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Ten Preliminary Lessons from the American Election

By: Kaushik Sunder Rajan

Joe Biden's victory was not narrow but comprehensive, to achieve which the tireless work of women of colour was crucial. Yet, this win is just a punctuation mark in a long & continuing struggle to realise the universalist set of foundational ideals of the US.

The week of 2 November was an exhausting one, in the United States and around the world. A few days after the US presidential election was called for Joe Biden on Saturday 7 November, there was certitude about the result, but uncertainty still about what comes next.

President Donald Trump has refused to concede, and is stoking conspiracy theories about election fraud instead, leaving democracy in America precariously poised, even as the election has demonstrated important aspects of democratic strength and resilience. Many institutions have rallied to conduct this election in exemplary fashion—from poll workers and election counters, to the Fox News decision desk, through all the courts that have already thrown out many of Trump's frivolous lawsuits. Other institutions remain threatened or threatening. There is Trump's militant base, increasingly convinced by fake news that the election has been stolen from them; Attorney General Bill Barr's para-military forces, which have already run dress rehearsals in Washington, D.C. and Portland over the course of the summer; and Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell, who cynically refuses to tell Trump that enough is enough and is instead himself fanning the flames of conspiracy.

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In this fragile cauldron of anger and uncertainty, it seems important to understand the structure of public discourse and the structure of feeling that has emerged in America over the past week, in relation to what is known about the election. Thus, this piece parses out:

- (1) What the election results actually seem to be saying, based on what we know (which is as yet still incomplete); and
- (2) What our emergent common sense seems to be about what the election results actually seem to be saying (which is also incomplete).

The gap between (1) and (2) is the space of ideology, and it can be dangerous. This piece therefore pushes back some of the common sense that has emerged the past fortnight in public discourse about the election. I am not referring here to right-wing conspiracy theories, but to that first slew of good analysis that often has a disproportionate effect on setting narratives, leading to forms of subjective internalization of external events that allow us to make meaning of them in some ways rather than others. Sometimes with grave consequences.

So, in this clarifying but incomplete scenario, what do we know and what lessons can we draw? I propose the following ten:

1. This is what a mandate looks like

In announcing the election, BBC called it a “cliffhanger”. This is false. Biden has won this election convincingly. He has won the most votes of a presidential candidate in American history. He is winning by the largest vote margin in American history, one that is likely to increase by an order of magnitude once California finishes tallying its remaining votes. He is on course to equalling or exceeding the number of Electoral College votes that Trump won in 2016. He is winning states that Democrats haven't won in decades, registering wins in swing states and Republican (so-called “red”) states, across the geographical swathe of the country. There have been losses along the way (notably in Florida and down-ballot in Senate and Congressional races, about which more later), but it is not a close win, it is not based on one state, and it is not based on a few votes here or there.

Biden's win is not a landslide, but it is comprehensive.

This is what a mandate looks like. It is not just bigger than Trump’s in 2016: it is significantly larger than George W. Bush’s “wartime” mandate in 2004, the only time a Republican has won the popular Presidential vote in the last 28 years.

2. This is not what a mandate feels like

But for too many of us, this does not feel like a mandate. Why? And does that matter?

Much of this is simply about the temporality of the process. That it took four days to call a winner, that the first results were negative, that there could not be that national outpouring of relief and emotion one saw in 2008, when Barack Obama’s election put a definitive close of the horrendous chapter of the Bush years. Trump’s own shenanigans and bad behaviour in the interim, rather than a graceful concession, have further vitiated the atmosphere. Relief is hard to find when malevolent presences do not just linger but keep thrusting themselves upon us.

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Yet, this was entirely predictable. It has been known for months that there would be a “red mirage” of an apparent Trump victory on election night, that it would take days to count the Biden votes, and that Trump would refuse to concede. This was how it was scripted to be. The week of the election was full of tension and uncertainty, but there is no surprise in how the events of those days unfolded.

The space of ideology is that space between what the results actually are (a resounding win for Biden), and what they feel like (a cliffhanger, as BBC puts it). This is a dangerous space, because if we—and by we, I mean each of us as voters in American, our mediated collective common sense, and indeed the Democratic Party and Biden himself—falsely believe that it was a cliffhanger, we will act accordingly. When Republicans win narrowly (and even when they lose), they act with the entitlement of absolute power. When democracy wins resoundingly, we cannot afford to act with the timidity of losers.

