A Grim Path Ahead

Elisha Patmon | Research & Communications Executive

This analysis is a critical reflection on the Democratic Party. With mishaps within their domestic policies and the stretched goodwill with what foreign policy they have left, the Democrats are out of touch with the way they campaign and who they have aligned themselves with. Employing old techniques to advantage themselves to a new audience, this analysis goes into what these techniques are, and why, during such an important election, they failed to secure the presidency.

As world leaders scramble to congratulate the now 47th President of the United States, the world sits and waits with bated breath.

The President-elect has already rolled out important positions to his loyalists: a news presenter, who has never held any position in office nor worked at the department he is now set to head, and a TV doctor heading Medicare - a very complex institution that requires years of experience that they do not have. This is not unheard of; falling short of expectations and inconsistent changes that influenced the instability of his first term in 2016, it is none of wonder that his newly appointed cabinet members are ignoring historic non-partisan acts. A familiar taste on what is to come as this administration's threat to dismantle institutions that have been in America's fabric for almost a century.

That is not good news.

A Trump win for a second time seems out of the ordinary. After the severity in under-planning of COVID-19, his reluctance to give government grants and a lack of tact when it came to diplomatically respecting other countries, nevertheless his own appointed leaders, it does not prove a part of stability that America has always been proud to convey. His followers dressed like him after his assassination attempt, the idol worship of his celebrity persona, and with the widespread belief in things that are proven factually false, he has cultivated a following.

With the spike of the word tariff on Google searches days after the election, his promises of alienating government institutions but using them to carry out his own personal afflictions, the Trump presidency is met with what it has been before - disorder and uncertainty.

The question will always be complex; why was there a second chance given? Personal answers range from belief, to economic status and of course, the lines drawn when it comes to the different parties. The problem is more than the conveyed simplicity of bringing the price of things down. It starts to become clearer that this is about a society that does not recognise that they are being left behind in an interconnected world, that consistently struggles to have their basic needs met.

The more glaring answer however, is simpler than it is given credit for, and a harsh truth for many.

In the days following the election loss, Democrats have come out of the woodwork to proclaim a hard truth: a forgotten working class. There is merit that the working class has been sidelined, but so has a hard make of a demographic - the white working class that has made up the majority and roots of the party for so long.

Trump's campaigned gained ground with white, non-college-educated voters, particularly in socio-economic struggling regions. With previous data showing white working-class Americans choosing differently regardless of the cultural messaging, economic preferences will always gain priority in the voting booth. The cultural countenance is not of no importance but long-term data tells us that they will base their political decisions on their economic preferences.

Concurring that a solid analysis of outside forces that have influenced the growth, decline and stalling of American industries, are not in the formula of his rallies. The progression of other economies, labour costs rising worldwide, and new industries surpassing old ones, are just some to name a few that do not make the mark when talking about world expansion that has lent a helping hand to the decline in many areas of work. With an omission to admit that these things have influence over domestic policy, most of his base remain unaware, that could ultimately prove the contradiction of Trump being a champion of the working class.

Trump has tried to raise the taxes on the 4 million of the poorest in the country, allowed employers to pocket employees' tips, and denied overtime to millions of low-wage workers. The grandeur of his speeches though, create an undisputed chant that despite what he has put forth, he will continue to look out for the large working-class base America has. There is a flicker of understanding to why the working class gravitate towards this environment - hearing isolationist policies that can feed into an untruthful bias - where Americans feel in control of their lives and not bending to the will of outside forces. With the class divide becoming more stark, the sharp contrast of being a billionaire and simultaneously appealing to the working class not seeming palpable, but made doable because of his seemingly authentic engagement.

The Democratic Party, although known for staunch beliefs in workers rights, also has strong contrasts. President Biden has not been the friend to the working class that he has platformed himself on. In 1977-1978, during a big push for labor reform, he stalled for months and sabotaged criticism of the bill itself. He authored the bankruptcy bill to reward creditors and punish debtors, and lauded being one of the main legislators of mass incarceration, which has had devastating effects on America's working class. There is a clear disconnect with the Democratic Party's policing; putting forth candidates that either have had to go back on progressive policies to attune to a more moderate level, or have them be moderate: depending on charisma or charm to overlook not so friendly socio-economic strides. The cognitive dissonance shown by the Democrats is a disengagement between the high ranks of the political party and their voter base. Running candidates who do not have the record to back up their pro-labor and pro-union stances. Although attitudes have changed for the current President, it still fosters a air of distrust to the thought process behind when it comes to their voting constituents - knowing what they want but not willing to give it to them.

