

Indo-Pacific election pulse 2020: Taiwan, Singapore, New Zealand, Myanmar and the United States

Views from *The Strategist*

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Introduction: Covid-19 and 2020 elections

Huong Le Thu and Alexandra Pascoe

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted almost all aspects of life, and elections have been no exception. Across the world, elections in 2020 were conducted under the shadow of the pandemic, providing a stress test not only for governments but also for the very process of casting votes. This year's [Indo-Pacific Election Pulse](#) series zooms in on some of the most consequential elections in the region—Taiwan, Singapore, New Zealand, Myanmar and, of course, the United States.

Unsurprisingly, public health and the economic, political, social and security implications of Covid-19 have loomed large on election agendas. Only the elections in Taiwan, which took place in January, before the pandemic spread globally, weren't dominated by Covid-19. Rather, Taiwan's was about China and Taipei's survival strategies. President Tsai Ing-wen received a record number of votes (8.2 million) in a testament to people's confidence in her ability to manage cross-strait tensions. But Tsai's administration also proved to be well placed to guide Taiwan efficiently through the Covid-19 crisis. In fact, in many assessments, it was the [world's best performer](#).



Image: iStockphoto/LPETTET.

For other countries, the pandemic has presented more of a challenge. People's ability to exercise their democratic rights by casting their votes also increased the risk of infections.

In New Zealand, that caused the postponement of the election by a month after a small spike in coronavirus cases.

In Myanmar, the election was plagued by voter safety concerns after [a large surge in coronavirus infections](#), and yet voter turnout was higher than expected. The election commission put it at around 70%, which narrowly beat a previous record turnout of 69% in 2015.

The US also recorded its [highest voter turnout](#) in over a hundred years as 65.1% of enrolled voters cast their ballots.

Amid a continually high count of Covid cases in Singapore, opposition parties called for a delay in the city-state's election. Long queues at polling stations led to the extension of voting hours to 10 pm, leading to the [highest voter turnout](#) since the 1997 general election.

As the virus forced campaign activities online, candidates and electoral authorities also faced the challenge of countering misinformation, disinformation and cyber-enabled attempts at [foreign interference](#), and it's clear that many countries have a long way to go in safeguarding their elections against these new and increasing threats.

In Singapore, where for the first time the election campaigns took place [without physical rallies of candidates and supporters](#), the government [invoked](#) a 'fake news law', claiming that a Facebook post by an opposition party contained 'false and misleading' information about government policies. While ostensibly the law seeks to combat mis- and disinformation, it's been used as a weapon by the government to [limit freedom of expression](#).

In Myanmar, [Muslim candidates](#) were hit with 'racist abuse and misinformation', and civil society organisations and journalists identified 'dozens of networks of accounts, pages, and groups spreading ethnically and religiously charged falsehoods'.

In the US, President Donald Trump himself emerged as the [biggest source](#) of election disinformation, spreading incorrect information about the results, the counting and even the timing of voting, all to claim his own 'victory'. Social media platforms such as [Facebook and Twitter](#) also faced increasing scrutiny over their efforts during the US election, prompting the companies to do more to label or take down false or misleading information.

The Covid-19 pandemic turned out to be a legitimacy test for many governments. In most cases, the voters rewarded leaders for their competent responses to the outbreak. Nowhere was that more clearly demonstrated than in New Zealand, where Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party secured a second term in government after delivering one of the world's most effective responses to the pandemic. Conversely, in the US, the Trump administration's disastrous response to Covid, which has resulted in [more than 230,000 deaths](#) to date, cost him re-election. If the pandemic is a stress test, it's one that Trump has not passed.

People's appetite for risk is often lower during crises. The electoral victory of incumbents during this year's elections—in New Zealand, Singapore and Myanmar—could also reflect a desire for stability and the security offered by known quantities, particularly during a time of regional and global upheaval. Taiwan would also fit into that category, although the threat perception there is mainly of Xi Jinping's harsh politics, rather than the pandemic.

Despite perceptions that democracy is in some kind of creeping retreat globally, which is arguably being exacerbated by Covid-19, the election results show that democratic activism and accountability are doing well. New Zealand stands out as a prime example of a well-functioning democratic government that has secured the confidence of voters to get the country through the pandemic and deliver economic recovery. Opposition parties were able to make historic gains in Singapore, where the Workers' Party achieved its most significant increase in its number of seats in parliament since independence. In Taiwan, the victory of the pro-independence party reaffirmed the island's desire to remain democratic and resilient.

The situation in Myanmar has come under scrutiny by many due to the unfair disqualification of some ethnic minorities from voting. Some believe that Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy provides the clearest path towards greater constitutional reform. Higher support for the league could increase pressure on the military to allow [constitutional reform](#) that could facilitate greater democratisation in Myanmar. However, the military appears to be unwilling to concede power, and the treatment and disenfranchisement of ethnic minorities in Myanmar places a serious question mark over the country's democratic future.

In the US, while Joe Biden was able to pull off an electoral victory, 2020 will go down in history as one of the country's most controversial elections. The structural problems with the electoral and political system in the US and the high degree of polarisation within American society have come to the fore, and conversations about necessary reforms will continue long after the Trump era.

The Indo-Pacific democracies, like all nations, have had their fair share of challenges this year, but those that had the additional task of conducting general elections and charting a course for the next term have done well. The year's been short on good news, but here's some: it ends on the rather positive note of good electoral outcomes.

Taiwan

Election result shows Taiwan is out of China's grasp

Charlie Lyons Jones, 14 January 2020

Voters in Taiwan have demonstrated that conciliation with Beijing is no longer a useful electoral strategy. Future presidential candidates, from both sides of Taiwan's political divide, will have to prove that they can stand up for Taiwan against China. That, as much as incumbent Tsai Ing-wen's overwhelming victory, may be the big message out of Saturday's poll.

Winning just over [57% of the vote](#), Tsai levelled a stunning defeat on her rival candidate Han Kuo-yu—who could convince only one in four voters that he was the right person for the job.

At face value, it was a landslide victory for Tsai and her independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as well as a major blow to the rival Kuomintang (KMT, also known as the Chinese Nationalist Party), which adheres more closely to Beijing's ideology. However, a deeper look at the results reveals a different story.

Saturday's election was not only for the presidency, but for Taiwan's parliament, the Legislative Yuan. The DPP secured 61 seats in the legislature, picking up 34.0% of the vote. The KMT won 38 seats, with 33.4% of the vote. [Put differently](#), the DPP won more seats than the KMT, but the KMT still got a sizeable proportion of votes.

The KMT's surprising vote share was despite the party causing controversy over the candidates it put forward for election to the Legislative Yuan. On what's colloquially known as the 'party list', [the KMT had nominated candidates](#) that many saw as unusually pro-Beijing (for example, one was a former military officer who had [attended an event](#) organised by the Chinese Communist Party). That, combined with [mudslinging](#) from the KMT's deputy secretary-general, brought the party's integrity into question.



Image: Taiwan Presidential Office/Flickr.

Despite poor judgement from its senior leadership, the KMT managed to do reasonably well in the Legislative Yuan. With nearly 40 seats, it will remain a credible opposition in a DPP-controlled legislature.

In this respect, Saturday's election wasn't so much a resounding victory for the DPP and defeat for the KMT as it was an endorsement of Tsai Ing-wen and a rebuke of Han Kuo-yu. The KMT remains a potent political force that could rebrand itself to win future elections in Taiwan.

Explaining how the KMT could win future elections requires an understanding of why Tsai won on Saturday. Unlike most Taiwanese elections, events in Hong Kong meant that 2020's poll was a [referendum](#) on how to maintain Taiwan's sovereignty and hard-won democracy. Tsai won because she proved herself to be a steady hand on relations with China and demonstrated her resolve when faced with Beijing's threats of coercion. Han lost because he appeared erratic and his views on 'unification' with Beijing seemed dangerously old hat. The [problem](#) was not the KMT, but the candidate it put forward.

However, the KMT can't win future elections simply by knowing why it lost on Saturday; it also needs to know why it has won in the past. While there are [useful precedents](#) from the KMT's history under Lee Teng-hui, the most important victory for the KMT was its most recent win in November 2018's local elections.

That election was fought largely on [domestic issues](#) such as the cost of living and labour reform, and the KMT offered a more conservative alternative to the DPP's style of progressive politics. For example, the KMT's candidate for mayor of Taipei, Ting Shou-chung, branded himself as '[boring but useful](#)' and [nearly beat](#) a strong incumbent in Ko Wen-je. Rebranding itself as a trustworthy, conservative voice that's still able to attract floating voters could be one way for the KMT to regain the upper hand.

Given the damage done to its reputation over this election season, the KMT will need time for any makeover to be successful. The party could keep its head down in opposition and focus on grooming a candidate who is completely different to Han and capable of winning the next presidential election in 2024. There are a few people who could play that role.

One such politician is the mayor of New Taipei City, [Hou You-yi](#). Hou was a career police officer who in 2006 became the youngest person to be appointed [to head Taiwan's National Police Agency](#). Once courted by the DPP, Hou is yet to publicly affirm Beijing's so-called 1992 consensus that Taiwan and the mainland form 'one China'. Should Hou distinguish himself as a good manager who's willing to stand up for Taiwan's autonomy, he may prove to be a viable candidate for the KMT.

Of course, a lot can happen in four years. [Jason Hsu](#) is another person to watch. As a co-founder of TEDx Taipei, Hsu is one of the KMT's few young politicians who might be able to appeal to Taiwan's youth. Whoever becomes KMT leader going into the next presidential poll in 2024, he or she will need to assure the public that Taiwan's sovereignty is an issue on which there will be no compromise.

The KMT will remain significant in Taiwanese politics only if it stands up for Taiwan against China. To fight and win elections, the party must demonstrate its willingness to defend Taiwan's autonomy whatever the cost may be. That likely means selecting a leader who does not recognise Beijing's '1992 consensus' and is willing to advocate for Taiwan's sovereignty around the globe.

A KMT that can transform itself into a party for Taiwan and cease being a party for [Chinese nationalism](#) will be the ultimate sign of maturity in Taiwanese democracy. For Beijing, however, such a KMT would represent its most consequential defeat. Short of war, China may have just permanently lost Taiwan.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/election-result-shows-taiwan-is-out-of-chinas-grasp>.

The significance of Tsai's victory in Taiwan

Huong Le Thu and Mark Harrison, 21 January 2020

In Taiwan's presidential and legislative elections on 11 January 2020, Tsai Ing-wen secured a second term as president and her party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), maintained its legislative majority. The elections attracted unprecedented international attention in the context of US–China strategic competition and the hardline stance of the Chinese Communist Party in the Xi Jinping era.

