

America's Plastic Hour Is Upon Us

The country is at a low point. But we may be on the cusp of an era of radical reform that repairs our broken democracy.



Hudson Christie

"There are in history what you could call 'plastic hours,'" the philosopher Gershom Scholem once said. "Namely, crucial moments when it is possible to act. If you move then, something happens."

In such moments, an ossified social order suddenly turns pliable, prolonged stasis gives way to motion, and people dare to hope. Plastic hours are rare. They require the right alignment of public opinion, political power, and events—usually a crisis. They depend on social mobilization and leadership. They can come and go unnoticed or wasted. Nothing happens unless you move.

Are we living in a plastic hour? It feels that way.

Beneath the dreary furor of the partisan wars, most Americans agree on fundamental issues facing the country. Large majorities say that government should ensure¹ some form of universal health care², that it should do more to mitigate global warming³, that the rich should pay higher taxes⁴, that racial inequality is a significant problem⁵, that workers should have the right to join unions⁶, that immigrants are a good thing for American life⁷, that the federal government is plagued by corruption⁸. These majorities have remained strong for years. The readiness, the demand for action, is new.

What explains it? Nearly four years of a corrupt, bigoted, and inept president who betrayed his promise to champion ordinary Americans. The arrival of an influential new generation, the Millennials, who grew up with failed wars, weakened institutions, and blighted economic prospects⁹, making them both more cynical and more utopian than their parents. Collective ills that go untreated year after

¹ <https://thehill.com/hilltv/what-americas-thinking/494602-poll-69-percent-of-voters-support-medicare-for-all>

² <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/2020-polls-national-health-care-plan-favored-by-most-americans-cbs-news-poll-finds/>

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2020/06/23/two-thirds-of-americans-think-government-should-do-more-on-climate/>

⁴ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2019/03/14/americans-want-the-wealthy-and-corporations-to-pay-more-taxes-but-are-elected-officials-listening/>

⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/the-end-of-denial/614194/>

⁶ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/241679/labor-union-approval-steady-year-high.aspx>

⁷ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1660/immigration.aspx>

⁸ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/185759/widespread-government-corruption.aspx>

⁹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/millennials-are-new-lost-generation/609832/>

year, so bone-deep and chronic that we assume they're permanent—from income inequality, feckless government, and police abuse to a shredded social fabric and a poisonous public discourse that verges on national cognitive decline. Then, this year, a series of crises that seemed to come out of nowhere, like a flurry of sucker punches, but that arose straight from those ills and exposed the failures of American society to the world.

The year 2020 began with an impeachment trial that led to acquittal despite the president's obvious guilt. Then came the pandemic, chaotic hospital wards, ghost cities¹⁰, lies and conspiracy theories from the White House¹¹, mass death, mass unemployment, police killings, nationwide protests, more sickness, more death, more economic despair, the disruption of normal life without end. Still ahead lies an election on whose outcome everything depends. (this article was published before the presidential election)

The year 1968—with which, for concentrated drama, 2020 is sometimes compared¹²—marked the end of an era of reform and the start of a conservative reaction that resonated for decades. In 1968 the core phenomenon was the collapse of order. In 2020 it is the absence of solidarity. Even with majorities agreeing on central issues, there's little sense of being in this together. The United States is world-famously individualistic, and the past half century has seen the expansion of freedom in every direction—personal, social, financial, technological. But the pandemic demonstrates, almost scientifically, the limits of individualism. Everyone is vulnerable. Everyone's health depends on the health of others. No one is safe unless everyone takes responsibility for the welfare of others. No person, community, or state can withstand the plague without a competent and active national government¹³.

The story of the coronavirus in this country is a sequence of moments when this lesson broke down—when politicians spurned experts, governors reopened their states too soon¹⁴, crowds liberated themselves in rallies and bars. The graph that shows the course of new infections in the United States—gradually falling in late spring, then rising sharply in summer—is an illustration of both ineffectual leadership and a failed ideology. Shame is not an emotion that Americans readily indulge, but the spectacle of the national coronavirus case rate surging ahead of India's and Brazil's while it declined in most rich countries has produced a wave of self-disgust here, and pity and contempt abroad¹⁵.

"We're at this moment where, because of COVID-19, it is there for anybody who has eyes to see that the systems we are committed to are inadequate or have collapsed," Maurice Mitchell, the director of the left-wing Working Families Party, told me. "So now almost all 300-plus million of us are in this moment of despair, asking ourselves questions that are usually the province of the academy, philosophical questions: Who am I in relation to my society? What is the role of government? What does an economy do?"

