

**THE 2020 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION:  
WILL IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE TO THE REST OF US?  
Thursday 22 October 2020  
SAIIA online webinar**

**INTRODUCTION**

**We are right on the cusp of the electoral discussion of this topic.**

Later **tonight** in the US (early early Friday here), the second and now-final US presidential candidates debate will take place. (if you have the dedication of a saint and the stamina of a Clydesdale wagon horse, you can get up at 2AM and watch it with me).

This debate will — supposedly — have a major focus on foreign policy issues, including the questions of climate change. (Unless, of course, the president goes off on a rampage about *Burisma* and the *NY Post* story about purloined Hunter Biden hard drives or something similar....)

Watch for charges that Joe Biden is a gormless tool of those nefarious folks in Beijing, China; simultaneously watch Donald Trump attempt to wriggle away from charges he is painfully obsequious towards Vladimir Putin ... and, that he never met an authoritarian he didn't love.

**THE FIRST DEBATE**

The first debate, it is now nearly universally accepted, was not a success for Donald Trump. It confirmed a portrait he is a bully, foulmouthed, arrogant, and fatally ignorant.

Speaking diplomatically, it was the worst demonstration of democratic practice I have ever witnessed.

If voters and citizens were waiting for deeper understanding about differences on policy issues, they didn't find them amidst the shouting.

But, there was one saving grace - climate and environment featured visibly in the Q/A.

Biden's key task was to look and sound like a responsible adult (and potential president) in his demeanour and in answers to questions.... And not go wandering off into strange, verbal non sequiturs.

For many of the 80m+ viewers (not us political junkies who have been following Biden's trajectory since the 1970s), this was a moment of truth.

A second direct engagement was killed by Trump's unwillingness to engage virtually. Still, the two parallel town halls last week reinforced Biden's seriousness (or ponderousness) and command of detail....

By contrast, Trump task was to:

1. gather in and strengthen ties with his base;
2. win converts to his cause beyond his core;

3. And not give vent to favourite conspiracies or ad hom attacks.... ....**Epic fail.**

A major difference with the 2016 election, is that, realistically, how many people still remain undecided this time around? To whom are the candidates actually appealing? **As many as 71 million votes already cast.**

Thus, this election, in contrast to 2016, is a **referendum** on Trump's four years, rather than between two faces, neither of whom is yet in charge.

In contrast to 2016 as well, very few voters will be thinking about the real non-entities running for the **3rd or 4th parties** this year. In 2016, a last minute shrinkage of what had been a considerable **pool of undecideds seems to have made the difference.**

Still, with a national audience of 80m+ people, presumably they reached some people who, while eligible to vote, had not done so previously (young people and newly registered?). (With voting generally around 60% of eligible voters, there are still people to reach, hypothetically.)

*\*\*\* A brief sideways footnote in history. While Lincoln Douglas debates of 1858 are justly famous, the real precedent for presidential debates was in 1960 with Kennedy-Nixon debates. (Kennedy came across as more hawkish, and radio listeners thought Nixon had won, while Kennedy's demeanour and suntan etc made TV viewers see him as winner.) Now debates are feature of every campaign, but is their time over?.... \*\*\*\**

The failure of Chris Wallace of Fox News as moderator/questioner to keep a tight leash on that first debate, reopens the whole notion of debate structure, style, purpose.

Meanwhile, Savannah Guthrie for NBC's Trump town hall did show what a determined interviewer/moderator can do to put someone on the spot....

### **STATE OF THE RACE NOW**

Polling data indicates Biden maintains a substantial lead 10%+/- over the incumbent president.

But ....national polling doesn't tell the full tale (assuming they are accurate). The **swing states** matter (or states presumably returning to their more usual alignment) such as Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Ohio and now, Florida, Arizona, North Carolina, Iowa, perhaps Georgia and even Texas...

It is in those states where relatively smaller voting blocs can hold the key... Now these include: **suburban/college educated/white women; +65ers, black/brown voters.**

**Gender split is critical and here Biden has huge lead** — and this may be the ultimate answer... For Biden, there is a lead with women generally. (The president, has been going on about things like dishwasher water pressure or saving the suburbs — and that is not going to solve that)

We hear an enormous amount about polling, but.... Polls are not predictive, but descriptive. Many issues can vex them. Best to follow 538 poll of polls, the Economist analytics, similar efforts. Crucial to follow state by state polls because that's where it really matters (explain shortly).

Unlike in numerous recent elections, the nation may have to be reconciled to gaining a final answer in the days following Election Day on November 3, but not that night. Thus the possibility of mischief on the part of Trump thru all the obstructions, legal wrangling we have heard about.

A word about the electoral system itself. Essentially 50, 51 individual votes. Theoretically, win a state by one vote and you get the entire electoral weight of a state. That is why it mattered in 2000 in Florida.

