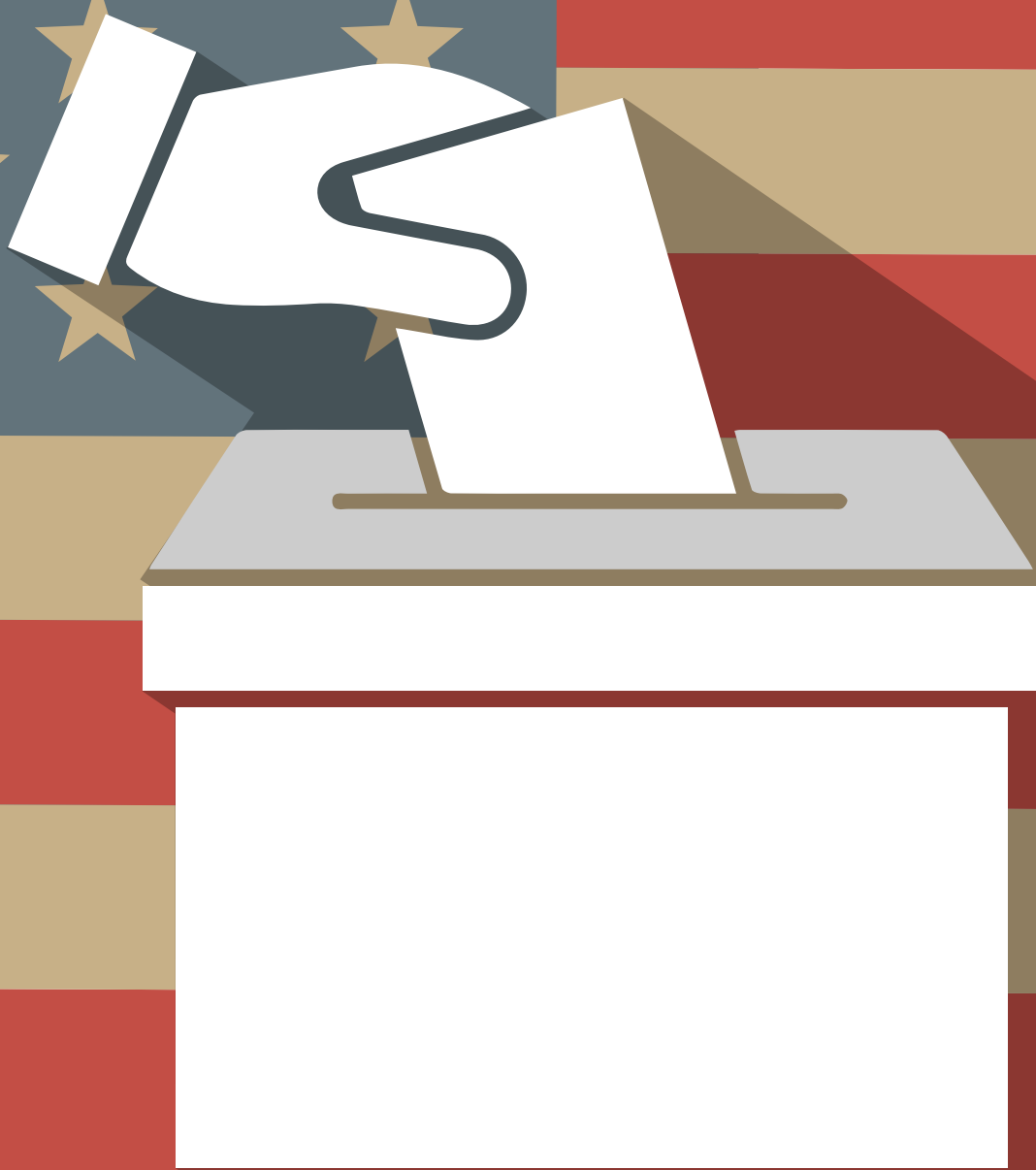


FO 360°

US Election Series



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The 2020 US Election Explained

A deeply divided US faces a defining election. This 360° context article explains the situation.

Atul Singh
Oct 12, 2020

With elections due on November 3, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has busted a plot against Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer. An armed militia allegedly planned to abduct and overthrow her. Whitmer had ordered stringent lockdown measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus that many Michiganders opposed and that the state's Supreme Court recently ruled against.

Trouble has been brewing in Michigan for a while. In May, armed protesters stormed the state capitol building. Such anger has been rising in much of the United States along regional, race and class divides. This year, a spate of police killings ignited outrage and Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests erupted. On June 6, half a million people turned out in nearly 550 places across the US. According to some analysts, the US is at its most divided since the 1861-65 Civil War.

Such is the rancor in the country that President Donald Trump has refused to participate in a virtual town hall debate, accusing the bipartisan debate commission of bias. In the first debate, Trump and his challenger Joe Biden traded insults, causing many to term it the ugliest such spectacle since televised presidential debates kicked off in 1960. This has grave implications for the elections and American democracy itself.

The Story of the 2020 US Election

The US is a young country with an old democracy. On April 6, 1789, George Washington was unanimously elected president. This was three months before a mob in Paris stormed the Bastille on July 14, kicking off the French

Revolution.

In contrast to the French who now have a fifth republic, Americans have stuck with their first one. The US Constitution is venerated in the same way as the Bible and has been amended a mere 27 times since 1787. The last amendment is of 1992 vintage and neither Republicans nor Democrats are proposing further changes. Despite the Civil War, the American republic, its democratic experiment and its Constitution have endured to this day.

American democracy follows a quadrennial cycle. Every four years, Americans go to the polls to elect the president and vice president. At the same time, they also vote in 435 members of the House of Representatives, the lower house of the US Congress that controls the purse, for two-year terms. Voters also get to pick around a third of the seats in the Senate, the upper house that confirms appointments — including those to the US Supreme Court — for six-year terms.

This year, 35 Senate seats are in play at a time when Trump has nominated Amy Coney Barrett for the Supreme Court after the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In the US, judges are appointed for life. Barrett is a conservative Catholic while Ginsburg was a liberal icon. The 48-year-old Barrett would give conservatives a 6 to 3 advantage vis-à-vis liberals in the Supreme Court. It could potentially lead to an overturning of the landmark 1973 ruling in *Roe v. Wade* that legalized abortion.

Elections for the House of Representatives and the Senate are relatively straightforward. All American citizens above the age of 18 can vote for representatives of their congressional districts in a first-past-the-post system. They also vote for two senators to represent the state they live in. When it comes to electing a president, the Electoral College comes into play. A total of 538 Electoral College votes are distributed among 50 states. Americans vote for presidential candidates in their states. The candidate who wins the majority in a state gets the Electoral

College votes assigned to that state.

To become president, a candidate must win 270 or more Electoral College votes. Most of the time, the winning candidate has won both the popular and the electoral college votes. However, this does not always hold true. In 2000, Al Gore won the popular vote but won only 266 Electoral College votes, while George W. Bush won 271. In 2016, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, but she only won 227 Electoral College votes in contrast to Trump's 304 because she lost key states by narrow margins. Currently, Biden and the Democrats lead in most opinion polls, but they have not entirely been accurate in the past.

The US has a two-party system with no space for a third party. The Republican Party is conservative. Historically, it stands for smaller government, lower taxes and stronger national security. Called the Grand Old Party (GOP), it opposes abortion, supports gun rights and wants to limit immigration. The GOP has strong support in the more rural parts of the country such as the South, Southwest and Midwest. The Democratic Party is the liberal political party. Traditionally, it supports greater governmental intervention, higher taxes and more social justice. Democrats support abortion, oppose gun rights and take a more lenient view of immigration. Their power base lies in urban areas that are largely in the Northeast and the West Coast.

Currently, while the Republicans control the Senate and the White House, the Democrats control the House of Representatives. The Democrat-controlled House and the Trump White House have clashed repeatedly over a new stimulus package to a coronavirus-ravaged economy. *Prima facie*, such partisanship and brinkmanship is not new. This is a recurring feature in American politics. Yet this time it is truly different.

Trump's election in 2016 was a seismic moment. He was the unlikeliest of candidates who emerged on top in the Republican primaries. During his presidential campaign, he survived many a faux pas and a scandal. In the process,

both the Bush and Clinton dynasties bit the dust. Trump won power as a populist and has governed as one.

President Trump has ushered in an era of protectionism, slapping tariffs on many countries, especially China. He has weakened institutions that the US itself created after World War II by threatening to pull out of the World Trade Organization and not paying remaining dues to the World Health Organization after withdrawing the US from it. Early in his presidency, Trump walked away from the 2015 Paris Climate Accord and jettisoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership that underpinned former President Barack Obama's Asia Pivot.

Why Does the 2020 US Election Matter?

The US election matters not only nationally but also globally. First, Americans are choosing between two poorly-defined but distinctly alternative visions. Donald Trump champions populist nationalism, while Joe Biden supports the post-World War II order. The former will push protectionism and unilateralism further, while the latter will roll back some if not all of Trump's measures. Under Biden, there will be freer trade and more US support for international institutions. The election result will change the world.

Second, Americans are deciding between two starkly different ways of handling the coronavirus pandemic. Trump has emerged out of hospital after contracting COVID-19 — the disease caused by the novel coronavirus — to greet his supporters from the White House balcony, take off his face mask and declare that the country must get back to business. Biden believes in prudence, wears his mask and proposes following public health guidelines advocating social distancing, limited economic activity and lockdowns in case of spiking infections. Unsurprisingly, the Pew Research Center puts the economy and health care as the voters' top concerns. The election might reflect the tradeoff that voters are willing to make between the two.

Third, questions about the election's legitimacy sound louder than at any other time since the Civil War. BLM marches and militia activity are symptoms of a deeper malaise. The US is deeply divided and trust in institutions is running low. At such a time, postal ballots could play a big role in deciding the election. All states provide for voting by post but rules differ widely. The final result could take days or even weeks. Trump has already cast doubts as to the legitimacy of postal ballots and there are real fears about a peaceful transfer of power.

Fourth, law enforcement and criminal justice seem to be key issues for this election. Many voters fear mass protests in many cities. Others believe that the criminal justice system is unjust and victimizes black people, especially young black men. Both rallies in support of law enforcement officials and for defunding the police are taking place across the US. The election will decide the direction of law enforcement and criminal justice in the country.

Finally, the result of the election has immediate global ramifications because Pax Americana is fraying. Like Rome, the US can go to war as was the case with Vietnam and Iraq. Yet like its ancient counterpart, it has been the global guarantor of relative peace. With the US withdrawing from the world stage, countries like Russia, China and Turkey are stepping in to fill the void. Furthermore, what Joseph S. Nye Jr. calls America's "soft power" seems to be waning.

Some surmise that American superpowerdom is unchallengeable. The US has the space program, the air superiority, the deepwater navy, the cutting-edge technology, leading universities, unrivaled innovation, seductive pop culture, cheap gas, bountiful resources and a relatively youthful population to be top dog. Others see the US as Rome in decline, plagued by corruption, division and discord. The 2020 US election might reveal which of these two views might be closer to the truth, with profound consequences for the history of the world.

***Atul Singh** is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer.

How Catholics Can Tilt the US Election

It is one of the great ironies that today, the majority of the Supreme Court justices happen to be members of a faith that once was considered anathema to everything America stood for.

Hans-Georg Betz
Sep 28, 2020

Few Americans these days are likely to recognize the name Thomas Nast. Yet in the Civil War era, Nast was arguably the most famous cartoonist in the United States, responsible for creating and popularizing iconic images, such as "jolly St. Nick" (aka Santa Claus), Uncle Sam and the donkey and the elephant — symbols of the Democrats and Republicans ever since. Nast's fame was reflected in the Overseas Press Club of America's decision, in 1978, to name their annual award for best cartoons on international affairs after him.

Yet 40 years later, the Press Club decided to wipe Nast's name clean of the official title of the award. This came at the heel of the controversy, a few years earlier, provoked by Nast's nomination for induction into New Jersey's Hall of Fame. The nomination, his third in four years, once again ended in failure, despite Nast's merits of having exposed the corruption of New York's infamous Tammany Hall boss William M. Tweed, and despite his commitment to the anti-slavery cause and racial equality.

Unfortunately, Nast had a serious blind spot: a pronounced hostility to the country's Catholic, and particularly Irish Catholic immigrant,

community. Nast routinely portrayed the Irish as drunkards with ape-like features, bent on creating havoc; one cartoon has an Irishman sitting on a powder keg, a bottle in one hand, a torch in the other. His famous cartoon, "The American River Ganges," was a perfect expression of the way Protestant Americans viewed the influx of European Catholics. It depicts Catholic bishops as crocodiles crawling onto American shores bent on attacking innocent schoolchildren.

Blind Spot

Nast's kind of bigotry was hardly something new. Anti-Catholic sentiments ran rampant throughout the 19th century, starting with the massive influx of Irish and southern German Catholics in the 1840s and 1850s, regaining steam in the decades of the Civil War, with the emergence of the American Protective Association and a wave of pamphlets peddling anti-Catholic conspiracy theories, most famously the claim that the Catholic Church had been behind the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

Catholics were generally regarded with suspicion, if not outright fear, as an alien force sent by the pope to subvert the country's republican institutions and destroy democracy in the United States. Even those who would concede that these allegations were highly exaggerated maintained that Catholic immigrants were not in a position to act as responsible citizens, lacking the independence of mind indispensable for being a good democrat. They were deemed to be under the influence of the pope and priests, who, in turn, were charged with being fundamentally hostile to American democracy.

Most of its detractors maintained that the Catholic faith was fundamentally incompatible with the basic values that informed the American republic. Nativist and white supremacist organizations in the 1920s, most notoriously the second Ku Klux Klan, routinely targeted the country's growing Catholic community.

It took more than a century for American Catholics to be accepted as fully equal citizens. In 1937, when Gallup first asked the question, no more than 60% of respondents said they would vote for a Catholic presidential candidate. It took until the late 1970s that that number surpassed the 90% mark. As late as 2003, a prominent book on anti-Catholicism referred to it as the "last acceptable prejudice" in the United States. Some 15 years later, a commentary in the Catholic News Agency charged that it was "becoming more and more obvious that the Catholic Church is being targeted as the public enemy of our society." For the author, a retired bishop from New Jersey whose diocese was marred in sex abuse scandals during his tenure, the main reason for anti-Catholic hostility was the church's standing firm on "her teaching on contraception, abortion, stem cell research, in-vitro fertilization, marriage and divorce."

This is one side of the story and certainly an important one that must not be ignored or trivialized. For large parts of American history, Catholics represented a besieged minority, particularly if they happened to be of Irish or Italian descent. At the same time, however, as the size of the Catholic immigrant community grew in size, so did its influence. Many in the first wave of Catholic immigrants settled in large northeastern cities, such as New York and Boston, where they quickly became a major political factor, primarily for the Democratic Party, which built a whole patronage system on the largely Irish Catholic vote. From this perspective, Nast's crusade against New York City's Tammany Hall and his anti-Irish cartoons acquire a certain logic.

It is also a fact that the American Catholic Church actively opposed abolitionism in the United States. And it is also a fact that there was little love lost between the Irish, and later Italian, immigrant communities and the African American minority, with animosities coming from both sides. Catholic immigrants had always voted for the Democratic Party, and the outcome of the Civil War only strengthened the association, as did Lincoln's Republican Party's

association with the anti-Catholic cause, albeit rather subtle, even if it was well known that in some parts of the country there were strong ties between the Republicans and the American Protective Association.

Historical Irony

It is important to keep this in mind in order to appreciate the significance of the role of the Catholic vote for the November election. Gone are the days when Catholics formed a dependable vote bank for the Democratic Party, when the Republicans were seen biased, if not hostile, to the Catholic faith. In 2016, according to Pew Research, 56% of registered Catholics voted for Trump, 44% for Hillary Clinton. Generally, nowadays, about half of registered Catholic voters identify themselves more or less as Republicans; roughly the same share more or less as Democrats. This implies that the Catholic vote is a perfect reflection of the pronounced political polarization and partisanship that has characterized the country as a whole for the past few decades.

At the same time, Catholics are no longer considered unfit for high political offices, their republican credentials questioned, as was still the case when John F. Kennedy ran for office. To be sure, this has not yet played itself out with respect to the presidency. Joe Biden, if elected, would only be the second Catholic to be elected to the country's highest political office. It is, however, the case for the other branches of the American political system — the Congress and particularly the Supreme Court. It is perhaps one of the great ironies of American history that today, the majority of the Supreme Court justices who are supposed to interpret and uphold the Constitution of the United States happen to be Catholics — members of a faith that once was considered anathema to everything the country stood for, or at least claimed to stand for.

With the passing away of Ruth Bader Ginsburg on September 18, the Supreme Court has once again become a focal point of attention. This might appear a bit strange. After all, the

Supreme Court is generally seen as “‘the least dangerous branch’ because it can only tell you what the law means.” Its principal task is “to settle conflicting judgments from lower courts, and determine whether laws are in conflict with the Constitution or other federal laws.”

This, however, is not how America's Christian fundamentalists see it. For them, the Supreme Court is the one crucial institution that is in a position to reverse what they consider the greatest abomination in American legal history, *Roe vs. Wade*, the decision that made abortion legal countywide. President Donald Trump's choice of Amy Coney Barrett, a devout Catholic and mother of seven (two of the children by adoption), to fill the vacant seat on the Supreme Court is, therefore, of supreme significance. Not only because it would tilt the court decisively to the right, but also because it might help sway the outcome of the November election in Trump's favor, particularly with respect to the Hispanic Catholic vote.

In a recent commentary in *The New York Times*, Linda Chavez called upon the Democrats not to take the Hispanic vote for granted. In 2016, almost 30% of Hispanics voted for Trump, despite his blatant denigration of migrants from south of the border. There are numerous reasons for the way Hispanics vote the way they do, not least their national origins. And there is the religious factor. As Chavez points out, a growing number of Hispanics identify themselves as Protestants or even evangelicals, and as such are more prone to vote for Trump.

In addition, there is the question of abortion — an abomination to evangelicals and devout Roman Catholics alike. In a recent poll, more than 50% of Hispanic Catholics thought abortion should be illegal in most or all cases. In fact, Hispanics were the only distinct ethnic group to think so. Among white Catholics, for instance, roughly 40% took the pro-life position. To complicate things even more, a study from 2007 found a marked difference between first and second-generation American Hispanics on the question of abortion. Among the former, almost

two-thirds indicated at the time that it should be illegal; among the latter, only a bit more than 40% thought so.

God's Tool

In an earlier article, I have suggested that Trump's core constituency, evangelicals and devout Catholics, have supported him not because they believe he is a man of God — he quite clearly is the opposite, all his pretending notwithstanding — but because they believe he is "God's tool." Ginsburg's passing away a few weeks before the election, allowing Trump to choose an avowed abortion opponent to fill her seat, cannot but strengthen their belief that the president is on a mission from God. Trump, of course, has far more mundane motives, first and foremost to lock in all the conservative, reactionary and far-right groups in American society that might put him over the edge in crucial states.

There is a certain irony to the fact that the most widely loathed president, both at home and abroad, in recent American history might be put in a position to impose himself for four more years both on the United States and the world at large with the help of a community that for a long time in the past was one of the most disparaged, if not outright abhorred religious minority in America. One might be tempted to see in this an instance of belated revenge for the treatment received in the past. As the good book states in Romans 12:19, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." Poor Thomas Nast must be spinning like a mad top in his grave.

***Hans-Georg Betz** is an adjunct professor of political science at the University of Zurich.

The Rise and Fall of US Democracy

The chaos of this year's election may well be enough to dispel all remaining illusions about American democracy.

