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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

## *The Trump Presidency and U.S. Workers: “America First” or America Diminished?*

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When the Associated Press projected Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential race on November 7, I joined in the collective sigh of relief that issued forth from millions of Americans who had come to view Donald Trump as an existential threat to democracy. Yet, like many, I remained puzzled that Trump still enjoyed so much popular political support and that the ‘Blue Wave’ had not been stronger. As a labor historian, I was particularly baffled by the working- and middle-class voters who had seemingly come to view Trump as a populist hero of working people and seemed convinced by his argument that the real threat to their well-being was not the corporate elite but the cultural, political, and media elites, in combination with illegal immigrants, who were allegedly taking American jobs, and Black Lives Matter activists, who were accused of fomenting violence on American streets. To anyone schooled in the left-wing populism of the American Gilded Age, the worship of a tax-dodging Robber Baron as a savior of working people seemed ironic but also frightening. Continued white working-class and rural support for Trump and his political allies, despite their false narratives of election fraud and recent efforts to overthrow the results of a legitimate democratic election, suggest that Trumpism within the Republican Party will survive his electoral defeat.

This essay seeks to update an earlier article I wrote for *H-Diplo* on the Trump phenomenon among workers in the aftermath of the 2016 election and to consider the long-term historical impediments to the forms of national “healing” promoted by Joe Biden. In my 2017 essay, I suggested—based on an article from the *Washington Post*-- that working class support for Trump had likely been exaggerated.<sup>1</sup> The authors of this article argued that if class was defined based on income rather than education, then workers likely only accounted for about 35% of Trump supporters.<sup>2</sup> Yet even if workers constituted a minority of Trump’s base, they likely played a critical role in ensuring his victory in Rustbelt swing states. In my essay, I noted analyses emphasizing Trump’s cultural appeal to some white workers. I focused, however, on a little reported debate within the labor movement that raged over whether the AFL-CIO should support Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders. Many labor activists preferred Bernie Sanders because they believed the longstanding support of Democratic leaders, including Clinton, for free trade treaties, at least without further protections for workers, was a mistake. Although not economic nationalists like Trump, they argued that globalization was a genuine threat to workers world-wide and that labor needed to be represented in ongoing discussions of trade treaties. Equally significant, they noted Clinton’s troubling pattern of supporting military interventions abroad, ranging from the war in Iraq to the intervention in Libya. Sanders fans were disillusioned by the way both the AFL-CIO leadership and the Democratic Party worked to undercut Sanders. About 12% of Sanders supporters subsequently voted for Trump and many others likely sat out the election.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth McKillen, “Workers, Donald Trump and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *H-Diplo-ISSF*, 20 September 2017, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5az-workers>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, “It’s Time to Bust the Myth: Most Trump Voters were not Working Class,” *Washington Post*, 5 June 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/>.

<sup>3</sup> Carnes and Lupu, Brian Mahoney, “AFL-CIO leader tries to quell pro-Sanders revolt,” *Politico*, 3 July 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/07/afl-cio-endorsement-2016-democratic-primary-119701>; McKillen, “Workers, Donald Trump and U.S. Foreign Policy.”

My point in detailing this debate within labor was to demonstrate the dilemma that the two-party system in America posed for class-conscious workers. The Democratic Party has typically offered a domestic agenda that is more friendly to workers and to labor, but its foreign policy has often been corporate-driven and has been responsible for some of the most damaging and counterproductive military interventions in U.S. history, such as Vietnam. In a constitutional system that mandated proportional representation for all parties, workers concerned about corporate-driven trade policies and military interventions might vote for a left-of-center-labor or socialist party. This is not a viable option, however, in the winner-takes-all American two-party system. As a result, disillusioned Democratic voters sometimes choose, in a paradoxical fashion, to vent their frustrations with the foreign policies of the Democratic Party by voting for the even more pro-business Republican Party. This pattern, for example, was evident in 1920, in 1952, and in 1968.<sup>4</sup>

