

The end of closed democracy?

The forces that have assembled behind Biden can end racism and exclusion everywhere



Two young New Yorkers celebrate Joe Biden's election victory in November, 2020. | Adam Stoltman/Alamy Live



Anthony Barnett

I think George Floyd didn't die in vain. COVID-19 is linked to climate change, to how we treat each other, how we look at health, wellbeing, morality, human rights, not to mention the outcome of the US election. I think this has been a seismic point in the history of the world. [...] We have the power now to demand, to recognise and to voice things [...] For the first time, people have felt that they could say what they feel and be listened to. [...] We have come to a point in the history of the world that, with our moral conscience and recognition of the challenges we face with climate change, things can never go back.

Steve McQueen, interviewed by Gary Younge in Tate Etc, spring 2021

From 9/11 to the Capitol

Given the role of the spectacle in the American imaginary, it is fitting that two events watched live around the world have bookended the final two decades of the era when market values dominated politics. The first was the levelling of the Twin Towers. The second, the storming and occupation of the Capitol.

Both were forms of 'propaganda of the deed'. Both were initiated by cunning, fascistic narcissists – Osama bin Laden and Donald Trump – each of whom apparently spent hours watching TV. Both were taboo-busting shocks played out on US landmarks; one destroyed, the other desecrated.

Threads of violence and frustration link 9/11 to 6 January 2021. The connections are symbolised by 35-year-old Ashli Babbitt, a veteran of 14 years' service in the US Air Force, who did tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq. During that time she earned 12 medals and ribbons, including the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, the Iraq Campaign Medal, the Air Force Expeditionary Service Ribbon with Gold Border and the Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal.



Pro-Trump protesters breaching the Capitol, Washington DC, on 6 January 2021 | Lev Radin/Sipa USA/PA Images

Babbitt was a former Obama supporter who switched her support to Trump in 2016. (“I think Obama did great things,” she [tweeted](#) three years ago. “I voted for him!.. and I voted for Trump. I could not vote for Hillary.”) By 2020, she was branding her tweets with QAnon conspiracy slogans. In January this year, Babbitt flew from her home in San Diego, California to Washington, tweeting: “Nothing will stop us [...] The storm is here and it is descending upon DC in less than 24 hours.” She joined the ‘Stop the Steal’ rally outside the White House, watched her president speak, then marched on the Capitol with her fellow believers. As she tried to scramble over a makeshift barricade that blocked the glass doors to the Speaker’s Lobby entrance of the House of Representatives, a lieutenant in the Capitol police shot her dead.

In effect, Babbitt recycled Osama bin Laden. Like him, she was trained by the US, served in Afghanistan, turned against American power, declared that a storm would fall upon it – and was killed.

The assault on Capitol Hill has unleashed a double earthquake that will transform politics around the world. Unlike the flights that brought down the Twin Towers on 9/11, these twin shocks did not come as a complete surprise: they had been building up over the course of Trump’s first term.

The first quake is on the Right. When Trump won the presidency in 2016, the desire of the traditional power structures was that he would be tamed by office. But he refused to bed down. He continuously fired staff who crossed him, was blatantly corrupt, abandoned any pretence of support for human rights, recklessly trashed the principles of environmental safeguards and prepared to turn the US into a fortress of authoritarianism directed by his family.

For four years, the political establishment (for want of a better term) hoped it would not get any worse. When he lost the election last November they were relieved: surely he and his supporters would now play by the rules. Instead, Trump escalated; he repudiated the legitimacy of the process and told his supporters to “fight like hell” and “take back our country” in a campaign that culminated in the Capitol insurrection. It was bad enough that Trump was personally willing to use force to retain the presidency. The bigger shock is that a majority of the Republican Party, its legislators and activists, supported him – and still do. The threat of *Trumpism* is embedded and can’t be defeated by traditional election manoeuvres.

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The second earthquake is on the Left. For decades, far longer than the period in which it underestimated Trump, the same political establishment marginalised egalitarian, democratic opposition to its policies and privileges, along with calls for climate action. The nature of its rule was to support finance and corporate capital, ameliorate the inequities and pollution where it felt it could – but always from above, to ensure its continued capacity to manipulate opinion and control outcomes.

Confronted by the audacity of Trump’s far-Right presidency, it crumbled. None of its usual mechanisms of control was able to contain him and his followers, now that social media meant he could cultivate, organise and inflame opinion in the wide-open frontiers of cyberspace, while Rupert Murdoch provided a bully pulpit on Fox News. Only a popular mobilisation on the Left, unwilling to demonstrate allegiance to the core power structures and determined to link up issues of the environment, race, gender, human rights and

economic fairness, provided the necessary countervailing effort to frustrate Trumpism – for the moment.

Joe Biden has said that he began to consider his run for the presidency in August 2017, when white power fascists buoyed by Trump's success held a torchlight rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. In [a striking opinion piece published](#) in The Atlantic, Biden denounced the racists and emphatically excoriated the president for lending them his endorsement. The week after Charlottesville, the far-Right organised a "free speech" rally in Boston. Tens of thousands of protesters, activists, feminists and anti-racists marched to oppose it. "In Boston," Biden wrote, "we saw the truth of America: those with the courage to oppose hate far outnumber those who promote it." For the first time in living memory, a successful presidential bid started out with a thank you to the progressive Left.

It would not be the first time that such a campaign had borrowed left-wing energy, only to abandon it outside the portico of the White House. Had Trump proved to be just a maverick who eventually embraced business as usual, then Biden too would probably have followed the usual course. But now everyone can see that any return to elite business as usual opens the door for Trumpism to bounce back in. Without a popular counter-force, the far Right will have its way. To succeed, the Biden administration needs to work with the progressive Left – and more importantly, is aware of this fact. "Progressives," Biden's chief of staff Ron Klain [recently said](#), are now a "big part of our party". When Biden addressed the nation from the Rose Garden to present his signature \$1.9trn American Rescue Plan, he [acknowledged](#) that "Bernie [Sanders] stepping up and making the case why this was so transformational made a big difference in how a lot of people voted."

The implications of this will be far-reaching. For now, everything depends on developments within the US – and to understand their significance we must start with how it has come about.

The origins of Trumpism

The link between 6 January and 9/11 personified by Babbitt was more than a random echo. The US responded to the levelling of the Twin Towers by occupying Afghanistan and then launching an insane, nationalist war on Iraq to demonstrate that its wounded hegemony was intact. To legitimise the aggression, the US – along with its close ally the UK – proclaimed, falsely, that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, orchestrating a massive PR campaign to convince the public.

Deceit and deception are normal in great power politics, but this was an obliteration of fundamental domestic norms. It opened up a path that would lead to Trump's mendacity. It lent validity to his assertion that the media disseminated fake news and the political system was rigged. As he pointed out on the campaign trail in 2016, he was part of it and he knew.

More importantly, however, the rigged system failed. The scale and intensity of support for Trump is rooted in the cumulative frustration of the American middle and lower middle classes, and their decades-long experience of income paralysis and increasing insecurity, accompanied by military stalemate. The occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq were unmatched logistical and martial achievements, deploying a colossal use of firepower, which nonetheless turned into drawn-out strategic defeats. The combination of dishonesty and failure opened the way in 2008 for Barack Obama, whose initial opposition to the invasion of Iraq gave him the standing to seize the Democratic Party nomination from Hillary Clinton, who had supported it.

