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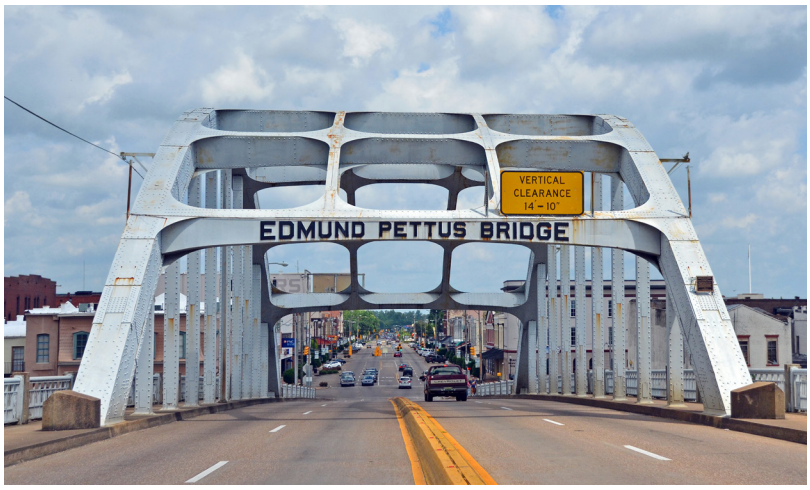
SPECIAL REPORT

Amid Widespread Hunger and Poverty, Republicans in Alabama Divert Covid Relief Funds to Donors

By Barbara Koeppel

Now in its seventh month, Covid-19 still snakes across America. It first attacked densely packed, blighted areas like New York City and Chicago, along with prisons, immigrant jails, meat slaughterhouses, and nursing homes. It then swerved south and west—again to heavily populated areas in Florida, Texas, and Arizona. In all these areas, frontline "essential" workers and those living with them were the hardest hit.



Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. Photo by Clément Bardot.

In the second month, the virus stormed into insulated American towns well off the beaten path. There, too, the virus hammered the elderly, poor, and working poor, as it did in Selma, Alabama, which is 80 percent Black and where poverty has been a staple for generations. When Covid-19 cases started to slow nationwide in mid-August (until schools reopened and cases reescalated), the numbers in Selma still pushed upward. Oddly named the "Queen City," Selma—the seat of Dallas County—has the distinction of being the poorest city in a state that is the fourth poorest in the country.

Except for a few moments in U.S. history, Selma has not been center stage. It made national headlines in 1965 when state troopers battered voting rights marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which spans the Alabama River. It was news again in July 2020, when John Lewis, Georgia's long-term congressman and one of the 1965 victims (and heroes), died. However, it is less known that in the 19th century, Selma was the center of the South's cotton trade and one of the arms manufacturing and shipbuilding hubs of the Confederacy. It was also the site of at least 19 lynchings from 1877 until 1943. Because these were common occurrences (more than 350 are documented in Alabama during this period alone), they got little national coverage. Locally, they were celebrated. Some were even public gatherings.

Details about the man for whom the bridge was named speak volumes about Alabama's white power structure. Edmund Winston Pettus, an Alabama native son, was a Civil War general and U.S. senator from 1897 to 1907, when some of the worst Jim Crow laws were passed. He was also a KKK Grand Dragon. More telling, the bridge was not built in the late 1800s or early 1900s; rather, it was erected and named for Pettus in 1940, when Southern white practices were still openly paraded.

When Selma was home to an Air Force base from 1940 until 1977, the $30 million annual payroll kept local businesses and jobs afloat. When it closed, the economy crashed. Today, Selma—with a population of 17,000—is something of a ghost town, with widespread litter, empty lots, dilapidated housing, systemic joblessness, huge numbers of arrests, boarded-up buildings, and a main street where nothing much happens, With the city's annual budget at $17.4 million and a decimated tax base, nothing much can.

Even the Dallas County jail (located in Selma) goes without. Built to hold 92 inmates, it now warehouses over 150. "It's like a plantation system," says Faya Rose Toure, a former municipal court judge, activist, and founder of the Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee. "Prisoners get one uniform—an orange jumpsuit—which the jail washes once a week. They're not allowed to bring their own clothes or visit with families (even before the virus, visits were by video). They also weren't given masks until I complained to a judge. After this, each man got exactly one, and they never got hand sanitizers or Covid-19 tests." Soap and deodorant are in such short supply that the LIFT Ministries, a Catholic service group, donated them to the jail on Father's Day and, along with

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the Blackbelt Wellness Center, bestowed more in late August.

Sheriff Michael Granthum, who runs the jail, told the *Selma Times Journal* (STJ) on June 4 that "there's a rumor going around that the Dallas County Jail has COVID-19 cases. That's not true." Toure says she has clients there who say he's lying. To find out and learn how the jail has handled the virus, I tried to interview Sheriff Granthum and Deputy Warden Quintin Stevens. Neither answered my calls.

Selma's poverty is pernicious. In the fall of 2019, when the U.S. economy was on a roll and unemployment was at 3.7 percent, Selma's rate was 7 percent. But even that hides the real rate, since half of working-age Selmans—from 18 to 64—aren't even in the workforce because of bad health and disabilities or are discouraged workers who've dropped out of the labor market, no longer searching for nonexistent jobs. Thus, median household income is about $21,000—which means half have far less—while the national median figure is $59,000.

People live on the edge and have no buffer to fall back on. When something like the virus hits, those who had jobs join those already in poverty.

