

Political Update 24. 17 October 2020. By Charles E. Morrison

Advantage Biden

The U.S. election is underway. With 16 days before the November 3 election day, 25 million Americans have already voted, more than 15% of the anticipated vote. In the states allowing early voting, the turnout has been driven by new voters and groups that polling tells us favor the Democratic candidate. In Georgia on the first day of voting, lines took up to 11 hours of waiting.

The previous update was just before the first debate. Since then, three trends are apparent:

- An increasing gap between Biden and Trump in the polls.
- Growing public interest in and awareness of Biden as a candidate in his own right rather than just the person running against Trump.
- More signs of strains between Trump and his party's other leaders.

These trends all point toward the possibility of a significant Biden victory and even a “honeymoon” period for the new president as much of the country and more of the Washington political elite breathes a sigh of relief over the change and before partisanship reemerges over concrete issues.

The First Debate, An Inflection Point?

Neither candidate shone and there was an almost universal verdict that it was the worst presidential debate in American political history. But it was the President's interruptive and bullying behavior that most disturbed watchers, affecting not only Biden but also moderator Chris Wallace. By one count, there were 90 interruptions, 71 of them by Trump. Trump, who was clearly not prepared on policy issues and didn't want the public to hear Biden's real positions, as opposed to the more progressive Democratic positions he had hoped to run

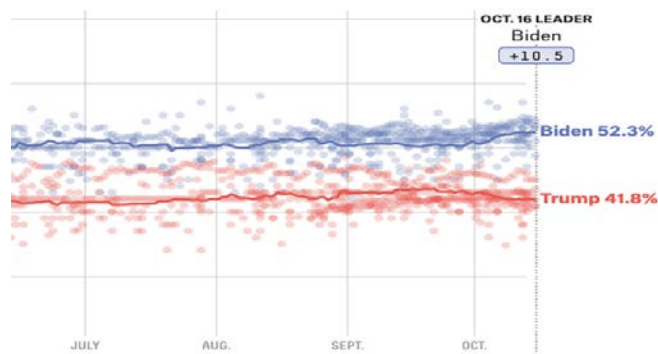


Figure 1 Polling Averages from FiveThirtyEight

against, made it almost impossible for Biden to state his case. Biden was clearly irritated, at one point asking Trump to “shut up” and at another referring to him as a “clown.” But on occasion he was able to directly face the camera and address the voters rather than his opponent. Trump's calculated effort to cause Biden to explode in anger over his attacks on his son failed. Polls afterwards showed that a majority thought Biden was the debate winner.

It is often difficult to identify inflection points as they happen, but after a long period of quite stable numbers, the debate heralded a decided movement in favor of former Vice President Biden, as mostly independents and new voters were making up their minds. Many polls now show Biden leading roughly 10 to 12 percent nationally, and he is also pulling ahead in an expanded list of battleground states. Overall, there appears to be a 2-3% shift. This is not that large compared to all voters, but it is a large share of the narrow slice of truly undecideds and the movement comes late in the electoral cycle. While it may still be a bump, Trump (who has often been the major driver of votes to Biden) has so far done little to move the needle back.

But aside from polls, there is much other anecdotal evidence of a Trump slide. There are fewer Trump signs and more Biden signs in what was once thought of as Trump territory. Models and odds makers now give Trump a 13-33% chance of winning, and these go down as time runs out. Perhaps the most telling evidence is that Republican candidates are deemphasizing their ties to Trump in favor of their independent positions or even criticizing the President. We will return to this.

Dueling Townhalls – the Country Reacquainting Itself with Biden

The interruptions in the first debate caused the sponsoring organization, the Commission on Presidential Debates, to announce that the second debate, to be October 15 and set up as a townhall meeting with undecided Florida voters, would be structured differently. Since Trump became infected with Covid-19 just after the first debate, the Commission said the second one would be done virtually. Trump turned it down, saying he needed real interaction with voters as he would no longer be contagious, and the Biden campaign promptly scheduled another townhall meeting in Pennsylvania. To get voter exposure and draw attention from Biden, the Trump campaign developed a competing townhall in Florida with NBC News at the same time.

