

The War of the Norm

by George Friedman - November 5, 2020

The primary reason about half the country voted for Joe Biden was that he wasn't Donald Trump. Trump was seen by many as violating fundamental norms of the presidency and of personal dignity. Biden had not introduced any stunning policy initiatives, nor did his supporters necessarily want him to. What they wanted was a return to the norm, as represented by Barack Obama, George W. Bush and others. They wanted a return to what they saw as moral rectitude and propriety, a country united rather than divided.

On the other hand, just under half the country voted for Trump because they saw the norm as unbearable. On the surface, it seemed to represent civility. Underneath, for them, it was a ruthless attempt to enhance the power of the elite and assault the values of the country. Put differently, the norm was seen as a way to manipulate society for the benefit of the elite, who covered their actions with mock civility. In the view of Trump supporters, the norm divided the country deeply, against the Trump voters' interests and values.

For Biden voters, supporting Trump was inconceivable, since he was in it for himself and stood for the lowest values possible. For Trump supporters, not voting for Trump was inconceivable, since he represented resistance against hypocrisy and the ruthlessness of the elite as they accumulated power. Trump's supporters knew that he lied. They argued that all politicians lied, but that their lies were subtle and hidden. Trump's were open. Given a choice between the two, they voted for Trump. Trump's enemies thought this attitude abnormal, seeing open and self-serving lies as destructive and denying that the American norm had become systematic but subtle dishonesty.

At the time of writing, the election is a virtual tie: Biden has about 50 percent of the national vote, and Trump one to two points less. For Biden supporters, this is a disappointment, though not a fatal one. The polls showed Biden with a substantial lead over Trump. For Trump voters, these polls were not only in error but deliberately so, seeking to portray America as in revolt against the Trump presidency. For them, the polls were simply another lie of the norm. What for Biden voters was a statistical anomaly was for Trump voters another case in a long line of deception. And so too, according to them, was the voting system put in place because of the COVID-19 crisis.

Biden voters argue that these conspiracy theories are lies destroying national unity. Trump voters argue that they are simply a representation of what is going on in the country. The voting rules and

polls were what would normally be expected under the circumstances. But Trump voters viewed these rules and polls as being justified by a norm that concocts rules that benefit the powers that be.

Obviously not all Biden and Trump voters approached the election this way. No single statement exhausts the complexity of the vote. But I think that, on the whole, what divided the country was the gap between the hunger for a return to what some considered the norm, and the demand that the old norm be overthrown and a new one forged. Thus what Biden voters see as normal processes are unbearable to Trump voters.

The issue is not who is right. The issue is that this country, judging by the vote, is divided down the middle. The tally is an important marker for who wins and loses, but in a broader sense the social split finds half the country on each side. The malice toward the other side varies. There is likely a spectrum of loathing, from merely disagreeing with each other to seeing the other side as the embodiment of evil. But the core distinction is that one side regards their antagonists as abnormal, while the other side views their antagonists as the normal purveyors of skillful oppression.

This can't be understood by recourse to policies. The mutual loathing points to fundamental differences on existential questions, such as the nature of truth, the definition of freedom and the meaning of citizenship. And that in turn is rooted in the fundamental social and economic shifts of the past 50 years. As the transformation takes place, demonstrators sit outside the building in Georgia where ballots are counted, with the Biden supporters unable to grasp that the protesters genuinely believe the election, among other things, is being stolen. Meanwhile in Portland, the response to the election by the radical left is breaking windows and destroying ATMs. They also are disgusted by the election, as they too despise the norm. They are a small fraction of the left – but in these times the opponents of the norm are powerful.

The fact is that the old norm is gone. Its economic foundation is old and tired, and the companies founded in garages 50 years ago are the General Motors of our time. People who had had comfortable lives working at GM are now threatened with penury, while a new elite is as indifferent to their fate as new elites always are.

It is a time of pain that will not go away until a new normal is established. Franklin D. Roosevelt was considered a freak – a rich man championing the immigrant working class. So too was Ronald Reagan – an actor, disengaged and not too bright, cutting taxes for the rich. We are years before the Roosevelt or Reagan of our time emerges, but one will. In the meantime, the only choice we have is between laughter and tears at how history is tearing at our beloved country. But since we have been here before, I suggest a good chuckle. Since we are unable to change the course, we may as well

enjoy it.

Author: George Friedman

[Read more from this author on geopoliticalfutures.com](https://geopoliticalfutures.com)