

Making Sense of the 2020 Election and Its Aftermath | Matt Taibbi

November 5th, 2020

Thank God at least it's about to be over. If it's about to be over. Please, let it be over. — Matt Taibbi

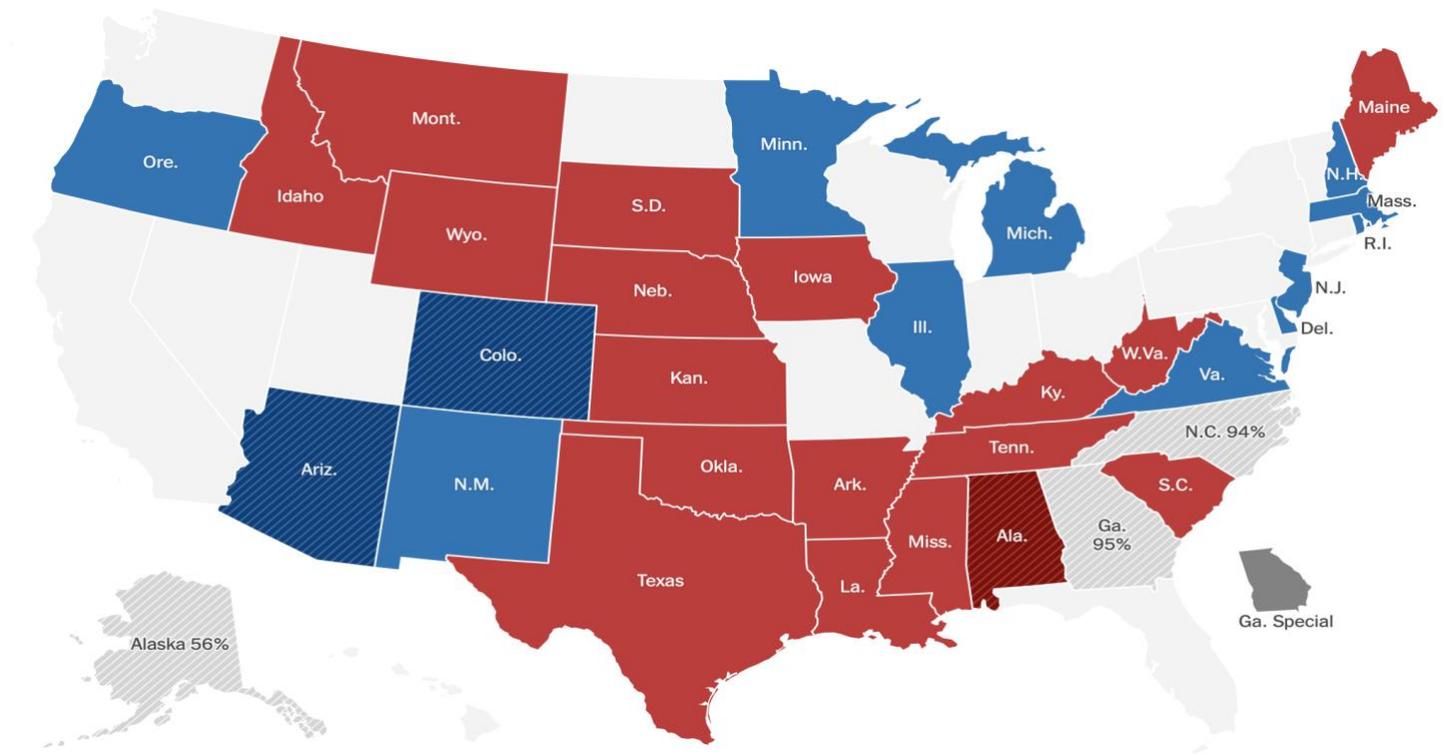
INTRODUCTION

Matt Taibbi is a contributing editor for Rolling Stone and winner of the 2008 National Magazine Award for columns and commentary. He has reported on finance, media, politics, and sports. He is a contributing editor for Rolling Stone, author of several books, co-host of Useful Idiots, and publisher of a newsletter on Substack. His most recent book is 'Hate INC.: Why Today's Media Makes Us Despise One Another,' which argues "that what most people think of as 'the news' is, in fact, a twisted wing of the entertainment business."

WHY DO I CARE?

