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TRUMP REDUX

From 2016 to 2024

IN ITS DRAMATIC outlines, the 2024 election of Donald Trump did not merely provide a dark sequel to 2016, but, in the anguished imagination of American liberals, enacted the more primordial horror of repetition. Once again Trump appeared in the role of challenger and insurgent, slayer of established pieties and establishment Republicans, undisguised bullshit artist and speaker of unspeakable truths. It was a remarkable feat of prestidigitation for a man who had already served as President of the United States for four years, and whose core political programme—lower taxes, higher tariffs and a hard border—had hardly changed since he and his party last commanded the presidency and both chambers of Congress eight years ago.

Of course, he had considerable assistance in this makeover, not just from the wayward bullet of a would-be assassin. The Democrats collaborated eagerly in restoring Trump's mythic aura of rebellion, transforming him from ex-president to rogue outsider, once again summoning his legions to overthrow the deep state. In every way the Democratic campaign followed the 2016 script, altering it only to up the stakes. Thus while Hillary Clinton and her allies spoke of 'character', 'bigotry' and the unwinding of 'norms', the keywords this year were 'criminal', 'fascism' and the danger to 'democracy'. While in 2016 liberal institutionalists sat in judgement of Trump's boorish behaviour, in 2024 actual liberal institutions convicted him of thirty-four felonies for concealing hush-money payments to a pornographic actress, and indicted him on fifty-two other federal and state charges.

As in 2016, the last election featuring a Democratic incumbent, the party leadership imposed its candidate of choice, this time not bothering with a meaningful primary process; when President Biden was revealed to be manifestly unfit, they replaced him with Vice President Kamala Harris, who was also coronated rather than elected. Like Clinton (and Biden in 2020), Harris far outpaced Trump in the money race, winning robust support from Wall Street, Silicon Valley and other bastions of blue-state capitalism; and like Clinton she concluded her campaign with a defence of the existing order against Trump's dangerous challenge.

On 7 November 2016 in Philadelphia, flanked by the Obamas, Clinton had decried Trump's 'derogatory and insulting comments', boasted of her service in Obama's cabinet, and framed the election as a choice 'between strong, steady leadership or a loose cannon who could put everything at risk'.¹ Harris gripped the status quo even more tightly, choosing to give her last major speech at the Ellipse in Washington, just outside the Democratic-held White House she had served in for the last four years. Where Clinton had insisted that 'America has never stopped being great', Harris went one better: 'The United States of America is the greatest idea humanity ever devised'. The Vice President offered herself as the guardian of American freedom against a 'petty tyrant' and 'wannabe dictator', a figure of chaos and leader of armed mobs who is 'unstable, obsessed with revenge, consumed with grievance and out for unchecked power . . . America, I am here tonight to say that is not who we are! That is not who we are! That is not who we are!'²

Dealignment

In substance as in form, the 2024 election reconstituted the essential features of 2016. Trump won his first victory by preserving the Republican base cemented by George W. Bush—white voters in rural areas, small towns and outer-ring suburbs—while adding a strategic slice of support in the deindustrialized Midwest. Yet if the first Make America Great Again campaign inspired genuine zeal in some places, including

¹ Clinton speech at a rally in Philadelphia; transcript available at CNN.com.

² Katie Rogers and Reid Epstein, 'In Closing, Harris Casts Herself as the Unifier and Trump as a "Petty Tyrant"', *New York Times*, 29 October 2024. Full transcript of Harris's Ellipse speech published in *The Black Wall Street Times*, 30 October 2024.

Florida's Gulf Coast and the Anthracite Coal Region of Pennsylvania, Trump's decisive success in the Rust Belt in 2016 was accomplished largely by a collapse in Democratic turnout.

In Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota, where the overall participation rate fell, Clinton's tally was 1.3 million short of Obama's total in 2012. Trump picked up about 400,000 of those voters, mainly white and blue-collar; but the larger share, nearly 900,000, simply dropped out of the electorate.³ The unprecedented support Clinton gained among prosperous and well-educated suburbanites was not enough to make up for these defections and disappearances. Fundamentally, the Democrats' failure to motivate the economically depressed layers of the Obama coalition—as evident in downtown Detroit or Milwaukee as in Sandusky or Saginaw—handed Trump the presidency.⁴

On first glance, Trump's second victory map looks rather different from the first. This year's most dramatic 'red shifts' came not in the Rust Belt but in an improbably far-flung set of locations: the Mexican border region of South Texas (where Hidalgo County, 92 per cent Hispanic, swung to Trump by 20 points), outer-borough New York City (where supermajority Asian precincts in Queens swung 34 points), black belt Alabama (where Montgomery, cradle of the civil rights movement, swung 16 points), and the Yupik districts of Alaska along the Bering Sea (also 16 points).⁵ In the crucial swing state of North Carolina, the single largest shift to Trump came not in the rural white piedmont or the buzzing suburbs of Charlotte, but Robeson County in the swampy southeast, home to the largest American Indian tribe east of the Mississippi. About forty per cent native Lumbee and twenty per cent black, Robeson had

³ Nate Cohn, 'The Obama–Trump Voters Are Real. Here's What They Think', *NYT*, 15 August 2017. All five states gained population from 2012 to 2016, so the 900,000 vanished voters cannot be accounted for in terms of demographic decline. On the Rust Belt wipeout see Mike Davis, 'The Great God Trump and the White Working Class', *Catalyst*, vol. 1, no. 1, Spring 2017.

⁴ Two reported bulletins from Milwaukee remain essential reading for understanding this failure: Sabrina Tavernise, 'Many in Milwaukee Neighborhood Didn't Vote—and Don't Regret It', *NYT*, 20 November 2016; Malaika Jabali, 'The Colour of Economic Anxiety', *Current Affairs*, 3 October 2018.

⁵ Matthew Thomas, 'The Red Wave in Queens Was Years in the Making', *Vulgar Marxism*, 18 November 2024. The Alaska figures are for state house districts 38, 39 and 40.

quietly entered Trump's column in 2016; this year his margins ballooned by a further nine points, four times the statewide swing.

In a contest dominated by mail ballots and early voting, election day exit polls have become less reliable than ever. The best early demographic analysis is the Associated Press's VoteCast survey, which interviewed over 120,000 American voters in the week before the election. Here the numbers confirm the hypothesis of a broad multiethnic shift toward the GOP. White voters in the MAGA era have been remarkably consistent: 55 per cent backed Trump in 2016, 55 per cent in 2020, and now 56 per cent in 2024. In racial and ethnic terms, Trump's decisive gains this year came among African Americans, where his support jumped from eight to 16 per cent, and Latinos, where it grew from 35 to 43 per cent. A range of further analysis suggests that Trump also made large if uneven national advances among Asian and Native American voters.⁶

These figures represent the final shovelful of dirt atop the battered casket of Obama's rainbow coalition. Paradigmatically, the triumphant theorists of an 'emerging Democratic majority', in which racial demographics would guarantee a generation of party power, have transformed themselves into acerbic critics of Democratic arrogance.⁷ Yet whether 2024 represents a 'racial realignment' is much less clear. Robeson County is not just 'majority minority', but the second-poorest county in North Carolina by median income.⁸ The dominant patterns in the election data, considered over the last decade, suggest not an ethnocultural but an economic reconfiguration of the US electorate.

The rise of educational polarization—Democrats winning more voters with college degrees, while Republicans gain support from the less educated—is by now a staple of both mainstream journalism and

⁶ Neely Bardwell and Marlon WhiteEagle, 'Post-Election Survey Shows Trump-Harris Split, Reservation Divide', *Native News Online*, 16 November 2024; Neetu Arnold, 'Why Asian Americans Are Moving Right', *The Free Press*, 22 November 2024.

