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# **High Stakes: Election 2020 Will Define America's Future Path**

**Raza Rumi**

5<sup>th</sup> Floor Ali Plaza, Jinnah Avenue,  
Blue Area, Islamabad.  
Email: [info@pipk.org](mailto:info@pipk.org)  
Tel No: 051-8444830  
P.O.Box 3393  
GPO Islamabad



# **High Stakes: Election 2020 Will Define America's Future Path**

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**Islamabad Policy Institute, Pakistan**

## High Stakes: Election 2020 Will Define America's Future Path

By Raza Rumi\*

On 3 November 2020, Americans will elect their next president, but this is not the usual electoral contest. In many ways, this election will determine the nation's economic and political future. The country faces the choice of advancing Trumpian policies or accepting the centrist agenda of Jo Biden, the nominee of the Democratic Party. While both candidates have contrasting approaches to issues of national concern, from civil liberties to climate change, and from the coronavirus to healthcare, this election has turned out to be a bigger contest. In the words of Jo Biden, this is about the "soul of America." The civil society and the media in the U.S. echo this sentiment but they are faced with the Herculean challenge of defeating a large segment of the population that feels empowered by President Trump, his worldview and policies.

### What are the polls predicting?

Joe Biden has been ahead of Donald Trump in most national polls since the start of the year. He has hovered around 50% in recent months. After the final presidential debate, the [CNN poll](#) found 53% of viewers thought he had done a better job, while 39% favored Trump. A [YouGov snap poll](#) was similar, with 54% putting Biden ahead, compared to 35% for Trump. [FiveThirtyEight](#), a political analysis website, says Biden is "favored" to win the election, while [The Economist](#) projects he is "very likely" to beat Trump. The outcome could be very different from where the polls say right now. The volatility in the polls could actually translate on Election Day, [says](#) NPR's polling director Patrick Murray.

Though Joe Biden is [leading](#) Donald Trump in the national polls, that doesn't guarantee his victory. In 2016, Hillary Clinton also had a clear lead but she ended up losing in the electoral college<sup>1</sup>. As Hillary Clinton discovered in 2016, the number of votes won is [less important](#) than from where they're won. Some states, labeled as "red" and "blue," nearly always vote the same way, leaving as primary battlefields the swing states where both candidates stand a chance of winning. These are the places where the election will be won and lost.

### Vulnerabilities of Elections

As Election Day nears, more than half of the votes cast in 2016 have been polled. The FIA recently warned that some elements could spread disinformation. This is compounded by four key vulnerabilities [noted](#) by *Boston Review*: flawed infrastructure, organically generated conspiracies

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<sup>1</sup> The Electoral College is based on the number of reps and senators each state sends to Congress. Out of a total of 538 electoral college votes, a presidential candidate needs to have 270 to win. Large populous states have comparatively higher college votes, prompting presidential candidates to campaign harder and invest more resources in those states.

and public outcry, vulnerability to low-cost, unattributable system hacks, and susceptibility to trolls and bots. Altogether, these weaknesses jeopardize the security and integrity of the election system.

The reliability and transparency of the election system is questionable as heightened concerns on hacking, disruptions and technical glitches persist. The lapses in security could allow someone tamper with and compromise the results, thereby subverting elections. Donald Trump has repeatedly hinted about potential rigging, thus fanning mistrust of the election infrastructure. It is also notable that machines, not voters, register ballots. A [study](#) found that only 40 percent of voters double-checked their ballots, and on many occasions during the last decade, most recently during 2018 midterm elections, election software has broken down.

Secondly, due to the coronavirus, staffing for polling stations may be insufficient.

With systems breaking down, people could carve out conspiracy theories as to “what might have happened” during polling, as with the rumors echoed soon after the 2016 elections and Iowa Caucus. This year, there could be a prolonged delay in the reporting of results because counting mail ballots could take days, a week even. It will provoke voters to doubt whether each vote was counted. Not only voters, but journalists also tend to project tainted theories, spurred by the free and abundant flow of digital information.

System hacks present another infrastructure vulnerability, and they are difficult to attribute and trace. A small unnoticeable worm, SQL injection in 2016 [Russian hacking](#) case, can gain access to election administrators’ websites, or into state and local voter registration databases. Adversaries can also execute an even lower-tech hack [using 4Chan](#). Users on the platform, under anonymous accounts, engage in political trolling, jam phone lines, stretch waiting times (as with the 2020 Iowa caucus) and post comments to skew results. Similarly, denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks could be used to delay reporting on Election Night. Online trolls could exploit the incessant drive for quick results.

These vulnerabilities pose serious threat to reliability of elections and ought to be addressed by election officials.

### **Key Issues in Election 2020**

Be it climate change or the coronavirus, Trump has downplayed science-based projections, exaggerated COVID-19 “progress” and mocked masks, while Biden has come forward with a [“Let Science Drive Our Decisions”](#) narrative on the virus, which by far remains the foremost issue in the presidential race. In addition, climate change policy, immigration, civil rights, economy (primarily employment) and healthcare remain major issues. The Trump administration, as Barack Obama said in a recent rally, “completely screwed this [coronavirus pandemic] up.” The

rising cases and spiking fatalities did not ring alarm bells as the White House apparently gave up on COVID-19.

