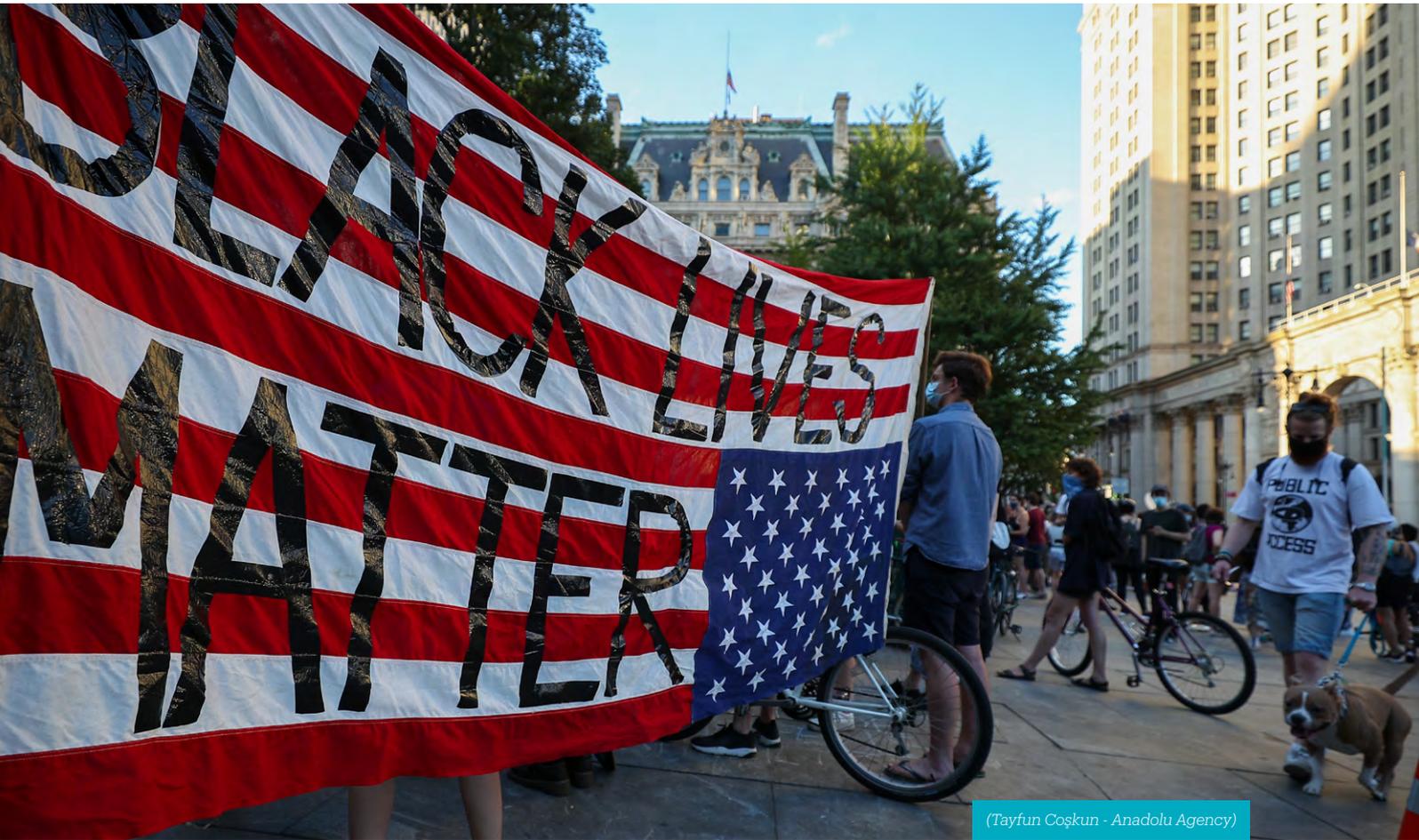


# A Divided Society:

## How will anti-racism protests influence the US elections?

Mamoon Alabbasi



(Tayfun Coşkun - Anadolu Agency)

**In less than three months, the United States will hold its presidential elections amidst ongoing protests against racial injustice across the country. This is happening against the backdrop of the Covid-19 crisis, which has impacted both the lives and livelihood of Americans. This policy outlook examines how the anti-racism protests, in the current health and economic climate, might influence the outcome of the elections. It also looks into whether a new president in the White House is likely to bring about meaningful change for people of colour in the country.**

