Three Stories from USA 2020

Publication

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There are three main stories that USA 2020, the presidential and congressional elections of the United States, have just told us.

The **first** already emerged on election night, on 3 November: “Trumpism” – and President Donald Trump, for that matter – is **no ephemeral** moment, an anomaly that America’s right can easily correct by going back to a more traditional conservative discourse and agenda. In fact, it is very much the present and near future of the Republican Party and therefore one of the poles around which US politics will revolve for some time ahead.

Trump has proven to be a formidable political machine. It took him just a few hours to shatter the Democrats’ hopes of a landslide, as he comfortably prevailed in Florida and easily captured the supposedly swing states of Iowa, Ohio and Texas.[1] The president went inches away from crossing the finish line first also in all other battlegrounds, from Wisconsin to Pennsylvania and from Georgia to Arizona (where he still has a slim, albeit uninfluential, chance to win).

Trump has expanded his electoral base by approximately 7.5 million votes compared to 2016, an **unexpected result** that makes him the most successful Republican candidate in history in terms of popular vote.[2]

The repudiation of Trump so many progressives had bet on has thus not materialised.

Conservative voters have not been alienated by Trump’s controversial discourse, a mix of ultra-nationalist rhetoric spiced with xenophobic and disturbingly authoritarian tones, demonisation of opponents and delegitimation of democratic norms and practices, all driven by a never-ending flurry of lies or misleading claims.[3]

Nor have his impeachment[4] for abusing presidential powers to press a foreign country (Ukraine) to sully a political rival, his erratic management of the COVID-19 pandemic,[5] opaque tax records[6] or the endless conflicts of interests[7] that have beset his presidential tenure reduced his appeal.

Trump’s discourse is thus as much a political reality as the agenda he has championed in the last four years:

trade protectionism,

opposition to immigration,

dismantlement of welfare benefits and

aggressive financial and environmental deregulation, coupled with antagonistic unilateralism in foreign policy and

a diplomacy geared towards coercion – military but especially economic – towards rivals and allies alike.

Trump’s ascendancy has been compared to a hostile takeover of the **Republican Party,[8] on which he has imposed his discourse**, **agenda** and **candidates** too (many of the newly elected Republican officials are proudly pro-Trump). The 2020 campaign has shown that the takeover is not only complete, but that shareholders – i.e., Republican voters – have mostly embraced it.

The US president is thus likely to remain a force to be reckoned with even after he leaves the White House. He will keep attacking the legitimacy of the election[9] and push Republicans in Congress to follow his line, for instance by threatening support for more loyal candidates in the primaries. Nor can we rule out that he may run again in 2024.

Here is where the **second** story of USA 2020, the inadequacy of the Electoral College to give the electorate fair representation, intersects with the first one. The only reason why Trump has come so close to re-election is that the Electoral College is **structurally imbalanced towards demographically small states**, which happen to vote Republican for the most part.[10

In the last eight presidential elections,[11] the Republican candidate has prevailed in the popular vote only once, in 2004 with George W. Bush. Bush himself had first won the White House in 2000 in spite of trailing his contender by half a million votes, still a far better performance than Trump in 2016, when 2.8 million more people voted for Hillary Clinton.

Had Trump won in 2020 too, the United States would have had a “minority president” for the third time out of six elections in just twenty years. To fully capture how exceptional this situation would have been, suffice to recall that the candidate with fewer votes had won the Electoral College **just three other times between 1824 and 1888** – and **never in the 20th century**.[12] Trump would have also been the first not only to have been elected but also confirmed as president by a minority of voters.

It is commonly assumed that the Electoral College is a by-product of the US federal system, but this is not entirely the case.

In fact, the Founding Fathers determined they could endow greater legitimacy on the president if they entrusted the right to elect him (or her) to an **assembly of state grandees rather than to individual voters** who, due to the fairly limited logistics of the late 18th century, would have scarce to no familiarity with the presidential candidates.[13]

The system never truly worked, and certainly was made meaningless by modern technological advancements. The sad reality is that **the result has been the opposite of the original purpose**: the Electoral College reduces, rather than producing, the legitimacy of the presidential electoral process.

Here comes the **third** story of USA 2020, the strength of Joe Biden as a candidate capable of overcoming the intrinsic iniquity of the Electoral College.

