

US Election 2020 shows a deeply divided nation

Ashutosh Varshney writes: Donald Trump's rise was a negation of egalitarian trends of five decades. He has 48 per cent of popular vote.

[Ashutosh Varshney](#)

Written by | Updated: November 6, 2020 8:56:14 am



People demonstrate outside the Pennsylvania State Capitol to urge that all votes be counted, Wednesday, Nov. 4, 2020, in Harrisburg, Pa., following Tuesday's election. (AP Photo)

It was a long November night. Technically, it ended three hours after the midnight of November 3, when both contestants — Joe Biden and Donald

Trump — had made their speeches. But, politically, the night has not yet ended. As of now, Biden is quite close to 270 electoral votes, which will make him the next US president. But he is not there yet. And even if he gets to 270, Trump has already filed legal cases questioning the vote in several states.

It is unclear what the courts will do, how long they will take, whether there will be more cases. In 2000, only Florida (29 electoral votes) was legally contested, and a settlement took until December 12. We have four Floridas now: Wisconsin (10), Michigan (16), Georgia (16) and Pennsylvania (20). Of these, Biden has won the first two, and has been closing the gap in the last two, generating anxiety in the Trump camp. More legal challenges can't be ruled out.

Trump's first post-election speech overflowed with his customary traits. He declared victory (with tens of millions of votes still uncounted), claimed voter fraud (with no prima facie evidence provided), asked states, where he was ahead on the night of November 3, to stop counting (when are democrats afraid of votes?), and threatened legal action.

As of now, we have little national-level data on three important issues: What proportion of each racial and ethnic community voted for the two candidates? What was the gender distribution? And were there serious age-cohort differences? These important issues can be analysed only when disaggregated statistics come in.

But here is what we do know. The turnout was historic. In presidential elections, the turnout in the US rarely crosses 60 per cent. Since 1960, only four times has that bar been crossed: In the three elections of the 1960s and in Obama's 2008 election. The turnout this year is likely to touch 65 per cent. That even a [pandemic](#) could not depress the turnout should demonstrate how high the stakes were.

We also now know that early votes — roughly 100 million out of the nearly 150 million — were disproportionately Democratic, and the Election Day votes were overwhelmingly Republican. As a result, in most swing states, Trump was ahead on election night, and on November 4, as mailed ballots were counted, Trump leads progressively shrank, or disappeared altogether. In Georgia, Trump was ahead by 3,72,400 votes before midnight on November 3. At 8 am on November 5, the lead had come down to roughly 18,000.

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The state-level trends are also quite clear. Trump's clearest path to victory was to keep in his victory column all Republican states he won in 2016, losing at best two of three Democratic states he unexpectedly swung: Michigan (16), Wisconsin (10), and Pennsylvania (20). He has lost the first two and Pennsylvania is uncertain. But the most striking development is that Biden might flip one or more of three Republican states — Georgia (16), North Carolina (15) and Arizona (11). That is why Biden is closer to 270 than Trump.

For most people, a statistical survey of elections is an exercise too dispassionately clinical. An election is as much about the meanings as about the data. What do the victories and defeats signify? In what ways are they linked to larger ideas and narratives of a polity and society?

At a policy level, this election was about the pandemic and the economic devastation of the last many months. But it was also about three less policy specific matters, each important in its own way. The first was simply the question of decency and civility in presidential conduct and public discourse. Should a president act like a bully, and encourage followers to do the same? The second was whether false narratives, formulated repeatedly and proclaimed loudly from the highest office of the land, are more important than

the truth. How could a president claim a successful taming of the pandemic when more than 2,30,000 people lost their lives? The third, and perhaps most important, was whether America is about racial equality and inclusion, or about white supremacy.

The answer to the last three questions is summed up in an awful and revealing statistic. Even after failing to contain the epidemic, behaving in an unpresidential manner with unerring regularity, ignoring and even approving right-wing militia groups and their violence, and repeatedly engaging in racist and misogynistic conduct, Trump received 48 per cent of the popular vote. It shows a deeply divided nation. What Trump stands for is manifestly obvious, not hidden. Nearly half of America approved of him and his conduct.

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Scholars of American history and politics have argued that two ideas about America's national identity have often reverberated in the nation's politics since its founding. The first is the so-called American creed, stemming from the constitutional values of equality and freedom. The second has always been the belief that America is a white nation and all non-white groups should recognise white primacy.

Both themes have been simultaneously present, though the exact mix has varied in different periods. Since the mid-1960s, the theme of equality has been more potent, bringing about many positive changes in America's race relations and leading also to the election of a black president in 2008 and 2012. Trump's rise was a negation of the egalitarian trends of the previous five decades and a call for a return to white supremacy. Even in his likely defeat, nearly half of America has embraced this revival.

This half has also accepted the power of narratives over truth. Stated

differently, narratives are the truth according to this view, requiring no independent verification. Arguments in politics, if they ally with prior beliefs, are to be celebrated. Beliefs themselves are not to be subjected to external validation. All validation is internal to beliefs.

This kind of politics has often led to great devastation in history. Arguments in politics can't be equated with religious beliefs. The latter may not require external proofs for their continuation, but the former cannot bring about sustained enhancement of collective life without some notion of empirical validation. Public policies must be shown to have larger benefits.

One of Biden's biggest tasks will be to heal a deeply fractured America, restore civility and decency in public life, and seek to revive the precedence of truth over narratives.

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This article first appeared in the print edition on November 6, 2020 under the title 'The long day after'. The writer is Sol Goldman professor of international studies and professor of political science at Brown University

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