

# America's democracy holds

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*In 2020 American democracy faced one of its most serious threats when the outgoing president refused to accept the electoral results, tried to overturn them in his own favour, and then incited a mob attack on the seat of government itself. How could this have happened? How will America manage to heal its wounds? Despite the preconceptions and scepticism of many commentators, Joe Biden was the ideal competitor to challenge Donald Trump. Not only did Biden gain the largest number of votes for any presidential candidate in American history, but he has also proved that, even in a situation of persistent polarisation, it is still the centre that determines American elections. Yet Democrats will not be in a position to implement far-reaching transformations and will still have to deal with the deep sectarian grievances that affect American society. Progressives will therefore have to build a new vision that is able to compete with Trump's right-wing populism and to overcome the country's profound divisions.*

The Trump years in America were often filled with hyperbole about the president's motives, intentions, and various assaults on the norms and values that underpin the constitutional system. At some level, however, most Americans assumed that Donald Trump was more of a clown, a distraction, and a con artist than a genuine "proto-fascist" threat to democracy.

That was before Trump – and an alarmingly wide swathe of GOP leadership across the country – attempted to overturn a free and fair presidential election by steadily raising the anti-democratic stakes with actions ranging from asking for legitimate recounts, to making false claims about a "stolen election", to trying to discard votes in urban areas through countless rejected court proceedings, to the president trying to get state legislatures to ignore the results and seat alternative Trump electors, to the state of Texas and hundreds of Republican leaders asking the Supreme Court to throw out the votes of four other states, to the president's former national security adviser calling for martial law, to white nationalist Proud Boys running around the nation's capital committing random acts of violence in defence of Donald Trump's "victory", to more than 100 Republican House members and many Senators refusing to certify Biden's victory, to the penultimate far-right mob attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 – incited by President Trump himself.

Fortunately for the US and its people, these authoritarian actions failed. The courts threw out almost all of Trump's fact-free cases alleging fraud. The Electoral College formally voted

on 14 December 2020 to make Joe Biden the next president, and after the appalling attack on the U.S. Capitol, Congress accepted the results in early January and Biden will assume constitutional power at noon on 20 January 2021.

American democracy has withstood one of its gravest threats in generations. But observers in Europe surely must be asking: 'How did the world's longest-standing constitutional republic descend to such a degraded state so quickly? Will American democracy hold in the long term? If so, what needs to be done to repair the breach?'

To answer these questions, let us take a brief tour of what happened in this election and what it means going forward.

## The centre is still vital in American politics

**American voters still care about principles and character, and want sensible, pragmatic leadership from their president and not radical left-wing or right-wing populism**

Although many left-leaning commentators are loath to admit it, Joe Biden was the perfect counterpoint to Donald Trump in 2020 – and a huge part of Biden's impressive upset of an incumbent president stemmed from his personal approach to politics and his years of experience. Biden was a comfortable landing spot for many Americans disgruntled and disaffected with Trump. Biden correctly understood what other Democratic candidates and Donald Trump did not: American voters still care about principles and character, and want sensible, pragmatic leadership from their president and not radical left-wing or right-wing populism.

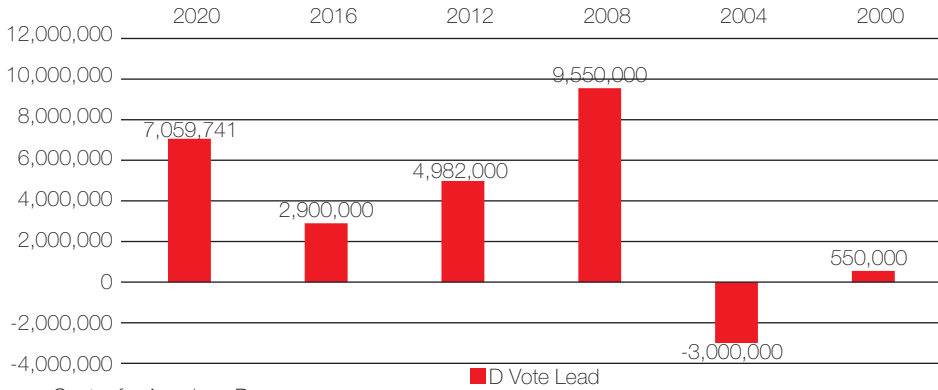
Biden won more than 81 million votes nationally, the most in American history, and successfully flipped the states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Georgia, and Arizona, to collect a 306 to 232 Electoral College victory and seal his victory. This year's victory represents national majorities for Democrats in five out of the six national elections since 2000, and a clear indication of the party's strength in the aggregate.