As Covid-19 shuttered the U.S. economy last April and May and unemployment wreaked havoc across the country, the national rate was 12 percent—but Selma's had soared to 23 percent. By late summer, when the U.S. rate had dropped to 8.4 percent and Alabama's overall rate was 5.6 percent, Selma's remained a stubborn 13 percent.

Nevertheless, Alabama Republican Congressman Bradley Byrne, whose district abuts Dallas County, voted to stop the $600 federal unemployment weekly benefit. Why? "The economy is better and cases are down" he wrote in the June 12 *Selma Times Journal*. Yet on the same day, Dallas County had 37 more Covid-19 cases than two days earlier, for a total of 406 cases. One week later, there were over 600. By late September, there were 1,800.

Byrne also says the $600 federal check that Congress approved to help unemployed Americans is not constructive. "I drive around and I see many 'help wanted' and 'now hiring' signs . . . so we must ask do we need to keep paying the extra $600 a week to those drawing unemployment? Have we created a disincentive to work?" he asks in a July 16 STJ editorial. However, the U.S. Department of Labor calculates that the 1.5 million workers now considered long-term unemployed could swell to five million by early 2021.

In fact, all of Selma's numbers are numbing. Joe O'Quinn, communications director for the Edmundite Brothers Mission, located on the city's main street, says, "In Selma, some think $10.10 an hour is what you need to pay rent and feed a family. But you can't live on it. And most people don't earn even near that. Usually they get $7.25 to $8.25 an hour, and most jobs are part-time"—such as at the nearby Walmart.

"People live on the edge and have no buffer to fall back on. When something like the virus hits, those who had jobs join those already in poverty. Their usual unemployment checks, without the extra $600, are only about $200 a week, since they're based on their wages," O'Quinn says.

Thus, a whopping 38 percent of Selma's residents and 64 percent of its children live at or below the U.S. poverty line. Life expectancy is the same as in Bangladesh. "Many people have early strokes and heart attacks, even at 42," says another Mission staff member (who asked for anonymity). "Money is so scarce that when we asked farmers to open up some land near Selma for the poor to cultivate, those who would have benefited couldn't afford the seeds," she adds.

Why don't young Selmans join the military, which, for many low-income Americans, is a way out of poverty? "They can't. You have to be healthy, and they're not. And they don't have any skills," says the Mission staff member.

According to Father Richard Myhalyk, the Edmundite mission priest, "people don't have enough to eat. The high school football team couldn't win games because the boys were so skinny. Everything you see is the product of generations of poverty."

Given the food shortage, private groups try to fill the gaps. O'Quinn said before Covid-19 came to town, "the Mission served 5,000 to 6,000 meals a week, some of which were to people with jobs. Now we make 7,000 or 8,000 meals." Until schools were shut, they also gave children a bag of food to take home for the weekends.

But even these contributions aren't enough. Thus, since April, the Dallas County Public School System has given lunches to children from Monday to Friday at five locations, and the Dallas County Feeding Program passed out 10,000 meals from June 8 to July 10, twice as many as in 2019. Various church groups, like the Christian Outreach Alliance, also have feeding programs.

The dearth of food is just one problem. Public transport is another, since Selma has none. And because the poor can't afford cars, they have to pay

someone to drive them to work or to buy groceries. It also means they can't take jobs that are outside the town.

Housing is another struggle. Father Myhalyk says, "One woman I know paid $100 a month for a one-room apartment with holes in the walls and no running water. We thought we'd fix it, but we learned that the landlord would have raised her rent. So we managed to find her another place and got her some clothes."

To worsen matters, Selma's sales tax, even on food, is 10 percent; (by comparison, New York City's is 8.8 percent and Washington D.C.'s is 6 percent). The priest says "the system has failed its poor. When the Department of Human Resources runs out of money, it calls on the Mission to help."

Then there's the fear factor—and not just about the virus. I wanted to interview workers to learn if their employers were giving hazard pay along with masks, gloves, and sick pay when people became ill, or if they arranged social distancing and disinfected the workplace. But I hit a wall of silence.

Of the 12 people I called, only two answered. "If we talk to you, we lose our jobs," one woman said. Although I assured her I wouldn't identify her, she said, "It's a risk I can't take." The other woman who would talk is employed at Walmart. "Although we were considered 'essential' workers, we didn't get hazard pay. Instead, Walmart sent us one check for either $300 or $500 depending on whether we worked full or part-time." Since Walmart mostly hires part-time workers, $300 was the norm.

If you're black and poor, your illnesses get worse and worse because you don't have health insurance and you can't afford to see a doctor or buy medicine.

The story is essentially the same at the other six or seven largest employers. For example, American Apparel, which manufactures U.S. military uniforms, gives sick pay to workers if they have to quarantine—but only their base pay of $8.25 an hour—not the $11 to $14 an hour they make if they sew over their quotas. However, the company doesn't pay for family leave if an employee has to care for a sick child or parent. Nor has it offered hazard pay. And it doesn't give paid vacations.

American Apparel workers—nearly all women—walked off the job in late April. "We were furious. They didn't tell us that some co-workers had gotten sick or give us masks and gloves. I was especially worried because my daughter has asthma," one woman told me. "We protested for two days while the company cleaned the place. When they told us to come back, some of us still thought they could clean it better. But if we stayed out, they said 'Don't bother coming back.'" Alabama's Department of Labor also weighed in: If the women didn't return, they wouldn't get unemployment benefits.

