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US Presidential Election 2020

An Election Doomed to Cause Harm?

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SYNOPSIS

Although several presidential elections in American history have been troubled procedurally, no election looks as doomed to cause trouble as the one to be held, presumably, on 3 November 2020.

COMMENTARY

MYRIAD UNCERTAINTIES pervade the upcoming 3 November 2020 presidential election in the United States. Aside from not knowing who will win the presidency and how Congress will balance out, prior anxieties attend the integrity of the voting process itself. That integrity is assaulted from three separate sources, which combine to produce an unprecedented circumstance.

The first of these is the threat of foreign interference in the electoral process. Russian intelligence was engaged in such manipulation in the November 2016 election, and today evidence proffered in congressional testimony by the US intelligence community suggests that Chinese and Iranian government agents are involved, as well. These efforts do not seek mainly to distort vote counts in electronic tabulations, but rather to skew debate before the vote by fabricating "opinion" through bots massively inserting fake views into the public domain.

Voting Integrity and the Rogue Factor

At least one authority, air force general and former director of national intelligence, James R. Clapper, argued in his 2018 book *Facts and Fears*, that Russian efforts in 2016 may have tipped the presidential election to Donald Trump. More recently,

Democratic vice-presidential nominee Kamala Harris suggested that Russian efforts again might make the difference.

The second fly in the electoral ointment is the massive disruption of normal, well-practised, if nevertheless imperfect, voting protocols because of COVID-19. One major new concern is that polling stations are being consolidated in many localities to limit possible pandemic super-spreader incidents.

The worry is that this will cause long lines where many wary people will come into proximity with those who may not wear masks or adhere to social distancing precautions. Such fears may suppress voting more in minority neighbourhoods, thus disproportionately affecting Democratic totals.

Worse, the politicisation of a large anticipated increase in mail-in ballots on account of COVID-19 fears – and the feared infirmity of both the United States Postal Service and local governments to do anything new right, even in the absence of partisan chicanery – has introduced a huge rogue factor in the integrity of the final count.

Crux of the Problem

Unprecedented counting delays of so many mailed-in ballots will also likely create phased results: polling-place results coming in first and mail-in and absentee ballots being counted later. The possibility of fraud over the latter is not high, but the likelihood of politically incendiary claims of fraud is very high indeed.

Neither side trusts anyone to be an honest, objective arbiter of disputes that could arise over mailed-in ballots; herein lies the real crux of the problem: Republicans don't trust Democrats on principle. Democrats don't trust Republicans, in part because they have sought to selectively suppress voter turnout in many ways over recent years.

The latest permutation of that tack is the president's threat to send sheriffs and other law-enforcement personnel to polling places, obviously to intimidate groups whose general experience with police has not been a happy one.

Clearly, the president's openly admitted desire to garrote the USPS to suppress "undesirable" votes – despite the fact that the president himself also votes by mail – has inflamed the situation. It, and the reaction against it by Congressional Democrats, have primed and pre-legitimated various parties to object peremptorily to any results they don't like, including demands that voting stop so as to invalidate late-counted mail-in ballots.

Thus, polarised, partisan "communications" teams now stand ready to flood social media – now by far the source of most Americans' "news" – with misrepresentations and lurid conspiracy theories about the vote count. Legal teams, too, are already assembled to seize any opportunity to muddy the waters in their eventual favour.

New Factor

Again, this is not entirely new, as the "hanging chads" debacle in Florida during the Bush-Gore 2000 election reminds us. But the present technological environment is

new: In November 2000 Internet-enabled iPhones did not yet exist, so neither did significant Russian opportunities to weaponise social media.

The third factor *is* new: Never before has an incumbent president pre-judged any electoral result that does not see him returned to office as fraudulent. During the 2016 campaign Trump introduced and often repeated this claim at campaign rallies. In 2020 he at one point assured the nation that he would step down voluntarily if he were to lose, only to reverse course to the 2016 meme – again claiming that any loss would be evidence of "deep state" fraud.

This, more than anything else, has provided the energy for the widespread fear that democratic norms will be seriously damaged in November; in other words, no matter who wins, the nation's democratic health and heritage will lose.

The fact that Kamala Harris has postulated Russian manipulations may determine the outcome in November – which is bound to be seen as a basis for future complaint and demand – is a lesser sin in this context, but a sin all the same. It was foolish to boot, because it provides Republicans with the raw material to claim, "well, the Democrats say that, too".

Three Assaults: Crossing the Streams

These three assaults on the integrity of the upcoming balloting have combined to produce fears of varying shapes and sizes. Many scenarios have been created, some public and some not. Some scenarios are realistic and thus useful as shields against otherwise unexpected crisis.

For example, unless there is a landslide for one side or the other, it is unlikely under these conditions that by late 3 November, or even 5 November, the nation will know who won the White House. Many House and Senate races likewise may remain undetermined.

The longer the delay, the more likely political violence will erupt as a deliberate, inflected continuations of the ongoing post-"George Floyd" unrest. The more likely, too, that law suits of various descriptions will be filed, delaying results still further. Here the partisan character of state legislatures may prove significant, and distortive, as was the case in Florida in 2000.

So it's a good thing to anticipate such harmful behaviours and plan ways to limit the damage they may do. Everyone in positions of high legal and political authority in the US is today already thinking about such eventualities, and many of them, at least, have the public's best interests at heart.

One example concerns an 11 August open letter written by two well-known retired military officers urging the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley to plan to forcibly remove Donald Trump from office if he ignores or otherwise tries to evade a negative November election result.

The uproar following publication noted that General Milley has no such authority (while other authorities do exist for such purposes) and wondered how two reputable people

could possibly get that wrong. The criticism also pointed out that urging the military to be the arbiter of political crisis disputes could hardly be more unconstitutional or injurious to civil-military relations. Yet they wrote it and a reputable magazine published it.

Not Normal, and More Than Silly

“Silly season”, what many experienced Americans have long since come to call election campaign seasons, has never been quite this silly, and certainly in my lifetime as a native son of Washington, DC, has never been as alarming for what it lacks in general probity and civic rationality.

The soul of the American liberal temperament, it seems, is being mugged by the tacit but mutual agreement of a hollow and haunted political class. Each part fears and loathes the other more than they cherish and respect either *We the People* or their own oaths of office. The wheels are coming off fast, and make no mistake: This is not normal.

The meaning for the rest of the world, whose peoples have equities in the US election outcome but no vote: For any practical purpose, you don’t exist in the mind’s eye of the American elite, let alone the rest of the nation. Advice: Keep it that way for now, for drawing our attention in current deranged circumstances will only bring you regret.

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