The brutal statistics that count the jobless, hungry, evicted, sick, and dead have forced a rethinking of our political and social arrangements. The numbers are a daily provocation for change—radical change.

¹⁰ <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2020/03/photos-quiet-emptiness-under-coronavirus/608272/>

¹¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/08/trumps-lies-about-coronavirus/608647/>

¹² <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/1968-and-2020-lessons-from-americas-worst-year-so-far/612415/>

¹³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/coronavirus-american-failure/614191/>

¹⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/coronavirus-republicans-governors-victory/611323/>

¹⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/time-americans-are-doing-nothing/611056/>

"I think we are at a hinge moment in history; it's one of those moments that arises every 50 years or so," Senator Michael Bennet, of Colorado, told me. "We have the opportunity to set the stage for decades of progressive work that can improve the lives of tens of millions of Americans."

The crises of 2020 could become the catalytic agent of a national transformation.

Our collapse is so complete that the field lies open—the philosophical questions brought on by despair allow us to reimagine what kind of country we can be.

Nothing about this opportunity is inevitable, or even likely. The election could end in confusion and chaos, or in another stunning upset for Donald Trump and his party. If Joe Biden wins, a continued Republican Senate majority could obstruct his policies even more than a Republican minority did President Barack Obama's. Even a Democratic White House and Congress could encounter ferocious resistance from an opposition party and conservative infrastructure grasping for lost power. Pressure from organized money in the worlds of finance and tech could sap the Democrats' reformist zeal. The left's penchant for splittism could break the party into warring factions. On a deeper level, our institutions might have calcified to the point that they're no longer able to realize far-reaching reforms¹⁶. The public could lapse back into cynicism and distrust made all the more enervating by raised expectations.

Eventually, the country will need a sane and healthy Republican Party¹⁷. But for any kind of national renewal to take place, the Republicans must first suffer a crushing defeat in November. A Democratic administration and Congress must quickly pass bold legislation for economic relief, job creation, social protections, and voting rights. But a new era won't arrive like a pendulum that swings according to the laws of physics. It will take more than the triumph of a candidate, a party, or even a sweeping agenda. The obstacles are greater than just politics, and so is the opportunity. Our collapse is so complete that the field lies open—the philosophical questions brought on by despair allow us to reimagine what kind of country we can be. The familiar narratives are used up; the dried-out words stick in our mouths. For change to endure, for national shame to become pride, we need a radical agenda with a patriotic spirit.

We have to revive the one thing that has ever held together this sprawling, multiplicitous country: democratic faith.

The presidential primaries that opened the year gave an impression of bitter disagreement among the Democratic candidates. Hours of televised debate time were consumed with the merits of *Medicare for All* versus *Medicare for All Who Want It*, the difference between treating undocumented immigrants humanely and decriminalizing southern-border crossings, the intricacies of Biden's position on busing in the 1970s.

Today those arguments seem like an irrelevant scholastic exercise. One notable effect of this year's crises has been to forge broad Democratic support for the most ambitious domestic policy agenda since the Great Society, with Biden as its unlikely standard-bearer.

¹⁶ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/protests-are-sign-despair/612724/>

¹⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/how-america-ends/600757/>

The coronavirus arrived just as Biden was wrapping up the Democratic nomination in March. By mid-April, 30,000 Americans had died and 22 million were newly out of work. A group of advisers had begun speaking to the candidate by phone and videoconference about his priorities for fighting both catastrophes. The advisers then turned for ideas to people outside the campaign, in labor unions, universities, think tanks, and small businesses.

In early May, Neera Tanden, the president of the liberal *Center for American Progress*, wrote an essay called “A New Social Contract for the 21st Century.”¹⁸ She sent a draft to the Biden campaign, which received it favorably. Her argument came directly from the experience of the pandemic:

“Our response to this virus ... is only as strong as our weakest link. It binds our fates together, more so than any economic or natural disaster.”

Tanden proposed revising the deal among citizens, corporations, and the state in ways that address the weaknesses exposed by COVID-19. A “new social contract” would give more protections to individuals in the form of universal benefits—paid family and medical leave, paid sick days, health care with the option of joining Medicare. It would demand more responsibility from corporations, obliging them to revise their charters and take into account the interests of workers and local communities as much as those of shareholders (who bear economic risk only until a financial crisis or pandemic necessitates a taxpayer bailout). And it would require enormous amounts of government spending to end mass unemployment by creating millions of jobs in manufacturing, caregiving, education, and clean energy. Tanden framed her policy ideas as an updating of the *New Deal*, the original social contract that significantly strengthened the role of government in order to shift the burden of economic risk from the individual to the collective.

