

# Face the Bitter Truth

We are two countries, and neither of them is going to be conquered or disappear anytime soon.

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We don't yet know the outcome of the election, but its meaning is already clear. We are two countries, and neither of them is going to be conquered or disappear anytime soon. The outcome of the 2016 election was not a historical fluke or result of foreign subversion, but a pretty accurate reflection of the American electorate. The much-discussed Democratic majority that's been emerging since the turn of the millennium is still in a state of emergence and probably will keep on emerging for years to come. The will of the majority is indeed blocked by undemocratic rules and unscrupulous politicians, but it's a bare majority without enough numbers to govern. When America finally becomes the promised land dominated by tech-savvy Millennials, its political values will be far from certain.

Tens of millions of Americans love MAGA more than they love democracy. After four years of lawbreaking and norm-busting, there can be no illusions about President Donald Trump. His first term culminated in an open effort to sabotage the legitimacy of the election and prevent Americans from voting. His rallies in the final week of the campaign were red-drenched festivals of mass hate, autocratic self-absorption, and boredom, without a glimmer of a better future on offer—and they might have put Trump over the top in Florida and elsewhere. Even as “freedom-loving people” came out in unprecedented millions to vote, their readiness to throw away their republican institutions along with their dignity and grasp of facts suggests that many Americans have lost the basic qualities that the Founders believed essential to self-government. There is no obvious way to reverse this decline, which shows signs of infecting elements of the other side as well.

But the composition of Trump's followers, with a large minority of Latino voters and a nontrivial number of Black voters, makes their motivations more various and complicated than the single, somehow reassuring cause that progressives settled on after 2016: racism. There turn out to be many different reasons different kinds of people want to fling themselves at the feet of a con man. The votes show that progressives' habit of seeing Americans as molecules dissolved in vast and undifferentiated ethnic and racial solutions without individual agency is both analytically misleading and politically self-defeating, doing actual harm to the cause of equality.

Many of the most influential journalists and pollsters continue to fail to understand how most of their compatriots think, even as these experts spend ever more of their time talking with one another on Twitter and in TV studios. The local and regional newspapers around the country that could fill in the picture of who we are with more granular human detail continue to die out. All of us, professionals and otherwise, are to some extent prisoners of impermeable information chambers, in which the effort to grasp contrary narratives is morally suspect.

This destruction of the mental commons is potentially fatal to a democracy. Unlike citizens of geriatric autocracies, we lack the cynical habit of learning to live with lies that we don't compel ourselves to believe are true. As newcomers, we're suckers for mass disinformation—passionate believers in the most ludicrous stories, instant experts in seizing every piece of data as proof of our chosen truth. One of the winners on Election Night was Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, a follower of the insane conspiracy ideology QAnon. She will sit in Congress alongside Democratic colleagues who, by her lights, engage in child sex trafficking.

There's nothing remotely comparable to QAnon in the Democratic Party. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake for Democrats who proudly believe in climate science and counting every vote to imagine that they are immune to the distorting effects of information technology and hyperpolarization. Having a basically sane worldview can make it harder to detect the creeping influence of self-delusion. How many people do you know who refused to believe that Trump could win a fair election? Antisocial media has us all in its grip.

There's no escaping who we Americans have become: This is the election's meaning. We are stuck with one another, seeing no way out and no apparent

way through, sinking deeper into a state of mutual incomprehension and loathing. The possible exits—gradual de-escalation, majority breakthrough, clean separation, civil war—are either unlikely or unthinkable. We have to live and govern ourselves together, but we still don't know how. Winning in this state becomes a chimera. Whoever takes the presidency, all Americans will remain the losers.

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