As president, Obama decided that his role was not to cut America's losses immediately, but to manage a withdrawal that preserved as much of Washington's international influence as possible. The result was eight years of global mortification and only partial domestic change,

despite the symbolic milestone of America electing its first Black president.

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Obama's re-election in 2012 marked a turning point. Although he beat his Republican challenger Mitt Romney, the Tea Party was on the rise, while the Occupy movement had forced the issue of inequality into public consciousness. A chilling New Yorker [account](#) of America's powerful Connecticut elite, by Evan Osnos, provides a revealing cameo. A wealthy Republican backer, Lee Hanley, felt there was a "deep frustration with the status quo" and commissioned a pollster to investigate further. The results recorded that the "level of discontent in this country was beyond anything measurable".

Ashli Babbitt has now become a heroine of this unmeasurable discontent. Reportedly, [a fifth of those arrested](#) for the Capitol Hill insurrection were military veterans, of wars that were so misconceived as to be futile. Many more came from police forces around the US and other parts of the security apparatus that identify with the military and share in the frustration. After her 14 years of service, Babbitt started a business but went bust, ripped off by a loan company. The Washington Post [reported](#) that a high proportion of the individuals who took part in the assault have faced financial ruin: nearly 20% of those charged had previously gone bankrupt; a quarter "had been sued for money", while one in five had "faced losing their home at one point".

The mob that descended on Washington was no mobilisation of the poor, and many of them were down-the-line white supremacists. People flew or drove in from across the US,



A shrine for Ashli Babbitt near the Capitol. | Kit Karzen/ABACAPRESS.COM

well equipped and clothed for the winter weather. They were members of an increasingly insecure middle class, who had seen their businesses go bust and the value of their modest wealth plunge while debts rose and health costs skyrocketed. And that's before we consider the influence of the ranting, paranoid tentacles of social media, which had become their key source of news.

Trump is not the cause of America's discontent – he became its voice and expression

In 2013, according to Osnos, Hanley “huddled” with Steve Bannon and the hedge-fund billionaire Robert Mercer. They wanted to use the bubbling rage of millions of Babbitts to further increase their own advantage. Perhaps they were far-sighted enough to realise that if it crystallised around a Left-wing challenger they might be done for. They agreed that they needed “a populist challenger who could run as an outsider, exposing corruption and rapacity”. It seems that they thought Trump unsuitable at first, but he came through the Republican primaries in 2016 as the candidate who fitted their requirements.

This is the reality from which everything else follows. Trump is not the cause of America's discontent – he became its voice and expression, backed by billionaires who investigated the strength of the discontent and then exploited it.

A crucial moment came in the Republican primaries, when Jeb Bush, brother of George W, was still the favourite. In February 2016, Trump [confronted](#) a hostile audience of Bush supporters who booed him continuously. “Obviously the war in Iraq was a big, fat mistake,” he told them defiantly:

The war in Iraq, we spent \$2trn, thousands of lives. We don't even have it. Iran has taken over Iraq with the second largest oil reserves in the world [...] We should never have been in Iraq. We have destabilised the Middle East [...] I want to tell you, they lied. They said there were weapons of mass destruction. There were none. And they knew there were none.

Trump then stated that the trillions should have been spent on rebuilding America.

Democrats and progressives were wrong to ignore or dismiss the quality of Trump's judgment. Tens of millions of families across America have members who are veterans, or police and security officers. They are predominantly Republican. Trump was one of their own and when he spoke like this they lifted their heads, as did Ashli Babbitt. They knew he was right. He would put “America first”.

Trump's opponents often [ask](#) how he “had so much support among the public”, when, with the exception of Murdoch's Fox News, the media and the establishment were so hostile to him. The answer usually turns on the financial crisis. But class issues are mobilised and resolved within national frameworks. In a terrific, forensic [interview](#) in Politico by Zack Stanton, the veteran US pollster Stanley Greenberg says that he was impressed at the way Trump brought in “all kinds of new voters” keen to protect themselves from immigration and diversity that they experienced as threats because they saw the US as ‘weak’. Their prime motivation remains to “save the country”.

Trump had a message that addressed America's national reality and discontent. First and foremost, he spoke to the millions of patriots who, like him, believed in winning. He promised to be a tough, macho leader who would stop the waste, end the defeats, stand up to China economically and withdraw the US from being a loser in the playground of globalists. Two million had served, 6,500 had died and 50,000 had been wounded, in 15 years of victory-less

conflict. What pride could the Babbitts and their families and relatives take in the costs and anxieties they had been exposed to? Trump provided the self-belief they craved, and his pledge was the answer they needed: "Make America Great Again", by ending wars overseen by the bipartisan elite responsible for the "big, fat mistake".

Then, of all the people to challenge this call for restitution, the Democrats chose Hillary Clinton. She was the personification of failed intervention, easily portrayed as someone who acted as if she was entitled to lead, yet could not even show the door to her lying, cheating husband.

Bringing the war home

Once elected, Trump delivered for his supporters. There were no new wasteful, endless wars. Taxes for the rich were cut. Jobs boomed. Then COVID-19 struck. Despite his grotesque mismanagement, his denials and braggadocio, plus a tanking economy and hundreds of thousands of deaths, Trump fought back, campaigning with demonic energy. In the November election, he increased his overall vote tally by a massive ten million. How could this possibly mean that he had not won?

At the heart of his apparent success was the serpent that would consume him. In the heady days of the 1960s, amid opposition to the US intervention in Vietnam, the militant Left had a boastful slogan: "Bring the war home!" Ironically, it describes what Trump did half a century later. He sucked back into America the violence that had been sent abroad. Trump did not start new wars overseas, but he unleashed force against immigrants at home, hardened the country's borders, pilloried the cultural 'elite' and permitted Russian intervention in domestic politics. He savaged anyone who crossed him and unleashed militant antagonism within the US.

Ultimately, the president declared war on his own country. At a rally in Georgia on 6 December 2020, a month after the election, Trump told his supporters: "We will not bend, we will not break, we will not yield, we will never give in, we will never give up, we will never back down, we will never, ever surrender." When I first saw [a clip](#) of this speech, I didn't take any special notice, as it seemed merely to continue the foul rhetoric he had spewed since he first ran for president.

That was my mistake. It was a significant escalation.

Georgia's Republican governor had just overseen certification of the state's presidential election results, which delivered a narrow majority for Joe Biden. The votes had been counted twice. Trump had clearly lost in the state, as he had nationally, yet he proclaimed a militant defiance of the primary function of America's political system. True to his presidency, he brought the war home. The Babbitts rallied to the call.

But the whole point of elections is that losers concede. During the Second World War, at the height of the British empire's confrontation with Nazism, William Beveridge – the economist who wrote the report that laid the basis for the UK's welfare state after 1945 – described the "essence" of democracy as the "effective means of changing the government without shooting". It's a striking definition. Beveridge was an upper-class liberal and the democracy that his class developed, on both sides of the Atlantic, was not about self-determination or giving the majority its say. Its essence was to ensure the peaceful transfer of power, thus preventing dictatorship, an approach that David Runciman has [described](#) as "the minimalist theory of democracy".