Then there's health insurance—or, more accurately, the lack of it. Like most Selma businesses, American Apparel doesn't offer it. Harvest Select, a catfish de-boning plant with about 300 "fish pickers," is located a few miles outside the city. According to Curtis Gray, who's with the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, "there's no sick pay although, in theory, their jobs come with health benefits. But workers have to contribute $36 a week. Since most of them work 27 to 30 hours a week for $8.50 an hour, they can't afford it. Also, they have to sign waivers that they won't sue the company if they're injured—which is a real risk, since they work with sharp knives on an assembly line, de-boning six catfish a minute."

At International Paper, Selma's largest employer, one worker said several people got the virus, but they weren't given sick pay. Instead, they had to take vacation days.

Fear also means wages start and stay low. Gray says, "My union tried to organize Harvest Select, but after 50 fish-pickers signed cards to hold an election, the owners threatened they'd close the plant if the union won. We needed to get 100 to sign, but we couldn't, because they were afraid. So it fizzled out." Thus, as elsewhere in the South, unions are usually absent. And the workers' fear of losing their jobs is paralyzing.

Covid-19 case numbers move upward

In late March, Covid-19 arrived, and the toll had to be big—given people's poor health and weak immune systems. But Governor Kay Ivey's actions didn't help. On April 30, when Dallas County had only 37 cases, she launched Phase I to reopen retail stores and beaches. Though she added social distancing restrictions, by May 12, cases had nearly tripled, to 108. Unfazed, Ivey started Phase II that same day, reopening restaurants, bars, breweries, athletic facilities, barber shops, nail salons, and tattoo parlors. And on May 17, she told churches they could resume indoor services. Ten days later, cases had more than doubled again, to 250. Dallas County's infection rate is 312 per 100,000, which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention considers high.

According to John Zippert, a weekly newspaper publisher and chairman of the board of a nonprofit group that runs a small hospital and nursing home in nearby Greene County, the virus exposed the "intersection of race, poverty, and health. If you're black and poor, your illnesses get worse and worse because you don't have health insurance and you can't afford to see a doctor or buy medicine. To make prescriptions last longer, you use half the dose you're supposed to take or take it every other day."

Although many Americans think the nation's poor get health care under Medicaid, that's not true in Alabama. Zippert explains that his state and Texas have the strictest Medicaid eligibility limits in the country. "People earn too much to qualify."

What's too much? According to Robyn Hyden, executive director of Alabama Arise, an anti-poverty coalition, "Single women and men who have one child are not eligible for adult coverage if they earn over $3,100 a year. If they have two children, the cap inches up to $3,900 a year.

"The cap is higher for pregnant women, who can earn up to $18,000. But coverage ends once they give birth. Alabama's Medicaid program does cover children up to 18, but the annual household income cap is still low—$25,000 for a parent with one child or $31,700 for three-member households. Alabama offers another health plan, the Children's Health Insurance Program, which has higher income limits ($54,600 to $68,800). But parents

must make co-payments."

Zippert explains that although the Affordable Care Act offers subsidized health insurance, Alabama's poor can't afford to buy into it because they'd need to earn $11,000 to $12,000 a year—which they don't (though this is still under the poverty line). "They earn too much to qualify for Medicaid and too little for the ACA plan, so there's a huge gap of people—40 percent of Greene County's poor—who have nothing. And this is probably true in Dallas County, too," he says. He adds that because Alabama didn't expand Medicaid under the ACA, only 17,000 adults are eligible for it, while 134,000 have no coverage at all.

"It's hard to comprehend the cruelty of the Supreme Court's 2012 decision that let Alabama and about 20 other states opt out of expanding Medicaid. Louisiana joined the program when voters elected a Democratic governor, but 14 states, mostly in the South, haven't," says Zippert.

Cares Act funds in the political trough

How has Alabama spent its $1.9 billion in Cares Act funds? Congress's goal with this recent legislation was to repay health facilities, city and state governments, and other groups for what they spend on Covid-19 supplies, tests, lab fees, sick leave, and nutrition assistance; it was also designed to give jobless benefits and help small businesses (with under 500 employees) keep employees on the payroll.

"In more than one instance, favored companies are receiving 100-plus percent of what they should get. It seems they want to line as many pockets as they can before the funds dry up."

When Congress approved the Cares relief, some Alabama legislators had their own priorities. Del Marsh, the Republican speaker of the Alabama Senate, wanted $200 million to build a new statehouse. U.S. Senator Richard Shelby wanted to match state funds with Cares dollars to extend 16 Alabama airport runways. Governor Ivey's budget, which the legislature approved, omitted these items. But some other items still raise red flags.

According to the *Selma Times Journal*, the state awarded $743,000 to the Law Enforcement Agency: of that, $400,000 will be used to "remove impaired drivers from highways" and $343,000 will support the "drug recognition program." The link to Covid-19 is not immediately clear.

Nor is the $10 million for the Alabama Forestry Association "to help timber owners impacted by Covid-19." Chris Isaacs, executive vice president of the Alabama Forestry Association, said, "Forest landowners were particularly hard hit."

This seems arguable, as a Bloomberg News piece on September 18 reported, "In April, pent-up demand for lumber exploded. Do-it-yourselfers fortified by government stimulus checks took on home repairs and remodeling." According to Kevin Mason, managing director at ERA Forest Products in British Columbia, "We're in an unprecedented market. The current price, $640 per thousand board feet, is higher than the average over the last four years."

One explanation for the disconnect could be that by 2020 (according to followthemoney.org), the Alabama Forestry Association had given $2 million to Alabama political campaigns, of which at least 90 percent went to Republicans—with Ivey getting the lion's share ($213,400).

