

A Biden Landslide? Some Democrats Can't Help Whispering

Astead W. Herndon - New York Time

MACON, Ga. — President Trump held a rally in Georgia on Friday, 18 days before the November general election. It wasn't a good sign for him.



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times Joseph R. Biden Jr. campaigning in Durham, N.C., on Sunday. His competitiveness in Republican-leaning states like North Carolina, Georgia and Texas has raised Democrats' hopes this year.

That Mr. Trump is still campaigning in what should be a safely Republican state — and in others that should be solidly in his column like Iowa and Ohio — is evidence to many Democrats that Joseph R. Biden Jr.'s polling lead in the presidential race is solid and durable. Mr. Trump spent Monday in Arizona, too, a state that was once reliably Republican but where his unpopularity has helped make Mr. Biden competitive.



Doug Mills/The New York Times President Trump at a rally in Macon, Ga., on Friday.

For some Democrats, Mr. Trump's attention to red states is also a sign of something else — something few in the party want to discuss out loud, given their scars from Mr. Trump's surprise victory in 2016. It's an indication that Mr. Biden could pull off a landslide in November, achieving an ambitious and rare electoral blowout that some Democrats think is necessary to quell any doubts — or disputes by Mr. Trump — that Mr. Biden won the election.

On one level, such a scenario is entirely plausible based on the weeks and the breadth of public polls that show Mr. Biden with leads or edges in key states. But this possibility runs headlong into the political difficulties of pulling off such a win, and perhaps even more, the psychological hurdles for Democrats to entertain the idea. Many think that Mr. Trump, having pulled off a stunning win before, could do it again, even if there are differences from 2016 that hurt his chances.



Doug Mills/The New York Times Perhaps the biggest sign of an expanded

Democratic map is the signals coming out of the Trump campaign as he finds himself in places like Macon rather than trying to expend resources in states Hillary Clinton won in 2016.

This much is clear: Landslide presidential victories have become rare — the last big one was in 1988, and a more modest one in 2008 — and Mr. Trump is still ahead of or running closely with Mr. Biden in many of the states he won in 2016 when the margin of error is factored in.

Democrats see flipping states like Texas and Georgia as key to a possible landslide; Texas hasn't voted for a Democratic presidential candidate since 1976, and Georgia since 1992. A New York Times and Siena College poll published on Tuesday found Mr. Biden and Mr. Trump tied among likely voters in Georgia.

“Until Democrats win a statewide election, we’re not a purple state,” said Brian Robinson, a Republican political consultant in Georgia. “We may be a purpling state. But until they win, this is a red state.”

It is just such a historic rout of Mr. Trump that some Democrats increasingly believe is necessary to send a political message to Republicans, a moral one to the rest of the world, and serve a key logistical purpose: getting a clear Electoral College winner on Nov. 3, rather than waiting for an extended ballot counting process.

To many, a commanding victory that sweeps Democrats to control of the Senate as well would set the stage for a consequential presidency, not just one that evicts Mr. Trump.

“What they’re going to need in order to move the country forward is to demonstrate that a ton of people are with him and are aligned with his agenda,” said María Teresa Kumar, chief executive officer at Voto Latino, a voter mobilization group that has endorsed Mr. Biden. “That the people want to address climate change in a big bold way. They want to address health care in a big bold way. And they want to address education in a big bold way.”



Elijah Nouvelage/Getty Images Jon Ossoff, the Democratic candidate in one of the two contested Senate races in Georgia, said he appreciated Mr. Biden’s greater investment in the state.

She added: “The only way to make Republicans find a spine is if this is a massive turnout election.”

For a party still traumatized by the ghosts of 2016, overconfidence or overreach are the last things most Democrats feel or want to project.

“This race is far closer than some of the punditry we’re seeing on Twitter and on TV would suggest,” read a memo last week from Mr. Biden’s campaign manager, Jennifer O’Malley Dillon. “In the key battleground states where this election will be decided, we remain neck and neck with Donald Trump.”

But even some Republicans have begun talking about a possible drubbing in a second Blue Wave that would power Mr. Biden to a huge Electoral College victory and help Democrats retake the Senate.

Last week, one Republican, Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska, warned constituents of a possible “Republican blood bath” in November, earning the ire of the president in the process. The conservative media mogul Rupert Murdoch has told friends he expects Mr. Biden to win in a landslide, according to a published report he did not deny.

