

# The US Elections: An Episode in a Cultural War

by [Amir Taheri](#)

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  - With the confederacy of minorities in mind, he [Biden] promised to protect and advance community rights, while forgetting that human rights, as spelled out in the Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, also largely an American product, are individual not collective rights.
  - For more than a century, America offered the world a different socio-politico-economic model, implicitly trying to make others like itself.... The classical American model remains the most attractive around the world. The irony, however, is that the model in question is being challenged inside the US itself. Rather than wanting to make others like the US, a growing segment of US establishment wants to make the US like others, notably European social democratic models.
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Pictured: Voters fill in ballots at the CenturyLink Field Event Center in Seattle, Washington on November 3, 2020. (Photo by Jason Redmond/AFP via Getty Images)

Although we don't yet know the denouement of last week's election in the United States, one thing is already clear: this was an exceptional event in America's more than 200-year-old democracy.

To start with, this was the first time that the election was not fought within the rules of the traditional two-party system. The Republican Party offered no manifesto or program, allowing the exercise to become a duel between President Donald J Trump and his opponents. That, in turn, gave the election a personal aspect never seen before. The Democratic Party did offer a program, but mostly to furnish the vacuum -- a program half of which canceled the other half. The party's presidential candidate, Joe Biden, claimed he had a secret plan to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic but mostly campaigned as anti-Trump and attracted support from diverse sectors largely on that basis.

The Republicans suffered a split, with the old establishment and some of the wannabes opting for anti-Trump shenanigans.

The Democratic Party's left tried to focus on winning in Congressional elections and, holding its nose, voted for Biden.

For months before election-day, numerous polls predicted a landslide victory for Biden with a blue tsunami that would sweep Trump and the segment of the Republican Party supporting him into oblivion.

In the end, however, the Republican secessionists failed to help cut Trump down to size and thus acquire a base for future plans. Results show that Republican voters turned up en masse to back their candidate. That enabled the split party to increase its numbers in the House of Representatives and hang on to its Senate majority. In contrast, the Democrats' leftist segment failed to achieve the revolutionary score it had hoped for. To be sure the "four furies", the four ladies who have energized the left, did keep their seats. But in most cases Democrat voters went for centrists or rightist candidates of the party, people closer to Joe Biden than Bernie Sanders.

There were other surprises.

The Democrats saw part of the "coalition of minorities" that has been their electoral backbone for decades abandon them in favor of Trump. The vilified incumbent increased his vote among Blacks, or African-Americans, by almost 50 percent and won a larger share of Latino votes than any Republican presidential candidate in decades. This time around the Democrats also sustained losses among Jewish Americans who turned to Trump in unexpected numbers.

In this election, Bill Clinton's cliché "it's the economy, stupid!" showed its limits. More voters continued to trust Trump on fixing the economy than Biden.

With all that in mind one might ask: what was this election really about?

An analysis based on class divisions, in the Marxian sense, would miss the point. More rich and well-to-do Americans voted for Biden than for Trump. Biden raised much more money for his campaign than did Trump. The bulk of the establishment elite of business, academia and media voted for Biden along with a majority of celebrities, big or small. However, Trump's constituency was not exclusively composed of what Hillary Clinton described in unflattering terms.

Leaving the class angle aside, one could also see that foreign policy was not a key factor either -- in fact it wasn't even properly debated by the two sides. Both candidates agreed that China was a looming threat.

With minor cosmetic caveats, Biden also endorsed Trump's initiatives for bringing peace to the Middle East. Nor was defense policy a source of divisions with Biden indicating he would not undo the build-up and modernization begun under Trump.

But what if this election was an episode in a cultural war over the American national narrative? The central theme of the American national narrative is that of victims of religious persecution and political oppression coming to the New World, and, thanks

to pioneer spirit, hard work, thirst for freedom and innovation, transforming themselves into heroes. In that narrative America is a celebration of individual success and heroism.

The German writer Erich Mari Remarque noted that one enters America by leaving behind one's autobiography, joining the great American story. Other non-American writers, among them Charles Dickens, Ivan Bunin, Ilya Ehrenburg, Franz Kafka and Parviz Dariush have also depicted America as "the land of new beginnings" for all those fleeing "old grievances and resentments". Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote of the challenge of making the "I" correspond with the "me" as one aspired after being a subject in one's own life but often ended up an object manipulated by others through religion, tradition and sheer power. Only in America with its huge physical and social spaces one could think of a first-person narrative.

Now, however, that narrative is challenged by a good segment of the American elite, especially in academia and media, in favor of a new narrative that replaces heroism with victimhood. In that narrative you must show that you or your ancestors have somehow suffered, granting you the status of a victim deserving empathy, apology and compensation from "the system."

Victimhood was a trope for most candidates in this election. Biden reminded people about the tragic death of his first wife in a car accident and that of one of his sons. He also revived his middle name Robinette to point to his ancestors' sufferings as Protestants in a militantly Catholic France. Biden's Vice-Presidential running-mate Kamala Harris was unable to point to any suffering endured by her Jamaican and Indian-Tamil parents in America but made much of her blackness to commiserate with victims of slavery in the New World. For his part, Trump alternated between playing hero and victim. He cast himself as the little man's champion heroically standing against the powerful establishment. But then he also played the victim persecuted by the mainstream media.

There were other signs of candidates distancing themselves from the classical American narrative. Biden spoke of "our communities", implicitly choosing the salad-bar shibboleth over the melting pot image. With the confederacy of minorities in mind, he promised to protect and advance community rights, while forgetting that human rights, as spelled out in the Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, also largely an American product, are individual not collective rights.

For more than a century, America offered the world a different socio-politico-economic model, implicitly trying to make others like itself. It succeeded beyond expectation as, today, a majority of nation-states are democracies with constitutions and a largely market-based capitalist economic system. The classical American model remains the most attractive around the world. The irony, however, is that the model in question is being challenged inside the US itself. Rather than wanting to

make others like the US, a growing segment of US establishment wants to make the US like others, notably European social democratic models.

If this election was about an attempt at ditching the American narrative, it failed. But the cultural war is far from over.

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