3. Get used to temporal disjuncture, and understand its motives

Election week was certainly a nail-biter, but it was not a cliffhanger. The difference is significant. By definition, all Democratic electoral victories going forward are going to be thus. Republicans win villages, Democrats win cities. Villages count more quickly than cities. Republican victories will always take hours, and Democratic victories will take days. This is a phenomenon that first started materializing in the early 2000s, and it has been getting more marked in each election cycle. It was especially marked in 2018. The higher the turnout, the more pronounced this temporal disjuncture is going to be. It is going to keep feeling like small Republican victories are mandates, because they are announced quickly, and big Democratic victories are cliffhangers, because they will become apparent more slowly. If we allow ourselves to be interpellated by this temporal mirage, we enter a very dangerous space of ideological concession to minority rule, where time trumps number in determining mandate.

To be sure, this temporal disjuncture has been accentuated this year by the pandemic, and the added uncertainty of mail-in ballots. It is important to understand that it was designed to be this way, by Republican state legislatures in Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania who ensured that the processing of mail-in ballots in these states could not start early. This was done precisely with the goal of creating the red mirage we have experienced and its attendant consequences. These would have been far more mischievous and dangerous had Trump been winning southern states like Arizona and Georgia, allowing for an all-out Republican assault, discursive, legal, and quite possibly paramilitary, on Pennsylvania. That was the plan all along, it was clearly signalled, and it was simply blunted by the fact that Biden’s win was convincing enough and dispersed across enough states to render this too big a coup to pull off.

It was blunted by the fact that this election was not a cliffhanger, but a comprehensive Biden win.

4. Women have defeated Trump

Before delving into some of the nuances of the election results, it is important to emphasize the structuring truth of this verdict, which is that women have defeated Donald Trump. From the earliest women’s march protesting Trump’s inauguration to the massive turnout in the 2018 mid-term election to give Democrats their “blue wave” and win the House of Representatives, to the defining vote of women in swinging the suburbs for Biden, this has been a mandated of, for and by women, who have articulated a democratic ethos on the basis of their concrete experience and organizing.

|| In this election, as always, women of colour have cleaned up white people’s mess.

Perhaps the single most important entity in delivering the states of Arizona, Nevada and Pennsylvania for Biden is [UNITE HERE](#), the union of hospitality workers. Their canvassing on the ground over the past months has been decisive, in Clark County (Las Vegas in Nevada), Maricopa County (whose swing to Biden gave him Arizona) and Philadelphia in Pennsylvania. The work of this organizing has largely been led by women of colour and UNITE HERE is exemplary of the current generation of (especially service workers’) unions, which are no longer white male bastions but deeply intersectional.



The canvassing by Unite Here! workers on the ground has been decisive in Joe Biden's victory | [Unite Here Facebook](#)

If there is one lesson to take home from this election, understand this: reams of narrative are about to be generated about how college-educated, white suburban women have delivered this election to Biden. And they have. But the conditions of possibility for their rightfully acknowledged agency, as always, are the months and years of tireless, invisible, unacknowledged labour of women of colour. Without their work, Trump would have been re-elected.

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5. What’s the matter with Florida?

Biden is winning either 306 or 321 Electoral College votes (depending on the eventual outcome in North Carolina). Had he won Florida, he would have won 335-350. In numerical terms, this is not a decisive or even significant difference: Biden has won comprehensively without Florida. The difference is that Florida announced first, so it would have felt comprehensive had it gone Biden’s way. Instead, it felt like a cliffhanger, because the narrative of the election was set by the Florida results. So, let us dig in to Florida for a bit, because it is interesting, and consequential.

The suburban swing towards Biden that was witnessed throughout the country in fact manifested in Florida as well. Just not decisively. Biden’s performance in much of the state over-performed Hillary Clinton’s in 2016 significantly, in some places historically. However, Biden’s vote collapsed in historically Democratic Miami-Dade County. Clinton won this populous county by 30% in 2016, a margin typical of Democratic victories there; Biden won it by 7%. In a state as close as this, there is no way that steady gains in the suburbs could offset a catastrophic urban collapse in one county. The early narrative of the election was set by this under-performance in one county: in likelihood, perhaps the only swing or Democratic county in which Biden significantly under-performed across the country.

