

CHALLENGES OF BIDEN'S PRESIDENCY: REPAIRING FAULTS IN DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS

ANALYSIS



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CHALLENGES OF BIDEN'S PRESIDENCY: REPAIRING FAULTS IN DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Introduction

The United States' presidential election were held along with the House of Representative and Senate elections on November 3. However, the result was not clear until November 6, when it became evident that the Democratic candidate, Joe Biden, won the American presidency. The next day, November 7, major American media sources announced that the election had been decided in Biden's favor.

Despite the spread of COVID-19 throughout the United States, and worldwide, the election was hotly contested and polarizing. In previous presidential elections, the winner has typically been announced on election night. However, anticipation to know who won did not subside on November 3. When the results came in favor of Biden, President Trump did not behave like previous presidential candidates. Trump refused to acknowledge defeat or congratulate his Joe Biden for winning the election. He questioned the integrity of the electoral process, and, in turn, the totality of the state system. He threatened to take legal action in order to challenge the vote-counting process in swing states and instigated his supporters to protest, asserting that he won the elections.

In most other parts of the world, many American allies and some opponents expressed their joy in seeing Trump's defeat, the end of an era of right-wing populism, and the return of traditional American leadership the world has been accustomed to since the Second World War.

How and why did Biden win the U.S. presidential elections despite running a campaign described by many as unimpressive and bearing no notable promises to the American voter neither on domestic or international levels? What does Trump's refusal to accept the election results mean, whether in terms of understanding the variables of the American political arena, or the fragility of the democratic system? And to what extent is Biden's ascent expected to bring about fundamental change in U.S. foreign policy as a whole and concerning the Middle East in particular?

What does Trump's refusal to accept the election results mean, whether in terms of understanding the variables of the American political arena, or the fragility of the democratic system?

Biden's Victory: An Unprecedented Support

Joseph Biden, previously a senator and vice president to Barack Obama throughout his two terms in office, entered the presidential election relatively late. However, he succeeded in winning the candidacy as nominee of the Democratic Party. He received the support and endorsement of the traditional party establishment amid the party's fear of the leftist senator from Vermont Bernie Sanders. Despite the bitterness felt by Sanders' younger followers, the Democratic Party soon united around its candidate in hopes of ousting Trump and his administration, to whom American leftist and liberal circles were greatly opposed. This was not only a traditional political opposition, but also opposition to what the left felt to be an insult to both America as a nation and its presidency alike.

The Biden campaign's primary strength was focusing on uniting the Democratic Party. However, a number of other factors contributed to the Democratic candidate's victory despite his old age, lackluster campaign, and allegations of his declining physical and mental capabilities. One factor was that the youth favored him, either because Trump seemed unconvincing or even embarrassing or because American youth generally lean liberal.

Biden also enjoyed a lot of support from suburban, middle-class residents in large metropolitan areas who would normally vote for the Republican Party. This was considered a revolutionary change in American voting trends. Why did this shift take place? It is still not clear; however, it is most likely due to the Trump administration's failure to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic and the president's recklessness regarding a quarter-million American citizens lost to the virus. This comes in addition to the president's moral record, his deliberate lying, accusations of corruption, and the nepotistic assignment of governmental positions to his family members. Perhaps the women who accused Trump of sexual harassment and assault also played a part in this shift among suburban America's voters.

However, this does not mean Biden's victory will eliminate Trumpism and restore unity to American society

However, the most important voter demographics that helped Biden were non-white minority groups, which consisted of Black people, Muslims, Jews, and Latinos (except for those of Cuban and Venezuelan descent who voted heavily for Trump and were the primary reason behind Trump's victory in Florida). Traditionally, Jews have voted Democratic even though Trump effectively gave Israel carte blanche. At the moment it would appear that Trump has not received more than 30% of the Jewish vote. The common denominator among these demographics was their abhorrence of the Trump administration's racist policies that fueled division and discrimination against non-white minorities.

In the end, Biden won the election; however, it was not the crushing victory that the Democrats and those who despised Trump in America and around the world had expected. By so far obtaining more than 74 million votes nationally and holding growing lead of more than four million votes over Trump, Biden has received the most votes in the history of the American presidential elections. Even though the final results have not been announced yet, it is anticipated that Biden will win more than 300 votes in the electoral college, while it is only necessary that he obtain 270 electoral votes to win the election.

