

When Elections Are Transformative

*The Trump-Biden contest evokes a bitter 1864 vote.
Will it too prove to be a pivotal moment in the nation's history?*

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Wall Street Journal
October 23, 2020



The narrative seems set in stone. Every four years, regardless of who is running for president or what shape the country is in, Americans face the most consequential election of their lives. It's the ultimate political cliché, and it's been around for centuries. In 1868, the Atlantic described the race featuring Republican Ulysses S. Grant and Democrat Horatio Seymour as “the most important election that Americans have ever known.”

Given that the election of 1860 had fractured the nation into warring camps, while the election of 1864 had occurred during the darkest moments in our national history, the fevered depiction of the long-forgotten Grant-Seymour race carries an important truth: Presidential elections rarely live up to their hype. Election 2020 is likely to be no exception.

There have been more than 50 contested presidential elections in the U.S. since a weary George Washington bid the nation adieu, and a fair number of them can claim a distinction of sorts. Franklin Roosevelt won the most lopsided victory ever in terms of electoral votes, trouncing Kansas Gov. Alf Landon in 1936 by the merciless count of 523 to 8. Five presidents—the latest being Donald Trump—have won the electoral college, and thus the election, while losing the popular vote. In 1824, John

Quincy Adams became the first son of a president to win the White House, a feat duplicated by George W. Bush in the controversial election of 2000. The 1928 campaign saw the first Catholic candidate, Al Smith, run for president on a major party ticket, and the 1960 campaign saw the second Catholic candidate, John F. Kennedy, break down that barrier. But another half-century would pass before our presidential campaigns, thanks to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, began to seriously reflect the diversity of the country.

Truth be told, however, few of these elections belong in the top tier of such races, and neither, at this point, does the Trump v. Biden contest, despite a gruesome year of pandemic and civil strife. There's a difference between a consequential election and a transformative one. The elevation of the 2020 election to a turning point in our history may well depend on one of two scenarios: President Trump loses, declares the results a farce, refuses to leave office and creates a constitutional crisis more toxic than Bush v. Gore. Or President Trump wins, completes a full realignment of his party and causes dominoes across the political spectrum to fall.

Historians are in general agreement about the handful of truly transformative presidential elections. These include the election of 1800 between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, two Founding Fathers with very different ideas about the nation's future. What made the race so critical was the ability of these men and their supporters to hold a bitterly contested election within a newly created party system, and to do so in a way that allowed for the peaceful transfer of power. There were no riots, no calls for military intervention, no threats to secede from the Union. "We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists," Jefferson famously said at his inauguration, knowing that the Constitution had passed its first crucial test.

Also dominating these lists is the presidential campaign of Andrew Jackson in 1828, the first to use large rallies and torchlight parades, ushering in an era of mass democracy for white men and a nightmare of forced relocation for Native Americans. A Southerner and a slaveholder, often violent and uncouth, Jackson would use his presidency to defend the Union against those who threatened to divide it, believing, like Jefferson and Lincoln, that secession would be a dagger to the nation's heart.

The other presidential contests most often cited as transformative are those that confronted vital issues in a time of maximum crisis. The "Civil War election" of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 is always included, as is the "New Deal election" of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. Most lists contain the Kennedy-Nixon campaign of 1960, with JFK's religion and the first televised debates taking center stage. I prefer the lesser known Johnson-Goldwater election of 1964, in which LBJ made civil rights a national issue, the infant war in Vietnam was readily endorsed and Goldwater offered a brand of modern conservatism that Ronald Reagan brought to fruition.

Less often discussed is a presidential campaign with remarkable echoes of the Trump-Biden race. It occurred at the height of the greatest national emergency in our history and centered on issues of race, absentee voting, calls for postponement, a Supreme Court nomination and the peaceful transfer of power. Bitterly divisive, it was less a contest between the two candidates—General George McClellan and President Abraham Lincoln—than a referendum on the behavior and leadership of the incumbent. Though a favorite of distinguished Civil War historians like Eric Foner, James McPherson and Doris Kearns Goodwin, the campaign of 1864 rarely makes the list of top presidential races. It remains a footnote, at best, in the sweeping narrative of American politics.

The race unfolded against the backdrop of mass slaughter. Having won decisive victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in the summer of 1863, Union forces found themselves in a brutal war of attrition against an enemy that showed no signs of relenting. Cold Harbor, The Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse—all brought alarming casualties but little good news. Caught in a nasty

political crossfire between “peace” Democrats demanding an immediate end to the war and Radical Republicans demanding the toughest possible terms for a Rebel surrender, Lincoln’s popularity plummeted.

Harper’s Weekly printed a list of terms that the president’s enemies were using to describe him: Tyrant, Despot, Robber, Monster, Liar, Scoundrel, Widow-maker, Ignoramus Abe. But the worst epithets were racial. Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 had revived the long-held fears of many white Northerners that “hordes” of newly freed slaves would flood their cities in search of jobs and housing. Sooner or later, warned the New York Daily News, “we shall find negroes among us thicker than blackberries.”

