

What Can Political Science Predict about the Unpredictable 2020 Presidential Race? Polls, Debates, and the Electoral College

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The second decade of the twenty-first century certainly has been politically eventful. In 2012, we saw Barack Obama, the incumbent president, win reelection. In 2016, we saw a most surprising victory by Donald Trump who challenged the incumbent party. When we look back at the last few presidential elections, we see that the 2008 election of Barack Obama seemed at the time like a crossroads election due to the Iraq War and the Great Recession. The contentious Democratic primary contests questioned the future direction of the United States in both domestic and foreign policy. After Hillary Clinton's stunning loss to Barack Obama for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, her decision to run again in 2016 appeared to mark another crossroads election, especially with the Republican presidential nomination of Donald Trump. The November 8, 2016, election results were a surprise to most people, particularly given the pre-election poll predictions. The polls were not entirely wrong, as I will discuss, but, certainly, the results were stunning.

And now 2020 is even more of a crossroads election. Someone asked me recently if this is the most important presidential election in recent American politics, and I have been thinking about that question. Since it is happening during a global pandemic, the 2020 election certainly is comparable to other presidential elections in times of international conflict or economic turmoil. For example, the 1980 election took place during the Iran hostage crisis, in which fifty-two Americans were imprisoned by Iranian revolutionaries in the US embassy in Tehran; the Americans were released just after President Ronald Reagan's inauguration on January 20, 1981.

Another important and consequential presidential election was the 2000 race. On Election Day, November 7, 2000, I was teaching at the United States Military Academy at West Point, and a student in my presidency course asked what would happen if Democratic nominee Al Gore won the Electoral College vote and Republican nominee George W. Bush won the popular vote. And I famously said,

“Don’t worry, it’s not going to happen. It hasn’t happened since 1888. We will know on Wednesday who the president will be.” And, of course, it took 36 days to know who the president would be.

While we have had crossroads presidential elections in recent years, 2020 really is significant because much is at stake—not just for who occupies the White House but also which party controls each chamber of Congress. The president and Congress will have to work together on several significant policy issues, including the pandemic, health care, economic policy, foreign relations (which have received very little attention in the campaign), climate change, race relations, and more. The list is extensive, and much work will be needed to strengthen our political community and civil society as well. We may not know if 2020 will be the most important presidential election in recent American politics, but it certainly will be a defining race.

What I would like to do now is discuss a few topics in which political science provides some useful insights for this year’s presidential race: polling, presidential debates, and the Electoral College. Let’s start with polling.

POLLING AND THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL RACE

As we look at public opinion polls about the presidential race, keep in mind that they are being updated frequently as the election nears. I initially prepared my presentation knowing that I would update it with the newest polling numbers the morning of the talk, at which time a student mentioned a poll on RealClearPolitics (<https://www.realclearpolitics.com/>). I looked at that website to find that a survey result had changed by a tenth of a percentage point. So, I updated the numbers once more. This talk discusses what the polls indicated as of the afternoon of October 27, 2020.

Former Vice President Joe Biden is ahead by high single digits, with an average of almost eight percentage points in the surveys listed on RealClearPolitics. CNBC has Biden ahead by double digits (eleven points), and Quinnipiac has him ahead by ten points. At the other end, The Hill has Biden ahead by four points, and Rasmussen has him ahead by only two points. That last figure is interesting, as there have been some questions about how Rasmussen conducts polls because they take into account the party identification of respondents. As of the morning of October 27, 2020, Rasmussen was the only survey on RealClearPolitics that listed President Donald Trump ahead of Joe Biden in the polls, with a narrow margin of about one point. Several hours later, after I had finalized my presentation, RealClearPolitics had listed additional polls, and Rasmussen had Biden ahead by two points. Taken as a whole, these surveys point to a likely Biden victory.

President Trump’s average job approval rating on RealClearPolitics is 44%, while his average favorability rating is 42.3%. Furthermore, surveys find that just under a third of respondents say the country is moving in the right direction, and close to two-thirds say we are on the wrong track. All of

these numbers are dangerous signs for the Trump reelection campaign. The other website that I look at regularly is FiveThirtyEight (<https://fivethirtyeight.com/>), which is excellent if you are especially interested in data analysis. They currently have Biden ahead by nine points as well.

