

2020 UNITED STATES PRESIDENTIAL POLL AND CAPITOL HILL ASSAULT: TUMBLE FROM A DEMOCRATIC MORAL HIGH GROUND

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Abstract

Over 150 million Americans voted in their 3rd November 2020 presidential election. The poll recorded the highest number of voters since the creation of the United States of America (USA) over two centuries ago. The defeated GOP candidate and incumbent President Trump broke from the long-established tradition to concede. He instituted over sixty legal challenges of results of the poll without success. After multiple legal failures, he birthed conspiracy theories that end with a single message: 'his mandate was stolen.' This message instigated his supporters' assault on Capitol Hill by insurrectionists on 6th January 2021. That singular decision liquidated cherished traditions of conceding to the will of the people, peaceful transfer of power, and faith in the American electoral system. A confluence of those events denied the Americans the moral strength to preach liberal democratic ideals at the global stage -- a mission they have been leading along with its allies since 1945, even long before then. This study was guided by the theory of American Exceptionalism that is traceable to the nation's founding philosophy. The study relied on secondary sources of data from periodicals, journals, statements from political actors, and think tank reports. Conclusions and suggestions stemmed from facts encountered in various data consulted and analyzed.

Keywords: Democracy, Elections, Conceding, Legal, Morality, Peaceful Transfer

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Introduction

On 3rd November 2020, over one hundred and fifty-nine million (159 million) Americans embarked on its every-four-year electoral tradition of electing their commander-in-chief. Lindsay (2020) posited that: That's the largest total voter turnout in U.S. history and the first time more than 140 million people voted. Voter turnout in 2020 was the highest in 120 years when measured as a percentage of the voting-eligible population: 66.7 per cent. You have to go back to 1900 to find a higher percentage turnout (73.7 per cent). The 2020 exercise was staged in all the fifty states of the country and administered territories viz: American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands (Davis, O'Shea, Grimes, 2020). Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council and the election infrastructure sector Coordinating executive committee released a joint statement on the credibility or fairness of the poll on 12th November 2020, in the following manner:

The November election was the most secure in American history...there is no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised...When states have close elections, many will recount ballots. All of the states with close results in the 2020 presidential race have paper records of each vote, allowing the ability to go back and count each ballot if necessary. This is an added benefit for security and resilience.

Government institutions headed by Mr Trump's appointees, and independent observer organisations gave judgments that had unanimous conclusions: "the process was credible and fully reflected the express wish of the majority of Americans that participated in the keenly contested presidential" (Tucker and Bajak, 2020). Despite the electoral institutional conclusions, President Donald J. Trump rejected the outcome of the 3rd November 2020 presidential poll. On 7th November 2020, Trump stated that the "election is far from over" and backed his stance with threats of a legal challenge. He further stated that Joe Biden has not been certified as the winner of any states, let alone any of the highly contested states headed for mandatory recounts, or states where their campaign has valid and

legitimate legal challenges that could determine the ultimate victor.

In addition to his multiple legal challenges in key battleground states, Trump set in motion a wave of conspiracy theories that marketed the big lie that his mandate was stolen to millions of his followers. The big lie was told with Goebbelian sagacity thereby successfully shove it down their political throats. This notion was backed by Senator Mitch McConnell, Senate Minority leader, on the floor of the House after Capitol Hill was invaded by Trump's mob on 6th January 2021 (Pericon and Cathey, 2020). Trump's refusal to concede, unrealistic legal battles, hyper propaganda, and incitement climaxed with an insurrection by his mob that attacked the Capitol with the sole aim of stopping a joint session of Congress that its business of the day was certifying states results of the electoral college. The insurrection killed a Capitol police officer, injured scores, damaged property and stole items while staging the unfortunate event. NBC News of 7th January 2021 report titled "*Capitol Police Officer Dies from Injuries After Clashing with Pro-Trump Mob*" gave a full narration of the saga.