Beijing continues to insist on the inevitability of 'reunification' and has intensified pressure on Taiwan. Meanwhile, Washington has increased the tempo of its engagement with Taipei, including [arms sales](#), general diplomatic support and high-level interactions under the Taiwan Travel Act. The significance of the election result reaches beyond domestic party politics: the poll also reflects voters' assessments of the successes and failures of Beijing's Taiwan policies, US–China relations and regional security.

In the week before the elections, there was a surprising level of uncertainty about the outcome. At the end of 2018, Tsai had poor opinion poll numbers and her government had been challenged by rivals within her own party, by a stalled domestic policy agenda and by [diplomatic reversals](#) as Beijing poached Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies. Public opinion had turned strongly in her favour by the middle of 2019, but the DPP remained cautious up until election night. In the end, not only did Tsai secure a second term, but she received 8.17 million votes (57.13% of ballots cast), the largest number ever for a candidate since direct presidential elections began in 1996.

The political sentiment around Tsai's win has been as much about expectations as her total vote count. Large winning margins are not unprecedented in Taiwan's elections, but they're usually associated with a change in the governing party. For example, in 2008, the leader of the pro-Beijing Kuomintang party (KMT), Ma Ying-jeou, was elected by a similar margin after eight years of a DPP government under Chen Shui-bian that was dogged by corruption allegations. However, Ma's win in 2012 was by a much closer margin amid disillusionment about his government's China policies. Similarly, in the legislature in this election, although the KMT made gains, they were smaller than expected for a second-term correction, and a minor party that is a key KMT ally, the People's First Party, was wiped out.

The results, therefore, point to structural changes in Taiwan's political landscape. The DPP can stake its claim to being the 'natural' party of government with strong support in the north, while the KMT retrenches to divisive politics that mobilise its core supporters but don't carry the broader electorate.

The KMT's presidential candidate, Han Kuo-yu—who in the [2018 mid-term elections](#) took the mayorship of the traditionally very pro-DPP southern city of Kaohsiung—initially offered a disruptive and populist alternative to the staid Tsai. His political style seemed suited to the era of social media in which disinformation and rumour, generated both domestically and by the Chinese state, circulated in Taiwan's febrile political atmosphere.

The turning point for Tsai's campaign was Xi's 2019 New Year [speech](#) on Taiwan marking the 40th anniversary of the National People's Congress's letter to 'Taiwan Compatriots'. Xi asserted unification under the 'one country, two systems' model as the necessary and non-negotiable outcome for Taiwan. Tsai's quick and decisive rebuke boosted her popularity domestically, with tacit support from the US administration.

Like previous Taiwanese presidents, Tsai [rejected](#) 'one country, two systems', but she used her statements after Xi's speech to regain the political initiative. The KMT's Han also stated his opposition to the policy, but was caught between criticising the DPP for not managing the relationship with China and promising openness towards China to support business interests.

Meanwhile, Han's campaign machine was dysfunctional and the KMT was beset by an identity crisis. In the second half of 2019, the protests in Hong Kong left few in Taiwan under the illusion that Beijing would honour any arrangements that would respect any form of autonomy. The [younger generation](#) of Taiwanese in particular saw an urgency to defend Taiwan's sovereignty, maintain their democracy and refuse a future like Hong Kong's.

On election night, Tsai herself emerged politically stronger as a democratically elected president in a way never before seen in Taiwan. She faced down rivals in her own party, defeated the KMT and also challenged an emerging populism in Taiwan's politics.

Having secured an election victory, the Tsai government faces continuing challenges internationally and in cross-strait relations.

Tsai was extremely disciplined in her cross-strait actions and rhetoric in her first term, despite the pressure within her own party and from Beijing, limiting the possibility of escalation or crisis. She has conveyed directly her intention to maintain that approach in her second term. In her [acceptance speech](#), she vowed to continue with a policy based on peace, parity, democracy and dialogue, explaining that:

‘Peace’ means that China must abandon threats of force against Taiwan.

‘Parity’ means that neither side of the Taiwan Strait should deny the fact of the other's existence.

‘Democracy’ means that the future of Taiwan must be decided by our country's 23 million people.

‘Dialogue’ means that we must be able to sit down and discuss the future development of cross-strait relations.

None of those is an easy goal. On one side is Beijing's intransigence and growing capacity for action and Xi's strongman tactics. On the other is a disciplined and experienced Tsai administration whose leader has been greatly elevated in political stature both at home and abroad. Having seen off a populist contender for the presidency and a number of presumptive men in the senior ranks of her own party, she will likely be inclined to use her political capital to its fullest to secure Taiwan's interests over the next four years.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-significance-of-tsais-victory-in-taiwan>.

What Tsai's re-election in Taiwan means for Australia

Mark Harrison and Huong Le Thu, 5 February 2020

Given the landslide election [victory](#) of President Tsai Ing-wen, and the likelihood that Beijing will intensify tactics to isolate Taiwan and pressure its government, Australia should consider stepping up its support for Taiwan's de facto independent status in the interests of cross-strait stability and regional security.

Of central importance are the manner of the election wins and the emphatic show of support by the Taiwanese electorate for Tsai and the policies of her Democratic Progressive Party. For the Chinese party-state, an equivocal result would have offered more convincing justification for its belief that, despite a [‘temporary counter-current’](#), Taiwan was on a path to unification. Such an outcome would also have created fresh opportunities for the Chinese Communist Party to exploit political and social divisions by cultivating links with the business and religious communities and with specific figures in Taiwan's opposition Kuomintang.

Instead, the result was a demonstration of political unanimity by the people of Taiwan. It made visible what has been obvious to close observers for decades—that Taiwan is not moving towards unification with the People's Republic of China. At the most fundamental level, the election results demonstrate Taiwan's political sovereignty through the practice of democracy.

How Tsai will use her strong mandate to manoeuvre between the pressure points likely to be applied by Beijing will matter a great deal for the region, and for Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy. That's especially so if China intensifies its pressure on Taiwan.

The hardening of party policies under CCP Chairman Xi Jinping—notably, his rejection of the degree of pragmatism and flexibility of his predecessor Hu Jintao—and the US determination to counter Beijing's regional ambitions increase Taiwan's vulnerability.

The CCP's leaders strongly believe that unification with Taiwan is the expression, in its distinctive Marxist sense, of the inevitable trajectory of history towards national rejuvenation and the realisation of socialism in the ‘New China’. For Beijing, that involves a non-negotiable offer to Taiwan of unification under the one country, two systems formula as a stage towards that ultimate goal.

So foundational are these beliefs to the party that any rethink of policy on Taiwan is highly unlikely. Beijing will continue its tactics of diplomatic isolation, military threats, economic inducements and domestic interference.

Canberra has no capacity to initiate systemic change or ideological reform in the PRC and it has pragmatically pursued a relationship with Taiwan over a range of trade, cultural and security links that is overshadowed by Canberra's much larger relationship with Beijing. This was demonstrated, for example, when negotiations on a free trade agreement with Taiwan stalled in the face of Beijing's objections.

However, the election shows that Australia needs to take seriously the gap between Taiwan's aspiration for a democratic political future and the destiny envisioned for it by the CCP.

While avoiding a cross-strait military conflict must always be Australia's goal, the opposite of war is not 'peaceful reunification'. The election result highlights the reality that it's impossible for Taiwan to become part of the PRC without destabilising the region, the Taiwan Strait, and ultimately China itself.

So, in the interests of peace and security, Australia must help limit Taiwan's diplomatic isolation by using high-level contacts; opposing Beijing's military threats; strengthening economic, cultural and education links; and collaborating on countering shared threats to democratic practices.

The number of visits to Taiwan by properly briefed politicians and officials should be increased. Canberra should also work actively with state and local governments to support contact with Taiwan and build policy capacity at all levels.

Australia's [Pacific step-up](#) is an important avenue for collaboration. Despite Taipei's shrinking number of allies, Taiwan is a long-term Pacific actor with a substantial footprint in the region. It offers Canberra opportunities to partner in developing quality infrastructure and governance.

Beyond the immediate region, both Taiwan and Australia have met Beijing's sharp power and foreign influence operations in their domestic policymaking and have shared experiences of cyber threats identified as originating in the PRC.

In an era of borderless challenges such as climate change and the unfolding coronavirus crisis, Australia's interests will be best served by an active and high-level relationship with Taiwan that modulates concern for Beijing's sensitivities.

Despite these drivers of policy, Taiwan remains a significant [challenge for Australia](#). The [prospect that a US military defence](#) of Taiwan could involve an Australian military commitment remains in the background of Australia's policy calculus. That's complicated by the extent to which the US has become a less reliable partner in the region. A second term for Donald Trump seems likely, but even if the administration changes, the positions of all of the Democratic contenders point to an inward-looking US government without a clear vision of global power.

Under these evolving conditions, Australia's policy towards Taiwan needs to be grounded in a proper understanding of the histories and politics of both China and Taiwan and a willingness to identify specific instances when the traditional strong emphasis on trade with China, and on the US alliance, doesn't serve Australia's national interests.

In her post-election comments to the international community, Tsai said Taiwan should be seen as 'a partner, not an issue'. Australia doesn't take sides in the democratic choices of the Taiwanese people, but it can recognise them in a values-based foreign policy, as prescribed in the 2017 white paper. To maintain Australia's own security and prosperity, we would do well to take seriously the opportunity offered by a closer bilateral partnership and find ways to realise it.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/what-tsais-re-election-in-taiwan-means-for-australia>.

Singapore

Why Singapore's election will be like no other

Huong Le Thu, 9 July 2020

Tomorrow, Singaporeans will be among the first citizens to vote in a national election during the global Covid-19 pandemic.

The general election campaign has been short and without the traditional rallies. Only on 23 June did Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong ask the president to dissolve the parliament to prepare for the poll, nearly 300 days before the ruling party's term was due to end. Calling for an early election is not unusual, but holding an election amid a pandemic has its challenges.

The island state only eased its lockdown a few weeks ago, and with strict social-distancing measures still in place, it remains to be seen how effective the 'time-band' system, which aims to spread out voters and minimise crowds, will be.

It's also not clear that everyone who's entitled to vote will get to do so. Singapore has compulsory voting, but people who don't comply aren't fined as they are in Australia.

People in quarantine will not be allowed out to vote. Those who have been served with stay-at-home notices [can vote, but with restrictions](#), and the virus may deter frail and elderly voters. Because of a ban on physical rallies, all campaign activities are happening online. Those who are less digitally connected are likely to miss the political messages from the contending parties.

There's also considerable concern about the negative aspects of social media, such as the '[echo chamber](#)' effect and the spread of disinformation. This will be the first election since Singapore adopted the controversial [Protection from Online Falsehood and Manipulation Act](#) in 2019.



Image: Abdul Rahman/Flickr.

There's unlikely to be a significant shift in support for any party. 'Voter apathy' and the absence of normal rallies have left little opportunity to shift the loyalty of swinging voters in the middle ground.

