

Undergraduate students at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania prepared these reflections on or around Thursday, November 5, 2020 for a course on the History of US Elections (History 211 with Prof. Pinsker). They read two articles from Politico Magazine as background, one by Joshua Zeitz which appeared in in 2016 entitled, "Epic Fails of U.S. Presidential History" and another by H.W. Brands from 2017 which asked, "Trump as the New Andrew Jackson? Not on Old Hickory's Life."

POST-ELECTION REFLECTIONS

This election has taken a surprising shift throughout Tuesday evening and Wednesday, early morning. Many believed that this election would be a landslide for the Democratic party because they would win majority of the swing states of Arizona, Nevada, Michigan, Maine, Wisconsin, Georgia, and North Carolina. Within the previous 2016 election, many of these states went to Trump but only by small percentages. Same-day votes have been tallied in these states, but some early ballots and absentee ballots have not been. Therefore, the election could not declare a winner on Tuesday night, pushing the election to continue past election day. Both candidates gave speeches discussing the turn of events and displayed their varying opinions of the delay. President Trump addressed his crowd by elaborating on how he believes he has won the election, the media's fakeness and fraud, and how he will bring a case to the Supreme Court on the disregarding votes past four a.m. Former Vice President Joe Biden faced his supporters with confidence and discussed how patience is critical for this election. All ballots should and need to be counted. He thinks his party can come out on top. Throughout Tuesday night, President Trump gained an overwhelming amount of same-day votes within the swing states and changed the night's trajectory. In terms of this delay and counting of absentee ballots, these votes could hurt Trump's numbers in these states. Many of these absentee ballots seem to be majority African American and Suburban voters, which means these votes could swing more in the Democratic direction, but there still remains a lot of uncertainty.

I write this reflection 24 hours after the first polls closed on election day with approximately 4 hours of sleep since the morning of the 3rd. It seems as if Biden will win a depressingly close contest which will usher in a period of divided government. I did not vote because I am too young and thus was unable to get a polling place anecdote, but I did watch election coverage throughout the night and day. The most unreal moment of the entire election was Trump's unhinged speech to a completely unmasked crowd in which he claimed victory and said that votes should continue to be counted in Arizona while saying that they should stop counting votes in PA and Michigan. His complete disregard for democracy was honestly sickening. I felt as though the election was lost until about 7am where after a 3 hour nap, I awoke to see that Wisconsin had switched blue and Michigan began trending blue. Now near 8 pm on November 4th it seems like it is only a matter of time before the election is called for Biden. I do think that this is good for our country, but I don't think that civility and peace will return to our country any time soon. Trump intends to recount anything close and challenge literally anything, this election will not be official for months. I cannot help but think that violence will occur and that

the next 2 to 4 years will only be marginally better than the previous 4. Deep down inside I fear that Trump will run again in 2024 and possibly finish the job of destroying our democracy. He deserves to be locked up for his many crimes against this country. Trump's presidency will be firmly cemented as the worst in our country's history and I believe that the MAGA hat will have a similar effect as a swastika in a few decades. I hope this country can heal and try to work on the crises of our day such as the pandemic, climate change and income inequality.

The result of this 2020 election are still seemingly far from being called, however both the Brands and Zeitz article can offer a lot of insight into how this election is being played out. In the Brands article, he asserts that Donald Trump compares himself to Andrew Jackson and that this comparison is not indicative of a real link between the two men. Over the course of his presidency, Trump more often compares himself with Abraham Lincoln, but Brands point still stands. Brands focuses on the difference of character between the two men, however I don't think this is an effective way to analyze Trump's populism in 2020. The fact stands that even though Trump is on less solid footing this year than 2016, a massive portion of Americans voted for him, and a lot of this vote, especially in rural areas, see it that Trump understands their plight. Despite the fact that Trump won mere months before this article was written, I think that Brands underestimates the power that Trump has over the electorate in America, especially seeing how close this election is despite Joe Biden being poised to have a safe lead over Trump.

While his campaign projects confidence and may have a right to do so, the Biden campaign could still easily become one of the campaigns poised to win but did not. In the Zeitz article, there is reason for Joe Biden to find confidence. The race he entered into was a tough one from the start, and one he never had a guarantee of winning. Chaotic and crowded primary seasons of the past such as the Democrats in 1844, Republicans in 1860, or even the Democrats in 2008 have come out on the other side with an underdog candidate representing their parties. Some leading candidates have been so confident as to "So confident was he in his position that, rather than launch an early campaign, he embarked on a long trip abroad in late 1859," a move taken by William Henry Seward in that 1860 race (Zeitz). Biden had not taken this primary win for granted and had to fight hard for it. As the summer turned to fall, it was clear there was no underdog candidate like Truman in 1948 or James Polk in 1844. In the general election, despite optimistic polls for the Democrats, the Biden campaign understood that the polls had failed Hillary Clinton in 2016 and that there was no reason to put a lot of faith in those polls. The failures of many candidates in the Zeitz article tell a tale of complacency. In 2020, there was never any opportunity for Joe Biden to be complacent, and there was no underdog to surprise the race results. Both campaigns had to work incredibly hard to secure whatever vote they will end up with. Though Joe Biden was favored in the polls this year, it would be foolish to assume that Joe Biden was ever in the leagues of the other characters in the Zeitz article because of Donald Trump's norm breaking wins that shook the system.