Peter Isackson
Oct 14, 2020

A functioning democracy requires an educated, informed population that understands its role in the processes that define how the democratic nation is governed. Ordinary citizens have two opportunities for actively participating in those processes. They can run for office or help those who are running for office get elected. And they can vote. Most people settle for voting. Actually, in the best of years, only slightly more than the majority of eligible voters actually vote. American democracy has never fired on all its cylinders.

The failure of half of Americans to participate is surprising because America has sedulously made the effort to educate its future voters. From day one, every schoolchild in the United States learns not only that the form of government they live under is a democracy but also that it is a regime defined by its commitment to freedom. Teachers, seconded by the media and the politicians who appear in the media, relentlessly drill into them the idea that the US is uniquely free, in ways that no other nation can claim. Americans possess unbridled freedom to speak out and to act, even in socially eccentric ways. For some, it even includes the freedom to shoot.

Although democracy and freedom are not synonymous, every schoolchild is taught to believe that they are. This has created a curious phenomenon in US culture: the idea that what they have is less the freedom to speak out, act and influence their community than the freedom from interference by other people — and especially by the government. In other words, many Americans understand that the most fundamental freedom is the freedom to be left

alone. Instead of defining the individual's field of possible action and participation, in their minds, democracy defines the right to avoid all action and participation.

The Art of Democratic Identity

Children who enter first grade and learn for the first time that they live in a free country may be left wondering what an unfree country is. A literal-minded 6-year-old — such as this writer who entered first grade during the Cold War — may naively wonder why, in a country that our teacher insisted is free, we have to pay for the things we consume. After all, any child who had ever been to a restaurant, a movie theater or a hotdog stand could sense what Milton Friedman would later affirm: There's no such thing as a free lunch.

My teacher's message, of course, had nothing to do with the price of things. We would learn about price, cost and value later. Like our parents, one day we would have a job, a house and a dog and be saddled with the task of fending for ourselves in a competitive world. We weren't quite prepared to understand that our teacher's riffing on the fact that we were a "free country" was, at the time, simply about the fact that another country with nuclear capacity, the Soviet Union, wasn't free. We children knew nothing about Russia, the Iron Curtain, communism, capitalism and everything else that was talked about on the news, mainly because we watched cartoons on television. Our exposure to Cold War propaganda was only just beginning.

On that first day of school, we began the task of memorizing the secular prayer that would kickstart the learning process every day of our schooling for the following 12 years: the pledge of allegiance. Its syntax was incomprehensible, but it sounded comfortingly patriotic. The abstract idea of allegiance was too much for our young minds to deal with. But the key words, beginning with "the flag," offered something concrete and allowed us to begin to understand that our job was to learn to comply with a system we couldn't yet begin to understand.

"The flag" had meaning because we could see it in front of us, whereas "the Republic for which it stands" remained a mystery. Even "one nation" failed to make much sense to any of us since we hadn't yet studied the Civil War — a moment in history when there were briefly two — but clearly one seemed to be the right number of nations to belong to. "Under God" confirmed what most of our parents had already told us, though the idea of who that being was differed from family to family.

It was the last six words of the pledge that held some meaning and still resonate in people's minds: "with liberty and justice for all." That's when we began to learn what it meant to be a democracy. This became reinforced later, when we began studying the salient facts of history, including the importance of the first three words of the Constitution: "We the people." The picture of a democratic society where people, on the one hand, are free (both to vote and to be left alone) and, on the other, treated fairly and equally, combined with our belief in the goodness of the complete system, had begun to fall into place.

Every official text we would subsequently discover, starting with the Declaration of Independence's proclamation that "all men are created equal," delivered the message that we, the citizens (or at least those who could vote), collectively controlled the form of a government that would protect us from various kinds of evil forces. Among those evil forces were, historically speaking, the European monarchies to the east against whom we revolted, and the rampaging Native Americans to the west.

The first group, the European kings, defined the enemy in our battle for freedom in the 18th century. The second group, the Indians on horseback, defined the 19th-century enemy. Once those two had been neutralized, all that was left in the 20th century, following our victory over the Germans and Japanese in World War II, was the Soviet Union.

Things had now become remarkably simple.

We were a democracy that thrived thanks to our freedom, and especially the freedom of our markets. The Soviet Union was a communist dictatorship with a five-year plan. We were consumers with the widest possible range of choice who knew we would be left alone to consume whatever we chose. Moreover, they were atheists, and we, despite our freedom to believe or not believe, were “under God.” They had the mission of spreading across the globe their elaborate system of government interference in every aspect of everyone’s lives. In contrast, we knew, as President Woodrow Wilson had clearly established decades earlier, that our mission was to “make the world safe for democracy.”

Reconciling Democracy and Predestined Greatness

Unlike the Soviets, we had the power to elect our leaders. They had a single party, the Communist Party. We had two, a consumer’s choice. We understood the principles of democracy. The first of those principles consists of having a constitution with a bill of rights. The second is to have regularly planned elections permitting to choose which of the two parties we wanted to be governed by. Any wonderful and wild idea was possible, so long as one of the two parties embraced that idea.

Communism, of course, or its twin sister, socialism, represented impossible ideas, not only because they made no sense in a consumer society, but because neither of the parties would embrace such ideas. Nevertheless, some feared that the Democrats might be tempted by socialism or even communism. And so, enterprising politicians committed to the idea of democratic choice invented the House of Un-American Activities, making it clear to political consumers — i.e. voters — that some choices, deemed political heresy, would not be available in the political marketplace. Heresy can, after all, happen in a free country that is also “under God.”

Throughout our schooling, our teachers and

textbooks led us to assume that the nation’s founders, like Woodrow Wilson more than a century later, had one mission in mind, though with a more local focus: making North America safe for democracy. According to the narrative we received, it was in the name of democracy that the Founding Fathers decided to break away from the despotism of the British monarchy. This created the enduring belief that the founders were visionaries intent on creating what would later become known as the “world’s greatest democracy.”

It’s a trope US politicians today never tire of repeating. The Democrat, President Harry Truman, may have been the first when he uttered the phrase in 1952, just as the Cold War was picking up steam. He cited America’s “responsibilities as the greatest nation in the history of the world.” Like George W. Bush, Mitt Romney and any Republican, President Donald Trump deems the US to be not only “the single greatest nation in the history of the world” but also “the greatest economy in the history of the world.” In contrast, this year’s Democratic candidate for the presidency, former Vice President Joe Biden, more modestly characterizes it as merely “the greatest nation on earth.” Perhaps he hasn’t studied history as carefully as Truman and Trump have.

It isn’t clear whether Cassius Clay, before becoming Muhammad Ali — who famously boasted he was “the greatest” — was inspired by patriotic politicians at the time vaunting the economic power and military prowess of the nation or whether today’s politicians who keep insisting on greatness are inspired by Ali. Donald Trump is not the only American to resonate to the idea of greatness. In every domain, Americans seek to determine who is the GOAT, the Greatest of All Time. There must always be a winner, someone who is totally exceptional.

American exceptionalism is not just an idea. It has become a dogma that leaders must embrace. Violating it or even trying to nuance it can prove disastrous. At a press conference in Europe in April 2009, fielding a question from a Financial

Times reporter, newly installed President Barack Obama tried to limit his patriotic hubris when he said, “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” This was too much for many Americans, such as Republican Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal and Fox News, who saw this as proof that Obama wasn’t a true believer in American exceptionalism. How could he dare to reduce the nation’s prestige to that of has-been countries like the UK and Greece?

The Historical Truth

At the nation’s very beginning, the founders sought and fought simply to create a nation that was no longer attached to Britain. It was a first step in the direction of just wanting to be left alone. They grappled first with the idea of how whatever emerged might define itself as a political entity. After that came the question of how it should be governed. Because of the diversity of the colonies, the founders could agree on the idea of dispersed authority, leading to the idea of a federation that could be thought of as a single federal state. They also, and nearly as emphatically, agreed that it was not about democracy.

In 1814, John Adams, a revolutionary leader and the second president of the United States, famously responded with this curt judgment to one of his critics who berated him for maligning democracy: “Democracy never lasts long.” Lambasting what he referred to as the “ideology” of democracy, Adams expressed his horror at “democratic rage and popular fury” and insisted that democracy “soon wastes exhausts and murders itself. There never was a Democracy Yet, that did not commit suicide.” The chaos of the French Revolution, which they considered an exercise in democracy, had left a bad impression on the minds of the Founding Fathers.

Alexander Hamilton, who died prematurely in a duel 10 years before Adams drafted his letter to John Tyler (but who miraculously came back to life on Broadway in a rap-based

musical comedy exactly two hundred years later) emphatically agreed with Adams: “We are a Republican Government. Real liberty is never found in despotism or in the extremes of Democracy.” Both men had studied ancient history and witnessed the chaos of the French Revolution. Hamilton concluded: “The ancient democracies in which the people themselves deliberated never possessed one good feature of government. Their very character was tyranny; their figure deformity.”

The idea of democracy got off to a bad start in the young republic. And yet, most Americans today assume that US democracy was born with the drafting of the US Constitution. Even if the Founding Fathers clearly stated their preference for the idea of a republic ruled by a patrician elite and sought to define the young nation as fundamentally the opposite of a democracy, for generations, Americans have tended to believe that the Constitution embodied and validated democratic principles.

Obsessed by the attribute of greatness, Americans also continue to believe that the US deserves the title of “the world’s greatest democracy.” This is a notion that has the potential to irritate people who are not American. Last year, Dutch blogger Moshe-Mordechai Van Zuiden, writing for The Times of Israel, bitterly contested the insistence on American greatness. He lists 10 reasons why the US electoral system in no way reflects the ideal or even the messy reality of effective national democracies.

After excoriating a two-party system offering “only a choice between two people widely despised,” as happened in 2016 and may even be the case in 2020, he makes a more fundamental complaint: “Top Dog Wins is not democracy. It’s a dictatorship of the majority.” All of the 10 points made by this brash Dutchman are well taken. Despite their national pride, more and more Americans are ready to agree.

The Last Election

Americans are clearly unaware of the fact that the revered founders believed that if democracy were to take hold, it would lead to the collapse of a fragile nation. The president who successfully marketed the idea of democracy for the first time, changing the course of America's political culture, was Andrew Jackson, the president Donald Trump most admires (after himself). It was during Jackson's presidency that Alexis de Tocqueville wrote and published "Democracy in America." Thanks to the French aristocrat's writing and Jackson's deeds, including displacing and sometimes massacring native tribes, the label stuck.

It subsequently became dogma that the United States not only is a democracy but exemplifies the ideal of what democracy should be. Abraham Lincoln went on to provide the concept of democracy with a permanent advertising slogan when he called it a "government of the people, by the people and for the people." By the time of Lincoln and the imminent Emancipation Proclamation, the idea of "people" had taken on a much broader meaning than at the time of the drafting of the Constitution.

As Van Zuiden and others have pointed out, the electoral system in the US was never designed to function as a true democracy. Nevertheless, the belief was solidly instilled that democracy was in the nation's DNA. It has withstood numerous assaults along the way and only recently begun to reveal some serious flaws that risk undermining Americans' unquestioning belief in its virtues. For future observers of US history, the illusion of democracy as the basis of government may technically have expired in December 2000 when nine Supreme Court justices, and not the people or even the states, elected George W. Bush as president. At the time and amid such confusion, few had the courage to acknowledge that Bush's election reflected a permanent change in their perception of democracy.

The chaos of this year's election, characterized by the twin evils of a persistent pandemic and the personality of Donald Trump, may well be the election that dispels all remaining illusions.

In 2021, a new approach to understanding the relationship between the people and the nation's institutions will most likely begin to emerge. The rupture with past traditions has been too great for the old dogmas to survive intact.

It's impossible to predict what form that seismic shift in the political culture will take. It now looks more than likely — though prudence is still required — that if democratic processes play out according to recognized rules, Joe Biden will be the 46th president of the United States. But there is no guarantee that democratic processes will play out in any recognizably legitimate way, partly because the COVID-19 pandemic has created a physical barrier to the already troublingly chaotic conduct of traditional elections whose results pass through the archaic Electoral College, and partly because President Donald Trump will be highly motivated to disturb, delay and possibly cancel whatever validated outcome emerges. But further complications and a practically infinite series of complementary risks are lying in the offing. The risk of uncontrollable civil unrest, if not civil war, is real.

Whatever the official result of the presidential election, whether it becomes known in the immediate aftermath of November 3 or sometime in January, it will be the object of contestation and possibly unpredictable forms of revolt by the citizens themselves. Like any episode of social upheaval, there is a strong chance that it will be quelled.

Biden's Dilemma

But even if quashed and silenced, it certainly will not be resolved. The most favorable scenario for neutralizing the revolt of the Trumpian right would be a landslide victory for Biden, with the Democrats retaking control of the Senate while maintaining and increasing their majority in the House. But even so, the losers will certainly cry foul.

A resounding majority for Biden and the Democrats would nevertheless buttress what

remains of the population's belief in democracy, legitimizing Biden's claim to govern the nation. But even in the best of scenarios, a landslide would still leave Biden in a fragile, if not precarious position. Biden has done next to nothing to unite his own party. A Democratic victory will incite the young progressives to contest his legitimate control over an aged and aging party establishment. Gallup reports that "Americans' frustration with the parties is evident in the 57% of Americans saying a third party is needed."

That figure has been stable for at least the past 10 years, but the level of frustration has been magnified by the presence of uninspiring candidates in both parties. As governing structures, both dominant parties have been seriously fragilized in the past two elections, the Republicans by Trump's successful assault on their traditions and the Democrats by the nearly successful challenge of Bernie Sanders and the party establishment's resistance to change.

If elected, Biden will be challenged on the right by the combined force of fanatical believers in Trump as the messiah and hordes of libertarians appalled by the prospect of more "big government." He will be challenged on the left by the progressives who not only oppose his tepid policies but no longer believe in the integrity of the Democratic Party. If it was just a question of managing the personal rivalries within his party, as it was for Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, all might be fine. But with a prolonged pandemic, an out-of-control economic crisis, increasingly lucid and effective racial unrest and a growing anti-establishment sentiment across much of the right and the left, reinstalling the establishment that preceded Trump and restoring faith in its ability to govern will be a task logically beyond the capacity of 78-year-old Biden.

The End of an Era

And those issues only begin to define the challenges Biden will be facing. In an essay in *The New Criterion* earlier this year, James Pierson observed the very real potential for social

collapse: "Yet today the United States seems headed in a different direction: toward pluralism without consensus — a nation-state without a national idea — and towards animus among racial, religious, regional, and national groups." In his article, Pierson deftly summarizes the history of the nation from the convergence of disparate colonies into a "union" and its need for imperial expansion to maintain its unity. Historically speaking, both convergence and expansion are no longer what they used to be.

Pierson claims that before the Civil War and the victory of the Union forces, the US had not really decided what it was. He asks the question, "what was it: union, republic, or empire — or a combination of all three? Whatever it was, it was not yet a nation." He claims it only became a nation-state "over a ninety-year period from 1860 to 1950, an era bookended by the Civil War and World War II, two great wars for liberal democracy, with World War I sandwiched in between."

Pierson credits Abraham Lincoln with creating the democracy that eventually came to dominate the world in the 20th century. Although assassinated by John Wilkes Booth before he could begin to implement his plan, Lincoln effectively created a political culture or system of belief that has only begun to fray in the last few decades. Pierson describes Honest Abe's ideological triumph. "Lincoln envisioned a nation held together by a 'political religion' based upon reverence for the Founding Fathers, the Constitution, and the Declaration of Independence." It was a nation "held together by loyalty to political institutions and abstract ideals."

Pierson believes that that stable system began to dissolve after 1950, when what had been clearly a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) culture began to lose its capacity to impose its norms. He concludes, somewhat nostalgically: "It is no longer possible for the United States to go forward as a 'cultural' nation in the form by which it developed between 1860 and 1950. Whether or not this is a good thing is beside the

point: it has happened, is happening, and will continue to happen.” And then, fatalistically, he adds: “These developments leave the United States without any strong foundations to keep itself together as a political enterprise — in a circumstance when its increasing diversity requires some kind of unifying thread. What will that be? No one now knows.”

Pierson’s description of cultural decline echoes the thesis of Samuel Huntington’s book, “Who Are We?” It expresses a sentiment that Trump exploited with his slogan “Make American Great Again.” Pierson seems to recognize that a return to the good old WASP order, wished for by Huntington and Trump (and perhaps Pierson himself), is simply not going to happen.

Joe Biden has promised to provide the thread that will unify the nation. Pierson believes that’s an impossible task. Others, focused on the possibilities of the future rather than a nostalgia for the past, claim it can be done. But Biden, though more conciliatory than Trump, clearly lacks the vision and the personality required to achieve it. And, of course, another Trump victory would only fragment the culture further and faster.

The obvious conclusion should be that there is little choice for a politician who wishes to survive intact other than to move forward boldly and accept to resolve some serious historical ambiguities and overturn a number of institutions that have created a situation of political sclerosis and accelerated cultural decline. There are plenty of ideas to work with. Some of the younger members of the Democratic Party have demonstrated the kind of energy needed to achieve success. And the population will not be averse to change if they see it is intended to cure the disease and not just temporarily relieve the pain. The opioid crisis has at least taught them that mere pain relief is a dead end.

The problem is that there will be resistance, though it will not come from the people. They know what they want. A majority wants to see

expanded choice and at the very minimum a third party, simply because they no longer trust the two parties that have been running the show. An even clearer majority supports single-payer health insurance. A majority among the younger generations and possibly the entire population expects a serious and thorough response to climate change. But as the actions of past presidents have demonstrated, changing the way of life of a society of consumers appears to be too much to ask of politicians.

Once the dust has settled from the election — unless that dust becomes radioactive while waiting for definitive results — 2021 is likely to be a year of confused political maneuvering and deep social instability. It will undoubtedly be a period of crisis. In a best case scenario, it will be the type of crisis that enables the nation to focus on a serious project of transformation. Those who see a Biden victory as a chance to return to the former status quo will attempt to manage the crisis, but they will inevitably be disappointed.

That includes traditional donors, Wall Street, Hollywood and the vast majority of the political class. The two-dimensional chessboard with its 64 squares that they have been playing on for decades has now acquired a third dimension. Their expertise in pushing around the same pieces, according to the same rules on the same traditional chessboard, has lost its validity.

Fragile Simulacrum

History has already overtaken the political potential of a fragile simulacrum of a democracy that was never meant to be a democracy. No historian tracing the events as they played out over more than two centuries should be surprised that, while maintaining the illusion of democracy, the system evolved to function essentially as an elaborate, well-armed oligarchy. The oligarchy will use every power it has in its high-tech arsenal, including new forms of apparent generosity, to stabilize those institutions that best resist the seismic forces that have already begun cracking the entire

system's foundations.

Even if it achieves some form of success and reaches what appears to be a state of relative stability, the world it believes it still controls will be very different and will begin evolving in highly unpredictable ways.

Many are predicting collapse. Given the degree to which an individualistic and corporatist culture has undermined most of the principles of human solidarity, collapse may well be the inevitable outcome. But collapse of what? Will it be the supposedly democratic political structures, traditions or ideologies? Will it be the economy? Or, as the coronavirus pandemic has shown, will it be human health, to say nothing of the health of the planet?

Voters in the November 3 election should be asking themselves not just whom they want to vote for, but a much more immediate question that is nevertheless difficult to answer. What do Biden and his future team think about all the above questions? Are they prepared? What do they seriously think they might do about them as soon as the cracks start appearing, many of which are already visible?

In the run-up to an election, politicians are unlikely to blurt out the truth, especially if it involves taking on serious problems whose solutions will inevitably cause pain in certain quarters. They will typically try to deal with three somewhat contradictory concerns. Keep the people happy. Reassure the donors. Prepare the next round of unholy alliances just to be certain they will be able to get something done. And then the big question arises: When it comes to taking hold of the reins of power, who will they accept to disappoint? But the real question is this, who can they afford to disappoint?

