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US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2020

A PRE-ELECTION REPORT

Abstract

The quick analysis deals with the upcoming US Presidential election. First we are going to start with the not so traditional pre-election period and the still ongoing debates about the electoral system. Not just the fact we have to highlight, that it is an indirect election, but also the case of early votes, that because of the pandemic many states offered a (wider) possibility for their citizens to cast their ballots ahead of the election day. After we are going to look into the polls and the swing states to be able to understand the recent forecasts and see, who has a bigger chance to be the President of the United States of America for the upcoming four years.

Keywords: *US Presidential election, US, election, Trump, Biden, campaign*

Introduction

Although we named this quick analysis a pre-election report, early ballots have already reached a record number and we have only a few days left until the actual day of elections. The paper intends to introduce the recent events and debates in this quite unique and definitely not normal election year. It's not just COVID-19, which made and makes the whole election special: Black Lives Matter-movement protesters, protesters against this movement, far-left and far-right groups increased street-activity, a President who refused to clarify, he would accept the outcome whatever happens and American citizens buying record number of guns ahead of election (Independent, 2020). If we add, that because of the nationwide

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pandemic situation and global trends, the economy is again under threat, we can understand the seriousness of the elections and the post-election period.

The pre-election period

Already the pre-election period was different, mostly because of the COVID-19 pandemic and Trump's decision to run for a second term. Donald Trump quickly, already in 2017 launched his campaign for reelection, slightly dividing the Republican Party as well. Although a few politicians announced their campaign against Trump, out of whom Bill Weld, a former governor we should name, but since in January 2019, a year ahead of the first primaries and caucuses the Republican Party expressed its undivided support for Trump (AP, 2019), that competition quickly became empty, many primaries were cancelled late 2019 and all the votes of the delegates were binded to Trump. Quite early, already in March 2020, with a record number of votes, he became the official candidate of the Republican Party. The Party decided to stand behind Trump, early 2020 he was still quite popular and had all the chances to win his second term – but many critical voices were there, not being happy with the decision.

The Democratic Party had a different course, after the demoralizing defeat of Hillary Clinton in 2016, a record number, 28 candidates (NYT, 2020a) declared their decision to go for the primaries. The Party's process to find the Presidential candidates was record long, coming from the many candidates, the lack of an obvious choice and COVID-19. Only in August 2020 on the Democratic National Convention the party delegates voted for Biden, who named Kamala Harris as his Vice Presidential candidate.

So, the two sides had a different path towards a majoritarian type of election, which (again) generated many debates after the 2016 events.

The electoral system

In 2016 the obvious became clear again: the Presidential election is not up to the popular vote. Hillary Clinton received more votes nationwide, still Donald Trump managed to collect more votes within the Electoral College, a body of electors whose duty is to vote for the President and the Vice President. This indirect mode of election was a compromise, settling a debate between those who supported the popular vote, and those who wanted the Congress to elect a President. The outcome is a body with 538 members, who are representing the states (and

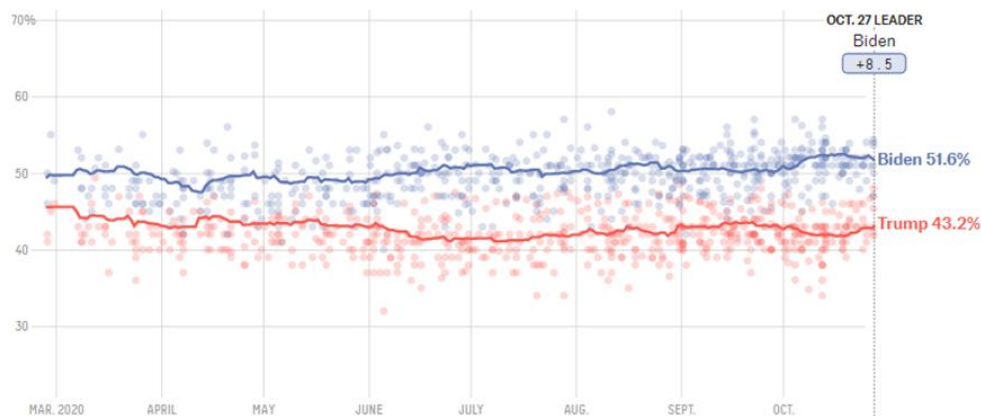
Washington D.C.) and who will decide about the two positions. Out of the 50 states and Washington D.C., Maine and Nebraska are unique. Unlike all the other 48 states giving all of the electoral votes for the winner, they allocate two electoral votes to the state popular vote winner, and then one electoral vote to the popular vote winner in each Congressional district (2 in Maine, 3 in Nebraska). While this method is a respected traditional process, it might create criticism and misunderstandings as well. If a candidate receives more votes than the other, even by only one vote, he or she receives all of the electors in that state (except for the mentioned Maine and Nebraska).