⁷ John Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, New York 2002; John Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *Where Have all the Democrats Gone? The Soul of the Party in the Age of Extremes*, New York 2023.

⁸ The median household income in Robeson County is \$39,393, nearly half the nationwide median of \$75,000, while the poverty rate is over 27 per cent: Samuel Stebbins, 'These Are the Poorest Counties in North Carolina', *24/7 Wall St*, 10 April 2024, which draws on the US Census Bureau's 2022 American Community Survey.

left-wing analysis. It is not unique to the United States. As Thomas Piketty and others have shown, virtually every post-industrial country in the world has seen its major centre-left party morph from a party built around organized labour to one grounded in ‘the credentialled fraction of the working class’, that is, educated professionals.⁹ Such polarization continued apace in 2024, with Harris largely retaining Biden’s historic support among university graduates, and extending it among those with advanced degrees. Meanwhile Trump gained further votes from those without college degrees, white and non-white alike.

Piketty’s formulation pits a remade ‘Brahmin Left’ against a pro-business ‘Merchant Right’ the world over. This may adequately gloss Trump’s political vision—now more mercantile and corporatist than ever, with the support of the world’s most famous monopoly capitalist—but not his revamped coalition. As recently as 2012 Republicans remained the leading party of affluent Americans—not just Super PAC megadonors, but the broad swathe of voters earning over \$100,000 a year who favoured Bush and Romney by consistent double-digit margins. This is no longer the case. In 2016 Clinton raised far more outside money than Trump, drew even among six-figure households, and surpassed him in wealthy suburbs from northern Virginia to southern California. By the 2018 midterms Democrats held seats in every one of the twenty richest congressional districts in the country. Two years later Biden won six-figure earners outright; this year, they were among the very few demographics that swung toward Harris. The Brahmin Left in the US today is not just highly educated but highly paid; and its influence within the country’s most powerful industries and institutions—hedge funds, AI firms, Big Pharma, the *New York Times*, the Ivy League—remains undiminished.¹⁰

The American Merchant Right, on the other hand, depends principally not just on the less-educated but the lower-earning portion of the working

⁹ Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, Cambridge MA 2022, pp. 744–74; Dylan Riley and Robert Brenner, ‘Seven Theses on American Politics’, NLR 138, Nov–Dec 2022, p. 17.

¹⁰ The best guide to the relations between capital and party coalitions in the US today remains Dylan Riley, ‘Faultlines’, NLR 126, Nov–Dec 2020. For a cursory map of political fundraising by industry in 2024, see Matthew Karp, ‘Power Lines’, *Harper’s*, October 2024.

class. The Democrats' historic advantage with the bottom third of the income distribution—households earning less than \$50,000 a year—has been in decline since 2012 (see figure 1). This year, as higher-income voters broke toward Harris, the lower-income group gave a small edge to Trump. Considering the income ladder as a whole, Republican gains were largest at the very bottom, diminishing with every upward rung: twelve points from voters making under \$25,000, ten points from those making between \$25,000 and \$50,000, seven points from those making between \$50,000 and \$75,000, and five points from those making between \$75,000 and \$100,000.¹¹

FIGURE 1: *Support for Democrats by Household Income, 2000–24*



Sources: National exit polls conducted by Voter News Service (2000) and Edison Research (2004–16); AP VoteCast (2018–24). Two-party vote only.

Even with these gains, Trump's overall advantage is still small: the great bulk of the American working class is almost perfectly divided between the two parties. The vote, as Tim Barker noted, is 'evidence of *dealignment*, not realignment'.¹² Yet the direction of these swings, topping a decade-long trend, cannot be ignored. For now, there is little reason to believe that either party has the ability, or even the desire, to prevent

¹¹ According to VoteCast, Trump's support among voters under thirty climbed from 36 to 47 per cent: this cohort seems likely to have driven much of the lower-income shift between 2020 and 2024.

