U.S. Election Analysis 2020: Media, Voters and the Campaign

Early reflections from leading academics

Edited by:
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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

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This election has raised countless questions and talking points, which journalists, academics, pollsters, pundits, and politicians alike are all busy analyzing. This project, and the report that follows, is our collective contribution to making sense of the 2020 election. To do this, we have again turned to leading academics in the U.S. and beyond – a diverse mix of world-leading experts and early career researchers – to offer their reflections, analysis and early research findings on the election campaign, the results, and what they might mean for the future of American politics.

Section 1 covers the policy and political context of the 2020 campaign. This was, of course, dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic that had taken over 240,000 American lives by the time of the election. But it also proved to be a divisive political issue, with incumbent Donald Trump and challenger Joe Biden offering different visions of how the U.S. should respond to the pandemic. The two candidates also offered contrasting policy platforms around such issues as abortion, foreign policy, immigration, and the environment, each of which are taken up by our contributors.

In **section 2** we turn to voters. 2020 saw a historic turnout rate of over 65% – the highest in over 100 years, and supported by a record number of mail-in and early in-person votes due to the pandemic. Pre-election polls had raised the prospect of a comfortable Biden win, and while at the time this report went to print he still looked likely to take the electoral college by some margin, overall voting patterns also demonstrated the resilience of the Trump vote. Our contributors examine the divisions within the American electorate along racial, geographic, age, and religious lines, while unpacking the increasing polarization around certain issues.

While both leading candidates were white, male and in their seventies, they are still fascinating dynamics behind their candidacies, which then shaped their campaign strategies. In **section 3**, our contributors examine the psychology of the candidates and their followers, alongside some of the key aspects of their campaign and communication strategies.

Section 4 turns attention to news and journalism. Throughout Trump's divisive presidency, he has presented the mainstream news media with unique challenges. Since becoming president, Trump has made over 22,500 false or misleading claims, averaging over 50 false or misleading claims a day in the final stretch of the election 2020 campaign. Meanwhile, the mainstream media has been subject to unprecedented political assault, particularly from the White House. By the end of this campaign and in an apparent shift from the ways in which they covered Trump in the previous four years, we saw TV networks cutting off the president as he made baseless claims about voter fraud.

Social media (**section 5**) was again a key battleground. Consistent with his 2016 campaign and his last four years in office, Trump sought to control the news agenda through his tweets. Yet, he now found himself subject to the moderation of the platforms, who censored a number of his tweets behind misinformation warnings, especially in the aftermath of the vote. Meanwhile, Biden's winning campaign spoke of how it 'turned off Twitter' during stages of the campaign. Scholars will be monitoring whether these and other developments continue beyond this election cycle and are seen in other national contexts.

Political communication does not just exist in news and other formal political spaces, but in popular culture too. In **section 6**, contributors show how sport, satire, and comedy are not just entertainment, but are actively involved in public critique during the election.

We end the report (**section 7**) with contributions that reflect on the state of democracy in the U.S. We do not use the word 'crisis' lightly, but we believe – alongside historians of fascism and authoritarianism – that this election has exposed the fragility of liberal democracy in the U.S. As we write, the election outcome is disputed, the integrity of the voting process is being attacked, truth and facts are drowning amidst waves of misinformation, and the sitting President has warned of "violence on the streets" if the vote count is not cut short. A poll from Politico/ Morning Consult found that 70% of Republicans do not believe the presidential election was "free and fair". These are trends that may well outlive Trump's presidency and affect U.S. politics for years to come.

Published within ten days of the result, these contributions are short and accessible. Authors provide authoritative analysis – including research findings and new theoretical insights – to bring readers original ways of understanding the campaign. Contributions also bring a rich range of disciplinary influences, from political science to cultural studies, journalism studies to geography. We hope this makes for a vibrant, informative and thought-provoking read.

BIDEN
DEMOCRAT

After 50 of 50 states

270 to win

TRUMP
REPUBLICAN

306

232

SENATE

48 DEM.

REP. 50

GAINED 1 SEAT
35 NOT UP

50

LOST 1 SEAT
30 NOT UP

HOUSE

218 DEM. ✓

REP. 203

LOST 5 SEATS

218 seats for majority

GAINED 6 SEATS

Source: Edison Research/NEP via Reuters

Lead **Win** Flip
Democrat

Lead **Win** Flip
Republican
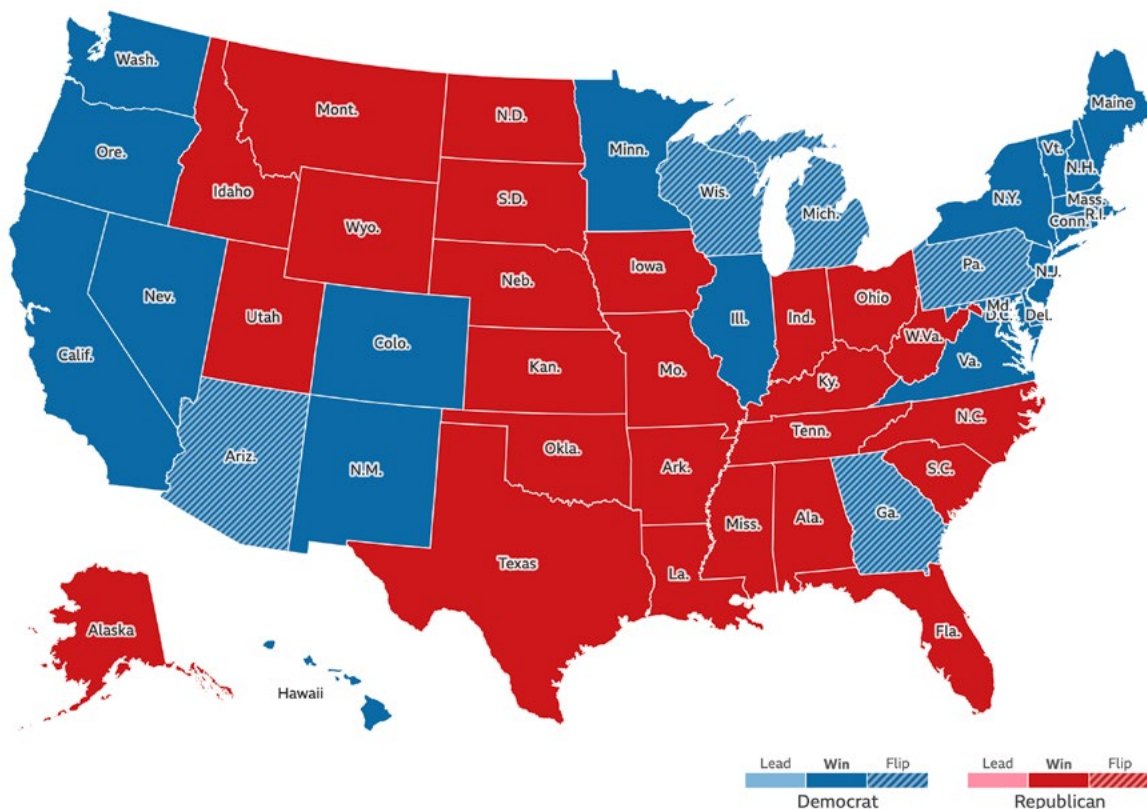
1

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Policy and
Political context

The far-too-normal election

To be totally honest, I thought the 2020 election would be a blowout. Not because Joe Biden ran a particularly effective campaign (it was fine, just fine). Not because Donald Trump ran a particularly ineffective campaign (it was bad, but the same type of bad as 2016). But because of the grim reality of life in the United States in 2020.

This has not been a *good* year, to put it mildly. Over 200,000 people have died of the Coronavirus. The economy is in shambles. Our children attend their schools virtually now. They cannot visit their grandparents in nursing homes or, god forbid, the hospital. The pandemic has hit the United States harder than other wealthy nations because the government's failed public health response.

And yet the presidential election results are basically what I would have predicted in January 2020. Three states that Trump narrowly won in 2016 flipped to the Democrat, with a handful of other narrow victories as well. Democrats lost a few of the House seats that they picked up in the 2018 wave, and they won a couple of Senate seats. Given Trump's demonstrable unpopularity, that was well within the bounds of what one would have expected had 2020 been more "normal."

Two possible explanations present themselves. It is possible that Trump was more popular than he seemed – that without the weight of the ruinous pandemic, he would have sailed to a second-term victory. If he came *this close*, despite all that has gone terribly wrong this year, then surely he would have done better in a world without the virus. The trouble with this explanation is that it requires us to disbelieve so many of the apparent facts-on-the-ground from the past three years. Trump was historically unpopular. He presided over an improving economy, but did nothing to unite an increasingly divided nation. He inflamed partisan divisions and gave comfort and encouragement to violent white nationalists at home while ruining America's reputation abroad.

The second explanation is that partisan preferences are now so deeply entrenched in the United States (at least when filtered through the prism of political geography, in which marginal gains and losses in vote share only matter in a select few narrowly-divided states) that the entire apparatus of political campaigning has no effect on the outcome of Presidential elections. This explanation is in some ways even more troubling – particularly for scholars of strategic political communication like myself.

What choices could Trump or Biden have made that would have altered this outcome? What messages could they have distributed, through what media? Were there digital advertisements or analog campaign commercials that could have moved the needle? Untapped potential in bold new policy proposals? Innovations in field campaigning? If the lived reality of the pandemic did not change votes, hearts, and minds, then it is hard to imagine any of the granular strategic decisions made by the legitimate political campaigns could have.

And the same goes for the digital platforms. We spent years pondering how Facebook, Google, and Twitter would mediate electoral communications – both legitimate and illegitimate. Each platform made complicated and flawed decisions over the course of the election. They attempted to tamp down on the spread of misinformation and disinformation. They were at times somewhat successful, at other times less so. Yet, this explanation leaves me to wonder whether any of the platforms' choices mattered to the eventual outcome. Would waves of misinformation and unchecked microtargeted propaganda have changed the results in Pennsylvania or Wisconsin, when the waves of hospitalization and empty storefronts did not? It is hard to fathom.

At the beginning of every semester in my strategic political communication course, I tell my students that "the answer to every question I will ask you this semester is 'well, it's complicated.'" I am sure as we delve through the data on 2020 campaigning in the months and years ahead, we will similarly learn that both of the explanations I ponder here are too simple – that reality was more nuanced and complicated.

But I also recall that my contribution to this volume four years ago was titled "The #LolNothingMatters Election." I reflected in that essay on just how it was possible that a campaign as technically shoddy as Donald Trump's could have won. I was baffled then, and I am baffled now.

If a pandemic of this magnitude leaves the mass electorate unfazed, then I have to wonder what (if anything) could move them.

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One pandemic, two Americas and a week-long election day

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The 2020 U.S. Presidential Election took place during a convergence of crises (a pandemic, an economic crisis, a systemic racism crisis). Pundits argued that COVID-19 will be one of the biggest issues affecting the elections. This brief analysis focuses on how the pandemic was framed by the two candidates in their rally discourses, the potential connections to the election results and what's next.

One pandemic, two realities

Trump and Biden painted two realities regarding the pandemic and what's at stake.

Trump consistently downplayed the virus, even after getting sick himself. His rally discourses from very early on, paint a rosy picture, albeit full of contradictions: "*But while I'm president, the United States we use every tool, and we've done it. By the way, our country is doing great. We have the pandemic should have never been allowed should have never been allowed to happen by China,*" (Oshkosh-Wisconsin-8/17). And while numbers kept spiking, Trump kept reassuring Americans: "*But you know what, without the vaccine, it's ending too. We're rounding the turn; it's ending without the vaccine. But the vaccine is going to make it go quicker. Let's get rid of it.*" (Macon-Georgia-10/16).

Trump constantly applauds his packed crowds: "*What a crowd. What a crowd. You see what's going on, on the road all the way up here. We have people all the way up.*" (Carson City-Nevada-10/18) and at different points he mocks Biden for being cautious, wearing a mask, holding virtual rallies.

Trump paints Biden as the one who will destroy everything: "*Joe Biden would terminate our recovery, delay the vaccine, prolong the pandemic, and annihilate Georgia's economy*" (Macon-Georgia-10/16). The election is "*a choice between a deadly lockdown and a safe vaccine that ends the pandemic with or without the vaccine.*" (Montoursville-Pennsylvania-10/31).

Biden's reality is a much bleaker one. In his rallies, he emphasizes COVID-19's toll: "*Today, unfortunately, America is going to… reach a tragic milestone, 200,000 deaths recorded as of today because of the coronavirus, 200,000 deaths all across this nation* (Manitowoc-Wisconsin-9/21).

He applauds respecting preventive measures: "*There's so many of you here, I wish I could go car to car and meet you all. I don't like the idea of all this distance, but it's necessary. I appreciate you being safe. What we don't want to do is become super spreaders, but thank you so much.*" (Bucks County-Pennsylvania-10/24).

Biden harshly criticized Trump's handling of the crisis; for downplaying the pandemic, politicizing and discouraging people from wearing a mask, for giving up. For Biden "the first step of beating this virus is beating Donald Trump." (Detroit-Michigan-10/31).

In his rallies Biden promises to end this pandemic, without shutting down: "*I am not going to shut down the country. But I am going to shut down the virus.*" (Broward County-Florida-10/29).

Finally, in Trump's discourses the pandemic is approached mostly towards the middle-end of the discourse, while in Biden's it is approached from the very beginning or first quarter of the speech. This focuses the attention on the problem and implicitly the vulnerability for Trump.

COVID-19 and elections results

COVID-19 cases surged before and on election day, especially in battleground states. In October, for 82% of registered voters supporting Biden, the outbreak would be "very important" to their vote, compared to only 24% Trump supporters. In a CNN exit poll, COVID-19 was ranked the third most important for their decision, behind the economy and racial inequality. The pandemic already affected the election process, resulting in a record number of mail-in ballots, and delaying the results.

On November 7, the AP called the race for Biden (290 vs. 214 electoral votes). Georgia and Arizona who switched from "red" to "blue" (voting Republican in prior five presidential elections, and both having Republican governors) are also among the states with high COVID-19 cases and deaths. But Biden did not win by a large margin. Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, who voted for Trump in 2016 (but blue in the four prior elections) voted for Biden and were also affected by the pandemic. However, it is also true that the states most affected by pandemic, remained loyal to either Biden and Democrats (California, New York) or Trump and Republicans (Texas, Louisiana). Florida also voted for Trump (while in 2008, 2016 voted for Obama).

While other factors beyond the pandemic were critical in this election, it seems that where there were many illnesses and deaths, Trump's speech focused on the denial of evidence lost to Biden's call to defend ourselves, to solidarity and collective care. It also seems that Trump's pandemic reality remained shared by many of his voters.

Elections are over, the nation is still very divided

Biden declared his victory as for "We The People," and emphasized this is a time to heal, to unite and to listen to science. However, Trump and his supporters are yet to officially concede and the Trump administration will still handle the national pandemic response for the next months. It remains to be seen who will dominate the Senate. Currently, Republicans seem to lead, but some things might still change (e.g. Georgia's run-off on January 3). Equally critical, Americans remain divided in their views of COVID-19 and mask wearing (e.g. Republicans and Whites are less likely to wear a mask) as COVID-19 numbers keep surging.

