



# No Time to Celebrate

## Progressive Politics in the Pandemic's Wake

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# Introduction and summary

Progressives around the world are asking what lessons can be taken from Joe Biden's presidential victory as they look to push back against populism and nationalism and set out an agenda to recover and rebuild following the COVID-19 pandemic. What were the decisive factors of Biden's winning political strategy and agenda, and how do they overlap with more general concerns about how the pandemic has transformed the environment in which progressive politics coheres?

In many ways, the impact of Biden's victory is already beginning to be felt beyond the United States, particularly in Europe. For one, the sense of inevitability that nationalism is in the ascendancy and that populism is impossible to beat—without at least playing along with the populists' agenda—no longer holds. Where once the nationalist Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán may have asserted that the future of Europe resembled Hungary's illiberal democracy<sup>1</sup>, increasingly nationalist leaders such as Orbán and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, or the leadership of Poland's Law and Justice Party, now appear to be on the wrong side of history. Moreover, with President Donald Trump newly cast as a political loser, it is doubtful that Matteo Salvini, leader of the far-right Northern League in Italy, will take quite as much pride in being labeled Italy's Trump.

President-elect Biden's victory could also change the geopolitical environment for nationalists. In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Johnson is now much less likely to run roughshod over the Good Friday Agreement, which ended years of violence in Northern Ireland,<sup>2</sup> or continue to pursue antagonistic relations with Britain's European Union neighbors given the importance that Biden attaches to the agreement and the incoming administration's likely support for a stronger EU.<sup>3</sup> The nationalist governments in Poland and Hungary have been forced to compromise on linking EU funds to the rule of law and in the medium term they will need to seek accommodation with EU institutions. Similarly, calls for economic nationalism—such as those of Marine Le Pen's National Rally (formerly the National Front)—also sound tin-eared. A renewed spirit of multilateralism seems to be taking hold, and Biden's pledge to hold a Summit for Democracy will likely further underscore this trend.<sup>4</sup>

In what follows, the authors analyze how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the opportunities and challenges facing progressives across the mature democracies and, where relevant, draw out the lessons from Biden’s presidential election victory. The analysis presented here is informed by a series of discussions that Global Progress, a CAP initiative that brings together progressive thinkers and leaders, and our partners, launched in early March 2020, as the pandemic took hold in Europe and the United States. Over the course of the past nine months, bringing together progressive thinkers, policymakers, and strategists from across 30 countries spanning four continents, these discussions facilitated an exchange of views examining the new challenges that COVID-19 presents for progressives as well as an evaluation of how existing challenges are being transformed. More specifically, this analysis draws on a series of country studies commissioned by the Center for American Progress as part of its Beyond Populism and Post-Pandemic Politics project, as well as those published by our partners.<sup>5</sup>

This analysis of lessons for progressives, detailed below, develops in three parts: the impact COVID-19 has had on politics; the prospects for social democratic policies; and the remaining challenges posed by technology and culture.

First, the COVID-19 crisis and its economic, social, and public health implications have not necessarily created a favorable political landscape for progressive policies—even in places where the pandemic is being mismanaged by incumbent conservative governments or denied by populist opposition leaders. Over the course of the pandemic, and particularly during the early months of the crisis, citizens across mature democracies rallied around the flag. Support for and the approval ratings of governments tended to rise, whatever the nature of their response or their political leanings. Except on very rare occasions, the response to COVID-19 will not determine the outcome of elections or the political course of a nation. The United States is, of course, an outlier of these trends; many analysts suspect that Trump could have won a second term had his administration handled the coronavirus response better given the United States’ good economic performance prepandemic.<sup>6</sup>

In societies across the globe, however, the pandemic exposed structural weaknesses that progressives have long sought to redress. In the same way that the virus preys on comorbidities in one’s body, those who suffer from societies’ inequalities and injustices are more likely to be harmed by the economic, social, and health impacts of the pandemic. Moreover, media coverage of the pandemic and its effects has also tended to make people more aware of the plight of others, the difficulties they face, and their contribution to society. These trends—combined with the rebirth of

communitarian spirit and the rise of younger generations who are more receptive to tackling long-standing societal inequality<sup>7</sup>—may create a space for progressive policies to be advanced if pitched correctly.

Second, for now, it seems that political parties of all persuasions have become social democratic, at least when it comes to economic intervention. As the pandemic took hold, and the economic consequences became ever more apparent, governments of all political persuasions—even the most conservative—began dramatic interventions into the economy to support incomes, businesses, and services. As the renowned Australian right-wing strategist Lynton Crosby noted in the early days of the crisis, “The state is back”—and it most likely will remain so for the foreseeable future.<sup>8</sup> The pandemic presented a problem on a scale that only government can solve—such as addressing scarce medical supplies and vaccine distribution across entire countries—thus bolstering support for the role of the state in solving some of today’s most pressing challenges. The emergence of a new social democratic consensus around the economy and the key role of government presents both opportunities and challenges for progressive ideas.

