

New “Normals” for a New Century

On November 21, 2022, NASA’s Artemis I mission, with no crew, successfully journeyed around the moon, 81 miles from its surface and traveling around 300 mph, in preparation for another moon landing.¹ “Orion traveled roughly 1.3 million miles (2 million kilometers) during this mission on a path that swung out to a distant lunar orbit, carrying the capsule farther than any spacecraft designed to carry humans has ever traveled. ... The spacecraft captured stunning pictures of Earth ...and a mesmerizing ‘Earth rise.’”² On December 12, 2022, and as the Orion spacecraft splashed down in the Pacific Ocean, off Mexico’s peninsula, Baja, California, the month-long mission came to “a momentous end.” “This was a challenging mission,” NASA’s Artemis I mission manager, Mike Sarafin, told reporters. “And this is what mission success looks like.”³ The journey might also be seen as symbolic celebration of another challenging year and midterm election results that confirmed Americans—many more than predicted by pollsters—could still overcome formidable challenges and did indeed care about preserving democracy, as best we knew it. The president used his years of experience to steady an angry and divided ship traversing turbulent waters. Congress, too, succeeded in finding common ground and passing substantial legislation, some of it on a bipartisan basis, and with a huge influx of federal government money going to the states. The Violence against Women Reauthorization Act passed in March, 2022, a bipartisan bill that reauthorized legal protections against domestic violence and sexual assault through 2027. In August, 2022, Biden made good on his campaign promise to forgive student loans, canceling up to \$10,000 in federal student debt for up to 43 million students of families earning \$125,000 or less and \$20,000 canceled for recipients of Pell Grants, which are awarded to students with the greatest financial need.⁴ The plan, however, has been challenged by a coalition of six states, and continues to face opposition. The president has taken several steps to cancel interest and to delay loan-paybacks. In the lead up to the midterm elections on November 8, 2022, two patterns had been especially notable in the news media.

Oil and gas companies were accruing huge profits at the same time several midterm candidates focused their campaigns on the hardships American families experienced with rising food costs and gas prices due to inflation. Record-breaking sales on Black Friday and Cyber Monday showed the hardships were not insurmountable for some—perhaps thanks to credit cards. But for those struggling just to make ends meet, costs of food, energy, and also supply chain crises fed public anxieties and fears of recession.⁵ The year ended with inflation at 6.5%.⁶ For several months, Biden released oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve in order to help lower gas prices at the pump. He wanted energy companies to use some of their “windfall war profits” to lower energy costs for American consumers because those profits were largely due to sanctions on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. For example, in just three months, from “September to November, 2022, ExxonMobil made \$20 billion. Chevron more than \$11 billion. Shell \$9.5 billion, and BP over \$8 billion.”⁷ The president argued that “at a time of war, any company receiving historic windfall profits like this has a responsibility to act beyond the narrow self-interest of its executives and shareholders.”⁸ But Clifford Krauss, energy correspondent for The New York Times, countered that energy companies were doing exactly what their investors wanted, i.e., returning all that profit to themselves and their shareholders. Krause added that oil companies were concerned combating climate change would leave them with “out of date” assets due to “electrification of the transportation system.”⁹ He made no mention of energy companies’ assets buying into clean energy nor of their previous knowledge of the dangers carbon emissions posed to the ozone layer, an awareness that had been ignored for many years. A second pattern in the media’s focus, was a “new” poll almost every other night, most of which put the president’s approval ratings in the 30’s. Few complained when COVID relief money was being distributed. At a Volvo manufacturing plant in Maryland, the president called out those “who voted against his infrastructure plan, declaring it socialism, but now eagerly sought funds under the bill, for their districts.”¹⁰ Much like the way the number of casualties suffered after weather disasters are updated each time new information is received, constant revisions to poll numbers without context might alert us to question the minute-by-minute data reported that may require longer periods of time to track reliable trends.