Political emotion and the global pandemic: factors at odds with a Trump presidency

In politics, the ability to emote appropriately and in response to changing social, political, and crisis conditions is a hallmark quality of responsive leadership. I have studied this phenomenon in relation to every U.S. president since Bill Clinton, and even several earlier presidents through a combination of empirical and qualitative methods including detailed coding of candidate behavior in debates, dial tests of debates, experiments that show leader responses to disaster news, eye tracking to document visual attention to inappropriate displays, and focus groups to capture viewer responses to memorable campaign moments.

Incumbent presidents are expected to show a high degree of emotional intelligence. In times of threat, an appropriate stance may be to project anger and resolve, as George W. Bush did in his masterful address ten days after 9/11 to a joint session of Congress. Yet sympathy for victims, and for less fortunate members of society, is equally important—as is the ability to reassure citizens in uncertain times, particularly during a prolonged conflict or ongoing crisis. This quality of leadership is regarded as central to an effective management style that job announcements for senior administrative posts in business and academia now list emotional intelligence as essential.

As I observed four years ago in the U.S Election Analysis 2016 report, Donald Trump does not know emotional expressiveness outside a narrow range of anger, defiance, and threat — a confrontational style of campaigning (and governance, as it turns out) that bonds supporters to his cause and holds them in line. The approach is limited and does not win many new adherents, but it generates considerable enthusiasm among followers. This strategy works for challengers, who are noted for the aggression they show in attempts to unseat the incumbent power holder, but it becomes a thin argument in the middle of a global pandemic and economic downturn where people are out of work and dying.

Under different conditions, perhaps with a vibrant economy and coronavirus vaccine, Trump might not have ended up a one-term president. But context matters. In 2008, Barack Obama again benefitted from his competent response to the economic crisis brought on by the collapse of the housing market; in 2012, Obama benefitted from the quick action he took, and empathy he showed, in response to Hurricane Sandy, which hit New York and New Jersey hard. Before COVID-19, Trump's presidency had been notably devoid of major crises. There were some dust-ups with North Korea and Iran, but most political messes, such as the government shutdown of 2018 and impeachment over attempts to get Ukraine to investigate Joe Biden, were of his own making.

The 2020 election brought the one enduring, externally driven crisis to confront the Trump presidency: the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus even afflicted Trump himself, First Lady Melania Trump, and several of his inner circle. Despite these developments, and an international outcry for more leadership on the issue, Trump double-downed on his characteristic misstatements and blame, first promising the virus would soon be eradicated, then touting false cures, blaming "Democrat governors" for lockdowns, encouraging armed protestors to "liberate Michigan" from democratic rule, mocking Joe Biden for wearing a mask, and finally declaring that he "beat this crazy, horrible China virus."

His advice to the country? "Don't let the virus dominate your life." Rather than expressing compassion, the president issued an order, telling followers it was time to move on. Surely this command reverberated as hollow advice for the thousands already reeling from the loss of loved ones or millions of once-infected individuals who, despite being COVID-free, are still struggling with the long-term consequences of a highly infectious and persistent disease.

In the rise to power, particularly in today's overcharged and cluttered media ecology, the ability to attract and hold attention appears to trump all other considerations. The loudest, most gregarious, and socially dominant attention seekers are able to command the spotlight as social influencers, building a personality driven following that translates into political popularity. Detailed understandings of public policy, adherence to the truth, and even time-honored political norms take a backseat to the performative histrionics that drive media attention. But even in an attention economy, circumstances beyond the performer's control can take center stage, demanding a response and not a performance. In the *holding* of power, as opposed to the *pursuit* of power, a carefully calibrated repertoire of expression and compassion (some of it agonic, some hedonic) is required to form alliances, maintain order, and reassure an anxious citizenry.

Although he maintained a loyal following despite blatant disregard for the truth, aided and abetted by alt.media cheerleading and legacy media amplification of falsehoods, Donald Trump was a highly flawed incumbent on many levels — emotional expression just one of them. American democracy can breathe a sigh of relief that his legal challenges to lawful voting will not survive judicial review and change the election outcome. But Trumpism will likely live on.

Moving forward, a more emotionally literate far-right candidate may emerge who again threatens the integrity of the system but this time may be able to build a broader coalition around deeply felt "emotional truths" that again bear little resemblance to reality. A society that values respect for the law and tradition, not to mention tolerance, diversity, and a concern for others, would anticipate this eventuality and build more safeguards into the system to guard against its demise.

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The pandemic did not produce the predominant headwinds that changed the course of the country

Dr Amanda Weinstein

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The choice between former Vice President Biden and President Trump seemed to be a choice between either addressing the ongoing coronavirus outbreak or the economy. Indeed, exit polls show that voters most concerned about the pandemic voted for Biden by a 68 point margin and voters most concerned about the economy voted for Trump by a 65 point margin.

With the pandemic looming large changing nearly every aspect of our lives and as cases rose to their highest levels since the pandemic began leading up to the election, many predicted large wins for Biden. The large margin of victory for Biden that many predicted did not happen. Biden lost Florida and flipped key states by slim margins. Exit polls suggest that the pandemic was the number one issue for only 17 percent of voters.

Among five issues, the economy was the most important issue for the largest share of voters at 35 percent. Yet, the two are not mutually exclusive. Data from Opportunity Insights show that consumer spending began its freefall as the U.S. announced its first COVID-19 case. Consumer confidence wanes as coronavirus spreads. Thus, economists suggest that we should not expect a full economic recovery until after pandemic has passed.

Biden focused more on effectively addressing the pandemic while President Trump focused on economic recovery by getting "husbands back to work". Yet, it is women who have experienced the most severe effects of this pandemic-induced recession with 4 times more women than men dropping out of the workforce recently. Female labor force participation rates have dropped 2 percent. Women dominate the high people-skill occupations that have been lost to a virus spread by people. Fewer high people-skill workers in the economy will lengthen the time to recovery and will stall wage growth for those who remain in the workforce. In today's economy, America will not be able to recover without the skills and abilities and experiences that women bring to the workforce. An August survey of economists by the National Association for Business Economics showed that a majority (62 percent) of economists believed that Biden would do a better job promoting economic growth, in stark contrast to the voters most concerned about the economy.

But economic growth is no longer broadly shared by all Americans. The gains from economic growth increasingly go to the richest Americans and aggregate wealth continues to decline for middle income and lower income households. Long-run economic trends that promote aggregate growth have not benefited many Americans especially in places acutely affected by outsourcing and automation. The largest swings toward the republicans in 2016 happened in the Midwest - in areas that have historically relied on manufacturing, many of them rural with no other industries waiting in the wings. The long-term economic realities of the inequality associated with technological change and globalization have yet to be addressed in any meaningful way. Yet, policies that fight against these economic headwinds are unlikely to be successful and have a significant opportunity cost of diverting funds away from policies that would instead help everyone to adapt to the economic headwinds.

Health experts suggest that the pandemic will be over sometime in late 2021, which means that, less than a quarter of the next presidential term will be marked by the pandemic. That still leaves at least three more years for the next president to address the other concerns of American citizens. The pandemic is a short-term problem compared to larger long-term issues that have plagued many Americans – both economic inequality and racial inequality.

Exit polls show that among five issues, racial inequality mattered most for 20 percent of voters (a higher share than the pandemic and second only to the economy). The voters most concerned about racial inequality voted for Biden by an 83-point margin. A significant portion of voters want a social recovery that addresses the long-run systemic issues facing minorities and an economic recovery that addresses inequalities in our economic system. And the two are not mutually exclusive.

Percent Change in All Consumer Spending*

In **Ohio**, as of **October 25 2020**, total spending by all consumers **decreased** by **2.6%** compared to January 2020.

**Week ending
Oct 25, 2020**

-2.6%
Ohio

-3.9%
USA

+10%

0%

-10%

-20%

-30%

Jan 15   Apr 1   Jun 1   Aug 1   Nov 6

Jan 20
First U.S. COVID-19 Case

Mar 23
OH Stay at Home
Order/Non-Ess. Bus. Close

May 29
OH Stay at Home Order
Ends

Mar 17
OH Public Schools Close

Apr 15
Stimulus Payments
Start

May 04
Select Bus. Reopen (OH)
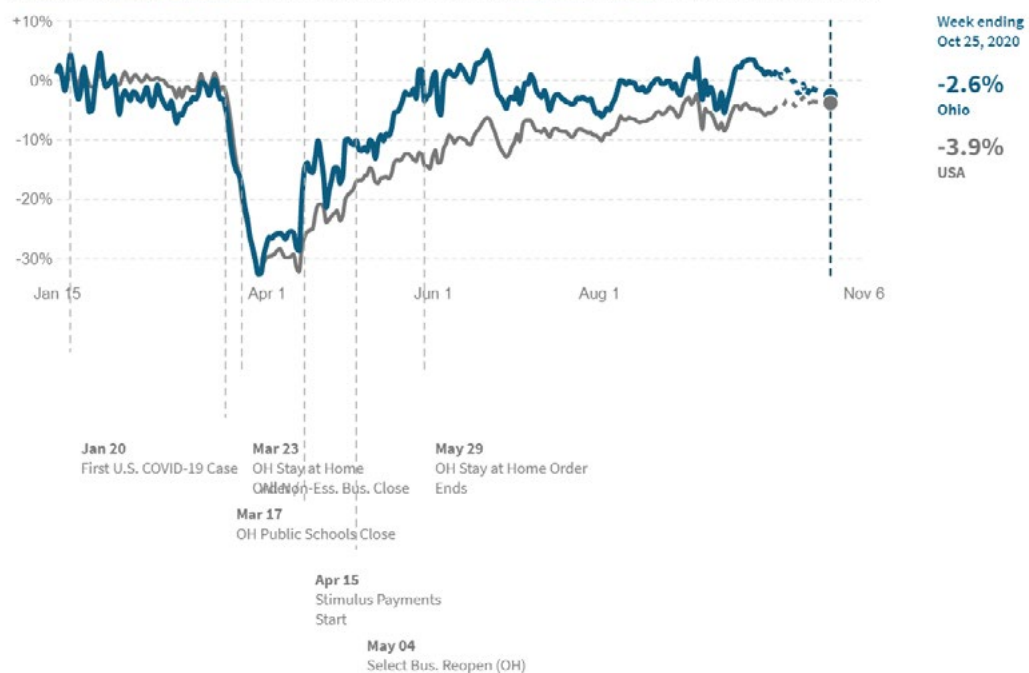
*Change in average consumer credit and debit card spending, indexed to January 4-31, 2020 and seasonally adjusted. The dashed segment of the line is provisional data, which may be subject to non-negligible revisions as newer data is posted. This series is based on data from Affinity Solutions.

last updated: **November 04, 2020**   *next update expected:* **November 11, 2020**

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Confessions of a vampire

Prof Kirk Combe

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You don't know me. But I know you. I've been at your neck for about four decades. Feeding. But don't bother looking in the mirror. You won't see me there. Sucking. Not because I'm not there. But because you've been convinced, that I'm not there. You see no teeth marks, no puncture wounds. Such details, such evidence of my existence are anathema to you. How is this possible? Simple. They don't match the worldview that has been formulated for you, by Conservatives and Liberals alike. Instead, you imagine me to be Nature, perhaps some manner of Fate or, more likely, as God's heaven-sent plan. I like that rationale best. It fosters your belief in Free Will even as you accept your ultimate impotence. It rouses your faith in a pure and fierce *individuality* even as it cripples your facility to examine tangible circumstances. What could better serve my never-slaking thirst?

To be perfectly honest, on no occasion do I find our little arrangement more charming than at election time. That's when you exercise your sacred Choice, assert your dearly held political views. On Election Day, that's when you're free to choose (to lose) between, well, me or me. Ah, I can see that you're puzzled. You haven't a clue as to who I am, nor about what I speak. Very well, then. I'll elaborate.

Call me, for the sake of whimsy, Count von Hayek. I hail from the tranquil shores of Lac Léman. Mont Pèlerin. Nothing ghastly or Transylvanian. I am no ghoul in the trivial sense, lurking in dark shadows. I am a button-down variety of fiend, my powers not preternatural but pecuniary. At present, they feature a fearsome three: *debt, derivatives, dividuation*. Of these, you understand, albeit imperfectly, only one. Debt. You are in it. No need to demur. You are, one way or another. Or, more feasibly, in multiple ways. There is no shame in it. You are indebted by design. Unless you belong to my fortunate 1%, debt is your lot—and my lifeblood. To be straightforward, you work to feed me. My financial entrepreneurs see to that, monetizing your debts as surely as owners starve laborers. Wage-slave or debt-slave are of a piece: to enrich me, I impoverish you. We play the game of *accumulation by dispossession*, you and I. And only I know the rules. And only I make the rules. And only I know such a game is afoot. And there is no other game in town. So take one guess at who is winning. Eight men—my happiest minions—hold as much wealth as the poorest half of the planet: 3.6 billion people. In the land of the free and the home of the brave, 40 million live in poverty, 18.5 million in extreme poverty, and 5.3 million in absolute poverty.

A more recent trick of mine is derivatives. Don't trouble your mind. You've no hope of understanding them. Not even the stockbrokers do, except as tools for swindle. These are bets made upon bets—and then often betted on again—packaged and repacked into confounding instruments of finance bundled to obfuscate. Frequently, your debts are the fodder. Remember that 2008 subprime mortgage crisis? Such a romp. And what "correctives" came about as a result of that "catastrophe"? Well, since 2008, the share of the global wealth held by my disciples has increased from 42.5% to 50.1%. Nowadays, a gratifying 70% of the world's working-age population owns just 2.7% of global wealth. Yes, as I always say, nothing like a good worldwide financial meltdown to convince people being sucked dry, four decades of blue-collar Republican voters say, to clamor to be sucked drier. I daresay, at this point, you are utterly perplexed. Rest assured, however, that you never profit from derivatives. These devices are a casino game for the super-wealthy. A means by which they wager for more super-wealth. Atop the global wealth pyramid, to be sure, is no place for the limited brainpower of the commoner.

Yet never question your utility. My latest and most telling innovation hinges entirely on you. Dividuation. What is that? Well, take your most cherished word, "individual," and remove from it the prefix: "in." What's left? *Dividual.* That which can be divided. Thanks to me, that's you. When browsing the web, sending an email, cruising social media, reading this, you are surveilled constantly, parsed endlessly, influenced perpetually. Why? So Big Data can sell your component penchants, pastimes, quirks, and obsessions to buyers, innocent and nefarious, who care little about undivided, whole, *in*dividual you. Confused? Incredulous? Good. You are neither merchant nor customer in this transaction, merely raw material. You've become my *ne plus ultra* of person dwindled into merchandise.

So, by all means, vote away! Whether making America great again ... again ... or building back better, until you get me off your throat, I will relish watching you rearrange the deck chairs on your Ship of State.

COVID-19 and the 2020 election

During public health crises, politicians often become crisis managers. Some politicians try to increase popularity by becoming the hero who enters the situation to help people but politicizing the issue in the process. While politicians do not create public health crises, they are responsible for performing an effective crisis response. Politicians use the "crisis performance" for political gain or to limit the political harm from the crisis. Support is gained when politicians are perceived as heroes for their crisis management performances. We can judge crisis manager performance along four criteria found in the crisis management research: (1) be quick with action, (2) be consistent with messages, (3) be honest about the crisis, and (4) show concern for the crisis victims. COVID-19 created a public health crisis and the need for political leaders to become crisis managers. In the United States, an election later in the year increased the pressure to perform as an effective crisis manager. Trump's COVID-19 crisis response was widely criticized in the news media for failing to take the advice of medical experts and Trump showing more concern about the economy than for the safety of the U.S. population. Expert analysis (how crisis experts evaluate the crisis management effort) suggests Trump failed on each of the four crisis management criteria. Trump was slow to respond to the crisis with a lack of testing and protective equipment. The response was inconsistent on key concerns including the wearing of face masks and drugs to be used to treat the virus. The response was viewed more as stonewalling than being honest and Trump showed little compassion for victims.

