

Biden may be in the White House, but ‘Trumpism’ isn’t going anywhere

By David Hearne, Researcher, Centre for Brexit Studies

For better or for worse, the United States of America is a colossus astride the world. The election of Joe Biden therefore has ramifications for all of us. The beginning of the Biden administration has seen a flurry of executive orders aimed at dismantling the Trump legacy.

Yet things are not that easy. Whilst it is tempting to see Biden’s election as a wholesale repudiation of “Trumpism”, reality is rather more nuanced. As we’ve noted previously on this blog, in 2020 Donald Trump received the second most votes of any presidential candidate in American history (surpassed only by Biden himself).

Whilst some of this is undoubtedly driven by strong population growth, that is far from the whole story. The reality is that Trump is hugely popular. He is also not as dissimilar from previous administrations as is sometimes made out.

Consider George W. Bush – another recent president who was lampooned for his frequent gaffes and left power in the midst of a historic crisis. He, too, came to power on the back of a movement to put “America First” (although the language might have been less crude).

Certainly, there are differences: as a former governor of Texas Bush assiduously courted the votes of Latin Americans. From a policy perspective, the Trump presidency was less distinctive than his rhetoric might suggest.

Whilst the Trump presidency undoubtedly took a harder line on legal migration and existing undocumented migrants, he was hardly the first president to issue a call to “secure our borders”. Bush, too, was “committed to building hundreds of miles of integrated, tactical infrastructure along the Southern border” [\[1\]](#). It might not have the rhetorical resonance of “build the wall” but the policy direction was clear.

Previous presidents, too, whilst they might have preached the gospel of free trade abroad on a Sunday were only too happy to engage in protectionism on the Monday. The Reagan years, for example, were characterised by a series of “voluntary export restraints” of trade partners and restrictions on certain trade (e.g. textiles).

As for other areas of social conservatism, the gap between Trump and his Republican predecessors was even smaller. Likewise, whilst Trump’s commitment to respecting democratic outcomes clearly leaves something to be desired, the practice of gerrymandering is commonplace and something of a travesty^[2].

Where Trump differed from his predecessors was in his bellicosity and, perhaps, his honesty. Trump discarded any pretence of “free trade”, instead appealing directly to those who felt disadvantaged and disenfranchised by the process of untrammelled globalisation.

His trade policy was not a break from the past – remember the Bush steel tariffs? – but his rhetoric certainly was. Likewise, Trump’s “wall” might have been merely an extension of what was already there, but his stridency was new.

Not for Trump the circumlocutory talk over border control and “managed” legal migration. Trump was blunt, upfront and belligerent: Mexican immigrants were “rapists”. As a style, it grated with both other world leaders and many Americans.

Yet Trump was expressing openly what had previously been alluded to. For all the talk about “securing our borders” (plural), everybody knew *which* border was being referred to. There was certainly no clamour to install new border infrastructure and fences on the northern border...

In contrast, Biden has often been spoken of as a centrist and conciliator. Certainly, his inauguration speech sought to reach out to opponents in a way that Trump never did. We can certainly expect abrupt policy reversals in a number of areas and a return to pragmatic leadership, at least in those areas not constrained by a wafer-thin majority in Congress.

Yet what are the broader lessons? Firstly, the recent past is not an aberration and neither is the United States. Every political movement is unique – Boris Johnson is not Donald Trump and nor is Viktor Orbán. Yet there are important parallels.

A willingness to ride roughshod over established process and violate protocols is one of them. “Alternative facts” Those movements labelled as “populist” all share a common commitment to greater national sovereignty. All seek to speak to those for whom globalisation has been far from an unalloyed good.

Usually, the twin areas highest on the list are trade^[3] and migration. Not coincidentally, these are the two areas most closely bound up with Brexit. For some, concerns over migration amount to outright hostility, particularly towards certain migrant groups.

The second key lesson is not to see this as binary. As humans, we like to categorise things: good or bad, populist or centrist, black or white. Our language doesn't help: “in 2016, America voted for Trump, in 2020 America voted for Biden” conceals more than it illuminates.

After all, it's reasonable to surmise that the overwhelming majority of those who voted for Biden in 2020 also voted for Clinton in 2016. Those individuals have not changed and nor have their political views.

In 2016, Clinton won 48.2% of the vote, in 2020 Biden won 51.3% – an incremental shift. Trump's vote share actually *increased* between 2016 and 2020 (from 46.1% to 46.9%), not that you'd realise it from media coverage. This has lessons for all of us. Trumpism and its analogues elsewhere are not going away.

[1] <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/stateoftheunion/2007/initiatives/immigration.html>

[2] Respect for democratic outcomes abroad is another interesting case in point, although the US is far from unusual in this regard.

[3] In some cases this rather naturally spills into areas where economic policy is shared. Tensions within the Eurozone are the most obvious example.