The Trump administration continued to introduce restrictive new policies to limit immigration and reduce the number of refugees and asylum seekers reaching the US, ultimately fanning xenophobia and racism. Gun violence incidents — such as [mass shootings in Parkland and Texas](#) — and police brutality with impunity — including [George Floyd's killing](#)<sup>2</sup> — saw a new spike, and white people calling police on Black bystanders became a new normal. About half a million “[March for Our Lives](#)” protestors were ridiculed as subjects of a conspiracy that they were [getting 'paid'](#) by the Left [Democrats].

### The Rural Vote

Over the past few years, America's meat industry has undergone tremendous mergers and concentration by a few companies, at the expense of farmers. The [Packers and Stockyards Act](#), antitrust legislation of 1921 designed to regulate meat companies, has not been effectively implemented. Weak government oversight has enabled farming families that incurred massive debt to go bankrupt. Farm bankruptcies increased 24% over 12 months, ending September 2019 with 580, up from 468 the previous year, and 627 for the 12-month period ending March 31, 2020, according to U.S. Bankruptcy Courts [data](#).

With fallen protective tariffs and competitive advantage, U.S. farmers receive less than 15 cents of every dollar consumers spend on food. Their futures are at risk; this is apparent from an unprecedented rise in farmer suicides. Joe Biden has attributed this to the Trump administration-led “[unmitigated tariff disaster](#)”.

Farmers and ranchers increasingly feel isolated and excluded. Trade deals made in current and previous administrations, according to the CEO of the Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund, [have favored large corporations](#) under the guise of “free trade.” This group identifies itself as conservative, and opposes abortion. But would economic concern outweigh such social issues? In the current climate, some disaffected Republican farmers are starting to jump ship. During his Iowa visit, “Trump's Policies Cause Farm Bankruptcies,” was the [billboard message](#) greeting Mike Pence in August. Chris Gibbs, the Ohio soybean grower behind the billboards, founded [Rural America 2020](#) — a group made to comprehensively highlight the rural community's plight, with an aim to change their minds amid intense social pressure to vote for Trump.

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<sup>2</sup> Floyd was choked to death within minutes with knee on his neck on May 25, 2020.

**What is at stake? The Future of American Democracy.**

The U.S. has enjoyed its esteemed status as a leader of democracy across the globe. But since Trump strode into the White House, there have been abundant fears and predictions on the fall of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism. History is [replete](#) with examples of the decline of democracies into authoritarian regimes with shrinking space to reverse engineer the trajectory if not addressed timely.

Trump has been pushing a narrative asserting that if he loses, it must be due to rigging — thus sowing seeds of distrust in institutions and election system, both of which are hallmarks of democracy. “There won’t be a transfer...”, he said answering a question about the [peaceful transfer of power](#). “I don’t think so...” is how he exhibited nonchalance about an American pillar that has remained intact since 1792. This raised many an eyebrow within Republican circles, though right-wing politicians are careful not to directly mention President Trump in criticism.

During the first presidential debate, President Trump did not condemn white supremacists and militia groups when asked to do. “[Stand down, Stand by](#)” was his response after facing backlash for not explicitly denouncing far-right groups. Earlier, in an exchange with a Fox News reporter on Sept 30, he had claimed that he had not heard of the white supremacist group Proud Boys. “...You’ll have to give me a definition because I really don’t know who they are...” he said. A large number of U.S. commentators [believe](#) that Trump’s presidency has been marred by an unprecedented, scandalous trail of misplaced statements, attacking civic liberties and free speech, calling journalism “fake news,” avoiding tough questions and attacking reporters. Independent groups have warned about the prospect of weakening democracy within the United States.

Freedom House, a nonprofit human rights watchdog that monitors democracy globally, raised questions in its [2020 annual report](#) about American democracy: “In recent years its democratic institutions have suffered erosion, as reflected in partisan manipulation of the electoral process, bias and dysfunction in the criminal justice system, flawed new policies on immigration and asylum seekers, and growing disparities in wealth, economic opportunity, and political influence.”

The road of democratic decline is not always an inevitable path that ends with a strongman regime. The current elections have witnessed an extraordinary turnout. Many Americans realize that it’s an election that won’t on affect America, but the world. Aside from economic well-being and liberal-conservative divides, America’s democratic future, its global standing and its fabled reputation as the “land of opportunity” are at stake.

	POLLING LEADER	IF POLLS ARE AS WRONG AS THEY WERE IN...	
		2016	2012
U.S.	+9 <b>Biden</b>	+7	+12
N.H.	+11 <b>Biden</b>	+7	+14
Wis.	+10 <b>Biden</b>	+4	+13
Minn.	+9 <b>Biden</b>	+3	+11
Mich.	+8 <b>Biden</b>	+4	+14
Neb. 2*	+7 <b>Biden</b>	+11	+2
Nev.	+6 <b>Biden</b>	+8	+9
Pa.	+6 <b>Biden</b>	+1	+7
Maine 2*	+5 <b>Biden</b>	+8	+10
Ariz.	+4 <b>Biden</b>	+2	+2
Iowa	+3 <b>Biden</b>	+1	+7
Fla.	+2 <b>Biden</b>	<1	+4
N.C.	+2 <b>Biden</b>	+3	+3
Ga.	+2 <b>Biden</b>	<1	+2
Ohio	+2 <b>Trump</b>	+8	+1
Texas	+3 <b>Trump</b>	+5	<1

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NYTimes US Polls Averages

*\*Raza Rumi is a policy analyst, journalist, and an educationist. He is the founding editor of Nayadaur Media and a member of IPI's Board.*