We are left asking ourselves whether John Adams was right when he wrote that democracy never lasts long. If Biden is elected and serves two terms (reaching the age of 88 at the end of his second term), the kind of democracy the US has created will have lasted exactly two hundred

years. John Adams probably would consider that a long time.

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Reworking US Policy in the Middle East and North Africa

Global competition, heightened interventions by regional actors and increased local domestic instability have changed the calculus of what will best serve US interests in the Middle East and North Africa.

Jean AbiNader
Oct 14, 2020

US foreign policy has shifted dramatically from just a brief 20 years ago. This is not the making of Donald Trump, Xi Jinping or Vladimir Putin. Rather, they are symptoms of forces that have been building since the post-Soviet era. With the ascendancy of the US as the global superpower and the "Washington Consensus" as the pillar of economic development, it was easy to assume that Pax Americana was our legacy to the world.

In less than three generations, we are now less sure of our leadership and concerned — as are other nations — with the contradiction of a great power festering internally. Yes, the US certainly retains the world's strongest military, economy, number of Nobel Prize winners and sometimes even Olympic gold medals. But America's leaders are unsure of its place in the world, and they disagree on key issues: climate change and the environment, sustainable economic growth, support for international organizations, reengineering the social contract and similar deep-seated concerns.

The US in the Region

It is no surprise that there are many opinions on what US foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region will look like under an administration led by Joe Biden or Donald Trump. The only clear agreement is that there is no going back to 2000, 2008 or 2016. The world has changed in many respects. While we can discern a pattern of Trump's preferences, Biden's policies would reflect what he and his team learned from their time in the White House under Barack Obama and, hopefully, what he has learned in his almost 50 years of being in Washington.

Opinions about a return of Trump's world vision run the gamut from doomsday to what could be better? For example, writing for Brookings, Thomas Wright exclaimed that "a second Trump term would make a lasting impact on the world right when it is at a particularly vulnerable moment. U.S. alliances would likely crumble, the global economy would close, and democracy and human rights would be in rapid retreat."

This is hardly the view of the president's supporters. They believe that international alliances, the global economy and promoting democracy and human rights have not secured stability or prosperity for the US, so why continue with policies that do not serve America's vital interests? This brings us to the nub of the question: What are those interests that are literally worth fighting for?

On the macro-level in the MENA region, it used to be simple: Israel and oil, with a secondary nod to trade and arms sales. This is no longer the case. Trump has put Israel on the road to control over its future by pressuring Iran and Hezbollah, continuing bilateral defense arrangements that enhance Israel's qualitative edge, sealing the normalization of relations between the Israelis and some Arab countries, and ensuring that the UN Security Council will never pass another annoying resolution challenging Israel's worldview.

In world energy markets, Saudi Arabia has found itself outmaneuvered as the US can shift the supply paradigms to Asian markets by increasing its exports, which now makes America a more dangerous competitor than Russia. Even in arms sales and commerce, the US finds itself in tough competition with Russia, China and a host of regional producers — from Turkey to France and the UK.

Regarding who are US allies and who are not, it appears that Trump favors leaving the Middle East and North Africa to its own devices, which includes supporting leaders who reflect his values of disdain for democratic limitations on their exercise of decision-making. This includes Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman and the UAE's Mohammed bin Zayed. Trump's penchant for transactional diplomacy is well illustrated by his treatment of the Kurds, Iraqis, the Syrian opposition, Turks, Iranians and others, often viewing diplomacy as a zero-sum competition.

Does this mean a Trump foreign policy in the MENA region is without merit? Not if you are a supporter of Israel's security, a hard-line approach on Iran's dysfunctional role in the region and beyond, pro-arms sales as a tie that binds the US to its friends, and ending what seem to be "endless wars" that make no sense to many American voters.

A Second Trump Administration?

If Trump wins a second term in office, his administration would further refrain from direct action in places like Yemen, Libya, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt, again focusing on the benefit to US interests as the guiding principle. For weak states like those in North Africa as well as countries such as Lebanon, it will continue to be a tug-of-war within the State Department as to how best to support US interests in any bilateral relationship. The bigger the country (Egypt), the better endowed with energy resources (Algeria) or the more likely to be convinced that normalizing

ties with Israel will be tolerated by its citizens (Sudan), the more attention it will get. As has been noted by a former US ambassador, “This will become a major priority of the next Trump administration and they will make foreign aid contingent on normalization agreements.”

How this shakes out for Morocco and Saudi Arabia, both of which are targets of US-Israel diplomacy, is not clear as the two countries have special ties to Jerusalem not easily superseded by realpolitik. Don’t plan on seeing any reduction in US support for the Saudis in Yemen unless the Senate goes to the Democratic Party, which may force the president to deal with his friends in the Gulf.

Somalia remains an outlier, although its fits and starts toward democracy may draw the attention of policymakers who realize the threat of the geostrategic encroachment of China and Russia in the Horn of Africa. As for Mauritania and Djibouti, like many Americans, most members of Congress can’t find them on a map, which leaves these countries open to the jaws of Russia and China.

The great powers game in the MENA region is just beginning to be engaged as China has expanded its ports to the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Its economic diplomacy is making inroads in a long and patient march to North Africa. Russia is not leaving Syria anytime soon and will continue to press Lebanon and Egypt to accept military assistance, as it will also do in Iran, much to the detriment of US-Israel interests.

It would be quite short-sighted to minimize the roles of Iran and Turkey as regional powers in being able to affect key issues: Libya, Lebanon, Syria, eastern Mediterranean energy, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar, the use of mercenaries, arms sales and taking risks that are considered illogical to some Washington policymakers. Each must be considered on its own terms and with a close eye on their often expressed interests and weakening domestic support. While a paper can be written on each

of these countries, suffice it to say that a second Trump administration will have to use much greater diplomatic finesse in convincing Erdogan to work with rather than against Washington’s interests.

And a Biden Administration?

The biggest challenge to an incoming Biden administration is to indicate how it will retain the best policies of the Obama administration while introducing initiatives that will strengthen perceptions of US commitment to act decisively. Many people in the Middle East and North Africa look at President Obama’s hesitation to act firmly in Syria and Libya, the hands-off treatment over Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and the uneven commitment to human rights as indications of weakness and inconsistency.

A Biden administration would begin from a different set of values that define different interests than the Trump White House. Ironically, Joe Biden’s values have more in common with the internationalist agendas of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and George H.W. Bush than with the current Republican administration. The cornerstones of Biden’s platform include the primacy of diplomacy, building relationships and alliances, emphasizing multilateralism for conflict-resolution, and greater attention to human rights and rule of law.

As an open letter of endorsement for Biden by former US ambassadors and Middle East experts states, while “each country faces its own unique issues, the core complaints of poverty, corruption, and a scarcity of freedom are a common challenge.” Many of Biden’s positions are aspirational — for example, assuming that the right combination of sticks and carrots will bring Iran back to the bargaining table while Russia and China are already working to bolster the Iranian regime militarily and economically.

Promoting human rights and democratic values are front and center, but one wonders how those values resonate with the current generation of leaders, many of whom ignore and suppress

expressions of dissension and calls for change. Part of Biden's pledge is to support economic and political reforms, which may be opposed by those regimes he seeks to move toward. These reforms include greater inclusiveness and economic development for the young, women and marginalized groups.

Biden claims that his administration would not countenance regimes that deny the basic civil rights of their citizens, nor ones built on widespread corruption and cronyism or those that meddle in the affairs of neighboring states. There is a gnawing fear among pro-Israel Americans that he will veer from his traditional uncritical support for Israel and insist on an end to actions that undermine the possibility of a two-state solution between the Israelis and Palestinians. These include halting the construction of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and stopping the annexation of Palestinian territory. Biden has already noted that he will restore economic and humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians and reopen the US Consulate in East Jerusalem that serves the Palestinian communities.

Regarding Lebanon, the former vice president favors assisting its civil society and citizens to develop and implement policies that will be inclusive, and also supporting a dynamic state that reflects democratic values of equality and fairness. He mirrors the Trump administration in promising to continue support for the Lebanese armed forces. Biden also recognizes the need to sustain extensive humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees and host communities in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. What Biden won't do, according to his statements, is continue to tolerate support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen and its pursuit and punishment of dissidents and critics inside the kingdom and elsewhere.

While no specifics are mentioned regarding Biden's policy on Syria beyond "standing with civil society and pro-democracy partners on the ground," his campaign platform maintains the role of US leadership in the coalition to defeat the Islamic State group and restore stability and

promote a political solution in partnership with others in the region.

Although not an Arab country, Iran plays an outsized role in the Middle East. Biden has already noted that he will renegotiate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action — the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran — with a broader focus on ending Tehran's regional interference, support of terrorism and militias, and production of missiles. A similar agreement tailored to the specifics of Erdogan's endgame in the region is also critical if any of the goals mentioned by a Biden administration are to be realized.

While these goal statements are well-crafted, the lack of details — while understandable — raises concerns considering challenges, such as needing to reenergize a dispirited US diplomatic corps, indifferent or hostile players in the region, and unsure allies in Europe and the Middle East and North Africa. The critical need to focus on America's domestic economic and psychological revival in the coming years will also compete with international priorities. Of course, the disposition of the races in the Senate and House of Representatives are also critical to closing the gap between aspiration and implementation.

The authoritarian regimes in the MENA region prefer the devil they know. Yet the youth, women and those who are marginalized are desperate for changes that incorporate their aspirations and are built on equality, justice and opportunity. Donald Trump and Joe Biden are both known in the Middle East and North Africa. It will be quite interesting to see how the region reacts on November 4.

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US Election 2020: The Fight of the Machines

Instead of machines fighting us, they have devised a way to make us fight each other, and the November election is shaping up to be a key battle.

Ian McCredie
Oct 15, 2020

Donald Trump is a cult leader with a following of millions. In the minds of cult followers, their leader, by definition, can do no wrong — all his actions are automatically right. The leader has a prophetic vision and a direct line to the divine. They are not bound by the rules and laws that lesser people have to follow. Jim Jones, David Koresh and Donald Trump all fit this description — in the opinion of their followers.

Trump's following is vastly greater than Jones or Koresh, partly because he is a US president but also because social media and the artificial intelligence (AI) that backs it has vastly magnified his powers, possibly beyond the point that even he realizes. For Trump's disciples, social media filters out any contrary news about their chosen one and feeds them undiluted negativity about his opponents. Trump's devoted followers exist in a bubble where Democrats are flesh-eating pedophiles or Marxist revolutionaries, and where Trump has been chosen by God to save America.

For the evangelicals, Trump has been sent to fulfill the prophecies of Revelation and usher in the end times. No amount of fact-checking or reality will penetrate. For his followers, Trump is always right, incapable of doing wrong and uniquely gifted to lead them to the promised land. Those who do not understand this are either souls waiting to be saved or, more likely, those that have chosen Satan and the path to hell. Any potential pro-Trump opinion or even nascent tendency is picked up by social media algorithms and magnified and echoed back to the individual over and over, sucking them into a

rabbit hole of Trumpian fantasy.

Trump may be a fraud and a con man, but he has seized the leadership of this cult. His leadership, which in earlier years would have been mocked as an embarrassment, is instead viewed as messianic by his cult. This superhuman power enables him to command his followers to disbelieve anything in the "fake news media," defy law and ignore social norms. He has already threatened disorder if he loses the election. America is a tinderbox of racial tension, social discord, dramatic inequality, a deadly pandemic and economic collapse. Like Jones and Koresh, Trump has the capability to precipitate disaster, but on a far greater scale.

The force multiplier behind this cult is the AI run by Google, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and all the other social media giants. The super-computers which run the AI algorithms discern our likes, emotions, prejudices, tastes, political views and sexuality. The databases they collect are huge, and the AI profile of each of us detailed and perceptive. These computers are always on, always connected, and the algorithms employed are far more powerful than we realize. They overwhelm the human ability to filter the stream of self-reinforcing messages and subtle exploitation of our subconscious, wherever you fall on the political spectrum. The continuous social media feed that surrounds each of us in a bubble of "reality" is in fact highly subjective, tailored individually and continually reinforces our own beliefs and prejudices. Cult members exist in an individually crafted matrix. The singularity may have already arrived.

The singularity is the point in the future when AI overtakes human intelligence and becomes self-replicating. This was thought to signal the rise of the machines and an existential threat to human existence — think of Arnold Schwarzenegger in "The Terminator." Stephen Hawking warned that "the development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race."

The AI revolution has enabled both the Trump cult and its opponents to flourish to the point where society has fragmented into warring

factions who believe the others are out to destroy them. Instead of the machines fighting us, the machines have devised a way to make us fight each other, and the November election is shaping up to be a key battle.

***Ian McCredie** is a former senior British foreign service official.

What Would a Biden Victory Spell for US-Turkish Relations?

If there is a new president in the Oval Office come 2021, it will pose many more challenges for US-Turkey relations.

Nathaniel Handy
Oct 19, 2020

In an interview for a new book from Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward, US President Donald Trump says: "I get along very well with Erdogan, even though you're not supposed to because everyone says, 'What a horrible guy.'" A lot is revealed in that statement. The key lies in the phrase "you're not supposed to." It implies there is a moral authority vetting such preferences and that he is dismissive of that moral authority.

Of course, it says more about the moral fault lines at the heart of US politics than it does about US-Turkish relations. These fault lines are being given the scorched earth treatment once more as the election season draws to a close. But what does the future hold for US-Turkish relations, once so unshakable and now so fractious, despite President Trump's personal warmth toward Recep Tayyip Erdogan? Will it make any difference if the old man at the helm is Joe Biden instead?

Let the Old Men Talk

As the above quote reveals, much about US-Turkish relations today is being driven by personalities. Individuals always matter in international relations, but their importance is accentuated by the rise of figures who command strong populist appeal, who are firmly embedded in positions of power and who espouse an essentially patriarchal and conservative vision of the exercise of that power. It means relations are not the smooth ride they were during the Cold War era. Today, these populist figures thrive on being bullish and awkward leaders.

In Donald Trump, Turkey's leader, like many others, has found a man with whom they can engage. Indeed, President Erdogan is said to have a regular hotline to the White House. The US president is openly admiring of strong and often autocratic leadership. It's a style he clearly feels he epitomized in the business world and which he has brought to his presidency. That his tenure as the president of the United States may be briefer than that of many of the populist and autocratic leaders he admires is the one spoiler.

It may also be a spoiler for the US more broadly. In the past few years, such world leaders have grown self-confident in the global order lead by Donald Trump. A Biden administration that chastises them for their faults on human rights, conflict resolution or democratic norms might well receive a hostile response. This poses a conundrum for the United States. A president who set out specifically to put America first may have made it far harder for a successor who wants to begin collaborating again.

What Would Biden Do?

The signs are that as president, Joe Biden would not have as easy a relationship with Erdogan as Trump has had. Given that getting on with Turkey has increasingly come to mean getting on with its president, this matters a great deal. Almost a year ago, Biden said in an interview with The New York Times that he regarded Erdogan as an "autocrat." He also expressed misgivings about Turkey's actions in Syria, confrontations in the eastern Mediterranean about energy resources,

and the stationing of NATO nuclear weapons on Turkish soil.

Though these comments went unacknowledged at the time, the Turkish government has since raised heated objections as Biden's presidential bid has gathered steam. There will also be real concerns in Ankara about Biden's longstanding support for Kurdish rights, including his belief that President Trump has dealt shoddily with his nation's Kurdish allies in Syria after they helped to subdue the Islamic State group. Such a position would bring back some of the tensions of the Obama presidency.

Clearly, upon gaining the presidency, one would expect a measure of realignment from the Biden White House. The former vice president's strong stance against Erdogan would have to become more nuanced as occurs for all those who gain actual power. President Erdogan is not an autocrat. He may have authoritarian instincts, but autocrats do not allow elections with credible results, nor do they allow their opponents to win the mayoralty in their largest cities.

The complex and competing tensions of the region in which Turkey lies will necessitate the US working with Turkey to a large degree. That requires finding common ground and mutual interest. But necessity can only get you so far. To generate any real warmth to his relationship with President Erdogan, Joe Biden will have to reveal some dissatisfaction with the global status quo or at least some sympathy with those, such as the Turkish president, who are driven by this belief. That such concern genuinely motivates Biden might be a hard sell.

No Smooth Rides

Nothing about the past few years of US-Turkish relations has been smooth, from the furor over the jailing of American pastor Andrew Brunson to the simmering Turkish anger at US refusal to extradite Fethullah Gulen, the head of the movement held responsible in Turkey for the failed 2016 coup attempt. That incident, which

has defined the trajectory of the country over the past five years, was a pivotal one not only internally but also externally.

Russian President Vladimir Putin was quick and decisive in backing Erdogan at a point when the success of the coup was still unclear. The US, on the other hand, was less wholehearted, and there was the sense that it hesitated and that US personnel might even have been complicit at the Incirlik air base in southeastern Turkey. In moments of crisis, you learn whom you can really trust. In the personality politics of today, President Erdogan learned much from that episode. It fed into his already established worldview in which the West was inherently predatory and untrustworthy.

None of this means that Turkey or its president are wedded to deep friendships with US opponents such as Russia, Iran or China. Indeed, Turkey's relations with Russia over the past five years have been exceptionally turbulent. But it does mean that Turkey has, in President Erdogan, a pugnaciously nationalist leader who is unafraid of picking fights. It means he has picked several with the US itself, and yet, with President Trump at the helm, you always feel that, however unsavory things get, the Turkish president is always half-admired for his obstinate aggression.

If there is a new president in the Oval Office come 2021, it will pose many more challenges for both sides. The relationship will not be easy, and without the bromance that occasionally surfaces between the current leaders, it could be a more dangerous one. US-Turkish strategic goals have been diverging for years. This causes systemic strain to the relationship. The Trump presidency may, inadvertently, have eased some of that strain, but it will not go away. A president less in tune with the current administration in Ankara could tear it further apart. For bilateral relations, for NATO and for the whole Middle East and Mediterranean region that could be a very destabilizing prospect.

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Does Beijing Prefer Biden or Trump?

What is at stake for Beijing is an unfortunate choice: endure four more years of Trump's tirades or a US administration that values America's alliances and intends to reinvigorate them.

Daniel Wagner
Oct 20, 2020

Few major events in the world now occur without China having a stake, directly or indirectly, in their outcome. That is because Beijing has become a force to be reckoned with, and its influence has grown to rival or even surpass that of the US in many parts of the world. Just as elections throughout the world have historically implied some sort of impact on Washington, now the world is becoming accustomed to the same being true for Beijing.

The US presidential election is certainly no exception. At least part of the reason that matters to Washington is because, for the first time since America became a global superpower, it now has a proper peer. The former Soviet Union may have been a military peer, but it was not a peer on any other level. That is not true with China, which now rivals the US in some arenas or is on its way to doing so. In some aspects of science, technology, the global economy, diplomacy and political influence, Beijing is already more consequential to much of the rest of the world than America is.

Given its single-minded focus on creating an

alternative world order crafted in Beijing's image, as well as the tremendous resources it is devoting to that task, there is little reason to believe that China's trajectory will change in the coming decade and beyond. One could argue, in fact, that the outcome of the election matters almost as much to Beijing as it does to America, for it will define the type and scope of headwind Beijing faces for at least the next four years.

A second Trump term of course implies more of the same: trade war, challenging Beijing at every opportunity, the war of words, and not giving an inch on anything. But it also implies four more years of discord and disarray between America and its many allies. Both America and China have paid a serious price for having Donald Trump in the White House, but Beijing has certainly benefited while Washington has suffered from the fractious nature of America's relationship with its allies.

