Donald Trump’s Re-election Prospects

John E. Owens examines the polling data and finds the odds stacked against a Trump victory in November, with the incumbent’s underlying electoral vulnerability compounded by his chaotic response to domestic crises.

Donald Trump might well become the first incumbent US President in the 21st century not to be re-elected. Just over 100 days from the election, his approval levels were languishing at just 40 per cent at the same time that most polls have him trailing his Democratic opponent, Joe Biden.

Presidential approval ratings and head-to-head polls, of course, are only snapshots taken at a particular moment in time; they cannot predict the outcome of the election in advance. Nonetheless, the former Vice-President’s lead has been increasing from between four and six per cent in May, depending on the poll, to between eight and 10 since then. That Biden’s poll lead has been far more consistent and greater than Hillary Clinton’s in 2016’s open contest, which she lost, may be significant for November inasmuch as it reflects Americans’ responses to Trump’s highly problematic performance in office.

Crisis handling
Negative perceptions of Trump’s responses to the COVID-19 crisis have dominated reactions to the President in this election year. As US infections have risen to 4.4 million and deaths to 151,000, and millions of workers have filed for unemployment benefits, unsurprisingly, by early July, 88 per cent of poll respondents had become ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ concerned about its effect on the economy. Just 71 per cent worried about the infection itself. Voters increasingly
identified COVID as a ‘major factor’ in deciding how to vote in the November presidential election and perceived Trump handling the crisis poorly. A Reuters/IPSOS poll taken in mid-July showed that approval of the President’s handling of the crisis had dropped from 55 per cent in March to 33 per cent, with 67 per cent disapproving, mirroring his overall ratings. Crucially, approval among independents – a majority of whom had supported him in 2016 – had declined from around 45 to 33 per cent. Even support for the President among core parts of his 2016 coalition has declined, compared with March: 16 per cent less among evangelical Protestants, 15 per cent among white men without college degrees; and 11 points among rural residents.

Trump’s inflammatory comments and lack of empathy for the Black Lives Matter movement have also contributed to his poor approval ratings. A CBSNews poll early June found that 52 per cent of whites believed George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis was ‘part of a broader pattern of excessive police violence toward African Americans’. Just under half of respondents in the poll disapproved of the President’s responses to Floyd’s murder and Black Lives Matter protests. A Pew poll also reported that just under half of respondents, including 42 per cent of whites, said that Trump’s responses had made race relations worse.

But, much more telling for Trump’s re-election prospects than these snapshots are the basic, enduring, electoral weaknesses underpinning his Presidency – weaknesses that have actually changed little since 2016, and were significantly reinforced by the midterm election results in November 2018. The likely upshot is that although Trump might still win re-election in November, it is more likely that Biden will become the next President.

The narrowness of Trump’s 2016 base

Let us start with the 2016 presidential election results. Trump won the election in the Electoral College, 304-227, but the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton won a majority of the national popular vote, 46.1 to 48.2 per cent, with 2.87 million more votes than Trump. The narrowness of Trump’s victory was underlined by the narrowness of the winning margins in the states either candidate won. Most particularly, Trump won by just 79,646 votes in three states – Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Had Clinton won those votes – representing, respectively, 0.2, 0.7 and 0.8 percentage points of votes cast in those states – she would have garnered the additional 46 electoral votes she needed to become President (Table 1 on the next page).

Trump’s Electoral College victory was not only narrow but also, contrary to many popular narratives, it could not be explained by some supposed invisible, magnetic, ideological appeal Trump had among great swaths of the US electorate – unlike his predecessor Barack Obama in 2008. Exit polls taken in November 2016 showed that most respondents rejected his anti-immigrant, anti-inclusive agenda, while a remarkable 70 per cent were bothered by his objectionable treatment of women. Compared with Clinton, moreover, more than 60 per cent thought he was unqualified to be President and lacked the right temperament. Still, sufficient numbers of voters went out and voted for him – many, in the expectation that he would lose, would make a terrible President, and because they could not bring themselves to go out and vote for Clinton whom they did not like.