**If Trump’s performance has been formidable, Biden’s has been extraordinary**.

The former vice-president has won over four million more votes than Trump – and once all votes from heavily Democratic and demographically large states such as California, Illinois and New York are counted, the margin will likely grow.[14] He has also crossed the majority threshold (he is hovering around 51 per cent at the moment), always a remarkable feat in a US presidential election.

**Biden has re-built the “Blue Wall” of Midwestern states – Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin** – which had delivered the White House to Trump in 2016, and he may have conquered two Republican strongholds such as Arizona and Georgia.[15]

Biden is also the presidential candidate who has garnered most votes in US history – at least 75 million people have cast their vote for him, and again that number will rise as outstanding votes continue to be counted.

Some progressives may be tempted to believe that a more inspirational candidate capable of drawing crowds to every event – a Barack Obama, for instance – would have fared better.

Perhaps. Yet the reality is that Biden has outperformed the collective result of Democratic candidates for Congressional seats, thus proving that he has made the difference.[16] It seems reasonable to conclude then that **Biden is not the reason why Trump has not been repudiated. He is the reason why Trump has been defeated.**

As strong as he has been as a candidate, Biden may well be a less effective president.

Much will depend on whether the Democrats will win both runoff elections for Georgia’s two senatorial seats in early January.

Given the Democrats’ historically poor record in byelections, it is a tall order.[17] Yet Georgia has arguably been the great surprise of 2020, and Democrats may count on the impressive organising skills of Stacey Abrams, the Georgian politician most credit with turning the state blue for the first time since 1992.[18]

Should the Democrats pull it off, they would reach parity with the Republicans in the Senate, thereby enabling Vice-President Kamala Harris to exert her constitutional power to break the tie in the upper chamber of Congress.

If Republicans do cling to their majority, however, Biden will have little chance to advance any significant legislative agenda – not to speak of the fact that a Republican majority would have the final say on his cabinet, ambassadorial and judicial appointments.

Biden may thus find out that his may be a lame-duck presidency even before taking office.[19]

In spite of his repeated appeal to bipartisan cooperation and insistence on his ability to reach across the aisle, it is far from certain he will be up to the task in America’s contemporary, ultra-polarised politics.

This, however, is tomorrow’s challenge. Today, we should pause and recognise that while USA 2020 has told us many stories, it has eventually had just one protagonist: Joe Biden.

Democracy in America

This election has been, no more, no less, about democracy in the United States.

This is true for its citizens, but it is also true for liberal democracies and authoritarian states around the world.

With the US being, nolens volens, the leader of the democratic world, a crack in the US democratic system would represent a lethal blow to liberal democracies elsewhere, emboldening homegrown autocrats to follow suit.

It would vindicate illiberal narratives promulgated by authoritarian leaders concerning the instability, ineffectiveness and moral bankruptcy of liberal democracies.

This is a story that Vladimir Putin has explicitly advocated and Xi Jinping more subtly implied.

The risk has been and to an extent is still there.

An incumbent President who pre-emptively claims victory, denounces fraud, calls for a halt in vote counting, and mounts an all-out legal battle to reverse the election result **has done much damage to US democracy**. Donald Trump’s tweets and press conferences during the election count made one wonder, is this the United States or Belarus?

The contrast between Trump’s plain lies and the elegance of Senator John McCain’s 2008 concession speech could not be starker: a nostalgic reminder of how low the country has fallen.

However, the depth and duration of the damage will depend on how events will pan out in the coming days and weeks.

If street violence were to spin out of control, or courts, up to the Supreme Court, were to be poisoned by politicisation, undermining the sacrosanct principle of the separation of powers, the damage would be irreparable. Thankfully, early signals point the opposite way, with **Trump’s appeals largely falling flat with judges in Nevada, Michigan, Georgia and Pennsylvania.**

Joe Biden’s victory represents a defeat for European nationalist populists, who saw in Trump a leader and role model. The fact that the democratic system in the US is holding, notwithstanding Trump’s attempts to undermine it, bodes well for the future. How the dust eventually settles in the US will be hugely consequential for liberal democracies in Europe and elsewhere.

As the blue wave began sweeping across the map, most Europeans sighed in relief.