Although analysts are still sifting through voter files and results to form a firmer picture of what happened, the basic story is that Biden racked up huge margins in the suburbs of places like Atlanta, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Milwaukee, turning out base Democrats and black voters, winning over lots of college-educated white voters, and doing better than Hillary Clinton did in 2016 with non-college educated white voters in numerous counties across key battleground states.

In an election with record high turnout, Donald Trump continued to do well in many rural areas and increased his support notably in some heavily Hispanic counties. But he fundamentally failed over the course of his presidency to add to this base of support, essentially capturing the same 46-47 per cent of the vote as he did in 2016 without expanding in any meaningful manner.

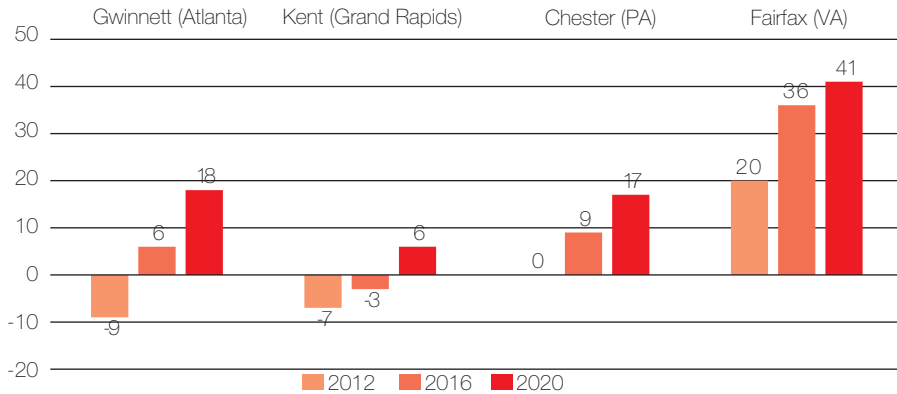
Biden pulled off this win with a focused and sharp message based first on character ('restoring the soul of the nation') and second on a practical approach to the twin challenges fac-

**Figure 1: Democratic popular vote margin**



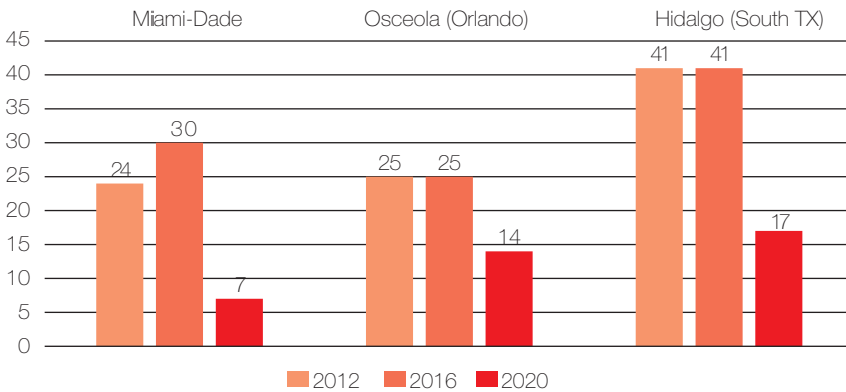
Source: Center for American Progress

**Figure 2: Biden increased margins in suburbs**



Source: Center for American Progress

**Figure 3: Trump improved in key Hispanic counties**



Source: Center for American Progress

ing the country: the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent economic crisis. These components made for sharp contrasts with Trump's erratic and failed leadership, and helped Biden establish a base-level of trust with voters that he represents core American values like decency, compassion, and equal opportunity for all people. They also helped establish trust that he has a plausible plan for first containing the coronavirus threat and then moving to rebuild America on multiple fronts from jobs and healthcare to infrastructure and international cooperation on climate, pandemics, and other common threats.

