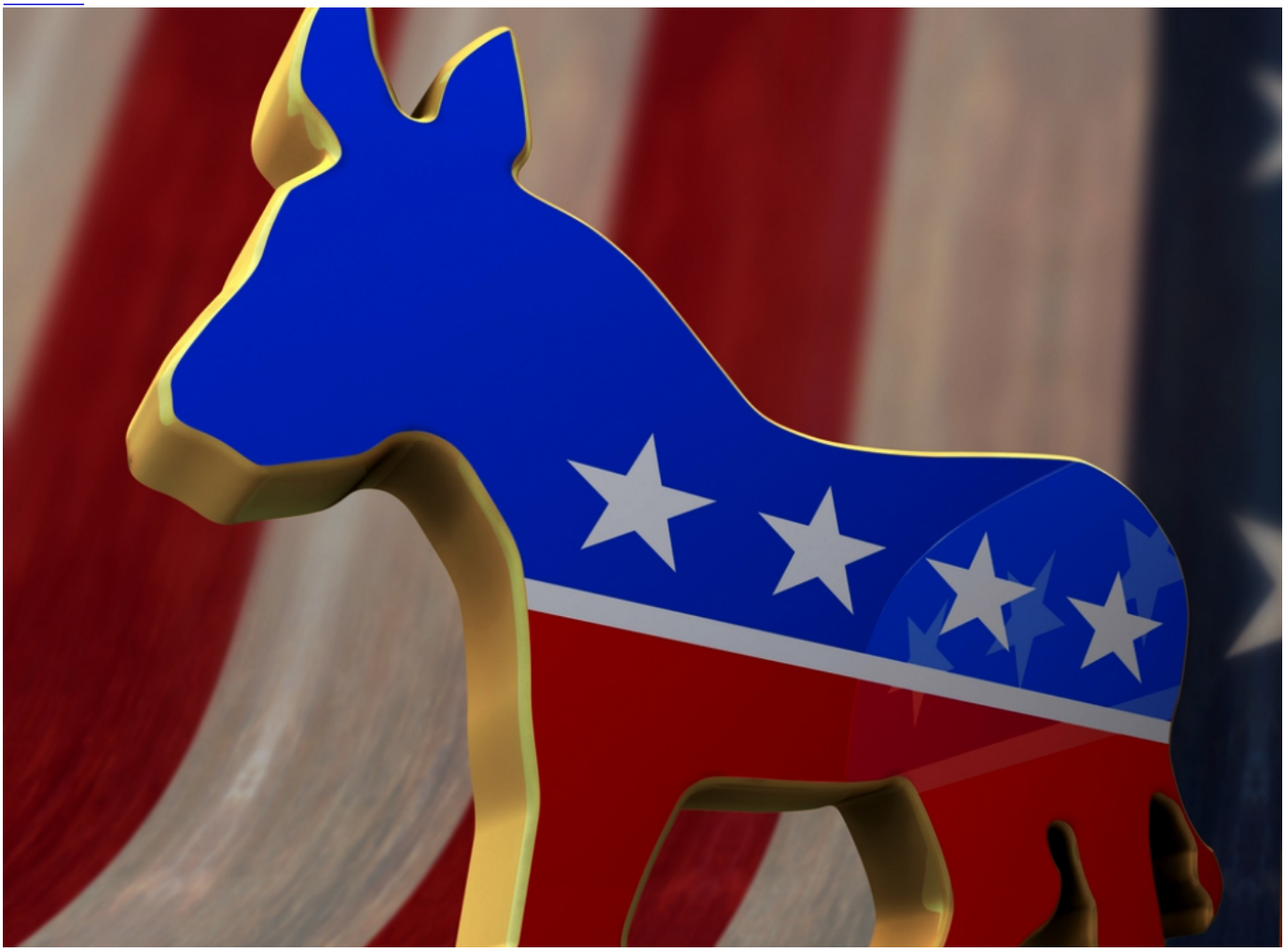
Opinion
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by Michael Sean Winters

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The strangest Democratic National Convention in history kicks off today. Instead of gathering in Milwaukee's spacious Fiserv Forum to officially designate Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as the party's standard bearers, the nominees will appear, and the delegates will watch, on TV and computer screens. Politics in the age of COVID-19. Crimped. Scripted. Disembodied.

Yet, what the body politic, the polis, needs is a politics that is anything but crimped. 2020 is the year in which the need for effective government has never been more pronounced. The economic crash will require bold experimentation, a willingness to go off script, an urgency not seen in recent years. And the values that have become transcendently necessary in this crisis, most especially solidarity and expertise, must reach from the halls of power to kitchen tables nationwide, an embodied solidarity and concrete expertise.

2020 is the year for casting aside, at least for now but hopefully for a long time, the libertarian impulse that has long been a recessive gene in the American psyche but became a dominant one during the Reaganite-Thatcherite revolution.