One especially interesting survey was conducted in the fall of 2020 by the Gallup Poll, which no longer makes presidential race predictions because in 2012 they predicted that Mitt Romney would win. And that, of course, was incorrect. However, Gallup does conduct political analyses, and in a September 2020 poll, Gallup found that 56% of Americans say they are better off now than they were four years ago.¹ This poll was conducted before the first presidential debate, which took place on September 29, 2020, and before the announcement that President Trump had tested positive for the coronavirus. Nevertheless, in non-crisis times, having 56% of the country saying they are better off now than they were four years ago would indicate a steady path to reelection.

In a typical election year, the Gallup finding likely would illustrate a classic example of retrospective voting—if people are doing well, then they vote with the incumbent or the incumbent’s party. Ronald Reagan famously asked this question in his single debate with President Jimmy Carter in 1980: “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?”² A Democratic National Committee campaign ad for the 1992 Clinton/Gore campaign featured the famous 1988 pledge by then Vice President George Bush, “Read my lips: No new taxes,” and George H. W. Bush saying, “You will be better off four years from now than you are today”; after Bush broke his no-new-taxes pledge, this same Democratic ad asked, “Well, it’s four years later. How’re you doing?”³ Even though the US recession of 1990-91 had technically ended, perceptions about the poor state of the economy contributed to President Bush’s reelection loss.

In the past year, I have looked especially closely at presidential polls because my school, Hofstra University, entered the polling world in this election cycle. Hofstra’s Peter S. Kalikow School of Government, Public Policy, and International Affairs and the Peter S. Kalikow Center for the Study of the American Presidency will conduct the Kalikow School Poll twice a year and three times during presidential election years.⁴ This is a national poll administered by the survey firm YouGov, in which we oversample suburban likely voters, as their attitudes are of high interest given the importance of suburban voters in the 2016 and 2018 elections and our location in suburban Long Island. Our first poll was in November 2019, and the second was conducted in early March 2020, just before the pandemic shutdowns began. We then completed a poll in mid-September 2020, and another one, from which the results will be released just before Election Day, was recently in the field.

The September 2020 Kalikow School Poll had former Vice President Biden ahead by double digits, with an 11.3% margin of support over President Trump. Suburban voters favored Biden by almost ten percentage points. Of suburban voters who said they voted for Trump in 2016, 90% said they would

support him again, while 8% said they would vote for Biden. Just 2% of suburban voters who supported Hillary Clinton in 2016 said they would vote for Trump. Thus, we do not see a major shift in support from loyal partisans. Also, the survey found that independent voters supported Biden by 4.6 points. In 2016, independent voters were very important for the election results, as there were a number of undecided voters who did not make up their minds until the final days before the election. Furthermore, many independent voters in 2016 supported a third-party candidate, either from the Green Party or the Libertarian Party. In 2020, however, there is not a strong minor-party candidacy to draw votes away from the two major-party candidates.

One interesting finding in our survey was the difference in responses between support for a candidate and expectation of that candidate's victory in the presidential race. Respondents favored Biden for the White House by eleven points. But when they were asked who they thought would win the presidency, Biden was ahead by less than four percentage points. This clearly reflects the hesitancy of relying on polls in the aftermath of the 2016 results, when Hillary Clinton was widely expected to win the election but ended up losing in the Electoral College even though she was victorious in the popular vote.

Let me offer just a few insights from the Kalikow School Poll's questions about policy issues. In the March 2020 poll, the economy was President Trump's strongest issue. His net approval rating (calculated as the difference between approval and disapproval ratings) was 5.3 percentage points—five percent more approved than disapproved of Trump's economic performance. In the September 2020 poll, Trump's net approval was less than a percentage point. And for every other policy issue, Trump's net approval was negative in September 2020, meaning that more people disapproved than approved.

