

Political Update 22. September 7, 2020. By Charles E. Morrison

The Beginning of the End

Labor Day, occurring September 7 this year, traditionally marked the beginning of the U.S. presidential election campaigns. Now the race is almost continuous over a two-year period. But following the two national party conventions in last weeks of August, it has entered the final, two-month decisive stage. With the country more or less evenly divided along partisan lines, the race will likely continue to tighten as even those few, reluctant “undecideds” are forced to make up their minds. In the final two months, politics will totally dominate public life and both campaigns will be caught up in a whirlwind of charges and countercharges, frenzied travel, local get-out-the-vote activities, debate preparation and spinning, and massive spending, mostly in the competitive states. The election has also spawned a plethora of books (for example, by former Trump press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders praising the President and former and convicted Trump lawyer Michael Cohen denigrating him), and articles timed to take advantage of the heightened interest or influence the outcome.

The pandemic impedes rallies, “pressing the flesh,” and house-to-house canvassing, but both candidates will make frequent and repeated visits to the critical battleground states. While the frenetic news cycle gives an appearance of volatility and shifts in voter sentiments, public preferences appear to be remarkably stable so far. By most polling measures, Biden retains a solid popular vote lead, although Trump is certainly in the race given the advantages the Electoral College gives his more rural base. Political analysis site, FiveThirtyEight, based on a model and some 20 post-conventions polls, now gives Trump a 30% chance of winning, up a couple of percentage points from mid-August. But Las Vegas odds-makers, who heavily leaned toward a Biden victory a month ago, called it “a horse race” after the conventions, that is, almost dead-even. Odds-makers know that unexpected events can wreak havoc with even the most stable of straight-line trends and projections, but Vegas again slightly favors Biden. Time is tight for Trump, who has not adjusted his messaging or style for broader appeal.

The Party Conventions

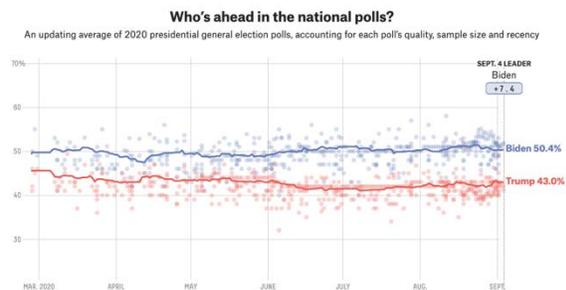
Traditionally gala affairs, which for the past fifty years have had only formal roles in ratifying the candidates already chosen through state primaries, conventions or caucuses, the national party conventions have served to conduct party business, build enthusiasm among the faithful, and introduce candidates and party platforms to the public. This pandemic year both parties adjusted to a virtual format fairly successfully. The emphasis was on ginning up support among party members. The Democrats showcased their candidates but also sought to reach out to new voters, featuring anti-Trump Republicans and ordinary citizens. The Republican convention centered on demonstrating that Trump is an effective leader who has kept his promises, and it seemed more focused on winning back doubtful supporters than reaching beyond the existing base.

Partisans on both sides insisted this is the most consequential election ever. But both focused less on their own visions of the future than on the apocalyptic consequences if the other side won. For the Democrats, basic American institutions and values, even its democracy, are at stake in a struggle for the soul of America. For Republicans, Donald Trump is the only force standing between a strong America and an America overtaken by forces of radical socialism and anarchy, that would also “be owned by China.”

Both conventions sought to present their parties as ethnically diverse and their candidates as kind, decent people who care about ordinary folk. For Biden, a traditional lunch-pail, meet-and-greet politician from a very small state where personal relationships with voters is not only possible but required, this was mostly a matter of personalizing and fostering this image to a larger public. The President, however, required a more challenging remake of a public persona is often that of a scowling, volatile, and self-absorbed leader. The Republican convention mostly used the Trump children, staff, and Republican political figures to project this remake.

Post-Convention Polls

While the race is likely to narrow as doubtful Republican or Republican-leaning independent voters move back toward the Trump column, the evidence so far is that neither convention had much national-level impact. As this graph from FiveThirtyEight shows, the polling trend lines have been stable over the past three months. While there are outliers suggestive of a closer race, the averages indicate only a slight Republican bump at the end of August. Voters are so highly partisan and attitudes so fixed, that normal politicking is unlikely to make much difference. If this is correct, Biden’s main job is to hang on and avoid major mistakes, while Trump’s is to find something to change the narrative. The Biden campaign realizes that hanging on requires resuming in person campaign appearances and aggressively countering the President’s efforts to distort his positions. Trump is desperately trying to change the narrative, with law and order as his central pillar. Ramping up efforts to paint Biden and Harris as stalking horses of socialism is another. So far, neither has had much effect.