Before the technical challenges brought by the pandemic, Singapore had been gearing up for a changing of the guard at this election to 'fourth generation' leaders, or 4G as they are known locally, and a transition to a post-Lee family era. Lee Hsien Loong, who has been prime minister since 2004, has indicated many times his intention to retire. It's expected that he'll follow the precedent set by his late father, Singapore's founder, Lee Kuan Yew, and go on to play a role as a 'senior minister' and 'minister mentor' behind the scenes. Nothing is, however, set in stone.

Heng Swee Keat, the current deputy prime minister, has been groomed for the PM's position for some time and is widely regarded as a trustworthy and competent leader. Whether he has the charisma to succeed in such challenging times is another question.

Another novelty in this election campaign is that members of the Lee family are supporting opposite sides for the first time. The split was the result of a family feud between the prime minister and his businessman brother, Lee Hsien Yang, following the death of their father.

Lee Hsien Yang has joined the opposition [Progress Singapore Party](#), which was formed last year. He recently [accused](#) the prime minister of abusing their father's legacy and departing from his party's original vision of caring for all Singaporeans, rather than just the elites.

This election is a de facto referendum on the 4G leadership, measuring their competency, style and party branding in a new era. The results will reflect the nation's level of satisfaction with and confidence in the government's handling of the pandemic crisis.

Even before the Covid-19 outbreak, the trade war and strategic competition between China and the US had Singapore worried given its dependence on trade. The more unstable international environment calls for experienced and skilled leadership to protect a smaller country's interests. It is also the first time that Singaporeans—who are highly attuned to the international environment—will decide on a government that must prove capable of steering Singapore in the uncertain and less secure future where both China and the US show less interest in Asia's regional prosperity.

This election is primarily about 'jobs, jobs, jobs' and the economy in the post-Covid reality. Singapore is [forecast](#) to face its deepest recession since 1965.

Prime Minister Lee has said that 'keeping Singapore going, flying straight and level safely through the turbulent weather, is the most challenging and urgent priority for the government'. The People's Action Party's [manifesto](#), 'Our lives, our jobs, our future', released in late June, focuses on economic growth and employment. It offers a vision to reboot the economy, reskill the population and restructure the economy after the coronavirus crisis.

The Workers' Party, which in the last election won six out of 89 elected seats in parliament, has urged voters to avoid an electoral wipe-out and is targeting a third of the seats.

All opposition politicians have pointed out the lack of transparency surrounding the election call. They've each issued [manifestos](#) in recent weeks supporting social safety nets, minimum wages and job security. They've also raised the issue of migrant workers, who suffered a surge of second-wave Covid-19 infections, as evidence of the government's shortcomings. They've promised more support for the healthcare system, assistance to small businesses, and actions to address social inequality.

The People's Action Party has governed longer than any other party in Southeast Asia and this election is unlikely to see its rule end. The sudden calling of the election and the novel way it is being conducted suggest that voting behaviour will benefit the incumbent.

Social psychologists say people are less inclined to take risks during times of crisis and uncertainty. Singapore's election may seem likely to be an easy win, but the PAP's credibility is at stake. In the 2011 elections, it received a record low 60% of the vote, which bounced back to nearly 70% in 2015.

The question to be answered on election day is how many Singaporeans feel that the PAP is the best party to guide them through these stormy times.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/why-singapores-election-will-be-like-no-other>.

The continuing contest for Singapore's future

Chong Ja Ian, 24 July 2020

As the dust settles after the city-state's 10 July [general election](#), Singaporeans are facing a new parliamentary term that promises to be challenging. Tensions will play out between persistent constitutional constraints and new expectations in the context of a pandemic-ridden world. Voters are anticipating substantive change following the unexpectedly [strong showing](#) by alternative political parties. The Workers' Party (WP) won a record 10 seats, [consolidating its position](#) as Singapore's largest and most important opposition party.

Beneath the excitement remains the fact that the long-dominant People's Action Party (PAP) retains its parliamentary supermajority and [close relationship with key state agencies](#), such as the People's Association. This raises questions about how the nation will reconcile a popular desire for greater oversight and more diversity with a political system that remains dominated by a single party.

One theme common among the opposition parties was the need to have a parliament that is [more representative](#) of the different voices that make up the country and better able to watch over a PAP administration. The larger and more electorally successful parties—the WP, the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP)—were particularly clear in articulating this aspiration, emphasising a need to avoid giving the PAP 'a blank cheque'.

Singaporean voters also seemed to support a more systematically redistributive approach to public policy. The WP, the SDP and, to some degree, the PSP all took on [positions to the left](#) of the PAP, putting forward proposals for a national minimum wage, redundancy insurance, and support for unpaid caregivers to apply across the board. The PAP, on the other hand, kept to its [traditional emphasis](#) on the efforts of individuals and families, with minimalist state support supplemented by one-off transfers.

Acceptance of, even enthusiasm for, more left-leaning proposals suggests that Singaporeans are willing to consider different social and economic policy settings. This shift in popular sentiment is perhaps unsurprising, given the widespread [concern](#) about the impacts of a prolonged global economic slowdown in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another takeaway from this election is Singaporeans' apparent readiness to have more open discussions about race, discrimination and bullying. Half-way through the election campaign, news broke that one of the WP's candidates, Raeesah Khan, had posted [strongly worded statements](#) about discrimination and supposed special treatment.

Those revelations sparked a [police investigation](#) and drew sharp criticism from the PAP, which claimed that Khan was trying to undermine social stability by stirring racial and religious differences. [Strong public support](#) for Khan and against public bullying followed, accompanied by police reports alleging past discriminatory statements by PAP candidates and others associated with the party. These efforts appear to have neutralised the PAP's attempts to cast Khan and, by extension, the WP as threats to society.

Notwithstanding their newfound tolerance for a departure from familiar PAP approaches, Singaporeans continued to give the party a [strong mandate](#). The party won 83 out of the 93 seats in parliament, which puts it in a position to pass any law it wishes, including constitutional amendments.

Voters demanded more questioning of and deliberation over PAP policies by parties that **appeared credible** in their eyes—those with experienced or well-credentialed candidates, organised party structures and clear, coherent platforms. The limited support for the other parties suggests that Singaporeans are not ready to give a free pass to anyone simply based on reservations about the PAP, its politics and its policies. The PAP's leadership is acceptable so long as the party keeps looking over its shoulder.

The election results and the voter sentiments they reveal indicate a tension in Singaporean politics. Even if voters had extended a qualified rebuke of the PAP, the party's continued **parliamentary supremacy** means that there is technically nothing to prevent it from resisting voters' demands and even changing laws to limit or roll back oversight. Suspicions that the PAP engages in such behaviour persist, most recently surrounding **constitutional amendments** that seemingly limited eligible candidates for the country's presidency to a former PAP stalwart and speaker of parliament. The **party claims** it was seeking to ensure minority representation and the experience necessary to safeguard the country's reserves. Unless the PAP can credibly commit to restraint and adherence to voter preferences, questions will remain about whether the 2020 elections will usher in meaningful shifts.

Some observers see these elections as a **watershed**. Yet, the coalescence of support around stronger non-PAP political parties championing oversight and to the left of the PAP in their policy positions seems to be a continuation of a slow-moving trend that appeared as early as 2001. Though somewhat chastened, the PAP remains all-powerful given not only its continued popular support, extensive resources and parliamentary presence, but also its deep roots in state and society.

The PAP's Central Executive Committee will continue to appoint the party's next secretary-general and Singapore's prime minister, even if the election results imply **reservations** about the so-called fourth-generation leadership. Where there may be more visible adjustments is partisan consolidation around the WP and the two next best performing political parties, the PSP and SDP.

Beyond the excitement and euphoria, Singapore's 2020 general elections are likely set the stage for a contest between some version of politics as usual and the start of a new trajectory for the city-state.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-continuing-contest-for-singapores-future>.

Singapore's real opposition emerges

Hoe-Yeong Loke, 25 August 2020

Many general elections in Singapore have been described as 'watersheds'. It's become the euphemism every time the opposition makes gains. And so it was with the latest one on 10 July, but with one crucial difference—this watershed election was an unexpected one.

What explains this surprise jolt for the ruling People's Action Party (PAP)? The virtual nature of the campaign, and the impact of young voters, played a large part. But underlying all this are signs of a real **inflection point** for Singapore politics—the Workers' Party (WP) has consolidated its position as the opposition to contend with, while the PAP's 'fourth generation' (4G) leaders now find themselves on shaky ground.

The elections saw even greater Covid-19-related restrictions on physical campaigning than in the South Korean legislative assembly elections in April. This meant Singapore's opposition was not able to hold rallies which, especially the WP's, are some of the most boisterous and vibrant of any democracy.

Nevertheless, the opposition invested heavily in virtual outreach activities, as did the better-resourced PAP. Yet it was the WP that came across with clearer messaging, because it is a smaller, more tightly knit outfit than the behemoth that is the PAP. More potent perhaps was the spread of political messages on WhatsApp, although they were mainly satirical memes. TV political broadcasts were stepped up, but featured highly scripted speeches that made for drowsy evening viewing.

A virtual election also meant that the opposition's campaign had been at the mercy of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act—the anti-fake-news law that has been criticised for stifling online debate (the government's position is that it 'can only enhance public debate'). Some parties were slapped with correction orders under the act, including the Singapore Democratic Party for its criticism of the government's handling of the pandemic.

While campaigning was virtual, voting was still a very manual process. Voters, accustomed to Singapore-style efficiency, faced long queues at polling stations because of Covid-19 screening measures. If swing voters indeed make up their minds in the last hour or so before casting their ballots, imagine the impact of an otherwise mundane problem. Party insiders have shared anecdotal evidence that polling precincts with the longest queues delivered weaker results for the PAP.

The prevailing wisdom is that it was younger voters who swayed the election. The notion is that as digital natives, Generation Z voters have been exposed to a worldview that the PAP can never hope to control—more so now at a time of growing youth activism around the world, on issues ranging from climate change to identity politics.

In presenting the PAP's election post-mortem, cabinet minister Lawrence Wong disputed this reading, pointing instead to middle-aged voters, whom the PAP has vowed to win back. Wong clearly had the group constituency of Sengkang in mind, which the PAP lost in a shock defeat. Sengkang is a relatively new neighbourhood with many young families, more concerned about the loss of income and jobs than issues typically associated with youth activism.

K. Shanmugam, another cabinet minister, said that younger Singaporeans now 'must decide where to draw the boundaries on discussions on race and religion'—a significant change of tack in Singapore where racial and religious harmony is policed by strict laws. This could only be a nod to the incident where Raeesah Khan, the 26-year-old WP candidate for Sengkang, was castigated by the PAP for her social media posts calling for racial justice. A police report was made against her. Some regard the episode as having backfired against the PAP and contributing towards its loss of Sengkang.