## Introduction

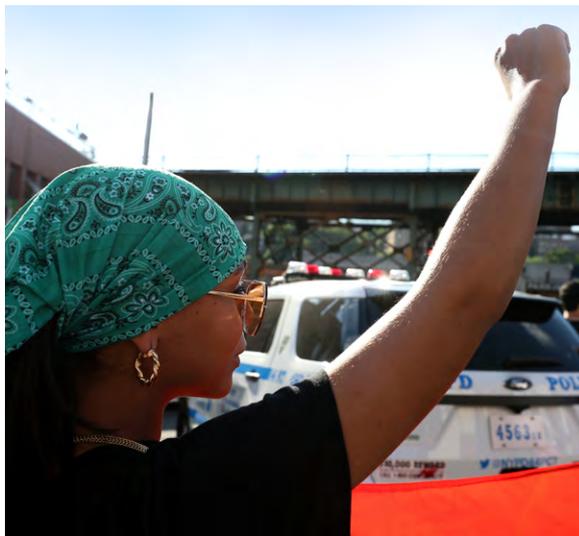
In less than three months, the United States of America will confirm whether it will have a 46th President, or whether it will stick with Trump for four more years.

President Donald Trump is, according to [recent polls](#), well behind the Democratic challenger, Senator Joe Biden. That said, as far as polls go, it is worth recalling that in 2016, Trump was widely expected to be defeated by the then-challenger and overwhelming favourite, Hillary Clinton.

However, what makes this election even more difficult to call are the challenges that Donald Trump has negotiate simultaneously, namely, a pandemic with no signs of abating, as well as social justice and inequality issues that have resulted in protests, sometimes leading to violent outcomes.

Added into the mix are extraordinary economic woes, which are largely - though not wholly - attributable to Covid-19. Worsening ties with China are threatening to [further escalate](#) an on-going trade war, which could hit the US economy further. There is [party infighting](#) on the [contents](#) of the much needed economic [stimulus bill](#); disagreement on the handling of the pandemic within the Senate as well as the White House (between supporters and opponents of the approach taken by the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr Anthony Fauci), resulting in [contradictory messages](#) on public health guidance. All of these are likely to be brought into focus as the election campaign heats up.

Amidst all of the issues facing the Trump re-election campaign, this policy outlook will focus on the impact of Black Live Matter (BLM) and the associated civil unrest might have on President Trump's re-election chances.



A woman takes part in anti-racism protests in New York City, United States on July 20, 2020. (Tayfun Coşkun - Anadolu Agency)

## Background

The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013, early into the second term of President Barack Obama, in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the racially-motivated killing of African American teenager Trayvon Martin. Demonstrations and protests ensued and grew following further deaths and mistreatment of minorities at the hands of the police.

Intervening periods of relative calm were short-lived as deaths by police, usually during an arrest rather than in custody, would often make headline news due to bystander footage capturing the event. One such event was the killing of [Eric Garner](#) in the summer of 2014, where the victim, whilst in a police-administered chokehold, cried out "I can't breathe"; a slogan that would be adopted by BLM in protests, and one which would later become an expression of solidarity, alongside the taking of the knee, against police brutality and social injustice.

Reforms were promised by the Oval Office, with the 44th president [proclaiming](#) that "the African American community is not just making this up. It's not something that's just being politicised. It's real. We as a society, particularly given our history, have to take this seriously". However, this emotionally charged acknowledgement turned out to be nothing more than a platitude, and without meaningful follow-throughs, abuses of minorities at the hands of the police continued to rise. The [numbers](#) continue to shock. African Americans represent 28% of those killed by police since 2013 despite constituting only 13% of the population.

## Why is it different this time?

The gruesome video footage showing the demise of an unarmed black man, George Floyd, at hands of four police officers, along with other incidents, such as the recent unlawful killing of jogger Ahmaud Arbery, engendered widespread outrage.

Another overlooked but noteworthy incident involves [Amy Cooper](#), a white woman who was captured on film making a false distress call to the police against a black environmentalist, in the presumed hope that it would provoke a violent reaction by the police upon their arrival. This incident resulted in condemnation, but more importantly highlighted the elements of privilege and inequality along racial lines.

The protests sparked by George Floyd's killing grew and spread across the world. Within the US, [public opinion](#) expressed support for BLM across racial and ethnic lines.

While these high-profile incidents maintained protest momentum, it should be stated that BLM is not a catch-

all Civil Rights movement. It does not represent all facets; black conservative commentators such as [Candice Owens](#) are against it; [Oprah Winfrey](#) depicted it as a leaderless movement. One of its co-founders, [Patrisse Cullors](#), asserted that "organising elements are decentralised, with many leaders".