Under a Biden presidency, that is likely to be greatly reduced, which should concern Beijing a lot, for it has enabled the Communist Party of China (CPP) to act with virtual impunity on the global stage while America and its allies passively look on. That is what has enabled Beijing to expropriate and militarize the Spratly and Paracel Islands, bulldoze its way into more than 70 countries without opposition via the Belt and Road Initiative, and significantly increase its influence in the world's multilateral organizations, among other things. That damage has already been done and, in truth, there is relatively little Joe Biden or any subsequent US administration may be able to do about it.

What Biden can do in response is repair those alliances and lead an effort to coordinate and unify the West's future responses to Beijing's actions. It is by acting in unison that the West will not only get Beijing's attention, but begin to reverse the tide. Beijing has few real allies, and some of its "allies" have dual allegiances between Beijing and Washington. When push comes to shove in a time of crisis, Saudi Arabia, for example, is not likely to pivot in Beijing's direction, despite China's growing economic ties

with the kingdom. The same is true with a variety of other allies that China believes are in its camp but which Washington has cultivated over the decades. Beijing is a new arrival to the party.

So, what is at stake for Beijing is an unfortunate choice: endure four more years of Trump's tirades or (at least) four years of a US administration that values America's alliances and intends to reinvigorate them. Biden is not likely to try to reverse the course Trump has embarked upon with Beijing. That ship has sailed. US Congress is on board with Trump's contention that Xi Jinping and the CCP are bad actors and that the Chinese government is America's greatest adversary. Biden's foreign policy is unlikely to be substantively differently oriented.

In that regard, while this is undoubtedly the most important election of most Americans' lifetimes, it is also crucially important for Beijing. The gloves are off on both sides and they are not going to be put back on. The question is, does Beijing prefer Trump or Biden? While the answer is probably neither, knowing that bilateral relations are not going to revert to where they were under Barack Obama, Beijing may actually prefer Trump over Biden in the hope that the damage done to America's alliances may become permanent. In the meantime, the CCP will continue to use Trump to whip up nationalism at home, which of course suits its ultimate objective of strengthening Xi's and the CCP's grip on power.

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Trans and Non-Binary Voters Face Disenfranchisement in US Election

The potential for disenfranchisement is even higher for transgender people facing other vectors of oppression related to their race, criminal history, ethnicity, age, income or ability.

Colleen Scribner
Oct 21, 2020

In the United States, trans and non-binary people's voting rights are under threat from strict photo ID laws or harassment at polling stations. As November 3 approaches, the impact of such restrictions looms large for the status of the country's democracy. To have credible democratic elections, they must be free from discrimination, particularly regarding the ability of historically marginalized groups to participate. It is essential that steps are taken to mitigate this impact in the next two weeks and that changes are made for future elections.

In the US, 36 states have voter ID laws, with 18 of those requiring a photo ID; notably in North Carolina and Pennsylvania, strict photo voter ID laws were recently struck down. These ID laws significantly affect transgender voters who may have difficulty obtaining an ID that accurately reflects their name, gender and appearance. As a result, transgender citizens with identification documents that do not match their gender may be turned away at the polls. By some estimates, approximately 42% of eligible transgender voters do not have identification documents that reflect their name and gender.

Disenfranchisement

When it is permitted, the administrative process of updating voter identification cards can also be onerous and involve significant financial and administrative hurdles for trans people, discouraging voting. At least 14 states have burdensome requirements to alter the gender section on IDs, including a court order, proof

of gender-affirming surgery or an amended birth certificate. This is despite the fact many trans people do not want, cannot access or afford surgery or other gender-affirming care. In addition, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of gender-affirming procedures have been put on hold as non-emergency care and surgeries are postponed.

These requirements potentially disenfranchise hundreds of thousands of trans citizens. The UCLA Williams Institute notes that “In the November 2020 general election, over 378,000 voting-eligible transgender people may face barriers to voting due to voter registration requirements and voter ID laws, including 81,000 who could face disenfranchisement in strict photo ID states.” These difficulties have only been exacerbated by the pandemic when courts and the Department of Motor Vehicles offices closed across the country for weeks, hindering the process of updating identification documents.

Of course, the potential for disenfranchisement is even higher for transgender people facing other vectors of oppression related to their race, criminal history, ethnicity, age, income or ability. For instance, as Human Rights Watch notes, the practice of disenfranchising felons and of removing inactive voters from the rolls can disproportionately affect transgender voters who experience housing insecurity and incarceration — often due to the criminalization of HIV transmission or sex work — at higher rates.

Transgender people also often face harassment and discrimination at the polls, even from poll workers. Human Rights Campaign found in 2019 that fear of discrimination has led “49 percent of transgender adults, and 55 percent of trans adults of color to avoid voting in at least one election in their lives.” This fear is not without basis. The Williams Institute also found that after presenting inaccurate IDs at a polling station, many experience voter suppression: “Respondents reported being verbally harassed (25%), denied services or benefits (16%), being asked to leave the venue where they presented

the identification (9%), and being assaulted or attacked (2%).”

Ensuring Equal Access to Suffrage

Access to suffrage, regardless of gender identity, is fundamental to democracy, and all undue constraints on who can vote should be eliminated. While the responsibility this November will, unfortunately, fall primarily on trans and non-binary voters to create a voting plan that may include voting by mail when possible, it is the state’s responsibility to ensure equal access for these communities.

Across the globe, there are models on which to base reform. In several countries such as Argentina, Colombia and Denmark, citizens can self-determine their gender on their IDs. In Malta, there is also an “X” or third gender/decline-to-state option for passports. Having this third option is extremely important for including trans and non-binary voters, yet in the US, only 19 states and the District of Colombia allow residents to select a non-binary option on their driver’s licenses. Further, changing one’s gender on an identification card should not require proof of medical intervention and should be based solely on self-identification.

In addition to these longer-term reforms, there are also opportunities to prevent discrimination against trans and non-binary voters in this electoral cycle. Advocacy groups should continue to encourage members of the LGBTQ+ community to become poll workers. Simultaneously, the government should train all poll workers on interacting with transgender and non-binary voters and ensuring that they are not denied a ballot. Notably, voters can also report any intimidation at the polls to the nonpartisan Election Protection Coalition at 866-OUR-VOTE. These steps can ensure that members of these communities will feel safe going to the polls and making their voices heard.

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Trump's Gift to America: Spectacle

Whatever the world thinks about Trump, the undeniable reality is that he is the most ubiquitous American president in history.

Ellis Cashmore
Oct 23, 2020

Time: January 3, 2015. Place: Trump Tower Bar and Grill, 5th Avenue, New York

Overheard conversation between two diners.

"Another great show, Don. You were terrific as usual. Your bluster is so intimidating. I loved the way you thundered on about that one guy's shortcomings and made him cry."

"Yeah, I thought I was excellent. Most of these 'Apprentice' wannabes are useless. They couldn't run a newsstand where there's no television."

"You know, Don, I think you could do anything you want. You should run for president. You'd do a better job than some of these clowns. Last year, Obama had his worst year in office: He accused Russia of invading Ukraine, ordered airstrikes in Syria and, now, he's got protesters chanting 'black lives matter.' He's even talking about bypassing Congress' opposition to his plan to allow 4 million immigrants to apply for work permits. Man, he's in trouble."

"I could take care of business."

"Then why don't you? Run for the big job. Think about it: You could do for America what you've

done for TV. It's been running since 2004 and you've made it one of the most popular shows in history. You can use 'The Apprentice' formula, nominating project leaders who can take responsibility and make strategic decisions. You can call them into the Situation Room and tell them to brief you. If you don't like their work, you know what to say, right? You're dismissed! Just kidding, Don."

The World's Most Famous Bouffant

When people thought they'd seen enough of the world's most famous bouffant, they were treated to "The further adventures of" Except not in another reality TV show, but an American presidency, a presidency that had the thrills and creative destruction of "The Apprentice." No one, surely not even Trump himself, thought he stood a chance when he decided to take on established figures in the GOP and the hugely experienced Democrats, in particular Hillary Rodham Clinton.

His upset election triumph over her was so improbable that it briefly managed the impossible, making people forget North Korea's nuclear tests, the Syrian Civil War, the election of openly anti-American President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and the surprising decision by Britain to leave the European Union. All people were thinking and talking about was Trump, who became a member of an exclusive club: He was one of only five presidents to win office while losing the popular vote.

What happened? Had Americans lost their senses? After all, Trump had no political experience whatsoever. Even the most inexperienced presidents in history had either served at senior levels in the military or in the legal system. Trump was an entrepreneur-turned-reality TV star. But his leap into the unknown came in the second decade of the 21st century when small matters like this seemed of secondary importance.

What mattered more was Trump's ability to deliver a booming, rumbling, roaring

performance and easy-on-the-intellect messages that people could understand. Cut taxes. Ban Muslims. Bomb the shit out of ISIS. Build a wall with Mexico. Bring home American troops. Tear up trade agreements. Move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

There were other similarly attention-grabbing commitments. Trump's gift to America was spectacle. There had never been such a spectacular candidate, and perhaps that's what nearly half of America wanted: a captivating leader. America has developed a culture in which everything, no matter how solemn, can be alchemized into handsome if meretricious entertainment. And, if you disagree, I have a two-word response: Kim Kardashian.

Over the past four years, Trump has dominated world affairs. His foreign policy decisions have effectively redefined US relations with the rest of the world. His fiscal policies have made Wall Street deliriously happy. His attitudes toward racism have divided his own nation as well as huge parts of the world. Trump has angered and delighted, probably in a rough ratio of 60:40. Whatever the world thinks about Trump, the undeniable reality is that he is the most ubiquitous American president in history. There hasn't been a day in the last four years when Donald Trump has not been reported as doing or saying something headline-grabbing. Reality TV shows that hog our attention are doing their jobs. Presidents who do it are probably doing something other than politicking.

For many politicians, a scandalous claim of an affair would be embarrassing, if not ruinous. But porn star Stormy Daniels' charge that she and Trump had a liaison in 2006 seemed entirely congruent. In fact, it would have been more of a surprise had the president not been entangled in some sort of sex imbroglio.

There is even a global movement that regards Trump as far more than a politician. For QAnon, Trump is waging a surreptitious war against a cabal of Satan-worshipping Democrats, plutocrats and Hollywood celebrities who engage

in pedophilia, sex trafficking and harvesting blood from dead children. Not even a drama, let alone a reality TV show, could have scripted a more fantastic narrative than this. The nearest equivalent I can think of is in Yaohnanen, on the South Pacific island of Tanna, where Britain's Prince Philip is worshipped as a sort of messiah, a son of the ancestral mountain god.

Trump has not repurposed himself as president. He has adapted the presidency to his own requirements, surrounding himself with senior-level advisers, assigning them tasks, then firing or promoting them. His staff turnover as of October 7, it was 91%. No one has been safe while Trump has been behind the Oval Office desk, not even the first senator to endorse Trump's presidential candidacy in early 2016, Jeff Sessions; he was fired in 2017. Many others have resigned, but the revolving door approach to senior political appointments and dismissals suggests a style of leadership in which delegation is key, much like in TV.

Still Fresh

Now the big question is whether this novelty is still fresh. Even the most fascinating, amusing and engaging celebrities have a shelf life. Trump has delighted and infuriated people in roughly equal measures. Every faux pas — and there have been a good few of them — is somehow glossed over as blithely as if he'd thrown up in the back of an Uber. Every success is hailed, usually by him, as a groundbreaking masterstroke. Sometimes, to be fair, it is. The rapprochement with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un was genuinely significant.

But awarding himself an A+ for the "phenomenal job" he had done during his tenure grated with as many as it amused. And the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has provided his opponent Joe Biden with a gift-wrapped opportunity to expose him. "We have it under control. It's gonna be just fine," Trump assured everyone in January. A month later, he called the coronavirus a "hoax." "The virus will not have a chance against us," he claimed as the death rate climbed

toward the current figure of 222,000. He blamed “China’s cover-up” and criticized the World Health Organization. His complacency was unnerving even to skeptics.

When Trump and Melania were stricken only a month before the election, many must have muttered something about hubris. But, with characteristic bravado, Trump used his brief incapacitation as an occasion to show he doesn’t scare easily. Nor should anyone else. “Don’t be afraid of Covid,” he tweeted. “Don’t let it dominate your life.” Once more, he treated an abstract malefactor as if it were a challenge on “The Apprentice.” “Covid isn’t that serious,” he concluded dismissively. It was typical Trump, making light of what is, to others, a near-irresolvable problem. Then again, that’s been his *modus operandi* throughout his presidency. For Trump, there hasn’t been a problem that doesn’t have a solution. It’s just that most people are “losers” and don’t want to discover it. He always can. This is why he’s intolerant of journalists whom he calls negative when they attack him. The problems may be larger and more complex than those on “The Apprentice,” but they all have resolutions.

Most Americans have made up their mind about how they’re going to cast their ballot. Trump’s illness might evoke sympathy, but it won’t affect anyone’s choice. Trump is already back on the road, swatting away criticisms with his usual humorous self-assurance. His flamboyant, often preposterous, occasionally laughable and always entertaining style of leadership has dazzled America and, indeed, the world for four years now. Polls suggest Americans are satiated and ready for a return to a more traditional leader.

What worries them most? An extravagantly bombastic president who never doubts the wisdom of his own choices or a more measured and reflective personality who will probably lead competently but never offer the kind of extravaganza to which Americans, as well as the rest of the world, have become accustomed?

***Ellis Cashmore** is the author of “Kardashian Kulture.”

The Importance of the US-South Korea Relationship

Presidential leadership needs to be even-handed and sensitive to the concerns of US allies.

Steve Westly & James Bang
Oct 26, 2020

There are many things we look for in a president. We look for leadership and the ability to manage grave challenges like a pandemic. While most people are focused on avoiding COVID-19 and keeping their jobs, we would be wise to remember that one of the most important roles for any president is to build a set of global allies who will stand with us when inevitable conflicts occur.

Today, America faces unprecedented challenges from foreign powers, especially China and North Korea. To meet the challenges, we must build a coherent foreign policy that the world — especially our allies — can understand and support. We are witnessing China increasingly flexing its muscles on the Indian border, in Hong Kong, in the South China Sea and with Taiwan. America puts itself at risk to not realize that China is investing much of its resources into a growing, multifaceted military.

The US needs to build alliances throughout Asia to ensure our stability for the next century. We need to be doubling down on our relationships with India, Vietnam, Taiwan, Japan and especially South Korea. South Korea is the world’s 12th-largest economic power and one of America’s strongest allies for the last 60 years. It has been a bastion of democracy housing one of

the largest US military bases in Asia. It also houses an essential element of the West's global supply chain for technology, transportation and telecommunications. This supply chain is more important than ever if relations with China continue to deteriorate.

While the importance of a strong South Korea policy is at an all-time high, US President Donald Trump managed to stick his finger in the eye of our Korean allies. In 2019, Trump demanded "out of thin air" that the Koreans pay \$4.7 billion per year to station US military forces on the Korean Peninsula, according to CNN.

There is no question that our allies have to pay their fair share for defense. However, cost-sharing negotiations must be based on rationale and data. At precisely the time we need strong allies in Asia, President Trump is burning bridges. This is a major political gaffe that America needs to correct before our relationship suffers long-term damage. If the South Koreans cannot count on reasonable and predictable US foreign policy, they will have little choice but to abandon Washington and to seek out other alliances.

The South Koreans weren't the only ones taken by surprise. Even Republican Senators Cory Gardner and Marco Rubio were unprepared to discuss the president's comments. Senator Ed Markey, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, said, "If South Korea decides that it is better off without the United States, President Trump will have undermined an over 60-year shared commitment to peace, stability, and rule of law."

The United States can do better. We need to deepen our relationship with South Korea as an essential partner for dealing with North Korea and China. We should be doing the same with other Asian countries and continue to promote the policies that Democratic and Republican secretaries of state have built over decades. A president needs to communicate a consistent game plan that the American people — and our allies — can understand and count on.

Presidential leadership needs to be even-handed and sensitive to the concerns of our allies. Demands should be replaced by reasonable requests and ample explanations. Insisting that allies vastly increase payments to the United States might make good domestic election-year politics at the cost of American safety in the world.

If we do not rethink the importance of our allies soon, we may be left to fight the next war alone.

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What the US Election Means for the Liberal World Order

As the COVID-19 pandemic risks to mark the end of the world liberal order, will the upcoming US election represent the last call for what remains of the current system?

Vittorio Emanuele Parsi & Valerio Alfonso Bruno
Oct 28, 2020

In 1992, Francis Fukuyama published his controversial best-seller, "The End of History and the Last Man," arguing that liberal democracy is the final form of government for all nations. Almost three decades later, G. John Ikenberry, one of the most influential theorists of liberal internationalism today, in "A World Safe for Democracy" suggests that the liberal world order, if reformed and reimagined, remains possibly the best "international space" for democracies to flourish and prosper. After all, reasons Ikenberry, what do its illiberal challengers like China or Russia have to offer?

Apart from outside challengers, the liberal

international order's project is threatened from the inside as well. In fact, both populist parties and technocracies in a variety of forms and shapes represent a growing threat not only to the rule of law, party politics and parliamentary democracy, but to the international order tout court. Ikenberry considers the COVID-19 pandemic as the moment possibly marking the end of the liberal world order, specifically the spring of 2020, "when the United States and its allies, facing the gravest public health threat and economic catastrophe of the postwar era, could not even agree on a simple communiqué of common cause."

However, Ikenberry admits that "the chaos of the coronavirus pandemic engulfing the world these days is only exposing and accelerating what was already happening for years." As the COVID-19 pandemic risks to mark the end of the world liberal order, will the upcoming US election represent the last call for the existing system or what still remains of it?

A Brief History of the Liberal World Order

The liberal world order was forged in the aftermath of the Second World War upon a set of principles governing the international system. Based on the leadership of the United States and exerted through five core institutions — the UN, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and NATO — with all its limits and weaknesses, granted economic development and security to a significant part of the world during the Cold War. Free market societies, supported by strong welfare policies, produced a long-term yet fragile balance between instances of economic competition, social inclusion and cohesion.

The dynamic worked well until the 1980s, when the foresightedness of preserving such a fragile balance gradually vanished. Liberal premises (equality of opportunities) and liberal promises (a more equal, peaceful and wealthy world) have been subverted by neoliberal politics and economic ideological positions, regressive and anti-progressivist in nature.

Today, a neoliberal world order has almost replaced the liberal one, bringing with it the opening of the markets through economic privatization, financialization and deregulation that results in national governments unable to shield citizens from social inequality deriving from unregulated globalization. Neoliberal politics and technocracies, often by taking advantage of emergencies and crises, have produced financial bubbles and rising economic inequality. This has taken place in light of an abstract intellectual orthodoxy, often reduced in opening international markets even if detrimental to social order, as argued, among others, by Joseph Stiglitz.

These days, the majority of the mass media points to radical-right populism and nationalism as the main threat to liberal democracy and its "international space." In fact, the mainstreaming of the radical right has become an international phenomenon, with radical-right and nationalist parties experiencing growing electoral support among the middle classes globally. Yet Donald Trump, Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen & Co are not the only threat: A new balance between state sovereignty and the coordinative action of international institutions is paramount to saving the international liberal order.

If we want liberal democracies to escape a Scylla and Charybdis' kind of dilemma, such as having to choose between the trivialization of politics proposed by populists or the gray hyper-complexity of technocratic governance, it is key to point out elements of convergence, different from the status quo and envisioning a general interest — not the sum of particular interests — to change non-cooperative behavior.