On the whole, the PAP's 4G leaders look in danger of losing young voters, a trend that may have been accelerated by the virtual nature of the election. Lee Hsien Loong's presumptive successor as prime minister was three percentage points away from losing his seat. Amid a rare moment of vulnerability for the PAP, Lee has chosen to stick to his succession plan as gleaned from the post-election cabinet reshuffle, calculating perhaps that the alternatives are even worse.

As a corollary, the WP was the real winner on election night because it had the youth and virtual factors going for it, and more. Even the most cynical of election watchers now see that the WP has been on a clear upward trajectory for some 15 years, punctuated only by a slightly disappointing showing in 2015.

The WP has been derided by some domestic and foreign observers as being 'PAP-lite' for its moderate stances, calculated to win over middle-ground voters, but ultimately a token opposition presence. Such criticisms have been completely misguided. The ideological/policy gap between the PAP and the WP is not vastly different from that between most recent governments and oppositions in Australia or the UK, for instance.

Singapore's other opposition parties are perennially blighted by structural weaknesses and infighting. They have not won any seats in three successive general elections. Any talk of a grand opposition coalition to face off the PAP is no longer taken seriously. It is time to recognise the WP as the real opposition to contend with, as Lee has.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/singapores-real-opposition-emerges>.

New Zealand

New Zealand's corona-shaped election

David Capie, 15 October 2020

With just days to go until New Zealand's general election on 17 October, the polls strongly suggest Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party is on course for a second term. The bigger question is whether Labour will get the votes it needs to rule alone.

It has been a strange, drawn-out affair, one that began with a false start. Ardern originally picked a 19 September election date, but an outbreak of coronavirus in Auckland in August led to [calls from opposition parties to delay the vote](#). A four-week postponement made it an unusually long, listless campaign, with socially distanced party launches and elbow bumps replacing the usual hugs and handshakes. Whatever their political convictions, on Saturday evening a fatigued New Zealand public will let out a collective sigh of relief.

Unsurprisingly, the election has been dominated by the global pandemic and its economic impact. Labour [initially rode high in the polls](#), receiving plaudits for its 'go hard and go early' response to the virus. Finance Minister Grant Robertson turned on his money printer, with a wage subsidy and stimulus spending cushioning the worst effects of the border closure and nationwide lockdown. Even when shortcomings in border management and testing came to light, and [the health minister was fired](#), the government seemed able to ride out the critics. Ardern dominated the media landscape, eclipsing not just the opposition National Party, but also her coalition partners, the Greens and New Zealand First.

For its part, National struggled to land punches. Leader Simon Bridges was [flayed for being too critical of the government's](#) response and—unforgivably—suggesting Australia was doing a better job of handling the Covid-19 crisis. As National's polling dropped, [Bridges was rolled](#) by the relatively unknown Todd Muller. Muller lasted just 53 days before stepping down, admitting the pressure of the role had taken its toll. In turmoil, National turned to party veteran Judith Collins to stabilise the ship.



Image: [New Zealand Labour](#)/Twitter.

Collins outperformed expectations in the leaders' debates, but her message of a 'strong team' and superior economic management hasn't been helped by persistent leaks and a NZ\$4 billion miscalculation in National's Covid-19 response plan. The party hasn't been able to make serious inroads into Labour's support. Instead, it has bled votes to the right-wing ACT New Zealand party, which has supplemented its longstanding free-market policies with a [new-found enthusiasm for gun owners' rights](#). ACT, a one-man band in parliament since 2011, looks on course to have as many as 10 MPs.

The Green Party has had its own election travails, with [co-leader James Shaw apologising to the party](#) after approving NZ\$12.7 million in government funding for a private school. Despite that, the Greens look likely to get back into parliament, although there will be a few nerves on election night; polls show them hovering just over the 5% threshold. If ACT surges and the Greens fall below 5%, a [slim path to government might open up for National](#).

The biggest casualty of the election, however, looks to be Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters' populist NZ First party whose nine MPs decided the outcome of the last election. Dogged by a [political donations scandal](#), the party has lost voters both left and right. Peters has defied the pollsters before, but his party languishes at around 2%, which would leave it out of the next parliament altogether. That would spell the end of a remarkable political career for the 75-year-old Peters and, with no heir apparent, likely means the end of NZ First.

That won't have escaped the notice of the foreign policy and national security communities in Canberra, who have been happy to have Peters as foreign minister and his NZ First counterpart Ron Mark in defence. NZ First pushed for investment in new defence capabilities such as the P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft and the C130-J Super Hercules, and is widely seen as the driver of a tougher New Zealand line on China. But [as my colleague Robert Ayson has noted](#), foreign and defence policy has hardly warranted a mention in this election.

Would the election of a Labour–Green government mean New Zealand is about to make a sharp change of foreign policy direction? Don't bet on it. A focus on the Pacific will continue, along with an emphasis on climate change and working with multilateral institutions. Concerns about a more assertive and authoritarian China are increasingly shared across the political spectrum and embedded in a range of policy measures, even if New Zealand chooses to express those worries in careful language. And if Joe Biden wins the White House on 3 November, that will make ties with Washington much less complicated, at least in the short term.

But if Peters isn't returned to parliament, foreign affairs will be different without him. As an NZ First minister, he has played a special role—articulating the government's most pressing foreign policy and security concerns while also providing it with a useful degree of ambiguity, even deniability. It's hard to see how that will be easily replaced.

The prospects for defence look more challenging. With a large Covid-sized hole in the government's coffers, some of the projects in last year's defence capability plan would struggle to generate enthusiasm no matter what the make-up of the new government is. Mark spent a lot of the past three years trying to convince his coalition partners that the defence force was worth funding because of the contribution it makes to 'community and nation'. Did he succeed? We won't need to wait long to find out. A defence assessment is currently in the works and a full defence white paper is due next year.

As polling day approaches, Ardern seems to have the momentum. With [almost 1.2 million early votes already cast](#)—close to half the likely total—the possibility of some last-minute black swan event intervening seems remote. It remains to be seen if Labour can secure a big enough win to govern on its own—a feat never achieved before under the country's [mixed-member proportional electoral system](#)—or if it will need the support of the Greens. Either way, New Zealand's long Covid election looks likely to return an incumbent prime minister but a different flavour of government in Wellington.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/new-zealands-corona-shaped-election>.

Ardern shows the way in engaging with young voters

Alexandra Pascoe, 16 October 2020

As New Zealanders head to the polls, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and the Labour Party are in a good position to be able to form government in their own right after three years in a coalition with New Zealand First. A substantial part of Labour's support is likely to come from [young people](#). Before the [last election](#) in 2017, 52% of those aged 18–34 voted or intended to vote for Labour and 47% of 25–34-year-olds also supported the party.

The power of the 'youth vote' is frequently discussed, but, more often than not, it is also underestimated. There's a growing number of young voters enrolled around the world. In Australia, young voters rushed to enrol to vote in the same-sex marriage plebiscite in 2017. That pushed Australia's [enrolment rate](#) at the 2019 election to a historic high of 96.8%. [In the US](#), people under the age of 40 comprise almost 40% of eligible voters. [In the UK](#), before the 2019 election, more than 1.5 million people under the age of 34 had enrolled to vote, up from 1.2 million prior to the 2017 election.

Despite this, youth voter turnout often falls short of expectations. Young people no doubt care about political issues, but there's a strong sense of disillusionment with, and disengagement from, traditional politics and traditional politicians who seem unconcerned with the issues young people care most about. This, along with a perception that their votes won't make a difference, seems to limit the number of young voters who show up on election day.

But this doesn't appear to be entirely the case in New Zealand. The Labour government led by Ardern seems to have been more successful in appealing to young people and encouraging them to participate in the electoral process in greater numbers.

When Ardern assumed the leadership of the Labour Party in 2017 at age 37, just two months before becoming New Zealand's youngest prime minister in 150 years, the country was gripped by 'Jacindamania'. Young people in particular seemed inspired by Ardern, who adopted an '[unrelentingly positive](#)' campaign style, coupled with a platform including a plan to implement three years of [free tertiary education](#) by 2024. This, as well as a perception that she communicated *with* young people, rather than just talked *about* them, resulted in an increase in [voter turnout](#) among New Zealanders aged 18 to 29, a [6.5%](#) jump from the 2014 election.

The emergence of a young, female political leader has done a lot to reinvigorate New Zealand's domestic politics. Ardern has recast the mould of what it means to be a politician. She has employed empathy and effective communication to provide the leadership necessary to bring her country through the Christchurch terror attack and the Covid-19 pandemic. Her ability to communicate in a relatable manner, particularly via social media during the pandemic and throughout the election campaign, has driven engagement with her messages and motivated 'perceptions of [authenticity and expertise](#)'.

But Ardern's appeal for young people goes beyond the mere fact of her being young, female and an effective communicator. Despite her history as a [career politician](#), she has committed to doing politics and implementing policies differently.

In stark contrast to the strongman politics on display in other parts of the world, Ardern has demonstrated an ability to be both [empathetic and decisive](#) in delivering effective leadership in New Zealand's [Covid-19 response](#). Despite stringent lockdown measures and the heavy impact of the pandemic on young people—in terms of both [employment](#) and [mental health](#)—Ardern's leadership has been viewed as successfully uniting the country and has garnered global recognition. Her encouragement of New Zealand's '[team of five million](#)' to accept tough lockdowns, and her willingness to take a [pay cut](#) herself as others have been hard hit, stand out among global responses to the pandemic.

Ardern's '[wellbeing budget](#)' is another good example of how Labour has done things differently, reconceptualising how to measure the economic success of the country and focusing on improving people's quality of life over the long term. While it maintains elements like debt and budget targets, the wellbeing budget aims to provide greater consideration of [factors beyond](#) GDP growth, to include measures for supporting sustainable and low-emissions growth, providing skills and opportunities to New Zealanders, and supporting mental health.

This long-term and forward-looking policy agenda no doubt resonates with young voters concerned with inequality and their economic future. New Zealand's [2020 budget](#) focuses on job creation, with initiatives targeted at young people such as a trades and apprenticeship package, support for employment services and a new hardship fund for students.

Labour's [climate policies](#) also reflect the concerns of young people and the priority they place on action to tackle climate change. A zero-emissions target, as well as a commitment to apply a '[climate change lens](#)' to all government decisions, makes clear that the government understands that climate change is a critical issue with wide-ranging effects, and that it's serious about taking action.

Those looking for an effective model for promoting youth voter engagement could learn much from New Zealand's example. Refreshing and non-traditional politicians have an advantage, but employing effective communication strategies and enacting policies that are responsive to the needs and concerns of young people are key. Young people want to see that their vote matters and that it can lead to tangible change that benefits them and the society they live in.

