

Political Update #20. July 9, 2020. By Charles E. Morrison

If the 2020 election were being held today, polls suggest, there would be a massive Biden victory, perhaps a 5% or more popular vote margin and a decisive Electoral College outcome. According to the neutral political tracking site, Real Clear Politics, Las Vegas betting odds stand at 56 to 39 in Biden's favor. The Economist magazine now gives Trump a one in ten chance of winning. Even new fund-raising has shifted in Biden's favor now that he is now longer competing with other Democrats for money and increasingly appears a likely winner. This shift of momentum toward the Democratic candidate reflects virtually no surge of support or enthusiasm for Biden but rather a continuing erosion of Trump's support. So far, the President is not in free-fall nor is he likely to become so given party loyalties. Some 90% of Republicans (about 30% of likely voters) say they will vote for Trump and his job approval remains around 40-41% of adults. The election is still 4 months away. However, during the past month, Trump has been hammered by unfavorable developments, some beyond his control, but many self-inflicted mistakes that he or his campaign have made. The campaign is more directed toward destroying the opposing candidate than promoting their own, and it continues to struggle to find an effective, credible angle of attack on Biden. The deeper Trump digs himself into a hole, the harder a comeback, and since Trump refuses to change, the more a positive outcome for him depends on a Biden mistake or some surprise. Indeed, many Democrats are nervous their candidate may make an unforced error or be victim of "dirty tricks." But time is running and barring a stunning reversal, Trump is on target to score another historic first – the largest voter repudiation of an incumbent U.S. president in many decades.

These updates have sought to provide an objective assessment of trends and developments in U.S. domestic politics. With this in mind, it is important to understand why Trump's position has been eroding. In this author's mind, there are two basic important factors: Trump's refusal to adjust his modus operandi which means he is alienating marginal supporters and not reaching out to new audiences, and a growing public weariness, or Trump fatigue, with the high his high degree of partisanship and lack of detail. On some issues, these may not matter, but Trump's politicization of the policy responses to the virus is increasingly associated with the notable failure of the United States to control the pandemic. The country is still "knee-deep" (infectious disease specialist Anthony Fauci's term) in a rapidly expanding epidemic. This failure contrasts sharply with that of many Eurasian countries, and is incredibly costly in human and economic terms.

We will look at three interconnected facets of the President's current political vulnerability as illustrated by events of recent weeks: a failure to provide effective national-level leadership typified by his response to the renewed coronavirus threat and continuing racial tension; policy management chaos highlighted by the publication of an insider book by his former National Security Adviser John Bolton; and lack of respect for essential institutions of governance, which has been reflected in several recent extraordinary inventions in the criminal justice system.

The Lack of National-level Leadership

Since his election, President Trump has projected himself as a president for those who voted for him, and, unlike most predecessors, resisted moving toward broadening his reach. This has helped him achieve the most stable approval ratings in recent presidential history, but never above 50%. Trump, of course, does not need a majority vote to eke out an Electoral College victory; in 2016 he won 304 to 227 in the Electoral College with just 46% of the popular vote. While appearing to be a comfortable margin, in fact it was razor-thin. He would have lost 267 to 264 without narrow victories in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, each with margins of less than 1% and in sum just 0.001% of 2016 voters. Most polling today has him in the low 40s as compared to Biden’s high 40s. Polling also suggests most of the thin wedge of undecideds lean Biden’s way.

	2016 Result	NYT/Siena June 2020
Michigan (n=610)	<1 Trump	+11 Biden 47-36
Wisconsin (655)	<1 Trump	+11 Biden 49-38
Pennsylvania (651)	<1 Trump	+10 Biden 50-40
Florida (651)	+1 Trump	+6 Biden 47-41
Arizona (650)	+4 Trump	+7 Biden 48-41
North Carolina (653)	+4 Trump	+9 Biden 49-40

Based on a New York Times/Siena College poll of 3,870 registered voters from June 8 to June 18.

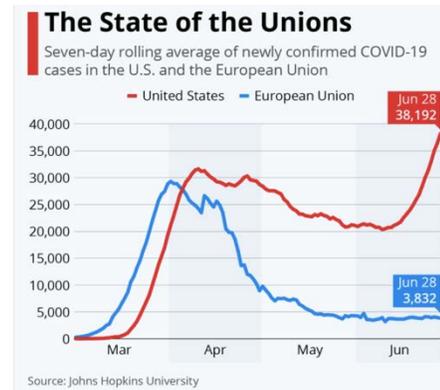
The pandemic knocked the props from under Trump’s biggest reelection asset – a strong economy. However, it also gave him an opportunity to show national-level leadership in addressing the crisis and recovery. Almost every U.S. governor rose to the challenge. But the President’s initial reaction was to downplay the crisis until it could no longer be avoided and then prematurely hype and politicize the recovery. The first was a mistake, but he was in good company with some other national leaders. The second was a political gamble in that catered to his base and was predicated on a steady ebbing of the

disease, and it may be fatal. Firmly placing himself and his party in the lead on a hasty reopening seemed like a good bet in April, May, and even into early June when the disease was on the decline anyway and unemployment at all-time highs. Trump hoped to benefit by leading a post-pandemic economic recovery.