But did Trumps' questionable performance as a crisis manager seem to affect voters? Beginning in July, U.S. polling data related to COVID-19 consistently found that registered voters were far more disapproving than approving of Trump's handling of COVID-19. In the summer of 2020, on poll showed the disapproval to approval was 55% to 39%. By October of 2020, the polls indicated disapproval to approval was 61% to 35%. Voters were being influenced by the rising COVID-19 death tolls attributable to an ineffective crisis response. Registered voters favored Trump's Democratic rival Joe Biden by 17 points for the person they wanted handling the pandemic. In Pennsylvania, a key state in the upcoming Presidential election, 52% of registered voters trusted Biden to handle the pandemic compared to 32% for Trump (Voters). Two-third of registered voters polled by Powered felt Trump failed to take appropriate action while 62% distrusted what he says about the virus. The week before the election, 56% of likely in Pennsylvania voters are reported as saying it was more important to control the virus than to restart the economy compared to 38% favoring restarting the economy. The numbers did not change

significantly even after Trump contracted the virus. These numbers reflect a feeling that Trump had failed on the crisis manager evaluative criteria. However, we need to consider how Trump's crisis management messages politicized COVID-19.

Polling data can hide important details if we only examine the total numbers. It is instructive to look more closely at how the COVID-19 polling numbers vary between Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. This closer look can expose how an issue becomes politicized; viewed through partisan lenses. Democrats consistently rated Trump low for his COVID-19 response with 92% disapproving of how he has handled the situation and only 5% approving. Independents express less disapproval at 35% and 61% approval. Republicans reported only 23% disapproval and 74% approval of Trump's handling of the virus. The numbers reflect how in politics, the evaluation of the crisis manager is in the eye of the beholder—will follow partisan lines. Moreover, the polling data found while Democrats viewed COVID-19 as an important concern, Republicans did not see as an important issue (Poll). Though experts being cited in the news media deemed the crisis response a failure, Trump supporters were willing to believe Trump's claim that he was doing a great job. The closer examination of the polling data indicates the COVID-19 crisis management was not a problem among Trump supporters. Trump's reality has him doing a great job managing the crisis and his supporters largely accepted that reality. Furthermore, the crisis management effort was galvanizing the opposition and was a minor factor among independents (more approved than disapproved). Even though COVID-19 had killed more than 200,000 citizens and cases were rising quickly prior to election day, pre-election and exit polls indicate the virus had a minor effect on the election results. The virus simply reflected pre-existing party preferences.

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President Trump promised a COVID vaccine by Election Day: that politicized vaccination intentions

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In the weeks leading up to the presidential election, President Trump promised Americans on several occasions that a vaccine for the novel coronavirus would be ready for public use by Election Day. The Trump campaign saw accelerated vaccine development as an important campaign talking point – featured in battleground state campaign ads, and touted on several occasions at the first presidential debate. Vaccine experts – including the administration's CDC director Robert Redfield – cautioned that this timeline was unrealistic. Although Operation Warp Speed enabled the manufacture of vaccines prior to the conclusion of clinical trials, with the hope of *beginning* the distribution process within one day of approval, experts projected widespread availability months after Election Day.

Nevertheless, the President's decision to link vaccine development to the election fueled concerns the administration might pressure regulators to cut corners in the approval process. Some scientists worried that the administration might attempt to ease emergency use authorization (EUA) guidelines, which allow vaccines in development to be administered to vulnerable populations before approval for widespread use, in order to facilitate distribution in October. The administration exacerbated these concerns by placing substantial pressure on the FDA to permit doctors to treat sick people with the plasma of recovered coronavirus patients; a promising, yet presently unproven way to fight off the virus more quickly. Likewise, HHS spokesperson Michael Caputo, who formerly served on the President's 2016 election campaign, was met with scorn after he accused government scientists of prolonging the pandemic in order to advance their personal and political ambitions.

The administration's decision to tie vaccine development to the election politicized elites discussion of vaccines on the campaign trail. In an interview with CNN in early September, Vice Presidential candidate Kamala Harris stated that she "would not take [President Trump's] word" that a vaccine developed before election day would be safe and effective. Worryingly, elite partisan disagreements about vaccine-related issues are also reflected in Americans' intentions to receive a coronavirus vaccine, once it becomes widely available.

In demographically representative surveys of mass level politicization in vaccination intentions (see the red and blue lines Figure 1). For reference (in gray), I include an indicator of monthly media attention to vaccine politicization -- i.e., the total count of newspaper and television stories coverage of President Trump's Election Day vaccine promise.

I find that, at the onset of the pandemic in April 2020, over 70% of both Republicans *and* Democrats indicated that they would be willing to receive a vaccine. However, as the pandemic progressed, Republicans' intentions declined gradually, potentially a result of waning concern about the

severity of the pandemic – before reverting *back* to early-pandemic levels (75%) on the eve of Election Day. One could argue Republicans' fall resurgence could be due in part to an uptick in concern about the pandemic, amid a "Fall Wave" of new infections. Polling averages, however, suggest very little change in public pandemic concern from mid-August to mid-October.

Alternatively, and consistent with the possibility that vaccination intentions became highly politicized, this shift coincides with President Trump doubling down on his promise of a vaccine within "a few weeks" (i.e., in the first Presidential Debate), as well as Vice President Pence's assertion, in the Vice Presidential Debate, that Senator Harris' skepticism about the safety of a vaccine approved by the Trump administration might "undermine public vaccine confidence." The shift also follows a major spike in media attention to President Trump's Election Day vaccine promise (see: gray shaded line).

Democrats, on the other hand, remained enthusiastic in their vaccination intentions throughout the summer; with over 80% reporting that they planned to vaccinate by June. However, Democrats' intentions began to drop off in the last week of August; just days after President Trump referred to the FDA as "deep state" actors seeking to prevent Americans from receiving a coronavirus vaccine, and put pressure on the agency to authorize unproven therapeutics.

Democrats' enthusiasm for the vaccine dropped off sharply in the coming months, amid increasing elite polarization about vaccine-related issues and media attention to President Trump's Election Day promise. By October, just 67%. This means that the partisan subgroup once most likely to vaccinate experienced the steepest decline in vaccine intentions, from late summer into early Fall.

These results, while correlational, nevertheless caution that playing politics with vaccine development can have important and negative public health consequences.

While Democrats' substantial dropoff in vaccination intentions may have been offset, to some degree, by Republican enthusiasm, Americans' intentions to vaccinate remained concerningly low; decreasing from 74% in April to 67% in October. Because current epidemiological estimates suggest that as many as 70% of Americans must develop immunity to COVID-19 in order to put the virus' spread into decline, either by getting vaccinated, or by contracting and recovering from the virus, politicization may extend the amount of time it takes to achieve herd immunity against the disease. Ironically, then, it may be that the President's decision to guarantee a vaccine before Election Day, aimed at promising a speedy return to "life as usual", has actually *prolonged* the time it may take to recover from the pandemic.
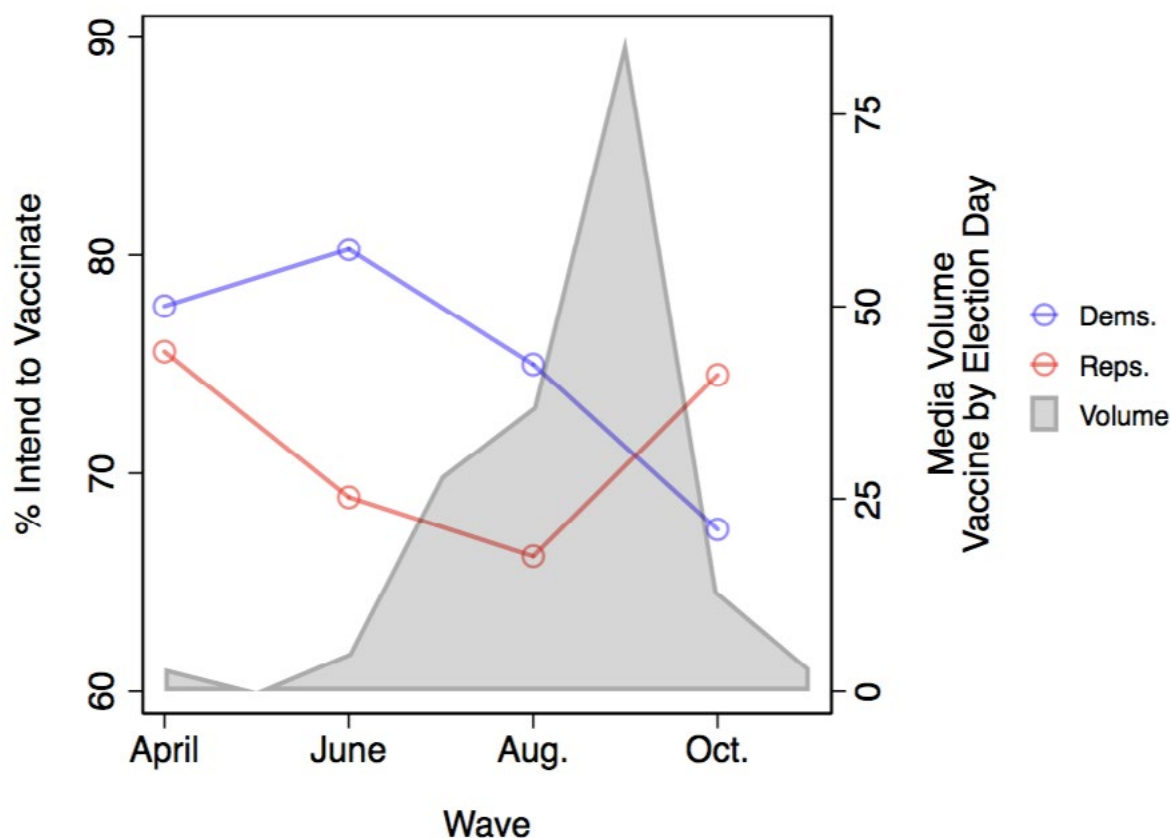
Figure 1. COVID-19 vaccination intentions by partisanship (April - October 2020)

Note. Combined N = 4,002.. Mean levels of vaccine refusal across survey waves. Respondents were asked to report whether they are "very likely," "somewhat likely," "not too likely," or "not likely at all" to "request to be vaccinated" against COVID-19 "when a vaccine for the novel coronavirus becomes widely available." Respondents were also asked a standard (branched) partisan identification question (with those "leaning" toward the Democratic or Republican parties coded as Independents). Responses were collected via Lucid Theorem's online opt-in internet service, which used quota sampling to target demographic representativeness on respondents' age, race, gender, educational attainment, income, partisan identification, and residential region. I apply post-stratification weights to account for any remaining differences between the sample and U.S. population on the basis of age, income, educational attainment, gender, and race. Media volume data reflect all U.S. newspaper articles and television closed caption data where the terms "Trump," "vaccine," and ("before Election Day" or "by Election Day") co-occur in the same piece. Media data were obtained via ESCO-host.

The enduring impact of the Black Lives Matter movement on the 2020 elections

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The outcome of the 2020 United States presidential election may have been determined nearly six-months earlier with the confluence of nationally politicized medical and racial events.

In May 2020, the world was in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The United States had surpassed every other country in confirmed coronavirus cases and was on lockdown as locally mandated "stay at home" orders were issued. Then George Floyd, a 46-year-old unarmed black man, died at the hands, or knee, of now-fired Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin. For eight minutes and 46 seconds, the world turned its attention to social media channels and television broadcasts to watch recorded video of Floyd's cries of "I can't breathe" growing faint, handcuffed and pinned under Chauvin's knee.

For Blacks, Floyd's death was just another loss to systemic racism. But for the general public, the video taken by 17-year-old Darnella Frazier was proof positive of the intersection of police brutality, racial inequality, and social justice. The recording of Floyd's death was a lens that revealed the harsh realities of Black life in America. For some, Floyd's death and the media attention it garnered brought forth comparisons to the tragedy of *Bloody Sunday*, March 7, 1965. Both horrific events in Black history that influenced public opinion about the need for social and political reform. The events of *Bloody Sunday* gave people an in-your-face picture of the realities of segregation and police brutality in America. In parallel, George Floyd's death also gave voice and credibility to many non-Black, oppressed people that Black lives, or at least in this case one Black life in the form of George Floyd, did matter.

Social Advocacy and Political Action

In the midst of the pandemic, hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets to assure their voices were heard. Chants of "Black Lives Matter" filled the air in over 150 cities. According to a Pew Research study, the BLM movement saw a 67% approval rating from May through June. It was through this movement that political and social justice allies like the NAACP, Divine Nine and National Pan-Hellenic Council (historically black fraternities and sororities), and similar organizations developed voter registration initiatives (like The Electoral Justice Project) to encourage voter turnout in hopes of changing the de facto support of police brutality against Black people.

Melinda Messineo, a Ball State University professor and sociologist, observed how the pandemic gave people the ability "to pause and hear the argument (for police reforms, racial and social justice, and political accountability) in a way that they hadn't heard of before." She added, "By protesting under the pandemic conditions, people were going out there, risking their own lives in a way that they didn't have to before." In spite of the groundswell of support from a majority of the American public, many on the political right were not as amenable to change. The pushback further set the political stage for clarion calls for reform.

Election Night (week)

The first votes in the U.S. election were cast shortly after midnight in Dixville Notch, a small township in New Hampshire. Former Vice President Joe Biden, a Democrat, took all five votes for president. The clean sweep gave news broadcasters on three cable news channels pause, leading a few of them to jokingly ask if this vote was anecdotal evidence of a "blue wave" about to sweep across America. The answer was quickly realized when 16 of the 21 votes cast by residents from Millsfield, New Hampshire, were for President Trump, Biden received five votes. The final total 16 votes for Trump and 10 for Biden. The early vote in two small New Hampshire towns did not evidence a fast approaching "blue wave," but it was foreshadowed the many ebbs and flows that marked the election. New Hampshire would offer a glimpse of our divided nation. A nation wrestling with its social, racial, and political identity, and with each state election result, a collective anxiety would rise depending on one's political affiliation.

For four days, the nation held its collective breath, hoping the other side would not win. Phrases like, "We have to be patient," "Transparency is going to be key," "No rush in counting the votes," "Take time to count the votes in PA," and "The votes are coming in, but still need to be counted" were commonplace in media discourse. Around 11:25 a.m. EST. on Saturday, November 7th, media organizations called Pennsylvania for Biden. He was awarded its 20 electoral votes raising his total over the 270 electoral college votes required to win the race.

Conclusion

In the end, nearly 160 million votes were casts for the presidential candidates. For President-elect Joe Biden and the first Black female, Vice President-elect Kamala Harris their winning collation of Black and brown people and their big tent inclusive policies were a driving force in turning out over 48,032,772 absentee voters in a socially distant world. During Biden's first speech as president-elect, he made several important acknowledgments affirming, "the African American community stood up again for me. They always have my back, and I'll have yours." Additionally, he declared his commitment to, "achieve racial justice and root out systemic racism in this country." These tenants align with the early BLM movement and should serve as paths for the healing of our America.

