Election 2020: Election Results, the Aftermath, and Tech Agendas

By Marietje Schaake and Rob Reich

THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH OF ELECTION DAY 2020 offers lessons about the state of American democracy as well as technology's influence on voters, the voting process, and democratic institutions. Whatever the outcome of an election, and despite a polarized society, it is clear that all Americans share a common stake in protecting the integrity and independence of the administration of elections, the declaration of winners and losers, and a peaceful transition of power. Yet other questions persist: How have disinformation campaigns, whether domestic or foreign, affected the electoral process? And what does the future hold in terms of a tech agenda?

These issues are under discussion in the eight-week Stanford University course, "Technology and the 2020 Election: How Silicon Valley Technologies Affect Elections and Shape Democracy." The joint class for Stanford students and Stanford's Continuing Studies Community enrolls a cross-generational population of more than 400 students from around the world.

The Nov. 4 class session on the election outcome and technology featured guest experts Michael McFaul, director of Stanford's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies;

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Domestic disinformation in the 2020 election turned out to be a more serious problem than foreign meddling.

- A growing divide exists between the majority vote winner and Electoral College result in U.S. presidential elections.

- Democracy itself is vulnerable, a greater risk than ever in today's environment when social media can be leveraged to sow discord, division and disinformation.

Anja Manuel, co-founder and partner in Rice, Hadley, Gates & Manuel, and author of *This Brave New World: India, China and the United States*; and Ryan Heath, an Australian journalist and Politico Senior Editor who authors POLITICO's Global Translations, and previously edited U.N. Playbook, Brussels Playbook, and Davos Playbook.

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Introduction

All the major TV networks have called the election in favor of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. The administration of the election, carried out in the face of considerable challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic and fears about potential voter intimidation or even violence at polling stations, was an enormous success. In the wake of election day, however, many concerns remain about the intersection of technology, elections, and a healthy democracy.

One serious problem is domestic disinformation. For example, President Trump falsely claimed victory the night of the election and he continues to allege claims of cheating days afterwards without offering evidence. Also, Black and Latino voters were targeted and flooded with messages designed to discourage them from voting in the final days of the election, according to voting rights activists and experts who track disinformation. And, a week after the election, social media networks continue to face significant disinformation campaigns designed to undermine confidence in the vote counts in swing states as well as the integrity of the electoral process as a whole.

The large social media platforms differed in their treatment of disinformation posts. Many of them took action on posts that declared a victor in any race prior to an official projection of a winner. We've already learned that social media platforms are amplifiers, and the President the most influential spreader of disinformation. It seems likely that he will not offer a concession speech. And, what happens in the coming weeks if Trump never concedes?

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the greater worry is about the tyranny of the minority. Democracy itself is vulnerable to populist demagogues, perhaps more than ever in today's environment when such actors expertly leverage social media to sow discord, division and disinformation.

Discussion

First, some good news: the 2020 election did not involve procedural breakdowns, violence or massive foreign hacking aimed at disrupting voting on election day. The effect of disinformation and the effect of policy changes on the part of social media platforms remains to be independently researched. Poll workers and local election officials largely performed their jobs unhindered, and content moderators at social platforms were far better prepared to handle disinformation and other manipulations than they were in 2016. That bodes well in certain aspects for the American democratic process – yet avoiding violence is a low bar to set for success.

Back in 2016, cybersecurity and disinformation issues were arguably more disruptive, but substantial research on what actually happened this year is still to commence. To gain confidence in the performance of the platforms, we will need greater transparency and new norms, compatible with privacy protections, about data access for independent researchers.

U.S. elections, particularly in battleground states, will continue to be close for the foreseeable future, and

Even after Biden is declared the official winner, a divided U.S. government is the reality, reflecting current American tensions between liberalism and illiberalism.

while some states like Florida have improved their voting count processes, a rational, bipartisan set of federal standards could greatly improve elections. Too many inconsistencies and local variations in electoral laws currently exist.

How does the world view the U.S. after the 2020 election? While the President may make unfounded claims on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, other policymakers have pushed back, even some who are close to Trump, and stressed to respect the democratic process. How one looks at the situation unfolding in the U.S. depends on whether one is sitting in Brussels, Beijing or Moscow. Adversaries will highlight any chaos or difficulties, and friendly countries will wish to see the election yielding a trustworthy outcome if the U.S. is to remain a credible democracy on the global stage.

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Final Thoughts

Expectations are that a Biden Administration would put forth a comprehensive tech policy agenda. As Michael McFaul and Anja Manuel point out, it's possible that more R&D for science and greater support for the semiconductor industry would be available, while other issues such as ethics and artificial intelligence, online privacy regulation, antitrust, platform liability, and reform of Section 230 might come under consideration.

However, it's likely that the case for more R&D funding has not been successfully made to the American people, especially those who supported Trump. So, rather than being aspirational, the Biden Administration's tech agenda may hinge on what can be accomplished in a Congress with a Democratic majority in the House and a likely Republican-led Senate.

Deeper mutual engagement among the U.S., Europe, the United Kingdom and other allies would ensure democratic countries maintain their leads in semiconductor design and production; supply chain security; coordinate on investment screening and export controls; regain the lead in fintech innovation; and define norms to govern the safe use of AI.

Brainpower and talent around the world has historically sought opportunity in Silicon Valley and other American innovation hubs, as well as top U.S. universities and companies. While visas are currently restricted by the Trump Administration, the framework that has guided

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basic science research since the 1980s is still valid, which calls for such research opportunities to be open and unencumbered. Many foreign researchers choose to stay even during the pandemic, and that needs to be encouraged.

Finally, America needs to develop a sophisticated, comprehensive, and successful strategy for repelling future potential threats in U.S. elections from foreign and domestic actors seeking to disrupt the integrity of the electoral process.

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<u>Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (HAI)</u>, applies rigorous analysis and research to pressing policy questions on artificial intelligence, particularly human-centered AI technologies and applications. For further information, please contact HAI-Policy@stanford.edu.

The Cyber Policy Center at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies is Stanford University'' premier center for the interdisciplinary study of issues at the nexus of technology, governance and public policy.

The views expressed in this issue brief reflect the views of the authors.

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