

# And the World Hangs by a Thread

***By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies***

As I write this I am still somewhat astounded by the thought that Donald Trump could still win the presidential run-off, given how (unexpectedly) tight the contest remains, with only two million votes separating the candidates and results in key swing states such as Pennsylvania and Wisconsin (which Trump won in 2016) yet to come in...

Trump has been widely castigated for falsely claiming victory despite trailing in the popular vote and in the Electoral College tally needed to secure a victory, and also in terms of trying to stop votes from being counted if were not tallied by today.<sup>[1]</sup> Such actions only fuel concerns that Trump will contest any attempt to remove him from office, should he lose.

Should I be astounded though? Trump winning the contest in Florida shouldn't come as a surprise, given its high proportion of retirees, who as a cohort are more likely to vote Republican. However, I (like many others) thought that Trump's handling of Covid-19 might have led to a more emphatic vote for Biden.

I guess that one should not underestimate the notion that "freedom" or "liberty" count more with significant proportions of the US electorate than accepting restrictions to combat a lethal virus, as seen with the protests of far-right groups thereof.

However at a more prosaic level, the Trump vote I would suggest reinforces reasons for voting Republican for that segment of the US who are well-off and therefore well-shielded from Covid-19, own assets and regard the Democrats as ravenous socialists who will stop at nothing to tax them and deprive them of their freedoms.

And add to this the toxic element of race in American politics and one can therefore see the continued appeal of Trump to large swathes of the population. The rest of the world can only wait with baited breath for the outcome of this contest.

The US President of course is ultimately determined by an 'Electoral College', a grouping comprised of varying numbers of representatives of each of the 50 states (the individual numbers for a state of which are based on population). There are 500 Electoral College votes in total and 270 of these are needed for a candidate to become president.

To get a state's Electoral College votes you only need a bare majority of votes in a state and you get ALL the votes of that state, whether you win it by one vote or a million. It is this mechanism that resulted in Donald Trump winning the Presidency in 2016 (and George W Bush in 2000), despite polling fewer votes than Hilary Clinton.

The awaited results in Wisconsin and Nevada (where Biden currently leads in the votes cast) will be crucial, as Trump leads in the other undeclared states to date.[\[2\]](#)

However, there are also contests going on in that second arm of the US Government; the legislature[\[3\]](#), in the form of Congress, with its two chambers, the House of Representatives (lower House) and the Senate (upper House).

In the House of Representatives, which comprises 435 Congressional Districts; the make-up of which is broadly weighted to a State's population (California, the largest state, elects 53 representatives, whilst North Dakota and Alaska for example elect 1)[\[4\]](#), the Democrats look set to increase their majority.

In contrast, the Republicans look likely to retain a majority in the Senate. The Senate comprises two Senators for each of the 50 states, so the makeup of it is inherently slanted toward smaller states. Wyoming, for example, with approximately 600,000 people, elects the same number of Senators as California, with a population in excess of 40 million. Thus the Senate is more difficult for the Democrats to win, and weighs disproportionately toward smaller, conservative, rural white states.

What does all this mean then for the rest of the world, and the UK in particular?

If Trump pulls off an unlikely victory, then he will have to continue to negotiate with a hostile House of Representatives, which has the power to veto trade agreements that he might sign, with the obvious example of the UK currently in the spotlight.

More generally, whilst the President can veto legislation passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate, the two Houses can override a Presidential veto if they both vote by a two-thirds majority to do so. However in practice, at the current point in time, this is unlikely to arise given the prospective make up of them in comprising Congress. Hence, the famous system of “checks and balances”.[\[5\]](#)

So the thrust of US domestic policy then continues to be shrouded in uncertainty, not least in terms of combatting Covid-19 and putting forward policies to assist (e.g., direct financial support) those Americans whose livelihoods have been displaced by the pandemic.

As I have written previously though[\[6\]](#), one area where we can expect continuity in terms of foreign policy is the US’s strategic rivalry with China and the manifest tensions that this has entailed. Similarly, in trade terms, differences with the EU will continue over areas such as agricultural produce and environmental standards.

However, a Trump victory would represent an enormous setback for progressive causes around the world, be it in terms of combatting covid-19, reducing inequality and tackling climate change – here possibly terminally so, given the critical juncture at which the world has reached in terms of climate tipping points.

For Brexit Britain, the stakes are high for the Johnson Government if Trump loses and the prospects of a trade agreement with the United States diminish. For it is pretty clear that the Democrats regard Johnson, Brexit and Trump as all cut from the same cloth and he could expect a chill wind to blow from across the Atlantic should Biden be confirmed over the coming days.

The world indeed hangs by a thread as this contest plays out....

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[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/04/donald-trump-election-joe-biden-vote-count>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2020/nov/03/us-election-2020-live-results-donald-trump-joe-biden-who-won-presidential-republican-democrat>

[3] The third being the Judiciary, namely the Supreme Court, which arbitrates on upholding the US Constitution.

[4] <https://www.britannica.com/topic/United-States-House-of-Representatives-Seats-by-State-1787120>

[5] <https://www.archives.gov/files/legislative/resources/education/veto/background.pdf>

[6] <https://news360.tv/en/world/the-us-presidential-election-what-will-it-mean-for-international-community/>