I am writing these words on Tuesday morning, November 3rd—election day. If you are a Democrat, you have been gruelingly awaiting today's arrival for the last four years. You've been told by CNN, MSNBC, the New York Times, etc., that today represents not only an opportunity for a new beginning, but perhaps, more importantly, our one, last chance to "save democracy" from the clutches of a tyrannical despot. If you are a Trump supporter or a Republican who prefers Trump to what has been on offer from the Democratic party in recent years, you've been told by your respective outlets that today represents a perilous moment. Donald Trump is the only thing that stands between America and the woke, leftist hoard of radical Democrats determined to turn America into a socialist dystopia and cancel your right to self-expression in the prosses.

While I don't wish or intend to minimize the differences between our two presidential candidates, I think that for most people, the outcome of this election couldn't be more meaningless. The narrative pushed over the last four years is that America is a fundamentally racist, homophobic, misogynistic, and nativist patriarchy ruled by the logic of white supremacy, and that this is why everyone is so pissed off. It's a difficult narrative to refute, because it contains within it some uncomfortable truths.



It is true. America is a country founded by white men who owned other human beings—kidnapped from a distant continent—and used them to build the very country that locked them in chains and treated them as livestock. This is an incomprehensible evil, and yet, there was a time when it was common practice throughout the Americas and Europe. The same can be said of man's relationship to women, as well as Christianity's treatment of homosexuality. While



politically overt forms of racism, misogyny, and homophobia have been extinguished, their residue remains in the cultural fabric of society and its impact can be felt in the way our courts administer justice, in how our companies hire workers, in how we are targeted by advertisers, and in the myriad ways in which we go about living our daily lives.

Yet, these truths do not explain the rage and sense of indignation that has overtaken our society in recent years, nor do they speak to the majority of Americans, who irrespective of their phenotypic markers feel that life has become increasingly unfair.

The truth is that while we Americans certainly do hold prejudices and these prejudices do influence our behavior and decision making in myriad ways, they pale in comparison to the power and influence of money in American life. Acknowledging this does not absolve us of our responsibility to minimize the role played by identity in determining outcome. It is simply to state the obvious, that if you are sufficiently wealthy and well-connected in America, irrespective of your biological make-up, life has never been better and this election isn't going to change that. There are protected classes in this country, but the ones I'm talking about aren't identifiable by race or gender.

I recall hearing my old professor of Soviet history, the late Stephen Cohen remark once that the central, unresolved grievance among the Russian people is the manner in which the country's assets and shares in its state owned companies were privatized and sold off in the years immediately following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Americans have not experienced such a similarly singular event as the privatization of the 1990's. However, as the inheritors of sole super power status in the 1990's and early 2000's, our own elite took it upon themselves to expand the dominion of concern and influence from the territorial United States and its Cold War allies, to every corner of the globe. This shift in focus, coupled with a large and stable demand for dollars from the rest of the world, enabled this cadre to operate with very little regard for its domestic audience. The disastrous Iraq war and subsequent occupation, coupled with the massive, open-ended bailouts of America's financial class during the 2008 crisis have exerted a similar influence on American politics. Most of us are not unaware of who was involved in both of these calamities, and while we do not talk much about it, we resent the manner in which this small class of American oligarchs have been able to wreck so much of our country and enrich themselves at our expense in the process without the slightest repercussions.

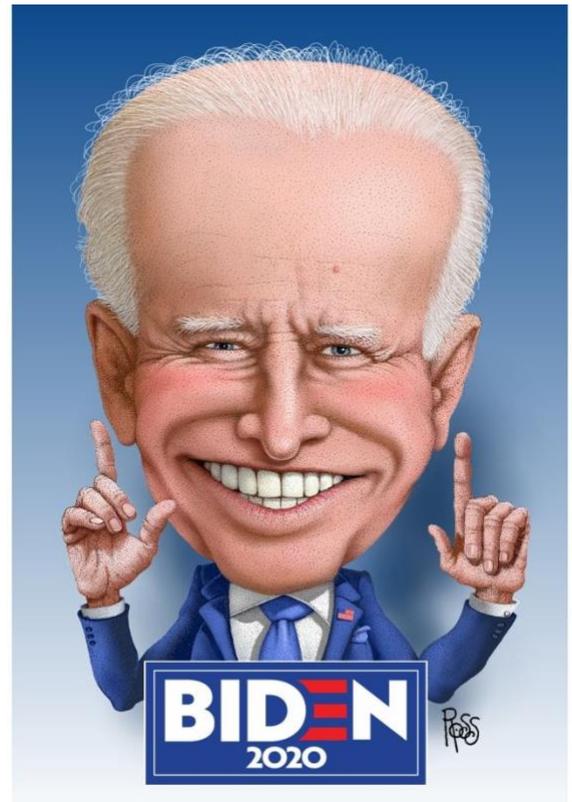
I have no idea who will win this election, or if we will even know by the time that Matt and I sit down to begin our recording. What I do know is that our leaders have yet to acknowledge the true source of the problem, and until they do, the political division and social unrest that we have experienced in the last four years isn't going to get any better.