To be clear, from my own perspective Hillary Clinton's assets far outweighed her liabilities in 2016. Yet, there were rational reasons why some workers might have supported Trump in 2016. By contrast, this argument cannot be made in 2020 because his policies have clearly been a disaster even for his own political base. Although President Trump has frequently boasted that, in the era before the pandemic began, he "achieved the greatest economy in the history of our country," analysts on both the political right and left have demonstrated that job and income growth was greater during the last three years of the Obama administration than in the first three years of the Trump administration.<sup>5</sup> The large Republican tax cuts given to corporations by the Republican tax plan did not stimulate businesses to invest in hiring permanent workers at higher rates than did the Obama administration's investments in green energy. Meanwhile, Trump's 'America First' tariff policies stimulated a trade war with China and, to a lesser degree Europe, that particularly hurt American agriculture. In Maine, for example, lobster exports dropped 50% due to Chinese retaliation against American tariffs, and Maine's international wild blueberry sales plummeted 97%. Dairy products suffered a severe decline nationwide. In the Midwest, corn and soybean prices declined due to the trade wars and, Trump, seeking to maintain the base of his political support, offered government subsidies to farmers that accounted for 40% of total farm income in many areas. Some tariffs, such as those on foreign steel, proved slightly beneficial and helped to create a modest number of jobs, but this was offset by a decline in manufacturing.<sup>6</sup>

The modest economic gains achieved by the Trump administration during its first three years in office were eviscerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Trump liked to blame the pandemic on the Chinese, his mishandling of it inestimably worsened its impact on the United States both in terms of health and economics. One of Trump's first missteps occurred even before the pandemic struck, when he eliminated an office created by the Obama administration that could have helped organize not only a coherent national but also a

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<sup>4</sup> On the long-standing Democratic policy of support for free trade and its resultant military interventions, see especially, William Appleman Williams, *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1959). On working class responses to these foreign policies, see especially, Elizabeth McKillen, *Making the World Safe for Workers: Labor, the Left and Wilsonian Internationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), and idem, "Labor and U.S. Foreign Relations," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, 2017, <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-732?rsk=may7Eo&result=3>, Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), Edmund Wehrle, *Between a River and a Mountain: The AFL-CIO and the Vietnam War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); John Bennett Sears, "Peace Work: The Antiwar Tradition in American Labor from Cold War to the Iraq War," *Diplomatic History* 34:4 (September 2010): 699-720.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Trump interview with Leslie Stahl of Sixty Minutes, *CNN Post*, 22 October 2020, <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=trump+claims+greatest+economy&&view=detail&mid=&&FORM=VRD GAR&ru=%2Fvideos%2Fsearch%3Fq%3Dtrump%2520claims%2520greatest%2520economy%26qs%3Dn%26form%3DQBVR%26sp%3D-1%26pq%3Dtrump%2520claims%2520greatest%2520economy%26sc%3D0-29%26sk%3D%26cvid%3DF3DDE95A2ADE4D858937FD2822226FFF>; Chuck Jones, Obama's Last Three Years of Job Growth All Beat Trump's Best Year, *Forbes Magazine*, 7 February 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chuckjones/2020/02/07/obamas-last-three-years-of-job-growth-all-beat-trumps-best-year/?sh=5b44c0c6ba61>; Rich Exner, "The Job Record: Donald Trump vs. Barack Obama," 29 September 2020, <https://www.cleveland.com/open/2020/09/the-jobs-record-donald-trump-Da-vs-barack-obamajoe-biden.html>; David Pakman Show on Youtube, 27 February 2020, <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=trump+claims+greatest+economy&&view=detail&mid=A0D0F14778A200022839A0D0F14778A200022839&&FORM=VRD GAR&ru=%2Fvideos%2Fsearch%3Fq%3Dtrump%2520claims%2520greatest%2520economy%26qs%3Dn%26form%3DQBVR%26sp%3D-1%26pq%3Dtrump%2520claims%2520greatest%2520economy%26sc%3D0-29%26sk%3D%26cvid%3DF3DDE95A2ADE4D858937FD2822226FFF>

<sup>6</sup> Lee Webb, "Trump's Trade War Left Maine's Economy in Crisis," *Bangor Daily News*, 22 October 2020, <https://bangordailynews.com/2020/10/22/opinion/contributors/trumps-trade-war-left-maines-economy-in-crisis/>; Daniel Dezner, "How 'America First' has Failed Trump's Base," *Washington Post*, 28 October 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/10/28/how-america-first-has-failed-trumps-base/>; Alan Rappoport, "Trump Funnels Record Subsidies to Farmers Ahead of Election," *New York Times*, 12 October, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/12/us/politics/trump-farmers-subsidies.html>; Geoffrey Gertz, "Did Trump's Tariffs Benefit American Workers and National Security," *Policy 2020 Brookings*, <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/votervital/did-trumps-tariffs-benefit-american-workers-and-national-security/>