Then there's the $26 million to farmers and cattle ranchers. Bobby Singleton, a state Senator since 2005 (representing the Tuscaloosa area) said the farmers and ranchers complained of losses because they couldn't get cattle to the slaughterhouses when these facilities closed (after workers got the virus). "But they wouldn't really have losses since the cattle could stay where they are until the facilities re-open. The problem wasn't one of feed, since they eat grass." Not surprisingly, the Alabama Farmers Association gave $3.8 million to current officeholders, of which $3.4 million was to Republicans. Rick Pate, the commissioner of agriculture, got $97,000. Governor Ivey received $95,000, and Lieutenant Governor William Ainsworth got over $100,000.

A key problem is that Alabama decided that cities, counties, and nonprofits have to spend on Covid-related services first and then be reimbursed with the Cares dollars afterward. "But small organizations or poor counties and towns don't have the budget to lay out," says Singleton. So he asked Kelly Butler, Alabama's budget director, if they could get the funds upfront, especially to counties or towns where people live under the poverty line. Butler said he'd check with the Governor and get back to him. He got back but said the state would stay with the existing reimbursement model.

Felecia Lucky, director of the Black Belt Community Foundation, says, "Small towns and counties didn't have the money to spend for items like PPE, the equipment city or county employees need to work at home, EMTs, and sick pay. So they couldn't take advantage of the Cares funds."

Thus, BBCF started a Recoverable Grant Program to give the local jurisdictions tranches of $50,000. "By collaborating with Alabama Power Foundation, Protective Life Foundation and the Education Foundation of America, we got a $1.6 million line of credit from the Hope Credit Union. Now, by tapping into the credit, 16 Black Belt counties can get up to $18 million of the Cares funds. (These counties were originally named for their fertile black soil and the economy based on cotton, which was produced by slaves and later, poor Black laborers. Today, it refers to counties with large Black populations.)

A fiscal manager at an Alabama state agency (who asked for anonymity) is concerned that some companies are receiving priority due to their political affiliation and connections with the state government. "My superiors have pushed for certain firms to receive the funds. They've also asked us to find 'creative' ways to spend as much of the funds as possible. Sometimes this means awarding them to companies that don't have a connection to virus expenditures. And there's supposed to be an auditing team to ensure the funds are sent to companies with the greatest needs. But the team doesn't exist. The funds are completely unchecked."

He adds that companies with a history of providing services to Alabama access the funds more easily. For example, he points to EA Renfroe, a firm that handles claims for a range of disasters or those against government entities—"not services that can be reasonably considered Covid-related," he says. He also names the firm Ability Plus, which offers services (for the state) to the disabled. "I've talked with other fiscal managers who believe these companies are receiving special treatment."

Other companies getting the funds don't have contracts with state departments but are politically connected. "There's Balch and Bingham LLP, for example, a corporate law firm with over 200 attorneys in several states. It's hard to imagine a Covid-related need for it to be receiving upwards of $5 million." (The amounts the companies received are listed in Al.com.)

The state agency fiscal manager says the process is rife for abuse. "The funds are being dispersed to various state departments which, in turn, divide them as they see fit. This explains how some seemingly inappropriate companies have ended up with millions of relief dollars.

"Even where a company seems to qualify, no one is auditing the process to know how many employees it has and if it's getting the amount it's entitled to, say, to cover furloughed workers. In more than one instance, favored companies are receiving 100-plus percent of what they should get. It seems they want to line as many pockets as they can before the funds dry up." He says that small businesses receiving relief "seem to be in an altogether different realm from the whale companies receiving millions."

Image from the New York World-Telegram *and the* Sun Newspaper *Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.*

Voter suppression works

Why aren't more Black people in the legislature, where they could push for much-needed programs like an expanded Medicaid? Now only 27 of Alabama's 140 legislators are Black, all of whom are Democrats. The governor is Republican, as are six of the seven members in the U.S. Congress.

The answer is simple: Since 1877, when the Reconstruction era ended, those in power have persistently blocked the Black vote. Voter suppression schemes have shifted over time but always succeed. Originally, the state charged Blacks a poll tax of $1.50 to vote each year (about $25 today) and made them take literacy tests designed for failure: They had to read passages from the U.S. Constitution aloud and then describe them in writing. The tax and tests continued until the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965; and, along with violent repression, they explain why only 240 Dallas County Blacks were registered to vote as late as 1963 (when they comprised 60 percent of Dallas County's population).

Alabama also denied the vote to those convicted of minor crimes, such as vagrancy (say, for not having a job), for "moral failings" or "mischief" (say, for making insulting gestures), or for mental deficiencies. Thus, in 1903, only 1 percent of Black Alabamans could vote.

The 1965 Act banned these tactics, but the Supreme Court turned the clock backward in 2012, with the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision: States could now change their voting rules without Department of Justice approval: Chief Justice John Roberts said, "Minority voters don't need help any more."

Losing no time, Alabama's Republican-controlled legislature passed a law within 24 hours of the court's ruling that requires residents to show photo IDs to vote.

It also planned to shut 31 Department of Motor Vehicle offices, where people get their IDs and voter registration cards. According to a 2018 *New York Times* article, eight of the 10 counties where the offices were located had the largest percentage of Black residents. The ploy failed, since federal investigators said this would cause "a disparate and adverse impact on the basis of race," and Alabama had to reopen DMV offices for longer hours in several majority-Black counties.