Trump never plans; he wagers



Trump greets supporters at a rally in Georgia in December. | REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst

Minimalist it may be, but the non-violent transition from one government to another, despite hard-pressed conflicts of interest, is the core achievement of representative systems. It preserves government from tyranny. Thanks to this, although the US may have been oppressive, imperialist, racist, corrupt and determined by corporate oligarchy, its government has nonetheless changed hands peacefully since the end of the Civil War in 1865.

Until now. When Trump made that declaration in Georgia, he was not planning on leading a civil war, or planning on there being shooting to keep the presidency. He never plans; he wagers. Trump's wager was that by mobilising his supporters, he could intimidate the vice president, the Supreme Court, Republican politicians and state officials into overturning the election result. Instead, the wager culminated in the huge crowd of "patriots" – as Trump's daughter Ivanka called them – arriving at the White House on 6 January and storming Congress in his name.

What prevented Trump's victory?

Trumph's behaviour represents a threatening rupture from the norms of US democracy. It has been met with an equally unprecedented breach of America's political routines: the sheer number of voters who mobilised to defy him. Last year while Trump won 74 million votes, nearly five million more than any previous presidential candidate, 81 million rallied to Biden. When third-party candidates are included, 23 million more votes were cast in the US in 2020 than in 2016, a staggering increase.

From early on, Trump could see that he was unlikely to win the popular vote, that postal and early voting would favour his opponents – not least as ethnic minority voters felt intimidated going to polling stations – and that his re-election depended on the electoral college votes of swing states. The president therefore began a pre-emptive campaign against the legitimacy of

the outcome, culminating in his wide-ranging and well-financed effort to declare himself the winner.

Why did this fail? There are four answers.

First, the institutions and processes held. Votes were counted and recounted accurately. Officials, even when they were Republicans, did their job, reported the data and refused to be intimidated. Courts threw out cases that had no merit in law, even when the judges had been appointed by Trump.

Second, influential Republican funders and supporters – not least Rupert Murdoch and his Wall Street Journal – whose businesses rely on a framework of law, did not feel threatened by Biden and refused to support illegal breaches of due process.

Third, a “coalition of activist groups”, as the New York Times [described](#) them, let officials know that they would be held accountable if they caved in to Trump’s pressure. These groups avoided provocative celebrations immediately after the election, while also making it clear that the opposition would erupt in protest if the election really was stolen. Activists, according to a [report](#) by Molly Ball for Time, had also spent more than a year working to strengthen the dilapidated voting systems of the 50 US states.

Finally, there was Joe Biden’s stirring (if vacuous) opening proclamation in his inaugural address on 20 January: “We celebrate the triumph not of a candidate, but of a cause [...] at this hour, my friends, democracy has prevailed.”

The campaign to reverse voter suppression in Georgia was part of a far wider and potentially more important movement

The real determining factor behind all four answers is tens of millions of votes. I’d like to say that it was feminism that defeated Trump, because of how much that would annoy him and his followers. In a way, it *was* the work of feminism: Biden’s victory was delivered by a significant proportion of women voters – who overall broke 57% for Biden and only 42% for Trump – and, in many cases, it was the organising efforts of women, especially Black women, who got out the vote. Stacey Abrams, who led the huge effort in Georgia to get citizens registered and to the polls, is the greatest such example.

The exemplary campaign to reverse voter suppression in Georgia proved critical in winning the state for Biden in November and then, even more significant, flipping its two senate seats in January, depriving the Republicans of their majority in the upper chamber. It was part of a far wider and potentially much more important movement.

Molly Ball’s report for Time described how Mike Podhorzor, an adviser to the AFL-CIO trade union federation, began to build a progressive network in 2019. By 2020, according to Ball, his weekly Zoom meetings “became the galactic center for a constellation of operatives across the Left who shared overlapping goals but didn’t usually work in concert”. It included “the labor movement; the institutional Left, like Planned Parenthood and Greenpeace; resistance groups like Indivisible and MoveOn; progressive data geeks and strategists, representatives of donors and foundations, state-level grassroots organizers, racial-justice activists and others”.

An observer on some of the zoom calls told me that while Time’s narrative of a central coordinating hub was “misleading”, the people mentioned in the piece, “alongside thousands more, all played critical roles in defeating America’s wannabe dictator”. He was most impressed by “how bottom-up the whole process was”. In response to the “flood of dark

propaganda from the right wing”, progressive US civil society “developed increasingly effective network organising capabilities”. Groups on the Left forged links with Silicon Valley technology experts and concerned business people. By 2020, “there were thousands of organisations and leaders involved in anti-Trump networks, operating mostly without any coordination with the Biden campaign – and they knew how to play well together.”



A New Georgia Project volunteer handing out pasta, gloves and scarves at a polling station in Pittsburgh, Atlanta | Aaron White, openDemocracy

Some of these were alliances, such as Protect Democracy and the Voter Participation Center, or the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. One initiative arranged for 150 organisations to ask every member of Congress to back \$2bn in election funding. (They got \$400m.) These networks also raised huge amounts from philanthropic foundations to shore up weak and underfunded state electoral systems.

This is a description of American civil society in action. Groups that are notoriously competitive or work in silos collaborated. Trade unions, along with organisations and networks such as Planned Parenthood, Greenpeace and Black Lives Matter, worked together to secure the integrity of the voting system and increase turnout. The scale of cooperation between trade unionists, feminists, environmentalists and anti-racists is a historic breakthrough, one achieved partly through brilliant online campaigning, embodied by younger politicians such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

If the huge increase in turnout lasts, it will transform the country into a genuine democracy

In 2017, in my book 'The Lure of Greatness: England's Brexit and America's Trump', I argued that such was the extent of gerrymandering, corporate funding and voter suppression in the US, that the country "barely qualifies as a democracy". Millions of people who qualified to vote stayed unregistered and millions more were effectively prevented from casting their ballots. At the low point of 1988, 91.5 million votes were cast in the US presidential election, a mere 50.3% of the voting age population.

By contrast, in 2020, the total votes cast were 159.5 million, 66% of those actually eligible to vote. This is what brought Trump down. Yes, the system withstood his pressures, his backers rejected blatant illegality, civil society made itself effective and 'democracy' saved the day. But something else changed. An unprecedented number of voters on both sides, across the country, decided that their vote mattered. If that huge increase in turnout lasts, it will transform the country into a genuine democracy and permanently alter the nature of the world's major power.

The nature of Trumpism

Can Trump's followers roll back turnout – or rather, will Biden's government allow them to? This is far more than a technical or tactical question, and its answer will have wide-reaching implications for the world.

In the US, the ballot has long been interlinked with race, especially since 1890 when Blacks (and poor whites) were systematically disenfranchised across the South. Today, the expansion of actual voting, as witnessed in November 2020, means the incorporation of ethnic minorities of all kinds. The fundamental explanation for the dangerous persistence of Trump's support is the desire to prevent this from becoming permanent.