transnational response to the crisis.<sup>7</sup> Subsequent missteps included downplaying the seriousness of the pandemic, undermining government epidemiological experts, failing to invoke emergency powers to coordinate nationwide testing and production of personal protective equipment for medical personnel, refusing to mandate or even encourage masks and social distancing, encouraging states to open prematurely from lock-down, withdrawing the United States from the World Health Organization, and failing to develop any plan for coping with the COVID resurgence in the autumn that government leaders correctly predicted was imminent. As infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci correctly warned in April, economic recovery has proved impossible without bringing the virus under control. Frontline workers of all races have suffered disproportionately from both the virus itself and its economic aftershocks. Trump's mishandling of the virus also helps explain why the United States ranks in statistical terms among the top ten nations in the world for both infection rates and deaths per million of its population.<sup>8</sup>

Many of Trump's other policies seem problematic for his working class-base as well. Both Trump and his Supreme Court appointees have weakened protections for American labor unions in ways that undermine their ability to help workers regain lost economic ground.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Trump has inflamed racial tensions through his failure to take seriously systemic racism within American law enforcement agencies, his unwillingness to condemn white supremacist groups, and his heavy-handed law and order response to Black Lives Matter protests. Until systemic racism in American institutions is uprooted, new political coalitions to address the underlying economic problems that have led to wage stagnation for the majority of Americans during the last 40 years will remain elusive.<sup>10</sup> Republican efforts at suppressing voter turnout and at undermining the validity of the recent election, meanwhile, seem a threat to the democratic rights of all Americans.

Finally, the legacy of President Trump's "America First" foreign policy strategies are at best a mixed bag. He has withdrawn American troops from some hotspots more rapidly than his Democratic predecessors as promised, but done so in abrupt and ill-thought-out ways that have created more insecurity, as in Syria in 2019.<sup>11</sup> His criticisms of international organizations, withdrawal from multilateral treaties like the Iran Nuclear Deal and Climate Accord, and abrasive style have alienated key allies and also seem likely to encourage more long-term instability. By contrast, he developed warm relations with dictators and authoritarian figures across the globe, ranging from Kim Jung Un in Korea, to Recep Erdogan in Turkey, to the Crown Prince in Saudi Arabia, and Vladimir Putin in Russia, in ways that have emboldened them. Although Trump supporters believe he deserves a Nobel Peace Prize for brokering a peace treaty between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, others see the agreement as largely an empty gesture since it fails to develop any real solution to the Palestinian problem.

One apparent bright spot in the Trump administration's foreign economic policies has been its recent success in negotiating and winning bipartisan support for the United States, Mexico, Canada Agreement (USMCA), which replaced NAFTA. The AFL-CIO initially opposed the agreement because they believed it failed to sufficiently address labor concerns, but endorsed it when trade negotiators agreed to include more protections for workers and trade unions. Significantly, however, the AFL-CIO did not thank the Trump Administration but rather thanked Congressional Democrats and labor organizations for insisting upon the labor protections. Most recently, the AFL-

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<sup>7</sup> Beth Cameron, "I Ran the White House Pandemic Office. Trump Closed It," *Washington Post*, 13 March 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/nsc-pandemic-office-trump-closed/2020/03/13/a70dc09c-6491-11ea-acc8-80c22bbe96f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/nsc-pandemic-office-trump-closed/2020/03/13/a70dc09c-6491-11ea-acc8-80c22bbe96f_story.html)

<sup>8</sup> Ken Bredemeir, "Fauci: U.S. Economy won't Recover until Coronavirus is Controlled," *VOA NEWS*, <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/fauci-us-economy-wont-recover-until-coronavirus-controlled>; Christina Maxouris, "U.S. Coronavirus Situation is a Humanitarian Disaster and the pandemic is only accelerating experts say," *CNN*, 12 November 2020 <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/us-coronavirus-situation-is-a-humanitarian-disaster-and-the-pandemic-is-only-accelerating-experts-say/ar-BB1aW60b?ocid=msedgdp>. Coronavirus Deaths Per Million Inhabitants, 12 November, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1104709/coronavirus-deaths-worldwide-per-million-inhabitants/> <https://www.statista.com/chart/21176/covid-19-infection-density-in-countries-most-total-cases/>

<sup>9</sup> Charisse Jones, "Amy Coney Barrett Could Influence Workers' Rights and Other Economic Issues on the Supreme court," *USA Today*, 27 October 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/amy-coney-barrett-could-influence-workers-rights-other-economic-issues-if-she-joins-supreme-court/ar-BB19HuUQ>; Editorial Board, "Civil Servants in Trump's Cross-Hairs," *MSN News*, 30 October 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/civil-servants-in-trumps-crosshairs/ar-BB1axidA>

<sup>10</sup> On wage stagnation and growing economic inequality, see Colin Gordon, "A Political History of American Inequality," <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/growing-apart-a-political-history-of-american-inequality/index>

<sup>11</sup> David Sanger, "Trump Followed his Gut on Syria: Calamity Came Fast," *New York Times*, 14 October 2019 (ProQuest).