Polls at the state level are less frequent and less reliable. Although Biden appears to retain a lead in most battleground states, Trump may be gaining ground. The past week’s Fox News polls, denounced by Trump as “fake,” showed Biden leading 49% to 40% with just 6% undecided in Arizona, while support for Republican Senator Martha McSally is also collapsing. Fox also found Biden comfortably ahead in Wisconsin, 50% to 42%, and more narrowly in North Carolina. But Trump forces were encouraged by the well-regarded Monmouth poll showing Biden now ahead by only 3% in Pennsylvania, well within the margin of error. A post-convention Quinnipiac poll, however, showed Biden still ahead in that state, 52-44%. Pennsylvania is critical as there is almost no believable scenario for Trump to win the Electoral College vote without it. A Quinnipiac poll had Biden ahead by only 3% in Florida, effectively a

statistical tie. His support was with younger and senior voters, blacks, and women, while Trump had more support among middle-aged groups and white males. Hispanics were split. These battlegrounds are truly competitive, and they will determine the outcome.

Trending Issues

The Law and Order Debate. President Trump pivoted after disorder in Minneapolis following the George Floyd death on May 25 to emphasize that he is the candidate of law and order, ready to protect cities, property owners, and statues against violence. This prong of his campaign lost some steam when the Federal forces were sent uninvited to Portland, Oregon where they had the effect of augmenting rather than calming protests. But it regained momentum since the Portland protests did not end, and a horrible incident took place in Kenosha, Wisconsin on the eve of the Republican Convention, followed by burning and looting. In Kenosha, a viral video showed a young black man, Jacob Blake, being shot seven times in the back when he tried to get into his car after ignoring police demands to stop. Despite his family condemning violence, a small group of protesters burned and looted stores. The next day armed vigilantes gathered at the scene. One of them, 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse, killed two people and wounded another with a semi-automatic weapon.

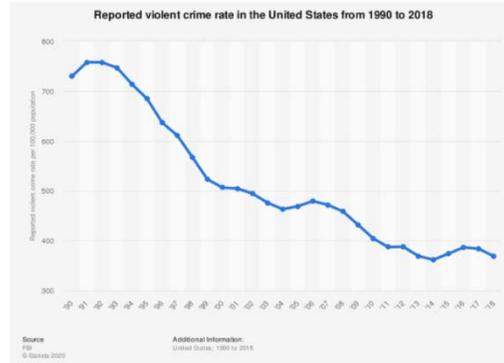
Trump quickly condemned the Kenosha property violence and focused on supporting police. He accused Biden of being soft on violent protesters and for wanting to “defund” law enforcement. He also blamed the violence of Democratic local leaders, encouraged by “leftist politicians.” The strategy, with its racial undertones, was directed at stoking the fears of suburban and older voters, especially women, among whom Trump had been losing support.

The violence, the clear and simple nature of the President’s message, and the obvious distortion of Biden’s record and positions unnerved Democratic supporters, especially in the Midwestern battleground states, and Biden responded with a speech in Pittsburgh with a forceful condemnation of all violence, by protestors, militias, or police. He challenged Trump to do the same. Biden argued Trump could not end violence since he was stoking it in his own interests, and he should not make anyone feel safer.

The differing strategies were accentuated by visits of both candidates to Kenosha. Trump surveyed damage, met police, and condemned leftist politicians. Two days later, Biden met with the Blake family (in nearby Milwaukee), listened to Kenosha residents, and called for reconciliation and addressing the underlying reasons for the violence.

The Democrats fear that increased protester violence could play into Trump’s hands by reinforcing an image with suburban and rural voters that urban violence is widespread and that

peaceful protests beget violence. But Democratic leaders have little influence over the few who take advantage of the violence, sometimes just to loot, but also because, just like the militias, they may believe themselves to be on the front lines of a racial civil war. Since any new incident can trigger an outburst, the issue remains unpredictable, but, so far, the law and order theme has not seemed to much help Trump. There may be several reasons: first, violent and property crime statistics



have gone steadily down in the United States for several decades and the vast majority of Americans believe they live in safe neighborhoods; second, many Americans recognize that there are legitimate black grievances that need to be addressed, and third, a majority (55% according to a recent poll) see Trump as part of the problem. Multiple polls indicate a majority believes Biden could handle racial and law/order issues better than Trump, but there is also evidence of reduced voter sympathy with continuous, disruptive and less focused protests, even peaceful ones. These attitudes bear close watching.

The Pandemic and the Economy. Biden’s campaign has centered around the failure of the Trump administration to develop a viable national strategy to contain the virus in comparison to virtually every other advanced economy. Republicans argued the virus would have been much worse had the president not issued his travel bans and praised his testing and vaccine development programs. With typical hyperbole, the President boasts that the economy is recovering more rapidly than anyone thought possible and will be booming next year.

