

Opinion **Global Insight**

America is drifting into a perfect storm

The existential nature of this presidential election is a bad sign for the country's exhausted majority

EDWARD LUCE



The US has had no dress rehearsal for a situation like this © Reuters

Edward Luce 6 HOURS AGO

On some days it feels like nature is giving America a heads-up. [Migratory birds falling from the skies](#); [smoke from America's west coast fires reaching Europe](#); parts of Florida [underwater](#) — the atmospherics are Wagnerian. Humans are waiting in the wings for when nature takes a breather. The coming weeks will show whether the US can manage a fair [election](#) amid a likely second wave of [coronavirus](#) when most Americans believe a win for the other side could only be because of fraud. America has had no dress rehearsal for a situation like this.

It is not a good time to be part of the country's so-called exhausted majority. The base of each party believes the other side is preparing to [steal the election](#). Democrats, with good reason, think Donald Trump wants to make it as [difficult as possible](#) for people to vote by mail amid a pandemic. Having said all year that this will be “the most corrupt election in the history of our country”, Mr Trump has primed his supporters to respond to his call if the time comes. Talk of a [Democratic coup](#) is becoming routine in Trumpian media outlets.

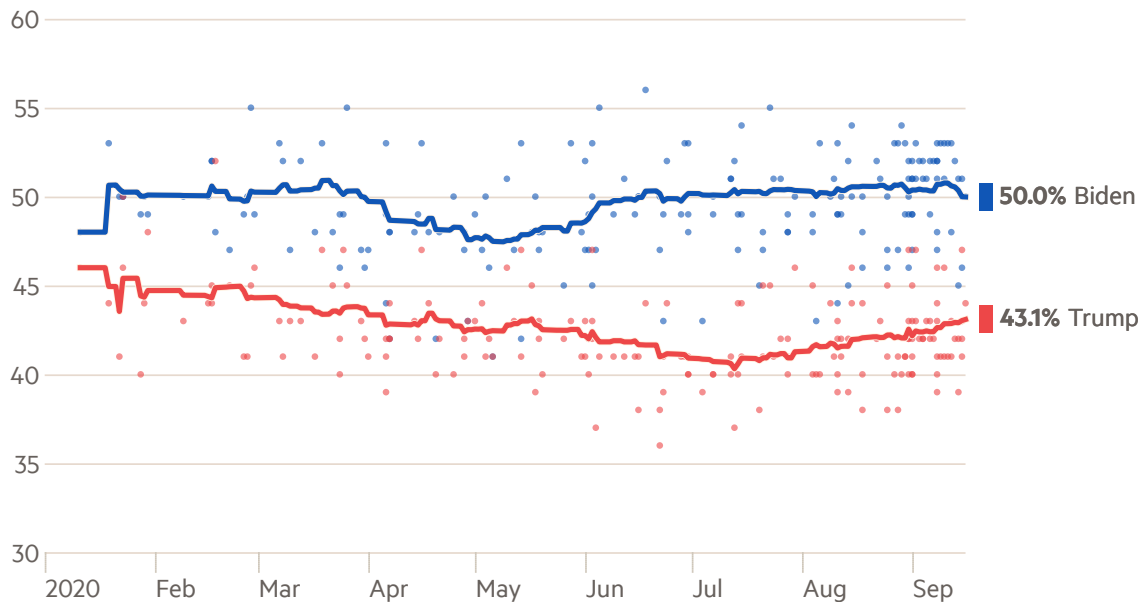
Joe Biden, the Democratic nominee, has twice warned that Mr Trump might [“try to steal”](#) the election in November. Mr Biden has also, somewhat rashly, predicted that the US military would “escort him from the White House” should he [refuse to concede](#). In practice, it is hard to believe US soldiers would break more than two centuries of precedent to intervene in civilian affairs. Such a job would fall to the Secret Service or the Capitol Hill police. But Mr Biden was probably right to imply that others, whoever they may be, would need to show Mr Trump the exit.

The most ominous dimension is that both extremes are preparing for a rigged election. This race is fuelled by two forces. The first is knowing that the other side is readying for violent clashes. Militia extremists have made appearances in dozens of American towns since George Floyd's killing in May. There are measurably more rightwing armed groups, and they have had [much more practice](#). But leftwing groups associated with Antifa and Black Lives Matter have also begun to flex their [second amendment rights](#).

Should Mr Trump lose the popular vote but win the electoral college, which happened in 2016, the street reaction this time could be far more dramatic. A narrow Trump defeat would likely be worse. Mr Trump has dropped consistent hints that he would bring his people onto the streets.

How Trump and Biden are doing in the US national polls

Lines represent weighted averages, points represent polls (%)



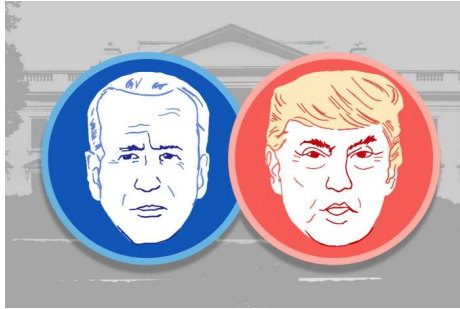
Source: RealClearPolitics, updated as of September 17 2020
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The second force is the existential nature of this election. Americans increasingly see this as an all-or-nothing contest. [Both sides](#) believe that a victory for the other would tilt the rules of the game against them. This is reinforced by the fact that it's a decennial year, which means that down-ballot winners in America's states will have the power to redraw electoral boundaries in their favour for the next 10 years. It is a measure of how toxic things have become that American scholars are nostalgic for the days of routine gerrymandering. Unfair electoral boundaries are one thing. The end of America as we know it — or wanted it to be — is quite another.

If nature is feeling kind it will postpone, or cancel, what epidemiologists have dubbed "Covid 2.0". Alas, nature exploits whatever opening humanity is offering. America is heading into the autumn with a base infection rate of [over 35,000 a day](#) and more than 800 deaths a day. This is nowhere near the flattened curve scientists wanted as the influenza season begins — and Americans retreat back indoors.

Trump vs Biden: who is leading the 2020 election polls?



Use the FT's [interactive calculator](#) to see which states matter most in winning the presidency

Anthony Fauci, America's leading epidemiologist, and a member of the exhausted majority, says people will have to "hunker down" this winter to avoid a second lockdown. One of the country's best forecasters, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, predicts another [60,000 American deaths](#) before polling day — assuming no further easing. That is among the lower estimates.

The scene is set for an October surprise. That could be Mr Trump unveiling a Covid-19 vaccine. Or it could be a war with Iran, or even a clash with China. The particular twist is anybody's guess. But it will be something.

Elections like this do not end with a whimper.

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