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The American Divide: The Growing Chasm

Despite Trump's defeat, votes cast for him had reached a little more than 70 million by the morning of November 7. This number surpasses what Hillary Clinton obtained in 2016, where she had won the popular vote but lost the election due to a lack of electoral votes. This means Trump did not lose any significant percentage of support from the 2016 elections that got him into the White House. In fact, support for him has only increased. Therefore, Biden's victory must be attributed to his success in convincing more Americans to vote than his ability to persuade Trump supporters to change their vote. This is at the core of the American divide, and it does not seem Biden's presidency can alleviate it.

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The roots of this divide date back to the rapid economic changes the United States underwent from the end of the 1990's until the first decade of the 21st century. These changes were represented by great advances in new means of production. These means pushed back traditional industries and enhanced the value and position of modern technology companies in the economic sphere. These tremendous changes either led to the decline of traditional industries or to the companies' owners' search for foreign production centers that had cheap labor and lower production costs.

These changes soon generated new elites that did not seem to care much about the fate of the declining segments of society. It was normal for those who sustained losses to feel marginalized and for the policymaking centers to not take their interests into consideration. It was easy, at that time, to convince these groups that their loss was caused by opposing external economic forces such as China, or Europe, or to the waves of immigrants from Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

Trump succeeded in addressing these sections of American society, and not just the politically, socially, and economically conservative demographics who normally vote for the Republican Party. Trump addressed them with a racist, nationalist, isolationist approach and promised to defend their rights and restore the livelihoods. The problem is that the majority of the impacted demographic traditionally votes for the Democratic Party and represents a tangible part of the industrial states in the northern and northeastern United States. Moreover, both the Democrats and the Republicans, in the foreseeable future, will not be able to save them from the cycle of major economic changes that plague American society.

Because the American elections revolve around winning in 10-12 swing states, given that affiliations in most of the other states are stable and well-known, the fate of this election ended in small vote differences in only a few states such as Florida, Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Georgia, and Nevada.

In other words, Trump's presidency was in a way a revolution against the new elite, the traditional political class, and the American state mechanism that has considered its primary duty to preserve the capitalist system and the stability of American society. However, the president was neither of sufficient moral capacity nor able to maintain the presidency as an institute that represents the American people. Since becoming president, Trump has been known for his lying and his disregard for portions of reality. He promoted a racist rhetoric and fueled racial conflicts within American society, and he did not care for expert opinions in both the affairs of the government and the state and in his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

He presented himself, while a billionaire, as someone who could preserve the interests of marginalized groups of American society, secure their trust, and challenge political traditions. He broadened the divide within American society and deepened existing divisions. However, the turmoil he induced in Washington and in the foundations of American society, in addition to his moral fragility, were the driving forces for Biden's victory. This despite Biden's campaign being based solely on restoring societal unity, respect for the presidency, and properly confronting the pandemic.

Trump's claims that the elections were stolen from him and his refusal to acknowledge defeat and congratulate his opponent not only exacerbate America's social divide, but also implies that Biden will have limited means with which to contain the divide. How will Biden deal with this divide as president? How will he convince tens of millions of economically marginalized groups that he will work to protect them from the impacts of the pandemic or at least convince them that Trump was lying to them? How will he make them feel less marginalized? It is still not clear, and it is not even certain that it is possible.

Restoring Alliances and Confronting Traditional Opponents

There is no big debate that Biden's primary domestic priority will be combatting rising COVID-19 cases. The Biden administration will attempt to urgently handle the pandemic and its devastating economic effects on the working and middle classes. Apart from that, Biden will try to please the left wing of the Democratic Party that lined up and worked around him effectively during his election campaign, especially when it comes to health, work and education issues, while putting an end to the climate of racial discrimination against Black people, Muslims, and Latinos.

Biden's campaign has stressed restoring America's position and reputation in the world, restoring relations with allies, returning to the World Health Organization, recommitting to the Paris Climate Agreement, and facing Russian expansion

There is no doubt the Trump administration's nationalist and isolationist policies caused a rift in its relations with Europe, an economic war with China, and strained relations with Canada and Mexico, which were each pressured to negotiate economic agreements with the United States. Biden's campaign has stressed restoring America's position and reputation in the world, restoring relations with allies, returning to the World Health Organization, recommitting to the Paris Climate Agreement, and facing Russian expansion. How will these positions be transformed into actual concrete policies? This will depend greatly on who Biden appoints as heads of defense, national security, foreign policy institutions, the role the vice president will play — given Biden's old age — and the urgent surprises that Biden's administration will face in a rapidly changing world.