ELECTION UPDATE

I am writing this on Wednesday afternoon, November 4th. What an insane 18 hours we have just lived through? A couple of weeks ago I read a very insightful [article by Barton Gellman](#) that attempts to game out an election night scenario in which Donald Trump wins the in-person vote but loses once all the mail-in votes are counted in the days after election day. The scenario he lays out is precisely the one that seems to be unfolding thus far. Donald Trump may well have won the in-person vote by a convincing margin. He was certainly doing very well during the late evening when it appeared that he was going to win the election. However, the tide seemed to turn late into the night and we now have a seriously contested election on our hands. I'm not sure what to make of what we are seeing at the moment, because I don't trust any of the information being reported anywhere, by anyone about this election. And honestly, my faith in our media institutions and in our government is the lowest it has ever been in my entire life.

Let me break and speak frankly for a moment. I am not a conspiracy theorist. When Jeffrey Epstein was found dead in his cell for example, my first instinct was not to presume that he was murdered, but to genuinely seek to understand what happened, if the official explanation was credible, and what evidence was being put forward to justify claims that there was foul play. This is a formula that I have stuck to quite stubbornly over the last few years, but it's becoming increasingly difficult to do this without feeling like I'm just spinning my wheels. Unless you are directly plugged into both the Biden and Trump campaigns and have intimate relationships with people all over the government, how can you begin to trust any of the information coming to you about this election? You can't, because everyone is playing you.

For the first time in my life, I feel totally paralyzed. This didn't happen all at once. My despondency and epistemic paralysis is cumulative. It's been building for the last 4 years. The fomentation of fear and distrust by media institutions, government officials, foreign agents, and millions of useful idiots on social media (i.e. all of us) has led an atmosphere of mass hysteria that has come home to roost in this election. Donald Trump is going to milk this for all that it's worth and his most ardent supporters and those who are already predisposed to believe in "deep state conspiracies" will be totally convinced that the election was rigged from the very start and that it is being stolen right in front of their very eyes. What's more alarming is that I have my own doubts about what is really going on. I believe anything is possible in our elections today, because my entire world view feels like it's in the process of collapsing. I've had similar experiences in years past, most notably with the 2008 bailouts. If there is in fact election interference on the part of the Democrats, it certainly isn't as obvious as the bailouts of Wall Street, but we still have a long ways to go before any partial clarity begins to emerge, if ever. Perhaps a more accurate comparison is that of 9/11. Very few people doubted the source of the attacks in the immediate days and weeks after they happened, but over time, doubts began to seep in about who was responsible and what, if any role the government had in them. The same is true of the Kennedy assassination, the moon landing, and just about any other important, historical event we can think of. The 2020 election will generate its own conspiracies that will flourish in the years to come and remain for decades if not centuries, but



we know from history that definitive answers will never come. And this is at the root of the predicament we find ourselves in. Trust in objective truth has been shattered, and it's not going to be put back together in the next four years unless something really traumatic happens that forces people to come together. A war? Maybe. Maybe it's not even helpful to think about things in such binary terms: war or no war. In some ways, we are already at war. We are at war with our fellow citizens, with our government, with corporations that steal our data, and with foreign governments who seek to turn our familial disputes and sufferings into their good fortune. So long as the people of this country are divided those in positions will continue to exploit us for their own ends. Foreign adversaries like seeing us divided, and so do companies like Twitter, Facebook, Google, and others who profit from our outrage know that if we are focused on each other we won't have the brain cycles to devote to pushing our own government to hold them accountable.

For what it's worth, here is my sense of what is happening to us. I believe that our nation is spiraling wildly out of control. I believe that the nation's institutionalists and kingmakers are backing Biden because he represents a moderate who they know and feel they can control in order to restore order. The same goes for Harris, who may well take the reins in the first year of this administration. I do not believe that these two candidates represent the type of change that the majority of the electorate—democrat and republican alike—are looking for or will accept. I think it's a miracle that we made it this far into the 21st century without a radical upheaval of the status quo. Trump was the country's first attempt at making this happen. The fact that he was truly independent meant it was actually possible for him to break with the "deep state," make meaningful reforms, and get himself reelected in the process. Unfortunately, he is a deeply disturbed human being who wasted this precious opportunity on petty vanity plays, vindictive counterstrikes, and four years of internecine conflict with his own staff and cabinet.

