Can the Biden Administration Bring Normalcy to the United States?

Democratic Backsliding, Race War, Political Divide, and Decline in Global Leadership

East Asia Institute (EAI)

I. Analysis of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

Highest Voter Turnout in U.S. history

- Professor Paul Pierson and Professor Taeku Lee both emphasize how the 2020 presidential election saw the highest voter turnout in U.S. history since the early 20th century. A record number of voters cast their ballots as a result of successful mobilization of by both the Trump and Biden campaigns. According to Professor Lee, the total number will reach around 150 million Americans once the exit polls are finalized, which is two-thirds of the eligible voters. Trump is also on target to receive nine million more total votes than he did in 2016, and Biden is on target to receive 11 million more total votes than Hillary Clinton did.

Election Characterized by "Deep Division" in Race (Race War)

- Professor Lee contends that one of the main characteristics of the recent election is the "story about racial division in America." Although the U.S. was already racially dividedbefore Donald Trump ascended to presidency, he has deepened those divisions with his rhetoric and with his policies.

- He adds by stating that the exit polls clearly show Biden and Harris won because Black, Latino, Asian-American, and Native American voters "coalesced to deliver the White House for the Democrats." Within the polling that Professor Lee conducted, he found that 89% of Blacks, 70% of Latinos, 68% of Asian-Americans voted for Biden and Harris. By contrast, only 41% of Whites voted for Biden and Harris. And from the White population, Biden and Harris received 43% of the White female vote, 49% of the college educated White vote, 46% of the suburban White vote, and 46% of the 18~29 year-old White vote.

Close Election & Unexpected Outcomes

- Although once the dust settles and all of the votes are tallied, Biden and Harris would have received five million more votes than the other side, Professor Lee argues that the outcome was "remarkably close still" in the key respect of the Electoral College vote. Five million votes may seem a large number, but it is only one percent of the total vote margin and if it had been distributed selectively across Wisconcin, Georgia and Arizona, there would have been an entirely different outcome in terms of the Electoral College vote.

- According to Professor Pierson, the Democratic coalition in the Midwest, or the 'Blue Wall,' which includes Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania is evolving with the changing racial makeup. It was also a close election in the 'Blue Wall' as Biden and Harris had "just the enough" turnout including that of people of color in urban areas "to swing the balance." On the other hand, "it [was] a big deal" that the Democrats carried the 'Sunbelt' including Arizona and Georgia, which are traditionally more Republican. Georgia, in particular, is now racially a"majority nonwhite" state compared to 2010, with 58% of its population composed of Asian-Americans, Blacks and Latinos.

- Professor Pierson adds that Biden and Harris were able to win the Midwest not just by recapturing the white working class voters, but also by making significant gains in the suburbs. Professor Lee also agrees that a Democratic win in the Midwest is worth the attention, considering how well Trump did in mobilizing his base in those states throughout the last couple of weeks.

II. The Future of the Biden Administration

Political Gaps Widen & Biden Administration's Reforms Have Their Limits

- Professor Pierson and Professor Lee both recognize domestic political divide and democratic backsliding as the Biden administration's primary challenges. According to Professor Lee, the U.S. is "deeply divided as a country" by ideological and racial polarization, which are set against a backdrop of "much weaker social institutions, rise of conspiratorial thinking, pervasive distrust in the institutions that adjudicate facks such as mainstream media, the criminal justice system, science and the academy." The U.S. has lost a lot of what it had in the past in terms of having a public sphere for the free competition of ideas, which is the "pulse of flourishing democracies, both as an ideal and as a practice." Instead, such loss has been replaced by the exchange of information channeled thorough "filter bubbles." Although this was all true before Donald Trump was elected president, it has become much truer during his presidency and for the forseeable future.