The ideas in Tanden’s essay are not new. Most of them have been circulating for years in policy papers put out by liberal think tanks and in the stillborn bills of congressional Democrats. Their philosophical basis goes back at least a century. Political transformations don’t happen when a blindingly original insight flashes across the sky. *The New Deal* itself, for all of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s openness to experimentation, mainly brought to fruition seeds that had been planted by *Populists* and *Progressives* over the previous four decades. The Reagan revolution realized conservative ideas that had originated in the period after World War II. In the face of institutional inertia, politics requires a long game—something that the modern American right has understood better than the left. Milton Friedman, an intellectual force behind Reaganism, once wrote:

“Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.”

While Biden’s campaign was still formulating its domestic policies, George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis police officer, and the country erupted in protests against racial injustice.

“The vice president looked at all that and said, ‘How I respond in the face of these will be presidency-defining,’” Jake Sullivan, a senior adviser, told me. *“‘I want a response that meets the moment and is true to who I have been in the campaign and over my career.’”*

¹⁸ <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/a-new-social-contract-for-the-21st-century/>

In the primaries, Biden had presented himself as the candidate of the Obama years. But the historical clock never rewinds, and the status quo ante is unequal to the desperate now. In response to the pandemic and the protests, Biden's lines changed.

The scale of Biden's agenda is breathtaking—it would go further in reducing inequality and remaking the social contract than any administration in modern memory has even attempted.

Over the summer, as the virus surged, the recession deepened, and the streets filled, Biden gave a series of speeches in which he laid out the heart of his economic plan, under the rubric "Build Back Better." For decades, political leaders have grasped for a programmatic brand name as memorable as "New Deal" or "Great Society"—but who remembers Bill Clinton's "New Covenant," George W. Bush's "Ownership Society," or Barack Obama's "New Foundation"? They soon vanished, because they never came to life in transformative legislation. Slogans stick when they're attached to programs that change the country. There will never be such a thing as *Bidenism*—because Biden himself has no ideology, no politics distinctly his own—but his policies deserve a more memorable name. Quoting a Depression-era poem by Langston Hughes¹⁹, and sticking it to the incumbent, Biden could call his agenda "Make America Again." The words don't order us back, like Trump's, to a glorious age that never was. They speak to an idea that has to be continuously renewed:

*"America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!"*

The scale of Biden's agenda is breathtaking. At its center is a huge jobs program. A Biden administration would invest \$2 trillion²⁰ in infrastructure and clean energy. He proposes creating 3 million jobs in early education²¹, child care, and elderly care—sectors usually regarded as "soft" and neglected by presidential candidates—while raising their pay and status.

"This economic crisis has hit women the hardest," Sullivan said. "These care jobs are primarily jobs filled by women—and disproportionately women of color and immigrant women—but they don't pay a fair wage, and the opportunities to advance aren't there. This is a big, ambitious, bold proposal—not an afterthought, but at the core."

Another \$700 billion²² would go to stimulating demand and innovation in domestic manufacturing for a range of essential industries such as medical supplies, microelectronics, and artificial intelligence. Some \$30 billion²³ would go to minority-owned businesses as part of a larger effort to reduce the racial wealth gap.

¹⁹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147907/let-america-be-america-again>

²⁰ <https://joebiden.com/clean-energy/>

²¹ <https://joebiden.com/caregiving/>

²² <https://joebiden.com/made-in-america/>

²³ <https://joebiden.com/racial-economic-equity/>

Biden is proposing industrial policy—massive, targeted investment to restructure production for national goals—something that no president has openly embraced since the 1940s. His agenda would also give workers more power, with paid family and medical leave, paid sick days, a public option for health care, and an easier path to organizing and joining unions. It would more than double the federal minimum wage, to \$15 an hour—a bitter point of dispute between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders in 2016, now uncontroversial among Democrats. Free trade is hard to find on the agenda. For all Biden's history as a centrist, his economic program would put an end to decades of Democratic incrementalism.

Americans are more broadly liberal on economic issues than on social and cultural ones. On the latter, Biden has stayed to the right of his party's activists: reform and demilitarize police, but don't defund them; remove Confederate statues from public places, but leave presidential monuments; regulate fracking, but don't ban it; rule reparations neither in nor out. For now, opposition to Trump has blurred the party's fracture lines. Democrats are united behind proposals that would go further in reducing inequality and remaking the social contract than any administration in modern memory has even attempted.

