



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG EVENT BRIEF

The US Presidential Election 2020: Decline of Deliberative Democracy

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Cover Photographs:

US President Donald Trump. Source: BBC

Democrat Candidate Joe Biden. Source: CNN

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The US Presidential Election 2020: Decline of Deliberative Democracy

by
Sanjay Pulipaka

The contentious and prolonged counting process and aftermath of the US presidential election suggests anything but a smooth transition of power. It is also on the verge of possibly entering a lengthy litigation phase, with President Donald Trump's campaign already launching a [legal challenge](#) in several courts across key swing states against alleged electoral irregularities.

Contrary to pre-election opinion surveys that had predicted an easy win for the Democratic candidate Joe Biden, the election turned out to be very closely contested, with Trump unexpectedly securing almost 48% of the [popular vote](#). Given the pandemic, some states allowed mail-in ballots – a process which is now being questioned by the Republicans for its credibility. Since Trump and Biden are locked in a close contest for electoral college votes, every vote cast matters. There has been little clarity as to how many mail-in ballots were in play in the important battleground states of Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Georgia and Nevada.

Both candidates seem to be acutely aware that they should not tread the path of former Presidential candidate [Al Gore](#), who was criticised by his supporters in 2000 for conceding the election before the counting process was fully complete. Given this historical experience, both candidates have given quasi-acceptance speeches. [Biden](#) addressed his supporters by remarking that “it is clear that when the count is finished, we believe we will be the winners.” [President Trump](#) on his part declared “Frankly we did win this election... we want all voting to be stopped... we don't want to find ballots at 4 am.” President Trump's claim of victory, even before the declaration of the final result, has predictably generated a furore across the political spectrum. While [Trump deployed words](#) such as ‘fraud’ and ‘attempts to steal’, there is a growing chorus for patience till all votes are counted. [Republican supporters](#) have countered that only votes that were “cast according to state law” should be counted.

Joe Biden seems to have a relatively clear path to victory after he was projected as the winner in Wisconsin and Michigan. In other battleground states as well, [Biden is fast catching up](#) with Trump or increasing the margin of lead. However, in politics victories are better understood in three dimensions – moral, electoral and ideological. On the morality front, Trump's critics have often accused him of practising amoral politics and being immoral as well. It is

uncertain if Trump will have an electoral victory. However, contrary to predictions, Trump has demonstrated the ideological resilience of conservative populism and the continued popularity of his message across vast geographies of the American heartland.

It is indeed true that Trump has been intemperate and shrill in his political articulations and occasionally has demonstrated a [lack](#) of [empathy](#) to human suffering under his watch. Not surprisingly, Trump has been subjected to harsh criticism within the country. Trump has also often disparaged leaders of other countries and has in turn been [mocked](#) by foreign leaders and criticised sharply at international platforms for his policies ranging from trade to climate change and dealing with European allies. He has been accused of indulging dictators, [colluding](#) with foreign powers and [impeached](#) on partisan lines by the House of Representatives. He has rebuked journalists, weathered a consistently hostile relationship with the media and failed to obtain celebrity endorsements. And for all that, Trump may win or lose with a razor-thin margin and has proved pollsters wrong.

Compared to 2016, Trump has bettered his performance across various demographics. Contrary to expectations, he appears to have received a significant proportion of the Hispanic vote in various states such as Texas ([40 percent](#)) and Florida ([47 percent](#)). Older voters who bore the brunt of the pandemic have refrained from punishing Trump. Cited election statistics indicate that there is a substantial segment of the US electorate which is decidedly uncomfortable with the agenda of the Democratic party and its presidential candidate.

Ethnicity and Voting Preference (%)					
Based on the New York Times Exit Polls (2016 and 2020)					
	Trump			Clinton Biden	
	2016	2020		2016	2020
White	58	57		37	42
Black	8	12		88	87
Hispanic/Latino	29	32		65	66
Asian	29	31		65	63
other	37	40		56	58

Democratic Party leaders will have to re-examine their communication and political strategies, as their party's performance in the concurrent elections for the Senate and the House of Representatives delivered no blue wave as had been anticipated. If Trump has divided the country, as many Democrats claim,

they have also failed to bring people together and bridge the divide. Even in the midst of a raging pandemic and associated economic challenges, the Democrats were unable to sway voters in significant numbers to ensure what they had assumed would be easy electoral victories. It is likely that the message and agenda of Joe Biden did not transcend his support base.

It is clear that there is significant scope to improve the decentralised and far from uniform voting and counting processes in US presidential elections. Despite repeated warnings of chaos and confusion related to mail-in ballots, there was little effort to strengthen transparency and put in place robust mechanisms for ensuring compliance with electoral law. In many battleground states, there is still [very little clarity](#) on how many mail-in votes were polled, while the levels of scrutiny for eligibility also remains subject to interpretation. This is bound to create challenges during a presidential election. Ironically, a country which is the world's leading economic as well as technological power, plays a prominent role in international politics and promotes democracy in other parts of the world has not been able to fix problems in its own electoral process even after past counting controversies, such as during the presidential election in 2000. Perhaps it is time for US election officials to study successful election processes in other large democracies to draw the relevant lessons.

Thus far, leading US political leaders, including from the Republican party, have demonstrated political sagacity and wisely refrained from calling the election a 'fraud.' But the above discourse raises a few important procedural and constitutional questions: (1) Electoral democracy is premised on the notion of a secret ballot and ensuring that a voter's choice remains anonymous and personal. Do large-scale mail-in ballots ensure secrecy of the vote and anonymity? (2) While states have the right to define their own election rules, can they stipulate procedures in a manner that delays the national verdict? (3) Is it not high time for the states of the union to have a conversation with each other on developing common standards for the conduct of US presidential elections? These questions may go to the heart of debates on federalism in the United States, but are inescapable if electoral practices are to be improved for the future.

Despite a surging pandemic, the voting percentage of over [66 percent](#) was impressive and bodes well for American democracy. At a larger level, US election observers and pollsters have to pay close attention as to why they are repeatedly failing in their assessments. If there are challenges in statistical modelling, then it is a minor problem. On the other hand, if a large number of people are refraining from discussing their political and ideological preferences openly, then it indicates a significant dent in [social capital](#) –

decline in participatory conversations and trust-deficits that make it difficult to bridge social and ideological divides. It appears that a significant segment of the US population is more comfortable in articulating views only within the confines of the voting booth, when no one is around to judge them. However, reducing democracy to an act of voting alone misses an important attribute, namely that democracy is also about constant and open deliberations among the citizenry. It is a matter for reflection if this idea of deliberative democracy is being eroded by the raging culture wars and illiberal suppression of diverse opinion which is becoming a hallmark of America's progressive left.

Whoever is elected, the next US leader will have an uphill task of bridging a polity that seems to be divided right down the middle. It looks increasingly likely that there will be a Democratic president and a Republican-controlled Senate. One can only hope that such distribution of power will help constrain ideological extremism in both the political parties and thereby facilitate genuine conversations and compromise on public policy.

For the friends and allies of the US, these developments may constitute a source of considerable discomfort. The US is becoming increasingly inward-looking and is likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. This election was akin to a referendum on Trump; as a consequence, there was very little discussion on the US and its role in the world. Despite the enormous economic, technological and military power the US wields, domestic deliberations and consensus building on US grand strategy require constant attention. At a juncture when the international scene is becoming increasingly fluid and is marked by growing disorder and uncertainty, the US political system seems to be creating conditions for an absence of decisive actions. One can only hope that this uncertain democratic transition in the US is a temporary phenomenon.



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