On international trade, Trump had 2% net approval in March, but -2.7% net approval in September. Foreign affairs dropped from -1% net approval in March to -4.5% in September. Immigration dropped from -0.6% net approval to -6.3%, and race relations dropped from -3.1% to -8.1%. The Kalikow School Poll did not ask the same question about climate change in March and September, but Trump's net approval on the issue was -9.4% in September. The president's net approval on health care dropped from -4.8% in March to -7.9% in September. Of course, we did not ask about the president's management of the pandemic crisis in March, but his net approval in September was -7.7%. So, on every issue but the economy, more voters disapproved than approved of the president's job performance. The economy is the only issue in our poll where the president's approval rating is positive, and, even there, it is less than half a percentage point. Without a doubt, these are danger signs for President Trump's reelection campaign.

Before we move on from polling, I do want to speak briefly about difficulties with focusing on national versus state public opinion surveys in the 2016 presidential race. Many national polls had predicted that Hillary Clinton would win the popular vote, and she did, though they were off by about a percentage point, predicting a three-percent margin that actually was 2% (which equates to a popular vote

victory of close to three million votes). What went wrong with polling in 2016 is that polling organizations did not spend enough time on state-by-state predictions. And we all know now, of course, about the key states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, where there were concerns with Democratic campaign efforts. For example, the Clinton campaign did not return to Wisconsin for the general-election campaign after Senator Bernie Sanders's double-digit victory in the Democratic primary. And these concerns had been raised during the campaign. When we review articles published just before the election, it is clear that more polling was needed to see what was happening at the state level and to account for the fact that the Electoral College and the national popular vote don't always match up. Consequently, for 2020, we should be attentive to polling in swing states as well as to national polls.

The last topic I would like to discuss briefly from the September 2020 Kalikow School Poll is the high stakes of this year's presidential race. We included a question about whether, if a respondent's preferred candidate were to lose the presidential race in November, the respondent would support having their state formally request to secede from the Union. This certainly would be a drastic move, but a simulation conducted by the Transition Integrity Project last summer included a scenario about what might happen if a presidential candidate refused to accept the election results and if a state had competing Electoral College results from the governor and state legislature.⁵

Let me be clear: I do not think that any state will request to secede from the Union regardless of which candidate wins. However, since we have been discussing the importance of the 2020 election, we should consider that more than a third of survey respondents said they would support or somewhat support a formal request by their state to secede if their preferred presidential candidate did not win. Almost 41% of Democrats had this response as did almost 44% of Republicans and just under one-third of independents. Looking at geographic location, rural voters were most likely to support this option, at 43%, followed by urban voters at 39%, and suburban voters at almost 38%.

These findings indicate that the stakes in the 2020 presidential race are indeed very high and that whether you win or lose is not just a matter of civil disagreement. This is a current scholarly debate in political science, actually—whether we can disagree about politics and still find some areas of commonality, or whether political debates have become so personal and intrinsic to our identity that they define our views of American society and American politics.⁶ If the latter is the case—if politics has turned into a kind of tribal warfare, if you will—then that is a dangerous sign for American democracy.

PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

As you may know, Hofstra University has hosted three consecutive presidential debates in the last three election cycles. We hosted the third debate between John McCain and Barack Obama on October 15, 2008; we hosted the town-hall debate between Obama and Mitt Romney on October 16, 2012; and we

hosted the first debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump on September 26, 2016. The news came on July 19, 2016, that the school that was supposed to host the first 2016 debate, Wright State University near Dayton, Ohio, had to withdraw due to high financial costs for security and the difficulty of controlling access to the public institution, so Hofstra organized that debate in less than ten weeks.⁷

I initially had planned to focus on presidential debates in this talk, but after the free-for-all in the first presidential debate between President Trump and Joe Biden on September 29, 2020, and then the cancellation of the October 15, 2020, town-hall debate following the announcement that President Trump had COVID-19, I decided to modify the lecture topic. Then the October 22, 2020, debate did take place, as well as the vice-presidential debate on October 7, 2020. So I do think it is worth offering a few comments about how presidential debates inform campaigns and elections.