Undaunted, the state designed more strategies, such as closing 100 polling places in 25 counties. According to a 2018 *Birmingham Watch* article, some counties lost 25 percent of them—making it harder for people who don't have transportation to vote.

Next, lawmakers limited the days on which Alabamans can vote: As Secretary of State John Merrill announced, "There is no future for early voting as long as I'm secretary of state." He also banned curbside voting.

Nor are absentee ballots easy to come by: People must mail in their applications along with a copy of a photo ID. According to Jessica Barker, founder of Lift Our Vote, a nonpartisan group that seeks to end voter suppression, "Most poor people have IDs, but they don't own printers. Since there's no public transport, getting copies made is challenging. You might have to walk 20 to 30 minutes to some place that makes copies, and if you're older, disabled, or afraid to go out because of the virus, you're likely to give up."

Even if voters get their ballots, the battle isn't over. Merrill ruled that voters must have them signed by a notary or two adult witnesses. "Getting two people to sign may not seem hard, but again, for those who are disabled, live alone, or are frightened to go out, it's a hurdle," says Barker.

The NAACP and Southern Poverty Law Center sued the state, arguing that photocopies shouldn't be required to apply for

mail-in ballots. But the case hasn't yet settled.

There's also the criminal justice system, which creates "the most pernicious form of voter suppression," according to Daniel Schwartz, executive director of the nonprofit Faith and Action Alabama, a faith-based community organization. "It's the reason that almost 15 percent of voting-age Blacks still can't vote," he says. Ever since the Jim Crow era, Blacks have consistently been jailed for contrived or remarkably minor offenses. (Faya Rose Toure tells of one client whose car was repossessed. "When he tried to remove his personal belongings from the trunk, he was arrested for 'stealing' them and put in the Selma jail.")

Alabama lawmakers linked felonies to voting as early as 1901, when they passed the Moral Turpitude Act: Those who committed crimes that fell into this category lost their vote forever. Over time, more than 500 crimes were lumped under the label—"so many that people didn't even know what they were," says Schwartz. In 2016, several organizations fought to abolish this injustice, and a state task force whittled the number down to 46. Schwartz says, "This was something of a victory, but former prisoners still don't know they can vote since Merrill and the governor refused to send them letters telling them they're eligible."

Alabama legislators moved one-sixth of Black voters from majority-white to majority-Black districts. Since Alabama's whites overwhelmingly vote Republican, the redistricting assured the GOP would run the state.

Much more is hidden. Zippert says, "If you're waiting in jail and haven't been convicted, you're allowed to vote. But people aren't told this."

The biggest barrier is that ex-felons must pay all their bills before they can vote—which include fines, restitution fees (for something they stole), and court costs. They even have to pay the cost of their parole officers. According to a 2020 Southern Poverty Law Center report, this "is an impossible task, since a 2014 University of Alabama survey found that on average, each ex-felon owed $7,800," and the jobs they find when they get out of prison pay very little.

As expected, gerrymandering has seriously affected the Black vote. Senator Singleton says the worst impact was in Jefferson County, which includes the city of Birmingham. Here, Republican legislators moved a majority Black district to Huntsville, which altered the size of the Jefferson delegation. "It used to have nine Democrats and nine Republicans, but by moving the district, this reduced the number of Democrats to eight—which changed the balance for passing laws at the state and local level."

Altogether, using a strategy adopted by Republican politicians across the South, Alabama legislators moved one-sixth of Black voters from majority-white to majority-Black districts. Since Alabama's whites overwhelmingly vote Republican, the redistricting assured the GOP would run the state.

Zippert says "lots of people have given up, thinking it doesn't matter who gets elected, and to some extent, this is valid—given the conditions under which they live. But it's not totally true. If a Democrat had been governor when the ACA was passed in 2010, Alabama would have expanded Medicaid. Walt Maddox, the Democrat mayor of Tuscaloosa who ran against Kay Ivey for governor, said he'd expand it on his first day in office. Ivey, who won, is against it. Also, during the Obama administration, Black farmers got loans and conservation grants. Today, under Trump, this doesn't happen. So we need to motivate people. They need to know their votes count."

Zippert's organization, the Save Ourselves Movement for Justice and Democracy, which is a coalition of 40 other groups, along with Lift Our Vote, the League of Women Voters, and the Coalition for Justice, are working on several fronts. For example, to help voters get copies of their photo IDs, Barker's group goes door to door with portable printers. "We tell people to leave their IDs outside at the front door, in a paper bag. Then we make a copy and put it back in the bag. We also drive people to polling stations and hold classes in large parking lots—such as at Winn Dixie or Walmart—to train people to become notaries."

Some groups have launched voter registration drives by going to college campuses and using social media. Dexter Strong, a youth pastor with the group Alabama Democrats, says, "There's a lot of excitement out there. We signed up 10,000 new voters a few months ago, and we're now up to 24,000. But there's a catch. When students register, their voter ID cards are sent to the college post office, and students must pick them up. Often they don't know the cards were sent and don't get them. When they go to vote, they're told they're not on the voter list and can't vote."

The key battle will be for the U.S. Senate, where the Democratic incumbent, Doug Jones, is battling a former Auburn University football coach, Republican Tommy Tuberville. In a state that is ecstatic about sports, the contest will be close—although Tuberville has baggage: He was co-owner of a hedge fund whose ventures, according to a July 5 *New York Times* article, "turned out to be a financial fraud." The partner, John Stroud, went to jail; Tuberville's investors sued him, and he reached a settlement. Whether this matters to his fans is questionable. That it matters a great deal to the ability of Democrats to retake the Senate is obviously paramount.