While the steepness of the U.S. downward curve was not as great as in the EU, aggregate trends for both new infections and deaths were decidedly downward even as the locus of the pandemic was shifting from coastal centers in the Northeast to more rural parts of the South, Midwest, and West. [See previous Update #19, June 11]. But by mid-June, the growth in infections in new disease centers began to outstrip the decline in earlier hot spots, rising rapidly from just over 22,000 a day in mid-June to 50,000 a day in early July. In Texas, Florida, and Arizona, where infections are soaring and hospitals coming under growing pressure, Republican governors were forced to reverse aspects of their earlier premature economic openings, which had ignored Center for Disease Control (CDC) suggested guidelines. The new sobering reality is that the disease is not disappearing any time soon nor as the result of wishful thinking.

The reemergence of the disease gave the President a second chance to acknowledge its virulence and call for a unified national strategy, but instead he became mostly invisible, handing back pandemic leadership to Vice President Mike Pence, intervening mainly to assure

people that all will be well and continue to advocate opening, most recently of schools (a local issue in the U.S.). Since he is openly dismissive of CDC guidelines, his government is giving confusing, mixed messages. And since his forecasts of success proved wrong before, vague reassurances without concrete plans or steps are not reassuring. He has not addressed the nation, and he refuses to set an example by wearing a face mask in public, unlike his vice president and most other American political leaders. He resumed public rallies (the first in a mostly-empty indoor Tulsa arena on June 20) and insists the rise in cases is because of increased testing, for which he takes credit.ⁱ



Testing alone does not account for the explosive growth of the disease in the new disease centers or the higher percentage of positives for the tests. Most tellingly, there is also increased testing in Europe but without similar results. While even more politically decentralized than the United States, the EU has seen a sharp drop in infections and is open again to visitors from abroad, but pointedly not from the United States.ⁱⁱ

The President's failure to lead on COVID has unnerved some of his most committed supporters. Conservative columnist, Cal Thomas, who regards Biden as "a prisoner of the hard left," asked Trump to "display some sympathy for people who have died and their relatives," "acknowledge the virus is spreading," and "stop personal attacks." He insisted if the President would only wear a mask, visit some survivors, and "show some kindness," he "might" get reelected. Another usually pro-Trump columnist, Marc Thiessen, complained that Trump's Tulsa speech "contained barely a word designed to persuade anyone who was not already persuaded to support" him and urged him to use compassion and empathy.

Some around the President have even speculated that he may not want to be reelected or will surprise everyone by stepping down. Trump is unpredictable, but it is not in his character to change his tone or message or resign. Instead he doubled down in firing up his base about what he hoped would be a more popular law and order theme. While most media and public attention has pivoted back to the disease, there are still reverberations from the George Floyd killing in many locations, including numerous efforts to topple or deface statue of slave-owners or those who sympathized with slavery. There have also been many local measures, some adopted, on police reform, mostly directed toward enhancing accountability.

The President's shift to law and order coincided with the resumption of his rallies. He spent much time on it in Tulsa and in remarks at Mount Rushmore on the Fourth of July. This theme may be more in tune with public sentiment since there is little general sympathy for violent or illegal actions when lawful processes exist to update statutory. But so far it appears to have little resonance outside his existing base. First, it comes in place of attention to the pandemic rather than in addition to it, so it leaves the President stubbornly not addressing the most important issue on the public mind. Second, although Trump signed an executive order on police reform, he appears to have all but forgotten that as well as earlier remarks aligning

himself with peaceful protests. His remarks focus on supporting police and protecting statues, not reforms. Finally, many of his critics and increasingly others see him as part of the problem, not the solution. The normal expectation of a national leader in the face of social turmoil is that he/she would try to calm the public, but Trump makes law and order with partisan and harkens to fear. Whether knowingly or not, he seems to intentionally inflame sentiments and keep the country divided, and to have calculated this is in his political interest.