Moving forward two years, the narrowness and fragility of Trump’s electoral coalition became even clearer. The 2018 House midterm elections, which resulted in the Democrats retaking control of the chamber, with the largest national vote since the Watergate election of 1974 (53.1 per cent), were essentially a referendum on Trump’s presidency. Indeed, Trump encouraged this interpretation, telling a rally in Mississippi a few weeks before the elections: ‘I want you to vote. Pretend I’m on the ballot’. Weeks later, in a record turnout (53.4 per cent), the Democrats garnered over nine million (8.1 per cent) more votes than Trump’s party.

The combination of Trump’s marginal 2016 victory, his party’s trouncing in the 2018 midterm elections, and his unimpressive approval ratings since 2017 mean that Trump’s re-election prospects have always been vulnerable to an electoral context dominated by negatives and weak on positive factors.

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The 2020 electoral cycle

At first glance, several positive factors might have helped Trump in the 2020 electoral cycle: disunity in the Democratic Party, strong approval ratings, an impressive response to the COVID-19 crisis, and a good economy. One hundred days before election day, three of these factors have come to favour Biden while serious doubts have crept in on Trump’s handling of the economy, at the same time that his historical electoral vulnerabilities have become more evident.

As the 2018 midterm results showed, and more recent national polling data corroborate, Trump has failed to extend his 2016 electoral coalition beyond his base of white evangelicals, rural voters, conservatives, self-identified Republicans, and non-college white men. Nor has he made any serious attempts to do so. Rather, his re-election pitch has retained its sharp, divisive, inflammatory language, and lies, focusing almost laser-like on retaining the support of his base supporters. A New York Times/Siena College poll taken in late June showed that although 86 per cent of Trump’s 2016 voters said they would stick with him in 2020, he was losing independents, college-educated whites (especially women) and older voters, who were part of his 2016 coalition. Increasing numbers have shifted to the Democrats,
as they did in the 2018 midterm elections. Trump has even been slipping support among white evangelical voters.

Even if Trump was to retain the same levels of support he received in 2016 from the groups that are now straying from his coalition, the narrowness of his base likely precludes him winning re-election. One very important reason is that the 2020 electorate is not the same as that of 2016. By 2020, new generations who elected Obama in 2008 have become the dominant groups in this newly formed electorate.

Members of so-called ‘Generation Z’ born after 1996, comprising only four per cent of the 2016 electorate, were not old enough to vote in 2012. In 2020, they will account for ten per cent of eligible voters. Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) will comprise another 27 per cent. Adding these groups to members of Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) means that over 60 per cent of this year’s electorate will be younger than 55 – at the same time that the older (white) population will have continued to decline. This larger universe of post-baby boomers, moreover, is more ethnically diverse than the older sections of the electorate, and more liberal on racial and social issues. In a Pew poll of registered voters taken in late June, 68 per cent of those under 29, and 60 per cent of those between 30 and 49 favoured Biden; 52 per cent over 65 favoured Trump. Even among whites under 45, Biden led Trump 52 to 30 per cent. If carried through to November – and, importantly, these younger voters turn out to vote – these patterns would demonstrate younger generations’ rejection of an incumbent President whose re-election campaign continues to play on the fears and anxieties of older generations.

Vulnerability in battleground states

A string of recent state polls suggest that those in the disproportionately white battleground states where most voters who helped Trump win in 2016, plan to vote for him again in 2020. Figure 1 shows the narrowness of Trump’s 2016 victories in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Florida, Arizona and North Carolina, the evident shifts in the 2018 midterm elections to the Democrats in each of these states, except North Carolina (as measured by their share of the two-party vote), and the latest mean of head-to-head polls for Biden and Trump in 2020.

Together, these six states comprise 101 Electoral College votes, which if Biden won them all, as current projections suggest, would give the Democratic contender a landslide victory, with 63 more votes than
he actually needs to win. Even if Biden does not win all the states, Trump's predicament remains highly problematic. Biden's poll leads in these states now appear to allow him multiple paths to 270 Electoral College votes, as most combinations of any three of these states would yield victory.

Overall, although a significant majority of Trump's 2016 voters in these six battleground states plan to do so again in 2020, the results from the late June New York Times/Siena College poll taken in these states results mirror the national polls: only 42 per cent approved of Trump's handling of his job as President while 54 per cent disapprove. Unsurprisingly, Trump is also under water on all but one of the issues dominating the election year agenda – even among his 2016 supporters. Just 41 per cent of respondents approve of the President's performance on the COVID crisis, 40 per cent on criminal justice, 34 per cent on race relations, and 31 per cent on his reactions to the protests following the murder of George Floyd.

