

Analysis

The State of Play in the U.S. Presidential Election

Matt A. Mayer

A day doesn't seem to go by without more drama occurring in the U.S. presidential election. With roughly one year to go, the landscape is in a constant state of flux as the Democratic Party candidates jockey for position and as President Donald Trump continues to poke the mainstream media and the American Left. In three months, Iowa will hold the first caucus and New Hampshire will hold the first primary election of the 2020 election. The pace of action will only increase as those events approach.

Recently, Democrats seized on a congratulatory election call President Trump made to Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky that they claim included a quid pro quo focused on former Vice President and Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and his son, Hunter. This call and how The White House handled it generated a whistleblower complaint the Democrats are now using as the basis for impeaching President Trump. Given the weak outcome that ended up being the Mueller Investigation into Russian collusion, I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for this latest "scandal" to finally bring down President Trump.

With a year to go, now is a good time to assess where things stand in each political party and look ahead to the 2020 election.

Trump will be the Republican nominee

Despite the fervent wishes of the 'Never Trumpers' and other Establishment leaders on the Right, President Trump's approval rating among Republican primary voters is above 90 percent. His support is so strong among those voters that many states are cancelling their Republican primaries to save money. As they see it, no sense in wasting taxpayer funds to hold a primary when the winner is a forgone conclusion.

Frankly, I find this approach a little unsettling. I'd much prefer to allow Republican primary voters the opportunity to cast their ballots, as it is a core function of being American. Plus, for data junkies like me, analyzing the primary turnout numbers of both political parties can provide interesting clues on what might happen in November.

For example, if a contested Democratic primary draws fewer voters than a largely uncontested Republican primary, it would be a strong indicator that the Democratic nominee in the general election won't win that state. Similarly, if Republican primary turnout exceeds prior presidential primary elections where the nominee was an incumbent like President Trump, it can indicate a higher level of energy that likely would translate to a higher turnout in November.

In terms of the Republican primary election, as this point, three other Republicans have thrown their hat in the ring to challenge President Trump for the nomination. Former two-term Massachusetts Governor Bill Weld jumped in in April 2019. Governor Weld has always been viewed as a liberal Republican and even ran previously for the vice-presidency as the

Libertarian candidate in 2016. His ticket received roughly 4.5 million votes. He rejoined the Republican Party in 2019 to challenge President Trump.

Former Illinois Congressman Joe Walsh announced his intent in August 2019. Congressman Walsh was a loud critic of President Barack Obama and has a long history of controversial statements. Congressman Walsh lost his seat to redistricting and then lost an election for a different seat thereafter.

Finally, former Congressman and South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford decided to make a run in September 2019. Congressman Sanford used to be very popular with Republican primary voters until he lied to voters about an affair he was having as governor. He then won a congressional seat, but eventually lost that seat in a primary election.

It is easy to announce a presidential run. It is much harder to make something of it. Whether any or all of those men are able to get their names on the ballot in all fifty states is an enormous challenge they face. Each state requires a certain number of signatures from each county by a date certain. Those activities cost lots of money that the candidates must raise, as none of the candidates is wealthy enough to self-fund such an endeavor.

To date, none of the candidates are making much headway in their campaign efforts. This outcome isn't a surprise due to President Trump's popularity and the steep climb in takes to make such a run.

Thus, there is little doubt that President Trump will be the Republican nominee in 2020.

The crazy Democratic primary will only get crazier

More than twenty candidates decided to run for the Democratic nomination over the last year, including Vice President Biden, Senator Elizabeth Warren, Senator Bernie Sanders, and Senator Kamala Harris. After the first series of debates, several candidates have dropped out, with more expected to quit in the coming weeks, as the criteria to qualify for the debates get harder. From the moment he entered the race, Vice President Biden took a strong lead over the other candidates, as he became the consensus choice for the candidate most likely to be able to defeat President Trump.

That lead began to shrink after the first debate when Senator Harris attacked him over his stance on forced school desegregation busing in the 1970s. Vice President Biden's performance at that debate appeared shaky to many analysts and voters. Some attributed his performance to his age, as he will be 77-years-old in 2020. If elected president, he would be the oldest American ever to become president at 78-years-old. President Ronald Reagan ended his two-term presidency when he was 77-years-old. If reelected, President Trump would become the oldest man to be president at the age of 78-years-old when his second term ended in January 2025.