The Democrats have done good when it comes to long term policies, such as mitigating the inflation of COVID and promoting job recovery, emphasising infrastructure and green infrastructure with the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law by allocating $1.2 trillion in November 2021 to over 65,000 projects over the country, all of these long term solutions are key to furthering society and necessary, but they take time. When someone is living month to month, they don't see these policies as lucrative as the fear of falling further down the socio-economic pipeline concludes more in the short term.

The messaging of the Democratic Party then falls on fragmented. There is no immediate impact seen such as an uptick of the standard of living, instead there are complex explanations that voters struggle to connect with and constant stalemates because of hidden conflicts. Policies are often intertwined or rely on one another to benefit people or improve conditions, when one part is understood but the other is not, or not deemed important enough, there becomes a gap in the chain that is supposed to be seamless pathway.

The housing crisis is an acute example of this very thing. Nearly half of renters are "cost burdened" and spending more than 30% of their income on rent. A whopping 60% of Americans live one pay-check to the next, creating an environment that leaves very little room for emergencies or medical problems in an already stressed and hard to navigate healthcare system.

The Democrats have tried to focus on housing supply, but instead of enacting clear cut laws that forbid price gouging or putting limits such as rent control, they have faced valid criticism for not doing enough to regulate corporate landlords for driving up rent and home prices. The issue is made worse when there is little to no action to directly aid low-income renters, furthering a cycle that many cannot retain. Rent increased by 20% over the three years under Biden's presidency. Minimum wage has historically been stagnant, but when it was raised in 2023, they did not keep pace with inflation, leaving many to struggle with a still heightened cost. All these factors can easily domino into unpaid bills which can spread into homelessness - a frightening conclusion borne frequently out of these situations, reaching record levels of over 650,000 people.

Instead of a straightforward narrative, Democratic points are splintered and convoluted, offering little explanation to domestic policies that are affected by global trends and a slow turn around in those issues with constant fighting. Campaigns are not just made of debates, they are made of consistency, especially when connecting with people that have different lived experiences. Jargon that has plagued Democratic speeches for years with soft truths that promise to focus on the bigger picture, has now been favoured to more Republican formulas - to the point, conviction, and honing in on collective responsibility that fosters a strong bond between peers and candidates.

In a turn of events that chronicled his win in 2020, Trump appealing to the collective memory before the financial crisis in 2008. A time that was not shrouded in overt hardship in American society, before a global recession that arguably changed the way the world's various economies relied on one.

Trump unlocked something the Democrats have been trying to for decades - the guts to say exactly what he wanted. He flagged down individualistic ideologies, ramped them up and shoved it back into the general population, making it seem possible that they were all united under a singular agenda, the 'America First' one. When his campaign expanded with so much momentum in such a short time, many rural and lower-income people that make up a part of his base, seemed to have options for the long term. A back-to-basics ideology with a simple message that resonated. When explored, the Trump win does make sense - no matter how archaic to the consensus, or how Democratic leaders say that this is "not the America they know".

This conservative change has been brewing for a long time, since before the Obama administration. Acknowledging mistakes displayed in foreign policy and at home, much of Obama's presidency was slighted by a Republican congress that was clearly using a rigid stance of "If he was for it, we had to be against it." A stark difference to his view of bipartisanship, where he placed two Republicans in his cabinet, extending an olive branch that was never reciprocated. Obama proved what many critics of the Democratic Party had been saying for years; that the liberalism that was afforded to Cold War American politics was outdated, and a new form of progressiveness had to sweep the country to keep people engaged, and further bring up domestic institutions that had been crumbling for decades.

Liberal hegemony prioritises ideological ambitions over pragmatic considerations, often compromising security and resources. This is neglectful of regional dynamics, the limits of power and domestic monopolies that often result in backlash and diminished credibility nationally and internationally. The Democrats face a fundamentally different world, a world that see's a tangible decline of U.S. relative power in real time. Traditional liberals want an active role in global leadership because of what it promotes, whilst more progressive liberals advocate for the scaling back of larger military commitments and focusing on domestic changes that will incite a more positive domino effect. Both need to eradicate the cold war model in a bid to control the narrative that feeds on political dysfunction.

The legacies of liberal presidents do nothing to quell vexation that has grown in a perceived rags-to-riches story. Already warned of a more conservative sweep when Trump won the first time, Bernie Sanders, the leading progressive senator, pleaded with the Democrats to go back to its working-class roots. Unfortunately, prioritising an outdated liberal hegemony, that fed directly into crumbling domestic policy became a downfall. This is part of a bigger reason to why the explosion of Trump was so fierce - he offered something different by promising to not go into overseas affairs, creating national stability on the dissolution of foreign intervention.

The Biden administration is not a stranger to this, opting for policies that meet in the middle, drawing ire from the constituents that voted for the administration in order to enact change. With the collective grief in 2020, the Biden-Harris administration got the American people to come out and vote in historic numbers.

With that secure however, the Democrats got complacent.