Mr. Biden’s campaign has also stepped up travel and investment in states that were expected to be out of reach for Democrats — sending Jill Biden to Texas, and scheduling events for Senator Kamala Harris and her husband in Georgia and Ohio, before a staffer tested positive for coronavirus and her travel schedule was limited.

But perhaps the biggest sign of an expanded Democratic map is the signals coming out of the Trump campaign as he finds himself in places like Macon rather than trying to expend resources in states Hillary Clinton won in 2016.

The subtle shift in thinking among some Democrats — that the goal for Election Day should not only be to defeat Mr. Trump but do so by a large margin — is about setting the tone for the post-Trump era.

A crushing Electoral College victory, the thinking goes, would deliver an unmistakable rejection of Mr. Trump’s political brand and minimize the impact of Mr. Trump’s rhetorical war against mail-in ballots and any attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the election.

Mr. Biden, a cautious moderate, without the limitless charisma of President Obama, who has portrayed himself as more a transitional figure than a transformative one, might seem an unlikely figure to produce a political tsunami. He has balked at progressive litmus test issues such as the Green New Deal or expanding the number of Supreme Court justices.

But Waleed Shahid, a spokesman for Justice Democrats, which seeks to add left-wing Democrats to Congress by challenging more moderate incumbents, said his group is at peace with Mr. Biden’s current positioning; the goal is to create a movement so vast that Mr. Biden has to shift his thinking. This election is the first step, he said.

“Lincoln was not an abolitionist, F.D.R. not a socialist or trade unionist, and L.B.J. not a civil rights activist,” Mr. Shahid said. “Three of the most transformative presidents never fully embraced the movements of their time, and yet the movements won because they organized and shaped public opinion.”

He added: “A major victory would help provide Democrats even more of a mandate to govern through the bold policy unseen since the era of F.D.R. and L.B.J.”

And Mr. Biden, for all his low-key style, has shown signs of thinking big. After all, he promised during the primary not just to win but to beat Mr. Trump “like a drum” and restore the “soul of the nation” with a robust rejection of the white grievance politics the administration has embraced.

Jon Ossoff, the Democratic candidate in one of the two contested Senate races in Georgia, said he appreciated Mr. Biden's greater investment in the state. He argued that Democrats winning in the state would represent more than an additional Senate seat, or 16 electoral votes in a presidential election, but would break the Republican vise grip on the South and beat back the "Southern Strategy" of racial division that has kept the region solidly Republican for decades.

A win, Mr. Ossoff said, would prove "it is no longer possible to divide Southerners on racial lines in order to win elections. Because there will be a multiracial coalition that is demanding more progressive leadership."

In a recent interview, the former presidential candidate Beto O'Rourke made a similar case in regard to his home state of Texas.

"Texas, more than any other state, has the ability to decide this on election night," he said. "

And what would be so powerful, and have so much political and poetic justice, is if the most voter-suppressed state in the union, with such a diverse electorate, turned out in the greatest numbers that put Joe Biden over the top."

The last two weeks have also mobilized a particular wave of optimism among Democratic political operatives based on Mr. Trump's erratic performance in the first debate and Mr. Biden's surging lead in amassing financial resources for the campaign finale.

On Friday, a group of progressives launched a new super PAC for the campaign's final stretch, investing \$2.5 million to flip Georgia. The group, called New South, had a clear message for Mr. Biden and Democrats: the future of the party is here and the moment to embrace it is now.

"In Georgia, two Senate races are up for grabs, we have the opportunity to clinch the election for Biden and Harris, and we can flip the state house heading into the crucial redistricting," said Ryan Brown, who leads the group. "Both the stakes and the possibilities of the Georgia elections this year warrant our attention and this large-scale investment."

However, voters in both parties reflect tempered expectations shaped by 2016 and Georgia's political history.

Mr. Robinson, the Republican operative, said he believes polling has over-sampled Democratic constituencies.

"We have seen for years, polls showing Democrats tied or ahead in the middle of October," Mr. Robinson said. "The media gets in a tizzy, and the Democrats get confidence, and then the Republicans win."

He said, "If the polls are tied in Georgia, that means the Republicans are winning." Dennis Jackson, a 58-year-old Democrat who voted early in Atlanta a day before Mr. Trump's rally, shared Mr. Robinson's skepticism, after the heartbreak of the 2016

election and the 2018 governor's race, when Ms. Abrams lost to the Republican Brian Kemp by a narrow margin.

"More people are getting involved," Mr. Jackson said, "but some people don't know how this goes. I do."

Jonathan Martin contributed reporting from Washington.