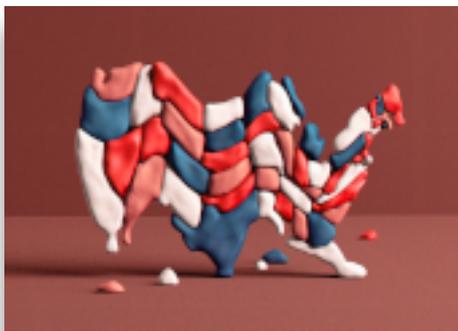


Illustration of U.S. - Hudson Christie

After teams made up of Biden and Sanders advisers and allies hammered out a 110-page policy platform, Sanders said,

"I think the compromise that they came up with, if implemented, will make Biden the most progressive president since FDR."

At one point Biden sidled up to the comparison.

"I do think we've reached a point, a real inflection in American history. And I don't believe it's unlike what Roosevelt was met with," he said in July. "I think we have an opportunity to make some really systemic change ... Something's happening here. It really is. The American people are going, 'Whoa, come on, we've got to do something.'"

This is not the stirring language of a visionary leader, or the doctrinaire rhetoric of an ideologue. It's the prosaic talk of a career politician shrewd enough to realize that he might have greatness thrust upon him.

"I think he's come to the realization that he can be a very consequential president," Sherrod Brown, the Democratic senator from Ohio, told me.

After alluding to the *New Deal*, Biden dropped the reference. His campaign seems wary of ideological framings that might alarm suburban mall shoppers in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. Jake Sullivan offered a different, less partisan Roosevelt analogy: the mobilization for public investment during World War II.

"The vice president's metric really is: How do we build momentum behind far-reaching, ambitious programs that actually are matched to the moment," Sullivan said, "without having them take on a particular ideological stripe?"

Biden has no particular ideological stripe. He's always been comfortable at the center of his party. The party moved left, the facts moved left, and Biden moved with them. Barack Obama ran as a vi-

sionary and governed as a technocrat—a change that ultimately disillusioned younger and more progressive Americans. Biden might make the same journey in reverse.

I asked Ted Kaufman—who has advised Biden since his first Senate race, in 1972; briefly filled his Senate seat when Biden became vice president; and now runs the campaign's transition planning—whether his boss is undergoing a late-in-life ideological conversion.

"I don't think so at all," Kaufman said. "What he's always done, if you go back and look at every single position he took—what Joe Biden talks about are things that can happen. He will not get up and promise something and not believe that he's going to get it done. I don't care if we got the Senate back, if we got 59 senators, 60 senators—you could not pass Medicare for All. His positions in the primary were left of center at the minimum. The big difference between him and everybody else running? He's not going to promise something he can't deliver."

Biden sees his first task as stabilizing the country, not creating more upheaval.

"The main thing is to get back to normal," Kaufman said. "It's the old addition by subtraction—having someone get up in the morning who says, 'Let's try to get the country back together. That's the best way to deal with covid-19.'"

Every day in the Biden White House would be a struggle between his instinct to reach for familiar policies or personnel and the imperative to think and act anew.

The conventional metaphor for new presidents is financial: Victory gives them a certain amount of political capital, and they have to decide how to spend it. It gradually dwindles—the sum is finite, and usually largest at the start. But there's a different way to think about a Biden presidency. His first task would not be to husband his limited capital wisely, but to take a long-stalled vehicle, get it into motion, and quickly pick up speed. He has to show that government can do big things before corporate money organizes to co-opt him and habitual public cynicism buries him.

If Republicans lose the Senate, they will rediscover their mislaid principles as deficit hawks and use the filibuster to obstruct Biden's agenda. Then the Democrats would have to pack a great deal of policy into a "reconciliation" bill, which allows for the passage of budget-related legislation via a simple majority vote. Or Senate Democrats could vote to end the filibuster. Many of them seem open to killing it.

"We've got to eliminate the filibuster," Brown told me. "I don't know if it has unanimity, but I've not talked to anybody that says 'I don't want to do it.'"

Democrats might even arrange an execution by bringing up a popular and historically charged bill, such as one that addresses voting rights or police accountability, and daring Republicans to align themselves with the *Dixiecrats* who filibustered civil rights.

Michael Bennet has spent his decade in the Senate watching "the world's greatest deliberative body" achieve next to nothing. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell

"has basically destroyed the Senate—he's turned it into nothing more than an employment agency," Bennet said. "If people continue for their own political reasons to make it impossible for the majority to exercise its will, filibuster reform may have to be on the table."