Put simply, Biden proved that the centre still determines US elections – even in an age of party polarisation. While Trump was perceived to be closer to many voters' median opinions in 2016 against Clinton, he was viewed as an extremist with failed management of the biggest crisis facing the country and wildly out-of-touch positions in 2020.

## **America is more divided than ever**

Despite Biden's impressive victory against an erratic and difficult opponent, Democrats did not secure the sweeping change across multiple levels of government that they wanted.

Republicans picked up a net 10 seats in the House of Representatives to narrow the Democratic majority for the upcoming session to 222 seats versus 211 for the Republicans (with two seats still outstanding). After eyeing potential control of the Senate on election night, Democrats managed to gain only 1 seat overall, but later won both runoff elections in Georgia in January 2021. Democrats' victory in these two elections now means that the Senate will be tied 50-50, with incoming Vice President Kamala Harris breaking future tie votes.

**Table 1: Balance of power after 2020 elections**

Position	Democrats	Republicans	Net (for Democrats)
President	306	232	+74 electoral votes
Senate	+4 (AZ, CO, two in GA )	+1 (AL)	+3
House	+3	+13	-10
Governors	0	-1 (MT)	-1
State legislatures	0	+3 (NH, AK)	-3

Source: Center for American Progress

Likewise, Democrats failed to gain any ground at the state level, losing a governor's seat in Montana and falling short in its efforts to flip control of any of the party's state legislative targets. Republicans now control 27 governorships compared to 23 for Democrats, and 62 state legislative chambers compared to Democrats' 37 chambers.

Even with the decisive electoral rejection of Trump, the country has not solved its basic political divides in any clear manner.

More importantly, the split results in 2020 indicate a hard truth for Joe Biden and those on the centre-left in America: there will be no New Deal- or Great Society-style massive Democratic majorities for progressive change anytime soon. Favourable demographic

change will not usher in uninterrupted Democratic control in the next decade. The House majority alone is tenuous and given historical trends could easily flip back to Republicans in 2022. Even if Democrats manage to win close elections in the next few cycles, they will not be in a position to implement the kinds of far-reaching transformations envisioned by many social movement activists and members of the Democratic left.

Biden and Democrats must therefore accept political reality, and build an agenda and approach to politics that reaches a wide array of voters and expands from Democrats' traditional strongholds in urban and suburban areas.

But this will be exceptionally difficult, not only due to the divides in Congress but also the serious schisms within American society itself.

We must confront the ugly reality that American politics, and the media and social media ecosystem underpinning our informational divides, has essentially become sectarian and almost entirely based on competing cultural grievances rather than measured consideration of alternative paths to protecting and serving the country's interests. Where the two parties and their leaders once debated the size of government, deficits, regulations, and the proper scope of the social safety net, today's partisans fight over who counts as genuinely American, which racial and ethnic groups deserve or do not deserve power and support, which online slight or untoward statement makes their respective voters feel demeaned or underappreciated.

Although Americans continue to find other avenues for constructive engagement with one another outside politics and in more local communities and organisations, the country's national political system is utterly broken.

Rationality, logic, and civil discussion of pressing national needs have been replaced by a national politics built on emotional instability, misinformation and disinformation, and strident positions that do little to confront chronic problems plaguing America: the serious lack of investment in infrastructure and well-being of people; rising economic and geographic inequalities; sclerotic governmental bureaucracies; and toxic distrust of most major institutions and elites in American life. It is not clear that America anytime soon will be able to arrest this doom cycle of political cynicism and corrupted politics driving anti-democratic figures like Trump who further fuel rage and anger, and who hamper or attack democratic solutions to our collective problems.

Biden will certainly try to reach out and build a new politics, as he should. But in order to make this more of a reality, he will need to forge and promote a new model of politics for a country deeply divided and seemingly incapable of resolving its differences politically.

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## America needs a new vision of inclusive nationalism

To start, Biden and the centre-left need to articulate a pragmatic domestic vision of equality and opportunity for all, consistent with a wider internationalism focused on challenges across borders. Democrats will need to focus on unifying themes of national economic renewal while strategically disengaging from ongoing culture wars. Facing great uncertainty and rising anger among Americans, Biden and his team should promote an agenda and vision that can command support from the sensible majority of Americans, avoid unnecessary and divisive social issue fights, and chart a vision for America's collective purpose post-crisis and post-Trump.

