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# Evaluating American Democracy

## Session 20

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17.263: American Elections

# Roadmap

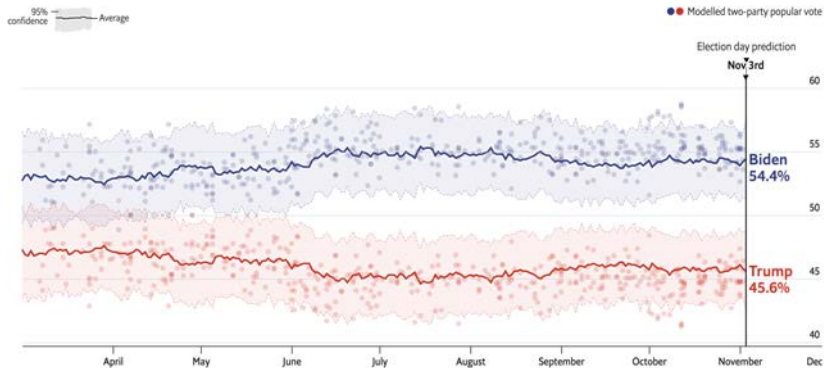
[What Happened](#)

[Evaluating the Election](#)

[What Can We Expect](#)

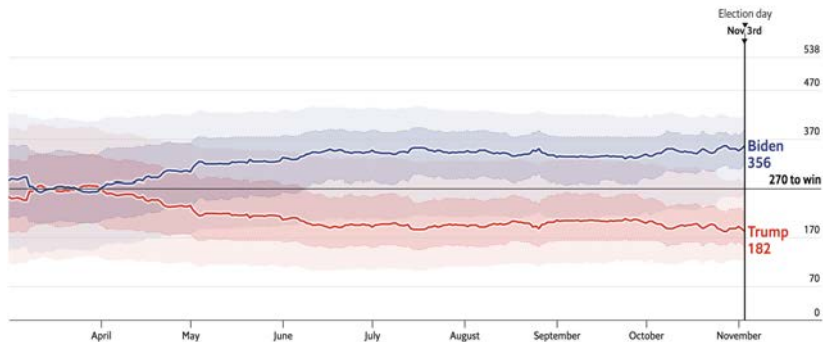
# What Happened

# The Economist's Presidential Forecast

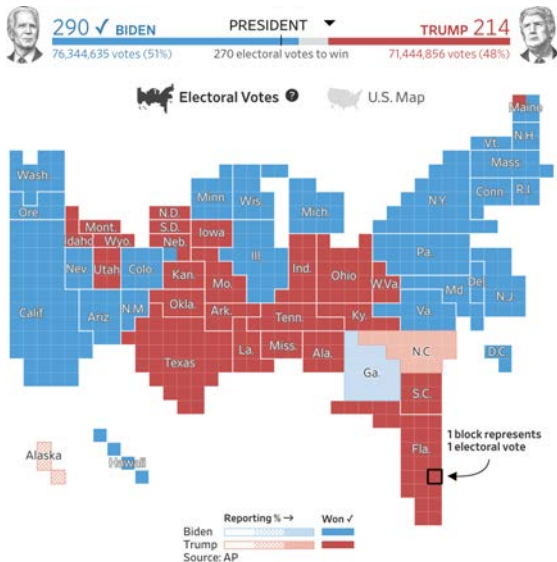


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# The Economist's Presidential Forecast



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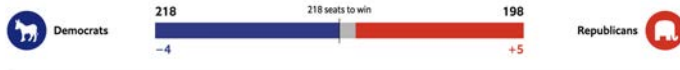


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## House Democrats hold majority

At 6:11 AM GMT November 9th, 90% of votes counted



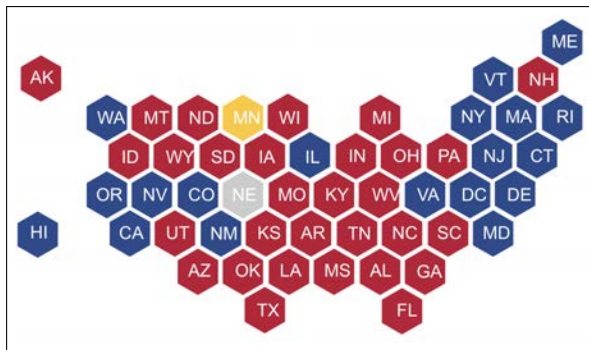
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## State Governments

Stasis, except NH legislature (D → R) and MT governor (D → R).  
(AK and AZ legislatures are uncalled but will probably remain R.)