The contrast between two townhalls was palpable. Facing stiff questioning from the voters as well as moderator Savanna Guthrie, Trump was typically combative, elusive on policies, prone for exaggeration, and vicious toward his opponent. Biden's townhall lasted a half hour longer, but also included a non-televised extra hour with participants. Biden also had some factual errors and exaggerations, but without constant interruptions from Trump, he was calm, far more directed to the questions, and accurate, nuanced and cogent in his responses.

Biden may not be the most charismatic Democratic candidate, and age has been a liability, but in early March and in the face of a possible win by a more progressive candidate, the Democratic leadership and primary voters quickly coalesced around Biden as the most acceptable candidate for the party and the most likely to appeal to independent voters. Consequently, in our updates, we have tended to analyze the election as a referendum on the Trump record between Trump and the "anti-Trump candidate" meaning Biden. Trump's unforced errors seemed to drive voters to the anti-Trump side more than Biden's many serious policy proposals.

However, as Biden increasingly appears to have a strong chance of winning, more Americans are getting acquainted or reacquainted with the former Vice President. Remarkably, more Americans, 14.1 million to 13.5 million, watched Biden's townhall rather than Trump's, even though it showed on just one television channel rather than three. From the beginning of the campaign, Trump has tried to characterize Biden as "sleepy" and senile. These images had started to creep more politely into some of the mainstream descriptions of Biden as having "lost a step," but Biden's recent performances have shown him vigorous and intellectually sharp even though he continues to occasionally struggle over words.¹

The final debate is scheduled to take place on October 29 in Nashville, Tenn. The announced topics are fighting COVID-19, American families, race in America, climate change, national security, and leadership.

Republican Criticism of Trump Builds

Trump's missteps, particularly with respect to the pandemic, which is again surging to a third peak, have caused increasing consternation within his party. Some establishment figures in the party, of course, had never reconciled themselves to Trump and were clustered around Republican organizations that actively supported Biden. Former Governor of Ohio, John Kasich, had spoken at the Democratic National Convention. But as the election draws closer, other Republicans are under pressure to define their positions vis-à-vis the President. This is tricky for them because they need the enthusiasm of Trump diehard supporters, but they also know that in most cases these supporters alone will not give them a victory in state and district elections. Most have increasingly toted their records and not their staunch support of Trump.

Republican governors in Democratic-majority states Massachusetts and Maryland have been frequent critics the president and openly said they could not vote for him; Maryland's Larry Hogan reporting he had written in "Ronald Reagan" on his ballot. But the most forthright criticism of the President from within his party came from Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska, who unloaded himself at a townhall meeting with supporters when asked why he didn't back the President more vigorously. Trump "kisses dictators' butts," "sells out our allies," "mistreats women," "mocks evangelicals behind closed doors," and "spends like a drunken sailor," Sasse said. He criticized the President's pandemic response, his foreign policy, and his family's treating "the presidency as a business opportunity." Sasse is running for reelection in his red state and is considered sure to win.

Why the Trump Slide?

A number of proximate factors are behind the Trump slide of the past two-three weeks:

¹ As a personal observation, when I worked for a Republican Delaware senator, I became acquainted Biden in 1973 after Biden was first elected to the Senate. My impression then was that Biden, who had overcome speech problems, was personable, sharp and alert, but often rambled and seemed undisciplined. My impression is that Biden now is far more mature, confident, and in command of the issues.

- Trump’s bullying debate performance was a miscalculation and hurt him.
- His contracting Covid-19 almost immediately after the debate along with many others on the White House staff, did not earn him much sympathy. It suggested he had been reckless with his own health and that of those who served him.
- The accumulation of negative publicity about his chaotic administration, his finances, and his remarks about the war dead have surely taken their toll. No one story, even his non- or minimal payment of taxes during most of the past fifteen years, may not have been that damaging in itself, but the almost daily drumbeat of negative information has kept Trump on the defensive and tested the enthusiasm and loyalty of his supporters.
- Other recent actions are unpopular, including failure to personally engage with the Congress in developing a second stimulus package and pushing forward Supreme Court nominee Amy Coney Barrett during the election.
- Trump’s messaging has become even more scattershot, vague, and unfocused, but it has also targeted the narrow segment of voters who already support him. Much of it has also promised free giveaways. Unlike Biden, Trump has not been a disciplined candidate, preferring to trust his own instincts rather than his campaign professionals.

