

# TIME



## AMERICAN REALITY

*by*  
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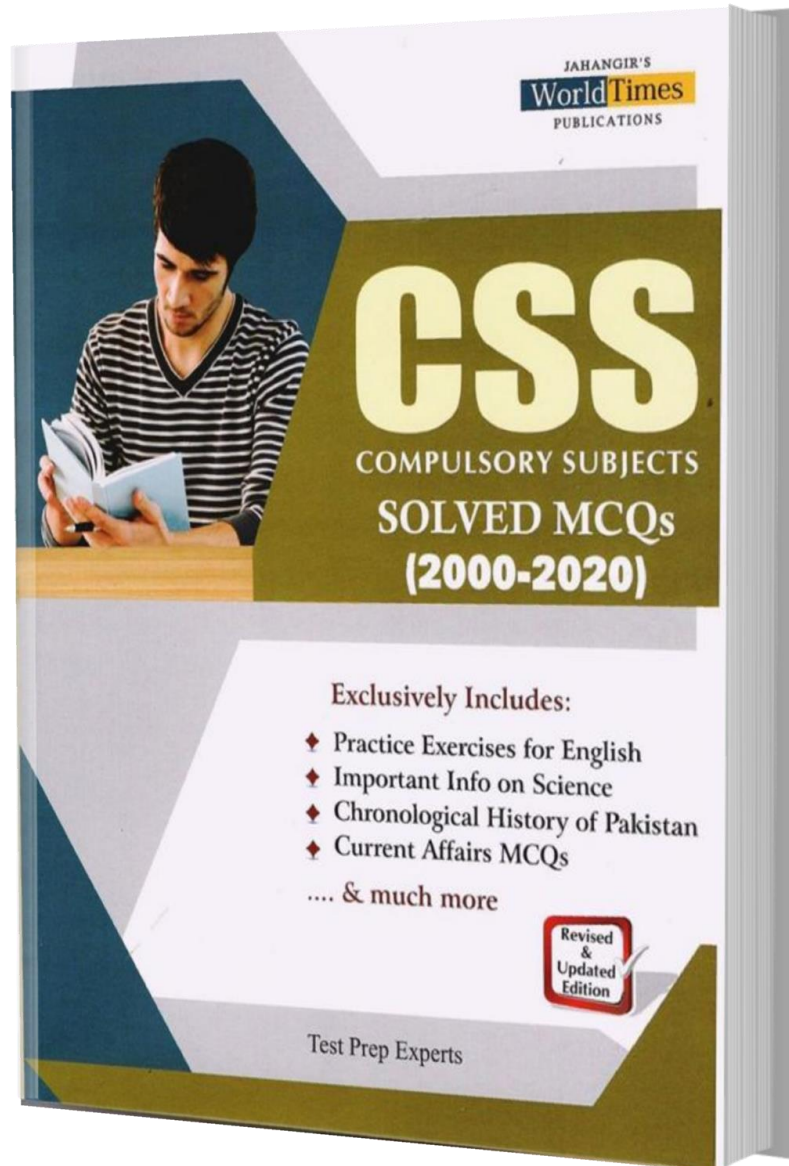
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ELECTION 2020

# TIME

VOL. 196, NO. 18 | 2020



## LONG DIVISION

America's seesaw election teeters on its ruptures  
By Molly Ball 24

## SORTING THE MAIL

A surge of posted ballots stokes a nation's anxiety  
By Abby Vesoulis 30

## RUSHING TO COURT

Trump's legal team may face an uphill fight  
By Alana Abramson 36

## PLUS:

Viewpoints from David French, Brittney Cooper, Justin Worland and Ian Bremmer

## BUDAPEST BLUES

A mayor squares off against Hungary's strongman  
By Vivienne Walt 48

## BABY BUST

The upshot of the declining U.S. birth rate  
By Eliana Dockterman 52

## TIME OFF

Bad times are good for country music 59

ON THE COVER:  
TIME  
illustration

Steven Lewandowski views returns outside Chase Center in Wilmington, Del., on Nov. 3

Photograph by Tony Luong for TIME

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## Introducing ATEM Mini

The compact television studio that lets you create presentation videos and live streams!

Blackmagic Design is a leader in video for the television industry, and now you can create your own streaming videos with ATEM Mini. Simply connect HDMI cameras, computers or even microphones. Then push the buttons on the panel to switch video sources just like a professional broadcaster! You can even add titles, picture in picture overlays and mix audio! Then live stream to Zoom, Skype or YouTube!

### Create Training and Educational Videos

ATEM Mini's includes everything you need. All the buttons are positioned on the front panel so it's very easy to learn. There are 4 HDMI video inputs for connecting cameras and computers, plus a USB output that looks like a webcam so you can connect to Zoom or Skype. ATEM Software Control for Mac and PC is also included, which allows access to more advanced "broadcast" features!

### Use Professional Video Effects

ATEM Mini is really a professional broadcast switcher used by television stations. This means it has professional effects such as a DVE for picture in picture effects commonly used for commentating over a computer slide show. There are titles for presenter names, wipe effects for transitioning between sources and a green screen keyer for replacing backgrounds with graphics.

### Live Stream Training and Conferences

The ATEM Mini Pro model has a built in hardware streaming engine for live streaming via its ethernet connection. This means you can live stream to YouTube, Facebook and Teams in much better quality and with perfectly smooth motion. You can even connect a hard disk or flash storage to the USB connection and record your stream for upload later!

### Monitor all Video Inputs!

With so many cameras, computers and effects, things can get busy fast! The ATEM Mini Pro model features a "multiview" that lets you see all cameras, titles and program, plus streaming and recording status all on a single TV or monitor. There are even tally indicators to show when a camera is on air! Only ATEM Mini is a true professional television studio in a small compact design!

ATEM Mini.....US\$295\*

ATEM Mini Pro.....US\$595\*

ATEM Software Control.....Free







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## WHAT YOU SAID ABOUT...

**SEASON FINALE** Molly Ball's feature on the stakes of the 2020 U.S. presidential election in the Nov. 2/Nov. 9 issue left readers reflecting on how much the race has amplified divisions. Francis D. Kelly of Shrewsbury, Mass., lamented that "a sense of 'common good' has evaporated in the midst of argument and bickering." Stu Luttich of Geneva, Neb., argued that Nov. 3 will bring no easy resolution, as "the issues that divide us will remain as strong, if not stronger, than before." But TIME's cover, a portrait by Shepard Fairey, struck Ashok Kulkarni of West Palm Beach, Fla., as "most appropriate and encouraging during this historic election." And to Riley King of Corvallis, Ore., every Election Day offers an opportunity for hope. "We can determine our destiny," King said. "We can elect leaders who will unite and inspire us."

*'Great writing that cuts to the heart of what's really on the ballot'*

@HYSPERBOLE,  
on Twitter

**THE GREAT RESET** In that same issue, a series of bold proposals for building a better world post-pandemic, produced with the World Economic Forum, inspired some readers. "This evolution isn't an act of altruism, but an existential necessity," wrote @RefilWest of the ideas and their collective ambition.

"Uplifting vision of a possible future," shared Twitter user @Valerie\_Keller\_ of economist Mariana Mazzucato's op-ed on "How We Bounced Back," which imagined the growth of a more inclusive global economy in the near future. After reading the piece, "I cried," said Lee Watts of Hollywood, Fla. "Then I prayed."

*'What a great enlightened article, and doable! Let's make it happen.'*

FRANK REICKERT,  
Lady Lake, Fla.

After reading the piece, "I cried," said Lee Watts of Hollywood, Fla. "Then I prayed."

## LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

To support children with remote learning and help them understand the news, TIME for Kids is now offering—for the first time—an at-home digital subscription. For an introductory offer of \$19.99 per year, subscribers will receive weekly TIME for Kids issues and a newsletter with curriculum resources, conversation guides and activities to keep young learners engaged with the world. For more information, and to subscribe, visit [timeforkids.com/family](http://timeforkids.com/family)



## It's not just you

Big-hearted advice for anxious times

TIME's newest newsletter, *It's Not Just You*, offers "a dose of small comforts, pithy insights and evidence of human goodness," says its creator, TIME editor at large Susanna Schrobsdorff. The Sunday email aims to inspire self-kindness, with health and wellness tips delivered to your inbox. Sign up at [time.com/notyou](http://time.com/notyou)



**FRONTLINE HEROES** India now has the world's second highest COVID-19 case tally, with more than 8 million confirmed among the country's 1.3 billion people—about two-thirds of whom live in rural areas lacking health facilities. Female community-health workers like Sunita Rani are working to fill the void, often for little pay or without protective gear. "We are warriors who were sent to war without any weapons," Rani tells TIME. Watch a video about their work at [time.com/india-covid](http://time.com/india-covid)

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*‘Our fellow citizens are not our enemies.’*

**MITCH MCCONNELL**,  
Senate majority leader, on Nov. 3, declaring victory over challenger Amy McGrath to win a seventh term

**‘I AM VOTING FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE FOR THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, AND IT’S FOR SOMEONE I TRULY TRUST... ME.’**

**KANYE WEST**,  
musician and independent 2020 candidate, on Nov. 3; across 12 states, West received about 60,000 votes

**‘IT’S NOT THE SUPER BOWL. NOBODY’S GOING TO HOIST A TROPHY ON ELECTION NIGHT.’**

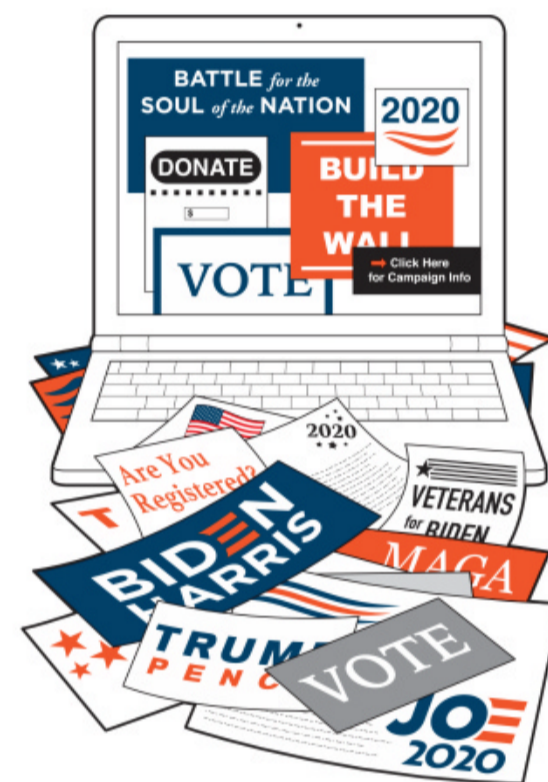
**MARYBETH KUZNIK**,  
the sole election official of Armstrong County, Pennsylvania, in a pre-election interview with the *New York Times*, on counting votes in the hours after polls close on Nov. 3

*‘Today, we take this fight for Black Lives from the streets of Ferguson to the halls of Congress. We will get justice.’*

**CORI BUSH**,  
who is set to be the first Black woman to represent Missouri in Congress, on Nov. 3; Bush defeated incumbent William Lacy Clay Jr. in an August Democratic primary

**\$14 BILLION**

Approximate total spending for the 2020 election, a new record, according to estimates from the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics; adjusted for inflation, the 2016 race cost \$7 billion



**22**

Number of presidential elections in which Ruth Graham Ray of Jacksonville, Fla., has voted; Ray celebrated her 108th birthday by casting an early ballot on Oct. 31

**‘Our sisterhood is resilient.’**

**ILHAN OMAR**,  
Minnesota Congresswoman, on Nov. 3. All four progressive Democrats known as the Squad were projected to win re-election

**65.2 MILLION**

Number of mail-in ballots received as of Nov. 3; in total, more than 101 million people voted early in the 2020 general election—equivalent to 73% of the total turnout in 2016



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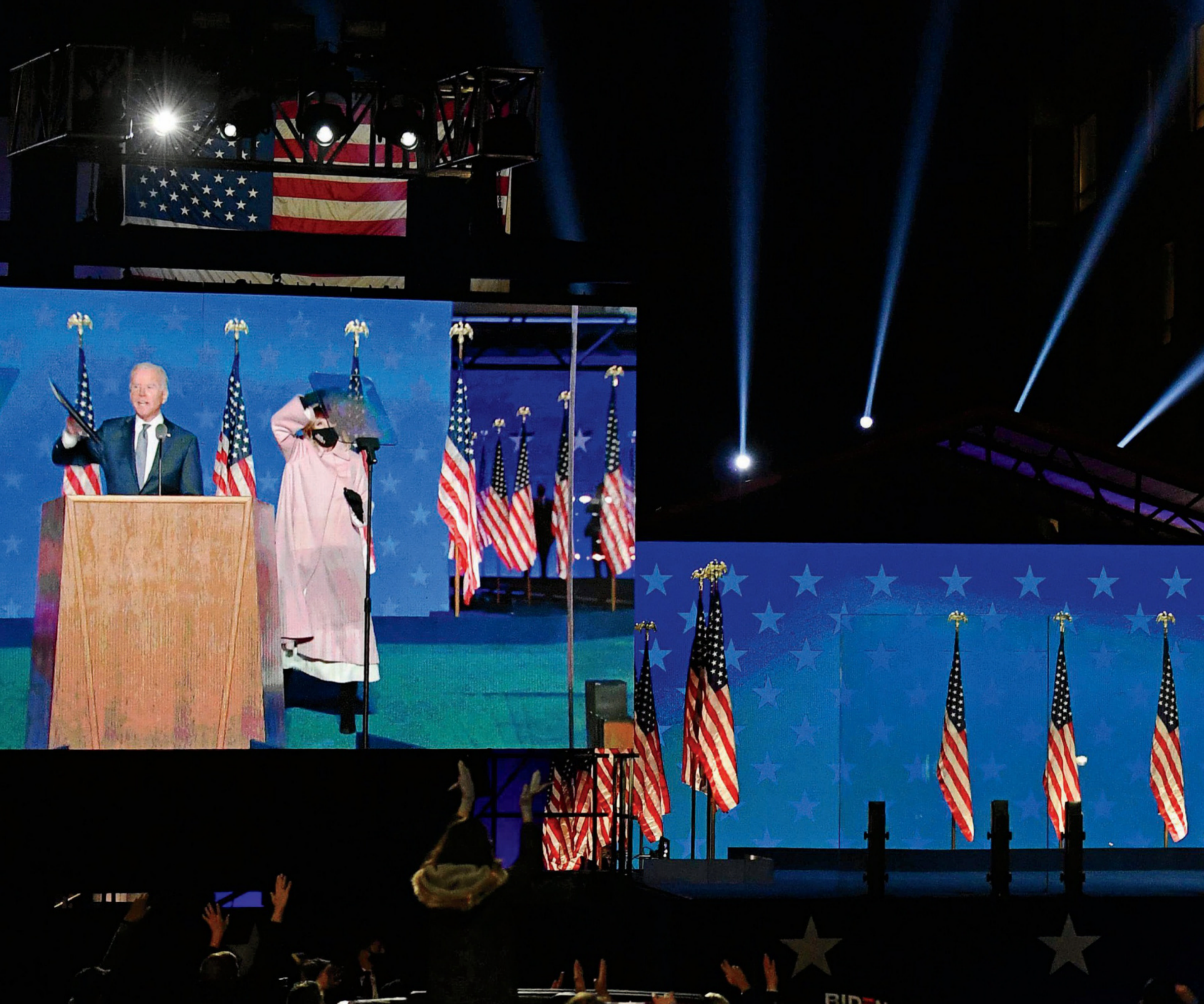
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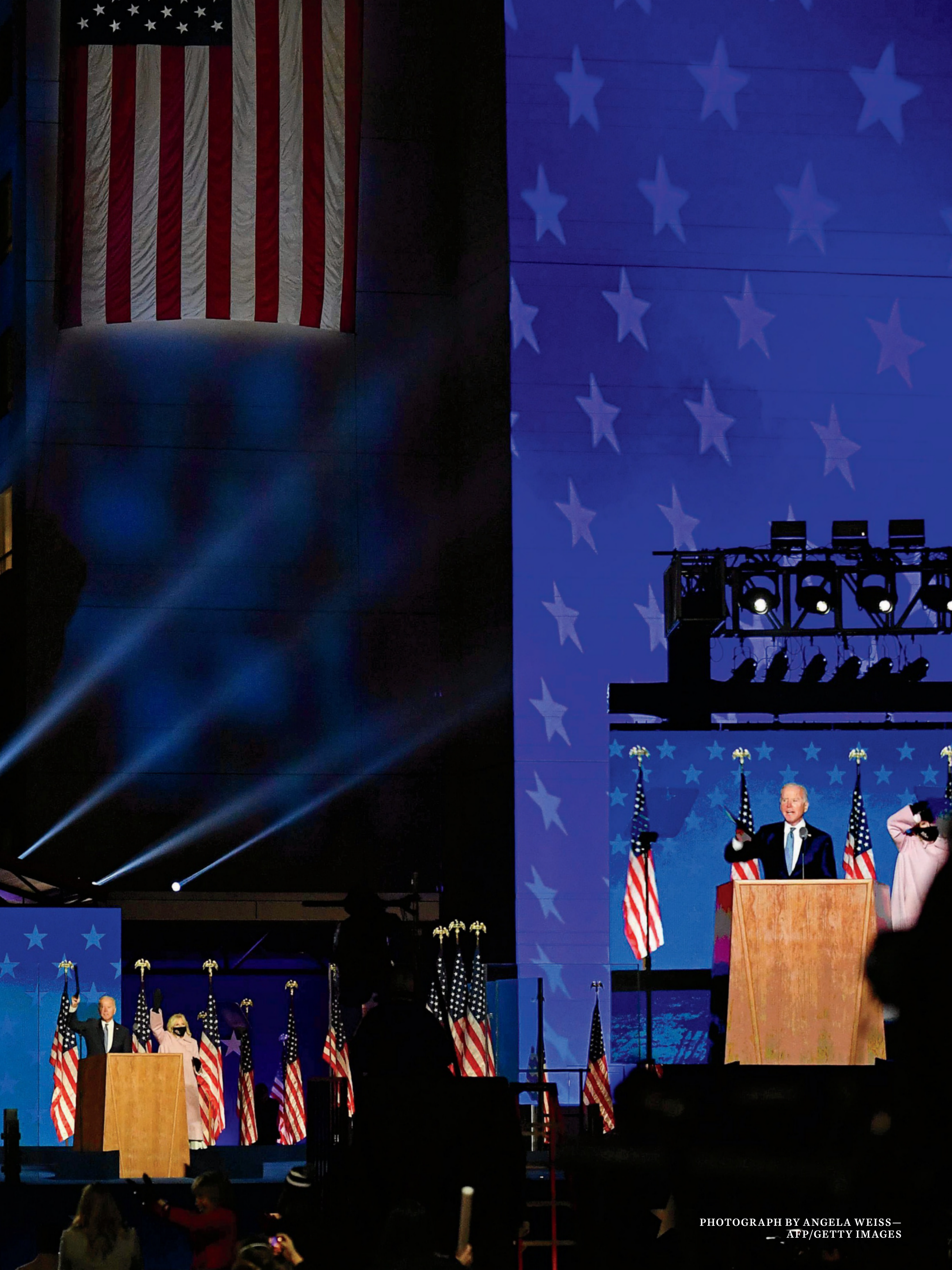
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**'IT'S NOT MY PLACE  
OR DONALD TRUMP'S  
PLACE TO DECLARE  
WHO'S WON THIS  
ELECTION. THAT'S THE  
DECISION OF THE  
AMERICAN PEOPLE.'**

—JOE BIDEN, at the Chase Center in Wilmington, Del.,  
just after midnight on Nov. 4





PHOTOGRAPH BY ANGELA WEISS—  
AFP/GETTY IMAGES



ELECTION 2020



A photograph of Melania Trump, the first lady of the United States, standing in front of a large American flag. She is wearing a dark blazer over a white collared shirt. Her hair is blonde and styled. She is looking slightly to her left with a neutral expression. The background is filled with the stars and stripes of the American flag.

