Three Stories from USA 2020

by Riccardo Alcaro

There are three main stories that USA 2020, the presidential and congressional elections of the United States, have just told us.

The first already emerged on election night, on 3 November: "Trumpism" – and President Donald Trump, for that matter – is no ephemeral moment, an anomaly that America's right can easily correct by going back to a more traditional conservative discourse and agenda. In fact, it is very much the present and near future of the Republican Party and therefore one of the poles around which US politics will revolve for some time ahead.

Trump has proven to be a formidable political machine. It took him just a few hours to shatter the Democrats' hopes of a landslide, as he comfortably prevailed in Florida and easily captured the supposedly swing states of Iowa, Ohio and Texas.[1] The president went inches away from crossing the finish line first also in all other battlegrounds, from Wisconsin to Pennsylvania and from Georgia to Arizona (where he still has a slim, albeit uninfluential, chance to win).

Trump has expanded his electoral base by approximately 7.5 million votes compared to 2016, an unexpected result that makes him the most successful Republican candidate in history in terms of popular vote.[2]

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[1] See State results in the *New York Times* website. See, in particular: *Florida*, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-florida.html; *Iowa*, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-iowa.html; *Ohio*, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-ohio.html; and *Texas*, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-texas.html.

[2] Wikipedia, *List of United States Presidential Candidates by Number of Votes Received*, updated 8 November 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_United_States_presidential_candidates_by_number_of_votes_received.

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The repudiation of Trump so many progressives had bet on has thus not materialised. Conservative voters have not been alienated by Trump's controversial discourse, a mix of ultra-nationalist rhetoric spiced with xenophobic and disturbingly authoritarian tones, demonisation of opponents and delegitimation of democratic norms and practices, all driven by a never-ending flurry of lies or misleading claims.[3] Nor have his impeachment[4] for abusing presidential powers to press a foreign country (Ukraine) to sully a political rival, his erratic management of the COVID-19 pandemic,[5] opaque tax records[6] or the endless conflicts of interests[7] that have beset his presidential tenure reduced his appeal.

Trump's discourse is thus as much a political reality as the agenda he has championed in the last four years: trade protectionism, opposition to immigration, dismantlement of welfare benefits and aggressive financial and environmental deregulation, coupled with antagonistic unilateralism in foreign policy and a diplomacy geared towards coercion – military but especially economic – towards rivals and allies alike.

Trump's ascendancy has been compared to a hostile takeover of the Republican Party,[8] on which he has imposed his discourse, agenda and candidates too (many of the newly elected Republican officials are proudly pro-Trump). The 2020 campaign has shown that the takeover is not only complete, but that shareholders – i.e., Republican voters – have mostly embraced it.

The US president is thus likely to remain a force to be reckoned with even after he leaves the White House. He will keep attacking the legitimacy of the election[9] and push Republicans in Congress to follow his line, for instance by threatening support for more loyal candidates in the primaries. Nor can we

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[3] Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo and Meg Kelly, "Trump Is Averaging More than 50 False or Misleading Claims a Day", in *Fact Checker*, 22 October 2020, https://wapo.st/3dPhhaE.

[4] US Congress, *Impeaching Donald John Trump, President of the United States, for High Crimes and Misdemeanors*, House Resolution 755, 19 December 2019, https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/755/text.

[5] Sean McMinn and Rob Stein, "Many Places Hard Hit by COVID-19 Leaned More Toward Trump in 2020 than 2016", in *NPR Shots Blog*, 6 November 2020, https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/11/06/930897912/many-places-hard-hit-by-covid-19-leaned-more-toward-trump-in-2020-than-2016.

[6] Russ Buettner, Susanne Craig and Mike McIntire, "Long-Concealed Records Show Trump's Chronic Losses and Years of Tax Avoidance", in *The New York Times*, 27 September 2020, https://nyti.ms/2S3mz8j.

[7] Andrew Solender, "Watchdog Report Cites 3,400 Conflicts of Interest During Trump Presidency", in *Forbes*, 24 September 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewsolender/2020/09/24/watchdog-report-cites-3400-conflicts-of-interest-during-trump-presidency.

[8] Andrew Solender, "Audio Reveals Kushner Touted Trump's 'Hostile Takeover' of GOP, Said Party Platform 'Meant to Piss People Off'", in *Forbes*, 28 October 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewsolender/2020/10/28/audio-reveals-kushner-touted-trumps-hostile-takeover-of-gop-said-party-platform-meant-to-piss-people-off.

[9] "Text of Statement from President Donald Trump", in *AP News*, 7 November 2020, https://apnews.com/article/transcript-statement-donald-trump-c809d17b5cd34048e1a5e9bbb4b73cb7.

rule out that he may run again in 2024.

Here is where the second story of USA 2020, the inadequacy of the Electoral College to give the electorate fair representation, intersects with the first one. The only reason why Trump has come so close to re-election is that the Electoral College is structurally imbalanced towards demographically small states, which happen to vote Republican for the most part.[10]

In the last eight presidential elections,[11] the Republican candidate has prevailed in the popular vote only once, in 2004 with George W. Bush. Bush himself had first won the White House in 2000 in spite of trailing his contender by half a million votes, still a far better performance than Trump in 2016, when 2.8 million more people voted for Hillary Clinton.

