

# THE WINNING STRATEGY



## INTRODUCTION

The low-key and to date ineffective campaign of the Democratic party for the 2020 presidential election calls for a drastic revision of course if the Democrats are to have a chance at terminating Trump's tenure in November. This white paper presents a four-pronged strategy that would maximize the chances for a successful Democratic outcome. To explain the necessity of each of the four elements of the strategy, the paper first analyzes the reasons for Donald Trump's surprising victory in 2016, and then lays out how Trump as president has upended decades-old rules and customs of presidential campaigns and authority, and has finally moved towards transforming the American Democracy into an authoritarian regime akin to Hungary's and Turkey's "illiberal democracies". These unprecedented and alarming developments necessitate that the Democratic campaign must abandon traditional policy themes of the Democratic party, and focus squarely on Trump's character, behavior, ineptitude, and failures. Equally important, the paper recommends that the Democratic party launch an all-out grass roots campaign and that the Democratic candidate (presumably former Vice President Joe Biden) should not be restrained by now defunct political canons and conventions.

## TRUMP'S SURPRISING VICTORY

With the masterful manipulation of public perception through social media, Donald Trump used lies and demagoguery to convince an increasingly less educated populace that he had their welfare in mind, when he was only interested in serving his ego and own business interests. The road to his surprising success unfolded through the extensive use of social media, primarily Tweeter, that have completely transformed the landscape of social interactions and political discourse. Today it is possible for everyone to go online

and express views and opinions that can be defended as “facts”, since a consensus arbiter (or fact checker) does not exist, showering the internet with lies or inaccuracies at will. Furthermore, the origin of internet posts is obscure, and it is up to the recipients and consumers of these views and opinions to interpret them as facts or lies. After a successful campaign built on misinformation and populist promises, Trump was elected President in 2016 thanks to the American electorate system, even though he received about 2.9 million fewer votes than his Democratic opponent.

While Trump took advantage of the way social media had changed the campaigning landscape, a major contributing factor to Hillary Clinton’s loss was that her persistence to stick with the traditional way of thinking, which put her always on the defensive, instead of addressing head-on Trump’s inconsistencies, falsehoods, violation of rules and norms and his general ineptitude for the highest office in the land. It is unprovable that such a strategy would have turned the small majorities of Trump in battleground states to Clinton’s favor, especially because she was perceived by many as inauthentic, but her failure to directly address and counterbalance her opponent’s tactics (“lock her up”) deprived her the opportunity to offset his all too apparent violations of ethical (both personal and political) standards. Clinton’s strategy was unfortunately a reflection of the still old-fashioned approach to politics by the Democratic party as a whole. Michelle Obama’s exhortation “if they go low, we go high” will remain as one of the most ill-timed slogans in the history of the Democratic party.

## **IMMEDIATE SIGNS OF TROUBLE:**

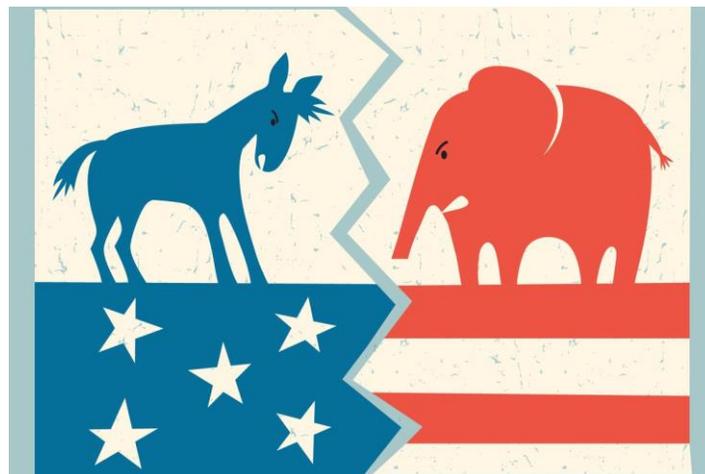
### **TRUMP’S BEHAVIOR SINCE HIS INAUGURATION**

In the aftermath of Trump’s victory many pundits had predicted that the neophyte Republican politician would gradually become more “presidential” in his behavior; that he would severely curtail, if not abandon, the use of Twitter as a means of communication with the American public; that he would establish regular press briefings to make important policy statements and answer questions from the press; and, more importantly, that he would scale down exaggerated facts, refrain from partial truths and outright lies, and instead concentrate on the policies that would reflect his campaign slogan “Make America Great Again”.

