



The 2020 United States Presidential Election is undeniably one of the most important to take place during our lifetimes.

Its impact will reach across not only the vast expanse of America but globally. America's future is at stake amid an ongoing global pandemic, financial and economic crises, and a social justice awakening taking place across the country. *Battlegrounds: An Insider Guide to the 2020 US Presidential Election* addresses some of the most pressing and challenging issues of this election: the 2016 electorate compared to that of 2020, what the polls in battleground States are telling us, the influence of COVID-19 on campaigning methods, a breakdown of key issues, the contours of the presidential debates between Trump and Biden, and what will ultimately decide US election 2020.

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Contents

**INTRODUCTION ([HTTPS://WWW.CURTINRC.ORG/BATTLEGROUND-
US-2020/#INTRODUCTION](https://www.curtinrc.org/battlegrounds-us-2020/#introduction))**

**ELECTORATE 2020 VS 2016
([HTTPS://WWW.CURTINRC.ORG/BATTLEGROUND-
US-2020/#ELECTORATE-2020-VS-2016](https://www.curtinrc.org/battlegrounds-us-2020/#electorate-2020-vs-2016))**

**WHAT ARE THE POLLS IN BATTLE GROUND STATES TELLING US?
([HTTPS://WWW.CURTINRC.ORG/BATTLEGROUND-
US-2020/#POLLS-IN-BATTLEGROUND-STATES](https://www.curtinrc.org/battlegrounds-us-2020/#polls-in-battleground-states))**

**COVID-19 AND CAMPAIGNING
([HTTPS://WWW.CURTINRC.ORG/BATTLEGROUND-
US-2020/#COVID-19-AND-CAMPAIGNING](https://www.curtinrc.org/battlegrounds-us-2020/#covid-19-and-campaigning))**

**TRUMP'S CAMPAIGN STRATEGY
([HTTPS://WWW.CURTINRC.ORG/BATTLEGROUND-
US-2020/#TRUMP-CAMPAIGN-STRATEGY](https://www.curtinrc.org/battlegrounds-us-2020/#trump-campaign-strategy))**

**BIDEN'S CAMPAIGN STRATEGY
([HTTPS://WWW.CURTINRC.ORG/BATTLEGROUND-
US-2020/#BIDEN-CAMPAIGN-STRATEGY](https://www.curtinrc.org/battlegrounds-us-2020/#biden-campaign-strategy))**

**ISSUE ENVIRONMENT 2020
([HTTPS://WWW.CURTINRC.ORG/BATTLEGROUND-
US-2020/#ISSUE-ENVIRONMENT-2020](https://www.curtinrc.org/battlegrounds-us-2020/#issue-environment-2020))**

**DEBATES 2020 ([HTTPS://WWW.CURTINRC.ORG/BATTLEGROUND-
US-2020/#DEBATES-2020](https://www.curtinrc.org/battlegrounds-us-2020/#debates-2020))**

**DECIDING ELECTION 2020
([HTTPS://WWW.CURTINRC.ORG/BATTLEGROUND-
US-2020/#DECIDING-ELECTION-2020](https://www.curtinrc.org/battlegrounds-us-2020/#deciding-election-2020))**

**CONCLUSION ([HTTPS://WWW.CURTINRC.ORG/BATTLEGROUND-
US-2020/#CONCLUSION](https://www.curtinrc.org/battlegrounds-us-2020/#conclusion))**

Introduction

As an operative who has been working in US Democratic politics for three decades, I was always told that the current election was the most important election of our lifetime, until the next election of course. On October 2, we find ourselves 33 days out from US National Election Day 2020, and it is undeniably one of the most important of our lifetime. As individuals are still registering to vote and others already voting, the United States finds itself faced with a critical decision: who will be the

President of the United States of America? In addition, and of equal importance, we have simultaneous elections for state Governor, statewide elections, the Senate and Congress, state legislatures, and municipal elections happening all over the country on November 3.