Had Trump won in 2020 too, the United States would have had a "minority president" for the third time out of six elections in just twenty years. To fully capture how exceptional this situation would have been, suffice to recall that the candidate with fewer votes had won the Electoral College just three other times between 1824 and 1888 – and never in the 20th century.[12] Trump

would have also been the first not only to have been elected but also confirmed as president by a minority of voters.

It is commonly assumed that the Electoral College is a by-product of the US federal system, but this is not entirely the case. In fact, the Founding Fathers determined they could endow greater legitimacy on the president if they entrusted the right to elect him (or her) to an assembly of state grandees rather than to individual voters who, due to the fairly limited logistics of the late 18th century, would have scarce to no familiarity with the presidential candidates.[13]

The system never truly worked, and certainly was made meaningless by modern technological advancements. The sad reality is that the result has been the opposite of the original purpose: the Electoral College reduces, rather than producing, the legitimacy of the presidential electoral process.

Here comes the third story of USA 2020, the strength of Joe Biden as a candidate capable of overcoming the intrinsic iniquity of the Electoral College.

If Trump's performance has been formidable, Biden's has been extraordinary. The former vice-president has won over four million more votes than Trump – and once all votes from heavily Democratic and demographically large states such as California, Illinois and New York are

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[10] Geoffrey Skelley, "Trump Is an Underdog, But the Electoral College's Republican Tilt Improves His Chances", in *FiveThirtyEight*, 28 September 2020, https://53eig.ht/3kUrWTY.

[11] Wikipedia, *List of United States Presidential Candidates by Number of Votes Received*, cit.

[12] Wikipedia, *List of United States Presidential Elections in which the Winner Lost the Popular Vote*, updated 8 November 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_United_States_presidential_elections_in_which_the_winner_lost_the_popular_vote.

[13] Dave Roos, "Why Was the Electoral College Created?", in *History Channel*, 2 November 2020, https://www.history.com/news/electoral-college-founding-fathers-constitutional-convention.

counted, the margin will likely grow.[14] He has also crossed the majority threshold (he is hovering around 51 per cent at the moment), always a remarkable feat in a US presidential election.

Biden has re-built the "Blue Wall" of Midwestern states – Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin – which had delivered the White House to Trump in 2016, and he may have conquered two Republican strongholds such as Arizona and Georgia.[15] Biden is also the presidential candidate who has garnered most votes in US history – at least 75 million people have cast their vote for him, and again that number will rise as outstanding votes continue to be counted.

Some progressives may be tempted to believe that a more inspirational candidate capable of drawing crowds to every event – a Barack Obama, for instance – would have fared better. Perhaps. Yet the reality is that Biden has outperformed the collective result of Democratic candidates for Congressional seats, thus proving that he has made the difference.[16] It seems

reasonable to conclude then that Biden is not the reason why Trump has not been repudiated. He is the reason why Trump has been defeated.

As strong as he has been as a candidate, Biden may well be a less effective president. Much will depend on whether the Democrats will win both runoff elections for Georgia's two senatorial seats in early January. Given the Democrats' historically poor record in byelections, it is a tall order.[17] Yet Georgia has arguably been the great surprise of 2020, and Democrats may count on the impressive organising skills of Stacey Abrams, the Georgian politician most credit with turning the state blue for the first time since 1992.[18]

Should the Democrats pull it off, they would reach parity with the Republicans in the Senate, thereby enabling Vice-President Kamala Harris to exert her constitutional power to break the tie in the upper chamber of Congress. If Republicans do cling to their majority, however, Biden will have little chance to advance any significant legislative agenda – not to speak of the fact that a Republican majority would have the final say on his cabinet, ambassadorial and judicial appointments.

[14] Maggie Astor, "The Electoral College Is Close. The Popular Vote Isn't", in *The New York Times*, 6 November 2020, https://nyti.ms/2U1NrGW.

[15] See State results in the *New York Times* website. See, in particular: *Michigan*, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-michigan.html; *Pennsylvania*, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-pennsylvania.html; *Wisconsin*, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-wisconsin.html; *Arizona*, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-arizona.html; *Georgia*, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-georgia.html.

[16] Lisa Hagen, "Democrats' Blue Wave That

Never Came", in *U.S. News*, 5 November 2020, https://www.usnews.com/news/elections/articles/2020-11-05/democrats-underperform-in-house-and-senate-races.

[17] Luke Broadwater, "What's a Runoff, and Why Are There Two? Here's Why Georgia Matters", in *The New York Times*, 7 November 2020, https://nyti.ms/3eISUfh.

[18] Vanessa Williams and Reis Thebault, "Stacey Abrams Garners Praise from Democrats on the Verge of Achieving a Long-Held Dream: Flipping Georgia", in *The Washington Post*, 7 November 2020, https://wapo.st/3k4jQHp.

Biden may thus find out that his may be a lame-duck presidency even before taking office.[19] In spite of his repeated appeal to bipartisan cooperation and insistence on his ability to reach across the aisle, it is far from certain he will be up to the task in America's contemporary, ultra-polarised politics.

This, however, is tomorrow's challenge. Today, we should pause and recognise that while USA 2020 has told us many stories, it has eventually had just one protagonist: Joe Biden.

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[19] Edward Luce, "Biden Risks Being a Lame Duck President", in *Financial Times*, 5 November 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/7eef4ec9-0dc5-4880-bb89-1fc83a72ad84.

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