

Biden understands what Twitter doesn't: Democrats need a big tent



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August 20, 2020 at 5:14 PM EDT

The Democratic National Convention began with a [mosaic of Americans](#) reciting the preamble to the U.S. Constitution — a striking display of ethnic, racial and gender diversity. But more important, this time around, the Democrats have taken care to celebrate the kind of *ideological* diversity that is crucial to winning the White House on Nov. 3.

The convention has prominently featured progressive icons such as Bernie Sanders and Stacey Abrams, moderates including Hillary Clinton and former Republican Mike Bloomberg, and conservatives such as John Kasich, Cindy McCain and Colin Powell. Many on social media reacted furiously to including Republicans, with one user [sarcastically asking](#), “What time is Dick Cheney speaking[?]”

But Joe Biden seems to understand that Twitter will not cast the deciding vote in the election. He is returning to a winning formula for the Democrats, which is to be a big-tent party.

“I am not a member of any organized political party. I am a Democrat,” [quipped](#) Will Rogers. The joke expressed an important truth. The Democrats dominated U.S. politics from the 1930s through the 1960s because they included all kinds of people, from Southern segregationists to Northern

liberals. It was a Faustian bargain, but that coalition rescued the country from the Great Depression and passed Social Security, Medicare, food stamps, Head Start and a host of other programs that helped Whites and minorities alike.

It wasn't just a Democratic formula. When Ronald Reagan reshaped the Republican Party in the 1980s, he [repeatedly](#) pointed [out](#) that he [had been a Democrat](#) and a [union organizer](#), that he respected rank-and-file Democrats and that he understood how hard it was for them to break with a decades-long sense of [political loyalty](#). He courted the religious right but from a distance, literally. In his eight years as president, he [never attended](#) the annual antiabortion rally — voicing his support [by phone](#) instead — even though the event was held half a mile from the White House.

Earlier this year, when asked what role she might play if Biden became president, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) [said](#), “Oh God. In any other country, Joe Biden and I would not be in the same party.” She’s probably right, but America is different. For one thing, it’s very big. In fact, it worried the country’s founders that in the past, democracy had flourished only in small city-states. They believed a large, diverse country like America could pose critical challenges to the democratic process. And they were thinking of just the 13 colonies, nestled east of the Allegheny Mountains! In a vast, continental nation of 330 million, with wide variations of geography, economic activity, history and culture, it should be obvious that not everyone sees things the same way.

For some ideological warriors, to accept this reality is to make sordid compromises. But it is the durable way to actually get things done. Sanders is a powerful force in America and has raised many important issues. But in his three decades in Congress, he has been the [lead sponsor of just seven bills that have been enacted](#) — two of which named post offices. If you want to translate ideas into action, you have to grapple with the political realities of the country. Whether on immigration or infrastructure, you are likely to make enduring changes only if you can build a coalition.

Vox's Ezra Klein [makes the case](#) that Democrats in particular need to have a broad appeal. Their constituency is more diverse than that of Republicans to start with — from Northern Whites to Southern Blacks to Latinos in the West. Add to this redistricting and the electoral college, which help Republicans gain power even when they cannot get a majority of votes, and Democrats have a compelling practical reason to be a big-tent party.

There may even be a larger virtue in this kind of broad approach. One recent study found that ideologically diverse teams produce better work than homogeneous ones. Summarizing in the Harvard Business Review, the researchers [noted](#) that at the individual level, bias can lead to foolish investments and erroneous conclusions. But people with strong political biases are also passionate and hard-working and dig deep for information to prove their case. “Collectively, teams with mixtures of bias that are willing to engage and collaborate can yield superior performance,” they concluded.

Last year, Stanford scholars gathered 523 registered voters to talk to one another about their disagreements in small groups. After several days, liberals and conservatives had both changed their views significantly, and the share of participants who believed American democracy was “working well” had [doubled](#) from 30 percent to 60 percent. If the Democrats continue to embrace this kind of deliberative democracy, they will have an opportunity to make policy changes that endure, and perhaps more importantly, to heal this country’s broken democratic culture.

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