In this context, the fundamental political question to address is how to distinguish progressive agendas from their conservative and nationalist rivals. Some on the left seem persuaded, through a sort of confirmation bias, that the current political environment provides the foundations for greater spending on their predisposed policy interest—be that universal basic income, a Green New Deal, or otherwise. Yet as the reports in this series argue, a more appropriate response would be to pursue a more pragmatic economic recovery agenda focused on work and place. Moving beyond traditional tax-and-spend policies and redistribution, this agenda should be focused on predistribution and empowerment of workers, families, and communities. Such an agenda is advantageous not only because it will allow social democratic and labor parties to rediscover their political roots but also because it provides an opportunity to rebuild connections with those parts of the working class and the blue-collar workers with whom they’ve lost touch.

Third, even if the above challenges are met, progressives will still face two crucial challenges: technology and culture. The economic precarity that many societies feel is in large part driven by the enormous impact of technological innovation on economies and long predates the pandemic. To recapture an agenda for the future, progressives will need to illustrate that they understand technology. But more importantly, they will need a plan and strategy to ensure that technology works for the many and not the few; can be harnessed to improve public services,



create high-quality jobs, tackle racial and other injustices; and be used to help solve the world's most pressing global challenges such as climate change. Notably, by building and implementing this agenda, progressives may also be able to form alliances with groups, particularly among the entrepreneurial class, that have often been skeptical of their motives.

When it comes to culture, it is depressing to note how COVID-19 has become the latest front in the so-called culture wars, whether it be conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus, misinformation about how the virus is spread or the efficacy and dangers of therapeutic responses and vaccines, or indeed the anger stoked about social distancing, wearing masks, or implementing lockdowns. Of course, COVID-19 is but the newest axis in what Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, the well-known American scholars of populism, have termed the “cultural backlash” driving populism,<sup>9</sup> a trend that CAP has analyzed in greater detail in previous reports.<sup>10</sup> In responding to today's cultural backlash, the political challenge for progressives is to hold together a coalition that is sympathetic to its ambitions. Ensuring that those parts of the population that agree with the sentiment behind calls for tackling social and racial injustices—but may disagree on the policy changes needed—can trust progressives to provide balanced management of the issue will be key. To achieve this balance, progressives will need to address the interplay between culture and technology, and in particular tackle the negative effect social media can have in the public square and on democratic discourse in societies. Indeed, tackling “truth decay,”<sup>11</sup> as former President Barack Obama has noted,<sup>12</sup> has become a first-order issue in the defense and renewal of democracy, and thus the revival of progressive politics.

The lessons—both good and bad—from across the globe as well as from President-elect Biden's victory help progressive leaders toward navigating these three sets of challenges and the new political environment produced by the pandemic. Moreover, the opportunities presented by a future Biden administration to cooperate on pressing global challenges, and indeed the possibility to create new geopolitical architecture, could also help reshape the context in which these domestic political contests will play out. In the final analysis, however, the revival of progressive fortunes will remain a largely domestic challenge, albeit one that can be informed from lessons around the globe and a renewed spirit of and a new approach to multilateralism.

# Politics and the pandemic

Given the profound effect that the coronavirus has had on world economies and societies, it is not surprising that many have sought to question whether the pandemic might not also be the determining factor in domestic politics and recent elections.<sup>13</sup> After all, the United States has now lost more than 250,000 people to the virus, and almost 12 million people have been infected.<sup>14</sup> Could Trump's defeat have been avoided had he not so disastrously mismanaged the pandemic? Conversely, in New Zealand, where a little more than 2,000 people have contracted the virus, 25 have lost their lives, and the virus has been practically eradicated, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern resoundingly won reelection in early October.<sup>15</sup>

While gaming out counterfactual scenarios might be an interesting pastime, there is no clear evidence that a government's management of the pandemic favored progressives or conservatives. Rather, as a general rule, the advent of the pandemic seems to have helped incumbents in advanced democracies. To this extent, the cases of New Zealand and the United States may be extreme outliers from which it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions. More generally, although the policies and responses implemented to tackle the coronavirus challenge have varied, most advanced democratic governments—besides the United States—received strong public support for their handling of the pandemic. Polling in European countries, Canada, Australia, Japan, and South Korea this past summer suggests that most people believe their country has done a good job handling the outbreak.<sup>16</sup>

Political party and ideology also did not appear to affect public perception of an incumbent's handling of the coronavirus crisis. As Canadian strategist and researcher Don Guy notes in his paper for this series, a key takeaway for progressives is that voters have rallied around conservative and progressive political leaders alike. In Canada, for example, the liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the conservative Ontario Premier Doug Ford received almost equal favorability ratings in polling during the pandemic.<sup>17</sup> In the Netherlands, despite a slow reaction at the beginning of the pandemic—the country still shipped