**‘WE’LL BE  
GOING TO  
THE U.S.  
SUPREME  
COURT.’**

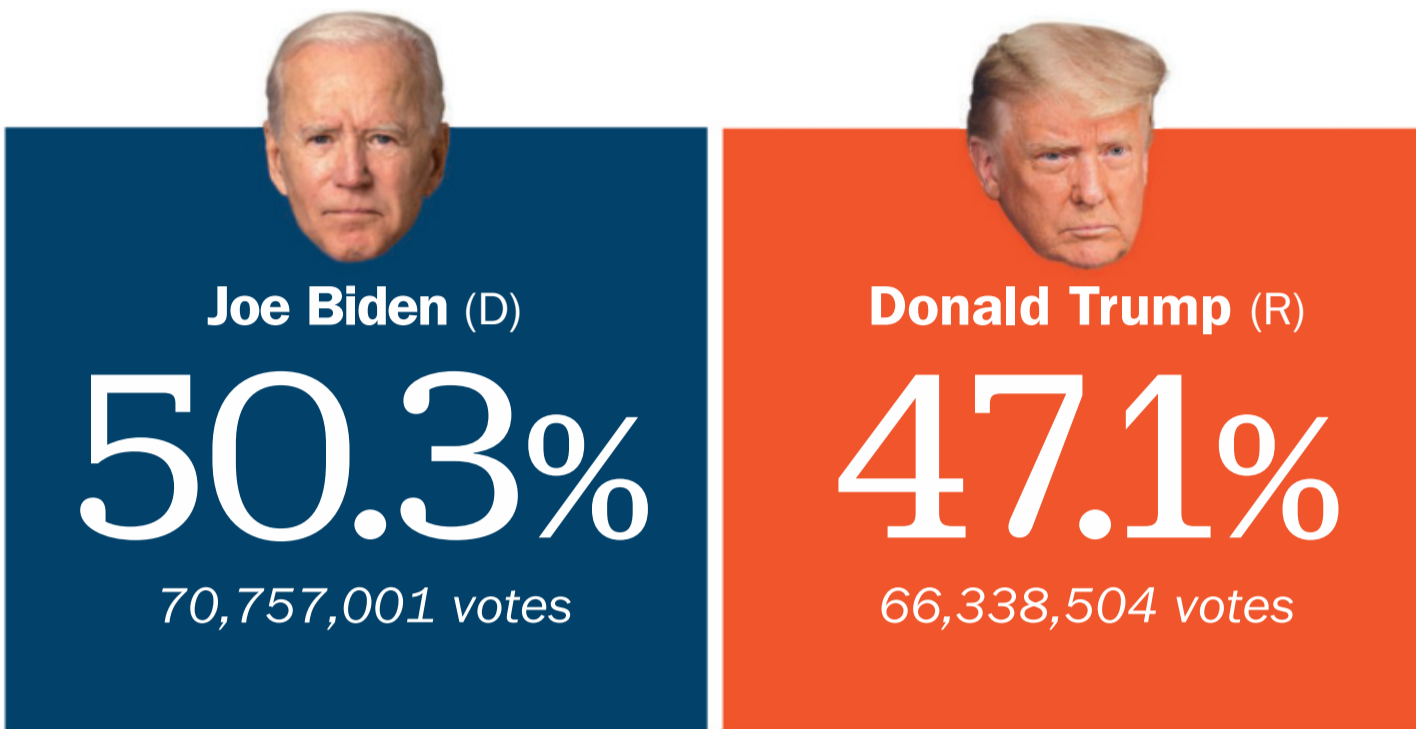
—DONALD TRUMP, in the East Room of the  
White House early on the morning of Nov. 4

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER VAN AGTMAEL—  
MAGNUM PHOTOS FOR TIME



# THE BIG EVENT, BY THE NUMBERS

As of Nov. 4 at 6 p.m., neither Biden nor Trump could claim victory. Here's how their stats compare. —Emily Barone



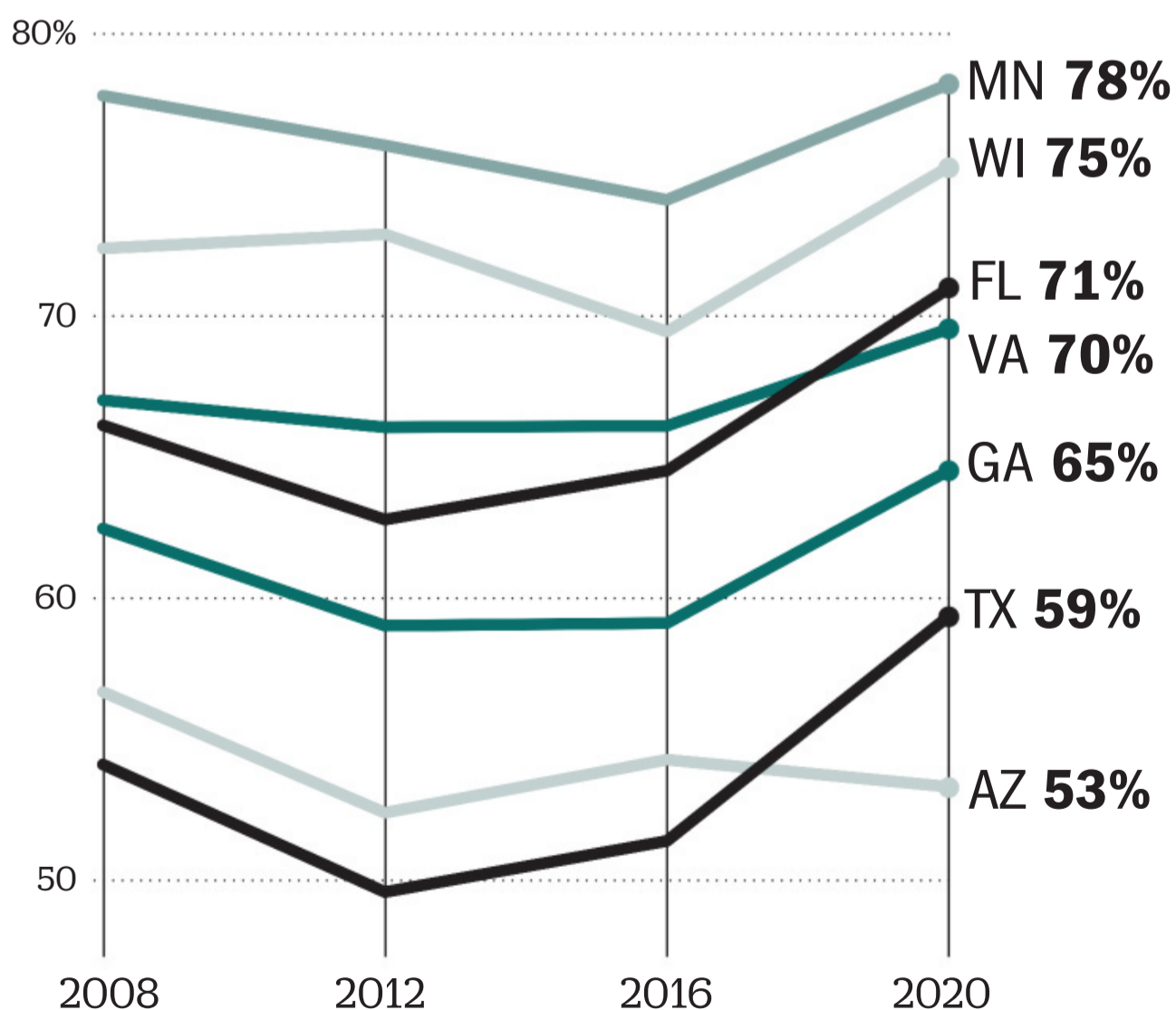
**Jo Jorgensen** (Libertarian) **1.1%**  
1,580,513 votes

**Howie Hawkins** (Green Party) **0.3%**  
375,238 votes

## GETTING OUT THE VOTE

With an eager electorate—as well as pandemic-related changes to the voting process, including expanded early and mail-in voting—most states saw increased voter turnout compared with 2016

Voter turnout as percentage of eligible voters



**Biden**  
**264**  
Electoral Votes

## BUILDING A VICTORY

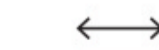
With 270 Electoral College votes needed to win the White House, each state plays its own role in contributing to the total projected votes for each candidate.

**WISCONSIN** In a nail-biter, Biden is projected to win Wisconsin, which Trump took in 2016, by about 20,000 votes.

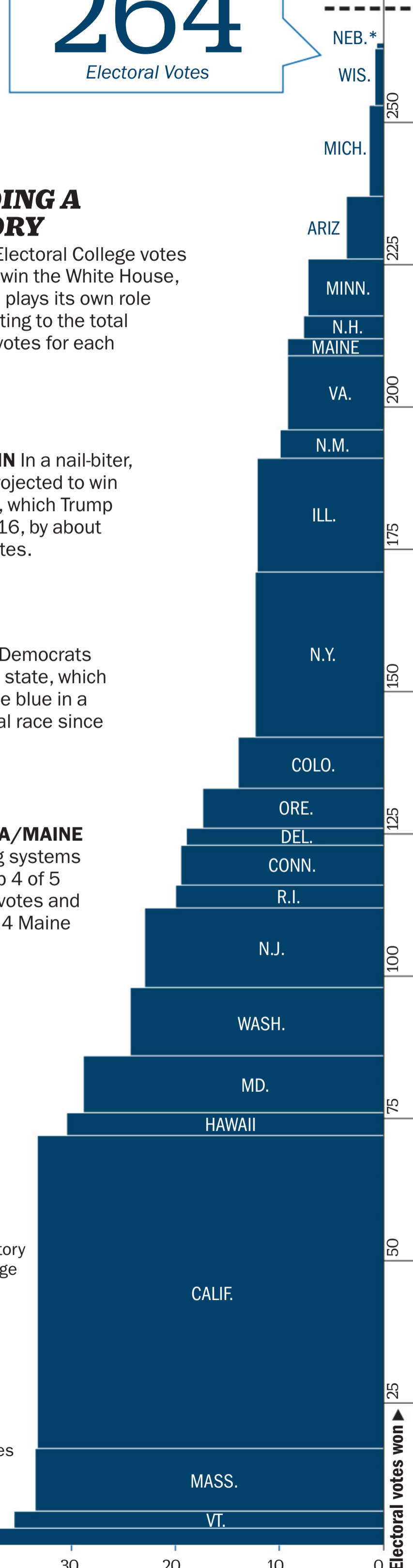
**ARIZONA** Democrats flipped the state, which hadn't gone blue in a presidential race since 1996.

**NEBRASKA/MAINE** Split-voting systems gave Trump 4 of 5 Nebraska votes and Biden 3 of 4 Maine votes.

**WIDTH**  
Margin of victory (in percentage points)



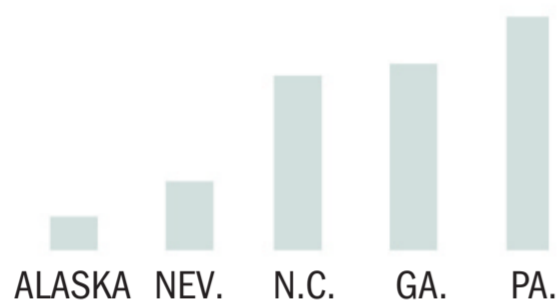
**HEIGHT**  
Number of electoral votes



270 needed to win

Trump  
**214**  
Electoral Votes

**Longer to count** Several states took time to tally votes—and they will determine whether Biden or Trump reaches 270.



**FLORIDA**

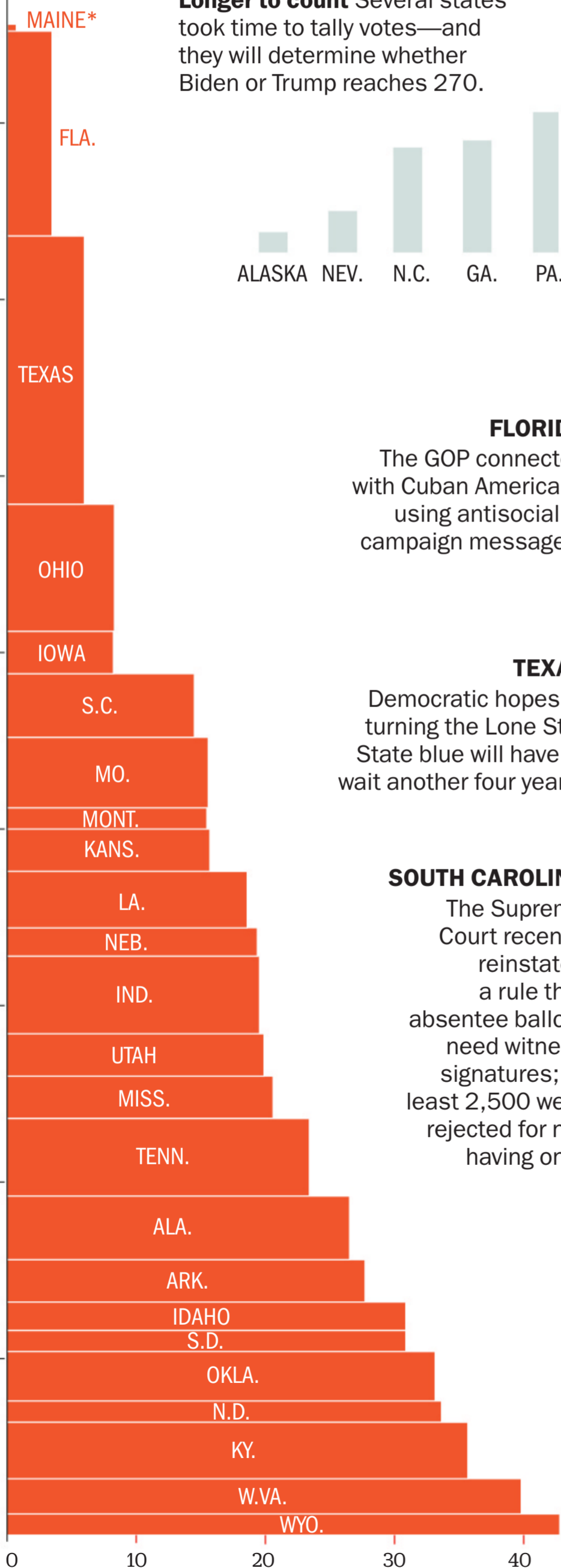
The GOP connected with Cuban Americans using antisocialist campaign messages.

**TEXAS**

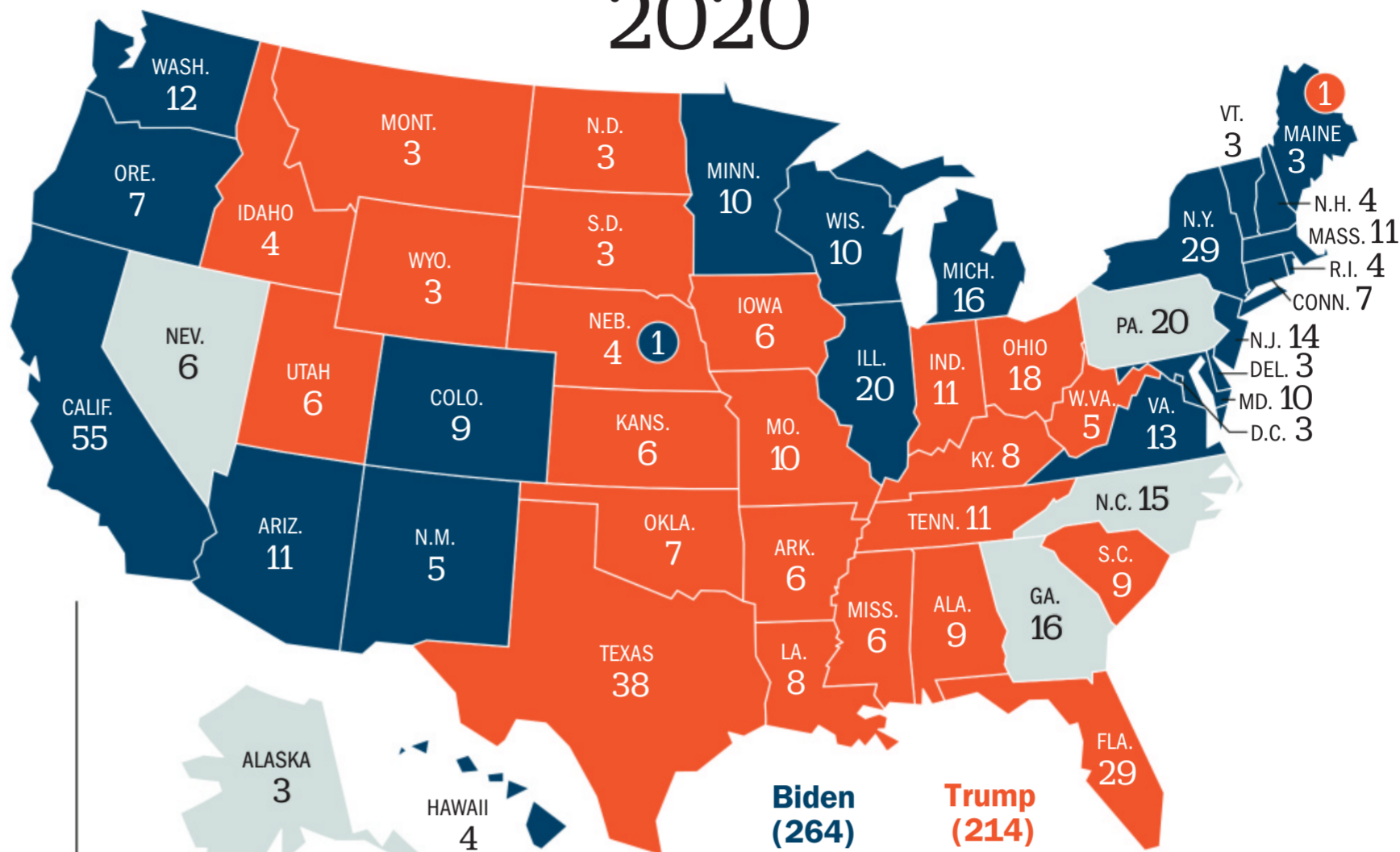
Democratic hopes of turning the Lone Star State blue will have to wait another four years.

**SOUTH CAROLINA**

The Supreme Court recently reinstated a rule that absentee ballots need witness signatures; at least 2,500 were rejected for not having one.



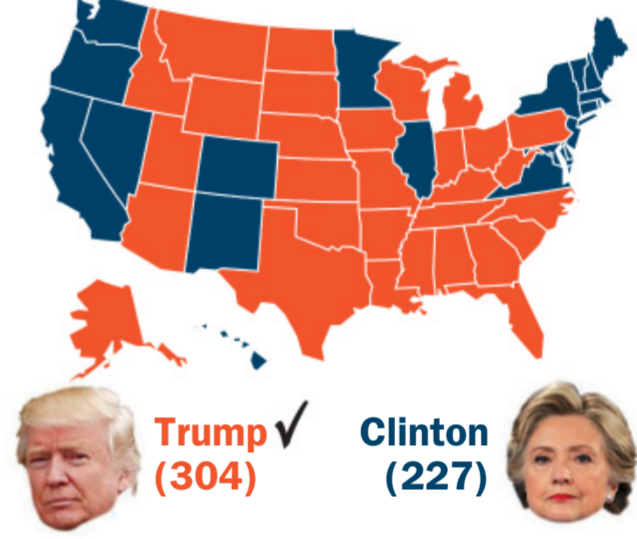
2020



**SWING TIME**

Several presidential elections in recent history have been decided by swing states, which are often won by a narrow margin. Here's how the presidential battlegrounds have changed parties over time.

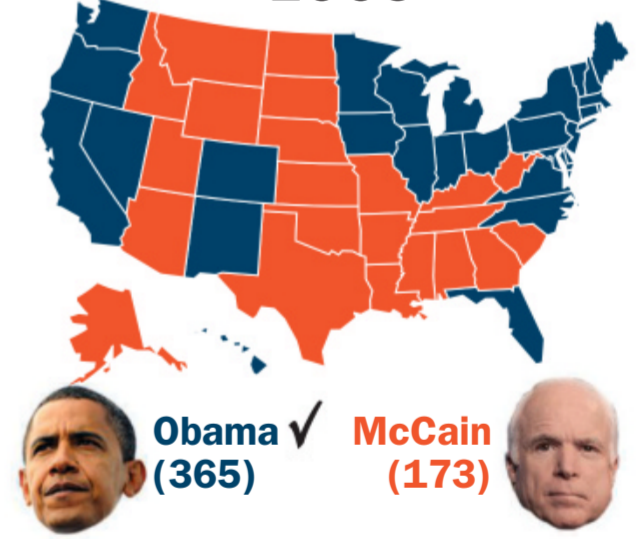
2016



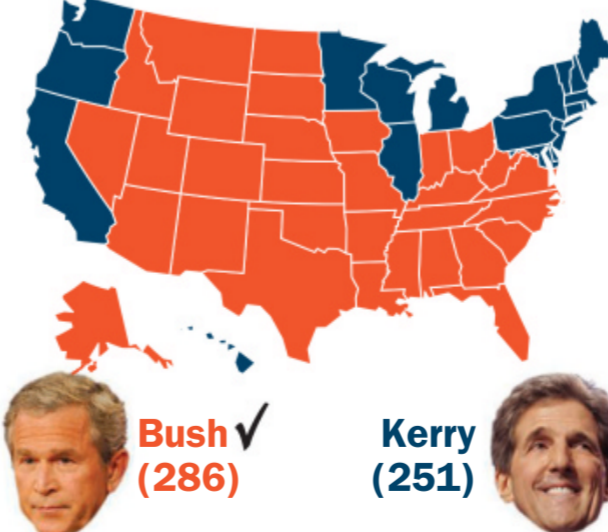
2012



2008



2004



2000



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NOTES: RESULTS AS OF 6 P.M. EST ON NOV. 4. NOT ALL HISTORICAL ELECTIONS ADD UP TO 538 DUE TO FAITHLESS ELECTORS. NEBRASKA SPLIT IN 2008 (1 OBAMA, 4 MCCAIN). MAINE SPLIT IN 2016 (3 CLINTON, 1 TRUMP). SOURCES: AP; FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION

# DOWN THE BALLOT, ADDED UP

How Election Day shook out in the U.S. House and Senate

BY MADELEINE CARLISLE AND LISSANDRA VILLA

HEADING INTO ELECTION DAY, DEMOCRATS were bullish about the possibility of a decisive sweep in the Legislative Branch. Coming out of Election Day, their pathway to a Senate majority had narrowed significantly, and the races that were called early indicated they'd made few inroads. Likewise in the House, early projections suggested Democrats had miscalculated how much offense they could play in expanding their majority. The reality was they were on defense, with several of the seats that flipped in their favor in 2018 apparently reverting back to red. Here's where things stood a day after the polls closed.

## Holding the line

IOWA, MONT. AND MAINE (SENATE)

**Joni Ernst, Steve Daines and Susan Collins**



Republicans appear to have held strong in at least a few Senate races in key swing states: Ernst in Iowa and Daines in Montana are projected to win re-election in states that Trump took in 2016 and looks to have won again. Likewise, **Collins**, a rare moderate in a polarized era, notched another win in Maine. The seats were seen as potential pickups for Democrats—so even with some races unresolved, the path to a blue majority is now much steeper.