6. First national lesson to be learned: Don’t count on the suburban vote alone

What are the lessons to be learned from this? Quite clearly, that the suburban swing towards Democrats is real (and gendered) and has been decisive in ending Trump’s presidency. However, winning the suburbs is not enough to win swing states and swing elections.

For Biden to win a swing state, he has needed to win the suburbs plus a more “traditional” Democratic constituency. Biden resoundingly won the Midwest (the job he was hired to do), because the suburban shifts to the Democrats in Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania have come alongside both a significant return of the white working class to Biden, and huge African-American turnout in Milwaukee, Detroit and Philadelphia.

In other words, Biden brought home and turned out the key Democratic constituencies in the Midwest that had deserted Hillary Clinton. In the South, meanwhile, he won those states where the suburban swing was complemented by a significant uptick in minority voter turnout (Georgia, Arizona, Nevada).

7. Second national lesson: The suburbs are telling something different from what the media is telling us they’re telling us

It is clear from the numbers that the suburban vote is an anti-Trump vote but not an anti-Republican vote. Nowhere is this starker than in the Maine Senate race, a state that Biden won by double digits, but where Republican incumbent Susan Collins held her Senate seat comfortably. That’s a level of ticket-splitting between Presidential and Senate candidates that has been unheard of in the past decade, but it is seen repeatedly in this election. This has very interesting consequences for the future of Republican national politics, where jockeying for 2024 has already begun.

The conventional wisdom that has established itself the past fortnight is that the results show the hold that Trumpism has on the Republican Party. On the one hand, that is correct: Trump emerged as the loudest figure in the Party, his “Make America Great Again” base asserted itself as its most vociferous element, and Donald Trump Jr. already announced a litmus test of bootlicking for Republican leaders, making it clear that only those who echo his election fraud conspiracy theories have a political future. Yet the numbers from the suburbs paint the complete opposite picture: while Trump didn’t drag Republicans down with him, as I expected he would, he went down. The suburbs are saying quite clearly that the Republican Party can win them back, if they repudiate Trump.

But there is a lesson to learn here for Democrats as well, which is that catering exclusively to the suburban vote at the expense of core constituencies is not going to keep winning them elections. This is why understanding what happened with the minority vote in this election is vital.

8. What happened with the minority vote?

One of the most pernicious discourses to emerge out of the past week is the one that suggests that “blacks and Hispanics migrated to Trump”. It’s too early to paint a full picture of this, but it is important to parse what we know.

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First, it is important to recognize that Trump likely did make small inroads with minority voters. To the extent that one can treat this generically, these inroads are gendered: there is something about Trump’s misogyny that is appealing to men of all races. To the extent that one can generically diagnose this among non-black minority communities, these inroads reflect the fact that anti-blackness is not just a white disease.

Having said this, an early look at the data seems to suggest a massive turnout of African-Americans relative to 2016, crucially in key Midwestern cities, but also decisively in Georgia. The Latinx vote is more complicated, because the “Hispanic” community is not monolithic.

Significantly, its demographics are quite unique in Florida relative to other southern states. Even in Florida, the figures that we have suggest huge differentiations. The two largest demographics in Miami-Dade, for instance, are Cuban-Americans and Puerto Rican-Americans, each comprising about 30% of the population. While 55% of Cuban-Americans in Miami-Dade voted for Trump, 70% of Puerto Rican-Americans voted for Biden.

9. Organizing wins minority votes

There is a deeply striated electoral landscape to tease out here, but in fact a very simple conclusion that can be drawn: where minority voters have been organized, Biden and Democrats have won. In Georgia, this has been consequent to the enormous amount of work that the 2018 Democratic gubernatorial candidate and voting rights activist Stacey Abrams has done, both during her own campaign and in her organized efforts to combat voter suppression in the two years since.

The problem is not Hispanic apathy or Trump support as much as it is voter suppression and a failure of outreach to register voters in key regions.