When Kamala Harris was nominated as the Democratic incumbent for president, there was hope that there would be a focus on workers, on the disparity of class and race, civil rights being reinstated, an end to the heavily contested foreign policy of Biden's administration. Important issues that should have principled people's vote were not ratified, for favour of having celebrity endorsements that were out of touch.

Identity politics will always rear its head when it comes to anything political in the United States. For a country that has based its policies on race, gender, and class since the beginning of it's conception, it is virtually impossible to not have it at any debate, or at least not present in policies when put forth. The divide in America has always been about class but it is unprecedented to not support that with the reductionism of race, gender, and socio-economic status, those conversations become redundant.

Biden's decision to drop out of the race three months before the general election is a difficult cursor to come to terms with, when trying not to hone on it as selfish. There is selflessness in taking a step back because of the general populations opinion, but it is hard when looking at it objectively, as the nomination was put onto a woman who was not known expansively, making her an easy target for the Trump administration to discredit her, refuse to debate her with nefarious misogynist undertones and ultimately deface her and ultimately everyone who looked like her.

America does seem ready for a woman president, and no amount of backlashing makes that easier to digest. It does not mean that there should not be one, or a decreased ability to do their job simply based on their gender, it means that America has a problem when it comes to quelling something out of the status quo. Especially when that status quo was challenged three months before the election, even if the candidate excelled and surpassed all qualifications against their opponent. The glass celling can be broken, but Kamala Harris's gender, as well as her race were a factor. Regardless if she was the district attorney of San Francisco, and then the attorney general of California, working her way from an immigrant family to the sphere she holds now, or that there was a black president before that set the tone for the outcome of possibilities when it came to race, the results of the election only proved so much. More people united over class struggle, but it does not dispel the fact that systemic attitudes, and charged rhetoric rang true when it came to the voting booth.

The likes of Dick Cheney, someone who famously approved torture techniques, amongst other Republican pundits with less than savoury opinions during the Bush administration, being at the forefront of validation, was a major lack of judgment from the party that touted itself as the reasonable and empathetic counterpart. Her administration thought it was the best move in trying to appeal to moderates across the board. This backfired as it only proved that this misconception in view of bipartisanship was futile; cementing herself further away from the base that she was trying to include and the younger generation, to which the Democrats were very likely thinking, had their vote secured.

The class barrier this election proved multiple things - how demographics vote, how the white voting class in America has been seemingly forgotten, and the uncertainty that is now coming with another period of instability. Arab Americans, Black Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, Indigenous Americans, and other minorities were not the main focus. It was defeating Trump, and whilst that was important, not addressing the issues at hand explicitly proved to be alienating and ultimately grevious. That does not dissuade the fact that two things can be right at once.

America is a divided nation - ideologically and almost physically. Whilst there have been strides to combat their roots in prejudice, racism, and sexism, the skeletons in their closet are often at times, overwhelming. This is the thorny state they exists in. It is two candidates that continue to say they are fundamentally different, yet in so many ways keep the status quo of being similar.

The American working class has been forgotten, freedoms are threatened with stipulations and minorities suffer. With news of the Pentagon having secret meetings to discuss of what to do in situations where force is ordered but not needed, to military tribunals, to the removal of the Department of Education, America finds itself once again in the middle of a media circus - the difference is that now there is more preperation at the helm. There are a host of people in his arsenal that are not only loyal to him, but strategists with years and even decades operating within the American political system.

The Democrats have lost their spine.

They look in favour of trying to meet in the middle. The Republicans do not do this, yet the Democrats foolishly try to hold onto the idea that somehow there will be a bipartisan meeting. This was proven false with COVID-19, when Obama was president, multiple government shutdowns, and now. That is the inconsistent behaviour that they are afforded. The Democrats show that they are willing to work with their different counterparts, and whilst that is commendable and there is favour in conducive relations, working together does not hold any countenance on the Republican agenda. By consistently pushing a narrative of bi-partisanship, with counterparts that do not see eye to eye on fundamental issues, a visceral detachment echoes. With the largest donors, corporations, and the leaders of the Democratic Party, these ideals they have do not innately affect them. For the representatives that were voted in because the people felt they best represented them, it is conjugated to a difficult reality.

Shaking hands with people who actively try to vote against their constituents' very own interests and person is not a moment that should be enshrined, it is a moment that many feel pain towards and sparks vindictiveness. The party that used to be about the working class has changed to petty comebacks and the constant threat of civil rights in the past decade. The party that took a more nationan-centric approach is brazenly knocking on doors that employed tactics to one of the worst wars the world has seen in contemporary history.

American politics has become a celebrity ping pong match over the past decade; who can yell the loudest instead of who is making sense, making things more akin to a service, rather than a country. The parties that America has do not end up representing the crux of the people with out-of-touch politicians that have fundamentally lost the ability to relate.

