

Christiane Lemke · Jakob Wiedekind

# The Battle for the White House

The US Presidential Election  
2020 under the impression of  
Polarization, Coronavirus Pandemic  
and Social Tensions

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## Preface

This book started out in the manageable waters of pre-pandemic times in the winter semester of 2019/2020 at Leibniz University Hannover. The lively discussions with students in the seminar on the Trump presidency and the upcoming election campaign, which was jointly taught by both authors, were the starting point for considerations of how the numerous interesting approaches and analyses of US politics could be further developed and combined. In a subsequent seminar in the winter semester of 2020/2021, we discussed the course and background of the election results again with master's students. We also followed each phase of this unusual election year in a blog: from the primaries to the nomination of the candidates; from the campaign in the fall to the election on November 3, 2020; from the certification of the results to the change of power in the White House on January 20, 2021. In the blog, we regularly analyzed key political issues and concepts, reflected on current developments, and evaluated empirical data. At the beginning of our project, we could not foresee the spread of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown in most US states. This development not only posed great challenges to the everyday life of the American people. Rather, it seemed as if the themes that had previously determined them, the candidates' positioning, and the strategies of the election campaign were turning into a kaleidoscope of power and powerlessness, crisis and renewal, despair and hope, cohesion and division, right before our eyes. Insights that could be gained from previous elections seemed to lose their validity and were put to the test. Unexpected challenges arose and the analysis required new political science interpretations and perspectives time and again.

The research for this book is based on extensive research, which we partly carried out in Washington D.C., partly during longer stays at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In fall 2020, the UNC at Chapel Hill also supported a

virtual Transatlantic Seminar with students on both sides of the Atlantic. This valuable intercultural dialogue resulted in some interesting perspective changes that have enriched the content of this book with additional facets. The manuscript was completed at our home university, Leibniz University Hannover.

Hannover, Germany,  
January 2021

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Jakob Wiedekind

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We would like to thank our colleagues and employees of the Institute for Political Science at Leibniz University Hannover for their many suggestions and support despite the restrictions caused by the Coronavirus pandemic. Special thanks also go to our students who participated in the discussions. Their critical questions and perspectives on the USA have greatly enriched the research for this book. Finally, we would like to thank Natalia Dalmer and Dominic Nyhuis for their valuable input as well as Sebastian Kahlfuß and Pia Schnelle for their editorial support.

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# Introduction

# 1

*“Somehow we’ve weathered and witnessed a nation, that isn’t broken, but simply unfinished.” Amanda Gorman, poet-laureates, Inauguration Joe Biden und Kamala Harris, 20.01.2021. (Gorman, 2021)*

The US elections of 2020 can rightly be described as historically unique. The peculiarity of the elections was already apparent early on through the rapidly spreading pandemic, which fundamentally changed the conditions for the election campaign. This continued in sometimes very close election results in favor of the Democratic challenger Joe Biden in some states and finally culminated in Donald Trump’s stubborn refusal to accept his election defeat. Never before had an incumbent US president so deliberately tried to prevent a peaceful transition of power. His campaign against the election defeat, which claimed a large-scale election fraud, went beyond legal challenges and was also conducted on Twitter. While it was unable to produce any evidence of election fraud, it eventually prompted some of his supporters to violently break into the Capitol in Washington D.C. in order to prevent the certification of the official election results by Congress. This action led to the initiation of a second impeachment against Donald Trump shortly before he left office. There had never been such drama in elections in American history.

But back to the start. Only a few weeks after the primaries began, which were decisive for the selection of candidates, the conditions changed completely due to the rapidly spreading coronavirus. Like most other countries in the world, the United States imposed a lockdown in early March 2020 with extensive travel and event restrictions. Due to the pandemic, campaign events were canceled, primaries postponed, and nomination conventions moved into the virtual space. Never before has a presidential election taken place under the pressure of such far-reach-

ing restrictions on social interaction and individual freedoms. With 30 million people officially reported unemployed already in April 2020, numerous corporate bankruptcies, and declines in international trade, the United States was also heading for one of the deepest recessions since the Great Depression of the 1930s right in the election year. The already highly polarized public opinion became even more polarized during this troublesome situation and also extended to the fight against the pandemic. Approval ratings for Donald Trump's job performance fell and remained low throughout the election year, even though Trump quickly resumed large campaign events attended by thousands of his supporters, despite the pandemic. In summer 2020, a large coronavirus relief package was finally launched and Trump accelerated the development of a vaccine against COVID-19. However, the president, who clearly lost the election, was not granted a second term after four turbulent and controversial years in office. In addition, the Republicans failed to regain control of the House of Representatives and also lost their majority in the Senate. After turbulent months following the November 3, 2020 election and mass riots in Washington D.C. with the storming of the Capitol, Joe Biden was ultimately inaugurated as the 46th President of the United States on January 20, 2021. The course and result of the elections not only reveal far-reaching shifts in the political power relationships. Rather, this election also deepened and confirmed the extensive polarization of US society and politics. In addition, many observers criticized the attacks on established democratic procedures, such as the peaceful transfer of power after the elections, as a shaking of the democratic foundations in America.