Everything's Not Lost

From abandoning the World Health Organization (WHO) in the middle of a global pandemic to the signing of the Abraham Accords and openly flirting with right-wing extremists and white supremacists like the Proud Boys or QAnon adherents, President Donald Trump's radical and populist rule has given up on multilateralism for

a chaotic and opportunistic unilateralism. Trump has galvanized radical and far-right nationalist and populist parties worldwide, while his administration's lack of interest in multilateral governance, in times of increasingly global nature of the issues policymakers are called to deal with, has implied both the weakening of the international order and the risk of handing it over to authoritarian challengers.

Paradoxically, some of those challengers, particularly China, have now even recognized that international institutions and organizations such as the WHO, with all their shortcomings, do have a comparative advantage in confronting global trends such as pandemics, climate change or large-scale migration.

However, on the other side of the Atlantic, old historic allies, in particular Germany, have not given up on the possibility to resume multilateralism with the US, as recently argued, among others, by Max Bergmann on Social Europe and Peter Wittig in Foreign Affairs. While the Trump administration jeopardized decades of liberal international order, transatlantic relations and multilateralism, Germany kept fighting to keep it alive. Germany's *Zivilmacht* — civilian power, to use Hanns Maull's formulation — even if often expressed internationally in geoeconomic terms, with key business partnerships established with China or Russia, has never allowed business interests to undermine its regional and international commitments.

Chancellor Angela Merkel has demonstrated leadership in the recent poisoning of Alexei Navalny, Russia's key opposition figure, or when forced to act unilaterally during the 2015 refugee crisis, providing leadership by example to reluctant EU member states despite being heavily criticized at home, or in the case of the €750-billion (\$821-billion) EU recovery fund, produced in close partnership with France. These crises made Angela Merkel the most trusted leader worldwide (and, for the time being, without a political heir), holding that spot since 2017, when Trump succeeded Barack Obama as US president, according to PEW research surveys.

This trust was even more confirmed during the COVID-19 pandemic, with Germany's leadership considered most favorably in relation to the US, France, China, UK and Russia.

As we await the 2020 US presidential election, we should not forget one lesson: In a globalized world, crises can be unique occasions to rediscover the mistreated virtues of multilateralism and collective decision-making. A victory for Donald Trump next week would translate into a coup de grace for the liberal world order, as countries as Germany will not be able to take on America's role as global leader, in particular if other European Union member states are neither able nor willing to join their efforts.

If Joe Biden enters the Oval Office next January, there is a chance for the liberal system to survive, but it would require both bold vision and reforms, as suggested by Ikenberry. However, if globalization keeps increasing financialization and deregulation, only a simulacrum of the liberal world order will remain.

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Working-Class America Needs Real Change, Not Slogans

Working-class people demand better from a republic that promotes freedom, equality and the pursuit of happiness.

Carlos Figueroa
Oct 29, 2020

In August, Joe Biden addressed the Democratic National Convention as he accepted his party's nomination to run for president. During his speech, Biden framed the election on November 3 as a battle for the "soul of America." The former vice president depicted the urgency of the moment as he saw it: that the American people have a critical choice to make in an election that carries great social, political and economic implications.

However, Biden's use of the word "soul" is not new to American political discourse, according to historian Jon Meacham. Behind Biden's message is an appeal to euro-centric principles or certain traditions attempting to underscore the reality that the US political and economic system is broken — dividing people culturally and socially along the way. Biden claims our beliefs, values and political norms have been dismantled, corrupted and co-opted by those who either do not understand them, take them for granted or perhaps couldn't care less about them for the sake of their interests.

The blame is placed on President Donald Trump and his associates at home and abroad for good reasons. Trump and his ilk have distorted or corrupted liberal traditions, republican citizenship and democratic institutions and, at the same time, they have disregarded individual rights, civic fairness and human decency.

Trump has wrought a new divisive politics, from his self-serving slogans ("Make America Great Again" to "Keep America Great") and rhetorical tweet storms to his elite-centered social policies.

Together, this has ushered into the mainstream of American life radical right-wing ideas, extra racial and immigrant animus, and anti-media hostility. These divisions have reached unimaginable heights, with dire consequences reflected further in Trump's and the Republicans' lack of leadership around the coronavirus pandemic, racial and social justice, the homelessness crisis and rising unemployment, among others.

Both Trump and Biden are operating within a symbolic/performative political frame that supposedly addresses the real needs of the American working people. Yet the competing slogans and the performative politics we have witnessed over the past few months have done more to perpetuate the bitter partisanship keeping us "trampling on each other for our scraps of bread," as E.L. Doctorow pointed out in 1992. So, what we instead need is a transformative (redistributive) politics that directly answers the complex quotidian concerns of the majority working-class people across race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and civic or legal status now and after the election.

Sloganism and Performative Politics

American author William Safire once wrote that slogans can serve as a "rallying cry" or a "catchphrase" that often "crystallizes an idea" or "defines an issue." Most importantly, according to Safire, some slogans even "thrill, exhort and inspire" people into action. Sloganism has become an American neoliberal ideological tool and strategic marketing imperative that guides both the Republican and Democratic parties, especially during presidential elections.

The 2020 election seems different because there is more urgency to win at any cost, even at the expense of democracy itself, from both major parties and their supporters. American voters seem to gravitate more to familiar or comfortable slogans, without critically assessing the purpose or the message behind them. Many lose themselves in the symbols and patriotic images that slogans invoke. Even Biden seems

to use a “Battle for the Soul of the Nation” as both aspirational and inspirational, if not transformational.

These slogans and the broader performative electoral context that gives rise to them obscure the political and economic structures creating and sustaining the underlying problems facing the working class. This includes wealth inequality, lack of labor and political power, declining wages, unemployment, affordable housing issues and limited access to quality health care. Taken together, all of this makes many Americans more vulnerable during public health crises, environmental disasters and economic downturns.

What Forms Transformative Politics Take Also Matters

We need to consider the forms of transformative politics that Trump, as the incumbent president, has engaged in that run counter to his “Keep America Great” slogan. Trump’s housing policy, for example, is not based on what the working class need, especially in the middle of a pandemic and economic crisis. His slogan does nothing to help those in need of affording housing, rent control and extended eviction moratoriums.

Trump’s proposed federal budgets and other policies on public and assisted housing reflect his real intentions. Yet his form of transformative politics was evident just a few years ago, too. “Trump’s administration has proposed legislation that would sharply raise rents for tenants in public and other federally subsidized housing,” wrote Thomas J. Waters back in 2018. Regarding the economy, this is what Trump’s transformative politics under his slogan “Keep America Great” looks like, according to Jerry White: “While tens of millions of people are confronting the worst economic and social crisis since the Great Depression, the multi trillion-dollar CARES Act bailout for Wall Street has led to booming bank profits. Goldman Sachs on [October 14] announced that its third-quarter profit nearly doubled to \$3.62 billion.”

President Trump’s actions that have failed to control the spread of the coronavirus are as irresponsible as his politics, economic views and policy positions. Trump used taxpayer-funded hospital services at Walter Reed Medical Center to “heal” from the COVID-19 disease, while ordinary Americans who do not have access to such quality services — despite paying taxes — die by the hundreds of thousands. Other Republicans have been irresponsible too. This is not what Americans want at any level of government.

Another way of looking at the impact of Trump’s form of transformative politics is his federal judge appointments, including the placement of Judge Amy Coney Barrett of the Seventh Federal Circuit to a lifetime appointment on the Supreme Court. Her place in the nation’s highest court has the potential of negatively transforming the lives of millions of Americans. Democratic Senator Sheldon Whitehouse argued in a recent statement that the effects of replacing the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg with Barrett would eliminate many people’s access to health care. Moreover, Justice Barrett would signify a major shift in the court’s ideological makeup with transformative political, social and economic consequences.

Barrett, with her ultra-conservative credentials and originalist judicial philosophy, could play a role in overturning *Roe v. Wade*, a 1973 Supreme Court case to protect women’s reproductive rights, including access to abortion. Her appointment could also lead to the elimination of the Affordable Care Act, which protects over 20 million people with preexisting medical conditions. Most importantly, with another conservative justice in the court, Trump could secure an election victory by disqualifying mail-in ballots and allowing restrictive voting tactics (reducing drop-boxes, for instance) with impunity.

On voting rights and the role Barrett may play on any potential challenge to the election outcome, Mother Jones reporter Ari Berman observes: “President Trump has explicitly said that he

wants the Supreme Court to look at the ballots. So, everything about Amy Coney Barrett's nomination is illegitimate, but it's especially illegitimate if Trump wants to get her on there so that he can install himself in a second term." This form of transformative politics in the name of "keeping America great" would thus undermine the constitutional rights and civil liberties of all Americans, eroding the underlying political culture that is often ingrained since childhood, and thus further deteriorating American voters' trust in their democratic institutions.

In terms of protecting workers and industries, Trump has failed to fulfill his promises as his 2016 slogan, "Make America Great Again," suggested. Yet he continues to make similar arguments about bringing back manufacturing jobs and providing health care to working-class Americans. In reality, Trump's policies have led to more offshore jobs than ever before.

Finally, although Trump does not possess a presidential temperament that has been a requirement since at least the 1960s, he has remained popular among many within the Rust Belt states (Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania, though that could change). This is due to his performative nature as a reality-TV celebrity and, of course, his longstanding image as a so-called successful businessman, despite recent revelations about his failure to pay income taxes (only \$750 in 2017 and 2019) because he lost more money than he made in the past 15 years.

Importance of Class Solidarity for Transformative Politics

What are the real concerns of American voters who are in the majority working class? Although some people are convinced by catchy slogans and performative politics, most working-class Americans expect real reforms in the short and long terms. Ed Yong of The Atlantic recently pointed out, "Showiness is often mistaken for effectiveness."

Americans want real redistributive policies

and need even more critical structural changes around issues like education reform, police brutality, affordable housing, employment opportunities, a living wage, health care, infrastructure and taxation, among others. Framing the election in either rhetorical, symbolic or moralistic terms only goes so far in the voters' minds. According to the Pew Research Center, the economy (79%), health care (68%), Supreme Court nominations (64%), the coronavirus outbreak (62%) and violent crime (59%) are the most important issues for registered voters this year.

Policies that impact real people are the key to creating universal and transformative changes that will benefit all, if not most Americans. As Matt Bruenig of the People's Policy Project suggests: "Given the demographic composition of the different economic classes, it really is the case that class-based wealth redistribution will also heavily reduce the disparities between different demographic groups." He adds that every "\$1 redistributed from the top 10 percent to the bottom 50 percent reduces the class gap between those groups by \$2 while also reducing the white/black gap by 52 cents, the old/young gap by 57 cents, and the college/high-school gap by 75 cents. This kind of leveling is where our focus should be."

Regrettably, we have seen an increase in symbolic politics from both liberals and conservatives over the past several years that ignore or down-play voters' demand for transformative (redistributive) politics. Both Trump and Biden have remained within the same neoliberal capitalist framework where concerns over racial, class-based inequalities are outdone by superfluous debates over removing Confederate flags and monuments of racist historical figures. Less debated are issues dealing with demilitarizing police departments and properly funding public schools.

As Professor Toure Reed of Illinois State University recently wrote: "For the past several decades now, liberals and conservatives alike have been disposed to view racial inequality

through one of two racist frames: the ingrained, if not inborn cultural deficiencies of black and brown poor people; or the ingrained, if not inborn racism of whites. The political-economic underpinnings of inequality, however, have been of little interest to either Democrats or Republicans.”

Yet economic redistribution is rarely, if ever, seriously discussed in public, the media or even in academia. Why? Because that would force both Democrats and Republicans — who are often beholden to Wall Street firms, K-Street lobbyists and the broader investor class — to reveal positions, strategies and policies that produce the forms and types of racial and wealth inequalities that they ought to be addressing for the betterment of all Americans. But to do so means potentially putting themselves and their supporters out of business. Lastly, Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed, Jr. show that a race-only policy focus or using race as a proxy measure, especially in the medical industry, may lead to dire real-world consequences for working-class communities across race and other categories of ascriptive difference.

Of course, if we were to focus on a broad class analysis (as measured by an individual’s relational position within a power structure that determines who produces what goods and services and when), that would put the neoliberal capitalist and political establishment in jeopardy of being closely scrutinized by those critical of the elite/investor class’ malfeasance, which is something that mega corporations, media conglomerates and the big pharmaceutical industry, among others, do not want.

This may partly explain why Trump — and, at times, Biden — would rather engage in performative politics and empty promises than deal directly with what ails most of the poor and working-class people, who are often essential workers making the neoliberal capitalist system work. It is easier to frame things with slogans like “Battle for the Soul of the Nation” and “Keep America Great” than talk about wealth redistribution, single-payer universal health care,

a Green New Deal and workers’ rights.

There is a big difference between what Trump has accomplished — and for whom — over these past four years and what Biden stands for and promises if elected president. Despite Trump’s claims that Biden is a radical social democrat, the former vice president’s record over the past 40 years shows he is neither a radical nor a social democrat. At best, Biden is a moderate liberal with certain progressive tendencies.

Within this context, Biden has tried to navigate and balance competing interests within the Democratic Party. There has been tension between the progressives represented by Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren and “The Squad” and Biden’s own Clinton-Obama neoliberal establishment (Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer). Biden’s historic choice of Senator Kamala Harris, who is the first woman of Indian and Jamaican descent on any major party ticket, is supposed to appease the progressive wing while also satisfy the neoliberal Democratic establishment.

Yet Harris on the ticket would also appeal to those moderates in the Republican Party who want to return to pre-Trump norms. However, this moderate-to-liberal past has been distorted by a misguided and opportunistic Trump who continues spreading falsehoods and lies about Biden’s record, vision and plans.

At the Republican National Convention in August, Trump said: “Your vote will decide whether we protect law-abiding Americans or whether we give free rein to violent anarchists and agitators and criminals who threaten our citizens. And this election will decide whether we will defend the American way of life or allow a radical movement to completely dismantle and destroy it.” Later, he offered a different picture to counter Biden’s “Battle for the Soul of the Nation” slogan. While Biden’s version offers a hopeful message, Trump provides a dire and apocalyptic vision of an America under a Biden-Harris administration. “Joe Biden is not the savior of America’s soul — he is the destroyer of America’s jobs, and if given

the chance, he will be the destroyer of American greatness,” Trump said.

Nevertheless, the president failed to heed his own messaging. His political short-sightedness has once again brewed controversy. Trump has called service members or those who lost their lives at war “losers” and “suckers.” Jeffrey Goldberg, while referring to John Kelly’s reaction to Trump’s off-putting questions and comments about US soldiers, wrote, “Trump simply does not understand non-transactional life choices.” Trump’s performative politics then backfired because the commander-in-chief is expected to respect service members and their families, not insult them.

Trump has lost the support of many military families despite his speeches otherwise during the most important election in a generation. Unfortunately, this attitude from the president is not new and reflects his well-known tendency toward self-absorption and self-imagery that places the well-being of others, including the entire country, in a secondary position.

This attitude endangers the men and women serving in the military at home and abroad. It weakens the image of the military and the working-class citizens who volunteer to serve in that capacity for often economic reasons, which is something Trump himself avoided during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s. Democratic Senator Tammy Duckworth captured Trump and his position well when she called the president the “coward in chief” during an interview with MSNBC in September.

Transformative Politics Viewed From Likely Voters’ Perspective

Whether Trump’s political strategy of invoking fear of a Biden-Harris administration proves effective, only time will tell. Yet, according to the latest national polls of likely voters presented by FiveThirtyEight, Biden is running ahead of Trump. The Quinnipiac University’s state-by-state polls also show Biden leading in key swing states (including Georgia), though Florida is too close to

call either way, as per the latest figures.

The regional or state-by-state approach to understand likely voters should be our focus instead of the national polls. The latter are usually conflated by Democratic likely voters in California, New York and New England states, which masks the fact that the Electoral College historically determines the presidency, not the national popular vote. This makes both Midwestern swing states — Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin — as well as Pennsylvania pivotal grounds in presidential elections.

Several other factors must be taken into consideration in this most critically important election. The debate over absentee ballots, vote-by-mail and early voting versus in-person, same-day voting has increased over the past few weeks amidst the rising numbers of COVID-19 infections.

Most likely Republican voters (Trump supporters, presumably) have said they will vote on Election Day (70%), while those who lean Democratic have said almost the inverse: they will vote early and by-mail/absentee ballot (74%). Still, Republican Party officials have begun to make strides toward convincing many of their supporters to reconsider the vote-by-mail or absentee ballot option over in-person voting, attempting to keep up with the Democrats while contradicting President Trump’s claims about the potential corruption and voter fraud of the mail-in ballot process. Trump’s comments have been proven false by many election experts.

Voting in the United States is controlled and managed by local and states officials, while the federal government through the Federal Elections Commission (FEC) regulates, administers and enforces federal campaign finance laws. The Trump administration and the Republican Party have been engaged in voter suppression tactics that further erode Americans’ views and confidence in long-standing democratic practices and institutions. Yet potential voter intimidation at voting places and the elimination of drop-off boxes are two

more reasons to be vigilant.

A Transformative Paradigm Shift in the Presidential Election Cycle

American poor and working-class people demand better from a republic that promotes freedom, equality and the pursuit of happiness. These standards require a political and economic system that provides stable employment, a living wage, modern infrastructure, access to a fast internet connection, quality health care for all, affordable and modern housing and more. This means real transformative elections and politics.

In the end, the American voter is expected to make an important choice on which party will bring about those kinds of transformative changes. Many states now provide a variety of voting options because of the pandemic. At the time of publishing, over 75 million people have voted either early in person or by mail. An increase in early voter turnout should lead to a paradigm shift in the ways we talk about voter participation and how states deal with presidential elections in the future. Although the increase in mail-in and absentee ballots is due to circumstances around the COVID-19 pandemic, the additional voting options beyond the traditional in-person method should be made permanent, especially if we want to uphold the ideals of freedom, equality, community and democracy in the US.

Media, social commentators, scholars and political pundits alike need to talk less about Election Day that is based on anachronistic constitutional rules and norms and more about a fall election quarter where registered voters often begin casting ballots as early as September in some states. This transformative paradigm shift will, in turn, lead to less pressure in having to declare a winner on election night and, more importantly, prevent President Trump and others in the future from claiming that the election is rigged, corrupt and illegitimate or even unconstitutional.

What will become the new normal in American

political and social life? Will we be a liberal, social or racial democracy? Will we become a real democracy based on working-class solidarity across races and less on racial divisions across and between classes? These are some of the most critical questions of our time that should keep us busy in trying to hold elected officials, the media and ourselves accountable if we want to keep any semblance of our republic intact.

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Trump, Biden and the Climate: A Stark Choice

The contrast between the Democratic and Republican approaches to climate policy couldn't be starker.

Arek Sinanian
Oct 30, 2020

While the economy and COVID-19 may dominate discussions around the coming US election, environmental issues and climate change, mainly due to the recent wildfires in the state of California, may also be a differentiating factor between the two presidential candidates. Back in January 2017, in my article titled "Trumping the Climate," I lamented the uncertainties and questions ahead of Donald Trump's inauguration, particularly relating to climate change policy. As we approach the 2020 election, what can we say about the legacy of the Trump administration and its stated future policies, and what of Biden's policy directions as presented in the party platforms?

The contrast between the alternative policies couldn't be starker. The most baffling aspect

is the Republican decision to adopt the same platform the party used in 2016. It would have been logical to update the document and delete sentences such as “Over the last eight years, the Administration has triggered an avalanche of regulation that wreaks havoc across our economy and yields minimal environmental benefits.” The next sentence states that “The central fact of any environmental policy is that year by year, the environment is improving.” Did someone in the Republican camp actually review this document?

Trumping the Climate

But before comparing the Republican and the Democratic platforms, it would be useful to recap the actions of the current administration relating to the environment and climate change. Based on research from Harvard Law School, Columbia Law School and other sources, more than 70 environmental rules and regulations have been officially reversed, revoked or otherwise rolled back under Trump. Another 26 rollbacks are still in progress. Here are some of the most significant rollbacks introduced.