¹² Tim Barker, 'Dealignment', *NLR-Sidecar*, 11 November 2024. The fullest statistical portrait of the phenomenon in US politics is Jared Abbott, 'Understanding Class Dealignment', *Catalyst*, vol. 7, no. 4, Winter 2024.

the double-headed education-and-income shift from continuing, in both directions.

Democratic slump

The 2024 race reenacted 2016 in one more crucial dimension: it was marked less by a MAGA tidal wave than an unexpected drop in Democratic turnout. Nationally, about 64 per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot, quite high by recent US standards, though a mild decline from the high-water mark of 2020.¹³ For the most part, Trump matched his support from four years ago, while adding significantly to his raw totals in Texas, Florida and the Northeast. In the battleground states, Democratic-led efforts to expand ballot access may have inadvertently helped the Republicans, who now win the largest share of erratic voters. ‘The strategy was very much like 2016, to bring out casual voters who thought the country was on the wrong track’, a Trump campaign pollster told the *New York Times*.¹⁴

Yet at the national level, Trump’s 2.5 million additional ballots were dwarfed by the 7.1 million Biden voters who failed to turn out for Harris. This Democratic collapse was most visible within the party’s urban base. In major cities all across the country, Harris garnered far fewer votes than Biden—1.1 million fewer in New York City and Los Angeles alone. In Boston she recorded the Democrats’ lowest vote total since 2008; in Miami, Cleveland, St Louis and Honolulu, the lowest since John Kerry’s doomed 2004 campaign. In New York and Chicago, Harris ran behind even Kerry in both total votes and share of the electorate.

Lubricated by Harris’s \$1 billion war chest, Democratic support in Atlanta, Pittsburgh and other swing-state cities held up better than elsewhere. In Milwaukee, under what has become perhaps the most efficient and certainly the most hyped state Democratic organization in the country, turnout rates rose.¹⁵ Yet in Philadelphia and Detroit, the Democratic

¹³ Turnout in 2020 was over 66 per cent; the pandemic election reforms of that year seem to have raised the floor of participation in national elections. Michael McDonald, ‘Turnout Rates in the 2024 General Election’, Election Lab at the University of Florida.

¹⁴ Ashley Wu et al., ‘Key to Trump’s Win: Heavy Losses for Harris Across the Map’, *NYT*, 19 November 2024.

¹⁵ Elena Schneider, ‘Wisconsin Democrats Built a Winning Machine. Now Comes Its Greatest Test’, *Politico*, 3 April 2022.

vote tumbled back toward 2004 levels, helping to keep Pennsylvania and Michigan out of reach.

As in 2016, this general urban downswing had a clear class character. While Harris held her ground in wealthy, credentialled Brooklyn neighbourhoods like Boerum Hill and Park Slope, tens of thousands of Biden votes disappeared in blue-collar Bensonhurst and Brownsville. Across Chicago's distressed South Side, both Democratic support and overall turnout rates fell precipitously. So too in poor and mostly black precincts in West Philadelphia, Southeast Washington, North St Louis and Akron, Ohio.

In New York and a few other blue-state hubs, working-class frustration with Democrats spilled over into a small-bore MAGA surge: Trump won more votes in the Bronx than any Republican since Reagan in 1984. In the precinct containing Chicago's largest jail complex, the swing toward Trump reached 45 points.¹⁶ Yet across most cities, downscale suburbs and poorer rural areas, the main factor was again the vanishing of Democratic votes—as in metro Seattle, much of the Great Plains and the entire state of Mississippi, where Harris's tally sank in 81 out of 82 counties. In Ferguson, Missouri, birthplace of the Black Lives Matter movement ten years ago, Trump gained no new support but Harris notched 25 per cent fewer votes than either Biden or Clinton.

