

What Trump and Biden Could Learn from Gandhi

“There go my people, I must hurry to catch up with them for I am their leader.”

Gandhi said that, a wise observation by a man who understood the fragility of leadership: If you lose your followers – in today’s political terms, your base – you’re done. You may think you’re their leader but make no mistake, it’s the followers who call the shots.

Politicians understand this, which is why they pander to their base, why they hurry to catch up with their followers – in order to secure a place as their leader.

So we get President Trump telling his base whatever it wants to hear, about his “beautiful” wall and the “pencil neck geeks” who are out to get him.

And we get Democrats kissing up to their base, promising them all sorts of goodies just to make sure the followers select one of them as their leader.

And what is it that the perpetually angry progressive base of the Democratic Party wants?

Well, the base wants to add a few more (blue) states to the union – Puerto Rico and Washington D.C.

The base wants a new law that would allow 16 year olds to vote (for Democrats).

The base wants to pack the Supreme Court (as long as the many new justices are liberals).

The base wants free college and Medicare for All (as long as those greedy rich people pay for it).

The base wants to abolish the Electoral College (because it cost them the last election).

If the base had its way it would demand that illegal immigrants be allowed to vote for president.

What usually happens is that candidates in both major parties start out by appealing to their base to win in primaries then pivot to the center to win the general election. That won't be easy for the Democrats in 2020 given how detached their progressive base is from the American middle, the place where elections are won and lost.

Here's the problem for someone like Joe Biden, who, if the polls are right, is way out ahead of his Democratic rivals: If he moves left to appeal to younger, passionate progressive voters, he risks losing older, more moderate Democrats who he needs to beat Donald Trump next year. But if he plays to the moderates as the reasonable middle of the road establishment candidate, he risks losing the take-no-prisoners progressive base. Good luck, Joe!

President Trump doesn't have to worry about his base; they would stick by him if he *literally* shot someone on Fifth Avenue. That's why it makes sense for him to cozy up to swing voters, the independents, the ones who can be persuaded to support him – if he would just tone down the divisive rhetoric. But he's shown no interest in appealing to any bloc beyond his most passionate base, the people who go to his rallies and cheer every word that comes out of his mouth.

But President Trump can't win reelection if all he has is his loyal base. It's just not enough. And the Democrats can't win, either, if all they have is their progressive base. Walking a tightrope is never easy.

So let me offer some advice to the president and to the Democratic frontrunner.

Mr. Trump should talk non-stop about the economy he presides over. He should remind voters over and over that unemployment is at 50 year lows, that employment for women and African Americans and Latinos is at record highs. He should tell voters that if the Democrats take over they will derail everything that's good about the U.S. economy. He should tell them that even if the Democrats mean well, their "free stuff" agenda will bankrupt the country. And he should do one more thing: Knock off the needles nasty, childish, behavior that turns off the swing voters he needs to win a second term.

Presidents who run for reelection when the economy is strong ... win. But while Mr. Trump gets high marks for his handling of the economy he gets much lower general approval rating from the American people. Translation: They like the jobs and the increase in wages that the Trump economy has given them; but they're not crazy about *him*. They may hold their nose and vote for him anyway because of the strong economy, but the president doesn't need to take that chance. He just needs to act in a way that doesn't alienate him from the swing voters who will decide the election.

And here's what Mr. Biden should tell the American people if he wants to send Donald Trump back to his tower on Fifth Avenue:

"I'm not a fan of the president. I don't like how divisive he is. But I like what he's done with the economy. I like the fact that unemployment is low and consumer confidence is high. If I'm your next president, I will change the tone emanating from the Oval Office – but I promise I will do nothing to derail the good things we've got going with the economy."

But back here, in the real world, we know why neither scenario will play out. If history is any guide, Donald Trump can't behave the way needs to. His combative style appeals to the base and that's all he seems to care about. Toning his rhetoric down is the last thing his loyal followers want and

so he has no incentive to control his mouth – even though that would provide his best chance of winning another term.

And Joe Biden can't do it because he's a Democrat and politics is all he knows, which means that giving any credit to Donald Trump for anything is against the rules.

A final thought from Gandhi that the President and his Democratic rivals might want to think about: "You may never know what results come of your actions," the Mahatma said, "but if you do nothing, there will be no results."