Trump's one remaining bright spot is continuing public support in these states for his handling of the economy (56 per cent). Even on this issue, however, respondents in these states perceive Trump as prioritising the economy at the expense of curtailing the Coronavirus pandemic and emphasising law and order over criminal justice: 55 per cent in these states want the President to focus on stymying the virus compared with only 35 per cent who said he should emphasise restarting the economy. Other polls of these states show similar.

Biden's relative appeal

While Trump's electoral vulnerability has increased, Biden's has decreased. After Bernie Sanders withdrew from the presidential race and added his endorsement of Biden to those of other candidates in April, Democrats' fear that their party would be divided in a nasty primary fight disappeared, and surprisingly quickly – and without Biden being pulled too much to the left of the political centre.

Notwithstanding his low-key style, frequent gaffes, and general blandness, Biden is nonetheless a very experienced, naturally gifted, highly respected, conventional politician, who is familiar to electors and much more highly regarded than the unpopular Hillary Clinton. Biden's campaign messages exude pragmatism, decency, and gradual change – on healthcare, climate change, guns and economic inequality – qualities likely to appeal to independents and centrist voters. In the New York Times/Siena College poll in late June, 50 per cent had a 'very' or 'somewhat' favourable view of Biden compared with 56 per cent who had either a 'very' or 'somewhat' unfavourable view of Trump. Even among Trump's own supporters, only 20 per cent explained their support for the President as opposition to Biden, whereas opposition to Trump motivated 54 per cent of Biden's supporters. Biden simply does not generate the same degree of antipathy as Clinton and Obama did among Trump's supporters. The antipathy towards Trump is much greater.

The two candidates' respective campaigns have also contrasted. While Trump has been campaigning aggressively, dominating the airwaves, and effectively ensuring that the 2020 election becomes another referendum on his performance in office, Biden's strategy hitherto has been low key – even invisible given quarantine conditions – and much more disciplined. The effect has been to concentrate media focus on Trump, particularly his egregious outbursts, his divisive statements on social media and elsewhere, and his dismissive attitude to the pandemic, the impending economic crisis, and racist policing. Biden's facetious observation that 'the more that Donald Trump is out the worse he does' seems to resonate loudly at a time when the Democrat has rarely appeared in the media.

Distance left to run

Much can still happen before polling day on November 3. Polls taken in the middle of a severe health and economic crisis are not necessarily useful indicators of the final result. For sure, the booming US economy on which Trump relies for his re-election has evaporated. The projected economic effects of the escalating COVID 19 crisis already look horrendous and unprecedented, with as much as one third of the economy shut down and the possibility of a bounce back by November looking remote. Even after Congress has pumped trillions of dollars into the US economy, the chair of the Federal Reserve Board has suggested that it could 'easily' contract by 20 to 30 per cent over the coming year, with unemployment peaking at 25 per cent, as in the Great Depression.

Notwithstanding Trump's institutional and media prominence, his poor handling of the COVID-19, crisis coupled with a flawed re-election strategy aimed solely at reinforcing his electoral base, seems likely to doom his re-election prospects – assuming he continues to seek re-election. Even more fatal will be the effects of the sharpest post-World War II contraction in US second-quarter annualised GNP (33 per cent) shown in data reported just a day before supplemental jobless aid expired for the 17 million Americans unemployed. Historically, second-quarter growth has shaped voters' opinions of the economy in an election year and depressed presidential approval ratings.

From the perspective of late-July, with Trump effectively cancelling Republicans' nominating convention, which traditionally boosts incumbent support, his remaining (slim) hope for some sort of popular impetus may lie with Biden revealing an unpopular vice presidential choice at the Democratic convention. The President will not however be able to mitigate to any significant extent the damaging economic effects of the pandemic or eliminate already strongly negative voter perceptions of his complaisant handling of it. This lethal combination could well be a recipe for electoral humiliation, a landslide for Biden, and a return to unified Democratic government.

Suggested reading


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