While Ardern has provided a new face and a new approach to New Zealand politics, hard work will be needed to advance Labour's policy agenda should the party win another term. The Covid-19-induced recession will no doubt pose a challenge to delivering on Ardern's and Labour's promises of 'transformational change' for New Zealand.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/ardern-shows-the-way-in-engaging-with-young-voters>.

Ardern faces major challenges despite landslide win in NZ election

Jennifer Lees-Marshment, 20 October 2020

Jacinda Ardern and the Labour Party secured a landslide victory in Saturday's New Zealand election. Labour got [49% of the vote](#) and 64 seats in the 120-seat parliament, meaning it can form a government without entering into a coalition. No party has won a majority since New Zealand adopted a mixed-member proportional electoral system in 1996. Labour received its highest level of support in 50 years.

But landslides are also disruptive, and there are a number of challenges ahead for the re-elected prime minister. Ardern's effective management of the health aspects of the Covid-19 crisis masked a failure to deliver on core 2017 promises and formulate policies for 2020 that will help New Zealand recover from the longer-term economic effects of the pandemic.

In the last leaders' debate, Ardern said people's minds were on the future and they wanted to know where the country would go next. But she failed to then say where that would be. Her list of [promises for 2020](#) included programs already launched and failed to highlight any obviously transformational policies. The overall policy branding was good, with a focus on people, jobs, rebuilding, business and NZ's global situation. But there was no outside-the-box thinking or clear priorities that the government can now score quick wins on. The phenomenal result therefore doesn't equal public support for specific actions because Labour never said clearly what action it plans to take.

The unfair reality of political marketing is that political consumers are rarely satisfied for long and always want more. Having successfully managed the health side of the Covid-19 crisis, Labour will soon find voters asking, 'What's next?' In particular, they will be looking for ideas from the new government on how it will handle the slower burn economic fallout from the pandemic.

Data from the online engagement tool [Vote Compass 2020](#) run by TVNZ (just like the one run by the ABC in Australia) suggested chinks in Ardern's armour. On the one hand she was [the most liked leader](#), reflecting her relatable brand. But the economy—including jobs and economic recovery—was [the top voter concern](#) and only 40% said they trusted Ardern to manage the economy best. This was only 12 percentage points more than National Party leader Judith Collins. And 56% of undecided voters—the very ones likely to have created Labour's landslide—said they trusted neither Ardern nor Collins or did not know.

The Vote Compass data also revealed a nationalistic or protectionist leaning among voters. There was a strong desire for protection of New Zealand's assets and independence—90% of respondents thought the government should impose a [royalty on exporters of NZ water](#), 70% that foreign ownership of houses shouldn't be allowed and 67% that New Zealand should be less reliant on other countries for its goods and services.

As the landslide settles into place, there may still be dust in the air, making it hard to read the political market.

While voters did support [increasing taxes](#) on wealthier people (59% agree) and [free dental care](#) for those on low incomes (70% support action in this area), there was a strong divide on other areas of social welfare such as increasing the minimum wage and providing [free lunches](#) to students in state schools.

In her first term, Ardern showed that she was good at dancing around the different [coalition partners](#), adapting to the circumstances she faced so that she could achieve as much as possible. However, her weakness was in not discharging plans effectively and thus being perceived to fail to deliver, abandoning key promises such as to introduce a [capital gains tax](#) and overseeing a [problematic implementation](#) of Labour's flagship housebuilding program, KiwiBuild.

She will now have to show leadership and use political management and marketing much more effectively. Time must be spent on creating a vision for the recovery, designing a plan with specific policy priorities, and investing political capital from the Labour landslide in executing plans once decisions are made. [In political marketing terms](#), this means creating market-research-led communication to persuade people to get behind potentially difficult decisions and ensure tangible outcomes can actually be delivered. And all of this must be done while managing the tension between two diverse markets: a victorious Labour movement wanting more transformational, progressive action and those who cautiously lent Labour their vote for the first time.

Ultimately, the biggest message to come out of Vote Compass was that New Zealanders want leadership that shows care and concern but also takes action. Doing this amid a global economic crisis is not going to be easy.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/ardern-faces-major-challenges-despite-landslide-win-in-nz-election>.

Myanmar

What to expect from Myanmar's post-election foreign policy

Moe Thuzar, 3 November 2020

Myanmar's citizens will brave Covid-19 concerns to go to the polls on 8 November. [In a survey](#) conducted last month, a third of respondents identified Covid-19 or health issues as a concern or barrier to voting. The survey also showed high trust in State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi; more than 65% of respondents reported positive attitudes towards the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD), which she leads.

Even without those findings, the [general outlook](#) for Myanmar's election is that the NLD will be returned to office, albeit with a smaller majority. The party is seeking a second mandate with an undertaking to continue tackling the promises made in 2015 when it ran—and won—on a ticket for change against the incumbent Union Solidarity and Development Party.

Foreign policy was an area of continuity in the NLD's agenda for change. The brief statement on foreign policy in the [party's 2015 manifesto](#) started off with a commitment to uphold 'an active and independent foreign policy', which has been Myanmar's position since 1974, when it amended its neutralist non-aligned policy to indicate that neutrality did not mean sitting on the fence.

As foreign minister, Aung San Suu Kyi confirmed a neutralist foreign policy in a briefing to the diplomatic community in Myanmar in April 2016. It was short on details, but the broad approach seemed to indicate a potentially stronger focus on multilateralism, with mentions of neutralism, universal friendship and human rights, and more people-to-people contacts. ASEAN and East Asian ties seemed to feature as large as they had under the Union Solidarity and Development Party; the [NLD's 2015 manifesto](#) included an intent 'to work together for the benefit of the region on issues relating to regional organisations and programmes'.



Image: [usaidinmyanmar/Flickr](#).

But in 2016–17 the international spotlight was focused on Myanmar over the military's atrocities against the Rohingya communities in Rakhine State. Though keeping the ASEAN link, Myanmar's foreign policy shifted to a preference for bilateralism and an 'Asian pivot' in seeking investment and trade continuity from Asian partners, notably China, Japan and South Korea. These three countries are among Myanmar's top 10 trade and investment partners, together with the United States (in trade), India, and several ASEAN countries (in both trade and investment).

The [section on foreign policy](#) in the NLD's 2020 manifesto continues the commitments to an active and independent foreign policy and to relations with international bodies. Unlike in 2015, however, there's no explicit mention of identifying 'joint economic enterprises of mutual benefit' for cooperation with other countries, or working together on regional issues.

Yet, any government taking on the challenge of leading Myanmar through its difficult transition should consider the economic and multilateral dimensions of foreign policy. Economic diplomacy will feature more in Myanmar's 21st-century foreign policy than in the past, as the country's trade and investment partners will link their financial interests to decisions related to expanding (or entrenching) their strategic space.

In continuing to balance its domestic exigencies with external pressures, Myanmar's post-2020 foreign policy seems set to be shaped by two main factors: balancing relations with China amid complex geopolitical concerns and continuing with economic reforms as the basis for domestic and external legitimacy.

It's unlikely that the NLD government will favour a tougher approach towards China, not just because of Chinese economic and infrastructure interests in the country, but also due to the political nature of China's 'mediator' role in Myanmar's peace process with ethnic armed groups and on the Rohingya crisis.

Still, a more nuanced approach to China might also help to better define Myanmar's interactions with other Asian partners. The government seems interested in continuing along this 'diversification' path. Economic and social recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic offers a ready context for this. Myanmar's recent hosting of a visit by high-level foreign affairs and defence officials [from India](#), engagement of the business and investment community in [Hong Kong](#) and [the United States](#), broadening of economic cooperation with [South Korea](#) and [Singapore](#), and signing of an agreement with [EuroCham](#) serve as some indicators of this intended direction.

Myanmar may have opportunities to shape its relationship with China so that it advances its own interests in an emerging—and widening—field of play beyond traditional security considerations. Covid-19 has complicated non-traditional security concerns, and a broad range of geopolitical issues linked to economics, energy and technology are imposing binary choices on Southeast Asian nations, including Myanmar.

The return of the NLD with a second mandate could also bring more emphasis on the environmental and climate provisions of any trade or investment deal. This is an area to watch, if the addition of 'sustainability' to the party's commitment for economic prosperity in the 2020 manifesto is anything to go by.

Myanmar also should consider how a new US administration might pursue (or revisit) America's strategy in Asia. Myanmar's constrained international bandwidth adds a third factor. How can decision-makers close the gap between the discussion on national security and interests, and perceptions of the country's conflict-soaked history?

Myanmar already has a convenient and constructive platform to address these foreign policy concerns. As an ASEAN member, Myanmar's political and economic choices affect—and are affected by—ASEAN's regional choices and commitments. Myanmar's post-2020 foreign policy would do well to have a stronger ASEAN underpinning.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/what-to-expect-from-myanmars-post-election-foreign-policy>.

Rebuilding a Covid-wracked economy must be Myanmar's top post-election priority

Sean Turnell, 6 November 2020

The people of Myanmar will go to the polls on Sunday to elect a new government. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, it was a near certainty that the current administration, led by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, would be returned. Indeed, and despite the ravages of Covid-19 on Myanmar, a landslide win for the National League for Democracy (NLD) remains the likely result.

Barely three months ago, Myanmar had seemed to have escaped the pandemic relatively unscathed. In August, however, a 'second wave' began, and since then the number of infected people has soared to nearly 60,000, while the number of deaths has climbed to more than a thousand. The economic cost of Covid-19 has been similarly severe. Predicted pre-Covid-19 to grow at nearly 7% in 2020 (the second-fastest-growing economy in Southeast Asia, just behind Vietnam), Myanmar's GDP is now likely to rise by little more than zero. Small wonder that it's not substantially negative (as in most other countries in the region), but the growth setback will bring about much suffering in a country where few people have much in the way of surplus resources to fall back on.

If the NLD government is returned on 8 November, its economic objectives will be two-pronged. Most immediately, relief and recovery policies will continue, at great but still bearable fiscal cost. But within a short period, barring other exogenous calamities, policies focused on longer-term reforms will reassert their priority. These policies will be a continuation of a trajectory that has seen around 100 major economic reforms enacted since 2016, and will aim to fundamentally transform Myanmar's political economy.

First on the agenda will be measures aimed at macro-financial stability. Myanmar's macroeconomy was long destabilised by an excessive state apparatus dominated by the military, but since 2016 the country's macroeconomic indicators have been just about all headed in the right direction. Especially noteworthy was the budget deficit, which more than halved across the current government's five-year term. The currency stabilised and foreign direct investment was steady (despite Myanmar's well-publicised and ongoing human rights troubles), while the broad modernisation of everyday life for many proceeded apace. However, with Covid-19 much on the fiscal front has changed. Good options are available to meet dramatically higher government spending, but implementing them will require adept hands on the macro-financial tiller.