If the voters who have been ignored or whose rights have been suppressed for centuries find their voice and weigh in heavily for the state-level contests, they could begin to change the laws, and their lives. ■

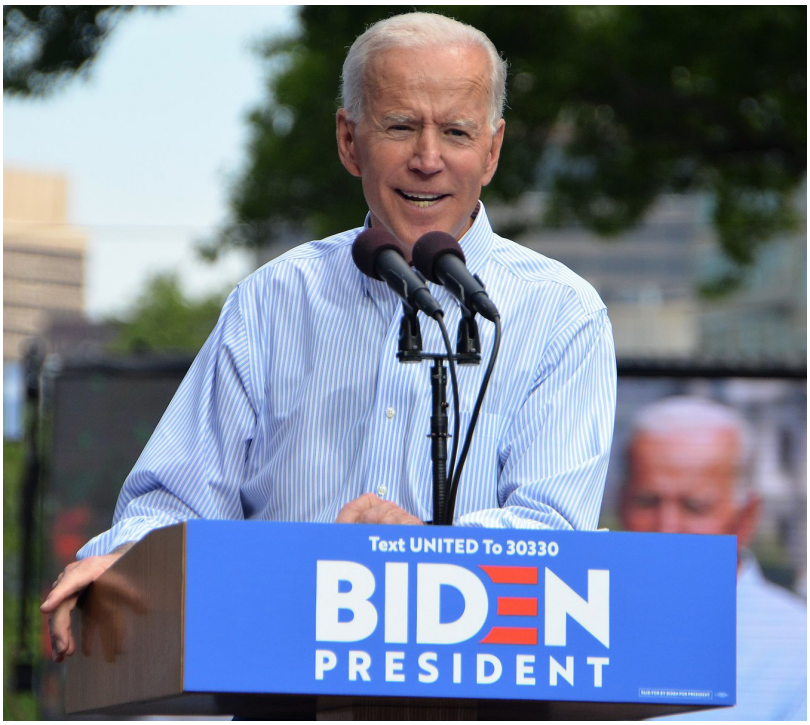
Barbara Koeppel is a Washington D.C.-based investigative reporter who covers social, economic, political, and foreign policy issues.

Democracy on the Brink: A Rogue President Exploits Racial Divisions and Redefines Executive Power

By Hamilton Fish

This article was written in response to questions we received from political science students at the University of York in England about the current mess in U.S. politics and how we got here. We'd love to hear your explanations for the present predicament and any prescriptions for relief that you'd like to offer. You can send your comments to editors@washingtonspectator.org.

The homestretch of the interminable 2020 election is underway. For those who see the presidential contest as a horse race, which includes most of the American press, neither the Trump nor Biden camp appears to have benefited much from its convention, the poll numbers having stayed more or less consistent since July or earlier. How and why as many as 48 percent of eligible voters surveyed consider it acceptable that this individual should continue as president is a question that occupies a lot of my thinking, and one that I'll try to address in this piece.



People on both sides of this deeply divided country view this election as a fight for the soul of the nation, but any similarity between the opposing camps ends there. President Trump has openly adopted the trappings and the reality of the authoritarian leaders whose respect he covets. He has embraced white supremacists and sided with law enforcement in the debate over recurrent police violence against Black people, while the Democrats have called for inclusivity and racial justice and have nominated the first woman of color to serve on the national ticket of a major party.

Where president Trump has withdrawn from the Paris accord, rolled back regulations on greenhouse gas emissions, and lifted restrictions on polluters across the corporate spectrum, the Democrats have signaled that climate change will be a priority in their agenda and have committed to develop alternative energy options and to reengage with the international community.

You can continue down the list of challenges we face in the United States, challenges that in most instances are also faced by other nations, and on issue after issue, Trump and the status quo business lobby in Congress stake out positions that favor the wealthy over the poor, white over Black, men over women, and profits over nature.

Democrats, in general, present a vision of a country undergoing profound change, driven by demographic shifts, technological innovation, the emergence of women in the workforce, the demands for economic justice and racial equity, and the need to be both better stewards of the environment and better global citizens.

Their positions on the issues resonate with as many as 65 to 70 percent of the electorate, yet for the third time in the 21st century, the Democrats are struggling to avoid losing a national election in which they win the popular vote but lose to the confounding math of the Electoral College.

Most recently in 2016, Hillary Clinton, with overwhelming support from the coastal states and their urban voters, earned nearly three million more votes than her Republican opponent, Donald Trump. Yet she lost in a lopsided tally of 304–227 in the Electoral College, a system held over from the slaveholding days of the 18th century that disproportionately rewards winner-take-all state vote tallies and gives swing states more of a say in the outcome.

It should be noted that many of the current alignments in American politics predate Donald Trump. With the exception of Virginia, the slavery states and the states that permitted slavery in the 1850s are the same states that voted Republican in 2012, more than a century and a half later. From voter suppression and the shredding of the safety net to the tolerance and even encouragement of bias throughout American life, the current Republican Party largely updates the Confederacy.

Democrats no longer count on New Deal coalition

And while most Democrats will be reluctant to acknowledge it, the party that delivered the New Deal began to stray from its support of the working-class base as early as the 1970s, when several new cultural and generational trends emerged. It was a time when labor unions were still a major force in American political and economic life and largely reflected the anti-Communist politics of the Cold War years. Their members, many from patriotic immigrant families, were torn over the Vietnam conflict and were reluctant to accept that the United States could be so wrong.