## The heavy hitters

KY. AND S.C. (SENATE)

**Mitch McConnell and Lindsey Graham**



All the money in the world can't defy political gravity. Senate majority leader McConnell of Kentucky and Senate Judiciary Committee chair **Graham** of South Carolina, two of the Republican Party's best-known figures and top villains to Democrats, are projected to win re-election races in their states—despite the national attention that helped their respective opponents, Democrats Amy McGrath and Jaime Harrison, swamp them in fundraising.

## Runoff ahead

GA. (SENATE)

**Kelly Loeffler or Raphael Warnock**



Georgia was the only state with two Senate races this year—and at least one, a special election, won't be determined until January. Republican incumbent **Loeffler** and Democrat Warnock will move to a runoff after failing to break a majority of voters. The other race, between incumbent Republican David Perdue and Democrat Jon Ossoff, had yet to be called.

## Gaining ground

ARIZ. AND COLO. (SENATE)

**Mark Kelly and John Hickenlooper**



Across what was expected to be a battleground of about a dozen competitive states, Democrats are projected to pick up at least two Senate seats. **Kelly** of Arizona and Hickenlooper of Colorado—seen as two of the likeliest blue gains—appear to have beaten Republican incumbents Martha McSally and Cory Gardner, respectively.

## Rising star

N.M. (SENATE)

**Ben Ray Luján**



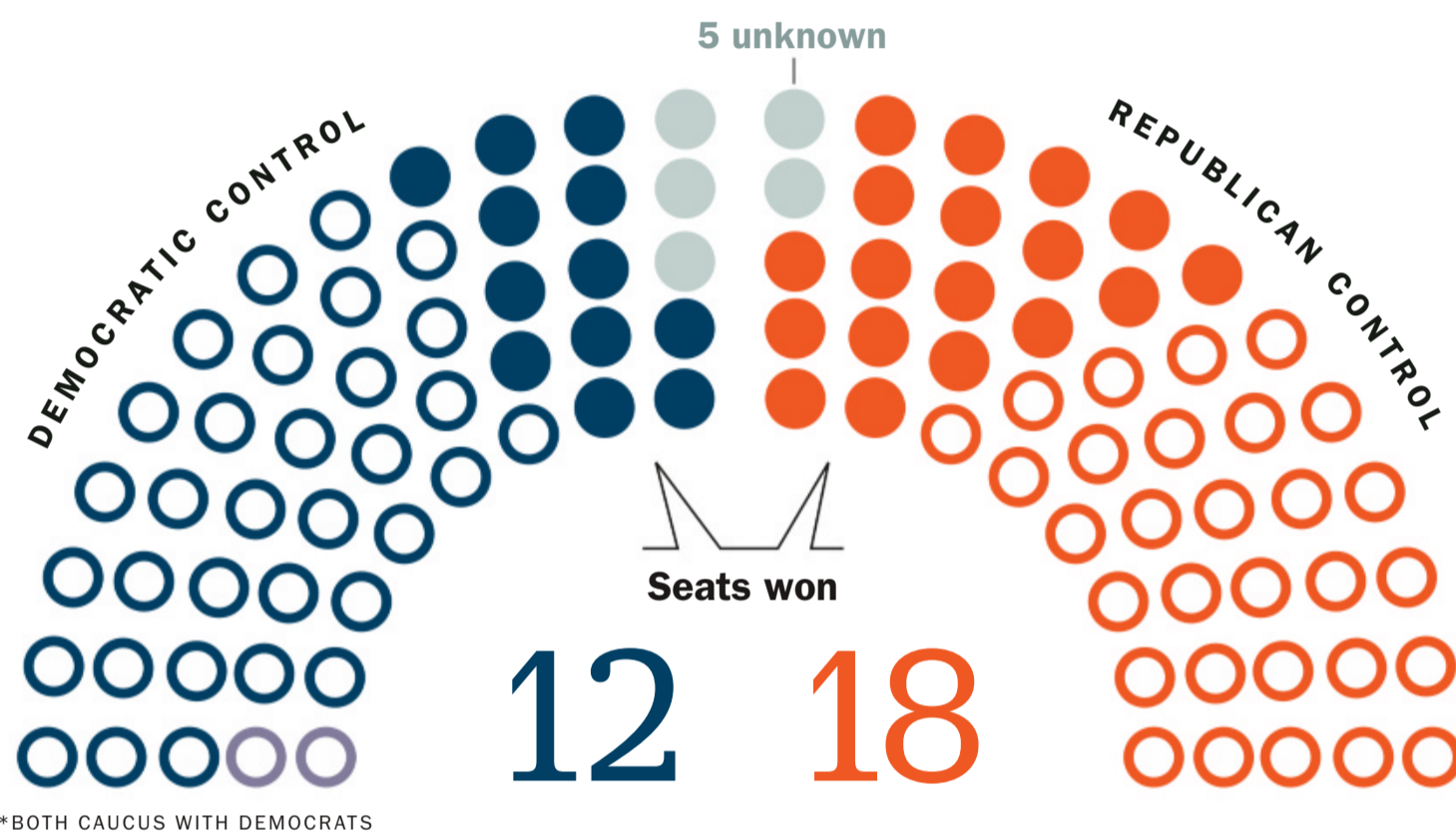
**Luján**, the U.S. House's highest-ranking Latino, is projected to win New Mexico's Senate race—a bright spot for Democrats after shortfalls with Latino voters in the presidential contest appear to have cost them key votes in areas like Florida's Miami-Dade County and Texas' Zapata County, both of which went to Hillary Clinton in 2016.

## THE NEW SENATE

35 of 100 seats up for grabs

As of 5 p.m. on Nov. 4, it appeared that 12 races had gone to Democrats and 18 to Republicans—and five were still being counted.

45 Democrat      2 Independent\*      48 Republican



**'I HAVE NEVER BEEN CHALLENGED LIKE THIS, AND I'VE NEVER HAD MORE SUPPORT THAN I DO TONIGHT.'**

—Lindsey Graham, South Carolina Senator

## Pushed back

U.S. (HOUSE)

### Around the country



House Democrats expected to expand their majority, but their huge 2018 gains appear to have been more of a ceiling than a floor. Several incumbent Democrats—from Iowa’s Abby Finkenauer and Oklahoma’s Kendra Horn to **Donna Shalala** and Debbie Mucarsel-Powell in South Florida—lost re-election in districts the party flipped in the midterms.

## Double first

N.Y. (HOUSE)

### Mondaire Jones and Ritchie Torres



Democrats **Jones** and Torres are projected to make history as the first openly gay Black Representatives in Congress. Torres, who won a close primary to win New York’s 15th District in the Bronx, is a breakout star in NYC politics; in New York’s 17th District, Jones won his primary with the backing of the party’s progressive wing.

## Texas ain’t blue yet

TEXAS (BOTH CHAMBERS)

### John Cornyn and more

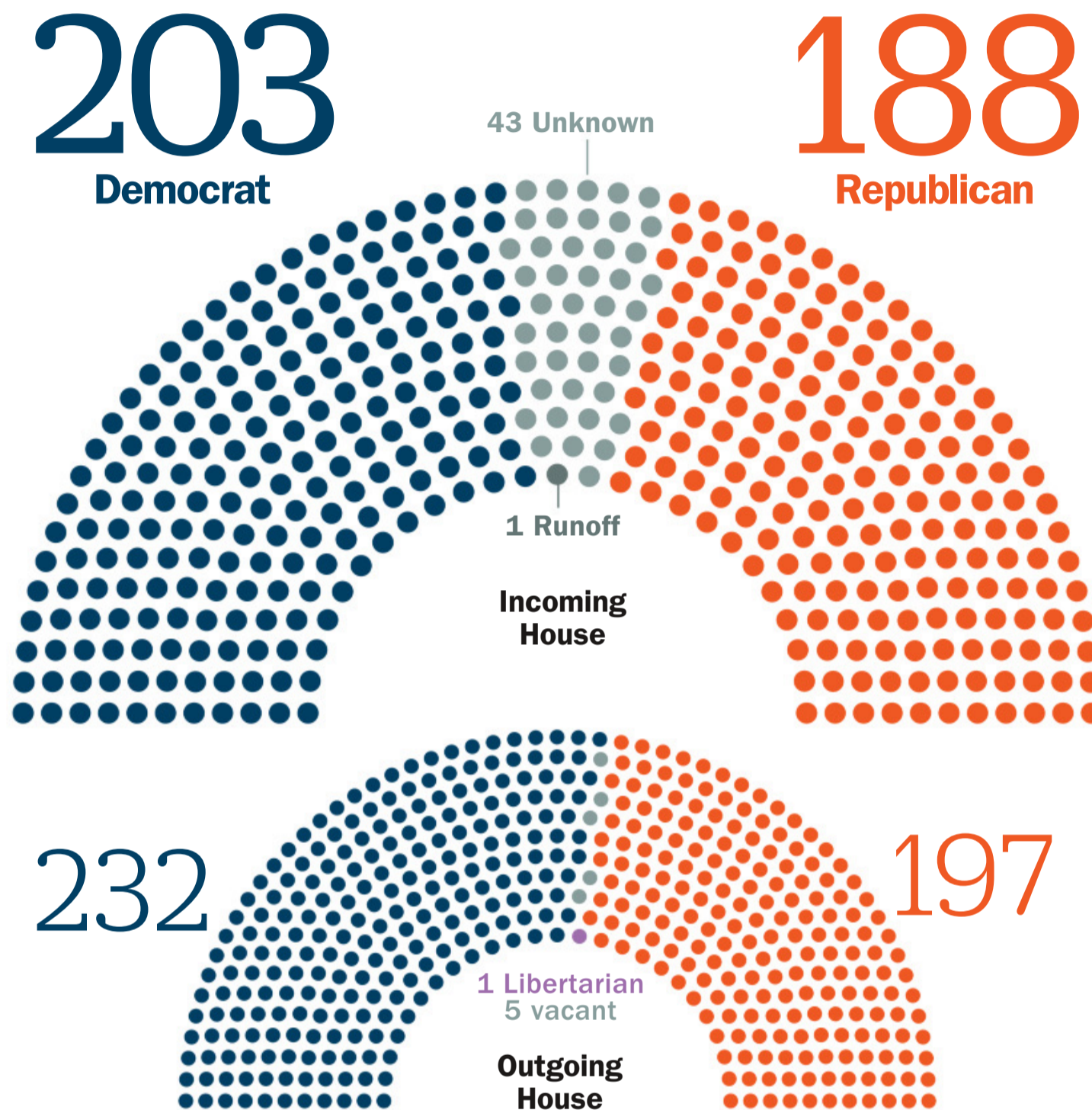


Democrats’ dreams of tipping Texas were squashed as Republican Senator **Cornyn** was projected to hold his seat, and all but one still-uncalled race in U.S. House districts held by Republicans seem to have stayed that way. The GOP also looks to have kept control of Texas’ House, and thus of redistricting.

## THE NEW HOUSE

All 435 seats up for grabs

At 5 p.m. on Nov. 4, Democrats held their lead over Republicans by at least 15 seats



## Left field

MO., N.Y. AND ILL. (HOUSE)

### Cori Bush, Jamaal Bowman and Marie Newman



Several progressive Democrats are projected to be moving up to the House after defeating establishment Democrats in close primaries earlier this year. They include Missouri’s **Bush**; Illinois’ Newman and New York’s Bowman, who took the seat of longtime Congressman Eliot Engel.

## GOP women win

U.S. (HOUSE)

### Maria Elvira Salazar, Nancy Mace and more



Just 13 of 197 Republicans in the House are women—but that number is set to rise, after candidates like Florida’s Salazar, South Carolina’s **Mace**, Minnesota’s Michelle Fischbach, Oklahoma’s Stephanie Bice and New Mexico’s Yvette Herrell had big nights in closely watched Democratic districts.

## Far-right faces

N.C. (HOUSE)

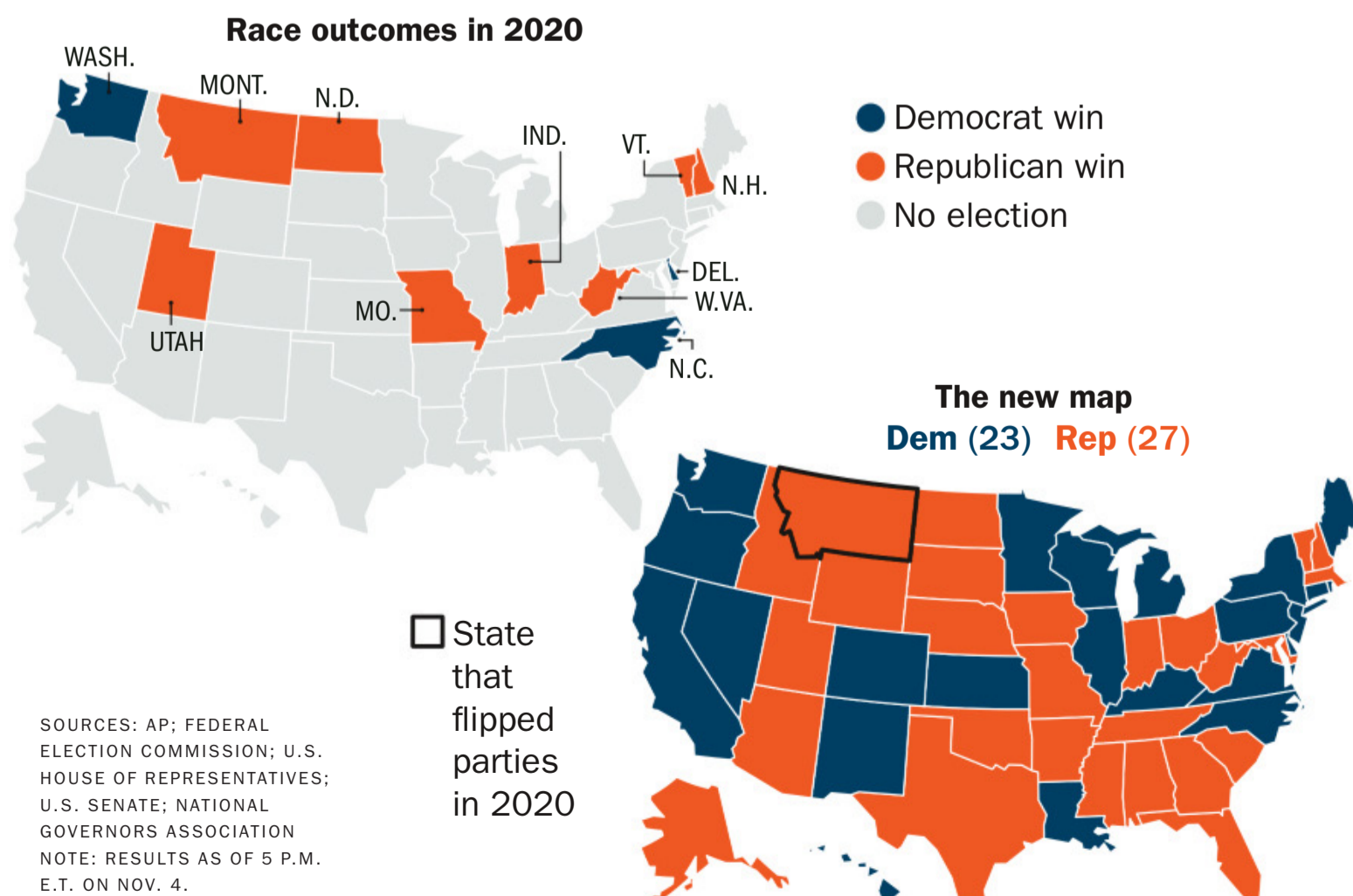
### Madison Cawthorn



At 25, Republican **Cawthorn** will be the youngest Representative in modern congressional history. He’s also one of several far-right House candidates who were projected to win on Nov. 3—including Lauren Boebert of Colorado and Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, both of whom have at times expressed interest in baseless QAnon conspiracy theories.

## NEW GOVERNORS

11 of 50 seats up for grabs





ELECTION 2020

# LONG DIVISION

*Why America's rifts are only deepening*

BY MOLLY BALL



The President's supporters in Grand Rapids, Mich., ignored the chill at the final rally of his 2020 campaign

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER VAN AGTMAEL FOR TIME





# T

THE CAR HORNS BLARED AS JOE BIDEN TOOK THE stage just before 1 a.m.—not to proclaim victory, but to urge his supporters not to lose hope, no matter what President Donald Trump might say. “We believe we are on track to win this election,” the former Vice President told the crowd in Wilmington, Del., on Nov. 4. “It ain’t over until every vote is counted. Keep the faith, guys.”

As the new day dawned and dragged on, it increasingly looked as though Biden was right. Having flipped Michigan, Arizona and Wisconsin, Biden appeared to be inching toward victory. Pennsylvania, Georgia, Nevada and North Carolina remained too close to call as of the evening of Nov. 4. Independent forecasters believed Biden was likely to eke out the requisite 270 electoral votes when all the votes were counted, over the President’s noisy objections.

Even with the White House nearing their grasp, Biden’s supporters could be forgiven if they found it hard to keep the faith. The 2020 election did not go according to plan for the Democrats. It was a far cry from the sweeping repudiation of Trump that the polls had forecast and liberals craved. After all the outrage and activism, a projected \$14 billion spent and millions more votes this time than last, Trump’s term is ending the way it began: with an election once again teetering on a knife’s edge, and a nation entrenched in stalemate, torn between two realities, two cultural tribes, two sets of facts.

Even if he has lost, a President who trampled the rule of law for four years was on pace to collect millions more votes this time. And though they braced for a bloodbath, the congressional Republicans who enabled him instead notched gains across the board. The GOP appeared poised to retain the majority in the Senate and cut into the Democratic House majority, defying the polls and fundraising deficits. Republicans held onto states such as Florida, South Carolina, Ohio and Iowa that Democrats had hoped to flip. They cut into Democrats’ margins with non-white voters, made gains with Latinos in South Florida and the Rio Grande Valley, and racked up huge turnout among non-college-educated white people, while halting what many conservatives feared was an inexorable slide in the suburbs.

Amid record turnout, Biden seemed sure to win the popular vote, possibly with an outright majority—a resounding statement by any standard. But many Democrats expected more. They believed that voters had soured on Trump and his party, that

his mishandling of the pandemic and divisive style had alienated a wide swath of voters, that a new political era was about to be born and Trumpism banished to history’s dustbin. Instead, they awoke to a different reality. “Democrats always argued, ‘If more people voted, we would win,’” says GOP strategist Brad Todd, co-author of *The Great Revolt: Inside the Populist Coalition Reshaping American Politics*. “Well, guess what? Everybody voted, and it didn’t help the Democrats. There is a multiracial, working-class ethos that is animating the new Republican coalition.”

As the votes were tallied into the following day, the candidates’ positions fell along predictable lines. The challenger encouraged the core exercise of democracy to continue, while the President tried to stop it. Biden’s camp urged patience; Trump voiced unfounded suspicions about fraud and cast unwarranted doubt on still incoming returns. Despite widespread fears of chaos, the vote was mostly peaceful and devoid of major irregularities. The President’s baseless declaration of victory was a sign that the test he has posed to American institutions isn’t over yet.

Biden’s campaign was predicated on a return to the pre-Trump political order, a “normal” that may always have been a figment of the collective imagination. If he emerges as the winner, his achievement—toppling an incumbent who manipulated the levers of government to try to gain an advantage, and made voter suppression a core campaign strategy—shouldn’t be discounted. But even if he becomes the next President, it seems clear that he will be governing Trump’s America: a nation unpersuaded by kumbaya calls for unity and compassion, determined instead to burrow ever deeper into its hermetic bubbles. Win or lose, Trump has engineered a lasting tectonic shift in the American political landscape, fomenting a level of anger, resentment and suspicion that will not be easy for his successor to surmount.

Whoever takes the oath of office on Jan. 20 will be tested by a historic set of challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has just entered its worst phase yet, rampaging across the country virtually unchecked. The economic fallout from the virus continues to worsen without new federal aid. Trump has given few hints of what his next months in office may hold, but few expect them to be smooth. An urgent set of policy problems, from climate change to health care to the nation’s crumbling infrastructure, may run into the wall of divided government. America’s democratic institutions will continue to teeter. “If in fact Biden wins, it’s still the case that an openly bigoted aspiring authoritarian not only won the presidency but captured the complete loyalty of one of two major political parties, and—but for a once-in-a-century pandemic—he might have been re-elected,” says Ian Bassin, co-founder of Protect Democracy, a nonpartisan legal group. “If that doesn’t tell you that something is completely rotten in the foundations of our democracy, I don’t know what would.”

*Biden voters anxiously watch results trickle in on a big screen near the White House on the day of the election*







The story of American politics in the 21st century has been one of escalating polarization and gridlock, a nihilistic feedback loop that has made the country all but impossible to lead. For years, a chaos-ridden nation has waited to deliver its verdict on Trump's unorthodox presidency. But this is 2020—the year when up was down and real was fake, the year of the plague, the year of the unexpected: of course it would not be that easy. Both sides hoped for a knockout blow, a landslide that would forever settle the question of which version of America is the true one. Instead, our identity crisis continues.

**THE CAMPAIGN UNFOLDED** over a year so convulsive that the third presidential impeachment in history now seems a distant memory. COVID-19 upended Americans' lives and drained their bank accounts. Millions of people, from all walks of life, took to the streets to protest police violence. The West Coast's sky was blotted by fire for weeks, while the East was battered by a record hurricane season. And yet, against this backdrop of chaos there was an odd political stasis: Trump's standing in polls remained about where it had been when Biden first entered the race—a sign, Democrats believed, that Trump

had little chance of persuading an electorate that had long since rejected him.