Paris Climate Agreement. The formal notice given by the Trump administration to withdraw from the 2015 Paris accords was a clear signal of its intent to not only cease its cooperation in global actions to address climate change but also to question the science behind it. By doing so, the US became one of only three countries not to sign on to the Paris Climate Agreement. The pulling out of any major player from international climate accords has to be seen as a huge setback — and it is. Perhaps more importantly, such action also undermines US involvement and leadership in other UN and international forums. It may also strain US trade and other relationships with the EU and other nations.

Clean Power Plan. As one of President Barack Obama’s key environmental policies, the plan required the energy sector to cut carbon emissions by 32% by 2030. It was rolled back by Trump’s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

in 2017 citing “unfair burdens on the power sector and a ‘war on coal.’” The GOP platform states that “We will likewise forbid the EPA to regulate carbon dioxide, something never envisaged when Congress passed the Clean Air Act.” It can be argued that the energy sector is already heading toward low-carbon alternatives, and clean energy is no more a war on coal than a healthy diet is on junk food. Admittedly, the transition to low-carbon energy will nevertheless require government initiatives and incentives, at least in the short term.

Air pollution regulations. The control of hazardous air pollution has been significantly diminished through the weakening of the Clean Air Act, whereby major polluters such as power plants and petroleum refineries, after reducing their emissions below the required limits, can be reclassified and can emit dangerous pollutants to a higher limit. Using my earlier analogy, this is like having a single healthy meal, then continuing to eat junk food.

Methane flaring rules. Methane is a much more powerful greenhouse gas than, say, carbon dioxide. The rollback of EPA standards for methane and other volatile organic compounds that were set back in 2012 and which resulted in significant reductions in methane emissions. Relaxing those regulations gives states control of their own standards, creating discrepancies in flaring rules between states.

Oil and natural gas. The move to encourage more oil and gas production clearly works against clean air initiatives. Apart from greenhouse gas emissions, the burning of fossil fuels emits significant amounts of other pollutants into the environment. Admittedly, there are economic and international demand-and-supply factors for consideration here. No doubt, US self-sufficiency in oil and gas supply is an important and appropriate dynamic.

Fuel economy rules. The weakening of the fuel economy rules reduced the previously set target of 54 mpg by 2025 for cars made after 2012 to 34 mpg. The fuel efficiency of road vehicles is an

important aspect of economic transport and air pollution and its health impacts.

Overall, the fundamental direction of the above changes in policy pulls back progress made by the Obama administration toward cleaner air and mitigating climate change, giving a higher priority to oil and gas, as well as assumed economic growth. More broadly, it ignores the importance of the global agreement and action on climate change and significantly undermines scientific consensus. Ironically, it could also be seen to be contrary to current and future market and economic forces, and as a defiance of science in general. Furthermore, it's intriguing that the establishment of a low-carbon economy, with its technology-driven projects and the building of more resilient infrastructure, isn't seen as job-creating.

The Trump administration made numerous other environmental policy changes dealing with water and wildlife management and opening of public land for business. Clearly, the Trump administration does not see climate change as a national emergency or an area of priority for policy direction, nor does it see a low-carbon economy as an economic opportunity.

The continuing increase in wildfire frequency and severity as well as other extreme weather events alongside Trump's persistent denial of climate change impacts continues to intrigue and frustrate experts in the field. On the one hand, the GOP platform asserts that "Government should not play favorites among energy producers" and on the other, appears to ignore renewable energy sources even though these are just as much "God-given natural resources" as oil and gas.

The Biden Plan

Now let's look briefly at the Democratic Party Platform for the environment and climate change. In summary, the stated initiatives in the Biden plan are as follows.

Climate change. The platform is unequivocal in

its acceptance of climate change and its social, economic and environmental impacts, pledging a \$2-trillion accelerated investment in "ambitious climate progress" during his first term. It is also unambiguous in the measures it plans to take to reduce inequities in how climate change affects low-income families, and the importance of building "a thriving, equitable, and globally competitive clean energy economy that puts workers and communities first and leaves no one behind." Economists agree that due to advances made in clean energy and its economics, net-zero emissions are not only achievable, but are now cost-effective and provide a cleaner environment in a world with a growing population and the inevitable increase in the consumption of resources.

Paris Climate Agreement. The platform is once again clear in its intent to "rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement and, on day one, seek higher ambition from nations around the world, putting the United States back in the position of global leadership where we belong." This would help recalibrate the global efforts and provide a boost to the international impetus for progress on climate change. The importance of binding global agreements and actions cannot be overstated if the world is to significantly mitigate climate change.

Toward net-zero emissions. The platform commits to "eliminating carbon pollution from power plants by 2035 through technology-neutral standards for clean energy and energy efficiency." It further commits to the installation of 500 million solar panels, including 8 million solar roofs and 60,000 wind turbines and to turning "American ingenuity into American jobs by leveraging federal policy to manufacture renewable energy solutions in America." Reading the platform's language and overall framework and knowing what I know about renewable energy and low-carbon technologies, I can't help feeling that the Democratic platform must have accessed credible and comprehensively developed scientific and economic analyses.

Auto industry. The Democrats pledge to "inform

ambitious executive actions that will enable the United States to lead the way in building a clean, 21st century transportation system and stronger domestic manufacturing base for electric vehicles powered by high-wage and union jobs ... and accelerate the adoption of zero-emission vehicles in the United States while reclaiming market share for domestically produced vehicles.” Numerous other initiatives include transitioning the entire fleet of 500,000 school buses to American-made, zero-emission alternatives within five years and to support private adoption of affordable low-pollution and zero-emission vehicles by partnering with state and local governments to install at least 500,000 charging stations.

Sustainable communities. The platform is ambitiously broad in its coverage of sustainable initiatives across all communities including agriculture, marginalized communities, climate resilience, disaster management, planting of trees for reduction of heat stress, education and training, public land management, energy efficiency and sustainable housing, sustainable energy grids in remote and tribal communities — all with job creation and economic growth in mind.

How the above differences in policy and direction in the US election are likely to play out in November are difficult to ascertain. Whichever way America votes will considerably affect the nation’s future in addressing not only its own climate change responses, but will carry a significant impact for the rest of the world.

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How Will Joe Biden Approach Iran?

A number of challenges would hinder a Biden administration from rejoining the Iran nuclear deal.

Hesham Alghannam
Oct 30, 2020

Addressing months of speculation over the future of US policy toward Tehran, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said on September 22 at the UN General Assembly, “We are not a bargaining chip in the US elections and domestic policy.” Earlier this year, Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden said if he is elected, the US will rejoin the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — the Iran nuclear deal — which the current administration withdrew from in May 2018. This set of the rumor mills about a major shift in Washington’s handling of Iran.

The JCPOA was signed in 2015 by the P5+1 group — the United States, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany — and the Iranians in a diplomatic effort to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Yet today, the agreement is standing on its last legs. US President Donald Trump, who campaigned against the agreement during the 2016 presidential election, has imposed a policy of maximum pressure on Iran in order to force it to negotiate a better deal.

For the Trump administration, an improved agreement would address Iran’s ballistic missile capabilities and its expansionist policies in the Middle East — two issues that the Obama administration and the European Union failed to incorporate in the JCPOA. This infuriated US allies in the Middle East, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which in particular has been on the receiving end of Iran’s destabilizing actions in the Gulf.

With the presidential election on November 3, the question of whether US policy toward Iran will change should Biden win the keys to

the White House is attracting the attention of pundits and policymakers in the Arab region.

Joe Biden's Position on Iran

Biden, who was vice president under the Obama administration, explained in a recent op-ed his proposed position regarding Iran. He said, "I have no illusions about the challenges the regime in Iran poses to America's security interests, to our friends and partners and to [Iran's] own people." He listed four key principles as he outlined his approach.

First, he promised that a Biden administration would prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. Second, he committed himself to rejoin the JCPOA if Iran returns to "strict compliance with the nuclear deal," and only as "a starting point for follow-on negotiations." In Biden's words, these negotiations would aim at strengthening and extending the nuclear deal's provisions and addressing "other issues of concern." Third, he made a commitment to "push back against Iran's destabilizing activities" in the Middle East, which threaten US allies in the region. He also promised to continue to use "targeted sanctions against Iran's human rights abuses, its support for terrorism and ballistic missile program."

Finally, he said, if the Iranians choose to threaten vital American interests and troops in the region, the US would not hesitate to confront them. Despite this, Biden wrote that he is "ready to walk the path of diplomacy if Iran takes steps to show it is ready too."

But Will His Policy Be Any Different to Trump's?

In relation to Saudi Arabia, Biden issued a statement on the second anniversary of the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in which he said, "Under a Biden-Harris administration, we will reassess our relationship with the Kingdom, end U.S. support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, and make sure America does not check its values at the door to sell arms or buy oil."

Although Biden's approach is a departure from Trump's maximum pressure on Iran and with regard to Saudi Arabia in its intervention in Yemen, it is possible that Biden might end up — at least concerning Iran — applying Trump's same tactics. This is partly because, according to Biden himself, Iran has stockpiled 10 times as much enriched uranium since Trump has been in office. This is further complicated by the fact there is no guarantee that Iran will surrender its stockpiles to the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Additionally, Iran has repeatedly declared that it will not negotiate additional provisions to the JCPOA, which is in direct conflict with Biden's intention to enforce additional restrictions on Tehran. Moreover, putting pressure on Iran to end its destabilizing regional activities, as Biden has promised, would certainly lead to points of confrontation between the two countries, especially in Iraq and Syria. If any of these scenarios take place, a Biden administration would be forced to impose even tougher sanctions on Iran with the help of EU countries.

Three Key Factors

Biden's decision to rejoin the JCPOA rests on three issues. The first is the balance of power within Congress between the Republicans and the Democrats. The second is how Iran fits into his overall policy toward China. Finally, the position of the Saudi kingdom and its allies regarding any future agreement with Iran would play a key role.

First, it is well known that members of Congress from both parties resisted then-President Barack Obama's policy of negotiating with Iran and insisted on reviewing any agreement before the US would ratify it. For this reason, a majority in Congress passed the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act in 2015, which forced the president to send any agreement he reaches with Iran to the US Congress for review.

When the P5+1 hit a breakthrough with the JCPOA, Obama sent the draft agreement to Congress as per the act, but the nuclear deal

was neither approved nor rejected. The House of Representatives overwhelmingly opposed the deal. Yet Republicans in the Senate could not block the agreement because they did not have a 60-vote majority to move forward with a vote against the JCPOA. In other words, almost half of Congress — which consists of the House and the Senate — were against the Iran deal.

If Biden becomes the 46th US president and decides to rejoin the agreement, he will face the same dilemma as Congress will have to review the JCPOA yet again, a process that will create tension between the president and Congress. Though considering the president needs Congress to pass domestic reforms related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the US economy, Biden would most likely not be in a rush to act on Iran.

Second, Biden would link the deal with Iran with his policy toward China. As president, Biden will continue Obama's Pivot to Asia policy of redirecting the US military presence from the Middle East and other regions toward East Asia to confront China's growing influence in the region.

Meanwhile, Beijing has expanded its position in the Gulf where it has established several strategic partnerships, which are essential to connect China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to markets in Europe. With Iran's signing of a strategic comprehensive partnership agreement with China in 2016 and its move to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Iran is very much part of the BRI.

Thus, a Biden administration will likely tie Iran to its China containment policy. That is to say, any US policy that aims to weaken China will have to incorporate some pressure on the Iranians to be effective, including maintaining existing sanctions on Iran. Further, Iranian ties with China will push the US under Biden's leadership to strengthen its relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states in order to prevent China from extending its influence into the Middle East. The Biden administration cannot do so without taking

into consideration the interests of Saudi Arabia, which are linked to the kind of agreement the US may strike with Iran.

Finally, while the US has become self-sufficient in terms of oil supply, the world economy is still reliant on Saudi oil exports. Saudi Arabia is also the heart of the Muslim world, and it maintains control over 10% of global trade that passes through the Red Sea. The kingdom's significance as a stabilizing factor in the Middle East is also increased with the demise of Syria, Iraq and the domestic troubles in Egypt, not to mention the challenges that Turkey is causing for the US in the region.

Accordingly, a Biden administration cannot afford to turn its back on Saudi interests. Such a policy would force Saudi Arabia to diversify its security, which would undoubtedly include strengthening its relations with China and other US rivals like Russia. This is something the US cannot afford to happen if it wishes to effectively confront its main competitors — China and Russia.

As for Yemen, there is no reason that prevents Saudi Arabia and a Biden administration from reaching an agreement. In 2015, the kingdom intervened in Yemen to prevent Iran from threatening its southern borders. Saudi Arabia wants the war to end sooner rather than later, and it wants the Yemenis to thrive in their own state. However, the Yemen conflict is connected to the Iranian expansionist policies in the Middle East, and Biden's administration would have to address this in its approach toward Iran.

When adding to these reasons the fact that the conservatives won the Iranian parliamentary elections in early 2020 and are poised to win the presidential election in June 2021, it is highly doubtful that Iran will accept a renegotiated nuclear deal with the US.

For all these reasons, returning to the JCPOA is unlikely.

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It's Time to Change America's Electoral System

The Electoral College has become a means of perpetuating inequality and unfairness, and is not representative of the country's diversity.

Daniel Wagner
Nov 02, 2020

America's electoral system is structurally deficient and badly damaged. Its elections are decentralized, underfunded and prone to manipulation. It fosters partisan election officials who routinely engage in gerrymandering and accommodates active voter suppression that includes judges and courts that disavow legally registered votes. Today, only landslide results can bypass the many obstacles that exist to achieving a truly free and fair voting system in the United States.

America's electoral system is structurally deficient and badly damaged. Its elections are decentralized, underfunded and prone to manipulation. It fosters partisan election officials who routinely engage in gerrymandering and accommodates active voter suppression that includes judges and courts that disavow legally registered votes. Today, only landslide results can bypass the many obstacles that exist to achieving a truly free and fair voting system in the United States.

Since the 1800s, the Electoral College system has not functioned as the framers of the Constitution had intended. It was designed to be representational by district, but since Thomas Jefferson instituted the winner-take-all approach,

the regimen has morphed into a muddled, skewed, corrupt mess, leaving many Americans feeling like the system is rigged.

Perpetuating Inequality

Consider this: By 2040, 30% of Americans from smaller, more rural states will elect 70 of the 100 US senators. By then, 70% of Americans will live in just 15 states and 50% of them will live in just eight of those states. Rather than help ensure equal representation under the law, the Electoral College has merely become a means of perpetuating inequality and unfairness, and is not representative of the country's diversity. And since each state governing body can decide how the electors will vote, it is rife with partisanship and amenable to corruption.

It is only because the college exists that any candidate who may not have won the most votes can become a victor in an election. Electing leaders who do not have a majority of the popular vote is becoming more commonplace. The first time an election was lost to the candidate with the most votes was in 2000, when Al Gore won by about 500,000 votes. In 2016, Hillary Clinton won by nearly 3 million votes. On November 3, Trump could lose by 6 or 8 million this time and still conceivably win an electoral victory. Americans increasingly believe that their votes do not count and see the system as illegitimate. That must change.

The US House of Representatives hasn't been enlarged since 1929. It is time to have a constitutional amendment to expand it to be more representative of population dispersion and the diversity of the country. Beyond that, the entire structure of the electoral system badly needs to be reformed and modernized to better reflect the composition of American society and remove some of its impurities. America needs meaningful systemic change that truly shakes up the system, not more business as usual. It is time for the American people to take back their government from career politicians, lobbyists, special interests and an elite who have all gamed the system to their own advantage.

While around one in four Americans identify as independent — more than either Democrats or Republicans — the vast majority vote for Democrat or Republican candidates rather than independents. Independent parties have historically performed poorly in state and national elections because independent voters do not vote for them, part of the issue being that independent parties and candidates sometimes represent the “looney left” or the radical right. But a bigger contributor is the absence of a meaningful independent party platform.

Meaningful Change

Going forward, candidates for any party should agree in advance to serve only one term. The immediate effect would be to strip the lobbyists and special interests of their ability to influence the way lawmakers from any party voted because those lawmakers would not need their money to get reelected. Such an approach would permit lawmakers to focus on what they were sent to Washington or the state house to do: govern, rather than spend 80% (or more) of their time raising money for their reelection and perpetuating a corrupt political system.

Meaningful, significant change is not going to occur from within mainstream political parties in America — it will only come from outside them. The party platform I would propose is based on all elected representatives subscribing to honesty, integrity, transparency and, more importantly, accountability for their action or inaction. If any elected representative in such a party fails to deliver what they say they will deliver, they would need to agree in advance to be removed from office before their term is finished.

All such elected representatives would need to agree to adhere to the laws which they pass — that such laws also apply to them, with no health plans for themselves or their families that are different than what they pass into law for everyone else. The idea would be to bring fairness, honor and dignity back to their offices and to the people they serve.

Too many of our elected officials have forgotten who sent them to Washington, who they work for and why they are there. The Democratic and Republican parties have been hijacked by extremists. The electoral system does not function as it was intended. That is why it is time for radical reform, and the American people should demand it from their government and parties.

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Held Together With String, Can America Hold?

With many loose tribes pulling in different directions, America faces a protracted war for the soul of the nation.

Atul Singh
Nov 02, 2020

In December 2007, Mwai Kibaki beat Raila Odinga in the Kenyan general election and all hell broke loose. Odinga’s supporters took to the streets, alleging Kibaki had “stolen” the election. Police fired on demonstrators and some died. In retaliation, the targeted ethnic cleansing of Kikuyus, Kibaki’s community, began.

The Kikuyus themselves responded by targeting other communities. A bloodbath ensued. The New York Times observed that “ethnic violence, fueled by political passions” was threatening to ruin the reputation of a country regarded as one of the most promising in Africa. It turns out that this promise was illusory. Rival ethnic groups within arbitrary colonial borders were held loosely together by self-interest and little national identity. The country was held together

with string.

About 20 years ago, Stephen Heiniger, then a British policeman, visited a dear friend in New York. Like my view of Kenya, he observed that New York was held together with string. The Guatemalan who worked in a restaurant's kitchen had little in common with the owner. He did not really identify with New York or even the US. The immigrant was slaving away to make money to send back to his family, socializing largely with people from his part of the world.

What Heiniger observed about New York 20 years ago is increasingly true for America today. The country is full of such loose groups held together by self-interest. This is largely defined in terms of success, which in turn is mainly measured by money. A strong social, regional or national identity and common purpose in a large, diverse and unequal land is increasingly lacking.

In the 2020 presidential election, America might be about to emulate Kenya. Political passions run so strong that the threat of violence looms high. Not since the Civil War ended in 1865 has America been so divided. The reputation of a country long considered the most promising in the world faces damage, if not ruin.

The Mother of All Elections

Michael Hirsh, the deputy news editor of Foreign Policy, thinks this is the most important election ever. It is more important than the seminal elections of 1800, 1860 and 1932. These led to the triumphs of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt respectively, changing the course of history. In each of these elections, America was divided but managed to hold together and move forward.

Hirsh argues that the 2020 election is the most significant because President Donald Trump has damaged institutions of American democracy to such a degree that the future of "the 244-year-old American experiment of a republic of laws" is at stake." He blames Trump for openly encouraging racial violence, stoking division and

failing to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hirsh reflects the unease of many members of the American elite. For a long time, they have self-consciously thought of themselves as a modern-day Rome. Now, they fear that America could end up "as just another abject discard on the ash heap of failed republics going back to ancient Rome and Greece."

As during the times of the Cold War, Americans fear an enemy. This time it is another communist country, a former ally named the People's Republic of China. Hirsh believes the US is stumbling precisely at "a moment when [it] has lost its material preponderance" to China. Its "central place in stabilizing the global system" is on the ballot.