Jermaine Hunter

Where do we go from here? The 2020 U.S. presidential election, immigration, and crisis

Prof Jamie Winders

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Four years ago, I sat down to collect my thoughts, days after Donald Trump was elected U.S. president. Like many, I was shocked at the election results and, given my interest in international migration, concerned about how Trump would approach immigration. I ended my essay on immigration and the 2016 presidential election by asking, "Where do we go from here?," and lamenting the dark days ahead for those interested in humane immigration policies. Now that the 2020 U.S. presidential election is behind us (sort of), I find myself again asking, Where do we go from here?

After the turmoil of the 2020 election, it is difficult to recall, let alone thoughtfully reflect on, how each candidate approached immigration in their campaigns. The COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing protests against police brutality and racial injustice, and fears of post-election mayhem across the United States all but crowded out immigration as a 2020 campaign issue. The main issue for voters depended on where they sat on the political spectrum, and the most pressing topics of this election revolved around whether all votes would be counted and whether the losing side would respond with violence.

What, though, did each candidate actually say about immigration? Trump's campaign website did not reference details about his platform on its landing page, but the immigration portion of his 'Promises Kept' presented a laundry list of accomplishments that curbed immigration and 'protected our borders,' reiterating the argument that immigrants were sources of crime and insecurity. The Biden campaign addressed immigration under 'Joe's vision,' centering immigrant families (separated at the border by Trump or torn apart by ICE raids) and positioning the United States as a nation of immigrants. With both a reiteration of the Biden-Obama approach to immigration and a detailed plan for Biden's first 100 days as president, his campaign focused on the consequences of immigration policies for immigrants, marking a sharp distinction from the Trump campaign's focus on how immigration impacted (and hurt) 'Americans.'

In reality, I suspect, few voters visited either candidate's website to learn about their positions on immigration. After four years of Trump's unrelenting effort to transform the U.S. approach to immigration, to gut the refugee resettlement program, and to reconfigure immigration's place in U.S. national identity, it is hard to imagine voters who were unsure about how each candidate approached immigration. In 2020, immigration was simply not a campaign issue.

The absence of attention to immigration in the 2020 campaign is somewhat ironic, given how much media attention the topic demanded during Trump's presidency. What has received less media attention, however, are the profound shifts in migration trends that migration scholars like Douglas Massey have noted. The early decades of the twenty-first century have seen fundamental changes in the nature of and rhetoric about immigration to the United States, especially from Latin America: a shift from young Mexican men seeking work to Central American families seeking refuge and from optimistic globalism to defensive populism as the dominant framework for approaching immigration as an issue. While U.S. public opinions toward immigrants have been largely unchanged in recent years, reconfigurations in who comprises that immigrant population and how that population is politically framed have been profound.

As I drafted this essay, the news that Biden had won the 2020 U.S. presidential race scrolled across my phone. Those invested in immigrant rights and humanitarian commitments will meet this news with sighs of relief and renewed hope for the future. Biden, though, has his work cut out for him if he plans to undo Trump's dismantling of the U.S. immigration system, as he has promised. Not only will Biden need to rebuild the infrastructure supporting refugee resettlement and take swift action to address the humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border, but he will encounter a set of immigration policies out of step with current migration flows to the United States and a Congress unwilling to work across party lines. The last round of comprehensive immigration reform in the United States was in 1986. Much has changed about immigration, and about Congress's interest in bipartisan legislation, since then. While Biden can reverse some of Trump's damage with his own executive orders, managing immigration via executive order is not sustainable. If Biden really wants to address the issue of immigration, he will need to create bipartisan support for comprehensive immigration reform – a task that will require a commitment to building bridges and working across political divides that Washington, DC, has not seen in many years. While I want to be optimistic about what Biden can accomplish vis-à-vis immigration, Trump's policies and rhetoric have caused long-term damage to not only U.S. immigration policies but also national dialogues around immigration, belonging, and who we are as a nation. A progressive path forward concerning immigration will be incredibly hard work, but at least it no longer seems impossible.

A nation divided on abortion?

Abortion will continue to be a key issue in U.S. politics, with the nation divided on what role the government should have in reproductive rights. In a Pew Center poll from August 2020, 46% of President Donald Trump's supporters and 35% of challenger Joe Biden's supporters described abortion as a very important factor in their voting.

In terms of the presidential race, for some voters, the election has been a referendum on abortion. In his last term, President Donald Trump instituted various changes that have hindered reproductive rights. He reintroduced the "global gag rule," meaning U.S. government funds will not go to foreign groups that provide or inform about abortions, and similarly within the U.S., federal family planning dollars cannot go to organizations that provide or inform about abortions. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently signed the "Geneva Consensus Declaration," which asserts that there is no international right to an abortion. Joe Biden has pledged to rescind the "global gag rule," but has wavered on other policy matters like the Hyde Amendment which means that taxpayer money cannot be used to fund abortions except where there is rape, incest, or danger to the mother, a policy that impacts low-income women in particular.

With the passing of eminent Supreme Court Judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg in the month before the election, the stage was set for abortion to be at the forefront of the pre-electoral period. Republican politicians were determined to replace Ginsburg before the election, even though nine months before the 2016 election, they obstructed President Barack Obama's Supreme Court candidate, Merrick Garland. The president's nominee, Amy Coney Barrett, joined the Supreme Court just before the election took place. In his 2016 campaign, President Donald Trump promised to install judges who would overturn the landmark Supreme Court case that legalized abortion nationally, *Roe Vs Wade*, and in the confirmation hearings for Amy Coney Barrett, there was much speculation about how she might rule if *Roe vs Wade* was challenged in court. Barrett's record on rulings in the federal court related to abortion is mixed, and it remains unclear how she would rule in a case to overturn *Roe Vs Wade*.

This pre-election maneuver means that the political outlook for *Roe vs Wade* is far more precarious than it has ever been, and this has been bolstered in some states where amendments for the 2020 election are undermining reproductive rights. In Louisiana, an amendment was passed which creates language in the state constitution stating that abortion is not a right. The amendment passed by 62% of the vote, and it lays groundwork so that if *Roe vs Wade* is ever overturned, abortion will definitely be illegal in the state of Louisiana. Twenty-two states in the U.S., including Louisiana,

have already banned abortion after 20-24 weeks of pregnancy except in cases of life or health endangerment. These amendments create confusion about whether abortion is available or not. Other states have voted down amendments that sought to restrict reproductive rights. In Colorado, 60% of voters rejected a law that would have made abortion illegal after 22 weeks of pregnancy (except in life endangerment) and also would have criminalized doctors for performing them. These differing results suggest the U.S. is a nation divided in beliefs about abortion.

America's views about abortion, however, have remained steady over the last 50 years. 50% of Americans believe that abortion should be legal in certain circumstances, 29% believe it should be legal under any circumstances, and 20% believe it should be illegal. Only 0.5% of Americans believe that abortion is one of the most significant problems in the country. The majority believe that abortion should be legal under most circumstances, which begs the question, why has the anti-abortion movement gained such ground?

A consistent campaign by anti-abortion movements has sought to place sympathetic politicians in office. One take-away from this election is that there has been a significant surge in Republican women in office, many of them anti-abortion in their views. Abortion, however, has also become a rallying cry for pro-choice campaigners; for example, the unexpected numbers of Democratic voters in Georgia might be in part because of the efforts of Planned Parenthood, which helped to execute a get-out-the-vote campaign for Democratic candidates up and down the ballot.

Overall, the 2020 election has yielded mixed results for anti-abortion movements. If *Roe vs Wade* is taken to the Supreme Court, it is unclear what the result will be, and there are more anti-abortion politicians in office. It is clear however from statistical analysis of views on abortion and the result in Colorado that a ban on abortion is not what most Americans want, and if the race for the presidency was a referendum on abortion, the result is not what anti-abortion movements would have hoped for.

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Ending the policy of erasure: transgender issues in 2020

Prof Anne Osborne

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The 2020 election was like no other, with an incumbent president like no other. It has revealed the United States to be a deeply divided country, where Democrats and Republicans profess fear and even hatred of each other, a country struggling to recognize one another's basic humanity. Erasure, fear and violence are things that transgender people have long known to be deeply rooted in America.

According to the Human Rights Campaign, a not-for-profit LGBTQ+ advocacy group, over the last five years at least 127 transgender people have been murdered in the United States. The highest number of murders has been recorded in 2020 — 34 at the time of this writing — and the vast majority of those killed are Black and Latinx trans women. According to a survey conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality, 47% of Black transgender people and 30% of Latinx transgender people "reported being denied equal treatment, verbally harassed, and/or physically attacked in the previous year because of being transgender." The deputy executive director for the National Center for Transgender Equality, Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen, is quoted on the organization's website saying, "Transgender people – and particularly Black and Latina transgender women – are marginalized, stigmatized and criminalized in our country. They face violence every day, and they fear turning to the police for help." These attacks on people simply because they do not conform to the gender binary as imposed on them at birth have been institutionalized at the highest level of American government, making this election a referendum on, among many other things, whether we as a country recognize the very existence of transgender and gender non-binary people.

In the last four years, the Trump administration has continuously undone progress in transgender rights enacted by the Obama administration. Beginning on inauguration day, the administration eliminated any mention of LGBTQ+ people from the White House, Department of Labor, and Department of State websites. This symbolic erasure signaled the administration's intent to repeal advances in transgender rights across education, housing, employment, and healthcare.

In February 2017, the Departments of Education and Justice reversed Obama administration guidance that extended Title IX protections to transgender students. The Department of Education, in May 2020, issued a letter going so far as to say that including transgender female athletes in high school sports violates Title IX. President Trump began his assault on transgender people serving in the military with a tweet on July 26, 2017, "the United States Government will not accept or allow Transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the U.S. Military." In April 2019, the military implemented its ban on transgender people serving in the armed forces. Another attack occurred in July 2020 when the Department of Housing and Urban Development reversed anti-discrimination laws protecting homeless transgender people seeking shelter and other federally funded housing services. In August 2020, the Department of Health and Human Services instituted a rule that according to Roger Severino, the director of the Office for Civil Rights at the Department of Health and Human Services, as quoted in *The New York Times,* "was 'equivalent to housekeeping,' and that the federal government was 'updating our books to reflect the legal reality' that sex discrimination language does not explicitly refer to the legal status of transgender people." In effect this ruling states that transgender people, as a defined category, do not exist and therefore are no longer protected from discrimination by doctors, hospitals, or insurance companies.

Throughout his campaign, President-Elect Joe Biden promised to fight for LGBTQ+ rights. The Biden campaign website specifically calls out the concerns of transgender people.

Donald Trump and Mike Pence have given hate against LGBTQ+ individuals safe harbor and rolled back critical protections for the LGBTQ+ community. By blocking the ability of transgender individuals to openly serve their country, denying LGBTQ+ people access to critical health care, proposing policies allowing federally funded homeless shelters to turn away transgender people and federally funded adoption agencies to reject same-sex couples, and failing to address the epidemic of violence against transgender people—particularly transgender women of color—the Trump-Pence Administration has led a systematic effort to undo the progress President Obama and Vice President Biden made.

The simple willingness to name transgender people is a marked difference between the outgoing administration and the incoming Biden administration. Language has power. As bell hooks wrote, "Sensitivity to language is responsibility to language, and respect for its power to call forth whatever is summoned by its use."

The election of the Joe Biden is a big win for transgender rights. For many, it undoubtedly feels like steadying the ship after a long, deadly storm. While it is a win worth celebrating, it cannot undo the trauma caused by four years of unrelenting attacks, efforts by the Trump administration to symbolically and legally eliminate transgender people.

U.S. presidential politics and planetary crisis in 2020

First, context. 2020 will set temperature records (again), as scientists give 2030 as the deadline to cut greenhouse emissions by ~50% to avoid 'dangerous' global warming. Wildfires ravaged Australia, Amazonia, and Western North America. Hurricane season exhausted the Roman alphabet for names. And there is a global pandemic. COVID-19's impacts on poor, Black, and other marginalized communities demonstrate the ecological crisis is not just 'environmental' but 'social.' The Trump effect is not to create something new, but to expose, and exacerbate, existing conditions.

It is remarkable the greatest emissions reductions in three decades of international climate policy come as the global system experiences its greatest crisis in decades. Also remarkable is how the pandemic created breathing room for the Paris climate regime, at its most critical point since inception. 2019 saw negotiators punting again on commitments to reduce emissions (climate mitigation) and ensure compensation (climate finance) for climate adaptation and development. Ironically COVID-19 has helped keep negotiations on life support, with the annual conference postponed to 2021.

Recall 2009, after Obama's election. Optimism carried to climate negotiations in Copenhagen, where many hoped for more progressive U.S. leadership in the renegotiations of the Kyoto accords, which faltered due to U.S. ambivalence and antipathy under Clinton and Bush. Instead, Obama submarined negotiations by subverting protocols, arranging backdoor deals to avoid binding commitments for wealthy polluters, thereby alienating and antagonizing developing countries, who scuttled the talks.

There is thus more than a symbolic connection between this election, delivering Joe Biden, defender of Obama's legacy, and the formal withdrawal of the U.S. from the Paris Agreement on November 4, four years after Trump's victory and ratification of the non-binding Paris Agreement, modeled after Obama's initial Copenhagen design. One major difference between 2020 and 2008? There can be no such unrestrained optimism this time.

We must resist illusions Biden will willingly advocate climate issues, as made clear during the primaries. His path to nomination was rightward of all serious contenders, particularly on climate and energy. Biden consistently rejected a Green New Deal (GND), offering tepid support for his own watered-down policy. And despite unscripted remarks against oil (quickly backtracked), Biden has long aligned interests with fossil capital, deeply embedded in his home state of Pennsylvania which delivered the election.

All this was clear before. Now, two more points are salient. First, Democrats are (still) failing to articulate a cohesive and effective message around the GND. Beyond fissures between neoliberal, 'third way' establishment Democrats and their social democratic challengers, lies a core contradiction of modern progressivism: that carbon energy has fueled the greatest expansion and accumulation of capital the world has ever seen, thereby producing the greatest crisis the planet has ever known.

Another issue lies in exit polling on the pandemic. With 230,000+ deaths and 100,000+ new infections/day, it is alarming that 31% of respondents said the U.S. response has been "somewhat" and 17% "very well." How should we expect this 48% of the electorate to respond to a climate crisis that requires a complete overhaul of society?

Though much rides on the remaining Senate races, at best is a slim Democratic majority and a Democratic house majority slimmer than 2018. Biden's main priority must be undoing the past four years of damage. While environmentalists advocate a swath of feasible reforms, very little can be expected from Congress. Even if (and when) bipartisan climate/energy/economy policy comes, expecting "Green" legislation in four years would undermine the original's ambitions, hence calls for a GND "decade." The judiciary also dashes hopes of change through the courts. While youth climate cases may inspire new discourses and actions regarding climate harms, U.S. environmentalists cannot expect textualists to recognize these claims.

Within institutional politics, ecological justice advocates should stake as much possible on matters resonating with Americans now: economic inequality, racial injustice, universal healthcare and education. Strong priorities must be given to human rights, civil liberties and responsibilities, and dismantling the carceral state, especially as struggles for ecological justice shift to the streets and sites of extraction. For sources of hope and visions for the future, we should look to grassroots organizing of frontline communities and working-class people, especially of color, who delivered an end to the Trump regime, if not his legacy.

