

How Liberals Rehearsed for Trump's Power Grab

A huge coalition of activist groups had been working together since the spring to make sure that Joe Biden won and that the “election stayed won” amid Donald Trump’s subterfuge.



Demonstrators in Philadelphia after Joseph R. Biden Jr. was declared winner of the presidential election in November. Credit...Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Alexander Burns, *The New York Times* National Edition, January 25, 2021, A1.

The video call was announced on short notice, but more than 900 people quickly joined: a coalition of union officials and racial justice organizers, civil rights lawyers and campaign strategists, pulled together in a matter of hours after the Jan. 6 attack on Capitol Hill.

They convened to craft a plan for answering the onslaught on American democracy, and they soon reached a few key decisions. They would stay off the streets for the moment and hold back from mass demonstrations that could be exposed to an armed mob goaded on by President Donald J. Trump.

They would use careful language. In a presentation, Anat Shenker-Osorio, a liberal messaging guru, urged against calling the attack a “coup,” warning that the word could make Mr. Trump sound far stronger than he was — or even imply that a pro-Trump militia had seized power.

And they would demand stern punishment for Mr. Trump and his party: Republicans at every level of government who incited the mob “must be removed or resign,” read one version of the group’s intended message, contained in Ms. Shenker-Osorio’s presentation and reviewed by The New York Times.

The meeting was no lucky feat of emergency organizing, nor was the highly disciplined and united front that emerged from it.

Instead, it was a climactic event in a long season of planning and coordination by progressives, aimed largely at a challenge with no American precedent: defending the outcome of a free election from a president bent on overturning it.

By the time rioters ransacked the Capitol, the machinery of the left was ready: prepared by months spent sketching out doomsday scenarios and mapping out responses, by countless hours of training exercises and reams of opinion research.



Democratic activists urged against calling the attack on the Capitol this month a “coup.” Credit...Kenny Holston for The New York Times

At each juncture, the activist wing of the Democratic coalition deployed its resources deliberately, channeling its energy toward countering Mr. Trump’s attempts at sabotage. Joseph R. Biden Jr., an avowed centrist who has often boasted of beating his more liberal primary opponents, was a beneficiary of their work.

Just as important, progressive groups reckoned with their own vulnerabilities: The impulses toward fiery rhetoric and divisive demands — which generated polarizing slogans like “Abolish ICE” and “Defund the police” — were supplanted by a more studied vocabulary, developed through nightly opinion research and message testing.

Worried that Mr. Trump might use any unruly demonstrations as pretext for a federal crackdown of the kind seen last summer in Portland, Ore., progressives organized mass gatherings only sparingly and in highly choreographed ways after Nov. 3. In a year of surging political energy across the left and of record-breaking voter turnout, one side has stifled itself to an extraordinary degree during the precarious postelection period.

Since the violence of Jan. 6, progressive leaders have not deployed large-scale public protests at all.

Interviews with nearly two dozen leaders involved in the effort, and a review of several hundred pages of planning documents, polling presentations and legal memorandums, revealed an uncommon — and previously unreported — degree of collaboration among progressive groups that often struggle to work so closely together because of competition over political turf, funding and conflicting ideological priorities.

For the organizers of the effort, it represents both a good-news story — Mr. Trump was thwarted — and an ominous sign that such exhaustive efforts were required to protect election results that were not all that close.

For the most part, the organized left anticipated Mr. Trump's postelection schemes, including his premature attempt to claim a victory he had not achieved, his pressure campaigns targeting Republican election administrators and county officials and his incitement of far-right violence, strategy documents show.



Mobilizing voters for the November election was the top priority of progressive groups. Credit...Bridget Bennett for The New York Times

Ai-jen Poo, a prominent organizer involved in the effort, said the realization had dawned on a wide range of groups: “We all had to come together and bring everything we could to protecting our right to vote.”

Preparing for a Crisis

Like so much else about the 2020 election, the progressive alliance came together because of the coronavirus pandemic.

It was early last April, after the virus struck and disrupted the Democratic presidential primaries, that Mr. Podhorzer wrote a document titled “Threats to the 2020 Election.” He warned of myriad dangers, including cyberattacks and mass disinformation.

One entry in his catalog concerned a postelection battle over the appointment of presidential electors: Under certain conditions, he wrote, rogue Republican state legislators could seek to nullify the will of voters and appoint pro-Trump electors from swing states.

“We are eight months away from crisis,” Mr. Podhorzer wrote in a missive to his allies. “Our efforts over the last three years to create a political infrastructure to mobilize and persuade voters has been extraordinary, but our preparation for the coming crisis has been woefully inadequate.”

Other progressive strategists, at organizations founded after 2016 like the Fight Back Table and the Social and Economic Justice Leaders group, had been mulling the same perils ahead.

They worried that a traditional political campaign might never attain victory if it did not also prepare to battle a would-be strongman during a deadly pandemic.

And so the Democracy Defense Coalition was born. Deirdre Schifeling, a former top strategist for Planned Parenthood, took the lead in coordinating the effort. With a grand name and a skeletal staff, the group began approaching liberal organizations in Washington and the states. A cluster of a few strategists became a coalition of 80 groups, and then of more than 200.

It was the largest of several interlocking progressive federations that prepared for a contested election.

“A lot of other organizations were very focused on winning the election,” Ms. Schifeling said in an interview. “This whole defending the election once we won it — making sure the election stayed won — was not something a lot of others were focused on.”

One of the more exhaustive assessments of legal threats to the vote came from Protect Democracy, a nonpartisan group formed after Mr. Trump’s election that had become an influential hub for efforts to battle Mr. Trump through the legal system.