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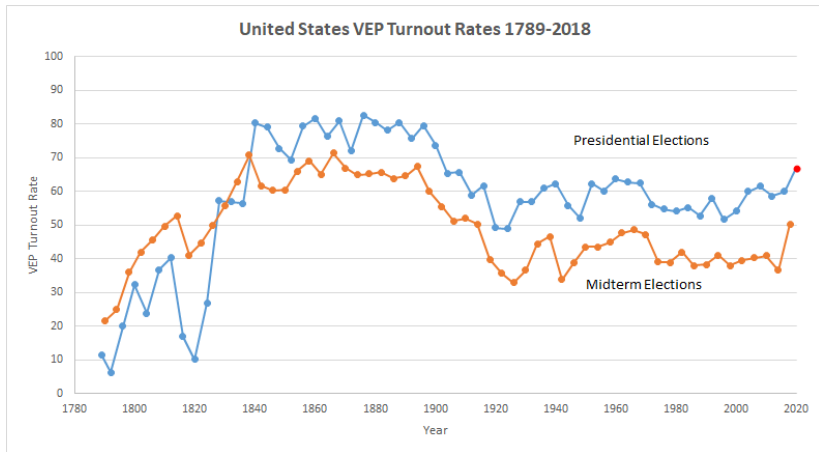
Partisan control of state legislatures

## Summary of Likely Party Control

- ▶ **President and Vice-President:** Democratic
- ▶ **US House:** ~225–210 Democratic
- ▶ **US Senate:** 52–48 Republican (assuming they win GA runoffs)
- ▶ **State Control:** 25 Republican (+4) and 15 Democratic (+0)

# Evaluating the Election

# Record Turnout



"National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present." United States Elections Project. © [Electproject.org](https://electproject.org). All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

## A Surprisingly Smooth Election

Despite the challenges posed by surging turnout in the midst of pandemic, from the perspective of election administration 2020 was surprisingly smooth, at least relative to worst fears.

- ▶ Despite USPS foot-dragging, almost all **mail ballots** reached their destination and fewer than average were invalidated due to error.
- ▶ Few accounts of **intimidation** or violence at polling places.
- ▶ No credible evidence of consequential **fraud** or counting irregularities.

## But a Disconcerting Transition

### FOX NEWS

Biden wins presidency, Trump denied second term in White House, Fox News projects



Hillary Clinton concedes presidential election to Donald Trump: 'We must accept this result'

Former secretary of state addresses supporters to formally concede election a day after Donald Trump pulled off stunning victory

Refusing to concede, Trump blocks cooperation on transition

**LIVE** Republicans back Trump as he refuses to concede

President Trump is refusing to admit losing the election to Joe Biden, making unsubstantiated fraud claims.

US election: Justice lawyer quits after attorney general orders 'vote fraud' inquiries

See slide 23 for credits.

## Warning Signs for American Democracy

- ▶ As we discussed early in the term, one of the most important functions of democracy is providing for peaceful transitions of power.
- ▶ This coordinating function depends on widespread acceptance of the **legitimacy** of election outcomes.
- ▶ Trump's baseless allegations of fraud are dangerous because they undermine his supporters' willingness to accept the outcome.
- ▶ As has happened so often, Trump's refusal to abide by traditional norms (e.g., conceding, facilitating the transition) has revealed the **fragility of democratic norms** and the degree to which they depend on **informal enforcement** (e.g., by the media).

# The Message of the Election

If the 2020 election is voice of the people, what did they say?



# What Can We Expect

## Election Outcomes Matter

- ▶ Due to politicians' incentives to cater to swing voters and barriers to large, consequential policy changes (e.g., ACA repeal), election outcomes rarely have a huge effect on peoples' lives.
- ▶ Nevertheless, Democratic and Republican politicians do take (increasingly) divergent policy positions, even when representing identical constituencies, and they generally seek to implement these positions in office.
- ▶ It's also important to remember that elections are not just about ideology and policy, but style and competence as well.

## A Very Different President

Biden will clearly govern very differently than Trump

- ▶ A return to traditional norms of presidential behavior
- ▶ Executive orders on climate, DACA, “Muslim ban”, etc.
- ▶ Appointment of very different judges and executive officials
- ▶ Vetoes of conservative efforts such as ACA repeal, and support for liberal ones such as (moderate) policing reform.

## Congress: Pivots and Gridlock

Biden's power will be severely constrained by Congress.

- ▶ Under current rules, passage of ordinary legislation requires the assent of a majority in the US House (thus a very moderate Democrat) as well as 60 votes in the Senate (thus a conservative Republican, if the bill moves policy leftward).
- ▶ There are very few policy proposals that, if considered individually, satisfy these conditions (and would receive Biden's approval).
- ▶ Ominibus legislating
- ▶ Little chance of filibuster reform.

In addition, the GOP-controlled Senate will almost certainly delay or block Biden's judicial and executive appointments, especially to the Supreme Court.

- ▶ Interim appointments likely

## States: Another Decade of Republican Dominance

- ▶ Republicans strengthened their dominant position in the states just in time for another round of redistricting.
- ▶ Republican control of redistricting not as complete as 2010, but still substantial (and getting more aggressive).
- ▶ Major policy shifts unlikely, but liberal initiatives blocked.

## Looking ahead to 2022

- ▶ Large turnout drop-off
- ▶ Midterm loss likely to be modest
- ▶ Chance for Democratic takeover of Senate due to favorable map

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Lemire, Jonathan, and Zeke Miller. "[Refusing to Concede, Trump Blocks Cooperation on Transition.](#)" The Associated Press, November 9, 2020. © The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

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Zurcher, Anthony. "[US Election: Justice Lawyer Quits After Attorney General Orders 'Vote Fraud' Inquiries.](#)" BBC. November 10, 2020. © BBC. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

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