An expanded franchise can still deliver reactionary government. But the evidence suggests that a majority of the American public desires a modest yet effective welfare system, and policies that support greater fairness. [For example](#), a majority support Senator Elizabeth Warren's proposed wealth tax of 2% on those worth more than \$50m. The proposal is [even supported](#) by a majority of millionaires except for those who are white, male, college-educated, Republicans – the people, in other words, who run the party and state machines.

The vested interests represented by the Republican Party understand that their success depends on reinforcing minority power, not building democracy. They know that their appeal, while extensive and capable, is insufficient to win a fair political contest when their core support is white, male and aging. Their immediate and evidently coordinated response to last November's election has been to extend and update gerrymandering and voter suppression.

On 19 January, Reuters [reported](#) that loyalty to Trump "was on display last week in the Texas state legislature as several Republicans introduced bills to restrict voting access, including limits on mail-in voting and early voting, citing a need to prevent fraud". It was the first sign of a "rush of new bills" from Republican state legislators, according to a [detailed report](#) in The Hill.

As of 19 February, [according](#) to the Brennan Center, "state lawmakers have carried over, prefiled, or introduced 253 bills with provisions that restrict voting access in 43 states." A wide variety of schemes are being deployed. In state after state, similar keywords are [being used](#) to justify them – such as the "sanctity" of the vote, the "integrity" of the process and a need "to restore confidence". In Mother Jones, Ari Berman [paints](#) a gripping picture of how Republican state legislatures are redrawing congressional districts to cement minority power. The danger is [echoed](#) by Aziz Rana in Jacobin. It was already exceptionally hard to get your ballot in to be counted in Georgia, as Mary Fitzgerald [explained](#) and Greg Palast have [reported](#) in openDemocracy. In early March 2021, the Republicans in the state senate passed additional voter restrictions [so blatant](#) that the Republican Lieutenant Governor Geoff Duncan refused

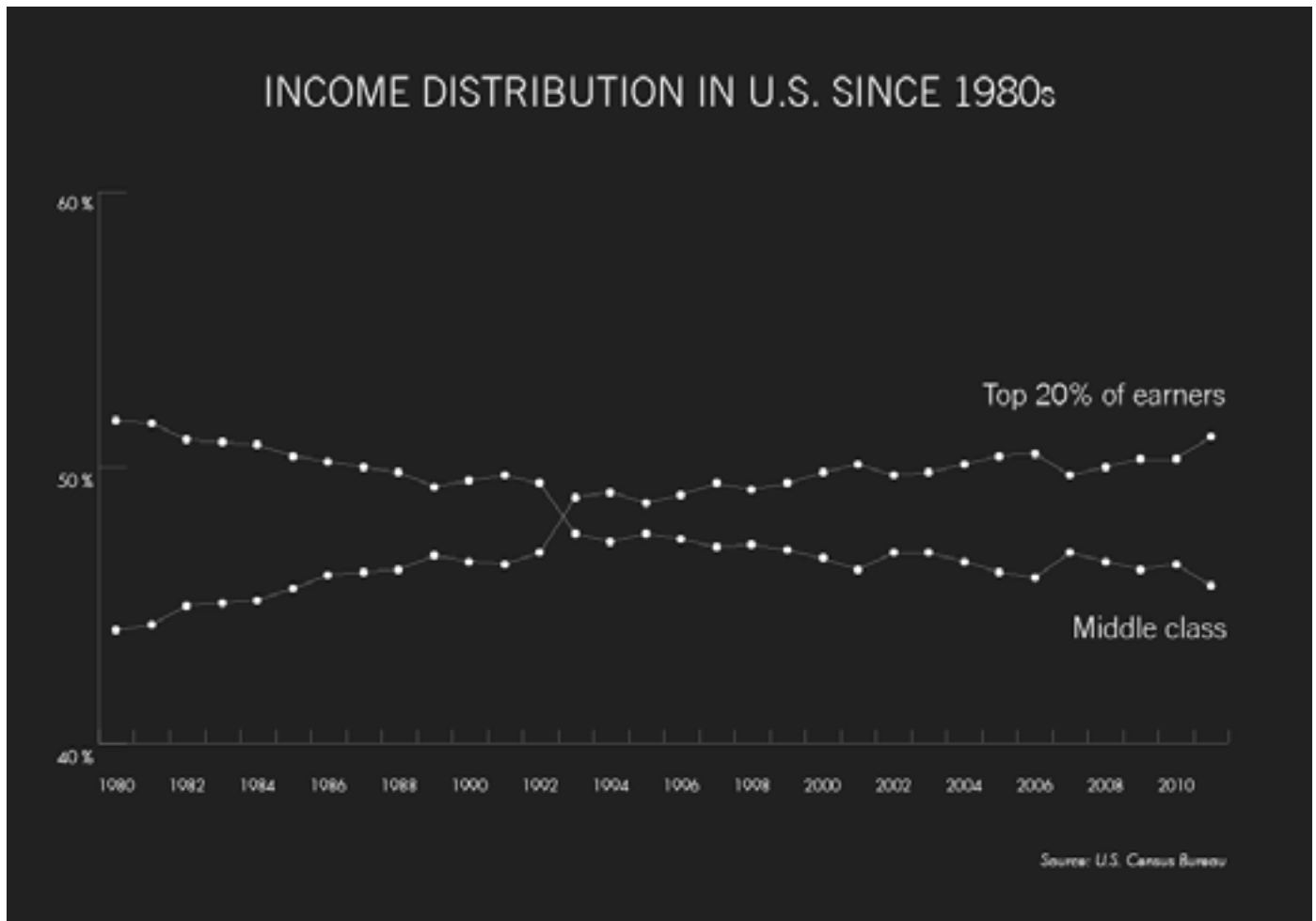
even to preside over the proceedings and boycotted them.

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Why do Republican moves to suppress votes and gerrymander the political system have such widespread support? This poses the question of how to describe Trump and Trumpism. He is more than a demagogue, but is he proto-fascist, or a fascist without regiments of storm troopers? Are his voters simply racist?

It's important not to stereotype Trump's 74 million voters. Labelling them all as "racists" is a gift to the far Right. To wean as many as possible from Trumpism we have to understand them – and like everyone, except fanatics, most have a mixture of motivations. This is one of the themes of Thomas Frank's work. In his recent book 'People Without Power', he writes that "acknowledging that some Trump voters might be desperate and otherwise decent people became a thing unsayable" in liberal circles. He quotes Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times on the "outpouring of rage" he gets from readers who usually agree with him, when he offers some human empathy with Trump supporters. Perhaps now that Trump is out of the White House, and the issue is how to ensure he and his kind stay out, intelligent understanding will be extended to the nature of Trumpism.

The starting point is to give their judgment the respect of considering it at face value. The first thing is to read what it says on the can. In this case, it isn't hard: they wanted to "Make America Great Again". The slogan looks forward in some positive but vague way. What is unambiguous is what it says about the past: it is a statement that the country has failed. It is a



rejection of the way the US has been governed.