With rampant digitisation and rapid dismemberment of our data, privacy, and general education, a new era of information has promoted a wave of inexperience, slowly chipping away and decaying society. There is a celebration of ignorance, not only by the public but by government officials; people with unprecedented levels of power and monumental influence, who champion and applaud fierce misinformation, instead of putting forth policies that care for much of the population and further generations to come.

The Democratic Party has a grievance to take care of within. They are not united as one, something that their neighbours are very good at doing. Even during a contested election, the party was still rife with weakened communication and constant disagreement, fostering ill will and a cracked facade on where they stood and what their true agenda was. Beating Trump seemed like it was not enough and things became stagnant because they were at a loss when they realised that it failed to change minds.

Trump on the horizon is not looked fondly upon - there is little argument that he will be worse when compared to his adversary. A high point of conflict was Project 2025, becoming a hot button issues as election day grew closer, and the debates pulling a tug of war between policies that border on the ridiculousness of dismantling federal agencies, reversing climate policies and even compromising patient privacy with a family planning agenda. Considering most polls show that Americans favour progressive policies, Project 2025 is a guarantee that most working people will not be directly benefitting. It is a danger to not just the democracy that America so valiantly positions itself on, but a cursor for other countries and governments to follow suit as they please. Having that much power in the world means that the influence wielded is of the same caliber.

Wanting dependability from overt people in power seems futile when one side is reassuring cold war liberal hegemony politics that are outdated, and the other does not want consistency by making the role of government so minute that no one trusts institutions anymore. To most, the Democratic Party may offer a head of stability, but even that has shaky foundations at best because of the recurrent problem of out-of-touch messaging, and a deep untrusting nature that has been cultivated.

Many are fighting for a place in the world that they do not recognise anymore, and instead of changing the tired conversation by addressing systemic issues, not letting key acts expire in congress, and listening to their constituents, the Democrats babied the Republicans and went back on their once strong doctrines about class. The question remains to whether they will change the tide of their own discretion. Picking another senator that has the most magnetism to take the mantle and redistribute what influence they have left, does not quell the overarching problem.

America's self-declaration as the world's police officer and bringer of peace has become an ironic hallmark of its contemporary history, marked by interventions that have often undermined its credibility. The pressing question for Democrats now is whether they can learn from such hazardous shortcomings and take meaningful steps to rebuild trust—both domestically and globally—or if they will persist with a hollow ideology that will only further fuel the growing discontent looming.

References

CBS Interactive. (n.d.). Trump taps Fox News host Pete Hegseth for Defense secretary. CBS News. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-pete-hegseth-defense-secretary/

Senator scolds Dr. Oz over Weight-Loss products. (2024, November 25). [Video]. NBC News. https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/dr-mehmet-oz-health-claims-controversial-medicare-trump-rcna181085

Bowden, J. (2022, March 24). Controversial GOP candidate Mehmet Oz fired after refusing to quit president's council on sports. *The Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/dr-oz-firing-herschel-walker-b2043332.html

Hatch Act Overview. (n.d.). https://osc.gov/Services/pages/hatchact.aspx

Graziosi, G. (2024, November 26). Searches of 'who pays for tariffs' sees massive spike after Trump's announcement. *The Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/who-pays-for-tarriffs-searches-b2654174.html

McCausland, P. (2024, December 3). *Kash Patel: Trump's FBI nominee's qualifications face criticism*. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c89xwjqwe5vo

Jones, E. (2012). Understanding America's White Working Class: Their Politics, Voting Habits, and Policy Priorities. In *https://www.brookings.edu/articles/understanding-americas-white-working-class-their-politics-voting-habits-and-policy-priorities/*. Brookings Research Institute.

Hager, E. (2024, November 2). What Trump's record suggests about how he'll fight for Working-Class Americans. *ProPublica*. https://www.propublica.org/article/donald-trump-agenda-working-class

Stock market surges after Trump's 2024 election win. (2024, November 8). [Video]. NBC News. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/trumps-return-white-house-mean-economy-taxes-rcna177690

Today, K. M. K. a. J. E. Z. U. (2019, December 24). How America went from Barack Obama to Donald Trump in one head-spinning political decade. *USA TODAY*. https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/12/22/donald-trump-capped-political-decade-barack-obama-launched-column/2700108001/

Pilkington, E. (2024, January 13). Sanders warns Biden: address working-class fears or risk losing to demagogue. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/jan/13/sanders-warns-biden-working-class-voters-presidential-election

Winant, G. (2021, January 21). Don't be fooled: Joe Biden is no friend of unions. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/02/joe-biden-is-no-friend-of-unions

Torturers for Harris | The Nation. (2024, September 18). The Nation. https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/kamala-harris-dick-cheney-endorsement/