## Covid-19

Observing from afar, one might conclude that America is at war with itself. This is not an entirely fanciful statement. City after city has been dominated by protests against racial injustice, which have periodically spilt over into violent clashes. This is all happening against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic looming over a nation that cannot seem rid itself of the first wave, much less prepare for an anticipated second wave in the winter.

The chaos of the pandemic brings with it economic doom and gloom, brought about via a disorganised and delayed shut-down of the country. Covid-19 carried with it more than a deadly virus; a lack of preparation and poor leadership that created a battle between lives and livelihood.

On Covid-19, President Trump initially disagreed with the World Health Organisation's assessment of the pandemic, before opting to [sever ties](#) with them citing a lack willingness to reform, as well as claiming that "China has total control" over the United Nations agency responsible for international public health. It was a decision that was opposed by the Democratic Party, which was already critical of the President's approach to tackling the virus.

Dr Anthony Fauci, one of the leaders of the White House Coronavirus Task Force (a team of medical response experts tasked with coordinating and overseeing the administration's efforts to monitor, prevent, contain, and mitigate the spread of Covid-19), was [side-lined](#), having repeatedly taken opposing views to that of the President, on response and treatment options.

The resulting mismanagement has led to a situation where the virus remains out of control, where states are continuing to record cases, emergency units at operating full capacity, and where the death toll that is far greater than any other nation on earth.

With a seemingly unending first wave of Covid-19, culminating in an increasing infection count and a death rate curve, the president has since back-tracked on his initially dismissive take on the virus and even sported a mask on occasions.

However, the president's base – his core and loyal support – remain sceptical regarding the merits of social distancing, wearing a mask in public spaces, and more worryingly, are vocally and at times [menacingly resistant](#) to a vaccine that does not currently exist.

Scientific data points to the distressing fact that Covid-19 disproportionately and adversely affects African Americans. This would have been the ideal opportunity for President Trump to appeal the black vote by offering health care provisions and introduce risk-mitigating infrastructure. Instead, he opted against the science to suggest that people were free to choose if they would wear masks during the first months of the virus outbreak; a statement that back-fired given the extended first wave.

## Disharmony within the GOP

Winning the White House as an "underdog" in 2016 was a remarkable feat, Trump had understandably garnered goodwill from the Republican Party grandees. This might appear as a given at first, but it is worth remembering that Trump is not a typical Republican per se; he simply ran under the banner, much like Bernie Sanders leadership ambitions that could only have been realised on a Democratic ticket.

That support has begun to show signs of weakening. First came the investigations into his financial affairs, then questions were raised regarding the wisdom of some of his appointments. Amongst the first, was the nomination of [Jeff Sessions](#) for the role of Attorney General; Democrats greeted this with dismay, given the well-publicised accusations of racism and discrimination during Sessions' career. Sessions would go on to be confirmed but stepped down less than two years into the role following a troubled relationship with the President. Another high-profile appointee was [Michael Flynn](#), a retired Army General was Trump's pick for National Security Advisor; he held the position for less than a month before resigning after it was revealed that he had misled Vice President Mike about his ties to Russian officials.

Unconventional communication with foreign leaders received mixed feedback from supporters in Congress as well as the State Department. For instance, [using Twitter](#) to taunt the North Korean leader over matters as serious as nuclear weapons was a break from protocol. Leaving the Paris Agreement (i.e. the Paris Climate Accord) in 2017 was another watershed moment whose effects will impact future generations.

Admonished by party notables, such as former presidential candidate Mitt Romney, testing the nerves of ally Lindsey Graham, it became abundantly clear that there was trouble within the Grand Old Party (GOP).

The recent pardoning of a long-time friend of the president and convicted felon, Roger Stone, of serious crimes such as witness tampering, lying to congress, and obstruction of proceedings, has only re-enforced the view that cronyism and nepotism are the modus operandi of the

administration, and created further antagonism within the Republican party.

Furthermore, amid the seventh week of nightly protests in Portland, Oregon, local and state officials have slammed the Trump administration for sending Homeland Security (i.e. Federal) agents to wrestle control back over the city from Black Lives Matter and social justice protesters. And while this action appeals to the President's base (which [champions](#) upholding "law and order" in the face of "unruly" [protests](#)), it goes against the GOP's mantra of allowing states to resolve their issues without federal intervention.

