**Primary Stress**

**Democratic Narratives, Identity, and Audience in 2020**

**Accompanying Punditry Podcast Episode:** [**https://www.buzzsprout.com/1058530/3593281**](https://www.buzzsprout.com/1058530/3593281)

**Abstract**

With the selection of Joe Biden as nominee, I believe that the Democratic party has misread the audience that will convene in November to select the next President of the United States. The intersection of democrxcy and performance is my framing lens for this narrative analysis of contemporary political history and economy and political performance. This paper has a few monumental ambitions:

1. A critique of the particular practice of American representative democrxcy in 2020 on the basis of how hyperpolarization drives audiences to increasingly locate their identity in their civic performance, and second, what I see to be the Democratic Party’s failure to respond to that fact going into the 2020 general election.
2. A criticism of Joe Biden as neither representative of his party nor appropriately styled or suited as a performer in this era of identity-driven audiences.
3. An acknowledgement that the contexts and actors explored above exert influence on a national “democratic” stage that is already structurally flawed and unrepresentative of the ideals of democrxcy.[[1]](#footnote-1)
4. An acknowledgement that capitalist history often makes damaging progress in the ongoing project of primitive accumulation and the neoliberal deconstruction of democrxcy at times of crisis.
5. An assertion that the spectacle occuring in our national political theater is intended to shield the presence of anti-democratic influences from voters’ attention, and that compelling, unifying narratives that address the paradoxes of American democrxy are needed to reverse this damage.

As we ask questions about who American capitalist democrxcy empowers, and who it divides, the already present schismatic patterns in the Democratic coalition take on a more sinister purpose to the schemes of capital. Based on my review of political media surrounding the primary elections of 2020, I contend that an established corporatist faction of the Democratic party intends (how do I know this intention? I observe it, I propose it) to market the bland centrism of their candidate as a strength. In fact, it is his greatest weakness. Biden has not yet filled the federal void in leadership or motivated the audience of voter-citizens to turnout in record numbers, as a President of this era must. I believe that this strategy is a failure because it does not respond to contemporary levels of partisan polarization by activating the passionate mobilization of a voter’s identity. In American political theater, the audience of voters increasingly expresses and associates their personal identity with their civic performance. I question the viability of Biden as the sort of performer-candidate required for this era, and suggest that he adopt strategies that rectify that weakness.

The primary campaign is a valuable site for the excavation of political narratives, strategies, and candidate performances that may resurface in the general election. In particular, Bernie Sanders’ political performance, while unsuccessful electorally, served as a foil[[2]](#footnote-2) to Biden’s and exhibited strategies he should consider adopting to unite his party. Control of the narrative levers of democrxcy has been hijacked by neoliberalism and turned into a weapon against the demos. If the voting public intends to protect their self-sabotaging practice of imperfect democrxcy (is any other kind possible?), they must wrench back narrative control and address the foundational undemocratic nature of American government and ideology.

**Crises and Capitalism**

American politics is in crisis, both in narrative and reality. The atmosphere of crisis is exacerbating factionalism and putting stress on our already damaged democrxcy in an election year. Crises, historically being moments of social reconstruction and intensified capitalist expropriation,[[3]](#footnote-3) demand increased public vigilance.

Thinkers like Wendy Brown and Naomi Klein have provided a contemporary critique of capitalist political economies in this age of neoliberal globalization. Wendy Brown’s book *Undoing the Demos* describes the danger we face as members of an ailing democrxcy: “neoliberal reason, ubiquitous today in statecraft and the workplace, in jurisprudence, education, culture, and a vast range of quotidian activity, is converting the distinctly political character, meaning, and operation of democrxcy’s constituent elements into economic ones. Liberal democratic institutions, practices, and habits may not survive this conversion. Radical democratic dreams may not either.” Democrxcy and its underwriting values, having grown alongside capitalist political economies incorporate the same tendency toward monopoly, inequality and exploitation.

Naomi Klein’s book, *The Shock Doctrine* brings to light a particularly terrifying method that is leveled against the public by neoliberal rationalities. From the military principle of Shock doctrine[[4]](#footnote-4) Klein produced an analytic of disaster capitalism[[5]](#footnote-5) that describes the alliance between the state and capital that turns crises into investment opportunities at the expense of its citizens. These anti-democratic projects have found a comfortable home in the American ethos that espouses freedom and personal liberty with the careless quality of a blank check. David Harvey’s article “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction” compellingly describes the modern rhetorical strategies (the co-option of “individual liberty” and “freedom” as arguments for disbanding state protections of the demos) by which neoliberalism masks how the ongoing upper-class project of primitive accumulation imperils democrxcy. He says, “The more neoliberalism is recognized as a failed if not disingenuous utopian project masking a successful attempt at the restoration of class power, the more it lays the base for a resurgence of mass movements voicing egalitarian political demands, seeking economic justice, fair trade and greater economic security and democratization. But it is the profoundly anti-democratic nature of neoliberalism that should surely be the main focus of political struggle.” (157) Like Klein, Harvey is concerned about the unevenness of the playing field and the speed with which democracies are losing ground to the corporate[[6]](#footnote-6) influences neoliberalism exerts in government. This is the rationality, strategy, and system of influences that all political actors fall under.

The emergence of a world-wide pandemic at a time of neoliberally weakened democrxcy makes this election a time for capital to further sink its hooks into the flesh of government. Coronavirus has illustrated perhaps the most dangerous condition in American politics today: Capital may soon have the power to eliminate citizen protections and permanently damage our democrxcy by transforming the nation into a tool for the accumulation of profit. America the cash cow is one version of our narrative fate that I would like to avoid. Primarily the interruption of a “normal” primary season served to suspend political concerns in favor of public health concerns (a positive sign of the vigilance of our national press). At the same time, the narrative pause made clear that the general election would be a one-issue election. Thematically, crisis will define every debate between Trump and Biden. The need to place blame for the fallout of this pandemic crisis will be high by the time November rolls around, and likely drive up voter participation and rates of negative partisanship. We should keep in mind that Trump won in 2016 because he sold a polarized performance of white anxiety and authoritarian glibness that enjoyed dedicated support in the white Christian conservative voting base at a time of economic security and sturdy public health. Circumstances have changed significantly, and the strength of the incumbent party is waning on many fronts. In the coming social reconstruction, we must be vigilant against losing ground to anti-democratic blitz attacks. Losing focus at this moment of national emergency is not an option. Neoliberal forces are continuing to invade the apparatuses of government, and this is yet another opportunity for social restructuring.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The fields that Covid-19 has touched are already scarily located near the means of production, where lives stand to be lost and money made. Everything from global supply chains, food distribution, public education, common spaces, the ability to protest, voting, and the American business of health-care profiteering, is up for grabs. Additionally, this pandemic will serve to redefine the private spaces of our most vulnerable citizens.[[8]](#footnote-8) Regardless of who deals with the fallout of this crisis, strong leadership that inspires cohesive political participation is necessary to save American democrxcy from implosion.

This President has ceded his position of leadership in this time and tossed 50 disunited states into a competition for survival. His decision to ride out this crisis as if it were a non-problem, use it as an opportunity to fire watchdogs of oversight and consolidate executive control over a slush fund of economic aid intended for the people, indicates how our present narrative of crisis is to him, an economic and political opportunity for corruption.[[9]](#footnote-9) An article in the Monthly Review, “COVID-19 and Circuits of Capital” by Rob Wallace, Alex Liebman, Luis Fernando Chaves and Rodrick Wallace describe how government officials are already enacting (performing) neoliberal logic. The authors remark, “Indeed, a pandemic that arises out of the capitalist mode of production and that the state is expected to manage on one end can offer an opportunity from which the system’s managers and beneficiaries can prosper on the other. In mid–February, five U.S. senators and twenty House members dumped millions of dollars in personally held stock in industries likely to be damaged in the oncoming pandemic. The politicos based their insider trading on nonpublic intelligence, even as some of the representatives continued to publicly repeat regime missives that the pandemic served no such threat. Beyond such crass smash-and-grabs, the corruption stateside is systemic, a marker of the end of the U.S. cycle of accumulation when capital cashes out.” Neoliberalism is embedded in our government, our work, our personal lives and productive discourse. Such an invasive infection requires solutions that meet neoliberal rationality at this point of production: language. From this, my interest in popular narratives that circulate in national election media is an attempt to examine opportunities for redefining “freedom,” “liberty,” and “democrxcy” in less economic and more empathetic terms.

The impending Trump vs Biden 2020 election will come to define practical allocations of power for years to come. The coming election is a referendum on Trump’s brand and a test of his narrative, a large part of which is selling fear. This is an examination of governments, nations, and lives – in crisis.[[10]](#footnote-10) In November, voters will select with their vote one of two political narratives presented in an atmosphere of crisis and may even find their civic ability and lives jeopardized.[[11]](#footnote-11) A lawless and incompetent President, elected by a polarized citizenry, has bungled the federal response to a global pandemic during an election year, causing an economic meltdown we do not yet know the extent of.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Our current crisis is an unacceptable risk to the health of American government. The astonishing mismanagement of a crisis is a scandal, one that demands prompt responsive action. Although our media ecosphere of conflict and crisis feel hyperbolized to an overwhelming degree, this intensification follows what feels like three and a half years of crisis-training under President Trump. Democrats have had 3 years to formulate the best strategy for meeting this unique set of circumstances in the electoral arena and the primary season delivered a champion. Biden’s performance will be juxtaposed and measured against the President’s as a narrative foil. The contextual stress on American democrxcy forces us to consider how Democratic electoral strategies respond both to heightened levels of partisan polarization, the media’s[[13]](#footnote-13) embrace of conflict and sensationalism, and this President's capitalization on those circumstances and qualities.[[14]](#footnote-14)

A responsible citizen does not have the luxury of ignoring the structurally flawed and decomposing body of norms that is the United States’ 232-year experiment with a limited form of representative democrxcy.[[15]](#footnote-15) Consider the contemporary confluence of crises. Nation-states across the globe are destabilized by neoliberalism,[[16]](#footnote-16) an era and logic of capitalism that expediates the accumulation of income inequality[[17]](#footnote-17) and creates an atmosphere of mistrust in representative governments.[[18]](#footnote-18) Crippling factionalism divides a weak Democratic Party[[19]](#footnote-19) and the mirrored consolidation of the Republican Party exhibits a losing national battle with ideological polarization.[[20]](#footnote-20) Our window to save the planet from Climate Change is shutting, making the 2020 Presidential election critical to preserving the planet for future generations. Most pertinently, a viral pandemic ushers in global economic crisis and now threatens a complete medical infrastructure failure in the United States as a result of poor federal leadership during the outbreak of Covid-19.[[21]](#footnote-21) The overwhelming nature of these stacked crises should not be taken as coincidental. Being a citizen of contemporary democrxcy requires this sobering pragmatism. The stakes of this election are clear: the integrity and safety of our democracy is at risk, along with millions of lives.

