

ISSUE BRIEF

Strategic Significance of the US Elections

The good news also contains some daunting challenges

by Nicholas Dungan

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The sense of relief is palpable. The symbolism is powerful. After four years on the lunatic fringe, the United States of America might soon return to a form of recognisable normality, at home and abroad. The record voter turnout and the legitimate, if lengthy and laborious, election process have rebuilt a bit of faith in American democracy. The election as Vice President of Kamala Harris, a highly competent, accomplished professional and a woman of both Asian and Caribbean-African descent, helps restore the US to its pedestal as a beacon of opportunity, an emblem of inclusiveness, all quite the opposite of the hostile, peevish, grotesque xenophobia of Trump.

Beyond the psychological effect, there are several practical benefits that arise from the election of Joe Biden as the president who will assume office on 20 January 2021. (Many have referred to Biden as the 'next' president of the United States but the era of Donald Trump is so volatile that to assume Trump will actually make it as far as January seems like a hypothesis that could be proved wrong; if Trump misfires, or quits, or some other surprise occurs, Mike Pence could end up being the 'next' president, his job then being to hand over the reins of power to Joe Biden on the day.)

The first practical benefit stems from the quality of the Biden team. Biden himself has a lifetime of experience in the Senate, the legislative branch, and as Vice President in the White House, the executive branch. Biden's advisors are professionals and insiders. The fact that they are professionals means that they will pursue a policy agenda, not personal aggrandisement, so they will be predictable and trustworthy counterparts. It also means that they will make judgements based on rational policy criteria, not short-term political advantage or blind, unrealistic ideology.

The fact that they are insiders means that they know everybody: in DC, around the United States and throughout the world. This is an enormous advantage compared to the largely inexperienced Trump team, with its reliance on neophyte family members in key White House positions, and so many representatives of the Republican party establishment who had refused to work for the Trump administration. Professional insiders will make a huge difference in getting the business of government done—from the corona virus to climate change—both in domestic policy, particularly with the Congress, and in international relations, with a community of nations cautiously awaiting the United States as a responsible stakeholder in international affairs once again.

A further practical benefit, ironically, arises from the lack of a 'blue wave', that massive landslide in favour of the Democrats that would have been interpreted as total repudiation of the Republican party. The Democrat majority in the House of Representatives will be smaller than under Trump and the Senate looks to be quite evenly divided. As a result, nobody will expect the Biden administration to perform legislative or policy miracles. At the same time, the Republicans, though perhaps tainted by their subservience to Trump, can claim their status as a valid opposition party.

An evident additional practical benefit results from the open arms with which the future Biden administration is being welcomed by many world leaders. Even the UK, beset by a relatively inexperienced cabinet and a prime minister seen as too much like Trump, really need not worry: the Biden team will have little interest in settling scores, though they can clearly be counted upon to uphold the interests of the United States in a future UK-US trade negotiation. But their conviction that allies count, and the value they place on reliable relationships, will also underpin their attitude, even with a UK outside the EU. The UK is still a member of the UN Security Council, NATO and the Five Eyes intelligence network; the UK-US working relationship is vast and it is valuable.

Professionalism, experience, freedom from radical expectations and an international community waiting to engage: what more could one ask?

In his first speech as President-Elect, Joe Biden referred to the current moment as an inflection point. He is right. There is a need, as he stated himself in his January article in *Foreign Affairs*, to re-make American society from the ground up. He literally does need to 'Make America Great Again'. There is also a need once again to be 'Present at the Creation' of a new world order. These are daunting challenges, but ones for which an older, seasoned president may well be suited.

The paradox lies in the existence of not one but two post-war periods, which policy makers have largely failed to acknowledge. One 'Postwar', from 1945 to 1989, worked. There was the free world, the communist world and the non-aligned world. International institutions worked because this world of the Cold War was 'frozen' and because nation-states dominated as sources of power and as limits to action. Countries, in the free world at least, could do what they wanted within their own borders. They remained masters of their own fate. So did the peoples in their societies.

The second post-war period, since 1989, has been disorganised globalisation. The nation-state is far from the dominant paradigm (which is why this writer teaches a course on non-state actors in international affairs). Society is divided between those perceived as the global elites—often distinguished as much by education, cultural mobility, open-mindedness and humanistic values as by any actual material advantage—and those perceived as left behind, or who self-identify as left behind. In the most recent US election, as in the Brexit referendum in the UK, the proportion of these two demographics is astonishingly close to 50-50. In America and many other societies, the anger of the 'deplorables' is real, whether elites agree with it or choose to recognise it or attempt to address it, or not. The old left has become the new right. This problem is not going away easily.

What is needed, then, is a new vision, for societies at home and for the community of nations. The strategic significance of the Biden election is that it offers policy makers the opportunity, and the challenge, of exercising, or not, the leadership that will shape a better future for this century.