Late last summer, the group asked a Washington law firm, Arnold & Porter, to compile a report on how votes would be tabulated and electors assigned in every swing state, including a catalog of the pressure points someone like Mr. Trump could exploit.

The 137-page document identified people and governmental bodies in seven swing states who would play a key role in determining the integrity of the election. Among those listed were Republican state legislative leaders in battlegrounds like Michigan and Pennsylvania; the Michigan Board of State Canvassers; and Brad Raffensperger, the Georgia secretary of state. Mr. Trump would soon seek to twist every one of them to his advantage.



President Trump pressured Brad Raffensperger, the Georgia secretary of state, to change the state's election results in his favor. Credit... Brynn Anderson/Associated Press

The progressive organizations prepared for physical threats, too. They held de-escalation training sessions around the country, aimed at giving people the tools to ease potentially violent conflict.

Nelini Stamp, a top official with the Working Families Party, said her organization had been in touch with bail funds that could be activated in response to mass arrests and had readied a separate fund to raise money for the families of anyone killed in violence on or around Election Day. Their thinking, Ms. Stamp said, had been informed by the immense protests after the killing of George Floyd.

“We prepared for the worst of the worst: We’re going to get shot at, killed, on Election Day and afterward,” said Ms. Stamp, adding, “You have to understand that a lot of this is coming from movements that have been dealing with a lot of death.”



Watching election night results at a bar in Atlanta. Credit...Audra Melton for The New York Times

Stopping the Steal

On the night of the election, the alliance of liberal groups convened at 11 o'clock for a video call. Mr. Trump was ahead in nearly every important state, but Democratic election modeling had predicted he would get a head start before the counting of mail-in ballots in states like Michigan and Pennsylvania.

Still, for too many, it felt like 2016 all over again.

“People were ashen,” Ms. Schifeling recalled.

The group had prepared for several contingencies. Under one seemingly likely scenario, in which Mr. Trump declared himself the victor prematurely with the help of Fox News and moved to block ballot tabulation in key swing states, a major public mobilization was planned for Nov. 4 to demand that vote counting continue.

But during the long hours of election night, the strategy needed a tweak. Mr. Trump’s declaration of victory had been treated by television networks as a galling stunt, and Fox quickly called the key state of Arizona for Mr. Biden. Vote counting was proceeding without major inhibition.

The rallies were canceled, in favor of more targeted actions: Instead of throngs of protesters carrying Biden-Harris signs and competing for street space with Trump supporters, progressives assembled in smaller groups around vote-counting facilities in Philadelphia and Detroit, aiming to head off any intimidation tactics from the right.



Police officers pushed back demonstrators who sought to challenge the vote counting in Detroit. Credit...Brittany Greeson for The New York Times

Anna Galland, a prominent progressive organizer involved in the deliberations, said it had been a “tough decision” not to mobilize nationwide demonstrations. Part of the concern, she said, had been that they might “inadvertently turn the tide of media momentum” by depicting a defeated president as a fearsome adversary.

“Organizing any kind of massive ‘It’s a coup’ mobilization, in the midst of those contested days, would have just been bait for the right,” she said.

Where they did gather, organizers were urged to take a tone of celebration and triumph. The goal, leaders agreed, would be to make Mr. Trump’s actions look impotent. Ms. Stamp described a midweek demonstration in Philadelphia, organized when she and others learned of a Proud Boys presence in the area, that became a “two-day dance party” that averted a tense standoff.

When the left finally took to the streets en masse on Nov. 7, after media organizations projected Mr. Biden as the winner, it was in a mood of jubilation.

“Celebrate our achievement: turning out in record numbers, seeing will of people prevail,” a presentation on Nov. 6 had recommended, and that was how the scenes that Saturday unfolded.

The same document warned, however, that Mr. Trump was “deliberately inciting violence because he hopes to distract us from the fact that he has lost this election.”



Organizations bonded around a series of sharp and restrained messages about the sanctity of the electoral process. Credit...Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

While Democratic Party lawyers thrashed Mr. Trump in court, it was in Michigan that one of the scenarios envisioned in the Protect Democracy report came closest to unfolding: The president appealed to Republican election administrators to block certification of Mr. Biden's win there and summoned the Republican leaders of the Michigan Legislature to the White House.

Art Reyes, leader of the activist group We the People Michigan, directed a two-pronged effort, bombarding legislators' offices with phone calls and deploying several dozen volunteers to meet the two Republican leaders, Lee Chatfield and Mike Shirkey, at the airport on their way to Washington. A corresponding group was waiting when they landed.

Democratic litigators had been in contact before Election Day with Michigan's attorney general, Dana Nessel, about the possibility of an attempted electoral heist. "We were prepared to counter it," Ms. Nessel said in an interview.

As Mr. Shirkey and Mr. Chatfield traveled to the White House, word of a potential state investigation burst into view when it was reported that Ms. Nessel was scrutinizing the meeting.

Mr. Trump's gambit flopped. The lawmakers left the White House meeting and issued a statement stressing that they would "follow the normal process" regarding the state's electors.

Jegath Athilingam, a strategist who helped craft the progressives' messaging on Michigan, said they had been poised to deliver "more of an aggressive" denunciation of the lawmakers had they colluded with Mr. Trump.

But, she said, "Once he failed in Michigan, a precedent had been set."

Having hit a wall in Michigan, Mr. Trump had no success with attempts at back-room maneuvering in other states. But Mr. Trump's failure, they said in interviews, only offered them limited solace.

"We may have walked back from the brink of a dangerous moment in this country, but this cannot be the norm," said Rahna Epting, executive director of MoveOn. "It's not sustainable for democracy."

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A version of this article appears in print on January 24, 2021, Section A, Page 1 with the headline: How Democrats Planned for Doomsday.