The history of US presidential debates is very interesting. The first general-election presidential debates took place between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon in 1960, and you can find their four debates online.⁸ After 1960, general-election presidential debates were not held again until 1976, and they have taken place in each presidential election year since then. The television networks arranged the 1960 debates, and the League of Women Voters organized general-election presidential debates in 1976, 1980, and 1984. The private, non-partisan Commission on Presidential Debates has been responsible for overseeing general-election presidential debates since 1988.⁹

There have been many changes in the structure and format of US presidential election debates over the years. The first vice-presidential debate took place between Bob Dole and Walter Mondale in 1976, and a vice-presidential debate has taken place in each presidential election year since the debate between George H. W. Bush and Geraldine Ferraro in 1984.¹⁰ A town-hall debate has been a feature of each presidential election cycle's general-election debates since 1992, and this format has been very important for bringing in public voices to ask questions of the presidential candidates.¹¹ Of course, the people who will be in the town hall are selected ahead of time (and they typically each prepare questions, some of which are selected by the debate moderator), but their participation allows a perspective that is different from the that of the journalists who ask questions in the other debates. It is unfortunate that the cancelled October 15, 2020, debate was the town-hall format, as hearing the topics that voters want to discuss is so instructive.

The primary question about presidential debates is whether they can change the outcome of the election. And the short answer is that they do not. Debates are remembered for memorable moments, such as Kennedy looking healthy and vigorous in the first 1960 presidential debate, while Vice President Nixon looked unwell. In 1976, President Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter waited on stage silently for 27 minutes while a technical problem with the sound system was repaired. After a poor performance in his first presidential debate in 1984, President Ronald Reagan rebounded in the second debate when he said

he would not make an issue of his opponent Walter Mondale's youth and inexperience. This was a skillful way of deflecting criticism that perhaps Reagan, who at the time was the oldest president, was no longer able to meet the responsibilities of the job. In 1992, President Bush looked at his wristwatch in the first town-hall debate, indicating some impatience with the event, and, in 2000, Vice President Al Gore walked very close to George W. Bush while Bush was speaking, which looked like an awkward attempt at intimidation. You can easily find video clips of these moments online.¹²

There are only three cases in which political scientists see any potential for the presidential debates to possibly have influenced the election results. In each case, public opinion was shifting as Election Day neared, and all three were close elections. In 1960, Kennedy won solidly in the Electoral College, but the popular vote margin was much narrower, about 117,000 votes. In 1976, the margin was very close in the Electoral College, where Carter won with just under 300 Electoral College votes. (That actually is the first presidential election that I remember; I distinctly recall my parents discussing late on election night whether Ford would win reelection or Carter would prevail.) In 2000, the election was decided very narrowly in the Electoral College after a Supreme Court ruling, though the victorious George W. Bush did not win the popular vote.¹³

Even if presidential debates do not influence the election outcome, they continue to be important because they serve an informational purpose. I was discussing this topic in class with my students, who agreed that even if presidential debates do not change many minds, they still are useful. For example, we were fortunate to have the October 22, 2020, debate between President Trump and former Vice President Biden, as it made up for the upheaval, interruptions, and chaos of the first debate on September 29, 2020. The October debate allowed us to hear what the candidates had to say face to face (with social distancing) about the key issues at stake facing the country today.

As we look back at that October 22, 2020, debate, we may well have a memorable moment in the image at the end of both former Vice President Biden and Dr. Jill Biden wearing masks, First Lady Melania Trump wearing a mask, and President Trump not wearing a mask. (In the September 29, 2020, debate, President Trump did say he wears a mask "when needed.") This image is important because it illustrates the issues in 2020 related to combating the pandemic.

As for substance, it is pretty clear that Biden did better than the president in the first debate, if only because President Trump's interruptions were so off-putting to the point that the Commission on Presidential Debates decided to ensure that each candidate would have two minutes of uninterrupted speaking time during each of six segments by muting the other speaker's microphone. As a result, the October 22, 2020, debate was much better for both candidates. Probably one of the most memorable lines, frankly, will be President Trump saying that he has done more for the black community than any president since Abraham Lincoln, which is an interesting way to frame issues about race relations. The

debate started well in that the candidates presented their starkly different views on how to address the pandemic.¹⁴ While the debate did not move the needle of public opinion on the presidential race in any significant way, the return of civility (for the most part) in and of itself was highly significant.

THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

Finally, what does political science predict about who will win the 2020 presidential race? Let's review some predictions from journalists and scholars about the 2016 elections. These examples are from *Lost in a Gallup*, a book by American University communications professor Joseph Campbell, which is a very interesting analysis of polling and presidential election predictions that I recommend highly.¹⁵ Shortly after Donald Trump entered the presidential race in 2015, journalist James Fallows wrote the following in *The Atlantic*: "Donald Trump **will not** [emphasis in original] be the 45th president of the United States. Nor the 46th, nor any other number you might name. The chance of his winning nomination and election is exactly zero."¹⁶ About five months before election day, David Plouffe, President Barack Obama's campaign manager, tweeted, "The race is not close. And it won't be on November 8. 350+ electoral votes for Clinton."¹⁷ He was off by more than 100, as the final electoral college was 232 (Trump) to 227 (Clinton).

To check the (in)accuracy of these predictions, we can turn to the election results and the final Electoral College results in 2016. Ultimately, Donald Trump had two faithless electors, and Hillary Clinton had five, making the final Electoral College vote 306 for Trump and 227 for Clinton.¹⁸

In terms of predictions for the 2016 election, journalist Bret Stephens, who was a columnist for the *Wall Street Journal* in 2016 and now is a *New York Times* Op-Ed columnist, wrote in August 2016, "A lot of people have no idea that Trump is headed for a historic defeat."¹⁹ Princeton neuroscientist Sam Wang said a month before the election, "If Trump wins more than 240 electoral votes, I will eat a bug."²⁰ (Apparently, he did just that on CNN after the election.) And then, probably most notably, Republican pollster Frank Luntz tweeted on Election Day, November 8, 2016, "In case I wasn't clear enough from my previous tweets: Hillary Clinton will be the next President of the United States."²¹

You can create your own predicted Electoral College map for 2020 at www.270towin.com by creating your own envisioned scenarios on the interactive map.²² Let me just suggest that on election night, we start by looking at Florida. The path to reelection for Donald Trump is very narrow, and it starts with Florida. If he holds Florida, Ohio, North Carolina, and Georgia—we are not looking at any pickups for the president at this time—then he can afford to lose Michigan, and that seems likely as Biden has been consistently ahead in Michigan. That gets Trump's 2016 Electoral College vote to 290. If any of those four states go to Biden, however, then I would say the election is over for Trump. He can afford to lose Wisconsin, which would bring him down to 280. Then Pennsylvania becomes the state to watch. He

can't afford to lose Pennsylvania (which has 20 Electoral College votes) or Arizona (which has 11). Without a doubt, there will be a lot to see in Pennsylvania and Arizona—it will be a long, momentous election night.

Finally, I have a few images for us to consider. One is of President George W. Bush's family watching the returns on election night November 2, 2004. The results were not clear until the next morning when we learned that President Bush had won Ohio, which was essential for his reelection. Similarly, on election night this year, November 3, 2020, we will be watching closely the returns from several battleground states to see whether 2020 is a successful reelection for the incumbent, as happened with President Obama in 2012, or is a change in political party, as happened with the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952. That 1952 campaign was so vitriolic that President-Elect Eisenhower refused to follow the custom of entering the White House for a cup of tea or coffee with the outgoing president, Harry Truman, before Eisenhower's inauguration.

What have we learned about what political scientists can predict for the 2020 presidential election? The polls, debates, and Electoral College all point to overwhelming odds favoring Biden, and a narrow, but nevertheless a clear, path to victory for Donald Trump that starts with Florida and then turns to Pennsylvania.

Let me end by noting that I am not a resident of Pennsylvania anymore, and I have not been since 1994, so I do not vote here. But I have already mailed in my ballot in New York, and I want to emphasize that your vote counts.

NOTES

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