The World Is Fast
Recent Elections Missed the Biggest Challenge of All

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We’ve just had a nonsense midterm election. Never has more money been spent to think so little about a future so in flux. What would we have discussed if we’d had a serious election? How about the biggest challenge we’re facing today: The resilience of our workers, environment and institutions.

Why is that the biggest challenge? Because: The world is fast. The three biggest forces on the planet — the market, Mother Nature and Moore’s Law — are all surging, really fast, at the same time. The market, i.e., globalization, is tying economies more tightly together than ever before, making our workers, investors and markets much more interdependent and exposed to global trends, without walls to protect them.

Moore’s Law, the theory that the speed and power of microchips will double every two years, is, as Andrew McAfee and Erik Brynjolfsson posit in their book, “The Second Machine Age,” so relentlessly increasing the power of software, computers and robots that they’re now replacing many more traditional white- and blue-collar jobs, while spinning off new ones — all of which require more skills.

And the rapid growth of carbon in our atmosphere and environmental degradation and deforestation because of population growth on earth — the only home we have — are destabilizing Mother Nature’s ecosystems faster.

In sum, we’re in the middle of three “climate changes” at once: one digital, one ecological, one geo-economical. That’s why strong states are being stressed, weak ones are blowing up and Americans are feeling anxious that no one has a quick fix to ease their anxiety. And they’re right. The only fix involves big, hard things that can only be built together over time: resilient infrastructure, affordable
health care, more start-ups and lifelong learning opportunities for new jobs, immigration policies that attract talent, sustainable environments, manageable debt and governing institutions adapted to the new speed.

That’s just theory, you say? Really? Look at one aspect in one country: Mother Nature in Brazil. On Oct. 24, Reuters reported this from São Paulo: “South America’s biggest and wealthiest city may run out of water by mid-November if it doesn’t rain soon. São Paulo, a Brazilian megacity of 20 million people, is suffering its worst drought in at least 80 years, with key reservoirs that supply the city dried up after an unusually dry year.”

Say what? São Paulo is running out of water? Yes.

José Maria Cardoso da Silva, a Brazilian and senior adviser at Conservation International, explains: The drought hit a landscape that had been stripped of 80 percent of the natural forest along the Serra da Cantareira watersheds that feed six artificial reservoirs sustaining São Paulo. The Cantareira supplies nearly half of São Paulo’s water. The forests and wetlands have been replaced by farmfields, pastures and eucalyptus plantations. So today the pipes and reservoirs that gather the water are still in place, but the natural infrastructure of forests and watersheds has been badly degraded. The drought exposed it all.

“Natural forests act like giant sponges soaking up rain and gradually releasing it into streams,” he said. “They also protect watercourses and maintain water quality by reducing sediment and filtering pollutants. The forest loss in Cantareira increased erosion, caused the decline in water quality, and changed seasonal water flows, reducing the resilience of the entire system against climatic extreme events.” The Cantareira system has fallen below 12 percent of capacity.

Sadly, deforestation increased under Brazil’s newly re-elected president, Dilma Rousseff, but this was also barely an issue in Brazil’s election. Yet Reuters quoted Antonio Nobre, a leading climate scientist at Brazil’s National Space Research Institute, arguing that “global warming and the deforestation of the Amazon are altering the climate in the region by drastically reducing the release of billions of liters of water by rainforest trees. ‘Humidity that comes from the Amazon in the form of vapor clouds — what we call ‘flying rivers’ — has dropped dramatically, contributing to this devastating situation we are living today,’ ” Nobre said.

Paul Gilding, the Australian environmentalist and author of “The Great Disruption,” emailed from Brazil to say that the lack of a serious Brazilian response “reinforces to me that we’re not going to respond to the big global issues
until they hit the economy. It’s hard to imagine a stronger example than a city of 20 million people running out of water. Yet despite the clear threat, the main response is ‘we hope it rains.’ Why such denial? Because the implications of acceptance are so significant, and we know in our hearts there’s no going back once you end denial. It would demand that the country face up to the urgency of reversing rather than slowing deforestation” and “the need to prepare the country for the risks that a changing climate presents.”

When changes in the market, Mother Nature and Moore’s Law all get this fast, opportunities and stresses abound. One day, we’ll have an election about how we cushion, exploit and adapt to them — an election to make America and Americans more resilient. One day.