Not that he particularly tried. Strategists of both parties believe the campaign was winnable for the incumbent if he had embraced a more traditional strategy and style—something his entire presidency has shown him to be uninterested in doing. Discarding the advice of the political professionals, Trump insisted on rerunning the 2016 election, down to the leaked emails and antiestablishment rhetoric. He made little alteration to his bull-in-a-china-shop attitude, even though the hellscape he raged against was now one that unfolded on his watch. "COVID certainly didn't help, but this election was about the President's performance over the last four years, not just the last nine months," says Brendan Buck, a former top adviser to the GOP ex-House Speaker Paul Ryan. "It was four years of bumbling his way through every issue, alienating everyone who didn't agree with him, and never being able to use the tools he had for any particular good."

As Trump careened from one outrage to another, Biden limited his campaign to theatrically cautious appearances: masked speeches to small, distanced groups; "drive-in" rallies where attendees sat in their cars. The longtime pol known for his garrulousness



▲  
*The different style of the campaigns—  
 and of their supporters—was echoed  
 in their Pennsylvania offices*

and gaffes stuck unerringly to the script. Many lines in his final TV ads were identical to what he said when he launched his campaign a year and a half before. Unusually for a general-election candidate, Biden actually saw his standing with the public improve over the course of the campaign. Only about 10% of the ads aired by Biden’s campaign and allies were attacks on Trump, according to the Wesleyan Media Project. His campaign believed that his themes of unity, compassion and expertise were an implicit rebuke to the incumbent. “The message has been incredibly consistent: an implicit contrast between Trump’s character flaws and their consequences for real people,” says Democratic strategist Jesse Ferguson, a veteran of Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign. “Trump is self-absorbed and chaotic; Biden is the opposite: in it for others, stable, the antidote to everything Trump represents.” But Democrats now wonder if Biden, like Clinton before him, put too much emphasis on character and not enough on kitchen-table issues,

and whether his decision not to campaign more in person was a missed opportunity.

Biden was buoyed by a vast grassroots movement: the Trump era has seen a frenzy of political action, with thousands of newly motivated activists leading local political groups. Middle-class women gathered their Facebook friends to drink wine and make canvassing phone calls; disaffected Republicans waged a multimillion-dollar campaign to mobilize their peers. A weak fundraiser who ended the primary essentially broke, Biden shattered general-election fundraising records—his campaign hauled in \$952 million, dwarfing the incumbent by more than \$300 million—as liberals showered donations on him and the party’s congressional candidates.

But Trump had his own army of enthusiastic supporters. His massive rallies—held at cavernous airport hangars and sports arenas with no social distancing and limited mask wearing—were not just aimed at flattering Trump’s ego or creating images of enthusiastic throngs for local and national media. Republican National Committee (RNC) teams perched outside each event, registering new voters and creating a database of supporters. “People sometimes pooh-pooh the rallies and say there’s really no campaign



structural benefit to them,” says Brian Ballard, a Republican lobbyist with close ties to Trump. But they allowed the campaign to “utilize the crowds that not only go, but the crowds that registered to go, and sometimes that number is five times the amount of folks that actually show up.”

Trump’s campaign also kept up its field-organizing program through the summer, while Biden’s team hung back out of safety concerns. The joint field program between the RNC and the Trump campaign boasted 2.6 million volunteers, according to figures provided by the RNC. They made more than 182 million voter contacts—more than five times what they did in 2016—and added nearly 174,000 new GOP voters to the rolls. Early voter-registration figures in Florida, North Carolina and other states showed that Republicans had “essentially neutralized what had been a Democrat advantage” by mobilizing new voters, says John Podesta, who ran Clinton’s failed 2016 presidential bid.

Democrats underestimated the Trump tribe’s breadth to their detriment. “I think you miss some of the Trump quotient [in polls] because these folks come out of the woodwork, and they’re out of the woods and waters of South Carolina,” says former GOP Representative Mark Sanford, a Trump critic whose Charleston-area district Republicans took back on Nov. 3. Despite putting more than \$100 million behind Senate candidate Jaime Harrison, Democrats fell short of defeating Senator Lindsey Graham by double digits. “These Trump rallies and Trump parades and all those kinds of things, they don’t strike me as the type that would be answering a polling call,” Sanford says.

Having made the decision to forgo traditional field organizing, Biden’s campaign manager, Jen O’Malley Dillon instead turned the Biden campaign into what may be the largest digital-organizing machine in American political history. “Jen O’Malley Dillon took a risk in investing as much in digital acquisition as she did,” says Patrick Stevenson, chief mobilization officer at the Democratic National Committee. “You’re putting down \$1 million in April that you’re expecting to show back up as \$5 million in August.” By September, the digital operation was printing money. Digital organizers recruited more than 200,000 volunteers and deployed them on hundreds of millions of text messages and phone calls. But the result raises questions about whether this virtual juggernaut could really substitute for old-fashioned face-to-face campaigning.

**WHAT COMES NEXT** is anybody’s guess. There are 2½ months until the next Inauguration. A lame-duck President with the world’s biggest platform, an even larger ego, and millions of supporters who internalized his rhetoric about election “rigging” could stir a lot of trouble on his way out of town. So much, including the odds of violence erupting, depends on Trump’s rhetoric in the days and weeks to come.

## NATION

# ROLLER-COASTER COUNT

*What produced whipsaw turns in the vote tallies of key states? Following the letter of the law*

**BY ABBY VESOULIS**

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP COMMANDED an early lead in Michigan on Nov. 3, only for Joe Biden to gain the advantage the next morning. The opposite was true in Ohio: Biden appeared ahead right after the polls closed on Election Night, only for Trump to overtake his lead around 10 p.m. What gives?

While the President raged about the disparities on Twitter, baselessly insinuating that the whiplash was the result of fraud or malfeasance, the real answer is simple: mail-in ballots are counted at different times, and at different rates, in different states. In Michigan, Trump appeared to be ahead among ballots cast in person, but when mail ballots were tallied, that lead evaporated. In Ohio, Biden appeared to be ahead among mail ballots, but when in-person votes were chalked up, that lead vanished.

This election cycle, Democrats were much more likely than Republicans to vote by mail. That’s largely due to Trump, who spent months bashing mail-in voting and urging supporters to vote in person instead. Many appear to have listened: 67% of Republicans said they planned to vote in person on Election Day, according to a Marquette University Law School poll, compared with just 27% of Democrats.

Voting by mail is a safe and secure way to cast a ballot, but counting those ballots does tend to take longer than tallying votes cast in person. In most states, election officials must remove each mailed ballot from its outer envelope and secrecy sleeve, verify the voter’s registration and signature, and then feed that ballot into a

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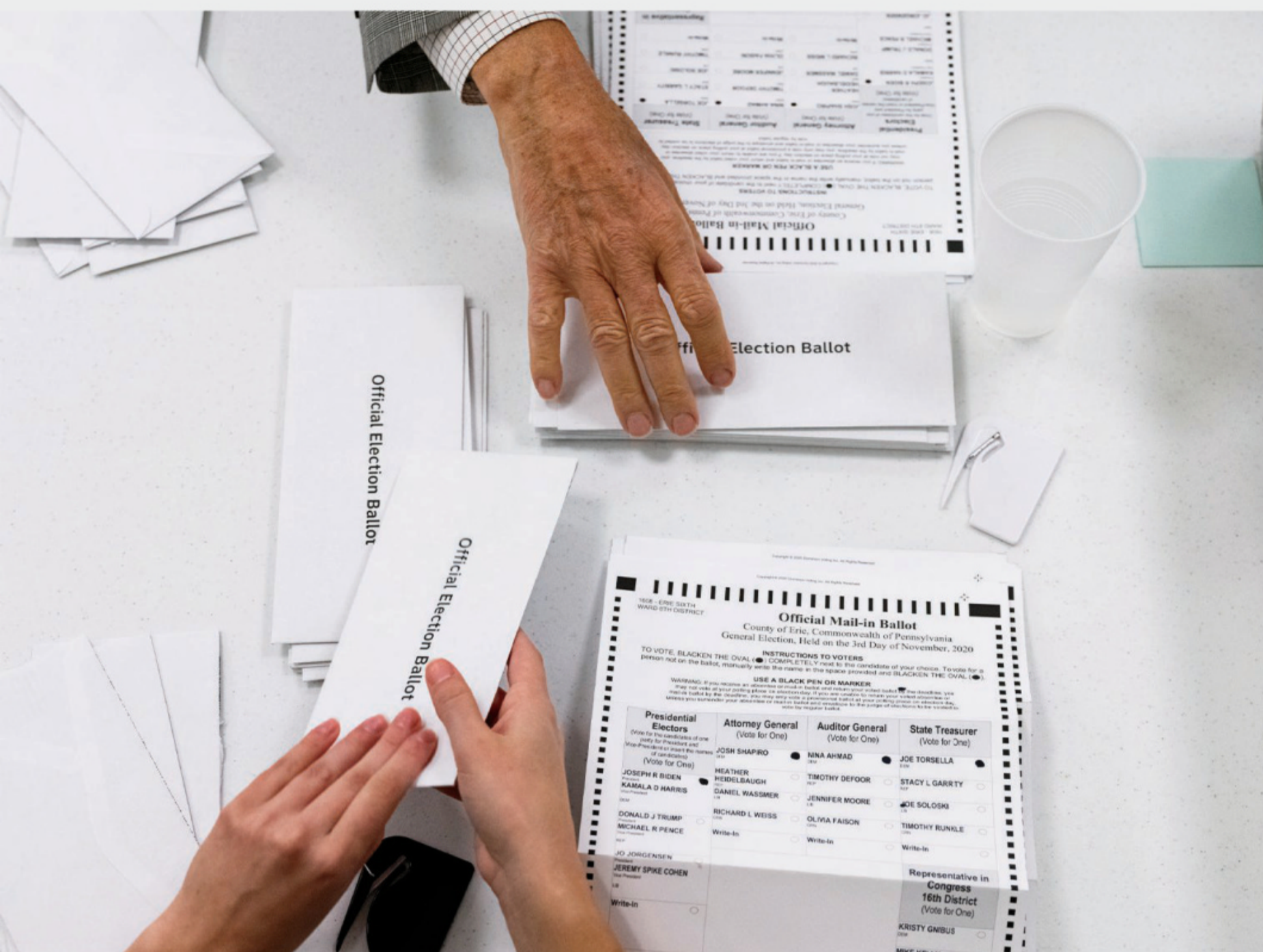
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scanner. Processing tens of thousands—or tens of millions—of votes in that manner takes time. States’ rules affect how quickly mail ballots are counted, too. In both Iowa and Ohio, election officials can process absentee ballots before Nov. 3, allowing them to report those results relatively early. In other states, including Michigan, officials aren’t allowed to start processing mail ballots until Nov. 2, significantly delaying a final tally.

Pundits saw the phenomenon coming well before Election Day, dubbing it the “red mirage” or the “blue shift.” There are plenty of examples. Take Wayne County, Michigan, where Detroit is located. Donald Trump, at one point, led Biden in the state by hundreds of thousands of votes, but as absentee ballots from the Detroit-metro area flooded in early Wednesday morning, they helped Biden close the gap, reflecting pre-election polls showing Democrats were more keen on voting absentee.

Similar shifts happened in Wisconsin and Virginia. In Wisconsin, where officials aren’t allowed to process mail ballots until Election Day, Trump’s 31,000 vote lead was eviscerated around 5 a.m. Nov. 4 when election officials counted 69,000 absentee ballots advantaging Biden. The Associated Press later called the state for Biden. In Virginia, where most counties tallied in-person votes first, Trump held a lead for several hours, but as more than 900,000 mail ballots were chalked up, Biden secured a 9-point lead.

This is all normal, says Washington

▲  
*Mailed ballots being opened at an Erie County courthouse on Election Day, the earliest time Pennsylvania allows it*

secretary of state Kim Wyman, a Republican whose state has been conducting elections primarily by mail since 2011. “It’s entirely possible in some states, just because of the crushing volumes that they’re anticipating, that they may take a couple of days or a week even to really get through the volume that they’re going to see,” she says. “It doesn’t mean there’s any voter fraud. It means that they’re really focusing, trying to do it right.”

**EVEN IN PAST ELECTION YEARS**, when COVID-19 has not driven tens of millions of Americans to cast ballots by mail, states do not certify results on election night. It takes days and sometimes weeks for officials to count every ballot, particularly those that arrive late, from absentee voters and military personnel overseas. This year, with most states expanding access to mail voting, experts expected it to take even longer. “It is very likely that it’s going to take time, and we will not have a winner on election night,” warned Sylvia Albert, the director of voting and elections at Common Cause, a nonpartisan watchdog group. Early election-night results, she predicted, would not represent “the true votes of the public.”

Trump, however, has been quick to cry foul. The day after Election Day, his Twit-

ter feed was crammed with furious insinuations. “How come every time they count Mail-In ballot dumps they are so devastating in their percentage and power of destruction?” he tweeted on Nov. 4.

Whipsawing results on election night, combined with days of post-election uncertainty, is perhaps not the best way to project confidence in the electoral process. But, election experts point out, Republican lawmakers and attorneys have repeatedly moved to prevent the early processing of mail ballots. In Pennsylvania, for example, Republican legislators blocked initiatives to allow processing to begin early. As a result, several counties said they wouldn’t be able to begin tallying absentee ballots until Nov. 4 because their staffs are too small to keep up with in-person voting and mailed ballots. In Nevada, the Trump campaign and the state Republican Party sued the secretary of state and Clark County registrar on Oct. 23, seeking to stop the count of early mail-in ballots in the Las Vegas area. A judge rejected the request.

We can expect more incremental shifts in final vote tallies in the days and weeks to come. Many states’ rules allow mailed ballots postmarked by Election Day, or the day before, to arrive later in the month and still be counted. In North Carolina, ballots postmarked by Nov. 3 will be counted if they arrive as late as Nov. 12. In Ohio, ballots postmarked by Nov. 2 can arrive as late as Nov. 13. In Pennsylvania, mailed ballots that arrive by Nov. 6 will also be counted. (The U.S. Supreme Court upheld a lower court’s ruling on this extended deadline, but has indicated it could revisit the matter.)

In an election defined by a global pandemic, and an unprecedented number of Americans voting by mail, delays are inevitable. Ritchie Torres knows that struggle all too well. The 32-year-old Democrat beat his challengers for a congressional seat representing New York’s 15th District by double digits in the state’s June 23 primary. But it took a full six weeks for the state to certify the results. “Be patient,” he says. “Understand there’s a difference between the growing pains of vote by mail and voter fraud.” That’s good advice for every American, including the one in the White House. — *With reporting by* MARIAH ESPADA *and* OLIVIA B. WAXMAN □



*Violetta Smith holds portrait balloons at an outdoor election-night event in Wilmington, Del.*

ELECTION 2020



Then there is the question of tapping the federal treasury on the way out—his companies and family have pocketed millions in government funds during his time in office—and whether he might seek to pardon himself and his allies. “His impulse might be to abuse executive authority, and my hope and prayer is that those around him would restrain him, though they haven’t been very successful so far,” says Tom Ridge, the GOP former Pennsylvania governor and Homeland Security Secretary who endorsed Biden. “I have never felt that this President has ever truly respected the Constitution, the rule of law and the freedoms embodied in our democratic process.”

If Biden does take office, he will confront a set of challenges like few Presidents before him. He has laid out a comprehensive—and expensive—federal plan to combat the COVID-19 pandemic that includes promoting mask wearing, ramping up testing and the production of protective equipment, improving information transparency and scientific reopening guidance, and creating and distributing a vaccine. Democrats have previously proposed trillions in new spending to help individuals, businesses and local governments and shore up the health care system needs that will only grow in the coming months.

The coronavirus is far from the only problem Biden and the Democrats have promised to solve. A former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Biden would likely devote great attention to restoring America’s traditional trade and security alliances. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi recently said the congressional agenda for 2021 would include a major infrastructure bill and an expansion of health care. Liberals will be pushing for fast action on police reform, climate and immigration. Democrats have been remarkably unified since Biden effectively sewed up the nomination in March, but the party’s left wing has signaled it will not be so deferential once victory is in hand. Progressive groups have been circulating lists of potential Biden nominees they would (and would not) accept for key Administration posts.

Four years of Trump have left Democrats with few worries about overreading their mandate. “If we win the election, we have a mandate to make change, period,” says Guy Cecil, president of the Democratic super PAC Priorities USA. But if Republicans retain their hold on the Senate, prospects for major legislation will be dim. Republicans had won 48 seats as of the evening of Nov. 4, with at least one January runoff in Georgia that could decide the balance of power in the chamber.

Whatever the ultimate result, the election exposed the shaky edifice of U.S. democracy. From the antiquated governing institutions that increasingly reward minoritarian rule, to the badly wounded norms

surrounding the independent administration of justice, to the flimsy protections of supposedly universal suffrage, to the nation’s balky and underfunded election infrastructure, Trump’s presidency has laid bare the weaknesses in our system. But initiatives to reform campaign finance, government ethics and voting rights seem fated to run aground in a divided Washington.

A round of harsh recriminations seems certain for the Democrats, who had assumed that their coalition of minorities, college-educated white people and young voters was destined only to grow as a share of the electorate, while the post-Trump GOP would be doomed to rely on a dwindling population of older, white, non-college-educated voters. Instead, Republicans appeared to have increased their share of the Black and Latino vote. Democrats failed to topple any GOP incumbents in Texas and lost a congressional seat in New Mexico. Their hopes for a surge of college-educated suburban voters also fell short, suggesting that the GOP’s attacks on liberal ideology proved effective in places like Oklahoma City and Cedar Rapids, Iowa. “Democrats need to ask

themselves why someone like Joe Biden is an endangered species in the party,” says Justin Gest, a political scientist at George Mason University and author of *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality*. “Why is the party of experts, urban intellectuals and woke social-movement activists not producing candidates who can mobilize people in Montana, Ohio, North Carolina? It just doesn’t look like a national party.”

Republicans, even if they lose the presidency, are likely to feel emboldened to continue pursuing Trump’s themes. “Donald

Trump isn’t going away,” says Buck, the former Ryan adviser. “He’s still going to be the leader of the party and the biggest voice, and he’ll at least flirt with the idea of running again. It’s going to continue to be a populist, grievance-fueled party.”

Some elections mark a breakthrough—the emergence of a new American majority after years of conflict and gridlock. A landslide like Franklin D. Roosevelt’s in 1932 or Ronald Reagan’s in 1980 would have signaled a nation ready to move on from its cultural and ideological cleavages and seek some way forward together. Instead it looks more bitterly split than ever. “There was a substantial political divide in this country before Donald Trump was elected,” Ridge says. “His presidency has exacerbated that divide to an almost unimaginable degree. But that did not begin with Donald Trump, and it will not end with him, either.” —*With reporting by* CHARLOTTE ALTER, BRIAN BENNETT *and* TESSA BERENSON/WASHINGTON; ANNA PURNA KAMBHAMPATY/HONOLULU; *and* MARIAH ESPADA, ALEJANDRO DE LA GARZA *and* SIMMONE SHAH/NEW YORK □

## ‘[THE DEMOCRATS] JUST DON’T LOOK LIKE A NATIONAL PARTY.’

—Justin Gest,  
political scientist, George  
Mason University







*Reflecting the  
exhaustion on  
both sides of the  
aisle, a Trump fan  
rests on a table at  
an election-night  
party in Las Vegas*

PHOTOGRAPH BY  
JOHN LOCHER—AP



# COURTS OF LAST RESORT

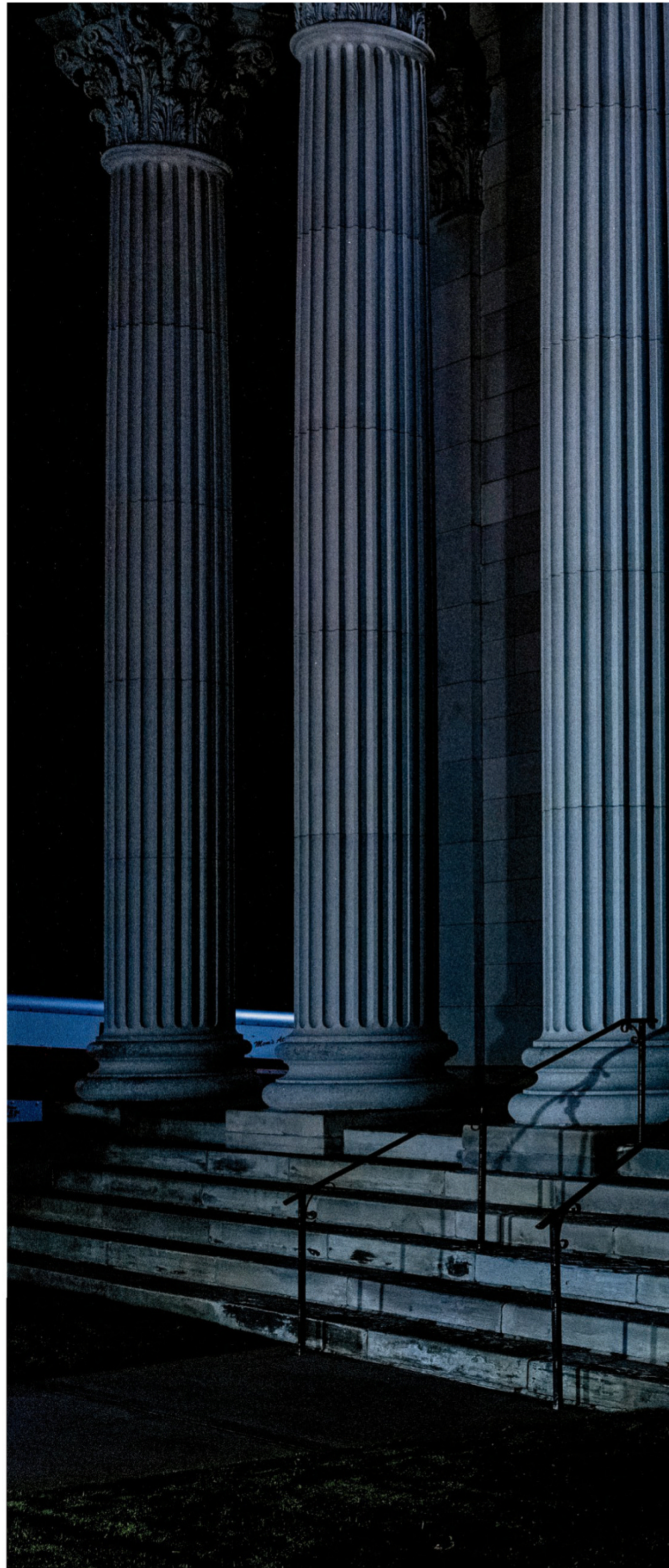
*Tight margins in key swing states trigger litigation*

**BY ALANA ABRAMSON**

IN THE WEE HOURS OF THE MORNING AFTER ELECTION Day, state officials were still tallying millions of mail-in and absentee ballots in key battleground states, and the presidential race remained too close to call. But that didn't stop President Donald Trump from gathering his supporters in the East Room of the White House, falsely asserting he had already won, and promising he would challenge future election results in court. "We'll be going to the U.S. Supreme Court," he said. "We want all voting to stop. We don't want them to find any ballots at 4 o'clock in the morning and add them to the list."