Gender gaps

In the wake of Trump's victory, rapid-fire commentary focused on the conjunctural factors that brought the Democrats low. The post-pandemic surge in prices had already recoiled against incumbent governments from the Netherlands to New Zealand; with two-thirds of US voters rating the economy below par, there was little reason the Biden–Harris regime would be exempt from the general backlash. Destabilizing proxy conflicts in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine, lavishly funded by US taxpayers but thinly supported outside the political elite, contributed to a general unease—and cost Democrats key constituencies, including Arab Americans in Michigan and younger voters everywhere. As in 2016, when Trump ran against Clinton's interventionist record in Iraq,

¹⁶ Andrew Stanton, 'Trump Beat Harris Among Pretrial Detainees in Chicago's Biggest Jail', *Newsweek*, 19 November 2024.

Libya and Syria, the background of Democratic-backed wars allowed him to pose as the candidate of 'peace'.

The embarrassment of Biden's own soft parade to the party nomination, followed by his abrupt meltdown and messy overthrow, did not help the Democratic cause. Harris herself was an unstable and perhaps unknowable quantity: during her 2019 primary run, under the slogan 'Kamala for the People' and a blazing red-yellow-purple banner, the colours lifted from the cover of a paperback edition of *The Wretched of the Earth*, she accused Biden of defending racial segregation and backed an industry-friendly version of 'Medicare for All', alienating almost every kind of Democrat before she dropped out ahead of the Iowa caucuses. Her 2024 presidential campaign was much more closely managed, faithful to party dogma on every particular from weapons for Netanyahu's war on Gaza (urgently needed) to the Joe Rogan Experience podcast (absolutely unacceptable). She brought few competitive assets to the race. Meanwhile Trump, inspired by the luck of a grazed earlobe and an ample dowry from the world's richest man, attained personal highs in polling favourability. A stiff breeze was at his back.

Yet though the wind can ripple a river's surface, it does not determine the direction of the current. The precise repetition of 2016's deepest patterns, class dealignment above all, suggests that the real story of Trump's second victory is not reducible to the immediate circumstances of 2024. Some of the clearest evidence here, paradoxically, can be found by considering what many regarded as the most significant US political event between the last two elections, the Supreme Court's Dobbs ruling of June 2022. According to conventional wisdom, the Court's landmark decision to overturn *Roe vs Wade*, the longtime precedent enshrining constitutional abortion rights, was an ideological victory for Republicans but an electoral gift to Democrats, given that about two-thirds of the US public supports legal abortion. In state referenda on the issue since the decision, majorities have consistently turned out in favour of abortion rights, even in red states like Ohio and Missouri. For many liberal pundits, the 'post-Dobbs universe' appeared structurally biased toward Democrats, consolidating their hold on the female electorate. The party's escape from a 'red wave' in the 2022 midterms seemed to justify this confidence.

The reversal of *Roe* was a particular boon to this version of the Democrats, in that it has allowed the party to adopt a position of high moral outrage

without advocating anything more daring than a return to the status quo ante. Harris made abortion rights a centrepiece of her campaign, even suggesting that Democrats might bypass the Senate filibuster to codify Roe in federal law. The threat of a national abortion ban, meanwhile, served as a major line of attack against Trump and the Republicans.

It had little impact. Trump, showing more tactical dexterity than any Democrat, acted swiftly to neutralize the issue. At the Republican convention he put forward a party platform conspicuously lacking further commitments to restricting abortion rights; later, he defied right-wing orthodoxy and pledged to veto any federal abortion ban that arrived on his desk.¹⁷ Liberal chatter about ‘Christian nationalism’ notwithstanding, enough of the electorate appears to have believed him—or gambled that abortion could be secured at the state level, regardless of federal policy. In the battleground of Arizona, Trump beat Harris with ease even as 60 per cent of voters backed a measure protecting abortion rights in the state constitution. Nationwide, a third of pro-choice voters cast a ballot for Trump.¹⁸