Are they justified in making such a judgment? We have just seen that in terms of the US's military stature, which means so much to Trump supporters, the answer is yes. It is also 'yes' in terms of their economic experience. There is a striking [set of charts](#) published by PBS Frontline in 2013, the year Trump first considered running for president. Since 2000, while the wealthy had grown richer, the income of the middle 60% of Americans had fallen by 8%. Millions of good jobs had gone, while part-time work – and therefore insecurity – were rising in a country without public healthcare.

At the same time, people were being robbed on an astonishing scale. A [recent report](#) for the RAND corporation attempts, in the words of its authors, to “quantify the scale of income gap created by rising inequality”. They document the cumulative effect of four decades. In 1975, a US worker with a median income earned \$42,000 a year; this had risen to \$50,000 a year in 2018. By contrast, the average income of someone in the top 1% was \$289,000 in 1975, which had increased to \$1,384,000 in 2018.

Just as striking, the RAND analysts calculated that if growth had been as equitable over the decades of neoliberalism as it had been before 1975, the top 1% would be earning a hardly uncomfortable \$630,000 a year, while the annual median income would have been \$92,000 rather than \$50,000. With all belief in collective action drummed out of them, Trump supporters did not object to this vicious inequality; rather, they wanted to join the beneficiaries to relieve their precariousness. They embraced the winner's creed.

Of course, if you regard the overall status quo and state of the nation as fine; if you share Hillary Clinton's [view](#) in 2016 that “We don't need to make America great again, America has never stopped being great”, then Trump is nothing but an irrational, racist interruption – Trump is the problem. Whereas the starting point for any understanding of Trump's popularity is to recognise that, indeed, America has gone wrong, internationally and domestically and Trump is not so much the problem as the wrong answer.

There is something special and significant about Trump's proffered solution to America's ills: his shamelessness. It was a core attraction because it was experienced by his supporters as truthfulness. This is not just a matter of his racist and sexist attitudes, where his body language is loud and clear. Trump represents honesty with respect to the relationship of the state to the economy.

Trump's followers could see that they were ruled by business interests, so why not put a businessman in charge?

Capitalist democracies combine a political arena where all citizens are equal and a marketplace where, from companies to individuals, all is unequal. After 1945, electoral politics generated governments that shaped the market, equalised economic outcomes to some degree and ensured employment, security and welfare. This was true for most of the US population – if not for the 13% who were Black.

In 1980, this form of welfare capitalism was replaced by market fundamentalism, with its claims that the global market knows best, that government is the problem, and that individuals must compete against each other rather than cooperate for the common good. Under this set of ideas, known as neoliberalism, the media and politicians pretended that politics still continued to govern the market as it had after 1945. In reality, the “imperatives of globalisation” were invoked to disguise the reverse: that money governed politics.

Trump ended the pretence. His followers could see that they were, in fact, ruled by business interests, so why not put a businessman in charge? When he openly governed as a businessman would – securing sweetheart arrangements for his hotels and family, giving tax cuts to his fellow plutocrats, disparaging public servants, breaking the rules of diplomacy and bending the state to his self-interest – his supporters adored his lack of pretence. Their experience of politics under neoliberalism was, correctly, that it was a hypocritical rip-off in which politicians pretended to act for the common good. Trump, by contrast, didn't hide his corruption.

Thankfully, a majority of voters decided to repudiate such a presidency in 2020. In response, Trump's assault on the November election result unfurled the full, anti-democratic colours of market fundamentalism that he now personified.

This claim might seem like a paradox: how can someone who is so blatantly a disruption of the established order be at the same time its representative? An [insightful column](#) by Branko Milanovic provides the answer: "Trump tore off the curtain which divides citizens from the rulers and displayed the wheeling-dealing exchange of favours for all to see."

He committed the "unpardonable sin", Milanovic continues, of flaunting the illegal and semi-legal actions that previous administrations "carried out with the curtain lowered. [...] Those who replace him will do their best not to change [...] a systemic feature. But once a truth is out it is hard pretending nothing has happened."

Defeating Trumpism

On 20 January this year, immediately after he was sworn in as president, Joe Biden and his vice president Kamala Harris visited Arlington National Cemetery, along with all three previous presidents who attended his inauguration. This is where Americans who die in the country's wars are buried. By laying a wreath there in the presence of his



Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris place a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Inauguration Day. | White House

predecessors, Biden wanted to show the military and security services that he represented the continuation of the republic whose constitution he had sworn to serve, as had they.

Standing respectfully behind Biden and Harris were the three men who oversaw the disaster that produced Trump. Bill Clinton, a Democrat who accepted the neoliberal dictum that the market knows best, marginalised trade unions and incarcerated Blacks in a prison-industrial complex. George W Bush, who launched the wars that his successor Barack Obama rightly called “dumb”. And Obama himself, who continued them.

These three presidents elevated finance, permitted deregulation and evacuated self-determination from electoral politics. Biden’s flaccid appeal to democracy and bipartisan unity will be disastrous if it means a return to the politics of his predecessors. To say that democracy has “prevailed”, as Biden did in his inauguration speech, implies that a pre-existing state of affairs carries on undisturbed.

In fact, there has been a double disruption: the negative disruption of Trump himself, and the positive disruption of the rise in voter turnout. Trump revealed the corrupt nature of neoliberal government. To defeat him there will also have to be a break from neoliberalism, which will require making the second disruption permanent. Consolidating the growth of voter engagement will in turn demand a return to integrity and redistribution. There is nothing bipartisan about such a project while the Republican Party remains committed to voter suppression.

Biden’s appeal to democracy and bipartisan unity will be disastrous if it means a return to the politics of his predecessors

Electoral democracy in the US must be inclusive or it will not survive. There cannot be ‘unity’ with a politics whose aim is to exclude large sections of the population from voting. It is not a question of whether or not to seek a compromise; the clash is over the nature of the polity itself. The new administration and its supporters must eliminate the threat. Anything less will open the way to the next iteration of Trumpism, which will be more efficient and more ruthless.

We are not used to thinking about politics in these terms. But this conflict has to be addressed in the quasi-military fashion that Trump himself initiated. Some hard-fought battles can indeed leave both armies in the field to prepare for another confrontation. Others may turn into a rout that disperses the losers forever.

This is the defeat that we must hope the victors impose on Trumpism. It is not the end of the Republican Party, or of conservatism. But Trumpism, however multi-layered and capable of recruiting some female, Black and Latino support, is nativist, white supremacist and misogynist. Whatever the outward appearance of the US political system, it has always been a home for these reactionary and frequently genocidal impulses, and ridding the body politic of them will transform America.

Obama, talking about what we can now call the Trumpian character of American behaviour, would often proclaim “that’s not who we are.” Apparently, [he said this](#) 46 times when he was president. The need to repeat it so often did not lead him to the conclusion that, actually, such activities *are* American. The well-meaning denial functions to postpone the deeper challenge that requires America to be changed for good. That change demands an equitable electoral system in which everyone can vote, and an end to the corruption of politics and its subordination to dark money. It also calls for an economy that delivers basic welfare, health and security for everyone and creates a sustainable environment.

Given the vested interests, this will be hard to achieve, despite the country's abundance of wealth and capacities. The key point, however, is that basic social and economic improvement is not enough. A double-helix of change is essential. Social, economic and environmental programmes must be wrapped around with political reform if either is to prove lasting.