We should not expect much better from a Biden-Harris administration. Sure, they will say all the right things, but the right things aren't "the right things" anymore. The majority of Republicans elected Trump in 2016 and turned out in record numbers for him this year because they are done negotiating with the power behind the throne and getting nothing, year after year. They are done

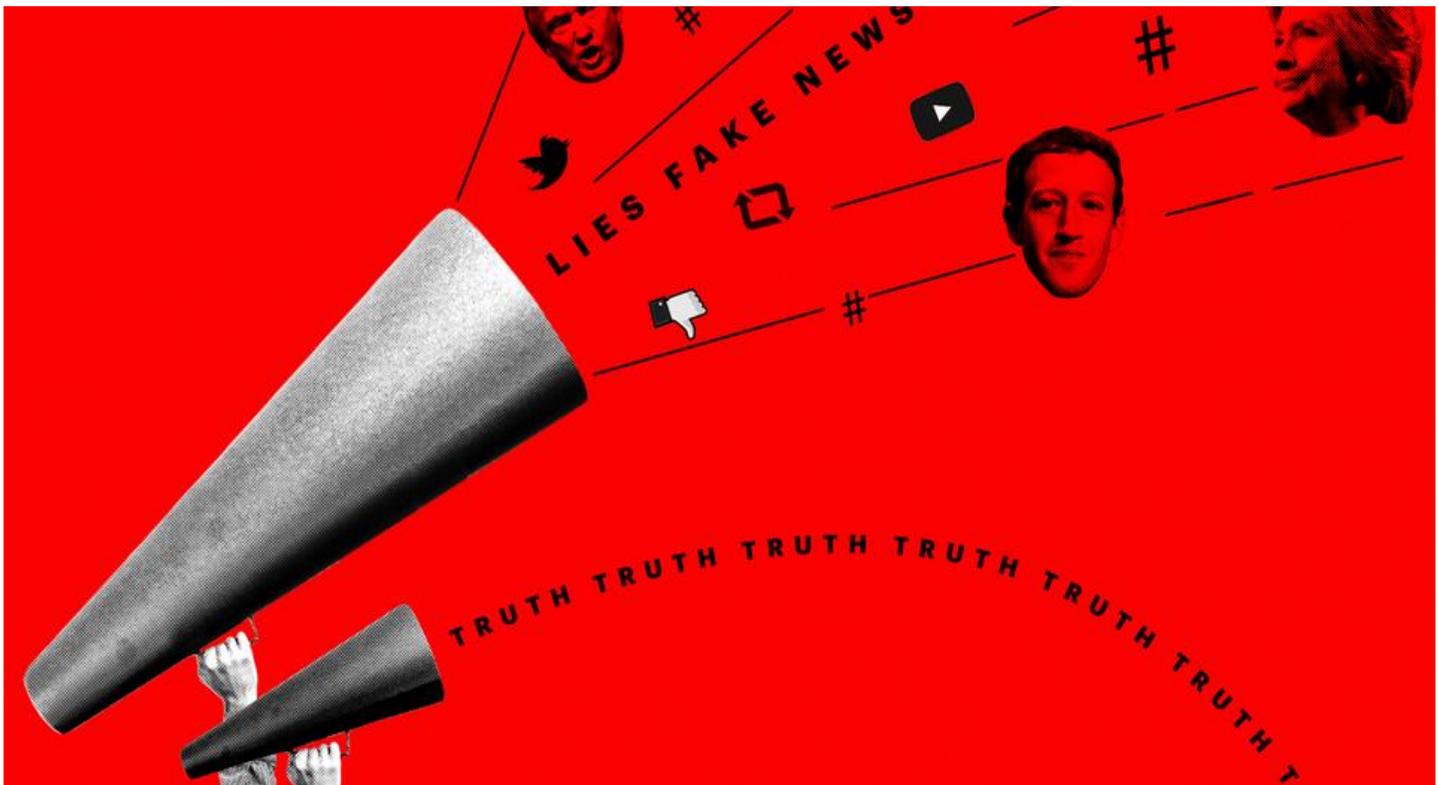


asking to be treated like adult human beings. They are done with broken promises. **How long before Democrat voters come to the same realization?** How long before AOC or an AOC derivative emerges and decapitates the Democratic party in the same way that Trump did to the Republicans in 2016?

