Democrats Won the Election. So Why Are We Still Losing?

By Tara McGowan

Depending on what news you consume, you may not know that last week's historic presidential election is, in fact, over. President-elect Biden won by a margin of votes [more than twice as wide](#) as that of his predecessor, and will be sworn into office on January 21st. President Trump has very publicly refused to concede to reality, and only a handful of elected Republicans have publicly accepted the outcome. The collective delusion of elected Republicans is not representative of their constituents however, [as more than half of all Republicans say that Biden won the race](#). But a more troubling trend is starting to gain traction.

According to a recent Morning Consult poll, a shocking seven in ten Republicans [don't believe](#) the election was free and fair. This partisan divide of trust in our elections is no accident, but the result of a deliberate strategy. For months, Trump and his administration have been laying the groundwork with one clear goal: to protect their power at all costs, even if [the cost is our Democracy.](#)

While we knew this could happen, too many Democrats didn't see it coming. Through hubris, denialism (or both) many Democrats believed that this election was an open and shut case against a flailing president, and that Joe Biden and Democrats up and down the ballot would deliver a resounding rebuke of Trump and all he stands for. It's painful to admit but the numbers don't lie: over 70 million Americans *did* cast their votes for a second term of Trump. That's not enough to keep him in power, but it is enough for us to be struck by their power.

The power of this bloc shouldn't have felt like a surprise. The myths that are circulating that claim that "the election results aren't true" are being spread through the same voices and channels that helped deliver Trump 63 million votes in 2016 and another 72 million votes in 2020.

Fueled by powerful conservative voices like Ben Shapiro and outlets like The Daily Caller that reach tens of millions of followers online every day, right-wing media have been using misinformation to cultivate and reinforce voters' support of Trump for years. By spreading conspiracy theories and outright lies, these digital-savvy channels work lockstep to surgically influence the opinions and behavior of millions of Americans, drawing them into an alternate reality where facts don't matter and the only source you should trust is Trump himself. Those efforts have paid dramatic dividends -- both financially and politically.

Pandemic misinformation started in the early spring of 2020, seeded directly by the President. Right-wing outlets -- online and through talk radio and Fox News -- amplified this misinformation at dramatic scale, resulting in large numbers of Republicans refusing to wear life-saving masks, putting millions of Americans at risk and slowing any hope of economic recovery. Baseless conspiracy theories about "liberal pedophile rings" and "radical socialist" coups jumped from Americans' news feeds to their group text threads, dinner tables, and ultimately, ballot boxes. And, now, in the week following the election, the posts with the most engagement on Facebook scream election fraud -- from the same usual suspects.

This election also saw Democrats step up their digital investment and tactics in ways that undoubtedly contributed to Biden's victory, but the harsh reality is that those efforts are not sufficient. Paid advertising is not how the majority of misinformation is spread online, so when campaign media budgets dry up or political ads are banned by platforms like Facebook, as they are today, Democrats have no recourse or lever to counter the disinformation actively gaining traction online.

The always-on conservative media ecosystem effectively kept Democrats on the defensive in hundreds of Senate, House and down ballot races across the country. It's reductive and damaging for Democrats to blame any one message or tactic for these losses when the media ecosystem they're actually competing with exists to misinform and inflame Americans to vote against them - regardless of their agenda or the facts. Given their dramatic reach through social media, conspiracy theorists like Ben Shapiro are the new mainstream media that

candidates and parties must contend with - [and this new ecosystem is only going to get more volatile in the years to come.](#)

The reason that Democrats still find themselves losing the information war after winning the presidential election is clear: we're *still* not fighting on the same battlefield Trump and the Right are - and the field they're fighting on is one where the vast majority of Americans are getting their information. As long as Democrats continue to over-rely on paid advertising to reach voters with their messaging rather than building online communications infrastructure that can communicate to voters year-round, they will remain at the win of narratives driven by the Right.

This is not an argument to stoop to Republicans' level to win the information war, either. We can tell the truth. We can reveal and counter the lies. We can compete and win with the facts -- and with the powerful stories of Americans impacted most by the decisions made for them in Washington. We can't win if we don't show up for the game.

It's time to get serious about building a progressive media infrastructure that engages Americans year round with the facts and stories that will counter the lies and help rebuild trust in our government, elected officials and one another. If we don't, we may still very well lose our democracy -- the one we just very narrowly secured the opportunity to save.

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