CIO has complained that the Trump administration has failed to supply the money necessary to create a system ensuring reasonable compliance with labor standards.<sup>12</sup>

To sum up then, little in Trump's record seems to merit continued working- and middle- class support for either Trump or the craven Republican leaders who have defended his corrupt and divisive tactics while in office. Yet, although an important portion of those who voted for Trump in 2016 have returned to the Democratic fold and helped ensure Biden's electoral victory, a surprising number continue to support the president. This can be partly explained by Trump's mastery of the skills of disinformation. A protégé of Roy Cohn, the lawyer of Joe McCarthy of Red Scare fame, Trump has regularly repeated lies so often and with such confidence that he has clearly persuaded many in his audiences—perhaps even himself—that they are true, despite regular fact checks by main-stream media demonstrating that they are false.<sup>13</sup> Yet the roots of the kind of confused class consciousness that led some workers to support Donald Trump also have deeper historical roots. As historian David Roediger has argued, American class consciousness during the early stages of the industrial revolution was complicated by the existence of slavery in the United States and by the Civil War. Some white male workers, suggests Roediger, defined themselves by what they were not—slaves—and perceived themselves as entitled to citizenship rights because they were both white and male. This vision constituted a kind of “herrenvolk republicanism,” or a brand of republicanism that emphasized that only some ethnic groups within the nation state were entitled to full citizenship rights. Class anger, consequently, was sometimes directed against workers of color and immigrants who sought the same rights as native-born whites rather than at the economic elites who exploited workers.<sup>14</sup> Remnants of this kind of thinking persist in the white nationalist beliefs of some of those who support Trump's right-wing populism.

These elements of Trump's base are unlikely to be attracted to the Democratic Party regardless of its appeals. What progressives instead need to work towards is dismantling the political scaffolding that gives conservative white voters from rural states unfair and disproportionate voting power. In particular, the Electoral College, which was created in part to mollify slave-holding interests in the United States, must be eliminated. This system clearly gives disproportionate voting power to more conservative voters in rural states and helps explain why Republicans lost the popular vote in 2000 and 2016 but won it in the Electoral College. In 2020, moreover, it created an election nightmare in which Donald Trump tried to ‘game’ the system by making false claims of election fraud in a few battleground states and seeking to overturn the results in these states in his favor. The fairest and most efficient method of deciding the presidency is clearly the popular vote. The time has also come to consider serious structural changes to the Supreme Court and the Senate.

In the meantime, the Biden administration needs to avoid the temptation to drift to the political center again to win back voters from the Republicans. Two calculations seem important here. First, the reformist wing of the party, ranging from House Representative Alexandria-Ocasio Cortez to Bernie Sanders, has helped attract new voters to the party. Second, some of the centrist policies of the Democratic Party have long been unpopular with working-class voters. In the foreign policy realm, the free trade policies of the Democratic Party and its continued support for military interventions abroad helped provoke the defection of those Democratic voters most influenced by pragmatic economic considerations to the Republican Party in 2016. The solution here would seem to lie, not in embracing the disastrous economic nationalist policies of the Republicans, but rather in ensuring that worker and agricultural interests are better represented in trade negotiations. A rich literature in both diplomatic and labor history has outlined the ways in which Democratic leaders of past generations sought to include trade union representatives alongside business leaders in informal “corporatist networks” designed to solicit their opinion on, and support for, key economic and foreign policies. Such networks often included only the most conservative trade unions and sometimes led to disastrous entanglements for labor, as when AFL-CIO leaders assisted the CIA in

