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Democrats need to go bold, or else lose in 2022

To avoid another, possibly worse, iteration of Trumpism, Democrats have one simple task: to help people and to do it fast

President Biden takes office with a ticking clock. The Democrats' margin in the House and Senate couldn't be thinner and midterms typically raze the governing party. That gives Democrats two years to govern. Two years to prove that the American political system can work. Two years to show Trumpism was an experiment that need not be repeated.

Two years.

This is the responsibility the Democratic majority must bear: If they fail or falter, they will open the door for Trumpism or something like it to return and there is every reason to believe it will be far worse next time. To stop it, Democrats need to reimagine their role. They cannot merely defend the political system. They must rebuild it.

'This is a fight not just for the future of the Democratic Party or good policy,' Senator Bernie Sanders told me. #It is literally a fight to restore faith in small-d democratic government.'

Democrats have another chance

Among the many tributaries flowing into Trumpism, one in particular has gone dangerously overlooked. In their book 'Presidents, Populism and the Crisis of Democracy,' the political scientists William Howell and Terry Moe write that 'populists don't just feed on socioeconomic discontent. They feed on ineffective government — and their great appeal is that they claim to replace it with a government that *is* effective through their own autocratic power.'

Donald Trump was this kind of populist. Democrats mocked his 'I alone can fix it' message for its braggadocio and feared its authoritarianism, but

they did not take seriously the deep soil in which it was rooted: The American system of governance is leaving too many Americans to despair and misery, too many problems unsolved, too many people disillusioned. It is captured by corporations and paralysed by archaic rules. It is failing and too many Democrats treat its failures as regrettable inevitabilities rather than a true crisis.

But now Democrats have another chance. To avoid the mistakes of the past, three principles should guide their efforts. First, they need to help people fast and visibly. Second, they need to take politics seriously, recognising that defeat in 2022 will result in catastrophe. The Trumpist Republican Party needs to be politically discredited through repeated losses; it cannot simply be allowed to ride back to primacy on the coattails of Democratic failure. And, finally, they need to do more than talk about the importance of democracy. They need to deepen American democracy.

It's time for boldness

The good news is that Democrats have learned many of these lessons, at least in theory. The USD 1.9 trillion rescue plan Biden proposed is packed with ideas that would make an undeniable difference in people's lives, from USD 1,400 checks to paid leave to the construction of a national coronavirus testing infrastructure that will allow some semblance of normal life to resume.

If America actually abided by normal democratic principles, Trump would have lost in 2016, after receiving almost three million fewer votes than Hillary Clinton.

And congressional Democrats have united behind sweeping legislation to expand American democracy. The 'For The People Act,' which House Democrats passed in 2019 and Senate Democrats have said will be their first bill in the new session, would do more to protect and expand the right to vote than any legislation passed since the Great Society, and it would go a long way toward building a fairer and more transparent campaign financing system.

'It's time for boldness, for there is so much to do,' Biden said in his Inaugural Address. 'This is certain, I promise you: We will be judged, you and I, by how we resolve these cascading crises of our era.'

But none of these bills will pass a Senate in which the filibuster forces 60-vote supermajorities on routine legislation. And that clarifies the real question Democrats face. They have plenty of ideas that could improve

people's lives and strengthen democracy. But they have, repeatedly, proven themselves more committed to preserving the status quo of the political system than fulfilling their promises to voters. They have preferred the false peace of decorum to the true progress of democracy. If they choose that path again, they will lose their majority in 2022, and they will deserve it.

Voters need to 'feel' legislation

Nor do you get re-elected for legislation voters cannot yet feel. The Affordable Care Act didn't begin delivering health insurance on a mass scale until four years after the bill's passage. That reflected a doomed effort to win Republican support by prioritising private insurance and a budgetary gimmick meant to keep the total price tag under a trillion dollars over 10 years. Obamacare eventually became a political winner for Democrats, but it took the better part of a decade. A simpler, faster, more generous bill would have been better politics and better policy.

'Democrats are famous for 87-point programs which sometimes do some good but nobody understands what they are,' Senator Sanders said. 'What we need to do now is, in very bold and clear ways, make people understand government is directly improving their lives.'

That's particularly important in a time of fractured media, polarised parties and widespread disinformation. Democrats cannot rely on widely trusted media figures or civic leaders to validate their programs. Policy has to speak for itself and it has to speak clearly.

