



The Biden Popular Front Is Doomed to Unravel

It may turn out that Donald Trump was the one force keeping the Democratic Party together.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHELLE KONDRICH

Christopher Caldwell / November 23, 2020

It's lucky that votes usually don't get counted till late at night. Victorious

presidential candidates have two audiences to speak to. Their zealous volunteers generally get little reward other than the sense, inculcated over months of battle, that they are fighting to vanquish the forces of evil. On election night, they expect someone to extol their bravery and ruthlessness, and to hold aloft the head of the vanquished foe. It's preferable if this can be done while the rest of the country is either sleeping or weepily watching its own candidate concede. When, days later, the president-elect pivots to flatter the whole country and extend an olive branch to his rivals, his loyal followers can feel jilted.

Because of late arriving mail-in votes, huge turnout, and the sheer closeness of November's election in swing states, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris had to rile up supporters and reassure neutrals at the same prime-time event. It was four days after the election, at one of those outdoor parking lot rallies that became a staple of Biden's Covid-era campaign. Harris was triumphal: "Our very democracy was on the ballot in this election, with the very soul of America at stake," she said. "You chose hope and unity, decency, science, and yes, truth." Biden was conciliatory, quoting the Bible and promising to "work as hard for those who didn't vote for me as those who did." Perhaps that will be a viable division of labor for the indefinite future.

But Biden and Harris have a problem. The vision of ousting Donald Trump has been wildly attractive, drawing 79 million votes, more Americans than have ever voted for anything. As Michelle Obama put it, they voted against "lies, hate, chaos, and division." If by this she means Trump, then lies, hate, chaos, and division turn out to have quite a constituency themselves, commanding 73 million votes, more than her husband won in either of his races. Trump's House delegation has been bolstered by the elections—and radicalized, judging by the arrival in Washington of Georgia QAnon habitué Marjorie Taylor Greene and Colorado gun enthusiast Lauren Boebert. His Senate majority has held, barring a Democratic sweep of January's pair of runoff Senate contests in Georgia. As long as the Trump coalition remains the central force in American politics, reconciling the country to a Biden presidency will be difficult. But reorienting the Democratic Party may be harder. With Trump himself gone, Biden's historic

purpose is achieved. His work is done. If he doesn't secure a base within his own party, he risks radicalizing Republicans and Democrats alike.

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The coming weeks may see the reemergence in backrooms and boardrooms of the tensions that loomed over the 2020 Democratic primaries. Let us review the three power centers in the party as they existed then:

The new economy. Two titans of the finance world (Michael Bloomberg and Tom Steyer) sought to win the Democratic nomination by funding their own and various down-ballot candidacies. (Both would eventually back Biden.) There was also one impecunious primary candidate who had some original ideas about the tech world: Andrew Yang. The new economy provides wealth for so few people that it can never command the party's rank and file. But it exercises a dizzying gravitational pull on its leaders.

Socialism. Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren were its candidates, the former in a doctrinal way (unions, benefits, income redistribution), the latter in a way adapted to strike more precisely at modern power relations (financial regulation, economic rights), which she denied was any form of socialism at all. Each was a more dire threat to the interests of people like Bloomberg and Steyer than anything the tax-cutting, deregulatory Republicans might produce. This is the great drama of the Democratic Party: They are the party of the 1 percent.

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Civil rights. The party's glue is civil rights, broadly understood. Civil rights long meant looking out for the practical and principled interests of Black people—naturally a commitment on which cooperation with socialists is possible. But over the decades, civil rights has also become a regulatory and judicial system for advancing the interests of other groups, including immigrants (elite and mass), women executives, two-income gay couples, and lawyers—commitments more consistent with those of the Democrats' plutocratic wing. The role of civil rights as reconciler-of-contradictions can be compared to that of anti-Communism in the tripartite Reagan coalition of the 1980s, which appealed in one way to Christians who thought the country ought to be more fraternal and in another to businessmen who thought it ought to be more rapacious.

All the candidates were candidates of civil rights, but in varying ways. Harris was constrained to progressivism by the politics of her state. Julián Castro of Texas was closer to Sanders and Warren. But most were drawn to (or from) the Democrats' powerful 1 percent wing, with such a pallid ideological profile that it seemed the whole point of their candidacy was the chance to elect, say, Pete Buttigieg as the first gay president, or Amy Klobuchar as the first woman.

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Election night in New York City.

MARK PETERSON FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Biden belonged to this group as well, with some pluses and minuses: He was minus any “glass ceiling” narrative. And he was plus three or four decades in age. His rhetoric was pitched to the hard-hats who had dominated his party when he arrived in Washington during the Nixon administration but who were now either dead or Republican. Biden’s attempt to pour WPA wine into BLM wineskins would culminate late in the campaign with his claim to have seen two men hugging and kissing in downtown Wilmington, Delaware, during the Eisenhower administration, after which his Mass-going, high-school-educated father explained to his teenage son, “It’s simple. They love each other”—one of the least likely tales ever told from an American political podium. Primary voters consigned him to fourth place in Iowa, fifth place in New Hampshire, and a distant second in Nevada. Sanders topped all three.

