Opinion

News



Democratic presidential candidate and former Vice President Joe Biden sits and talks with local residents about the effects of the coronavirus disease pandemic on their small businesses, on the outside patio of the Carlette's Hideaway sports bar June 17 during a campaign stop in Yeadon, Pennsylvania. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Last week, I called attention to an article at Politico by Steven Shepard entitled, ominously, "Trump has a point about the polls." He recounted how President Donald Trump reacted to a CNN poll that showed him trailing former vice president Joe Biden by 14 points. He ranted, and demanded an apology, but what he really did is remind his base that they will need to turn out and vote for him if he is going to win this thing.

Then, at FiveThirtyEight.com, the website that specializes in statistical analysis, Nate Silver wrote about their weighted, national average giving Joe Biden a 9-point lead. The subhead of the article gave me the chills: "But the race is closer in swing states, which could allow Trump to win the Electoral College if the race tightens."

Both columns examined what happened four years ago, when pollsters missed what was brewing within the electorate: white, working-class voters, who had begun tilting toward the Republicans over the years, went all-in for Trump, and some who had not voted for years, thinking it would not make a difference, turned out to vote for Trump who presented himself as their champion.

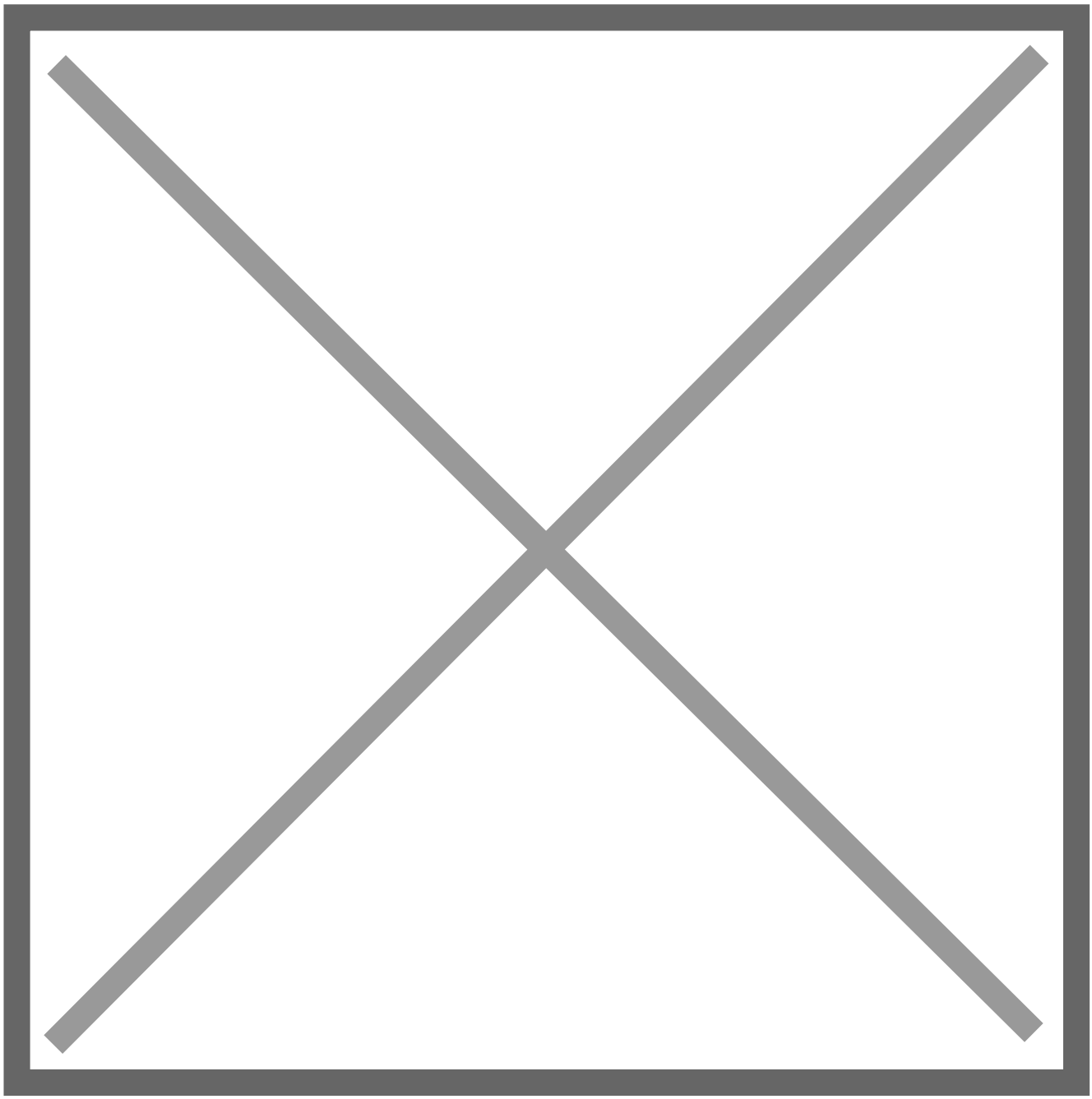
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The irony, the grim irony, is that Trump has never been the champion of working-class Americans. At the time of the 2019 government shutdown, John Nichols, at The Nation, drew the connections between Trump's business practices and his politics, between his long history of cheating workers and contractors — refusing to pay them and using bankruptcy procedures to dodge justice, all the while living his lavish lifestyle — and his approach to governance. Only an interlude in the inappropriately named world of reality TV allowed him to transform himself into the champion of the working class, a master at nurturing and exploiting grievances and resentments.