We are experiencing an evolution, or intensification, of a long-developing trend in political performance. Political campaigns and Presidents have been innovating in the craft of electoral success and interacting with a vast network of media with the aim of crafting narrative since the founding of our representative democrxcy. From Washington to Obama, master politicians both, Presidents have traded on their name recognition and rhetorical ability to lay claim to the lofty founding ideals of this nation and harness their emotional weight (and the activation of a shared identity) with the voter-public. The strength of identity in such tailored narratives was strong enough to start a bloody Civil War over slavery, justify a war on terror following 9/11 (that revived America’s profitable war machine) and put an incompetant conman with a penchant for white nationalism in charge of the legacy of this nation’s first Black President.[[22]](#footnote-22) Our political narratives outlast their material effects and inscribe themselves in the identities that pull people together in such times. What more romantic story is there than one about a rag-tag collection of colonies revolting against a tyrannical king? That story founded our nation and Americans still flock to a good story.

It is useful to think of politicians as performers, digital media as a national stage (entertainment platform), and voters as an interactive audience. Human psychology and a historical attachment to narrative and storytelling make narrative analysis central to political punditry. The internal logic of both campaigns and media is to tell the most compelling narrative. A national election is a competition, now more than ever, in showmanship and storytelling. The emotional connection to story developed by the human brain and our cultural tendency to collect and preserve them places narrative and performance squarely at the intersection of social-political change and human identity. [[23]](#footnote-23) The identities of candidates, as well as the audiences they appeal to, figure heavily in my critique of what contemporary political performances look like.

The beasts we wrestle with as a representative democrxcy are complicated and divisive ones. Ideological polarization is dividing us into inflexible and hostile groups that produce a base level stress to representative democrxcy. Neoliberalism as a logic and ideology is perforating public institutions like an illness, turning the arms and legs of the government against the body politic. The additional public health crisis in the form of the global pandemic Covid-19 might just prove to be the straw that broke the camel’s back. Simple resistance to the exponentially growing forces of capitalist and elite control of American democrxcy is no longer sufficient. I see the potential for a radical restructuring of the political narrative that the Democratic Party needs to transform if they are going to attempt to recapture the Presidency.

**Partisanship and Polarization**

American representative democrxcy and its corresponding political narratives have been slipping into a state of perpetual narrative crisis alongside compounding polarization. Partisan conflict aids in the neoliberal deconstruction of American representative democrxcy by dividing the audience of citizens into ineffectual coalitions. That the distracting spectacle occurring at this time of lethal crisis is no coincidence. The Partisan side-show in combination with our representative democrxcy's various undemocratic foundational structures acts like a paralytic on the particular form of democrxcy that we practice.

Voters are geographically and regionally sorted into the two available (but ideologically similar) political parties, and the majority of “the people” do not vote in our representative democrxcy.[[24]](#footnote-24) Low national turnout and political interest are symptomatic of a weakened democrxcy and indicative of an atmosphere of political exhaustion that becomes dangerous to the preservation of rule for and by the people.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The synchronization of geographic and ideological polarization in contemporary America is an important circumstance of the coming election that cannot be avoided. The imbalanced distribution of Democrats and Republicans across the United States’ geographic space[[26]](#footnote-26) impedes the functioning of our democrxcy by insulating pockets of homogenous identity and preventing the free exchange of varied political experience. How to stop hyperpolarization is not a realistic question to ask. How to mitigate its effects under a President who has whole-heartedly embraced hyper partisanship is.

In contemporary America, ideological migration drives conflict by allowing the collection and consolidation of dangerously inflexible opinions. Partisans sort themselves in a way that should not be surprising. They want to live and work with people who share their values. Within those separate spheres, cultures, media ecosystems, norms, narratives, the frames[[27]](#footnote-27) of voters grow further apart, intensifying the foil produced by polarized political representation. Foil is a term used in narrative analysis to describe the strengthening of differences by the juxtaposition of opposites. In terms of dominating voters’ attention, a contentious, adversarial competition is the politically engaging way to go, and foils play a powerful role in the project of economizing voter attention.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The parallel processes of geographical and ideological sorting have dangerously cemented partisanship, immobilizing the government at a time when drastic action is needed. Nothing new, polarization has been steadily on the rise for over 50 years and only in the last ten years have the effects of geographical and ideological sorting become untenable to effective and competent democratic government. Following the modern realignment of the parties,[[29]](#footnote-29) physical territories were reinscribed with political identity, tying together geographic, ideological and partisan loyalties.[[30]](#footnote-30) We’ve seen heightened partisanship exacerbate factional differences, weaponize volatile group identities, and destabilize good administration. The hardening of these political mega-identities are making communication across party lines a cross-cultural endeavor, and one that devolves too frequently into screaming matches.[[31]](#footnote-31)

How does this define the voting audience that judges candidate performances? In many ways there are two segregated countries.[[32]](#footnote-32) Two audiences. Two narratives of America that are diametrically opposed. What it means to be a “Democrat” or “Republican” implies a lifestyle, a set of choices and cultural and characteristic norms and tendencies that make up a group-identity. A question often asked by campaigns is: What mobilizes a voter? In applying a study of audience and performance, our lens is: What engages an audience? The answer lies in the activation of a defining political identity that motivates an individual to participate civically. As political participation becomes an avenue for the voter-audience’s performance of personal identity, consistent and repetitious activation of those identities becomes a reliable driver of polarization.[[33]](#footnote-33)

When voters live around people culturally similar to them, they’re challenged less often by different opinions and contrary information.[[34]](#footnote-34) Individuals that are members of groups with strong identification are less likely to consume a varied information diet that challenges their worldview. As a result, homogenous groups are not exposed to moderating influences, and their radicalism is structurally empowered to grow. Partisans become more likely to reject information that would threaten the world view of their group.[[35]](#footnote-35) The presentation of information that contradicts an individual’s frame comes to be viewed as a personal attack on their identity.[[36]](#footnote-36)The personal and communal threat is what makes politics as contentious and adversarial as it is. These dangerous effects of hardening partisanship and polarization encourage narrowmindedness and the production of echo chambers.

The atmosphere that defines Democrats’ intraparty dynamics is as passionately oppositional as across-the-aisle conflict. An established faction of the Democratic party,[[37]](#footnote-37) is engaged in ideological war with the progressive coalitions[[38]](#footnote-38) making party schism a real danger in 2020, especially if a majority of the Democratic Party does not feel represented by Joe Biden. The empowered wing of the party controls the narratives in center-left mainstream media. Their choices in narrative demonstrate a fear of polarization and its effects. What made the Republican party stronger has a more complicated effect on Democrats.[[39]](#footnote-39) The heterogeneity of the Democratic party base means that polarization creates more divisive internal disagreement than in the Republican party because of the variety of identities that must come together. Primaries are the place to duke it out over the party platform and define the type of the leadership valued in the party. The only danger is when a unification narrative becomes impossible as a result of these impassioned disagreements. While it is difficult to measure what strategy had which effect, in some cases, the very presence of a narrative is a loss. The sort of blame that circulated after Clinton’s failure in 2016 concerning Bernie’s voters is the sort of disunification narrative that poses true danger to the party.[[40]](#footnote-40) Moving into the 2020 election, the most important job for the Party and Joe Biden is to establish unity narratives. With a common enemy under normal circumstances,[[41]](#footnote-41) uniting a voting audience would be easy, but the absence of a federal response is shielded from being at the center of the debate because the President insists on filling that spotlight.[[42]](#footnote-42) His performance of leadership consists of fanning the flames of the coronavirus crisis with his “sarcastic” remarks about ingesting bleach or inject disinfectant.[[43]](#footnote-43) He satisfies his base by thumbing his nose at reporters while media attention to him and his identity as a bully, or a strongman, depending on your frame. Don’t think me crude, but political theater is a competition for attention, and Donald is a strategic attention whore. How do we wrest control of the narrative back to the things that matter and the lives at stake?

**Identity and Narrative**

All this discussion on polarization and identity gets thick and frankly, produces the feeling that our factional paralysis is inescapably embedded in American government.[[44]](#footnote-44) There may be no easy solution to this stressor on our democrxcy, but its presence enables a voter-turnout strategy that is being successfully utilized to keep a dangerously exclusive and antagonistic faction in power. Here we can ask the question, “Where can narrative meet the challenge of the modern era of hyperpolarization?”

An ideal campaign successfully puts together a vast coalition of intersecting identities that disagree and unites them under common compromise with a unifying narrative or interest that solidifies the divided audience[[45]](#footnote-45) Demographically, the makeup of America’s voting audience is hard to unite and deserves more than the choice of one of two banners. At present, an individual must essentialize the vast collection of political opinions and interests they hold and select R or D. A structural change to American democrxcy is needed to solve that particular problem, but in the interim, narrative strategies can be used to combat rising levels of contentious partisanship.

Stories map on to the identities of their readers, activating and growing in meaning with the audience that interprets them. Partisanship, as much as religion, family, sexual orientation, or profession, has become a group identity[[46]](#footnote-46) that is strengthened by each activation. Because negative partisanship (i.e. fear of the adversary candidate) is becoming the strongest contemporary unifier of hyper partisan voters,[[47]](#footnote-47) it is more crucial than ever to the health and stability of our democrxcy to determine where connections of empathy and care can form. When evaluating a candidate’s performance, the way specific or generalized narratives map activate the audience’s identities has analytical value in defining the who in “Who is this performance for?”

Research[[48]](#footnote-48) exploring the ideological and psychological differences between liberals and conservatives becomes valuable as we examine which narrative will unite the Democratic party. In the Democratic Primary, the audience being addressed by candidates is very different from the audience convened by the general election. The attributes and ideological dispositions of both audiences are kept in mind by any campaign worth its salt. To maintain the legitimacy of our representative democrxcy, and satisfy as many voters as possible, the winning candidate must craft a narrative that can circulate widely. Some level of generality is required to make the message applicable to disparate coalitions. The only downside to breadth is shallowness. A general connection is less powerful than a particular one. This is where identity stacking comes in handy in an age of ideological polarization. Coalitions in the Democratic Party require a strong ideological performance to energize the most reliable constituencies to turn their voting power into electoral power.[[49]](#footnote-49) In a more passionately motivated voter, the right narrative activates a more individual identification, and compounds the sense that one is addressed particularly by the candidate’s speech or performance of the candidate.

The ideological disposition of liberals[[50]](#footnote-50) privileges narratives of empathy and justice, sweeping change, individual dignity and equality. George Lakoff defines the ruling logic of liberals as “nurturant parent morality.”[[51]](#footnote-51) From this understanding of how liberal voters typically connect with politicians, we see a priveling of community, the collective good, and optimism. The ideological disposition of conservatives[[52]](#footnote-52) privileges narratives of preservation, tradition, community loyalty and the authority of institutions and leadership figures. The strict father father model of morality[[53]](#footnote-53) leads the audience of conservatives voters to look for very different performances of leadership from liberals. This must be kept in mind by a campaign looking to unite a country that is cleaved in half. Differences in how and towards whom empathy is expressed within these political ideologies emerge from the individual’s worldview and personality traits,[[54]](#footnote-54) priming and shaping the audience’s expectations for political performances and narratives.