Election Aftermath (for 11/5)

The aftermath of the 2020 election feels *wrong*, for lack of a better word. I'll admit my own bias out of the gate; I voted for Biden, and I consider myself a strong Democrat. Polling for the past several weeks has appeared to show Biden with significant lead, and an extended wait for the

final results was to be expected due to the large amount of mail-in ballots. But now, with several states still undecided and others called with win margins of less than a full percentage point, this is turning out *nothing* like what pollsters predicted. I hoped for a landslide Biden victory in both the popular vote and the electoral college, but that isn't coming to fruition. When thinking about Zeitz's list of "epic fails," I find myself hoping that Biden will not end up on that list, doomed to failure by incorrect polls and the mysterious "shy Trump voters." Alternatively, if Biden wins by a slim majority and Trump contests, sending the results to his now-stacked Supreme Court, Biden could find himself on the list, robbed of victory by a biased failure of the courts. I also fear that a Trump victory will finally seal the fate of the electoral college in the minds of young Democrats like myself. To see Trump lose the popular vote twice (which appears very likely as of now) and *still* win the presidency would be outrageous, and I know that I and many of my friends who are just beginning to vote would not want to let that happen again. The current closeness of the race is nerve-wracking and feels like it's looming over everything else right now. If there is anything substantial to take away from this election, it is that polls cannot always be trusted. Voting, registering new voters, protesting, petitioning, and participating in our democracy in every way possible is the only way to (attempt to) get the result you want from an election.

The 2020 election results seem to be somewhat historic, in the context of the United States. There have been elections that have dragged on well past election day and needed legal action like 2000, but the influx of different types of votes coming at different points in the night like mail in voting taking days, and their being such partisan differences between the ways in which voters got their votes in is historic. Trump's claim that he's won Pennsylvania far before we know if that's true or not, and his claim that Democrats found Biden votes that didn't really happen so he would lose, seem to back up the claim that Trump is the new Andrew Jackson. My takeaway from this wild week is that I will probably never see an election like this again.

From when I voted up until now, I have been in a rather strange emotional limbo consisting of both anxiety, happiness, and nervousness. I have been keeping live election results on standby at all times and I have been checking them very frequently. After Trump got off to a hot start with the counting of the in-person ballots, I started feeling very uneasy and very nervous. As the mail-in ballots and absentee ballots started being counted later on, red states started flipping blue, and Biden was taking the lead in more and more states. I don't want to jinx anything as I write this, but I'm currently feeling very optimistic and proud that America isn't as disappointing as I had anticipated and prepared for. Both readings did a good job of oddly alluding to how Trump seems to be performing at the moment. Trump is flopping right now and has been flopping throughout his presidency, which I think adds more relevance and significance to the Andrew Jackson piece. Jackson and Trump can seem similar in their personalities and attitudes all they want, but the key difference in the article and apparently in the real election is that Jackson could do one key thing that Trump cannot: execute. The Jacksonian era was unique in that despite the scrutiny it held, it lay the groundwork for the basis of our American democracy more so than just about any other. Trump is effectively acting in the opposite manner, and by tearing down the

democracy on which America thrives, he forces himself to crash and burn. Again, I don't want to jinx anything as I write, but this is simply what I have noticed so far.

As I write my election narrative on the election of 1876, I cannot help but think about some of the similarities to today. Currently, votes are still being counted around the country and as many as six states are hanging in the balance. I certainly hope that an election even somewhat resembling 1876 can be avoided, but the potential is certainly present. America in 1876 was still deeply divided and bitter, as it had not yet forgotten memories of the Civil War. Today, America is an incredibly divided country along political lines, though fortunately, not along sectional lines as 19th century America was. In 1876, there were several states in which delegates were disputed and several states, most notably Florida and Louisiana, in which there was massive voter fraud. The fraud was so great and the vote so uncertain that historians today struggle to know whether Hayes or Tilden should have won. This year, the Trump campaign has already leveled accusations of voter fraud in several states. They accuse Democrat-run cities and municipalities for halting the count early in the morning after election day and resuming once they could "find" and "dump" ballots that boost Biden. 1876 still holds the record for highest turnout, as 81.8% of eligible Americans voted. This year many expect turnout to be more than it has been in over a century. Already, lawsuits are being filed challenging certain votes and it seems increasingly likely, especially with Pennsylvania up for grabs, that the election will not be settled anytime soon. Pennsylvania's Supreme Court extended the time in which the state will accept mail-in ballots, but that decision may well return to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1876, the Supreme Court was viewed as highly partisan, as just one justice was an independent. Ultimately, an electoral commission was established to settle the disputes. Each decision was decided along party lines, with Supreme Court Justice Joseph P. Bradley casting the deciding vote for the Republican Hayes. Today, the highest court is highly politicized and if any election challenges go to that court will surely be seen as partisan and illegitimate by a great number of Americans, due to the recent confirmation of Justice Amy Coney Barrett. We do not have the vivid reminder of violence that Americans did in 1876 but we would do well to consider the danger in disputed elections.

So, everyone I have been interacting with has seemed more at ease that they have been for a long time. Even the folks I know that voted for Trump are pleased that the election is over, with hopes for a good uneventful presidency ahead. Regardless of anyone's political affiliations in my group, we haven't spoken about politics these last few days near as much as any other time in the last few years. It seems that everyone just wants to get past this right now, and no one wants that more apparently than Biden himself. His speech the other night was beautifully crafted, called back nicely to Obama 2004, and made firm his belief that he owes an obligation to the voters he didn't carry almost more than the obligation owed to the voters he carried. I am less and less worried about a real Trump pushback, as it seems many Republicans are urging him to concede with grace and not damage the democratic system any more than already. I can't wait for 2021 to come and for this shit show of a year to be over.