This should come as no great surprise, given the barrenness of Democratic support for so-called ‘reproductive rights’. In 2024, as usual, this amounted to abortion, birth control and little else—no parental leave, public health care, or broader social-democratic provision for family life. Harris’s child tax credit was actually less generous than the subsidy floated by Vice President-Elect J. D. Vance.¹⁹ The politics of reproductive rights, centred on the menace of right-wing reaction rather than positive reform, failed to stir the electorate. In 2020 Biden won mothers of

¹⁷ ‘They rolled us’, lamented one veteran anti-abortion activist at the RNC. It was the first time since 1992 that a Republican platform did not include ‘any pro-life language’: Matt Smith, ‘RNC Platform Committee Approves Trump-Backed GOP Agenda in Milwaukee’, *WISN 12 News*, 9 July 2024.

¹⁸ A Center for Working-Class Politics study of Pennsylvania found that Democratic appeals to abortion rights were considerably less effective than rhetoric with an economic populist bent: Jared Abbott et al., *Populism Wins Pennsylvania*, New York 2024, pp. 10–20.

¹⁹ A disingenuous suggestion, given congressional Republicans’ demonstrated opposition to such a credit, but indicative of the increasing muddiness around the politics of family welfare. The American Enterprise Institute, once the dominant think tank on the right but largely left in the cold by Trump, scoured both proposals: Alex Brill, Kyle Pomerleau and Stan Veuger, ‘Presidential Candidates’ Duelling Tax Credit Expansions’, *Tax Notes Federal*, vol. 185, 7 October 2024.

school-age children by twelve points; this year, according to Votecast, ‘Moms’ gave Trump a two-point advantage.²⁰ Women under forty-five, hyped as a core abortion-rights constituency, also moved strongly toward Trump. And young men, wooed by Democrats with quasi-pornographic ads that threatened a GOP ban on the morning-after pill, proved even less receptive: their Trumpward swing was a remarkable twenty-two points.

Bidenomics?

Above all, as in 2016, the election turned on the ruling Democratic Party’s failure to retain its support within the economically depressed working class—male, female, white, black, Latino, Asian and Native. Without a belief that Clinton/Harris could or would change the Obama/Biden status quo, a significant share of voters opted for Trump’s concrete alternative—however mendacious and inadequate in practice—of trade protection and border control. An even larger share stayed home.

Given the US economy’s impressive topline numbers—in employment, wages, productivity and growth—some liberal pundits have found this particularly maddening. Biden, after all, had sought to telegraph a regime change in Washington’s political economy, conspicuously rejecting the Obama-era emphasis on deficit reduction. His large pandemic stimulus, followed by substantial if winnowed-down spending on green energy, infrastructure and semiconductor manufacturing, was greeted with much fanfare about ‘the end of the neoliberal era’. Biden worked hard to market himself as ‘the most pro-union president in American history’, even appearing at an autoworkers’ picket line in Michigan. His appointees at the National Labor Relations Board, Federal Trade Commission, and Securities and Exchange Commission, received with general adulation by liberal-left commentators, bolstered the idea that this was a different kind of Democratic presidency.

Yet on the ground in most of the country, it didn’t feel that way. In fact the direct pandemic stimulus passed under Trump was larger than Biden’s package; and his other spending bills, with their ten-year budget horizons, were too modest and spread too thinly to make a significant difference in the lives of most Americans not immediately involved in a handful of targeted sectors. Whatever Biden said or did

²⁰ ‘Dads’, by contrast, shifted one point toward Harris.

for organized labour, union density continued its decades-long decline on his watch.²¹ Through its regulatory arms, the administration scored a number of wholesome reforms—reducing the price of hearing aids, cracking down on hidden consumer fees, prosecuting cryptocurrency fraud—but achieved almost nothing that left a structural imprint on the economy or relations of power, or that might generate an ongoing political constituency.