**Biden and Sanders; Foil in emergent strategies**

Despite being abruptly swept aside by Covid-19 in mid-March, the dynamics of the 2020 Democratic Primary revealed factional weakness and a more critical leadership vacuum in the Democratic party that needs to be resolved if Biden is going to be a successful candidate. He must fill this void and unite the party around a clear and cogent narrative responding to Trump’s brand of conflict and outrage, as well as the pandemic. The best chance for preserving American democrxcy and rebuking the contemporary wave of neoliberal alt-conservatism is to provide a winning narrative that sweeps Trump’s out like last week’s bathwater. Unfortunately, the Democratic Primary did not provide Biden with the springboard that usually comes with winning a primary (exhaustive press on the victory and a pimp-show of sorts touting the vitality of the party’s nominee. As far as the usual horse and pony show goes, this one has been replaced with a pandemic dystopian narrative (somewhat a shift in tone, but precipitated and normalized by Trump as a President creating daily crises[[55]](#footnote-55)).

A model developed by Moody Analytics places relevant neoliberal variables (by which I mean, they tie the economic fate of individuals well as the country to voting behaviors and the chances of Trump’s reelection) into conversation with the United States’ electoral appendages and has produced a pre-epidemic prediction that marries the fate of this President with the economy.[[56]](#footnote-56) Their economic focus leads us, appropriately for both this president and this election, to measure this incoming health crisis as a defining setting for the coming performance. The narratives exchanged between American cultures in 2020 political theater will privilege the economic, social, and moral themes of this pandemic. The ones that inspire power and resiliency put community, mutual aid, and the moral imperative to save human lives at center. Others turn down alleys marked by fear and mistrust, landing in a dog-eat-dog world where righteous sacrifice, stoic loss, and neoliberal greed take the reigns of crisis response narratives.[[57]](#footnote-57)

The primary is an important site of ideological performance but crucially fails to represent voters adequately. While we presume some collective will of the people, the votes we cast are a performance mimicking a system of democrxcy we do not have. Elections are a delegates game, a structural flaw in our representative democrxcy that reveals something key about the dynamics between candidates and political parties. Candidates perform to the party membership and elites in power. The roars of the audience, and voters themselves, are props held up to prove that candidates can mobilize public support in the general election and ensure the perceived legitimacy of that presidency. Candidates perform leadership and competence to the voter-audience, while laying claims to specific coalitions within the Democratic Party to win the votes that actually delegate power.

The beginning of the Primary had a crowded collegial atmosphere. Good-faith policy debate reflected the internal polarization of the Democratic Party, but moved the party left on many issues.[[58]](#footnote-58) Exemplary of this shift, the debate surrounding healthcare opened the Democratic party to a thorough debate on the embeddedness of profit in a system that is meant to preserve life and health.[[59]](#footnote-59) In stark contrast to Bernie Sanders’ vision of socialized healthcare, Joe Biden and the majority of establishment-wing candidates supported a public option or expansion of the ACA instead.[[60]](#footnote-60) The fact that one of the most conservative of available Democratic candidates on this issue won the nomination of a sliding left party that will inherit the management of the largest pandemic since Spanish Influenza is a disaster in the age of polarization. A majority of the country supports the more progressive universal form of this policy, and that was before a national pandemic. Narratives of dissatisfaction are almost more damaging as rage or conflict because they fuel political apathy. Those more heated emotions at least provoke voters to respond. Disappointment causes them to not show up to the polls.

Once a field that exceeded two dozen, the candidates were whittled down to a predictable matchup between Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders, who held the two largest advantages entering the field. High levels of name recognition aren’t everything, but they can activate strong bases of national support. The last two standing democratic candidates had the strongest starting positions in their campaigns, but the sheer size of the field reflects first, that there was no clear successor to Obama after Clinton’s loss in 2016, and second, that the Democratic party was open to a performance of pluralistic competition between varied leadership styles.[[61]](#footnote-61) With as many options as presented to the voter-audience this year, some minority voters saw themselves represented on the stage for the first time in Democratic nomination history. The contrast between our starting selection and the presumptive nominee is puzzling to all who thought that Democrats had learned their lesson with uninspiring white establishment candidates in 2016. On the other hand, voters may be responding to Trump’s brand of white chauvinistic nationalism with a candidate who is safe from those sorts of racial or gendered attacks.

To a large swath of the voting-audience, including me, the strongest choice of candidate to put up against Trump is his antithesis.[[62]](#footnote-62) That the final two contenders were white men was a strategic compromise and an anxious choice.[[63]](#footnote-63) In a reactionary countermove to the consolidation of voters mobilized by white anxiety and cultural conservatism, Democrats have extended an olive branch to Independents (if those exist in the wild anymore, a few remain in captivity) and Republicans alienated by the dog-whistle laden performances of this neoconservative President.[[64]](#footnote-64) Obama, being the head that last wore the crown, did his best to point the party in a conciliatory direction with his endorsement of Joe Biden.[[65]](#footnote-65) As of Bernie’s April 8th withdrawal from the Primary, the general election officially started and the former President immediately took control public attention[[66]](#footnote-66) and offered a party narrative of compassion, unity and compromise. His contribution, if fully adopted by the party, is an excellent start to reforming alliances in the Democratic Party and defining the themes that a Democratic response to crisis will encompass.

Obama’s endorsement is helpful after Biden’s debate performances, but there are improvements he could make that would prepare him going up against Trump. Despite often regularly placing (among other candidates) high in percentiles of time in debates,[[67]](#footnote-67) Biden is barely memorable[[68]](#footnote-68) as a candidate until Klobuchar, Buttigeg, and Steyer dropped out and endorsed him, signaling a consolidation of the moderate vote behind Biden.[[69]](#footnote-69) Here the foil with Bernie as a candidate benefited Biden. Anyone who couldn’t identify with Bernie’s revolution (and in fairness to them, Sanders did little to actively invite them in) voted accordingly, “for the other guy.” A plurality of Democratic voters delivered Biden the presumptive nomination and a huge responsibility to perform engaging and comforting leadership.

My critique of Biden’s campaign is that he is addressing the wrong voting audience. Biden’s supporters more closely resemble Republicans than the average Democrat in identity.[[70]](#footnote-70) The context we live in demands a sort of political outreach that he is not equipped to successfully navigate. Biden’s campaign alienates the most passionate faction of the democratic party while failing to pick off Trump supporters (whose loyalty to him resembles a cult of personality with little evidence of declining membership)[[71]](#footnote-71). His middle way comes from a bygone era that inappropriately misunderstands the challenge presented by neoliberalism. Biden’s greatest strength is his association with Obama and his record of legislative competence, but unless he can fire up polarized Democrats, he may find that his return to normalcy message had no persuasive effect on Trump’s voters, and little mobilization power with the far left progressive activists who engage in grassroots organizing. While Biden’s base is older and more likely to vote than Bernie’s, the mobilization of voters under thirty will likely decide this election. If his moderate performance fails to ignite these voters, he will have failed in the central claim made by his campaign: that he can beat Donald Trump.

Rhetorically, there are times when Biden misses opportunities to address his audience in a way that unites them more effectively. Let’s take Biden’s Super Tuesday speech for example. Following his victory in 10 out of 14 states, Biden opens his speech with this: “For those who’ve been knocked down, counted out, left behind, this is your campaign.”[[72]](#footnote-72) His words are welcoming to the underdog, suggesting a fellowship between people who suffer common abuses. While effective as a general platitude, it sounds odd coming from a white man who has held a position in government for nearly fifty years. His version of being counted out and knocked down may look very different (and therefore be unrelatable and fail in activating a more particular group identities that tie a voter to his coalition) from a minimum wage worker trying to stay alive during the Covid-19 outbreak.

Another instance where Biden misses the mark with his rhetorical claim to an audience: After denouncing the xenophobia coming from the Trump administration, he follows with, *“Let me be crystal clear, the coronavirus does not have a political affiliation. It will infect Democrats, republicans and independents alike. It will not discriminate based on national origin, race, or gender or zip code…”* [[73]](#footnote-73) Technically, none of that is true, but language like this obscures the very real truth that people are located differently in hierarchies of power. This is a classic misuse of truth to create an excessively and unrealistically picture of equality and freedom. While true, the virus doesn’t discriminate, our society does, and forces impoverished people, non-white people, and other disadvantaged minorities into narrative realities that improperly characterize their experience and negatively impact their health. Early death toll demographics of Covid tell us that people of color are being affected by the virus more heavily than whites.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Progressives often use politics to express their moral solidarity with others, so Biden thematic focus on coronavirus is essential, but he needs to offer material concessions so that his words seem like more than just words. If Biden is unwilling to change his mind on Medicare for all,[[75]](#footnote-75) he would be throwing away the biggest bargaining chip he has with the far left and ignoring the pieces of a very satisfying narrative arc (the pieces of which only recently became available). The confluence of an election pre-defined by the primary as centered on health care and the emergence of a global pandemic is a coincidence too great not to seize.

In the same Super Tuesday speech from above, Biden is interrupted by “Let Dairy Die” protesters who run onstage five minutes in and dramatically decry the Dairy-agribusiness’ abuse of cows. I’m not suggesting that Biden make a specific appeal to vegans, or pacifists, or Peta. I simply suggest that he find a message that inspires the voter-audience with as much passion as those activists who make an effort to disrupt the willful social blindness to pervasive issues of justice. The activist and grassroots coalitions of progressives are an incredibly valuable resource to the party when they are utilized.

