**Headline:** Why 2020 Was the ‘Precarity Election’

**Teaser:** Neither political party has truly addressed the issue of economic security, which is why the country remains a house divided against itself.

By Albena Azmanova and Marshall Auerback

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**[Article Body:]**

While Joe Biden will be America’s next president, the 2020 election demonstrated that the basic building blocks of our electorate are evolving. What were 20th-century political anchors of meaning—“working-class” or “white-collar”—are increasingly flimsy labels that obscure critical political tensions and splits.

America’s two main political parties will not be able to produce national majorities unless they consider the changing electorate trends when fashioning their strategies. Race, gender, and rural-urban identity politics clearly remain important dividing lines, but the 2020 election highlighted a greater amount of fluidity and ideological heterogeneity than the media consensus allowed for. Most importantly, these simplistic silos obscured the big political question, namely, to find a party that best can tend to the politics of the [precariat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precariat)—a massive pool of voters sharing very similar experiences, relating to employment security; the rising costs of health care, housing, and education; and the corresponding degradation in the quality of public services (which are increasingly rationed by income and employment, rather than provided with universal access).

The phenomenon of economic precarity is truly the hallmark of contemporary capitalism: the combination of automation, globalization and cuts in social provision has generated massive economic instability for ordinary citizens—for men and women, young and old, Black and white, skilled and unskilled workers, middle class and poor alike.

The challenge is to build a more stable, secure and sustainable society, which means explicitly addressing the issue of economic precarity that largely characterizes today’s capitalist system in the United States and abroad.

As one of us has [written](https://americancompass.org/the-commons/us-election-the-working-class-is-up-for-grabs/) before, if any election were ripe to achieve this goal and reestablish the kind of coalition that had “sustained the Democrats electorally for decades, it was this one. But the most striking takeaway from the 2020 election is how much it mirror[ed the profound splits] of the 2016 election, literally give or take the shift of a hundred thousand votes or so in a few key Rust Belt and Sun Belt states. … [And] despite Trump’s [direct appeals to racist fears](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/us/politics/trump-suburbs-housing-white-voters.html),” [he](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-election/) and the [New York Post](https://nypost.com/2020/11/04/despite-racist-charges-trump-did-better-with-minorities-than-any-gop-candidate-in-60-years/) claimed [that](https://americancompass.org/the-commons/us-election-the-working-class-is-up-for-grabs/) “more than a quarter of his votes came from nonwhite Americans, [‘the highest percentage for a GOP presidential candidate since 1960.’](https://nypost.com/2020/11/04/despite-racist-charges-trump-did-better-with-minorities-than-any-gop-candidate-in-60-years/)” As with many of Trump’s boasts, this [may be overblown](https://www.forbes.com/sites/theapothecary/2020/11/09/no-trump-didnt-win-the-largest-share-of-non-white-voters-of-any-republican-in-60-years/); however, the [Brookings Institution reports](https://www.brookings.edu/research/2020-exit-polls-show-a-scrambling-of-democrats-and-republicans-traditional-bases/) that as of exit poll results through November 11, in some non-battleground states, “the Democratic margins for each of the major nonwhite groups… [were] somewhat reduced. The Black Democratic margin—while still high, at 75 percent—was the lowest in a presidential election since 2004.” Perhaps even more surprising, [among Latina women](https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/exit-polls-predict-more-white-women-voted-for-trump-this-election-than-in-2016/#twitter-widget-0:~:text=Among%20Latino%20voters%2C%20Trump%20performed%20well%2C,from%2025%20per%20cent%20in%202016.), the vote for Trump [rose from 25 percent](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/elections/exit-polls-changes-2016-2020/#poll-table:~:text=Latino%20women) in 2016 to [30 percent](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/exit-polls-president.html?0p19G=0232#g-exit-polls:~:text=Latino%20women) in 2020. This may seem strange to some, but keep in mind that anxieties related to threatened livelihoods can overshadow issues of ethnicity, gender and race. According to a pre-election [AP VoteCast](https://www.npr.org/2020/11/03/929478378/understanding-the-2020-electorate-ap-votecast-survey) survey, for 28 percent of Americans, the economy and jobs were more important than other issues in this election—and [some 80 percent](https://www.npr.org/2020/11/04/931308587/good-or-poor-pandemic-economy-splits-voters-along-partisan-lines) of this group favored Trump.

