

## I. Synthèse

### Introduction (the Nov 6 version)

As pundits, devastated or triumphant columnists and data analysts are scrutinising the results of last week's election, a nagging question keeps coming back: what strategic mistakes did the Democrats make? The prevailing answer is that they failed to win over Trump's voters because they overlooked their real preoccupations and plight. Even though many, including liberals, had raised the alarm.

It is precisely what this column, written by one of the New York Times's star contributors, Nicholas Kristof, does. Echoing President Clinton's speech at the Democratic National Convention just 10 days earlier, he urges his fellow liberal Americans to respect and pay closer attention to Donald Trump's electorate, using his personal experience in rural Oregon to back his arguments. The warning is clear: not heeding their plight and not going back to the fundamentals of the Democratic party as the party of the working class, is a terrible strategic mistake.

I intend to read a passage later on in my presentation

### Notes for the synthèse

#### A/ Following Bill Clinton's advice

- (A piece of advice that could come for both Clintons) Democrats should remain cautious and refrain from taking things for granted
- A call for fellow Democrats to refrain from looking down on or overlooking people they don't see eye to eye with them and to try and reach out.
- It is because reacted quite bluntly to his retweeting this speech that Kristof decided to write column

#### VB/ Taking A close look at some of the struggling working-class Americans that have felt let down

NK proceeds to portray a couple of Trump supporters that live in his rural area to illustrate their grim reality

- One woman supports Trump because of unemployment / distrusts establishments / warms up to Trump's promises about manufacturing jobs
- Another one is likely to vote Trump because of high prices which she blames on Democrats
- All have been directly and painfully affected by the Opioid / drug / suicide crisis that has plagued entire communities and feel nothing has been done to help
- Adding to this, being belittled because of her religious beliefs is painful
- So Kristof reminds the readers (and liberals) two key figures: 3 quarters of Americans believe in God and only just above a third are college-educated!

#### C/ Call for Democrats to go back to their fundamentals

- Fears that today's Democrats have lost touch with the values embodied by FDR as expressed during the Great Recession (Democratic party passing some of the historical measures to weave a safety net and boost the economy ) trying to draw attention to the forgotten man <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFqjIg13kAc>
- To fight inequality & poverty, Democrats should focus on class rather than race and gender as they have done recently (knowing that race and class are interconnected anyway)
- From his August 2024 perspective, NK had the feeling Harris had grasped how urgent that was
  - Nominated Tim Walz...
  - Stressed her own story

## II. Commentary

To prepare the commentary here are the notes I jotted down as I went...

### ➤ **Context:**

- Just after the Democratic convention during which Kamala Harris and Tim Walz were officially nominated and the party united behind her ticket (August 19 – 22 )
- So roughly 6 weeks after Joe Biden stepped down
- Period of enthusiasm and renewed confidence. Polls were starting to look brighter but hyper polarization kept plaguing the campaign.
- Reaching out to the other “side” mainly meant trying to be endorsed by moderate Republican leaders for KH or by celebrity Black American or Latino figures, for Trump
- **Opioid & economic crisis** of great proportions especially in the rural areas of the US. Not the usual picture one expects especially seen from abroad / Precisely the one JD Vance put to the fore with his Memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*

### ➤ **Hubris – Mistake – losing strategy on the part of the Democrats**

- This has been all over the news this week, obviously. But there had been warnings before.
- Suggests Kamala Harris ended up making the same mistakes as Hillary Clinton, only worse (Clinton had won the popular vote by over 3m votes and Harris is likely to lose it in greater proportions)

### ➤ **Liberal elite disconnected from working-class people**

- This criticism sounds like textbook populism
- The evolution of the Democratic party: has it lost touch with its base? Or some of its base?
- reference to Democratic Party under FDR (still considered as touchstone)
- See what happened in 2016 / blue wall falling
- The expression “*They deserve empathy not insults*”, is very likely to grate on the NYT readers
- See reaction mentioned 190 to 93.
- Simply because it is very hard to differentiate the Trump voters described in the text and the caricatural xenophobic misogynistic MAGA supporters that are brought to the fore during rallies / online / that staged the Jan 6 insurrection
- What Kristof is asking from his liberal / Democrat-leaning readers is really hard to do, however justified it is

