

Opinion – Re-election in Doubt: The Perfect Storm Approaches Donald Trump

Written by Lucas Leite

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LUCAS LEITE, JUL 16 2020

The latest polls in the United States indicate that Donald Trump will need to improve his strategy if he wants to be re-elected. Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden has ten points more than his opponent and has leadership in key states that can decide the election in November. In order to understand the possibilities, some considerations must be made about the current context. Trump continues to use social media to stay close to his constituency, but also to reinforce his fake news network on topics that catch Americans' attention. In spite of this, the reality shows that his government's management in relation to the pandemic, the lack of direction in terms of foreign policy and the current debate about police violence and anti-racism movements have weakened the general perception of Trump's leadership and aptitude for the post.

By initially doubting the emergency character of the biggest pandemic in a hundred years, Trump once again demonstrated negationism that marked the previous years of his administration. Something that will be common in electoral discourse from now on will be precisely the rescue of guilt for the pandemic from external actors. It is the case of the World Health Organization (WHO) and China – in a repeated case of racism when referring to COVID-19 as a “Chinese virus”. This narrative is not new, neither to blame international organizations nor to transfer to China the reason for internal problems, from unemployment to public health.

Still in relation to WHO, Donald Trump stated that he will cut American funding to the institution – which breaks the rules established with the other actors that there are fixed participation quotas and variable quotas – which are often filled by non-state actors based in the United States (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for example). The American president's refusal to cooperate with the international organization that has made the most efforts to organize data and fight the current pandemic stems from the divergence of “opinions” between the institution and the American government. This guided part of his response in ineffective measures and in the belief that hydroxychloroquine would be able to act in the fight against COVID-19.

WHO reinforced the need for social isolation, and in particular the role of states in ensuring that this should happen fully and with direct financial assistance to citizens who in many cases lost their jobs or had their incomes reduced. The institution also pointed out that hydroxychloroquine had no positive effects in the treatment of COVID-19, on the contrary, it was shown to be inadequate in any prophylactic or application aspect in mild or severe cases.

In electoral terms, this means a setback for Donald Trump. Even Fox News, considered conservative, pointed to the failure of management in combating the pandemic, reiterating what WHO issued in official documents and statements to the press. This has demoralized Trump as a good decision-maker and reinforced the discourse that his inflexibility stems from an extreme ideologization, from an incapable and unskilled subject for the position he holds. The narrative of blaming international organizations, in the sense that they generate more costs than gains, therefore, loses its attraction. And the idea of a common enemy to Americans, external, as in the case of China, becomes one of the few options of the president when trying to build his narrative – and, even so, more likely to be shared by those who already supported him or that fall into more radical spectrum of American politics.

Donald Trump may even try to resume some of the points that were positively perceived in relation to his foreign

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policy, such as the renegotiation of NAFTA, the suspension of the deal with Iran and the resumption of discussions with North Korea. However, even these elements can be questioned to some extent, as is the case with the proximity to the dictator Kim Jong-Un, who brought little practical effects to peacebuilding with South Korea – on the contrary, recently there was an attack from North Koreans to mixed area facilities. Even in relation to Iran, there was some questioning about the embargo to the country and how it affected the possibility of the Iranians having access to medicines and protective equipment in the fight against COVID-19. As a result, all the points that could be highlighted as possibilities to build Trump as a statesman lose meaning or are hardly remembered due to the current context.

In terms of domestic politics, police violence gained notoriety in the United States' racial debate especially after George Floyd's death in late May this year. Support movements for the black cause were mobilized across the country and in several other places in the world. They demand justice and effective changes in the treatment they receive both by police and security officials and in the rules and codes that determine the laws related to the theme. Donald Trump took a long time to pronounce on the subject, made general statements, with little empathy and delegitimized the movements previously mentioned. Joe Biden, on the other hand, was open to dialogue with leaders of the movements and participated in a march in order to show solidarity and support – in the quest to directly oppose the current president.

Moreover, the United States faces a wave of unemployment greater than that recorded in the financial crisis of 2008. This information is important since the period immediately before the pandemic registered historically very low unemployment rates, something that Trump used to boast and it could certainly be pointed out as a possible reason for his re-election, despite all the other aspects. The forecast for American GDP is also terrifying, with predictions that 2020 will be a very difficult year.

From these considerations it is possible to point out that the re-election of Donald Trump is no longer as concrete as one might think at the end of last year and beginning of this year. In fact, what marks the current period is uncertainty and unpredictability, and Donald Trump is not known for being a manager who works with long-term situations, who presents consensus plans or who admits mistakes. His view of the role of the United States in the world, of an isolationism that deconstructs multilateralism, goes against the need to envision joint technical cooperation and solution agreements with traditional partners such as Europeans.

Joe Biden is not necessarily a name that attracts the entire electorate, having been presently more discreet – his indication is more representative of a return to establishment than an endorsement of new political values or the chance for a younger politician that could renovate the American political system. This is due to a possible strategy by the Democrats to let Donald Trump curl up on his own and increase rejection rates for his government. The 2020 elections, therefore, may be more defined by the anti-Trump vote than necessarily by direct and personal support for Biden. However, as the American electoral process has shown previously, polls can point to one thing and the outcome be another. It is necessary to be aware of the possibilities of postal voting and how this can affect the election. In addition, with four months to go, a lot can happen – so betting on someone right now is still risky. The only certainty is that Donald Trump is definitely no longer comfortable and will have to pursue new strategies if he wants to be re-elected.

About the author:

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