Myanmar's private banking sector has traditionally been as fragile as its public finances. The location of periodic crises and collapse, Myanmar for much of the past 50 years has been largely without the institutions to create and allocate the capital that its farmers, entrepreneurs and ordinary people need. On this front, however, Myanmar's leaders can afford some optimism. Stimulated rather than repressed by the Covid-19 pandemic, Myanmar's fast-growing mobile financial service providers have been developing a digital ecosystem that has the potential of replicating (in form if not size) the transformative impact of China's fintech disrupters.

Around half of Myanmar's people rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, but it's a sector that has long been neglected by governments. A second term of the current administration will see a set of initiatives aimed at improving the lot of Myanmar's farmers, cultivators and rural workers broadly. Wholesale reform of Myanmar's state-owned agricultural bank is underway, which includes dramatically expanding its outreach via digital channels and link-ups with microfinance institutions. Also in the pipeline is increased investment in agricultural infrastructure, especially rural roads, irrigation and sustainable water management. Access to electricity has been a particular problem in Myanmar, but a growing number of people are now connected to the national grid (although it's still not completely reliable) and substantial investments are being made in solar, microgrids and other renewable energy systems.

Myanmar's garment and textile export sector has been a strong contributor to economic growth in recent years (and a vast employer of rural women in particular), but it has been hit hard by Covid-19. Disruptions to international markets and supply chains have placed the industry in some jeopardy, leading the government to work on facilitating its return to health through improvements in Myanmar's notoriously inefficient transportation infrastructure, measures aimed at alleviating the burdens of excessive red tape on businesses, and substantial tax relief on existing and new enterprises. That work will surely continue,

whatever the colour of the next administration. Myanmar's tourism sector has been even more affected by the pandemic, and a post-election plan to get visitors back will target tourists interested in the country not so much as a one-off bucket-list destination, but as a place for recurring travel for ecotourism, outdoor and adventure sports, and cultural heritage.

One of the most important questions facing Myanmar's new government will be how to manage relations with China. Of course, this question presents itself to all countries in Southeast Asia, but in Myanmar it's a matter that is close to existential. China is Myanmar's largest investor and trading partner, and Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative ambitions in Myanmar, and attendant financing, will continue to require both close scrutiny and hard-headed realism. These qualities have been conspicuously present in Myanmar's negotiating toolkit so far. One product was the dramatic reconception of the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port as an asset for Myanmar, rather than an entrapping liability. Vigilance on this front (and others) will be the price of Myanmar's monetary, fiscal and broader sovereignty.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/rebuilding-a-covid-wracked-economy-must-be-myanmars-top-post-election-priority>.

Suu Kyi wins strong popular mandate in Myanmar election

Nicholas Coppel, 13 November 2020

Early results indicate another massive victory for Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in Myanmar's 8 November general election. [Ninety-one political parties](#) fielded candidates, but the elections were again essentially a first-past-the-post contest between the NLD, identifying with democracy and a change from military rule, and the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), identifying with stability and security. Women constituted only 16% of the candidates. Unlike in 2015, when the NLD didn't field a single Muslim candidate, this year it [fielded two](#).

The NLD polled better than expected—[preliminary results](#) indicate the party will win well above the 322 seats needed to form a majority in its own right. The ethnic-based parties, less fractured than in 2015, had mixed results, faring better in some regions and worse in others. The big loser was the USDP, which failed to get re-elected in most of its seats, including its four stronghold seats in southern Mandalay Region. The party is challenging the results, [claiming the election was unfair](#).

With the disenfranchisement of the Rohingya, some commentators had claimed this year's election could never be free and fair, while others had [called for](#) the poll to be postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic. Notwithstanding the imperfections, the results have been widely accepted as broadly reflective of the wishes of the people—other than their wish for Suu Kyi to be president. The strong popular mandate reflects the nation's abiding admiration of and trust in her.

There were several improvements in this year's elections. Voting for soldiers and their families was shifted from unobservable military cantonments to regular polling stations where the counting was subject to the scrutiny of national and international observers (votes are counted at polling stations). Overseas voting is reported to have been much better organised for this election. And people over the age of 60 in lockdown areas were [permitted to vote early](#) to reduce the risk of Covid-19 infection.

As in 2015, many voices were not heard, not just the disenfranchised Rohingya but also millions of undocumented migrant workers in Thailand and ethnic minorities in conflict zones who were unable to vote. The treatment of the Rohingya wasn't an election issue, but the two Muslim candidates were subjected to a [barrage of](#) ethnic- and religious-based abuse and misinformation on Facebook, despite its intensified efforts to block and remove harmful content. In a victory over prejudice, both candidates were elected.

The Union Election Commission [cancelled voting](#) in parts of the country that were at risk of armed conflict, including most of Rakhine State, where three NLD candidates had been kidnapped by the Arakan Army, a Buddhist Rakhine ethnic armed group. Aside from these incidents, there was little election-related violence. Observers reported that the [elections were well conducted](#) with only a few problems on election day. [Voter turnout was high](#) and coronavirus fears didn't keep people away from polling stations, which had safety precautions including hand sanitiser, masks and face shields in place.

The military-drafted 2008 constitution remains the biggest obstacle to free and fair elections. The intention of the drafters was to keep the military in de facto control under the guise of a civilian-led, popularly elected government. This was to be achieved by reserving 25% of the seats in both the upper and lower houses of the national parliament for uniformed military appointees chosen by the commander-in-chief of defence services, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

And the only serious threat to military dominance, Suu Kyi, is precluded from becoming president because she is married to a foreigner and has children with foreign citizenship. In 2015, the NLD side-stepped this constitutional obstacle by appointing a compliant president and creating the position of state counsellor for Suu Kyi. There is no provision in the constitution for a state counsellor, but the public welcomed her assertion that she was above the president. We can expect this precedent to be followed when the new parliament sits to elect the vice presidents and then a president.

The president chooses most ministers and the chief ministers of the 14 administrative regions and states (irrespective of the outcome of regional elections), but it is the commander-in-chief who chooses the ministers for defence, border affairs and home affairs. The commander is not answerable to any civilian or other authority and holds a monopoly on the coercive power of the state. The military also has extensive and opaque business interests. The military sees itself as the praetorian guard of national unity and stability, and the civilian side governs constrained by a fear of military reintervention.

The choice of president will be critical to the NLD's modus operandi continuing to work. Then the president's subsequent choice of ministers will be closely watched for signs that the current aged group of men will be replaced by people with the energy, ideas and confidence to make decisions. The long-term success of Myanmar's democratic and economic transition needs teamwork and to develop a cohort of experienced potential leaders.

The victorious NLD can be expected to continue with economic reforms, but it won't directly target the military conglomerates. Rather, the reforms will progressively diminish the military's absolute and relative importance by introducing competition, reviewing and removing restrictive licensing requirements that only benefit the incumbents, and revitalising other sectors of the economy. Many in Myanmar have a misplaced hope that President-elect Joe Biden's win in the United States will eventually see a return to better bilateral relations, but in reality they will continue to accept with some ambivalence the [friendship of China](#).

The unambiguous NLD victory is a clear sign of the people's faith in the capacity of civilians to govern. This doesn't mean the military will now consent to constitutional reform, but the NLD is in a much stronger position to argue for it. And those who care about democracy and an accountable military in Myanmar should see their way to support Suu Kyi on this issue.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/suu-kyi-wins-strong-popular-mandate-in-myanmar-election>.

United States

Could a President Biden face a triple North Korea crisis?

Peter Jennings, 17 August 2020

North Korea presents a potential Biden administration with some deeply complicated problems and, quite likely, a crisis to manage soon after the presidential poll in November.

No one would be surprised if Kim Jong-un attempted to generate a crisis during the presidential transition period as a way of gaining Biden's attention, an attempt to reopen direct communications and a way to extract concessions on sanctions. [Pyongyang may test intercontinental-range ballistic missiles](#) or threaten a nuclear test.

What can Joe Biden do about North Korea? He should admit that neither Barack Obama nor Donald Trump had the right strategy. Obama's 'strategic patience' strategy didn't amount to much more than watching Kim accelerate attempts to develop reliable nuclear weapons and missiles. Few obvious disincentives were put in Kim's way. Trump's audacious engagement strategy came to nothing after calmer heads in the administration concluded that the North had no intention to surrender its capabilities.

Biden starts with an empty policy cupboard: the reality that North Korea has a believable but limited nuclear capability and a porous but somewhat effective sanctions regime. Beyond these threadbare realities, I suggest that Biden should take the following steps.

First, Biden should surround himself with a bipartisan group of the smartest policy minds he can recruit, thinking through all possible options for Korean policy. We can only hope that the era of gut instinct and real-estate videos is behind us. Let a creative brains trust have a crack at some lateral thinking.



Image: Joe Biden/Twitter.

Second, Biden should reach out to Seoul, reassuring it that America's presence is rock solid. While he's at it, Biden should quietly but firmly bring South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe into a trilateral dialogue designed to help South Korea and Japan overcome their differences in the face of far bigger strategic challenges.

Third, Biden should gather the allies to make it clear that the best way to deal with North Korea is from a platform of shared allied intent. This engagement cuts both ways. America needs to understand that the allies are looking for leadership and want to confidently judge that their interests will not be undercut by random deal-brokering of the Trump variety. For his part, Biden should be clear that allies and regional friends must shoulder more of their own security burden. This is not Washington's problem alone.

Finally, Biden should appoint a high-level representative to engage with North Korea. A direct line of communication has been opened and it should be kept open, but there should be no prospect of a meeting between Biden and Kim until—and if—major strides towards controlled denuclearisation happen.

So many factors could disrupt these plans. Kim's health looks to be poor. An attempted leadership transition might already be happening. What of coronavirus? Can a nation in deep lockdown for over 70 years really keep the virus at bay?

Biden may well find himself dealing with a North Korean triple crisis of an unsure dynastic succession happening during a viral outbreak and [escalating nuclear confrontation](#). There is no easy transition to a government plan for that.

*For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/could-a-president-biden-face-a-triple-north-korea-crisis>. A version of this article was published at *The National Interest*.*

Whether Trump or Biden wins the election, America's Indo-Pacific strategy is about to change

Walter Lohman, 20 October 2020

Washington's approach to the Indo-Pacific will change over the next four years, regardless of the outcome of the November election. The only questions are how and how much.

The first term of President Donald Trump, while stylistically unsettling, produced many conventional national security and foreign policy outcomes in the Indo-Pacific. The US military is still forward-deployed. The Trump administration has maintained US alliances throughout the region and diplomatic commitments to Southeast Asia. It has undertaken new diplomatic initiatives as well, in places like the South China Sea and the Mekong.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration's consistent focus on its Indo-Pacific strategy has helped catalyse similar conceptual frameworks as far afield as Berlin.