A further, recently much more heated debate is about the early votes. The main and general method of voting in each (or at least in the vast majority) of the states is regular voting on elections day by showing up at a polling station. This, however is not regulated on a national level, so the ways eligible citizens can vote are controlled and decided by the state. And there are states, where early voting is a tradition and because of the pandemic situation, more and more states are opening up this opportunity for their citizens. For instance, in Colorado it is a possibility for decades now, in New York this is the first time offered, while in Texas there were changes even within the last minute, somehow reacting on Donald Trump's fears. While nationwide these new rules had been implemented, Trump launched an attack, citing a possible fraud. After the claims of the President, even the FBI came out and said, there is no evidence about a nationwide voter fraud (Forbes, 2020). But the bug is already in the minds of many, raising questions about the recognition of the outcome.

The polls and the battleground states

Joe Biden is ahead in national polls. An average of state polls, combined with demographic, economic and other data show a Democratic lead ranging from 5% (270twin, 2020) to 8.5% (Fivethirtyeight, 2020b).

Figure 1. *Who's ahead in the national polls?*



Legend: An average of 2020 presidential general election polls, accounting for each poll's quality, sample size and recency. Source: Fivethirtyeight, 2020b.

But once again, even though, that there is a 96% chance, that Biden is going to win the popular vote, the outcome is dependent on the so-called battleground, or swing states, where each of the candidates have a chance for winning – and turning the majority within the Electoral College towards their side.

According to the numbers, these are to swing states, where the two candidates are close to each other: Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Wisconsin and lately even Texas became a so-called battleground state.

Coming from the structure of the electoral system, candidates focused much more on these states, since it is essential for them to collect the electoral votes. Out of these Pennsylvania is the most important, or at least it might be the tipping point. According to Rakich and fivethirtyeight estimations this territory is *"by far the likeliest state to provide either President Trump or Joe Biden with the decisive vote in the Electoral College"*, so important that models *"give Trump an 84 percent chance of winning the presidency if he carries the state — and give Biden a 96 percent chance of winning if Pennsylvania goes blue"* (Rakich, 2020).

In 2016 Trump won only by 0.7%, receiving all of the 20 electors, making it a red state after the 1988 elections again. In 2020 this quite evenly divided state going to be important again.

The main topics and debates

The campaign was not just about the swing states of course, in a year packed with social tensions and a global pandemic. Already the debates were affected by COVID-19, original venues cancelled their participation until finally they could agree upon 4 debates: three Presidential and one for the Vice Presidential candidates.

The topics which were covered within the campaign and on the debates as well:

- COVID-19, on how the Trump-administration reacted, if the economy should be shut down, how much China is responsible for the virus and also the case of the WHO came up.
- Protesters, BLM, far-left and far-right movements, we could see both sides trying to push the others towards the far left or the far-right direction.
- Economy and climate change, the future of oil industry, the Paris agreement, and the so-called Green New Deal.
- Voter frauds, issues with early postal ballots, especially Trump was active, given the fact that the majority of the early ballots were casted by Democrats.
- The case of the Supreme Court after the death of respected Court member Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The debate was about the timing on when they should decide about the new member, where Republicans were pushing for a pre-election decision, while Democrats insisted on waiting for the election outcome – interestingly both sides changing their minds compared to previous cases. Trump’s nominee Amy Coney Barrett eventually took her oath and was sworn in pushing the Court further to the conservative right direction.
- The US foreign policy was also cited several times, Trump was named as a puppy of Russia by Biden, while Pence called Biden a cheerleader of China.
- And family ties and business were also on the table. The Trump family and the tax issues of Trump, and Hunter Biden’s corruption suspicion defined the debates as well.