These revisions might also alert us to the drift towards what appears most exciting or dramatic that informs much of the media in order to captivate and draw viewers in with what holds their audience’s attention—if only momentarily. Minute-by-minute polling by the media and obscene profits of big energy corporations are examples of what Dr. Sanjay Gupta had called “an erosion of trust” ...in the media and in large institutions.¹¹ He blames “purposeful misinformation” for the “significant pushback” to getting the vaccine.¹² Eleven days before the midterm elections, the 82-year-old husband Paul of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was attacked and beaten with a hammer in the couple’s San Francisco home.¹³ Biden condemned the violence and called the Speaker. Senate Minority leader Mitch McConnell was said to be “horrified and disgusted.”¹⁴ For many voters, the attacker’s chilling shout, “Where is Nancy?” reinforced the memory of January 6 rioters, who had likewise shouted “Where is Nancy?” when the Capitol had been torn apart. For the so-called “exhausted majority” of voters, many of whom are now unaffiliated with either party, months of repulsive, midterm election ads as well as a mind-boggling \$80 million spent on attack ads to defame an 82-year-old woman, the Pelosi incident was pivotal in shifting to center stage concerns for the civility of our institutions and the preservation of democracy.¹⁵ After the midterm results, sighs of relief were heard that American democracy might still have a beating heart. Most 2020 election deniers were defeated; most candidates on both sides conceded their losses. Arizona was prompted by a judicial ruling to certify its election results.¹⁶ Voters seemed to have learned to disregard polls that come out every other day. Abraham Lincoln once spoke of gratitude needed to overcome division. Three years after a pandemic of indifference swept the nation with its turmoil, it seemed most Americans celebrated Thanksgiving, 2022– with gratitude. At the end of 2022, writer Armstrong Williams celebrated something many voters share and reminded us why we care about the democratic process: “In spite of the setbacks that each person’s party suffered, everyone has cause to be grateful for and to celebrate the fact that democracy emerged triumphant: “accepting election results and the peaceful transfer of power...is the only way for power to be distributed fairly.”¹⁹

Gen Z and millennials, many from the fast-growing Latino segment of voters, had made substantial impact on midterm races across the country. Those under 30, 37% of whom identify as independent and 34% as moderate, made up 12% of the electorate– the second highest turnout of young people in almost 50 years.²⁰ PBS reporter Laura Barrón-López interviewed Alan Zhang, student chair of the Harvard Public Opinion Project, who finds young people tend to be more pragmatic and prefer “politicians to meet in the middle and compromise.”²¹ Along with concerns about climate change and abortion, Zhang found his colleagues were anxious about rights being taken away—“about 72% believe that the rights of others are under attack, and 59% believe their own rights are under attack.”²² In a previous interview, Judy Woodruff asked first-time voters in Wisconsin for their thoughts on voting. Students interviewed were looking forward to voting, but also stated concerns about their voices being heard. Amaya Boman felt that despite candidates who visited campuses during the past two years, she was not confident the issues she cares about, such as the overturning of Roe vs. Wade, would even be heard once emails are routed to staffers.²³ Student Ryan Bartley credited former president Trump with handling the economy, but added, with the clear-headedness of youth, “I believe, in this country, we shouldn’t have the sort of massive division we have between Republican and Democrat, because working together is how we fix things.”²⁴ College students also understand the technology they grew up with better than do many lawmakers and courts—an incongruity that may affect their attitudes towards institutional authority. Student Ben Fraley voiced concern about the age difference with so many of those in Congress: “A lot of these politicians are just so much older than us.”²⁵ Fraley sees problems that “are going to be very different, because, for our 80-year-old and 60-year-old Senate members, climate change means 3 or 4 degrees, and then they aren’t going to be around much longer. But for me, climate change means I might see the world crumble.”^{25a} Ten days after the midterm elections, Pelosi conceded, “The hour has come for a new generation to lead the Democratic Caucus.”²⁶ She prefaced the announcement with a reminder of her rise from homemaker to Speaker of the House and the barriers to others, including women, for whom her work helped pave the way. Significantly, there are now five times as many women in Congress as there were when Pelosi took office.²⁷ Hakeem Jeffries was unanimously elected the new Chair of the Democratic Caucus and the first Black leader to a party in Congress.²⁸ Pete Aguilar (D-CA), the highest ranking Latino in Congress, was elected Vice-Chair of the Democratic Caucus.²⁹

