

Prospects

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The point of view

US election pages – February 2020

How do you outmanoeuvre an elephant when there are several of you stuck in a corridor?

The election campaign has got off to a promising start for Donald Trump, but there's a long road ahead for everyone. One thing is certain, however: there will be surprises along the way. Why? Because the US political landscape is being completely remoulded, and it isn't just about people or parties: what's happening is deeper and more historic than that. It's about a crisis of democracy, deadlocked institutions, polarisation and the reinvention of ideological positions amid new constraints and aspirations. In short, while the outcome of this process is important, so is the nature of the debate among both the winners and the losers, which will shape voters' preferences for years to come. And voters' preferences are what propel politics and then the economy – which, it appears, is driven by constrained preference functions...

It's with this in mind that we are kicking off these US election pages, in which we'll be covering the various camps and debates. These debates will orient the country's ideological compass, and thus its economic policies. This year, the United States must be seen as a political laboratory.

The elephant...

For the time being, the rambunctious president is strengthened by all-time high levels of confidence in the economy, with 63% of Americans rating his economic initiatives favourably. And so, even as some are quite rightly sounding the alarm about a never-ending growth cycle, and even though that cycle rests on macroeconomic imbalances that also continue to grow, the American people are staunchly confident in the economy. And let us not forget that the unemployment rate is at its lowest level for 50 years. All this is helping Trump. But make no mistake: like it or not, the consolidation of his electorate goes beyond this sense of economic satisfaction.

Although his approval rating has never topped the 50% mark, and although he was elected on a fairly weak footing (i.e. through the institutional alchemy of his 306 electoral college votes rather than by a popular majority), Trump is currently enjoying a rising tide of favourable opinion: his approval rating now stands at 49%, its highest level since he was elected. In other words, we can no longer consider him – as some observers did at the time of the election – an accident of history: he has built his legitimacy. This is the first difference relative to 2016.

Furthermore, we already knew that some of his base were pretty much fanatics (those who, according to Trump, would shoot someone in the street if he asked them to). But it was harder to foresee the growing loyalty of another section of his base: those who had previously voted for Obama but then switched to Trump out of a desire to reject the elites. But this anti-elite vote turned into a loyal pro-Trump vote. Which leads us to the second difference relative to 2016: although the president is still playing the polarisation card for all its worth, the political momentum behind him is new.

Lastly, his approval rating among independent voters has risen 5 points since September. As in all major democracies affected by growing political disaffection and abstentionism over the past 30 years, the battle

to capture these swing voters will be crucial (45% of voters say they are independent, compared with 27% Republican and 28% Democrat).

... And the others stuck in the corridor

For the time being, things have not got off to a good start for the Democrats. The Iowa caucuses¹ were surprising not just for their disastrous organisation (with Buttigieg and Sanders both claiming victory) but also for the position of the junior competitor (Buttigieg), which gave his reputation a big boost. The consequences of the botched vote count should not be understated. We must not forget the suspicions of procedural illegitimacy harboured by Sanders voters, who in 2016 accused the party's management of favouring Clinton's nomination. The very legitimacy of the primaries is at stake – and with it, the difficult task of rebuilding the American left.

Still traumatised by a 2016 defeat they struggled to make sense of, the Democrats are in the midst of an ideological overhaul. As part of this, they are trying to unwind the party's excessive bureaucracy and outline a new social policy and a "Green New Deal". This effort to redefine the party could already be seen on its left wing as far back as the 2016 election, when many said Sanders was the real ideological winner (remember that he won the primaries in Wisconsin and Michigan, two of the "swing states" that swung to Trump). Indeed, the ideas championed by Sanders, a self-described democratic socialist, appeal to young people and all the anti-Trump streams. These ideas are also setting the agenda in the party's debates, with key themes like the principle of universal health cover, free higher education and the need for fairer taxation. In fact, the other candidates are all taking up more or less radical positions around these themes. And Sanders' views have gained widespread acceptance: he's no longer the only candidate campaigning for radical change, but faces competition from Warren, for example.

Think left, or further left?

What is at issue in these primaries is whether they will lead the Democrats further to the left or towards the traditional centre ground, hitherto represented by Biden, but which could be won by Buttigieg. In the latter case, will the moderate candidate succeed in winning over radical voters, as Clinton failed to do? "Sanders or bust" is the mantra of many young people. To date, Biden has picked up only 7% of the Sanders vote... If the primaries should push the party further left, the election would become a spectacular battleground of ideological polarisation. And what would that do for America's governability?

Lastly, as is the case all over Europe, the interesting question for the coming years is whether or not an ideological "New Left" will emerge in opposition to a "New Right" whose key players and political and economic footings are now becoming clearer. This would mean overcoming two obstacles. The first is the polarisation stoked by social media and the person of Donald Trump, which makes compromises harder to reach and fuels political hysteria – not exactly a conducive environment for debating ideas. The more extreme the polarisation, the more the debate will veer towards values... and the greater the risk of a populist vote on both the right and the left. We have Sanders to thank for protecting the Democrats – for the time being, at least – from the risk of left-wing populism.

The second obstacle is the tendency, highlighted by Mark Lilla, to give up the social struggle and retreat into identity politics², when debates on race and gender dominate public discussion. The question is not whether such debates are legitimate, but to what extent they risk taking over politics and driving away voters looking for an inspiring and credible social proposition.

Ultimately, the three upcoming primaries in February (New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina) will give us some clues as to where the Left's ideological compass is pointing. For a clear answer, though, we will have to wait until "Super Tuesday" on 3 March, when 14 States are due to hold primaries or caucuses. We will then find out what power relations are at play within the party, the key risk being that of a fragmented vote. If that happens, the momentum of the primaries could descend into backroom deal-making rather than being driven by what voters want. ■

¹ The Iowa caucuses are an electoral event during which citizens of the US State of Iowa vote, within the political party they support, for their preferred precinct delegates for the county conventions. Each of Iowa's 99 county conventions then selects district and state delegates, who ultimately choose delegates to the national convention.

² Mark Lilla: *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*.

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