The actual debates were not that successful, the first debate was a “*sh*tshow*” according to a CNN correspondent right after the debate. It was not easy to

understand each other's points, especially Trump was very aggressive, maybe too aggressive, not letting Biden to make mistakes – it was obvious during the Democratic debates as well, that he is not the best debater and probably coming from his age, he has issues with concentration as well – they even asked for two breaks for the debates, which the Republican Party refused to accept. The Vice Presidential debate was more successful, but traditionally not in the center of attention. In the shadow of their Presidential candidates, both Pence and Harris had their duties to push through their messages – although coming from the fact that both Biden and Trump are old, many started to talk about the possibility of the Vice President taking the administration over in the upcoming term. The second Presidential debate got cancelled because of Trump's positive COVID-19 test, and although there were plans to have it an online way, Trump refused to participate – which was an understandable decision. The final debate on the 22nd of October was more like a debate, the candidates' microphones were muted during each other's initial two-minute replies to the moderator's questions, creating a calmer environment.

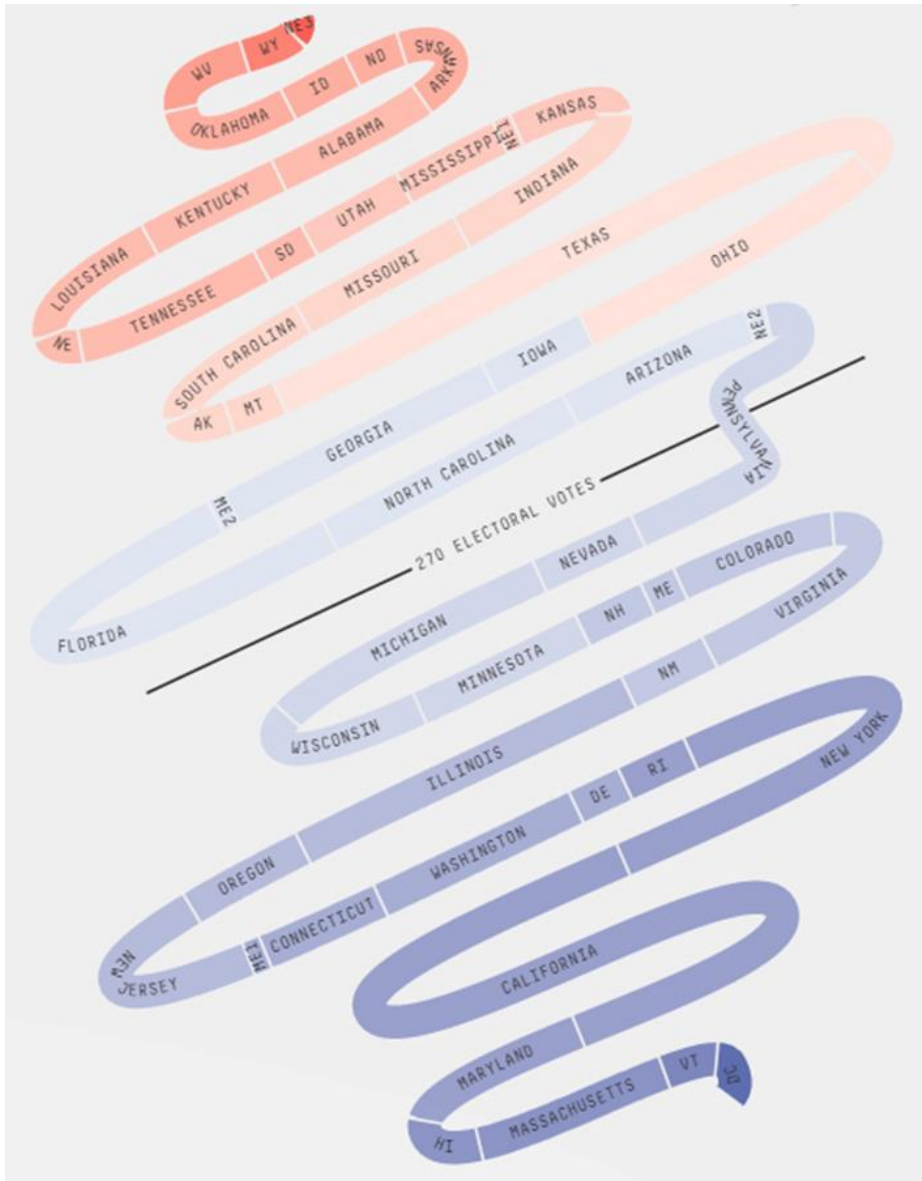
Forecast for the election day

3rd of November 2020, the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November is going to be a long, if not the longest election day since having them on the same day in all of the states. It is going to be long because of the record number of postal votes: until the 28th October 2020, nationwide more than 69 million citizens had voted (NYT, 2020b), a record, especially visible if compared to the 2016 total numbers: 6 million early votes (BBC, 2020). This amount also means, half the 2016 votes are already in (NYT, 2020b). Counting these votes might take extra time as well, so it's possible, that in a few states we won't have an outcome until at least the next few days.