Even Biden, an inveterate institutionalist, has suggested that filibuster reform might be necessary.

Bennet, a center-left Democrat from a purple state, envisions

“a more progressive agenda than any modern president has pursued, and it would also be wildly popular with the American people.”

He believes that Congress should “*build political momentum*” by passing key legislation early on, with each breakthrough making the next one more, not less, thinkable: enact paid family and medical leave, double the federal minimum wage, reverse the Trump tax cuts for the rich and corporations while giving the middle class a tax cut, hold police accountable, increase teacher pay, fund universal preschool, move to universal health care through a public option. At the start of the previous congressional session, the House introduced *H.R. 1*, a bill that would have strengthened democracy by, among other things, enacting same-day voter registration and tightening ethics rules for members of Congress. *H.R. 1* died in the Senate before it could be vetoed by Trump. Both Bennet and Tanden said they hope that the next Congress will immediately take it up again, which would signal a commitment to political reform. Tanden argued that *H.R. 1*, with its voting-rights provisions, would begin to loosen Republicans’ undemocratic hold on power—which is based on a strategy of making it ever harder for citizens, especially poor, Black, and Latino Americans, to vote—before the party had time to reorganize for a counterattack.

“Everything on that list—any Democrat running for the House of Representatives could support it,” Bennet said. “Therefore it’s something that could probably ultimately get passed. Moderate Democratic senators could support it. It would make a massive difference in the lives of working Americans and poor Americans. What I’m talking about is an agenda that’s more ambitious than any time since Lyndon Johnson was president.”

There were three eras of reform in the United States in the 20th century. Our historical moment has elements of each of them. A new period of reform would need to bring together the best values of all three.

The Progressive era at the beginning of the century was the least ideologically distinct of them. With no obvious leader, faction, or defining issue, currents of Progressivism ran through both of the major parties, while absorbing ideas from the *Populists* and *Socialists*, and through every region of the country, in local, decentralized bursts of reform. Progressivism was more an impulse than a program, a moral awakening among mostly middle-class Americans to the sense that the country had drifted from its democratic moorings. Their chief concerns were corporate power, corruption at every level of government, and the “*shame of the cities*” (as the muckraker Lincoln Steffens had it)—urban bosses, slums, and sweatshops. The new conditions of modern life—industrialization, technological change, mass immigration—galvanized them to act, but they were hardly revolutionaries. Their main answer to social ills was to create better citizens.

“We are unsettled to the very roots of our being,” Walter Lippmann wrote in 1914 in his Progressive manifesto *Drift and Mastery*. *“There isn’t a human relation, whether of parent and child, husband and wife, worker and employer, that doesn’t move in a strange situation.”*

Lippmann proposed bringing the destabilizing new freedom of modern life under the purposeful control of science—experts, managers, forward-thinking leaders. But in his brilliant survey of American life, Black Americans are scarcely mentioned. Most Progressives, even muckraking journalists, were blind to racial injustice, and some—Woodrow Wilson is the best known—were outright racists

and eugenicists. Rather than build on the achievements of *Reconstruction*—that earlier, ill-fated reform era—*Progressivism* set out to reinvigorate a democracy of white Americans.

The *New Deal*, propelled by the greatest economic crisis in American history, turned many *Progressive* ideas into national realities, including unemployment insurance, minimum wages, and collective bargaining rights. The labor movement and the *Communist Party* created interracial alliances, but Roosevelt's national programs were enacted by a Congress that left *Jim Crow* in place while limiting protections for Black and other disenfranchised Americans—domestic workers, farmworkers, the intermittently employed. Workers continue to fall through these holes in the safety net to this day, in our latest version of the *Depression*.

The civil-rights movement in the early to mid-1960s produced a burst of creativity in Lyndon B. Johnson's administration. Johnson was a creature of the Senate, an institutional figure in every good and bad way, and a failed presidential candidate whose career seemed to have come to an end in the purgatory of the vice presidency. When he succeeded John F. Kennedy—another president in the technocrat-as-visionary mold—Johnson was scorned by eastern liberals as a crude, big-eared Texan, a party hack, and a bigot. But he took Kennedy's stalled agenda on civil rights and poverty and realized it in the most vigorous set of laws and actions for social justice in America since the 1930s²⁴. Johnson had two advantages over Kennedy: unparalleled knowledge of Congress and an atmosphere of crisis amid mobilization in the streets. He also benefited from an electoral mandate in 1964. The analogies to Biden are not hard to see.