Progressives are already calling on the Biden administration to make these reforms. The [Solidarity Agenda](#), proposed by a list of distinguished individuals and groups, places an emphasis on welfare and the environment. It is a call for real change, including democratic reform, but does not appear to emphasise just how essential the latter is.

Speaking at the memorial service last July for the Georgia congressman and civil rights movement veteran John Lewis, Barack Obama [spelled out](#) the constitutional revolution that would be needed, while leaving aside the role of money. "Even as we sit here," Obama said in his eulogy, "there are those in power doing their darndest to discourage people from voting – by closing polling locations, and targeting minorities and students with restrictive ID laws, and attacking our voting rights with surgical precision, even undermining the postal service in the run-up to an election that is going to be dependent on mailed-in ballots so people don't get sick." (Trump, notably, [refused](#) to pay his respects when Lewis's body lay in state in the US Capitol.)

According to Obama, the tasks now are to make sure every US citizen is automatically registered to vote, including former prison inmates; creating more polling stations and expanding early voting; making election day a national holiday; giving full statehood to Washington, DC and Puerto Rico (to rectify the built-in white advantage in the Senate); and ending gerrymandering, along with the filibuster rule in Congress, which Obama described as a "Jim Crow relic". Nothing less than these steps would be necessary to secure the rights of every American.

Yet Obama showed no sign of regret that his own presidency had not been strongly identified with this agenda – and there was something unsatisfactory about hearing the demands made at a gathering where none would disagree. In the favourable atmosphere of a memorial meeting in a church, they become more of an incantation, a prayer that raises the hopes of the excluded, rather than a challenge to those who benefit from supremacy.

The urgency of Stacey Abrams has to replace the folksy Obama approach

The danger is that Biden will make similar 'right-on' calls for democratic reform, boosting the feel-good factor while little actually changes. A tremendous effort will be needed and a mobilisation, upon whose success everything turns, is underway. The [For the People Act](#) has been passed by the Democrats in the House of Representatives and goes as a bill to the Senate, where Senator Amy Klobuchar will introduce it on 24 March. At a press conference about it on 17 March, Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer said: "Failure is not an option." It will secure improved voter access across the US, limit the role of money and rein in gerrymandering. It imposes federal criteria, which may be the only way to roll back the voter suppression (now rolling out across Republican-run states) and gerrymandering that could secure the Republicans a majority in the House of Representatives in 2022. Mike Lee, a Republican senator from Utah, [told](#) Fox News: "This is a bill as if written in hell by the devil himself."

In the Senate, the bill will hit the filibuster and vigorous efforts are being mounted to close it down. Democrat Jim Clyburn, the House Majority Whip, [told](#) The Guardian: "There's no way under the sun that in 2021 that we are going to allow the filibuster to be used to deny voting rights. That just ain't gonna happen. That would be catastrophic."

The urgency of Stacey Abrams, [writing](#) in The Washington Post, has to replace the folksy Obama approach: “Time is short. The forces standing against a democracy agenda seek to preserve and expand paths to power by shrinking the voting pool rather than winning voters over. [...] We don’t know how many chances we will get to reverse our democracy’s near-death experience. We must not waste this one. We must go big – the future of democracy demands it.”

All change for the Left?

Even though Biden won the popular vote in 2020 by an astounding seven million votes, the actual result was still terrifyingly narrow. This alone shows how undemocratic elections continue to be in the US. Trump lost Arizona by 10,457 votes, Georgia by 11,799 and Wisconsin by 20,682. He needed just 42,941 votes to win all three. The electoral college would then have been tied. Since Mike Pence, the vice president, was responsible for announcing the outcome, he would have called it for Trump.

When a result is so close every factor counts, and so responsibility for Biden’s victory is shared among the various parts of the coalition that made it happen. To claim that he only won because of the support of Bernie Sanders, or thanks to organisers inspired by Black Lives Matter, would be absurd. Yet he would not be president without them. It was the breadth of the alliance that saw off Trump, from militant community organisers, to traditional conservatives reassured by Biden’s demeanour, to millionaires who want action on the climate.

For the Left, being part of this coalition is transformative and a huge, welcome challenge. Steve McQueen, quoted in the epigraph to this essay, is right to call it “seismic”. For the first



A woman holds a placard at a Black Lives Matter protest in Alabama, 2020. | Carmen K. Sisson/Cloudybright / Alamy Stock Photo

time, as he puts it, “people have felt that they could say what they feel and be listened to”. The operative word here is “could”. It is not that we will necessarily be listened to. But it is no longer a given that we will be ignored – and that’s in large part thanks to the new territory carved out by the Black Lives Matter movement.

I have experienced and participated in numerous movements of protest against injustice and oppression, from marching against the Vietnam War in 1968 to the colossal worldwide demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq on 15 February 2003. In this century, I’ve joined a session of the once-mighty World Social Forum, which opposes the corporate World Economic Forum at Davos, and witnessed the tremendous gathering of the *indignados* in Madrid that initiated the worldwide Occupy movement in 2011. Again and again we were proved right, especially about the wars. Afterwards, the question was always why did so much energy and wisdom fail to make more than a dent (at most) on power. Nothing, however, equalled the profound impact of Black Lives Matter after the killing of George Floyd.

In 2020, Black Lives Matter was not a protest exterior to and against the system. The protests came from the heart of society: they initiated – they *were* – a repudiation of the structures of racism. It felt qualitatively different, even from the massive events of the civil rights movement. Thanks to J Edgar Hoover, the FBI, President Nixon and the deep taproots of support they drew on, civil rights leaders were either assassinated or remained on the outside, as they demanded justice. Black Lives Matter did not seek to correct an injustice; rather, it has catalysed a process that will root out the fears, prejudices and systemic privilege that leads to racism, and not just in the US.

Nothing equalled the profound impact of Black Lives Matter

The fact that this energy was brought into Biden’s coalition, rather than turned against it, made a critical difference. In 1968, the anti-war protestors mobilised outside the Democratic Party convention in Chicago and were clubbed. Many argue that if they had backed the Democratic candidate, Hubert Humphrey, he would have ended the war: instead, Nixon became president and continued it. In 2000, Ralph Nader ran as the Green Party candidate for president and got nearly 100,000 votes in Florida – helping hand victory to George W Bush, who won by 600 votes, instead of the environmentally conscious Al Gore.

In both cases, I would argue, the official Democratic Party failed to reach out to radical new energy and thinking, while radicals divided off and campaigned against the establishment Democrats. As a result, the Republicans triumphed. In 2020, by contrast, while a little known Libertarian candidate, [Jo Jorgenson](#), took enough votes from Trump to ensure he lost in three key states, radicals and progressives made history, by participating in the official Biden campaign.

This shift is indeed seismic. Biden was more its beneficiary than its agent: the forces for change crystallised around him. He was a long-time establishment operator in a neoliberal order that turned the planet into its playground, demobilised voters and marginalised protesters. Despite warnings from some economists about the ultimate result of neoliberal policies, the caste of which Biden was a member continued with them, confident that resistance could be neutralised. Millions of hard-working people were used, abused and misled; their livelihoods and economic security cratered while the rich scooped up largesse.