Bernie Sanders has employed far more effective strategies for activating the specific identities of his coalition with themes of care and sharing diverse experiences. A particular strength of his is in tying his audience together rhetorically. One ad in particular titled “Fight for someone you don’t know”[[76]](#footnote-76) makes clear that his particular style of leadership shepherds individuals into communities on the basis of accepting and loving their differences while fighting to preserve equality. In the ad, Sanders addresses a crowd, saying “Take a look around you and find someone you don’t know. Maybe somebody that doesn’t look kinda like you. Are you willing to fight for that person as much as you’re willing to fight for yourself? If you and millions of others are prepared to do that, then not only can we win this election, but together we can transform this country” The tone of this ad is hopeful and aimed expertly at the identity Sanders’ wants to appeal to: a compassionate community member with a desire to make a statement with their vote of selflessness or courage or solidarity with others who are exploited economically in this country. That message, of course, is going to appeal to a particular type of person (With Valdesolo and Lakoff’s work we can characterize this intended audience or frame as progressive, politically engaged, empathetic towards large diverse groups and open to new experiences). That sector of the Democratic base is not being as well addressed by Biden, who lacks the same strong appeal to pathos and ethos in his performance. Biden should consider bringing in the sort of audience-engaging language use by Bernie. Sanders puts some of the work on the audience, and gives the direction: “Look around you.” That act of engagement forms a visual and emotional bond between a collection of strangers so that they can become a unified audience. That audience’s loyalty to the progressive ideals thematic to Sanders’ campaign strengthen and encourage the sort of call to action that a mere feeling of approval or resignation to the lesser of two evils. His language makes clear that he and supporters intend to build a movement, not a cult for Sanders’ ego. [[77]](#footnote-77) His campaign’s focus on building communities that care for one another, connecting on the basis of shared beliefs and identities, is the sort of democratizing project this country needs.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Midterm elections tend to have lower turnout than general elections (which means that fewer, but more passionately polarized voters convene for these elections and determine the identities of the candidates placed in foil), but a 2018 spike in turnout points to a silver lining, if we grasp it. The 2018 midterm elections delivered a blue wave of candidates at the local and regional levels, with turnout overwhelming 100 year old records for voter participation in a midterm election.[[79]](#footnote-79) Largely motivated by Trump, his outrage machine, and strengthening polarization,[[80]](#footnote-80) the Democratic Party reclaimed a few of the often forgotten roles of regional leadership.[[81]](#footnote-81) If these trends continue, the President’s chances of re-election could very easily be in trouble as he continues to invest only in his homogenous and loyal base.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Sanders and Biden have both employed testimonials and endorsements very well. Biden’s appeal to Jim Clyburn is a regularly cited endorsement that “won over” black voters in South Carolina. While it is difficult to place the effect of one endorsement in the results of an election, ihe instinct to team build is a good one. Sanders has an ad that consists of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s personal endorsement of Sanders.[[83]](#footnote-83) The ad featuring AOC is called, “Our Aspiration” and contains her heartfelt opinion that Bernie's example of leadership is the kind we need right now. It is grounded in a clear principle that cures the systematic problems that arise from democrxy in the Capitalocene: economic and social justice. While her endorsement is no more or less valuable than anyone’s objectively, as a darling of the progressive movement and a nationally known face, securing approval from these sorts of Democrats, would benefit Biden’s campaign in the mission of unifying the Democratic Party. Of course, the matter of securing these endorsements is not logistically hard now that Sanders is out of the race and Trump is the alternative. It is the tone and message these endorsements express that have power with the identities of voting publics.

Another example of the type of voice Biden needs to incorporate in his team and narrative allyship is Jesse Jackson. At a rally with Jackson, Sanders aligned himself and his flagship issue with a man whose identity inspired the rainbow coalition and centered similar values in his 1980 presidential bid. Sanders in a rally with Jackson says, “For the last 30 years, Jesse Jackson and I have believed that Healthcare is a human right, not a privilege.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Clear, compassionate, team building messaging on an issue so prescient to contemporary crises, lands well with an impassioned part of the Democratic base.As Democrats, and more specifically progressives, reassert local priorities and leadership in this era of government paralyzed by national crisis, a picture of a team starts to emerge. Bernie and the progressive movement are making a concerted effort to ride a wave of backlash to Trump’s brand of fear and hatred to a more compassionate political discourse.

A final major critique I have of Biden’s campaign is their failure to quash the conspiracy theories of Biden’s deteriorating mental state.[[85]](#footnote-85) Ignoring it as they have been is the only acceptable strategy now, but their mistake was in allowing the accumulation of enough gaffes to make compilation videos on the internet called “[Joe Biden’s brain is melting](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeBgMYFcFh0)”[[86]](#footnote-86) In Biden’s California Super Tuesday Speech, he slips up confusing his wife and sister. What was very likely an honest confusion and no more, but will continue to add fuel to the fire that is the persistent narrative of Biden being unfit mentally for office. Fox News will exploit this sort of material and do serious damage to Biden if he continues to provide plot events that confirm such a narrative. The danger in this sort of narrative is that it asserts moral or functional equivalencies between Biden and Trump. More than anything, we must not forget that these two figures are very different in their performances of leadership and ability to administrate. A corporatist Democratic is still better than a willfully destructive force to the demos and American political theater. A similar moral equivalence is in danger of being asserted with the allegations of Tara Reade. In an article about press coverage of those allegations, Nathaniel Rakich notes that the coverage by conservative outlets of Reade’s sexual assault allegations spiked in late April, forcing a response from the Biden campaign on May 1st.[[87]](#footnote-87) Putting aside for a moment the truth of the accusation (which I remain unable to square, considering my policy of default belief of sexual assault claimants, and Reade’s choice of lawyer[[88]](#footnote-88) Of course, conservative echo chambers will exploit this story because it outrages and alineates affected and oppressed identities from political participation. If Biden cannot put down this story in a way that rings true with his base, he risks losing the election that he staked his career as an electable guy on. For the sake of the entire demos, I hope that my anxieties over Biden’s failure to control political narratives is misplaced, but my instincts are tuned to prepare for the worst after 2016.

**Conclusion and Unification Narratives**

Times of social reformation are scary. Our collectivity is damaged by the economizing forces that push political performance towards the outrageous or the spectacular. I have argued for strategies that do not fight polarization, or the centrality of identity in politics and I suggest a grassroots movement pushing radical democratic reforms as the only effective stop gap to the dissolution of our country and the protection of an ever-evolving, equality-driven democrxcy. Our battle against neoliberalism is a desperate and pitched one,[[89]](#footnote-89) but it opens up an opportunity to transubstantiate radical democratic imaginaries that eradicate the parasite that bleeds the demos for profit. The time must be right now for the survival of even an ideal of democrxcy to survive this era of challenges brought about by the Capitalocene.

Our range of democratic solutions is limited only by our ability to share and communicate experience. Noyes points to the power of social identification, which I would rephrase the power of empathetic imagining, saying “…it is our ability to identify imaginatively with human actors, encased in feeling bodies like our own, that allows us to dramatize society at all.”[[90]](#footnote-90) From practicing these values in our language, organization, and political performance, I think democratizing projects still stand a chance. We have an opportunity to reclaim and reimagine democrxcy through identifying with each other in new, particular ways.

As justice-minded humans and academics in the field of democrxcy, we ought to be expanding narratives that dispel with factionalism and promoting interactive and collaborative—not competitive—communities. We need to be building a democratic consciousness and culture that is self-critical and constantly evolving its language. This should be a moment where we think not only of political strategy and democratic theory, but the bridge between performance and production.[[91]](#footnote-91) This moment calls for a narrative revolution.

# **May 14th Addendum:**

The timing of the town hall host Lawrence O’Donnell hosted on May 14 with Joe Biden and Stacy Abrams almost perfectly aligns with the points I’ve made in this paper. The performance put on by these two politicians conforms to the mechanics of the suggestions I make above.

While Biden has not announced a Vice President pick at this time, it remains one of the most valuable cards he has left to play. The more splashy and exciting he can make unveiling his choice, the better chance he has of outperforming Trump. We can think of this town hall performance as an audition, or a test of the waters. If we see a positive response from the subsection of voters who have media and representative polling presence, we may be able to expect such an announcement in the near future.

In Stacy Abrams, Vice President Biden has found a strong and inspiring woman who has stellar communication skills and passion for democrxcy. Her every word exudes the seriousness with which she regards our (demos) access to the vote, our health, and our safety. She brings diversity to the ticket and a reputation associated with Fair Fight (her organization which expands access to the franchise) which progressives would find (I think) a convincing to trust in her and her support for (and perhaps partnership with) Biden. In both her identity, and her language, she speaks with the intention of activating care and compassion in the audience she performs for (in a way that is different from Biden, and advantageous to the ticket).

Voters who may mistrust Biden for one reason or another, but still come to politics with the intention of expressing who they are with their vote, might see themselves in Abrams in a way they could not with Biden. It must be said that Black women have been the backbone of the Democratic party just as Black lesbians have been to the feminist movement. It is crucial to take this, or some similar act of representation in the White House. Identity is important, perhaps to a heightened degree in this era, but more than the color of her skin or her gender, Abrams is a better spokesperson for Joe Biden than he is for himself. While this impression is very much based on my own progressive frames, I do believe that her ability to get to the point in her sentences and exceed the expectations and framing of the questions she is asked is a crucial skill necessary for the coming election.

While there is so much more I would like to say about the possibility of Abrams as one of the team members on Biden’s ticket, I do not have time to adequately source and analyze the full performance. Moving forward, I would be very interested to see if Biden starts making more dual appearances. Perhaps other auditions wait in the wings, but if none are planned, any national visibility for Biden at this moment that activates care and compassion as identity traits in voters is a worthy democratizing practice. With that said, this paper may very well evolve across the summer leading up to November and learn more about how Biden performs leadership in response to Coronavirus and the foil he could exploit from being compared to Donald Trump. He only has to control the narrative driving that comparison.

