

# The Clock Strikes Thirteen

And the Establishment gets washed away by a preference cascade. But it was a damn close-run thing.

By Glenn Harlan Reynolds

What happened? It's like a spell broke. Since November's election (re-election?) of President Donald Trump, the woke is going away, and all sorts of problems are resolving themselves. But why?

There are several reasons, but basically, it's a preference cascade.

In law we talk about the proverbial thirteenth chime of the clock, which is not only wrong in itself, but which calls into question everything that has come before. Most of our institutions have been chiming thirteen for quite a while, and people have noticed.

But it's not enough to notice. Soviet citizens knew their system was founded on lies, too, but the system kept them isolated, unaware that so many of their fellow citizens felt the same way, and unable to come together to act.

This technique, used by totalitarians of all sorts, is called "preference falsification," in which people are forced to profess belief in things that they know not to be true. If the powers that be are good at it, virtually every citizen can hate them and want them out, but no one will do anything because every citizen who feels that way thinks they're the only one, or one of a tiny number.

In his classic book, [\*Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification\*](#), economist Timur Kuran notes how governments, and social movements, do their best to enforce this sort of ideological uniformity. People

tend to hide unpopular views to avoid ostracism or punishment; they stop hiding them when they feel safe.

This can produce rapid change: In totalitarian societies like the old Soviet Union, the police and propaganda organizations do their best to enforce preference falsification. Such regimes have little legitimacy, but they spend a lot of effort making sure that citizens don't realize the extent to which their fellow-citizens dislike the regime. This works until something breaks the spell and the discontented realize that their feelings are widely shared, at which point the collapse of the regime may seem very sudden to outside observers – or even to the citizens themselves. Kuran calls this sudden change a “preference cascade,” and I think that's what's happening here.

In America, the left spent years bullying people into accepting “woke” ideas on race, gender, and politics. There's considerable reason to believe that a majority of Americans never accepted these ideas, but between constant media repetition, and the risk of being mobbed and canceled if you disagreed with them, most people for years were afraid to stand up.

But two things put a stop to that. One was Donald Trump's election. The other – and the two are related – was Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter, now X, which is now a free-speech platform with roughly equal representation of Democrats and Republicans. Both had the effect of blowing up the lefty bubble and letting people realize that they, not the woke, were the actual majority.

Trump's victory, with a majority of the popular vote, was important. The media and most pollsters kept telling us he was a loser, and once again they were wrong. They likewise told us that Joe Biden was “sharp as a tack” until the debate with Trump demonstrated that he was, in fact, sharp as a bowling ball. Then they told us that joyless scold Kamala Harris was

running a campaign of “joy” and was a spirited “brat” instead of a charmless cog in the Democratic machine. Her somehow simultaneously dry and sodden public performances got rave reviews, when nobody, in fact, much liked her. By election day, she was basically hiding from the press – and voters were basically hiding from her, as her events became smaller and her appeal “more selective,” in the words of Ian Faith, right to the end.

When Trump won, it was not only obvious that he had won, but that the people who told us that he was a marginal figure in American politics had been lying. And that their lies lacked power.

Some of that was because of X. Pretty much every other platform in the country, from social media to old media, parroted the same script. (Even Fox News was a sometime thing, though better than in 2020). In 2020 the Hunter Biden laptop story was effectively censored by false claims that it was a Russian disinformation project. Twitter, not yet owned by Musk, even censored mentions of the story from people’s private messages.

This time around, X was a free speech outlet, and it wasn’t possible to keep the lid on the same way. There were a lot of ordinary people on there, and they weren’t having it. It’s impossible to maintain preference falsification without message control – which is why the left has tried so hard to control “misinformation,” which always just means politically inconvenient information. Even a few popular outlets that exist outside the controlled messaging space wreck the project, and that’s what happened here.

And now something else is happening. Since the election, I see pushback against woke ideology in all sorts of places. But what’s really interesting is that the pushback started not with the allegedly freethinking educated classes, but with the working class that made up the core of Trump’s movement. Now,

with the election won, you know see people who would have been afraid to embrace Trump, or at least to treat him normally, doing so. The election gave them permission.

It used to be, of course, that the lower and middle classes were stuffy and constrained by social convention while the freethinkers at universities and in the ruling class got to experiment with unconventional ideas. If their experimenting got enough success, then it might eventually filter down to ordinary people. (The sexual revolution worked this way, more or less).

But now it's our ruling class that is hidebound by political correctness, and it takes movement by the masses to give it permission to express a controversial view. That's a major change, and it's one that the ruling class isn't likely to appreciate much.

But it's good for the country. Preference falsification is undemocratic, and it makes a nation stupid. If people are taught to parrot slogans instead of to discuss, debate, and report on what's actually happening, bad decisions get made. (See, again, the old Soviet Union.)

One of the virtues of democracy is that it shakes things up, and allows preference cascades that don't require leaders to be beheaded and masses to be slaughtered. And one of the virtues of a free press is that it prevents preference falsification, and makes democracy effective.



*Was Elon Musk our Wellington? Or was it Donald Trump?*

As it turns out, we still have both, but not for want of trying on the part of much of the Establishment, which knows that democracy and free speech are good for the nation, but which believes, correctly, that both are a threat to its exercising the kind of power it wants. In the words of the Duke of Wellington, it was a damn close-run thing.

Let's work to strengthen democracy – through voting reform and more – and free speech so that things won't be so close in the future.

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