

# US Election: A tight race and no landslide for Biden and Dems tempers progressive agenda both domestically and abroad

Blog post by the GC USA team, 4 November 2020

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Whatever the outcome of America's election - which for both the presidency and Senate remained too close to call as of early Wednesday morning in the US - the blowout victory that Democrats were hoping for did not materialise. This has implications for both US domestic and foreign policy regardless of the final outcome. Both are likely to be more moderate and more inwardly focused than many might have hoped.

Buoyed by favourable polls, a massive fundraising advantage and a party animated by its anger toward President Donald Trump, Democrats were hopeful that nominee Joe Biden would not only defeat Trump, but beat him in a landslide, with the "Blue Wave" manifesting itself in control of both houses of Congress and the Oval Office. But Tuesday's results proved this was not the case. To be clear, there are a number of crucial states that will continue to be counted throughout the next hours and days, and a protracted legal battle for the presidency remains in play. But all roads point to a far closer election than what Democrats had hoped. Acknowledging the potential "blue shift" toward Democrats as mail-in votes are counted in the days to come, the presidential race looks tight in several battleground states. Senate races in North Carolina, Maine and Iowa were also very close as of Tuesday night, with Republicans who tied their fates closely to Trump performing better than polls anticipated. Sen. Lindsey Graham, a Trump supporter who also led the effort to seat US Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett just a week before the election, fought off a well-financed Democratic challenger in conservative South Carolina to win relatively easily. As of this writing, it appears that Republicans are poised to maintain a narrow majority in the Senate, though Democrats might still eke out a victory. Democrats easily held the House, but Republicans flipped at least six seats as of the time of writing, picking up a net four.

One of the conclusions to draw from this tight race is the apparent moderate and swing-voter disaffection for ambitious progressive ideas. This was made clear early on Tuesday night in one of the first states that reported results - Florida, and in particular, the crucial county of Miami-Dade. Biden's poor performance in the county, underperforming Hillary Clinton who carried the county in 2016 by a comfortable margin, was underscored by the fact that Latinos did not turn out for Biden (similar data was reported in Texas). While there are likely a myriad of issues that caused this constituency to break for Trump, exit polling and media reporting suggested one culprit was the Democratic embrace of "defund the police" in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. Democratic operatives in Florida are already bemoaning the phrase, pointing to its widespread support by Democrats as a factor that overwhelmingly turned away the Florida Latino community, despite Trump's consistent fanning of racial tensions and hard-line immigration policies. It is important to note, however, that Biden continues to perform well among the Latino vote in the South West, with exit polling in Arizona showing 58% of Latino men and 68% of Latino women backing Biden in the state.

Without the covid-19 pandemic - and Trump's handling of it - it is likely that Trump would have won re-election handily, despite the many scandals that have dogged his presidency. First, it is an important reminder that the vast majority of the American electorate does not follow Twitter. But more important, Tuesday's election results can be seen as a victory for Trump's *policies*, even if the election proves not to be a victory for Trump himself.

If Biden should win, even if Democrats do take the Senate in the end, it does not appear that a "go big" progressive agenda is on the table. Progressives were hoping for a mandate to pursue significant action on climate change, expansion of government-sponsored healthcare and other issues. While Biden could certainly roll back many of Trump's executive orders and appoint regulators in many sectors who will favour consumers over industry, a progressive legislative agenda appears too risky unless Democrats want to give their majority right back in the 2022 mid-term elections. It certainly puts proposals such as 'court packing' and eliminating the filibuster firmly on the back burner.

In foreign policy, the tight election results are likely to further accentuate a potential Biden administration's domestic focus, as basic governance will require more bandwidth than many establishment Democrats would have hoped. If Trump winds up the victor, many US alliances and international organisations are at risk of collapse. Many of our clients and friends outside the US think of America as the global diplomat, peacemaker and dealmaker - the America that helped bring down the Berlin Wall, that helped broker Middle East peace talks. Tuesday's results are a sign that this America, always more myth than reality, is gone, at least for the foreseeable future. Memories of World War II and the global rebuilding effort afterward, so key to the narrative of American engagement abroad in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have faded for most in the US. For many Americans, US involvement abroad now means the wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan - thousands of American lives lost, trillions of dollars spent, no victory parades Americans returning home. Little-noticed last night, but sailing to re-election was Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas, whose foreign-policy views align closely with Trump's, and who has been discussed as a possible presidential candidate in 2024.

Trump may or may not be president in January 2021. But last night's election results suggest that the progressive domestic revolution will have to wait, and that Trump's rejection of globalism and his priority on putting "America First" appear here to stay.