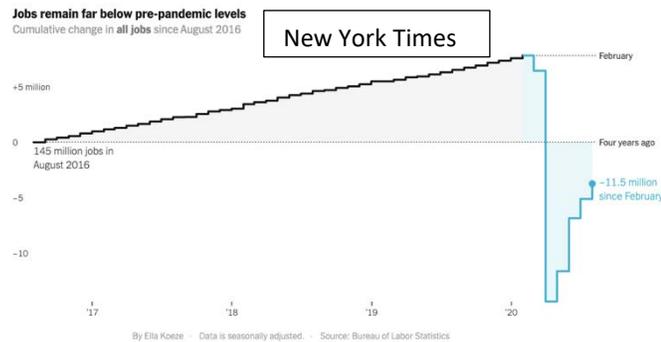
Like the violent edge of the protests for Democrats, however, the Republicans can neither control the course of the pandemic nor wish it into oblivion. While new infections have declined sharply in some states, including battlegrounds Arizona and Florida, as well as for the country as a whole from almost 60,000 a day in July to 40,000, the death toll remains stuck at about 1,000 a day. States, cities and even rural communities are consumed by debates on how to reopen schools and resume sporting events. In August, many colleges reopened or partially so, and this was mostly successful in the northeast where infection rates are low, but more problematic in the South and Midwest. Two large schools, the University of North Carolina and Notre Dame closed again, and some 51,000 infections nationwide are associated with university students and staff.

While there is hope that the worst is over, the pandemic remains at the forefront of public concerns. The cooler air may bring another wave. Until the development of an effective vaccine, which is the most reliable way to “herd immunity,” Americans are living with a degree of fear and uncertainty unprecedented in recent history as well as with the economic fall-out.

Trump would love to announce a vaccine and is reportedly fixated on its prospects, regarding it as a key to his reelection. Most observers praise the Administration’s massive “Warp Speed” vaccine development funding, but there is little likelihood of a credible announcement in time

to affect the election. States were told to prepare for a vaccine by the end of October, but this was widely seen as a political gimmick. Because both Democrats and Republicans fear of rushing a vaccine for political reasons, the major drug companies themselves plan to make a collective promise to reassure the public that they will not seek governmental approval for distribution of vaccines now in final trials until they are proven safe and effective.

The economy, of course, is closely associated with the pandemic, and Biden has begun what will probably be a series of speeches to cut into one of Trump's few advantages: a majority of the voting public sees Trump as better able to lead an economic recovery. Biden's Build Back Better plan has received little public attention. Trump argues that he is bringing back jobs at an unprecedented rate. But the return has slowed, and a fifth of the job growth in the August figures were temporary ones, such as census workers. Trump can also point to the stock market, which has remarkably retained its value after initial covid volatility in March. But the market is quite fragile, and speculation can quickly move it in the opposite direction.



Biden has several angles of attack: that the economic suffering is much worse than it needed to be because the pandemic was mismanaged; that the recovery is "K-shaped," helping some but harming many others; and that there would have been more relief for those most hurt if the President had personally engaged the Congress in a spirit of compromise to develop an adequate second stimulus package. Beyond criticizing, however, Biden needs to lay out for the public his longer-term economic strategy and make a compelling argument for its superiority. For the debates, Trump also needs to move beyond vague, rosy promises.

New Angles of Attack. The experienced team at the Biden campaign appears to have a clear strategy and a disciplined candidate, and it has shown the campaign is able to respond quickly to new opportunities. One arose on September 3 when Jeffrey Goldberg, editor in chief of *The Atlantic*, published an article alleging that Trump refused to visit an American war cemetery in France because he didn't think it important and called fallen U.S. soldiers "losers" and "suckers." While the quotes were anonymous, journalists from other news organizations, including Fox News, corroborated basic parts of the story. Biden emotionally expressed outrage if the story was true. Trump was immediately on the defensive, attacking the piece as "fake news," its author as a "con man," and demanding, by tweet, that the well-respected Fox corroborator, Jennifer Griffin, be fired. At the same time, it was revealed that the military's independent newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, that had been zeroed in Trump's February budget was ordered to shut down by September 30 unless funding was renewed by continuing Congressional resolution. The newspaper was backed by both Republican and Democratic members of Congress, and Trump immediately announced himself against the decision.