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1. The United States’ foundational protections and ideological privileging of property continues to tie political power to wealth in a way that needs revolutionizing if we are to succeed in democratization projects. Democracies that grow along capitalism unavoidably include foundational neoliberal logics. For example, the electoral college shifts voting power away from the demos to land (an unrepresentative Senate relies on this structural concession made at the birth of our nation to empower capital in American representative democrxy). This must absolutely be addressed by any sincere democratizing project. Abolishing the electoral college and instituting a popular vote that awards representation proportionally would be one of the most empowering reforms to democrxcy the United States could take while still maintaining the basic framework of representative democrxcy. That fact that our representation was never directly proportional is a discrepancy in the American ethos that provides a narrative crux begging for resolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The juxtaposition of foils in narrative serves to accentuate differences of identity. I refer to this concept throughout my essay to point out how the identities of two opposed performers or audiences bring out unique comparisons and conflicts that are often located in emotion and not logic. Pathos has greater power in politics than logos. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* comes to mind for the most detailed account of the class-based war of terror unleashed on European working-class peasants in the transition from feudal economies to capitalist ones (especially with emphasis on the divide and conquer strategies and the construction of difference that capitalism employs against the proletariat). In her book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein fully develops the thesis of shock doctrine and disaster capitalism as utilizing crisis as neoliberal investment opportunity. Klein says of capitalism’s historical pattern, *“the history of how this market model had swept the globe, however, I discovered that the idea of exploiting crisis and disaster has been the modus operandi of Milton Friedman' s movement from the very beginning—this fundamentalist form of capitalism has always needed disasters to advance.”* (9) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Klein, Naomi “Blank is Beautiful” *The Shock Doctrine*. Klein states, *“Shock and Awe are actions that create fears, dangers, and destruction that are incomprehensible to the people at large, specific elements/sectors of the threat society, or the leadership. Nature in the form of tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, uncontrolled fires, famine, and disease can engender Shock and Awe. —Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance, the military doctrine for the U.S. war on Iraq* (3) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Klein, Naomi “Blank is Beautiful” *The Shock Doctrine*. Klein states,*“I call these orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities, ‘disaster capitalism’”* (6) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Harvey, David. “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction” As Harvey notes, *“A more accurate term for a system that erases the boundaries between Big Government and Big Business is not liberal, conservative or capitalist but corporatist. Its main characteristics are huge transfers of public wealth to private hands, often accompanied by exploding debt, an ever-widening chasm between the dazzling rich and the disposable poor and an aggressive nationalism that justifies bottomless spending on security.”* (15) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A bridge between the conversation about polarization and crisis can be found in modern texts on intersectional feminist resistance to neoliberalism. I find Nancy Fraser’s work to be a relevant and concise summary of contemporary capitalist interactions with democrxcy. Fraser, Nancy. “Contradictions of Capital and Care” *“Especially in moments of general crisis, when multiples contradictions—political, economic, ecological and socio-reproductive—intertwine and exacerbate one another, boundary struggles have erupted at the sites of capitalism’s constitutive institutional divisions: where economy meets polity, where society meets nature, and where productions meets reproduction. At those boundaries, social actors have mobilized to redraw the institutional map of capitalist society.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sophie Lewis, The virus and the family. Patreon. *“the pandemic is no time to forget about family abolition. In the words of feminist theorist and mother Madeline Lane-McKinley; “Households are capitalism’s pressure cookers. This crisis will see a surge in housework—cleaning, cooking, caretaking, but also child abuse, molestation, intimate partner rape, psychological torture, and more.” Far from a time to acquiesce to ‘family values’ ideology, then, the pandemic is an acutely important time to provision, evacuate and generally empower survivors of—and refugees from—the nuclear household.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Chait, Jonathan “Top government Vaccine Expert Fired for Questioning Trump’s Fake Science” The Intelligencer’s Jonathan Chait reports on the sudden firing of Dr. Richard Bright, head of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority. Bright was apparently fired for contradicting the President’s desire to repurpose malaria medications to fight Covid-19. Chait reflects, *“The loss of one of the nation’s most highly regarded vaccine specialists is a devastating blow to what is quite literally the most important project in the world. It is also indicative of a Trumpian war on science of which Bright is far from the only casualty. Also today, the* Wall StreetJournal[*reported*](https://www.wsj.com/articles/health-chiefs-early-missteps-set-back-coronavirus-response-11587570514) *that Trump threatened to fire Nancy Messonnier, a CDC official, after she warned in late February that the coronavirus was likely to spread within the United States at a time Trump was denying it posed any threat. Messonnier, unlike Bright, was not fired, but either she or her supervisors got the message and stopped letting her speak publicly.”* Here a pattern of willful mismanagement and neglect can be observed in the President’s leadership style (or lack thereof). https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/04/top-vaccine-expert-fired-trump-hydroxychloroquine-messonnier-science.html [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Crisis is thrown around so cavalierly, it’s worth pausing and considering the theoretical context we are addressing with this word. Dirk Nabers, in his book, *A Post-structuralist Discourse Theory of Global Politics* defines the term and contextual theory I’m referencing with the catch-alls “crisis,” and “neoliberalism.” He says, *“Due to its omnipresence in spoken and written political language, ‘crisis’ seems to be an opportune term to get to the essential questions related to global social change, the link between change and the nature of political reality, the makeup of the social, and the transformation of social boundaries, which are in turn related to questions of inclusion and exclusion, power and subordination, democracy, and control. . . In most strands of modern liberal political economy, crisis is not seen as a phenomenon that is endogenous to capitalist development, but is induced by defective exogenous interventions into an otherwise smoothly operating economic system. In contrast, Marxist critical political economy aims at conceptualizing crisis as necessary and immanent contradictions within the capitalist mode of production”* (10-11) The Marxist analysis of crisis illuminates how events that seem to emerge organically and rarely, are in fact strategically deployed in the interests of enshrined power and capital. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Trust in representative forms of government break down at the same rate as protections of democratic participation. The chaos that erupted in [Wisconsin Primary](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/14/wisconsin-election-coronavirus-republicans-supreme-court) over the question of voting during a pandemic has made voting (going forward into the 2020 general) a life-and-death performance demanded of citizens. Will voters risk their lives to maintain their influence in a representative democrxcy in crisis? Early turnout in the primaries suggests optimism, but the question of voting in November is far from settled and thrown into uncertainty by Covid-19. The Republican Party’s attempt to suppress the vote is in keeping with a pattern of obstructionist performance. The untenable stress to our representative democrxcy emerges when our bicameral branch of legislators becomes paralyzed by contemporary levels of polarization. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. An article from The Wall Street Journal by Paul Vigna, Avantika Chilkoti and David Winning notes *“U.S. stocks fell hard enough at the open to trigger a circuit breaker for the first time in 23 years that kept trading frozen for 15 minutes. The Dow Jones Industrial Average suffered its worst decline since 2008”* (March 9, 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Klein, Ezra. *“The political media is biased, but not toward the Left or Right so much as toward loud, outrageous, colorful, inspirational, confrontational. It is biased toward the political stories and figures who activate our identities, because it is biased toward and dependent on the fraction of the country with the most intense political identities… So, too is everyone else in politics.”* (170) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Control of the narrative under this president has proven difficult. His most effective and grimiest skill comes from the huckster-con-man performance he delivers. He takes the lead, dominates space with his world view, no matter how wrong-headed. He uses sleights of hand, plays on anxieties, reassures, flatters, complains, deflects. He’ll reframe the issue. Divert attention from substance. Deflect blame. He pushes the loyalty of his voters as far as it will go and capitalizes on an unfortunate byproduct of the digital information revolution: the specialization of media in trafficking in clickbait and outrage. His strategies for commanding and shifting media attention take a neoliberal view of human psychology. He is a product of an era defined by neoliberal frames infiltrating the minds of American voters and transforming the government from tool for and by the people, into slave to capital. Trump’s presidency is in keeping with patterns of modern capitalist intensification and destabilization of democrxcy. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I make this distinction between a set of foundational problems this nation has negotiated since its founding and the loss of ground and regulatory norms that citizens have experienced as part of a modern era defined by neoliberalism and its unfettered attacks on American representative democrxcy. The first is a problem of revolution. The second is a problem of infection. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A school of thought headed by Milton Friedman that gained traction in government in the 1970s and pushed, *“the movement for unfettered capitalism and … the contemporary, hypermobile global economy.”* (Naomi Klein, Blank is Beautiful, 4) This philosophy is defined by a definition of government that I view as too impoverished for the demands of this world and nation but is internalized in the American psyche and narrative structure of political theater. In Friedman’s words, the state's sole functions were *"to protect our freedom both from the enemies outside our gates and from our fellow-citizens: to preserve law and order, to enforce private contracts, to foster competitive markets."* (Klein, Blank is Beautiful, 5) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. David Harvey describes the sweeping institutional reform enacted by capital in the era of globalization in his article, “Neoliberalism as creative Destruction.” Points to a modern circumstance that threatens democrxcy: *“the neoliberal turn is in some way and to some degree associated with a project to restore or reconstruct upper-class power”* (Harvey, 147). As class inequality continues to be wielded against democrxcy, we should consider methods of material and discursive deconstruction of this crux. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The UN Department of Economic and Social affairs issued a [global report](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/world-social-report/2020-2.html) on income inequality and the corroding effects on trust in demxcracy. *“This lack of trust, in turn, can destabilize political systems and hinder the functioning of democracy. Today, popular discontent is high even in countries that have fully recovered from the 2008 financial and economic crisis and have benefited from steady growth in recent years.”* (Executive Summary: 5) A global phenomenon of undermined public trust is dangerous to all democratic nations but is clearly exhibited in contemporary United States political theater by performances of outrage (specifically, white masculine rage in the form of President Trump. Despite the economic success of Obama’s two terms, and the post-2008 recession recovery, national discontent was high enough for Trump to capitalize on the public’s sense of mistrust in both parties. This is a failure of our government to recognize when a norm of representative democrxcy (parties, a lack of proportional representation) meets a modern circumstance (hyperpolarization, and now a public health crisis) that throws our system into crisis. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I refer here to the well-known fact of growing polarization in American partisanship and the effect I observe of narrative gridlock. Ezra Klein describes the trend of increasing hatred and oppositional thinking of modern political parties. He cites Shanto Iyengar’s research on inter-party marriage, stating, *“the nature of American political partisanship, he worried, was mutating into something more fundamental, and more irreconcilable, than what it had been in the past.”* (75) This hardening of partisan boundaries remains a crux in 2020 that Joe Biden is marketed as being able to solve with his reputation of compromise and getting results that his campaign touts.

    Further relevant reporting on the modern state of the Democratic Party:

    Ansari, Julia. [“Weak Parties and Strong Partisanship Are a Bad Combination”](https://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2016/11/3/13512362/weak-parties-strong-partisanship-bad-combination) Vox. 3 November 2016. *“The defining characteristic of our moment is that parties are weak while partisanship is strong,”*

    Thompson, Derek. [“The Democratic Party of 2020 Is Broken”](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/democratic-party-2020-broken/606547/) The Atlantic. 14, February 2020. Web. *“The primary process rewards whoever arrives at the ballot box with the biggest, loudest base.”* Ansari and Thompson’s articles point out that the strength of partisanship is on the rise even as the structure of the party system is weak. Group identity and growing allegiance to partisan membership plays a large role in maintaining ideological cohesion while inflaming political conflict in order to maintain voters’ attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Klein, Ezra. “Why We’re Polarized.” The future holds demographic changes (a browning of America and transformation into a majority-minority country) that are a source of anxiety for a shrinking white base in the Republican Party (109). Polarization is activated and strengthened by diametric opposition, fear, and conflict with an out-group. The primary season, in which only the most passionate and vocal partisans and voters show up to set policy provides these antagonistic conditions. Klein analyzes the weakening effect of polarization on Party leadership, something Biden will have to contend with. He says, *“Intense minority of party supporters who turn out to vote in primaries (in 2016, for instance, less than 30 percent of eligible voters participated in primaries—and that was unusually high). This has made parties weaker, partisans stronger, and the American political system more vulnerable to demagogues.”* (178). Trump’s infiltration of the Republican Party in 2016 is an example of how an organized minority of passionate voters can have an outsized effect on the ideological setting of the party platform. Biden makes a mistake in not harnessing the passion of his party’s vocal minority, which vehemently opposed his candidacy and still may threaten party schism unless some material concessions are made. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Neighmond, Patti. [“Would The U.S. Health System Be Ready For A Surge In Coronavirus Cases?”](https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/02/13/799534865/would-the-u-s-health-system-be-ready-for-a-surge-in-coronavirus-cases) NPR. 13 February 2020. Web. *“‘No one is ready for a worst case-scenario for a really bad, lethal, fast-moving pandemic,’ says bioterrorism and biosafety expert Dr. Tara O'Toole, former undersecretary for science and technology at the Department of Homeland Security”*

    Shesgreen, Deirdre. [“'Gross misjudgment': Experts say Trump's decision to disband pandemic team hindered coronavirus response”](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/03/18/coronavirus-did-president-trumps-decision-disband-global-pandemic-office-hinder-response/5064881002/) USA TODAY. 18, March 2020. Web. *“In May 2018, President Donald Trump’s biodefense preparedness adviser* [*warned that a flu pandemic*](https://rsph.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=a0abecbd-b0a0-4c5a-b2cf-a8c800dd44dd) *was the country’s No. 1 health security threat, and the U.S. was not prepared.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Zac Beauchamp’s article on Vox “White riot" addresses the adoption of economic anxiety by white nationalists as a coded expression of the threat they perceive from a Black President. It’s racism that caused a certain group of Americans to say the economy is doing badly. “Concern about the economy became, for some, an outlet for anxieties about the country being led by a black man.” <https://www.vox.com/2016/9/19/12933072/far-right-white-riot-trump-brexit> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. While there are many different explanations for the human affinity for storytelling, my preferred theory is one of human fascination with simulation of experience as suggested by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*, echoed in this work on story and human development by Hugh Crago, *Entranced by Story: Brain, Tale and Teller, from Infancy to Old Age*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Both Valdesolo and Klein comment on the loss of more moderate voices as politics evolves closer ties with identity and becomes more of a performance in confrontation than an exercise in political compromise and administration. What even is a democrxcy when the people just aren’t interested in self-rule?