Just as the *New Deal* nationalized local *Progressive* ideas, the *Great Society* tried to consummate the *New Deal* for all Americans. But it soon disintegrated amid urban riots, big Republican gains in the 1966 midterm elections, and the catastrophe in Vietnam. The coalition for reform—civil-rights groups, unions, peace marchers, academic experts, liberal politicians—collapsed as the country exploded, and the left splintered into fragments that grew more and more extreme.

Like the *Progressive* era, our age is marked by monopolistic corporate power that has created immense inequality and threatens democracy itself. Like the 1930s, our decade has begun with mass unemployment and vivid demonstrations of the vulnerability of American workers. Like the 1960s, our moment is animated by a dynamic young generation passionately inflamed by ongoing racial injustice.

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but the places with the power to solve problems.*

Most American reform movements carry a strain of puritanism, a zeal for personal self-correction so powerful that it can sometimes replace the effort to make concrete changes to material conditions. These movements begin with protest from below—by impoverished farmers, striking workers, disenfranchised Black southerners—and rise up into the middle class, which adopts the cause with what the historian Richard Hofstadter, writing of the *Progressives*, called “a rather strenuous moral purgation.” A personal sense of guilt produces a quasi-religious fervor directed toward social and political ills and a longing for redemption in solidarity with the downtrodden. Progressive crusaders ventured into the slums to expose the squalid conditions of immigrant life; in the '30s, bourgeois *Communists* and fellow travelers exalted the proletariat and sacrificed intellectual independence to the iron will of the party; in

²⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/04/what-the-hells-the-presidency-for/358630/>

the '60s, white college students joined the struggle for Black freedom in the South and then decided that they required their own liberation, too, by means of taking over campuses and curricula.

In the past few years, we've seen fitful bursts of a new moral awakening: *Occupy Wall Street* in 2011, a utopian flicker; the *Black Lives Matter* protests of the late Obama presidency; the Sanders campaigns, a political outlet for the anti-capitalist grievances of young people. Trump's election accelerated and intensified this awakening: the *Women's March* following his inauguration; the rise of anti-Trump "resistance" groups, largely composed of middle-class, middle-aged women new to activism; the #MeToo movement, a phenomenon centered on private interactions more than public policy; demonstrations on behalf of immigrants at airports and along the southern border; the return of racial justice as an overriding issue prompting nationwide protests.



Illustration of hands in circle - Hudson Christie

The new progressivism is in the streets, in classrooms, on social media—everywhere **but** the places with the power to solve problems. It has drawn a sharp, clear line from historical crimes to contemporary inequalities. It has dramatically changed the way Americans think, talk, and act, but not the conditions in which they live. It has no central theme or agenda, no charismatic leader to give it direction and coherence. It reflects the fracturing distrust that defines our culture: Something is deeply wrong; our society is unjust; our institutions are corrupt. The protests are the death throes of a declining capitalist empire, or the birth pangs of the world's first truly multiethnic democracy, or something else altogether.

something else altogether.

"All those other eras, you have one big issue," the historian Michael Kazin, who has written many books about the American left, told me. "I'm not sure what that is now. I'd like to think it's a combination of anti-monopoly and helping working people have a better life." The internet, Kazin said, makes clarity and unity more difficult. "I'm old-fashioned enough to think that matters."

A decade of social mobilizations with no tangible achievements. Each new phase builds more pressure for radical change. If, in November, Trump is consigned to a late life of social-media whining and legal jeopardy, the pressure won't subside. Under a Biden administration, the streets are likely to keep roiling, maybe more tumultuously than ever, as raised hopes lead to greater demands and disappointments. Most younger Americans have seen no viable kind of politics other than protest. Kazin, a veteran of the '60s who watched the *New Left* doom itself with its own illusions, said,

"I fear the left will expect too much or be too damning too quickly with a Biden administration. That can always happen."

As the party moves in a progressive direction, Biden will have a harder time ignoring pressure from his left than Obama did. But unlike Sanders or Hillary Clinton, he isn't a polarizing figure, and the very vagueness of his views might allow political crosswinds to blow around him without bringing down the edifice of reform.