We should cautiously expect the Biden administration to restore warm relations with European allies, with perhaps a tougher relationship with Boris Johnson's government in the United Kingdom due in part to Biden's opposition Brexit. The Biden administration will also be tougher on Russia both in the European sphere and in the Middle East and the Balkans. However, it is still not clear how the Biden administration will deal with trade relations with China, or with China's controversial maritime claims in the South China Sea.

The Biden Administration will not abandon Israel in any way, but it will work concretely toward the survival of the Palestinian Authority. The foreign policy adviser to Biden's Presidential campaign, "Tony" Blinken, discussed Biden's opposition to policies of economic boycotting of Israel, but also the great damage Trump's policy caused by ignoring Palestinians in the peace process. The Biden administration's position on Israeli settlements — their legitimacy and related Israeli annexation policy — support for UNRWA, and the future of negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians will determine its position on the entire Palestinian issue.

Even with Iran, which had been waiting eagerly for Trump's defeat, Biden does not appear to be returning to the nuclear deal unless it begins with Obama-era terms. It also does not appear that he will rush to lift sanctions on Iran before reaching a new agreement

With regards to Arab dictatorships, it is likely that the Biden administration will not provide them the complete cover that the Trump administration gave. The administration will probably attempt to hold regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates accountable for their human rights violations. Biden is expected to be less willing to ignore the tragedy of the war on Yemen; however, the expectations that the Biden administration will work to overthrow these regimes are certainly exaggerated. There are, however, no indications that Biden will make any fundamental change in U.S. policy toward Syria. Even with Iran, which had been waiting eagerly for Trump's defeat, Biden does not appear to be returning to the nuclear deal unless it begins with Obama-era terms. It also does not appear that he will rush to lift sanctions on Iran before reaching a new agreement.

Undoubtedly, Biden's stance on Turkey is the most ambiguous. On an audio tape of an interview he gave to the New York Times which leaked last year, he attacks Recep Erdogan's regime in Turkey promising to work on changing the regime. If Biden really means what he says, his vision for the future of the Middle East is of concern to many in the region, including Turkey. For example, Biden believes federalism is the best solution to the nationalist struggles and sectarian conflicts in the Middle East, and he is notably sympathetic to the Kurdish issue. However, Biden the president may not necessarily match Biden the senator. His positions on the Kurdish issue and relations with Turkey, who is, the main force to balance out Russia in the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus, are all open to possibilities.

Trump's Heavy Legacy

In light of the results in swing states, Biden's path to the White House will likely be unaffected by fundamental obstacles. Trump's campaign will file its legal objections to the results before the courts, and some states will recount votes; however, none of these are expected to substantially change the results announced the evening of November 7. Perhaps Trump will not admit his defeat and welcome the new president (in accordance with the traditions of American politics), and perhaps his administration will not cooperate with the Biden team on a smooth transition of power, but Biden will — unless something exceptional happens — occupy his position as president of the United States next January.

However, Biden assuming his presidential powers does not mean an end to Trumpism because the latter's political existence is closely linked to the division of the American people. Perhaps Trump will return in four years

However, Biden assuming his presidential powers does not mean an end to Trumpism because the latter's political existence is closely linked to the division of the American people. Perhaps Trump will return in four years, challenging the Biden administration on every major and minor policy.

In addition, it will be on Biden to preserve the Democratic Party's unity, especially the left-leaning party members who supported him through the election campaign. This requires a greater willingness to give the left wing a tangible role in the next administration, whether in administrative or policy roles.

Internationally, it will not be difficult for Biden to restore the nation's ties with Europe. Confronting Russia, however, will be more complicated. In the Middle East, it should be noted that it is unclear if Biden is willing to pursue a policy that encourages stability based on fairness and integrity, considering he comes from the core of the American establishment. During his decades of work in Washington, he supported more imperial foreign policies, like the Iraq War which lacked any legal basis.

Overall, for those who saw Trump's four years as a dark era in the history of the United States and the world, it seems Biden's victory is positive despite doubts surrounding the nature of his domestic and foreign policies.

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