During the first phase of the Democratic primary, the impulse of many candidates was to run to the left to win the Democratic base, which is increasingly liberal and progressive. Most of the candidates endorsed the following policies:

- Medicare for All
- Green New Deal
- Free College Tuition for All
- Free Health Care for Illegal Immigrants
- Decriminalization of Crossing the U.S. Border
- Ban on Semi-Automatic Guns
- Reparations for African-Americans for Slavery

Needless to say, the price tag on these policies is enormous and none of the candidates have explained how they'd pay for these programs. The tax data shows that "taxing the rich" won't yield near enough tax funding to cover the estimated costs of these programs.

Republicans love this movement to the progressive left because they know that the persuadable voters living in the suburbs needed to win the 2020 election don't support these policies. Many of the Democratic debate clips will be used by Republicans to move these key voters to the Republican column.

After the next series of debates, Senator Warren began to climb in the polls at the expense of Vice President Biden, Senator Harris, and Senator Sanders. While many media pundits promoted the candidacy of South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, he stalled in the polling after a poor response to a police officer shooting of a black resident in South Bend. Similarly, media favorite former Congressman Robert "Beto" O'Rourke never caught fire with voters despite his great run against Texas Senator Ted Cruz in 2018. The only other candidate to earn a meaningful level of support in polling is tech millionaire Andrew Yang.

As of late September, the average of the national polling data has the candidates in the following positions (3% or more):

- | | |
|-------------|-------|
| • Biden | 28.4% |
| • Warren | 21.1% |
| • Sanders | 17.1% |
| • Buttigieg | 5.5% |
| • Harris | 5.0% |
| • Yang | 3.3% |

The next debate will be in mid-October in the battleground state of Ohio in the city in which I grew up, Westerville.

Despite who will qualify for the upcoming debate, the reality is that the Democratic primary is now a three-person race between Vice President Biden, Senator Warren, and Senator Sanders. It should be noted based on the numbers above, the two progressive senators combine for 38% of the vote versus Vice President Biden's 21 percent. That fact will continue to push the primary to the progressive left, which likely will alienate more general election moderates.

The biggest unknown right now is how the Democratic impeachment drive over President Trump's call to Ukraine President Zelensky will impact Vice President Biden. Regardless of whether Hunter Biden did anything wrong, there is an unseemliness surrounding two actions that occurred with Vice President Biden. First, Hunter Biden joined the board of a Ukrainian gas company just after President Obama named Vice President Biden the Administration's point man on Ukraine. Hunter Biden had no experience in gas issues, nor did he speak Ukrainian. Later, Vice President Biden publicly bragged about going to Ukraine and withholding U.S. funding unless the prosecutor looking into corruption of that gas company was fired.

Secondly, in December 2013, Hunter Biden accompanied Vice President Biden on an official trip to China. Just weeks later, Hunter Biden's investment company received a \$1.5 billion investment deal from the Chinese. The media has reported that both instances raised eyebrows in the Obama Administration.

Again, regardless of whether there was any wrongdoing, both events pose serious conflicts of interests and appear to be examples of how officeholders can legally use their offices to enrich friends and families. Each example smacks of cronyism. I raise these issues because whatever taint the Democratic impeachment process tries to paint on President Trump also will splatter on Vice President Biden. I fully expect his poll numbers to begin dropping. The drop may be irreversible.

His drop likely will result in Senator Warren's rise. Unlike Senator Sanders who ran in 2016, she is a fresher face with similar ideas. She also attracts the critical female vote. Even with his numbers coming down, Vice President Biden is a national figure with decades of support across the country. While President Trump cruises to the general election, I'd expect the Democratic primary to boil down to a long, bloody contest between Vice President Biden (the "moderate") and Senator Warren (the progressive).

Given how progressive the Democratic Party's primary base has become, it is increasingly likely Senator Warren will snatch the nomination at the end.