In reality, none of these predictions materialized. As president, Donald Trump continued his earlier racist remarks against African Americans, established anti-immigrant policies, and continued his verbal assaults against Native Americans, disabled Americans, women and African countries. In 2017, at a violent rally between white supremacists and counter-protesters in Charlottesville, VA. he asserted that “there were fine people on both sides”. And in 2018, following a spree of mass shootings, the Trump Administration’s main

proposal was not to ban assault weapons for civilian use, but, rather, to fully arm school personnel with handguns!

Moreover, since he came to power, Trump has continued to lie (as of June 8, the Washington Post has counted nearly 20,000 falsehoods), and is increasingly turning to arbitrary and abusive use of his executive powers, through the granting of pardons to convicted felons, the firing of inspectors general, and the appointment of loyalists who typically lack the requisite qualifications and many have extensive conflicts of interest to key government positions. To further their own political agendas, the Republicans got in step, reversing their previous harsh aspersions against Trump's character. A casualty of the Republican sellout was the American political system, which in essence ceased being presidential and became parliamentary, i.e. strictly based on party loyalty with no scope for *crossing the aisle*, which was to date the hallmark of the US system of checks and balances.



Internationally, Trump withdrew from the Paris Agreement on global climate change and from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, canceled the Nuclear agreement with Iran, and launched a trade war with China. He also cancelled two arms-control treaties with Russia. During the unprecedented coronavirus pandemic, at a meeting in March 2020 the G7 foreign ministers failed to agree on a communiqué after Mike Pompeo, the US secretary of state, insisted they brand it the 'Wuhan virus.' Subsequently, the United States declined to participate in a summit hosted by Emmanuel Macron, France's president, to collaborate on the development of a vaccine and in June Trump declared that the US would withdraw from the World Health Organization Trump's international isolationism, coupled with his chaotic service in office that was accentuated by a constant stream of high-profile firings (secretary of state Tillerson, attorney general Sessions, defense secretary Mattis, two chiefs of staff and many others), undermined America's global leadership and caused consternation among America's traditional allies. In a series of leaked classified cables the former British Ambassador to the United States Sir Kim Darroch characterized Trump as "inept" and "incompetent". In response, Trump insulted Darroch repeatedly and then declared him *persona non grata* via a tweet.

## UNCHECKED ABUSE OF POWER:

### THE MUELLER INVESTIGATION, THE IMPEACHMENT PROCESS AND THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

The importance of the Mueller investigation on Russia's interference in the 2016 election and the subsequent impeachment process are significant events not so much about their respective outcomes, which were more or less predictable, as about what they revealed regarding Trump's 2020 reelection strategy. For the Mueller investigation and, incredibly, even for the coronavirus pandemic, he invented the term "Democratic hoax" (an extension of his original "fake news" slogan), which was used repeatedly by himself, his surrogates (including members of his family) and his controlled media outlets such as Fox News.

The impeachment process, which failed to remove him from office thanks to the Republican majority in the senate, gave him the opportunity to launch an unprecedented retaliatory purge of government officials. Trump's reaction to the Mueller investigation and the impeachment confirmed his determination to base his defense on an all-out assault against the integrity of government officials who had followed established rules and regulations.

With Trump's vintage lies, inconsistencies, extreme ignorance and the daily morbid statistics, one would have thought that the coronavirus pandemic, which broke out in January 2020 and continues unabated to date, would turn out to be a turning point against Trump's 2020 reelection prospects. Of the myriad episodes during the first four months of the pandemic, one stands out: his infamous April 23 suggestion that disinfectants such as Clorox can effectively cure COVID-19 by injection or ingestion. That statement made news around the world, and in many cases world leaders and citizens realized for the first time that Donald Trump was not just a buffoon, but a dangerously ignorant politician.