The riotous mob succeeded in truncating the joint session of the Congress for some hours. The Congress dramatically emerged from their hiding dungeons, reconvened and completed their constitutional schedule of delegates certification. The chairman of the *Joint Session and Vice President Mike Spence said:* "To those who wreaked havoc in our Capitol today, you did not win. Violence never wins. Freedom wins. And this is still the people's House." Similarly, the former Majority Leader of the Senate, Mitch, Chairman of the Joint Session, former vice president Mike Pence, gave a condemning speech. McConnell (R-Ken) oozed bombastic words like: "failed insurrection had only clarified Congress's purpose. They tried to disrupt our democracy. They failed." (Fandos and Cothrane, 2021).

The Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi (D-California) a figure targeted for assassination by the insurrectionists gave a powerful speech condemning the act that desecrated the U.S. holy temple of democracy and peoples house. The most quintessential part of her 6th January 2021 speech goes this way:

To those who strove to tear from our responsibility, you have failed. To those who engaged in the gleeful desecration of this, our temple of democracy, American democracy, justice will be done. Today, January 6th is the feast of the epiphany. On this day of revelation, let us pray that this instigation of violence will provide an epiphany for our country to heal. In that spirit of healing, I evoke the song of Saint Francis. I usually do. St. Francis is the patron Saint of my city of San Francisco, and the song of St. Francis is our Anthem. "Lord, make me a channel of thy peace. Where there is darkness, may you bring light. Where there is hatred, let us bring love. Where there is despair, let us bring hope.

The Senate Minority Leader, now Senate Leader, Chuck Schumer, also had strong rebuke for the protesters and their presumed instigator; President Trump:

This will be a stain on our country not so easily washed away: the final, terrible, indelible legacy of the 45th President of the United States...the mob was in good part President Trump's doing, incited by his words, his lies, his violence. His responsibility. His everlasting shame.

Events that started a few minutes after midnight of 3rd November 2020 instigated by former President Trump via a tweet rejecting mail-in and absentee votes dripping-in already tallied election day result peaked with the disgraceful assault on Capitol by Trump's mobilised and instigated mob. While the drama and melodrama were unfolding, the whole world watched with rapt attention because the promoter of democratic values and peaceful transfer of power has recorded an unfortunate incident that has dented its image in the comity of nations.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopted the theory of American exceptionalism as its tool of analysis and guide. The major thrust of this dictum is; America is a country founded on a philosophy. The theory postulated that all other nations emerged out of either conquest or some sort of historical evolution that lacked ideals of freedom and liberty. America is the only country that emerged out of love for freedom, liberty and pursuit of happiness. Ceaser (2012) cited in Rammattan

and Szenberg (2017) opined that American exceptionalism is essentially advancing the assertion that: there is something unique with America, there is something spectacular with America, and America has certain unprecedented qualities that cannot be found in the state before its creation. Those unique and distinct features and qualities birthed the political philosophy of exceptionalism.

Shafer (1999) traced the history of the dictum of exceptionalism to John Winthrop of Massachusetts who stated that their new country shall be a shining city on the hill. After Winthrop's pioneer declaration, succeeding politicians like Ronald Reagan and George Bush popularised or reminded their fellow Americans and the world of their status of exceptionalism. In his farewell address to the nation in 1989, President Reagan reminded them that America is a shining city upon a hill. Americans used this notion of exceptionalism to anchor their foreign policies during the Cold War and beyond. However, Alexis de Tocqueville was the scholar that popularised the theory of exceptionalism in the academic circle. The theory has gotten more attention from politicians than academics.

Reasons for Rejecting the Poll

Several reasons could have informed the incumbent president's refusal to accept the verdict of the sovereign that was unambiguously expressed. Almost all the reasons he advanced were baseless and without synergy with common sense, extant legislations and electoral traditions. He merely moulded whimsical and capricious matters and exhibited them as *raison d'état* for rejecting the verdict of the people. Former President Trump accused states of changing their electoral laws that accepted 100% mail-in, absentees and early voting. He postulated that the not-so-new process that was traceable to the Second World War, specifically designed to permit Democrats to dump millions of illegal votes for his Democratic challenger and eventual victor, former Vice President, Mr Joseph R. Biden. He succeeded in veering off the attention of his millions of teeming supporters from the historical antecedence mail-in or absentee balloting. President Trump also refused to accept fate because of the

time frame that the mail-in or absentee votes were considered valid voted by states election managers.