Our future is at stake amid a global pandemic, a financial crisis, and a social justice awakening taking place across our country. In politics, 33 days can fly by at the speed of light and, at the same time, drag on for eternity. This discussion paper will address some of the most pressing and challenging topics of this election: the 2016 electorate compared to that of 2020, what the polls in battleground States are telling us, the influence of COVID-19 on campaigning methods, how the environment matters, the contours of the presidential debates, and what will ultimately decide election 2020.

Our party conventions are over, the summer has petered out, and we are all in election mode – engaging voters, debating issues, investing key resources, and of course, showing the contrast between the two presidential tickets. There are thousands of races happening across the US.

Operatives know races are not won by trying to prosecute the last one. Many things have changed since our last national election: the candidates, major issues, political environment, electorate, and tactics available to reach voters, and voting systems. We may not know the victor on election night. Yet there are some things we do know heading into the final days. The recent passing of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg will ultimately have some impact on the race, whether it is in the message of the importance of this election, the powerful role presidents have in nominating these positions, or if they will affect turnout numbers for both Republicans and Democrats with all that is at stake. We know the deep divides that have opened up during this election will be amplified the closer we get to election day, and there will be newly elected officials in our country in 2021.

Electorate 2020 vs 2016

The voting electorate in 2020 is different than the one that voted in 2016. The US is still deeply divided by race and ethnicity, education, gender, age, and religion. According to research by the Pew Research Center, in its early snapshot of the 2020 electorate states, about half (49%) of registered voters say they are very or fairly satisfied with the presidential candidates, while (48%) say they are not too or not at all satisfied. Voter satisfaction with the candidates is higher than it was in 2016 when just 40% expressed satisfaction. Whether this indicates Joe Biden's support is less of a protest vote against Donald Trump or an indicates genuine support for his campaign remains to be seen.¹

Not only are voters' attitudes toward the candidates different, but the actual demographics of the electorate have changed as well. Communities of color have a more significant share of the electorate. Non-whites will account for a third of eligible voters – their largest share of voters on record – driven by long-term increases among certain groups, especially Hispanics. The 2020 election will mark the first time that Hispanics will be the largest racial or ethnic minority group in the electorate, accounting for just over 13% of eligible voters – slightly more than African Americans – up from 9% in the 2008 presidential election and 7% in 2000.² How these constituencies will vote in

2020 is a moot question. With only a few months to go, concerns have been expressed that the Biden campaign does not have the requisite support in the Hispanic community to win.³ Polling indicates that Trump is doing better with Hispanics than he did four years ago, signaling potential trouble for the Biden campaign which needs votes from the Hispanic community. Hillary Clinton won a majority of Hispanic voters in 2016, and she was ahead with this cohort of voters by 37 points against Trump in an average of the final pre-election polls.⁴

The Biden campaign is focused on Hispanic voters, campaigning especially in Florida, and using microtargeting to reach Hispanic voters with a message of economic opportunity and investment in the community. Simultaneously outside groups are ramping up messages of support with advertisements targeting the community. The Lincoln Project, an anti-Trump Republican group, is beefing up its Hispanic outreach in swing states, pouring millions into the presidential election.⁵

There has also been a shift in the percentage of generational voters by segment in 2020. One-in-ten eligible voters are members of Generation Z, Americans aged between 18 and 23 on election day. Millennials and all other older generations account for a smaller share of eligible voters than they did in 2016. We know older adults are more likely to turn out to vote in 2020. Even though Boomers and older generations accounted for 43% of eligible voters in 2016, they cast 49% of the ballots.⁶

The Biden campaign strategy will need to make a series of carefully executed plays, including cutting into Trump's margins with rural and ex-urban voters in states from the Upper Midwest to Florida. They will need to make sure African American, Latino, and Asian American turnouts are strong in the Sun Belt and Rust Belt states and appeal to a subset of voters where Democrats have been racking up big wins lately: suburban voters (especially women) who may have voted for Mitt Romney in 2012 but are wary of Trump. And finally, maybe the biggest play of all, the Biden campaign must win or at least significantly cut into the president's margins with older voters, a traditionally more conservative and reliable bloc that suddenly seems to be turning away from the president.⁷

What are the polls in battleground states telling us?