    Evidence of a culture of political apathy in 2016 shows us that something is disconnected between political performances and their intended audience. [“If ‘Did Not Vote’ Had Been A Candidate In The 2016 US Presidential Election, It Would Have Won By a Landslide”](https://brilliantmaps.com/did-not-vote/). 13 November 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This is a large and persistent weakness in American representative democrxcy that needs to be resolved so that the actions and representation of this country can accurately reflect and protect the interests of all citizens. Part of the problem being lack of interest and abundance of choice, the other being a persistent strategy of disenfranchisement.

    Democrxcy as practiced in this globalized era of capitalism cannot help but reproduce inequalities and consolidate power in the hands of those with the means to pay for it. A more radically democratic practice, with the constitutional enshrinement of equality and justice is needed, and that starts with a focus on voting. In suggesting solutions (granting D.C and Puerto Rico statehood, eliminating the filibuster, implementing automatic voter registration, and reconsidering how land votes in America (By 2040, 70 percent of America will be represented by 30 senators)) Klein makes a simple connection between the ideological democratizing principle and the modern lack of representation of American democrxcy throughout its entire history: *“We live in a country built on the principle of representation. The fact that we deny it to so many of our citizens is indefensible”* (256) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Martin, Greg. [“The Real Culprit Behind Geographic Polarization”](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/11/why-are-americans-so-geographically-polarized/575881/) The Atlantic. November 26, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. George Lakoff’s analysis of the values and identities that frame political discourse is pivotal to this conversation about narrative resistance. His book, “Don’t Think of an Elephant!” overthrows truth as some objective ruling paradigm and describes the moral and personal roots of political opinion. He grounds progessive failure in partisan conflict in the-mistranslation of nurturant values. *“The myths began with the Enlightenment, and the first one goes like this: The truth will set us free. If we just tell people the facts, since people are basically rational beings, they’ll all reach the right conclusions. But we know from cognitive science that people do not think like that. People think in frames. The strict father and bururant parent frames each force a certain logic. If the facts do not fit a frame, the frame stays and the facts bounce off.”* (15) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. A side note on another neoliberal complication of this discussion of voter attention and candidate performance. In the modern attention economy, a term coined by Matthew Crawford, the value of a message is determined by how many people pay attention to it. Crawford’s concept can be summed up, *"Attention is a resource—a person has only so much of it."* The seconds a person will “spend” on a message have exchange value that advertisers are paying dearly for. The opportunity to engage your attention is now a commodity for candidates to capitalize on politically. Influence in (or manipulation of, depending on how you look at it) your brain and the narratives it adopts concerns anyone scheming for power. As the central currency of democratic access, it needs to be protected from antagonistic forces. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ezra Klein describes the political transformation succinctly:*“The story of how the Demcratic Party came to embrace civil rights is complex. It includes the idealism of politicians like Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey as well as the hard math of electoral coalitions that, particularly in the North, began to include nonwhite voters. It reflects the logical endpoint of economic progressivism, as attention to the poor demanded attention to what was keeping so many nonwhite Americans poor, and it reflected strategic decisions made by the conservative movement’s successful effort to turn the GOP into an ideological vehicle defined by mistrust of government, opposition to redistribution, and faith in state and local rule-- attractive ideas for southerners looking to block national efforts to improve both the economic and political conditions of African Americans.”* (29) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. In the same way that candidates lay claims to coalitions of voters, parties lay territorial claims to geographical regions of the country. This has the effect of consolidating the identity of a Southerner or a Backwoodsman with more conservative of libertarian ideologies, for example. Collin Woodward has an [excellent article and graphic](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/30/opinion/urban-rural-united-states-regions-midterms.html) that divides up America into regional-ideologies that are far more descriptive than “American.” Aside: Ezra Klein just happened to nail my own mega-identity, *“You may be a democratic socialist living in Berkeley, California, who dismisses Democrats as spineless corporatists.”* (Klein, 70) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Klein, Ezra. “Why We’re Polarized” *“Our political identities have become mega-identities. The merging of the identities means when you activate one you often activate all, and each time they’re activated, they strengthen.”* (70) [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Valdesolo, Piercarlo, and Jesse Graham. Social Psychology of Political Polarization. Routledge, 2016. *“a broader phenomenon of ideological migration that has resulted in the growing segregation of Red America and Blue America.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Klein. “Why We’re Polarized” *“identity is far more powerful than issue positions in driving polarization.”* (74) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Here is the crux that I believe narrative solutions have a hope in resolving. It is the fact that these groups have been growing non-porous and inflexible that stresses the American electoral system. If we can craft narratives that activate universal compassion in group identities and empower communities of care, we might ease the inflammatory narrative nature of American politics. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Klein, Ezra. *Why We’re Polarized.* Klein citing Dan M Kahan, “Making Climate-Science Communication Evidence-Based—All the Way Down,” explicates social cohesion by explaining how fear of deviating from your in-group becomes a logical reason to accept bad information. *“The reality, he concludes, is that ‘the cost to her of making a mistake on the science is zero,’ but ‘the cost of being out of synch with her peers potentially catastrophic,’ making it ‘individually rational’ to put group dynamics first when thinking about issues like climate change…individuals subconsciously resist factual information that threatens their defining values.” (*Klein, 96) [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Klein citing Dan M Kahan, “Making Climate-Science Communication Evidence-Based—All the Way Down” Feb 13, 2013 explicates on social cohesion by explaining how fear of deviating from your in-group becomes a logical reason to accept information. *“The reality, he concludes, is that ‘the cost to her of making a mistake on the science is zero,’ but ‘the cost of being out of synch with her peers potentially catastrophic,’ making it ‘individually rational’ to put group dynamics first when thinking about issues like climate change.”* (96) [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. By this I mean party big-wigs, delegates, policy writers, and public relations staff of the DNC that set the narrative of the Democratic Party and dictate it to the media. The “establishment” is a difficult to define and nebulous faction of the Democratic party largely perceived to be “in control.” Dorothy Noyes took the advantage of a position in the establishment that I wish to focus on: *“ the authorities who control these ritual means. The tellers who emplot the narrative and give it a genre are the voices of officialdom”* (212) The Democratic party’s machine is effective in curating a basic sort of loyalty that is binding and rarely questioned by the average voter. This average joe of the Democratic party has cast the deciding vote in Democratic primaries in the past as a result of being the largest slice of the Party’s base. In 2020 majority establishment control (of the narrative as well as the voting base) is affirmed with the presumptive nomination of Joe Biden, but elite control of the nominating process has been bad for Democrats in the past. Biden’s less than fiery performances have failed to capture the attention of the most passionate of Democrats. The party may have to make larger compensatory guarantees to the progressive wing of the party, or risk a repeat of 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. These are the far-left voters who would find no political home in the republican party. People of color, the LGBTQ community, far leftists, socialists. Black and Latinx feminist lesbians come to mind as the perfect intersection of identity that is fundamentally threatened by the contemporary Republican party platform. These minorities are the backbone of social justice causes in the Democratic party. There is no elsewhere for these voters to turn for viable (read: electable) leadership. Their issues get reduced to identity politics because their very existence is a nexus of profit and discrimination exploited explicitly by one party, implicitly by both. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Klein, Ezra. “Why We’re Polarized” *“The Democratic Party will not be able to win elections without an excited, diverse coalition. The Republican Party will not be able to win elections without an enthused white base.”* (130) [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. The spoiler narrative that Bernie’s voters either didn’t vote or voted for Trump. The facts actually contradict this narrative, with Clinton supporters in 2008 more than 2x more likely to vote for McCain over Obama than Bernie voters were to vote for Trump over Clinton. The PUMA (Party Loyalty My Ass) strain of ideological purism is a threat to a democratic politics. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Klein. *“Nothing Brings a group together like a common enemy.”* (63) Trump offending such a wide swath of the population is one of the biggest advantages that Democratic coalitions have against the Republican party’s unyielding support from their voting base. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Bernstein, Leandra. “Trump dominating media attention with unfiltered daily press briefings” CBS. April 7th 2020. <https://cbs2iowa.com/news/coronavirus/trump-is-dominating-media-attention-with-unfiltered-daily-press-briefings> [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. “Trump says injecting disinfectant was sarcasm toward reporters” Youtube. April 24th, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6uj62KTuoo> [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. James Madison in Federalist No. 10, defines faction for our conversation on partisanship, “By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adversed to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” Madison proposes the republic as a stopgap against a tyranny of the majority and pitches American resentative democrxcy to capitalists and political elites as a structural advantage both for the protection of the people and the enshrined power of capital. <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/founding-documents/primary-source-documents/the-federalist-papers/federalist-papers-no-10/> [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. A basic expectation in representative democracies. When compromise is narratively and realistically prevented, democracies fail. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Klein, Ezra. *“…conservatism isn’t, for most people, an ideology. It’s a group identity.”* (233) This is in no way exclusive to conservatives. Progressives also use politics as an expressive performance of who they are and the community they belong to. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Klein, Ezra. *“Why We’re Polarized.”* This was true in 2016 and is certainly a factor considered by Democrats when selecting their 2020 nominee. *“…some pre-election polls showed a majority of Trump voters said they were motivated more by fear of Clinton than admiration of Trump.”* 193) [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Research and analysis on empathy and polarization point out the difference in target of empathy by members of each party ideology. Valdesolo, Piercarlo, and Jesse Graham in Social Psychology of Political Polarization. Routledge, 2016. *“… liberals and conservatives do not differ in their capacity for empathy or willingness to empathize with others. Rather, the present research suggests that liberals and conservatives differ in terms of the targets toward whom they expend their empathy, with liberals expressing empathy to a greater degree toward larger social circles and conservatives expressing empathy toward smaller circles.”* (62) [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. The last Democratic example of this form of leadership is President Obama, who successfully boosted turnout across demographics key to the Democratic Party’s base in a way that energized key voting coalitions. Klein states in his book, *Why We’re Polarized*, *“Obama, by contrast, was a candidate for an age of identity stacking: his strength wasn’t in converting Republicans but in mobilizing Democratic constituencies to vote at unheard-of rates.”* (175) [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Valdesolo, et. all analyzes an article by Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003) and notes the cognitive-motivational style of liberals, *“Political liberalism, on the other hand, thus reflected a greater comfort with lack of structure, greater openness to new experiences, and a stronger tendency to seek out novel situations.”* (64) [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Lakoff, George. *Don’t think of an Elephant.* Lakoff describes the liberal frame of mind thus: *“The nurturant parent worldview is gender neutral. Both parents are equally responsible for raising the children. The assumption is that children are born good and can be made better. The world can be made a better place, and our job is to work on that. The parents’ job is to nurture their children and to raise their children to be nurturers of others. What does nurturance mean? It means three things: empathy, responsibility for yourself and others, and a commitment to do your best not just for your family, but for your family, your community, your country, and the world”* (10) [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Valdesolo, et. all *“A landmark article by Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003) reviewed evidence suggesting that conservatives exhibit a higher need for closure, order, and structure, a greater intolerance for ambiguity, and lower integrative complexity than liberals. This meta-analysis revealed that political conservatism might reflect stable individual differences in the tendency to seek safety, structure, and stability; to view ambiguity or changes to the status quo as threatening; and to exhibit closed-mindedness toward novelty.”* (64) *“…conservatives tend to emphasize the importance of maintaining the security associated with group solidarity and loyalty whereas liberals focus on applying principles of justice more broadly.”* (66) [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Lakoff, George. *Don’t think of an Elephant.* Lakoff describes the conservative frame of mind thus: *“The strict father model begins with a set of assumptions: The world is a dangerous place, and it always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore, they have to be made good.”* (4)