By the time the sun had risen, the Trump campaign had taken its cue, with top advisers calling for multiple lawsuits on the grounds that the ongoing vote count would result in tallying "illegally cast ballots." In a recording of a Nov. 4 phone call with supporters obtained by TIME, campaign aides forecast legal challenges in Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. By late that afternoon, the campaign had demanded a recount in Wisconsin, filed suit to stop the ballot count in Michigan, and launched two more legal challenges questioning the ballot-counting process and voter-ID laws in Pennsylvania. It also filed a motion to intervene in an existing dispute over Pennsylvania ballots at the U.S. Supreme Court.

Election-law experts from both sides of the aisle dismissed the Trump team's suggestion that the ongoing vote count was untoward. State election officials routinely take days to finish counting ballots, and with more than 90 million Americans requesting mail-in ballots because of the pandemic, delays were widely expected. "It's contrary to law and the way we run elections to suggest we should stop counting votes because one of the candidates is ahead and doesn't want to fall behind," says Trevor Potter, former general counsel for John McCain's presidential campaigns.





*A courthouse in Pennsylvania, the most hotly contested state in this election and already the subject of legal challenges*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LORENZO MELONI FOR TIME



But with relatively tight margins in key battleground states, including Pennsylvania, Nevada and Georgia, it was also immediately clear that an onslaught of election-related litigation was all but inevitable. It is no longer a question of whether the results of the 2020 presidential race will end up mired in the courts; it is how long and how consequential that court battle will be.

The contours of the coming fights are only beginning to emerge. Experts say that in coming days, new cases could hinge on anything from recounts to obscure state statutes to whether the U.S. Postal Service delivered ballots.

The Biden campaign's legal team has been sanguine about the deluge to come. "Let me tell you this: if you go to the Supreme Court today, drive around the building, you will not see Donald Trump, and you will not see his lawyers," says Bob Bauer, former White House counsel under Barack Obama and a senior adviser to the Biden campaign. "He's not going to the Supreme Court of the United States to get the voting to stop."

But at least some top Republicans, including Tom Spencer, who worked for George W. Bush in *Bush v. Gore*, the case that decided the 2000 election, foresee the legal wrangling ending at the court, where Trump has appointed three of the nine Justices. He predicts that the outcome may hinge on three Justices—Brett Kavanaugh, John Roberts and Amy Coney Barrett—all of whom, like Spencer, worked on Bush's team two decades ago. In September, Trump said he wanted Barrett installed on the high court before the election to ensure a full bench to decide election disputes. "The big issue of course is how is Justice Barrett going to rule," Spencer says.

The consequences of the coming legal battles may extend beyond who becomes the next President of the United States. The litigation could test Americans' confidence in the electoral process, shake their faith in the judiciary as an impartial arbiter of U.S. law, and further divide an already polarized nation. "Make no mistake: our democracy is being tested in this election," Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf said Nov. 4. "This is a stress test of the ideals upon which this country was founded."

**LAWYERS FOR BOTH** the Trump and Biden campaigns have been preparing for this moment for months. With backing from deep-pocketed donors, as well as the Republican and Democratic National Committees, each has amassed an army of top-tier lawyers and legal experts who have been deployed at strategic outposts around the country. In the months before the election, lawyers for various Democratic and Republican entities filed more than 400 election-related lawsuits, putting the 2020 race on track to be the most litigated in history.

Some of these decisions may have made a post—

*Ken Weber, a Pennsylvania election official, validating votes. All ballots arriving after 8 p.m. on Nov. 3 were segregated*



Election Day showdown more likely by narrowing the margin between Biden and Trump. On Oct. 26, the Supreme Court upheld Wisconsin's ballot-receipt deadline. Appeals courts similarly ruled in favor of shorter ballot-receipt deadlines in Georgia and Michigan. The Supreme Court decision in the Wisconsin case "unquestionably" made the margin closer, says Jay Heck, executive director of Common Cause in the state. "There are probably thousands of absentee ballots that will be [arriving] in the next few days." When the deadline was extended during Wisconsin's primary this year, the state's election commission said it resulted in an additional 79,000 ballots being counted.

The lawsuits have only just begun. On Nov. 4, Bill Stepien, Trump's campaign manager, noting the close margins in Wisconsin, called the state "recount territory." "There have been reports of irregularities in several Wisconsin counties which raise serious doubts about the validity of the results," he said. Pennsylvania is also likely "ground zero" for coming election-related litigation, experts say. The commonwealth's 20



electoral votes make it the biggest prize of all the remaining battleground states, and its decision to expand access to mail-in voting for the first time this election cycle opens the door to lawsuits. The two lawsuits filed by the Trump campaign on Nov. 4 are likely just the beginning.

The state has already been the target of multiple Republican-backed lawsuits, with mixed results. In mid-September, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled that mail-in ballots could be accepted through Nov. 6. Republicans tried twice to get the U.S. Supreme Court to intervene, and while the Justices declined to rule, they left open the possibility of hearing the case at a later date. If Pennsylvania is very close, says Potter, lawsuits are much more likely to occur because “both candidates will be fighting over which ballots to count.”

Pennsylvania’s election officials also recently ordered ballots arriving after 8 p.m. on Election Day or without definitive time stamps to be “segregated” from the rest of the ballots—a move that, election experts say, suggests they are anticipating a postelection legal challenge to such ballots. On

Election Day, local Republicans filed suit challenging the commonwealth’s rules allowing voters to recast ballots after their first ones were disqualified.

As the lawyers sharpen their arguments, they are most certainly looking at how judges on both the appellate courts and the U.S. Supreme Court have ruled. In prior preelection cases, judicial opinions have most often rested on one of two principles. The first is that courts should not make decisions that change the rules of voting and ballot counting too close to an election, to avoid confusing people. The second is that state legislatures—not judges—should determine election laws, even if those laws may result in some voters not having their ballots counted. “Federal courts have no business disregarding those state interests simply because the federal courts believe that later deadlines would be better,” Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote on Oct. 26 in a controversial opinion upholding Wisconsin’s Election Day deadline for receiving mail-in ballots.

Democrats and voting-rights activists, along with dissenting judges and Justices, argue that courts should make decisions that encourage enfranchisement, especially during a global pandemic. Chief Justice John Roberts has staked out the middle ground, arguing that state courts can interpret state laws but that federal courts should stay above the fray.

**AMID ALL THE SOLOMONIC PARSING**, good news may yet await Americans who are eager to see a quick, clean resolution to the presidential race. For one, the incoming litigation from the Trump and Biden campaigns may be moot if the final vote tallies aren’t razor thin. Even if a court rules on a case that results in thousands of ballots being invalidated, it may not change the final result. “We still have votes to count,” says Edward B. Foley, an election-law expert at Ohio State University. “It’s still possible the margins of victory in all the battleground states are decisive enough that it’s not going to be *Bush v. Gore*-type litigation.” It’s also possible important cases may be resolved quickly at the local level. That would prevent lengthy, high-profile fights at the Supreme Court that could tarnish the credibility of the election’s outcome.

Even if the fight does go up to the Supreme Court, there’s a clear end in sight. Under U.S. law, state electors are presumably valid if chosen by Dec. 8, and electors meet to cast their votes on Dec. 14. On Jan. 6, the newly sworn-in Congress counts the results and the Vice President pronounces them official. Which means even this unusually partisan and unruly moment in American democracy could help underscore one still reliable truth: all the bluster and litigiousness in the world can’t displace the rule of law. —*With reporting by* CHARLOTTE ALTER, CURRIE ENGEL *and* JULIA ZORTHIAN/NEW YORK *and* TESSA BERENSON *and* VERA BERGENGRUEN/WASHINGTON □



## VIEWPOINT

# POLARIZATION PREVAILED, AGAIN

*Our tribal loyalties remain too intense for one election to change anything*

BY DAVID FRENCH

ON THE MORNING OF ELECTION DAY, AMERICANS faced two competing narratives. On the one hand, there was a veritable avalanche of polling data indicating the possibility—even probability—of a blue-wave election not seen since Barack Obama's 2008 rout of John McCain.

On the other hand, we had decades of data and experience telling us that America was closely (and intensely) divided. Americans are by and large entrenched in their political and cultural tribes, and virtually nothing can budge them.

As the votes started to roll in, and the hopes of a blue-wave election dissipated, the electoral outcome grew momentarily cloudy just as the underlying national realities grew ever more clear. Once again, the polls were wrong. America remains deeply polarized, few voters are truly persuadable, and angry gridlock will likely dominate Washington.

Rarely in American history has so much happened and still changed so little. In the past year alone, the House impeached the President; a pandemic killed more than 232,000 Americans and seriously sickened countless more; we endured a historic economic collapse; and a shocking act of police brutality in Minneapolis ripped the scabs off America's racial divisions, leading to protests and civil unrest in cities and towns from coast to coast.

Any one of those events would be historic and traumatic. All of them together have rendered 2020 uniquely painful for the American public. Yet politically, it's remarkable how these seismic events have led to very little political change.

Take a look at the exit polls. In 2016, Donald Trump won 58% of the white vote. In 2020, he won 57%. In 2016, Hillary Clinton won 89% of the Black vote. In 2020, Joe Biden won 87%. In 2016, Clinton won 66% of the Hispanic vote. In 2020, Biden won 66%. Yes, the total margins adjusted very slightly—and those slight adjustments can make the differ-



Competing political signs dot the lawn of the Blue Ball Barn, an event space in Wilmington, Del.

## THE NATION'S POLITICS LOOKS LIKE A VERSION OF TRENCH WARFARE

ence between winning and losing in closely divided swing states—but the overall message was crystal clear. Our tribal loyalties remain intense.

**IT'S WORTH NOTING** here the role of the Electoral College and the Senate. It's virtually certain that the GOP has lost the popular vote for the seventh time in the past eight presidential elections, yet at the same time, it has no real reason to believe that either the presidency or the Senate is slipping from its grasp. The result is a sense of increasing political frustration from a majority of the nation, with no real path to reform the system.

And so the nation's politics looks like a version of trench warfare, where massive effort is expended to achieve the most incremental gains and the costs of stalemate only escalate.

Those emotional costs may well be the most consequential. As the Pew Research Center has noted, partisan antipathy is growing “more intense, more personal.” A supermajority of Democrats and Republicans view their opponents as “more closed-minded.” A supermajority of Republicans view Democrats as “more unpatriotic.”

But data is inadequate to capture the pain and intensity of human feelings. Our social media timelines are full of stories of broken relationships and fractured families. Many of us can tell stories of old friendships grown cold.

The presidency may change hands, but the fundamental reality of American politics and culture remains the same. Our nation is deeply divided, our partisans are very angry, and there is no immediate prospect for change.

*French is a columnist for TIME*



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## VIEWPOINT

# WHERE THE FAULT LIES

*It is unreasonable to keep expecting Black voters to save our democracy*

BY BRITNEY COOPER

SINCE THE 2000 ELECTION, THE FIRST IN WHICH I was old enough to vote, the Republican Party and the courts have worked together to disenfranchise voters on the left, who are disproportionately people of color. It is because of two sets of practices—voter suppression and the Electoral College, both rooted in American racism—that the 2020 presidential election is a nail-biter. It should not be.

The Trump presidency has been a failure. He was impeached for inviting foreign interference into U.S. elections. He has separated breastfeeding babies from their mothers and locked kids in cages at our border. He has encouraged white supremacists, failed to pay his taxes and mismanaged a pandemic costing more than a quarter-million American lives. There is no set of standards—professional or moral—by which he could be deemed a success.

But he may still be re-elected.

Like many Americans who love “liberty and justice for all,” I hope that Joe Biden and Kamala Harris will prevail. But if they don’t, it’s certainly not Black people’s fault. Let’s be clear: Donald Trump is the fault of white people. His rise is a direct result of white people’s collective rejection of the progress that the Obama era signaled. And it is time to point fingers. It is time for the Americans who elected him the first time, handing him the power of incumbency this time, to take responsibility. At some point, we must reckon as a country with the moral perversion of asking the people with the knee of the state on their necks to subdue their attackers. Yes, that is the African-American story—that we fled plantations and led slave revolts to demand our freedom. But that is not a reasonable expectation of citizens in a functioning democracy. The institution of slavery did not die until white Americans were willing to risk something to insist on a better way for the country.

**WE MUST STOP** holding as a broad cultural expectation the idea that African Americans need to overperform in the voting booth to stave off fascism. Black people, especially Black women, consistently show up in large numbers to insist that America does not have to go the way of white supremacists and fascists. Based on the early numbers in this elec-



▲  
A woman hands out Republican voter guides outside a polling location in Scottsdale, Ariz., on Nov. 3

tion, Black people could break records in places like Georgia and Texas. It is the energy that young Black voters are bringing back to the South—helped along by the vision of Stacey Abrams—that might actually change the political landscape of the country.

And it is white voters, and increasing numbers of men across racial demographics, who show up to kill the hope of an expanded democracy. If Trump wins, white Democrats might have to accept what so many of us who are not white already know: the future of the country is young, Black and brown. Those are the people who represent where progressive politics is headed, and it is their votes that should be courted.

As Abrams’ own trajectory proves, Black turnout alone cannot best state-sanctioned voter suppression. Liberal politicians and commentators need to remember this, too, as they try to explain what happened in this election. If Biden and Harris prevail, it will be because Black voters overwhelmed the system. But white people—all white people—must stop holding this as the expectation and the standard. White voters overperform in their support for white-supremacist candidates, and white folks must grapple with the reasons as we determine what the story of 21st century American politics will be.

*Cooper is the author of Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*

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## VIEWPOINT

# LONG ROAD TO A RECKONING

*The election revealed a stark divide in the fight for racial equality*

BY JUSTIN WORLAND

IN THE WEEKS BEFORE THE NOV. 3 ELECTION, as polling suggested that former Vice President Joe Biden might stand on the precipice of a landslide victory, many who had spent the past four years fighting President Donald Trump took solace in a silver lining: Trump, with his egregious behavior and his penchant for saying the quiet part out loud, had removed a bandage that in recent decades has hidden America's deepest defects on race. In doing so, many of his opponents believed, he had presented us with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fix them.

But election night brought a shock, if not a surprise, for those eager for the country to turn over a new leaf. While Biden remains favored to collect enough electoral votes to win and become the next President, the striking reality of the small gap between the two contenders left many despondent and fearful. This was not the total repudiation of Trump and Trumpism that so many had hoped for. Instead, in some quarters, it amounted to an embrace, with Trump actually increasing the total number of votes he'd received in 2016. Trump removed the gauze, but rather than healing the wound, we may now be watching it fester.

**IT'S NO SURPRISE** that many Americans are only now catching on to this country's long history of systemic racism. In history class, most Americans learn of the past horrors of slavery and Jim Crow, but the line isn't always drawn to the present. When it is, it's often presented as a long arc of progress, one that "bends toward justice," as famously described by Martin Luther King Jr. and often repeated in political rhetoric, most famously by President Barack Obama. But the reality is that race—and racism—continues to profoundly shape American life.

Four years of Trump have accelerated the learning. The COVID-19 pandemic—which has killed people of color at higher rates than their white counterparts—has exposed the health disparities that divide this country. His campaign for "law and order" has only inflamed tensions and fur-



▲  
*A projector is set up at a George Floyd memorial in Minneapolis for the community to watch election results*

ther highlighted the mistreatment that many Black Americans are likely to face at the hands of law enforcement. He attempted to schedule a rally on Juneteenth in Tulsa, Okla., the site of a 1921 massacre of Black people, inadvertently bringing attention to both the history of violence against Black Americans and the Juneteenth holiday, which celebrates the freeing of the enslaved. And that was just this year.

Some white Americans have reacted with outrage to this newfound understanding, joining Black Lives Matter rallies and reckoning with race



nance with the larger American public—had started to fade. Why that happened and what can be done about it will be the work of the months to come.

When it came time to vote, tens of millions of Americans evidently shrugged off the racism. Many say they don't like Trump's handling of race but prefer his approach to the economy. That makes sense: sacrificing the welfare of a minority group for economic prosperity may not be uniquely American, but it is a part of the American DNA. For some others, Trump's stoking of racial hostilities has been more a feature of his presidency than a bug. At Trump's rallies, adoring crowds repeated and amplified the President, whether it was his reference to COVID-19 as "Kung flu" or adopting a chant of "Send her back" in reference to Ilhan Omar, a member of Congress born in Somalia.

**FOR CENTURIES, POLITICAL LEADERS** in the U.S. have used race as a cudgel to shore up support from white Americans, particularly those for whom racial hierarchy afforded a sense of status they otherwise lacked. White Southerners supported slavery—going as far as fighting and dying over it in the Civil War—even though most of them could not afford to own a slave. They did so because it gave them a higher social status. In the 1960s Richard Nixon used the infamous Southern strategy, which created the current electoral map, to stir up fear of Black empowerment and persuade white Southerners to vote for him.

These are Trump's strategic predecessors. Immersed in data, his campaign built an engagement strategy around speaking to his largely unwavering base and motivating new, largely white voters sold on Trump's personality and showmanship and his message of grievance. Not relying similarly on data, Trump still effectively channels his campaign's messaging with constantly calibrated applause lines to test what energizes his audience. Trump's fanning the flames of racial resentment tells us a lot about who he is; his crowd's roaring response tells us more about where we are as a nation.

Biden is deeply aware of this fissure. He ran on healing it, and exit polls show he won over voters concerned about racial justice. Betting that most Americans believe in equality and justice, among other democratic values, Biden referred to his campaign as a "battle for the soul of the nation." With more than 70 million votes received and counting, Biden

may be favored to win the election, but to uproot the forces that perpetuate the deeply entrenched racism in this country, it'll take more than maybe half the country. □

in the workplace, at school and with friends. The marches this summer that captured the nation's attention, occurring in small towns and metropolises alike, are thought to be the largest mass demonstration in American history, collectively drawing nearly 9% of the country to the streets, according to data-science firm Civism Analytics.

And yet nothing really changed. Gridlock in Washington stymied even modest reform efforts. Trump doubled down, using the unrest to stoke his base's fears of social unrest and crime with a seemingly endless stream of shock-and-awe television ads and dramatic rhetoric in his speeches. By the end of the summer, the marches still continued, but their strength—and, most important, their reso-

## TRUMP'S FANNING THE FLAMES OF RACIAL RESENTMENT TELLS US A LOT ABOUT WHO HE IS



< Tea drinkers in Istanbul watch one of President Trump's press conferences

## VIEWPOINT

# AMERICA'S FALTERING GLOBAL ROLE

*The results suggest that the U.S. won't reclaim its leadership role anytime soon*

BY IAN BREMMER

IT'S ONLY FITTING THAT THE MOST DIVISIVE U.S. election in recent memory would end in a most divisive election-eve finish—one that will have consequences for America's standing in the world.

As of this writing, the ballot count continues to be under way. President Donald Trump wasted little time before declaring victory, setting himself up to later claim that his opponents were trying to “steal” the election. For Trump—a President who has shown remarkably little concern for the long-term health and legitimacy of U.S. democracy—refusing to concede makes all the sense in the world. Beyond the powers of the presidency itself, Trump's current and future command of the Republican Party is at stake, as is his ability to use the powers of the presidency to shield himself from financial and legal troubles. The chances of Trump's gracefully conceding an election loss were always vanishingly slim.

While there remains a good chance that Joe Biden emerges victorious once all the ballots have been counted, a Biden loss will be devastating for Democratic supporters, many of whom could also

## DYSFUNCTION AT HOME WILL MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR THE U.S. TO LEAD BY EXAMPLE

feel that the election was “rigged” against them.

Regardless of the way the final presidential tally shakes out, one thing is increasingly clear—in 2020, there is no advanced industrial democracy more politically divided than the U.S. is today. Trump's overperformance in the election relative to poll expectations solidifies that fact, and makes clear that the divisions in the U.S. electorate are more structural and ingrained than many political pundits had hoped heading into November.

