

Reflections on the 2020 U.S. Election

By

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Four years ago to the Sunday, this room was filled with a standing-room only crowd yearning for comfort and help making sense out of what had just happened: the election of the most unfit candidate ever to the U.S. Presidency, despite what the polls had reassuringly predicted. For people watching the angst-ridden election coverage this past Tuesday, it seemed as if history was repeating itself as the hopes of those desperate for change seemed to steadily erode throughout the night. But the next day the picture improved, at least for those who voted Democrat, as key states began returning the results of millions of mail-in ballots, which were overwhelmingly in support of the incumbent's challenger, and steadily climbed as the counting continued throughout the week. The outcome, which I'm guessing most of us here are pleased with, was finally announced yesterday.

But there is still much to feel anxious about. Many of the problems facing us yesterday are still facing us today, Trump will remain in office until January, is unlikely to ever concede, and is likely to continue spreading lies and conspiracy theories about the election results that could further divide our nation, if not lead to violence and unrest. The number of COVID-19 cases and resulting deaths is now higher than ever in our nation, far higher than anywhere else in the world, and, for the most part, we're all still on lockdown because of it. We're also still facing global warming, lots of unrest due to continued inequality in our country, and, of course, a looming economic disaster if we can't get the pandemic under control soon.

Still, after four stressful years of an erratic, incompetent, unchecked narcissist running the country, today affords a more hopeful outlook than many of us have grown accustomed to. But before we look ahead, let's take a short step back to election night when it still looked like things were going the other direction. Many of us saw all the red on the map and wondered how it is possible that so many could have voted to reelect Donald Trump. I know it's possible that a few joining us today may have preferred Trump to Biden, and, as far as I'm concerned, you're welcome here, too. But ours is a liberal religion and most of us vote accordingly, and must be ministered to with this in mind, just as I did my best to do four years ago when the shoe was on the other foot.

In fact, what I want to do for a bit right now is advocate for the Trump voters because I'm guessing many of them feel a lot like some of us did four years ago, and, like us, are now wondering how so many people could possibly have voted for the other candidate. This is so, I believe, because all of us, whatever party we prefer, are subject to cognitive dissonance, which prevents us from acknowledging information we dislike. Like Sherlock Holmes, we

conclude that, “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.”

The problem with cognitive dissonance, however, is that we are never able to eliminate all the possibilities because we can’t comprehend all of them to being with. And because we can’t, we end up believing we’ve thought of everything imaginable. Unable to entertain any other possibilities, we think whatever remains in our minds must be the truth. To further complicate the matter, different groups have different dissonance, so Republicans see different priorities than Democrats do. And Democrats are willing to overlook concerns that Republicans aren’t, and *vice versa*.

This is why millions of goodhearted people voted for Donald Trump four years ago; and did so again this week. Many of those who did not, cannot understand how so many others could have supported a man who had proved to be so cruel, totalitarian, incompetent, and just plain dumb in so much of what he says and does. Just two days ago I received an email from a local social justice organization stating, “This election was a referendum on race, white supremacy culture, racial equity, and racial justice. Voters showed up by the millions to say yes to white supremacy.” In addition to being a “cup half full” interpretation of the outcome, I disagree with this oversimplified characterization of the election. Suggesting it was strictly about racism, and that anyone who voted for Donald Trump must have done so because they are white supremacists, denies the complexity that is inherent in all individuals, as does the Republican claim that anyone who voted for Biden must be a socialist. I voted for Biden and can assure you I am not a socialist.

It’s also true that Cuban Americans showed strong support for Trump in Florida, not because they are white supremacist, but because, at least for some, the claims they heard about Biden being a socialist triggered a lot of understandable fear, justified or not. So I was dumfounded on election night—when things still weren’t looking so good for the democrats—to hear CNN commentator Van Jones suggest his party is going to have to do a better job appealing to Latino voters, specifically referring to Cuban Americans. He made this comment against a backdrop of blue dots representing heavily populated urban areas surrounded by a sea of red rural communities in almost every state. I immediately thought how much more sense it would make to try appealing to all American voters, especially to the millions living in rural communities who feel disenfranchised from the Democratic Party. Insinuating that all Republicans are white supremacists, or that they should only focus on the interests of select identity groups just to get their numbers up, is part of why Democrats keep doing so poorly in rural communities. Why write off half the country instead of reaching out to them, asking what they need, finding our common ground, and building relationships based on our shared values and concerns?