While the White House touted the triumph of Bidenomics, the Harris campaign’s watchword was ‘joy’, and some progressive economists celebrated ‘the greatest economy ever’, most Americans, struggling between paydays, felt otherwise.²² Nor did it require a left-wing intellectual (or Rust Belt swing voter) to sniff out the distress lurking beneath the chipper macroeconomic headlines. While liberals blamed the ‘bad vibes’ on partisanship and propaganda, the vast majority of African Americans—still the most loyal demographic element of the Democratic base—judged the economy fair or poor.²³ After the election, even *The Atlantic*, leading citadel of Beltway centrism, could see that Bidenomics had simply failed to improve working-class lives:

Real median household income fell relative to its pre-Covid peak. The poverty rate ticked up, as did the jobless rate. The number of Americans spending more than 30 per cent of their income on rent climbed. The delinquency rate on credit cards surged, as did the share of families struggling to afford enough nutritious food, as did the rate of homelessness . . . The food-stamp boost, the extended child tax credit, the big unemployment-insurance payments—each expired. And the White House never passed the permanent care-economy measures it had considered.²⁴

In 2024, the immediate economic culprit was inflation, as in 2016 it had been wage stagnation, inequality and manufacturing job loss in the Rust Belt.²⁵ But the larger encompassing reality is that most working-class Americans no longer see the Democrats as a party that represents

²¹ Andrea Hsu, ‘Union Membership Grew Last Year, But Only 10 Per Cent of US Workers Belong to A Union’, NPR: *All Things Considered*, 23 January 2024.

²² Dean Baker, ‘Joe Biden Has Given Us the Greatest Economy Ever’, Center for Economic Policy Research blog, 19 May 2023.

²³ ‘Cross-Tabs: October 2024 *Times*/Siena Poll of the Black Likely Electorate’, NYT, 12 October 2024.

²⁴ Annie Lowrey, ‘The Cost-of-Living Crisis Explains Everything’, *The Atlantic*, 11 November 2024.

²⁵ Dylan Riley, ‘American Brumaire?’, NLR 103, Jan–Feb 2017.

their interests. In the half century between Eisenhower and Kerry, this was the trait that voters most liked about the party—that it seemed to be ‘the party of the working class’.²⁶ That perception, always politically indulgent and sociologically doubtful, did not survive the Obama presidency. Though he sometimes embraced ‘populist’ rhetoric on the campaign trail, especially against the private equity chief Romney in 2012, Obama’s most lasting achievement in the White House was to confirm the Democrats’ new identity as the party of metropolitan capital: a political formation defined by close kinship with Wall Street and Silicon Valley, technocratic rule in government and elite pluralism in culture. The older aura of ‘working-class’ priorities and values—that of Roosevelt and Truman, Johnson and Humphrey—was already long gone; but only under Obama was it positively replaced with something else. Neither Clinton, Biden nor Harris has been able to revive it.²⁷

The Democratic drive to replace lost blue-collar voters with educated professionals has not come without dividends: it has improved their performance in lower-turnout midterm elections, while boosting the intraparty influence of affiliated media, advocacy groups and blue-state business lobbies. In favourable conditions—as in 2020, when under the enormous pressure of the pandemic, just enough workers in pivotal states rallied to Biden—the party’s remade coalition is still capable of victory. But with university graduates accounting for less than forty per cent of the US voting public, the larger shift has imposed a low, hard ceiling on the Democrats’ electoral reach. A Democratic triumph at the scale of 1992 or 2008—never mind 1936 or 1964—is no longer conceivable.

After 2016, Democrats consoled themselves with the idea that they were beaten by an ugly spurt of popular bigotry—fuelled by right-wing ‘misinformation’ and a gullible media—rather than any deeper changes in the electorate. This attractive explanation will no doubt flavour many party postmortems in 2025. Everyone outside the bubble, however, should look elsewhere.

²⁶ Mark Brewer, *Party Images in the American Electorate*, New York 2008.

²⁷ Perry Anderson, ‘Passing the Baton’, *NLR* 103, Jan–Feb 2017, pp. 62–4 and Matthew Karp, ‘Party and Class in American Politics’, *NLR* 139, Jan–Feb 2023.