Lessons liberals won't learn

The inability of liberals to understand Trump's political appeal is itself part of the explanation for his historic, and entirely avoidable, comeback

A story in chess lore involves the great Danish-Jewish player Aron Nimzowitsch, who, at a tournament in the mid-1920s, found himself struggling against the German master Friedrich Sämisch. Infuriated at the thought of losing to an opponent he considered inferior, Nimzowitsch jumped on the table and shouted, 'To this idiot I must lose?'

It's a thought that must have crossed the minds of more than a few liberal pundits and Democratic eminences late Tuesday night, as Kamala Harris's hopes for winning the presidency began suddenly to fade.

How, indeed, did Democrats lose so badly, considering how they saw Donald Trump — a twice-impeached former president, a felon, a fascist, a bigot, a buffoon, a demented old man, an object of nonstop late-night mockery and incessant moral condemnation? The theory that many Democrats will be tempted to adopt is that a nation prone to racism, sexism, xenophobia and rank stupidity fell prey to the type of demagoguery that once beguiled Germany into electing Adolf Hitler.

Why did Harris lose?

It's a theory that has a lot of explanatory power — though only of an unwitting sort. The broad inability of liberals to understand Trump's political appeal except in terms flattering to their beliefs is itself part of the explanation for his historic, and entirely avoidable, comeback.

There were many tactical missteps: her choice of a progressive running mate who would not help deliver a must-win state like Pennsylvania or Michigan; her inability to separate herself from President Joe Biden; her foolish designation of Trump as a fascist, which, by implication, suggested his supporters were themselves quasi-fascist; her overreliance on celebrity surrogates as she struggled to articulate a compelling

rationale for her candidacy; her failure to forthrightly repudiate some of the more radical positions she took as a candidate in 2019, other than by relying on stock expressions like 'My values haven't changed.'

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There was also the larger error of anointing Harris without political competition — an insult to the democratic process that handed the nomination to a candidate who, as some of us warned at the time, was exceptionally weak. That, in turn, came about because Democrats failed to take Biden's obvious mental decline seriously until June's debate debacle (and then allowed him to cling to the nomination for a few weeks more), making it difficult to hold even a truncated mini-primary.

But these mistakes of calculation lived within three larger mistakes of worldview. First, the conviction among many liberals that things were pretty much fine, if not downright great, in Biden's America — and that anyone who didn't think that way was either a right-wing misinformer or a dupe. Second, the refusal to see how profoundly distasteful so much of modern liberalism has become to so much of America. Third, the insistence that the only appropriate form of politics when it comes to Trump is the politics of Resistance — capital R.

Regarding the first, I've lost track of the number of times liberal pundits have attempted to steer readers to arcane data from the St. Louis Federal Reserve to explain why Americans should stop freaking out over sharply higher prices of consumer goods or the rising financing costs on their homes and cars. Or insisted there was no migration crisis at the southern border. Or averred that Biden was sharp as a tack and that anyone who suggested otherwise was a jerk.

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Yet when Americans saw and experienced things otherwise (as extensive survey data showed they did) the characteristic liberal response was to treat the complaints not only as baseless but also as immoral. The effect was to insult voters while leaving Democrats blind to the legitimacy of the issues. You could see this every time Harris mentioned, in answer to questions about the border, that she had prosecuted transnational criminal gangs: Her

answer was nonresponsive to the central complaint that there was a migration crisis straining hundreds of communities, irrespective of whether the migrants committed crimes.

The dismissiveness with which liberals treated these concerns was part of something else: dismissiveness toward the moral objections many Americans have to various progressive causes. Concerned about gender transitions for children or about biological males playing on girls' sports teams? You're a transphobe. Dismayed by tedious, mandatory and frequently counterproductive D.E.I. seminars that treat white skin as almost inherently problematic? You're racist. Irritated by new terminology that is supposed to be more inclusive but feels as if it's borrowing a page from *1984*? That's doubleplusungood.

The Democratic Party at its best stands for fairness and freedom. But the politics of today's left is heavy on social engineering according to group identity. It also, increasingly, stands for the forcible imposition of cultural norms on hundreds of millions of Americans who want to live and let live but don't like being told how to speak or what to think. Too many liberals forgot this, which explains how a figure like Trump, with his boisterous and transgressive disdain for liberal pieties, could be re-elected to the presidency.

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Last, liberals thought that the best way to stop Trump was to treat him not as a normal, if obnoxious, political figure with bad policy ideas but as a mortal threat to democracy itself. Whether or not he is such a threat, this style of opposition led Democrats astray. It goaded them into their own form of antidemocratic politics — using the courts to try to get Trump's name struck from the ballot in Colorado or trying to put him in prison on hard-to-follow charges. It distracted them from the task of developing and articulating superior policy responses to the valid public concerns he was addressing. And it made liberals seem hyperbolic, if not hysterical, particularly since the country had already survived one Trump presidency more or less intact.

Today, the Democrats have become the party of priggishness, pontification and pomposity. It may make them feel righteous, but how's that ever going to be a winning electoral look?

I voted reluctantly for Harris because of my fears for what a second Trump term might bring — in Ukraine, our trade policy, civic life, the moral health of the conservative movement writ large. Right now, my larger fear is that liberals lack the introspection to see where they went wrong, the discipline to do better next time and the humility to change.

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Another take on the subject can be found here.



Bret Stephens

Bret Stephens is an opinion columnist at The New York Times. He won a Pulitzer Prize for commentary at The Wall Street Journal in 2013 and was previously editor in chief of The Jerusalem Post.