



Historic 2020 US Election: The pandemic vs the economic

Sunday, Nov 8, 2020

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12:00 AM, November 08, 2020 / LAST MODIFIED: 01:23 AM, November 08, 2020

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The 2020 US Presidential Election held last Tuesday, November 3, will likely go down as among the most important in United States history—for several reasons. First, there was the

turnout. For the last few weeks, Americans listened to former first lady Michelle Obama, one of the most liked person in the country, and voted like their lives depended on it. They voted in record-shattering numbers, and the final turnout will likely be higher than 150 million, the highest in US history. It is worth noting the vote count is still ongoing. The delay is happening because more than 100 million Americans voted by mail or in person before election day. Most states have rules that delayed the counting of these early votes until after the election. Also, state officials, aware that their vote count will be closely scrutinised and even perhaps litigated, are taking extra care to be accurate.

The second reason why it is historic is that Americans knew that it would be among the most consequential in US history, probably since 1932. In 1932, the US was three years into the Great Depression, and one in four Americans were out of work. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected to lead the US out of the Great Depression and to victory in World War II.

In 2020, the situation is also grave. A three-way crisis has caught the United States in a vise. First, a largely unchecked Covid pandemic is rampant and now again resurgent. The virus has infected more than 9 million and has taken more than 225,000 lives. A record-breaking 121,000 Americans were infected yesterday. The outlook for this winter is grim. Second, the economy plunged in spring, with the annual GDP falling by 9 percent that quarter, leaving more than 20 million Americans newly unemployed. What seemed like a promising recovery between July and September is now petering out, endangered by the resurgent virus. Third, perhaps most significant, chaotic governance and politics have plunged the country into dangerously deep divisions and have led to outright attacks on venerated American institutions.

As it happened, with so much at stake, more than half of the electorate of the US went to bed on election night, in shock and dismay. Late Tuesday night, early trends in voting results that first counted the people who voted on election day suggested that it would be a repeat of 2016. Donald Trump could win the election again by winning the electoral college even though he was losing decisively in the popular vote.

Thankfully, on Wednesday, to enormous relief, the race evened out. Democrats also now had the path to win. The Biden-Harris ticket appears to be on a victory track in the four states of

Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, and Pennsylvania, where the votes are still being counted. A win in Pennsylvania alone will get them the 270 electoral college votes to make them victorious. Alternatively, a victory in any two of the other three states would make them victorious in the US electoral college.

Two other reasons make this election historic. If Joe Biden wins and becomes president, he will have won by getting more than 74 million votes, the highest ever in American history. Interestingly, the previous record-holder here was Barack Obama, who won with 69 million votes in 2008. The second reason a Biden win will be historic is that a woman, Senator Kamala Harris, will be elected vice president of the United States for the first time. But it goes further, as Kamala Harris also comes from African-American and South Asian parents. That will also make it a historical first.

This race is also a historical landmark because it has confirmed the widespread failure of pre-election polling first noticed in 2016. In some respects, the loss of credibility of this important industry has been worse this year. In 2016, the final national polling was close to the actual results: Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by two percentage points or nearly three million votes as projected. In 2020, national-level polling results showed Biden would lead by anywhere from seven to 10 percentage points. As of now, Biden leads by about three percentage points or about four million votes. Polls also predicted clear victories in the key battleground blue wall states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania and suggested a tie in Florida. Thus, the polls significantly underestimated the strength and resilience of the support for Donald Trump. Biden won the blue wall states by mostly razor-thin margins.

These small margins are a surprise. The choice should have been more evident, not only among the electorate but also among the establishment. Even among some Republican business leaders, intellectuals, professionals, intelligence chiefs, retired generals, there was little doubt about the preferred candidate at this time of crisis. They supported Joe Biden as a decent and experienced man. But beyond that consideration, they also endorsed Biden because they wanted to defeat Donald Trump, a man widely regarded as one of the biggest threats to the United States Constitution.

If there were any doubts about this, Trump's reckless press conference in the White House this Thursday night dispelled it. The president of the United States denounced the elections

of his own country as corrupt. He nearly also claimed that tens of millions of Americans who had voted by mail were part of a fraud. Rarely has a serving leader condemned his own country and fellow citizens like this. If Trump loses the election, he is unlikely to leave graciously. Far from it, he has already raised the threat of a range of legal challenges. But these threats are unlikely to go anywhere. The danger for disruption is more significant, however. Many observers also see Donald Trump as a frustrated authoritarian leader. If he could, he would use extra-constitutional means to overturn the election results. He has, more than tacitly, encouraged private militias that support him to be vigilant.

One final thought—something that will puzzle historians—is why did Donald Trump get 70 million, and still counting, votes in 2020? How was he able to increase the number of his voters from 2016 by almost seven million? Why did these voters not penalise him for his disastrously bungled response to the Covid pandemic? Why did these voters not see the threat Donald Trump posed to the healthcare of tens of millions of Americans? These are questions that deserve careful thought. Deep-rooted social, cultural, class, race, political-economic factors have played a role. But it is essential to avoid simplistic explanations. Consider that quite a few Trump voters in 2016 also supported Barack Obama in 2008; some even endorsed Obama in 2008 and 2012. Also worth keeping in mind is that a higher number of Hispanics and even African-Americans voted for Trump in 2020.

Two early analyses provide the beginnings of an explanation for Trump's resilience with voters. The Associated Press and the Edison Institute, a think tank, used voter surveys and exit polls to offer a plausible answer. Voters who thought the pandemic was the most serious issue facing the USA voted for Biden; voters who thought reviving the economy was the priority went for Trump. Unfortunately, many Americans, even those who opposed him, gave Trump credit for the economy. Some even believed him when he said he had created the best economy ever. For most professional economists, giving Trump any credit for the economy would be misplaced. Thanks to his ineptness, the US economy is now in an even worse crisis than in 2008.

But it is easy to see why Trump's narrative of creating the best economy had appealed to people. Unfortunately, the Biden campaign never launched an effective response to Trump's story. The Obama-Biden administration came to office in 2008 after the Bush Republican administration left the US in the worst economic recession since the great depression of

1929. Obama-Biden rescued that economy and then launched it into a long expansion. It fell to Donald Trump and the Republicans to crash the US economy again in 2020.

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