**THE FACT THAT** neither side looks like it will quickly concede the election doesn't mean that the U.S. is on the verge of becoming an authoritarian state; its democratic institutions, though admittedly weakened in recent years, still remain firmly entrenched, and the overall level of U.S. wealth continues to provide some cushion. But the U.S. is increasingly moving away from being a true, functional representative democracy in the mold of a Canada or Germany—where the direct will of the people is reflected in government policy and their elected leaders, and is widely accepted by the losing side—and is moving more toward being a hybrid political system, such as we now see in Hungary and Turkey. It isn't quite that bad just yet, but it is trending worryingly in that direction.

Regardless of who ends up being sworn in as U.S. President, that means more dysfunctional U.S. politics at home, and a weaker U.S. international presence when compared with that of the past 50 years. On the domestic front, expect arguments over political processes and policy issues like free trade and immigration to continue raging and to divide the country; social media will also continue to drive the polarization of Americans of all political stripes. That dysfunction at home will in turn make it difficult for the U.S. to lead by example on vital issues like climate change and tech regulation. Or to face China with a united front on tough issues like trade and security. That's true even if Biden does ultimately secure the presidency, as he will likely face a Republican Senate and be limited in how much political capital he can expend on foreign policy.

The world was looking for a “statement election” from the U.S. It got one; expect the next four years of U.S. politics, at home and abroad, to look more like the past four rather than the past 50.

*Bremmer is a TIME columnist and president of the Eurasia Group*

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World

# The Bulwark of Budapest

Democracy is wilting in Hungary. Can Gergely Karacsony save it? **By Vivienne Walt/Budapest**

ON A RECENT AUTUMNAL NIGHT IN BUDAPEST, about 1,000 people jammed the narrow street outside the city's prestigious University of Theatre and Film Arts, as speakers on a makeshift podium railed against Hungary's far-right Prime Minister Viktor Orban. "We have had enough of this civil war!" bellowed the filmmaker Szabolcs Hajdu, just hours after the government effectively removed the school's longtime leaders and replaced them with Orban's political loyalists. "This is not just about the university," Hajdu shouted. "It is about the whole country."

The crowd needed little persuasion that their country was inching toward authoritarianism. Orban and his Fidesz party won overwhelming control of Hungary's parliament in early 2010 and set about building what the Prime Minister himself calls an "illiberal democracy." In the decade since, Hungarians have seen judges and bureaucrats appointed for their political fealty, the media transformed into pro-government propaganda and civil-society groups starved of resources.

Then came the pandemic. With the world in crisis and Hungary under lockdown,

Orban declared emergency measures in March, granting himself the power to bypass parliament and rule by decree. COVID-19 data was to be strictly controlled, with doctors telling inquiring politicians and journalists that they were forbidden to talk publicly about the crisis. Those who criticized the government online faced arrest. On paper, the emergency measures expired in June, but the government's grip on power has not loosened. What few remaining independent news sites remain are being silenced, and public universities like the University of Theatre and Film Arts are being privatized, with control handed to Orban's allies. In May, the Washington-based rights group Freedom House said Hungary no longer qualifies as a full democracy.

Opposition parties fight among themselves, and the E.U., which ostensibly requires member states to operate as democracies and free of corruption, has proved toothless. Orban has brazenly flouted Europe's rules ensuring press freedom and an independent judiciary.

Yet here on the streets of Budapest, there are finally signs that Orban's rise might have



*Karacsony in Budapest's city hall on Aug. 26. The opposition now has a "real chance" of uniting in victory, he says*



peaked. In a shock victory in October last year, Gergely Karacsony, a 45-year-old former member of parliament from the left-wing environmental party Dialogue, ousted one of Orbán's strongest allies, who had presided over the capital since 2010. Losing Budapest, which makes up more than a third of Hungary's economy and has one-fifth of its population, dealt a body blow to Orbán, suggesting for the first time that he might be susceptible to a challenge. "It really brought a spiritual boost," says Akos Hadhazy, an opposition member of parliament. Before, he says, "people just did not believe it was possible to win against Orbán."

Now, after a year in his mayoral suite in the capital's grand 18th century city hall, Karacsony (pronounced Ka-rat-shawng) has been thrust into a leading role, attempting to knit together an opposition capable of toppling Orbán. Hungary is scheduled to hold parliamentary elections by April 2022 at the latest. Although Orbán has a commanding two-thirds majority in parliament, a fourth term in office no longer seems entirely inevitable. "We have a real chance now against Orbán, the biggest chance we have had in 10 years," Karacsony tells me one drizzly September morning in Budapest. "But 2022 might be the last chance... If Orbán stays in power, the hollowing out of democratic institutions will be complete."

**KARACSONY DOES NOT SEEM** an obvious figure for a knife fight against Europe's pre-eminent strongman. He lists among his passions jazz and cycling, and when he speaks about Hungary's political battle, it is in soft tones and measured phrases.

Yet it was he who emerged as the consensus mayoral candidate among five squabbling opposition parties in October 2019, after five years as the elected leader of one of the city's districts. Perhaps not believing he would actually defeat the incumbent, a stalwart Orbán ally, he watched the election results come in from a small bistro surrounded by only close aides and friends.

Up in the old mayor's office, Karacsony is now tackling the city's deepest crisis in years. Only a handful of months into his term, the first cases of COVID-19 began showing up in Hungarian hospitals. From the start, Karacsony

realized he would need to fight hard against a hostile government to get Budapest its fair share of help. He says he was stunned to be invited in April to meet government officials to discuss coordinating their crisis response. Karacsony told them Budapest was in dire need of cash, in part to replace revenues lost from public transportation, since city buses and trains were at a standstill under the lockdown.

But the government's gesture of inclusiveness was hollow, he says. By introducing the emergency laws, allowing it to operate without consultation, Orbán had ensured an all-out collision with his critics. "It was a trap," Karacsony says. "It was something the opposition parties could not possibly vote for... That's how he created the illusion that the opposition

'2022 might be the last chance ... If Orbán stays in power, the hollowing out of democratic institutions will be complete.'

was obstructing the rolling out of the pandemic measures."

As the pandemic wore on, Orbán's government dramatically tightened the flow of information on COVID-19, ignoring media requests for more detailed data on infections and deaths. At the same time, Karacsony says, the Prime Minister's allies channeled public funds away from opposition municipalities and to their own localities.

It all served to help persuade Karacsony to play a leading role in convening the opposition. In August, he helped coordinate a virtual meeting among leaders of six opposition parties, to begin plotting their strategy to oust Orbán. Topping the agenda was an agreement not to field competing candidates against him, a factor that had allowed Orbán sweeping wins.

Sitting in his office, Karacsony says that in order to defeat Fidesz, opposition politicians must be unified. "Once that is done, the opposition can focus

on attracting swing voters in the middle," he says. He believes they should also avoid making the election all about Orbán. Instead, they should forge a new, unified platform, including improved public health and reviving the economy, which has been battered by the pandemic. "We should not even mention Orbán's name," he says.

The opposition may yet be helped by the E.U., whose leadership is finally considering whether to act against its most renegade member. In Brussels, politicians have spent months arguing over whether to make investment from its \$887 billion pandemic recovery fund contingent on Hungary's committing to rein in corruption and protect democracy. "There's a very, very hard discussion about whether E.U. should punish them for the rule of law," says Katalin Cseh, a Hungarian lawmaker in the E.U. Parliament opposed to Orbán and Fidesz.

In September, the European leadership issued a first-of-its-kind report into the rule of law in Europe that heavily criticized Hungary, detailing multiple allegations of corruption and abuses of judicial independence. Vera Jourova, the bloc's values and transparency commissioner, described Hungary as an "ill democracy," prompting Orbán to demand her resignation. Cseh says that unless Brussels now places conditions on the coronavirus relief funds, corruption will grow worse. "If the E.U. continues to stand by idly while the Orbán regime siphons off taxpayers' funds to oligarchs," she says, "it will be very hard to fix in the long term."

Karacsony too sees this as a tipping point, accelerated by the deep economic crisis. In mid-October, he led a group of opposition mayors across Hungary to demand that the government funnel half the COVID-19 relief funds it is due to receive from the E.U. directly to their cities. They fear that Orbán might otherwise direct the money to mayors who support him.

If that happens, Karacsony says, Orbán's years of financing his political allies might finally backfire. He is betting that as the recession deepens, Hungarians might question more closely why some of them have grown extraordinarily rich through the Orbán decade. Not even Orbán will be able to avert the pandemic-related downturn, and this time there are no foreigners or E.U. politicians to blame. "They have



been governing on an economic upswing since 2010,” Karacsony says. “Now, they have a real crisis to manage.”

Winning Budapest is one thing. But take a drive out of the capital, past the city’s cafés, stores and theaters, and it quickly becomes clear how difficult it might be to unseat Orbán. The Prime Minister retains huge popularity in the heartland, boosted by years of gerrymandering of electoral districts.

Here in small-town Hungary, many still regard Orbán as their protector against outside dark forces, and a booster of conservative values. “The Prime Minister gives people energy,” says Zoltan Tessely, a veteran Orbán ally and Fidesz member who serves as the mayor of Bicske, a town of 12,000 people 30 minutes west of Budapest. “He just gives people a good feeling.”

Some of that “good feeling” draws from Orbán’s hard-line anti-immigration views. He won in 2018 on a fierce nationalist message, telling people that Europe’s “Christian heritage” was at risk from refugees arriving from the Middle East and

▲  
*Karacsony’s election in October 2019 was the first electoral defeat for Fidesz in nine years*

North Africa. Although few refugees wanted to settle in Hungary, Orbán’s fear-mongering hit home nonetheless.

Europe’s migrant arrivals have been steadily declining since 2015, yet among Orbán supporters, it is still a hot issue. The government has severely restricted immigration to Hungary, instead trying to boost birth rates with payments to families for each child born and lifetime tax-free status for women who have four children or more.

**COVID-19 HAS** only served to strengthen nationalist sentiment among Orbán supporters, many of whom see the virus as just another would-be invader. “The migration crisis can easily be connected with this pandemic,” Tessely says. “People came in infected with COVID,” he says. “The pandemic is worse among the migration trail.”

Prevailing against those messages will require an all-out effort from Orbán’s critics—and perhaps a unity candidate. Karacsony demurs when asked whether he himself will run against Orbán in 18 months. But he is now the leading voice of an emerging political force. His reluctance to declare his ambitions to be Prime Minister, allies believe, could be in order to spare Budapest, and himself, being the target of months of vitriol from Orbán.

Increasingly, though, he sounds like he is preparing for battle. In an impassioned speech outside city hall on Oct. 23, the anniversary of the country’s uprising against the Soviet Union in 1956, he implored Hungarians to fight for freedom against authoritarian rule, just as their forebears had done decades ago. “No power should ever define itself as the country it rules,” he said, aiming his anger at Orbán. “What makes a strong leader is his ability to unite, rather than divide, people.” —*With reporting by GABI HORN/BUDAPEST and MADELINE ROACHE/LONDON* □

# Pregnant Pause

WOMEN ARE DECIDING NOT TO HAVE BABIES BECAUSE OF THE PANDEMIC. THAT'S BAD FOR EVERYONE

BY ELIANA DOCKTERMAN

► SHELBY PARKER PLANNED TO GET PREGNANT this year. The timing seemed right: She was working as a middle-school teacher in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, a job that provided benefits for her whole family. Her husband, who drives a truck for FedEx, had just gotten a promotion. Their 21-month-old daughter was nearly ready for preschool.

Now Parker, 29, is contemplating not trying for a second child at all. The state, deprived of tax revenues because of business closures resulting from the coronavirus, cut public-school funding by \$300 million. The school has warned teachers that there may be a round of layoffs before the end of the year. As the pandemic rages on, Parker and her husband worry that she could end up out of work. If that happens, they'll be left without health insurance.

If things were different—if Parker had confidence in the economy, in her chances of avoiding exposure to the coronavirus on the days she teaches in person, in the government's ability to control the spread of the virus—she'd be pregnant already. "I'm grieving for the family I thought I would have," she says.

Economists and fertility experts say hundreds of thousands of American women are making the same decision. A June report from the Brookings



Her job threatened by the pandemic, Shelby Parker and her husband Ben have put off plans for a second child



# Society

Institution estimated that the U.S. would see as many as 500,000 fewer births in 2021, a 13% drop from the 3.8 million babies born in 2019. Telehealth clinic Nurx has seen a 50% jump in requests for birth control since the beginning of the pandemic and a 40% increase in requests for Plan B. A survey from the Guttmacher Institute found that 34% of sexually active women in the U.S. have decided either to delay getting pregnant or to have fewer children because of concerns arising from COVID-19. Lower-income women were most likely to want to put off having a baby; that's especially true among Black and Latinx women, who have suffered disproportionate income and job losses this year.

On top of financial worries, the pandemic has plagued would-be mothers with a host of other concerns, including hospital rules that might banish partners from the delivery room and the risk of exposing relatives to illness if they're needed to provide childcare. And of course, parents are worried about the health of the mother and baby: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported on Nov. 2 that pregnant women who contract the virus face an increased risk of death and are more likely than nonpregnant women to need intensive care. Pregnant women with COVID-19 also appear to be more likely to deliver preterm. And Los Angeles County recently reported the first COVID-19 cases in newborns in the U.S. Katie Hartman, 34, lives in Florida, one of the states hardest hit by the coronavirus, and is considering a home birth if she decides to get pregnant. "You never know when another spike will come, and it just seems wise to avoid the hospital," she says.

The long-term impact of such delays could be staggering. The U.S. fertility rate is the lowest it has been since 1985. By 2034, Americans over age 65 are expected to outnumber those under 18 for the first time in U.S. history. Already, the country faces a severe dearth of workers able to drive the economy and care for our aging population.

Demographers and women's-rights advocates say the looming baby bust is a damning indictment of the nation's health care and childcare systems. The U.S. is the only developed country that does not guarantee paid leave to new parents, and it does not offer universal childcare or universal pre-K. "COVID set off a bomb in the middle of these jerry-rigged ways of getting by in this country that individual families had created," says Emily Martin of the National Women's Law Center. "It's no wonder parents don't want to deal with having a newborn right now."

A July survey from the Mom Project, a startup that pairs mothers who have dropped out of the workforce with new jobs, found that U.S. moms are twice as likely as dads to leave their jobs in 2020 because of the strains



## 'THE BIRTH RATE IS A BAROMETER OF DESPAIR.'

—DOWELL MYERS, POPULATION DYNAMICS RESEARCH GROUP, USC

of juggling work and family care during the pandemic. The Bureau of Labor Statistics found that four times more women than men dropped out of the workforce in September alone. Studies show that women who leave the workplace, even for just a year, suffer financial consequences for the rest of their lives.

After decades of fighting for equal pay and opportunities in the workplace, women are once again left with a choice: Have a career, or have a baby?

**MARGARET OGDEN**, a 33-year-old lawyer in Richmond, Va., had been waiting until her husband, a doctor, finished residency before trying to get pregnant. She figured she could lean on her mother for



help with childcare. Now, her husband is working in a hospital where he might be exposed to the virus, so her plan is on hold. Asking her mother to babysit is out of the question, and Ogden knows she'd likely be left to juggle childcare and work on her own. "As a lawyer, you can't really work part time, and full time is a lot more hours than some other professions," she says. "I have friends who are honest and vulnerable about what's happening, and they feel like they're not being good parents or good employees." Even before the coronavirus, she saw high-powered female lawyers forced to take on less ambitious work when they had children. The ones who stayed demonstrated grit difficult to emulate. "Choices for working couples were never great to begin with," she says. "They're impossible now."

The situation is worse for would-be parents who don't have the option of working from home. Aaron Jarvis, 33, has an endometriosis diagnosis that could make getting pregnant difficult, so she and her husband Marty discussed starting their family soon. But

▲  
*Aaron and Marty Jarvis must both go in to offices to work, risky for a pregnancy*

Jarvis, who works in human resources in Detroit, and her husband, who works at Chrysler, were told they must come in to work despite the pandemic.

Even if she felt comfortable going to an office while pregnant during a pandemic, Jarvis had to wonder how the family would manage after the baby was born. Taking vacation days to care for an infant would be financially risky: "With everything being so iffy and businesses closing and layoffs, would I have a job to go back to?"

And then there's the issue of accessible childcare. The childcare industry has been slammed by the pandemic, according to a July survey from the National Association for the Education of Young Children. It predicted that without substantial government investment, 40% of childcare programs surveyed would be forced to close because of low enrollment and higher operating costs. "We decided we're probably not going to have a kid until coronavirus is gone gone," says Jarvis. "And that might be a few years. And that's O.K."

But demographers say that if women delay having babies at any point in their lives, it's more likely that they won't have children at all or won't have as many as they originally planned. "Women see a major crunch. They have to complete their education, get their careers started, find a partner and have babies—if they plan to do that—in just a 10-year span," says Dowell Myers, the director of the Population Dynamics Research Group at the University of Southern California. Even as advances in health care have allowed women to delay pregnancy, women are having fewer babies total than their mothers and grandmothers did.

Millennials, the 24- to 39-year-olds most likely to consider having a child right now, already had their life plans delayed because of the Great Recession. They're achieving career milestones later, buying houses later and having kids later than previous generations. Myers says that if hundreds of thousands of millennial women choose to delay pregnancy even longer, "we're looking at a fundamental and unprecedented change to our population."

Many women are asking existential questions about whether they should bring a child into such a scary world. Haley Neidich, a 35-year-old therapist in South Pasadena, Fla., has decided not to get pregnant until "the pandemic is over," but she's still trying to figure out what "over" means. Her previous two pregnancies—one of which ended in miscarriage shortly before she began to quarantine—were tough. She experienced debilitating nausea that, if she were to get pregnant again, would make it hard to care for the toddler she already has. She has nightmares about the possibility of another miscarriage and of being forced to go to the doctor alone for a heartbreaking surgery if that came to pass.

## Baby bust

Many experts initially believed couples would spend quarantine conceiving more babies. But analysts now predict up to 500,000 fewer births in the U.S. next year

But that may be a risk she has to take. “I still believe in a world where I go to brunch and get to take pictures of my pregnant belly with my friends,” she says. “But maybe for women 35 and older, that’s unrealistic. That’s not going to be the reality of pregnancy in the near future, and maybe I need to adjust my expectations for what pregnancy is.”

**EARLY IN THE PANDEMIC**, many people assumed that quarantine would be temporary, delays in plans minimal. “Everyone’s initial reaction was there was going to be a baby boom because there’s only so much to watch on Netflix,” says Phillip Levine, a professor of economics at Wellesley College in Massachusetts and co-author of the Brookings study predicting a baby bust.

That carefree version of quarantine was a fantasy. More than 232,000 people have died in the U.S., and the pandemic remains out of control. At its peak so far, more than 40 million people in the U.S. were unemployed. “If you don’t have enough food, you’re probably not thinking this is a good time to have a kid,” says Levine.

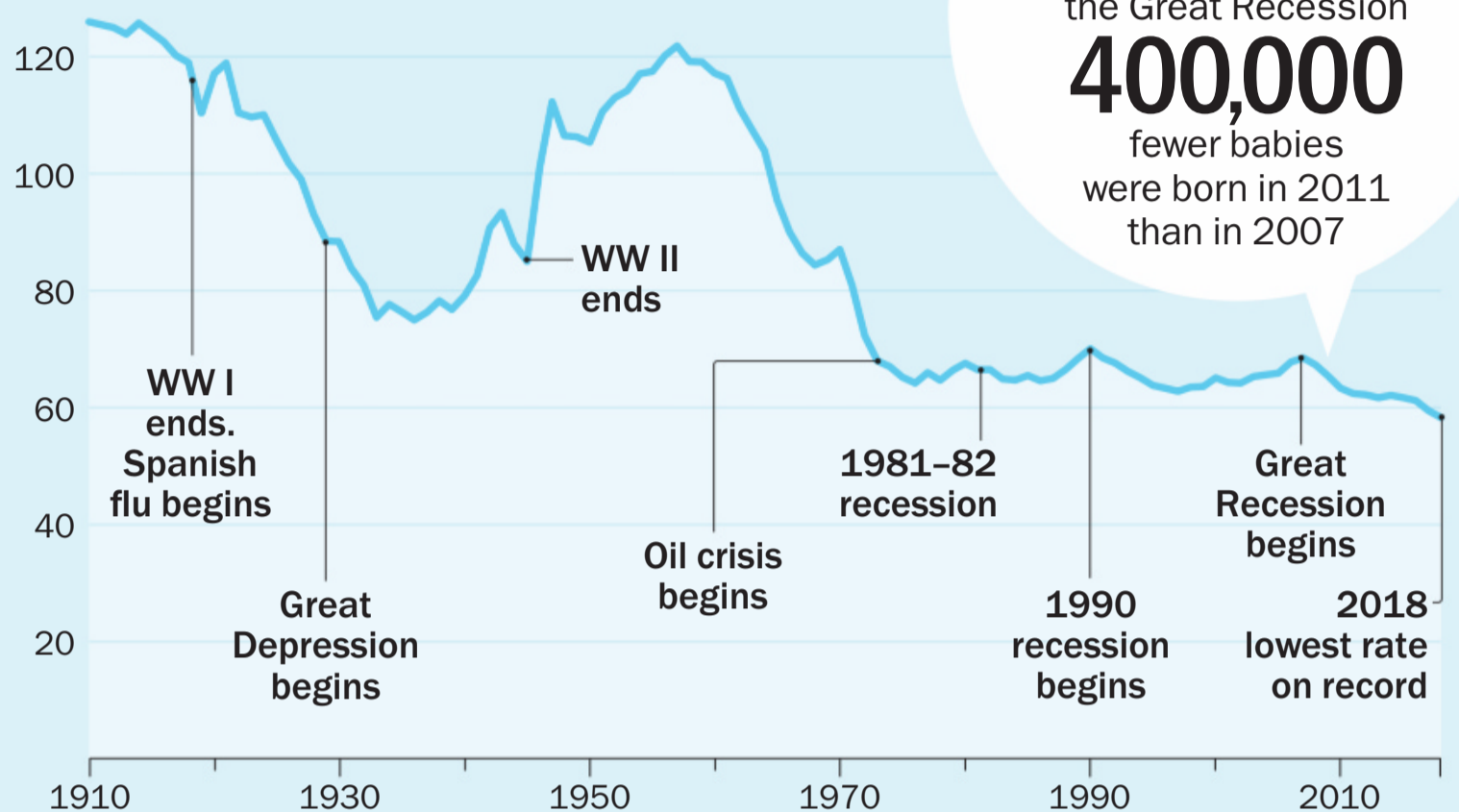
The flu of 1918 is the only real modern comparison point for the current COVID-19 crisis. Levine and his co-author, Melissa Kearney of the University of Maryland, examined data from that time and found that major spikes in death rates during the two-year pandemic corresponded with a 12.5% decline in birth rates nine months later.