South Carolina saved Biden. Democrats’ constituencies tend to be metropolitan

and complex. South Carolina is not. It has neither Pride parades long enough, nor software IPOs numerous enough, to ever put the state in the Democratic column in a presidential election. The party there is almost 60 percent Black and subject to influence by its senior figures. When Biden got the endorsement of 79-year-old House Majority Whip James Clyburn, reportedly after promising to nominate a Black woman to the Supreme Court, the state fell into line.

This presented Democrats with perhaps their only chance to solve a serious structural problem. In 2016, half a dozen Republican egomaniacs vying for the nomination had stayed in the race too long. By allowing the establishment vote to splinter into fifths and sixths, they delivered the party up to an interloper. In a similar way, donors and consultants warned, Democrats were on the verge of nominating an unelectable socialist. In the three days between South Carolina and Super Tuesday, party leaders prevailed on establishment candidates Buttigieg and Klobuchar to fold, and suddenly it was the socialists who had the problem of an overcrowded field. Biden won 10 of 14 states on Super Tuesday. In only five of them did his newly consolidated establishment candidacy outpoll the combined progressive vote of Sanders and Warren. It appeared the primary campaign might be over. A week later, there was no longer any “might” about it. By then, the U.S. had 1,000 coronavirus cases, and the dispute about the ideological direction of the party was buried. Until now.

Biden’s candidacy had advantages. Democrats ran the first billion-dollar presidential campaign, outraising Trump by about 60 percent. They funded a hundred-million-dollar Senate campaign in South Carolina and came close to that mark in Kentucky. By summer, Biden was outspending Trump on advertising by two-to-one nationwide, by three-to-one in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. By early October, Trump had little money, and he was off the air altogether in Iowa, Ohio, Texas, and New Hampshire. Trump’s campaign had a slightly less plutocratic profile than Biden’s, getting 45 percent of its funds from small donors, versus 39 percent for Biden. But both were in the middle of their respective parties to judge by their donor profiles—neither working people’s candidates (such as Sanders, Warren, and Castro, all of whom got more than half their money from small donors); nor upper-class cat’s-paws,

such as Deval Patrick and Bill de Blasio, each of whom got upwards of 80 percent from high rollers.

There have been plenty of one-term presidents, but Donald Trump's four-year Republican ascendancy marks only the second time since the nineteenth century that a *party* has been given the White House for just one term. (The Democrats of Jimmy Carter were the other party to peter out after four years.) An explanation is called for. Certainly Trump was not the most pride-inducing president who ever stood behind a podium. After a while, even a voter willing to put up with eccentricity can get worn out.

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But those who mock Donald Trump as a mere huckster or illusionist are forgetting that, in a whole nation full of such people, that is not necessarily a downside. In the great nineteenth-century narratives of the Rutgers historian T.J. Jackson Lears, the archetypal American personality is usually not a Civil War general or a cowboy or a railroad baron but a fast-talking salesman peddling Dr. Chase's Nerve Pills or Kellogg Cereals or Dr. Warner's Coraline Corsets. By the Gilded Age, Lears writes, "the carnival was in town all the time. American society began to approximate Melville's vision—a milling mob of conniving confidence men and questing consumers, rendered credulous by their magical dream of self-transformation through purchase."

From the founding of the republic on through today, many powerful and rich men have yearned to do what Trump did. Since Ross Perot took almost 20 million votes in 1992, Starbucks founder Howard Schultz has mulled a run, and Bloomberg and Steyer have made one. How did Trump crack the code? Either he had talents that they lacked, or he identified a crisis that they missed.

It was the latter. Trump set himself against the 1 percent at a time when donor-

dependent politicians (including virtually all of them in the Republican Party) were unable even to consider that the country might have a problem with inequality. And Trump did so credibly. He didn't just oppose the 1 percent, he made them sick. That meant he wouldn't be able to sell out to them even if he wanted to. That was enough.

The inequality that we are speaking of was as much cultural as economic. Trump's supporters were disproportionately rural and exurban "deplorables," to use a coinage of Hillary Clinton's that will be the one thing the average schoolchild is taught about her a generation from now. They were sneered at, condescended to, and lectured about their racial homogeneity, as it were a function of their hostility to diversity rather than of their exclusion from the global economy arrangements that *generate* diversity. But such matters are often subjective, subtle, and time-consuming to describe except in broad stereotypes. We must turn to economic statistics for an objective description of this great social conflict, even if they leave out its most important psychological and sociological elements.