As for his opponent, former vice president Joe Biden is the definition of the bipartisan Washington establishment. He is proposing no big changes in America's traditional Asia policy, beyond repairing the damage he estimates has been done to it by Trump. A Biden administration's national security strategy would more resemble the Trump administration's 2017 document than anything produced during Barack Obama's administration.

All things being equal, bipartisan consensus on geostrategic competition with China will carry the day whoever wins the American presidency.

The problem is, all things are *not* equal. The US faces two deep crises at home: unprecedented levels of debt associated with managing the Covid-19 pandemic and escalating political divisions. The way it sorts through these challenges rests on the distribution of power in Washington for the next two to four years. And on that will turn the future of America's Asia policy.

There are a number of likely configurations next year's distribution of political power could take.

A Trump presidency, Republican Senate and Democratic House. This scenario will mean more of the same. Trump will continue a forceful line on China, and this competitive dynamic will guide American foreign policy generally throughout the region. There will continue to be bipartisanship in Congress around the need to confront China. The difficulty will come in reconciling inevitable overall budget cuts with a hawkish China policy. The choices will be to maintain defence spending at the considerable cost of domestic programs; to attempt the China competition on the cheap—most significantly, cutting into military readiness and shipbuilding plans; or to prioritise the Indo-Pacific theatre over other global interests. There will be a similar set of choices with State Department and development assistance funding.

A Biden presidency, Republican Senate and Democratic House. There are competing factions within the Biden camp, one reminiscent of Obama's conciliatory China policy and another more focused on competition with China. A Biden presidency will provoke persistent charges of appeasement from Republicans in Congress. No approach he takes to China will be strong enough in their estimation. This will invigorate hardliners in the Biden administration and seed the ground for ever-firmer policies down the road. Trading off domestic spending to maintain defence spending will be off the table. The government will, therefore, be left with even starker versions of the other two options, cutting into military and diplomatic capacity or downsizing commitments elsewhere. It will seek to make up the difference with a renewed focus on leveraging alliances and partnerships, as well as plurilateral and multilateral organisations.

A Biden presidency, Democratic Senate and Democratic House. In this scenario, Republican minorities in Congress will be strident in their criticism of Biden's China policy, but deprived of control of the Senate, they will be less of a factor in policy development. This outcome favours the conciliatory side of Biden's China team. There is no returning to the comprehensive Obama-era emphasis on US–China cooperation, but prospects of cooperation in specific areas like climate change and pandemic management will take the edge off US–China competition. In some areas, like the Trump administration's very active schedule of freedom-of-navigation patrols in the South China Sea or its increased support for Taiwan, cooperation with China will on occasion take precedence.

Then there is trade.

The good news is that there's bipartisan consensus. Unfortunately, US trade policy in the Indo-Pacific in coming years will have far more to do with trade politics than grand strategy. And unlike in previous eras, particularly during the presidency of George W. Bush, where the balance of political forces favoured free trade, the balance now has turned heavily in the direction of protection and industrial policy. This will constrain the economic component of any US Asia policy.

This is particularly true for high-tech issues, where there's a powerful confluence of legitimate security issues and special interests. But while there may be adjustments in the target set—expect less pressure on Canada and Japan in a Biden administration, for instance—neither administration will move off of America's new-found enthusiasm for punitive tariffs as an instrument of trade policy. Tariffs on China in particular will be exceedingly difficult to remove.

Meanwhile, trade remedies that the Trump administration has made ample use of—anti-dumping and safeguard provisions—will continue to receive a great deal of attention. Remedies that appear to most contradict US commitments to the World Trade Organization, like restrictive tariffs, will receive less attention in a Biden administration. New comprehensive trade liberalisation initiatives—including joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership—will be nearly impossible in either administration.

Like in much of the world, 2020 has been a very difficult year for the United States. Washington remains, by and large, wedded to the commitments to Asia that have characterised its role for many decades. These commitments, however, are set to come under great stress. And while they won't break, they will bend. How far and what shape they take will depend on who wins in November.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/whether-trump-or-biden-wins-the-election-americas-indo-pacific-strategy-is-about-to-change>.

Who wins the US election matters to Australia, but not as much as we think

Michael Shoebridge, 4 November 2020

Plenty of commentary and analysis has said what's at stake in the contest between US President Donald Trump and Democratic challenger Joe Biden. Speculation about [US policy approaches](#) to vexed issues that Australia has deep interests in has sought to [outline](#) how the US under a second-term Trump or a first-term Biden would handle things.

All worthy stuff, but there's a certainty whatever the outcome. Australian political leaders will need to keep making hard decisions in our national interest and, by doing so, help shape global debates and directions.

That's a daunting but also encouraging prospect. Daunting because such decisions come with pushback, pressure and criticism, though they also bring support and like-minded decisions by others. Barley, beef, wine, coal and now [lobsters](#) may tell you what this pushback looks like, even as Chinese authorities look shocked that anyone might draw a link between [statements from its officials](#) about coercing and punishing Australia and the various trade embargoes, bans and investigations that serendipitously seem to follow [those threats](#).

It's an encouraging prospect because we've seen over the past five years that Australian analysis and decisions have shaped big global debates. Think about the global decision-making on 5G technologies and providers, and how it has shifted since—and because of—the decision the Australian government made back in [August 2018](#). Or the new frameworks and policies being debated and constructed in various countries to reduce the problem of foreign interference in policy- and decision-making, set off again through Australian leadership with the 2018 [foreign interference legislation](#).

Add the contribution that Australia is making to debates on how to approach economic rebuilding post-Covid-19 to reduce the exposure of key supply chains to the caprices and coercion of the Chinese state. This has occurred mainly through governments and businesses seeing exactly how Beijing uses its power aggressively, for reasons wholly divorced from economics and despite the vaunted 'mutual benefit' such trade provides.

The obvious global lesson the Australian experience provides is the need to make China matter less as an economic partner if you don't want to be subject to trade mines planted and detonated by the government in Beijing. If political leaders aren't understanding this lesson, their populations are—as shown by the [collapse in favourable views](#) of the Chinese government across the developed world.

Interestingly, none of this Australian shaping of global debates or pushback from populations against Beijing has depended on US leadership in the past four years. That's probably a good thing, because the need for independent action is likely to remain after the US election, not just if there's a confused transfer of power and not just if Trump wins and continues with his 'America first' mindset. A Biden win would reverse the tendency for the US to treat allies as adversaries—or free riders (except when they are)—but a Biden presidency would also be consumed by a focus on rebuilding and healing a divided America.

Superpowers can obviously walk and chew gum, but when there's so much domestic gum to chew, ideas and policy directions will probably need to be developed by others and marketed to Washington. That's good news for Australia, because it's what Australian political leaders have already been doing, with this year's [AUSMIN](#) meeting being a fine example. One area of policy action Australia can help Washington with is the Indo-Pacific—particularly connecting trade and economic policies to strategic and military directions.

Beyond the fact of a distracted and domestically focused US, there's the larger reason that pinning for a return to US leadership is probably a mistake. The two predominant political, strategic, technological and economic challenges of our times are China and climate change—probably not in that order. And they're connected.

On climate change, Beijing [talks a good game](#), with promises to be carbon neutral by 2060, but in the meantime it is supporting rapid and wide construction of coal- and gas-fired power stations, prioritising dirtier domestic coal over cleaner, more efficient

Australian coal. Maybe more importantly, it's building an [economy](#) whose energy use is likely to outstrip creation of alternative energy sources and so continue a deep reliance on fossil fuels. That's bad because of the size of China's economy and its resulting [massive contribution](#) to the globe's carbon emissions. So, the defining contribution China is likely to make to climate change is to accelerate it. As my old school's motto says, 'Actions not words.'

As to the political, strategic, technological and economic challenges posed by the Chinese state to other nations and their people, these can't be reduced to a case of US-China competition, where the key thing is to work out whether you take sides or try to hedge and balance. China is a challenge to every other economy and political system that engages with it, because Xi Jinping's '[China dream](#)' vision is of a Sino-centred world order and economy—and we know from the experience Australia and 26 other countries have had in recent years of [Beijing's economic coercion](#) that such a vision is far from the 'win-win' and 'reform and opening up' bromides we often hear. Xi is after much more of a master-servant relationship, with Beijing dispensing reward and punishment in the same way it does for its 1.4 billion citizens.

The US has a vital role in working with others—notably the major European powers and the EU itself, as well as Japan, India, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, and its Five Eyes partners of the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada—but it need not be the sole orchestra leader. Telling ourselves that the China challenge is a problem for the US, and that we all must simply wait to see how we play into it, is a conceptual error that's also fundamentally disempowering. It's dismissive of our decision-making capacity and the impact that has globally, and it also discounts the effect that strong public understanding of the China challenge provides to national political and corporate leadership.

Whatever the outcome of the US election, we still need to advance our interests. That means we must understand that we can ensure our future is a prosperous, sovereign and secure one through the decisions we make and the partnerships we develop as a result. The incoming US administration will be fundamental to that future, as will our partners across the Indo-Pacific and in Europe.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/who-wins-the-us-election-matters-to-australia-but-not-as-much-as-we-think>.

What can social media platforms do about disinformation?

Ariel Bogle, 19 November 2020

On 10 November, a journalist with the right-wing news network One America News (OAN) tweeted the unsubstantiated claim that voting technology used in Michigan and Georgia had 'glitched' for Joe Biden. Her tweet was retweeted by President Donald Trump.

The post was dutifully marked by Twitter as a '[disputed](#)' claim about election fraud. But on YouTube and Facebook, OAN's claim didn't receive the same treatment.

Dominion Voting Systems, whose equipment was used in several states, had [some technical difficulties](#) on election day. But the suggestion that the technology switched votes to the president-elect [has been debunked](#) multiple times.

Yet this falsehood is one of many seeking to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the election in the hyperactive and interconnected ecosystem of cable news, conservative news websites and social media. Conspiracies about dead voters now [flow quickly](#) from politicians on Fox News to YouTube. Rumours about switched votes [spread](#) from web forums to right-wing blogs to YouTube, and to the president's own Twitter account.

But despite the quick way such ideas metastasise, social media platforms seem to have largely been moderated during the election as separate islands, with their own domestic rules and norms. Twitter, for example, added a warning label to the OAN reporter's tweet as part of [its policy to add context](#) to disputed claims about the election. At last check, the post had been retweeted more than 71,000 times. Twitter moderators also added the label to an OAN tweet that contained a link to her report on YouTube.



Chanel Rion OAN ✓
@ChanelRion

...

#Developing: The **#DominionVotingSystems** that "glitched" in favor of Joe Biden (and was used in 29 states), partnered up with Clinton Global Initiative and had on staff former employees of both Clinton Growth Initiative and Clinton Cash Cow TENE0.

