

Marginal Gains

A PolSoc publication

marginalgains@solsch.org.uk

February 2021



The star of the show!

The presidential inauguration

By Rhys Foster

With Joe Biden taking the keys to the White House on the 20 January in his inauguration as the 46th President of the USA, we wonder how such a ceremony has evolved from the times of Washington to the day long ceremony that achieved 39.87 million TV viewers.

The first inauguration, that of George Washington in 1789, was held on 4 March and continued on that date until 1933. In 1937, the day of the Inauguration was moved to 20 January, due to the ratification of the twentieth amendment. This reduced the presidential transition period since the mechanics of counting votes took less time as did the transportation of people and documentation.

Different elements of previous historical inaugurations have been selected and fused to create today's inauguration, incorporating open displays of distinctive 'flavours' of American nationalism, a kaleidoscope of patriotism.

The Inaugural parade has its roots in that of Jefferson who in 1805 paraded in front of the Navy Yard mechanics. In 1809 Madison became the first president to hold a ball, attended by 400 guests. This inauguration ball has developed into an even bigger and more lavish affair: Reagan's Inauguration even had 4 tonnes of Jelly beans. The tradition of the FLOTUS holding the book for the oath originated in the Inauguration of Lyndon B Johnson, whose wife Lady Bird Johnson was the first to do so.

Therefore, one can see how the ceremony of inauguration has evolved from merely a 135-word inaugural address of Washington to the cacophony of jubilation that Biden orchestrated when he became president.



The Hill We Climb

The star of the inauguration was undoubtedly 22 year old poet Amanda Gorman whose poem, The Hill We Climb, encapsulated the theme of President Biden's speech and was a stirring call for tolerance and unity. Part of it can be read below:

We are striving to forge our union with purpose.

To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters, and conditions of man.

And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but what stands before us.

We close the divide because we know, to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside.

We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.

We seek harm to none and harmony for all.

Can Biden Unite America?

By Lauren Webb

In 2020, Biden ran on a platform of 'I'm not that orange buffoon'. The anti-Trump candidate, he promised to 'restore the soul of America' and heal the political divides scarring the United States. With a flurry of executive orders taking a sizeable chunk out of the previous Presidency, it certainly appears that Biden is living up to his promise to reverse the legacy of Trump.

Yet, his promise to be the consensus President, to bring America together, to prove there is more that unites Americans than divides them, is woefully reminiscent of Obama's same promise, twelve years ago. And, just as Obama left the country far more polarised than it was in 2008, it is unlikely Biden will be able to make good on his promise.

'The US is so polarised that the losing side cannot even accept the other's victory ... America has never been further apart.'

America is a nation divided like never before. Despite expectations that, with US COVID deaths in the hundreds of thousands, voters would have stormed back into the political centre ground offered by Biden, Trump gained 74million votes. This is second in volume only to Biden in US history. Trumpism is still very much alive. Nor is it willing to die quietly, as the right-wing terrorist attack on the US Capitol showed.

The US is so polarised that the losing side cannot even accept the other's victory. Fears of anarchy stalk the streets, online echo chambers loom like demons and the tardy blocking of Trump's social media accounts appears to be simply stoking the flames of the fire. America has never been further apart.



And, like it or not, the Republican Party will be dragged behind their increasingly right-wing voter base. Biden might have won Georgia, but he still doesn't have the 60 seats in the Senate needed to override a filibuster. The Republicans will block his every move. And when they don't, the conservative-packed courts will.

That is not to say that Biden cannot be a force for good. Just like Obama did, he's already taken steps to improve the lives of US citizens: the US has re-joined the Paris Climate Change Agreement; he's revoked the 'Muslim ban'; and is taking steps to get COVID under control. But his talk of unity is, just as Obama's was, noble but naïve.

Actions speak louder than words

By Freja Webber

Many people think that the 2020 election has meant that America has turned over a blue leaf, with the election having many historical firsts. President Biden received the largest ever number of votes, 82 million. He was the oldest president ever to be inaugurated at the ripe old age of 78. His vice president was the first woman, the first black and the first Indian VP. Many people would think that the introduction of more liberal policies and a more representative cabinet would mean the positive change is inevitable. That may not be the case.



President Biden emerged at the beginning of the presidential race, older than the other candidates but more determined, hoping that the third time would be the charm. He proposed liberal ideas and promised change. When the pandemic started he was quick to criticise Trump's impotence and slow response.

'As a presidential nominee, he said he supported gay rights but why did he vote for a measure aimed at outlawing gay marriage in the 1990s?'

During his inauguration speech he said he hoped to heal the divide within the country so that the two parties would be able to cooperate with each other like they previously had been able to do. He also wanted people to be able to disagree with each other without it descending into violence, as seen at the Capitol Building.

In summary he seems like the ideal person to unite the country and to help everyone who has been affected by the pandemic, whether that is with financial support or by providing hospitals with more PPE. But can we continue to hope that the president and vice president will be successful when they preach unity but have also enacted divisive change.

As a presidential nominee, he said he supported gay rights but why did he vote for a measure aimed at outlawing gay marriage in the 1990s? Harris has also voted to remove protections for Native Americans and LGBT individuals.

In summary, while I find that they are a better duo than Trump and Pence, I cannot fully trust them knowing that they are either pretending to care about unity, or lacked the courage and strength to fight for what is right. Only time will tell if they manage to enact a positive impact in America.