MARK PETERSON FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Trump didn't sell out his supporters. In fact, his presidency saw something extraordinary, even if it was all but invisible from the country's globalized cities: the first egalitarian boom since well back into the twentieth century. In 2019, the last non-Covid year, he presided over an average 3.7 percent unemployment rate and 4.7 percent wage growth among the lowest quartile of earners. All income brackets increased their take. That had happened in the last three Obama years, too. The difference is that in the Obama part of the boom, the income of the top decile rose by 20 percent, with tiny gains for other groups. In the Trump economy, the distribution was different. Net worth of the top 10 percent rose only marginally, while that of all other groups vaulted ahead. In 2019, the share of overall earnings going to the bottom 90 percent of earners *rose* for the first time in a decade.

The reasons for Trump's success are not yet clear. They may well have involved his unorthodox policy choices: above all, limiting immigration. Whatever the

reason, this equalization must be why Trump's economic approval was over 50 percent at election time, even as his personal scores remained low. We can assume that the great demographic surprise of the election—Trump's uptick among Black and Latino men—owed more to this wage progress than to Lil Wayne's endorsement, or to Trump's musing aloud that he had done more for Blacks in America than any president since Abraham Lincoln.

Uncomfortable though it may be for many Americans to admit, Trump got extremely unlucky. It was not his election that was a fluke but his removal. Had the coronavirus not struck the country late last winter, Trump would almost certainly have been reelected. His political problem was not that he mishandled the virus, though he certainly blundered, boasted, and prevaricated. Covid-19 inflicted historic levels of suffering on the United States, but that didn't make the country an outlier. In the week after Election Day, Americans were dying at a lower daily rate than people in Britain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and most other European countries. Spaniards were dying at three times the American rate, Belgians at six times.

Some of Trump's choices were sound (such as his prompt decision to restrict air travel from China, carried out, as he was correct to recall, in the face of Democratic and press accusations of xenophobia). Some of his poor choices were constrained by the situation on the ground: the outright discouragement of mask use by his surgeon general, Jerome Adams, may have been due to the fact that the United States was incapable of manufacturing them, leading to shortages among medical professionals. Private-sector progress toward a vaccine was significant, and certainly aided by the Trump administration's promise to purchase hundreds of millions of doses.

The problem for Trump's reelection was not that his response was too anti-lockdown and loosey-goosey. On the contrary. It was that the lockdowns imposed were draconian enough to disfigure the economy. Covid-19 not only stopped the egalitarian trend that was underway—it subjected the country to the most plutocrat-enriching trimester in its history. Plumbers and waiters were suddenly without incomes, and Uber rides dropped 80 percent. The economy

shrank at an annualized rate of 5 percent in the first quarter of 2020 and by an astonishing 31.4 percent in the second. But the giant internet retailers boomed. By late summer, Jeff Bezos had added \$90 billion to his wealth on the year. The country rebounded with 33.1 percent growth (again, annualized) in the third quarter. The good news was published by the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis on the Thursday before the election to much fanfare from Trump, but this looked more like through-the-looking-glass surrealism than trustworthy economic policy. And besides, by then much of the country had already voted.

That is the second way Covid-19 brought about Trump's loss: It rendered irresistible the pressure to broaden access to ballots and pioneer new forms of voting that on election night would cut Democrats' way. If this can be called luck, it is an example of the adage that luck favors the prepared. Democrats had long focused on reshaping electoral rules to their advantage. In the 2018 midterms in Florida, a Voting Rights Restoration for Felons referendum passed by almost a two-to-one margin. Generally, these reforms went in the direction of expanded access—early voting, mail voting, absentee voting, removing limitations on felons, and others. But not always. In New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo revised election laws to make it harder for third parties to win spots on the ballot. Many of these, notably the Working Families Party, had competed with Democrats.

The coronavirus led to voting reforms almost everywhere. More than half the ballots in Democratic primaries were cast by mail. Extending voting this way changes electoral tactics, and even the nature of election issues. It can reduce the effectiveness of revelations “dropped” by political partisans late in a campaign—George W. Bush's drunk driving arrest record on the final weekend of the 2000 election, Donald Trump's *Access Hollywood* tape in October 2016, or the October 2020 accounts of Hunter Biden's business dealings in Ukraine and China. That is arguably an upside for democracy, making it less “game-able,” less subject to manipulation.

But there is a counterproductive side to more liberal voting laws, too. They

break the unity of an election in a way that threatens its intelligibility. Consider the late stages of this election, in which the president himself contracted coronavirus, a disease very often fatal to those who are both aged and overweight. Had events taken a different turn, the votes of many who voted early on the assumption of a Biden-Trump contest would have been meaningless.