Almost two years after the January 6 attack on the Capitol, 964 people had been charged, some with seditious conspiracy against the U.S., including founders of the Oath Keepers Militia Group Stewart Rhodes and Kelly Meggs.³⁰ Although 21 Republicans voted *against* doing so, at the end of a second year of the pandemic, the US Capitol Police and Washington D.C. police were honored with the Congressional Gold Medal for defending the Capitol on January 6, 2020.³¹ On the second anniversary of January 6, 2020, Biden awarded the police officers the Presidential Citizens Medal.³² Major legislative successes followed the midterm elections. The bipartisan Infrastructure Law, signed on November 15, 2022 invests \$550 billion in much needed repairs to decaying roads, bridges, airports, rail, water infrastructure, and expanding broadband—all matters previous administrations had campaigned and talked about doing, but had not achieved. Flint, Michigan, Jackson, Mississippi, and now Baltimore, Maryland, have all seen problems with fresh water due at least in part to lead pipes and aging infrastructure. The Infrastructure Law is “the largest long-term investment in our infrastructure and economy in our nation’s history.”³³ The bipartisan Chips and Science Act invests \$280 billion in domestic research and manufacturing in the semiconductor industry, with tax breaks for the production of chips. It strengthens Buy American rules to make sure more of what we buy in America is made here and invests in our supply chains.³⁴ Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., the first openly gay American elected to the Senate, led adoption of the Respect for Marriage Act, which under federal law protects same-sex and interracial couples so that they retain benefits from the state where they were married if they moved from one state to another.³⁵ The bipartisan Safer Communities Act was the first time in nearly 30 years that Congress responded to mass shootings with very modest regulations of gun laws—red flag laws, some background checks of 18- to 21-year-olds, and requirements for specific gun sellers to conduct background checks on some potential buyers. “The action in Washington came in response to mass shootings in Buffalo, New York, and Uvalde, Texas, that occurred 10 days apart and killed 31 people, including 19 schoolchildren.”³⁶ The House also passed an overhaul of the Electoral Count Act: “The provisions amending the 1887 law –long criticized as poorly written – won bipartisan support to make it harder for future presidential losers to stage another Jan. 6, 2021.”³⁷

Biden hailed the provisions’ inclusion in the spending bill... calling it “critical bipartisan action that will help ensure that the will of the people is preserved.”³⁸ Along partisan lines, Democrats passed The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) a pared-down version of Biden’s Build Back Better plan that could make it possible to transition to the renewable energies many keep hoping for. The act represents “the largest attempt in U.S. history to combat climate change with a \$369 billion package of clean-energy funding covering cars and homes and businesses.”³⁹ The Act puts the nation “within striking distance of the administration’s commitment to reduce greenhouse gases to 50% below 2005 emissions by 2030,” a resolve that helps to “restore the U.S. to a position of global leadership on climate change.”⁴⁰ And given the billions and more *billions* of dollars of “windfall war profits” oil companies had made due to sanctions on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, those companies were at least positioned to help with clean energy due to long neglect of the dangers posed by carbon emissions to the ozone layer. The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) allows Medicare to cap out-of-pocket prescription charges on some drugs, such as insulin and lowers the cost of health insurance for many.⁴¹ A new, 15% corporate minimum tax is included to help pay for some of the changes—what Biden has called a “fair share,” as well as more IRS funding to improve oversight on taxes for those making over \$400,000/year.⁴² The president predicts the new legislation will set the nation up to win the 21st century. He aims to realize the economic vision laid out in his campaign by rebuilding the economy from the middle out and bottom up, rather than the top-down model that has produced drastic income inequality between the 1% at the top and 99% of the country.⁴³ His goal is for ordinary “people to make a decent living...at ‘good-paying jobs’...and...continue to increase the economy’s capacity to grow,” which he cited also as a strategy for reducing inflation.⁴⁴ Two years earlier, when America was first tackling the Covid pandemic, studies seemed to confirm the president’s economic plan. David Hope of the London School of Economics and Julian Limberg of King’s College London examined 18 developed countries over a 50-year period before concluding: “50 years of tax cuts” have not trickled down to other members of society.⁴⁵ Rather, “tax cuts for the rich may not accomplish much more than help the rich keep more of their riches and exacerbate income inequality.”⁴⁶