Full report on [@OANN](#)



This claim about election fraud is disputed

8:31 AM · Nov 10, 2020 · Twitter Web App

60.8K Retweets 10.4K Quote Tweets 149.6K Likes

But on YouTube itself, where the approach to election misinformation has been called 'light touch', OAN's video about the claim appeared without any warning notice and was viewed almost 204,000 times. While YouTube says it [removes videos that 'mislead people about voting'](#)—such as those publicising the wrong voting date—[views on the outcome](#) of the election are allowed.



Clinton ties to Dominion voting system, which 'glitched' for Biden

203,913 views · Nov 10, 2020

20K 128 SHARE SAVE ...

The YouTube video travelled further still. It was shared on OAN's Facebook page, where it received more than 18,000 interactions in the form of reactions, comments and shares, according to the insight tool CrowdTangle.

Before the election, Facebook said it would attach 'an informational label' to content that discussed issues of legitimacy of the election, but one did not appear on OAN's YouTube clip on Facebook. Overall, the YouTube link received more than 40,000 interactions on Facebook. Just under half of those took place on public pages, suggesting it was also shared widely in private Facebook groups, which are difficult for researchers to access.



This inconsistency, while not surprising, is increasingly problematic. The spread of disinformation aimed at discrediting the results of the US election has again underscored that a disjointed approach is ineffective at mitigating the problem, with potentially disastrous consequences for democratic institutions. In an environment where a video [removed from YouTube spreads on Facebook](#)—not to mention TikTok, Parler or dozens of other platforms—some may demand a uniform approach.

The platforms do collaborate on some law enforcement and national security issues. For example, all three companies are part of initiatives to share hashes—unique fingerprints for images and video—to stop [the spread of violent imagery](#) and [child exploitation material](#).

But coordinated efforts on disinformation have largely focused on removing foreign and state-backed disinformation campaigns. [Domestic misinformation and disinformation](#), which became the main challenge during the US election, rarely evokes similarly unified efforts from the big three, at least publicly.

Pressure is intensifying for the platforms to ‘do something’. Yet forcing all of the major companies to work together and take the same approach could result in what Evelyn Douek, a lecturer at Harvard Law School, has called ‘[content cartels](#)’.

Decisions about what stays online and what gets removed often lack accountability and transparency, and, in some forms, coordination could help power accrue to already very powerful companies—especially if there’s no independent oversight or possibility of remediation. ‘The pressure to do something can lead to the creation of systems and structures that serve the interests of the very tech platforms that they seek to rein in’, Douek has argued.

A circuit breaker is needed to stop the cross-platform spread of deceptive or misleading claims, but even the coordinated removal of posts and videos about issues like election fraud raises concerns about false positives and censorship. And if such an approach were applied globally, the platforms could draw criticism for imposing American norms of speech in other countries.

In any case, given the now embedded use of disinformation as a campaigning tool, a where-goes-one-go-all approach to domestic disinformation is unlikely to be legislated. Any such measure would be interpreted by critics as collusion against a political party or message, even if it's only labels on disputed posts. And it's not clear that such interventions even work to halt the spread of misinformation.

The clash of local sensibilities with universal content moderation practices isn't deterring some countries from developing national regulatory regimes. Australia, for example, is developing [a voluntary code on misinformation](#) with digital platforms. The European Union also has a [code of practice on disinformation](#).

But around the world, claims of conspiracy often flow from the very top of government through friendly media channels. Those statements are then digested, edited and posted on YouTube, and the cycle begins again.

Content moderation is therefore only a partial answer to institutional and social failures. Companies like Facebook and YouTube shouldn't be let off the hook, but better and more moderation can't be the only way to halt the erosion of trust in elections.

As Douek has pointed out, what we consider a legitimate political campaign and what we consider manipulative is partly a social question, and not one for the platforms alone. That's because at the centre of these problems are individuals. People's political loyalties and desires, expressed by their clicks and shares, have helped spread the baseless idea of a voting machine 'glitch'—albeit people who were being worked on by a fast-moving system of politicians, pundits, mainstream media and social media algorithms in a way that's calculated to capture their emotions and attention.

And it works. Over the past seven days according to CrowdTangle, posts with the phrase 'election glitch' have received more than a million interactions on yet another Facebook-owned platform caught up in the disinformation cycle—Instagram.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/what-can-social-media-platforms-do-about-disinformation>.

Trump's damage to the US will be hard for Biden to undo

Alice Ba, 30 November 2020

Three weeks after a divisive US election and multiple challenges of the results by President Donald Trump, the official transition to President-elect Joe Biden was finally allowed to begin. Biden's first cabinet choices ([all familiar, none too flashy](#)) aimed to reassure those eager to see the United States return to critical international arrangements that the Trump administration pulled out of, attacked or tried to starve—the World Trade Organization, the UN Human Rights Council, the World Health Organization, the Paris climate agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, among others.

Those announcements, plus Biden's nominations of the first women as Treasury secretary and director of national intelligence, and Homeland Security's first Latino and immigrant head, signalled a hoped-for end to a tumultuous four years marked by abuses of power, the active sowing of division and discord at home and abroad, an impulsive and contrarian foreign policy, and 'America first' attacks on core US relationships around the world.

Yet, the Biden team faces a grave reality: America is not well. Election week brought record-high Covid-19 infection and hospitalisation rates as the country headed into the epidemic's '[most deadly phase](#)'. The interim period has also offered little comfort about the deep polarisation that plagues the United States at leadership and popular levels.

While the outcome of Georgia's two senate run-offs won't be known until January, it is a certainty that any Biden agenda will face obstacles from either a divided Senate or, more likely, a Republican-led one. The Democrats will retain control of the House of

Representatives, but with probably the smallest majority held by either party in over two decades, a point that will embolden House Republicans and divide the Democratic Party's moderate and progressive wings. And notwithstanding Biden's clear popular and electoral victories, Donald Trump still received 47% of the popular vote.

These sobering figures have serious political consequences for the incoming Biden team and its national security agenda. Trump's actions since the election compound the challenge. Still refusing to concede, Trump has convinced **as many as 86%** of his nearly 74 million voters that the election was rigged. Meanwhile, high-ranking Republicans have done little to stop or even criticise Trump's efforts to interfere with, destabilise and hamstring the political transition of power. As if that weren't enough, he also fired key members of his national security team in a post-election shake-up.

These actions expand the **vulnerabilities associated with presidential transitions** and, at a minimum, complicate the incoming Biden administration's ability to hit the ground running. Efforts to undermine the civil service these last four years also suggest that the Biden administration will spend no small amount of time undoing the damage done to state capacities and agencies. If the first few post-election weeks are any indication, the remaining weeks of the Trump presidency offer plenty of time to create more trouble.

Most of all, governance, including the ability to push forward new legislation, stimulus packages and multilateral commitments, is likely to be stymied. Temperamentally and institutionally, Biden favours consensus, but the political reality of a deeply divided polity will have serious consequences for Biden's priorities and what the administration can do.

By necessity, domestic issues—the Covid-19 crisis, the economy, and racial and socio-cultural divisions—will command centre stage. These factors are all interlinked and will challenge any nationwide effort to contain the human, political and economic costs of the Covid-19 crisis, even with the promise of working vaccines. If people won't wear masks, will they take a vaccine? Even in good years, the US 'has **never managed to vaccinate** more than half of adults for seasonal influenza'.

The US electoral process compounds the difficulties. It poses a challenge to governance in normal times, given the biennial congressional election cycle, and current conditions add to that. President-elect Biden, who will be 78 on inauguration day, has indicated he will serve only one term. He could change his mind, of course, but he'll be 81 come 2024, which means that the Democratic leadership is already in play. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, 81, has also indicated that this may be her last term. Meanwhile, President Trump (though no spring chicken himself) is reportedly already **considering a 2024 run**.

These challenges will present real dangers to US interests both at home and abroad, at least in the short term. They will also complicate the incoming administration's efforts to form US strategy and policy in ways that neutralise the many questions raised about America's role in the world role—among allies, partners and rivals—as a result of the last four years.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/trumps-damage-to-the-us-will-be-hard-for-biden-to-undo>.

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ISSN 1449-3993

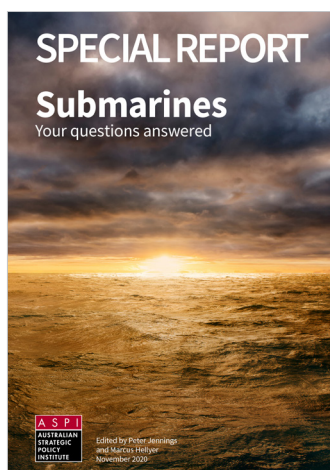
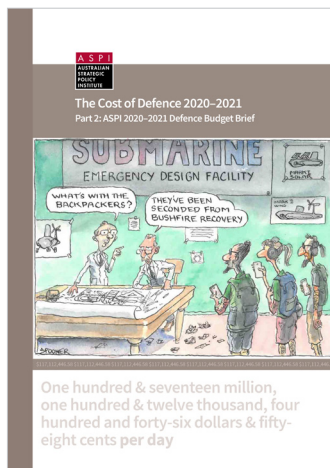
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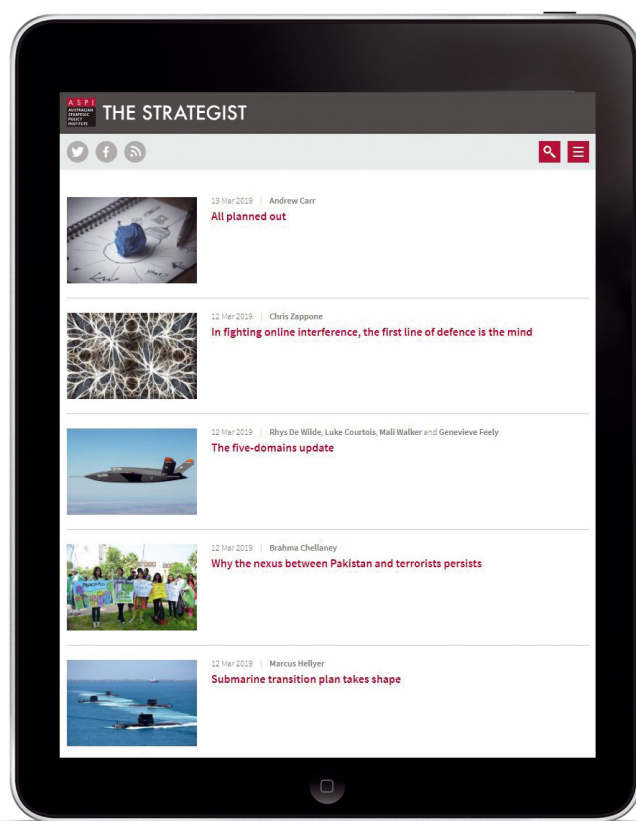


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