Not everyone fell for his act. It is worth going back and looking at the raw numbers in 2016. Hillary Clinton really did get 3 million more votes than Trump, but they were not distributed in the places she needed them to be. And, importantly, she only captured 48% of the vote nationally. In key swing states where white, non-college voters made the difference, the election was exceedingly close. The margin in Pennsylvania was only 44,292 votes, in Wisconsin, only 22,748 votes, and Michigan's 16 electoral votes went to Trump because he won only 10,704 more ballots than Clinton in that state.

It was a close-run thing.

Looking at the polling numbers now, the difference between Trump's disapproval rating (55.2%) and the percentage of people supporting Biden (50.3%) is the difference between a landslide and the kind of close-run race we saw in 2016. In the coming months, we will discuss how Biden makes sure he secures a landslide. But it is hard to see how he flips Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, putting them back in the Democratic column, unless he wins back some of those white, non-college voters. And, let's be clear: A disproportionate number of whom are Roman Catholic.



Screenshot of FiveThirtyEight's 2020 presidential election poll (NCR screenshot)

The other day, a friend called me about something unrelated to the election. She is very conservative and I do not think she has ever voted for a Democratic candidate for president. She is very concerned about pro-life issues, not just abortion to be sure, but has certainly not been made to feel welcome as a pro-life voter in the Democratic Party for many years. She told me that if Biden were to give some signal, any signal, even just saying that of course pro-life voters were welcome in

the Democratic Party, she and a whole lot of her friends would, as it were, jump the shark and vote Democratic. She was disgusted by Trump and could not overlook the many ways his policies contradicted his claim to be pro-life, from his harsh treatment of immigrants to his indifference to the spread of COVID-19, to his bizarre photo ops at St. John's Episcopal Church and St. John Paul II National Shrine.

Given the tenor of the times, I am not sure Biden, the first Catholic presidential nominee since John Kerry, would risk saying anything that might offend the pro-choice powers within the Democratic Party. But he will soon nominate a vice presidential candidate and we know that it will be a woman. As part of that selection process, the Biden campaign should ask each potential running mate if they would be willing to have a "Sister Souljah moment" with the pro-choice caucus. I suspect there are hundreds of thousands of working class — and middle class — Catholics like my friend, people who are deeply, profoundly pro-life, but would be willing to vote for Biden if only his campaign gave some sign that they were not entirely beholden to the abortion rights groups.

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No one should think that the defeat of Trump in November is a done deal. Five months is forever in politics. Working-class voters of all races are struggling because of the pandemic and people who are struggling can often buy into solutions that are simplistic but that at least acknowledge the hurt. If the Democrats exude a shrill, neo-orthodoxy built around neuralgic social issues, if they present themselves as the party of late-term abortion, if they speak about free college but never about how they will help those kids who do not go to college, if they pander to every constituency with no vision for the nation as a whole, they risk returning Trump to the White House.

In countless ways, the traditional Democratic Party, with its focus on economic and social justice, should be ready to take the reins of power and propel the nation forward with sustained, vigorous leadership. I am reminded of Franklin Delano

Roosevelt's first inaugural address:

> We face the arduous days that lie before us in the warm courage of the national unity; with the clear consciousness of seeking old and precious moral values; with the clean satisfaction that comes from the stem performance of duty by old and young alike. We aim at the assurance of a rounded and permanent national life. We do not distrust the future of essential democracy. The people of the United States have not failed. In their need they have registered a mandate that they want direct, vigorous action. They have asked for discipline and direction under leadership. They have made me the present instrument of their wishes. In the spirit of the gift I take it.

Political power is there for Biden and the Democrats to take, if they do not first shoot themselves in the foot.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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