Many rank-and-file Democrats came from traditional households and did not easily adapt to the call for women's equality. And they bristled when activists in the emerging environmental movement argued that their employment in industry was harmful to the planet.

At the end of the decade, inflation surged into double digits and 52 Americans were held hostage by Iran in a highly public and humiliating affront to American power. In 1980, when a genial, B-list Hollywood actor ran for president on the Republican ticket with vague but seductive promises of a foreign policy based on "peace through strength," many voters who had historically supported the Democrats—and indeed had reached the middle class largely on the strength of Democratic programs—switched over to vote for Reagan.

The Democratic coalition, with its roots in the Roosevelt era, was broken, and the Reagan Democrat was born.

The jovial new president signaled to the business community that making money was cool again, that taxes on the rich would be lowered and regulations on business would be lifted. Cronyism and corruption proliferated. The 1980s was the decade of indulgence, and for many, the guilt over the prosecution of an unjust war was set aside. Reagan built his 1984 reelection campaign around the slogan "It's morning again in America," a theme that the 2016 Trump campaign reprised with its derivative "Make America Great Again."

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Race and religion shape our politics

Republicans may not govern as well as Democrats, but they play the political game better (or more ruthlessly), and they certainly do capitalism better. During the Reagan years, the unsustainable gap between rich and poor in America accelerated, and antagonism toward the aspirations of women and Blacks and gays was tacitly encouraged. Most of the labor movement had remained with the Democrats, and the business community and the Reagan administration worked together with notable success to diminish the power and size of the unions. And the Republican courtship of the Religious Right had begun to pay dividends, foreshadowing a time, decades later, when conservative evangelicals would find themselves trying to explain their alignment with a reality-TV host and conflict-saturated real estate mogul who was more at home in Sodom and Gomorrah than the olive gardens of Gethsemane.

Although triumphalist Republicans would try to tell a different story, it was also the beginning of the decline of the Republic, a downward slide that has led us, in the words of the journalist Lou Dubose, to "the squalid, systemic partisan corruption that metastasized into what today is the party of Donald Trump."

Toward the latter part of the 20th century, facing divided legislatures, increasing deficits, and slowing growth, Democrats found it increasingly difficult to replicate the sweeping social reforms of the New Deal and the Great Society (programs like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid) and relied largely on incrementalism—income supplements, help for single mothers, college debt relief—to address social problems.

The Clinton administration, in the 1990s, did try for universal health care with its ambitious "Health Security" plan, an attempt at forging a middle path between market forces and regulatory reforms. But despite strong public sentiment for affordable health care, the plan—and its principal spokesperson, Hillary Clinton—were attacked by Republicans and the business community for ushering "too much bureaucracy" and being a "big government" solution. Divided over concerns that the plan did not go far enough, the left provided only lackluster support, and the proposal went down to defeat.

In the postwar years, when the economy was booming, it was possible to ask the middle class to absorb new taxes to pay for benefits for those who needed them most. But later in the century, the global economy cut into the American share, and other factors—above all, the damaging tax cuts Republicans delivered to corporations and the wealthy—helped to derail the American dream.

Republicans have overtly appealed to the racial grievances of white voters since the passage of the Civil Rights Act. In the conventional narrative, their focus has been on the Southern states, provoking a historic realignment premised on white supremacy and producing conservative majorities that voted seamlessly Republican until the Obama campaign in 2008. But in reality, Republicans have long been stoking fears about integration and incipient "urban problems" in comfortable white suburbs throughout the country.

Democrats, for the most part, have advanced the goals of the civil rights agenda—of the 53 African Americans currently in the U.S. Congress (including two delegates), 52 are Democrats and one is a Republican. Though the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act would not have passed without the support of Republicans in the Senate, today the party in both practice and policy is more polarizing on issues of race that at any time in the modern era.

Trump is by far the most unfettered, unapologetic racist since Andrew Johnson to have occupied the White House. Yet his approval ratings have remained consistent, reflecting the profound racial divisions that persist, and Republicans in office refrain from holding him accountable. Conservatives in the Trump era know they are staring into the face of history. The Republican Party understands that changing demographics will overwhelm its efforts to fend off progress, and it has resorted to extraordinary antidemocratic measures to delay this reckoning.

Republicans in the Trump era have launched an attack on immigrants (many of whom were American citizens or were here legally), accusing them of taking American jobs and obscuring the private sector's role in transferring jobs to low-wage markets overseas. Few recall that it was the policies of the Reagan and

Bush Senior years that led to the financial meltdown of the Savings and Loan era, and the utter lack of enforcement during Bush W. that chiefly paved the way for the massive economic dislocations of 2007–08.

Republicans attack the right to vote

The right has also built a massive voter-suppression apparatus, based on false claims of voter fraud. These initiatives are aimed at poor people, minorities, students, and ethnic populations who might be expected to vote Democratic.

Officials in Republican-controlled states have re-drawn the boundaries of political districts in ways that violate fundamental constitutional prohibitions against discrimination. They have instituted burdensome voter ID requirements; they've reduced the number of polling places in minority and other high-turnout Democratic districts; they've reduced the number of days during which voters may cast their ballots, making it harder for working people to vote. And they were abetted by a disastrous Supreme Court decision, *Shelby County v. Holder,* in which the conservative majority cut the heart out of the Voting Rights Act and signaled to local Republican jurisdictions that they could suppress the vote with impunity.

President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act, 1964.

Even against this backdrop, Trump has shamelessly used the bully pulpit to sow doubt about the integrity of our election system, laying the foundation for a challenge to the legitimacy of the outcome should he lose.