Against this background, the present book project sets out to examine the unusual elections of 2020 from an analytical perspective and to understand the course and results from a political science point of view. The focus is primarily on the domestic political dynamics of these elections, which are similar to a restructuring of the ship at sea. The analysis is based on our studies of American government and party research as well as studies from democratic theory. The scientific look at the rapid and highly complex dynamics of the election year seemed to us to be of paramount importance because the United States, more than any other country, influences international relations. The change of power in the White House will also change the relationship between the United States and Europe. After the unusual and controversial Trump presidency, the outcome of the election is of global political importance because it marks a significant change of direction.

Even before the coronavirus crisis, it was already clear that Trump's polarizing presidency had further divided American society. With his motto "America First", he had not only called into question the multilateralism of the liberal

international order and challenged international trade relations by withdrawing from international treaties, but also caused internal political disputes with controversial decisions such as the entry ban for people from some Muslim countries, the construction of the wall to Mexico and the planned deportation of undocumented immigrants. Again and again, Trump also attacked the mainstream media and individual journalists, insulted judges who made decisions he did not like and called into question the legitimacy of the Democrats and the opposition. A sharp friend-enemy rhetoric dominated the communication of the President, which was to a large extent communicated on Twitter. It became increasingly clear that Trump had succeeded in committing the Republican Party to his course. Some observers therefore raised the probing question before the election of whether American democracy could “break at this election” (Gellman, 2020).

Although the first impeachment proceedings against the president, initiated at the end of 2019 on the grounds of power abuse and obstruction of Congress’s work, failed in the US Senate in January 2020, the process deepened the rift between the two parties and between the president and Congress. Hence the primaries at the beginning of 2020 were already marked by a sharp confrontation between the Republicans and the Democrats. However, the opposition to the Trump presidency was not limited to the Democrats, but included a broad spectrum of civil society groups and social initiatives that wanted to prevent Trump’s re-election. On the other side were not only the unshakeable defenders of the president, but also a Republican Party that has increasingly developed into the party of Donald Trump. Through the protests against police violence and racism that flared up in many American cities across the year in response to the death of an African American during a police control and the harsh reactions of the President Trump to this, the bitter political confrontation then intensified even further.

Unlike in previous elections, the transition of power to the newly elected President Biden then became a complicated obstacle course, as Trump refused to acknowledge the victory of his Democratic opponent even after recounts and judicial clarification of objections to the election confirmed the election results and even the Supreme Court dismissed lawsuits of election fraud. The United States experienced a dramatic climax of Trump’s campaign to question the legitimacy of the elections and to doubt the election results on January 6, 2021, when, after a speech by Trump, his supporters stormed the Capitol in Washington D.C. to prevent the certification of the election results. While Trump denied any responsibility for this uprising, in which five people died, and according to YouGov polls 45% of Republicans surveyed considered the attack on the Capitol to be justified, the Democrats condemned the storming of the Capitol and saw it as an attack on democracy (YouGov, 2021). American

democracy was facing one of the biggest challenges in its history with these riots. A second impeachment process against Donald Trump for “inciting insurrection” was initiated by the House of Representatives shortly before he left the White House and even some leading Republicans distanced themselves from Trump. But the vote in the Senate did not result in the required two-thirds majority for an impeachment, which would have deprived Donald Trump of access to all public offices.

Since the influential writing of Alexis de Tocqueville (1835), which impressed his European contemporaries with the achievements of the democratic social order on the North American continent, democracy in the United States has been considered a model of a successful, new political order that has remained stable for more than two centuries. Even when European societies slid into authoritarian and fascist regimes as a result of the severe economic crisis of 1929/1930, the USA not only managed to maintain the democratic constitution, but also to implement extensive social reforms that were groundbreaking. The principle of “checks and balances”, a vital civil society and the adaptive capacity of the political system through crises were considered exemplary. Only under the impression of an increasingly divided society and the deep polarization fostered by the right-wing populist approach of the Trump campaign did the foundations of the democratic self-understanding come under particularly strong pressure. The political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) therefore warned early on of a scenario of the erosion of democratic relations “from within” – that is, by elected representatives who violate democratic norms and break rules. This development is capable of transforming a democratically constituted society into more authoritarian forms of rule, as some examples in South American and Europe political systems show.

