

Joe Biden's Narrow Win Won't Hold for Long Once He's in Office

Joe Biden's empty campaign may well have won over some suburban Republican voters. But the fragile majority he has likely eked out this time should have been many times larger, and without a more serious reorientation, it won't hold for long.

Capitalist democracy is a [class compromise](#). Capitalists agree to tolerate workers having a say in politics, and in return, workers agree not to use their vote to take away capitalists' property. Neither side gets everything it wants, but both can live with it. As Larry David put it, "A good compromise is when both parties are dissatisfied."

Tuesday's election results were a confirmation of capitalist democracy's ability to live up to Larry David's axiom. Though, as of this writing, it appears that Joe Biden will attain a majority in the Electoral College, and will expand slightly on Hillary Clinton's 2016 showing in the popular vote, the results have fallen short of the "blue wave" many commentators, [following the polls](#), had been predicting.

There's something here to make everyone unhappy. Donald Trump has probably lost the presidency, and while there are [signs that elite Republicans are glad](#) to finally be free of him, the tens of millions of voters who adore him will undoubtedly be furious. At the same time, Joe Biden achieved a victory that falls far short of the decisive repudiation of Trump that Democrats felt was needed. Moreover, the Democrats actually lost seats in the House of Representatives, probably failed to gain a majority in the Senate, and [lost ground in state legislatures](#).

Election postmortems are often an exercise in bias confirmation. Very few commentators have their views changed by election results. Rather, the argument is often that if reality had been different, their arguments would have been proven even more correct. In the ongoing battle between the Democratic Party's left wing and its centrists, this tendency will no doubt be on full display in the coming weeks. However, the election results are confounding enough to scupper any triumphalist takes on either side.

Rocking the Suburbs

After Hillary Clinton's disastrous defeat in 2016, Bernie Sanders supporters were able to argue, with no small amount of evidence, that "Bernie would have won." Carrying this attitude into the battle against Trump's reelection, Berniecrats adopted the slogan "Hindsight is 2020." Watching Joe Biden's anemic campaign limp through the months before the primaries, Bernie supporters argued that a campaign that stands for nothing in particular could never defeat the frenzied passion of Trump's base.

Much of the Democratic primary electorate saw things otherwise, however, and Biden was able to win handily once establishment support coalesced around him. In light of the election results, it's worth revisiting these arguments. Biden's probable win looks to be achieved on the slimmest of margins, and this amid historic economic devastation and a ruinously mismanaged pandemic. Take out COVID-19, and the Berniecrat argument that Biden couldn't beat Trump may very well be true.

As tempting as this line of argument is, however, it's also worth noting that Biden's strategy of appealing to traditionally Republican middle-class voters does seem to have achieved some real success. Though exit polls seemed at first to suggest that Trump had increased his share of the

Republican vote from 2016, making the Democrats' strategy a failure, the numbers are misleading. You can't simply compare Trump's performance among Republicans in 2016 and in 2020, because the pool of people who make up the Republican Party has changed in those four years. Since 2016, many former Republicans who don't like Donald Trump have stopped being Republicans. Similarly, many people who do like Donald Trump became Republicans. So it's not really surprising that as polarizing a figure as Donald Trump increased his vote numbers among people who now support his party.

Moreover, though there is still a great deal of data left to analyze, it really does seem that the Democrats succeeded in picking up votes in some key Republican suburbs. In Warren County, Ohio, near Cincinnati, the Democrats closed the gap between their vote and the Republicans' by 10 points. Waukesha County, Wisconsin (famous among pundits as a bellwether), went for Trump 62-34 in 2016, but Joe Biden was able to cut that down to 60-39. That ten thousand or so vote swing made a big difference in a state Biden is projected to carry by fewer than thirty thousand votes.

In other words, the strategy of avoiding a polarizing message to appeal to moderate Republicans in the suburbs appears to have had at least some success. For leftists, who have argued that centrist policies are not only bad for people but also lead to electoral defeat, this is something of an uncomfortable truth. Centrist strategy delivered the goods, this time.

