

Two radically different agendas

The U.S. Elections and Development Policy

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The Current Column

of 2 November 2020

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Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
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The U.S. election on 3 November 2020 presents two stark directions for American development cooperation: four more years of the Trump administration gutting the civil service, appointing loyalists with little expertise, and alienating development partners, or a Biden administration that will bring back what is likely to be a technocratic, cooperative approach to leading United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Under Trump it appeared the technocratic trend inherited from Obama would continue with the bi-partisan appointment of Mark Green as USAID Administrator, a former Congressman and U.S. Ambassador to Tanzania. He took an approach that aimed to reduce developing countries' reliance on aid, a strategy termed "Journey to Self-reliance". This strategy did not represent anything groundbreaking, but from early 2017 to early 2020 Green was able to quietly manage a functional U.S. development agenda in which Trump himself took little interest. The one time Trump took a direct interest in development aid, it was to suspend aid to Central America in 2019, unless countries in that region stopped outward migration.

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Since Green stepped down on April 10 2020 to become executive director of the McCain Institute for International Leadership, the chaos that has been a hallmark of Trump's administration found its way to the USAID. The current White House liaison to USAID, William Maloney, has overseen the appointments of staff who have limited qualifications but are loyal to Trump. This has ruined morale among the USAID civil service, compounding the general chaos and incompetence that defines the Trump administration. More recently, efforts to provide support to countries coping with COVID-19 have been hampered by management failures and miscommunication within the administration. These were made worse by the administration's decision to leave the World Health Organization, which was the primary partner in delivering U.S. public health aid.

While it is self-evident that another four years of Trump could be institutionally ruinous for the United States Agency for International Development, what would a Biden administration do differently? Could Biden undo the institutional damage of the Trump administration, and also rebuild the relationships with partner countries and international organizations that Trump has strained?

The answer to the first question is that Biden is likely to bring back traditional, expert-driven leadership to USAID. As President Obama's Vice President, the legacy of the Obama administration's USAID strategy could provide insight into what Biden would do. From 2010-2015 USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah reformed the contracting process so that more local actors received funding directly, and launched the Global Development Lab which aims to increase the use of science and technology in American development cooperation. Bringing experts back into leadership roles would strengthen USAID as an agency, and help rebuild staff morale.

Could Biden rebuild the relationships, partnerships, and American position in international organizations that are currently strained or broken? Biden himself is a well-known from his time as Vice President, which would bring a general level of predictability to U.S. development policy. The American system of political appointments also means that Biden could appoint competent leadership to USAID relatively quickly, especially if Democrats retake the Senate. The United States has an exceptional pool of public health, economic development, and governance experts who could start rebuilding the international relationships that have been strained by Trump's 'America First' agenda.

On November 3, Americans will vote on two radically different agendas for the future for American development policy. Four more years of Trump is likely to mean USAID will be bereft of expertise and focused on using aid coercively. Biden is likely to bring expertise back into USAID, as well as policy coherence and a development strategy focused on cooperation and partnerships. The decision Americans make will shape global health, climate policy, and governance not only in the next presidency, but through the rest of the decade.