



## Research Article

Volume-02|Issue-09|2021

## The United States May Currently Be Living in a Pre-Trumpian or Pre-Trump 2 Time Period: A Combined Progressive Politics and Humanistic Psychology Perspective

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### Article History

Received: 15.08.2021

Accepted: 05.08.2021

Published: 30.09.2021

### Citation

Benjamin, E. (2021). The United States May Currently Be Living in a Pre-Trumpian or Pre-Trump 2 Time Period: A Combined Progressive Politics and Humanistic Psychology Perspective. *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(9), 13-19.

**Abstract:** In this article the author describes why the United States may currently be living in a Pre-Trumpian or Pre-Trump 2 time period. The author utilizes a combined progressive politics and humanistic psychology perspective to discuss ways of trying to offset this possible scenario from taking place. In this context, the author also conducts an evaluation of the first 8 months of United States President Joe Biden's term in office, with a focus on the dangers of Biden's decision to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan and the resulting deadly chaos that occurred, and Biden's failure to advocate for carving out voting rights from the filibuster to allow for the possibility of federal voting rights legislation getting passed that could offset a number of states passing various voting restriction laws. Finally, the author discusses his advocacy for humanistic psychology to engage with progressive politics in direct political action to try to offset a potential 2024 Pre-Trump or Pre-Trumpian presidency.

**Keywords:** Progressive Politics, Humanistic Psychology, Experiential Democracy, Trumpian, Trump 2.

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## INTRODUCTION

Although I am certainly tremendously relieved that we in the United States currently have Joe Biden as our president and not Donald Trump, I am also greatly concerned that our current time period may actually be the precursor of a Trumpian presidency, meaning a Trump-like presidency, or perhaps even a return of Donald Trump himself as president, which I will denote as "Trump 2." I say this because in addition to what I perceive as some concerning failings on the part of Joe Biden, as I have previously described (Benjamin, 2021a, 2021b) and which I describe further below, the Republicans have already established voting restrictions in a number of states, and they appear to be on target to greatly increase these voting restrictions in a multitude of additional states (Liptak, 2021). These voting restrictions may likely give the Republicans what they want, which is to insure that both the House and Senate have Republican majorities in 2022, and may consequently stop Biden from accomplishing anything significant for the American people, which would significantly strengthen the beneficial effects for Republicans of all their voting restrictions when it comes to the United States 2024 presidential election. I am afraid that the result of all this may very well be once again a President Trump, or else a "President Trumpian."

My background in humanistic psychology revolves around authentic and empathic relationships with people, striving for personal growth and seeking out the most beneficial qualities that people have to offer (Benjamin, 2011; Rogers, 1961; Schneider *et al.*, 2015). Along these lines, existential/humanistic psychologist Kirk Schneider (2020) is currently promoting his experiential democracy framework, in which he fosters genuine communication between people who hold diametrically opposed political views. I have shared my concerns with Schneider about his project, both privately with him (K. J. Schneider, personal communication, September 25, 2020), and in my book review of his experiential democracy work, which motivated him to write a follow-up response (Benjamin, 2021c; Schneider, 2021). The crux of my concerns is not Schneider's experiential democracy framework per se, but rather the reality of what I believe is the massive cultic Trumpian influence that is having an extremely detrimental effect on the ability of Trump followers to engage in the kind of genuine and caring experiential democracy framework that Schneider has been promoting (Benjamin, 2021c, 2021d). Consequently, my advocacy in humanistic psychology, both in my articles and conference talks,<sup>1</sup> has been on engaging politically as a significant component of humanistic psychology, in particular as part of the progressive politics movement that was

tremendously active in regard to the Resisting Trump movement (Benjamin, 2019, 2020, 2021e).