The General Election will be unlike anything we've ever seen

It goes without saying that the general election will be about as nasty and divisive as possible. President Trump will hit Senator Warren for her improper claim of Native American heritage and her progressive ideas. Senator Warren will attack President Trump on corruption and craziness. Both candidates will hold their voting bases. The key question for both will be how they bring the persuadable middle to their side.

Here are some key issues that will determine how that question gets answered:

- Will the U.S. fall into a recession or significant slowdown between now and the election? Over the last 100 years, every president who ran for reelection won except three incumbents who suffered economic weakness going into their reelections. In 1932, President Herbert Hoover lost to New York Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt after the Great Depression hit. In 1980, former California Governor Reagan defeated President Jimmy Carter during the malaise created after the oil shocks. In 1992, President George H.W. Bush lost to Governor Bill Clinton because "it's the economy, stupid." Should the economy remain as it is, President Trump's reelection chances remain high.
- Can President Trump secure any trade deals? Currently pending in front of Congress is the United States-Canada-Mexico Agreement intended to replace NAFTA. President Trump just finished a limited trade deal with Japan. He continues to fight with China over its trade violations, with a tariff war ensuing between two countries that hurts some of his supporters. Finally, President Trump wants a trade deal with Europe that evens the table on automotive and agricultural goods, which the Germans and French are very resistant to giving up. President Trump won the blue-collar Democratic voters in eastern Ohio, western Pennsylvania, southern Michigan, and Wisconsin because of his strong trade stance. They remain with him, but finalizing a deal with China would definitely help him keep his support among those voters and American farmers.
- Does Iran finally renegotiate the Iran Nuclear agreement? With the United Kingdom, Germany, and France joining the U.S. in blaming Iran for the recent attack on Saudi Arabia and the continued pressure of President Trump's maximum pressure sanctions campaign, it seems likely the mullahs will realize they've lost. If President Trump can secure a better deal than President Obama agreed to, voters will reward him for his foreign policy success.

As you can see, all of the issues above involve President Trump and his accomplishments or lack thereof. Should he manage to keep the economy going and cut a deal with China, he will be very hard to beat in 2020. That is why Democratic elder statesmen have sent word to China and Iran to wait out President Trump to get a better deal from whoever defeats him. That approach is a very high-risk, high reward one that would be catastrophically bad should it fail. A reelected and reinvigorated President Trump would extract even greater pain from China and Iran should they try to wait him out and lose.

In terms of the impeachment saga, it is more likely that endeavor will help President Trump's popularity, as it did President Clinton's in 1998 because it is going to be seen as a highly partisan affair. The American public is solidly against it. With the near-constant stream of impeachment talk over the last three years, this latest effort falls squarely in the category of the "boy who cried wolf." Democrats may succeed in impeaching President Trump along party lines, but he won't be convicted in the U.S. Senate. The public will tune it out and take their frustration at the lack of getting anything important done out on Democrats in 2020. As in 1998, Republicans could gain enough seats to take back the U.S. House and keep control of the U.S. Senate.

The road to the Presidency is largely predictable

Most of the states won't really be up for grabs during the 2020 election. Those states are either reliably red or reliably blue. In the red column, you can expect these states to go for President Trump:

Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Ohio, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

These twenty-four states possess 204 Electoral Votes of the 270 Electoral Voters needed to win. The nineteen blue states are:

California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington.

These states total 229 Electoral Votes. That leaves just seven states with 105 Electoral Votes for the two parties to fight over during the general election. These states are: Arizona, Florida, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

President Trump won six of the seven (all but New Hampshire) in 2016. He likely will win Arizona, Florida, and North Carolina again in 2020, leaving just Michigan, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin to decide the election. The Democratic candidate would need to sweep all four states to win whereas President Trump would need to win just Pennsylvania or Michigan to win.

It will be incredibly close and likely not decided until the early hours the following day. No matter who wins, the U.S. will be even more divided by the result than it is today. That outcome is bad for America and the world, but it is a reality of today's hyper-polarized world.

Matt A. Mayer is the CEO of Provisum Strategies and former senior official in the Bush Administration, as well as an American Memorial Fellow for the German Marshall Fund of the United States. He routinely advises executives and politicians on how best to navigate today's uncertain political environment.

Would you like to react?

Mail the editor: redactie@atlcom.nl.