Are the Georgia Senate elections a game changer?

By Ciara Savage

Although 2020 proved an uncertain year for politics, 2021 has begun positively for President Biden, when on January 18, the final results of the Georgia Senate election came in, revealing that both seats had, for the first time 1993, been won by Democrats. Raphael Warnock (the first black senator elected in Georgia) and Jon Ossoff were sworn in two days later, meaning that the Senate now has a 50-50 split of Republicans and Democrats, leaving Vice President Kamala Harris the final vote.

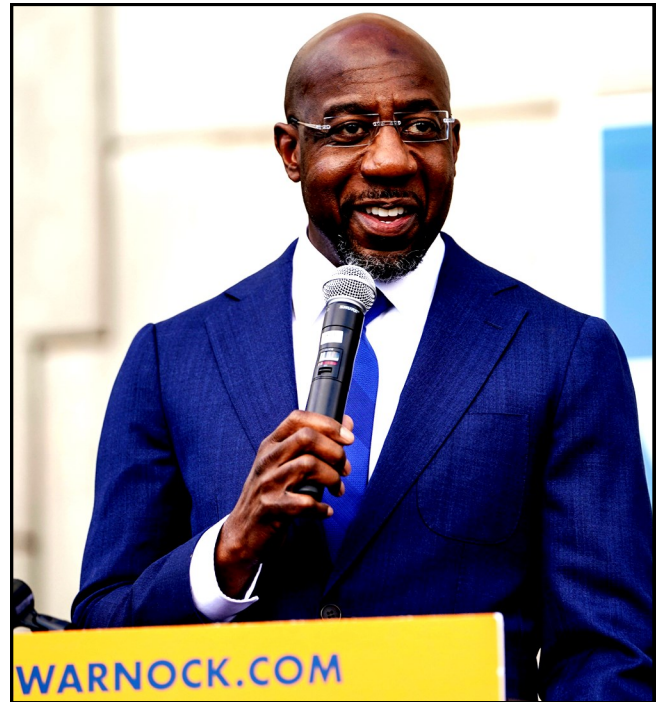
For the last two years legislation which had come from the House of Representatives that was controlled by Democrats was blocked by the Republican-controlled Senate. Now that Democrats hold the majority in both the House and the Senate, Biden and Harris can attempt to tackle issues like healthcare, the environment, governmental reforms, and a struggling economy.

However, whilst this victory is positive, Biden's proposed Green New Deal and legislation on public health insurance will be harder to pass due to the filibuster, which requires 60 votes out of 100 to end debate and move to a vote. With the divide between Democrats and Republicans increasing, Biden will have to rely on the support of Democratic centrists in Virginia and Arizona, as well as a handful of Republicans, to make major change.

Nevertheless, with this congressional majority, the new President has the ability to rescind regulations put in place by Trump, such as re-joining the Paris Climate Agreement and the World Health Organisation, whilst

rolling back some of Trump's last-minute regulations which 'were harmful to public health, damaging to the environment, unsupported by the best available science or otherwise not in the national interest', said Biden.

Gaining control of the Senate was a major boost to the Biden presidency and greatly increases his chances of being able to implement his policies.



Reverend Raphael Warnock, Georgia's first black senator.



The special relationship?

By Miah Hampton

During the first phone conversation between Boris Johnson and newly inaugurated President Joe Biden they seemed to have spoken about everything from trains to Trump, but still Jen Psaki (Biden's spokesperson) has stated that she cannot guarantee any trade negotiations with Britain or offer any timeline for these talks.

Since leaving the European Union, it was expected that the UK would enter into a trade deal with the US as they have been close allies over the years, and both Johnson and Trump suggested a trade deal would be easy to achieve. But during the Brexit process this became more complicated after the Internal Market Bill was passed which put the Good Friday agreement and peace in Northern Ireland at risk. President Biden had previously stated that if this bill was to go through then it was unlikely there would be a trade deal between the UK and US, leaving the question 'what will the future between the allies look like?' unanswered.

Despite this, some progress seems to have been made as this was Johnson's first talk with the new President, and both leaders have agreed to 'strengthen the special relationship' between countries as they co-operate on 'combatting climate change, containing Covid-19 and ensuring global health security'; however, as nothing was formally agreed, and Biden is busy at the start of his first 100 days, it seems unlikely that any formal moves to 'strengthen the special relationship' are likely to happen anytime soon.

Let's hope that their shared love of trains is the start of a bright future relationship between the US and UK post-Brexit.



Boris Johnson during his conversation with President Biden



Marginal Gains

A PolSoc publication

marginalgains@solsch.org.uk

February 2021

US Presidents Quiz

In honour of the new presidency, here is a short quiz about US presidents. Answers by email to Mr Affleck - prize for all correct entries!

1. How many presidents of the United States have there been?
2. Who was the first president of the United States?
3. Which president kept a big block of cheese in the White House for members of the public to eat?
4. Where was President Lincoln assassinated?
5. Who is the only president elected for two non-consecutive terms?
6. Who is the only president also to serve as a Supreme Court justice?
7. Which president married his cousin?
8. Which president's wife was called Lady Bird?
9. Which president was a peanut farmer?
10. Who is the only president to have been impeached twice?