During the presidency of George W. Bush, the national debt (public debt + intergovernmental liabilities) increased from \$5,792 trillion in September 2001 to \$11,898 trillion by September 2009. Obama nearly doubled that number to \$20,233 by September 2017. In four short years, Donald Trump's administration has added another 7 trillion dollars to it.

None of this takes into account the rise in Federal Reserve liabilities over the same period as evidence in the extraordinary expansion of central bank's balance sheet. **We have been saying for DECADES that our debt is becoming unsustainable. At what point does it become unserviceable?**

I could go on and on. I've talked at length about the wealth disparity issue in America and how such levels of wealth inequality are fundamentally incompatible with a free-market economy where and democratic republic. When less than 100 people own more wealth than the other half of the country, that's not capitalism. That's feudalism. The only way for a system like that to work is to put everyone on a salary, guarantee them universal housing, and run the economy like a plantation, but instead of using a whip to motivate the serfs, you use behavioral science to control them directly through their proximate digital devices.



QUOTES:

Usually, **high in-person turnout favors Democrats.** This year, because so many Democrats voted early (and Republicans have been warned away from mail ballots), **the situation will likely be reversed.** This means we could very well have early results that look confusing, maybe even like a wipeout for Trump, when what we're actually seeing is just in-person votes being counted faster than mail votes. We also could see opposite scenarios. — [Matt Taibbi](#)

Expect Republicans to tell tales of trucks of fake ballots shipped over the Rio Grande in burlap sacks, while Democrats might counter with photos of wheelchair-bound minority voters invited to exercise their democratic covenant at ad-hoc ballot stations re-located to the top of hundred-foot climbing walls. — [Matt Taibbi](#)

Joe Biden is a corpse with hair plugs whose idea of “empathy” is to jam fingers in the sternums of people who ask the wrong questions, or [call them “fat”](#) or [“full of shit,”](#) or dare them to “try me” — and that’s if he remembers what state he’s in. **Is he a better human than Donald Trump?** Probably, but his mental decline has hit [Lloyd Bridges-in-Hot-Shots!](#) levels and he shares troubling characteristics with the president, beginning with a **pathological struggle with truth.** — [Matt Taibbi](#)

Biden spent much of 2020 lying about everything from his Iraq War vote to his [educational history](#) to a fantasy about being [arrested in South Africa](#) with Nelson Mandela. The same press that killed him for this behavior in the past let it all slide this time. Same with the growing ledger of handsy-uncle incidents that had adolescent girls and campaigning politicians alike wondering why a Vice President needs to smell their hair or **plant lingering kisses on their heads while cameras flash.** — [Matt Taibbi](#)

In modern America the president’s most important job might be using his or her voice to reassure the country. **Trump not only lacks this ability, he finds ways to make huge portions of the population feel like passengers in a pilotless, plummeting jetliner every time he opens his mouth.** — [Matt Taibbi](#)

The issue today is not that the companies are taking too many posts down ... **The issue today is that companies are leaving too many posts up.** — [Sen. Edward Markey \(D\)](#)

As a member of the press, the drift toward a Chinese-style digital media landscape, policed by armies of political truth-scorers, probably bothers me more than most, but that’s on the table. **There are going to be a lot of people coming back to Washington who are going to insist that something like Trump not be allowed to happen again, even if it means snipping a passage or four out of the Constitution.** — [Matt Taibbi](#)

If we were going to push for an election then **we should have made sure that we did something to determine who was going to win.** — [Hillary Clinton](#)



I think we're headed toward that vision of American democracy familiar to most of the rest of the world, where we have the freedom to vote, but only the right way. — [Matt Taibbi](#)

Falsehood is a recognized and extremely useful weapon in warfare, and every country uses it quite deliberately to deceive its own people, to attract neutrals, and to mislead the enemy. The ignorant and innocent masses in each country are unaware at the time that they are being misled, and when it is all over only here and there are the falsehoods discovered and exposed. As it is all past history and the desired effect has been produced by the stories and statements, no one troubles to investigate the facts and establish the truth. — Arthur Ponsonby



Man, it is said, is not "a veridical animal," but his habit of lying is not nearly so extraordinary as his amazing readiness to believe. It is, indeed, because of human credulity that his lies flourish. — Arthur Ponsonby

The public can be worked up emotionally by sham ideals. A sort of collective hysteria spreads and rises until finally, it gets the better of sober people and reputable newspapers. — Arthur Ponsonby