medical masks to China as a sign of goodwill as the virus was spreading—center-right Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s job approval and electoral support for his party has shot up.<sup>18</sup> Similar trends in Norway and elsewhere have made it hard for progressive parties in opposition to gain traction in the political debate.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, support for the measures that governments have adopted seem similar regardless of the approach so long as they appeared to be taking some action. In Hungary, as Dániel Róna and his colleagues write in their paper, Orbán’s response was viewed positively by a slight majority of respondents even though most of the government’s efforts focused on publicity rather than effectively addressing the pandemic.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the most notable exception to this trend of rallying around the incumbent is in France, where President Emmanuel Macron’s approval ratings remained at the same low levels that predated the crisis.<sup>21</sup> As Bruno Jeanbart, managing director of OpinionWay, notes in his contribution to this series, the historical lack of trust the French people have in their government led officials there to impose uniquely stringent lockdowns with archaic restrictions and surveillance mechanisms,<sup>22</sup> which may partially explain this divergence. There is also little evidence that the French trust other political leaders to handle the crisis any better. For the United States, Trump’s reluctance to assume federal authority for the coronavirus response meant that governors and mayors played the more central role in devising measures to contain the pandemic—and received much higher favorability ratings as a result.<sup>23</sup>

While confidence in government responses do vary somewhat from county to country, these seem more reflective of differences across countries with regard to trust in government. In few if any countries, save perhaps the United States, does the public assume that opposition parties would do a dramatically better job.<sup>24</sup> Focus groups indicate that, in most countries, the public tends to believe that the pandemic is a nightmare scenario that would be problematic regardless of who is in power and that the trade-offs the pandemic imposes on society are always going to be difficult to navigate.

While the pandemic seems to have had little effect on the overall fortunes of one political tradition over the other, it is clear that the injustices and inequalities it has exposed have changed public perceptions of the societies in which they

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live. Addressing the disparities and inequalities exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic must be central to any progressive approach to recovery. It will be impossible to attain prepandemic GDP levels without rehiring women and supporting their reentry into the workplace.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the pandemic makes it all the more important that issues of racial injustice are redressed. And when it comes to elderly, the pandemic has highlighted the necessity of tackling labor market failures in nursing homes and care; many of the deaths attributed to the virus were spread by care workers who were forced to work multiple jobs or unable to take sick leave due to the precarious nature of their contracts.

## Inequality and the pandemic

At the time of writing, there have been more than 60 million coronavirus cases worldwide and more than 1.4 million deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>26</sup> Although mortality rates have declined as doctors have developed more effective treatment and new therapeutic drugs, excess deaths in countries have continued to climb. Notably, infection and mortality rates skew disproportionately toward communities of color—among both the general public and front-line service workers—pointing to what many see as the consequences of structural racism across mature democracies. In the United States, for example, people of color make up more than half of all deaths despite being just 40 percent of the U.S. population.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, a U.K. study found that British people of color were between 10 percent and 50 percent higher risk of dying from the virus than white British people at the height of the outbreak this summer.<sup>28</sup>

The economic impact of COVID-19 has also been skewed. Among those to be hit hardest by the pandemic are the economically worst off, women, and people of color. Workers in low-income industries around the world have been devastated by job losses and reduced hours or pay.<sup>29</sup> U.S. data show persistently higher rates of unemployment for Hispanic or Latino and Black or African American workers than white workers.<sup>30</sup> The pandemic has also created the first recession that is disproportionately affecting

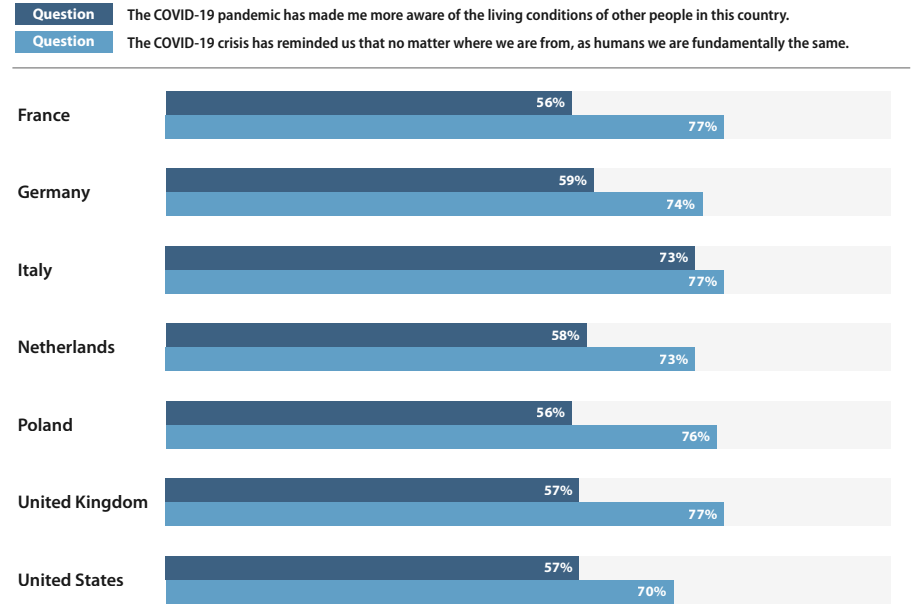
women (referred to by some as a “she-cession”), threatening to erase decades of progress toward gender equality.<sup>31</sup> Women make up 39 percent of global employment but account for 54 percent of overall job losses, according to one study.<sup>32</sup> A major reason for this disparity is that women tended to assume more child care responsibilities as schools closed, leaving them with no choice but to leave their jobs.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, because people of color, and especially women of color, around the world are more likely to work in front-line sectors such as health care or essential services, they have been doubly affected by the pandemic.<sup>34</sup>