For the past several months, the Biden campaign has been leading in national polls. However, when we examine his support in the states which will make a difference in the electoral college vote – so-called battleground states – the contest is tighter in these places than what is reflected nationally. States like Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Arizona are close, and some even within the margin of error. It will be imperative for the Biden team to increase the lead in these critical states, focusing on communities of color, older voters where they need to increase their vote share, and suburban voters that proved essential for many Democrats during the 2018 midterm elections.

Top Battlegrounds: Trump vs. Biden⁸

RCP Average	Date	Biden (D)	Trump (R)	Spread
Top Battlegrounds	9/17	48.7	45.1	Biden +3.7
Florida (https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2020/president/fl/florida_trump_vs_biden-6841.html)	September 17th	48.7	47.1	Biden +1.6
Pennsylvania (https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2020/president/pa/pennsylvania_trump_vs_biden-6861.html)	September 17th	49	44.7	Biden +4.3
Michigan (https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2020/president/mi/michigan_trump_vs_biden-6761.html)	September 17th	47.8	43.6	Biden +4.2
Wisconsin (https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2020/president/wi/wisconsin_trump_vs_biden-6849.html)	September 17th	50.1	43.4	Biden +6.7
North Carolina (https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2020/president/nc/north_carolina_trump_vs_biden-6744.html)	September 17th	47.6	46.7	Biden +0.9
Arizona (https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2020/president/az/arizona_trump_vs_biden-6807.html)	September 17th	49.2	45.0	Biden +4.2

COVID-19 and campaigning

At their core campaigns are and always have been a conversation with voters. How are these conversations interacting with the global pandemic playing out across the United States?

The spread of the virus and government responses may significantly impact the 2020 electoral cycle in terms of the (1) pre-electoral period (training, information, and voter registration), (2) electoral period (nominations, campaigns, voting, and results), and (3) the post-electoral period (review, reform, and strategies). Under normal circumstances, these elements would be in place to provide the appropriate processes, provide information opportunities for voters, and to conduct elections in ways

that allow full participation and legitimate results.⁹ In these disruptive times, COVID-19 means that staff are working remotely, voter contact happening over the internet, and candidates are not traveling to key states or meeting with voters at the frequency or pace seen in past elections.

Of the significant challenges remaining are the partisan divide and how voting methods should be executed to ensure voters' safety and security in all states, territories, and overseas voting. Many cite the accessibility and safety involved in mail-in voting while others point to the potentiality of voter fraud. Early indicators are that most of mail-in ballots would come from Democratic voters and election day voting from Republicans. Why is this significant? This would lead to a situation whereby votes counted on election day would skew favorably to Republicans while the process for counting mail-in votes is longer – Democratic votes would not be initially reflected in early returns. This could lead to winners' assumptions, and the media will play an important role in making sure every vote is counted before victors are declared both by the media and their own campaigns.

With the pandemic having tragically claimed over 200,000 American lives and ravaged the nation's economy, national and global interest in the presidential campaign is about as high as it was in June 2016 and much higher than during the previous three elections when incumbent presidents were on the ballot. We may be closing in on an election year of historic turnout and yet left to wonder whether we have the capacity to process all these individuals participating in the process.

Turnout expectations are high, especially when we consult polling which shows that some 83% of registered voters say it really matters who wins the presidency, up from 74% four years ago and the highest share of this opinion in two decades of Pew Research Center surveys.¹⁰ Indeed, according to a survey conducted in early June by the Pew Research Center, a growing share of registered voters says it is personally important to them to receive messages about the presidential election and other important issues from the Donald Trump and Joe Biden campaigns. While the public's interest in hearing from the campaigns has increased, voters have been paying far less attention to the election than to news about the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests over George Floyd's killing.