Trump's offensive rhetoric towards minority voters became a source of irritation for some members of the GOP, who felt that, from a strategic perspective, the Republican Party needed to widen its appeal remind minorities that this was, after all, the party of Lincoln. For President Trump, however, the black vote, in particular, was perhaps considered non-essential, and unlikely to yield a return capable of securing a Trump victory in any swing states.

There is an uncomfortable truth here: The remarkable [victory in 2016](#) was largely built on what became known as "Trump's White Wave". Ergo, the election was effectively contested on racial lines.

As long as the turn-out was sufficient to win Electoral College votes in each of the swing states, it did not matter if the popular vote was ceded, and there was no point going after voters in Democratic strongholds much to the chagrin of Republican Party traditions, which understood that developing [grassroots movements](#), such as Heritage Action, would help advance conservative objectives in both the White House as well as both houses of Congress.

## Are the Democrats capitalising?

The Democrats, led by Joe Biden, seem to have a better image on the global stage than they do domestically, certainly amongst historical (and democratic) US allies, as well as its major trading partners, including China. During his tenure, Trump - through his "America First" policy - soured many of the otherwise secure relationships that the US had previously forged. But having a better image abroad does not necessarily translate to more votes at home.

Disappointingly for the democrats, their domestic optimism hasn't matched their 2018 mid-term highs of 2018. A series of faux-pas by Biden during the chase for the nomination meant that keeping him out off-stage was deemed the safest option by party strategists, and Covid-19 facilitated this perfectly.

All is not lost however; President Trump continues to afford opportunities to rivals with confrontational policies - whether targeting protesters with force or his administra-

tion's severe mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Biden will also feel buoyed by the fact that he has support within the black community who may have been responsible for rescuing his campaign to secure the Democratic nomination. Moreover, whilst trump was lukewarm at best when seeking the black vote, Biden knows full well this vote could help secure wins in marginally Democratic states that the party lost in 2016 because the voters did not turn out to vote for Hilary Clinton.

BLM co-founder [Alicia Garza](#) said that Biden remains "far away" on a number of changes that democratic voters are looking for, such as defunding the police. In a recent [Op-Ed for USA Today](#), Biden outlined several incentives in a bid to win the black vote including combatting systemic economic racism. Endorsing the ban on police chokeholds, as well as reforming qualified immunity was well received by BLM activists.

Biden's naming of Senator [Kamala Harris](#), a woman of colour (whose father is originally Jamaican while her mother is originally from India), [as his running mate](#) for his presidential bid may give Biden a boost with minority voters.

Biden did not shy away from [pointing to the race issue](#). "All across the nation, little girls woke up, especially little black and brown girls, who so often feel overlooked and undervalued in their communities, but today...they're seeing themselves for the first time in a new way, as the stuff of presidents and vice presidents".

Trump understood the racial implications of her nomination, and on the same day accused Biden on Twitter of having ["a racism problem"](#). Trump supporters took to Twitter to remind Harris of [her own criticism of Biden](#) on race issues during the Democratic Party primaries. Critics of Harris sought to edit [her profile on Wikipedia](#) as they objected to her being labelled as African American. Indeed, the website [FactCheck.org](#) had to publish an article clarifying that Harris is eligible to serve as US president after viral posts on Facebook questioned her origin.

This is not to say, however, that African American voters would all vote for her. Many African American voters [had favoured Biden over her](#) in the Democratic primaries as she was widely seen as not being "authentic" or as a champion of African American causes.

There is still time for Biden to capitalise on Trump's downward popularity trajectory. During the 2018 mid-terms, local and state issues appear to have been less relevant as the election effectively became a referendum on the Trump presidency, according to [the Wall Street Journal](#). Such focus could better serve the Democrats in November, as Trump's popularity has gone down.

By relying on his base, Trump has perhaps overlooked the importance of changing demography. Consider California's white population: it continues to age and shrink, and



Republicans have been unable or unwilling to cultivate fast-growing minority communities and younger voters of all ethnicities, who in turn ended up in the Democratic fold.

However, it must be noted that not all black voters who are opposed to Trump will vote for Biden or vote at all. Speaking to TRT World Research Centre, Ahmed Bedier, President of United Voices for America, explained:

"A lot of it has to do with [Trump's] opponent, the Democratic Party and Biden - how he'll be able to use this, to speak the language. It's not good enough for the Democratic Party and Biden to rely on the hatred against Trump and the fear of White Supremacy, for (winning) his (Biden's) election. He (Biden) has to actually give something to people of colour and the black community to vote for. It's not enough just to say, 'elect me because I'm not Donald Trump'. I don't think that's going to work because people want meaningful change. Because Biden has been for such a long time, some people within the African American community consider him to be part of the problem because he did pass laws in the past that have been detrimental to the black community, especially when it comes to criminal justice."

