

Making Sense of the 2020 US Election

Written by Julie Norman

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JULIE NORMAN, NOV 10 2020

The 2020 election saw the highest voter turnout in over a century, with nearly 67 percent of eligible voters participating. With some votes still being counted, Joe Biden garnered 50.5 percent of the popular vote, compared to Donald Trump's 47.7 percent, a difference of about 4 million votes, a significant but much smaller margin than predicted by national polls leading up to Election Day. The electoral college vote is still being finalised as several states finalise ballot counting, but Biden has passed the crucial 270 mark with 279 electoral votes over Trump's 214 at the time of writing. Trump has mounted legal challenges in several states, but these are unlikely to move forward or challenge the outcome of the race.

Democrats were hoping for a 'blue wave' of support to give them control of the Senate and a stronger majority in the House. Instead, Senate Republicans held on firmly to seats thought to be competitive in states like Maine and Iowa, and are on track to maintain a slim majority with the chamber, with final numbers dependent on two expected run-off votes in the state of Georgia scheduled for 5 January. The most Democrats can hope for at this point is a 50-50 split, with Vice President Kamala Harris as the tiebreaker.

Meanwhile, although Democrats are on track to hold a majority in the House, they lost at least four seats, including several of the Trump-carried districts they won in 2018, setting off a debate between moderate and progressive House Democrats on the relative appeal of their respective approaches. Further, Democrats were unable to flip even one state legislature, with Republicans maintaining control of state chambers in Texas, North Carolina, and Florida, giving the GOP a distinct advantage in determining redistricting as well as policy agendas at the state level.

Biden's most striking contrast to Trump will be in his tone and approach, one that restores messages of national unity, moderation, and compromise. But there will be sharp policy differences as well.

In the short-term, we can expect a significant shift in Covid-19 policy under Biden; he is already launching a task force to lead on a public health based-response emphasising widely available testing, contact tracing, and vaccine development, and he will also be pushing Congress to pass a robust relief package supporting for workers, small businesses, and financially-strapped states. The pandemic response will tie in with Biden's other policy priority of protecting and building upon the Affordable Care Act to reduce costs and eliminate barriers to healthcare.

Finally, there will be a sharp contrast between Biden and Trump in terms of climate policy; Biden has promised to invest in green infrastructure and industries in an effort to bring the US to zero net carbon emissions by 2050, and his transition team is already reviewing how to reinstate over 100 environmental safeguards rolled back by the Trump administration.

However, the ability of Biden to translate his agendas into policy will depend largely on which party ultimately controls the Senate; while a divided government does not guarantee gridlock, it does make it that much harder to push through ambitious legislation. With Biden's 36-year history in the Senate as a pragmatic compromiser however, he may bring more leverage than others in his party in overcoming the hyper-partisanship that has characterised Washington for the past decade.

As with domestic policy, Biden's foreign policy will differ from Trump's in style as much as substance. We can expect

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a more multi-lateral approach to international relations, in contrast to Trump's 'America First' doctrine, including re-joining the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Paris Climate Accord, reassuring US commitment to NATO, and re-engaging with allies on the JCPOA (the Iran nuclear deal). While mending relations with allies, we also expect a repudiation of authoritarian strongmen that have benefitted from Trump, including Russia's Putin and Saudi Arabia's Mohammad Bin Salman.

Even in areas where the Biden administration's policies may somewhat align with Trump's, such as maintaining a tough stance on China, we can expect a less escalatory and more diplomatic approach, and one that engages rather than pressures allies. With security-relevant decisions, such as withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan and the Middle East, Biden will most likely eschew Trump's rash decision-making in favour of more traditional consultation with military, defense, and state department officials, facilitating a more stable and predictable foreign policy.

Even with the Biden victory, the election was far from being the repudiation of Trumpism that Democrats had hoped for. With over 70 million votes cast for Trump, the election further illustrates the polarisation of the country between two political and increasingly social spheres. However, it is important not to make polarisation a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially as research shows that Americans estimate that members of the other party dislike or disagree with them twice as much as they actually do. Further, while it is tempting to view the country as starkly split between liberal and conservative states, there is significant diversity of opinions and ideology within locales, such that it might be wiser to revision the map as varying shades of purple rather than clear red or blue.

It is also important to note that, despite strong partisan identities, there were several small but notable shifts in this election that suggest a scrambling of traditional Democratic and Republican bases. As expected, Biden led Trump overall among women voters; Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian voters; college-educated voters; urban voters; and voters under 45. However, according to exit polls, Trump actually made gains in most demographics *except* white men, including modest but unexpected gains among white women, Black men and women, and Hispanic men and women. Shifts among Cuban-American and Venezuelan-American voters in Florida in particular have been credited with contributing to Trump's victory in that state, even as Hispanic votes in states like Texas and Arizona held steady for Democrats. These shifts underscore the importance for both parties of recognising the diversity within communities that are often discussed in homogenous terms, and also complicate the characterisation of 'Trumpism' as solely appealing to white men.

As the slight demographic shifts indicate, support for Trump may be more nuanced than previously appreciated; both parties would be wise to look beyond surface-level assumptions to better understand the issues and grievances that turned 7 million *more* voters to Trump in this election than in 2016. To be sure, not all ballots cast for Trump were necessarily a full endorsement of his personality or policies; 2020 was clearly an atypical year with a myriad of crises, and polls indicated that the majority of Trump voters were voting largely on economic concerns. Others were likely voting in accordance with party loyalty and support for conservative platforms rather than outright embrace of Trump. And the fact that Trump underperformed GOP congressional candidates in down-ballot races indicates that his personal brand of politics could only go so far, even within his own party. Yet Trump's brand of populism, a mixture of nationalism and rejection of 'elites,' clearly resonated with a number of voters, suggesting that 'Trumpism' will remain significant in US politics.

Riddled with falsehoods about legitimate voting, Trump's statements after the election suggesting widespread voter fraud and election stealing were unprecedented and rightly struck many observers as undermining American democracy. However, it is notable that both Democrats and Republicans, as well as media institutions, including Fox News, swiftly denounced and fact-checked the President's comments, with the three major news networks actually cutting away from some of his most misleading comments. Further, the fact that courts in Michigan and Georgia threw out lawsuits regarding Trump's unsubstantiated claims of fraud in those states should restore confidence in the integrity of American institutions, even in the midst of Trump's incendiary and false rhetoric.

Other questions about American democracy beyond the contest between Biden and Trump remain. The closeness of this election in the electoral vote, despite Biden's clear victory in the popular vote, will no doubt prompt further discussion about rethinking the electoral college. And the over 300 lawsuits regarding mail-in ballots and early voting

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procedures raise important questions about future efforts to facilitate voter access and prevent voter suppression. Both parties will also face larger challenges regarding their own trajectories: To what extent will the Republican party re-orient towards or away from Trumpism? How will Democrats maintain a viable coalition between moderates and progressives?

At this point however, after months of divisive campaigning, days of arduous counting, and a year unlike any other, Americans and the international community can view this election as one that has affirmed rather than degraded democracy. In both the presidential race and down-ballot races, Americans have indicated a clear preference for civility and moderation, and the high level of voter turnout underscores how the majority of Americans, even in times of crisis, still believe first and foremost in the robustness of the electoral process. Further, despite the high level of tension, voting before and on election day proceeded peacefully, and the country has not devolved into violence as some predicted. To be sure, the election brought out thousands of Americans, Biden and Trump supporters alike, in peaceful protests and demonstrations, but these should be seen as an expression and embrace of democracy rather than a threat to it. This election has tested American democracy, but it has proved resilient.

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