Nevertheless, neither the momentous significance of a health crisis that has claimed over 105,000 American lives in less than 6 months, nor Trump's continued use of executive authority to suppress legitimate, independent oversight of his Administration seems to have seriously eroded Trump's Republican base. Recent national polls indicate that Trump continues to enjoy broad support among Republican voters and, at least one CNN poll conducted between May 7-10 showed that Trump is above Biden in 15 swing states that will determine the outcome of the 2020 presidential elections.

Why has Trump managed to retain such strong support and what should be the Democrats' strategy that could earn them the White House in November? These important questions will be addressed in the last three sections of this paper.

## BEFORE THE PRECIPICE:

### THE MOVE TOWARDS AN ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY

While Trump's first two years in power were characterized, both domestically and internationally, by astonishment and ridicule about the thinking, juvenile actions, impetuous reactions and immature pronouncements of the successor to Barak Obama (a Nobel-Prize winner and perhaps the fourth best American president in the history of the country), developments since the conclusion of the impeachment process point towards an unfettered presidency. Beginning with the State of the Union Speech, which took place only a few days before Trump's expected acquittal in the Senate, Trump began showing signs of ramping up his brazen moves towards acquiring unlimited powers: his response to the Senate's predictable vote to acquit him was tweeting out a video depicting him winning not just the 2020 election, but every election for the next several thousand years! It ended with the logo "Trump 4EVA." Perhaps the most alarming sign of the times, and in sharp contrast to Nixon's procedural impeachment steps and Clinton's actual impeachment, is that Trump's abuses of power have been constantly abetted by the Republican-controlled senate. Trump's acolytes in the Senate are actively pushing for purges and have repeatedly suggested that those who informed on Trump's malfeasance and abuse of power be subpoenaed and forced to testify. In the arresting prose of George F. Will, Republican senators are "*invertebrates whose unswerving abjectness has enabled [Trump's] institutional vandalism [and] have voiced no serious objections to his Niagara of lies*".

Students of history may recall Germany's [1933 Enabling Act](#), when the country's parliamentarians neutered themselves in the face of Adolf Hitler's demands for unfettered power, allowing the new chancellor to bypass the legislative body in drawing up laws. In so doing, they signed the death warrant for the Weimar Republic and ushered in the Nazi dictatorship. Similarly, in Italy the Italian parliament passed the [1923 Acerbo Law](#), which afforded the party winning the largest share (i.e. plurality, not majority) of the votes to gain *two-thirds* of the seats in parliament. That law brought the Fascist party in power in the 1924 elections, which were the last free elections until the end of WWII in 1945.



In contemporary Europe, in March 2020 the Hungarian parliament passed legislation that would create a state of emergency without a time limit, suspend the parliament, and grant Prime Minister Viktor Orbán the ability to rule by decree. This was a culmination to Hungary's democratic backsliding since Orbán became a Prime Minister in 2010 and in 2014 described his own country as an "illiberal state".

With these historical examples in mind, Donald Trump, an admirer of authoritarian regimes and leaders, is almost certain to lead a reelection campaign by taking vengeance against those who testified, spoke out, or voted against him since the beginning of his presidency. Moreover, Trump may resort to increasingly coercive tactics to make up for the shortfall in public trust caused by his xenophobic and racist policies. And in early June President Trump threatened the mobilization of "thousands and thousands of heavily armed soldiers" to quell "lawlessness" across the country. The similarity between the [\*Reichstag fire of 1933\*](#) and the protests, some violent, following the homicide of George Floyd in Minnesota, cannot go unnoticed. If the economy has not recovered substantially by November, Trump's only chance of winning reelection would be whipping up a frenzy of paranoia, including calls of prosecution against Barack Obama and Joe Biden.

To influence the actual voting process, as well, Trump has now turned against the states who consider mail-in balloting to help mitigate the risks of the coronavirus pandemic. Trump's latest attacks show how voting access has become a major battleground in the 2020 presidential race, as both parties invest tens of millions of dollars into dozens of lawsuits and voter outreach across the country to try to shape how ballots will be cast amid the coronavirus outbreak. Not surprisingly, while Trump threatens to curtail federal funds to states considering mail-in balloting, his attacks clearly target only swing or Democratic-controlled states. Many Republican states that are similarly expanding mail balloting have been left outside Trump's sphere of criticism.

