

## The American Election of 2020 and Canada-US Relations

As I record this podcast on November 6, 2020, three days after election day in the United States, it remains somewhat uncertain who has been elected president of that country. It very much appears, however, that it will be the Democratic candidate, Joe Biden. It is even more apparent that President Donald Trump will not go quietly into the night and that a good deal of rancor and ugliness is in store for the American political scene for quite some time.

Ugliness and rancor are not unknown when it comes to presidential transitions in the United States, although rare in modern times. The election of Abraham Lincoln on November 6, 1860, was followed by the secession of seven southern states before his inauguration, and the beginning of the Civil War shortly thereafter. Lincoln's name didn't even appear on the ballot in ten southern states. Try that on for political polarization!

Canadians, or at any rate those who lived in the British North American colonies at the time of Lincoln's election, had very good reason to fear the consequences of an American civil war that seemed imminent. As historian Fred Landon writes,

*Canadians could not overlook the gravity of the Washington situation in its relation to their own future. In the United States there had always been an element in favour of the annexation of Canada and--with the possibility of the South being lost--Canada seemed to have been reserved by "manifest destiny" as a compensation. It was this feeling in Canada, a fear of the aggression possible under such circumstances, that hastened the Confederation movement and aided in forming the present Dominion. (Dalhousie Review, 1922, p.330:*

[https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/bitstream/handle/10222/56921/dalrev\\_vol2\\_iss3\\_pp329\\_334.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/bitstream/handle/10222/56921/dalrev_vol2_iss3_pp329_334.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

Well, 2020 is a long way from 1860, and notwithstanding the current level of political polarization in the United States the current situation cannot seriously be compared to what followed Lincoln's election. Even less can the likely consequences for Canada of the 2020 American election be compared to those feared as the United States slid into civil war.

And yet many Canadians are worried, some of them very worried. A Léger survey carried out in Canada and the United States just a few days before the November 3rd election found that Canadians were almost as worried about the outcome of the election as Americans, 75 percent saying that they were very (30%) or somewhat (45%) worried, compared to 77 percent of Americans (37% very worried, 40% somewhat worried). Fears of "significant civil unrest or violence in the streets on election day or the following days" were about as likely to be expressed by Canadians (80%) as Americans (83%). Canadians were also worried about the possibility that President Trump might be re-elected, with 80 percent of those polled saying that the best outcome for Canada would be the election of Joe Biden as president. Only in the prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba was this overwhelming preference for the Democratic candidate less pronounced. (<https://leger360.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Legers-Weekly-Survey-November-2nd-2020-min-1.pdf>)

This strong preference among Canadians for the Democratic Party and its presidential candidate is nothing new. It has existed in every presidential election that I can remember.

Canadians believe that they and their country are better off with the Democratic Party in power and that Canada-US relations will be better than under the Republican Party.

It is not at all obvious that these beliefs are well founded. Nevertheless, it is understandable, particularly in light of President Trump's demeanor toward and statements--often Tweets--about Canada and Prime Minister Trudeau, that Canadians should believe that a Democratic administration in Washington will be much better for Canada. Moreover, Canadians have long heard from their opinion leaders that there is a special relationship between Canada and the United States, a special relationship that President Trump appeared not to have heard about or believed in.<sup>1</sup>

Is there really a special relationship and would it be restored with Joe Biden in the White House? To answer these questions we need to distinguish between appearance and substance in Canada-US relations. Canadians, the vast majority of them, loved Democratic President Bill Clinton. But during Clinton's eight years in office virtually nothing was done to resolve Canada's longstanding complaints about what the Canadian government claimed were unfair American tariffs on softwood lumber exports to the United States. Although you may never have heard of this issue, I assure you that it was a major grievance of Canadian governments, Liberal and Conservative, in their relations with Washington for two decades.

Canadians also loved Democratic President Barack Obama, and Obama seemed to return the love. But that didn't stop Obama from vetoing the expansion of the Keystone XL pipeline that would move Alberta oil to refineries on the Texas coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Joe

Biden has promised to reinstitute this veto on Keystone XL, the go ahead for which had been given by President Trump.

Of course all Canadians know that the Trump administration insisted that NAFTA be replaced by a new trade agreement between Canada, the United States and Mexico, which has happened, and that his "America First" policy has seen the threat and imposition of tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum. But Canadians are wrong to assume that protectionist pressures from within the Democratic Party and the groups that support it, including organized labor, are weaker than on the Republican side. As Roland Paris, a professor at the University of Ottawa and former foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Trudeau observes, Joe Biden ran on an economic nationalist platform supported by many influential figures within his party. That platform includes what Paris characterizes as the biggest "buy America" plan in the history of the United States and that, "Canada could be at risk of getting sideswiped by new protectionist measures whether Trump is reelected or Biden is elected."

[\(https://www.citynews1130.com/2020/11/03/what-at-stake-canadians-us-election/\)](https://www.citynews1130.com/2020/11/03/what-at-stake-canadians-us-election/). On the relationship between Canada and the United States under Trudeau and Trump, Paris says, "The relationship between Trudeau and Trump is decent. Our government has maintained a pretty effective and constructive relationship with the Trump administration."(Ibid.)

You may find it hard to credit Paris's claim about the relationship between the Canadian and American governments being "effective and constructive" during the Trump presidency. But on the whole he is correct. The optics of our bilateral relationship were poor, sometimes very poor, and there is no doubt that Canadians were often offended by President Trump's

unorthodox and undiplomatic style. In this regard we should not feel special. The Germans, the French and even, much of the time, the Brits, and their respective leaders, had as much reason for complaint on this score as did Canadians during the Trump presidency.

But what do you think? In what ways do you think Canada-US relations are likely to change under President Biden?

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<sup>1</sup> See podcast #27 on the Special Relationship at the student companion site for *Canadian Democracy*: [https://learninglink.oup.com/access/brooks-podcast-archive#tag\\_audio-podcasts](https://learninglink.oup.com/access/brooks-podcast-archive#tag_audio-podcasts)