Trump Fatigue

Aside from these recent reasons for Trump’s sliding support, it should be remembered that there has been a growing weariness with Trump over a much longer period. The President was polling poorly against many possible Democratic contenders last year, long before the pandemic. He was elected with a minority of votes, and his approval rating has only once briefly exceeded 50%. We have referred to a “Trump fatigue,” a growing public weariness with promises, deflections and lies of the incumbent as well as the chaotic and impulsive nature of his presidency.

It is a reflection of Trump’s inexperience as a politician that he has not been more alert to his situation and sought to make adjustments. Among his classic political mistakes:

- Trump may not spend his time in a bunker, but he has built a virtual wall to shield himself from constructive criticism. This has made it difficult for even his chief of staff, campaign staff, and possibly his children to provide a real view of the world and the corrective advice he needs. This is a frequent and fatal political error.
- Relatedly, Trump seems incapable of appreciating that he attained office with a minority of votes. A natural politician’s response would be to expand his voting base, but Trump’s has been to intensify the fervor of his minority by vicious attacks on his opponents or those who didn’t support him (non-Trump Republicans, for example, are

“human scum.”). Exploiting this weakness, Biden has promised to be a president for all Americans, including those who won’t vote for him.

- Trump makes out his presidency to be about himself as an individual, and not about the country. Even when he speaks of national problems, it is in an extraordinary personal way that many people find off-putting or know to be incorrect.
- His frequent tweets, especially their often petty and personalistic contents have long struck many as unpresidential. When in his townhall he defended his retweets of conspiracy theories as a service for the public to see and decide, moderator Guthrie pointedly admonished him that he is the president, not somebody’s “crazy uncle.”

Is the Election Over? Not Quite So Fast.

Despite the many differences between 2016 and 2020, because of the surprise Trump victory, no sober analyst wants to say the election is over. A 13 to 33 percent chance is not negligible, but it is also hard to see how it could be achieved. Polling error would have to be a big part, but polls have tried to compensate for undercounts of Trump supporters in 2016. Other factors could be some terribly bad Biden performance on the campaign trail or in the final debate, an illness, or a lower Democratic turnout than expected, whether because of suppression and voting restrictions. However, it would take an almost perfect storm of all these factors to see a clear road for a Trump victory.

Long-time Republican political strategist, Karl Rove, argues that although it may be late, the President could still come away with a victory if he would campaign in the final stretch as “a happy warrior,” a term used for long-time liberal senator and vice president, Hubert Humphrey, for the exuberance and enthusiasm he brought to American politics.² This is not in Trump’s DNA, and even if it were, three weeks of a different posture is not going to overcome years of extreme partisanship and dire predictions of disaster if not reelected.

An October Surprise? Hunter Biden’s Damage Computer

Trump’s team is also hoping for a bombshell to change the dynamics of the race. Presidential campaign smear tactics hit a new low point when on October 11, a tabloid paper, the Rupert Murdoch-owned New York Post, published images of material taken from a computer of Biden’s son Hunter. The Post had gotten these materials from Rudy Giuliani, Trump’s private attorney who had long been digging up dirt on Biden. They included pictures of Biden looking wasted and a letter from a Burisma Ukrainian business colleague thanking him for introducing him to his father. The Vice President’s records show no such meeting, but even if he had, there were no allegations of his acting on behalf of Burisma. The computer had been supposedly damaged and brought to and then abandoned at a computer repair facility run by a Trump supporter and turned over to both the FBI and Giuliani’s attorney. The images and letter were

² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-has-no-time-left-to-spare-11602715244>

supposedly from several years ago, but those in the Post were Pdf copies made last year. It had all the earmarks of a Russian operation.

While the right-wing media and Trump exulted, given the sheer implausibility of the provenance, technical questions, and Giuliani's involvement, Facebook and Twitter restricted access to the Post's stories while they checked it out and the mainstream media gave it scant attention, their stories also focusing on the unlikely circumstances and many questions. These included a story that Trump had been warned last year by U.S. intelligence that Giuliani was dealing with Russian disinformation agents and shrugged it off. One of the agents, Ukrainian parliamentarian Andrii Derkach, has been sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department.