Trump's Campaign Strategy

Donald Trump and his allies will focus on what they perceive to be America's economic prosperity, notably stock exchange indexes hitting record highs as recently as February. However, with the economy in recession and sky-high unemployment rates, the pandemic has shifted attention firmly onto how the Trump's administration is handling the pandemic. His campaign may try to deflect from these challenges by highlighting other issues, especially the Supreme Court nomination, and other divisive cultural issues. Yet Trump's handling of COVID-19 and management of the economy have resulted in Team Biden pulling ahead in the polls during the summer. As it stands:

- Biden was polling at 49.7% against Trump on March 5 in the FiveThirtyEight average of the polls. As of 31 August-6 September 2020, the Biden campaign is on 52% nationally.
- Trump appears to have a ceiling of 46%: he has not gotten higher against Biden than the 46% of the popular vote he got in 2016, when he faced off against Hillary Clinton.

- Trump's 45.6% at the end of February was his peak against Biden over the last 10 months.¹¹

As we head into the election proper, Biden's polling lead could dissipate under sustained pressure.

Biden's Campaign Strategy

Biden's strategy is to stay firmly focused on the economy and the coronavirus pandemic during the final weeks of the presidential race. Trump's lethal mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic has also given Biden the upper hand in conversations about Trump's ability to lead the nation during a crisis, conveying the impression that the US is on the wrong track to tackle these challenges.

The campaign's ability to reinforce the connection between COVID-19 and the recession is central to Biden's strategy. It relies on a highly customized model of voter outreach that reflects more than 150 different coalitions and affinity groups. Biden has vastly outspent the Trump campaign on TV and digital advertisements. The Biden campaign has reserved more than \$280 million compared to the Trump's campaign plan to spend \$200 million on advertisements this fall. In the hours following the passing of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the evening of Friday 18 September to Saturday afternoon, more than \$46 million was donated to Democratic candidates and causes.¹²

Biden's campaign is also very focused on helping voters navigate the voting process safely, especially after continued public comments from Trump claiming that mail-in voting was rife with fraud.¹³ For Biden and his campaign team, polling numbers consistency serves as evidence that the race is fundamentally stable and their strategy is working. Yet so much can change in 33 days.

Issue Environment 2020

Although there is a myriad of policy questions and proposals that need to be addressed in this country, a smaller number of specific issues have come into focus during this election cycle and have captured voters' attention. One of the best snapshots of research to understand the issue perspective of this voting generation was conducted by the Pew Research Center in August 2020.

The Pew research suggests the economy is the top issue for US voters in 2020. With the US in the midst of a recession, nearly eight-in-ten registered voters (79%) say the economy will be very important to them in deciding who to vote for in the 2020 presidential election – the top issue of 12 included in the survey. While the economy was relatively stable before the pandemic, the impact of this global health crisis on the US economy could dramatically shape the election. As President Trump seeks to share his 'success' stories in the midst of grave financial challenges we face, the Biden campaign will seek to connect a failed healthcare response to a suffering economy.

According to the Pew survey, 68% of respondents say health care is very important to their vote. Given the ongoing COVID-19 deaths, climbing to over 200,000 in the US alone and the increasing number of cases, the pandemic will be central to voter decision-making. Another interesting insight was that 64% of voters cite Supreme Court appointments as an important issue, and this was before the most recent vacancy. In coming weeks, it will be clearer if and how the vacancy changes election conversations and how both candidates seek to use this important decision in talking to voters.

As the US grapples with the coronavirus outbreak, 62% of voters say the outbreak will be a very important factor in deciding who to support in the fall. COVID-19's potency will depend on the available information on the virus including vaccines, changes to stay at home policies and policies affecting education, businesses, and major US industries like travel, tourism, and entertainment.

What other issues are influencing voters? About six-in-ten (59%) say violent crime will be very important to their 2020 decision, and 57% say the same about foreign policy. Immigration and racial and ethnic inequality rank toward the lower end of the list for voters (52% each call these issues very important to their vote). Fewer than half say climate change (42%) or abortion (40%) will be very important factors in their decision (though majorities say these issues will be at least somewhat important to them). While these issues are seen as major influencers in voter decision-making it is critical to note that perceptions of these issues vary for those who support different candidates.

