

# Contrasting leadership - Trump vs Biden

LBS expert comments on Donald Trump's response to the November 2020 election results

16 DECEMBER 2020

## Leadership Organisational behaviour



After another hugely divisive US election in which Joe Biden has been elected the 46th US President, it is interesting to consider the response of Donald Trump to the election result.

Back in 2016, Randall S. Peterson, Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Academic Director of the Leadership Institute at LBS, predicted that the US would become “less open, less outward focused, but remain largely intact”. Professor Peterson has arguably been shown to be right on all fronts. Following Professor Peterson's article ‘Is President Trump a sign of the times?’ written shortly after Trump was elected US President, Professor Peterson reflects on Trump's response to his 2020 electoral defeat:

“Looking forward from Donald Trump's election in 2016, some of what would happen was pretty easy to predict. For example, a candidate who campaigns against immigration is going to govern by reducing immigration. I think what was not so clearly anticipated is that he would govern only for those who voted for him and make no attempt to reach out to people who voted for his opponent or even speak to those who did not vote because neither candidate appealed. In my view, it has been a long time since the USA had a ‘smash and grab’ President – take everything you can now for yourself and the people who most strongly support you, to the detriment of those who lost.

“Most of us associate that generally with countries that do not have a tradition of democracy and the smooth transfer of power. We understand that politicians in these countries may not accept that when power ebbs and flows smoothly, the net outcome of the stability for everyone (including them) is positive over the medium and longer term. This matters because stable democracies are about what happens to the people who lose the election, more than majority rule.

“The losers of the election need to maintain their place in the system and live to fight another day. If this doesn’t happen, politicians from opposing sides will be incentivised to take everything they can when they are in power. The US system has, for a long time, guaranteed those rights for the losing side, and this has been a critical factor supporting stability. But how does one deal with a President who not only governs for only the ‘majority’ who voted for him, but who does not accept losing and is not satisfied with simply retaining his right to fight another day?

“We rightly disparage places in the world where leaders grab everything they can for themselves because no one knows what tomorrow is likely to bring, and they fear being punished once out of power. We explain away this behaviour in some parts of the world as a legacy of losing everything in European colonialism. And, yet, here we have been seeing great resistance by a leader to let go of power in one of the world’s oldest and most established democracies – one with a long tradition of doing better, and having benefitted from it. There is no reason anyone should support this approach - not even Trump himself.

“The challenge for Joe Biden, as the US’s President-elect, is in how to respond. If he takes matters too seriously, he gives the lies about electoral fraud credibility. If he ignores them, that could encourage the improbable. If he appeases this behaviour in any way, he could empower others to take hold as happened in Germany in the early 1930s. This is probably the biggest leadership challenge of Joe Biden’s career. He has to thread this needle just right to get the nation safely to the other side. He is cautious, considered, and careful, if not hugely charismatic, all of which is being put to a maximum test now. If he gets it right, it will be ‘obvious’ and no one will believe any of this was ever a serious threat. The consequences of getting this wrong are unthinkable. For the stability and prosperity of the USA, and much of the rest of the world, I wish him good luck.”