Biden Can’t Stop America’s Democratic Decline

A new administration won’t deliver the changes the country needs. Now it’s up to the U.S. public.

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A few years ago I developed a moderately cheering theory about the effects of four years of U.S. President Donald Trump. The thought came to me while I was covering the French presidential elections in 2017. Very few French voters seemed to be attracted to Emmanuel Macron’s Anglo-American brand of liberalism, but they voted for him in overwhelming numbers against Marine Le Pen because they felt called to defend so-called republican values against her populist nativism. The French had a collective memory of their own brush with fascism during the Vichy era and the 1930s. So, too, the Spanish, who kept their own right wing firmly in check. Perhaps, I thought, Americans’ own problem was historical complacency; if so, Trump could provide a kind of homeopathic remedy which would inoculate them against the full-blown disease of authoritarianism without making them gravely ill.

I was wrong. The democratic catharsis that I hoped this election would produce did not happen and is not happening. I need not recite the evidence, as so many others have, including Foreign Policy’s editor, Jonathan Tepperman. It is enough to say that my medical metaphor got it backward: Trump exploited a preexisting condition of contempt for democratic norms
and then made it vastly worse.

What is to be done? And by whom? President-elect Joe Biden has said all the right things about bringing Americans together, and I don’t doubt that he will continue saying those things, because he believes them. As an old white guy, and a much-scarred, profoundly decent man, Biden may be a more suitable messenger than was former President Barack Obama, whose very identity as a Black man and Ivy League bearing ignited suspicion and resentment even as he issued passionate pleas for harmony. But how much can presidential rhetoric, and even symbolic deeds, accomplish?

In recent days, I’ve posed this and similar questions to a number of scholars of democracy, hoping for insights from other countries or eras. They generally agreed that there are few prior examples of a mature democracy that has lost and then refound its way, though history furnishes any number of instances, such as Weimar Germany, of democracies that have slipped their moorings and plunged into authoritarianism. I found very little optimism. Thomas Carothers, head of research at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a leading authority on democracy and governance, said that the United States has now sunk to “the lower echelon of the well-established democracies” and is more deeply polarized than any of the others. “You can’t de-polarize,” he concluded. “You just try to manage this condition we have.”

Scholars have long argued that shaky democracies must “deliver” in order to become “consolidated.” It is now clear that the principle also applies to mature democracies at a moment when old underpinnings have given way. U.S. democracy was not shaken during the Depression, as many European democracies were, because then President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated a radical experiment in state intervention in order to alleviate poverty and restore faith in the system itself. At a moment when the prevailing model of
capitalism has once again led to stagnation, fear, and resentment even amid great plenty, Biden, himself a figure of the status quo, is called to begin shaping a new domestic order that might ultimately break the national fever.

But that, too, is probably not in the cards. Biden will only be able to work around the edges so long as the Senate rests in the hands of Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, whose ideal of political success is making the other side fail. A better outcome in the 2022 midterm elections might free up some political space for the large-scale changes in taxation and spending to which Biden is committed. Nevertheless, an ambitious Democratic program will only deepen partisan fury, at least so long as Trump has something to say about it. The delivery will be generational; the backlash will be immediate.

Thinking about what can be done right now about the country’s long-gestating illness only leads to despair. Perhaps, then, the answer lies in stepping back and thinking about long-term answers that provide less immediate gratification. Most of the scholars I spoke to believed that the United States’ political structures have led Americans into a cul-de-sac, and thus that they have to change those structures in order to find their way out. Any such reforms might well be blocked by the same partisan resistance that a new tax-and-spending agenda would provoke; they may, however, enjoy the slight advantage that comes of not intrinsically advantaging either side. In any case, structural reform might well have to begin at the state level before percolating up to national politics.

Lee Drutman of the New America Foundation has argued that the two-party system has become a deadlocked machine in which both parties have come to feel that “you can’t give an inch or else you’re going to lose the entire war.” In a recent book, *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America* (and in a piece in *Foreign Policy*), Drutman has called for a shift to a multiparty system.
Drutman has pointed out that in the 1980s, New Zealand, today’s global darling, was locked in dysfunctional governance until a national commission recommended a switch to a German-style multiparty system that allowed people to sort themselves out according to their actual views and afforded those views a new measure of political representation. He suggested that a President Biden create just such a commission, with a mandate to produce recommendations for reform broad enough that neither party could be sure beforehand if it would win or lose. (For an example of just such a document, see the admirably thorough and balanced report of the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship.)