Because the study ended in 2015, it did not include the 2017 tax overhaul bill that was signed into law by then-President Trump. But in 2019, economists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman of the University of California, Berkeley found “for the first time in a century, the 400 richest American families paid lower taxes in 2017” than did “people in the middle class.”⁴⁷ ProPublica found, “The wealthiest 25 people saw their worth increase a combined \$401 billion between 2014 and 2018, but they paid an average federal income tax of 3.4% on that wealth. By contrast, an American making \$70,000 a year pays an average federal income tax of 14%.”⁴⁸ A study by the Federal Reserve in 2021 showed the top 1% in the U.S. increased their wealth by 6.5 trillion dollars, and almost a third of the country’s wealth is controlled by “the wealthiest sliver” of Americans.⁴⁹ In response to studies like the above, Vermont’s independent Sen. Bernie Sanders has done much to bring to the public’s attention the nation’s extreme income disparity. In his State of the Union address, the president proposed that Americans worth more than \$100 million “pay their fair share” of 39.6% tax on all of their annual income, including capital gains and dividends. The proposal has been called “no more tax-free pass on inherited capital gains.”⁵⁰ The White House released a statement regarding the President’s economic position: “President Biden is a capitalist and believes that anyone should be able to become a millionaire or a billionaire ... [but] He also believes that it is wrong for America to have a tax code that results in America’s wealthiest households paying a lower tax rate than working families.”⁵¹ If passed into legislation a “no more tax-free pass on inherited capital gains” proposal would close a huge tax loophole because right now, Americans worth more than \$100 million pay zero taxes on assets like stock that appreciate over time. Rather, many live off of just the interest gained, and when they die, their heirs inherit the stock/assets and also pay no taxes on them. Although these people pay no taxes, they make use of the same common resources that the nation makes available to all.⁵² Therefore, contributing to the upkeep of the nation makes sense and is fair. Furthermore, vast *inherited privilege* is something the founding fathers tried to rethink, as Biden and Sanders are doing. The president’s vision for America is one in which no one is left behind. He has said when the middle class does well, the poor have a ladder up, and the rich still do well.

Closing the above tax loophole would even cut the federal deficit by hundreds of billions of dollars, but the current House of Representatives has refused to consider it. Three years in to the pandemic, COVID-19 persisted as the mutating background against which our social, legislative, and political efforts played out. As 2022 came to an end, a highly immune-resistant omicron variant doubled weekly, with CDC data showing it “now represents about 41% of new cases in the U.S.”⁵³ And as 2022 was ending, fears of first-time student voters about climate change were spot on: Even if the pandemic showed signs of retreating, displays of nature’s power did not. Western New York recorded sixty-six inches of snow in a day, the highest snowfall in the state’s history, causing structures to collapse and hundreds needing to be rescued.⁵⁴ In Alabama, the National Weather Service reported an EF-2 tornado with “a path of almost ten miles and 110 mph winds” that left mobile homes flipped into piles of rubble, and thousands without power.⁵⁵ In Texas, “high winds toppled big rig trucks, and hail the size of tennis balls” fell in Rockwall County.⁵⁶ As the holidays neared, 13 million people were affected by winter blizzards all across the Sierra Nevada Mountains with hurricane winds 169 mph. People were under alert for epic storms of winter snowfall—48 inches in 48 hours—blinding drivers.⁵⁷ Massive and dangerous winter storms on the West coast moved across Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, impacting 14 million people,” and accompanied by 35 tornadoes reported in ten states.⁵⁸ In December, a massive blizzard hit the northwest and then moved south, leaving heavy rains and tornadoes tearing across Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Alabama.⁵⁹ After developing near the Great Lakes, a monstrous arctic blast and hurricane-like storm brought bitter cold and winds across much of the nation right before Christmas and holidays. Classified a “bomb cyclone,” this kind of storm occurs when cold air collides with warm air, and “the atmospheric pressure at the center of the cyclone drops rapidly.”⁶⁰ The storm was so large that it encompassed “most of the lower 48 states,” and “affected more than 200 million people.”⁶¹ Power outages sputtered across the nation. “On Mount Washington, the highest peak in the northeast...winds topped 150 mph.”⁶² Across the nation, the National Weather Service had warned of “extremely dangerous” roads and urged travelers to expect periodic “near-zero visibility and considerable blowing and drifting of snow.”⁶³ South Dakota had snow drifts as high as 12 feet.