Whatever prospects for GND, a decade is too long to merely 'reform' the capitalist system. Even if we cut emissions by half by 2030, the struggle for a 'just' climate future will be difficult. Vision lies with movements demanding social and environmental justice, via nonviolent direct actions, and just transition to a sustainable alternative (e.g. climate strikes, anti-fossil campaigns, food sovereignty). One recent source of hope comes from Chile, where protests demanding socio-economic rights and an end to neoliberalism paralyzed the country, causing the government to cancel the COP25 climate negotiations (later moved to Madrid). Just last month, Chileans voted 4-1 to rewrite their constitution.

With much still to be determined, Chile may suggest how institutional change can come from below. But the scope of climate justice must go beyond what we should expect a Biden Administration, GND or no, to achieve within four years.

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Joe Biden and America's role in the world

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Although it did not get a lot of attention in the 2020 presidential campaign, the future role America will take in the world is a question of fundamental importance for its U.S. global leadership. We already have an idea of how President Trump articulates the U.S. role abroad through his "America First" agenda. What might we expect from a Joe Biden administration? How has he talked about what America's role in the world should be, and what might we expect from a Biden administration concerning this issue in word and deed?

Vice President Biden's campaign rhetoric suggests he would revitalize America's commitments abroad and return to a leadership role maintained by Republicans and Democrats in the post-World War II era. I have long argued that American exceptionalism underwrites the discourse and debates concerning America's role in the world. All presidents and presidential candidates espouse the language of American exceptionalism. Where they have differed is how the *enact* that discourse. In American history that enactment comes through in two different narratives: the exemplar narrative and the intervention narrative. The exemplar narrative was fundamental to U.S. foreign policy rhetoric in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Exemplarists maintain America best demonstrates it leadership through the power of its example. America models institutions, behaviors, and practices domestically to influence the affairs of the world. However, exemplarists warn about intervening in the affairs of the world, particularly in Europe. If the U.S. involves itself in the affairs of other nation-states the problems of those countries could come home and harm U.S. politics. Therefore, it is best to stay out of global affairs unless it is our direct interest to do so. Interventionists assert the U.S. just cannot rely on its example to influence the affairs of the world. The U.S. must demonstrate its leadership through increasing free trade, involvement in international organizations, and actively promote its ideals and values abroad. Since the end of the World War II, Republicans and Democratic presidents have fused the exemplar and interventionist narratives together to make their case the U.S. must maintain and extend its leadership role. According to these presidents, engagement and intervention abroad protects us at home, which allows the power of America's example to flourish. At the same time, economic prosperity and improving domestic institutions gives American presidents credibility to promote similar values abroad.

Donald Trump's presidency marks a break from that fusion rhetoric. Trump's "America First" rhetoric privileges the exemplar narrative and emphasizes non-interventionism in today's global environment. A Joe Biden presidency, in my estimation, will reverse this trend and return to rhetorically fusing the exemplar and intervention narratives to justify global leadership abroad. There are a couple of places one can find this in Biden's campaign discourse concerning America's role in the world. First, Biden has consistently maintained that U.S. global leadership begins with our domestic example. However, the Trump administration's rhetoric and policy have increased racial tensions, exacerbated wealth inequality, failed to control the COVID-19 pandemic has gravely harmed the power of America's example. To restore American leadership abroad, Biden argues—consistent with his post-World War II Democratic predecessors—the United States must re-engage at home, rebuild its domestic institutions, reduce racial tension and wealth inequality, and get control the pandemic. Improving that example, striving for a "more perfect union" at home, Biden asserts gives America more power to lead the world in fighting global problems.

A second prime example can be found in how the Biden campaign talks about relationships with other nations and international organizations. For example, Biden's running mate Kamala Harris asserted in the vice-presidential debate that foreign policy is built upon relationships. For U.S. leadership to continue, Harris argued, the U.S. must maintain and keep its word to its friends, while keeping America's adversaries in check. Harris accused the Trump administration of betraying its friends and embracing adversaries. Biden has gone further by speaking about how he would restore friendly relations with NATO allies, rejoin the World Health Organization, the Paris Climate Accords, and the Iran nuclear deal, stop the trade war with China, and confront America's adversaries in Russia and North Korea. Biden's discourse suggests he would restore America's leadership by maintaining and extending the post-World War II liberal international order that Republican and Democratic presidents rhetorically supported for 75 years.

Ultimately, if Joe Biden becomes president, America's role in the world will be fundamentally altered. Donald Trump's America First exemplarist rhetoric will be replaced by a foreign policy rhetoric that focuses on improving the power of America's example as a means to assert its leadership abroad, while at the same time re-engaging, restoring, and resetting its relationships with nation-states and international organizations across the world.

President Biden's foreign policy: engagement, multilateralism, and cautious globalization

Election night on November 3, 2020, and the days that followed proved to be hours of high drama. Throughout Joe Biden adopted a patient, mature and statesmanlike posture emphasizing that it was his objective to unite the nation and bring the country together, once he had been inaugurated.

This is also the approach we can expect President Biden to adopt in the conduct of American's foreign relations. Just as President Trump did his utmost to divide the American people and sow fear and mutual distrust, Trump made an almost deliberate effort to fall out with America's closest allies in both Europe and Asia and antagonize further countries such as China where relations had been on a downward course for several years already. We can expect the Biden administration to steer a cooperative, multilateral and much more stable and predictable course. Biden will attempt to engage with both allies and foes and will not to be tempted to pursue an isolationist or protectionist policy.

Biden is aware of both the advantages of globalization but also its economic pitfalls and risks. The new president can be expected to attempt re-juvenating America's global leadership position by, for instance, rejoining the Paris Climate Treaty and the World Health Organization and, under certain conditions, the nuclear deal with Iran. Biden is aware of the importance of upholding the rules-based global order and finding a new consensus on crucial global governance issues. Most likely he will attempt to seriously reform the World Trade Organization and perhaps even consider re-joining the Transpacific Partnership (TPP), an economic organization with mostly Asian memberstates, which Trump had withdrawn from during his first few days in office.

For reasons of space, in the following I will focus on America's most crucial relationships: the ones with Europe and China.

Transatlantic Relations

During the Trump administration, European-American relations deteriorated to an almost unprecedented extent. Unlike Trump, however, Biden is aware of the weight European (and Asian) allies bring to the table and how this strengthens America's standing and influence in global affairs a great deal. While the Biden administration will also urge Europeans to spend more on defense, it will not question the importance of NATO. Biden will not try to divide the Europeans among themselves in order to weaken the European Union (and by implication the process of creating a more politically united European continent). Trump mistakenly believed that this would provide him with an advantage in U.S.-EU trade negotiations.

There is a good chance that Biden may attempt to revive the negotiations for a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) which had been started by the Obama administration but had been quickly abandoned by Trump. Biden's balanced and well-grounded mature personality will also ensure that a lack of chemistry and political difficulties with individual European leaders will not lead to the personalization of the entire transatlantic relationship and result in public bickering and griping as was frequently the case under Trump.

The Biden administration will not pay particular attention to the so-called "special relationship" with the UK. Perhaps influenced by his Irish background, Biden was not impressed by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's willingness to sacrifice the preservation of an open border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in order to obtain a more advantageous Brexit deal with the EU.

China

While the country was deeply divided during the Trump administration, there existed a rare consensus regarding the necessity of a tough policy toward China. It is unlikely that this will change quickly under the new administration. In view of the many doubts about Biden's toughness during the election campaign, he can hardly afford to come across as being 'soft' on China. Still, similar to embarking on a new re-set policy with the EU (as well as possibly toward Russia and some other difficult countries), a new, more constructive approach toward China can also be expected.

Biden's China policy will be more nuanced, less focused on personal relations with Xi Jinping (or for that matter other strongmen in world politics) and more focused on re-establishing bilateral and multilateral communication and consultation channels with Beijing. It will be a significantly less volatile and more predictable approach. Biden, however, will put a much greater emphasis than Trump on human rights and will expect China to be much less assertive in the South China Sea, toward Taiwan and within the context of the 'Belt and Road'-initiative.

Biden will also look for more opportunities to cooperate with China on issues like climate change, relations toward Iran's nuclear policy, and perhaps a common approach to African development issues. He will not hesitate to explore other areas of common interest either, such as developing a global cooperative framework for dealing with the Covid-19 crisis. Biden will also be interested in re-establishing a bilateral political and economic/trade dialogue with Beijing (while also continuing the new U.S.-EU Dialogue on China). While not being as keen on re-locating important supply chains back to the U.S. as Trump, Biden will not hesitate to pursue a similar strategy if he feels that China continues to play unfair. America's trade deficit in goods with China, intellectual property theft matters, and reciprocal market access issues will also be areas of great concern for him. It is unlikely, however, that Biden wishes to unleash a "new Cold War" with China.

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Presidential primary outcomes as evidence of levels of party unity

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After the early primary contests, Joe Biden's candidacy looked like it was in trouble. However, by April 8 Bernie Sanders conceded marking the earliest end of an open primary since 2004. Despite the large number of entrants, the Democratic Party was relatively unified. To show this is the case, I compare the 2020 Democratic primary to both parties' primaries in 2016. The relatively higher unity displayed by the Democrats gives an indication of where the parties may be headed in the years to come.

Let us begin by considering 2016 for both parties. Each contest extended into the summer. However, the contests were quite different as Hillary Clinton faced a single opponent while the field was much more divided among Republicans. For much of the race, there was not one clear alternative to Donald Trump.

Like the 2016 Republican Primary, the 2020 Democratic Primary consisted of a record number of entrants, thus making for an interesting comparison. Here too we observe relatively more unity within the Democratic Party: Biden won support of 51.8% of primary voters, while Trump won 44.9%— the lowest of any nominee since Michael Dukakis in 1988. Moreover, the votes were spread more evenly across several candidates in the Republican primary. We can compare the three contests in Figure 1, which displays the vote share for each candidate who received at least 1%.

Another way to examine the unity of the two parties involves utilizing a measure common in other fields to gauge diversity such as E. H. Simpson's Measurement of Species Diversity." published in Nature in 1949. For our purposes, I have recoded it so that higher values mean more "unity"—it would be 1.0 if all voters voted for the same candidate (the minimum value is 0.0 if votes were evenly divided across many candidates). In 2020 Democrats received a score of 0.5, compared to 0.45 for Republicans in 2016. To put recent contests in perspective, Figure 2 traces this measure back to 1976 for both parties. The open circles represent years with competitive primaries, the black circles represent years when a sitting president was eligible for re-election—for example, President Obama in 2012 and President Trump in 2020. The left-hand panel displays the Democratic Party and the right-hand panel the Republican Party. In each panel, the line represents the trend for open primaries.

Two conclusions emerge from the figure. First, the primary electorate in both recent Democratic contests displayed more unity than the 2016 Republicans. Second, at least by this measure, the two parties have been moving in the opposite direction since 1976: The Democrats have become more unified and the Republicans less so. Another way to look at the data is to note that even though there was an unprecedented number of entrants competing for the Democratic nomination in 2020, the party was only slightly less unified than in 2016 and was slightly more so compared to 2008. There is little evidence that the Democratic primary electorate is hopelessly divided.

The data presented here is consistent with other evidence that indicates the Republicans are more internally divided than Democrats—both among elected officials and the public. A factional candidate like Trump was able to narrowly win the nomination without majority support in the party, while in a similarly large field in 2020 the Democrats coalesced rather quickly around a consensus candidate. This lack of internal cohesion among Republicans may also help explain the lack of governing success that Republicans have had this century—for example, beyond tax cuts and judges, the Republicans have little to show from their two years with unified control of government and it would be difficult to classify George W. Bush's presidency as a success.

Whether these trends continue moving forward is, of course, an open question. And while time may prove me wrong, my hunch is that despite some of the handwringing that has emerged immediately following the election about the Democratic Party's "underperformance," chances are that over the next few election cycles the party remains relatively unified. As for the Republicans in 2024, it seems reasonable to imagine that the internal divisions will continue to exist, and that a protracted and fractious fight is reasonably likely scenario.

Figure 1. Vote share for candidates receiving 1% or more of the vote.
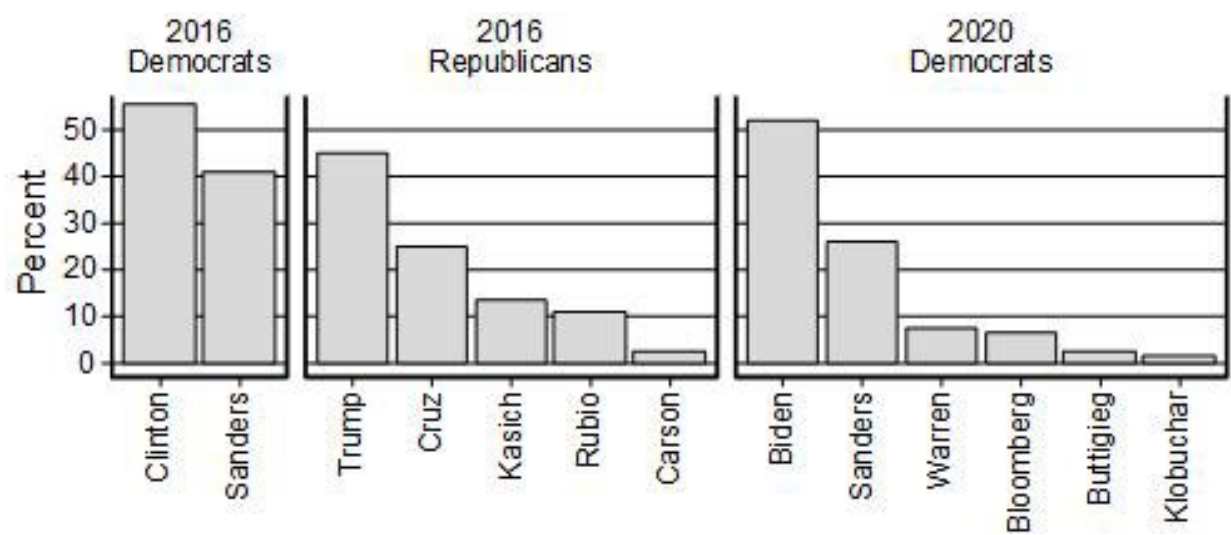
Figure 2. Unity for primary voters by party, 1976–2020.
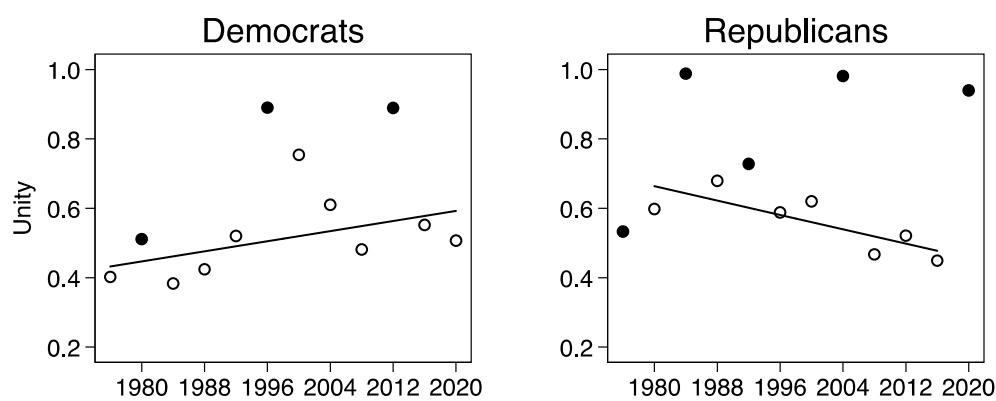
A movable force: the armed forces voting bloc

Dr Amanda Weinstein

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Early polls suggested there may be dramatic swings in voting behavior for a few key voting blocs on November 3rd. The most shocking prediction came in August from a Military Times Poll (in partnership with the Institute for Veterans and Military Families) suggesting that former Vice President Biden was four points ahead of President Trump with active duty military members. For comparison, a similar poll in 2016 gave Trump a 29 point lead over Clinton with active duty military members. In the end, exit polls in 2016 suggested that veterans voted overwhelmingly for Trump by 27 points. Active duty military members and veterans are an institution of the Republican party leading many Democrats to ignore this voting group turning their attention toward others. A 31-point swing in the veteran voting bloc would suggest a significant crack in the base of the Republican party and an opening for the Democrats.