The elderly also suffered disproportionately from COVID-19 outbreaks, particularly during the spring. Nursing homes and care facilities for the elderly were linked to up to half of all deaths in Europe, according to one World Health Organization study in April.<sup>35</sup> In Belgium, during the peak of the crisis, elderly care residents accounted for 2 out of 3 deaths in the country over the summer.<sup>36</sup> People in care homes made up more than half of England’s coronavirus-related deaths as of midsummer; in Australia, they accounted for about three-quarters of deaths.<sup>37</sup> And in the United States, adults 65 years and older accounted for 80 percent of deaths, with significantly disproportionate numbers of deaths in care facilities.<sup>38</sup>

The pandemic also seems to have raised people’s awareness of the situation that others in their societies find themselves in as well as peoples’ sense of shared humanity. Recent comparative research by More in Common has shown that a majority of people in the United States, U.K., France, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy feel that they have become more aware of how others live and also reminded that “we are fundamentally the same.”<sup>39</sup> Comparative data suggest that this awareness has been accompanied by a revival of communitarian spirit and that volunteering is on the rise amid the pandemic. A study by LinkedIn found a surge in workers in the United States adding volunteer experiences to their profiles.<sup>40</sup> In China, data collected from a digital app also demonstrated a surge in volunteerism.<sup>41</sup> In the U.K., a government call for 250,000 volunteers to support the National Health Service was forced to cut off applications after more than 750,000 people signed up.<sup>42</sup>

**FIGURE 1**  
**The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded people around the world of their shared humanity**

Polling from More in Common suggests that COVID-19 has made people more aware of others' living conditions and reminded them they are fundamentally the same



Source: More in Common, "The New Normal?", available at <https://www.moreincommon.com/newnormal/> (last accessed December 2020).

Anecdotal evidence—and viral social media posts—also suggests a rise in the communitarian experience. Early videos from March in Italy showed quarantined neighbors and well-known opera stars singing from open windows and balconies.<sup>43</sup> A 99-year-old English army veteran walked 100 laps in his garden and raised millions of pounds for the front-line health workers, completing his final lap live on the BBC.<sup>44</sup> In Spain, a viral video showed a fitness instructor leading a workout from a rooftop for dozens of neighbors on balconies and indoors nearby.<sup>45</sup> And survivors of the Spanish flu told stories of surviving their first pandemic and spent quarantine sewing face masks.<sup>46</sup>

For many progressives, the rise in awareness and communitarian spirit has been seen as an indicator that, at least in the medium term, progressive politics that support broad social welfare initiatives may benefit from the pandemic. It is unfortunately too early to tell whether this will be the case. As the pandemic has become more prolonged, traditional divisions and new political tensions have begun to emerge, and the economic and financial costs being incurred continue to mount. A recent study found that the pandemic is now having a divisive effect: 48 percent of respondents in the 14 advanced economies surveyed thought that divisions in national unity have grown.<sup>47</sup> Again, the United States is an extreme case: A staggering 77 percent of Americans feel the country is more divided.<sup>48</sup> An early indicator in many countries will be the public response to vaccine distribution plans that prioritize at-risk groups over the general population; support for such efforts could demonstrate a continuance of this communitarian spirit even as pandemic fatigue has set in.

The next phase of the pandemic response may bring an inflection point in the politics of the pandemic. Tensions between generations have started to become more pronounced, particularly with regards to social distancing and the spread of the virus by younger generations that are less fearful of its health implications.<sup>49</sup> So too have differences between rural and urban areas, between people with school-aged children at home and those without—each often have dramatically different experiences of the pandemic—sparked tensions. In the early days of the pandemic, many progressives seemed concerned with the effect that digital tracking and contact tracing systems might have on individual privacy.<sup>50</sup> But today, as governments are looking to break the trade-off between public health and reopening the economy, most people now seem more frustrated with the efficacy of the systems they have in place. Yet on the conservative side, the supposed civil liberty infringements associated with social distancing and lockdowns have become a new populist rallying call and look set to intensify not just in the United States

but also across Europe.<sup>51</sup> These tensions are likely to be further exacerbated once vaccines are ready to be rolled out, when some groups will be eligible for vaccination before others, which may be perceived as fair or not depending on how governments communicate distribution plans. Unfortunately, the impact of disinformation campaigns regarding the prevalence of the disease and unproven cures are soon likely to combine with those about the supposed dangers of vaccination. This is but a further illustration of the disruptive and destructive role that social media platforms play in today's politics as well as their role in driving so-called "truth decay."<sup>52</sup>

Rising tensions between different cohorts of society represent a challenge for progressives. To effectively harness the politics of recovery, progressives will need to balance these tensions and demonstrate progress in the next phase of the pandemic. The initial understanding that many citizens felt for governments dealing with unprecedented crises is waning, and a new front in the culture wars threatens to exacerbate tensions. Policy solutions to the pandemic will need to harness this renewed communitarian spirit by helping out those who are suffering most. Transparency in the decision-making process behind vaccine distribution plans, with clear explanations of why prioritizing some groups is important for the overall recovery, will be critical. Economic policies, discussed below, must provide relief to those who have been most affected by the crisis such as women, people of color, and lower-income workers. Progressives will need a carefully crafted message to convince constituents of their governing capabilities and the merits of a smart agenda for implementing their ideas.