Joe Biden’s presidential victory is now secure in terms of the Electoral College and impressive in terms of the popular vote (in which Biden received [more than 77 million votes](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-president.html), the [largest popular vote in the country’s history](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/11/11/how-joe-biden-win-compares-past-presidential-elections/6227238002/#gnt_atomsnc:~:text=broke%20the%20record%20for%20most%20votes%20ever%20received%20by%20a%20presidential%20candidate)). However, as one of us has [written](https://americancompass.org/the-commons/us-election-the-working-class-is-up-for-grabs/) before, “[the coattail effect](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coattail_effect)… [was] minimal (ironic, considering that this was one of the ostensible rationales for Democrats selecting a moderate like the former vice president, as opposed to a progressive, such as Bernie Sanders). [The GOP remains favored to]… retain control of the Senate, and while the ‘[Democrats will keep their majority in the House of Representatives](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/democrats-maintain-majority-house-representatives/story?id=73981078),’” as ABC News [reports](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/democrats-maintain-majority-house-representatives/story?id=73981078), “after all the votes are counted, they could wind up with the slimmest House majority in 20 years.” And Donald Trump himself registered more than [72 million votes](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-president.html).

As one of us has [written](https://americancompass.org/the-commons/us-election-the-working-class-is-up-for-grabs/) before, “It wasn’t supposed to be this close. Against the backdrop of a[n ineptly managed] pandemic, depression-like levels of unemployment, and a president [whose approval rating never rose beyond 50 percent](https://news.gallup.com/poll/203198/presidential-approval-ratings-donald-trump.aspx) during his entire time in the White House, 2020 created what should have been the ideal conditions for [a so-called ‘blue wave,’](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/04/us/election-state-house-legislature-governors.html) both nationally and in the statehouses.” The disappointment to Democrats is rooted in a failure to accurately diagnose the nature of the working class and its grievances.

While 20th-century Democrats strongly depended on the working class for their majorities, the current version of the party is rather oblivious to what has given rise to the precariat. In many ways, they are expanding it through the continuum of neoliberal policies the party still favors.

Case in point is California’s [Proposition 22](https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_22%2C_App-Based_Drivers_as_Contractors_and_Labor_Policies_Initiative_%282020%29), a neo-feudal piece of legislation from the bluest of blue states that has effectively entrenched economic precarity for a large chunk of the state’s workers by undermining traditional employee protections and benefits included in California’s existing labor law. The Golden State has long been viewed as a leading indicator regarding future social, economic, and political trends, starting in 1978 with [Proposition 13](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1978_California_Proposition_13) (a property tax-cutting provision that prefigured Reagan’s supply-side fiscal policy two years later). If it is still true that “[as California goes, so goes the country](https://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/21/weekinreview/the-nation-golden-rules-as-california-goes-so-goes-the-country.html),” then today’s economic precariat ought to be very concerned [about the passage of Proposition 22](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/11/03/uber-prop22-results-california/), a regressive union-busting measure that allows Uber and Lyft to continue classifying their drivers as contractors, not employees, thereby [exempting](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/04/california-election-voters-prop-22-uber-lyft) them from a California labor law that seeks to outlaw the practice. Although both Joe Biden and Kamala Harris explicitly opposed Proposition 22, it certainly [didn’t help](https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2019-09-12/kamala-harris-uber-family-campaign-drivers-labor) the Democrats’ brand that Kamala Harris’ brother-in-law and adviser, Tony West, who is the chief legal officer of Uber, led the campaign in favor of Proposition 22; her niece, Meena Harris, is on Uber’s diversity team; and her ex-campaign strategist, Laphonza Butler, advises Uber on labor relations. After the passage of Proposition 22, workers at gig economy firms will continue to be classified as contractors, without access to employee rights such as minimum wage, unemployment benefits, and health insurance. There is no doubt that other states will take note.

