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## Election tension dashes dreams of post-campaign calm, clear mandate

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The massive voter turnout in the 2020 election and the narrow margin in the vote brought into stark relief a deepening divide in the U.S. that has robbed the winner of a clear political mandate.

The dynamic is dashing voters' dreams of a calm after the campaign storm and adding to the sense that the country is a powder keg.

Nina Turner, a senior adviser to Sen. Bernard Sanders' 2020 presidential campaign, said neither of the political parties received a clear edict from voters.

"If Democrats had a mandate, we would know who won by now," Mrs. Turner told The Washington Times.

"People who voted, by and large, voted mainly because they were anti-Trump and not necessary pro-the Democratic candidate or the Democratic agenda," she said, expressing dismay in the Democratic candidate Joseph R. Biden's lack of a clear economic vision. "This was totally, 'I can't take any more of Donald J. Trump drama and trauma.'"

But the country has been growing increasingly polarized for the past two decades, reaching record levels of partisan division during Barack Obama's presidency, according to data collected by the Pew Research Center.

Mr. Obama played a part. In an infamous exchange with then-House Minority Whip Eric Cantor, Mr. Obama told the Republican in 2009, "Elections have consequences, and Eric, I won."

Then-Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell also contributed to the partisan tenor, admitting a chief goal was to make Mr. Obama a "one-term" president.

While all the ballots haven't been counted yet, the turnout already broke records with more than 141 million votes cast.

Mr. Biden and Mr. Trump are separated by just 3.8 million votes, or 2.7%, with tens of millions of Americans on opposing sides.

Speaking on Fox News this week, Robert P. George, a professor at Princeton University, said the nation is bitterly divided along moral and ideological lines, and that the parties are transforming.

"We are divided ideologically, we are divided between the religious and the secular, we are divided along lines of class, and of course we also have divisions along lines of race," Mr. George said.

Mr. George said the Republican Party appears to be morphing into the party of working-class voters, while Democrats have moved away from those votes and become “the party of the professional classes and of the new super-rich — especially in the tech sector.”

New America Foundation’s Lee Drutman, author of the book “Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America,” recently wrote in the libertarian Cato Institute’s Cato Policy Report the polarization is threatening the rule of law and adherence to constitutional norms.

“When ‘winning’ becomes everything, and winning means dehumanizing the other side for short-term gain, it legitimates increasingly extreme behavior on both sides,” Mr. Drutman said.

“I call this problem the ‘two-party doom loop,’” he said. “The idea is similar to an arms race, or any self-reinforcing feedback loop of escalation. More aggressive actions on one side justify more aggressive actions on the other side.”

Mr. Biden, who served as vice president in the Obama White House, is vowing to lower the partisan temperature and bring America together.

“Once this election is finalized and behind us it will be time for us to do as we’ve always do as Americans, put the harsh rhetoric of the campaign behind us, to lower the temperature, to see each other again, to listen to one another, to hear each other again and respect and care for one another, to unite, to heal, to come together as a national,” Mr. Biden said this week. “To make progress we have to stop treating our opponents as enemies. We are not enemies.

“Let me be clear. We are campaigning as Democrats, but I will govern as an American president.”

That could be easier said than done — particularly given that many Trump backers are echoing the president’s charge that Mr. Biden and Democrats are trying to steal the election.

They blame Democrats for driving the division, saying they inflamed the rancor in the country by playing politics with the coronavirus pandemic.

“The Democrats spent seven months scaring the heck out of people and their voter base,” said John Fredericks, Trump’s Virginia campaign chair. “Now you have the chaos they wanted to ensure they could manufacture the votes they ended to get the orange man out.”

Democrats had hoped the anti-Trump sentiment would not only carry Mr. Biden into The White House but also fuel a takeover of the Senate and bolster their House majority.

Instead, Democrats lost seats in the House and Republicans are clinging to control of the upper chamber.

Mr. Fredericks said the election laid bare the differences between the major parties.

“Our policies bring people together and their policies divide people,” he said. “They are all about grievance and victimhood. That drives them.”

Mrs. Turner had a different take.

“I think we learned that the unfinished business of this nation is still unfinished — that the stain of white supremacy, anti-blackness, and the other isms that are intersected with that level of

hatred is real,” she said. “We have been living in a fantasy. It was all an illusion before Donald J. Trump came along.”

“There is an anxiety here that is linked both to race and to class that if it is not dealt with it pits one group against the other, and what President Trump was able to do is he tapped into the racial anxiety on the white working-class side and just lit a torch to that.”

Charlie Gerow, a member of the American Conservative Union, said the 2020 election proved the nation is “nowhere near going down the socialist path that some hoped.”

“America is never going to be a socialist country,” Mr. Gerow said. “We just may sadly edge closer to it.”

Mr. Gerow said the nation’s education system is part of the problem.

“The education process has unfortunately convinced a lot of people that the country needs to be fundamentally restructured,” he said.

Despite those concerns, Mr. Gerow said he finds comfort in an old political adage: “If you’re not a liberal when you’re 25, you have no heart. If you’re not a conservative by the time you’re 35, you have no brain.”