These stories blew up explosively because they were given credence by Trump's well-known disdain for some military heroes, especially the late John McCain, and his reputation for hypocrisy. They also illustrate potential vulnerabilities that both candidates may have, but Trump more so. This is a result of his prolific, undisciplined, and often spiteful tweets and informal remarks, as well as the many enemies he has created during his tenure in office. Now is payback time, even if anonymously. And indeed, *The Atlantic* says its story is "the tip of the iceberg," implying more to come.

The Debates Lie Ahead

There will be three presidential debates of 90 minutes each: September 29, October 15, and October 22. The first will be moderated and led by Chris Wallace of Fox News, the second will take the form of a "town hall meeting" in Miami with uncommitted voters in south Florida asking the questions, and the third will be moderated and led by Kristen Welker of NBC News. In addition, there will be a debate between the two vice presidential candidates, Mike Pence and Kamala Harris, on October 7.

The debates are the only time that candidates have the opportunity to direct rebut the statements of the other, and thus for the public to see how the two define their differences. Neither Biden nor Trump are excellent debaters, but Biden has had a lot of recent experience during the primary season, while Trump has not debated for four years.

Many in the viewing public will believe their already preferred candidate prevailed. Nonetheless the debates, particularly the first one, may influence the thin slice of truly uncommitted voters. Because of mail-in voting ahead of the election, the impact of the debates will probably be less than usual as mail-in voters often vote quickly after receiving their ballots. This is all the truer because of uncertainties over postal delivery. Nonetheless, a disastrous debating performance by either candidate would probably seal his fate.

Election Manipulation

Polls indicate that unprecedented majorities of voters of both parties fear that the election will not be free and fair. In 2016, in contrast, a majority of Republicans were fearful of election fraud, but a minority of Democrats. Two factors are at work. First, the coronavirus has required a massive move toward absentee or mailed-in voting, rising from about quarter of the vote in 2016 to half or more this year. Voting procedures are determined by states. For this election, only six states still require voters to have a legitimate reason for absentee voting, like physical disability or being out-of-town. The others either will mail ballots to registered voters or allow voters to request absentee ballots without offering an explanation. The technical issues alone of shifting to mail are daunting for states with little experience. Moreover, especially among Republicans in those states, there is a fear that mail-in voting is ripe for abuse, and this suspicion has been frequently accentuated by the President. Coronavirus is also disruptive for traditional polling stations, which may be cramped or lack poll workers, who are usually drawn from the ranks of retired people. Local government are vigorously trying to shift

to larger venues, like arenas, and many companies are offering paid leave for employees to volunteer for poll work.

Trump, of course, is the second reason and the main driver of Democratic fears. Over his tenure, the President has used, or abused, the executive power of government in fashion beyond any previously accepted political norms. A major example, which caused the impeachment, was the withholding of aid to Ukraine to force that country to investigate the allegations of some former prosecutors about Biden's or his son's actions in that country. Other less outrageous but still possibly illegal examples took place at the Republican convention where the President used Federal property and exploited normal government activities for the purpose of his political campaign.

Moreover, since Trump has not sought to broaden his own base, he has a strong interest in suppressing the votes of the other party. Some measures that seem to have that effect may have been more innocent than they appeared to Democrats, including post service changes. But they accompanied other actions that are obviously a part of a broader strategy to suppress votes, such as the many Republican legal challenges to states that are broadening mail options. Moreover, many Democrats agree with Michael Cohen, Trump's former convicted lawyer, that the President will "do anything" to win, no matter how reckless or illegal.

The well-documented Russian cyber interventions to sow disruption in 2016 and help Trump add to these concerns. U.S. intelligence says that Russia is at it again, augmenting fears of racial wars and voting fraud, and spreading rumors that Biden is senile.

In this environment, a close election could easily result in a delayed and bitterly disputed outcome. Since more Republicans are likely to vote in person than Democrats and most states do not begin to count absentee votes until election day, early results may look like a Trump victory that was snatched away by mail votes, a sure-fire formula for Republicans to cry fraud.

How Large Must the Margin Be?

With the huge potential for a disputed election, the question arises of how big the win must be for an undisputed transfer of power. A Trump victory is likely to result in a more peaceful outcome, if only because Trump already occupies the position. A Biden victory would probably have to be decisive in both popular and Electoral College terms, 3.5-4% of the popular vote and 300 or more Electoral College votes. A Biden victory in an unlikely place, like Texas or Georgia, would help seal the victory. Unless Trump has solid legal reasons to challenge the elections, there would be strong pressure on him, including his own party leaders, to concede.

However, an indeterminate outcome or a very narrow Biden victory might be challenged by Trump in both legal and in unorthodox ways. Yogi Berra, an American baseball player of the last century, once said "It ain't over 'til it's over," and, indeed, afterwards his team overcame a nine-game deficit at the end of a season to win a pennant. But this year, many Americans worry that even when it's over, it won't be.