Still, veterans are a small share of the voting populace at just 6.6 percent of the adult population in the U.S. Both the Democratic and Republican parties might logically set their sights on and allocate a greater share of scarce campaign resources toward larger growing demographic groups such as the Hispanic population - nearly 2.5 times larger than the veteran population (about 16 percent of the adult population). Yet, when margins of victory are thin, small voting blocs can have an outsized impact.

In 2016, Trump's margin of victory was the closest in Michigan, winning by just 13,080 votes. With nearly 600 thousand veterans in Michigan (8.2 percent of the adult population), even a slight narrowing of the veteran gap in voting behavior could have moved Michigan to Clinton in 2016. Similarly, veterans comprise 8.6 percent of the adult population in Wisconsin at well over 300 thousand veterans in the state; Trump won Wisconsin in 2016 by a slim margin of just 27,257 votes.

Reports of President Trump's disparaging remarks referring to fallen service members that echoed his attacks against the late John McCain may have created the opening Biden needed to sway veterans. But President Trump's support among military members showed signs of slipping well before. Polls show President Trump's approval rating among active-duty military had been slowly declining since he first took office. Despite the decline, active-duty military members approval ratings remained higher than the general population in 2018. By 2019, approval ratings among active-duty military dropped further to be on par with the nation with military members expressing concerns that Trump does not listen to military leadership. Biden was well positioned to seize this opportunity. "Joe Biden is someone who has always been a champion for service member, veterans, and their families. It's deeply personal to him as the father of an Iraq War veteran," said Will Goodwin, the director of government relations for the group VoteVets.

Many may be too quick to discount veterans as an immovable monolithic voting bloc. The military population has been changing slowly over time with more women and minorities in their ranks including at the highest levels of leadership. The nation's perceptions of military members and of veterans is outdated. Many non-veterans are surprised to find out that veterans out-earn non-veterans, on average, largely because they are more highly educated and more skilled than non-veterans. These misperceptions can hinder veterans in the workforce, but it can also lead political strategists and political hopefuls astray if they are too quick to discount them. Not Biden. In the closing months of the election, Biden took the time to hold roundtables with veterans in key swing states such as Pennsylvania.

Ultimately, exit polls in 2020 suggest Biden did not win the veteran vote, potentially further discouraging the Democratic party from future efforts to sway this demographic group. But Biden did narrow the veteran gap from a 27-point advantage to Trump in 2016 to just 7 percentage points in 2020, a 20 point swing! By narrowing this gap, Biden likely gained about 70,000 additional votes in Michigan, 43,000 in Wisconsin, 60,000 in Arizona, 82,000 in Georgia, and 97,000 in Pennsylvania. As the nation waited for Pennsylvania to finish counting votes moving on to counting absentee ballots from military members (used to waiting to have their ballots counted), reports came out that Biden won 4 out of 5 military ballots in Allegheny County (Pittsburgh).

When narrowing margins can win elections, neither political party should discount any voting bloc – yet, small voting blocs can only have a big impact if the larger voting blocs of the political base remain stalwart.

Source: Pixabay, Pexels

A Shrinking Veteran Margin

Veterans Voting Republican **61%**

Non-Veterans Voting Democrat, **50%**

Non-Veterans Voting Republican, **45%**

Veterans Voting Democrat, **34%**

52%

46%

45%

2016   **2020**
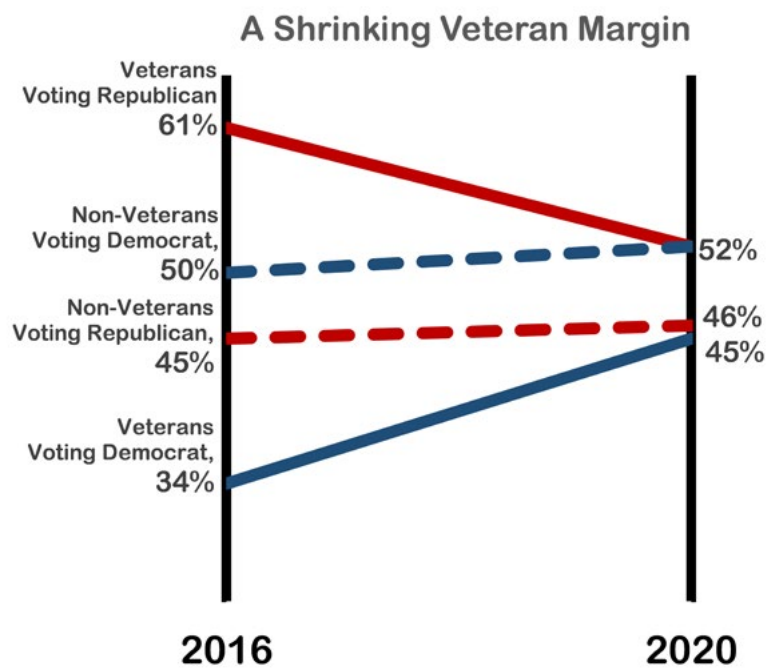
Source: New York Time Exit Polls conducted by Edison Research

Guns and the 2020 elections

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The 2020 elections were dominated by three overriding issues that no one could have anticipated before the start of 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic, the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, and an explosive Black Lives Matter movement. One might have thought that these crisis issues would have pushed the gun issue well down or even off the 2020 election agenda. In a certain respect that was true. Owing to the pandemic, 2020 was the first election year since 2012 that a statewide gun reform measure failed to appear on any state ballot. The cause had nothing to do with any lack of enthusiasm on the part of gun safety advocates. Rather, the process of collecting petition signatures to place referenda on state ballots was short-circuited by health restrictions. Despite this, however, guns and gun controversies infused each of the dominant national issues.

Measures enacted to combat the spread of the virus provoked a sharp and sometimes armed response from right-wing groups. In the spring and summer of 2020, armed protestors showed up in several state capitals to express opposition to pandemic lockdown policies they believed to be unnecessary and a violation of their rights.

Firearms-expressed anger extended beyond public protests, including, in one alarmingly extreme case, a foiled plot hatched by at least fourteen so-called militia members in Michigan to kidnap that state's governor, Democrat Gretchen Whitmer, in reprisal for her administration's anti-virus measures. A similar plot was uncovered against Virginia's Democratic governor, Ralph Northam. A series of legally dubious police shootings of Black people around the country were the proximate motivation for widespread protests, coalescing under the Black Lives Matter movement banner. The country also witnessed an increase in shootings and homicides, especially in urban areas—an increase attributed, at least in part, to the interruption of programs devised to reduce gun violence because of the adverse economic effects of the pandemic. That increase was notable given that crime in virtually every other category continued to decline. Hovering over the entire fall election were fears of an armed presence during election time amidst the rallying of right-wing armed groups who spread alarm that the elections would be somehow hijacked by opponents of Republican President Donald Trump.

All of this occurred in the context of mass demonstrations around the country, which in a few instances led to violence, including a few incidents of armed violence. Yet despite some incidents of violence, the opposite was the case. According to a study by the nonprofit Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, of the 7750 protests held in all fifty states from May to August 2020, 93 percent were non-violent. Violent protests were defined as those that involved interpersonal clashes or property damage. One notable shooting instance occurred in Kenosha, Wisconsin, when an armed 17-year-old counter-protestor shot three people, killing two. President Trump failed to condemn armed counter-protestors and expressed sympathy for the Kenosha shooter. He also sought to paint the demonstrations in dire terms, playing on fears of a breakdown of law and order. Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden denounced violence on all sides and urged calm.

The other notable trend spurred by the climate of uncertainty and concerns over violence was an upsurge in gun sales. The spread of the pandemic prompted an increase in gun sales, a seemingly puzzling response, given that firearms bear no relationship to viral infection. Gun purchases were also spurred by fear surrounding the racial justice protests and counter-protests.

As for gun groups, as of election day 2020 the National Rifle Association had spent $23.4 million on the campaign overall, roughly a third of that spent in 2016. Of that, $16.2 million went to the Trump campaign, less than the over $31 million it spent on Trump in 2016. The gun safety group Everytown for Gun Safety spent $21.1 million in 2020.

Second Amendment rights re-entered the political debate with the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court. The most revealing piece of information about her view on gun rights came from a dissenting opinion she wrote in a 2017 court of appeals case upholding a law that barred felons from obtaining guns. In her dissent, Barrett relied on a narrow and historically inaccurate view of old gun laws. That, plus her self-proclaimed "Originalist" philosophy signal that Barrett's addition to the high court will undoubtedly provide a firm five-member majority for striking down gun laws formerly held constitutional.

Despite polls showing that large majorities of Americans feared Election Day violence, there was none—the election itself went off without any violence or disruption. A few scattered vote-counting protests emerged in the days after election day. Trump supporters were disappointed at the outcome, but the process unfolded as intended.

Can Biden's win stop the decline of the West and restore the role of the United States in the world?

Many commentators argued that the 2020 election was the most important presidential election since FDR's victory during World War II. In fact, the most important election was that of 2016. That was the turning point, which marked the dawn of a new era, of the New World Disorder: the unravelling of the U.S.-led postwar liberal institutionalism; the decline of American influence and soft power across the world; the undermining of established alliances and institutions (UN, NATO); regional power vacuums rapidly covered by ethnocentric authoritarian regimes such as Xi's China, Putin's Russia, and Erdogan's Turkey, which are now engaging in a New Cold War against the West.

By no means did the decline of the West *start* in 2016. Its roots lie in the Bush Administration's flawed strategy of quasi-imperial overreach after 9/11; the catastrophic wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which destabilised the Middle East and led to the emergence of ISIS (which, in turn, led to waves of refugees and home-bred Islamist terrorism in Europe). Coupled with the timid handling of the 2008 financial crisis, which only increased structural inequality, left intact global networks of tax evasion, and hit the West's middle and working classes, these phenomena ultimately led to the wave of radical populism that produced Trump and Brexit in 2016.

Thus, the West has been undergoing structural disintegration for many years, even before Russia unleashed a campaign of political interference and misinformation across the West, and China launched its neo-colonialist expansion.

Can the 2020 Biden win stop this decline and erosion of Western liberal democracies?

This looks unlikely. Biden's victory was not a cathartic one. The 2020 election could have marked a turning point had there been a massive, national wave against the politics of Donald Trump – a moral, ideological, and cultural defeat of the politics of fake news, absurd conspiracy theories, and civil strife. Rather, what the 2020 election does signify is the consolidation of Trump's politics into a movement. It formalizes the division of the United States into two separate universes that hardly communicate with each other, mirroring similar (albeit less acute) patterns in Europe.

Global power is not simply a matter of military might or assertive foreign policy (China and Russia possess both), not even vast economic growth and technological leadership (China possesses those, too). Postwar U.S. leadership was ultimately embraced and owned by other Western countries because of the combination of those assets with *cultural* alignment: America's commitment to freedom, civil liberties, justice and the rule of law; equality and the successful integration of diverse demographic groups; an institutional system of checks and balances; a model of capitalism that, for a long period, worked for the middle classes; intellectual and creative excellence; and infrastructural investment leading to a better quality of life. The American Dream was constructed and broadcast across the world by Hollywood, then by the advertising agencies of Madison Avenue, and then by the libertarian tech innovators of Silicon Valley.

To the rest of the world, the United States increasingly looks like a broken, battered doll. This is not about U.S. foreign policy per se, but about domestic dysfunction. Widening inequalities and rural poverty; crumbling infrastructure; tragic mismanagement of the COVID19 pandemic; a campus culture that defies reason and stifles freedom; latent racism; a fragmented and fragile election system; perhaps above all else, a fundamental crisis of values and a collapse of the moral consensus regarding the value of science, truth, and tolerance: these are just some of the things that people across the world who used to look up to the United States now see; things that make them doubt about the value of liberal democracy itself, of which the U.S. had been the beacon for decades.

When Joe Biden and Kamala Harris finally manage to formalize this messy victory, and when they manage to get through what is likely to be an ugly and disorderly transition during which anything could happen, they would then have to:

- Lead the effort to scale back China's authoritarian clampdown in Hong Kong, its territorial expansion in Nepal and the South China Sea, its neo-colonial practices in Africa, and more pertinently, its campaign of infiltrating Western institutions (including universities);
- Stop Russia's campaign of misinformation, confusion, and interference;
- Repair ties with European allies and restore faith in NATO, which includes disciplining – possibly expelling - Erdogan's Turkey, which has become a rogue state in Europe, Caucasus and the Middle East;
- Lead global coalitions on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), enact urgent climate action, and help build resilience against extreme weather phenomena;
- And do all that amidst a global pandemic that has highlighted the structural weaknesses, and dependence on national whims, of multilateral institutions such as the World Health Organization, leading to the revival of nationalist fantasies.

A mission impossible, if there ever was one.

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Voters

A divided America guarantees the longevity of Trumpism?

There are many reasons this election is historical, two being the high turnout and the close result. Joe Biden has won the popular vote, by a narrow margin, and the Electoral College to become the 46th President of the U.S. However, and independent of the final outcome, it is clear that Trump performed better than opinion polls expected and won more votes in 2020 than in 2016. The projected widespread rejection of his presidency has hardly taken place. Providing Trump departs the White House with a degree of credibility intact, it is probable that him and his America first vision will remain a strong force in the American political scene.

So, why didn't voters reject Trump heavily? Permanent campaigning literature suggests newly elected governments and particularly newly elected presidents strive to retain the support of their electoral base, while building trust with the wider electorate, in order to secure a second term. Thus, from a political branding perspective, they tend to employ a communication strategy aiming to promote an effective brand consisting of six elements: values, reassurance, aspiration, uniqueness, simplicity and credibility. The latter seems to be of crucial importance since it requires that a president's credibility depends heavily on the capacity to deliver on pre-election promises. As Trump failed to be re-elected, it would appear he failed to promote and protect his brand completely. However, this is not the whole story, examining his tenure from a political branding perspective allows us to better understand his political and electoral resilience.

In 2016, Donald Trump came to office on the back of campaign which made key pledges including large tax cuts; implementing protectionist trade policies by imposing tariffs, mainly on China; limiting immigration by building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border; and repealing the Obamacare Act. Four years later, there is evidence that he managed to keep a great deal of these promises. The Trump administration cut taxes for most American businesses bringing the top corporate income tax rate down from 35% to 21%, though it had pledged a 15% tax rate. Moreover, although the rich seem to have benefited the most by receiving over 50% of the total tax savings, most Americans saw their taxes burden reduced. Furthermore, Trump delivered on his promise to engage in a trade war with China, imposing tariffs on several products, withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and renegotiating other trade agreements. In addition, he has so far constructed approximately 400 miles of border barriers, thought this falls short of the promise to close the entire 1000 miles of border. Lastly, even though he failed to dismantle the Obamacare, he never stopped trying to undermine it.