# A new 'social democratic' consensus

No country has escaped the economic fallout of the pandemic. Economists have predicted that the global recession will be long-lasting as GDPs have taken a hit and unemployment has risen (or will rise once government-sponsored employment programs run out). To keep economies and citizens afloat, government spending has necessarily skyrocketed.<sup>53</sup> The United States passed an unprecedented \$2 trillion stimulus deal, and the EU passed an \$857 billion package to help less-wealthy states in the European bloc.<sup>54</sup> Government debt around the world has increased as countries have sought to support workers and businesses through the pandemic, as the text box below illustrates.<sup>55</sup> Tax, mortgage, and rental obligations were suspended or reduced to ensure that working people were not put in more difficult financial straits. Grants and loans were given to suffering businesses, and direct government support was provided to prop up critical industries such as health care and other social services.

## International responses to the economic fallout from the pandemic

- **Supporting workers who experienced unemployment or lost income:**

Australia, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Hong Kong, Italy, and the U.K. released early economic stimulus packages with funds dedicated to supporting vulnerable workers. To prevent mass layoffs, the British government covered 80 percent of salaries of retained workers, and Denmark agreed to cover 75 percent.<sup>56</sup> Australia, Hong Kong, and the United States provided one-time payments to citizens to help stimulate the economy and provide relief to working families.<sup>57</sup>

- **Supporting small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs):** Many European

countries took steps to directly support businesses. Germany provided “unlimited” credit access to businesses through its national development bank and pledged to underwrite companies’ debts.<sup>58</sup> France, Denmark, and Japan pledged to guarantee loans for SMEs.<sup>59</sup> At the regional level, the European Central Bank pledged to support commercial banks who were lending to SMEs.<sup>60</sup> The United States started a Paycheck Protection Program that provided forgivable low-interest loans to small businesses to support employees.<sup>61</sup>



- **Reducing fiscal and tax burdens:** Another common intervention was to reduce tax, mortgage, and rental obligations by suspending or deferring repayments. Spain and Italy froze mortgage payments through the end of the year.<sup>62</sup> The U.K. and the United States passed eviction moratoriums, preventing landlords from evicting tenants who could no longer afford rent.<sup>63</sup> Indonesia and Thailand, respectively, suspended and reduced income tax to stimulate spending.<sup>64</sup>
- **Supporting health care providers:** Many governments also dedicated relief funds to supplementing the health care sector. South Korea reserved a portion of its stimulus package for medical institutions and quarantine efforts.<sup>65</sup> The U.K., Italy, and New Zealand pledged additional funds for health services and workers.<sup>66</sup> Spain, Japan, and the United States invoked laws to nationalize certain supply chains or procure supplies.<sup>67</sup>

Among the first to enact such policies was the Danish Social Democratic government led by Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, whose policies attracted a great deal of international interest.<sup>68</sup> The Danes' lead was soon followed by governments of all political persuasions. In essence, the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic created a social democratic moment or consensus, but one that was not dependent on the presence of a social democratic parties in government.<sup>69</sup>

While a number of conservative governments have indicated that they might wish to end government economic support sooner than those led by social democratic parties—notably Johnson's conservatives in the U.K.<sup>70</sup> and Scott Morrison's liberals in Australia<sup>71</sup>—they have often been forced to reverse course as new waves of the pandemic have hit. Indeed, current polling suggests that so long as the pandemic persists, the public in most countries will continue to support borrowing and investment in the economy. In the United States, less than half of U.S. adults called the deficit “a very big problem” this summer even as it grew from \$779 billion at the end of fiscal year 2018 to \$2.8 trillion in July 2020.<sup>72</sup> In Canada, as Don Guy notes in this series, until the pandemic has retreated and economic activity has recommenced, voters overwhelmingly support borrowing and investment of management of deficits and debt,<sup>73</sup> while in Europe public support for sharing the economic burden remains high.<sup>74</sup> Among the elite policy community, it is also noteworthy that the International Monetary Fund and United Nations have also encouraged greater spending to help countries survive the economic crisis. In September, the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development declared that “bold public spending [is the] only way to recover better from COVID-19.”<sup>75</sup>

Despite this broad consensus, perhaps unsurprisingly, conflicts between progressives and conservatives have emerged over the specific use and allocation of funds. Progressive parties in opposition have often distinguished between merited or productive support for workers, families, and businesses and what they have termed “corporate welfare,” or support for businesses that asks for little if anything in return for the investment or grants received.<sup>76</sup> In the Netherlands, for example, the leader of the Dutch Labour Party, Lodewijk Asscher, has been highly critical of the unconditional support that the Rutte government has given to airlines and online platforms that have previously acted in a cavalier manner toward the local community or done little to move toward a more sustainable footing.<sup>77</sup> Second, and more recently, progressives have also begun to question the manner in which emergency contracts—whether for personal protective equipment or testing—have been allocated. In the U.K., for example, there have been growing concerns about the lack of transparency in this process as well as the cozy relationship many of those award contracts have with the Conservative Party or ministers.<sup>78</sup>

