

How important an issue is education in the US elections?

By Demitri Coryton

Just how important an issue do American voters think education is in November's election? The answer to this question is more complex than people outside the USA may think. There is a federal Department of Education and a federal Education Secretary, Betsy de Vos, but it is one of the least significant federal departments as education is largely a local and state issue. But then, so is the election. Foreign media report on the election as a federal event, concentrating on the presidency and occasionally the battle for control of the Senate or the House of Representatives. Yet for the vast majority of Americans these are not the most important electoral battles.

When Americans go to vote, which if they are voting in person they do at a voting machine, they are faced with a vast array of positions that are up for grabs, from the local rat catcher, through school board members, local councilmen, road commissioners, judges, state congressmen, local referenda and finally for members of the US House of Representatives, possibly the US Senate (one third of senators are up for election every other year) and the presidency. Like British constituencies, most states are safe for one party or the other at presidential level, so when they say that all politics is local in the USA that is literally true. Instead of seeing this as an American federal election, it would be more accurate to see it as 50 state elections (plus one in the District of Columbia) all taking place at the same time. And every state has its own laws on who can vote, how and when, so voting practices vary from state to state.

Another peculiarity of the American system is that technically nobody votes for any of the presidential candidates. While the names of Donald Trump and Joe Biden are on the ballot, if you look at the small print of an American ballot paper you will see that uniquely, for the positions of president and vice president, people are actually voting for electors and not for the candidates themselves. These electors are local party dignitaries who the vast majority of Americans have never heard of who pledge to vote for a presidential candidate. They come together (figuratively, they actually meet in their local states) on 14 December to form the electoral college and it is they who actually elect the president and vice president. When Donald Trump was admitted to hospital with COVID-19 a few days ago there was much speculation in the British media about what would happen if at the last minute he could not be a candidate through ill health or death. While this would be a political problem for the Republican party, it would not be a constitutional issue, as although his name was on the ballot paper, including those of the six million Americans who have already voted by post, it is the electors that people are voting for so the electors who would have voted for Trump would simply vote for some other Republican if Trump was no longer available come the meeting of the electoral college in December.

Swing states

Presidential elections are, like British general elections with their marginal seats, decided in a small number of states. At this election there are six states that are critical. They are Arizona, Florida, Michigan, Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Wisconsin. Donald Trump is President because in 2016 he won all six, but in particular three that Hillary Clinton was expected to carry and which Trump won by less than one per cent of the vote in each case. These were Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

In a Reuters/IPSOS poll published last week, Joe Biden is ahead of Trump by 9%. (He is ahead by just over 10% in the average of polls.) Trump has lost two significant groups that he did well with in 2016. These are the over 65s, who are most affected by COVID-19 and are not impressed by

Trump's handling of the pandemic, and suburban women, who have deserted him in droves. Yet national polls predict who will win the popular vote, but American elections are decided in the electoral college not by the popular vote. Biden is ahead of Trump in five of the six swing states that will decide the election, and tied with Trump in the sixth. However, Biden's lead was much narrower than his national lead of 9% in every case but one. Only in Michigan was his lead, at 8%, almost the same as his lead in the national vote.

The tied vote in North Carolina and the 2% Biden lead in Arizona are within the statistical margin of error (although the 10% Democrat lead in the Arizona Senate race will help Biden.) In Florida, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin Biden leads by 4%, 5% and 6% respectively. However, the Florida lead is deceptive. Florida has an unusually high level of voter suppression, that is action taken by the state governments to illicitly reduce voting by certain groups. Voter suppression is a practice almost entirely of Republican states that aims to artificially reduce the voting of the poor and, in particular, African Americans, who largely vote Democrat. In Florida, voter suppression will significantly reduce any lead Biden may have in opinion polls.

Given the margin of error in the polls, the possibility of shy Trump voters depressing Trump's polling figures and the greater enthusiasm of the Trump base, it means that Trump is still in play in five of these six states. If Biden flips only Michigan, that's not enough to win. He has to carry either Michigan and Pennsylvania or Michigan and two other states to win the narrowest of victories. Given the fact that there are always a small number of what are called 'faithless' electors, that is electors who vote for someone other than the person they were supposed to vote for – there were seven faithless electors in 2016 – in reality Biden must win over four of the six states to be certain of victory. That is asking rather a lot. The Democrats have won four of these six states in only three of the seven presidential elections since 1992.

Biden is ahead, and is benefiting from a growing mood among a few Republicans that Trump is a threat to them. They believe the polls and fear losing the Senate and the White House and significant long-term reputational damage because of Trump. These largely Never Trumpers have launched Project Lincoln to rescue their party from Trump, who they rightly see as not a genuine Republican or Conservative at all. This is small scale but growing, and will help Biden, but Trump is still very much in play. He is likely to lose the popular vote, as he did in 2016, but he is still in with a chance of winning the electoral college and therefore the election.

The issues

In a tight race the issues that voters think important can be the deciding factor. Last week's Reuters/IPSOS poll put the Coronavirus pandemic as by far the most important issue for voters in all six swing states. This is bad news for Trump, who is widely seen to have handled COVID-19 badly, even by many of his own supporters. He wanted the last month of the campaign to be focused on anything but coronavirus, but now that is front and centre with more than twice as many voters concerned about this than the economy, an issue where Trump is ahead. These two issues are by far the most important to Americans. Healthcare is the only other issue to register above 10%, and then only in four of the six states.

Sadly, education was one of the also-ran issues. It got a mention in all six states, but as one of a group of issues of concern to only a few percentage points of voters. In most states it came behind crime, racism, morality and gun violence. Only in North Carolina did education come as high as fourth, but still mentioned by only five per cent of voters as their main concern. So, in answer to the question how important is education in the US elections, the answer is not very.

This is surprising at a time when the Black Lives Matter movement has had such an impact on the election, with racism a main issue in all six states, and usually a more important one than education. Educational opportunity is one of the biggest drivers of racial inequality in America. While the gap in high school graduation rates between Black and White students has narrowed dramatically in recent decades, it has persisted at the college level. Only 41 percent of Black students

completed their degrees, compared with two-thirds of Whites, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

One final thought about this election. Very considerably more people than before will be voting early, either by post or at early voting stations. Voting is already taking place. It is Biden supporters/Democrats who are voting early in larger numbers than Trump supporters, partly because Trump has convinced many of his base that the postal system is open to fraud (a claim without any evidence to support it). In many states postal ballots are counted the day after voting. So, in the early hours of 4 November, it will be the votes of those who voted in person, counted by machine during polling day, that will be announced and these will be more Trump voters than Biden supporters. They may well show Trump as winning the electoral college and therefore the election. Counting the postal ballots will take time, partly because there will be tens of millions of them and partly because each postal ballot paper will cover so many different election races. It could be several days, or possibly even weeks if there are legal challenges to the results in some areas, before we know who has won.

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