The conflict-ridden 2020 election showed that even well established democracies like the United States can be shaken by undemocratic, illiberal political strategies. “It Happened in America” was the title of the well-known American political scientist Pippa Norris’s (2021) critical essay on the hollowing out of democratic procedures during the Trump presidency. However, the open disregard for democratic norms and procedures was, according to Norris, foreseeable at an early stage if one not only analyzed Trump’s views and habits, but also took into account the support in parts of the population, which, as survey data showed early on, supported Trump’s nationalist-authoritarian path (2019). “Democratic backsliding” was expressed not only in Trump’s populist political views, but also in his strategies of circumventing open, pluralistic procedures and democratic norms. It finally culminated in the denial of an election result achieved through democratic elections, which was supported by parts of the Republican Party, and

in the challenge of the peaceful transfer of power to the elected successor. The critical diagnosis of democracy researchers on the global crisis-ridden development of democracies finally also affected the USA (Merkel/Kneip, 2018). How endangered is American democracy? Will Joe Biden be able to bridge the gaps in the divided society? What are his chances of implementing his political reform program in the economic, health policy and social sectors? How will the Republican Party position itself in the future? In order to answer these questions, this book lays the foundation by disentangling political developments on the basis of the elections and the underlying political currents. We argue that the evident rifts did not only arise with Trump's presidency, but that the fault lines were already laid earlier. The future development of the democratic constitution of American society will therefore depend to a large extent on how these fault lines are addressed and overcome.

The elections are not only decisive for American society and the development of democracy in the country. Rather, the United States' global role is also at a crossroads. Four more years under the principle "America First" would have quickly accelerated the erosion of its global leadership role, because it would no longer be pursued by the leadership in the White House. However, the resentments in parts of the American population towards the costly international engagement of the USA will not simply disappear under the Democratic President Joe Biden. A simple return to the previous policy of multilaterally shaped international relations will therefore not take place without friction, because the goals and strategies in the post-pandemic world have to be re-adjusted and adapted to the consequences of the global economic crisis. This also exclude a re-ordering of transatlantic relations. Global politics have not stood still either, as can be seen in the growing self-confidence of China, an aggressive Russia or the ambitious Iranian nuclear program.

The analysis starts with the primaries at the beginning of the election year 2020. While the candidacy of Donald Trump remained largely unquestioned within the Republican Party and the primaries were only a formality, the field was initially very wide among the Democrats. We reconstruct the path to the nomination of Joe Biden, illuminate the power relationships within the Democratic Party and the challenges Biden had to face, and analyze the positioning of the Democrats and the Republicans in an increasingly polarized social environment. We pay special attention to this context in connection with pandemic-related changes in the course of the primaries and their consequences, which are directly related to social questions of voting rights and voter turnout. In the following chapters we deal with the central political issues in this special election campaign: the economic development, which gained importance for the outcome of the election due to the

pandemic-related recession, the controversial immigration policy, which became more acute due to the coronavirus crisis, as well as the role of minorities and racism. In the two following chapters of the book, we deal in more detail with the campaign in the last phase, the campaign strategies and the outcome of the elections. Here, we not only consider the presidential election, but also review the results of the House of Representatives' and the Senate elections. In the final chapter we reflect on the importance of these elections for the future domestic policy of the United States and their consequences for transatlantic relations.

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## Joe Biden's Road to the Nomination

# 2

At the beginning of a very special and turbulent election year in the USA, it was initially difficult to anticipate who would challenge Donald Trump in the presidential election in November 2020. The field of candidates within the Democratic Party was unusually large with up to 28 candidates at times, and it seemed like a competitive and long way to the nominating convention at the end of August, which would bring certainty. By mid-April, it was finally clear that the fight for the White House would be decided between the Democrat Joe Biden and the incumbent Republican Donald Trump, following the withdrawal of the progressive Senator from Vermont, Bernie Sanders. Joe Biden's path to becoming the Democrats' official candidate was initially marked by much optimism. Biden has an established political profile through his long political career in Washington D.C. as a Senator for the state of Delaware, and served as Vice President under Barack Obama from 2009–2017, which is why he was initially considered the frontrunner in the primaries of the Democrats. However, he then suffered significant setbacks such as poor results in some primaries (especially in the states of Iowa and New Hampshire) and declining donations in January 2020. Only the primary in the US state of South Carolina at the end of February was able to revive his faltering campaign and to create a new momentum, which was also described as “Joementum” in the American press (Grullón Paz & Stevens, 2020).

He then achieved significant victories in important states in March, such as in Michigan and in Florida. At this point, the Democratic primaries were essentially a competition between Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden, as many initially promising candidates such as Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar due to declining chances of success withdrew from the race. This was caused, among other things, by Biden's successes on the so-called *Super Tuesday* early March, on which primaries took place simultaneously in 14 of the 50 US states. This gave additional