For all these reasons, I continue to feel the need to speak out about the dangerous reality that I believe the United States is currently living in. There are so many dangers to this reality, but if the Republicans regain control in 2024 with a Trumpian or Trump 2 presidency, then we need to look no further than the massive rampant destruction from the escalation of global warming and the consequential deadly effects of climate change to envision the horrific devastation that we would be faced with, leading very possibly to the accelerated extinction of our species.<sup>2</sup> But oppressive and deadly high temperatures, wildfires, and hurricanes are not our only dangers. If we do somehow manage within the next few years to finally end the current coronavirus pandemic largely through the heroic efforts of President Biden, I shudder to think of what would happen if and when another pandemic comes to ravage us and we have a President Trump or President Trumpian to deal with it.<sup>2</sup> But these are only the “hard core” disasters; what about the effects of a Trump or Trumpian presidency on the basic qualities of people being decent and caring to one another? I am certainly supportive of Schneider’s quest to depolarize America, as I agree that this depolarization needs to happen for America to engage in any kind of civility, much less kindness, between people who think differently from each other. But I am afraid that with a 2024 Trumpian or Trump 2 presidency, the kind of extreme polarization that resulted in the deadly capitol insurrection in January, 2021 could become entrenched in a steady day-to-day violence beyond anything we have ever experienced as a country, aside from the Civil War. And this is why I continue to advocate for humanistic psychology to engage directly in the kind of progressive politics that reinforces the qualities of empathy and authenticity that are the central building blocks of humanistic psychology (Benjamin, 2011, 2019, 2020, 2021e; Rogers, 1961; Schneider *et al.*, 2015).

### **An Evaluation of the First 7 Months of Joe Biden’s Presidency**

Kirk Schneider and I reached an agreement in our 9/25/2020 personal communication on a “both and” rather than an “either or” perspective on engaging with people through his experiential democracy project combined with my advocacy for humanistic psychology to engage directly in progressive politics, currently to avoid a 2024 Trumpian or Trump 2 presidency. But to avoid what I perceive as the dire and devastating set of events that would likely accompany a 2024 Trumpian or Trump 2 presidency, I think that Joe Biden would need to be perceived widely as having done an excellent job as United States President for 4 years. And I think this is true in particular because of all the voting restrictions that the Republicans have effectively put into place already, with a great many more to follow,

which are being allowed to happen by Democratic senators Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema refusing to carve out voting rights from the filibuster (McCarter, 2021a, 2021b). Thus it is instructive to briefly review some of the pros and cons of Biden’s first 7 months of his presidency, some of which I have previously described, and to take a brief look at some more recent areas of his presidency that I have serious concerns about.

Joe Biden started off his presidency with a veritable progressive anti-Trump bang, as I previously conveyed when writing in January, 2021 after Biden had been president for just over 36 hours:

Biden subsequently wasted no time in signing into law a number of executive orders to reverse Trump’s policies that many people believe have been extremely destructive, inclusive of the signing into law of executive orders that involve more humane policies on immigration, re-joining the Paris climate agreement and the World Health Organization, halting the Keystone Pipeline and the building of the border wall, removing travel bans from predominantly Muslim countries, and safeguarding the rights of LGBT Americans.... However, while Biden has made a strong pitch for unity, he also has displayed that he has no intention of retaining who he considers to be unqualified and dangerous Trump appointees in powerful positions. . . . I believe that Biden’s diverse choice of cabinet members, both from a social and political perspective, is an initial demonstration of his goal of unifying the country and captures the essence of the title of this essay series: Integrative United States President Joe Biden. (Benjamin, 2021f, p. 2)

In my subsequent reviews of Biden’s presidency, which were written in March, 2021 and July, 2021, I focused upon Biden’s impressive quality of empathy. Although my evaluation was certainly less enthusiastic than the one I wrote after his first 36 hours as President, I concluded that Biden’s positive achievements most definitely outweighed some of his concerning (for Progressives) domestic and foreign policies:

As we navigate through Biden’s first 6 months as President of the United States, while a number of aspects of both his foreign and domestic policies are discouraging for progressives, I think that his rhetoric and policies regarding empathy and combating hate continue to be on proud display for all to see... I am thankful that President Biden has demonstrated that he is on the side of fighting for democracy, and taken as a whole, I believe that the first nearly 6 months of Joe Biden’s presidency is a worthy tribute to both his

quality of empathy and to the basic premise of genuinely caring about people, which is the hallmark of humanistic psychology. (Benjamin, 2021b, p.50)