This is an especially good question for those of us in this part of the world because, unlike most of the, so-called, red states, which had tight races, our next-door neighbors were

solidly in Trump's camp. Idaho voted 64 percent in his favor compared to 33 percent for Biden. In Montana it was 57 percent to 40 percent. And in Wyoming it was 70 percent to 27 percent. I'm not saying this to suggest we need to convince anyone they should be voting our way, only to point out there are plenty of people in our own neck of the woods that we are ideologically alienated from. We have to work on building relationships with them by mutually discovering our common ground. That can't happen by narrow-mindedly calling them racists, bigots, and rubes any more than it can by calling us godless communist baby killers.

Last year I spoke with a man who voted for Trump and felt he was doing a good job. When, with genuine curiosity, I asked him why, he told me he liked his record on job creation and deregulation. You can imagine how surprised I was when he also revealed he had voted twice for Barack Obama for the same reason he voted for Trump, because his priority was his desire for meaningful change. With this goal in mind, he considered few other priorities, finding a way to ignore many of the things that most trouble others about Trump. I also have three sets of neighbors living next door and across the street from me who are Trump supporters, and are also great neighbors who would do anything for me, even though one of them likes to tease me about my liberal politics, which I don't mind in the least. Like all of us, what motivates these individuals is complicated and cannot be reduced to overly generalized and judgmental one-liners in an email.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting it's solely up to us to have relational conversations with millions of Americans who think differently about politics than we do, especially not for the dehumanizing purpose of winning them over to our side. The humanistic ethic requires that nobody become a means to our ends. Rather, they are to be encouraged by us to pursue their own ends. Such an effort has to become a concerted, long range strategy by the Democratic party, with the goal of meaningfully helping our neighbors who are seeing their rural way of life disappear as millions of American migrate into cities, as are people all over the world. Today, more than 80 percent of Americans live in cities compared to 200 years ago when it was only 5 percent. The farther away these shrinking communities are from major metro areas, the worse their economies are becoming, as they watch their property values decline, local businesses go under, and their friends and family move away. As Democrats we don't need to seek their votes, we need to seek their welfare by figuring out how to help them continue thriving in a time upheaval and disruption.

This holds true for those living in coal and oil country who are also wondering how they will get by now that coal has gone bankrupt and oil is on its way out in the wake of solar and wind technologies that are producing the cheapest energy in human history. Of course some of them don't want to face the reality of Global Warming: because the green energy revolution has killed their economies, their communities, and their way of life, while leaving them with nowhere else to go. Millions of our neighbors now have rusty belts, empty bread baskets, dry wells, and abandoned mines, yet how many of us are in the

streets demonstrating our care for them, demanding that our government help them through this difficult and uncertain period? Whether they are sincere or not, the Republicans have done a much better job promising to make their lives great again by bringing back farming, oil, coal, steel, and other bygone industries. This isn't about winning votes, it's about human welfare, it's about compassion, and if we can genuinely offer this, the votes will follow.

So that's my big takeaway from the election, but I have a couple of other points I want to make. Among them is how happy I am with the historic turnout, which included more ballots cast than any election in American history, both for the winner and the loser. Whoever had won, this much seems indisputable, it would have been a fair and democratic process. Despite Trump's unsubstantiated, self-serving, and insane claims to the contrary, we waited four days for all the necessary votes to be meticulously and openly counted before a winner was declared, all thanks to mail-in ballots. I'm not naïve: I know we have a history of voter suppression, and forcing major demographics, like women and blacks, to have to fight for their Constitutional right to vote. After passing the Voting Rights Act, such suppression went underground, erecting the New Jim Crow era of mass incarceration that has disenfranchised millions of black and brown voters by conjuring up an expensive and unnecessary drug war, and, in more recent years, massive voter purging and stringent voter I.D. laws.

Still, I hope what occurred this week becomes the wave of the future for all our elections because it makes voting easy and eliminates a lot of the mechanisms by which voter suppression occurs, including deterring and detouring voters who try to cast their votes at a shrinking number of available polling centers, and puts the onus on state governments to send every eligible voter a ballot without them having to show up every year with multiple forms of ID before they can vote. I suspect, after this year's result, there will be some politicians who will work hard to prevent the widespread use of voting by mail, but I also predict the genie can't be put back in the bottle, and am glad of it. Mail-in voting just democratized our democracy.

