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Post 2020: The Future of Democracy

THE YEAR 2020 will remain in the American conscience as the year of two major challenges: the COVID virus and the undermining of voter confidence in the 2020 election results. Both were fraught with polarized thinking and positions. What does this mean for the future of democracy?

LARRY M. BARTELS

ELECTION OUTCOMES

- Election outcomes are mostly erratic reflections of the current balance of partisan loyalties in a two-party system with competitive elections. The last 25 years have been marked by a series of relatively close presidential elections, which is unparalleled since the late nineteenth century.
- The choice between the candidates is essentially a coin toss. Elections do not produce genuine policy mandates. They simply put a different elite coalition in charge.
- About 90 percent of Republicans voted for Donald Trump in 2016, just as they had for Mitt Romney in 2012, except the coin toss was in favor of the Republicans rather than the Democrats. Given the stability of the results, despite how unusual Trump was as a candidate, political scientists mostly concluded that partisanship is a powerful drug.

THE 2020 ELECTION

- Up until the 2020 election, in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic and other events under the Trump administration, there was little aggregate change in approval or disapproval for Trump. If anything, 2016 Trump voters favored him more in 2020.
- 2020 exit polls suggest that voters were evenly split on their assessments of both the pandemic response and the economy. Fifty-one percent felt the U.S. efforts to contain COVID were going somewhat well or very well. Forty-nine percent felt the condition of the economy was good or excellent. The vast majority of those people voted to re-elect the president and, this time, the state-by-state results were even more stable than they had been in 2016.

- A consistently high level of partisan continuity is especially surprising in light of the massive increase in turnout in the 2020 election. Trump managed to find 11 million more votes in 2020 than he had in 2016. Joseph Biden received 15 million more votes than Hillary Clinton had in 2016. This higher turnout is a testament to the intensity of feelings in the public on both sides of the partisan divide, and massive mobilization efforts on both sides.

GOVERNMENT AND POLICY-MAKING

- Biden was elected with a narrow majority in the House and a tied Senate. Democrats have a once-in-a-generation moment to deliver policies at the scale of the crises we are facing. The Senate is likely going to be an excuse for some degree of inaction.
- Within each party, there is a *modest* positive relationship between the preferences of constituents and the behavior of their elected officials. For both parties, there has been a growing gap since the 1980's between the positions of presidential candidates and the positions of voters in the middle of the political spectrum.
- People mostly do not vote on the basis of policy. As a result, politicians in office are mostly free to do what they want. Liberal or conservative policy agendas are not constrained by the public directly.
- Every one of President Barack Obama's major legislative initiatives passed with exactly as many votes as needed in the Senate. President Biden's policy agenda will be similarly constrained by insufficiently liberal senators.

REPUBLICAN AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES

- We can think of political values in terms of three broad bundles: economic conservatism, cultural conservatism, and ethnic antagonism.
- Among Democrats, partisan attitudes are most strongly related to attitudes about economic issues and the role of government. Cultural and ethnic values are less important.
- Why are Republicans voting against their economic interests? On average, Republicans care much more about cultural values than they care about economic issues and the role of government. Republicans, and

especially Trump, have succeeded by appealing to cultural and ethnic concerns.

- The nature of partisan polarization is not just Democrats and Republicans disagreeing about political issues. It is disagreeing about what politics is about in a fundamental way.

ANTI-DEMOCRATIC SENTIMENTS LEADING UP TO 6 JANUARY 2021 AND BEYOND

- Bartels conducted a survey in January of 2020 in which he asked a national sample of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents some questions that touched on their allegiance to democratic values. Even at that point, about 75 percent agreed that it was hard to trust election results. About 40 percent agreed that a time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands.
- Although smaller numbers of people holding these attitudes to more extreme degrees were most likely to engage in anti-democratic action on 6 January, these views are widespread. The widespread nature of these kinds of views among the party rank-and-file will likely encourage anti-democratic behavior by the party's political leaders.
- Anti-democratic sentiments seem not to be primarily attached to cultural issues, but rather to ethnic antagonisms. Republicans who are likely to endorse these anti-democratic sentiments are most concerned about immigration and the idea that whites are discriminated against.
- Democrats hope that the prospect of increasing demographic diversity will guarantee a durable new Democratic majority. In the short run, however, Republicans will likely benefit from the intense support of whites who are agitated by decades of disorienting social and cultural change.
- Average levels of ethnic antagonism show no diminution by generation, except for the youngest cohorts. Ethnic antagonism is unlikely to decline, at least for the next 20 years or so. More political turmoil than we have recently experienced is foreseeable.

SUSAN HERBST ASKS . . .

Can you talk about the Founders' failure to predict practical democracy, democratic action, and what the constitution looks like?