This kind of development potentially creates a huge opening for the Republican Party, especially if it can also adapt to the new realities of work and relinquish trickle-down economics policies its donors demanded for the past 40 years.

Trump clearly understood how to exploit the anxieties of the rural identity crisis, and he made inroads into what seemed to be certainties about voting patterns with regard to race and sex. If Republicans can deliver leadership about giving security to the precariat, it will be equivalent to the achievement that the Democrats made during the Great Depression for blue-collar workers under the New Deal, a period when Franklin Delano Roosevelt developed policies that mitigated the worst ravages of the economic crisis and sustained a winning governing coalition for over half a century.

Today, the Democrats are losing a lot of what is left of what we understood to be the traditional working class. They are losing what remains of these voters, at the same time that this label is losing its meaning: The traditional working class is disappearing, having been eviscerated through a combination of automation, globalization, attacks on private-sector unions and cuts in public services. Until the party realizes that work is nothing like what it was, and increasingly won’t be, it will be hard for them to offer credible solutions.

At the same time, if the Republicans are to become a more broadly based multiracial party of blue-collar conservatism, as Missouri Senator Josh Hawley, for one, [has advocated](https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/can-republicans-become-a-multiracial-working-class-party), they too will have to understand that what constitutes blue-collar—work, life, existence, identity—is quite different now from the 20th-century blue-collar of the Democrats’ coalition, and is going to be even more different in 10 to 20 years. There are some [recent indications that the GOP is beginning to recognize this](https://rsc-johnson.house.gov/sites/republicanstudycommittee.house.gov/files/%5BFINAL%5D%20Reclaiming%20the%20American%20Dream%20.pdf)—but the party needs to reverse its positions on taxing the wealthiest, punishing and preventing the expansion of organized labor, reversing their position on outsourcing manufacturing, and addressing economic precarity.

The GOP’s own historic corporate constituencies create some challenges for the party if it wishes to secure this rapidly changing precariat vote. A trade policy whereby American reindustrialization is ultimately married to national security concerns may be part of the answer. Given its historically stronger ties to the defense establishment, that would seem to be a more plausible scenario for the GOP, a recent example being Senator Tom Cotton’s [new bill](https://www.allaboutcircuits.com/news/new-senate-bill-proposes-to-pump-25-billion-into-us-semiconductor-industry/) focusing on the domestic production of semiconductors. But that will not be enough.

There are only so many homegrown strategic industries required to sustain U.S. military supremacy that also provide blue-collar jobs, especially given the degree of automation and the requirement of advanced degrees in industries such as semiconductors (even allowing for the knock-out impacts). Traditional concepts of work will have to be expanded as we ponder how to address the problems of automation, rising inequality and economic precarity. This will also mean discarding a lot of old neoliberal shibboleths, recognizing that national industrial policy will be required not simply to reduce prevailing inequality, but also to promote American economic growth and security in the fullest sense of the word—i.e., by addressing existing global supply chain vulnerabilities and discarding the silly notion that economic and employment security can be achieved simply by creating a bunch of serf-labor jobs designed to serve the interests of the oligarch class.

The outrage against inequality has been a calling cry for the Democratic Party, especially in Rust Belt states such as Michigan and Ohio. Here, poverty is a result of broader industrial decay caused by automation and the offshoring of manufacturing to countries with cheaper labor, which has in turn entailed urban decay and rising criminality. Those states responded well to Trump’s campaign rhetoric in 2016. And even though the president lost [Michigan](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-michigan-president.html) in 2020, the results were still close. Likewise, Ohio has increasingly become a red state, as opposed to a swing state. All of this suggests that the electorate was not fully persuaded by the Democratic Party’s solutions, which entailed redistribution from the winners to the losers, but little in the way of structural change to address the precarity problem.