It is no secret that the last four years have been a rough ride for Europe. Over the decades, there have been plenty of transatlantic differences and disagreements, frustrations and misunderstandings, as there are in every family. However, these unfolded within the contours of what was always unquestioningly seen as family.

**The United States has always been the guarantor of European security**, the first and foremost supporter of European integration, and the go-to partner for the EU and its member states in global affairs. Over the last four years, for the first time in post-World War II history, a US president questioned NATO’s collective defence,

treated the EU as an adversary in trade,

threatened secondary sanctions because of Europe’s adherence to international law and deliberately undermined multilateral institutions and agreements so integral to the European DNA. President Trump viewed and treated Europe as anything but family.

Under a Biden administration, much of that nightmare is gone.

The US commitment to NATO will be reaffirmed, and transatlantic discussions over European defence will veer away from the mercantilist obsession with trade imbalances and towards a healthier US concern about European risk and responsibility sharing and the resilience of NATO.

A Biden administration will seek genuine partnership across the Atlantic. It will work alongside, and not at cross-purposes with the EU in the Balkans,

it will coordinate with Europeans over Ukraine, Belarus, the Caucasus, Russia and Turkey, and

it will welcome European facilitation to ease its way back into the Iran nuclear deal.

From pandemic response to climate, non-proliferation and economic recovery, with Biden, **Europeans will have a US partner again in global governance.**

The United Nations, the G7, the G20 and COP26 will become multilateral formats in which Europeans and Americans will mostly play in the same team.

The good old days are gone

It would be a terrible mistake for Europeans to believe that President Trump was an aberration, however, and that the good old days of the transatlantic relationship are back.

The 2020 US election itself tells us otherwise. Some in Europe will now be tempted to stick heads in the sand and pretend otherwise.

Doing so would be plainly irresponsible.

Trump lost the elections, but Trumpism is alive and kicking.

Joe Biden won by a comfortable margin in the Electoral College, but did so with razor thin majorities in several swing states.

True, Democrats won back key Rust Belt States, with Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin. Georgia too made the momentous switch from Red to Blue.

However, Trump received close to seventy million votes, and Europeans cannot afford to ignore this.

It is not just because in 2024 the US President may be a new incarnation of what Donald Trump represents today.

Neither is it only because in all likelihood – depending on the run-off for Georgia’s Senate seats – President Biden will have to accommodate a Republican-majority Senate.

More fundamentally, it is because the **values and interests that Trump incarnated are organic to an important segment of US society**, which cannot be dismissed as a dwindling group of angry white men in the Midwest. **Trump impersonated a worldview that has made inroads across generations, genders and ethnic backgrounds**.

This is a reality we cannot ignore.

It has three principal implications for Europe.

**First**, **protectionism in the US is here to stay**. The Biden administration is unlikely to revert to the Obama days in which the US agreed on a Trans Pacific Partnership and negotiated a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

**That agenda was reversed by President Trump and Biden’s administration is unlikely to U-turn again**.

Whereas a pandemic and post-pandemic economy will likely see shortened supply chains, notably in critical supplies, making a renewed case a more regionalised globalisation and thus for a stronger transatlantic economic bond, **re- rather than near-shoring is more likely to win the day in public debate,** **notably in the US**.

While Biden will likely step back from trade and aluminium tariffs on the EU and refrain from threatening secondary sanctions, Europeans are unlikely to see an immediate reversal in US trade policy, either bilaterally vis-à-vis Europeans and possibly multilaterally within the World Trade Organisation.

**Second**, the US–China confrontation is here to stay. In fact, it may aggravate under Biden. Antagonism towards China is shared across the aisles in Congress and widespread in US public opinion. **The tone and tactics may change now**, but the overall view of China as a competitor and an adversary will remain constant.

**The US–China confrontation** will be a defining feature of 21st century international politics regardless of who sits in the White House. There will, of course, be differences, and these will be consequential for Europeans. But these may put Europe in a more difficult spot than over the last four years. This is both because the US–China confrontation may deepen, with President **Biden being less inclined to strike deals with authoritarian leaders and more genuinely concerned with democracy**, human rights and rule of law issues, from the domestic situation in China to Hong Kong, Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Furthermore, whereas Biden’s administration will likely coordinate its China policy with Europeans, **the goal of that coordination will be to veer Europe towards its understanding of what decoupling should mean**. For Europeans it will be infinitely harder to turn down Joe Biden than Donald Trump. Saying no to a friend is never easy.

