

USA vs. Everybody? Why Foreign Policy Will Be a Backdrop to Domestic Policy in 2020

Bruce Stokes

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Foreign policy has rarely been a preeminent issue in U.S. presidential elections. But the world has often been a foil for U.S. politicians seeking to demonstrate to voters their toughness, their anti-cosmopolitanism, and their nationalism. In 2016 Donald Trump's 'Make America Great' campaign followed that script. In 2020, his blaming of China for the coronavirus, his threat to defund the World Health Organization and his continued anti-trade, anti-immigrant, anti-NATO rhetoric are clear evidence that an appeal to 'us against them' sentiment, with Americans as victims of foreigners, will again be a backdrop to domestic policy debates during the campaign.

Everyone, everywhere, has a stake in the outcome of this electoral debate because the winner of the U.S. presidential election will not only be the United States' leader, but by extension, he will also be the leader of the world. So it is not too early to assess how American voters' views of the world and the U.S. role in it may influence their voting. For even in this time of total coronavirus pandemic preoccupation, the public's reaction to the crisis provides telling insights into how foreign policy issues may play a role in the November voting in the United States.

President Trump has used the health crisis to repeatedly attack others: labeling the disease a 'Chinese virus,' threatening to pull out of the World Health Organization, peremptorily banning travel from Europe and attempting to block international trade in medical equipment.

In doing so, he is appealing to deep-seated nationalist sentiment long held by his core supporters. Eight-in-ten Republican registered voters believe that other nations take advantage of the United States. Just four-in-ten Democrats agree. So, when President Trump castigates foreigners—be it in the context of the coronavirus or for their trade practices or for NATO allies' inadequate military expenditures—he is speaking for his domestic base that perceives themselves as victims of the outside world.

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Republicans' sense of victimhood should not be underestimated as a factor in the upcoming election. Arguably all Americans are victims of the current health emergency. But many already saw themselves as victims of unsettling change beyond their control.

Since 1967, trade as a portion of the U.S. economy has nearly tripled, while the share of the U.S. workforce engaged in well-paid manufacturing has fallen by two-thirds. And the portion of the U.S. population that is foreign born has nearly tripled. It is little wonder then that trade and immigration were major issues in the 2016 election.

Six-in-ten people who voted for Donald Trump in 2016 believe the country is changing too quickly. (Seven-in-ten who cast their ballot for Hillary Clinton embrace such change.) So there is fertile ground for a 2020 U.S. presidential campaign where discussion of foreign policy issues are rooted in Republican voters' views of themselves as not only aggrieved by the pandemic but by a rapidly changing world in general.

Expect new attacks on international institutions such as NATO, the UN, and the EU. By almost two-to-one (47 percent to 25 percent) Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say NATO is more important to other nations than it is the United States, suggesting that Trump's base will be receptive to even more criticism of alliance partners not paying enough for their own defense. At the same time, just 36 percent of self-described conservative Americans have a positive opinion of the EU and 38 percent favor the UN. This compares with 71 percent of liberals who give the EU a thumbs up and 80 percent who are positive toward the UN.

Protectionist trade rhetoric was a staple of the Trump campaign in 2016 and a reprise is inevitable. Most Americans think trade is good for the country, but they also think it destroys jobs and lowers wages. Such negative sentiment is most prominent among older white men, the very heart of the Trump constituency.

And there are also likely to be periodic attacks on China. Only a third of Americans hold a favorable view of Beijing, including only a quarter of Republicans, the lowest approval in more than four decades. Three-in-ten Republicans also name China as the greatest enemy of the United States, sentiment that has grown (22 percent to 31 percent) in just a year. In contrast, just 12 percent of Democrats classify Beijing as the United States' greatest foe.

With regard to all three of these issues—multilateralism, trade, and China—Trump supporters are more negative than Democrats. But Democrats are not much more supportive. So Trump will benefit from going on the attack, while Biden will gain little from mounting a defense of internationalism.

In the end, the November U.S. presidential election will not turn on foreign policy issues. Public opinion surveys consistently show that international concerns are among Americans' least worries. The outcome will hinge on the depth of the recession and voters' perception of Trump's handling of the pandemic. But both of those issues only fuel the public's sense of victimhood. So expect the Trump campaign to fan those flames with a steady drumbeat of attacks on other countries and international institutions to reinforce the president's supporters' sense of solidarity in an election that will be framed as 'us against them,' be it a virus, or an economic downturn, or perfidious foreigners. Victimhood is a powerful political rallying cry.

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