But in 1918, America was in the midst of World War I and factories were open: the country was not facing the same unemployment rates that it does now. Recessions also tend to lead to precipitous drops in birth rates. After the 2007–2009 Great Recession, America saw a 9% decrease in the birth rate over the course of five years, with about 400,000 fewer babies born in 2011 than were born in 2007. States hit harder by the recession saw more dramatic declines. Levine and Kearney have found that every 1% increase in unemployment translates to a 1.4% drop in birth rate. There are additional reasons to expect the birth rate to drop this year: stress, which is bad for fertility, and access to birth control, which did not exist in 1918.

Birth rates in America had been dropping for 34 years before 2020, except for a brief uptick in 2017, and recently fell below replacement level, the fertility rate that would keep the size of the population the same from one generation to the next. Ideally, age distribution in a population looks like a pyramid, with fewer older people at the top and a larger base of young people at the bottom. For the first time in U.S. history, that distribution is changing. From 1970 to 2011, the ratio of seniors (ages 65 and older) to working-age people was steady at 24 to 100, according to a calculation by Myers. Now, that ratio looks more like 48 to 100. “There is twice as heavy a load of older people as before,” he says. “If you then have shrinkage in the number of babies born, you’re going to undermine this ratio even more in future years.”

Potential parents may now fear health risks associated with hospital visits, but the birth rate is also linked to confidence in the economy

BIRTHS PER 1,000 U.S. WOMEN, 15–44



SOURCES: BROOKINGS INSTITUTION, JUNE; POPULATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE; NATIONAL CENTER FOR HEALTH STATISTICS; PEW SURVEY OF U.S. ADULTS CONDUCTED AUG. 3–16. UPPER INCOME: FAMILIES MAKING MORE THAN \$119,400; LOWER INCOME: FAMILIES MAKING LESS THAN \$39,800; U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

The birth rate decreased **9%** in the five years following the Great Recession  
**400,000** fewer babies were born in 2011 than in 2007

The long-term implications are profound. Fewer young people means fewer potential military recruits. Fewer workers means a lower GDP and fewer people contributing to Social Security. And the way nations typically make up workforce shortfalls is by allowing in more immigrants, an issue that already has polarized the country.

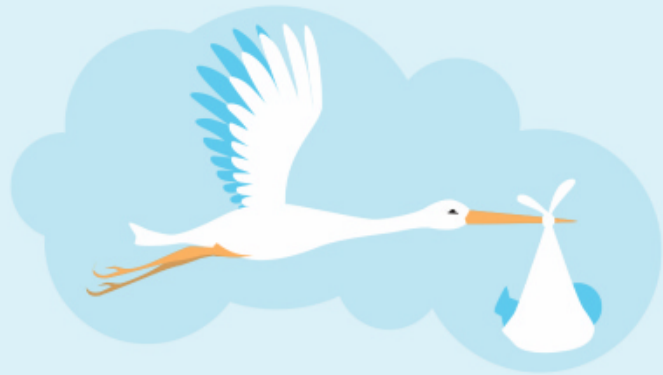
When birth rates fell to a 32-year low in 2018, despite economic growth, demographers puzzled

**‘WITH EVERYTHING SO IFFY AND BUSINESSES CLOSING ... WOULD I HAVE A JOB TO GO BACK TO?’**

—AARON JARVIS

over why people were putting off pregnancy or deciding not to have children at all. At the time, Myers said, “the birth rate is a barometer of despair,” explaining that young people will not plan for babies if they are not optimistic about the future. Now, he says, we’ve reached a new level of despair.

**WOMEN’S-RIGHTS ADVOCATES** say the alternative to a major drop in birth rate may be a mass exodus of women from the workforce. One in four women



2019 **3.8 million**

2021 **3.3 million**

More than 60 million people have lost their jobs since March. Black and Latinx workers have been hit hardest

AMERICANS HAVING TROUBLE PAYING RENT OR MORTGAGE SINCE FEBRUARY

All adults **16%**

White **11%**

Hispanic **26%**

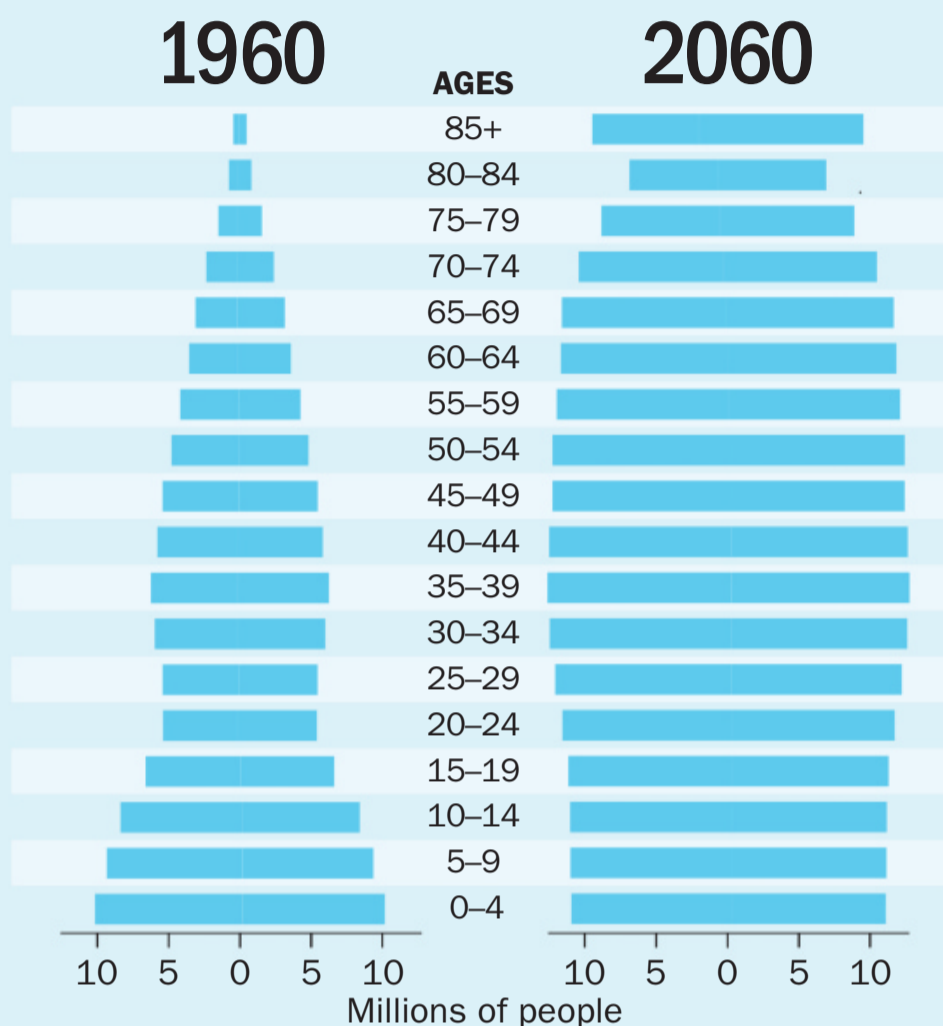
Black **28%**

Upper income **3%**

Lower income **32%**

Those over 65 are projected to outnumber those under 18 by 2034

POPULATION BY AGE GROUP



is considering downshifting her career or leaving the workforce because of COVID-19, according to a Lean In and McKinsey survey of 12 million workers at 317 companies. It's the first time in six years of conducting this annual study on women in the workplace that the researchers have seen evidence of women intending to leave their jobs at higher rates than men. Across industries, women still get paid less than men, so most straight couples calculate that it makes financial sense for the woman to step back. "We're seeing men's careers take priority, for economic reasons but also really ingrained social reasons," says Allison Robinson, CEO of the Mom Project. "That leaves women to make the tough choices."

As Jarvis contemplated whether to get pregnant this year, she watched friends struggle to balance work and newborns. "It was just fight or flight," she says. "I see their kids running around in the back of video calls or crying and think, How sustainable could this actually be?"

When women leave work even temporarily, their long-term earning potential plummets. The Institute for Women's Policy Research conducted a study that found the earnings over time of women who took one year off work between 2001 and 2015 were 39% lower than those of women who didn't take time off. The exit of large numbers of women from the workforce hurts the economy as a whole.

their children without losing out on crucial work experience. The Mom Project also partnered with several of America's largest corporations to create a \$500,000 fund to provide grants to companies to save working mothers' jobs.

Robinson points to tech companies, which have fared better than most sectors this year, as leaders in the effort to accommodate working parents. Google, Facebook and Salesforce have offered extra time off to parents. (Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff and Lynne Benioff own TIME.) Amazon, Netflix and Nvidia are paying for employee memberships to services like Care.com, which provide backup childcare to parents. Twitter has set up a virtual summer camp for employees' kids. Microsoft piloted a four-day workweek in Japan last year and reported a 40% boost in productivity from workers in those offices, and the Mom Project is advocating for companies to mimic that program in the U.S.

But as long as children stay home from school and day care, these programs will be mere Band-Aids. "I have not seen anyone come up with a bold solution to this problem," Robinson says. "For single moms, moms who rely on hourly wages, moms with kids home from school but without access to wi-fi, it's a matter of survival."

Women have largely been left to fend for themselves. Parker has returned to teaching, part time over video chat and part time in person. She worries that if one kid in her class tests positive for COVID-19 and if she develops symptoms, she would have to use sick days and vacation time that she carefully saved for a future maternity leave. Everything about her future—her work, her economic stability, her family plans—feels precarious. "At a certain point, we have to draw a line," she says. "Are we going to take our chances and try to conceive, or do we just say no more kids? Probably no more kids. It's the smart move. But I'm just so angry."

—With reporting by MARIAH ESPADA and SIMMONE SHAH

Women surpassed men to make up the majority of the U.S. workforce this year before the pandemic hit. "We need to make it as easy as possible for women to balance child-rearing and their careers," says Myers. "It's not about individual women. It's about the fate of the country."

America is particularly ill-equipped to support mothers right now, especially those who cannot work from home and must use day-care centers that are upping their prices to survive. "Gender inequity is a worldwide problem," says Martin of the National Women's Law Center. "But what we don't see in other countries, but do see in the U.S., is the way having a child is closely associated with a real risk of poverty." The pandemic has shone a new light on our long gestating childcare crisis: During the presidential campaign, Joe Biden proposed free pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds, plus childcare tax credits for some families and financial help for the childcare industry.

The Mom Project has begun working with companies to institute policies that would afford parents more options: flexible schedules for mothers who cannot log on until after their child has gone to sleep, for instance, and part-time shifts to ensure they can watch



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The advertisement features three devices displaying TIME for Kids content. On the left, a tablet shows the 'Digital Library' interface with a red header and a grid of article cards. The first card features Ruth Bader Ginsburg with the text 'Ruth Bader Ginsburg' and 'October 2, 2020'. The second card is titled 'Fast Forward' with the subtext 'Scientists are racing to develop a coronavirus vaccine.' and 'September 25, 2020'. In the center, a smartphone displays a 'COVER SPACE' article titled 'SPACE JUNK' with a sub-headline 'Debris is floating around the Earth. What's being done to fix this growing problem?' and an inset image of space junk collectors. On the right, a tablet displays the magazine cover for 'OCTOBER 23, 2020 • VOL. 11 • NO. 7' featuring a globe surrounded by space debris and the headline 'SPACE WASTE'. A circular badge in the bottom right corner of the image contains the text 'FIRST TIME EVER!'.

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# Time Off

## COUNTRY STRONG

Lauren Jenkins is among the country artists riding an unlikely pandemic wave



## INSIDE

THE AUTHOR OF GOSSIP GIRL RETURNS TO NEW YORK

AWARDS SEASON IN A YEAR WITHOUT THEATERS

AN ILLICIT AFFAIR ON FX ON HULU'S A TEACHER

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIELLE DEL VALLE

*Time Off* is reported by Mariah Espada, Simone Shah and Julia Zorthian



## MUSIC

# Country music's unlikely boom

By Andrew R. Chow

**W**HEN THE CORONAVIRUS HIT THE U.S., GABBY Barrett's breakout year was thrown into peril. The 20-year-old country singer-songwriter had just found her footing in Nashville with the steady rise of her fiery breakup single, "I Hope." She planned to build on the momentum with a debut album and a global tour with country idol Brad Paisley. Instead, the tour was canceled, forcing Barrett into the longest break of her life. "It was strange not being on the road," she says. "It's pretty much all that I know."

It looked as if country music itself were facing hard times. The scaling back of the physical spaces where the genre thrives—concert halls and bars; radio and concert tours—emphasized its vulnerability in the virtual realm. Having long prided itself on resisting the technological changes that have transformed the music industry, country risked falling even further behind hip-hop and pop, which dominate apps like TikTok and streaming services that now represent 80% of total music-industry revenue. Barrett, for her part, settled into home life, soon to learn that she would be expecting her first child.

Then something unexpected happened: "I Hope" exploded in popularity, topping the three major *Billboard* country charts and becoming the first debut single by a woman to top *Billboard*'s Country Streaming Songs chart. Meanwhile,

^  
*Gabby Barrett's career rose to unexpected heights this year with the success of her breakout song, "I Hope"*

the genre broke out at large, hitting a record number of streams for three weeks in a row, while pop, hip-hop and Latin all sank below their baseline averages. iHeartRadio's country stations, too, rose 7.4% from winter to spring.

Country's popularity has only grown during the pandemic. While the overall industry has risen only 2.6% on streaming services compared with its baseline pre-COVID numbers, country music has soared 15.8%, according to MRC Data/Nielsen Music. Country-music concerts have been among the first to spring back across the U.S.—at varying levels of social distancing—while rising stars like Luke Combs, Morgan Wallen and Barrett are racking up huge streaming numbers and crossing over into mainstream success. "Country music has thrived," says Tom Poleman, iHeartRadio's chief programming officer.

Experts suggest the reasons for this are both emotional and technological, as some listeners seek comfort in the soothing, nostalgic qualities of the genre, while others who previously disdained streaming platforms finally caved and subscribed. But while these factors might be temporary, they are also building a new foundation for country's digital-era resurgence. Its fans' increasing willingness to engage on digital platforms, combined with its artists' explorations beyond Nashville conventions of songwriting and sound, could move the genre back toward the center of mainstream consciousness. "Because all these writers and singer-songwriters are stuck at home, I fully expect Nashville to start pumping out some of its best work in years," says Johnny Chiang, director of operations at Cox Media Group Houston, which includes country stations KKBQ and KTHT.

**IT'S NOT A NEW PHENOMENON** for country music to rise and fall with the seasons. A representative for Nielsen says they expect country-music listenership to increase during the warmer half of the year, when the genre serves as the soundtrack for cookouts, road trips and tailgates. Summer also is when touring giants like Garth Brooks and Jason Aldean hit the road, raking in millions in revenue

TIME



# It's not just you

Big-hearted advice for anxious times



BY SUSANNA  
SCHROBSDORFF

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from new and old fans alike.

While the pandemic erased many of those events, people still turned to country in droves, perhaps precisely because it represented normality in turbulent times. “Country music is authentic, relatable and gives you comfort,” says Brittany Schaffer, Spotify’s head of artist and label marketing in Nashville. “You want to be in a place that feels like home at a time when the world feels uncertain.”

However, the places and times where listeners sought out country music changed. In Houston, Chiang’s stations’ ratings during the previously crucial morning-commute block fell sharply. Conversely, streaming services have seen a sharp uptick, with listeners tuning in from their home workstations. On Spotify, country has been the second fastest growing genre of music globally since February (behind electronic), making most of its gains in the U.S. and Canada. “Partially what we’re seeing is the natural progression of country fans starting to catch up with these other formats—and the country market had a lot of catching up to do,” says Melinda Newman, *Billboard*’s executive editor of the West Coast and Nashville.

In other genres, back catalogs are indexing higher than usual as fans seek familiar melodies. But in the country world, a new generation of stream-first artists are racking up impressive statistics, satiating younger fans’ appetites for something new while also offering wistful, nostalgic sounds to country diehards. Combs has led the charge: his album *What You See Is What You Get* has been a streaming juggernaut since its release last November, with at least five of its songs passing 50 million Spotify streams.

Wallen, a mullet-sporting 27-year-old born in Sneedville, Tenn., likewise broke out this summer in ways that might sound strange to the old guard of Nashville. In July, a snippet of his “7 Summers” caused a sensation on TikTok before the song was even released, racking up over 20 million views on the platform. The following month, the full song stormed to the Top 3 of the Apple Music song charts—an echelon almost exclusively reserved for pop and hip-hop—and became the first song solely by a country singer

to crack the Top 10 of the *Billboard* 100 since Sam Hunt’s “Body Like a Back Road” did the same in 2017.

The artist perhaps most emblematic of this new ecosystem is Barrett, a 2018 *American Idol* alumna who moved to Nashville unsigned and received attention from its establishment only after “I Hope” started racking up streams organically. At the end of August, pop star Charlie Puth jumped on a remix, pushing it to the Top 10 on the Hot 100.

“I Hope”—which has spent 14 weeks and counting at No. 1 on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart—represents a rising class of country songs with both internal and cross-over appeal. Country stars of past eras, from Dolly Parton to Garth Brooks to Shania Twain, have seamlessly blended pop and other genres to court new audiences, but now such forays seem to be not the exception but the rule. “Be Like That,” Kane Brown’s collaboration with rapper Swae Lee and the R&B singer Khalid, has accrued 90 million streams, while Keith Urban is charting for his duet with Pink, “One Too Many.” Blanco Brown, RMR, Lil Nas X, Nelly and even Diplo have melded country and hip-hop influences to continue to spur forward the Yeehaw Agenda, a celebration of Black cowboy culture. “Even 20 years ago, it was really looked down upon when a country artist tried to go pop or was having pop success,” Newman says. “We’re seeing that border coming down, and a lot of that has to do with streaming. People who stream don’t look at genre.”

**‘You want to be in a place that feels like home at a time when the world feels uncertain.’**

BRITTANY SCHAFFER,  
Spotify’s head  
of artist and  
label marketing  
in Nashville

**IN THE MIDST** of this boom, some fear that many lower-profile members of the country industry are being left behind. Because country music relies so heavily on touring and live sessions, thousands of workers are out of jobs with bleak prospects to return in the coming months. Layoffs or furloughs have been reported across Nashville, including at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Creative Artists Agency. “The only people making a ton of money right now are labels and songwriters,” Chiang says. “But the studio musicians, the touring musicians, the crew, even the managers—they’re in trouble.”

Lauren Jenkins, a Texas-born singer-songwriter, feared the worst when her career was sent into free fall this spring. Her East Nashville community had been torn apart by a devastating tornado; she was dropped from her label, Big Machine; she watched as every concert she had booked this year—including a tour of the U.K. and Europe—evaporated.

To keep afloat, Jenkins turned to livestream concerts with virtual tip jars, and found that a small but devoted audience would gather to watch her several times a week and send her money. She has since performed more than 100 concerts from her living room. Because she doesn’t have to pay for travel or other overhead expenses, she’s been able to pay her rent and for studio time for her next album.

Jenkins’ unlikely success gives hope to the idea that country music could regain its centrality in mainstream culture after the streaming revolution pushed it to the sidelines—and she isn’t surprised that it is flourishing in a crowded digital marketplace. “It’s the types of songs you can play socially distanced around a campfire,” she says. “You don’t need anything except for a guitar, a voice and a story.” □

REVIEW

## The case for crowding in

By Eben Shapiro

RENTS ARE THE MOST EXPLICIT METRIC OF THE premium people are willing to pay to enjoy the heady pleasure of living in the world's great cities—and currently they are down sharply in New York and San Francisco. London and Paris recently imposed new rounds of lockdowns. So perhaps it's not the ideal moment to publish *Metropolis*, an ode to cities and cosmopolitan life as “humankind's greatest invention,” according to its subtitle. In a hastily added few paragraphs in the introduction, the author, British historian Ben Wilson, acknowledges that the COVID-19 pandemic “could turn the tide against cities once again encouraging people to flee metropolises.” But he also adds that “cities are resilient, adaptable entities capable of standing up to all kinds of disasters.” In fact, considering that many urban innovations are responses to disasters, perhaps it's just the right moment for such a book.