Trump blew apart the politics of this world. Although he is now out of the White House, his impact has wrought an irreversible change. He dismantled the fatalism and acquiescence that neoliberalism relied on. To disprove Trump’s claim that Biden represents the same old failed political system, the new president will have to separate his administration from the

neoliberal legacy of his predecessors. The Biden White House, its backers and the Democratic leadership dare not try to put voters back to sleep. They know that the climate emergency is real, demanding an immense programme of active government that requires popular support. They know that a demagogue awaits if they serve up traditional elitism.

What's more, China is now an effective global rival, pioneering an authoritarian model of surveillance capitalism. To compete with China, the US government needs to become a developmental state in terms of skills, education and infrastructure renewal. It will also need allies, which entails being attractive again in the eyes of the world. This is impossible if its loudest voices are vile radio jocks, Rupert Murdoch's hateful media and Trumpist militias.

Scepticism is justified, given Biden's long career as a 'centrist' and the ability of the Left to turn on itself

To assure their own survival, America's political and administrative elites are obliged to try to develop a variant of capitalism that is more popular, fairer and ecological – and much less corrupt. It is an extraordinary shift, which demands that the Democratic Party abandons its post-war role as the party of the system to become the party of reform.

But how? Some people dream of a return to the welfare model of the 1930s New Deal. That was a time when top-down, paternalistic reforms could be effective, reinforced by hierarchical trade unions. Such methods cannot be disinterred for today's better-educated and networked society, even if Franklin D Roosevelt's determination to defy bankers and oligarchs remains inspiring.

Of Biden's actions so far, his proposed \$1.9trn response to the pandemic is welcomed by progressive economists such as [Joseph Stiglitz](#) and James Galbraith. The latter [salutes](#) it as a necessary "rescue" operation and emphasises that deep reform must follow – of the kind that Richard Parker [offered](#) to Obama when he became president in 2008. But another economist, Ann Pettifor, [disapproves](#) of the way John Kerry, Biden's lead on the climate crisis, is looking to fund managers to make the economy sustainable. For her, the test is whether, like Roosevelt, Biden will take on the power of Wall Street. That's not even to mention the power of big tech and the way it has reconfigured our information ecosystem.

Scepticism is justified, given Biden's long career as a 'centrist' and the ability of the Left to turn on itself, rather than help to set the agenda. But in contrast to Obama, a committed ideological centrist whose legacy becomes less impressive by the day, Biden goes with the flow. The current is now flowing in the direction of more democracy, a concerted effort to end domestic discrimination, and sustained government investment, especially with respect to the environment. It is [even possible](#) that the new administration will accept defeat in Afghanistan and close down the US's 'forever war' there.

If Biden fails to reconfigure the framework of American politics and secure the franchise for all, then Trumpism will return in some form in the 2020s. Reanimated and ruthless, it will implement the anti-democratic agenda that Trump initiated. It too will be unable to return to the days of a disassociated and disenchanted public, now that the depoliticisation essential to the neoliberal agenda has finally expired on Capitol Hill, and authoritarian capitalism will be generated around the cult of the leader. Either way, a new form of capitalism will emerge.

A historic divergence of this kind is full of danger. The myth about revolutionary transformations is that they take place through an uprising against an established order. The reality is that they happen when all parties realise that the governing course is clearly exhausted, but differ over how to replace it. Such a collapse is rarely instantaneous, because various efforts are made to resist change. Eventually, as these become more extreme, a

society is faced with a choice between fundamentally different futures.

To repeat, this does not come about because the status quo is challenged but because it is broken and therefore has to be replaced *in one way or another*. The need to choose generates a conflict between cross-class alliances. On both sides there will be young and old, the poor, the insecure, middle classes, intellectuals, organisers and the wealthy, mobilised around what they hold dear. While fighting for their own interests within it, all will proclaim they are the true expression of the country as a whole, although whoever wins will redefine it.

This is the situation the US finds itself in. So too does everyone in countries like mine, which are under its hegemony. The defeat of Trumpism and its brand of authoritarian market nationalism is far from irreversible. The situation is especially fraught with danger, as a new war of containment looms with China and its advanced form of surveillance capitalism. Yet the circumstances are far more auspicious than seemed possible in 2019 when, before COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter, Trump was destined to retain the White House.

I am not saying that the Left has ‘won’, merely that the polarisation that excluded it is being surpassed

There are good reasons for some optimism. First, the Biden administration seems to have grasped that the climate crisis is a matter of life or death. The measures needed for this alone ensure a rupture from neoliberalism. Second, it wishes to preserve the rule of law and ensure the full integration of women and minorities. This requires turning fine words into reality – above all by passing the For the People Act. Third, now that it has a serious technological rival in China, the US will need to invest in education and skills. All three call for active government that can only be sustained against the vicious fanaticism of the well-funded US Right by active voter support.

Finally, whatever the future, it isn’t going to be the US that Biden was born into – a paternalistic, top-down, male-dominated, white regime. Democracy today has to reflect a networked, feminised, multiracial and economically fragmented world. It is therefore bound to take a more open form. However much leaders of the Democratic Party may want to exclude the likes of Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, they need them and their supporters, and they now lack the institutions strong enough to exclude them.

I am not saying that the Left has ‘won’; merely, but crucially, that the polarisation that excluded it is being surpassed. The US remains a right-wing country and the *ancien régime* centrists in the Democratic Party are [already engaged](#) in deep opinion research to ensure that their platform is not perceived as ‘Leftist’. This is going to test everyone on the democratic Left – from liberals to anarchists, social democrats to socialists and greens – to act as partners in the alliance to stop and replace Trumpism. The ecosystem of the US Left stretches from the Democratic Party itself, via the well-maintained flora of liberal foundations and poorly cultivated trade union connections, to the wilder passions of identity politics. The triumph of Trumpism would not have been frustrated without its combined efforts. From now on, what it means to be on the Left, therefore, wherever you are on this spectrum, will change and will demand change and support from colleagues and comrades around the world.

A new opportunity

One way to measure the change is by comparing 2020 to 2016. Even though Trump lost the popular vote in 2016 by almost three million, when he gained the presidency it became fashionable to doubt the wisdom of democracy itself, rather than the US political system: perhaps Hillary Clinton was right after all and working people were

irretrievably “deplorable”. Had Trump had won a further four years thanks to the electoral college in 2020, a would-be populist Left would have blamed defeat on the caution of centrists, while the Democratic establishment would have blamed the Left for frightening voters. It would have reproduced a familiar division and an accommodation with authoritarianism.

Instead, we are in a quite different situation. Democracy might work! It is very early days, and the forces that have combined to potentially make the US a genuine democracy are a constellation rather than an alliance. But a new direction has opened up, which no one planned or foresaw.

Trumpism remains a significant threat. As I have tried to show, now that he has declared war on the American system, Trump must be subject to complete defeat. However, with Trumpist supporters entrenched in governorships, state administrations and half of the Senate, the defeat will demand a great democratic mobilisation. This requires domestic economic policies that benefit the majority, not the rich. American foreign policy will have to be reshaped as well. It is a battle that cannot be won if the Democratic Party leadership defaults back to neoliberalism, for the fundamental reason that neoliberalism demobilised voters.

