever comes into his head, just like those people berating Cruz. She predicts that there aren't enough of those people to give Trump the election. She thinks that simply seeming more or less normal is enough to win.

It's enough for her to act like there's nothing wrong with this country that can't be cured by a few tweaks. She doesn't have to talk about the disasters of climate change, a job-dependent economy that doesn't provide enough decent jobs for people who desperately want to work, a government that has lost its orientation, an economic discourse unwilling or unable to get past the failed ideas of the Chicago School, a system of justice that viciously beats up the poor and lets the rich walk with a wink and a fine, a police state in the making, a foreign policy dominated by killing people around the world, or any other real issue. She doesn't even have to hammer the loons in the Freedom Caucus in the hopes of dislodging the worst set of obstacles to progress. And she certainly doesn't

have to talk about a future with many fewer jobs thanks to technology or a poisoned planet stripped of resources.

If the Republicans had nominated one of their saner candidates, we'd have seen the standard Republican answers to all problems: tax cuts and deregulation; and some dog-whistling on social justice issues. Clinton would have offered exactly the same policies she offers today. Both sides would act like nothing has changed since the last century; they'd pretend everything is just fine as the planet burns up. Neither side would acknowledge that we face serious problems that require radically new solutions and a radically different understanding of the society, the economy, and the state of the world.

This campaign is stupid. But at least it has clarified what's wrong with us as a nation. We're stupid enough to put up with it, and those that aren't stupid enough to put up with it don't have a clue about how to fix it.