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US Presidential Election 2020

## Flaws of the Individual or the System?

By Irm Haleem

### SYNOPSIS

*According to the opinion poll website 'Fivethirtyeight' — also called '538' for the maximum number of electoral votes from which a candidate needs 270 to win the US presidential election — a Joe Biden victory is on the cards. The website predicts a 347.8/538 electoral triumph for Biden, versus a 190/538 electoral outcome for Donald Trump. Another US publication, Politico, notes that Trump's chances of winning the election are based only on "polling screw-up". The individual and the system will decide what the US administration will be like for the next four years.*

### COMMENTARY

TO HIS supporters, President Trump is a patriot of the highest order. He is seen as a 'regular' man who understands the 'regular' working Americans, a faithful Christian, and a saviour of a bleeding nation that has given too much to the world and gotten very little in return. In their view, the United States has suffered from the liberals' agenda which resulted in permeable borders and weak immigration policies that has increased crime in America and has overburdened its social welfare system.

For Americans who support Biden, Trump has been a divisive president who has created Nazi-esque camps as a 'holding pattern' for illegal immigrants before their deportation, put children of illegal immigrants in cages, created a nonsensical Muslim Ban that exempted the very country that represented the nationality of the majority of the 9-11 terrorists. Trump is regarded as a president with shattered legitimacy upon being impeached by the US House of Representatives, a president who has failed in response to COVID-19 pandemic by belittling its threat and placing the blame on the 'China virus' that has generated anti-Chinese racism in America. This president has

emboldened the violent far-right militia by failing to condemn their hatred and violence, and by instructing them to 'stand back, stand by'.

Adding to the objectionable policy positions taken by Trump and his character flaws, the Biden supporters are also concerned with the American electoral system, where a candidate does not win by a majority of the popular vote, but by securing the required number of electoral college votes.

### **What is the Electoral College?**

The US presidential election rests on the 'electoral college' system. This 'college' simply refers to a group of people whose job is to elect the president. In fact, when Americans go to the polls this week, on 3 November 2020, they are voting for the group of officials who make up the body of the electoral college; each state gets a certain number of electors depending on the population size of the state and the number of its representatives in the US Congress (that is, the House of Representatives and the Senate).

Each elector gets one vote and each one of them is supposed to support the presidential candidate which won the most popular votes at the state level. There are a total of 538 electors from all states. The candidate receiving the votes of 270 of these electors goes to the White House in Washington DC as the President of the United States of America.

The popular criticism of the American electoral system is that, basically, 538 persons determine the outcome of the US presidential elections. Some argue that this is hardly reflective of a purely democratic exercise. Contrary to widely-held belief, the occupant of the White House is chosen not by American citizens casting their votes personally but whether the presidential candidate get more votes in those states that matter.

Trump won the 2016 election when a combined small margin of votes from three states swung against his contender, Hillary Clinton, and this was reflected in the eventual voting in the electoral college.

### **Emotion Behind Trump Appeal**

Comments on social media posts reveal where the emotional strings lie for Trump supporters: Trump's isolationism is revered as a needed 'America First' policy, as patriotism of the highest order, despite the fact that US military involvement overseas was meant as a measure to guard against bringing the conflicts home. His promise of bringing troops back home is perceived as a caring for the soldiers despite his open disdain and disrespect towards key high-ranking military officers.

Trump's affiliation with the conservative Republicans is understood as a marker for morality and ethical behaviour, despite the fact that Trump's open misogyny has led to 26 counts of sexual misconduct, along with a litany of other unethical behaviour. His criticism of Biden and the Democrats as being 'anti-police establishment' is accepted wholesale based on fears of the lawless liberals, despite the fact that Biden has rejected the 'Defund the Police' initiative.

The Centre for Strategic and International Studies (a think tank based in Washington DC) reports that from January-August 2020, over 40 violent incidences were attributed to the violent far-right that Trump has emboldened, compared to 12 incidences from the violent far-left, and less than five incidences from violent Jihadi groups.

## **Virus vs Politics**

President Trump's chief of staff, Mark Meadows, is reported to have told CNN's Jake Tapper: "We are not going to control the pandemic." The COVID-19 infection is spreading like wildfire throughout the US. Yet, wearing of mask and social distancing are being contested by political factions in the country, with Trump leading an unrelentless campaign of rejecting the scientific advice and COVID-19 protocol.

This is even though he was personally struck by the coronavirus and hospitalised for a few days. The fact is that the Trump campaign gambled on the coronavirus being brought under control, and lost. It cannot change tack at this late stage of the game without political devastation.

There seems a determined effort to deny health care provisions by the Trump White House. Timothy Snyder, a professor of history at Yale University, warns that 'America's poor health is an invitation to tyranny'. Snyder notes that in "normal democracies, health care is not the preserve of an elite", but of the population at large. This is not so in America. Inaccessible health care generates fear and insecurities.

Instead of a concern for the health of Americans at large, Trump has threatened to revoke the Affordable Care Act – Obamacare – that offers affordable care to middle and working class Americans, and prevents insurance companies from denying care to individuals with pre-existing conditions.

## **The Biden Alternative**

In his election campaigns, Biden has promised that he will be an American president who sees no distinctions between red (Republican) states, or blue (Democratic) states, but sees only "the united states".

Biden promises a progressive presidency, where his 'Build Back Better' agenda comprises some of the following features: a US\$6 trillion over a decade to improve social and economic conditions for all Americans; a more effective contact tracing to combat the COVID-19 spread, new lockdowns if needed, and a no pay-out-pocket cost for Americans for a COVID-19 vaccine.

There will also be \$400 billion in investments in the economy; \$300 billion for research on clean-energy initiatives; a \$15 per hour federal minimum wage; support for unions; expanded Affordable Care Act; higher taxation for corporations and the wealthy; a plan to put into action Bernie Sander's 'College for All Act'; progressive criminal justice reforms and abolition of the death penalty; and a rejection of 'Defund the Police' campaign of the left.

## **The Three Scenarios**

Ultimately, the conclusion of the 2020 US presidential election depends on how the American system lives up to the challenges of the time — the coronavirus pandemic and its unprecedented disruption of society and economy, and the ego of Donald Trump. There are three possibilities ahead:

*The good scenario* is one where the candidate who loses the election will gracefully yield to his contender, showcasing a healthy, strong democracy in the world's most powerful country.

*The bad scenario* is where President Trump will declare a premature victory around 11pm on Election Day (3 November), well before all the mailed-in and absentee ballots are counted, and when these counts are completed and translate into a Biden victory, Trump will cry fraud, thereby pulling in the Department of Justice and conceivably the Supreme Court to render the final decision.

*The ugly scenario* is where the far-right militia groups act on Trump's 'stand back, stand by' commandment and view it as a licence to unleash violence on American streets. The fact that police is already preparing for violence and some shops have been boarded-up in anticipation of post-election violence confirms this fear.

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*Irm Haleem is an Assistant Professor in the Strategic Studies Programme at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is part of an RSIS Series.*

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**Nanyang Technological University**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)