The Economist shares Hirsh's view. It makes a case for Democratic nominee Joe Biden in a breezy editorial that seems to have been penned in the Oxford Union. It declares Biden not to be the miracle cure for what is ailing America but a good man needed to "restore steadiness and civility to the White House."

Media organizations from The New York Times to The Times of India agree upon the importance of the 2020 election. They have published millions of words on the subject and sought out pollsters to predict the election outcome. As the day of reckoning draws nigh, campaigning has reached fever pitch. Candidates for the House of Representatives, the Senate and the White House are all summing up their final arguments to Americans who have not voted yet. Even as citizens go to the polls on November 3, the Senate has confirmed Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, giving conservatives a 6-3 majority over liberals. Everything is on the ballot in 2020, including and especially the courts.

To understand the presidential election, it might be useful to cast our eyes to an event 30 years ago. In August 1990, Iraq's Saddam Hussein "invaded and annexed Kuwait." The US swung into action to liberate an oil-rich country that its cash-poor neighbor had gobbled. Hussein

threatened “the mother of all battles” but suffered abject defeat. This was a heady time for the US. The Berlin Wall had fallen. George H.W. Bush had come to the White House promising “a kinder and gentler nation” and “no new taxes.” Ronald Reagan’s revolution of getting the government off people’s backs and bringing the Soviet Union to its knees seemed to have succeeded. By the end of 1991, the Soviet Union had collapsed.

President Bush had presided over the ultimate triumph of America. The dreaded Cold War with its specter of nuclear destruction was finally over. America’s liberal democracy and free market economy were deemed the only way forward. Francis Fukuyama waxed lyrical about the end of history and humanity was supposed to enter the gates of paradise, with all earthlings securing unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

After a spectacular victory in the Gulf and the glorious subjugation of the Soviet Union, Bush should have romped to victory in the 1992 election. Instead, he lost. The economy had been slowing and deficits had been growing, forcing Bush to raise taxes. Many Americans went apoplectic. They could not forgive the president for breaking his promise. There was unease even then with the new era of globalization that Bush kicked off.

In that election, Texan billionaire Ross Perot made a dash for the White House campaigning against this brave new world. He warned against “shipping millions of jobs overseas” because of “one-way trade agreements.” Perot argued that countries with lower wages, lesser health care or retirement benefits and laxer environmental laws would attract factories away from American shores. With the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on the cards, Perot famously predicted “there will be a giant sucking sound going south.” Perot did not win, but he took enough votes away from Bush to pave Bill Clinton’s primrose path to the White House.

In 2020, Trump is running for a second term

as Perot’s angry child. He has jettisoned “bad” trade deals like NAFTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Biden is the successor to Bush and Clinton. He was vice president when the US negotiated the TPP. The die is cast for a clash between two radically different visions for the future.

Who Will Win?

In 2016, I had an uncanny feeling that both Brexit and Trump’s triumph were not only possible but probable. In February that year, I examined the UK’s troubled marriage with Europe and argued that British Prime Minister David Cameron had promised more than he delivered, which would cause him problems later. In July, I posited that we could soon be living in the age of Trump because of increasing inequality and rising rage against entrenched elites.

I followed the two articles with a talk at Google in August on the global rise of the far right. Aggrieved by the superciliousness of journalists based in New York and Washington, I resonated deeply with the “left-behind” voters. They believed that American elites had turned rapaciously parasitic and sanctimoniously hypocritical. It seemed inevitable that some Pied Piper would lead a populist reaction.

In 2020, I do not have my finger on the pulse in the same way as in 2016. Social distancing and limited travel in the era of COVID-19 has made it difficult to estimate what really is going on. Besides, Americans say radically different things depending on which candidate they support. Often, they are very guarded or say little, making it hard to judge what is truly happening.

Democrats seem convinced that the nation is horrified by four years of a Trump presidency. They see him as crass, racist, misogynist, dishonest and deeply dangerous. Democrats believe that Americans will punish Trump for damaging institutions, spreading hatred and lowering the dignity of his office. Opinion polls give the Democratic Party a handsome lead even in some key battleground swing states.

Pollsters were wrong in 2016, but they might have improved their methods since. Therefore, Democrats believe that they could retain their majority in the House of Representatives, flip the Senate and win back the White House.

Republicans do not seem to have much faith in these polls. Many are confident of another close victory. They predict losing the popular vote but winning the Electoral College. Republican strategists are banking on the silent white vote to turn out in their favor. Many voters are uncomfortable with the Black Lives Matter movement, calls to “defund the police” and prospects of higher taxes. They fear Biden to be a Trojan horse for the culture warriors of the far left led by Kamala Harris, his running mate. They worry about identity politics and the strains it places on the social fabric. Republicans also hope to pick up minority support from Hispanics who oppose abortion, Indians who back Trump’s good friend Narendra Modi, Taiwanese who hate China and others.

Making Sense of Donald Trump

When I speak to Americans, one thing is clear. This election is a referendum on President Trump. His manifest flaws have been chronicled by numerous publications and innumerable late-night comedy shows. Yet Trump still retains the trust of many Americans. Why?

The best answer came from some militia members I spoke to in West Virginia. They conceded that Trump lies but gave him credit for telling one big truth: Things had turned much too ugly for far too many people like them.

Some of these militia members were veterans who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan. They were filled with a burning sense of injustice. These gentlemen had withering contempt for the likes of Paul Bremer, Paul Wolfowitz and John Bolton who served President George W. Bush. They viewed wars abroad as a criminal waste of American blood and treasure. These war veterans pointed out that Bremer, Wolfowitz and Bolton had been courtiers who climbed up the

Washington greasy pole without ever serving in uniform. They remarked that Bush himself was a draft dodger who wriggled out of serving in Vietnam because of his father but sent others to die on foreign shores.

These West Virginians went on to say that their children had few prospects. Since 1991, working-class jobs have left for China. So, their children need a good education to compete for the few decent jobs in the services sector. However, they study in schools with few resources and overstretched teachers.

The militia members’ argument is simple but powerful. Only children who study in private schools or state schools in districts where houses cost a million dollars or more get into top universities, which cost a mere \$300,000 or so for an undergraduate degree. Affluent foreign students also make a beeline for America after high school. Such is the competition that most parents hire expensive admissions consultants for their children. So, those who come from hardworking ordinary American families are simply outgunned.

The celebrated entrepreneurs of the US might be dropouts, but top corporates hire largely, if not exclusively, from top universities. The West Virginians pointed out that, before Barrett’s nomination, “all nine justices of the nation’s highest court would have attended law school at either Yale or Harvard universities.” Those who go to posh schools and top universities effortlessly enter the cushy salaried class. They can walk in and buy a million-dollar home with a tiny down payment. All they need apart from their job is a good credit score. In contrast, ordinary Americans live paycheck to paycheck.

One militia member went on to discuss the bailout in some detail. He told me he had voted for change twice but got more of the same instead. This gentleman blamed President Barack Obama for caving in to Wall Street. He said veterans struggled to get by while bankers got big bonuses from taxpayer money. For him, this showed that Democrats had sold out to Wall

Street. He declared that fortunes of the new feudal superclass have been made through the serfdom of an ever-increasing underclass. In his memorable words, the system has “f**ked us over. Now, we will f**k it up.”

The West Virginians brought to life many arguments I have made over the last decade. In July 2013, I argued that increasing inequality, lack of access to quality education and an erosion of liberty were chipping away at the very basis of the American dream. Over the years, I have cited many studies that chronicled how America was becoming more unequal. In fact, inequality of both income and wealth has worsened even more during the COVID-19 pandemic. Note the economy has tanked but stock markets have stayed high. Social mobility continues to plummet. Poverty is shooting up dramatically. So is hunger. Surviving the terrible American nightmare has become more of a reality than achieving the great American dream.

Such developments have led to much anger. In an eloquent interview, Trump supporter-turned-opponent Anthony Scaramucci explained why the president won the support of the white working class in places like West Virginia, Wisconsin and Michigan in 2016. For this class, the television celebrity was “an avatar to express their anger.” In rural and suburban areas, blighted factory towns and rundown neighborhoods, Trump was the “orange wrecking ball” to “disrupt and change the system.”

Another interview by Trump’s former strategist, Steve Bannon, is equally instructive. He rightly says that the American economy is no longer based on capitalism but on neo-feudalism. This former Goldman Sachs highflier argues that the underclass and the superclass don’t pay for anything. The working and middle class are left taking the tab. Quantitative easing (QE) might have saved the economy from collapse but has largely benefited the wealthy. In a clever turn of phrase, Bannon calls QE the bailing out of the guilty who had crashed the system itself. Trump is a “very imperfect instrument” for this populist revolt.

Likable Uncle Joe and Dancing Kamala

Many Republicans tell me that they like Biden. They think he is a good and likable man. These folks have reservations about his son Hunter but admire his late son Beau who served in the US Army. However, Republicans fear Biden could be turning senile and Harris would be the real power behind the throne. They reserve their special ire for Harris who they damn for practicing identity politics. Even many Democrats are uncomfortable about her cozy relationships with the Silicon Valley mafia who Americans feel care more about India than Indiana.

For many Republicans, Harris is a disingenuous elitist who plays the race card to win votes and sympathy. She had no compunctions putting young black men into jail for minor crimes as a prosecutor to further her political career. They detest the fact that Harris played the race card against Biden during the Democratic presidential primaries. She made a big deal about his opposition to mandatory busing of colored children to largely white schools. Now, Harris is merrily dancing her way to the White House on a presidential ticket with the same man she excoriated not too long ago. Politics is a bloodsport, but some find Harris a bit too canny and bloodthirsty.

Biden’s supporters take a different view. They think he is still in good health and has good judgment. As per *The Economist*, the former vice president is “a centrist, an institutionalist, a consensus-builder.” He is exactly what the doctor ordered for a deeply-traumatized nation. Biden will not only steer the Democratic Party forward but also get rid of the scourge of Trump for the Republicans. Decency and civility will return to public life and the White House. Many point to Biden’s impassioned 1986 speech against the Reagan administration’s support for the South African apartheid regime as evidence of his deep commitment to equality and justice.

Democrats see reservations against Harris as evidence of America’s deep-seated sexism and

racism. With Indian and Jamaican parents, Harris is multiracial like Obama. For many, she is the future of America. She could be the first woman vice president, breaking the key glass ceiling. Immigrants like her parents provide America the talent to stay top dog. As long as Sundar Pichai, Elon Musk and John Oliver make a beeline for America, Uncle Sam will triumph over the Middle Kingdom.

Democrats make good arguments for the Biden-Harris ticket, but they lack the passion Trump supporters displayed. The fervor of the 2008 Barack Obama or the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaigns is distinctly missing. Democrats are not offering a clear vision or a program for the future. They are running on kicking out Trump and restoring American democracy. It remains to be seen if this will enthrone working-class voters to switch their support to the party of Roosevelt.

Another Battle in a Long War

Both Biden and Trump have declared they are fighting for America's soul. It is the mother of all battles in what could prove to be a protracted war. The country is now economically, educationally, socially, culturally and virtually divided. The division that cable news networks exacerbated a few decades ago is now on steroids thanks to social media. Algorithms have created filter bubbles and echo chambers. People see more and more of the same. In the post-truth world of fake news, people cannot even agree upon basic facts.

In this unequal and polarized world, institutions are falling short. Congressmen who face reelection every two years are constantly fundraising. They have little time to write laws or hold the executive accountable. Senators often stick around forever, some until they die. Partisanship is so intense that little gets done. Judges are increasingly appointed on partisan grounds and this is damaging their legitimacy.

At the heart of the matter is a simple question: What holds America together? Bannon has a point when he says that immigration and trade

benefit the affluent by lowering costs and raising profits. If hedge funds in Greenwich, Connecticut and internet oligopolies in Silicon Valley, California invest globally and move money through complex legal structures in different countries, what do they have in common with a plumber in Hattiesburg, Mississippi or a carpenter in Great Falls, Montana?

After the ethnic cleansing in 2007-08, Kenyan leaders signed a power-sharing agreement and the country drifted back to normalcy. As Kenya gears up for elections in 2022, fear and loathing are in the air again. The dormant divisions in this former colony threaten to erupt. The same is true for America. Young black men suffer violent policing and mass incarceration in America's unjust criminal justice system. The white working class feels betrayed. The woke generation wants to upend the old social order. Feminists want to burn down the patriarchy. Catholics and evangelicals aim to outlaw abortion. With America's different tribes pulling in different directions, things are truly held together with string.

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What Will a Post-Trump America Look Like?

Whoever succeeds Donald Trump — in 2021 or 2025 — must confront the legacy he leaves behind head-on.

Jamie Shenk
Nov 05, 2020

Americans are still anxiously waiting to find out who will be the 46th president of the United States. But while the results of the 2020 race may still be murky, what this election has made

clear is that whoever succeeds President Donald Trump — whether in 2021 or 2025 — will face an uphill battle of governing a post-Trump America.

What will this look like in practice? One only needs to look as far as one of the United States' closest allies in the hemisphere, Colombia, for a glimpse of the challenges that await Trump's successor.

Colombian politics has its own Trump-like figure. His name is Alvaro Uribe Velez. Elected in 2002, Uribe governed for eight years as a tough conservative politician. His aggressive military campaigns against the country's guerilla groups brought long-sought stability and security to much of the country and transformed him into a national hero for many Colombians. But his presidency was also marred by controversy. He has been accused of facilitating widespread human rights abuses, corruption and drug trafficking.

Despite — or perhaps because of — this dual legacy, Uribe has remained a central figure in Colombian politics since leaving the presidential palace. He continues to serve as the leader of the country's ruling political party, the Democratic Center, and sat as a senator until summer 2020 when he resigned pending the results of a criminal investigation against him.

The influence Uribe continues to wield on the Colombian political scene should serve as a warning to whoever succeeds Trump in the Oval Office. In Colombia, Uribe's willingness and ability to mobilize broad swaths of the population to support his interests has proved a challenge for governance by opposing politicians.

Former Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos experienced this firsthand in 2016 as he tried to sell the people a peace deal to end the country's 60-year-long civil war with a guerrilla group known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC). As the most visible and vocal opponent of the deal, Uribe consistently belittled both Santos as a politician and the peace he negotiated with the FARC. "Peace

yes, but not like this" became his rallying cry in public speeches, interviews and perhaps his — and Trump's — favorite platform, Twitter. His vitriolic attacks played a part in Colombians' surprise rejection of the peace deal in a national referendum, a humiliating defeat for Santos.

Trump May Still Influence US Politics

The small margins of this year's US presidential election suggest that a Democratic successor to Trump will have to confront a former president with a similarly devoted following as the one Uribe has maintained in Colombia. Trump is unlikely to bow graciously out of politics. With a large base that continues to support him, he could still influence politics informally, by calling on his followers to engage in (possibly violent) protests.

The president's continued popularity among Republican voters may also force the GOP to maintain its current far-right policy positions to retain voters in future elections. The election of a QAnon conspiracy theorist to the House of Representatives confirms that Trump's influence reaches beyond the presidency.

Indeed, Democrats are not the only ones who should be worried about Trump's continued influence after leaving office. Uribe's handpicked successor in the 2018 presidential election, President Ivan Duque, has struggled to govern under the shadow of the former leader. Like the US, Colombia today is deeply polarized. Though Duque and his allies hold a majority in the Senate, distrust and frustration with the government sent nearly 200,000 Colombians to the streets of the country's major cities in protest last year.

But Duque's reliance on support from Uribe's hardline followers has effectively precluded him from building bridges with his opponents, lest he be seen as abandoning Uribe's legacy. Unable to fully satisfy either camp, Duque's approval rating has languished far below 50% for most of his presidency.

Confronting the Legacy

Republicans will face a similar challenge if they wish to maintain Trump's base while also trying to repair the deep divisions that he has sown among US society.

It may seem extreme to compare the United States to Colombia, a country that has teetered on the edge of collapse and conflict for over 60 years. But the reality is that the US is also a post-conflict country. Our civil war may have ended in 1865, but events in 2020 — the partisan reactions to the coronavirus pandemic, racial tensions following the extrajudicial killings of black Americans, and a presidential vote that remains too close to call three days after the election — have proved that the legacy of the violence and the polarization it sowed persist today.

Whoever succeeds Donald Trump must confront this legacy head-on. But as Colombia shows, doing so with Trump in the background will be far from easy.

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"All I Want Is For My Vote to Count"

Whether it is in a blue state or a red state in America, every vote that has been cast must be counted.

S. Suresh
Nov 05, 2020

Citizens of the United States of America have finished exercising their right to vote in what is likely to be an election with the highest turnout in more than 100 years. Taking advantage of in-person early voting and by mail, nearly 100

million Americans had cast their ballots even before the polls opened on November 3. That staggering number adds up to nearly three-quarters of the total votes cast in the 2016 presidential election.

Another 60 million or so voted on Election Day, making the total number of citizens who voted reach nearly 160 million, according to CNBC estimates. This works out to a historic 66.8% of the 239.2 million Americans eligible to vote in 2020.

These people had one reason to participate in the democratic process. They wanted their vote to count. They wanted their ballot to be counted. Intellectually, it is easy to rationalize the logic that a person exercising their franchise wants their voice heard. That rationale took a far more significant meaning when I got a chance to observe the face, the countenance and emotions of a person when they showed up at a vote center and said, "I would like to vote."

Listening to Voters

I worked as an election officer in my local county for the 2020 elections and had the opportunity to observe first-hand nearly 1,500 people who stopped by at my vote center. What I experienced when I directly interacted with many of them made my usual intellectual rationale pale in significance, allowing me to viscerally appreciate the importance of every single vote.

It was heartwarming to observe a nonagenarian lady and her septuagenarian daughter come in together to cast their vote — the daughter assisting her mother with the process.

There was an elderly lady who required the assistance of her husband, a mobility walking aid device and a portable oxygen tank in order for her to come to the vote center and drop off her vote-by-mail envelope. She could have dropped it in one of the 100 ballot boxes the county had set up. Yet for this lady, it was important to come to a vote center — even if it meant taking one

small step at a time from the parking lot — and be assured that her vote would count by an election official before dropping her envelope in the proper bag.

There was an octogenarian man who was not comfortable coming into the vote center due to COVID-19. We assisted him by setting up a polling station out in the open so he could exercise his right to vote. Despite being worried about his health and the pandemic, this old man decided to come in person and ensure that his voice was heard.

Worried that using the United States Postal Service may not get their ballot to their county in time, an older couple was willing to drive more than 400 miles in order to drop off their ballot in their county of residence. Thankfully, we were able to assure them that dropping their vote-by-mail envelope in our vote center would ensure their ballot would reach the appropriate county and their vote counted.

Another person who was concerned that the vote-by-mail envelope she had mailed had not been recorded in the system made several phone calls to various people — including Senator Kamala Harris' office — before deciding to come to a vote center to understand what had happened. In her conversation with me, she kept repeating, "All I want is for my vote to count." Thankfully, we were also able to assist her and allay her fears that her voice would not be heard in what she felt was "the most important election she has ever voted in."

Yet another person who works for the city but registered to vote in a neighboring county that was a couple of hours drive away accosted me when I was taking a break to get some fresh air. Explaining his special circumstances, he clarified with me exactly how he could vote. Once he understood the process, I could hear him talking to his manager asking for time off on Election Day so he could drive to his county and exercise his franchise.

Living in one of the most diverse counties in

America, we were also able to assist several monolingual voters with the process. One of our bilingual aides spent nearly an hour assisting a first-time voter who only spoke Spanish. Another aide assisted a Vietnamese family who were somewhat overwhelmed by the voting process.

Every Vote Counts

These are only a handful of the many instances when I could sense the palpable concern of the voter who needed to be assured that despite efforts by the sitting president to discredit the democratic process, their voice would be heard.