Chaos, Disorganization and the Bolton Book

On June 20, after parts had circulated as opeds or surreptitiously, John Bolton's tell-all book, *The Room Where It Happened*, on his 2018-19 experience as National Security Adviser was officially released. Buoyed by the publicity surrounding the Administration's effort to suppress it, the book sold 800,000 copies in the first week. Bolton confirmed Trump's effort to hold hostage military aid to the Ukraine in exchange for an announcement of an investigation into Joe Biden, and he claimed that Trump begged Xi Jinping to help him with his reelection by offering a favorable trade agreement. Bolton also criticized Trump for spending too much time watching cable television rather than attending to national business, and he blamed the Democratic House members for failing to address broader foreign policy issues in their impeachment inquiry. This ignored the fact that Bolton had been unwilling to testify about these issues in the House. To have broadened the inquiry without specific inside information, as the whistleblower had provided on Ukraine, would have only opened the impeachment inquiry to further criticism of being a witch hunt. Unlike the Lincoln Project group of conservative Republicans who are supporting Biden to get rid of Trump, Bolton has sought to dissociate himself from Trump's Democratic critics while still branding Trump "unfit" for the office. In trying to weave a way through the middle, Bolton was roundly criticized from all sides, by Democrats for timidity and Republicans for treachery.

Bolton's key theme – that Trump's political interests prevailed over broad foreign policy and security concerns – was not especially surprising since this is usually true for any first term president.ⁱⁱⁱ What is unusual is the lack of any constraints on tactics on Trump's part and his blindness to understanding that seeking political favors from foreign leaders puts him in their debt. With the rapid turnover of the news cycle and the reemerge of the virus, the book rather quickly disappeared from the media. Some specifics may be regurgitated in anti-Trump ads or debates, but the main impact is likely a more general one of confirming the negative portrayal of Trump and his White House that had been made by anonymous, less well-placed, or less solidly conservative writers. Bolton authoritatively confirmed a common portrayal: lack of attention, impulsive decision-making, and a quarrelsome staff fearful of their boss and seeking to exploit or unable to control his most dangerous whims.

Bolton's criticism underscores one of Trump's greatest vulnerabilities from the beginning of his presidency, his failure to be able to recruit and retain competent, loyal staff. While there have been a few exceptions, the turnover has been notable in the senior positions. Trump was able to secure the services of some excellent people with solid conservative credentials, including Gen. John F. Kelly, Gen. James Mattis, and, of course, Bolton, but he proved unable to work

with them on a sustained basis or earn their loyalty. This may be in part because of his deep distrust of associates, causing him to rely on family members despite their lack of credentials or experience. The nepotistic and shambolic nature of his administration has undercut the image he tried to cultivate of being an organized businessman rather than a standard Washington politician. This is more and more evident to the general public, and Trump reinforced it when unable to respond cogently to a Fox News question about his agenda for his second term.

Lack of Respect for Institutions

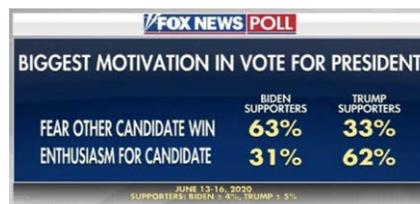
Trump's disregard for the traditional institutions of governance, both national and international, has been a source of strength with many of his supporters who had been disappointed by the direction of the country under previous administrations. Trump is famously transactional and prides himself of making "deals" in the best interests of Americans, ignoring institutional constraints or established norms if necessary. But this also is wearing thin, and as Bolton suggested, may be less about best interests of all Americans and more about his own. In recent weeks this perception has been further reinforced by several extraordinary interventions in the criminal justice system.

Pardons for federal crimes are a unique Constitutional power vested in the president with an obvious exception for impeachments. Earlier, Mr. Trump's pardons seemed to cater to his base's political sentiments. This included pardoning an Arizona sheriff for refusing to obey a court order and overturning a Navy judgment of a SEAL. More recently, his interventions, mostly carried out by his Attorney General, William Barr, have appeared to shift toward personal interests. At the border line was the dropping of a Justice Department case against Trump's first National Security Adviser, Mike Flynn, who had pled guilty to some counts and whom Trump had fired for lying to Vice President Mike Pence about his interactions with the Russian ambassador after the election but prior to Trump taking office. Flynn remained a hero to Trump's base, and is expected to play a role in his campaign.

Another case involved Republican operative and Trump friend, Roger Stone, who was found guilty of witness tampering and other crimes. In February Trump called for leniency by tweet, and according to the June testimony of the lead prosecutor, who had resigned, leniency was offered by the Department of Justice unfairly because of Trump's intervention. Stone currently is seeking a full presidential pardon. Finally, the abrupt and mismanaged reported resignation and then firing of Geoffrey Berman, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, appeared to some to be paving the way to reduce pressure on Trump ally and attorney, Rudy Giuliani, who is under investigation as well as a Turkish bank favored by Trump. This, of course, was denied by Barr who, however, did not offer another explanation. Despite widespread criticism from jurists, none of these cases in itself would much impact Trump's political standing, but the steady drip of widely criticized interventions reinforces the image of an Administration meddling with nonpartisan institutions for political and personal benefit.

