

Road to the White House – Taking Stock

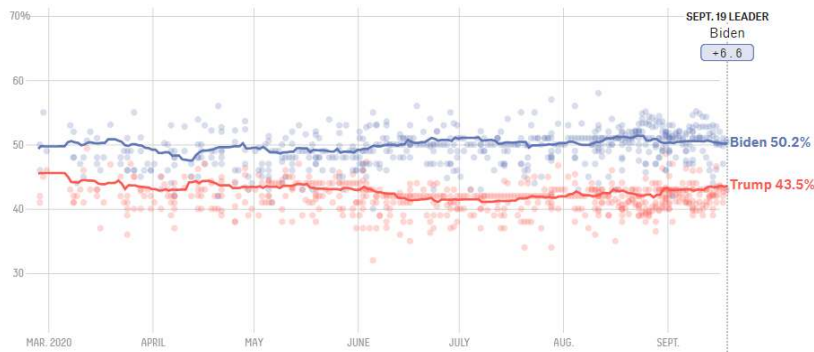
Leonard Williams

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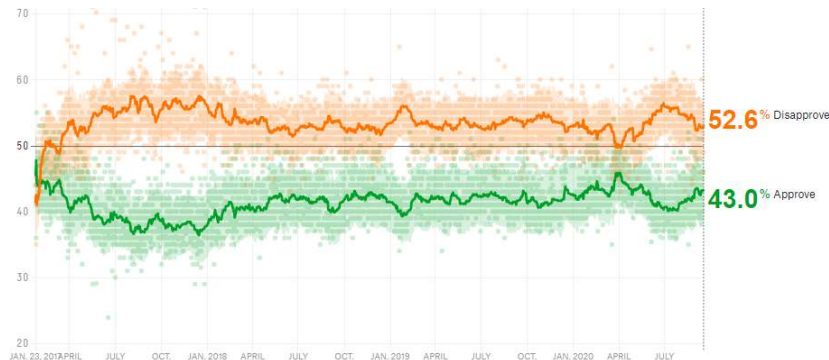
With a little more than one month to go before Election Day, it is time to assess the current state of the race for the presidency. My goal in this post is to highlight only a few of the campaign's many aspects. It will be a quick survey of some key points and not a comprehensive overview. Note the timestamp, though, as things most likely will have changed by the time you read this.

As I have thought about the presidential race over the last few months, one of its most remarkable features is its stability. The relative position of the candidates has changed little from when the nominations were secured. I am not alone in seeing things this way, for another political scientist (William Galston of the Brookings Institution) made the same point in a [piece published online about a week ago](#). The stability is evident in two trendlines posted on [FiveThirtyEight](#): one for the [horse race](#) and one for [presidential approval](#).

Horse Race



Presidential Approval



[Click on the links to view them on the web.]

As you can see, there seems to be a strong correlation between President Trump's approval rating and his standing in the race against former Vice President Biden. This is not surprising because, more than anything else, the election is a referendum on the incumbent's performance in office.

Biden is currently leading the race. Most national polls, whether of registered voters or likely voters, show him ahead by margins in the high single digits. So-called battleground polls also show Biden having leads in key states that likely will determine the outcome in the Electoral College. As time goes on, here are the states to watch: Pennsylvania (20 electoral votes), Florida (29 EV), Wisconsin (10 EV), North Carolina (15 EV), and Nevada (6 EV). Although Biden is expected to win the popular vote by 3-5 points and more than 300 electoral votes, there remains a significant chance (ranging from 20 to 30%) that the president can still win the election.

This is the time of year when one or another academic or pundit claims to have the best means for predicting the outcome. My advice is to ignore individual claims and focus on some combination of them. (This is how you should read poll results, too!) Most election models base their forecasts on any number of factors – polls, economic, partisanship, or incumbency. Some employ judgments about presidential performance; others, quite likely, use little more than hunches or gut feelings. Regardless of their particular approaches, [PollyVote](#) is a website that tracks and aggregates these forecasts for you. At this point, nearly all the academic forecast models predict a Biden victory.

So where does the uncertainty come from? One source can be traced to the voters themselves. Obviously, mobilization and turnout matter. Who votes, where, and in what numbers remains key. But the election is not just about votes, it is also about the attitudes behind the votes. Partisan polarization remains high and it puts us in different worlds. The most recent [NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll](#) reveals some of those differences.

	The economy	Coronavirus	Climate change	Health care	Race relations
National adults	20%	13%	11%	8%	8%
Democrats	10%	17%	22%	15%	10%
Republicans	33%	5%	1%	1%	3%
Independents	22%	15%	11%	9%	8%

PBS NewsHour/NPR/Marist Poll National Registered Voters. Interviews conducted Sept. 11 through Sept. 16, 2020, n=964 MOE +/- 3.8 percentage points.

Democrats worry about climate change, coronavirus, and health care; Republicans worry about the economy, civil unrest, and abortion. Which people get motivated to vote will depend on what issues are in the news as the ballots are being cast.

Uncertainty also emerges from events in the news. To be sure, debates to come (the first is on 29 September) certainly have the potential to make news, captivate our attention, and frame our discussions about the candidates. The death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and the partisan jockeying on the question of her successor, will doubtless play a similar role. And there will likely be other events and stories that will captivate us. Although the 2016 election shows that media narratives can shape a race, be careful about assigning any event the label of “game changer.” Political science research shows time and again that the game is rarely changed in such radical fashion.

My hope is that this post gives you a baseline from which to gauge the presidential race as it continues. It will shape my own understanding from here on.