But you can’t decree a change in party structure; you have to change voting systems. In a first-past-the-post-system such as the United States has, only the winner of the largest number of votes in any given constituency wins. Third parties almost never muster enough votes to win. Both Drutman and Larry Diamond, a scholar of democracy at the Hoover Institution, have argued for a system of proportional representation in multimember districts. Voters would elect up to five candidates in an expanded constituency, thus allowing new parties to win seats. Diamond is a devotee of ranked-choice voting, which he has called the “master reform” which would enable a host of other reforms. Once voters can list a second or even third choice, major-party candidates will have an incentive to reach out beyond their base in order to win votes from those who favor another candidate. Diamond has argued that this would both discourage major-party extremism and provide incentives for additional parties.

Both ranked-choice and proportional systems exist across the democratic world. In the Netherlands, for example, parties are allotted seats in parliament according to the fraction of votes they win nationally, which makes it hard to cobble together a coalition government but ensures that all factions, even very small ones, enjoy representation. The United States,
however, has neither. Maine has ranked-choice voting; Diamond was
discouraged to see that both Massachusetts and Alaska decisively voted
down referendums to establish such a system.

The problem with voting reform is that you can’t sing it. Ranked-choice
voting and proportional voting may stir the soul of political scientists, but
few citizens will march under that banner. They are likely to gain purchase
through experiments at the state and local level that show both the political
class and ordinary Americans that these voting systems can be far more
inclusive than is their current system.

My own preferred long-term solution is deliberative and participatory
democracy, which appeals to something very deep in Americans and in the
United States’ political tradition. It was the engagement of ordinary citizens
in local office-holding and jury service that convinced Alexis de Tocqueville
that democracy did not have to devolve into demagoguery. That small-town
world in turn gave way to the more raucous and urbanized culture of big-city
party clubs and machines, which served as vehicles for political involvement
for generations of newcomers.

That era has largely vanished with the rise of a leviathan national state and
an intensely nationalized politics. New means have to be created for an era
in which citizens widely express a sense of apathy and futility about their
own role as citizens. In 2019 Diamond and his colleague James Fishkin
founded America In One Room, which brought together 526 citizens of all
backgrounds and persuasions for a four-day discussion of incendiary topics
such as immigration. Few of the participants said they had changed their
minds, but many felt that they had come to respect the sincerity and
seriousness of those who thought otherwise. That qualifies as a hopeful
outcome.

Deliberative democracy is good in itself; I hope many public-spirited
billionaires agree to underwrite such experiments. But debating without the hope of changing anything besides your neighbor’s mind gets you only so far. Real participatory democracy, where citizens gain some measure of power over decision-making, can only happen where current legislators agree to cede some of their power.

In the United States, participatory democracy chiefly takes the form of referendums. But these exercises involve almost no actual citizen participation, much less deliberation. Many pit one giant interest against another with the victory going to the deeper pocket. (See this chart of spending on California’s 12 measures this year.) Advocates of real participatory democracy usually point to very modest experiments in which, for example, city councils allow a measure of neighborhood self-government.

In Europe, however, citizen assemblies are gaining popularity. Though France has a vastly more centralized political culture than the United States, Macron reacted to the fury of the yellow vest protests over gasoline tax hikes by impaneling an assembly of 150 citizens chosen by lot to devise broadly acceptable climate change solutions. In June, Macron formally embraced their report and agreed to spend an additional $18 billion on climate measures. That, too, constitutes a hopeful outcome. (For a more institutionalized version of the citizen assembly, see my article on Holland’s polder deliberations:)

Of course, the United States needs top-down legislative solutions on climate change, the pandemic, infrastructure, health care, and so much else. But none of them will stick—every one of them could be reversed—if one half of the country continues to regard democratic processes as a sinister means for empowering the other half. There is no one solution to that problem; and half the country might well resist absolutely anything endorsed by the other
half. But Americans can’t afford to wait until the fever breaks.

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