Indeed, it is with regards to the future direction of the economy, and how current funds might be used to help to direct it, that dividing lines are most stark and indeed likely to become more pronounced. On the one extreme, there are those best exemplified by Australian Prime Minister Morrison, who is advocating for a “snap back” of the economy and a return to the way things used to be.<sup>79</sup> On the other extreme stands the idea of “build back better,” a central pillar of the Biden-Harris campaign—and now transition—which has also become a mantra for progressives globally and was adopted by the World Economic Forum.<sup>80</sup> On this policy area, the response to the pandemic is reaching an inflection point. Many policymakers will admit that as the pandemic hit, support for the economy was as much about avoiding the worst consequences of the downturn as it was about thinking about the strategic direction of the economy as a whole or specific businesses and industries in question. Now that the initial crisis moment has passed and it is clear that significant funds will likely need to be invested in economic recovery, this will increasingly become a battle line.

What is clear from the contributions to this series is that any progressive recovery project should not simply focus on the big-picture direction of the economy and government investment but also on the way in which this might be structured. As Marcus Roberts, director of international projects at YouGov, illustrated in his analysis of the challenges facing the U.K. Labour Party published by the Progressive Centre UK, a truly progressive agenda must understand the importance of ensuring that working people have agency over their lives. Part

of this means ensuring that “hard work will pay off, without the need for what is sometimes felt to be charity from government in the form of tax credits or welfare payments.”<sup>81</sup> To achieve this, Roberts advocates for a genuine left-based political economy that delivers predistribution rather than redistribution, ensuring that wealth no longer simply flows from top to the bottom but rather is generated at all levels of society. Companies that have benefited from the pandemic should be expected to pay their fair share in the new economy.

Regional growth and workplace democracy, Roberts argues, can be the engines of this change through an ambitious program of regional bank development with high market capitalization. Similarly, a radical program of workplace democracy involving the empowerment of workers in pay remuneration committees and worker representation on boards could empower workers with shared responsibility for wage decision-making. Lower wages, he argues, can rise rather than welfare being called on to alleviate in-work poverty. All of this amounts to a “politics of control” in which workers themselves feel genuine agency over their time, money, and power. Taking this notion of agency one step further, Dutch political strategist Hans Anker posits a creative approach to worker empowerment through a points system for lower-income workers that helps them earn credits that could be used for educational courses, job coaches, and sabbaticals and thus enables them to take more control over their employment prospects.<sup>82</sup>

A similar approach to workplace agency is advocated by Nick Dyrenfurth, executive director of the John Curtin Research Centre in Australia, in his analysis of the challenges facing the Australian Labor Party for the Centre. Codetermination policies, he argues, are also a way to lift worker productivity and increase workplace collaboration.<sup>83</sup> For Dyrenfurth, such democratization initiatives should also be extended beyond the workplace to public services too, further empowering citizens and communities. He also proposes establishing tripartite boards constituted of caregivers, patients, and family members to assure appropriate governance—particularly in elderly care homes where the pandemic has exposed the precarity of care.

The message here is clear: Progressive leaders need to follow in the footsteps of the former German Social Democratic Chancellor Willy Brandt and “dare more democracy.”<sup>84</sup> Underpinning this strategic recommendation is a recognition that this agenda may also allow progressive parties (which these authors assert have become too preoccupied with identity politics and the postmodern concerns of urban voters) to reconnect with a voting base they have alienated—namely blue-collar workers—that had previously been the genesis of the progressive movement.

Interestingly, this outreach to alienated blue-collar and small-town voters seems to speak as much to the challenges facing progressives in Central and Eastern Europe as it does those in the mature Western democracies. As Konrad Golota, Adam Traczyk, Dani Rona, and others argue in this series, progressives in Poland and Hungary have far too often failed to take seriously the economic and social woes facing working-class and rural voters in their countries. An integral part of Fidesz’s strategy in Hungary, or the Law and Justice’s strategy in Poland, has been to effectively become the natural party of those who have lost out from globalization or the transition from communism to capitalism. Failing to recognize the real financial and social support these parties provide to these voters has helped to further alienate them from progressive opposition parties. This alienation is often compounded by the opposition’s focus on abstract issues concerning democracy and the rule of law—which have little resonance among people who are struggling to make ends meet—combined with a rather condescending attitude toward this group’s disinterest in these matters. Indeed, the need to move beyond the politics of condescension and to identifying ways of engaging more respectfully with those who have different worldviews is now a crucial challenge for many progressives and one on which progressives could learn much from President-elect Biden’s tone and demeanor.