However, keeping in mind the stakes that I described above in regard to Biden needing to be perceived as having done an excellent job for 4 years for the United States to have a reasonable chance of avoiding what I perceive as the disaster of a 2024 President Trumpian or President Trump, I believe that it is important to take note in particular of Biden's potential failings in this regard. Events have been happening at rapid speed, and I have watched Biden make a number of policy decisions, both domestic and foreign, that have disappointed and alarmed me. In my previous articles I expressed my disappointment over some of Biden's foreign policy decisions, inclusive of his bombing Iran-backed military targets in Syria and Iraq, and his initial placating of Israel in regard to the intensive violence that took place between Israel and Palestinian Hamas militants (Benjamin, 2021a, 2021b). More recently, another foreign policy decision that he made which concerns me, which was not publicized much at all, was the hosting in Washington D.C. and red carpet treatment given to the deputy defense minister of Saudi Arabia, who is the brother of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, after the Biden administration released a report in February that found the Crown Prince "directly responsible for approving the murder of journalist Jamai Khashoggi; sanctioned dozens of Saudis tied to human rights abuses; and ended US support for the Saudi war in Yemen (Gaouette & Atwood, 2021). And a foreign policy decision that Biden made which particularly alarms me is his decision to withdraw all military troops from Afghanistan despite widespread political and military advice against doing this, with the consequential deadly violence and take-over of the country by the Taliban that many people warned about (Stracqualursi *et al.*, 2021; Fox *et al.*, 2021). Although there are a wide range of reactions to Biden's actual withdrawal decision and it remains to be seen what the political fallout will end up being for Biden and the Democrats (Lafosner, 2021; News Corpse, 2021), the present reality is that Biden's popularity has been strikingly decreasing and that a number of Democrats and Independents, in addition to the expected number of Republicans, have severely criticized him over the way that he expedited the withdrawal of our troops in Afghanistan and the resulting deadly and harrowing chaos as the Taliban gained control of the country (Brooks, 2021; Greenwood, 2021; Lerer *et al.*, 2021; Shear, 2021; Segers, 2021).

A good summary of Biden's recent domestic decisions that have been disappointing to Progressives has been described in an article by Elie Mystal in *The Nation*:

He could ban excessive-force tactics, like choke holds, from federal law enforcement. He could recall military equipment that has been gifted to local forces. He could stop agencies like the FBI and the ATF from seeking or executing no-knock warrants. He could do something about ICE: abolish it, disarm it, retrain it, punish it for human rights violations—literally any “reform” would be better than what we have now. Biden has released a comprehensive plan to deal with domestic terrorism but nothing to deal with state-sponsored terrorism carried out by American police. (Mystal, 2021, p.7)

Now I am certainly not discounting all the wonderful things that Biden has done as United States President in little over 7 months in office, some of which I have previously described (Benjamin, 2021a, 2021b), and which more recently includes the Senate endorsement of two complementary infrastructure bills (Cochrane, 2021; Tankersley, 2021),<sup>5</sup> but my major concern at this time once again is in preventing what I perceive as an utter disaster: a U.S. 2024 Trumpian or Trump presidency. Some of the concerns that I have in this regard are by no means Biden's fault, such as the fact that we now have a terrible coronavirus surge due to the delta variant and approximately a third of the United States still refusing to get vaccinated (Wolf *et al.*, 2021). But some of my concerns are most definitely things that Biden could have done differently, and in addition to the current Afghanistan debacle that I have described above, what is foremost on my mind is the whole voting rights issue. As Elie Mystal conveyed:

When it comes to securing voting rights, Biden should be using his power aggressively. He should be expanding the courts, flooding them with judges who respect the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment and its promise of equal franchise. He should throw out the census taken by the previous administration, which undercounted communities of color in an effort to further vitiate their political power, and conduct a new count. . . . Every shred of executive power should be marshaled toward securing the next election against Republican attempts to disenfranchise voters of color. Lawyer Marc Elias has lawsuits going in 14 states trying to disrupt these attacks on voting rights, and Biden's Justice Department should join all of them. Instead, Biden has adopted a cautious, moderate approach that relies on herding senators like cats. (Mystal, 2021, p.7)

