



Review of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election and Contested American Democracy

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How to look at the 2020 U.S. presidential election

Finally, Biden declared victory on the 7th. A close race in the beginning turned into Biden's victory as votes were counted. The decision was made in Pennsylvania. The exceedingly and unusually close race delayed the confirmation of victory, caused some to deny the defeat, and ultimately produced irrevocable polarization in American society. It is necessary to look at two key dimensions to understand the 2020 U.S. presidential election - extreme partisanship and the COVID-19 pandemic environment.

Polarization and the highest voter turnout

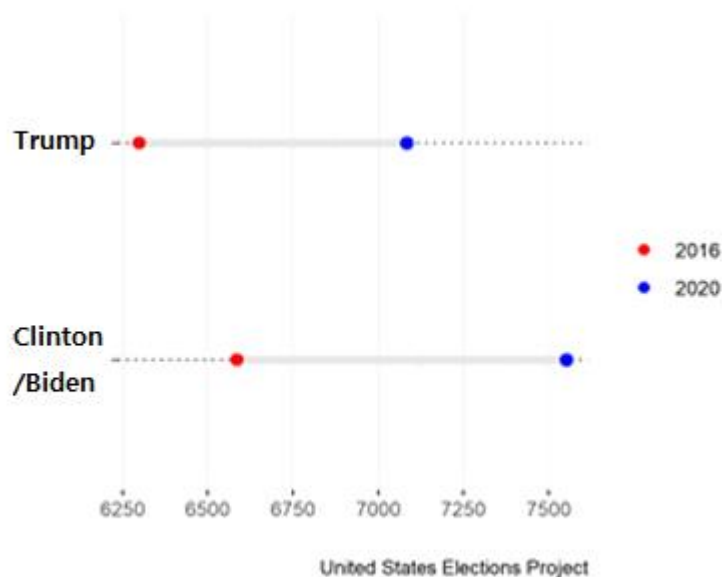
This presidential election will be recorded as an evaluation of the Trump administration's 4 years. For the last 4 years, President Trump broke away from international conventions and traditional patterns as he administered domestic and international affairs. He focused on politics for the constituents that supported him and not all Americans under the slogan of rebuilding the U.S. Trump's identity-centered politics worsened the long-standing clash, and polarization was at its highest. This election was an assessment of Trump for the swing voters in the middle and the supporters of the Democratic Party.

A tale of two cities in the U.S.

As the election processed and the results showed, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party are two cities in the U.S. These two cities grew apart since the elec-

tion of Trump and developed an irreparable relationship through this election. The winners and the losers of 2016 were swapped, yet the competition became fiercer than ever. Fierce competition in elections led to an increase of participation. About 16 million more Americans were mobilized to vote in the 2020 election than in the 2016 election. This voter turnout is found to be the highest. The total number of U.S. voters in 2020 is about 240 million. About 158 million people voted, and the voter turnout is estimated to be 66.4 percent. This is the highest voter turnout since 73.7 percent in 1900. Given that the 1900 election ruled out African Americans, this election has the highest voter turnout.

Figure 1: Registered Voters' Supporting Votes (10,000 unit)



43 states had higher voter turnouts this year than in 2016. Minnesota had the highest voter turnout with 81 percent. <Figure 1> shows that both Trump and Biden received more votes than Trump and Clinton received in 2016. In 2016, Clinton won about 65 million votes and Trump won about 63 million votes. In 2020, Biden received 9.7 million more votes than Clinton received. President Trump also received about 7.8 million more votes than he did in 2016.

Why did politics become so extremely divergent? In-group and out-group

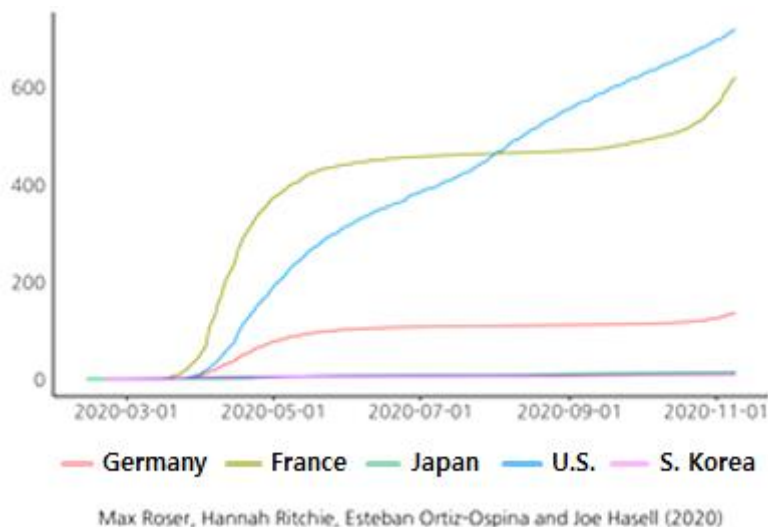
The most important aspect of the 2020 presidential election was the COVID-19 pandemic. The election would have favored the current president if there was no pandemic. Individual voters do not vote in a way of seeking a rational self-interest. Whom would the voters blame for the pandemic or other disasters other than the ruling party or the current president?

Political science has proposed two criteria for electorate's voting behavior. One con-

cerns the evaluation of the ruling government's administration performance. Good achievements of the ruling party results in reappointment and misrule leads to defeat. Hence, voters and citizens choose a president who is good at work. This is the Downsian tradition of injecting economic calculus into political science. Therefore, the outbreak of the pandemic severely disadvantages Trump. When the ruling party faces floods, famine, and pandemics that are beyond the control of the government, it is likely to lose in the democratic election.

The second school emphasizes the socio-psychological foundation of candidate selection. Individuals follow their own collective identity closely associated with social identity, and partisanship reflects group identity. In general, political identity forms during adolescence and lasts until death. As individuals' preference stems from their long-lasting emotional ties, these individuals support their favorite party no matter how much the party misrules. They observe objective facts subjectively through a lens of identity. In a word, an election is a conflict between group identities.

Figure 2: Confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people



The crisis of American democracy

As the conflict between camps based on in-group biases became more adversarial, the harmful effects of two-party competition, which is a zero-sum conflict, became serious. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic that favored the opposition party, President Trump earned a lot of support defying general predictions by the various polls. Although the pandemic swept the entire country, there was no sense of patriotism that generally forms.

President Trump did not actively deal with the pandemic which was more dangerous than he believed; he failed to achieve “national unity.” The number of confirmed cases exceeded 100,000 every day, and the number of deaths exceeded 250,000. It was im-

possible to expect victory in these circumstances (Figure 2). Nonetheless, polarization and partisanship favored Trump. Republican or Trump supporters followed Trump's argument and believed that economic recovery was more important than the prevention of pandemic, yet political partisanship could not overcome the fear of pandemic. During the 2020 presidential election, both the theory of government's responsibility of the pandemic and the in-group bias worked simultaneously. As shown in the denial of the results of presidential election, American democracy is showing signs of crisis due to the polarization revealed during the election process. Firstly, the president-elect is still not receiving procedural support, and the current president filed a legal suit. The launch of the new government is unlikely to go smoothly. Secondly, contrary to expectations, the Democratic Party failed to dominate the Congress and especially the Senate. It will be difficult to form a cabinet as Biden and the Democratic Party wish due to the challenge from the Republican Party in confirmation hearings. The Georgia Senate runoff that will be held on January 5 next year will be a tipping point for the future of the Biden administration. ❖

※ *Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.*

※ *This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.*