- Professor Lee also argues that amid polarization, the Biden administration will face a "double edged sword": on the one hand, it will face unwavering opposition from the Republicans and remaining Trump supporters, all the while being unable to deliver the policies that are needed to keep the coalition of independent centrist Democrats and leftist Democrats. According to Professor Lee, for Biden, "the core of voters most responsible for winning him the election" starts with Black voters and from those, poor Black voters. Therefore, beyond addressing COVID-19 and the economic fallout, police reform and racial justice are rewards that the Biden administration looks to grant its core voters, which are likely to meet opposition by the Republicans.

- Professor Pierson states that while the election results in both the Electoral College and the popular vote are indicative of "a clear defeat of President Trump," the Democrats did not capture the Senate. Although there is an opportunity for the Democrats to do so in early January with the runoff elections in Georgia, it is more likely that they will not. In such a case, Republicans will continue to hold majority control in the very powerful U.S. Senate, which means that the Biden administration will not be able to pass legislation unless it is acceptable to the majority leader of the Senate, Mitch McConnell. Biden will also be unable to appoint judges unless the Republican Senate majority allows him to do so.

- Professor Pierson adds by referencing how following the announcement of the election results, Republican leaders including Mitch McConnell amplified Trump's accusations that the election was legitimate, which they "did not do right." On the other hand, George W. Bush, Dan Quayle (George H.W. Bush's vice president), and several past Republican leaders came out with a congratulatory statement and publicly recognized that there had been no fraud. Such contrast in behavior and the relative maturity portrayed by those in acceptance of Biden highlight what the U.S. can expect in the days ahead in terms of the health of American democracy and its ability to "govern ahead of Trump and their party." In the perspective of the Republican Party, it is imprudent to support Trump's "baseless accusations of an illegitimate election" as doing so will only "fracture the party that would lead to fury on the right wing of the party in away that would potentially cost Republicans the election in Georgia."

The U.S. May Have Distanced Itself from Flames, but Its Institution Continues to Erode

- According to both Professor Pierson and Professor Lee, "Trump has unmistakably fanned the flames" of racial polarization and democratic backsliding within the U.S. Although Biden's victory signals the U.S. distancing from the conflagration set forth by the Trump administration, the American institution as a democracy still remains in flames due to continued democratic backsliding. Professor Pierson also observes that such "slippage of democracy" is reminiscent of that in countries like Hungary, Brazil or Poland.

- Professor Lee states that whether Trump accepts the outcome of the election will also dictate the overall state of U.S. governance and the country's status as a functioning democracy. He personally believes that Trump will have to accept the outcome in which case, "the dark clouds over American democracy for the last three or four years will lift." In addition, he hopes that once the dark clouds are lifted, the U.S. as a government will awake from the long period under the Trump presidency to return to "pre-Trump normalcy." Pre-Trump normaly refers to the U.S. aspiring to return to its standing as global leader, staunch ally, reliable trade partner, and a force for positive change on problems requiring multilateral solutions like climate change and the threat of future pandemics." He adds that a lot depends on how deep and resolute Trump's support among voters is, and what fraction of his voters is militant and militarized.

Biden's Keys to Success: Personal Decency & Foreign Policy

- According to Professor Lee, Biden's politicalsskills and personal relationships could build a consensus around daunting challenges, such as executing a coordinated federal response to mitigate and comat the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. With the whole country "tired from the last four years," Professor Lee also states that Biden can unilaterally lead an example if he can successfully be the president he says he will "for all Americans," including those who did not vote for him, especially through his initial set of policy priorities.

- Both Professor Pierson and Professor Lee emphasize foreign policy as "the one place where Biden is likely to have considerable room to maneuver" and the "one bright side." For instance, Biden has high credibility among countries that have been traditionally allies with the U.S. Foreign policy and the U.S. returning to its oncepreeminent place as a leader of the free world is a less contentious issue. Political elites, including many of those in the Republican Party who have been unhappy with the instability of Trump's "random tweet driven version of an America" would also care about this issue. Professor Pierson adds that Biden's "decency as a person and credibility in foreign policy" are the two strongest suits for the president elect. With the Republican retaining the majority of the Senate, foreign policy will provide the Biden administration the ability to exert more influence.