“Highways closed as crashes multiplied. Four died in a pile-up involving 50 vehicles on the Ohio Turnpike. Michigan faced a series of crashes, one involving nine semi-trailers.”⁶⁴ When the storm headed for western New York, the National Weather Service warned of snow accumulating so rapidly that it would be difficult to keep roads clear. Forty inches of snow fell overnight, forcing a travel ban and airport closure.⁶⁵ This “monster winter snowstorm” in Buffalo and western New York dumped nearly 7 feet of snow, 66 inches, a deadly and historic snowfall which was the highest ever recorded in a day.⁶⁶ The snowfall hindered rescue operations and did indeed block roads. Scores of vehicles were left in ditches or abandoned on roads, making it even more impossible for any kind of travel to get through. Some died while shoveling, but often there was nowhere to put the snow. ER workers toiled around the clock, rescuing those found in cars, homes, and snowbanks. After the weekend, the death toll was 64—the deadliest in Buffalo’s history.⁶⁷ Many were stranded in their cars or trapped outside. Others were found dead in their homes from the frigid cold. New York Gov. Kathy Hochul called the storm over Christmas weekend the “blizzard of the century.”⁶⁸ Life-threatening conditions included zero visibility due to whiteout conditions, -30 below zero wind chill, and winds that gusted up to 80 mph.⁶⁹ The city of Buffalo was said to “look like a war zone,”⁷⁰ as the death toll rose and weather conditions blockaded the city.⁷¹ But as happened in Florida after Hurricane Ian, ordinary people showed up in Buffalo to help random strangers. Snowmobile clubs brought trail “groomers,” one of the few pieces of equipment able to clear roads and “transport people through the storm.”⁷² These trail “groomers” got three nurses home after they had worked 50-60 hours straight.⁷³ Trucks came from New York City, Indiana, and Ohio just to help with digging out of the storm.⁷⁴ Rescuers went from car to car looking for people trapped who might need food, medicines, or transportation. Outside Buffalo, a local police chief dubbed citizen Jay Withey “Merry Christmas Jay” for breaking into a school for shelter and then, instead of remaining safely inside, going back outside to rescue twenty-four strangers who were stranded in cars trapped in the snow. One trapped driver said it was “scary and unforgettable. But seeing Jay ...and getting us in the school really saved us. We all came together.”⁷⁵

Despite severe weather warnings and the Christmas bomb cyclone impacting nearly all major airports, one third of Americans had expected to travel during the holiday season. But two days before Christmas, “more than 5,000 flights were cancelled across the US. The National Weather Service warned of a “once in a generation type event” and others called it a “storm of epic proportions.”⁷⁶ The *Washington Post* reported 342 deaths due to weather.⁷⁷ Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg said his department would hold Southwest Airlines “accountable” for its meltdown.⁷⁸ From December 22 to 29, the airline canceled over 15 thousand flights.⁷⁹ “At least 2 million travelers’ flights were canceled,” at a cost of at least \$800 million to the airline.⁸⁰ As the year 2022 came to an end, almost all local communities had been a target of the weather’s ferocity and now worked to herald a New Year. Overseas, the war in Ukraine rivaled the savagery of these weather disasters in the form of a human virus seemingly determined to display its own fierce tenacity like Covid-19, as well as ability to mutate. Fighting for its sovereignty, Ukraine termed Russia’s strategy one to “reduce whole cities to rubble.”⁸¹ Russia launched 69 missiles in its biggest attack on Ukraine’s electrical infrastructure, forcing even more people to evacuate.⁸² Putin played cat and mouse with phony calls for ceasefires. Chef André’s and World Central Kitchen (WCK) teams got in touch with chefs in France and also began operating 24/7 at all border crossings in neighboring countries with hundreds of kitchens now providing thousands of daily fresh meals.⁸³ Back in the U.S. the response of congressman Pat Ryan (D-NY) to his unexpected win in a swing district in Kingston, New York, demonstrates some inspiring characteristics in discussing what many had seen as an “existential threat to democracy.”⁸⁴ Ryan cites what he learned as a West Point cadet and Army officer: “It’s about finding that common ground, remembering that we’re all in this with a purpose and a mission greater than ourselves.... it takes a lot of work to bring that out in people, because everyone is distrustful right now. Everyone is exhausted. Everyone is at their wit’s end.”⁸⁵ Ryan does not dismiss the very “real darkness and division” the pandemic unearthed. But Ryan says he learned to live by West Point’s motto: Duty, Honor, Country. He ran for Congress because he wants to “bring that ethos to Washington where, he thinks, it’s desperately needed: that’s where leadership is even more important....There is reason to remember we’re all in this together. We have to continue to lead with hope and optimism and... remind people that we’re heading in a better direction.”⁸⁶ The congressman recalls the substantial aid the federal government has provided: “When you step up and help people and deliver their appreciation, and trust gets rebuilt.... I think that’s what we’re starting to really see ‘gain momentum.’”⁸⁷ The massive toll on the foundations of our government and democratic life continues. If we are to be vigilant about sustaining democratic government, what passes for “normal” demands careful, critical thinking.