A more important problem with extended voting, at least in theory, is that it permits organized political forces to interpose themselves between voters and vote counters—whether by coaching or by intercepting. How one weighs the relative value of voting convenience and fraud risk is a matter of personal conviction. Although limited studies have shown no long-term advantage to mail-in voting for either party, Democrats and Republicans have come to hold diametrically opposed views on the matter. Democrats approve of absentee voting under any circumstances, by a margin of 83 to 16. Republicans *disapprove* this sort of unlimited absentee voting by 55-44.

In the final months of the campaign, the basic ground rules of the election changed in a way that satisfied one party and infuriated the other. In Pennsylvania, 63 percent of the mail-in ballot requests came from Democrats, 25 percent from Republicans. In North Carolina it was 46 percent from Democrats, 20 percent from Republicans. Republicans suspected a partisan motive when the Pennsylvania Supreme Court moved to extend past election day the deadline for the arrival of mail-in ballots, rewriting the state's election laws. Whether or not the decision shifted any votes, it made inevitable Republicans' angry contestation of the election once they lost it. The parties' inability to agree on basic democratic ground rules threatens to remain.

The special circumstances of the resistance to Donald Trump have placed certain paradoxes at the heart of American politics. Joe Biden was chosen as the least-bad candidate to lead a broad anti-Trump coalition—a popular front, if you will—and he did his work creditably.

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At times he seemed to be a cipher—the twenty-first century equivalent of the do-nothing general George McClellan, who led the Army of the Potomac at the start of the Civil War. But McClellan understood that there was an advantage to being a nothing: The North had every material, technological and demographic advantage over the South, and these would do their work, given time. The Democratic Party entered this election with similar structural advantages. It is the party of wealth. Nine of the 10 richest states went for Biden. Fourteen of the 15 poorest went for Trump. Should the District of Columbia be made a state, as many Democrats are urging, it would be the richest one in the union, with a per capita income 17 percent higher than its nearest rival's (Connecticut). It would also be the most Democratic. The District voted for Biden over Trump, 92–5. The Democrats are also the party of the news media—as Jack Shafer and Tucker Doherty pointed out a few years ago, 90 percent of the people working in the news industry live in a county Hillary Clinton won, and the numbers will surely be similar for Biden. Finally, the Democrats are the party of the global economy and of two things it brings with it—inequality and ethnic diversity.

Increasingly radicalized by #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, the Democrats are a party of restoration, reparation, and retribution. Robert Reich and Chris Hayes, hardly the most intemperate voices in the anti-Trump ambit, have called for addressing Trump's legacy with a Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the sort set up in post-apartheid South Africa. And yet, for now, the Biden coalition manages to carry within it the rural Virginia Congresswoman Abigail Spanberger, who wants her party to “not use the word ‘socialist’ or ‘socialism’ ever again.” It carries within it (presumably) the woman in Iowa who tried to withdraw her primary vote for Pete Buttigieg when she discovered he was gay (“Are you kidding? Then I don't want anyone like that. ... How come this has never been brought out before?”). It even contains former Ohio Republican Governor John Kasich, who considers Biden's 2020 victory a mandate for implementing the *Republican* program (“Now is the time for Democrats, and I believe Joe Biden will do this, to begin to listen to what the rest of the other half

of the country has had to say”).

This cohabitation cannot last. Even the Army of the Potomac had to get moving in at some point. When the Democrats begin to move, they will suffer casualties. The future of American politics may hinge on whether it takes those casualties before or after the January runoff for both Georgia Senate seats.

Considering the Senate, the journalist Ronald Brownstein made a striking observation in the wake of the Biden victory. As recently as the Reagan administration, he pointed out, the Senate hovered above partisanship: the states Reagan won twice had almost as many Democrats as Republicans. But in the 25 states that voted for Trump twice, 47 of the 50 senators are Republicans. In the 20 states that voted *against* Trump twice, 39 of the 40 senators are Democrats. (The exception is Susan Collins of Maine.)

Brownstein frames the 2020 election as a clash between “the voters who embody the nation’s future” and “those who feel threatened by it.” While Brownstein is correct sociologically, it is worth noting how moralistic this is as a description. The conflict is not between two visions of America but between two peoples, one deserving (in fact, America incarnate), the other undeserving (or anti-American).

What appears to await us is a twenty-first-century version of a historical process familiar from the nineteenth: Longstanding traditions are undermined when only *part* of a country is able to take advantage of new technological possibilities. In the 1860s, three major Western countries—Germany, Italy, and the United States—each fought similar wars of national unification, in which the more dynamic part of the country subjugated the more bucolic (or backward) part. In our time, Democrats are the party of relatively greater technological and demographic dynamism, Republicans the party of relatively less. This is *not* the same type of relationship as the one that obtained until half a century ago, when Republicans were (roughly speaking) the party of capital, and Democrats the party of labor. Capital and labor need each other in a way that dynamism and tradition do not. One fears the present conflict will differ accordingly.