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Precarious Politics: An Analysis of the 2020 US Elections in the backdrop of COVID 19, Failure of Capitalism and Social Unrest

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ABSTRACT

The US Elections of 2020 were held in increasingly precarious conditions. The crisis of the Capitalist machine triggered by the Pandemic and the subsequent global recession, increasing rate of infections and deaths owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, evident pitfalls and loopholes in administrative and precautionary strategies of the presiding government, and the social unrest due to the prevalence of high levels of inequality in terms of wealth and social status, partly attributable to racial distinctions, which had caused a sense of lesser evilism among the masses whereby the populace saw Joe Biden as a messiah who would prove to be the harbinger of prosperity in times of great despair.

Keywords: *US Elections, COVID-19 pandemic, Joe Biden, lesser evilism*

I. INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 can said to be characterized by an extreme crisis of capitalism, visible clearly through the spectacle of the deadly Coronavirus pandemic and the consequent global recession. In such a year marked by upheaval, the US Presidential elections seemed out of the contour; a tussle for power between one of the least popular Republican Party candidates, Donald Trump and yet another humdrum Democratic Party nominee, Joe Biden. The US being a hegemon in terms of economic, diplomatic and military prowess, a change in its political and economic environs has an influence on the consciousness and political activity around the globe, as seen in the **Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement**. Biden's victory in the elections, despite Trump's dramatic claims of a fraudulent count of votes, has definitely marked a shift in the socio-politic and economic conditions of the USA. It is in this light that this paper intends of view the US Elections of 2020; and seeks to answer the lingering question of how the US Elections of 2020 turned out in the backdrop of a pandemic coupled with a crisis of Capitalism.

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II. COVID-19 AND THE GREATER DEPRESSION

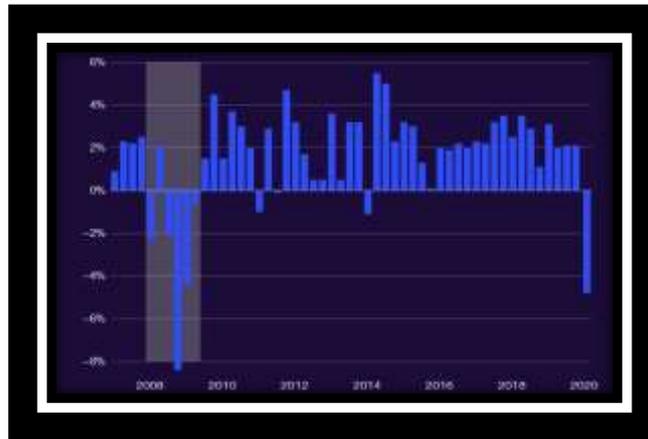
Even before the pandemic, the capitalist global economy, with USA as its leader, was teetering on the brink of a disaster reflecting the crisis-ridden nature of Capitalism. As very well articulated by Ellen Meiksins Wood in chapter six: ‘Capitalism’ of her book ‘The Origin of Capitalism’, the self-destructive competitive thrust of the Capitalist market proved to be fatal. In this case, it led to years of neoliberal attacks on social protections, an over-dependence on debt and increasingly isolationist policies stemming from the US-China trade war (Cleves 2020).

The impact of this recession on the American economy and on the working class in USA has been particularly devastating. Post the end of the second quarter (May-June) the rate of decline in the GDP of the US was a whopping 31.7% and predictions for the total decline of the year ranged from 42% in the overall GDP to a more conservative 36% (Cleves 2020). A ray of hope was visible nearing the end of the third quarter, when the economy continued to open up as more businesses restarted operating and people returned to work. Donald Trump and his supporters mention the 10.6 million jobs created post May as a sign of recovery, as well as the benign and shrewd leadership of the Trump administration in bringing America back on track. However, these statistics are not completely revealing; they do not tell the whole story. Economists are terming the path of economic recovery in the US as ‘K shaped’; indicating that the population belonging to the higher income brackets (capitalist and upper middle class) are faring better than they did before the pandemic, while the vast majority of the population is struggling to tread on water, if not already drowning. While unemployment figures have dropped owing to the opening up of the economy, they do not account for the 20.5 million who want to work but are not able to, 7.5 million people indulged in part-time work and the 1.4 million filing for unemployment benefits each week (Nutting 2020).

These figures alone demonstrate the tremendous instability of the American working class, and also highlight the gross economic inequality which has been worsened due to the crisis, underlining Wood’s claim that the increasingly competitive requirements of the market leads to novel and, in many ways, more unfair modes of exploitation (Wood 1999, 35-36), thereby augmenting the chasm between the wealthy and the masses. Even so, the aforementioned statistics do not take account of the banal approach of the Trump administration in taking precautionary measures for tackling the impending disaster. This approach has heavily contributed to the seemingly worse conditions of healthcare in America – as of October 29, 2020, the virus had taken the life of more than **220,000 Americans**, while infecting 7.5 million.