### **Possible transition (would have to be trimmed)**

The resounding defeat suffered by the Democrats both in the electoral college, as expected, but also in the popular vote, showed that, quite obviously, Kamala Harris did not get the point made by Kristof or the voters did not feel she did whereas the Republicans appealed to them and promised what they expected. *What NK's text brings to the fore is the deep polarisation within the electoral but also the pervasive feeling that there is a huge gap between liberal elites and the “people” and their needs.*

Are Democrats truly disconnected from reality? Have they only become the proponents of minorities' rights, women's rights in particular in this campaign, of college-educated urban professionals to the detriment of the interests of lower-class uneducated rural Americans? Yet another set of questions needs to be raised: Have Republicans really got their plight at heart as they claim? Aren't their promises just from the populist playbook? Whose interests are their policies most likely to benefit?

This campaign and its outcome highlight a series of paradoxes. I would like to suggest that Americans, by rejecting a leadership that appeared unfit to steer the country in the right direction have supercharged a party whose policies could well worsen their circumstances.

**NOTE/ TOO MANY QUESTIONS!!!**

A series of paradoxes

I/ **Mistakes made by Democrats** and belated or tepid / half-baked attempts at addressing them when they seem to have the weakest citizens' interests at heart // despite a fairly strong record.

➤ First let us recall that the odds were bad

The Democrats knew it would be a tough ride but may still have been overconfident – Hubris again?

- Let's not forget that the incumbent has really weak chances of winning Especially in a country still marked by consequences of pandemic + inflation etc
- K Harris had very little time to get into gear / Biden can be blamed for destroying his party's chances
- There were no primaries, so her candidacy was fragile
- She was from the West Coast, a typical product of the intelligentsia
- Tried to compensate that by stressing her modest origins
- by appointing Tim Walz – to be developed
- by trying hard not to commit the same mistakes as Clinton and her ill-fated remark about “the basket of deplorables” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basket\\_of\\_deplorables](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basket_of_deplorables)
- by bringing forward a resolutely populist economic agenda

There was massive enthusiasm and historical influx of funds – so how did they waste it?

➤ Democrats clearly misread the electorate as Kristof feared

- Despite the odds, they kept thinking (or spent too long trying to convince themselves) that their **achievements would be enough** most notably
  - \*employment was going up,
  - \*inflation was finally in control but still really high;
  - \*including a fundamental measure for the people that Kristof describes in the text > in late September **they** announced Cost Savings for 54 Prescription Drugs Thanks to the Medicare Inflation Rebate Program Established by the Biden-Harris Administration's Lower Cost Prescription Drug Law part of the IRA\* (Inflation Reduction Act – nicknamed The Climate Bill)
- Underestimated how central in most Americans' life, especially “working-class voters” / in “blue-collar communities” the cost of living had become
- And all of it, despite the fact that during the 2016 election, the Blue Wall\* had fallen
- Also seemed over confident about keeping their stronger supporters: young people + Black Americans and to a large extent Latinos. They lost significant proportions of them (see power point with results)
- About Black Americans and Latinos *see Doc 7 in File 4 but just mention what relates to Kristof's text*
- *This would take us too far away from what this text deals with but they also lost a striking amount of young people because of the war in Gaza and Ukraine* (cf K's remarks 1 55 56)
- They also clearly basked in wishful thinking about IMMIGRATION: there was a very marked shift to the right in counties most directly affected (the border counties and New York in particular).  
The Biden administration finally managed to check the massive surge in illegal migrants at the Southern Border, but too late.  
+ Kamala Harris did poorly every time she was asked about it in interviews

➤ **Democrats brought to the fore topics and fights that did alienate many / in which many Americans do not recognise themselves**

Cf remarks throughout the text about the “liberal values” that many voters don't share, that are seen as those of “well-educated, successful elites”, are focus on “racial and gender disadvantages instead of class disadvantages”