I am just one average citizen, living in one corner of America, but one who actively participated in the elections this year. My eyes misted over on more than one occasion when I interacted with people who braved many personal challenges, be it physical, emotional or a linguistic one, in order to exercise their democratic right. I wonder how many hundreds of thousands of people across the length and breadth of the country had to overcome their own personal obstacles in order to cast their vote in this election.

As I cleared my thoughts and got back to my job after each moving interaction I experienced, one aspect became crystal clear: that every vote matters. And every vote that has been cast must be counted. Whether it is in a blue state or a red state. Whether it is in a battleground state where the incumbent is leading or the challenger is leading. Even if it takes several days, in order to uphold the fundamentals of democracy, every vote that has been cast must be counted.

As that one voter put it, "All I want is for my vote to count."

***S. Suresh** is a writer and a product executive with more than 25 years of experience in enterprise software.

Joe Biden and America's Second Reconstruction

Joe Biden will take on the world's oldest democracy's greatest challenge: healing a very divided nation.

Gary Grappo
Nov 09, 2020

After four days of agonizing vote tabulations, interminable political commentary, overwrought election dissection and national public angst, Joe Biden has been declared the winner of the 2020 election as America's next president. Biden partisans are entitled to some celebration. It was a hard-fought win against what seemed like impossible odds at the beginning of the year. But the politician who began his public life 50 years ago as a Wilmington, Delaware, councilman will now take on the biggest challenge of his life and of the nation he will lead.

First, however, it's important to call attention to all the things that went well for America this last week. And they're vitally important for Americans — and non-Americans, too — to understand and appreciate as the nation and its new president invest themselves in this herculean challenge ahead.

For all the Sturm und Drang in the lead-up to the election, voting came off largely without a hitch. All voters who came to vote were able to do so. In most cases, waiting times were mercifully brief. Waiting tended to occur more frequently during the early voting. Those voters deserve their country's respect and gratitude for their patience, persistence and commitment to the democratic process. Despite plenty of hiccups in primary voting that took place earlier in the year, national election day procedures and systems performed just as they were supposed to do. Early voting as well as mail-in and absentee voting, occurring in many states for the first time to minimize the dangers of COVID-19, also proceeded with few problems.

Delays in ballot tabulation occurred in states like Pennsylvania, Georgia, Nevada and elsewhere largely because Republican-controlled legislatures prohibited starting the counting process until November 3 — voting day. In the end, that may have redounded against them and President Donald Trump. Also, to minimize voters' exposure to COVID-19, many states were using mail-in voting and same-day voter registration for the first time, accounting for further delays.

Vox Populi

The success of the process was bolstered throughout the nation by competent election administrators and effective election systems, manned by armies of conscientious volunteers, Republicans, Democrats and independents. Donald Trump's predictable, sore-loser accusations of fraud and manipulation are specious and groundless. His legal claims will likely go nowhere.

Furthermore, fears of violence or public unrest at polling places or in cities never really materialized, from either the left or the right. There were few, if any, reports of voter intimidation. The American people seemed to understand that this most sacred and honored element of their much-bruised democracy was off-limits. It was their chance to express their views, wishes and wants in the most forceful and effective way possible in a democracy.

The world may also take heart in the level of participation in this election. The voter participation rate — expected to reach nearly two-thirds of the population eligible to vote once all ballots are counted — will exceed the previous high of 65.7% set in the 1908 elections. In my home state of Colorado, voter turnout will reach an astounding 85%, the highest in the nation and the highest ever of any US state in modern election history.

It may be fair to credit Donald Trump for wresting American voters from their traditional election lethargy. He unquestionably stirred deep

and strong sentiments among supporters and critics alike. They responded as they should in a democratic society — by going to the polls. For America, vox populi prevailed.

There is a related benefit to the increased voter turnout. It would be hard to find a period in recent US history when so many Americans took such a strong interest in public affairs. One could hardly go to the supermarket, walk through a parking garage, take a stroll through the neighborhood or sit in a classroom or office — at least those still functioning under COVID-19 restrictions — without hearing people talk about the political issues and the election. Political conversations — whether online, on social media, TV, radio, print or at the kitchen table — dominated like never before. Animated and even stressful at times, these are nevertheless heartening. It is essential that this communication take place in order to keep a democracy vibrant and innervated. An engaged citizenry makes for a stronger democracy.

Finally, the much-feared tampering by outside “influencers” also failed to materialize, though not from want of trying. Federal, state and local agencies and authorities did in fact come together to ensure that these elections were largely interference-free and that the results do indeed reflect the genuine will of the people. Intelligence agencies tipped off Facebook, Twitter and other tech companies about fake social media accounts and posts in order to restrict the reach of bots and prevent the spread of false information. That was in spite of a president who has insisted for four years that outside agents had no influence in the 2016 election, when all three US intelligence agencies — the CIA, NSC and FBI — concluded otherwise.

The upshot of the 2020 election process is that the core component of America’s democracy — the expression of the people’s will — proved strong, healthy and resilient. It worked.

Now the Hard Part

Despite that success, however, American

democracy faces enormous pressures. The nation is plainly divided into two near-equal camps. Each seems unable and unwilling to listen or reach out to the opposite side, viewing the other as enemies rather than political adversaries. It is unhealthy and unsustainable. Democracy without compromise, almost a forbidden word in the rival camps, leads to stagnation and collapse. It will be President-elect Biden’s task to start the process to bridge this gaping chasm in American public life.

Just how is America divided? Some argue, rather eloquently and persuasively, that it’s a conflict of classes. In one corner is a wealthy, entitled, well-educated and aloof stratum of elites divorced from and insensitive to the needs of what is essentially a working class. This working class, in the opposite corner, provides for the elite’s essential services, contributes the manual labor to build and maintain their glass-encased office complexes and luxury homes, grows and processes their food, makes and maintains the cars and machines they depend on, cleans their cities, operates and maintains the transportation networks, and fights and dies in their wars.

The latter point bears elaboration because it is particularly illustrative of an apparent divide. Since 2001, America has been at war in Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which continue today. US forces remain present, though in fewer numbers today than five or 10 years ago, in both countries as well in other countries around the world. A recent study by the Council on Foreign Relations showed that 83% of American military recruits come from families or neighborhoods whose median incomes fall below \$85, 850. Only 17% came from income levels above that.

The median household income in the US was \$68,703 in 2019. People of color are disproportionately represented in the enlisted ranks of the Army, Navy and Air Force (African Americans) and the Marine Corps (Hispanics). In fact, black Americans are far more likely to serve their country in uniform than their white counterparts.

The United States turns to its middle and lower classes to defend itself and fight its wars pretty much like every civilization throughout history dating back to the Roman Empire. But none of those were democracies. So-called elites, who benefit substantially more than their lower-income fellow citizens in terms of legal protections, opportunity, privilege and rights, bear fewer of the burdens of defending and sustaining that system of rights than those who arguably profit less from it. One does not go to Harvard, Stanford or MIT in order to enlist or even seek an officer's commission in America's armed forces.

Class or Geography?

However, it is another statistical nugget in the CFR study that may allow one to argue that, in fact, it isn't class that divides America. It's geography. Data of state-by-state contributions to the enlisted ranks of the military indicate that states of the southeast, which are less affluent, are overly represented. The more well-off states of the northeast are underrepresented.

With that in mind, consider the state-by-state electoral map. With the exception of Georgia, whose growing metropolis of Atlanta belatedly delivered the Southern state to Biden, the Southeast was Donald Trump territory. The Southeast and the Midwest, which also went for Trump, are disproportionately rural and host fewer large cities than the states along America's two coasts, which gave their electoral votes to Joe Biden.

America's electoral map has changed little since the end of the Civil War. The electoral maps of 1880, just 15 years after the war, and 1908, over 40 years afterward, are illustrative. (Note: In the 1880 map, the colors used to designate the parties are reversed from what they are today — Republicans were blue and Democrat states red.) There is one important consideration that dramatically altered the party alignment in the South. With the civil rights movement in the 1960s, Southern Democrats switched to Republican. Richard Nixon cleverly played

the race card in 1968 at the height of the civil rights movement and again in 1973, cementing Southern loyalty for the Republican Party for the first time. It isn't class that is at the heart of what divides America today. For one thing, Americans never bought into the old Marxist-Leninist argument of class warfare. It was an outmoded and unrelatable Old World argument. It didn't apply to them.

Classes most certainly exist in the US, and Americans know it. Except for the Native Americans, all US citizens find their roots among immigrants who came overwhelmingly from lower classes. Most immigrants who came to this country through the 1970s were poor and seeking the kind of opportunities not available to them in their countries of origin. What they sought, later defined as upward mobility, was an America where class may have existed but wouldn't matter. Most Americans, with the exception of blacks, Native Americans and other people of color, believed that class warfare could not exist in their country. Their problems, like everything else about America, were different.

The real division in America is urban versus rural, supplemented with a healthy dose of race. Two recent books make persuasive cases for class versus the urban-rural arguments. Michael Lind, in his well-researched "The New Class War," makes the case for social class divisions in America. Ezra Klein's "Why We're Polarized" makes the case for what I would describe as American tribalism, an almost political Hatfields against the McCoys. Only it's Republicans versus Democrats. In her review and comparison of these two excellent publications, Professor Amy Chua writes that Klein's categorization embraces religion, race and geography.

But electoral politics suggest that geography, and not just on a national scale, may be the culprit and what really defines America's current challenges. Even within predominantly Democratic states, rural counties typically were drawn to Donald Trump. Overwhelmingly Democrat California and New York — and Texas on the Republican side — illustrate the point.

America's differences on just about every public issue today — race, gender, abortion, guns, big government, religion, taxes ... you name it — can almost always be sorted by the urban versus rural criteria.

America's Second Reconstruction

How does Joe Biden begin to fix that? Judging from his 50 years in politics, he may be fairly well suited. He's not an ideological iconoclast. Nor is he vindictive. He won't launch a campaign to vanquish his opponents in the fashion of Donald Trump. His campaign rhetoric and post-election commentary all suggest that he'll follow a moderate political course and look for compromise. And Biden comes from America's working classes.

That is all necessary. But it's far from sufficient. Biden needs a second Reconstruction. The ideological brainchild of Abraham Lincoln following the American Civil War, reconstruction sought to bring the South back into the American fold, promote economic reintegration and development, eradicate the vestiges of slavery, and incorporate the freed slaves into American society. It was generally considered to be successful despite Andrew Johnson's, Lincoln's successor, efforts to weaken it. A pro-Reconstruction, Republican-controlled Congress and President Ulysses Grant ensured steady progress. Nevertheless, it was tragically cut short, sacrificed in the political horse-trading to win Southern Democrats' support for Republican Rutherford B. Hayes following the disputed 1876 election.

With it went a united nation, with black Americans finally getting a taste of the forbidden American fruit of opportunity and upward mobility. Jim Crow, segregation and lynching became the order of the day, effectively slavery without the formal system. Also lost were the South's opportunity to capitalize on what would soon explode in the North and elsewhere — the Industrial Revolution. Like the Great Emancipator, his noble dream of Reconstruction followed Lincoln to an early grave.

Reconstruction remains unfinished business in America. And not just in the South. Rural areas throughout America need reconstruction. They need capital, infrastructure, better health care, improved schools and opportunities, especially jobs. This must especially include areas of concentrations of black, brown and Indigenous Americans. To capitalize fully on its great bounty, America's rural communities need to connect to their urban counterparts.

Donald Trump may have correctly read the frustrations and anxieties of rural America. But he manipulated those earnest feelings to advance the Trump brand. He offered no solutions. Instead, Americans heard verbal palliatives that made rural Americans feel that someone in Washington was finally listening. But the frustrations of being outside America's prosperity are still with rural citizens and people of color.

Biden will have to find a way to earn their trust and then begin a new reconstruction. His Build Back Better program, starting with coming to grips with the pandemic and getting it under control, may offer the broad outlines for a new Reconstruction. To earn that trust and start the healing process of his country, Biden may wish to refer to Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. With a large dose of humility, grace and forgiveness, President-elect Biden must listen to rural Americans, especially to those of color, all of whom want not only to share in America's bounty but also to preserve what is important to their cherished lifestyles. America's diversity is an unquestionable strength of its democracy. That must include its urban-rural diversity, too.

It may be historical irony that to heal a deeply divided nation, the newly elected president must look back to another president who sought to heal the much deeper divisions of a broken nation. This time, it must be made to work. The country's future may depend on it.

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Welcome to Joe Biden's Socialist States of America

The fact that a significant number of voters have bought into the Republican narrative of Joe Biden as a promoter of socialism is a reflection of the deep polarization of the current political landscape in the US.

Hans-Georg Betz
Nov 18, 2020

One of the sillier notions advanced during this US presidential election campaign was that if Joe Biden were to win, he and his party would transform the United States into the promised land of socialism. I guess not even the Republican strategists who promoted this canard seriously believed it to be true. Unfortunately, the message appears to have sent jitters among some segments of the American electorate, which, as a result, voted for Donald Trump.

We are not talking about all those good people in Nebraska, Iowa or North Dakota who would have voted for the incumbent no matter what. We are talking about the substantial number of Hispanic and Asian Americans who cast their vote for a candidate and for a party not known for their enthusiastic embrace of multiculturalism. In fact, one of the most sobering lessons from this most recent contest was that the Democrats lost — or, perhaps better, failed to appeal to — a significant part of an electorate they considered not only theirs but their “natural” constituency.

So much for the “emerging Democratic majority” often invoked over the past decade or so yet proving once again quite elusive. As it turned

out, to the apparent surprise of journalists and pundits alike, “non-whites” are significantly less homogeneous and significantly more diverse than progressive strategists have envisioned and taken for granted. “The horror, the horror!” to quote Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness.”

The Other Side

The fact is that the Democrats lost a significant share of “voters of color” — African Americans, Hispanics and Asian Americans. This loss not only deprived Biden of carrying Florida, but cost the Democrats congressional seats in Florida, Texas and even California. Significantly enough, as The New York Times noted, “the only House seats Republicans picked up that were not in districts Mr. Trump also carried were in heavily Hispanic or Asian regions.” Heavily Democratic south Texas communities along the Mexican border are a case in point — areas, according to Politico, along with parts of Florida, that “had some of the sharpest swings from Democrats to Republicans this year.”

Several south Texas counties, which Hilary Clinton had carried in 2016 by large margins, this time saw support for the Democratic contender melt like snow on a balmy spring Sunday; other counties went outright to the other side.

Among Asian American voters, Trump picked up around a third of the vote; the same was true for Hispanic voters. In both cases, the outcome of the vote was to a large extent a reflection of the heterogeneity of these communities. In Florida, for instance, Cuban and Venezuelan Americans predominantly voted for Trump; among Cuban Americans, around 60% said in a pre-election poll that they intend to vote for Trump. This was particularly the case among more recent Cuban migrants who, unlike US-born Cuban Americans, are overwhelmingly registered Republicans.

In south Texas, an area heavily dependent on jobs in law enforcement, Mexican Americans came out for Trump. In other parts of the country, Trump received significant support from Vietnamese and Filipino Americans. In

all of these instances, the Republican strategy to paint Biden as a socialist appears to have carried the day. Trump himself, in one of his tweets, had charged that Biden was “a PUPPET of CASTRO-CHAVISTAS like Crazy Bernie, AOC and Castro-Lover Karen Bass.” In addition, Trump’s stance on China appears to have appealed to significant numbers of Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipino voters, if for different reasons such as, for Vietnamese American voters, the memory of China’s “imperialist efforts” in the region.

It would be easy to dismiss all of these voters as misguided, taken in by a con man whose “muscular leadership style” resonates among certain portions of Latino men in Texas and elsewhere. Trump’s Christian posturing appeals to conservative Catholic and evangelical Hispanics, particularly with regard to the question of abortion. As one voter is quoted in The New York Times, “Abortion is the litmus test, Jesus is my savior and Trump is my president.” The Trump administration’s mishandling of the pandemic did nothing to undermine the conviction that he was the right man to fix the mess and get the country’s economy back on its feet.

Really Existing Socialism

All of these are valid reasons, as good as any to explain the outcome of this election. This, however, is not the case when it comes to the major charge, which apparently had considerable traction among a significant number of voters, that with Biden, the United States would be on the road to socialism. For a European, this is ridiculous. It is even more preposterous when it evokes the likes of Venezuela’s Nicolas Maduro, as if Maduro had anything to do with socialism — except for his claim to be a socialist. It once again shows to what degree the experience of “really existing socialism,” as the East German regime liked to put it, has debased and discredited what once was a beacon of hope for millions of people.

Marx never envisioned that the first countries to adopt his thoughts would be economically

backward ones such as Russia, China, Cuba and Vietnam. For Marx, the fundamental precondition for socialism was the establishment of an economy of abundance, brought about by the “unfolding of the forces of production” — technological innovation and progress which would liberate humans from the drudgery of dull, repetitious, stultifying labor. History, unfortunately, threw a curveball. In the hands of Lenin and his successors, both in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, socialism turned into a development strategy designed to catch up with the advanced economies in the West.

It was a miserable failure. In East Germany, for instance, the Socialist Unity Party (SED) claimed it was marching from one victory to the next until a rude awakening in 1989, when the “first socialist state on German soil” — as Erich Honecker, the leader of the GDR, declared on October 7, 1989, a month before the fall of the Berlin Wall — was forced to declare bankruptcy, both physically and ideologically. A system that cannot even guarantee the regular supply of toilet paper — and this in normal times, not during a pandemic — is hardly the socialist “workers and farmers’ paradise” the SED touted for decades. A socialist system is supposed to meet the material needs of its citizens so that the latter are in a position to develop their intellectual and artistic potential rather than having to stand in line to, perhaps, get hold of a measly banana.

Today, more often than not, “socialism” has been turned into a bugaboo that easily scares innocent minds. In the hands of political operators without scruples, it is an ideal means to undermine and discredit progressive ideas. Take, for instance, measures to confront global warming. In southern Texas, an area heavily dependent on the oil and gas industry, Hispanics voted against Biden because of the Democrats’ commitment to promote renewable sources of energy, seen as being left-wing.

To be sure, the transition to renewables is causing and likely to continue to cause significant social dislocations. Economic theory suggests

that the only reasonable way to mitigate the impact of these dislocations is a strong safety net that allows the losers of technological innovation to get the opportunity to retrain and lead a decent life. In the past, in advanced capitalist countries, it was primarily socialist and social democratic parties that promoted the social welfare state.

Today, even the International Monetary Fund and The Economist newspaper not only voice their concern about the dramatic increase in inequality and the nefarious fallout of hyperglobalization, but also stress the importance of a strong safety net and — the horror! the horror! — of state intervention in the economy. This is not socialism but basic common sense, which, unfortunately, appears quite alien to substantial parts of the American public.

The fact that a significant number of American voters have bought into the Republican narrative of Biden the promoter of socialism is just one more reflection of the deep polarization that characterizes the current political landscape of the United States. On the one side, Trump voters, full of nostalgia for times past when the US was a “God-fearing” country, the major economic power fueled by the abundant supply of cheap oil, respected and feared around the world. On the other, Biden voters, realistic (one might hope) about America’s diminished position on the international arena, humbled by the extent to which the virus exposed the country’s lack of preparedness and subsequent shortcomings which gainsaid the notion that the US still is “the greatest country in the world,” frightened by the apparent fragility of America’s democratic institutions and widespread public willingness to trade in democracy for the proverbial strong man.

It is to be hoped that Biden’s inauguration in January will mark the beginning of what promises to be a protracted process of healing. The threat of Trump returning in 2024 like Jason Voorhees (“He’s back!”) of Friday the 13th fame, is certainly not going to make things easy. In the meantime, let hope prevail.

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