

# The Coming Socialist President?

Lately we have seen numerous conservative commentators posit the thesis that the Democrats are disqualifying themselves from a 2020 presidential victory by lurching too far left on key economic and social issues. The idea is that the American people simply aren't prepared to follow the Democrats into the leftist territory that seems to be their nesting place these days. Ergo, the party is in the process of ceding the White House to the incumbent Republicans, meaning a likely Trump reelection triumph.

This may be comforting to conservatives, but it is based on faulty political analysis. There is a strong prospect that 2020 will see the emergence of a new leftist president who represents democratic socialism of the European style—a brand of politics eschewed by America since at least the end of World War II.

This perception is based on four broad political axioms worth exploring as the 2020 presidential spectacle gets under way.

**Axiom 1: Presidential elections are largely referendums on the incumbent or incumbent party.** In my 2012 book, *Where They Stand: The American Presidents in the Eyes of Voters and Historians*, I posited that if the incumbent's record is adjudged by the electorate to be exemplary, it doesn't matter much who the challenger is or what he or she says or does. The incumbent will win. If that record is perceived as unacceptable, then again it doesn't much matter who the challenger is or what he or she says or does. The incumbent or incumbent party will lose.

Of course, referendum politics shouldn't be viewed as the be-all end-all of every presidential election. Other factors come

into play—the character of the candidates, the record of the challenger, the issues being joined, the relative likability of the combatants. But incumbency performance is by far the most compelling factor. In *Where They Stand*, I noted the analytical framework for predicting presidential elections laid down by Allan J. Lichtman and Ken DeCell in their 1990 book, *The 13 Keys to the Presidency*. I also used that framework in the summer of 2016 in suggesting that, contrary to nearly all conventional wisdom at the time, Trump's chances were being underestimated. "Trump," I wrote, "actually can win." I based that on what I adjudged to be Barack Obama's failed second term, characterized by "a stalled domestic program, Mideast chaos, the ISIS threat, growing Islamist terrorism at home, intraparty frictions, and a lingering scandal" involving former secretary of state Hillary Clinton's private email server. Based on how the electorate had reacted to such lapses through history, I concluded that the Lichtman-DeCell keys pointed to a Trump victory.

Similarly, the 2020 fate of Trump and his party will be driven far more by the president's performance than by the advocacy—even very liberal advocacy—of the challenger.

**Axiom 2: In politically unsettled times, such as we're experiencing today, the nation often opts for experimentation.**

If Trump's presidency is the product of referendum politics, then it also is a product of the country's willingness to try new things when the political class screws up. Hardly anyone thought Trump could be elected because few analysts sufficiently took into account the degree of ennui and anxiety in the land. But to many Americans, that ennui and anxiety rendered thinkable the prospect of a Trump presidency, whereas in normal times his boorishness and repellent traits would have made him entirely unthinkable as a president.

The campaign of 1980 was also waged in unsettled times, with raging inflation mixed with economic stagnation, sky-high

interest rates, and fears of Soviet expansionism. Yet the conventional wisdom was that incumbent Jimmy Carter would likely win reelection because challenger Ronald Reagan was just too erratic, too extreme in his conservative views, and too much of a lightweight. But Reagan won big, not because the electorate suddenly turned conservative in its collective political outlook, but because the incumbent had squandered his claim to the job and because unsettled times called for trying new things, meaning a new president.

Or consider the 1850s, when the slavery issue roiled the nation and raised questions as to whether the matter could be settled short of war (of course it couldn't be). During those turbulent times, the country witnessed the demise of the previously powerful Whig Party, the emergence of the replacement Republicans, a seemingly hopeless split within the Democratic Party, and the 1860 victory of Abraham Lincoln under the banner of a party that hadn't existed eight years before. None of this was even remotely predictable. Similarly, during the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt captured the presidency for the Democrats after the GOP had maintained a hold on the office for 56 of the previous 72 years. One of FDR's recurrent campaign themes was the need for governmental experimentation in a time of economic crisis. This represented a case study in referendum politics mixed with a widespread national desire for change.

### **Axiom 3: Socialism is on the rise in America.**

Much has been written of late about rising "inequality" in the country. A lot of it has been tendentious, but there is a growing perception that the country's elites have fostered policies from which they have massively benefitted while leaving the middle class in a state of economic decline. This perception happens to be correct, and it is the single largest factor driving American politics today. It elevated Trump to the White House.

But if Trump fails (a distinct possibility, based on what we see of his governing style), the resulting increase in civic anxiety and a natural desire for experimentation could drive the country to the left. That is precisely what Democrats are banking on.

They note, for example, the recent SurveyMonkey poll conducted for *The New York Times*, which indicated that 62 percent of respondents want the government to take actions to reduce the wealth gap. As two *Times* reporters put it, “Nearly two-thirds of Democrats say it is immoral to have an economic system where some people have billions of dollars while others have very little.”

The poll also indicated significant support for Democratic policies that many conservatives consider beyond the political pale. Fully 61 percent, for example, support a 2 percent tax on net wealth above \$50 million (advocated by Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren) and a 70 percent marginal rate on annual incomes above \$10 million (hobby horse of fledgling phenom Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez). The poll didn’t ask about the so-called Green New Deal, another massive governmental expansion proposal put forth by Ocasio-Cortez and Massachusetts Senator Ed Markey, but no doubt there is substantial support for it on the left.

Much has been written also about the political outlook of the Millennial generation, those born between 1981 and 1996. The Pew Research Center, after extensive surveys of these younger Americans, characterized their outlook as “distinct—and increasingly liberal.” Among them, Trump’s approval rating, according to a poll conducted last year, was only 27 percent.

All this suggests that we shouldn’t discount the possibility of a national lurch to the left, particularly in light of the final axiom.

**Axiom 4: In today’s divided America, political decision making**

**resides on a knife's edge of parity.**

Trump won the presidency in 2016 by collecting just enough votes in just the right states to cadge an Electoral College victory. That means we're operating these days on the margin of politics. Even quite small swings in just a few states could turn the next election against him. And Trump, with his lack of success so far in expanding his base beyond his current 39 to 43 percent approval level, doesn't project the kind of political force that would make him a strong reelection candidate.

None of this is a prediction. A lot could happen over the next two years. But the idea that the Democrats are killing their prospects for 2020 by lurching leftward isn't based on sound analytical thinking. The four axioms above suggest that the dynamics of American politics are more complex than that.

So it's possible that the country could get, for the first time in its history, an experiment in socialist governance, mixed with a far-left push on high-voltage social issues such as immigration, political correctness, and racial politics. That would be a recipe for failure, leaving the country even more desperate for political leadership to restore stability.

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