Laws of many states piqued those votes postmarked before or on polling day and arrived two or three days, should be added in the tally. These laws were enacted in tandem with electoral culture and did not contradict extant federal laws. Disgruntled elements in some states challenged the laws in states supreme courts and verdicts were given long before the general voting date of 3rd December 2020. A case bordering this was challenged up at the Supreme Court of the country. The Supreme Court did not find merits in their legal challenges and denied granting them their prayers (Hal, 2020). More on this President Trump alleged that his election observers were illegally granted access to halls where election tallying was taking place in Pennsylvania and other key battleground states of Georgia, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Arizona.

Later events established the fact that only a transparent glass separated his so-called observers and election managers, counting and tallying the votes. Moreover, within the hall, agents of the two parties the Democratic Party and General Opposition Party (GOP) were right inside the hall. Another sacred fact Trump wish people do not know is, elections are being managed in a bi-partisan manner in the entire country (Quinn, 2020). The former President also alleged that foreigners manipulated Dominion voting machines used in 28 states of the federation. He alleged that the software deleted millions of Trumps votes. The most absurd dimension of this point came from his legal team: they accused Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro of the manipulation through their proxies—owners of Dominion company—who are U.S. citizens of Venezuelan origin (Alexander, 2020). Owners of Dominion have instituted two billion suits against Giuliani and his fellow legal teammate that levelled baseless and laughable allegations against their reputable company. Corasaniti's report of 25th January 2021, in *The New York Times*, gave an in-depth analogy of the legal action taken by Dominion Company against a team of unserious legal experts Trump engaged to reclaim his 'stolen' mandate.

Reasons advanced by the 45th President of the U.S. for rejecting the election were rejected by the court of public opinion and in the courts of law. Waxman (2020) summed up his assessment like this: “Judges in at least eight states have rejected the litany of unproven claims---that maintain ballots were improperly sent out, that ballots were counted wrongly, that poll observers were not given proper access to the votes count, and that foreign powers hacked into and manipulated voting machines”. Judge Stephanos Bibas—of federal appeal court of Philadelphia- a judge appointed by Trump nailed it down by ruling that: “Free and fair elections are the lifeblood of our democracy---charges of unfairness are serious. But calling an election unfair does not make it so. Charges require specific allegations and then proof. We have neither here.”

All attempts to make President Trump and his ardent followers understand that laws were amended because of the Covid-19 pandemic were unsuccessful. Curiously, lawmakers who are mostly his Republican party-men and supporters (elected) amended electoral laws in their states because they believe that the new laws of mail-in and early voting will increase participation and insulate people from exposure to the Covid-19 virus. Most of the laws permit people above 60 years – a cream most vulnerable to Covid-19 to exercise their civic duties without risk to life. They reasoned that choosing between election and life should not be contemplated by citizens of the free world and the oldest democracy and constitutional government in the contemporary world.

One reality that rendered President Trump claim of electoral fraud absurd and comical was, majority of election managers in key battleground states of Georgia, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin are Republicans and his never-say-die or unrepentant supporters and advocates. They campaigned for him and contributed money to his presidential mission in 2016, supported his controversial policies, and contributed money to the election in focus. Most of them were early believers and supporters of his “Make America Great Again” mission the year he announced his presidential bid. Because they have unshakable faith in the electoral

system and other democratic institutions, they stood with the popular will that favoured options of people mailing-in ballots, early voting and absentee balloting.