- They certainly did not predict the rise of political parties. In some sense, the party system developed almost immediately, beginning with the election of 1800. It then expanded in the 1820's to 1830's. But, we have seen a marked increase in the level of polarization in the last 30 years or so.
- A lot of the safeguards against excesses of democracy built into our system by the Founders have been relaxed. We have built workarounds to try to make a system that is more consistent with contemporary notions of populous democratic control.

There has been a lot of discussion recently about the Senate and what it is supposed to do. Can you discuss the Senate in general, and why we are all paying attention to Joe Manchin?

- In general, there have been a lot of complaints about the disproportionality of the system of representation in the Senate. It is natural to want to undo the Founders' arrangement—that was made to get small states on board—after so many years and in such a changed political environment.
- The six-year terms were intended to give senators some independence from their electorate and their party. Nowadays, Senate elections look much more like presidential and House elections—determined by the partisanship of the state.
- Senators have a good deal of latitude to deviate when they think their party is pushing a policy not in the country's interest. That seems to be the case with Senator Manchin. He seems to be operating on the basis of his convictions about good policy.

How much of the closeness of the 2016 and 2020 elections was about Trump, and how much was it about the natural polarization we are seeing?

- Leading up to the 2016 election, conventional wisdom was that Trump himself would matter a lot. We thought he would lose because he was such a

bad candidate—but the level of polarization is such that that turned out to not matter much.

Partisanship has invaded the public health matter of beating this pandemic. Are Americans capable of sacrificing for each other?

- The pandemic response only became a partisan issue once Trump made it political.
- The struggle for unity is an uphill battle. However, at least we are better off now than we were in the 1950's.

AUDIENCE QUESTION AND ANSWER TAKEAWAYS

What is your view of the electoral reforms proposed to mitigate partisan conflict (like jungle primaries, term limits, rank choice voting)? Do we need reforms bearing on mass media and social media?

- Our attitudes about reform are more shaped by hopes than reliable evidence about how they would actually work. For example, changes to California's primary process, which were intended to mitigate polarization, have not succeeded very well.
- Evidence suggests that term limits actually take power away from elected officials and give it to unelected staff and lobbyists.
- Reforms for media and social media are complicated. It is hard to know what those reforms would consist of.

Isn't it a big surprise that 6 January escalated so quickly to violence in a "democratic" country?

- We would like to think so. We let this possibility fall off our radar because the United States has been a "stable democracy" for such a long time. Democratic systems run into these kinds of upsets frequently.

Does the GOP have a future, or will it go the way of the Whigs?

- It is unlikely that the party will go away. Our electoral institutions are structured to advantage the two existing major parties.

Why is it so hard to start a third party in the United States?

- It is difficult for a third party to get a foothold in a system that is run by majoritarian principles. It would have to displace one of the major parties and beat the other one. It is difficult to come up with a package of values and policy positions that appeal to a large enough number of people to become a successful major party.

Do you think any legislation could put us on a better path to closing income and opportunity gaps?

- Democratic political leaders have mostly decided that this is not a winning issue to tackle head on.
- They will tackle it indirectly. Barack Obama, who talked a lot about inequality, made his most significant dent with the Affordable Care Act. This took money from affluent people in terms of taxes, and gave it to poor people in the form of healthcare subsidies. A lot of Biden administration policies, if successful, will have similar effects.
- This is not a new problem. Going back to the 1960's, some of the policies Lyndon B. Johnson pursued were quite popular—but the war on poverty was not.

Is there a lack of intra-party policy disagreement? Would more debate within the parties create more capacity to negotiate legislation between the two parties?

- There is some intra-party policy disagreement on both sides. They may need better mechanisms for deliberating, which would somehow translate the disagreement into a position that is more constructive for internal party bargaining.

If we cannot even agree on facts, how can we build a political debate? How can we develop proper public policy if we cannot agree on empirical data and reality?

- This is a big problem. In some sense, it is not new either. There has always been disagreement about facts. But it has gotten broader and deeper recently than it has been for a long time.

You mentioned that Republicans and Democrats cannot even agree on what politics is for anymore. Can you talk a bit more about that?

- On the Democratic side, people's political views are mostly about the role of government, the economy, the environment, and regulation.
- For Republicans, those things are not so important. They care about cultural values.
- Republicans vote against their economic interest and support a party run by and for plutocrats because these are the people who speak to their deeply held cultural values.

If you had to predict in two years: Which legislative initiatives do you think Biden will be successful on? Do you think he will lose the House or Senate?

- The pattern increasingly seems to be to stuff as much as possible into a relatively small number of bills. Once some form of the infrastructure bill is passed, for example, that will probably constitute most of the legislative accomplishments of the Biden administration.
- In terms of voting rights initiatives, it seems unlikely that anything along the broad lines proposed will pass. Maybe some narrower pieces of it will get through.
- Election outcomes are mostly coin tosses. This makes them hard to predict. We should not attach much broad philosophical meaning to the results.
- The usual pattern is for the president's party to lose seats, mostly because there is almost always an ideological reaction to the perception of policy change. Biden will probably lose seats in the midterm elections.

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