The philosopher Richard Rorty, in his book *Achieving Our Country*, distinguished between two kinds of American left: reformist and cultural²⁵. The first pursues justice through existing democratic institutions; the second seeks it in a revolution of consciousness. The reformist left wants to make police

²⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/04/the-next-left/306010/>

more accountable; the cultural left wants to confront America with its racist essence. When Rorty wrote his book, in the '90s, the cultural left was confined to university departments. Today its ideas reflect the prevailing worldview of well-educated, middle-class progressives, especially those under 40. Its vocabulary—white fragility²⁶, intersectionality²⁷, decolonize, BIPOC²⁸—confounds the uninitiated and antagonizes the skeptical. The cultural left dominates media, the arts, and philanthropy as well as academia; it influences elementary-school classrooms and corporate boardrooms; and it's beginning to reach into national politics. Its radical critique of American institutions has thrived during an era when reform has stalled and the current ruling party embraces an inflammatory white identity politics. At the same time, the distinction between Rorty's two lefts has eroded—a figure like Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez combines aspects of both.

Under Democratic governance, the left would have to move from critique to coalition-building. It would be pulled between its own impulses toward institutional reform and cultural transformation. President Biden would immediately face an overwhelming crisis in employment and health; if the left pushes him hard on divisive cultural issues such as decriminalizing illegal border crossings, eliminating standardized testing, and defunding the police, it will weaken his hand for a political and economic transformation on the scale of the *New Deal*. The identity politics that more and more defines the left has a built-in political flaw. It divides into groups rather than uniting across groups; it offers a cogent attack on the injustices and lies of the past and present, rather than an inspiring vision of an America that will be.

Maurice Mitchell, of the *Working Families Party*, has roots in union organizing and *Black Lives Matter*. His party endorsed Elizabeth Warren in the primaries. He imagines a broad, multiracial coalition of progressives, either inside or outside the Democratic Party.

"It is our job to make the Democrats uncomfortable and frustrate the hell out of them every single day," he said. "But right now we are fragmented. We need to challenge sectarianism and cynicism as two of our greatest enemies. We need to have the same ambition as Stephen Miller and Steve Bannon, niche voices in the right-wing wilderness that made it all the way to the White House. Lastly, we need a multiracial solidarity that can challenge the solidarity of whiteness: large majorities of people of color, mainstream liberals, and 15 percent of working-class whites. Then we could break the power of the Republican Party."

Mitchell added:

"I don't believe that Joe Biden is a comrade. What I believe is that he's adaptable and he can evolve based on where the political times are. Any government in 2021 will have to figure out how tens of millions of Americans quickly get work. Putting ideology aside, that is a call for government playing a very active role in people's lives; that is a call for government doing big, structural things."

After decades of futility, the left has a new habit of overestimating its own strength (as evinced by the shock at Sanders's defeat in the spring) and an old habit of driving away potential supporters by presenting popular ideas in alienating terms.

²⁶ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/dehumanizing-condescension-white-fragility/614146/>

²⁷ the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

²⁸ The acronym stands for black, Indigenous and People of Color

"On the left there's long been a cult of focusing on the most marginal rhetoric and demands instead of building a working-class program that's broadly popular," Bhaskar Sunkara, the editor of the socialist magazine Jacobin, told me.

His strategy differs from Mitchell's in putting the emphasis much more heavily on class.

"Politics at some point has to be about telling people they're welcome. White males are a third of the electorate. We can't let anti-racism just be a vague and indescribable thing. It has to be connected to material redress."

He means policies, such as universal health care and child care and the *Green New Deal*, that would benefit all working people, but especially the most disadvantaged. The new woke capitalism leaves him skeptical.

"We're not going to accept at face value corporate statements in favor of diversity and anti-racism, because they'll use this emphasis as a cudgel against workers of all races if we let them. Being part of a working-class movement means defending the labor rights of racists and bigots. But we have to find a way to engage with them and increase the level of class consciousness."

Biden's agenda is a working-class program without a working-class coalition. Non-college-educated whites remain Trump's base. Many progressives regard them with horror and contempt, as a sea of irredeemable racists. Despite how desperate life has become this year for working-class Americans of every background, it's hard to imagine a transracial coalition. That would require a perception of common interests, a level of trust, and a shared belief in the American idea that don't now exist. But it's also hard to imagine an era of enduring reform without something like such a coalition. It will come about only if Americans start to see their government working on their behalf, making their lives less burdensome, giving them a voice, freeing them to master their own fate.

We don't lack for political agendas, policy ideas, or protest movements. What we lack is the ability to come together as free and equal citizens of a democracy. We lack a sense of national identity and civic faith that could energize renewal.