It is predicted that this number will go up to 440,000 by the end of the year (Trotta 2020); a number which exceeds the amount Americans killed during the Second World War.

The following bar-graph indicates the GDP trends of the US in 2020 in comparison to previous years.



Source: US Bureau of Economic Analysis

It is clearly visible through this graph that the American capitalist economy has taken a huge hit and has dipped massively. In fact, according to BBC News, the US has suffered the most severe economic contraction in more than a decade as compared to the worst downfall seen in 2008. Considering the precarious nature of the economy, great inequalities and the problematic conditions of the American working class thereby resulting in frustration of the masses, it can be inferred that the US Elections of 2020 indeed took place during times of great turmoil and this has naturally influenced the Presidential campaign, and its consequent results.

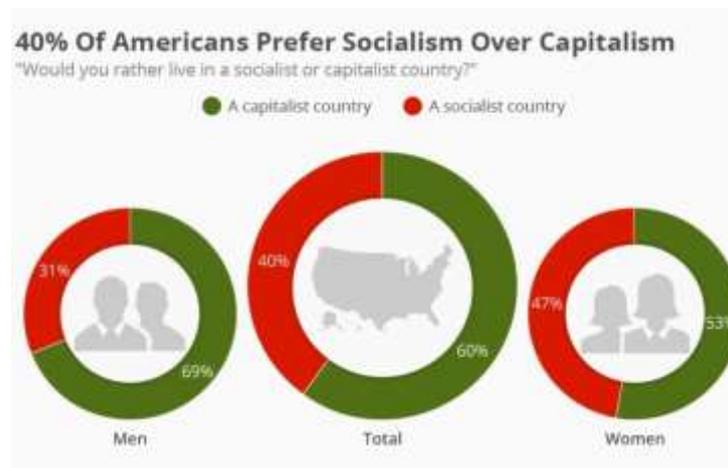
III. ‘BIDEN THE SOCIALIST’

As of 28 October, 2020 The Economic Times mentions Donald Trump and the Republican’s rampant claims of the Democrats being “anti-American radicals” who seek to glorify China – “If Biden wins. China wins”. These claims now seem to be baseless as Biden has turned out to be quite moderate in his approach. Neither his cabinet nor staff picks includes a single super-progressive or radical member. On the contrary, it is imbued with a bipartisan vision of leadership, rather than a “left- or right-wing call for retrenchment” (Rubin 2020). Given Biden’s record from the Iraq War to the 1994 crime bill, and his campaign rhetoric buttressing Medicare-For-All, it is clear that Biden and his administration are far removed from what the Republicans claim. Similarly, his economic team consists of not soak-the-rich socialists, but centre-left reformers whose most progressive idea might be increasing the federal minimum wage (as many states have already done). Biden’s “Build Back Better” is not a slogan which glorifies the collapse of Capitalism; it rather talks about ameliorating the prevalent system

(Rubin 2020).

The havoc caused due to pandemic has shown the fallacies of a truly Capitalist machine. People have begun to realise the need of social protection policies, something which Biden used very wisely in his Presidential campaign. In fact, Change Research, a firm evaluating the pandemic's impact on voting preferences, has estimated that 50% of the people who voted for Trump in 2016 in states with higher incidence of the virus, were likely to support Biden in the upcoming elections (Marcus 2020). This further underlines the fact that the pandemic has caused a change in the people's perspectives with respect to social protection strategies; they are no longer seen as Socialist machines introduced to cause the destruction of Capitalism (as claimed by the Republicans). Instead, such measures have now come to be seen as necessary for the well-being of even a Capitalist regime.

It is perhaps due to this trend that a new wave of political ideology has started to permeate the American society. The following representation showcases this change in ideology.