## **THE INAUDIBLE DEMOCRATS**

Over the past four years, the American political system has failed to check a president who from the start was clearly unfit for office. Most of the blame unquestionably falls on the Republican Party, which has enabled Trump at every turn. But it would be grievously false to attribute Trump's political successes only to his communication skills, blackmail tactics and obscene disregard of norms and traditional political ethics. A major part of the explanation (and necessarily the blame) has to lie with the Democratic party, which underestimated Trump during the 2016 campaign and continues to date to underestimate his persuasive abilities and browbeating tactics. With muffled and stilted responses,

Democrats have failed to rise as defenders of democracy, and have been unsuccessful in inspiring confidence in the American voters. In the past three-and-a-half years, Democrats have adhered to old-fashioned norms of “noble rivalry” leaving the political battlefield open to the rowdy attacks of Republicans. While Democrats call for bipartisan review committees, Trump and his allies continue unchecked to dismantle social programs, ridicule opponents, trash the traditional ethics of political discourse and declare the mainstream press the “enemy of the people”.

Without exception, all Democrats have failed to counter Trump in a way commensurate to his abuses. For example, President Obama has been distant and removed from the daily (or weekly, or even monthly) political fray, except for occasional interventions during major events or anniversaries. Even so, whenever Obama decided to intervene (for example, as recently as his webcast commencement speeches to the 2020 graduating class), he never mentioned Trump by name. In the words of *The Nation* “restrained by his respect for norms governing the behavior of former presidents, Obama refrained from commenting on Trump’s manifest corruption, incompetence, and degradation of the office of the presidency. He seems to have been operating from an assumption—shared by much of the political elite—that the system would restrain Trump from his worst excesses. There might have been some merit in this assumption in the early days of Trump’s presidency, but this approach was already failing before the pandemic and now stands as a typical elite fantasy”. Trump’s “worst excesses” are, in fact, an unrestrained steady progress towards an illiberal democracy, and we may reach a point where this process becomes irreversible.

In the middle of this quagmire, and with only five months before the presidential elections, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, Joe Biden, has been keeping a low profile. It is true that Biden does tweet out the occasional criticism of Trump and make TV appearances. But he rarely conveys the urgency of the current crisis, and neither is he (much like Obama) prepared to use sharp words calling attention to the unfitness of the present occupant of the White House. The reactions of Speaker Pelosi and Democratic Senate leader Schumer have been terrifyingly similar. Tom Perez, the head of the DNC, has been conspicuously absent. The Democratic leaders, at least in their public pronouncements, continue to promote and advertise measures taken (or proposals stifled by the Republicans) in support of familiar Democratic themes, which could be superficially summarized as protecting and defending the “voiceless, the widows, the orphans, and the disadvantaged”; rarely do they turn their attention to the incompetence of Trump and, when they do so, their responses are underwhelming.

What is to be done?

## AN EFFECTIVE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGY FOR THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS



In designing a detailed strategy and tactics, the Democratic leadership must grasp the fundamental reasons why Trump, during and after his presidential campaign and election, successfully inverted the meaning of the slogan that has dominated his presence on the political scene: the use of the term "Fake News".

According to the orthodox definition, "Fake News" is the deliberate dissemination of false information via traditional news media (print and broadcast) or online social media. Donald Trump has successfully used the term to cast doubt upon legitimate news from an opposing political standpoint. By popularizing the term "Fake News" in this sense, regardless of the truthfulness of the news, he used it extensively to describe the negative press coverage of himself.

It is highly paradoxical that the Democratic leadership and the mainstream media found themselves on the defensive in explaining the legitimacy of the information disseminated by them and dubbed "Fake News" by Trump, his disciples and his propaganda champions. It is astounding that mainstream media and Democratic politicians for four years have failed to use the same term to describe all the lies, falsehoods, partial truths and exaggerations that Trump and his surrogates (including all his press secretaries) have used before and after his election. The failure of the Democratic strategists to appreciate the impact of unfettered propaganda is an inexcusable ignorance of history.

