



# Biden's win is not a policy mandate — he should govern accordingly

David Boaz

November 13, 2020

The people have spoken, but none too clearly. President-elect Biden and his allies should be careful not to overreach.

The evidence suggests that the vote was a rejection of President Trump, not a full-throated endorsement of Biden and his platform. Voters kept the Republicans in control of the Senate (pending the outcome in Georgia) and narrowed the Democratic margin in the House. Biden has a mandate for modest normalcy, not revolutionary radicalism. It's not only why he beat President Trump, it's also why he beat Bernie Sanders.

People are exhausted, and Biden's basic appeal has been the prospect of a president you just don't have to think about that much, who doesn't always have to be the center of attention and dominate every single news cycle. Biden's lie-low, play-it-safe campaign strategy has been mocked as low energy and lacking excitement and passion, but it turns out dialing back the frenetic chaos of the past four years is exactly what voters wanted.

Voters made a judgment on how President Trump conducted himself for four years, and especially on his failure to deal effectively with the COVID-19 pandemic. When voters rejected those traits, they were not endorsing any sweeping new powers for Trump's successor.

In a Pew Research poll, 63 percent of Biden's supporters said their vote was more a vote against Trump than a vote for Biden. A CNN poll found similar responses.

That's a striking result. Most presidents with a strong economy have high approval ratings and cruise to reelection. And most people prefer to vote for, not against, a candidate. Indeed, 70 percent of Trump supporters said their choice was more a vote for Trump than against Biden.

Biden won by being less unpopular than Trump, and also less unpopular than Hillary Clinton in 2016. But his favorability ratings — about 50 percent in the RealClearPolitics average — were nothing to write home about. Unlike 2016, the people who disliked both candidates seem to have broken against Trump.

All of that urges caution on the new administration. There's quite enough to clean up without launching sweeping new programs and spending even more money than the profligate Trump administration did.

It should be noted that before the pandemic, Trump had strong ratings on the economy: 56 percent approval in January-February on handling the economy, and even in late October he led Biden on that question in battleground states. Voters were not persuaded that a program of more spending, taxes, and regulation would be good for jobs and the economy.

A few other points a Biden administration should keep in mind:

In 2020, 77 percent of Americans called immigration a “good thing” for the country today, up 20 percentage points since 2010 — a gift to Biden from his predecessor. Seventy-five percent of Americans, including 57 percent of Republicans, think undocumented immigrants should be allowed to stay in the United States.

Ninety percent of Americans think international trade is a good thing, and 70 percent support trade agreements.

Interestingly, supporters of candidates Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Pete Buttigieg are more supportive of trade agreements than Biden primary voters.

Fifty-one percent of Republicans and 76 percent of Democrats think marijuana should be legalized, and voters endorsed drug war reforms in seven states and the District of Columbia.

Voters in exit polls expressed support for Black Lives Matter and concern about police treating black people unfairly. But in California, where Biden will end up with some 66 percent of the vote, a strong majority of voters rejected a return to racial preferences in college admissions.

Californians also rejected expanded rent control and overruled the legislature’s demand that Uber and Lyft classify their drivers as employees, which would have wrecked their business model. Illinois voters rejected the governor’s tax increase proposal.

Most Americans support expanded diplomacy and trade, but less military spending and foreign intervention. An overwhelming majority — 74 percent — favor constraining the president’s ability to attack a foreign adversary by requiring the approval of Congress, including 90 percent of Biden supporters.

The late William Niskanen, a distinguished political economist and longtime Washington observer, found that divided government has three big advantages: fewer major wars, more restrained federal spending, and a greater likelihood of lasting reforms with broad appeal. That’s good news for the current situation.

And as a reminder to anyone who claims there’s a “mandate” for radical progressivism, Biden beat the candidates of the left, the advocates of Medicare for All and the Green New Deal, in the primaries. He knew then that Twitter is not the country, or even the Democratic party. Democratic voters are more moderate than their loudest voices. And, of course, it wasn’t just Democratic voters who put him in office; many independents and Republicans also voted for him. All those groups want to see the new president and Congress take up a few major challenges: dealing with the pandemic, assuring the country that the bureaucracy won’t be used as a political tool, and restoring our relations with allies and trade partners.

The president-elect campaigned on a message of decency, empathy, hope, and unity, as seen in his final television ads. Unaffordable spending programs and a reverse culture war — with attacks on free speech, religious freedom, and Second Amendment rights — will not bring the unity and normalcy that Americans seek.

*David Boaz is executive vice president of the Cato Institute*