The Failure of Anathematization

Today, many Democratic centrists are taking potshots at prominent Bernie supporters, gleefully proclaiming that the left critiques were proven wrong. Yet for all the

psychological compensation such exercises undoubtedly provide for a constituency frightened by the thin margin of their victory, they only conceal a much bigger problem for Democratic strategy.

Joe Biden's campaign message was simple. Donald Trump is a bad president and a bad person. In the context of a pandemic in which Trump himself was happy to act as a superspreader, this shouldn't have been a hard sell. And yet, while it may have succeeded in peeling off some layers of marginal Republicans in the suburbs, the message failed to land with huge swaths of its intended audience. This should be very concerning to the Democratic establishment, for two reasons.

First, Donald Trump's political career is over. He will not be running for office again, and if recent moves by Republican leaders are any indication, he will soon be unceremoniously shown the door by the party establishment. While stalwart Trumpists in the party will no doubt make their own bid for party leadership, the election results suggest a bright future for figures like Marco Rubio, adept at combining Trumpist demagoguery with politics more rooted in the party establishment. A Republican like Rubio who can provide a veneer of competency over Trump-style reactionary performance art has the potential to win back the marginal Republicans Joe Biden succeeded in wooing this time and, in doing so, cut deeply into the Democrats' persistent majority in the popular vote.

Second, the failure of anathematization means that the politics most favored by the Democrats' increasingly college-educated base, which focus on pointing out Trump's grotesque racism and sexism, have utterly failed to resonate with huge sections of the electorate. Ironically, Donald Trump, who took the GOP's famous ["autopsy" report](#) blaming their 2012 defeat on their hard-line immigration policies and spit on it, clearly consolidated an increased base among Latino voters, particularly in the key states of Texas and Florida. Moreover,

exit polls, which may well be unreliable this year due to the extent of early voting, suggest that he also increased his standing slightly with black voters.

While calling Trump out plays extremely well on MSNBC, it abjectly failed to deliver the electoral repudiation Democrats so desperately hoped for. Even worse, it feeds directly into the culture-war dynamic Trump cultivates for his support. The message that "Trump is a bad person, and people who support him are bad people" only intensifies his supporters' sense that they are a cultural minority fighting against an elite that holds them in contempt. It's a sentiment that Trump himself is a genius at mobilizing, and unique though his talents may be, it is unlikely that the lesson will be lost on those seeking to replace him.

This isn't to say that Democrats should tamp down their opposition to Trump's racism. Rather, it is a question of how that opposition is presented. Professional-class Democrats, now steeped in various diversity trainings and anti-racism seminars, have turned opposition to racism into a kind of code of etiquette, a prescription of what it is and isn't acceptable to say.

As the researchers Ian Haney López and Tory Gavito pointed out in September in a [prescient article](#) warning of Trump's competitiveness among Latinos, simply denouncing Trump's racism often fails to move people who are not already opposing him. Instead, the message that resonated in their testing is one that combines opposition to racism with class politics. What Democrats need to do, they suggested, is not call out Trump's ugly racism, but rather point out how his racist scapegoating is an attempt to divide Americans and allow the rich to continue their plunder of the country. Combating racism primarily as a moral violation, they suggest, will leave voters cold.

This appears to be precisely what happened. Though Biden is

certainly more comfortable sounding notes of class conflict than Hillary Clinton ever was, it's hard to center that message in a campaign appealing to affluent Republicans and promising that nothing will fundamentally change.

This is the dilemma centrists face going forward. Though it may be tempting for them to declare victory for their strategy this round, it would take a level of willful ignorance even the DNC can't muster to fail to see what lies ahead. The electoral majority the party clinched on Tuesday is exceedingly fragile. If the party's centrists insist on trying to maintain it by the same means they won it this year, they may not hold it for long.