A new direction has opened up, which no one planned or foresaw

After 1980, Stuart Hall foresaw the “reactionary modernisation” of market fundamentalism. It was to split the broad forces of the Left in three. Social democrats – and in the US, the Democrats – collaborated in the evisceration of their working-class support, either actively or because they could not prevent it as they embraced ‘globalisation’. The traditional socialist Left remained committed to confronting ‘the system’ from which their energies and idealism



An Occupy Wall Street march through New York's Times Square in 2011. | Anthony Pleva / Alamy Stock Photo

were now completely excluded, and held on to a Jacobin intransigence that had flourished in the 1960s.

In between were the greens, liberals, many single-issue campaigners and (for want of a better term) small-r republicans who later took advantage of the internet to encourage participation and active democracy. They sought a path between what they experienced as two forms of closure: neoliberalism and neo-Leninism. openDemocracy was part of this inventive but marginalised politics, which lent it distinction but little influence.

The core ideology of neoliberalism imploded with the great financial crash of 2008. The market, which was supposed to know best, had failed. Governments, which were supposed to be the problem, had to rescue the rich. The governing parties of the centre-Left were blindsided by the crash. Having already abandoned socialism, they were capsized when capitalism abandoned them.

In the US, on the Right, the Tea Party movement showed that anti-elite populism had support and energy. Trump was to wrap himself in the rage of these Republican voters and led a right-wing rising against politics itself. Only someone as utterly shameless as Trump, with his mastery of the media – a rentier plutocrat, whose residential towers were laundromats for international oligarchs – could lead such a movement.

The response from the Left has been slower, but deeper. In 2011, Occupy Wall Street demonstrated the popularity in the US of opposition to “the 1%”. Worldwide, it saw a new generation voice opposition to social and economic inequality and demand real democracy.

As these protests ebbed, the Jacobin tendency, with its unflinching critique of capitalism, gained a late reinvigoration. Yet on 6 January 2021, neo-Leninists were confronted with a real-time vision of their insurrectionist dream, as millions watched a live-streamed occupation of the Capitol.



George Floyd mural, Minneapolis, by Xena Goldman, Cadex Herrera, Greta McLain, Niko Alexander, Pablo Hernandez. | Wikicommons/ Lorie Shaull. Some rights reserved.

It should have been us, [wrote](#) Alain Brossat and Alain Naze on the Verso Books blog, entranced by both the iconoclasm of the intrusion and the shocked reactions to it. With a salute to Lenin, they advised us to “urgently escape” what they describe as the “emotional contamination” of being appalled by what Trump’s mob did. (“We are not going to shed tears over the ransacking of Ms Pelosi’s office,” the authors wrote.) Instead, “people could and should [...] reformulate the question on their own terms: storming of the Capitol, why not? – but rather by the Sioux or, say, a coalition of descendants of Sitting Bull, Geronimo, John Brown, Nat Turner, Malcolm X and Emma Goldman!”

The old answer to ‘why not?’ is that the capitalist order will hardly be shaken by an internationalist’s wet dream. The 21st-century reply is that a much more significant occupation of the Capitol actually took place in June 2020, when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, along with other Democratic leaders, took the knee in its halls – for the 8 minutes and 46 seconds that police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on the neck of George Floyd in Minneapolis as he slaughtered him.

Like Trumpism, Black Lives Matter entered Congress in a novel fashion – but as righteousness, not barbarism. Its activists went on to supercharge the mobilisation for Biden in November. The reward has been a flurry of anti-discrimination executive orders issued with determination by the new president.

This is not the ‘reformism’ we are used to, pushed through by a progressive elite that is proud of its paternalism while it excludes the dangerous from its councils. The moral imperative to repudiate structural racism has been so broad and so overwhelming that you no longer qualify to be a political leader unless you are willing to take the knee.

The absurdity of those seeking a vanguardist seizure of power connects to a deeper defeat for the Marxist Left. In the 1960s, radicals in the West were trapped between Stalinism and a stifling, corporate labour movement. Attempting a breakout made sense and an astonishing variety of internationalist strategies were adopted, from the violent and sectarian to the academic and abstruse. Yet, as [Tom Nairn](#) began to show in the arguments he developed in the 1970s, seeking any solution in a revamped proletarian orthodoxy was flawed. Both capitalist development itself, as well as resistance to it, would always be shaped in a fundamental way by national differences that “cannot be glossed over or occluded”.

It is an argument that has been surely vindicated. For here we are in the third decade of the 21st century and the world’s defining contest is not, despite globalisation, an international class conflict. Instead it is between two nation states. An ex-communist nation seeks to reshape the world in its image with patriotic self-confidence, while the old hegemon is reaffirming its national predominance. Both are now seeking to conscript support across the world.

What is happening is too strong and autonomous to be fobbed off. The world of closed democracy is ending

There is a Socialist International, a Progressive Alliance, a Fourth International and a Progressive International, but not a single influential ‘international’ capable of responding to the multiple crises of the global system. Yet simultaneously, questions of democratic self-determination, from Hong Kong to Belarus, Myanmar and Zimbabwe, not to speak of India, Turkey, Iran and Russia, show that the national question is taking on a new expression, as the young in particular demand free and fair elections and an end to corruption. In the US, this generational call has energised the Democratic Party and entered Congress.

These national movements for democracy are not nationalist in the sense of bellicose

demands for competitive distinction. Quite the contrary, they take forward a worldwide shift in the nature of democracy itself. In my recent essay [Out of the Belly of Hell](#), I showed how the response of governments around the world to COVID-19 reveals that a fundamental change has taken place. A combination of forces have developed across the last 50 years in a contraflow to the dominance of neoliberalism. None originated from socialist opposition to capitalism. Together they have altered the balance of expectations between people and government and generated a humanisation that resists the supremacy of market values.

The forces are material, in terms of the advances of science and its application to medical treatments. They are ideological, in terms of feminism, anti-racism, #MeToo and human rights. They are political, with the rise of ecological consciousness and the environmental movement. And they are even created by the market, in that consumers are empowered, most notably with respect to our bodies and our fitness – and, thanks to computerisation, our capacity to communicate. Social media is shaping these networked expressions of civil society.

I did not expect this combination of forces to help deliver a clear-cut political expression so rapidly as it has in the US. As we have seen, organisations from across civil society were crucial to Trump's defeat. What is unprecedented is that they had sufficient influence to affect the outcome.

Corporate and financial capital still dominate, but politics no longer serves them alone, by putting the interests of the market first. Instead, power is having to listen to people everywhere. In these circumstances the legacy attitudes of traditional Left politics, whether liberal, reformist or radical, have to change. What is happening is too strong and autonomous to be fobbed off. The world of closed democracy is ending.

17 March 2021

This essay is the third in a series of responses to the storming of the Capitol. The [first](#) was a short, quick defence of the nobility and necessity of insurrection, which contrasted the events in Washington, DC with recent protests in Hong Kong. The [second](#) looked at the way that Trump himself is a product of the 1960s. The fourth will be on the coming conflict between Washington and Beijing