In any case and independent of his actual governing record, most of his supporters share the view that Trump delivered on his pledges. According to a pre-election opinion survey of the New York University conducted by YouGov, the great majority of those who voted for Trump in 2016 believed that the president broke fewer than on one in five pre-election pledges. Most importantly, this notion appeared to be strongly associated with their tendency to vote again for Trump in 2020.

Hence there is evidence Trump seems to have retained the trust of most of his support base. It is indicative that, as the exit poll suggests, from those who voted for Trump in 2016, 92% said they remained loyal in 2020. Therefore, we can safely claim that Trump managed to retain his credibility in the eyes of the great majority of his backers and hence turn, to some extent, the public agenda in his favor. The same exit poll showed that when given the choice of five issues, only 17% of the electorate prioritized the coronavirus pandemic as the most important issue facing the country. By focusing on the economy, Trump managed to control what factors were considered by his supporters when they cast their ballots.

Trump voters were most concerned with the economy (82%) and rebuilding the economy 'even if it hurts efforts to contain coronavirus' (76%), as well as law and order (71%). Biden supporters prioritized racial inequalities (91%), coronavirus (82%), containing the virus even if it hurts the economy (80%) and health care (63%). With extreme polarization regarding the record and style of the candidates across their supporters it is difficult to see how a Biden presidency can reconcile the differences. Trump's strategy proved insufficient to secure him a second term. But it reflects two different visions for America, one of economic protectionism and closed borders, the other protecting the health of the people and promoting social unity. The latter may prove the biggest challenge given that just under half the electorate support Trumpism and so those ideas will likely remain a powerful force in the American politics.

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Cartographic perspectives of the 2020 U.S. election

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The 2020 U.S. presidential election did not only see a competition of two political opponents. It also was a competition by the media for catching the attention of larger audiences. Some of the most prominent news organizations excelled in their visualization capabilities compared to previous elections, with cartographic representations often being a central part of this effort.

Never had there been such a large diversity of – often interactive – mappings while the results came in. The long wait for confirmed (or at least relatively certain) outcomes from the different states helped to put these visualizations in the spotlight. As the wait went on, the different types of visual representations themselves also became part of discussions, especially in social media. This helped making wider audiences aware of the caveats that conventional mapping methods have in visualizing election outcomes.

In the context of U.S. elections, it was the incumbent president himself who demonstrated such a lack of map reading skills in the aftermath of the 2016 election. After his election victory he distributed conventional maps of the results to journalists in order to demonstrate his presumable landslide win across the country.

Conventional mapping techniques show data from a geographical perspective. For election outcomes this means that they show vote shares plotted onto the distribution of land area. This usually leads to sparsely populated rural areas being over-represented. In contrast, dense urban areas with an often significantly different demographic are obstructed from these maps, therefore providing misleading representations of an election outcome.

A different way of showing elections is the use of so-called cartograms where areas are transformed by certain (often social) indicators. The most commonly used cartograms usually show a proportional representation of population distributions. This can be achieved in manifold ways, as the wide range of visualizations during this election demonstrated.

This contribution shows three different cartographic perspectives of the election outcome: Shown here are one conventional map and two variations of cartogram depictions that demonstrate how the change in perspective provides unique new insights. The different visualizations show how using different base-maps can result in changing narratives for election outcomes.

At the time of writing (Nov 9, 2020) no final results were fully declared, although most states had completed counting between 95 and 100 per cent of the votes. Therefore, only minor changes in this overall picture provided here are to be expected (putting possible legal challenges to these outcomes aside).

The upper two maps both use a gradual color scheme to highlight the different vote shares of the candidate with the respective highest vote share in a state (therefore being on track to winning all the state's votes in the Electoral College). In the conventional map projection (top) this does resemble a significant dominance of the votes for the Republican Party and Donald Trump as the incumbent president across large parts of the country. Yet changing the base-map to a population-weighted cartogram (middle) where each state is proportional to the number of people who live there, this impression becomes relativized. The dominance of the Democratic Party with their candidate Joe Biden in some of the most populous states becomes apparent, while the Republican vote in the mid-western and central parts looks much less dominant due to the respective small populations there.

The display of the vote shares also shows how politically divided the USA have become: in around 16 states the vote share of the winning candidate lies in the range of between 45 and 55 per cent, showing how relatively close the outcome has been. When the final results have been released, this pattern will become even more visible at larger scales. This will only be the start of trying to understand the full spatial patterns that defined this highly unusual presidential election. A geographical analysis will be a crucial part of identifying some of the underlying causes for such a polarized country. It will be crucial for the forthcoming presidency to understand these patterns when it comes to finding solutions to mending a highly divided society.

The final map (bottom) is the most accurate picture of the actual political outcome of the election. Here each hexagon represents a federal state. This was then resized according to the total number of votes that this state has in the Electoral College, the assembly which elects the next president. While the legal battle over the election outcome might continue for a while and could change some of the political landscapes drawn in these maps, it seems unlikely that this map is going to change significantly. What it shows is that the majority of electors in the Electoral College are mandated to vote for Joe Biden to become the 46th president of the United States of America.
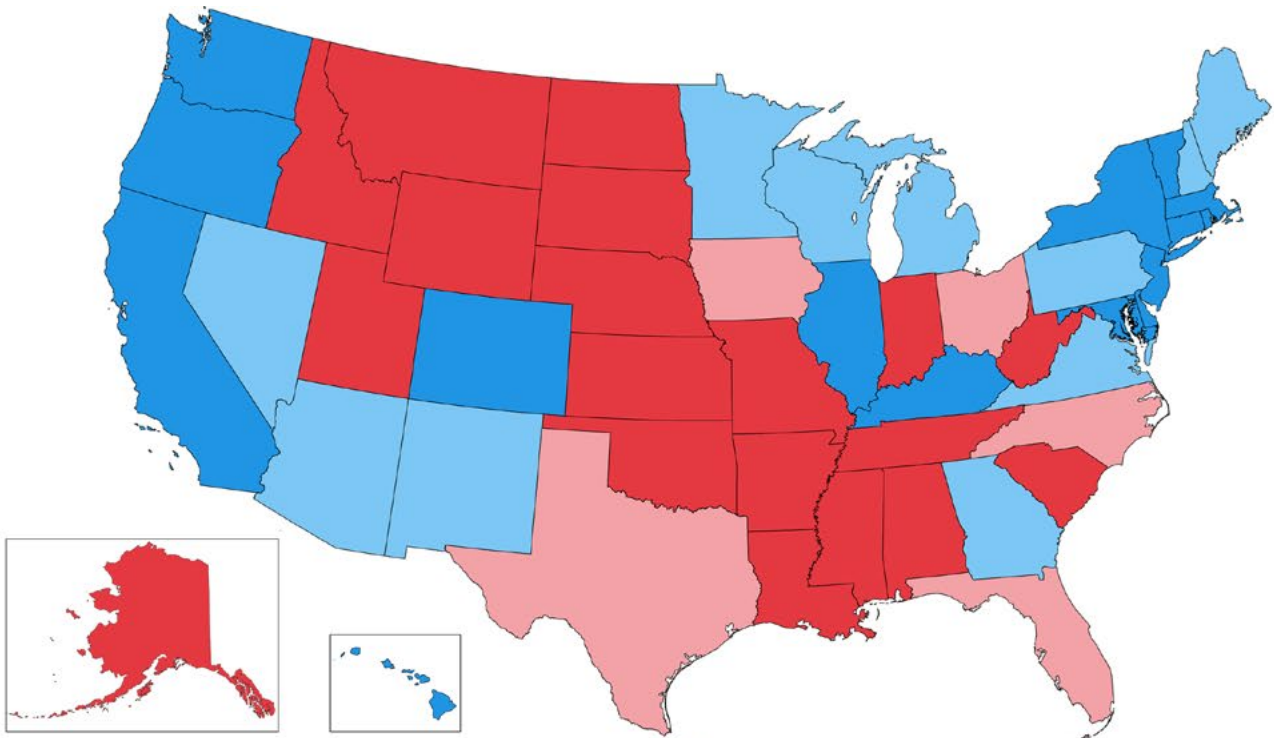
Vote share
of candidate with most votes

0   45 55   75   %

Trump

Biden
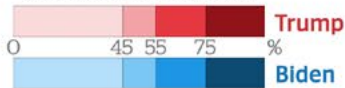
Hexagon map below shaded by candidate
projected to winning the elextoral vote

Gridded population cartogram:
areas proportional to
the number of people living there
(Alaska and Hawaii not included)

Hexagon cartogram:
each hexagon representing state
resized proportional to the
number of electoral college votes

States that flipped from 2016

* Possible recount
All data not based on final results,
last updated Nova 8, 2020
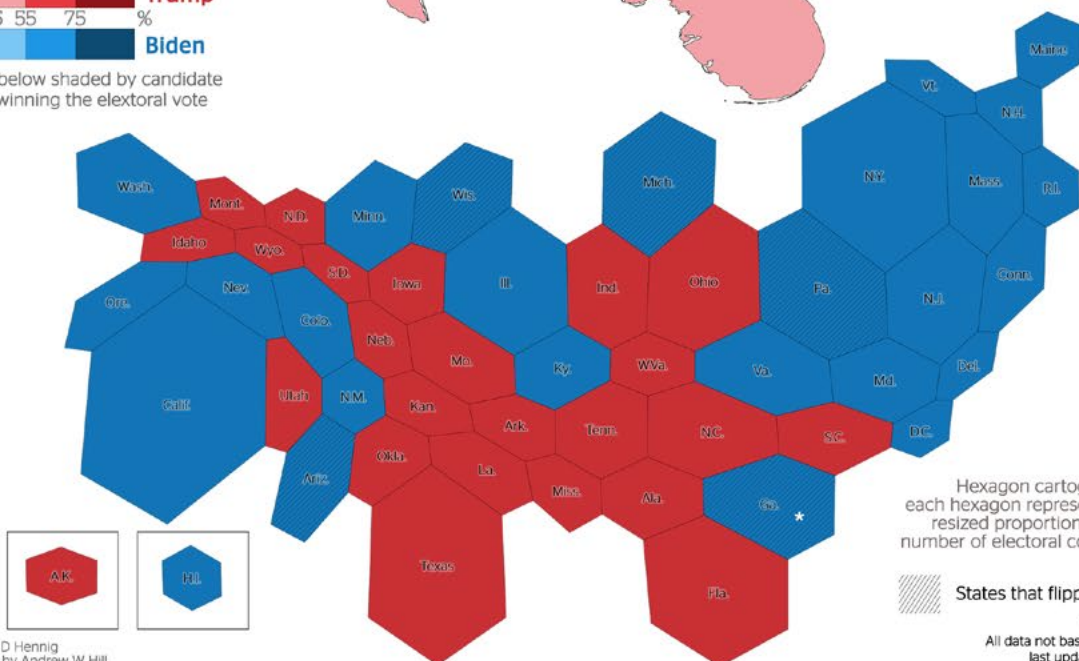
Maps by Benjamin D Hennig
using hexagon geometries by Andrew W Hill

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Wash. Mont. N.D. Minn. Wis. Mich. N.Y. Vt. N.H. Maine Mass. R.I.
Idaho Wyo. S.D. Iowa Ill. Ind. Ohio Pa. Conn.
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Texas Fla.

Vote switching from 2016 to 2020

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Almost nothing about the 2020 presidential election seemed like business as usual. Record-breaking turnout during the height of a pandemic. Widespread concerns about the legitimacy of the outcome even before the first vote was cast. The steepest quarterly decline in U.S. GDP in modern history. Ongoing and widespread protests for racial justice. Nonetheless, one thing about the 2020 election was not at all unique: the consistency of individual voter behavior.

In the 1940 presidential election, when the first ever over-time study of voter preferences was conducted, the researchers were surprised to find that fully 92 percent of their sample remained consistent in their voting preferences throughout the presidential campaign. In other words, people knew where they stood before the presidential campaign began, and the campaign changed few people's minds about which candidate to support.

Over seven decades later, we know that this pattern is not uncommon or unique to that era. For example, despite the novelty of Donald Trump's 2016 candidacy and campaign, the same pattern was clear; around 90 percent of voters supported the candidate of the party in 2016 that they had supported in 2012.

What about 2020? To analyze who switched and why in the 2020 election, we utilized a national panel study that interviewed voters in October 2016, shortly before the election, and then again in October of 2020, immediately before the 2020 election. This random probability sample was collected by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. By comparing people's reported vote preferences at both points in time, we can estimate the number of vote switchers in the recent election. In addition to identifying the number of "switchers," we asked those who reported a different preference in 2020 to explain their change of heart relative to their 2016 vote.

As shown in Table 1, around 90 percent of those who voted for Trump in 2016 also supported him in 2020. Given the extreme loyalty of Trump's base, this probably would not surprise anyone. But more importantly, it is entirely consistent with previous elections under far more mundane conditions, long before concerns about mass polarization emerged. Interestingly, Democratic voters were even more consistent, with over 94 percent of those who voted for Clinton in 2016 also voting for Biden in 2020. Likewise, the percentage of those vote switchers who defected to the candidate of the other major party remained tiny, at around 4 to 7 percent, with a slight advantage to Biden in converting more Republican voters than Trump converted Democratic voters.

We asked these switchers to explain in their own words why they changed their minds. Overall, most switchers were motivated by dislike of the opposition rather than enthusiasm for the candidate they supported:

"I don't like Trump. But I am terrified of what a Biden or Harris presidency would do to our nation."

"I'm not voting FOR Biden. I'm voting AGAINST Trump."

"Anyone. But. Trump."

"The way Donald Trump is acting as a president is a disgrace for the entire human race."

"I don't like Biden. He is a weak candidate."

What is perhaps most noteworthy about Table 1 is what happened to the roughly five percent of voters who supported third-party candidates in 2016. Regardless of partisan leanings, the stakes of the election outcome were perceived to be far higher in 2020 than in 2016. As shown in Table 1, the split among third party voters favored Biden. The explanations offered by those who switched from being third-party supporters in 2016 to supporters of one of the major parties in 2020 reflected their sense of the increased salience of their choice, and their fear of wasting their votes on a minor party candidate:

"Voting outside of the 2 party system is almost like not voting at all."

"A vote for a Libertarian is a lost vote."

"Can't in good conscience vote for Trump, and a vote for the green party is a wasted vote."

Although third-party voting is generally a small percentage in most elections, it was particularly tiny in 2020. Given the razor-thin margins in some states in 2020, this change may well have made a difference.

As the authors of The People's Choice first highlighted, vote "switchers" hold formidable leverage over the outcome of presidential elections, since their realignment simultaneously takes a vote away from one party and adds a vote to the other. We have yet to determine whether unusually high turnout in 2020 benefitted Trump or Biden or both equally. But Biden clearly gained a slight edge by means of shifting more Republicans than Trump did Democrats, and by attracting more voters who supported a third-party candidate in 2016.

Table 1. Individual vote preferences in 2020 as a percentage of vote preferences in 2016

Vote in 2020 Election

	Republican (Trump)	Democrat (Biden)	Third Party Candidate
Vote in 2016 Election Republican (Trump)	90.2%	6.7	3.1
Democrat (Clinton)	4.6	94.1	1.4
Third Party Candidate	37.5	51.8	10.7

Note: Based on a representative national probability sample of n=1091 panelists who reported an intent to vote in both the 2016 and 2020 panel interviews.