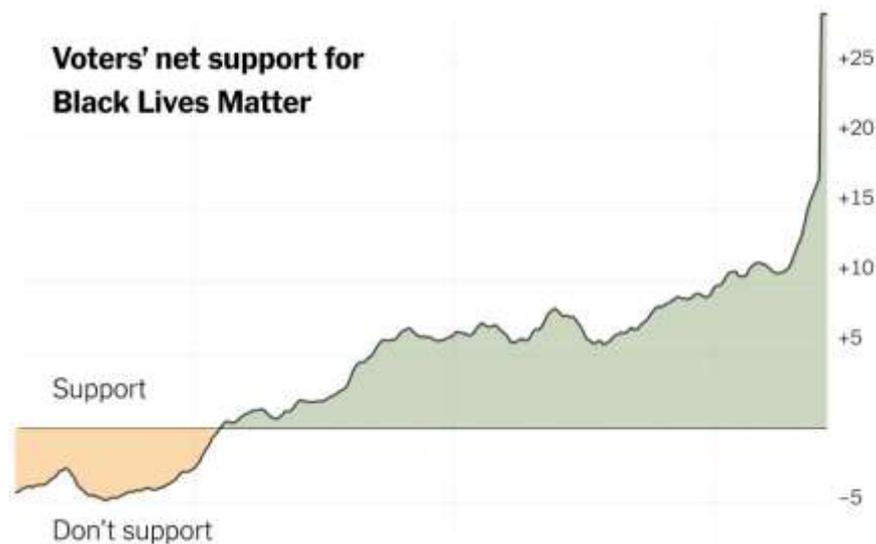
Source: The Harris Poll via Axios

IV. BLACK LIVES MATTER

This hue of extreme precarity of the American working class, and especially of the people of colour living in the US set the stage for an explosive re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in June, 2020. According to a study conducted by the Centre for Disease Control, Black people were 2.6 times more likely than white Americans to contract the virus, 4.6 times less likely to get immediate emergency hospitalization and 2.1 times more likely to die (Cleves 2020). In a study conducted by the New York Times, black teenagers were asked how many times a day did they have to face racially discriminate comments. On an average, each teenager had to deal with upto five such racially charged remarks - adding fuel to the flame. All these factors, including unemployment and a legacy of racist policing, sparked an explosive uprising

following the brutal police murder of George Floyd.

While the support for the BLM movement, decreasing from 67% to 55% (Thomas and Horowitz 2020), remains significant. Much of this support was likely consolidated due to the presence of the National Guard in most cities and the pick-up service provided to protestors. This trend has played a major role in the outcome of the 2020 elections. The presence of this racial discrimination coupled with skewed nature of the state authorities lead people of colour to undergo frustration and therefore look for an alternative leader who offered to ameliorate their condition – in this case, Joe Biden. The following graph supports this claim; Joe Biden was the only other credible option for the BLM movement supporters.



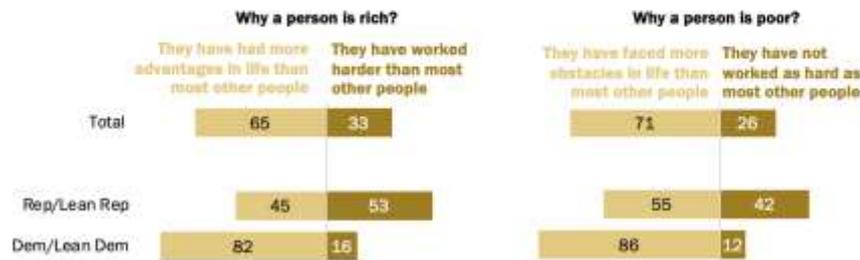
Source: New York Times

V. POLARISED CONSCIOUSNESS

Due to the prevalence of all the aforementioned factors, the time around the election was great for like minded people to organise. In a survey, it was recorded that 71% of the millenials said that they would prefer to vote for a Socialist President. 21% said that they supported abolishing private property. Furthermore, in a Pew Research poll, it was discovered that 65% of Americans believe that the majority rich are rich due to bequeathed wealth rather than inherent skill.

A majority of Americans say people are rich because they have had more 'advantages in life'; fewer say it's because they have worked harder than others

In your opinion, which generally has more to do with ... (%)



Source: Survey of US Adults, conducted Jan 6-14, 2020

In addition to this, worker's struggles were also surfacing. In March, "a LaborNews website called PayDay had identified that 1100 wildcat actions and 260 official strikes took place between 1 and 31 March, 2020" (Cleves 2020). Moreover, in the past couple of years women working in companies ranging from McDonald's to Google have put up the problem of sexual harassment at the workplace. This further contributed to the frustration among the masses, in hope for a better leadership. This highlights the **Marxian concept of Alienation** – a situation where people begin to estrange their human attributes as a result of living in a stratified social structure (Marx 1932).

The American consciousness was being influenced by these major trends at play here. Support for the Left increases day by day with young people, women and people of colour leading the way. However, at the same time the Right wing is also being consolidated and is moving further to the Right, thereby highlighting the process of Polarization taking place. It is in this context that the Presidential elections of 2020 were being held.

VI. CONCLUSION

The argument of 'harm reduction' seems to be a major reason for most millenials and Gen. Z voters to express their support for Biden. Even though the past record of Biden renders him as not a very strong public figure worthy of becoming the leader that everyone desires, the realisation that Biden's loss would lead to another term in hands of a precarious leadership has generated lacklustre support for Biden. It is due to this reason that the populace seems to be embracing the "Settle for Biden" slogan. In electoral terms, the term 'harm reduction' means adopting a stance in opposition to racial discrimination, sexism and state oppression, by electing the candidate who is less likely to support damaging policy. In practice, this resulted in increased support for the Democratic candidate.

This policy of lesser evilism effectively bolstered the ranks and support for the Democrats

resulting in Biden's victory. This has led to a 'honeymoon period' for the Biden administration, where industrialists, lawmakers and the masses are giving the Biden administration a chance to prove themselves. However, he has to do so in the backdrop of immense struggles, which might lead to eventual disappointment and subsequent unrest. Considering the aforementioned arguments, we can conclude that the presence of several factors such as the grave crisis of Capitalism, the gross wealth and racial inequality, and the visible failure of the Trump administration had greatly influenced the polarization of the masses in favour of the Democratic candidate.

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