Similarly, Latinx voters were organized significantly in Arizona in 2018, especially around issues of immigration and family separation, and groups such as Voto Latino had a decisive influence, then and in this election. The Nevada Culinary Union, a part of UNITE HERE, has been a machine in delivering Latinx votes to Democrats in the state for over a decade, the single factor behind turning Nevada from a solidly Republican state to a reliably Democratic one in a matter of years. This level of organizing of Latinx voters does not exist in Texas and Florida, and the election results reflect it. Organizing here is not just about persuading voters to support Democrats: it is about voter registration.



Celebration in Black Lives Matters Plaza after Joe Biden is announced as the winner | Miki Jourdan (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Much is already being made about the purportedly poor (~60%) Hispanic turnout in a high turnout election. Yet figures show that 86.5% of registered Hispanic voters turned out to vote. The problem is not Hispanic apathy or Trump support as much as it is voter suppression and a failure of outreach to register voters in key regions. Nowhere was this more deeply felt in the Rio Grande Valley, where there just wasn't enough Latinx voter registration to swing the state of Texas.

Lesson: Without on-the-ground organizing and the registration of minority voters, Democrats cannot win the South.

10. Understanding negative partisanship

The last thing to mention is the importance of understanding the Trump vote, which has also dramatically increased in number, if not in proportion, relative to 2016. There are many things to confront here—not least the reality of racism—but I think what this manifests, most of all, is the reality of negative partisanship in structuring contemporary American politics. i.e. too many Republican voters look at Trump next to the Democrats, and even if they do not like Trump, decide that the Democrats are the greater of two evils.

|| [I]t is likelier for Americans to enter into interracial relationships these days than it is to enter into cross-ideological ones.

While the fact of negative partisanship is now clearly established, it has yet to be well explained. Why is there this intensity of loathing across political ideology? Elements of an answer are readily available—not least a media (and social media) environment that allows, even incentivizes, people of different ideological persuasions to live in alternative info-verses. But the manifestation of this is much deeper and extends into all facets of American kinship: it is likelier for Americans to enter into interracial relationships these days than it is to enter into cross-ideological ones. This needs to be understood, for without addressing these, there is no way to conceptualize a “United” States of America, and there is every likelihood of a civil war.

What we are seeing, I argue, is the latest episode of what has been the foundational antinomy of American politics, what constitutional law scholar Aziz Rana calls “the two faces of American freedom”, manifesting as the two faces of American democracy, perhaps two elements of the American constitutional id. One is a deeply universalist set of foundational ideals and aspirations, expressed most eloquently today via the concrete, experiential demands for justice being made by all manner of marked bodies (women, people of colour, migrants, workers, LGBTQ+ folk, people with disabilities, indigenous people) ... i.e., those whose demands are too often dismissed as “identity politics” are the ones who are insisting upon and fulfilling the truly exceptional elements of the American democratic promise.

|| [T]he purest form of identity politics in America is, indeed always has been, white identity politics...

The second is a deeply exclusive and exclusionary set of foundational assumptions, which assumes that the proprietary subject of American freedom and democracy is the property-holding white male. When this assumption is threatened, as it is now both demographically and politically, it expresses itself as violent reassertion of original entitlement. In other words, the purest form of identity politics in America is, indeed always has been, white identity politics, which reveals itself as such when it can no longer masquerade under the guise of purportedly universalist values that are constantly denied to those who are not deemed entitled to be the beneficiaries of those values. When former Republican speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich, and anti-immigrant Fox News anchor Lou Dobbs get apoplectic about the “election fraud” in Philadelphia, Detroit and Atlanta, they mean it. To them, the fact of black people voting is illegal.

The job of those fighting to uphold democracy in America is to mobilize and organize that former constitutional id, that first, expansive face of American democracy, one that contains within itself the constant potential for reinvention towards a greater and more inclusive universality. In order to defeat the latter id, which is ugly, constantly threatened and hence violently guarding of its exclusionary entitlement. This involves recognizing that the road ahead is long and hard, and this election is just a punctuation mark in a series of struggles that have been ongoing for over two centuries and won't end anytime soon.

But it also requires us to recognize that not just Democrats, but democracy, won last week in the United States. Substantially, with a mandate. Don't let the ideologues, including the supposedly “objective” or “neutral” ones, convince you otherwise.

There is work to be done, but we who are committed to democracy around the world must allow ourselves an acknowledgment of this victory.