There are stark differences in how registered voters who support Trump and Biden view their importance. Of the 12 issues, the only matters which comparable shares of Biden supporters and Trump supporters view as very important are foreign policy and Supreme Court appointments. For Trump supporters, the economy (88%) and violent crime (74%) are the most salient issues. Roughly six-in-ten Trump supporters cite immigration (61%), gun policy (60%), and foreign policy (57%) as very important to their vote. By contrast, the largest shares of Biden supporters view health care (84%) and the coronavirus outbreak (82%) as very important. A sizable majority also rates racial and ethnic inequality as important to their vote (76%). While there are substantial differences between Trump and Biden supporters on the importance of most election issues, the widest gaps are on climate change (57 percentage points) and racial and ethnic inequality (52 points). In addition, Biden supporters are more than twice as likely than Trump supporters to state that the coronavirus outbreak is very important (82% of Biden supporters, 39% of Trump supporters) and economic inequality (65% of Biden supporters, 28% of Trump supporters). Larger shares of Trump compared to Biden supporters say violent crime (74% vs. 46%), immigration (61% vs. 46%), and gun policy (60% vs. 50%) are very important factors in their decision about who to vote for in 2020.

Who has the edge on major issues? Republicans lead on the economy; Democrats have advantages on climate, health, racial issues. Among registered voters, the Republican Party holds a 9-percentage point edge over the Democrats on being better able to handle the economy (49% Republican Party, 40% Democratic Party). And as has been the case for many years, more voters say the GOP could do a better job than the Democratic Party in tackling terrorism (46% vs. 37%). By contrast, the Democratic Party holds wide advantages among voters on climate change (58% to 27% over the GOP), abortion and contraception (51% to 36%), and health care (51% to 37%). The Democratic Party has 12-point leads on handling the public health impact of the coronavirus and issues involving race and ethnicity. On other issues, including immigration, gun policy, the federal budget deficit, law enforcement, and criminal justice, neither party has a significant edge among voters.

Debates 2020

The history of American Presidential general election debates is far shorter than the history of our national elections. While we have witnessed a long history of political parties using debates to help decide their candidates for the general election, the general election debate's history is shorter. These debates are not constitutionally mandated but have been institutionalized in practice. The Presidential Debate Commission is an independent organization which establishes the debate dates and locations and negotiates with the campaigns how they will be administered. This year the debates will be held on 29 September, 15 October, and 22 October. The Vice-Presidential Debate will be held on October 6. These debates will more than likely concern style rather than policy substance and provide a significant contrast between the two candidates. The Trump team has sought to target Biden's abilities, arguing that he is too slow and not in a state to hold his own in the debates against Trump. Yet this could backfire, as Biden is a seasoned debater and seriously preparing for the series of one on one contests between him and his opponent.¹⁴ The larger question is who these debates will reach. The percentage of undecided voters is low: just 3% of voters said they did not know who they'd vote for in a recent (early September) national Quinnipiac poll.¹⁵

As I write, the first debate on September 29 was 90 straight minutes of chaos in a year of upheaval. Peppered with interruptions and insults, there were only rare glimpses of policy initiatives and vision statements by the candidates about what they would do if given four years to serve as president. A key moment arrived when President Trump had the opportunity to denounce white supremacy several times and refused to do so outright. With over 200,000 US citizens dying from COVID-19, remarkably little time was devoted to understanding how we arrived here and what needs to happen for us to pull out of this healthcare crisis and begin to rebuild our economy for all Americans. This is important at a time where tax returns are out for both candidates, voluntarily released by the Bidens and leaked from news outlets for the Trumps. The President did not answer as to why he only paid \$750 in taxes while many suffering Americans pay more, even adding insult by his response of "I don't like to pay taxes." With so many voters having decided who they will vote for in this election the impact of the first debate night remains to be seen. In particular, for those suburban women who don't care for Trump's style or divisiveness or seniors concerned about the health risks we face and the future of the Affordable Care Act, what were they thinking?