Tellingly, the states where Trump made inroads among the working class (Alaska, Oklahoma, Wyoming, Iowa, Utah) saw the [smallest increases in inequality](https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/03/americas-inequality-election/#:~:text=in%202016%20Trump%20received%20the%20support%20of%20states) nationwide since 1989, but their troubled economies have not generated good and stable employment, suggesting that precarity, and not inequality, [is the central voter concern driving the working-class vote to the right](https://www.ft.com/content/0a566844-83e7-11ea-b6e9-a94cffd1d9bf). They remained firmly red, because here too the Democrats still have no policies that address their specific pathologies: Alaska, Oklahoma, and Wyoming were 20th-century resource economies that saw declines in reserves, or devaluation from global competition. But policies such as the Green New Deal have hitherto failed to make the case among workers in those states, even though [numerous studies](https://economicreconstruction.org/ManufacturingGreenProsperity) illustrate that green manufacturing jobs are inextricably linked to higher-quality employment and enhanced economic security.

Economic instability nurtures psychological affinities for stabilization—which the cultural conservatism and law-and-order affinities of the Republican Party appear better equipped to satisfy, at least on a cultural or social level. The capacity to attract the vote of the growing precariat has been crucial for the electoral fortunes of the Republican Party. Unsurprisingly, on the eve of Election Day, while Joe Biden issued an [appeal for hope, decency and unity, Donald Trump, reportedly against the advice of his communication experts to appeal to moderate voters, chose to focus on his base of supporters with incendiary rhetoric of fear and anger](https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/524066-trump-biden-offer-sharply-different-closing-arguments-on-eve-of-election). Judging from the close election result, that gamble paid off: The GOP benefited from a law-and-order backlash against protests and flag burning much as in the 1972 race between Richard Nixon and George McGovern.

The cultural disconnect that manifested itself in the wake of last summer’s marches was in part a product of the fact that, as Thomas B. Edsall [writes](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/28/opinion/trump-white-voters.html#interactive-credit:~:text=low%2Dincome%20white%20voters%20without%20college%20degrees,Republican%20side%20%E2%80%94%20have%20switched%20places) in the New York Times, “low-income white voters with­out college degrees on the Democratic Party side, high-income white voters with degrees on the Republican side—have switched places,” referring to a phenomenon outlined by Professors Herbert Kitschelt and Philipp Rehm in their 2019 paper, “[Secular Partisan Realignment in the United States: The Socioeconomic Reconfiguration of White Partisan Support since the New Deal Era](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0032329219861215).” If anything, the pandemic accentuated the trends outlined by Kitschelt and Rehm: growing numbers of university-educated Democratic voters had economically secure positions as members of the professional-managerial class. In sharp contrast, Trump may have appeared indifferent to the gravity of the coronavirus, but his persistent calls to reopen the economy addressed the precarity issue, as they appealed to many workers whose livelihoods were being destroyed by the pandemically induced government restrictions placed on economic activity.

Public health care authorities understandably directed their policy responses toward pandemic mitigation, and the Democrats largely embraced their recommendations. But they remained insensitive to the anxieties of tens of millions of Americans, whose jobs were being destroyed for good, whose household debts—rent, mortgage, and utility arrears, as well as interest on education and car loans—were rising inexorably, even allowing for the temporary expedient of stimulus checks from the government until this past August. Yet the inability of Congress to secure extensions on relief packages did not appear to unduly penalize Republicans, if one is to judge from the congressional results. Equally significantly, it didn’t help the Democrats either. This suggests that lingering fears about COVID-19 are being matched by economic anxiety from the many millions of American workers who are coming to realize that their jobs are simply not essential.

The struggle for the precariat vote will define the transformation of both parties in the next four years, and that’s an excellent thing, as it will force both parties to offer competing policies that begin to address their concerns. Until this group’s longstanding economic grievances—jobs, health, safety, pollution, the public purpose, and above all, relative stability and employment security over long periods of time—are addressed, the United States will remain a profoundly divided and divisive country at war with itself.