

Primary Primers: Biden and Trump go big for Minnesota – a state which may matter less than they think.



As a Midwestern state with ten electoral votes, Minnesota is often seen as a key battleground in the 2020 presidential election. But, writes [Rubrick Biegón](#), barring any ‘October surprises’, the North Star State is very likely to vote for the former Vice President, Democrat Joe Biden on 3 November. How President Trump and Biden are campaigning in Minnesota, he writes, tells us more about the challenges facing both candidates, rather than that the state is an electoral tipping point.

- This article is part of our [Primary Primers](#) series curated by Rob Ledger (Frankfurt Goethe University) and Peter Finn (Kingston University). Ahead of the 2020 election, this series explores key themes, ideas, concepts, procedures and events that shape, affect and define the US presidential primary process. If you are interested in contributing to the series contact Rob Ledger (ledger@em.uni-frankfurt.de) or Peter Finn (p.finn@kingston.ac.uk).

Minnesota’s status as a 2020 election [battleground](#) has been much-discussed in the months following the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May. That episode touched off protests and unrest which spread nationwide, catalysing the Black Lives Matter movement and catapulting issues of racial justice to the centre of the presidential campaign.

The social tumult led Donald Trump to test out a revamped ‘law-and-order’ strategy based on predictably crude rhetoric and authoritarian posturing, replete with racialized dog-whistles threatening the ‘[Suburban Lifestyle Dream](#)’, in the president’s words. For some observers, events in and after Minneapolis played to Trump’s advantage by inflaming the reactionary cultural sensibilities that fuelled his 2016 rise. Developments in [Kenosha](#) (in neighbouring Wisconsin) during the Republican National Convention echoed the earlier furore, heightening perceptions that the election would hinge on the upper Midwest.

As I wrote for [this blog](#) just before George Floyd’s killing, Minnesota, while more competitive than it used to be, is not as ‘swingy’ as other swing states. Pennsylvania, Florida, Arizona, Ohio, and Wisconsin all appear closer than Minnesota. If the election is tight, these traditional battlegrounds are more likely to end up as the election’s pivotal ‘tipping-point’ state. And despite predictions that reactions to the [uprising in Minneapolis](#) could benefit Trump, Biden has seen his [polling lead expand](#) in the North Star State. Unless the Supreme Court vacancy [upends the dynamics of the race](#), and barring a true ‘October surprise’, Biden should remain on track to capture Minnesota’s 10 electoral votes.

Both candidates continue to shower attention on Minnesota, however, amidst perceptions that it is up for grabs. Their [respective visits](#) to the state provided a window onto the campaign’s homestretch. In a stopover in the northern town of Bemidji, Trump returned to his favourite wedge issue, immigration, which is central to his efforts to rally his conservative rural supporters. Targeting the state’s Somali community, and ruminating on the ‘good genes’ of those in his audience, Trump claimed if Biden won the state would become a ‘[refugee camp](#)’. But Trump also cast himself as protector of northern Minnesota’s industrial base, with scattered references to the decline of the Iron Range, the state’s mining region and a former bastion of left-wing and Democratic politics.



"Minnesota – We are not Trump country – Minneapolis Trump Campaign Rally Protest" by [Tony Webster](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#)

In his visit to a union training centre near Duluth, Joe Biden sounded a populist tone. Framing the election as a choice between [Scranton and Park Avenue](#), Biden argued: 'All Trump sees from Park Avenue is Wall Street'. He outlined plans to raise the minimum wage, lower drug costs, and invest in infrastructure. The focus on 'bread and butter' issues illustrates a growing awareness that Biden's stripped-down anti-Trump message may be insufficient to win back disaffected lower-income voters.

The duelling visits to Minnesota underscore the challenges confronting both candidates. His bizarre idiosyncrasies notwithstanding, Trump may have difficulties recapturing the 'outsider' energy that drew disengaged swing voters to his side in 2016. Trump's skills at distracting his audience and disrupting the narrative are well-established, but his record in the context of the public health and economic catastrophe is now a clear [liability](#).

Biden, meanwhile, has spent months assailing Trump's character and temperament, cultivating support from erstwhile Republicans in the suburbs. The pivot to portray Trump as a typical GOP politician, on the side of the wealthy and against common folks, is a logical move, but it has come quite late in the game. Whether the message is pursued with enough force to be effective remains to be seen.

The pandemic has aggravated socio-economic disparities across the United States. Below the surface of polarizing culture wars and party-based tribalism, day-to-day realities for many citizens have grown more [precarious](#). True swing voters tend to be those who pay the least amount of attention to the dramas that excite committed partisans. In the crucial contests of the Midwest, at least, the candidate best able to tap into 'kitchen table' and class-based concerns is likely to emerge victorious.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

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