

## STATES OF MATTER

# Divided States of America

The vote count in the US general election reveals a deepening of the schisms that brought Trump to power



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**Strength in numbers** Trump had the early momentum in the vote count, but it began to dissipate as mailed ballots were opened BLOOMBERG/ERIC LEE

In the 24 hours since the last polls closed in the US general election, President Donald Trump sent out five tweets that Twitter felt obliged to flag as “misleading”. The social media giant felt compelled to institute this safeguard against a possible undermining of “electoral or other civic processes”.

The US has come a long way in its passage as a democracy. Today, it has a president in office who acts in absolute and unshakeable faith that the system has to serve his ambitions, rather than the larger cause of democratic representation.

Trump had the early momentum in the vote count, but it began to dissipate as the substantial number of mailed ballots were opened. Democratic challenger Joe Biden ran up a big lead in the national popular vote, but the race for the electoral college finally came down to six and then four states. With Biden maintaining a consistent lead in one of them, Arizona, armed groups laid siege to a counting centre, demanding that the “vote be stopped”.

In legal action that it vowed, the Trump camp seemed uncertain about how to couch its demands: Stop the count in Pennsylvania and Georgia, stop the vote in Arizona and Nevada, recount the vote in Michigan and Wisconsin. Consistency has always been a vastly overrated virtue for the Trump brand of politics.

In 2011, litigants arguing before a right-wing majority of five in the nine-member Supreme Court of the US succeeded in diluting provisions of the Voting Rights Act that enabled federal oversight of state election laws. The Supreme Court was influenced by Barack Obama’s election as the first African-American president and held that with racial discrimination at an end, there was no further warrant for federal interventions in states’ rights.

That rather facetious inference was deliberately inattentive to the backlash that Obama’s election had occasioned among rank-and-file

Republicans. On the streets, this was manifest in the “Tea Party Movement” that vowed to roll back his signature initiative in health care. And in Congress, the Republican majority that emerged in 2010, was amply clear about its obstructive intent and determination to deny Obama a second term.

That objective failed. Obama’s charisma and his modest success in retrieving the US economy from the 2008 meltdown, served his re-election cause well. But it only took a candidate who would shed all niceties and embrace the politics of rage and resentment to turn back that tide of slow, but inclusive change: 2016 was that moment, and Trump the chosen one.

Republican vote suppression techniques have been turbocharged since the Supreme Court ruling, typically taking the form of large-scale purges of voter rolls, and restrictions on voting hours and polling station numbers in districts and counties with a likely Democratic tilt.

As he prepared for 2020, Trump had begun signalling Republican party confederates that he expected every such assist in his re-election bid. Unsubtle gestures to armed white nationalist vigilantes sought to enlist their services in coercing potential Democratic voters into staying at home.

The coronavirus pandemic disrupted these plans. It elicited a flood of electoral law changes to prevent hazardous clustering at polling stations on election day. Though every move made by the states was contested and litigated at multiple levels, the final outcome was, provisionally, a vastly enlarged window for early voting. Billionaire donor Louis DeJoy, Trump’s appointee as Post-Master General, tried slowing down the delivery of ballots to intending voters, but media scrutiny brought

him up short of intended objectives.

Early voting broke all records, totalling close to two-thirds of the 2016 turnout. So too did the number of lawsuits demanding various restrictions on early voting eligibility. The counting of the ballots, by now sorted and classed various ways, followed a routine adapted to the special circumstances, allowing first one kind of trend to emerge, followed by its decisive reversal.

Going into election day, a poll of all the opinion polls had Biden leading the incumbent by an average of 8 points across the nation, and by comfortable single digit margins in the key battleground states of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin. When Trump got off to an impressive lead in the key battlegrounds within the first few hours of counting, it seemed that the profession of public opinion polling was destined for sackcloth and ashes. Though Biden did regain the advantage when early votes were counted, his margins were modest.

This was a second successive disaster for the polling industry after the monumental miscue of 2016. If a marginal sampling error was to blame then, this time around, a new villain has been

identified in the shy voter, who hesitates to admit, even with the assurance of anonymity, that he has bought into Trump’s four-year reign of ugliness and untruth. That perhaps is the real damage of the Trump years: That decades of genuflection before the neoliberal cult has created a political environment in which an average citizen is driven by resentment and racist animosities that he dare not articulate in public.

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