

Biden may be winning, but America's future isn't

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Two decades ago, when I was working in politics, I ran into a friend in New York after returning from my umpteenth trip to Washington. Election Day was weeks away, and I was tired in the way that political people are tired in the fall of years that end in an even number.

He expressed unease with how little he was engaged in politics. A brilliant actor, he didn't do much more than vote. I said — with absolute conviction — that we were fortunate to live in a country where art was more important than politics. Places where politics were all consuming and all important were invariably places with big problems.

America is now such a place.

The state of U.S. politics is dangerous dysfunction. A new nation is struggling to be born. An old nation is doing all it can to make it a stillbirth. And the toll of that struggle is rising.

"The closeness of today's party competition is decidedly not normal in American politics," wrote political scientist Frances E. Lee in 2014. "In fact, the last three decades have seen the longest period of near parity in party competition for control of national institutions since the Civil War."

The Civil War was not a high water mark for national greatness. And American politics has not improved since 2014.

In many ways, this election went much better than it could have. On Election Day, former Republican Sen. Alfonse D'Amato of New York emailed me, saying "I fear we may not know who the winner is for weeks to come!! I pray that our nation will not be besieged with chaos and violence!!"

Violence, no. Chaos, yes.

President Donald Trump wanted chaos, of course, and it's not an exaggeration to say that anything that serves Trump's narrow interests disservices the nation's. Predictably, he claimed a victory that is not his — saying in a tweet (since flagged by Twitter) that "We are up BIG, but they are trying to STEAL the election."

This is not true, of course. And that's no small part of the problem that America faces. Democratic politics is conducted via speech — call it "debate" if you are old-fashioned. There can be no functional, let alone healthy, democratic politics if the executive is a fountain of falsehood.

Trump may well be removed after the votes are counted. A Democrat will win the popular vote. Again. And while Joe Biden's night was not what Democrats had hoped

for, it bears some resemblance to election night in 2018, when Florida confounded Democrats yet again but the late-breaking vote in the Midwest and West bolstered a Democratic win. It looks like the Democratic majority in the House is depleted but standing. If the Blue Wall holds in the Upper Midwest, or the right combination of a partial wall with Nevada and Arizona stands, then Biden will be president.

That the popular vote has no bearing on that result is a structural problem that has no solution right now. That Biden may have a Senate with an obstructionist Republican majority is a more pressing concern. As the New York Times reported on the Senate races, "At stake was the ability of the next president to fill his cabinet, appoint judges and pursue his agenda."

The underlying assumption is that if Democrats do not win total victory across all branches of government, Republicans will make the nation ungovernable while trying to scuttle the economy. As my colleague John Authers wrote: "There will be no big game-changing shift toward fiscal policy and away from monetary domination."

If Trump somehow prevails, America will be well on its way to failed statehood, with a corrupt and incompetent administration that continues to be opposed by a majority of citizens. If Biden prevails, as seems increasingly likely, and the Republicans hold the Senate, Republicans will devote themselves to using the Senate to destroy Biden's presidency.

There is an enormous grassroots churning in the U.S. right now, from Black Lives Matter to suburban women organizing their neighborhoods. A future is coming into view. Yes, the anti-majoritarian Senate and Electoral College are serious impediments. But scores of millions of Americans voted for Trump.

The Republican Party has broad and genuine political support. It appears to have been largely defeated last night. But it was not rebuked, so it will not change. The costs of Republican intransigence will continue to mount.

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