In their book, Howell and Moe write that this is a common, but dangerously counterproductive, response to populist challengers. Defenders of the political system, eager to show that normalcy has returned, often embrace the very defects and dysfunctions that gave rise to the populist leader in the first place. The nightmare scenario is that Trump is defeated, driven from office, and that augurs in an era when even less appears to get done, as President Biden submits to congressional paralysis while embracing a calmer communications strategy. If Democrats permit that to happen, they will pave the road for the next Trump-like politician, one who will be yet more disciplined and dangerous than Trump.

Democrats for Democracy

'Democracy is precious,' Biden said at his inauguration. 'Democracy is fragile. And at this hour, my friends, democracy has prevailed.'

It's a stirring sentiment, but wrong. Democracy barely survived. If America actually abided by normal democratic principles, Trump would have lost in 2016, after receiving almost three million fewer votes than Hillary Clinton. The American people did not want this presidency, but they got it anyway, and the result was carnage. In 2020, Trump lost by about seven million votes, but if about 40,000 votes had switched in key states, he would have won anyway. The Senate is split 50-50, but the 50 Democrats represent more than 41 million more Americans than the 50 Republicans. This is not a good system.

Democracy is designed as a feedback loop. Voters choose leaders. Leaders govern. Voters judge the results, and either return the leaders to power, or give their opponents a chance. That feedback loop is broken in American politics. It is broken because of gerrymandering, because of the Senate, because of the filibuster, because of the Electoral College, because we have declared money to be speech and allowed those with wealth to speak much more loudly than those without.

The Vaccine Opportunity

Great presidencies — and new political eras — are born of crises. Thus far, America has bobbled its vaccination rollout. But the fault doesn't lie only with Trump. In blue states where Democrats command both power and resources, like California and New York, overly restrictive eligibility criteria slowed the rollout and huge numbers of shots were locked in freezers. It's an embarrassment.

A successful mass immunisation campaign will save lives, supercharge the economy and allow us to hug our families and see our friends again. Few presidents, outside the worst of wartime, have entered office with as much opportunity to better people's lives immediately through competent governance.

In other words, what Democrats need to do is simple: Just help people, and do it fast.

Biden's team understands that. Their USD 20bn plan to use the full might of the federal government to accelerate vaccinations hits all the right notes. But it's attached to their USD 1.9 trillion rescue plan, which needs 10 Republican votes it doesn't have in order to pass over a filibuster (Senator Mitt Romney already dismissed it as 'not well-timed'). Letting the resources required to vaccinate the country — and to set up mass testing and to prevent an economic crisis — become entangled in Republican obstruction for weeks or months

would be a terrible mistake.

Here, too, Democrats will quickly face a choice: To leave their promises to the American people to the mercies of Mitch McConnell or to change the Senate so they can change the course of the country.

Some, at least, say they've learned their lesson. 'I'm going to do everything I can to bring people together,' says Senator Ron Wyden, who will chair the powerful Senate Finance Committee, 'but I'm not just going to stand around and do nothing while Mitch McConnell ties everyone up in knots.' They will all need to be united on this point for it to matter.

Help people fast

In her book 'Good Enough for Government Work,' Ms. Lerman argues that the US government is caught in a reputation crisis where its poor performance is assumed, the public is attuned to its flaws and misses its virtues, and fed up citizens stop using public services, which further harms the quality of those services. The Trump years add another dimension to the analysis: Frustration with a government that doesn't solve problems leads people to vote for demagogic outsiders who create further crises.

But this is not an inevitability. Her titular phrase, she notes, #originated during World War II to describe the exacting standards and high quality required by government.# It was only in the 1960s and '70s that it became a slur.

It is no accident that World War II led to the idea that government work was a standard to strive for, not an outcome to fear. Crises remind us of what government is for in the first place. President Biden has an extraordinary opportunity to change the relationship between the people and their government. If he succeeds, he will not only deprive authoritarian populists like Trump of energy, he will give Democrats a chance to win over voters who've lost faith in them and he will give voice to millions more that the American political system has silenced. 'The best thing we can do right now to reduce levels of anger and frustration on both sides of the aisle is to give people the things they need to live better lives,' says Ms. Lerman.

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