Facts must be distorted, relevant circumstances concealed, and a picture presented which by its crude colouring will persuade the ignorant people that their Government is blameless, their cause is righteous, and that the indisputable wickedness of the enemy has been proved beyond question. A moment's reflection would tell any reasonable person that such obvious bias cannot possibly represent the truth. But the moment's reflection is not allowed; lies are circulated with great rapidity. The unthinking mass accept them and by their excitement sway the rest. — Arthur Ponsonby

In calm retrospect we can appreciate better the disastrous effects of the poison of falsehood, whether officially, semi-officially, or privately manufactured. It has been rightly said that the injection of the poison of hatred into men's minds by means of falsehood is a greater evil in war-time than the actual loss of life. The defilement of the human soul is worse than the destruction of the human body. — Arthur Ponsonby

As long as the peoples are armed against each other, there will be lying statemen, just as there will be cannons and machine guns. ("Tant que les peuples seront armes, les uns contre les autres, ils auront des hommes d'état menteurs, comme ils auront des canons et des mitrailleuses.") — Some Frenchman

There is the deliberate lie concocted by an ingenious mind which may only reach a small circle, but which, if sufficiently graphic and picturesque, may be caught up and spread broadcast; and there is the hysterical hallucination on the part of weak-minded individuals. There is the lie heard and not



denied, although lacking in evidence, and then repeated or allowed to circulate. There is the mistranslation, occasionally originating in genuine mistake, but more often deliberate. — Arthur Ponsonby

There is the general obsession, started by rumour and magnified by repetition and elaborated by hysteria, which at last gains general acceptance. — Arthur Ponsonby

There is the concealment of truth, which has to be resorted to so as to prevent anything to the credit of the enemy reaching the public. — Arthur Ponsonby

There is the "Russian scandal," the best instance of which during the war, curiously enough, was the rumour of the passage of Russian troops through Britain. Some trivial and perfectly understood statement of fact becomes magnified into enormous proportions by constant repetition from one person to another. — Arthur Ponsonby

When bias and emotion are introduced, human testimony becomes quite valueless. In war-time such testimony is accepted as conclusive. — Arthur Ponsonby

There is sham official indignation depending on genuine popular indignation which is a form of falsehood sometimes resorted to in an unguarded moment and subsequently regretted. — Arthur Ponsonby

There are personal accusations and false charges made in a prejudiced war atmosphere to discredit persons who refuse to adopt the Orthodox Attitude towards war. — Arthur Ponsonby

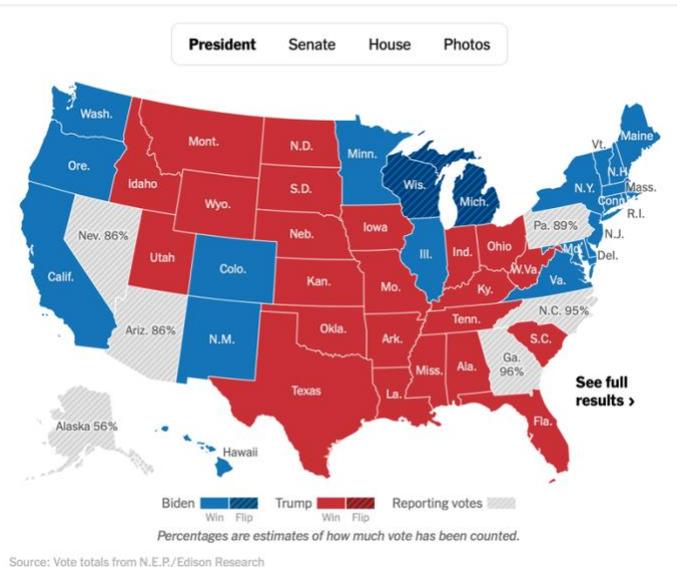
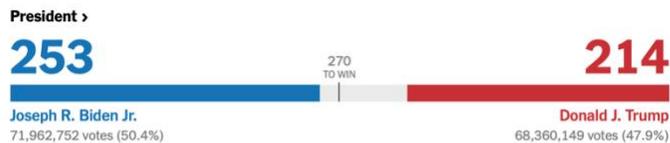
A good deal depends on the quality of the lie. You must have intellectual lies for intellectual people and crude lies for popular consumption, but if your popular lies are too blatant and your more intellectual section are shocked and see through them, they may (and indeed they did) begin to be suspicious as to whether they were not being hoodwinked too. Nevertheless, the inmates of colleges are just as credulous as the inmates of the slums. — Arthur Ponsonby