- Professor Pierson adds that Trump's four years have damaged the fundamental trust that the U.S. shares with its allies, and as the Trump experience has shown, allies will be asking themselves, "how much can we rely on the credibility of the U.S.?" He highlights that there is honesty and cooperation that emanates from the person who is the leader of the U.S. but also expectations that the U.S. must follow through and commit to as an ally in the long-term. Since currently, there is an absence of such kind of confidence, building or rebuilding an alliance—even without all of the other challenges the international community faces—will be extremely difficult. ∎

III. Speaker, Discussant, and Moderator Bios

■ **Paul Pierson** is the John Gross Professor of Political Science at the University of California at Berkeley. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Yale University. He is an active commentator on public affairs, whose writings have appeared in such outlets as The New York Times, The New York Times Magazine, The Washington Post, and The Atlantic. He has served on the editorial boards of The American Political Science Review, Perspectives on Politics, and The Annual Review of Political Science. He has also served as Chair of the Berkeley political science department. His research focuses on the fields of American politics and public policy, comparative political economy, and social theory. He is the co-author (with Jacob S. Hacker) of the forthcoming *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality*. Earlier books include *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Abandoned the Middle Class* (2010), co-authored by Jacob Hacker, and *Politics in Time: History, Institutions and Social Analysis* (2004). He also authored *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment* (1994), which won the American Political Science Association's 1995 prize for the best book on American national politics, and "Path Dependence, Increasing Returns and the Study of Politics," which won the APSA's prize for the best article in the American Political Science Review in 2000, as well as the Aaron Wildavsky Prize in 2011.

■ **Taeku Lee** is George Johnson Professor of Law and Professor Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. He is co-Principal Investigator of the National Asian American Survey, co-Principal Investigator of the Bay Area Poverty Tracker, and Managing Director of Asian American Decisions. He also serves on the National Advisory Committee for the U.S. Census Bureau and has previously served as member of the Board of Overseers of the American National Election Studies, member of the Board of Overseers of the General Social Survey, Treasurer and the Executive Council member for the American Political Science Association, Department Chair at Berkeley, and Associate Director of the Haas Institute at Berkeley. His research focuses on racial and ethnic politics, public opinion and survey research, identity and inequality, and deliberative and participatory democracy. His recent publications include the *Oxford Handbook of Racial and Ethnic Politics in the United States* (2015) and *Asian American Political Participation* (2011).

■ **Yul Sohn** is the president of EAI and a professor at Yonsei University's Graduate School of International Studies. He received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. He previously served as the dean of Yonsei University GSIS, president of the Korean Association of International Studies, and president of the Korean Studies of Contemporary Japan. His research focuses on the Japanese and international political economy, East Asian regionalism, and public diplomacy. His recent publications include *Japan and Asia's Contested Order* (2018, with T.J. Pempel), and *Understanding Public Diplomacy in East Asia* (2016, with Jan Melissen).

■ **Byoung Kwon Sohn** is a professor at the Department of Politics and International Relations, Chung-Ang University in Seoul, Korea. He teaches American Politics, American Foreign Policy, and Party and Legislative Politics as a subdivision of Comparative Politics. He got both BA and MA degrees from the Department of International Relations, Seoul National University, and Ph.D. from Department of Political Science, the University of Michigan, majoring in American Politics. He published several books and articles, including *Climate Change and the Dilemma for the U.S. Hegemony* (2012, written in Korean), *Is U.S. Congressional Politics Still a Model to Follow? The U.S. Congress Captured by Partisan Politics* (2018, written in Korean), "The Superdelegate Reform in 2018 in the Context of Democratic Party's Delegate Reform History" (2019, written in Korean).

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