Bedier pointed to challenges in translating protests into votes:

"If the (protest) leadership is able to direct the protest in the right way, they can galvanise that energy, that rage, that anger and say, as Obama used to say, 'don't get mad, vote', you could change things. But at the same time, some of the people, especially in the black community, are saying

'look, we've been voting for the past 50 years and things are getting worse'. There is something structurally wrong with the system that we're in and that's why there is this rage out there. Sixty years after the Civil Rights Act, these different laws, people died for this: Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, so many icons have struggled for this and this is still happening? This is causing people to lose faith in the democratic process, lose faith that the system can correct itself or fix itself."

Aside from race issues, the Democrats may consider turning Trump's "American First" policy on its head by pointing to the evidence. Maintaining America's prosperity and international stature has previously depended on trade and immigration policies. In a post-Covid-19 world, these must be brought back to the table.

## Will it matter for black lives who wins the presidency?

While the BLM protests alone appear unlikely to unseat Trump, another question needs to be addressed: will the lives of black people and other minority communities improve drastically under a Biden presidency? Bedier is not holding his breath:

"The way that the US government is designed, change happens very slowly. There are institutions and structures in place that are made up of people that have inherited this

country. Until now, a lot of people will say that the wrongs of the past haven't been made right so we're still inheriting this problem of structural racism and institutional racism and it continues till today. You can see it everywhere, not just in police brutality. Police brutality is the tip of the iceberg. It's what you can actually see but beneath that, there are huge structures of racism that exist."

## A closer look into the Opinion Polls

Polls can be misleading, and in some cases, outright wrong. This was in evidence in the Brexit Referendum, and more to the point, the Presidential Election of 2016, where Trump was victorious over the overwhelming favourite, Hillary Clinton.

Going into the 2016 election, Clinton led Trump in every [major category polled](#): The Economy (+4%), Terrorism (+14%), Immigration (+19%), and International Crisis (+29%). Yet, upon his victory, voters claimed that they trusted him more with the economy and immigration. The polls even focused on candidate attributes, such as honesty, empathy, experience, and personality. Again, Clinton led every domain convincingly. The majority of polls were wrong; notable exceptions did register Trump in a narrow lead, namely [Real Clear Politics](#), but even that fractional gain was expected to have faded away by election day.

Why would the polls be trusted this time around? Well, there are several factors: An obvious one would simply be that Trump has "one last chance" according to Henry Olsen of [the Washington Post](#) and that he is no longer seen as a radical, an unknown but needed quantity, someone who would break the political establishment. The United States is still a democracy with checks and balances, and a president, no matter how much of a maverick he may be, must still operate within this framework.

The answer behind why the polling this time around could be more accurate is based on the axioms that always existed, namely to:

A. Trump's base will back him no matter what. Trump's appeal is not limited to visceral remarks, constant appeals to draining the swamp, and the dismantling of the deep state. While Trump's base viewed him – and indeed continue to view him – as a crusader against the establishment, they also believe that Biden will be too soft on China at a time when some Americans believe that Covid-19 was shot across the bow by the communist state and a declaration of war against the US.

B. Upsets do happen in politics. In 2016, it should be remembered that Trump was not the obvious choice for Republicans.

C. Voter turnout remains relatively low and has not reached the 60%+ handle since 1968. Since Nixon's (first) election victory, the US election turnout has been consistently in the low-50s, with Bill Clinton holding on to the presidency with a mere 49% turnout as recently as 1992. If America is to elect a new president, then improving the turn-out is a key feature that needs to be considered. In the context of black and minority votes, this is a challenge that continues to elude progressives. In 2016, while Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by some three million, voters in key regions did not turn out to vote in the numbers required to secure victory in key swing states.

D. Not all polls use the same analytical tools. Some use phones (mobile or landlines), some use face-to-face interviewing, which has been challenging during Covid-19. Others have adopted digital strategies, however, the data captured from this medium is generally not considered reliable. Moreover, using different mediums and at a higher frequency does tend to return more reliable results.

State Polls are more crucial than National Polls; i.e. pay attention to the Electoral College. The winner of the presidential election may not be the one who wins the popular vote; rather, it is the candidate who can earn the required minimum of 270 Electoral College delegate votes. In 2016, Hillary Clinton received 3 million more votes than Donald Trump, however, Trump secured a decisive victory (304 vs 227) where it matters: the Electoral College.