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<sup>12</sup> Jeff Davidson, “Trump Deserves the Nobel Peace Prize: Will the Lefties award it?” 17 October 2020, <https://townhall.com/columnists/jeffdavidson/2020/10/07/trump-deserves-the-nobel-peace-prize-will-the-lefties-award-it-n2577651>. “AFL-CIO Endorses USMCA after Successfully Negotiating Improvements,” in AFL-CIO Press Release, 10 December 2019, <https://aflcio.org/press/releases/afl-cio-endorses-usmca-after-successfully-negotiating-improvements>. David Lowder, “AFL-CIO Chief Says Union to File Labor Complaint Under USMCA this Month,” Reuters, 3 September 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/companies/afl-cio-chief-says-union-to-file-labor-complaint-under-usmca-this-month/ar-BB18GHYq>.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Kruse, “The Final Lesson Donald Trump Never Learned from Roy Cohn,” *Politico*, 19 September 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/09/19/roy-cohn-donald-trump-documentary-228144>

<sup>14</sup> David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* Third Edition (New York: Verso Press, 2007), 59-60.

overthrowing democratically elected Socialist governments in Latin America during the Cold War. Yet a more inclusive strategy that incorporated a broad range of representatives from civil society in trade negotiations might yield more positive results.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar vein, working-class interest in decreasing the U.S. military presence around the globe has merit. Since the waning days of the Cold War, historians and international scholars have warned that the U.S. economy was being harmed by ‘imperial overstretch.’ In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, President George H.W. Bush talked about a “peace dividend” that would result from the reallocation of money away from military spending and toward domestic infrastructure spending. Yet that peace dividend has never materialized. Working people are right to be concerned that so many of their tax paying dollars continue to go toward defense and military interventions abroad.<sup>16</sup> Yet Donald Trump’s arbitrary and unilateral withdrawals from global hotspots, and shunning of diplomatic solutions to international problems, will only create more security problems in the long-run and lead to more spending on the military. Instead the United States needs to become more rather than less involved in international and multilateral organizations. American labor activists have a long history of insightfully criticizing some of these organizations for their undemocratic structures and often ineffective or even harmful policies. Yet globalization has made these organizations more vital than ever. The best approach lies in working to change these organizations from within rather than continuing to bear the costs of unilateral military commitments abroad.<sup>17</sup>

Left-of-center workers may well wish for a political environment more conducive to third-party politics in the current moment. In the short-term, however, it seems more vital to defeat the assaults on democracy being perpetrated not just by Trump but by a well-entrenched political right within the Republican Party. As historian Nancy Maclean has persuasively argued in *Democracy in Chains*, a radical libertarian right has sought to prevent majority rule in the United States since at least *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954), when they recognized that if working people of all colors came together politically, the privileges of wealthy white elites would be threatened. In recent years, this radical right has strongly influenced the Republican Party and has led it to pursue a politics of division and disenfranchisement. Donald Trump, through his politics of deception and disinformation, has significantly aided their cause. The recent election, however, has created a window of opportunity for the Democratic Party to discredit right-wing populism and, if opportunity avails itself, to eliminate the last structural impediments to democratic rule.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See especially McKillen, *Making the World Safe for Workers* and “Labor and U.S. Foreign Relations;” Thomas McCormick, “Drift or Mastery: A Corporatist Synthesis for American Diplomatic History,” *Reviews in American History* 10 (December 1982): 318-330; Michael Hogan, “Corporatism,” in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, Michael Hogan and Thomas Paterson eds., second ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 137-148; Victor Silverman, *Imagining Internationalism in American and British Labor: 1939-1949* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Kim Scipes, *The AFL-CIO’s Secret War Against Developig Countries: Solidarity or Sabotage?* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage Press, 1987); Thomas McCormick, *America’s Half Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989). Dale MacFeatters, “As wars wind down, no peace dividend, just IOU,” *Baltimore Sun* 22 February 2012 <https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/carroll/cct-arc-7eae4bfd-66a2-570a-b354-433d360206c9-20120222-story.html>. See also, the website of U.S. Labor Against the War, <https://www.laboragainstracismandwar.org/mission>.

<sup>17</sup> On working-class criticisms of international organizations, see especially, McKillen, *Making the World Safe for Workers*; idem, “Beyond Gompers: The American Federation of Labor, the Creation of the International Labour Organization, and U.S. Labor Dissent,” in *ILO Histories: Essays on the International Labour Organization and its Impact on the World During the Twentieth Century*, eds. Jasmien Van Daele, Magaly Rodriguez Garcia, Geert Van Goethem, and Marcel van der Linden (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2010): 41-66, idem, “Labor and U.S. Foreign Relations,” Edward C. Lorenz, *Defining Global Justice: The History of U.S. International Labor Standard’s Policy* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Nancy Maclean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2017). See also, Carol Anderson, *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression is Destroying Our Democracy* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).