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Why Biden needs a landslide just to win

Only a lopsided show of force would overcome undelivered mail, closed polling sites and Trump's schemes

When many of us question Hillary Clinton's performance and strategy in 2016 and say that she should have won, we're speaking sloppily.

We mean that she should have won *by more.* We mean that she should have won by so much that James Comey's vain and imprudent fit of conscience didn't matter, that Russian interference didn't matter, that Mark Zuckerberg's abdication of responsibility for content on his platform didn't matter, that the quirks of the Electoral College and the advantage it confers on Republicans didn't matter.

She got almost three million more votes than Donald Trump, as she justifiably mentioned on Wednesday night at the Democratic National Convention. We're saying that in light of what a wretched man he is, what an unsavoury candidate he was and what a chaotic campaign he ran, she should have received, heck, *five million* more, which would surely have included enough in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Michigan to tip the Electoral College to her and save us from these past few soul-effacing years.

I was reminded of that not only by her remarks at the convention but also by what many other speakers said. They didn't urge voters merely to cast more mail-in ballots than Trump's supporters do, merely to show up on Election Day in greater numbers, merely to deliver Joe Biden and Kamala Harris any old margin of victory.

They urged a show of force so lopsided that it would be able to overcome undelivered mail, closed polling sites, whatever schemes Trump might hatch and, on the far side of that, his insistence that any vote count that doesn't put him on top is rigged and illegitimate.

What a chillingly cynical perspective. And what an entirely accurate one.

Trump's attempts at cheating

The Democratic convention was out of the ordinary in many ways. It was disembodied, allowing for some inventive digital choreography but robbing big moments, like Harris's speech, of their customary hubbub, their celebratory thunder. In counterpoint to Trump's toxic narcissism, the Democrats framed their nominee, Joe Biden, not as some cinematic saviour but as a humble ambassador of goodness, a regular-guy corrective who would arrive at the White House with a bucket and a mop, ready to wipe away the moral stain left by Trump, Jared Kushner and the rest of these reprobates.

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But the most unusual aspect of the convention was the assumption on which it rested. It foretold and factored in outright cheating on the other side and suggested that, because of it, a new math was in order, an arithmetical overkill. It did that because there has been plenty of cheating or attempted cheating already.

There was of course that 'perfect' phone call between President Trump and his Ukrainian counterpart, who was tasked with the 'favour' of assassinating Biden's character. There was, according to John Bolton's memoir, an appeal to the Chinese president for help. Robert Mueller's investigation into the Trump campaign's dealings with Russians in 2016 didn't teach the president not to touch a hot stove again. It taught him that the burn is just legend.

He has since threatened to sue Nevada, a state he's unlikely to win, for easing its citizens' ability to vote. He has wished aloud for the gutting of the United States Postal Service so that mail-in balloting would be thwarted. He has floated the idea of delaying the election. While he doesn't have the power to do that, he knew that bringing up the subject was another way of saying to voters: *This is all a mess. Don't bother with it and don't believe the results.* And he knows that in a fog of all-encompassing distrust, voters can't distinguish properly between the good actors and the bad actors like him.

Make a plan to vote

A fair fight? Trump is the presidential equivalent of the sucker-punching boxer who left Hilary Swank paralysed in 'Million Dollar Baby.' Those of us who care about American democracy are Swank.

The situation is so perverse that Facebook is already bracing for, and

figuring out how to respond to, Trump's likely attempt to use the social network to invalidate any election results not to his liking, as Mike Isaac and Sheera Frenkel reported in The Times on Friday. Already, Facebook has been besieged by disinformation that gives people the wrong details about when, where and how to vote.

The 2020 presidential race is hardly the first time that one or both sides spotted or prophesied dirty tricks by the other. Go back only as far as the 2000 contest between George W. Bush and Al Gore and the Florida recount to find recriminations galore and cries of illegitimacy.

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But this election will make that one look like a game of patty-cake. Democrats are suitably braced for that. And so, over the four nights of their convention, they issued get-out-the-vote pleas that were more like get-out-the-vote tutorials, get-out-the-vote instruction manuals, that were remarkable in their specificity, in their repeated assertion that you needed to make a 'plan to vote.'

Trump Derangement Syndrom

This was Michelle Obama, on the convention's opening night: 'We have got to grab our comfortable shoes, put on our masks, pack a brown-bag dinner and maybe breakfast too, because we've got to be willing to stand in line all night if we have to.' When's the last time a leader urging Americans to vote included sartorial and epicurean tips? I'm guessing never. But that's where we are.

Two nights later, Barack Obama cautioned that Trump and his enablers 'are counting on your cynicism. They know they can't win you over with their policies. So they're hoping to make it as hard as possible for you to vote, and to convince you that your vote does not matter.'

'Do not let them take away your power,' he added. 'Do not let them take away your democracy.' When have you ever heard a restrained former president accuse the current one not just of poor stewardship but of a plot to destroy the American project itself? You haven't. Then Trump came along.

On the convention's final night, the comedian Sarah Cooper warned voters that Trump 'doesn't want any of us to vote because he knows he can't win fair and square.' Julia Louis-Dreyfus, the moderator, said, 'If we all vote, there is nothing Facebook, Fox News and Vladimir Putin can do

to stop us!'

Well beyond the convention, I hear people worrying about their votes being thrown away; about what happens if Trump is ahead on Election Day and falls behind only when the mail-in ballots are counted; about how large a margin of victory in the popular vote will be needed to guarantee triumph in the Electoral College; about how resounding an Electoral College triumph will be necessary to make Trump shut up.

These questions aren't the products of Trump Derangement Syndrome. They're the fruits of exposure to Trump. They're also the legacy of Clinton's defeat in 2016, when there was such a strong sense that the will of a majority of people fell prey to freaky, funky twists. A lesson was learned and Democrats are now heeding it: To eke out a victory, you need a landslide.

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