As we could see, the push for early voting managed to create a campaign topic as well, especially since Democrats are dominated among the early voters. But, this doesn't mean, that Biden's team can open the campaigns already, on election day still millions of Americans are going to vote, and even though Biden has a lead, the indirect way of electing the president can still mix the cards.

According to the recent forecasts and polls, and it is important that not actual votes, but surveys, opinion polls we are talking about, Biden would receive more electors, than Trump.

Figure 2. *The electoral snake, 27th October 2020*



Source: Fivethirtyeight, 2020a

It is visible from Figure 2, that Biden has the lead, but let's take a look at those swing states and the forecasted vote shares:

- Texas: Trump has a narrow lead over Biden, 50.9% vs. 48.1%. Many believe, or hope Democrats might win it, but that's not really possible.

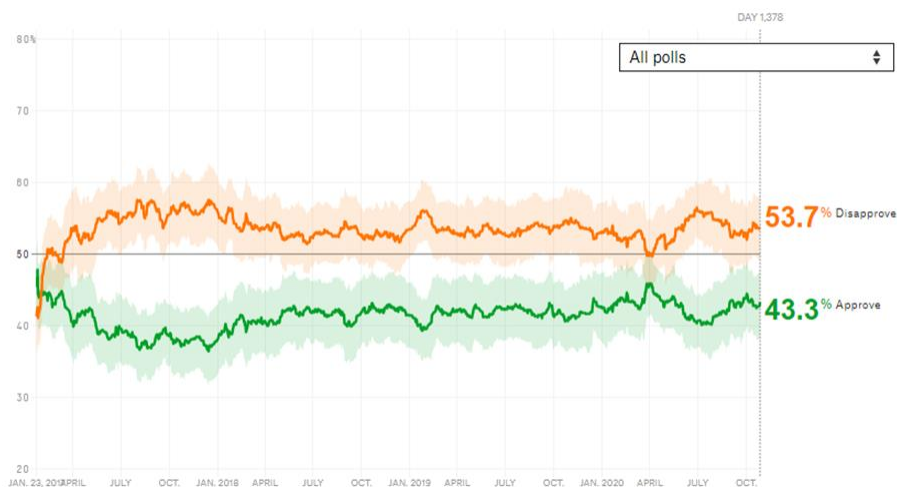
- Ohio: A few days back the states were blue, but Trump is only ahead of Biden by 1%. 50.2% vs. 48.8%. Still, Trump will probably win.
- Iowa: A narrow Biden lead, 49.4% for him, 49.3% for Trump.
- Georgia: An even narrower lead, basically both candidates have 49.6%.
- Florida: 50.4% for Biden, 48.9% for Trump.
- North Carolina: 50.5% for Biden, 48.8% for Trump
- Arizona: 50.6% for Biden, 48.2% for Trump.
- Pennsylvania: THE battleground state as we have already mentioned. It seems, Biden has a comfortable lead, but anything can happen especially in this state. So far it's 52.2% for Biden, 47.1% for Trump (Fivethirtyeight, 2020a). The Black vote in the cities and women's vote in the suburbs will be key.