Waxman (2020) published a feature in Times of 29th September 2020 that gave a historical analogy of America's laudable and attractive tradition of absentee votes that commenced during America's Civil War. That phase was followed by that of the First World War and subsequent phases that made citizens vote via mail-in, early voting, or absentee votes. This method of voting started with the American military serving outside their states of origin or the country and citizens living outside their states. Before the 2020 poll, almost all the states were practicing one form of mail-in or absentee voting system or the other.

Unethical Actions

The preceding segment of this discourse enumerated sundry reasons advanced by the 45th president of the U.S. and placed them on moral, ethical and legal scales. After rigorous perusal, none of the reasons he paraded in the court of law and public opinion succeeded in getting a legal verdict or gained the acceptability of the majority of the citizens of the country. While milling and simultaneously showcasing his strange reasons, he exhibited unethical actions unknown to American's longstanding democratic and electoral traditions. First, was his blatant refusal to accept the verdict of the people that was unambiguously expressed through popular votes and the electoral college system. His inability to resist that inordinate temptation of rebelling against the decision of the sovereign that every observer and government institution affirmed was credible introduced an unethical and strange dimension into America's electoral and political behaviours.

Refusal of the 45th president to accept decisions of judges from the lower to the highest court in the land was another unethical action unexpectedly introduced. It is incumbent in all democratic political settings that disgruntled parties in an election(s) seek legal

redress. But it is a settled matter that, after exhausting legal channels, candidates do surrender to the decision of courts or tribunals. It is absurdly strange that a United State president will have difficulties accepting this realism that is engraved in their electoral culture. Worse, he expressed disappointment that judges he appointed into the temple of justice refused to circumvent the laws to favour him. Feinberg (2020) opinion titled “Trump Wonders Why the Supreme Court Justices He Appointed Won’t Support him. He Shouldn’t,” published in *Independent Voices*, of 11th December 2020, succinctly captured his frustration with a horde of conservative judges and justices he appointed into various courts.

Trump’s call to the Georgian Secretary of state to change the result was another unethical action recorded. During an hour-long conversation that ended with threats, former President Trump said all he wants is, that the Secretary should find over eleven thousand votes to enable him to overturn Biden’s victory in the state. The Secretary resisted his request. Today, the state of Georgia has launched a criminal investigation into his action (Morris, 2021). Still, this is quite unexpected because even a leader of a less developed country cannot make such a request to an election manager with a straight face and loud voice the way he made. Trump is not alone in this charade of making unethical calls to election managers of states. His strongest ally in Capitol Hill, Senator Lindsay Graham of North Carolina, made controversial calls to the Secretary of State of Nevada, Arizona, and Georgia. Georgian Secretary of State on CNN Politics as reported in USA Today, of 20th November 2020, summed up Graham’s mission like this: “It was just an implication of, “Look hard and see how many ballots you could throw out”. This is another unethical venture from a lawmaker whose party prided to be a party of law and order.

Mobilising thousands of followers to storm Capitol Hill on the 6th January 2021, using the “*stop the steal*” was another exhibition of the unethical manner by Trump. He practically fed the mob with assorted lies and finally gave them a marching order to the Capitol, while delivering his speech to them in Washington. While his mob

was destroying peoples' houses and stealing items, he watched them from a situation room in the White House. Some of his aides were seen dancing to admiration of their actions that killed people and wounded scores. One month after his inglorious exit, Trump still reiterated his defiance in a Conservative Pac called CPAC on 28th February 2021. While delivering his speech he said "this election was rigged and the supreme court and other courts didn't want to do anything about it" (Wall Street Journal Editorial, 28th February 2021). He is the only candidate that made talking of his unambiguous and universally affirmed defeat a post-tenure mission. Others talked of their legacies and challenges and try to unite the country but not former President Trump.