- This campaign was less marked by the Black Lives Matter movement and debates about defunding the police but Kamala Harris mainly focused on women's rights in the wake of the 2022 Supreme Court Dobbs decision reversing Roe v. Wade – and that did not pay off
- What has been going on on campuses might also have tired people out or sent the wrong message anyway
- (without going into the details of this, it is worth mentioning that there has been long-term, methodical, well-orchestrated and generously funded lobbying throughout the country to debunk the types of policies most Democrats advocate - diversity / affirmative action / defending LGBTQ+ rights / decolonisation / reparations ...
- All in all and despite KH's repeated call to turn the page on an old generation of leaders, many, including on the left of the party, felt it hadn't heeded the call for radical changes particularly in leadership from voters

## II/ **The promises made by Republicans backed by actors that often appear disconnected from “blue-collar America”:** are they simply playing the populist card?

- **Trump's main point: draining the swamp & restoring power to the people**  
(for the spécialistes anglicistes, here the definition of populism by Cas Mudde for instance would come in handy)
  - He has been systematically opposing “you” and “them”, claiming there has been federal overreach / federal bureaucracy for too long depriving “the people” of their liberties and acting against their interests (if not peddling untruths or conspiracy theories about a deep state that he and JD Vance have promised to get rid of. For years conservatives have claimed that taking power from government agencies gives it back to the people (even if it means encouraging them to storm the Capitol?))
  - And yet, he is the embodiment of the business opportunist / an heir surrounded by and funded by tech or industry millionaires (if not billionaires) with very special interests!
- **J.D. Vance: a representative of the people?**  
Paradox: Hillbilly Elegy v. his career in business (he presents himself as the real representative of the people Kristof describes)
- **The super rich donors: business people and very (ultra) conservative Christian lobbyists**  
Depending on what you know, a word could be put in about Elon Musk or Timothy Mellon ...  
Most of them want the US government to intervene and let entrepreneurship boost the economy (which might well serve working-class people's interests in the long term) but many are in doubt.
  - See [HERE](#) a list of Trump's top donors by Forbes. And [here](#) and [there](#) two articles focusing on the groups that have been influencing Trump's and Vance's campaign
  - None appear clearly intent on dealing with drug addiction, homelessness, better housing etc

## III/ **The most striking paradox: it seems that Democratic policies would benefit the “people's” interests more.** Cf Kristof 150 “would benefit from a Democratic victory

- In terms of social policies: I'd like to focus on health (or / and) the environment
  - Constant Fight against or resistance to Obamacare (= ACA: Affordable Care Act passed in 2010) and to expand Medicare\* when it is exactly what Kristof's friends probably need to the most
  - Reducing access to abortion and planned parenthood affects lower-class much more
  - ...
- Economically:
  - protectionism and higher tariffs are more than likely to impact the very people Kristof talks about more
    - See: “Donald Trump's second term would be protectionist nightmare <https://econ.st/3O1PEhv>
    - See also “What to know about Trump's tariffs” [HERE](#)
  - significant lower taxes have been promised > appears that they will benefit the richest far more

- his immigration policy of mass deportations or bans on migration, if implemented and if successful, would also damage the economy and is very unlikely to boost employment significantly

• See <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/06/nx-s1-5181327/trump-election-economy-tariffs-deportations>

• And [HERE is the link](#) to one of Paul Krugman's very clear columns:

➤ **Politically / Institutionally / :**

- **“small gov”\*** :

The view that dominates among those advising DT or financing his campaign is based on state disengagement, deregulation. (Even though he detached himself from Project 2025)

- Donald Trump himself promised the dismantlement of the Education Department (On the campaign trail, he has pointed to the Department of Education as a symbol of federal overreach) but there have been other voices calling for the dismantlement or reformation of other departments or agencies (employment / the environment)

But the DoE is the provider and guardian of public schools, which lower-class Americans depend upon

• Cf <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/20/politics/department-of-education-shut-down-trump/index.html>

Cf [another article](#) that recaps what he has promised to do, full of useful links (it is CNN – the terms used are not neutral but they refer to factual elements!)