With this as background, the Democratic strategy should be based on four pillars:

• **First, a forceful communication strategy echoing throughout the United States through a grass-roots movement:** The Democratic campaign must launch a continuous and unrelenting exposé of the lies, falsehoods-turns and unfulfilled promises that Donald Trump has propagated in the past three-and-a-half years. The emphasis should be on major political themes, such as his yo-yo relations with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un (a term that aptly reflects Trump's characterization as Toddler-in-Chief by Daniel Drezner), his pronouncements on the pandemic (a comparison of videoclips from this February 26 and March 29 press briefings), his statements on the state of the economy, his befuddled behavior during the May/June racial tensions, etc. In doing so, the Democratic strategy should use all forms of dissemination besides digital media, such as town-hall meetings, mailing campaigns, even door-to-door delivery of the main election messages, appropriately tailored for the local electorate. The strategy should make full use of grass-roots organizations, adept at helping voters with transportation on election day, with mailing absentee ballots, and with any other local need that would increase voter participation. The messages should be consistent, simple and repetitive, and should originate from the DNC. Trump should also be identified with one or two nicknames (such as "Charlatan Don" or "Clorox Trump"), which has been a major omission of the Democratic strategy, even after his widespread use of terms such as "Crooked Hillary" or "Sleepy Joe". The days of restrained response out of respect to the Office of the President are gone.

• **Second, the shameful reversal of Republicans and their revealed untrustworthiness:** Through extensive use of digital media, the Democratic strategy must include continuous and unrelenting comparisons of statements by Trump's current supporters, notably Republican senators, before and after the election (see above). Their devastating discrepancies, or complete turn arounds, would help not only the campaign to defeat Trump but also the campaigns against those senators running for reelection in 2020. An effective recent ad against senator Lindsey Graham, which portrays him as a shameless turncoat in public view, could serve as a prototype. This type of campaign should again be coordinated by the DNC and include elements from the previous pillar, such as the identification of Trump with a standard moniker.

• **Third, exposing the opposition of Republicans to popular policies:** This pillar would reflect traditional Democratic themes, such as the passage of bills, the support of immigrants and human rights, efforts to broaden gun control, etc.—but with a twist: the emphasis should be not on the eventual outcome (for which Trump might take credit anyway, as when he disinvites the Democratic leadership from the signing of bills into law in the White House) but on the original position of the Democrats. This should be contrasted with the resistance they faced by Republicans and the implications for the final version, such as bailing out airlines instead of small debtors, allowing the Paycheck Protection Program to be administered by banks instead of the SBA, and other similar instances, and even explaining that the 2017 tax cuts legislation had included an increase in public spending at the insistence of congressional Democrats. Such lapses in communication tactics have been a major failure of the Democratic party

• **Fourth, a distinctly pugnacious Democratic ticket.** As an overarching tactic, the Democratic candidate, presumably former Vice President Joe Biden, and his judiciously selected running mate, must both exhibit the resolve and stamina to confront Trump at his own game. Recapturing the nation's soul, as Mr. Biden has frequently suggested, will not be enough to also recapture the old Obama voters lost to the Republican ticket in 2016. The substantive elements of the Democratic strategy should evolve around the three earlier pillars, but the delivery of the messages must reflect a powerful, uncompromised response to the bullying tactics of Donald Trump and must include a number of effective surrogates. Unlike 2016, when many voters felt they had to choose between the lesser evil, in 2020 the Democratic party should not ask citizens to vote against Trump; it should give the American people the opportunity to vote for strong leaders worth following.

There is no guaranteed strategy to defeat Trump, especially during this era of extreme polarization, social media manipulation and entrenched positions, which imply, more than ever before, that the election will be decided by a few swing states. But a well-designed and aggressive strategy that is based on assiduous and consistent bombardment of the character, incompetence, uncouthness and moral positions of Trump has more chances to succeed than one reflecting broad policy themes and lofty issues. The choice for the Democratic party is between certain failure and uncertain success.