Effects on American's Image

A confluence of unprecedented and unethical events enumerated and discussed hereinbefore, which climaxed with the destructive invasion of the Capitol by insurrectionists dented the image of America on the global stage. The status of the moral compass of liberalism and democracy boomeranged on the image of the country. The principle of American exceptionalism and Reaganian imagination of shining city on a hill surreptitiously liquidated. The unfortunate event allowed rivals like Russia and the People's Republic of China to air views on American internal affairs and used that to justify their dictatorial handling of voices of dissents. The Chinese government used the opportunity to compare the American government's reaction to Hong Kong's protests to Capitol riots. They used Peakee Nancy Pelosi's "Beautiful Sight" tweet as their launching pad. A foreign affairs spokesman Hua Chunying piqued in Global Times- an official communists' government tabloid. And blamed American media of double standard in the classification of rioters in Hong Kong and the U.S. Russian Federation also issued mocking statements, they called American democracy a "Limping Democracy". Times of India, of 7th January 2021, paraded Russian reaction thus:

American democracy is obviously limping on both feet...This is actually the bottom. I say this without a show of loathing...America no longer charts a course and therefore has lost all rights to set it and even more so to impose it on others...The electoral system in the United States is archaic, it does not meet modern democratic standards.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, a country that has been having multifaceted diplomatic spats with the U.S. since establishing its theocratic system in late 1979, reacted to the riots. Iran reaction did not single out America alone but aimed at the entire liberal democracy. Hassan Rouhani stated his government's position this way: "What we saw in the United States yesterday evening and today shows above all how fragile and vulnerable Western democracy is... We saw that unfortunately, the ground is fertile for populism, despite advances in science and industry."

Emmerson Nnangagwa of Zimbabwe, whose country has suffered many sanctions because of conducting elections that America feels do not measure up with the standard of liberal democracy also reacted to the event. He concluded that "America has no moral right to punish other nations under the guise of democracy". The Venezuelan government also used the occasion to pay back the pressure the successive U.S. government has been mounting on them because of reelection and human rights-related matters. They capitalised on to show that the U.S. has lost its innocence and lacks the moral strength to comment on its internal affairs. Part of the statement reads: "with this regrettable episode, the United States suffers the same thing that it has generated in other countries with its previous policies of aggression." The British Prime Minister, a close ally of Donald John Trump, could not hide his frustration and resisted the urge to be diplomatic in his reaction to the Capitol assaults. Johnson said: "The United States stands for democracy around the world and it is now vital that there should be a peaceful and orderly transfer of power". His labour opposition counterpart simply ruled that what happened was a "direct attack on democracy."

The U.S. has prosecuted deadly wars in near and far territories just to establish democracy. Its entire Operation Desert Storm in Iraq and the second invasion that ousted the Baathist government of Saddam Hussein was justified on the need to plant democracy in Iraq. Invasion of Panama and capturing of General Noriega was anchored on the need to institutionalised democracy on the island. In addition to the aforementioned, their over fifty years' sanctions on Cuba, the bloody Vietnamese and Korean wars were all for democracy. Their support for Arab Springs, which collapsed some of the most chronic dictators in the contemporary world, was on the premise of promoting a government decided by the people. Their constant head-on with Russia and China has been on democracy and the need for the leaders in those countries to put in place credible electoral and political systems that the will of the people will determine who should be their leader, how to terminate or renew their social contracts.

Conclusion

The assault on the Capitol is a confirmation that the U.S. has indeed tumbled from the moral high ground. Their vocal moral voice and visible actions will encounter similar reactions because of that singular act of insurrection by thousands of disgruntled elements that were fed with the big lie by former President Trump and his handlers. However, the country's new leadership must embark on massive, decisive, and aggressive diplomatic moves that will assure allies and foes that the country is ready to take its rightful place in promoting democracy across the globe and living by its original principle of American Exceptionalism. One factor that may abet their quick recovery at the global stage is the unshakable trust many leaders have in their new President Biden is known globally and has impeccable attributes of a man whose words and actions are trusted. America is a crucial player that we world need to succeed in promoting democratic values and ethos across the globe. It is the only actor with the capacity to peacefully or otherwise promote or enforce democratic principles in almost all the corners of the globe.

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