

B Americans Face Stark Choice as Election Day 2020 Dawns

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(Bloomberg) -- Election Day 2020 is underway and for American voters the choices couldn't be more stark.

Donald Trump was a novelty four years ago, a reality television star and real estate developer with a penchant for bombast and Twitter insults. The 74-year-old president has erased any notion that the Oval Office would tame him, thrilling Republicans by cutting regulations and taxes, restricting immigration and appointing three Supreme Court justices.

Joe Biden, 77, passed on a chance to run in 2016 but said Trump's reaction to racial protests in Virginia the following year convinced him to return to politics. After lagging in the primaries, the former vice president emerged as a unity candidate, portraying himself as a man of decency who would listen to scientists fighting the Covid-19 pandemic, restore America's overseas alliances and confront climate change.

The election entered its final day on Tuesday with a record-shattering 100 million ballots already cast. It's taking place amid a third deadly wave in the pandemic, warnings about renewed foreign interference and a political environment even more polarized than in 2016, with both sides warning that a vote for the other risks plunging the country into ruin.

In a morning interview with "Fox & Friends," Trump sought to tamp down earlier speculation that he might declare victory before mail-in votes are counted in key states.

"I think we'll have victory," Trump said. "But only when there's victory. I mean, there's no reason to play games. I look at it as being a very solid chance of winning here."

Biden, joined by wife Jill Biden and two granddaughters, attended a mass Tuesday morning at St. Joseph on the Brandywine near his Delaware home.

While there, the Democratic challenger visited the grave of his son Beau, who died in 2015 after battling brain cancer. The former vice president has often said that he decided to launch a third presidential bid as a way to carry on his late son's legacy.

Polling stations on the U.S. East Coast started opening at 6 a.m. local time. The key states of Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Pennsylvania will be among the first to close, starting at 7 p.m. Trump is planning to watch the results in Washington, while Biden will be in his home state of Delaware.

National surveys and polls of most key states give Biden the advantage, but Democrats scarred by Hillary Clinton's unexpected defeat in 2016 have taken little solace from their candidate's lead. The state on everyone's mind is Pennsylvania, which could take days to count its votes and where Biden has a slight lead.

Trump, meanwhile, has called the polling “fake news” and points to his strong support within the Republican Party. Surveys say he’s lost votes he had in 2016 among women and the elderly while gaining strength with some Latino groups.



*Bloomberg President Trump Holds A 'Make America Great Again' Victory Rally
Donald Trump in Fayetteville, North Carolina, on Nov. 2. Photographer: Rachel
Jessen/Bloomberg*

“Every day is a new reminder of how high the stakes are, of how far the other side will go to try to suppress the turnout, especially here in Philadelphia,” Biden said Sunday. “President Trump is terrified of what will happen in Pennsylvania. He knows that the people of Pennsylvania get to have their say, if you have your say, he doesn’t stand a chance.”

Despite the expected record turnout, Americans may not know who will be sworn in next January for days or weeks if a tight race in battleground states prompt judicial challenges over late-arriving ballots.

Democrats were encouraged by mail and early-voting turnout, which exceeded entire election vote totals in Hawaii and Texas, but Republicans say their numbers will surge on Election Day.

Whatever their policy differences -- and they are vast -- the coronavirus outbreak has defined the candidates and shaped the election. More than 230,000 Americans have died since February, a death toll approaching U.S. losses in World War II. The economy nosedived in March, when tens of millions of workers were sent home or left unemployed, and students found themselves taking classes online.

While the economy has been building back, even the wearing of masks to slow the virus’ spread has become a political statement. Trump’s handling of the virus -- he insists the country is “rounding the corner” even though infections and deaths are climbing -- is a key reason why Biden is favored.

The Democratic nominee took a more measured pace to the campaign, often spending days at his home in Delaware and holding more virtual events, buttressed by hundreds of millions of dollars in donations that shattered records and stunned GOP officials. The former vice president argued his approach was more responsible in the middle of a pandemic.

As in 2016, the two candidates offered starkly different visions of America. After protests erupted across the country in response to police killings of unarmed Black citizens, the president warned at one rally that “no one will be safe in Biden’s America,” and preyed on fears of violence and chaos led by left-wing agitators, even when his national security officials said right-wing White supremacists were a bigger threat.

More broadly, Trump cast himself as a champion of deregulation and tough immigration policies. He delighted evangelicals with his conservative Supreme Court picks, including Amy Coney Barrett, coming on top of more than 200 federal judicial appointments in his term.

Turning to his rivals, the president has portrayed himself as the victim of a sustained plot by the Democratic Party, a “deep state” in the federal bureaucracy and the media, to tie his 2016 victory to Russia. He decried his impeachment by the Democratic-led House over pressuring Ukraine to do him political favors as little more than partisan politics. The Republican-led Senate acquitted him.

After two failed runs in the Democratic primaries for the 1988 and 2008 elections, Biden would be oldest person to take the presidency if he wins -- capturing that record from Trump. Biden has been dogged by concerns about his age and mental acuity and Trump’s allies tried but failed to make an “October surprise” out of his son Hunter’s business dealings. If elected, Republicans warn Biden will merely be a pawn of the Democratic party’s “radical left.”

Tuesday’s election also puts Trump’s broader legacy on the line. A victory would be historic, but so would a defeat: Trump would be the first president since George H.W. Bush in 1992 not to win re-election. His loss could also cost Republicans control of the Senate.

A Biden win would also be historic, with running mate Kamala Harris becoming the first Black and Indian-American woman to hold the vice presidency.

Despite Democratic fears of overconfidence, some argue this time is different. Along with a consistent and larger lead, Biden has higher favorability ratings in surveys than Clinton did. Pollsters also believe their models better account for the White voters without a college education who broke for Trump that year.

“Everything beneath the surface looks strong,” said Margie Omero, a principal at the Democratic polling firm GBAO. “Biden’s favorabilities have improved rather than worsened. It hasn’t gone down because Trump hasn’t been able to land punches in the same way. There’s less intensity of feeling toward Biden.”

But while Biden's supporters imagine Trump's ouster, the president's supporters are driven and devoted, turning out by the thousands for his signature rallies despite the pandemic.

Analysts are cautious about how soon the U.S. will know the results of the vote. A Biden win in Florida would make a Trump victory more improbable. But Trump wins in states like North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Michigan would likely signal another four years for the president.

Murky legal language about recounts or late-arriving ballots could result in a challenge that ends up before a Supreme Court that includes Barrett, who was sworn in eight days before Election Day.

"If it's 100,000-vote lead for Biden no one's going to argue it. If it's a 300-vote lead, that's another matter," said David Lazer, professor of political science at Northeastern University in Boston. "That's the nightmare scenario."