    Teach his children right from wrong [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Valdesolo, et. all. *“The life narratives of political conservatives tended to center on authority figures, moral rules, and self-discipline, whereas the life narratives of political liberals tended to center on nurturance, openness, and empathy.”* (63) [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Trump as quoted by the Washington post: *“When somebody is the president of the United States, the authority is total. And that’s the way it’s got to be. It’s total.”* Trump’s language and actions are loaded with the traits and tone of dictators, a semiotic norm that we should call out as dangerous to democrxcy. The Republican party’s performance of blindness in response to Trump at moments when he weakens American democratic narratives points to a practical flaw in American partisanship.. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Their accounting for partisan voting patterns leads Moody Analytics to focus intensely on the motivations of swing voters, which they evaluate thus: *“what truly drives the behavior of the all-important marginal voter in our models is economics”* (2). Before the pandemic, this boded relatively good news for the President, but now it is a measure of the President’s panic surrounding his impending electoral weakness. The President has an instinct for what the statisticians at Moody state about his re-election chances: *“If income growth disappoints relative to expectations between now and Election Day, the president would have a tougher time than this model would initially suggest.”* Additionally, on the subject of possible recession, *“Under a moderate recession scenario, in which U.S. real GDP declines cumulatively by more than 2% over the next year, the average of our three models would point to a Democratic victory. However, under the current Moody’s Analytics baseline economic outlook, which does not forecast any recession, the 2020 election looks like Trump’s to lose. Democrats can still win if they are able to turn out the vote at record levels, but under normal turnout conditions, the president is projected to win.”* (9) [Moody Analytics](https://www.moodysanalytics.com/-/media/article/2019/president-election-model.pdf). Sept. 2019.<https://www.moodysanalytics.com/-/media/article/2019/president-election-model.pdf> The President’s recent performances take on a tone of desperation filmed over by thin bravado. His inability to let go of the spotlight at this moment is a strategic utilization of notional attention. Distract. Be louder, bigger, more engaging than the problem. In his words, ““WE CANNOT LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF,”” [(@realdonaldtrump, Twitter)](https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/488965-trump-hints-at-changes-to-restrictions-we-cant-let-the-cure-be-worse) According to AP reporters, “At one point the White House announced there would be no Trump briefing, but he appeared to have other ideas. His insistence on being the star of the daily briefing show came as his greatest asset in the reelection campaign — his ability to dominate headlines with freewheeling performances at his daily briefings — was increasingly being seen as a liability.” Zeke Miller, Jill Colvin and Jonathan Lemire. Associated Press April 26, 2020.<https://news.yahoo.com/plan-trump-shift-focus-prospects-040449420.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. The economic downturn is sending some conservatives into a bizarre romanticized expression of their neoliberal identity/ideology. Lieutenant governor Dan Patrick delivered the conservative narrative on Fox News thus, *““You know, Tucker, no one reached out to me and said, ‘As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?’” Patrick said. “And if that’s the exchange, I’m all in. That doesn’t make me noble or brave or anything like that, I just think there are lots of grandparents out there in this country like me.”* Beckett, Lois,  [“Older people would rather die than let Covid-19 harm US economy – Texas official”](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/24/older-people-would-rather-die-than-let-covid-19-lockdown-harm-us-economy-texas-official-dan-patrick) The Guardian. March 24th, 2020. His invocation of the word “noble” was thrown out there in order to mitigate the sort of selfless brag his statement implies to a capitalist society: dying so that the economy can live is the noble duty of patriots. This will be the alternative narrative Joe Biden and the Democratic Party must refute. If their narrative fails to address the assertion that humanity’s only worth is in making profits, and our political organizations should be employed in the expropriation of capital, then Democrats risk talking past the actual debate being had here. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. The most important of which, both by the efforts of Bernie Sanders across two presidential runs in four years, and by the coincidence of Covid-19 becoming a national pandemic, is Healthcare. Three candidates (Sanders, Warren, and de Blasio) stood on a stage and challenged the role of private insurance in the American healthcare system. Five more candidates support a version of Medicare for all with a role from private insurance, and the conservative majority of candidates (16 including Joe Biden) in the Democratic party suggest a public option.

    [Fernandez](https://www.axios.com/authors/MFernandez), [Marisa.](https://www.axios.com/authors/MFernandez) [Ayesh](https://www.axios.com/authors/rayesh), [Rashaan.](https://www.axios.com/authors/rayesh) [Medicare for All: Where the Democratic candidates stand](https://www.axios.com/2020-presidential-candidates-medicare-for-all-7d958bab-de34-4d8c-921d-b561f201c4c2.html) Axios.

    Uhrmacher, Kevin. [Where 2020 Democrats stand on Medicare-for-all and other health-care issues](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/policy-2020/medicare-for-all/) The Washington Post. April 8 2020

    Although support for universal healthcare or some sort of national program has had increasing support since 2016 support is unsurprisingly polarized by party. 8/10 Democrats support such a program and 7/10 Republicans oppose it, putting the rate of national approval at 54% as of March 2020.<https://www.kff.org/slideshow/public-opinion-on-single-payer-national-health-plans-and-expanding-access-to-medicare-coverage/> [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. The narrative theme of care, specifically reproductive care, is becoming central to the crisis we deal with. Nancy Fraser’s article “Contradictions of Capital and Care” describes the internal contradiction of capitalism thus: *“My claim is that very form of capitalist society harbours a deep-seated social-reproductive ‘crisis tendency’ or contradiction: on the one hand, social reproduction is the condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other, capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulations tends to destabilize the very process of social reproduction on which it relies.”* (100). That our crisis centers on the medical maintenance of citizens is no coincidence. Our systems of profit-making always undermine the ability of labor to reproduce itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. I’m using this word establishment again, this time to specifically refer to the group of “status quo” approximate candidates, whose healthcare plans would prevent the healthcare industry from losing a desperate market of sick American bodies. Joe Biden is the most important of this conservative Democrat ilk because he is the presumptive nominee. These candidates have absorbed a neoliberal logic (cost-benefit analysis) that refuses to disentangle the struggle for life from the business of profit. This is dangerous to democrxcy regardless of which party it permeates. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. As well as greater racial, gender, and sexual orientation variety in the identities of candidates, there was a corresponding variety of leadership styles, performances, and most crucially, identities. A veritable smorgasbord of candidates featured a Vermont Independent/ Democratic Socialist (Sanders), a few African-American establishment staples (Harris and Booker) and Obama’s right hand (Biden), a centrist businessman (Bloomberg), two white feminist candidates with different flavors of teacher (Warren and Klobuchar), a young, educated veteran and gay mayor (Buttiegeg), a young Asian-American tech-businessman (Yang), and many more types of Democrat. At this moment I would like to dispel any concern that we are being essentializing or engaging in identity politics by looking at racial diversification in the pool of candidates offered in response to Donald Trump’s brand of white nationalism. That the growing diversity in the Democratic party at times seems purely performative is problematic, to be sure. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. This feeling comes from an acknowledgment that polarization can’t be spun backwards with a blast from the past. A return to normalcy message is woefully misreading Trump as an abnormality in an otherwise functioning system. He is, in fact, the grenade thrown by citizens trying to communicate that our society isn’t working for the demos in the way it should. While it is true that right wing populism is steeped in racial anxiety, the underlying complaint of being abandoned to poverty in the richest nation in the world is valid and worthy of being addressed. The opportunity that is Trump’s unsuitability for office could have been a catapult for glass ceilings to be shattered (for women, people of color, LGBTQ+, etc.) This narrative predisposition relies on the functionality of a foil. The opposition of two polar opposites brings out more truth about each character than two that are similar. I believe that a figure like Bernie Sanders would have benefitted from Donald Trump as a comparison despite the forces of adversarial partisanship, if only because his approach in speaking to voters is so different, and his policies address their most immediate concerns. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. The trauma experienced by the shock surprise of 2016 election results should not be understated. Democrats are still nervous and unsure of the reason for Clinton’s loss. Her gender? Her demeanor? Her campaign strategies? The Republican party establishment buckled under its populist wave and produced a renegade candidate, but the two-time electoral failure of Sanders’ presidential bids is proof of a stronger managerial hand in the Democratic Party (and weaker coalitions). That an educated and competent politician with years of policy experience lost an election to an unqualified bigot is a warning shot sent by voters to the establishments of both parties. A return to the Washington corporatism that has defined establishment politics is in no way listening to the audience. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. In this, Democrats are allowing their choices to be ruled by negative partisanship. The strategy presupposes that offering a candidate who is unobjectionable to as many citizens as possible, will make the choice voters have to make in November easy. By conforming closely to the traditional identity of past Presidents, Democrats continue to tack to center, hoping to pick off Republicans and Independents who are not bound by party loyalty and desire competent administration. This is not a strategy for the era of hyperpolarization. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. A video was released on April 14 of President Obama performing his brand of presidential presence. It would be unoriginal to call him a master orator, but his tone is one of eloquence, tact, and dignity. The antithesis to Trump being so refreshing is worth contemplating further. His address begins with naming a public need to activate community bonds and see this crisis through together. stating, *“…if there’s one thing we’ve learned as a country from moments of great crisis it’s that the spirit of looking out for one another can’t be restricted to our homes, or our workplaces, or our neighborhoods or our houses of worship. It also has to be reflected in our national government. The kind of leadership that’s guided by knowledge and experience; honesty and humility; empathy and grace. That kind of leadership doesn’t just belong in our state capitols and mayors’ offices. It belongs in the White House. And that’s why I’m so proud to endorse Joe Biden for President of the United States.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Both Obama and Trump are more engaging performers than Joe Biden. In contrast to the engrossing presence of our last two Presidents, this candidate seemed quite shrinking violet on a crowded stage early in the Primary. If he is going to face off against someone whose job it used to be to entertain, Biden will need to adopt narrative strategies that hold voters’ attention where he cannot. Dorothy Noyes states, in “Authoring the Social Drama: Suicide, Self, and Narration in a French Political Scandal,” that, *“The attention of media and public is rarely sustained without narrative to compel it, especially when so many actors compete for the spotlight. Although theoretically and potentially always under scrutiny, the politician must as a rule act to enter and remain in the visible center. He must not only display his competence, but earn the opportunity to display it.”* (212) [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Biden spoke for [19:35 min](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/talking-abc-news-democratic-debate/story?id=68837585) in the ABC News February debate and [17:22 min](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/12/us/elections/debate-speaking-time.html) in the September Houston debate. This is not indicative of his personal performance as much as a reflection of the moderators’ direction of public interest. The focus of the debates often rested on Biden, Sanders, Warren and Bloomberg as central figures. Their domination of the stage made it very difficult to break out from relative name obscurity. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. I realize this is a highly personal evaluation, but I also assert that a majority of new reporting following the debates had a gossipy tone and focused on the more viral events like Elizabeth Warren’s evisceration of Bloomberg. For example, The Washington Post’s headline following the Nevada debate was “‘Titanic, meet iceberg’: Warren’s ‘devastating’ takedown of Bloomberg goes viral” (Chiu, Allison). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. [Alexander Burns](https://www.nytimes.com/by/alexander-burns), [Jonathan Martin](https://www.nytimes.com/by/jonathan-martin) and [Nick Corasaniti](https://www.nytimes.com/by/nick-corasaniti) The New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/02/us/politics/pete-buttigieg-joe-biden-endorsement.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Pew Research shows that 5% of Biden’s voters are under 30, 25% live in urban areas, 48% are women, 36% are college graduates, 56% are white, and 28% are religiously unaffiliated. While he does have support with African Americans as a result of his tenure with Obama, his supporters are older, whiter, and more religious than the average Democratic voter. This is a weakness for him because the identity he activates is not the passionately activist sector of progressive Democrats who engage in grassroots organizing. His supporters are the older, more likely to vote conservative democrat who in many ways, maintains a benevolent managerial position in a party that claims to welcome diversity while putting up the same white male candidates they always have. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Gallup Polling Data consistently measures the approval ratings of Donald Trump by party, with 93% of Republicans supporting the President in April 2020. Party loyalty is inhibitively inflexible