The candidates and delegates may not have access to the bleachers in Milwaukee, but this year, no one in the whole country is allowed to sit on the bleachers politically. Everyone is on the field. The consequences of governmental decision-making are immediately — and frighteningly — tangible at the nursing home down the street, the August unemployment stipend that is not in the bank account, the parents, teachers and students for whom there are insufficient tests to reopen school safely. The COVID-19 pandemic yields mountains of data, but for no one is it merely a theoretical exercise.

In years past, national conventions have also been exercises in persuasion, trying to simultaneously energize the base while attracting undecided, usually centrist, voters. Is anyone undecided about Donald Trump? Every election comes down to a simple choice: Is it time for a change? Millions of Americans support the president

and millions do not, but they made up their mind a long time ago.

The time for persuasion is past. The message from the convention is all about motivating voters who support Biden to get out and vote.

Different voters will be motivated by different messages. The base responds to a certain set of messages while centrist voters respond to other messages. Even within the base, there are economic progressives and there are social issue progressives, each group motivated by different issues and ideas. Sometimes there is overlap.

I suspect most people who voted for Bernie Sanders are also pro-choice on abortion, but not all. Since February, I have been urging readers to consult the research by Lee Drutman that demonstrates how there are few voters who are fiscally conservative and socially liberal, the Michael Bloomberg voters, while there are millions who are economically liberal and socially conservative, the Pope Francis voters.

Sadly, those who run campaigns and staff congressional offices tend to fall into the Bloomberg camp or they identify as liberal on both sets of issues.

Biden and his campaign team need to decide if they are going for a big win, or if they are simply aiming to get to 270 electoral votes. Put differently, will Biden run a campaign that seeks to win by as large a margin as possible so that he genuinely can claim to have been tasked by the American people with uniting the country? Or is this just about regaining the White House and the political power that goes with it?

These questions are not only about political strategy. Elections create mandates, but only for what the candidate campaigned for. If Biden wants to really "heal the soul of the nation," then he needs to aim for a big win, he needs to build as big a tent as possible, and that means he needs to calibrate the message coming from the little screens this week.

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First, and straight from the Catholic social teaching wheelhouse that has shaped Biden throughout his life, the main themes of this convention should be human dignity and the common good. The moral and political shackles of libertarianism

have been obvious for some time.

In June 2014, Stephen Schneck worked with the AFL-CIO to host a daylong conference on the topic of "Erroneous Autonomy: The Catholic Case Against Libertarianism" at which AFL-CIO president Rich Trumka introduced Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga who gave the keynote address and Blase Cupich, then bishop of Spokane, Washington, delivered a spectacular response. Two additional conferences continued to examine that theme and, at Boston College, Alan Wolfe organized a related conference "Why Libertarianism Isn't Liberal."

Not everyone was listening and, consequently, at the 2016 national convention, the nation saw delegates applaud NARAL president Ilyse Hogue when she shared her story about getting an abortion. Her argument was pure libertarianism. If you want to turn off the suburban moderates who delivered the House of Representatives to the Democrats in 2018, have someone this year "shout out" their abortion. Many suburban voters support access to legal abortion, especially in the first trimester, but they are not extremists.

The pandemic should put the final nail in the coffin of libertarianism for all but the Trumpophiles. Those who insist they have a right not to wear a mask are true libertarians. Biden should highlight the fact that public health measures are merely an expression of the common good, in this case, deployed on behalf of human dignity and human life itself.

Second, Biden and Harris need to engage the competing narratives on race and come down decidedly on the side of those like President Barack Obama who, in his magnificent eulogy at the funeral of John Lewis, did not argue that all white people are racist, or that racism is as indelible as it is old. He reminded the nation that the achievements of the civil rights movement on Lewis' watch not only advanced the cause of Black Americans, but helped make America a more perfect union, a task that falls to each generation. The vision is inclusive and inspiring. Lewis' legacy and vision point to concrete political, legal and cultural improvements. Symbols and semiotics matter, but they are not the heart of the matter.

Third, Biden must articulate specific governing policies that will alleviate the suffering the American people are currently enduring. If he wins, he will need to be able to say next year, "I told the voters I would do this, and they voted for me, so we have to do it." He needs specific mandates, not merely a generic one. Top of the list

must be economic and immigration reform, and extending health care coverage to more Americans. Those are the Big Three and progressive policies in each area enjoy overwhelming support.

We will be able to tell what kind of campaign Biden wants to run, and therefore what kind of president he wants to be, based on the themes we hear this week. I hope he aims big. The country really does need to be united, and there is no one who, by training and temperament, is better positioned to do it than Joe Biden.

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

Editor's note: *Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest. Sign up and we'll let you know when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.*

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