One of the most notable through lines during the Trump years has been the continued success of the right in making its victims its most ardent supporters. Not for the first time, Republicans advanced a tax bill that hugely favors their rich and connected patrons and disingenuously promoted it as a middle-class tax-relief act.

The economist Steven Pressman, writing in *The Washington Spectator,* has observed that as the 2017 tax bill made its way through Congress, President Trump claimed "his tax giveaway to corporations and the wealthy would trickle down. Everyone would gain. Firms would invest in efficient equipment and in their workers. Household income would rise $4,000, to $9,000. None of this happened. The standard trickle-down Republican hokum, peddled since the 1980s, had the same effect as in the past—the rich gained enormously."

Trump attacked existing trade deals and wildly exaggerated his negotiating talents. With great fanfare, he replaced Nafta (our trade regime with Mexico and Canada) with the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, a warmed-over, rebranded version of its predecessor that was long on rhetoric and short on substance. His only apparent tactic on trade and foreign policy negotiations is to alternate between lavish expressions of admiration and eviscerating ridicule on Twitter, a strategy that may work on reality TV and even in New York real estate but has failed to produce progress in crucial talks with China and has led, unsurprisingly, to further deterioration in relations with North Korea.

"People voted for Donald Trump feeling they had nothing to lose after decades of income stagnation," Pressman points out. "But lose we did. America lost respect around the world. Many lives have been lost to Covid-19, due to a deadly combination of incompetence and self-serving behavior. And even before the coronavirus hit, income gains during the Trump administration headed toward Wall Street: U.S. workers saw few benefits. Significantly, the president's two signature economic policies, protectionism and tax reform, abetted this demoralizing outcome."

Yet still, the base clamors for more. Trump partisans are a mix of white working- and middle-class voters who are estranged from costal elites and resentful at the perception of preferential treatment afforded minorities (try explaining that nuance of American political life to the Black parents of a child hurt or killed by police violence or a random shooting incident). They include the hugely influential religious fundamentalists and values-based coalitions, who have settled on "imperfect vessel" as the explanation for their hypocritical embrace of the most morally compromised president in U.S. history. And they include the political agnostic who simply wants to pay fewer taxes and make more money.

Widespread concern over response to Covid-19

But very few people anticipated the virus, and it's the virus—more than any convincing argument, more than any solid evidence, more than direct experience with the impact of the damaging lies this president and his unapologetic allies in Congress and right-wing media have repeatedly told—that will decide the outcome of this election.

Millions of Americans are sick, and tens of thousands are dying, significantly because of Trump's incompetence and single-minded focus on his own political and financial self-interest. Somehow, the same people who dismiss the rape charges against Trump, who know he underpaid his taxes and broke the law in his business dealings but have been willing to overlook it, who understand he is the furthest distance from being a good Christian a person can be but still make excuses for him; these same people sense that he mishandled the virus and lied about it—is still lying about it—and it bothers them.

The charge of collusion with Russia during the 2016 election and Trump's repeated denials further underscore the chasm between the president's lies and political truth. Even after an independent investigation authorized by his own Justice Department reaffirmed the Trump campaign's dealings with Russia, resulting in jail terms for key campaign operatives, Trump and his visibly compromised attorney general continued to distort and contest the evidence.

Now a Republican-led Senate committee has released a bombshell report concluding, in the words of *The New York Times*, "the Russian government disrupted an American election (in 2016) to help Mr. Trump become president, Russian intelligence services viewed members of the Trump campaign as easily manipulated, and some of Mr. Trump's advisers were eager for the help from an American adversary." While the fallout from these bipartisan findings has yet to filter into the campaign debate, the case against Trump's reelection was bolstered.

Trump campaign operatives, however, seem undeterred. The fine investigative journalist Anne Nelson revealed in *The Washington Spectator* that in May, when Covid-related deaths were nearing 74,000, members of the president's reelection campaign team recruited a few compliant doctors with questionable credentials to argue publicly against the use of masks and lockdowns and to offer spirited claims that, contrary to numerous studies, the extremely dangerous hydroxychloroquine was an effective remedy.

They staged a press conference on the steps of the Supreme Court, attended largely by a few straggling tourists, but the video was aired on Breitbart News, where it reached 185,000 viewers. Over its six hours on Facebook, the video was the second-most-engaged post on the platform, with 14 million views. A few hours after the presentation, President Trump tweeted to his 84.5 million followers, and Donald Trump Jr. told his 5.3 million followers to watch the video.

Social media, however, is growing wise to the prevaricator in chief. Nelson reports that Facebook took the group's video down a few hours after it was posted, and Twitter and YouTube followed suit, "all three on the grounds that the video violated their Covid-19 misinformation policies."

There is still a long road to travel before the election in November. Given the administration's fatal mismanagement of its response to the virus, and an economy in shambles, with no particular policy achievements to point to and without a discernible agenda for Trump's second term, Republicans are fanning racial fears and counting on conservative media to distract voters from the overwhelming documentation of the president's moral deficiencies and political failures.

The 2020 elections will turn, in part, on whether local precincts can offset Republican efforts to disrupt the vote and whether Democrats can inspire Black voters and women and wavering independents to go to the polls based on more than just their disgust with Trump. Will Democrats succeed in offering voters a promising path out of the mess Trump has created? And will very narrow slices of the electorate, who live and vote in bellwether districts that disproportionately affect the national race, look beyond Trump's self-serving lies and conclude, after nearly four years of this unscrupulous peacock, that our country cannot survive four more? ■

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