    <https://news.gallup.com/poll/203198/presidential-approval-ratings-donald-trump.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. [“Watch Joe Biden's Speech On Super Tuesday | NBC News”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnE9kKeOyTg) (quote found at 1:05) Mar 3, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. [“Joe Biden Gives Speech On Coronavirus Pandemic | NBC News (Live Stream Recording)”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMxokey64pU) March 12, 2020 (2:45-3:030 min) [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. “The Color of Coronavirus: Covid-19 Deaths by race and ethnicity in the U.S.” AMP Research lab Staff. Updated last: May 12 2020 <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race> [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Kapur, Sahil. “The coronavirus crisis hasn’t changed Joe Biden’s mind on ‘Medicare for All’” NBC News. March 30, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/coronavirus-crisis-hasn-t-changed-joe-biden-s-mind-medicare-n1172361> [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. “Fight for someone you don’t know” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mu-K6da4Os&list=PL_2NQfDP0JsPobDccgI5PxSvkijTfvTee&index=3> [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. On a page titled “Democracy is Building a Grassroots Movement” of his Vermont senate website, *“I have long believed that democracy isn't just voting every four years—it’s about ordinary people creating community, engaging in the political process together, and building powerful grassroots movements to achieve progressive change. And that’s exactly what we’re doing.”*

    <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/newsroom/video-audio/democracy-is-building-powerful-grassroots-movements> [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Sanders avoids what Trump embraced and his antithetical approach may prove therapeutic if practiced. The cult of personality that maintains the President’s loyal base will likely collapse without a central figure. Bernie’s movement, conversely, makes a priority out of decentralized grassroots support. Not taking Pac money is an exemplary policy position that follows from this sort of respect for the demos without preference or hierarchy of value.

    Jean-Luc Nancy, in *The Truth of Democracy* states *“Democratic politics opens the space for multiple identities and for their sharing (our), but it is nor up to it to give itself a figure. That is what political courage today must learn to acknowledge.”* (26) [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Stewart, Emily. *“*[*Voter turnout*](https://www.vox.com/a/midterms-2018) *in 2018 appears to have reached the highest level of any midterm election in a century. According to the* [*United States Elections Project*](http://www.electproject.org/)*, a sort of database about the United States electoral system,* [*49.3 percent*](http://www.electproject.org/2018g) *of the voting-eligible population turned out to vote. It also reverses a trend toward declining interest in midterm elections. Voter turnout in the 2010 midterms was 41.8 percent. In 2014, it was 36.7 percent —* [*the lowest in 72 years*](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/12/opinion/the-worst-voter-turnout-in-72-years.html)*.”* https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/11/19/18103110/2018-midterm-elections-turnout [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Yglesias, Matthew. “Democrats’ blue wave was much larger than early takes suggested With all votes counted, it’s a larger landslide than 1994 or 2010.” Vox. [November 13, 2018. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/11/13/18082490/blue-wave](https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/11/13/18082490/blue-wave) [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. 13 seats previously held by Republicans were won by Democrats in the 2018 midterms and the national visibility of others (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Pressley) have given the progressive movement a stronger voice that is located in people who look like them, and who can communicate the values of compassion and care compellingly. The leadership of other figures like governors Newsome and Cuomo who have taken the coronavirus as an opportunity to model stong leadership at a state level, where the identities of voters are more personally located. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. [Moody Analytics](https://www.moodysanalytics.com/-/media/article/2019/president-election-model.pdf)takes into account how a non-traditional candidate may drive stronger voter reactions than a boringly qualified candidate in 2020. Biden has opted for the opposite strategy with his appeal to normalcy. For this reason, Joe Biden will need to be careful about walking a difficult line. Performing non traditionally is attention-grabbing, but sensationalism fatigue and terror on behalf of voters may lead them to crave the generic white male leader of yore. *“In 2020, President Trump will be as much the nongeneric candidate as he was in 2016, and Democrats may also nominate a candidate who is a break from past party nominees. Further, if the 2018 midterms are anything to go by, turnout in 2020 could be the highest in living memory.”* (3) [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. “Our Aspiration” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YufHFz5UKh4&list=PL_2NQfDP0JsPobDccgI5PxSvkijTfvTee&index=5> [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Facebook live stream of Bernie Sanders rally. WILX News 10. <https://www.facebook.com/wilxnews10/videos/live-from-the-bernie-sanders-rally-in-grand-rapids/221142882271983/> [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Kass, John. [“Trump Wasn’t the First to Wonder About Biden’s Mental Acuity.”](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2020/03/11/trump_wasnt_the_first_to_wonder_about_bidens_mental_acuity_142627.html) RealClear Politics. March 11, 2020. A number of media platforms, both from liberal and conservative sources, have picked up this critical narrative, and it could prove damaging later in the general election. Kass’ commentary is a prime example.

    *“As ‘Joe Biden’ and ‘senility’ become twins in voters’ minds, like macaroni and cheese, Biden got into a verbal brawl with a Michigan autoworker, telling the younger man he was ‘full of s---' and threatening to ‘go outside’ and settle their differences on the Second Amendment. Just like that, #BidensCognitiveDecline was trending on Twitter, and it became a disaster, with Biden defenders in hysterics, blaming it all on the work of Russian bots and/or President Donald Trump.”* Notice the framing of the headline, Trump is ‘right’ for seeing something about Joe Biden that now everyone can see. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. “[Joe Biden’s brain is melting](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeBgMYFcFh0)” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeBgMYFcFh0 [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Rakich, Nathaniel. “How The Media Has-- And Hasn’t--Covered Tara Reade’s Allegation” FiveThirtyEight. May 5 2020. *“Of the three major cable news channels, Fox News has devoted the most attention to Reade so far.*[*3*](https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-the-media-has-and-hasnt-covered-tara-reades-allegation-against-joe-biden/#fn-3) *Through Friday, May 1, Fox News mentioned Reade in 371 clips collected by the TV News Archive — 344 of them on or after April 24.* [*Many of these mentions*](https://archive.org/details/FOXNEWSW_20200426_100000_FOX_and_Friends_Sunday/start/660/end/720) *were by the channel’s* [*conservative commentators*](https://archive.org/details/FOXNEWSW_20200429_000000_Tucker_Carlson_Tonight/start/1282/end/1317) *criticizing* [*Democrats and the media*](https://archive.org/details/FOXNEWSW_20200428_010000_Hannity/start/350/end/385) *for not giving Reade’s allegation more air time.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Jaffe, Alexandra. “Biden’s Accuser’s Lawyer Is Trump Donor With History of Representing Sexual Assault Accusers” Time. May 8 2020. <https://time.com/5834049/tara-reade-biden-lawyer/> Jaffe reports *“Tara Reade, a former Senate staffer who alleged Joe Biden sexually assaulted her 27 years ago, is being represented by a prominent lawyer and political donor to President Donald Trump’s 2016 Republican campaign.*” Is this a coincidence or a signal from the White House to conservative outlets to do exactly as they did and exploit this narrative so that the stage set in November looks like a choice between rapist 1 and rapist 2. What better strategy is there the turn off female voters, a demographic the President knows he is weak with. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Arruzza, Cinzia. Bhattacharya, Tithi and Fraser, Nancy. “Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto” (Verso 2019) states, *“The contrast could not be starker. But what makes the choice pressing for us now is the absence of any viable middle way. We owe the dearth of alternatives to neoliberalism: that exceptionally predatory, financialized form of capitalism that has held sway across the globe for the last forty years. Having poisoned the atmosphere, mocked every pretense of democratic rule, stretched our social capacities to their breaking point, and worsened living conditions generally for the vast majority, this iteration of capitalism has raised the stakes for every social struggle, transforming sober efforts to win modest reforms into pitched battles for survival.”* (3) [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Noyes, Dorothy. “Authoring the Social Drama: Suicide, Self, and Narration in a French Political Scandal.” (213) Ohio State University Press. Narrative, Vol. 8, No. 2, Narrative and Performance (May 2000), pp. 210-231 [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Habermas and Foucault laid the foundations for discursive political production and remain relevant to my analysis of narrative as formative and pillars of resistance to the withering of American democrxcy. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)