- The Environment. During his first term, Trump almost systematically rolled back on all measures taken under President Obama to protect the environment and fight pollution. When it has been documented that it is people living in underprivileged areas that are affected the most.

>> Project 2025\* could be mentioned here ... <https://wapo.st/4ekKIzb>

>> [A longer piece](#) about what “dismantling the deep state” means

- **minority rule\*** (See File 8)

This is another nagging paradox >> (white) American people living in rural areas are already overrepresented

- see the Senate: how it works and how much power it has in shaping the justice system
- Republicans have stretched the rules several times to slow down nominations under one Democratic president and speeding the process up under President Trump (therefore ensuring a comfortable leeway in the federal justice system and a clear majority on the Supreme Court), or at the local level doing everything they can to keep in power in state legislatures

Yet this strengthened power has mainly been wielded to push for a conservative cultural agenda or to deregulate further and not to ensure Medicare for all, to increase the minimum wage or boost union jobs.

➤ **For the sake of civility**, to quote Kristof one last time

- What he is asking his readers is quite difficult; see how uncivil and demeaning SOME Trump voters but more than anyone their candidate has been...
- Trump voters that are demeaned are not those Kristof depicts, but those seen as Trump enablers, as insurrectionists, as xenophobes, as science sceptics. Etc

## Conclusion

Biden “the soul of America” Harris “This is not who we are” quite obviously they are wrong... Many columnists have had to admit this bitterly, America is not (just) the America they would like it to be.

However, blaming Democratic voters for being condescending and ignoring the plight of those who suffer seems unfair. If time, reference to Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead?*

- Nicholas Kristof in his own words

<https://www.nytimes.com/column/nicholas-kristof>

I live on the family farm in rural Oregon that I grew up on, and more than a quarter of the kids on my old school bus have died from drugs, alcohol and suicide. That has seared and shaped me as much as my Harvard education or Oxford studies as a Rhodes scholar. After a law degree and then Arabic studies in Cairo, I joined The Times in 1984, working as bureau chief in Hong Kong, Beijing and Tokyo before becoming a columnist in 2001. My wife and I jointly won a Pulitzer Prize for covering the bloody Tiananmen Square crackdown in China, and I won a second Pulitzer for coverage of the Darfur genocide. I also picked up an Emmy for a video about Covid. My new memoir is called “[Chasing Hope](#).” Oh, and on the side, I backpack, run (including, briefly, [for Oregon governor](#)) and make Kristof Farms hard cider.

- If you're interested in the history of the Democratic Party and want to understand the turning point of the Roosevelt years you can go here:

<https://www.history.com/topics/us-government-and-politics/democratic-party>

Vocabulary brainstorming

- **To demean** – to belittle – to scorn – to look down on

Belittle, debase, degrade, despise, disparage, decry, derogate, lower, pan, scorn, sink

- **To overlook** – to turn a blind eye to – to be blindfolded – to ignore – not take into account – not pay close attention to

- **To be wrong** – to be mistaken – to make mistakes

be in error, be inaccurate, be incorrect, go astray, make a mess of, mess up (fam), screw up (tr fam)

- **Make sure you know the definitions of the terms you use (\*)**

Here is one for **minoritarianism / minority rule**

In political science, minoritarianism is a neologism for a political structure or process in which a minority group of a population has a certain degree of primacy in that population's decision making, with legislative power or judicial power being held or controlled by a minority group rather than a majority that is representative of the population

## Opinion

### 8 Democratic choices that paved the way for Trump's comeback

These blunders drove voters from almost every demographic into Trump's camp.

5 min

1648

By [Marc A. Thiessen](#)

November 10, 2024

[Donald Trump](#) deserves enormous credit for his historic victory, in which he [increased his support](#) among almost every demographic group in the country. But Democrats made it possible with several catastrophic choices over the past four years. Here are the eight key blunders that paved the way for Trump's comeback:

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**1. They ignored warnings from liberal economists that their massive new spending would unleash disastrous inflation.** Democrats should have listened to former Clinton treasury secretary Lawrence H. Summers, who [cautioned](#) in 2021 that the American Rescue Plan would “set off inflationary pressures of a kind we have not seen in a generation.” They should have heeded Obama economic adviser Jason Furman, who [warned that](#) “pouring roughly half trillion dollars of gasoline on the inflationary fire that is already burning is reckless.” They were right. By the time Joe Biden and [Kamala Harris](#) took office, the economy had [turned the corner](#) and was growing at 6.5 percent. But they wanted credit for the post-covid recovery. Instead, they got the blame for unleashing the [worst inflation in four decades](#).