270 of 538 (senate + house + 3 more for DC) electoral college delegate votes and you're it for the next four years. The Plato model for indirect selection....

Issues? They almost all centre on the Pandemic:

\*\*The economy connected to pandemic.

\*\*Health care? Connected to pandemic and seniors fears over ACA, Social Security, Medicare.

\*\* racially differential death rates from COVID

\*\*Law and order/ racial tumult/redress tied somehow to the economy.

\*\*But there is also, ecological/environmental fires, presidential chaos, \*\*TRUMP TAXES...

Biden wants to assert a return to normality, empathy and leadership. Trump wants to inflate the divisions to win allegiance.

Turnout is the great imponderable. The usual is around 60%. Getting votes the old-fashioned way, Trump became the 24% president.... mail-in/advance voting may mean a huge voter turnout this time.

DATA SAYS 45+ Millions HAVE ALREADY VOTED BY ADVANCE BALLOTING OR MAIL-INS, thus those votes are impervious to further information or shocks....

Crucial to remember the also up for election are one third of the Senate – that's 35 senators (23 GOP, 11 Dem seats up for grabs and thus control of Senate) – plus all 435 members of the House of Representatives, and thousands of other offices....

## **LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

Looking to the future, if there is a Biden administration, what are key elements of policy? Good for the US economy and thus the world's economic fortunes? How to rebuild trust with allies and adversaries alike? **First orders of business on 20 January?**

## **FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

I wrote the other day in the DM:

By the time Obama left office in 2017, the conversation about America's place in the world had become one of making the best possible accommodations in a world that was no longer dominated by the US.

Then, in 2017, as far as incoming president Donald Trump was concerned, he saw his task as, yes, the canard, "Make America great again" (whatever that really meant), but not, crucially, about any sense of dominating the world. As a result, it was "America first!", not "Fix the world!"

Or, as *New York Times* editorial board member and veteran foreign correspondent **Serge Schmemmann** reminded us just the other day:

**"The troubles of the world are not all Mr. Trump's doing. China's rise, Russia's machinations, the tenacity of Mr. Maduro [in Venezuela], the sectarian feuds in the Middle East and the new crop of authoritarian rulers were all underway before he was inaugurated, and would have taxed any president."**

Accordingly, whoever wins this election confronts the same set of realities and challenges.

Schmemmann goes on to say: **"...Many of the dominant currents of world affairs will not change as a result of a change of administration or tone in Washington. Russia will still meddle in foreign elections; China will demand a role commensurate with its wealth and military might; Europe will contribute too little for its defense; a reconfigured Middle East will still be buffeted by sectarian, social and ethnic divisions; North Korea and Iran will pursue their nuclear ambitions."**

Both Joe Biden and Donald Trump will be forced to address these same realities, regardless of their druthers. QED

**The challenge is to understand how they will choose to accept this reality of lessened influence, power, and respect and how they will respond to the global challenges that will be there, regardless. >>>And that, in turn, will affect the very different policies they choose to embrace to deal with America's diminished reality.**

For the Biden camp, it will likely be a need to accept — even embrace — the idea that full-on, flat-out globalisation and internationalisation in economic and trade relations has real trade-offs that can have negative impacts on big swathes of the nation's economy and workers. But globalisation is not necessarily the big evil. Disengagement is worse.

Biden policies will have something of the texture of a new, improved flavour Obama administration 2.0.

The Biden article in *Foreign Affairs* March/April 2020 gives some real detail of plans... ([https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again?utm\\_medium=promo\\_email&utm\\_source=special\\_send&utm\\_campaign=election\\_biden\\_foreign\\_policy\\_newsletter&utm\\_content=20201021&utm\\_term=newsletter-prerelease](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again?utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=special_send&utm_campaign=election_biden_foreign_policy_newsletter&utm_content=20201021&utm_term=newsletter-prerelease))

**Biden wrote:**

“By nearly every measure, the credibility and influence of the United States in the world have diminished since President Barack Obama and I left office on January 20, 2017. President Donald Trump has belittled, undermined, and in some cases abandoned U.S. allies and partners. He has turned on our own intelligence professionals, diplomats, and troops.

“He has emboldened our adversaries and squandered our leverage to contend with national security challenges from North Korea to Iran, from Syria to Afghanistan to Venezuela, with practically nothing to show for it. He has launched ill-advised trade wars, against the United States’ friends and foes alike, that are hurting the American middle class....

“Meanwhile, the global challenges facing the United States—from climate change and mass migration to technological disruption and infectious diseases—have grown more complex and more urgent....

“And the international system that the United States so carefully constructed is coming apart at the seams. Trump and demagogues around the world are leaning into these forces for their own personal and political gain.