This is because, contrary to popular belief, the President is not chosen by the votes of individual Americans, but rather by [Electoral College](#) delegates representing each state. Following the election, delegates will then vote for the candidates who got the highest popular votes in any given state. To complicate things further, not all states hold the same weight. Electoral College votes are based on the state's population, so, for example, California has 55 electoral votes while Nevada only has 4.

In 2016, Trump focused on a national cross-section instead of focusing on the highest numbered State (California), which has been staunchly Democratic, over the past five presidential elections (i.e. since 1992). In the upcoming election, Trump is unlikely to deviate from the tactic that served him well, targeting Ohio (18), Texas (38), Florida (29), and Pennsylvania (20), amongst others.

## What about the Economy?

From an economic perspective, the president's first term – up until Covid-19 struck – was largely positive. Unemployment was broadly low, the markets were up, and the Republican base was content.

His strong arm negotiation tactics and tax breaks yielded some positive outcomes, however, the disconnect between fiscal and monetary policies was in evidence long before Covid-19 ground the economy to a standstill. Public admonishment of the Federal Reserve chair over his decisions to hike interest rates did little to inspire confidence in his self-proclaimed economic "genius".

Running on an "America First" and "Free Trade" tickets will win votes amongst the disenfranchised and disillusioned by unchecked Globalisation, but there has to be follow-through.

Early in the Administration, "America First" and "Free Trade" were working in tandem and didn't result in the job losses as predicted by some economists due to the side effects of driving down costs, which can adversely affect certain industries and workers. Instead, employment, including amongst those from minority backgrounds, was on the rise.

However, since Covid-19, a recent [Bloomberg TV](#) poll revealed a bleak economic outlook amongst African Americans when asked how confident they were. Just 16% stated that they were somewhat confident that the economy would rebound; in contrast with the white (41%) and Hispanic (42%) outcomes, this reveals a pessimistic view.

More damningly, when asked about the state of the economy, an overwhelming 94% of those polled stated that it was poor, compared with the national average of 75%. Clearly, there is much to do to address such disparities.

The clock is ticking fast and income supplements are drying up at a time when millions are jobless and one in three Americans is not making a full rent or mortgage payment.

Following the unprecedented fiscal and monetary intervention, The US Treasury is now sitting on \$1.8 trillion ready to be deployed; and President Trump will likely want to use this cash balance in the next three months to boost his chances of re-election, rather than leaving it to a successor.

## Should President Trump be worried?

Trump is concerned, and not just because the polls are becoming impossible to ignore. The handling of Covid-19 has weakened the resolve of a large group of voters who simply chose Trump in 2016 because they did not trust Clinton. Total [Covid-19 cases](#) in the US alone now exceed 4 million, with a death toll nearing 150,000.

With an ever-increasing infection rate and the frightening death toll from Covid-19, the president has remained at odds with medical advisors.

The president is now constantly reminded – mockingly during press briefings – of his claims that the "virus will disappear"; until he declared that "it will probably get worse before it gets better".

The economy, which the president had always used as a success story since assuming office, is revealing major divergences between Wall Street and Main Street. The [job-less claimant count](#) and participation rates are worse than the Great Depression of the 1930s, yet the financial markets are rising, creating further inequalities.

In any case, while the Stock markets have recouped much of their losses, this more has to do the Federal Reserve's intervention, rather than a comprehensive fiscal recovery programme.

Both the pandemic and the state of the economy disproportionately impact the lives of black people – since they are more likely to succumb to the virus, and due to the economic inequalities that exist. The president's handling of these thus far has done little to endear minorities into voting for Trump, but this voting bloc was never a priority for his administration.

However, the way he's handling the protests and civil unrest, particularly in cities like Portland and Chicago – using anti-Republican tactics, through the deployment of Federal Government Forces over State matters and calling it a "Surge" – could end up losing him middle of the road voters, who chose him over Hillary Clinton in 2016.

## Conclusion

The Black Lives Matter protests, on their own, are not likely to cost Trump the presidency. The US president has several challenges that when combined, could cost him a second term. However, what is almost certain is that even under a Biden presidency, police brutality against minorities or the wider problem racial inequality will continue. Judging from its record holding the presidential office, the Democratic Party has also failed to bring about meaningful difference for people of colour with regards to police violence, even it had a black president sitting in the Oval Office.