The Campaigns

Concerned and perhaps even puzzled about the falling polls, the Trump Administration has struggled to explain that the President's situation is not as dire as conventional political wisdom and bookies now have it. They insist the polls fail to reflect the "enthusiasm factor" - that Mr. Trump's supporters are far more motivated about their candidate than Mr. Biden's. They also say that their more accurate internal polls suggest a much closer race. Internal polls are not shared and can often be misleading. They are also meaningless if the candidate is unwilling to believe and act on them, but it is definitely true that Biden himself has is a less motivating personality, mostly because he is a moderate and an incrementalist. But, as a Fox Poll suggests, many of his voters are highly motivated to vote against Trump. Unlike 2016, or the often cited 1988 presidential campaign which saw a large swing in its final months, the truly undecided 2020 vote seems small. Trump has been operating within his comfort zone to drive up enthusiasm among his faithful, but paying scant attention to the constituencies where his 2016 support has been eroding such as suburban women and less educated males, constituencies where he had done well in 2016. Nor is he reaching out to the truly undecideds where Biden seems to have an edge.



The Trump campaign clearly recognizes the so-called battleground states are key to the election. But appearing alone may not be very helpful to him if his message has not been updated and tailored to have broader appeal beyond his base.

In the meantime, Biden is deliberately presenting himself as anti-Trump in leadership, competence, consulting with specialists (especially on the coronavirus), and empathy. While he has been making speeches that are increasingly critical of Trump, he sought to project unity and caution. He seems to have calculated that after four years of a wild ride with Trump, the majority of Americans are looking for a more calming, deliberate leadership, one that is also more civil, more policy-focused, and more influenced by science. He has been working quietly and seemingly successfully with Bernie Sanders supporters to build out his support base without moving too far from his incremental approach. He has also avoided being provoked by Trump, unlike the primary season where he sometimes became angry with hecklers or questioners to his disadvantage.

Biden, and Democrats more generally, are taking advantage of pandemic to promote health care, a major Democratic concern prior to the pandemic. Except when speaking, Biden wears a mask. He is not holding mass rallies. The Democrats have already announced that their national convention in Milwaukee will be mostly virtual.^{iv} Biden's approach to health is incremental, but it involves establishing a Federal system building on Obamacare rather than substituting for private health care. Trump support groups have tried to use and distort this and other Biden proposals to suggest he and Democrats favor a socialist government. By characterizing Biden proposals as "radical socialism" rather than grapple with their substance, they again are failing to broaden their candidate's appeal.

Slips and Scandals

Trump's focus is on attacking his opposition rather than building up his own support base. He is finding Biden an elusive target with far fewer negatives than his previous opponent. Perhaps the next significant opportunity for Trump will be Biden's choice of vice president, originally intended to be by August 1 but possibly slipping. Biden has committed to choosing a woman, and many think the leading candidate is Senator Kamala Harris of California, a black moderate. While the Trump campaign would hope for someone on the left wing of the Democratic party, Biden seems unlikely to oblige not just that this would hurt his standing with the independents he is courting, but jeopardize the chances of downstream Democrats in the Senate, House, and state races. The Democrat Congressional success in 2018 was based on moderates winning in "purple" districts. The 2020 election is of special importance in providing the Democrats with an outside chance of winning the Senate as well as some statehouses that will be redrawing electoral districts following the 2020 census.

At this point it has become hard to imagine any slips or likely new scandals that would affect the outcome of the race. Both candidates are prone to rambling and gaffes, but the public has already discounted these. The degree of silliness and public disinterest was shown when Trump's campaign leapt on Biden's brief mistake of saying 125 million COVID-19 infections before correcting it to 125,000. Moreover, as two veterans long in the public eye, neither is likely to be impacted by some charge of new scandal not already publicized. But politics is full of surprises, and the election is another four months away.

ⁱ Trump supporters also point out that the number of deaths continued down and are now low and stable and thus mortality is declining. This is because of the decline in the original centers, mainly the New York area, better treatment as experience with the disease grows, and so many of the new infections are in a younger demographic. However, it is almost inevitable that with infections increasing so sharply, the absolute number of deaths will increase.

ⁱⁱ The premature openings were mostly in states that had not been ravaged by the disease. In these states many people knew of new one affected, and many, especially younger people, behaved as if the pandemic were over and life could return as before. In the places that had been ravaged, leaders and citizens were more cautious and apt to continue social distancing. The curve in the New York area, therefore, looks much more like Spain's or Italy's, even though the U.S. national curve has been so divergent from the EU one.

ⁱⁱⁱ For most Americans, it is much more serious that the President is letting his reelection effort drive his pandemic responses.

^{iv} The Republican National Convention that follows the Democratic one was moved to from Charlotte to Jacksonville at Trump's behest to take advantage of looser social distancing rules. Now, however, it is only a matter of time until it will also have to be announced as mostly virtual.