“The next U.S. president will have to address the world as it is in January 2021, and picking up the pieces will be an enormous task. He or she will have to salvage our reputation, rebuild confidence in our leadership, and mobilize our country and our allies to rapidly meet new challenges. There will be no time to lose.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS for Biden in that article

### **REINVIGORATE DEMOCRACY**

“First and foremost, we must repair and reinvigorate our own democracy, even as we strengthen the coalition of democracies that stand with us around the world. The United States’ ability to be a force for progress in the world and to mobilize collective action starts at home....

### **A FOREIGN POLICY FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS**

“...my administration will equip Americans to succeed in the global economy—with a foreign policy for the middle class. To win the competition for the future against China or anyone else, the United States must sharpen its innovative edge and unite the economic might of democracies around the world to counter abusive economic practices and reduce inequality.

“Economic security is national security. Our trade policy has to start at home, by strengthening our greatest asset—our middle class—and making sure that everyone can share in the success of the country....

### **BACK AT THE HEAD OF THE TABLE**

“The Biden foreign policy agenda will place the United States back at the head of the table, in a position to work with its allies and partners to mobilize collective action on global threats. The world does not organize itself. For 70 years, the United States, under Democratic and Republican presidents, played a leading role in writing the rules, forging the

agreements, and animating the institutions that guide relations among nations and advance collective security and prosperity—until Trump....

### **PREPARED TO LEAD**

.... “We must once more harness that power and rally the free world to meet the challenges facing the world today. It falls to the United States to lead the way. No other nation has that capacity. No other nation is built on that idea. We have to champion liberty and democracy, reclaim our credibility, and look with unrelenting optimism and determination toward our future.”

Inevitably, this means a Biden administration would include a re-embrace and reengagement with the country’s alliance structures in Europe and East Asia as the most reliable, and, ultimately, most cost-effective means to counterbalance the ambitions of both Russia and China.

**My reading of this is that a Biden administration would reorder priorities back towards international efforts to deal with climate change, epidemiological disasters, and nuclear proliferation, more open trade regimens.**

**Specifically for Africa**, it is less clear, but a key question would be what will replace AGOA when it expires in 2025? More of a push for PowerAfrica? Negotiations with that still-amorphous All Africa Free Trade compact? At the minimum, just more attention? For those of you wanting to know more about security issues, I suspect more continuity than change, however.

Useful to remember that as a senator, Biden pushed hard for the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act in 1986, as seen in his challenge to the Reagan Administration as part of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on the subject. I believe he also made a presentation with SALLA on a trip to SA that articulated opposition to apartheid in the context of human rights... presumably Biden would give more attention to Africa generally.

Concurrently, **while a second term for Donald Trump would similarly be forced to address the diminished role and impact of the US globally** as described by Schmemmann, **Trump’s responses to these circumstances would continue the sharp inward turn away from engagement with the international community in any cooperative sense.**

Nadia Schadlow, former Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategy, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in the October/November issue: “Since the end of the Cold War, most U.S. policymakers have been beguiled by a set of illusions about the world order. On critical issues, they have seen the world as they wish it were and not how it really is. President Donald Trump, who is not a product of the American foreign policy community, does not labor under these illusions.

“Trump has been a disrupter, and his policies, informed by his heterodox perspective, have set in motion a series of long-overdue corrections. Many of these necessary adjustments have been misrepresented or misunderstood in today’s vitriolic, partisan debates. But the

changes Trump has initiated will help ensure that the international order remains favorable to U.S. interests and values and to those of other free and open societies.”

Closer to here, \*\*\* Investec’s Greg Cline said the other day, by contrast to previous support for AGOA, “While \$9 billion worth of trade is estimated to transact between the two countries, the Trump administration has reviewed the agreement and identified South Africa as being restrictive and as such, agreement renewal in its current form would not be guaranteed under a Trump administration.” \*\*\*\*

**A reliance on the trope of “Make America Great Again” would continue to insist on starkly transactional processes in foreign affairs.**

Again, I return to Schmemann:

If Biden is successful, “...the United States will have a chance to reclaim at least some of its moral authority, and his [Trump’s] coterie of wannabe dictators will feel less comfortable. Mr. Biden has already pledged to rejoin the Paris climate accord, and he is likely to re-enter other international forums and to take steps to repair relations with miffed allies.

**“If Mr. Trump is re-elected, he will conclude that he has a mandate to continue in his dysfunctional statesmanship, and the world will have no choice but to conclude that the past four years were not an aberration, but the United States they now have to deal with.”**

**This upcoming election really does offer a stark choice of governing styles.**

**But more than just style, the choice offers American voters a way to indicate which direction the country will turn in dealing with America’s more limited freedom of action, its constraint of choices, and an ability to affect the future of the globe.**

Brooks Spector  
[brooksinihb@gmail.com](mailto:brooksinihb@gmail.com)

+27 78 758 5932