For the progressive movement moving forward, the key challenge in the economic recovery from the pandemic is not garnering support for mass spending initiatives but effectively guiding the direction of this spending. Progressives should seize the opportunity of the pandemic recovery to restructure the fundamentals of the economy in ways that empower those who have lost out over the past few decades such as lower-wage workers, while also redressing long-standing systemic inequality and racism inherent in the political structures of advanced democracies.

# Tackling culture and technology

Whatever has changed during the pandemic, two core challenges remain for progressives: effectively addressing culture and identity and dealing with technology and change. In the future, progressives' ability to outline a position on cultural issues—whether on racial injustice, migration, or other areas—will become more important as these issues become inevitably more challenging. Politically, this requires building a coalition that is supportive of the sentiment of those who advocate for greater racial justice, more openness, and the acceptance of refugees but who are not necessarily convinced of all of the policy responses that progressives propose.

A key example of this is how, for the first time, the politics of climate change were a central feature of the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign. This is perhaps unsurprising, as the catastrophic human impact of climate change has become ever more apparent, whether through wildfires ripping through states or record-breaking tropical storms hitting the homeland.<sup>85</sup> These climate crises have also increased migratory pressures, as climate refugees from the global south are forced to seek safety elsewhere.<sup>86</sup> In this context, it is not just that the cultural politics of identity will become more intense in advanced countries around the world, though they inevitably will, but rather that the need to accelerate the transition to a net-zero carbon economy will become more acute.

The key challenge for progressives is for their agenda to be pitched correctly. When it comes to public opinion, a recent comparative survey conducted by More in Common indicates that there is an appetite for the funds invested to bring about positive change rather than a return to normal.<sup>87</sup> The polling indicated that the desire to see such change is greater in those countries that have seen poorer management of the pandemic, which might also explain why they are also more skeptical about whether positive change can be achieved.<sup>88</sup> In this regard, there is a potential opportunity for progressives to advance an agenda to tackle big global challenges—in particular climate change—capable of garnering public support.



As the papers in this series note, even though the public seems less concerned by climate change now and considers it less of a priority than they did before the pandemic, they still remain largely supportive of investments that will create jobs, spur economic opportunity, and help make the transition to a carbon-neutral economy.<sup>89</sup> That said, progressives need to understand that public support for public borrowing and spending is not limitless and that, while they hope it will lift others out of poverty, they are also of the mind that it must be a tide that lifts all boats. Framing for these policies matters; whether an issue is pitched as helping others versus helping everyone can easily affect how much public support it garners. Progressives need to make the case that their priorities are not narrowly tied to helping a particular class or group of people but that they are broadly conceived to help everyone in tangible ways. The pandemic is an opportunity to help explain how interlinked we all are and how much our individual prosperity depends on the rising tide that lifts all boats.

Another related political challenge here, and one successfully navigated by the Biden-Harris team over the past year, is how to hold a progressive coalition together. All too often in progressive politics, the so-called sensible politicians that appeal to moderates don't seem radical enough to the more progressive wings, while what the so-called radical progressives find appealing doesn't seem sensible or credible to more moderate voters. While there is a raging debate about which constituency was core to the Biden-Harris victory—and which political strategy may or may not have cost Democrats seats in the U.S. House of Representatives<sup>90</sup>—what is not in question is that the Biden policy team has been able to present a relatively radical progressive economic recovery agenda while holding the support of more moderate voters and broader elements of the progressive coalition together. It is unclear whether any other Democratic candidate could have performed this feat. Biden continually outperformed the Democratic Party across the country. Moreover, Biden was able to win back a high proportion of unionized and former unionized voters in “blue wall” states such as Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania<sup>91</sup> as well as, and perhaps more importantly, suburban women more generally.<sup>92</sup>

## Biden's economic agenda

The “build back better” economic policy proposals<sup>93</sup> articulated by President-elect Biden demonstrate the concept of tying progressive ideas to priorities that affect working families.

- **“Mobilize American manufacturing and innovation to ensure that the future is made in America, and in all of America.”** This policy approach prioritizes creating union jobs in manufacturing and technology to support U.S. economic recovery.
- **“Mobilize American ingenuity to build a modern infrastructure and an equitable, clean energy future.”** This calls for building a clean energy economy and addressing environmental injustice.
- **“Mobilize American talent and heart to build a 21st century caregiving and education workforce which will help ease the burden of care for working parents, especially women.”** This policy direction addresses the unique impacts of this pandemic and recession on women and prioritizes their needs in recovery.
- **“Mobilize across the board to advance racial equity in America.”** This approach calls for tackling systemic racism, closing the racial wealth gap, and investing in marginalized communities.

Tackling culturally sensitive issues in a way that keeps a progressive coalition together and is framed as improving prospects for everyone will be crucial. Increasing global migration is one such emblematic issue, where conservatives and populists continue to portray migration as a threat to lower-wage worker prosperity rather than an asset to national economic development.<sup>94</sup> When it comes to migrants and refugees, progressives will need to address these challenges through two channels: embedding this policy in a rights and responsibilities agenda and accelerating the process of social and economic integration of newcomers to societies. Here, policies such as integration loans, which also have the benefit of reassuring blue-collar workers that funds needed for integration are not being reallocated from other communities in need, are worthy of further investigation. These types of policies help illustrate, at the very least, that progressives are not outsourcing the solution of this challenge to the most radical members of the progressive coalition.