The 1864 campaign likely stands as the most blatantly racist in American history. Lincoln’s Democratic opponents took to calling him “Abraham Africanus the First,” while portraying the Republican Party platform as the Ten Commandments from hell: “Thou Shall Have No Other God Than the Negro.” The New York World, a notorious anti-Lincoln newspaper, printed a hand-colored lithograph, “The Miscegenation Ball,” showing mixed-race couples dancing and hugging at an event sponsored by the “Lincoln Central Campaign Club,” with a portrait of the president smiling down upon the revelers. The World presented this fictitious event as if it had actually taken place. “This fact, WE CERTIFY,” it declared.

Lincoln fully expected to lose the election to McClellan, whom he had removed from command for failing to aggressively prosecute the war. In a private memo to his cabinet, dated Aug. 23, 1864, Lincoln wrote: “This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so cooperate with the President elect, as to save the Union.” It never crossed Lincoln’s mind to challenge the coming vote or to impede the process of presidential succession.

Nor did he endorse the scheme floated by some supporters to postpone the election. Eleven states had seceded from the Union, armed mobs had attacked army recruiting offices, and a Confederate raid on Washington in the summer of 1864 had come within 5 miles of the White House. Lincoln, however, refused to budge. American democracy rested on the will of the people. “We cannot have free government without elections,” he said, “and if the rebellion could force us to forego or postpone a national election, it might fairly claim to have already conquered and ruined us.”

Presidential campaigns can change on a dime. Today we call it an “October Surprise.” In 1864, it arrived in September via telegram from General William Tecumseh Sherman: “Atlanta is ours, and fairly won.” Suddenly, the war seemed winnable; the stalled momentum of Gettysburg and Vicksburg had been revived. “The impact of this event cannot be exaggerated,” wrote James McPherson. “The president was now a victorious leader instead of a discredited loser.”

Lincoln intended to make the most of it. As new energy pulsed through the Union ranks, the White House revived an obscure Revolutionary War experiment: absentee voting by the troops. Both parties endorsed the idea, the Democrats believing that McClellan, a career military officer, would prevail. But Lincoln knew better, writes Ms. Goodwin. “He trusted the bond he had developed with his soldiers during his many trips to the front.

After every defeat he had joined them, riding slowly along their lines, boosting their spirits.” He had entered their encampments and spent endless hours in military hospitals consoling the wounded. One historian estimated that “a quarter million or more had some glimpse of him on their own.”

Thirteen states quickly passed legislation that permitted absentee voting in the field, while four others approved a proxy system that allowed soldiers to place their ballots in a sealed envelope to be mailed to a trusted stand-in. When a few states balked, requiring voters to show up in person, Lincoln urged his generals to furlough those wishing to return home. Asked about the process, he replied: “I would rather be defeated with the soldier vote behind me than be elected without it.”

He need not have worried. In the 12 states that tabulated soldier ballots separately, Lincoln won close to 80% of the vote, helping to ensure his victory. Despite isolated incidents of fraud, the process went smoothly. Over time, as American society became more mobile, absentee voting was extended to civilians, with most states allowing them to apply without having to provide an excuse. It's estimated that more than one-third of the votes cast in the Trump-Biden election will arrive by mail.

Less than a month before the election, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney died. As if Lincoln didn't have enough on his plate, he now had to nominate a replacement for the jurist who had written the infamous Dred Scott decision of 1857, which ruled that people of African descent, slave or free, “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” Lincoln was very far removed from the views of Taney, as Donald Trump is from the views of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The difference is that Lincoln decided to wait until after the election to choose a replacement.

Some historians support the view expressed by Sen. Kamala Harris at the recent confirmation hearing of Judge Amy Coney Barrett that Lincoln thought it unseemly to nominate a chief justice only weeks before the people would be choosing the next president. Other historians disagree. Lincoln hesitated, they believe, because Congress wasn't in session and he didn't want to alienate any of the powerful men vying for that position on the eve of his own reelection. What can be said with assurance is that both Trump and Lincoln had the good fortune to be able fill an unusually large number of vacancies—three for Trump, five for Lincoln—allowing each man to dramatically shape the future of the Court.

Election Day brought no more surprises. Lincoln crushed McClellan, winning 55% of the popular vote and all but three states, the electoral count standing at 212 to 21. He was the first president to win reelection since Andrew Jackson's victory in 1832.

On March 4, 1865, with the Confederacy on the brink of collapse, Lincoln delivered his second inaugural address to an enormous, rain-soaked crowd outside the Capitol building. Declaring that God had inflicted “this terrible war” upon “both North and South” as judgment for the evils of slavery, he pleaded for a reconciliation with “malice toward none” and “charity for all.” He would die five weeks later at the hands of a Confederate assassin, at the age of 56.

The 1864 campaign deserves its due for many reasons, most importantly the president's insistence on maintaining the fundamentals of democracy at a time of the greatest national peril. Writing from the blood-soaked Shenandoah Valley, a young Union soldier described the thrill he felt in casting his vote from the field. “Thousands of bits of paper are falling into ballot boxes today.... It's almost a new thing in the history of the world when the results of whether this country shall be governed by one principle or another can be decided by such simple means. God hastens the day when all questions may be decided in the same way.”

As our own election approaches, it's a message well worth remembering.

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