Although Giuliani and Derkach claim there is much more to come, the story should have no significant impact. As Rove suggests, Trump should have been working on building a positive image of his actions and outreach beyond his base. His personal and perceived illegitimate attacks on his opponent and his son, perhaps intended mainly to anger and goad Biden into doing something foolish, damages his own reputation, especially in an election which still mainly turns around Trump's own record and actions.

The Fight for the Senate Majority

In his remarks critical of Trump, Senator Sasse made it clear that he was mainly concerned at this point as to how Trump's actions would affect the outcome of Senate races. Like many Republicans, he sees preserving the Republican majority as an essential check on the Democrats should they win the White House and retain the House.

The Republicans appear to have a slightly better chance of retaining the Senate than of winning the White House again, but based on its modeling, the political site FiveThirtyEight Politics gives the Democrats a 73% chance of winning a Senate majority. Although many more Republicans than Democrats are up for reelection, most of their seats are pretty safe, or at least were so before Trump's slide. The Democrats, defending far fewer seats, are almost certain to lose one in Alabama, while their candidates appear headed to defeat incumbent Republican senators in Arizona, Colorado and Maine. This would leave a 51-49 Republican majority. To retain the majority, the Republicans would have to win all three toss-up races where there are currently Republican senators. These are in North Carolina, Iowa, and Montana. North Carolina had looked within the Democrat's grasp, but suddenly became complicated. The Democratic incumbent had to suspend campaigning for a time with covid-19, while the Republican challenger admitted to texting romantic messages to a woman not his wife, possibly hurting his chances.

One surprising addition to the contested list is South Carolina, where Judiciary Committee chair, Lindsay Graham, hoped visibility from hearings on Supreme Court nominee Barrett would drive up enthusiasm of South Carolina's conservative voters. But the nomination also drove massive contributions to his opponent, Jaime Harrison, from angry Democrats around the country, so much so that Harrison shattered all records for funding-raising in any quarter in any Senate

race, \$57 million. While Graham is still expected to win, the race appears much closer than expected. Other Republican incumbents, including Senators Jodi Ernst in Iowa and Steve Daines in Montana, face well-funded rivals. Ernst also had a debate debacle when she did not know the break-even price for farmers of soybeans after her competitor had cited correctly the price for corn. The funds pouring into all the competitive Senate races illustrate the stakes for the two parties.

If the Republican retain 48 or 49 Senate seats, they will still have a large influence over legislation. It should be remembered that parties rarely vote as blocs in the United States except on a few highly partisan issues. Having the majority determines which party chairs the committees, which has important agenda setting and other powers. While the parties have aligned themselves mostly as ideologically right and left, the Republicans as a minority will be seeking to influence Democrats in more conservative states like West Virginia or Arizona just as Democrats today reach out to less conservative Republican senators in Maine and Alaska.³

A Final Note – Election Mechanics

Despite the increased chances of a more decisive victory, there remains nervousness about the mechanics of voting and counting, and concern about court-determined or even state legislature determined outcomes if the election in a decisive state becomes mired in legal controversies or the state is not be able to certify its election results prior to the Electoral College meeting on December 14. Because of the pandemic many states have changed their electoral procedures, mostly to make it easier for citizens to vote by mail. These changes have often resulted in court challenges, many of which Democrats have won. For example, in Pennsylvania, Republicans wanted to recruit poll-watchers from out-of-county; the Democrats claimed this was intended to intimidate voters and the judge decided in their favor.

The main threats are probably technical errors and delays as states accommodate many more mailing in votes and use new software. There may be a record turnout for what is perceived as a pivotal election. Some key states, including Florida and North Carolina, count absentee votes early so that they may be able to announce their results election night. Should either go Biden, it would be flip their 2016 results and clearly suggest the direction. Other critical battlegrounds Pennsylvania and Wisconsin do not permit counting prior to election day, meaning that in a tight race, the results may not be known on election night and possibly only much later. Contrary to the President's assertions, there is very little evidence of voting fraud or likelihood that fraud could make any difference. But with a high degree of distrust in the electoral system this year, partly pandemic enhanced, voters are highly motivated to vote early and ensure their votes are counted.

³ A Democratic majority would include two independents who caucus with the Democrats. Despite this status, their voting records closely align with the Democrats, and one of them, Bernie Sanders, has twice run for the Democratic nomination for president.