And what I have been especially disappointed about has been Biden's refusal to actively combat the filibuster, or at least to actively promote the carving out of voting rights from the filibuster, though there are some recent hopeful signs that this may be changing (Benjamin, 2021b; Jaffe, 2021; McCarter, 2021a,

2021b; poopdogcomedy, 2021).<sup>6</sup> I have been afraid that Biden's centrist political perspective in this regard may very well become the demise of the chances of the Democrats to avoid what I perceive as the 2024 Trumpian or Trump 2 disaster, though perhaps Biden is going to move away from his centrist position in regard to advocating for carving out voting rights from the filibuster. And this brings me squarely right back to Kirk Schneider's experiential democracy project, as I recently attended Schneider's presentation which was part of the humanistic psychology American Renewal Post-Trump: Towards Psychological Healing & De Polarization (Division 32) program at the American Psychology Association (APA) online 2021 national conference

### **EXPERIENTIAL DEMOCRACY, HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY, AND PROGRESSIVE POLITICS: Working Together To Avoid the 2024 Trumpian or Trump 2 Disaster**

At this humanistic psychology APA workshop, I was pleasantly surprised by one of the presenters, Ron Boyle, who made an outstanding case for all that I have been trying to convey in humanistic psychology circles the past few years about the devastation caused by Trump. Boyle infused the authoritarian dangers described by Erich Fromm (1941/1994) along with the malignant narcissist characterization of Trump and the Trump cult indoctrination rampant destruction, as described by Lee (2019); Hassan (2019).<sup>3</sup> Then Zimbardo (2008), the researcher and author of the famous Stanford Prison experiments in the 1970's, who was also the 2002 APA president, gave summary comments in which he reinforced Boyle's harrowing depiction of the dangers of Trump and Trumpism, and conveyed that he viewed Trump as being similar to the worst of the prison guards in his experiment; this prison guard described his perspective as being a puppeteer who pulled the strings of the prisoners just like they were puppets. And then in the office hour part of the program, I asked my question about how humanistic psychology could engage itself more politically to avoid the 2024 Trumpian or Trump 2 disaster that I have described above.

My question got a good deal of attention and various people responded, including Kirk Schneider, but the response was primarily a reinforcement of Schneider's experiential democracy work along with his advocacy for a chief government psychologist who would serve as a cabinet member and advise the United States President from a mental health perspective. This is certainly something I wholeheartedly support, just as I support Schneider's experiential democracy work, and there was also a discussion about the possibility of forming a Division 32 political humanistic psychology task force. However, I still felt frustrated that there did not appear to be much interest in humanistic psychology being more directly politically involved on a grass roots basis to avoid what I perceive as the 2024

Trumpian or Trump 2 disaster, and I sent Ron Boyer an e-mail along these lines. The upshot is that Boyle very much appreciated my concerns, sent my e-mail to all the presenters at the workshop, said that he wanted me to be involved in the formation of this potential political humanistic psychology Division 32 task force, and asked me to act as a liaison between this new potential task force and the Task Force on Hate Incidents, through my involvement with the latter task force.

And this spoke to me. I viewed this potential political humanistic psychology Division 32 task force as a way in which all voices can be heard, inclusive of Schneider's experiential democracy work as well as my advocacy for direct progressive political involvement. However, I had no illusions that we would be able to do anything concrete to make a substantial difference in the political outcomes of whatever happens or does not happen in regard to my 2024 fears. But at least I was now starting to feel that there was perhaps some kind of pathway to bring humanistic psychology and progressive politics together with the goal of avoiding what I perceive as the 2024 Trumpian or Trump 2 disaster. From a recent follow-up e-mail exchange that I had with Ron Boyer, a few weeks after the above APA workshop, it is evident to me that this is going to be a slow arduous process, but at least I am now able to envision and work on a course of action that I believe in, which is the incorporation of progressive politics into humanistic psychology through direct political action.