According to these numbers, it is probable, that Joe Biden is going to be the 46th President of the United States of America. It seems quite reasonable, that he is going to receive more popular votes, but it is still up to the setup of the Electoral College, if he is going to receive more votes from the electors. In 2016, the electoral snake was also dominated by the Democrats even on elections day, but we have to add, Biden's lead over Trump, especially in the tipping point states, is more solid than it was four years ago – but a few of these leads basically are within margin of error.

Concluding remarks

As we could see, the Republican Party agreed to stand firm behind Trump, who decided to go for a second term. And up until March-April 2020, his approval ratings were up – at least there was a rising tendency in his approval, and especially his approval regarding the economy was high, having a definite chance to compete with any of the candidates of the Democratic Party. But COVID-19, then the killing of George Floyd basically ruined this world and as we can see from Figure 3, the approval ratings of the President started to decline and reaching lows again by the summer.

Figure 3. *Approval ratings of Donald Trump (an average)*



Source: Fivethirtyeight, 2020c

It's not just how he handled the pandemic, but the fact that he was tested positive after the first debate, turned many away from him. Further on, his positive test blocked him from going on with his campaign in crucial times, because of that he failed to prove, he is a better debater than Biden and his messages about containing the virus became weightless.

Further remarks:

- The Vice Presidential debate showed, that Mike Pence is actually a great debater, and can represent the conservative voters, so at least there is a good news for the Republicans: they might have an excellent candidate for 2024.
- Joe Biden proved during the Democratic Party primaries – that he is old. He is planning to run only for one term, so even if he turns out to be the winner, he is not a long term solution for the party.
- COVID-19 definitely is a key issue for this election, together with domestic economy (jobs), where actually Trump has good approval ratings.
- Confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett as the new Supreme Court Justice can be a further issue that is giving Democrats something else to energize their voters about.
- Biden's campaign has outraised Trump's by a large margin (\$822 million – Biden; \$558 million – Trump) and Biden currently has more cash on hand (\$177 million to Trump's \$63 million). Biden's campaign has also outspent

Trump's (\$645 million to \$502 million) (Ballotpedia, 2020) especially on TV (\$421 million to Trump's \$254 million) (Politico, 2020).

- In 2016 Hilary Clinton won the popular vote by 2.9 million but lost the election because Trump carried 30 states for 304 electoral votes and Clinton only carried 20 (plus Washington D.C.) for 227 electoral votes. What many don't focus on however, is that the country was split 46.1% for Trump (62.98 million votes) and 48.2% (65.85 million) for Clinton which shows that Trump had a much larger support base than is usually talked about. Political pundits think that many who supported Trump in 2016 may consider supporting Biden in 2020 because they have less objection to him than they did Clinton. How many will switch, and will they be enough to give Biden the lead he needs is very difficult to measure.
- The US Elections Project at the University of Florida predicts a record turnout of voters this year of about 150 million (65% of eligible voters), the largest rate since 1908 (Guardian, 2020). Besides the votes of the younger generation will be key. Plus, former President Obama is now out campaigning in key battleground states for Biden, including working to get out the African-American vote.

Within these special, unique circumstances, we are going to witness a quite important and tense election, where not just the election day, but the aftermath of the elections is going to be essential. And one thing Donald Trump proved in 2016: he can win it even with the lower chances. Joe Biden has the lead, however, this presidential race is still very close and its not yet clear what the outcome might be, both parties acknowledge how close it is. Regardless of the outcome, the nation will remain deeply divided and it will take many years and deliberate efforts by the administration to heal that.

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