Innumerable historical examples show that counting cities out is a sucker's game. For one, Venice and other European centers lost at least 30% of their population to the plague in the Middle Ages. Beyond the enduring seduction and economic and

*Wilson's expansive history of cities covers 7,000 years, beginning with the world's first city, Uruk, and crisscrossing continents to demonstrate the innovations borne of densely packed, urban life, from flushing toilets to global trade*

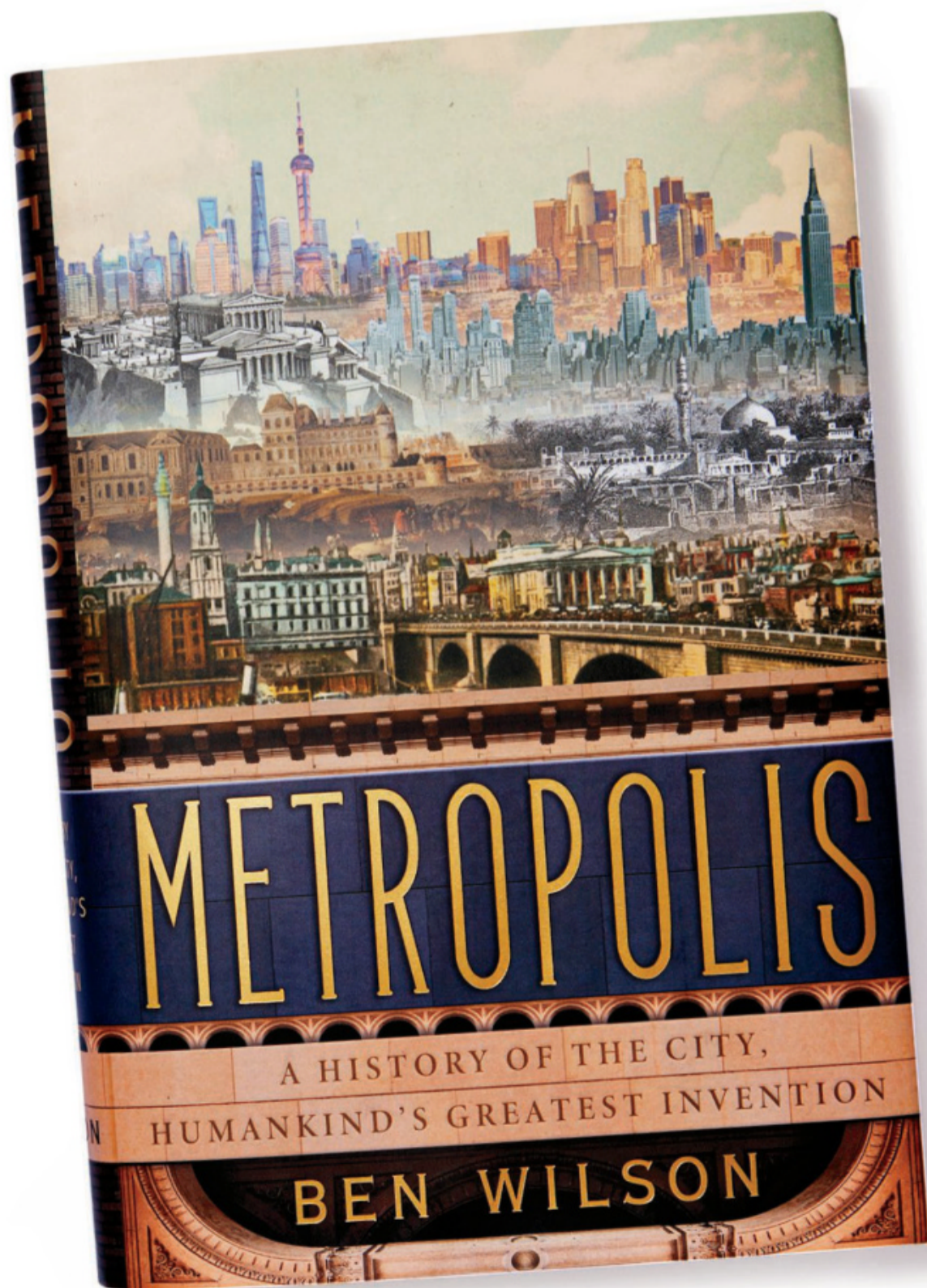


environmental benefits of cities, *Metropolis* has the added virtue of Wilson as an erudite, creative guide to the history of civilization through its great urban areas. He is a voracious, eclectic reader and an artful deployer of quotations, from Plato to N.W.A. The Epic of Gilgamesh is read through an urban-planning prism. The opening credits of *The Sopranos* “is what urban geographers call a transect, a slice taken from the city centre to periphery that reveals a range of social and physical habitats,” Wilson writes.

He has a reporter's eye for freshness, highlighting relatively recent archaeological discoveries of the grand cities of the Harappan civilization, circa 2600 B.C., in the Indus Valley. These cities were so clean that Wilson speculates they may have been the historical basis for the Garden of Eden story. “Few things symbolise collective civic endeavour more than the seriousness with which a city deals with its daily tonnage of human waste,” he writes. In the Indus cities, flush toilets were standard in the third millennium B.C., more prevalent than they are today in that region of Pakistan. His reporting takes readers to remote corners of China, where 700 mountains were literally moved, “razed . . . and the rubble tipped into valleys to create an artificial plateau on which a shimmering new skyscraper city” is being built. He broadens the book's focus beyond the usual Western suspects, noting that all but one of the world's 20 largest cities in the Middle Ages “were Muslim or in the Chinese Empire.”

**WILSON IS A SENSUALIST**, chronicling the sexual and gastronomical draw of densely packed people. He loves descriptive lists, citing author and co-founder of the satirical magazine *Punch* Henry Mayhew's account of the most popular street foods of the 1850s: “fried fish, hot eels, pickled whelks, sheep's trotters, ham sandwiches, pea soup, hot green peas, penny pies, plum duff,” and on and on. He provides an excellent account of the erotic draw of cities from ancient Babylon to the present day. He is also enamored of the energy and entrepreneurship of street life in emerging megacities such as Lagos. That city's “messiness,” he writes, is not “a sign of poverty and shame,” but a dynamic sign of a developing city.

At this current scary moment, when crowded cities can seem dangerous, even life-threatening, looking at history to see what emerges from the other side is instructive in imagining what can come next. After the Black Death, rents fell and wages rose. Pre-pandemic, the world's great cities were increasingly derided as playgrounds for the rich. It's heartening to reimagine a New York, a London, a Hong Kong, where teachers, artists, mechanics, inventors and police officers could live, jointly creating the next triumphant iteration of civilization's greatest invention. □



HAN: MELISSA LUKENBAUGH



REVIEW

## Escape to Brooklyn

It's the start of the school year in the affluent Brooklyn neighborhood of Cobble Hill, and new school nurse Peaches couldn't be more excited. In a letter sent home to parents warning of a growing lice outbreak, she begins with plenty of pep: "Welcome back, PS 919 peeps!"

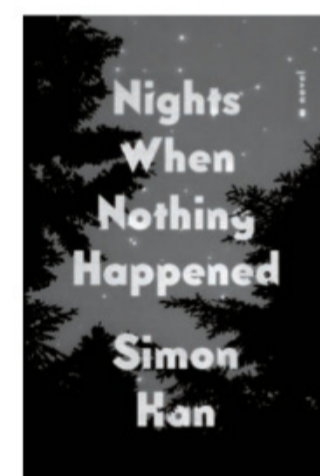
But the lice outbreak is just one of many colorful snafus in Cecily von Ziegesar's delightful novel *Cobble Hill*. Von Ziegesar, author of the *Gossip Girl* series, follows four families as they navigate their moneyed bubbles. Though things intensify when a neighborhood party gets out of hand, the joy of the novel comes from von Ziegesar's absurd and vivid descriptions of these characters' lives. One resident has a warehouse filled with prosthetic limbs; another stays in bed all day with no remorse while her husband takes care of their son. New to town, a novelist named Roy helps ground the story as he makes witty observations on the people of *Cobble Hill*.

The characters are self-aware and snarky, and their crises, beneath the glitz and pettiness, are relatable. Most surround parenthood, ambition and community. But von Ziegesar knows the injection of absurd playground drama, designer clothes and brownstone tours is what makes them so much fun to read about. —A.G.



Han was born in Tianjin, China, and raised in Texas

**Is it possible to feel truly safe in a place that wasn't made for you?**



REVIEW

## Lonely together at home

By Annabel Gutterman

WHEN JACK CHENG WAS A BABY, HIS parents Patty and Liang moved from China to Texas, and left him with his grandparents in Tianjin for six years. Patty, an engineer, and Liang, a photographer, wanted to be financially secure enough to raise Jack and, later, his little sister Annabel, in the U.S. In Simon Han's searing debut novel, *Nights When Nothing Happened*, Jack is now a sixth-grader in Plano, Texas. His parents chose the Dallas suburb because of its low crime rates and good schools. But as Jack enters middle school and his family inches closer to achieving the American Dream, Han asks a timeless yet urgent question: Is it possible to feel truly safe in a place that wasn't made for you?

Han works toward an answer by moving between the perspectives of the Chengs as they go about their daily lives: stuck in traffic, sitting in a classroom, playing on the monkey bars. Jack's voice is the most affecting. The time apart from his parents in his formative years has left him untrusting, particularly of his father. Nights are long and restless for the 11-year-old, who feels protective toward 5-year-old Annabel. She's been sleepwalking—a lot.

Gently, Han pulls the strings of each family member, moving them further from one another, to reveal the cracks in the unit. These fissures do not appear too wide to overcome, until a series of misunderstandings threatens to implode the Chengs' delicate stability.

To describe the event that causes things to unravel would do a disservice to Han's expert pacing. Throughout *Nights When Nothing Happened*, Han lingers in stillness, underlining moments of unease and sadness. While Patty watches her husband and children interact, whether they're passing each other in the hallway or keeping quiet at dinner, she's forced to ask herself what the silence means. In delivering these small but crushing observations, Han continuously asks if Patty's and Liang's sacrifices were worth it.

The biggest misunderstanding of all, which occurs at a party celebrating the most all-American of holidays, Thanksgiving, blows up the Chengs' status in their community. The family is forced to regain the trust of those around them—trust they never should have lost—all while learning to afford one another the same. □





## MOVIES

### Can this awards season reboot our movie love?

By Stephanie Zacharek

IF THESE WERE NORMAL TIMES, MOVIE LOVERS would now be gearing up for the holiday season, when big studios splash out with their flashiest work. But with so many theaters unable to safely reopen—and with the movie industry itself in a holding pattern—the upcoming awards season will be like no other. Some pundits have suggested canceling the Academy Awards altogether. What good is an awards season without the usual parade of dazzling Hollywood product?

The answer, actually, is that a break from awards-season madness could be pretty great—if we can adjust our notion of what an awards contender ought to be, and if we can come to honest terms with how we, as movie lovers, feel about the big-screen experience. For years now, I’ve been fielding arguments from people who claim to love movies but prefer to watch them at home: if you have a big TV and a nice sound setup, it’s just better. There are no annoying fellow humans to break the spell of your movie watching. You can sneak off to the fridge whenever you want—which also breaks the spell, but on your own terms.

Now, some eight months into pandemic life, I’m hearing arguments that people will never want to return to movie theaters again, partly out of safety fears—a reasonable consideration until COVID-19 is well under control—but also because they’re now too used to the convenience of streaming movies at home. Why go back to the old ways?

**The movie theater is part of the world in a way your living room is not**

This is where our true feelings about movies—works designed by their makers to be viewed larger than life, in the presence of other, possibly annoying human beings—and our self-defined expectations about awards contenders mingle into a potentially combustible cocktail. Now that most of us have been forced to stream movies at home for months, we’ve had plenty of time to assess—or grow to loathe—the experience. The two poles of the argument might be “Please cancel the Oscars because as much as I love movies, nothing I watched at home this year felt like a real movie,” and “Movies and TV have already blurred together for me. What do the Oscars matter?”

**IF THE MAJORITY** turn out to be in the latter camp, then the movies really are dead. But if you’re in the former camp—if not even the good new movies you watched at home in 2020 felt as “real” to you as they would have in a theater—you’re not alone, and your frustration is actually a sign of hope for the future. We can’t change the film industry—none of us can get it up and running, robustly, right now. But we can reject a world where mindless binge-watching triumphs over intense focus on one work at a time.

The movie theater is part of the world in a way your living room is not. And going to the movies, giving yourself over to an image larger than you are, entails both an emotional risk and a shift in context. It demands you step out into the night, or the bald daylight, even as you’re still processing what you’ve just seen. The drive or ride home, the conversation or silence afterward—any of those can become part of your experience of a film. We’ve been robbed of that context, at least for now.

For most of us, 2020 has required making the best of a terrible situation. It has also given us some terrific movies, pictures that should have had their chance to be seen big but, through no fault of their own, had to be shrunk small. This awards season will be lacking in big, glossy spectacles. (No Steven Spielberg *West Side Story* until 2021.) But then, this might be the year we focus more on intimately scaled films like Chloé Zhao’s *Nomadland*, or on pictures that shed light on our own sociopolitical circus, like Aaron Sorkin’s *The Trial of the Chicago 7*. It could be the year your favorite movie turns out to be a small, gorgeous picture about a friendship between two men in the 1820s Pacific Northwest, forged over stolen milk. (If you haven’t yet seen that film, it’s Kelly Reichardt’s *First Cow*.) Weird as it sounds, this may be the year that expands your view of what movies can mean. Movie people will always love movies. We have to have faith in the day we can step out into the light once again—which will be our cue to step back into the right kind of darkness. □

TELEVISION

## Teacher-student romance, revisited

By Judy Berman

FX ON HULU'S *A TEACHER* OPENS WITH A warning: "This series contains sexual situations as well as depictions of grooming that may be disturbing." Although this framing suggests a clear-cut narrative of predation, the show functions more as a thought experiment for a culture whose views on sexual misconduct have evolved quickly of late. Yes, some industries are purging their Harvey Weinstains. Yet *A Teacher*, out Nov. 10, illuminates areas of the #MeToo discourse that remain murky: What if the criminal is a pretty woman and her ostensible victim a young man? What if they're in love?

Creator Hannah Fidell first weighed these questions in a 2013 film also titled *A Teacher*. The expanded format of TV allows for richer characters whose story spans a decade, and offers sharper



For Claire (Mara), abuse of power comes as something of a surprise

insights into gender, power and consent.

Kate Mara plays Claire, a 30-something teacher in a floundering marriage. High school senior Eric (*Love, Simon*'s Nick Robinson) is both a popular athlete with boorish jock pals and a bright, mature striver who babysits his kid brothers

to help his single mom. Mostly, he seems to pursue Claire, though her breathtakingly bad judgment is evident from the start. It takes too long for things to come unraveled, but the show finds its purpose once the pair has been pulled apart. Their subsequent trajectories are surprising yet believable. Eric, in particular, is a complex character on a long path to self-knowledge; Robinson does justice to an identity under construction, imparting layers of charm, intelligence, naiveté.

It's no coincidence that #MeToo started in Hollywood. For decades, film and TV normalized teacher-student "affairs." Creators have to be more careful now, with good reason, but *A Teacher* avoids didacticism. Instead of hunting witches, Fidell reveals the myriad ways that adolescent trauma can stain a life—or two. The tragedy is that it's possible to mean no harm but inflict it anyway.

**A TEACHER** streams Nov. 10 on FX on Hulu

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## Baking brought me comfort as a child. Now it's getting me through quarantine

By Beth Nguyen

WHEN QUARANTINE TIMES BEGAN, EVERYONE AROUND ME started making sourdough. I baked cakes. Nothing against bread; I just crave the precision of a layer cake, the *fiddly* work, as it's called on *The Great British Baking Show*, a comfort series that I rewatched while making comfort cakes, tarts and galettes. Bread is a staple, but cake brings joy.

For me, it's always been that way. My family arrived in the U.S. as refugees from Vietnam at the end of the war, in 1975. We were resettled in Michigan, in a conservative town where I grew up not knowing what to do with all the racism we experienced. I was a shy child who had nightmares and fears. My whole family was anxious, but no one talked about trauma. We didn't know the concept of self-care. But surely that's why we loved to gather around the TV set with ice cream and potato chips. We loved little treats: candy, packs of gum, the rare Sara Lee pound cake and Entenmann's coffee cake.

When I was 10, my mom enrolled me in a senior citizens' cake-decorating class as an after-school activity. There, in a community-center kitchen, I learned how to shape buttercream into roses and leaves on little squares of wax paper. We did this over and over, flower after flower, lines of leaves until the frosting ran out. It was satisfying, doable magic. I would listen to the ladies gossiping and laughing, and feel included in their warmth, gaining secret knowledge about the world.

And so I became the baker in my family. Though my childhood was filled with the tension of not understanding identity and of feeling like an outsider, I knew two things for sure: everyone feels a little better when presented with cake, and everything feels a little better when there's cake.

***I am a person who still carries fear all the time. But my children think I am fearless because I can cook and bake***

**NOW, ALL THESE YEARS LATER,** I've returned to the Midwest—Wisconsin, the other side of Lake Michigan—and I'm teaching my own kids how to bake. I thought their childhoods would be so much safer and more stable than mine, but I didn't know we would be in a pandemic, living in a state that currently has one of the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases in the country. Like so many people in America, we are stressed out. We haven't gone to restaurants, haven't gone anywhere.

But at least we can bake.

Through these long months since March, I've been trying new recipes. Genoise and *joconde* and Victoria sponges, choux pastry, rough puff pastry, short crust pastry, churros and apple fritters, pies and hand pies, carrot cakes, chocolate cakes, strawberry cakes, pound cakes, Bundt cakes, almond cakes. On our 100th day of sheltering in place, I made a Boston cream pie. I started leaving cookies, cakes and fritters on my neighbors' porches and finding treats on my porch too. Late at night, after work and school and kids' bedtimes, I make caramel and crême *pâtissière*. Not every item has turned out, but every effort has made me feel more capable.

Recently, I taught my kids how to make those buttercream flowers. I hadn't done this in more than 20 years, but it all returned to me: the little squares of wax paper, the yellow counters in that community-center kitchen. My kids are 9 and 11. As I watched them try to form the petals of a rose—you have to move quickly, confidently, keep practicing—I wondered if I had looked that way at their age, determined to make a sugar flower bloom. I am a person who still carries fear all the time. But my children think I am fearless because I can cook and bake. I deep-fry doughnuts without hesitation. I deal with boiling water, broilers, gas flames. I remembered how to make a buttercream rose in a matter of seconds. To my kids, I know how to do so much.

In times of waiting and worry, it feels useful to gather ingredients and turn them into something that might bring sweetness to someone's day. Baking is so much more than following directions; it's about understanding process. It's about trust. Whether I'm baking with my kids or baking alone, I feel a sense of peace I rarely have any other time. Whatever the result, I know I'll be a little more ready for whatever comes next.

*Nguyen is the author of the novels Short Girls and Pioneer Girl*

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# 8 Questions

**Maya Rudolph** The comic actor on revisiting adolescence, transmitting warmth and her triumphant return to *Saturday Night Live*

**Y**ou live in Los Angeles but have been flying back and forth to New York City every week to play Senator Kamala Harris on *SNL*—during a pandemic—on top of a raft of other projects. Plus, you have four school-age kids at home. **How are you coping?** Every day feels different. It's a roller coaster of anxiety and emotion and frustration and sometimes motivation. I've been checking in with friends, who keep me up to date and feeling more hopeful, because it's easy to get down in the dumps. That being said, [aside from] finding four different quiet spaces for children to have school, I find the time spent with family comforting. I've enjoyed reassessing everything, in terms of school and work and home and family and friends. It's a good way to weed out the bullsh-t.

**Harris is often framed as hard to read because she doesn't lead with ideology. Was it tough to find a way into her character?** I don't see her that way—I fell in love with her. There's a conversational, familiar tone in the way she speaks. That element of her that's so approachable allowed us to lean into a style of telling it like it is, of someone who feels like they're your friend or your auntie.

**You've been popping up in plenty of other roles on *SNL* this season too. Is that a side effect of being inside the show's COVID bubble?** I think it's that, combined with everyone in that building knows how much I love the show and how much I love to play there. All the time I've put into the show has allowed any writer there to know my voice, so it's easy to plug in.

**Sarah Cooper's recent Netflix special, *Everything's Fine*, is the first release from Animal Pictures, the production company you co-founded with your longtime friend Natasha**

“WE'RE ALL HUMAN. WE'RE ALL MESSY, AND IT'S FUN TO LAUGH AT HOW WE ALL GO THERE”



**Lyonne. How does that partnership work?** We're first and foremost people who love each other. And we work at completely different speeds, which is a great thing. I came up with the idea for the name Animal because she's an animal when it comes to work. She embraces and loves every second of it. I like to take my time.

**You seem to have reached a point in your career where you can pick and choose roles tailored to who you are as a performer—like your stint as a chatty deity on *The Good Place*. How does that feel?** It's a nice feeling. It took me a while to get to that place. And it's an exciting place because, creatively, it's more inspired. I feel supported, and I'm more comfortable when I'm supported.

**Do you have a sense of what creators are looking for when they seek you out?** You're asking me a question that I ask other people. I always have a hard time seeing how I'm seen in the world.

**Would it be fair to say that warmth is a trait most of your characters share?** If that is being transmitted, that's a good thing, because it's what I naturally gravitate toward. I do well with goofy. And I work best when I think something's funny. It's one thing I can rely on when I'm feeling self-doubt.

**One of your most beloved characters is *Big Mouth's* Connie the Hormone Monstress, an animated creature who guides kids through puberty. She's a mentor but also the embodiment of raw, adolescent id. What appeals to you about Connie?** Her funniest stuff, to me, is when she's in that adolescent place of true feeling. It's the part where I go, “We're all human.” We're all messy, and it's fun to collectively laugh at how we all go there. She's very in touch with herself, very raw and honest. It's fun to play a character that's that free. —JUDY BERMAN

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