The current moment presents progressives with an opportunity to both challenge and compete with Trump-style right-wing populism that has pushed 'us versus them' identity politics across America and in other western democracies. But progressives need to be smart about it.

With politics fracturing along increasingly narrow and divisive visions from both the far left and far right, a national project focused on inclusive nationalism is urgently needed if America is to build a politically sustainable vision for the future.

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A successful vision of inclusive nationalism would speak for the common good at home and would reject the drift towards political tribalism and ideological extremes. It would speak to Americans as democratic citizens sharing common values grounded on individual freedom, political equality, and social responsibility. It would seek to include all people in a common national project of social and economic regeneration post-crisis.

In contrast to 'America First' political chauvinism, a new vision for inclusive nationalism would not shy away from commitments to those in other nations. Building on an economically stronger and more cohesive America, this approach would seek to work cooperatively with allies to address common challenges such as the coronavirus pandemic, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, cyberwarfare, inequality, and eroding democratic freedoms. A new nationalism would not isolate America from the world's troubles but recognise instead that strength at home requires engagement with the world and looking out for others as well as ourselves. Just as neighbourhoods are only as secure and prosperous as their individual members, families, and households, so the United States can only remain a strong and prosperous nation if it invests in itself at home and meets its responsibilities abroad.

Fortunately, America is not starting from scratch here. A new vision of inclusive nationalism coupled with international cooperation would channel the animating spirit of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms and New Deal and the optimistic New Frontier themes of John F. Kennedy, while updating the substance and focus for the early 21st century's defining challenge: rebuilding America's economy, society, and global standing in the wake of the Trump administration's disastrous response to the coronavirus pandemic coming on top of years of domestic divisiveness and neglect.

Although the exact details of this new vision for America must be debated, the major components of future domestic and foreign policy activity should include:

- *a national economic development plan* built on increased domestic manufacturing of critical needs, clean energy, investments in science and technology, stronger public education, and greatly improved national infrastructure;
- *a sturdier economic foundation for American families* built on high-wage jobs for workers and more comprehensive social insurance and protections;
- *a national equity model* that brings all left-behind regions of the country, both rural and urban, into full participation in American social life;
- *a rebalanced national security approach* that protects the American homeland and citizens from harm, secures its borders in a humane and managed manner, and deploys its economic, diplomatic, and military power in a more measured way;
- *an international 'all hands on deck' initiative* to focus American leadership and diplomacy on common challenges facing governments across the world including terrorism, poverty, public health and pandemics, climate change, economic inequality, and the erosion of individual rights and democratic freedoms.

When Joe Biden takes office in January 2021, he will face an intertwined political and policy trial unseen since President Roosevelt's time. The risks involved in persisting on the present course are high for progressives and the nation alike.

Donald Trump and other right-wing populists in America will certainly continue to cast about for others to blame, and seek ways to rip the nation apart while avoiding any responsibility for the crisis or offering any meaningful ideas to combat it. They will continue to favour certain groups over others in designing public policies while ignoring the needs of American society as a whole and the world at large. This approach amounts to a formula for internal decay and decline as well as a serious loss of influence and prestige worldwide.

As dramatically demonstrated by the coronavirus crisis and Trump's actions in the aftermath of the 2020 election, America remains a nation divided and ill-served by outgoing political leaders. Its government lacked the ability to effectively cope with the domestic crisis wrought by this global pandemic, much less work with other nations to contain and defeat it. In contrast, a new vision for inclusive nationalism spearheaded by incoming President Biden would seek to rebuild American society at home in order to reclaim American prestige abroad. Without an America able and willing to do its part to solve global problems and meet overseas threats, the United States will remain vulnerable to terrorists, pandemics, and autocrats the world over.

If the country is to bridge its divisions and move towards a more stable political order, Joe Biden and his allies must now take up the urgent and vital task of developing a new vision of inclusive nationalism, one that can attract the support of Americans across demographic, geographic, and political lines to help protect and extend the nation's democratic legacy.

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