War is fought in this fog of falsehood, a great deal of it undiscovered and accepted as truth. The fog arises from fear and is fed by panic. Any attempt to doubt or deny even the most fantastic story has to be condemned at once as unpatriotic, if not traitorous. — Arthur Ponsonby

If the truth were told from the outset, there would be no reason and no will for war. — Arthur Ponsonby

In wartime, failure to lie is negligence, the doubting of a lie is misdemeanour, the declaration of the truth a crime. — Arthur Ponsonby

No matter what the final result, there will be substantial doubts about its legitimacy by one side or the other, perhaps both. And no deranged conspiracy thinking is required for that. An electoral system suffused with this much chaos, error, protracted outcomes and seemingly inexplicable reversals will sow doubt and distrust even among the most rational citizens. — Glenn Greenwald



QUESTIONS:

2016 All Over Again? — Last time you were on the podcast, you mentioned that you had originally felt that Trump had a much better chance of winning in 2016, but that you let your colleagues convince you otherwise. You said that you would never let that happen to you again. **Q:** What were your expectations this time around and were able to honor that promise to yourself?

Polls Shmolls — **Q:** Why were the polls so off again in 2020? **Q:** How much of the error in the polling is because of a strong ground-game by the Trump team coupled with lots and lots of rallies down the stretch and how much has to do with the bubble the Democrats live in? **Q:** How did the professional progressive class miss this? **Q:** Did anyone get it right?

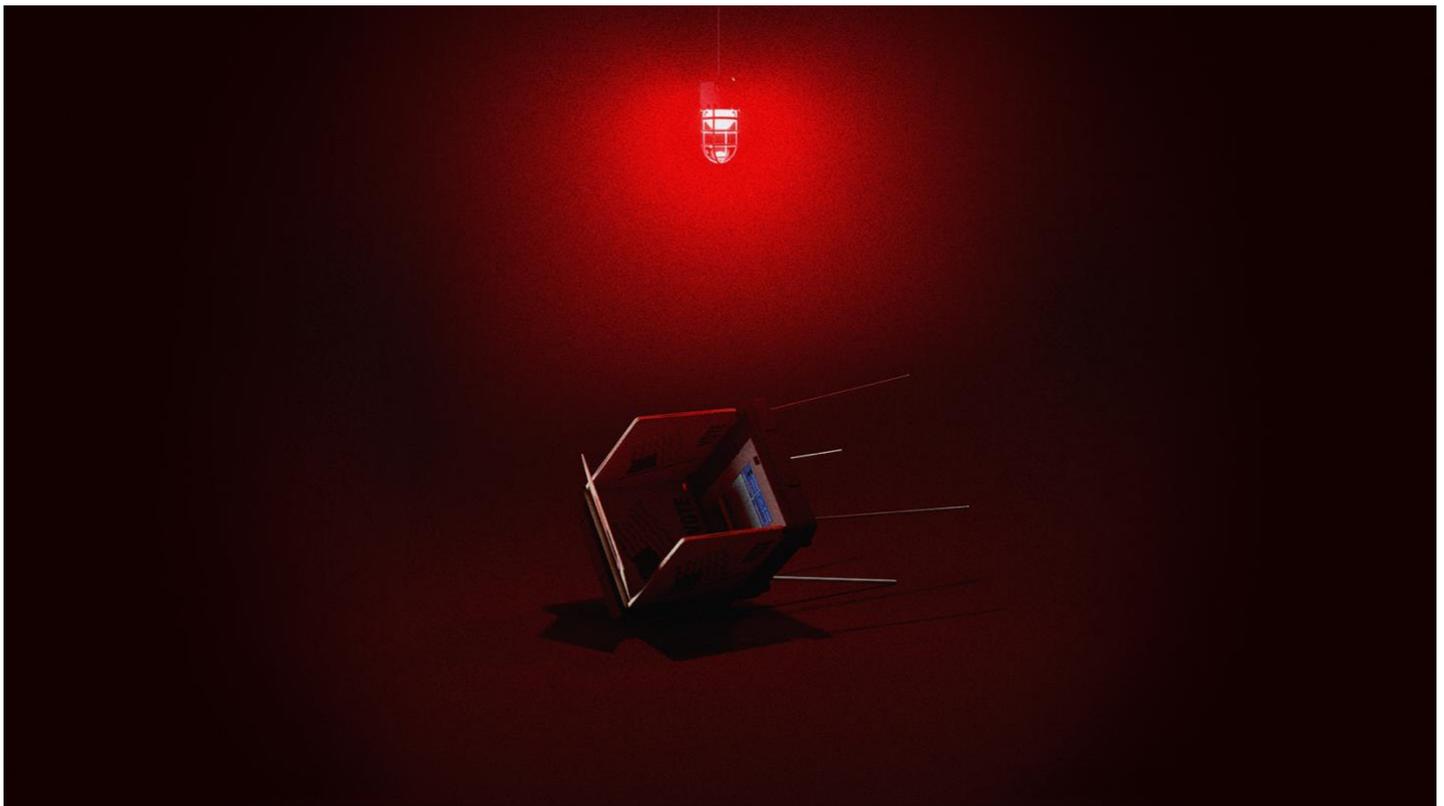
Future of Polls — **Q:** What lesson do we draw from the polling failures and how does this affect the industry and prominent pollsters going forward? **Q:** Are we going to continue to trust polls because the numbers give us a sense of control over the future?