Deciding Election 2020

There are key dates in the unique process for American voters to decide the 2020 Election. Voting is underway and runs until election day on November 3. Other post-election dates include:

- 14 December: Electoral college representatives meet in state capitols to formally cast votes.
- 6 January 2021: Congress enters electoral votes; Senate president announces vote tallies.
- 20 January 2021: Inauguration Day — the president-elect is formally sworn into office.

While this process is defined by federal statute and cannot be changed by any individual, concerns over the administration of our election are taking center stage and should be of concern not only in election 2020 but for future voter confidence in our elections at every level of government. Of great concern is Trump's inability to agree to a peaceful transfer of power if he loses the election.

It is important to note that court battles have been engaged in in every competitive state. This is the result of contending views over the pandemic's effect on issues such as witness signatures, postmarks, and the use of drop boxes for ballots.¹⁶ There are challenges to various processes and requirements in all US states. Most recently, concerns have been expressed over processing 'Naked Ballots' in Pennsylvanian mail ballots that arrive without inner 'secrecy envelopes.' Pennsylvania uses a two-envelope mail ballot system: A completed ballot goes into a 'secrecy envelope' with no identifying information, and then into a larger mailing envelope that individual voters sign.¹⁷

Litigation has become a powerful tool for both parties seeking to ensure that the election is administered in their favor. Justin Riemer, chief counsel for the Republican National Committee, says the RNC and other party committees are already involved in more than 40 lawsuits.¹⁸ The same is true for National Democrats; Marc Elias, who is leading the Biden campaign's state-level fight over vote counts and ballot rules, says: "We're litigating 30-plus lawsuits in 17 or 18 states."¹⁹

Amid these efforts, there will be variation between states; one of the most significant is when certain states can begin counting mail-in ballots. Many are legally required to not start until election day, delaying results and making it harder to ascertain national election results on 3 November. Both parties also differ on election-day scrutineers. The RNC plans to recruit tens of thousands of observers — especially mail ballots — at clerks and registrar's offices in key states. Elias sees this as a chilling development. "Under a president who is as hostile to voting and whose record on race is so poor, does anyone really believe that they are going to go out and go to the trouble to recruit 50,000 people to stand there like Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts just observing the election?"²⁰

Will we have a result on election day? Will there be confidence in results? How will we move to certify the election, ratified in Congress? More and more will be known about individual states and the processing of the votes in their individual states in coming days. Concerns over setting new precedents that could impact elections for years to come continue to preoccupy both parties.

Conclusion

In the US we like to refer to unexpected events that change the dynamic of election races as the October surprise, and as of 3 October there have been election surprises in spades. The implications of President Trump testing positive for COVID- 19 are immense, not only for the election but potentially for governing too. If and how the 74 year old will be able to do the necessary work of the President won't be known until the extent of his illness and recovery becomes clearer, but for the campaign there are short term effects. There is an immediate quarantine, campaigning will stop and the fate of the remaining two debates hangs in the balance. Trump's previous statements - typically bombastic - on the coronavirus will inexorably come into play. Will this impact voters, especially undecideds? Time will tell.

This election's unique nature means that the presidential outcome is highly unpredictable. While Biden has remained steadily ahead in national election polls, the election is clearly tightening. Televised presidential and vice-presidential debates, and shifting voter contact tactics amid a global pandemic, create an environment for potentially higher voter turnout, or conversely may compel American voters to stay home. The passing of Justice Ginsburg and the makeup of the Supreme Court may foster an electoral environment favorable to the Trump campaign, crowding out COVID-19 and the tremendous financial hardship of America as a whole. But if Team Biden can maintain a laser-like, disciplined focus on people's health and the health of the economy, baskets full of patriotic working and middle-class Americans might just send Trump packing. Whatever the result, Election 2020 will have a dramatic immediate and long-term impact on US politics.

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**'The nation looked to Labor,
and it did not look in vain.'**

- John Curtin, 26 July 1943