### **CONCLUSION**

As I have described in this article, I have serious concerns that the United States may currently be living in a pre Trumpian or pre-Trump 2 time period. It has been nearly a month since I started writing this article and Biden has now been in office for over 8 months. It now appears almost certain that Trump will be the Republican presidential candidate in 2024

(McGraw & Caputo, 2021), and a recent poll even concluded that Trump would beat Biden in a close match if they run against each other (Dutton, 2021).<sup>7</sup> Trump has capitalized to the maximum on Biden's loss of popularity through the delta virus surge, the chaotic and deadly Afghanistan withdrawal, and the decline in the economy (Enten, 2021; McGraw & Caputo, 2021). Furthermore, there are recently a number of concerns regarding how much Biden's celebrated degree of empathy extends to all people, as opposed to being primarily for Americans.<sup>7</sup> And in regard to the prospects of Biden accomplishing his two infrastructure packages to help regain some of his popularity, there are growing challenging roadblocks to getting this through Congress (Chamberlain, 2021).

My fears about 2024 are certainly extremely warranted at this point in time, but I will end on a more positive note, which is Biden's recent assertive

decisions to enforce, and strongly advocate for, actions that will result in more people in the United States getting vaccinated against the coronavirus (Linskey *et al.*, 2024). If Biden's decisions in this regard result in the trajectory of the Delta virus and coronavirus pandemic getting changed so that Americans feel safer and that life is getting more back to normal, including the economy improving, then I think that Biden's popularity will start to increase, especially if this is coupled with a compromise being worked out to pass both infrastructure bills. Of course there is still the impasse of the voting restrictions in all the states and the roadblock of the filibuster to offset this, but I am glad that Biden is now showing some definite signs that he will assert himself to try to carve out voting rights from the filibuster. At any rate, let me end here on at least a somewhat more positive note to try to avoid the 2024 disaster of a Trump 2 or Trumpian United States presidency.

#### Notes

- 1) I have given a number of progressive politics/humanistic psychology talks at American Psychological Association and Humanistic Psychology conferences, inclusive of as a member of the Humanistic Psychology Division 32 Task Force on Hate Incidents.
- 2) See [https://www.joboneforhumanity.org/world\\_s\\_most\\_critical\\_global\\_challenges](https://www.joboneforhumanity.org/world_s_most_critical_global_challenges) for a comprehensive description of the overwhelming climate disaster we are now in the midst of.
- 3) See also Benjamin (2021c).
- 4) See a corrected version of Benjamin (2021b) at <https://elliottbenjamin.medium.com/the-empathy-of-united-states-president-joe-biden-the-soul-of-america-7ce6803f09d9>
- 5) However, see Snell & Sprunt (2021) for a description of the complications and conflicts that are currently taking place in the House between Progressives and Moderates, as a group of Moderates (including my own district representative from Maine) are threatening to withhold their vote on the budget infrastructure reconciliation bill inclusive of climate change actions, unless the bipartisan infrastructure bill come up for a vote first, and Progressives are threatening to likewise withhold their vote on this budget infrastructure reconciliation bill unless both bills are voted on as a package deal.
- 6) See poopdogcomedy (2021) for a description of how Biden is planning on advocating for a carve-out of voting rights from the filibuster.
- 7) See Enten, 2021 for a description of how Americans are losing faith in Biden on a number of issues, highlighted by the surge in Coronavirus cases due to the delta variant, Biden's drop in approval ratings on the

economy, and his handling of the Afghanistan withdrawal. See Tomasky, 2021, Segers, 2021, and Smith, 2021 for descriptions that questions Biden's degree of empathy for the people of Afghanistan, as they describe how Biden appears to be limiting his celebrated degree of empathy to people of the United States. And see Richards, 2021 for a description of the fury that a number of Gold Star families conveyed after meeting Biden, in regard to what they perceived as Biden's lack of empathy for their sons and daughters who were killed in the suicide bombing at the Afghanistan airport.

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