**Third**, the Biden administration will be torn by the desire to reengage the world and the need to deal with existential problems at home. Joe Biden is cognizant of the need to rebuild bridges to the world, well aware of the damage done to US reputation and credibility during Trump’s tenure. However, **Biden will struggle to seal and above all ratify international agreements with a Republican-majority Senate**. Recommitting to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, for one, will be easier said than done.

Moreover, the new administration will be **absorbed by domestic priorities**.

The magnitude of the domestic challenges facing Biden makes Obama’s predicament at the height of the global financial crisis pale.

Fighting the pandemic and reviving the economy will come first. Beyond COVID-19, the Biden administration will be preoccupied with healing the toxic political polarisation, social divisions and economic inequalities poisoning the country. Addressing these is existential for the future of democracy in the United States.

In turn, **Europeans will certainly have a friendly ear in Washington, but not necessarily a much more active US hand in our part of the world**. The US expectation that European problems in and around the continent are primarily for Europe to handle is not only likely, it is reasonable too.

A renewed case for European autonomy and a strengthened transatlantic bond

The most serious risk that Europeans face under a Biden presidency is that of neglecting all of the above, and conveniently setting aside their quest for strategic autonomy.

The pandemic has already led Europeans to change their lenses. Whereas the last five years were marked by an instinct to look outwards and think security, the coming five years will be driven by an instinct to look inwards and think socio-economic.

In recent years, we watched our world crumble, from the wars in our surrounding regions, to the threat of terrorism in our cities, from the resurge of great power rivalry on the world stage, to the anxiety of uncontrolled migration.

The liberal international order that had served us so well started fraying, and its ultimate promoter and protector – the US – was missing in action.

It was a cold shower, but one which woke Europeans from their seventy year-long sleep.

Hence, despite – or perhaps even because of – the EU’s inability to get its act together internally, be it on the economy or on migration, it began making timid steps on foreign policy, security and defence. **The debate on European strategic autonomy surged in those years.**

The momentum for European strategic autonomy has already sapped, as evidenced by the fate of the funds destined for EU security and defence under the upcoming EU budget, or the European passivity in addressing conflicts, from Libya to Nagorno Karabakh.

With President Biden, some Europeans will be tempted to stick heads in the sand, putting global ambitions to rest, wrapped in a chimera of a comfortable return to a past that is fast disappearing.

Others will argue that pursuing European strategic autonomy is incompatible with a strengthened transatlantic bond, and with Joe Biden in the White House the priority should be the latter, certainly not the former.

**European autonomy is not incompatible with a stronger transatlantic bond, but is rather the precondition for it.** Only a more capable, and thus more autonomous Europe, can meaningfully work with Biden’s US to make multilateralism great again. From pandemic response to trade, security and climate, Europeans and Americans will be back in business, but in order to deliver, **European autonomy is a must.**

Given the profound transformation in the international system, we cannot afford to see European strategic autonomy and a revamped transatlantic bond as a binary either/or.

That the international liberal order underpinned by US hegemony is fading is only too painful to see. We already live in a non-liberal world in which liberal and illiberal states strive for power. It is a world in which we can no longer flippantly claim that democracy is the worst form of government except all alternatives.

As liberal democrats we firmly believe in Winston Churchill’s epic quote, but cannot be oblivious to the fact that others disagree and have stronger arguments than ever before.

**We can no longer claim that economic prosperity can only go hand in hand with political freedom.** China proves otherwise.

As China grows having apparently eradicated COVID-19, while Europeans and Americans knuckle under the weight of the second wave, we also have to prove the greater effectiveness of our system of governance in pandemic response.

We firmly believe in the non-negotiability of the rights that make up the good life. But in the 21st century, it will be harder to make our case both to protect our liberal democracies within and to promote liberal democratic values outside, within the bounds of an international rules based order.

**We stand a fair chance in succeeding if, and only if, we understand that European strategic autonomy and a revamped transatlantic bond are two sides of the same coin**.

In the 21st century, one cannot exist without the other.

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