This fall, the *Harvard* political scientist Robert Putnam is publishing a book called *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*. Using statistical data, Putnam graphs the years since 1890 as four lines that travel steeply upward for seven decades and then plunge just as steeply downward. The lines represent economic equality, political cooperation, social cohesion, and a culture of solidarity. They all begin at the bottom, in the squalid swamp of the *Gilded Age*, and then they rise together through the *Progressive* era, the *New Deal*, and the civil-rights movement, to an apex of egalitarianism, compromise, cohesion, and altruism around 1965—the year of the Selma march, the *Voting Rights Act*, and the enactment of *Medicare*—before descending for another half century to the present, to our second *Gilded Age* of *Twitter* wars and refrigerated trucks filled with the COVID dead.

We have one more chance—in Lincoln's words, a "last best hope"—to bring our democracy back from the dead.

Putnam calls this highly schematic arc "I-we-I." He wants to get to "we" again, and for inspiration he looks back to the start of the previous upswing, around 1900. The *Progressive* era, Putnam writes, was "the re-

sult of countless citizens engaging in their own spheres of influence and coming together to create a vast ferment of criticism and change—a genuine shift from ‘I’ to ‘we.’”

Putnam’s historical analysis is illuminating, but the book is short on details for how a new upswing might begin.

We can never again be as innocent as the *Progressives* about America’s past, or its future. In 1914 Walter Lippmann called for “mastery” of the new forces and freedoms unleashed by the modern world. We’re beset with something else—a sense of disintegration and decline. Radical legislative reforms are a necessary condition of a national upswing. What are the democratic dreams of a nonunion Amazon warehouse associate putting in mandatory overtime with a fever and leaving her remote-schooled kids in the care of her elderly mother?

“You can’t expect civic virtue from a disfranchised class,” Lippmann wrote.

Today the disenfranchised include some supporters of Trump. If the president loses reelection, they would be embittered by defeat and unlikely to be argued out of their views. A hard core might turn from the diverting carnival of MAGA to armed violence.

The experience of a competent, active government bringing opportunity and justice to Americans left behind by globalization would inject an anti-venom into the country’s bloodstream. The body would continue to convulse, but the level of toxicity would be reduced enough to allow for an interval of healing. No one would abandon their most cherished, most irrational beliefs, but the national temperature would go down a bit. We would have a chance to repair the social contract rather than tear it into ever smaller pieces.

But an ambitious legislative agenda isn’t enough, because the problem extends far beyond Washington, deep into the republic. Americans have lost faith in institutions, in one another, in democracy itself. Everything conspires against our role as citizens—big money, indifferent officials, byzantine election rules, mutual hatred, mutual ignorance, the Constitution itself. There is no remedy except the exercise of muscles that have atrophied. Not just by voting, but by imagining what kind of country we can live in together. We have to act like citizens again²⁹.

Last year, a commission created by the *American Academy of Arts and Sciences* spent months talking to a variety of groups around the country. Disaffection with the state of American democracy was nearly universal, but so was a longing for connection to a unifying American identity. In June the commission released a report called “*Our Common Purpose*,”³⁰ which put forth 31 proposals, some quite bold. They include political reforms that would make institutions more representative: enlarge the House of Representatives; adopt ranked-choice voting; end gerrymandering by having independent groups of citizens draw district lines; amend the Constitution to overturn *Citizens United*; appoint Supreme Court justices to 18-year terms, with one new nomination in each term of Congress.

Other recommendations are designed to change the political culture: make voting easier but also mandatory, connect voters with their representatives, train community leaders around the country, rebuild social media as a more constructive public space, shape an active citizenry through civic education and universal national service. The aim is not to realize any partisan cause, but to set Americans into motion as civic actors, not passive subjects.

²⁹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/losing-the-democratic-habit/568336/>

³⁰ <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report>

"Democracy works only if enough people believe democracy works," Eric Liu, a co-chair of the commission that produced the report, told me.

Ideas like these, some new, others lying around for decades, come to the fore in hinge years. They are signs of a plastic hour.

I began writing this essay in a mood of despair. The mood had grown so familiar, really almost comfortable, that it made me sick of myself and my country. But because I can't give up on either—suicide is too final, and expatriation is no longer possible—I tried to think about the future and the past. And this is what I've come to believe: We have one more chance—in Lincoln's words, a "last best hope"—to bring our democracy back from the dead. It will be like a complex medical rescue that requires just the right interventions, in just the right sequence, at just the right speed: amputation, transfusion, multiple-organ transplant, stabilization, rehabilitation. Each step will be very hard, and we can't afford to get any wrong or wait another hour.

Yet I've written myself into a state of mind that I recognize as hope.

We've made America before. Self-government still gives us the chance. Everything is in our hands.



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☐ GEORGE PACKER is a staff writer at The Atlantic. He is the author of *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century* and *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*.

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