Another challenge for progressives will be how to handle the broader issues of technological innovation and its impact on societies, economies, and democracies. Technological change will have a broad range of effects and indeed is driven by a multitude of strategies. Will some forms of technological change imply little more than the automation of existing jobs to drive up efficiency and simple profitability? That well could be the case, however the technological innovation associated with the transition to a carbon-neutral economy, for example, presents the opportunity to both retain existing industries—through the production of carbon-free steel and cement—as well as create new jobs associated with the infrastructure required to shift to renewable power sources. What is most challenging about the shift toward the carbon-neutral and digital economy, and the economic disruptions associated with it, is that such a shift hits political tensions at the heart of many progressive coalitions, namely between urban-value voters and those voters employed in the blue-collar manufacturing sector. In this regard, the challenge for progressives will be to ensure that there is a set of flanking policies that ensure any transition is not just focused on job creation but on economic justice, ensuring that those who suffer economic disruption are supported. Indeed, if such a frame is not created, then the likelihood that such a transition would not merely be resisted but actually feed populism that prevents it happening is exceptionally high.

The current environment of political protests is also exacerbated by the challenge of technological change.<sup>95</sup> The polarization and fragmentation of the political debate, aided and abetted by social media platforms, means that it is far easier today to mobilize opposition to change than it is to build consensus around the necessary policy solutions. It is, therefore, more important than ever for progressives both to reaffirm the idea that progress is possible—understood as advancement and improvement for all of society<sup>96</sup>—and also work to build broad support around an inclusive agenda that limits the political space for populists. Again, tackling disinformation—or challenging how some social media platforms’ insistence on treating denial of climate change as a matter of opinion—will also be critical.<sup>97</sup> Rumors and false information about the viability of vaccines or therapeutics for COVID-19 treatment will be an immediate testing ground for technology companies in this regard—one they currently seem likely to fail, according to a recent report by the Center for Countering Digital Hate.<sup>98</sup>

Once progressives have accepted that, alongside culture and identity, technological change is the political challenge of this generation, then the goal becomes one of designing a progressive agenda that resonates with the public based on the reaffirmation of core progressive strengths and objectives. These include an honest drive to ensure that the public at large can benefit from the practical benefits of new technology, whether that be through revolutionizing health care and education through predictability and personalization, or a renewed focus on building an agenda for inclusive, high-technology prosperity. With regards to this latter point, public investment—perhaps through the creation of an Advanced Research Projects Agency in every country—and smart regulation to promote public interest development is going to be needed to counter the commercial interests of Big Tech companies. These corporate behemoths should not have a monopoly on shaping the future nor on reaping the profits from the transition toward it.

In shaping a bold ambition for the public good, progressives may well open themselves up to building new—and what at the outset might seem unlikely—coalitions for change. Whatever their differences, technologists and progressives often share a common goal: making the world a better place. Moreover, creating a diverse rather than uniform society, one that is flat rather than hierarchical, is a common ambition for both. This suggests that progress toward common goals may be more achievable than previously assumed.

## Conclusion: A way forward

While it is tempting to suppose that recovery from the pandemic presents a new dawn for progressive politics, it is perhaps more accurate to think of the pandemic as the prelude for what is to come. Now is not the time to celebrate. President Trump may have lost the election, but Trumpism is yet to be defeated, and populism remains a formidable force around the globe. There is also much still that requires focused, full, and immediate attention.

The structural trends driving politics in Western democracies have not been fundamentally disrupted by the pandemic. If anything, it seems that they have been accelerated and intensified. Looking ahead, the choice facing Western democracies could well continue to be between a progressive politics of inclusion and hope focused on tackling real-world problems or a populist politics of division based in a denial of reality and refusal to tackle global challenges.

Undoubtedly, a Biden-Harris administration presents new opportunities for the progressive movement to change the odds of which of these political options will prevail. Renewed international engagement will be more important than ever not only in establishing mechanisms for better cooperation on global challenges but also in underwriting democracy. Here, as CAP has continually argued, the United States should draw on its formal alliances and partners with democracies from Europe to Asia and beyond to create a progressive alliance.<sup>99</sup> By bringing together partners with shared values into a broader security architecture, the United States and other democracies will be better able to collaborate on regional and global security issues as well as pressing global challenges.<sup>100</sup>

President-elect Biden has already pledged to hold a Summit for Democracy.<sup>101</sup> While the agenda for such a gathering has yet to be defined, it seems increasingly clear that the first order of business there must be to tackle the disruptions to the public square and “truth decay” driven by social media. The disruption of democracy, or rather the future of democracy, has now become a first-order issue. It will be impossible to solve for issues of economic and social inequality, racial



injustice, and climate change, among others, unless we can have a reasonable and reasoned debate about the true nature of the challenges we face and the solutions progressivism can bring to them.<sup>102</sup>

Beyond this, however, the summit must focus on making progressive policies deliver results for working people and tackling the cultural and technology transformation that lay before us. The time for progressives to unite around this agenda as a priority is now.

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