Failed Lessons — **Q:** What is the lesson that Democrats failed to learn in 2016 more than any other? **Q:** What coalition of voters does the Democratic party target?

Great White Hope — One of the more shocking facts of this election is the overwhelming increase in Trump support by non-white voters. Trump is currently [on track to gain the most support among non-white voters since 1960](#). Based on exit polling, Trump is projected to have won the support of 18% black male voters, up from 13% in 2016. Black female support for Trump doubled from 4% in 2016 to 8% this year, while a majority of white women voted for Trump. LGBT support also doubled for Trump this time around, while the percentage of Latinos and Asians voting for him also increased from 2016. **Q:** How are Democrats explaining this to themselves? **Q:** Is anyone asking the question “maybe our theories of white male supremacy are not actually jiving with reality?”

*** [Tone Deaf Op-Ed by Charles Blow](#)

Democratic Narrative — **Q:** What is the prevailing narrative among democrats about the nature of the electorate, the concerns of daily people, and the issues that animate them?



Future of the Democratic Party — Q:

What is the future of the Democratic party?

Q: Is this an AOC/Bernie party? Q: Who are the most compelling or powerful figures in the party who you think could rise up to take control of it in the next 4 years (if any)?

Nancy Pelosi — Q: Does Nancy Pelosi survive another four years or will there be a civil war in the House that will cost her the speakership?

Vote Counting Disaster — Q: What do you expect the process going forward to look like in terms of coming to a resolution about this election? Q: Why can't we count votes like a normal, developed country?



Violence — Q: Are we going to see violence regardless of which side wins? Q: Is there a particular base of voters or supporters of either candidate who are especially violent or dangerous?

Explanations — Q: Why do you think people voted for Biden? Q: Why do you think people voted for Trump?

Corona Fatigue — I was recently back in the city and noticed that people were behaving very differently than they have been in this rural part of New York where I've been for the last 9 months. They were on-edge about coronavirus in a way that seemed hysterically out of touch with reality. Q: Did the Democratic party overplay their reach about the pandemic? Q: Are most people too concerned with more immediate risks to panic about this virus?

State of the Senate — Q: How likely is it that the Republicans have held onto control of the Senate? Q: Could David Perdue's lead against Democratic challenger Jon Ossoff in Georgia flip and give the Senate to the Democrats?

Tie — Q: What would happen if this presidential election ended as a tie?

Divided Government — Q: Would Democrats prefer divided government at this time in order to help them walk back some of their more expansive promises without inflaming the AOC wing?

Trump's Future — Q: What happens to Trump if he loses this election? Q: Will Biden pardon him for any crimes he may have committed or will Democrats seek to prosecute him?

Post-President Trump — Q: Is there concern that he may become an important voice in exile? Q: What will the Republican party look like without Trump? Q: Who are Republicans looking for to lead them? Q: Is there anyone waiting in the wings?

Biden's America — Q: What will a Biden-Harris America look like? Q: Can we really expect Biden to lead this country given how tired and "out of it" he looks?

Future of the Courts — Q: Do you think that Biden will seek to expand the number of justices on the court? (i.e. "pack the court")

Tech Platforms — Q: What have we learned about the role of Big Tech through this election? Q: Do you think they will escape harm if we have divided government?

Never Again — Q: Can we expect to see legislative changes past under a Biden presidency that aim at ensuring something like Trump never happens again?