

Thoughts on the 2020 Elections

The first question in my senior US Elections course, during the spring 2021 semester, was “What are your thoughts about what happened at the Capitol on January 6th?” It is a good question and frankly I am glad students are thinking about it. This particular student asked knowing the Capitol was my office for seven years when I worked as a US Senate staffer. I often talk with my students in reverent tones about the shining white dome, and the feeling of awe which overcame me every time I went onto the Senate floor during a debate. I impart to them how it was an honor to go to work, every single day, for the American people. To see this building, this institution, breached and worse, trashed, took my breath away. I try not to be emotional and subjective when I discuss politics, because that is not what good scholarship is about, but this event hit a bit different. I was sad, angry, and confused that day, so when my student asked, I was honest about my feelings. I also editorialized that it seemed like an almost inevitable end to a tumultuous election cycle. I was clear it does not have to be this way and as Americans, we can and should do better.

During that first class, I stressed the fact that we were able to view the normal peaceful transition of executive power two weeks later, which has been a hallmark of American democracy for much of our 230-year history. The inaugural festivities by all accounts were average and without much excitement, which for most was a welcome change from January 6. These two events seem impossible to have taken place in the same year, let alone month. But, occur they did and they seemed to put a cherry on the already turbulent 2020 political sundae.

Throughout 2019 and early 2020, the reelection of President Trump seemed an inevitability and at other times an impossibility. The economy was booming; unemployment was at record lows; interest rates were practically non-existent. Political scientists like myself look to these economic factors, among other indicators, to help us predict election results. Then COVID-19 hit and the deck was shuffled. The summer saw civil unrest in countless cities across the country. Some pundits and analysts, myself included, thought this could mean more votes for the incumbent president in some of these states, but we recognized the effects of the pandemic were harder to model. The Democrats ended up nominating a moderate long term political fixture in Joe Biden. He did not engage in typical campaigning. The debates were a joke. We were only to October.

Election Day arrived, Biden was elected, but a few surprises were in store courtesy of America’s voters. We did not see a typical election or even response to national unrest and crippling economic numbers due to the pandemic. What we saw were astronomical turnout numbers in every state, with more people voting in this election than ever before. We saw a majority of America’s voters reject the sitting president, even though President Trump received more votes than any previous presidential candidate in history – except for Vice President Biden of course. Over 74 million people still preferred President Trump’s policies and brand of

politics to the potential Biden Administration. Several states' results were very close, not the previously speculated blow-out. This was not a lopsided victory for Biden by any means and any effort to categorize it as such would be folly, just as it would be to dismiss the 80 million people that supported him. Additionally, any effort to dismiss 74 million voters who retrospectively looked back at four years of President Trump and wanted more of the same, or just not Obama 2.0, can similarly not be dismissed. The losing side voters should never be ignored in American politics.

Some election observers might look at the 2020 results and think it was a clear repudiation of conservative or even Republican policies and politics. They would be wrong. Yes, President Trump lost states and voters from 2016. His bombastic rhetoric was voted out of the White House. However, his policies could never be universally considered conservative or even traditionally Republican. What we saw was a rejection of Trump himself not the ideas of conservatism or even the Republican platform. In many cases those ideas were embraced. Let me explain.

In the 2020 election, instead of Democratic congressional candidates catching and riding Biden's coattails to victory and expanding Speaker Pelosi's majority in the House of Representatives, the opposite occurred. President-elect Biden outperformed Democratic House and Senate candidates around the country. Republican challengers beat Democratic congressional incumbents in numerous districts, in fact the Republicans had a net gain of more than ten seats in 2020, greatly diminishing the Democrat majority in the House. Voters may not have agreed with President Trump, but they were not necessarily buying what the Democratic candidates were selling either.

Senate races were even more interesting and show us that voters were separating their thoughts about the top of the ticket from down-ballot races. The Democrats had a net gain of three seats in the Senate, but many had speculated that number would be greater. Many incumbent Republican senators were seen to be in danger of losing. Few pundits thought Senators Collins, Tillis, Ernst, Daines and Graham would all win. As we know, they were all reelected. This tells us voters across the country were ready to take their chances on a new president, someone whose personality and policies were a known commodity, but voters also wanted to keep a relatively conservative and Republican Congress.

What later happened in the Georgia runoff races should not be conflated with the November races, as according to the Washington Post, half a million voters stayed home in the January runoff after being told for two months their votes probably were not counted anyway. We should not take what happened in Georgia as a signal against Republicans or conservative policies. Instead it was voters listening to conspiracy theories of voter fraud.

Elections have consequences and one major consequence is coming together to govern in the aftermath. The Democrat majority in the House is razor thin, with many Democrats representing moderate districts, making the Speaker's job difficult on a good day. House Democrat leadership must work with moderate members of their own party and members of the minority to get their priorities, and those of the new Administration, passed. This means more moderate legislation could be coming out of the House. The Senate is split evenly at 50/50 and will look like that of 2001, when Senators Daschle (D-SD) and Lott (R-MS) worked out a power sharing agreement for the first five months of that year.

What all of this means is Congress needs to return to actual cross-aisle legislating. This means compromise can no longer be the dirty word of politics, and nobody gets everything they want. It means moderates play a larger than normal role in legislative politics, a role they have not enjoyed for several years. It also opens the door to real negotiation and policy outcomes that benefit a larger swath of Americans. Now is not the time to inflict retribution or punishment upon the minority party. It is not the time to eliminate the filibuster, to silence the voice of the minority. It is a time to heal the wounds of 2020 and the events of January 6th. It is time to call those events what they were – domestic terrorism by a radical fringe who do not represent all 74 million Americans who voted for the minority party. It is a time to be more tolerant and civil towards those with whom we disagree. It is time to be American.