I'd also mention, this election, in particular, like most the presidential elections during my lifetime, was too narrow to consider a mandate, even though the opposite has already been claimed. Winning 52 percent of the vote cannot be considered a true mandate, not when nearly half the country feels like they've lost. Saying otherwise only widens the divide between us by making a number of us feel invisible and like our voices no longer matter. If I had a dollar for every time I've heard a Republican refer to what Americans want, referring only to their own constituents, while making me feel insignificant or like they don't consider me an American if I disagree, then I'd be a rich man: but I'd remain poor in spirit. Landslides and mandates may be declared in nations like Russia, Turkey, and Bolivia, where widespread election fraud is routine, but not in America where millions of votes get counted.

I'm also glad Joe Biden has begun with such a conciliatory tone, empathizing with the disappointment of those who didn't vote for him, assuring them he wants to do his best to serve them too, and telling all of us we need to help bring this "Grim era of demonization" to an end. I think he was talking to liberals at least as much as he was to conservatives. If we're demonizing and, thus, dehumanizing those we disagree with, we're on the wrong side of history, of politics, and of ethics, no matter what party we belong to.

Another point to make, as important as this election is, at least for the morale of those who have felt traumatized by the Trump Administration, the office of the Presidency and the Federal government itself are losing their overall significance in our nation and in the world. In other words, who the President is, and which Party is in control, doesn't mean as much as it did just a few years ago.

During his presentation at Abundance Digital's 2020 Ex0 World Summit, technology forecaster, futurist, and consulting professor at Stanford University, Paul Saffo made an astounding claim: "digital technology is a solvent leaching the glue out of our international order, and the institution that seems to be dissolving most rapidly is the same one that dominated our geopolitics during the 20th century, the nation state." He went on to predict that by the middle of this century, just thirty years from now, that the United States will cease to exist as a meaningful entity: "the forces afoot today," he says, "are already changing the geopolitical landscape and creating an opening for a new challenger as the dominant political force in this century, and that is the city state. City states are stepping into the vacuum left by waning nation state power."

This is an entire sermon in itself, but, in brief, a state is distinguished by a defined territory and population, a nation by abstractions like culture, history, and commonality. A nation state exists when the two coincide and begins to dissolve when they don't. Today, Americans are no longer bonded by a unified culture, history, and commonality. Likewise, due to globalization and the communications revolution, the once well-defined borders of both nations and states have become blurred. It is now possible for a large city in a state to be a major economic player in the global economy by directly partnering with communities around the world. This is a major reason those recoiling from the end of the Nation State Era are obsessed with border control in futile attempts to reestablish their once distinct lines. Nation states require passports, Saffo points out, because they have citizens, but city states don't, because they have residents. This explains why cities around the nation have ignored Federal orders to deport immigrants, and why some have declared themselves Sanctuary Cities. Cities have residents who contribute and get something in return. They don't need passports.

A city state, which he calls the "perfect confluence of commerce, culture, and governance," is defined by a distinct geographical area, an outsized economy, makes a global impact, and

has a unique culture that helps create social cohesion. The Bay Area is a good example, Saffo says. San Francisco alone has a GDP larger than the entire nation of Saudi Arabia. It has spawned major world players like Google, Twitter, Apple, and Facebook. And it certainly has its own distinct culture, as do cities like Portland, Seattle, Atlanta, Miami, and so on. Increasingly these city states are defying Federal authority, as with immigration issues. More importantly, they are filling in the void left by the failures of the Federal government. Despite Trump's pullout from the Paris Climate Agreement, for example, major city states stayed in on their own. Others have had to tackle COVID-19 for themselves, given the lack of a unified Federal plan. Additionally, they are able to barter deals and establish partnerships with other cities all over the globe, regardless of what Nation they are in. As of 2007, most the world's population now lives cities, which are today's new power centers, not the totalitarian populists elected around the world in a futile effort to resist these inevitable changes.

I say this now because it think it's important for all of us to stop thinking so provincially about the world, and about who is in charge and who our neighbors are. This week's election was a bid deal for a lot of reasons, but we should understand how fast our world is changing, and that as individual residents in a city state, we have far more power to influence matters than we do as United States citizens. We can have direct relationships with our city councils and county commissions, which, on our behalf, have direct influence on our State Government, which can now bypass Federal commands and transcend its borders as a world player. That's a huge shift and requires a huge shift in how we think about ourselves and what we do.

Finally, as I've said many times, it remains up to each one of us to pursue our values and principles no matter what circumstances we are in, including who is or isn't living in the White House. What we do now is what we've been doing the past four years, and the four years before that, and before that, and so on, acting and advocating to make our dreams for the world come true, by pressing our societies to become more just and inclusive and compassionate. Although presidents come and go, governments fail, and nations decline, these principles remain and are the enduring powers that belong to us all.