**2. They created a border disaster.** Democrats knew that illegal immigration propelled Trump into the White House in 2016. So why, on winning back the presidency in 2020, did they immediately unleash the worst peacetime border crisis in U.S. history? The crisis cost taxpayers [\\$150 billion](#) in 2023 alone, according to an analysis by the Federation for American Immigration Reform — forcing inundated communities to cut police, fire and other services to support illegal migrants. Did they think voters would reward them?

**3. Their catastrophic withdrawal from Afghanistan convinced Americans they were incompetent.** Most were not thinking of Afghanistan in the voting booth, but the horrific images of Afghans [falling](#) from [departing U.S. military aircraft](#), Taliban forces [riding abandoned U.S. military vehicles](#), and [13 Americans killed](#) by a suicide bomber at the [Kabul airport's Abbey Gate](#) indelibly [changed opinions](#) of Biden's presidency. Before Kabul fell in August 2021, his approval rating had never dipped below [50 percent](#). After, the floor fell out. Harris proudly declared she was the last one in the room before Biden made the fateful decision to pull out — which sent a message of weakness that clearly emboldened Russia to invade Ukraine, and [Hamas](#), an Iranian proxy, to launch the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. Democrats promised to end the chaos of the Trump era, but instead unleashed chaos on the world stage.

**4. They broke their promise to unite the country.** Biden [pledged](#) in his inaugural address to put his “whole soul” into “bringing America together.” Instead, he [compared](#) Republicans to racists and traitors, accusing them of standing with George Wallace, Bull Connor and Jefferson Davis for opposing his partisan election bill, and declaring right before the election that “the only garbage I see floating out there is [Trump's] supporters” (he later claimed, implausibly, that he had misspoken). Harris went further, calling Trump “[a fascist](#),” a “wannabe dictator” and a “petty tyrant.” This not only reeked of desperation, it violated the very reason voters elected them.

**5. They covered up Biden's cognitive decline.** Democrats misled the American people about Biden's mental fitness — assuring them, as Harris did, that the president was “vibrant,” “tireless” and “absolutely authoritative in rooms around the globe” — only to have those falsehoods exposed by Biden's disastrous debate performance. Americans don't like being lied to. And if they had been honest sooner, Democrats could have held a competitive primary and picked a more capable and appealing nominee.

**6. They didn't give voters a benign alternative.** Unlike Biden, who at least had the veneer of moderation, Democrats nominated the most radical Democratic ticket in the history of the country. Harris was on record as having supported the Democratic socialist agenda, from [the Green New Deal](#) to [Medicare-for-all](#). In her 2019 campaign, she had pledged to [ban fracking](#) and the sale of gas-powered cars, [decriminalize illegal border crossings](#) and provide [taxpayer-funded health care for illegal migrants](#), including gender transition surgery. Repudiating [so much of her 2019](#)

[platform](#) came across as both inauthentic and implausible. Polls showed nearly half the country thought Harris was [too far left](#).

**7. They offered Americans continuity when they wanted change.** In an election when [95 percent](#) of Americans sought change, nominating the sitting vice president of one of the [most unpopular administrations since World War II](#) was a mistake. Only once in the [last 188 years](#) has a sitting vice president been elected president, and that was in 1988 when George H.W. Bush was elected because Americans wanted another Reagan term. No one wanted another Biden term.

**8. Their campaign of lawfare locked in Trump's nomination.** Indicting Trump caused many Republicans, including some who had been open to a different nominee, to rally around the former president. And that was exactly what many Democrats wanted. They thought Trump would be easier to beat. They were wrong.

Any one of these mistakes might have been survivable, but together they created a perfect catastrophic storm that Trump rode back into the White House.