It's the democracy, stupid

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The 2020 U.S. election was characterized by extreme polarization and by the harsh personal battle between the two candidates. Above all, the pandemic had a severe impact on the elections bringing about a full reshuffle of the election agenda, posing new stakes and dilemmas to the voters, such as the protective measures against the virus, the role of public health and the accessibility to it. This electoral battle has ended with Biden winning more votes than any other in the history of the American elections.

While it is remarkable these elections recorded the highest voter turnout since 1900, it is worth saying they completely divided American society. This is evidenced through the hard fights of both electoral camps, the enormous differences in important political topics, such as the accessibility to public health, and conflicting perspectives over the characters of both candidates. Nevertheless, something more structural divides American society that is better revealed through a closer reading of the qualitative characteristics of the exit polls: For Americans earning less than $100,000 the result was in favor of Biden; For those earning more than $100,000, Trump won 54%, Biden 43%. Biden also gained 60% of those living in cities with more than 50.000 inhabitants; 66% of those who voted for the first time, 76% of those who voted for the candidate that could unite the nation, 61% of the LGBT community, 72% of those who believe abortions should be legal, 80% of those who put tackling coronavirus above the economy, 70% of those who support Black Lives Matter and 64% of those who believe that wearing a mask is an act of social responsibility. On the other hand, Trump won 54% of those living in semi-urban/rural areas, 78% of the opponents of Obamacare, 75% of those who believe abortions must become illegal, 76% of those who put economy above the pandemic, 71% of those who chose to vote for whom they considered to be "the strongest leader", and 85% of those who oppose Black Lives Matter. Such data reveal political divisions are better understand by considering social and cultural factors.

Despite the incredible polarization, Biden emerged with 4 million+ more votes. The polls, although smeared shortly after the ballot closed, eventually showed a trend. After the closing of the ballot, there was confusion about where the results were leading. The first results were positive for Trump; analysts and staffs acted as if they had forgotten just a day before YouGov reported the intention to vote for those who had not yet voted at 69% for Trump. But for the majority who had already voted, support for Biden stood at 66%. This is exactly why as time passed the Democrats' percentages grew and the States gradually changed color. If counting of postal votes' was completed at the same time as the rest, the agony wouldn't have been as fierce. Probably the initial panic is largely due to the memories of the 2016 elections.

Trump may have gained more votes compared to previous elections, but eventually he was defeated due to his platform and character. Despite exit polls record showing the economy (35%) as the most important factor influencing voter choice, other vital issues played a significant role in Trumps' defeat, such as racial discrimination (20%), managing the pandemic (17%), the health care system (11%), and institutional deregulation.

Trump's challenger was an uncharismatic, indifferent in terms of communication, politically centered, aged candidate, who was favored by the outgoing President's absurd pandemic management, and the peculiar electoral campaign imposed by new health regulations. Biden made fewer appearances for a very long time with an excellent excuse. This is the candidate that Trump failed to beat in the debates, which play a crucial role in the American elections, and nor did Trump manage to control the agenda.

The result was that Trump became the third one term President of the United States of America since World War II. Trump's campaign was supported only by his family members; Biden was endorsed by Obama, Sanders, Cortez, most members of his party, and a huge network of public figures, that staffed the VOTE movement, and supported a big anti-Trump wave. What the Democrats did not do as successfully as the Republicans, was the door-to-door campaigning. The Republicans ignored to a large extent the coronavirus measures and became particularly active in canvassing.

Trump's electoral victory in the 2016 U.S. elections was not an 'accident', or the result of having an unpopular politician like Hillary Clinton running against him. Trump won because he gave voice to a frightened, xenophobic and introvert America, that did not assimilate the challenges of globalization; it dreams of a national and isolated capitalism, and finds itself in a nationalist frenzy, feeling constantly persecuted. This is America at a historic crossroad. The "symptom", Trump, lost the election. The causes remain. Could it be that the main stake in these elections was not the economy, as exit polls showed, but democracy itself?

An election in a time of distrust

We can define trust as a form of confidence or faith in others. It implies a reliance on others. In democratic societies, elections and adhering to the results of elections are built on trust. Trust that the system is fair, that it represents the will of the people and that the election means that the agendas of the winner can be achieved, at least in some small measure. None of this applies to the 2020 U.S. election. It was an election built on a turbulent and unsettling lack of trust, not only of the results but of the system as a whole, and just as important, a distrust in the future.

There is now a profound lack of trust in the U.S. political system. Trump did not create the U.S. constitution. What he did, however, was reveal its fundamental flaws. Trump's presidency revealed its antidemocratic origins arguably more clearly than any President. It began with the 2016 election which he lost by almost 3 million votes but won because of the Electoral College, an institution designed specifically to blunt the popular will of the people. Then Trump's use of presidential power showed clearly that the U.S. was a flawed Republic not a functioning democracy. A Republic founded by white men of property in large part to ensure the continued rule of white men of property. Over the years, democratic accountability has reformed this basic structure, but Trump showed even this transformed constitution, with an imperial Presidency and a spineless Senate, could be used to run roughshod over democratic norms. Trump was the revenge of the bewigged grandees who ideally wanted a Rome of Cicero rather than an America of Obama.

Trump was a massive stress test of the U.S. constitutional system. The system clearly failed. The divided powers of Congress, the Presidency and Supreme Court, long heralded as a way of dispersing power, was a comforting illusion of less partisan times. The federal system was revealed as flawed and inadequate. The Supreme Court is now filled with political hacks. Three of its current members, Roberts, Kavanaugh and Barrett, served on the Bush legal team that contested the 2000 Gore v. Bush result. A significant number of the jurists espouse an originalism doctrine, made famous by former Supreme Court Justice Scalia, that harks back to those self-same white men of property as their only reliable legal guide. Trust in the Supreme Court, once the most revered branch of government, has plummeted. That this flawed, undemocratic institution may be the arbiter of 2020 election only adds to the distrust.

Distrust is heightened by the separate political universes inhabited by Americans. A 20 million Fox-viewing audience, for example, sees Biden as a socialist and Trump as a national savior only criticized because of the bad faith of "fake news." A significant number of Americans, however, see Trump as an existential threat to the Republic. The election results will not move the opinions or basic beliefs of either side. Distrust is heightened by the very flawed nature of voting in the U.S. The voting system with its lumbering inefficiencies, gerrymandering, discriminatory voting requirements and downright harassment, are all designed to suppress the vote.

The lack of trust in the system as a whole is compounded by the fact that no one group feels dominant. That raises the stakes from compromise with opponents to their subordination. The Republic is turning into a super-nasty, zero-sum game with each group seeking to maximize its advantage while in power. The Republican Party acted like a predatory political elite in pressing home its partisan advantages while performing minimal governance. Barrett's nomination to the Supreme court was rushed though in a matter of weeks while millions of Americans still waited for legislation to provide much needed relief from the pandemic induced recession.

And we have lost trust with ourselves. One poll found in 1997, 64 percent of Americans had trust in the political decisions of their fellow citizen. By 2020 it was below 34 percent.

There is distrust of the future. The U.S. was long admired for its optimistic belief in the future. The rosy assumption that the arc of justice arced inexorably upwards, that the future could be and should be brighter than the past, was long a hallmark of the U.S. That optimism has been shattered. The long decline in the real wages of middle-income Americans, the dispiriting and sapping experience of endless wars in foreign lands and the threatening rise of China have all weakened American optimism in the future. The Trump era was a present of constant anxiety between an invented past and a fearful future. It was an exhausting period of permanent indignation that will continue long after the last votes are counted.

Election results are important. And they can herald a change. But the difficult job of rebuilding trust in the system, in the Republic as a whole and indeed in the future will likely take more than just one Presidential election, especially one with no clear cut and agreed mandate for change It will require a major constitutional overhaul. Republics do not suddenly die; they wither and atrophy from their unwillingness to adapt their constitutions from an idealized past to an anxious present. But to do that, we need to trust each other.

Prof John Rennie Short

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Polarization before and after the 2020 election

Em Prof Barry Richards

Emeritus Professor of Political Psychology at Bournemouth University, UK. His work aims to bring psychoanalytic insights into the understanding of politics. His recent publications include What Holds Us Together (Karnac, 2018) and The Psychology of Politics (Routledge, 2019).

In this election, American democracy has been threatened by a bitter polarization with deep historical roots. Many Americans may despair of conciliation across this divide. The prominent academic Richard Sennett, writing a day before the election in the British left-liberal newspaper *The Guardian*, suggested that Trump's base in 30% of the electorate is, as a whole, "extremist", characterised by "sneering aggression" and "viciousness" towards other Americans, and will become even more extreme if he loses. Yet although there's no denying the hatred on display at times, a more differentiated understanding of his support is necessary.

The study of tea party supporters in Louisiana by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild, most of whom went on to vote for Trump in 2016, makes it clear that there are thoughtful and decent individuals amongst those who have supported him. A considerable number of those who vote for Trump do not like him. And a significant number of Obama voters switched to Trump in 2016, some of whom must have stuck with him this time (see Edison's exit poll). They are presumably mostly outside the 30% base, sitting somewhere in the other 18% or so who also voted for him.

In 2016 some might have hoped that Trump's support would fold as his unfitness to lead the nation became evident. It has instead become clear that a durable body of public feeling has consolidated in support of Trump and of what his supporters feel that he stands for. Despite the tumult of his administration, his approval ratings, though relatively low, have been unusually stable across his term, and even with the polls underestimating his position, he was still seen as capable of winning the election.

This consolidation is, as a recent study has shown, part of a global movement of centre-right parties towards 'illiberal democracy', with their larger blocs of supporters in more entrenched positions. In the U.S. this has heavily reinforced the two-party system. Since the 1990s, red-or-blue leaning has climbed way above all other variables (including race, religion and education) to be the strongest predictor of political position on core issues. The strengthening of affinity with the Republican Party across over 40% of the electorate was probably intensified or accelerated by the emergence of more radical tendencies in the Democratic Party, so was part of a dynamic that we can call 'interactive' or 'cumulative' extremism. But the overall process of party-based polarization began long before Sanders.

So, approval of Trump has been more closely tied to Republican sympathies than it has been for other Republican Presidents. This may be surprising, since his own sympathies are promiscuous, as seen in his periods of support for the Democrats. It does however help to explain why he has not lost more votes amongst those who dislike him. The size and resilience of Trump's support seems to be the product of the blending of Trump's perverse charisma, which is quite complex psychologically, and an increasingly strong party identification amongst 'GOP' supporters.

What underlying needs in the American people does all this relate to? Along with others, I have suggested we see Trumpism as a mobilization of the capacity, which exists in us all, to imagine ourselves as magically immune to fear and weakness, to vulnerability of any sort (including to viruses). This defence against anxiety (technically a 'narcissistic' one) is often expressed, in different ways, by idealized visions of the nation and its leader as a protective shield. For many, especially in the core 'base', this appears to be still at the heart of their outlook.

But there is another key theme, also linked to the narcissistic defence: strong antipathy towards those fellow Americans seen as the main source of all threats. At the extremes, this is, as Sennett observes, an intense hatred, expressed by a sort of postmodern McCarthyism, in which a kaleidoscope of liberals, socialists and others are cast as enemies. For others, it may be less venomous and not delusional, but still run deep as a bedrock of antagonism, shaped by traditional Republican distrust of the state and by more contemporary populist tirades against elites.

Mitigating the polarization will involve looking more closely and respectfully at the outlooks, feelings and perceptions of many of those lodged along this axis of negativity. Even when congealed as antagonistic masses on either side of a deep divide, people do differ, in crucial ways, as empathic inquiry can reveal. Moreover, the process of polarization involves a complex dynamic between different groups, all of which should consider how their own behaviours may be experienced as provocations or denigrations, and so contribute to an escalatory process. Prominent academic, Mark Lilla, has urged Democrats to reflect on whether their own pre-occupations with 'identitarian' politics have helped to create today's polarization. While it is necessary to be realistic about the depth of the antagonisms, and the tenacity of the delusions which can be involved, a more detailed analysis of Trump's base and its penumbra may offer alternatives to Sennett's pessimism.

The political psychology of Trumpism

Nearly 1 in 2 American voters gave Donald Trump a thumbs-up.

That's a big news story of the 2020 election, even as Joe Biden has become the 46th president of the United States. Close to 50 percent of voters walked proudly, ambivalently or even reluctantly across the moral shards he hurled on democracy's floor and said they didn't care.

Over the course of President Trump's term, norms have been shattered with the same impunity that F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tom and Daisy Buchanan smashed things in a fictional region of Long Island not far from the area Trump actually grew up. As a multitude of journalists have chronicled, Trump eviscerated the sacred norms of democracy, including denouncing legitimate government investigations, using his office to try to force a foreign nation to tarnish his opponents, imperiling the independence of different government branches, vitriolically upbraiding opponents, and repeatedly making outrageously false claims about electoral malfeasance that undermined the legitimacy of a presidential election.

The question is why so many voters, particularly the White working class who put him over the top in 2016, cast their ballots for him. Some reasons can be readily understood. Trump tangibly addressed the powerlessness, social alienation, and economic wounds many white working-class Americans experienced, a function of globalization, automation and a raft of sociological problems from marital stress to opioid addiction. By promising to end punishing pro-global policies of previous administrations (another misleading claim, given some of the gains achieved by NAFTA under Clinton, as well as Bush's and Obama's salvaging auto plants), Trump could reasonably expect to be rewarded by blue collar voters in 2020. But he didn't create many infrastructure jobs, manufacturing wages did not rise significantly, and the empirical effects of tariffs in reviving old industries or increasing Rust Belt unemployment is decidedly underwhelming. So, on economic grounds, it wasn't rational for working class Whites to reward Trump with a 2020 vote.

Thus, we must look to venerable symbolic politics research, which takes us to a richly empirically-documented root of Trump's support, explaining why so many White working class voters turned again to him in 2020. Political science research shows his support had deep roots in White anxiety -- in his promise to offer a symbolic return to the cultural preeminence Whites experienced during the 20th century; his harvesting a sentiment– not founded in economic facts or his own statements, some of which denigrated his supporters, in the manner of an out-of-touch cult leader, that their traditions were under siege and would be preserved; and a racial, ethnic animus against immigrants and people of color that he embraced and repeatedly primed, enabling his supporters to bask in the feeling that their president would preserve, protect, and defend them, even as the best investigative journalism in the land showed the ones he protected, preserved, and defended were himself and his family.

Indeed, there is evidence that even though his voters knew his claims were false, they continued to support him anyway, so angry were they at the elite establishment. When populist sentiments have reached a point that many voters are willing to believe the political leadership "does not appear to govern on its behalf," they become resentful, convinced the system has no legitimacy. As Hahl et al argue, those who feel aggrieved and morally entitled are willing to take their symbolic protest to the point of favoring candidates who they know are "lying demagogues," to assert a voice they believe has been stifled. In this way reducing the concept of a good citizen to an angry, resentful voter.

Alas, political psychology is a complex construct, voters are complicated, and it looks as if some, though perhaps not most, blue collar workers in Rust Belt states may well have completed their ballots with a slightly leftward slant when it came to the presidential election, in line with the political science concept that elections act as thermostats that reset the temperature of the country. Polling research shows that union members voted more strongly for Biden, feeling that he identified more with their plight, as he channeled their anger at the system into hope for change rather than demonization of the non-white other.

2020, for all its turbulent complexity, has set a self-correcting mechanism in motion. The nation has shifted course before, famously in 1860. As Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of State William Seward is quoted as saying during this period, with optimistic implications for today, "There was always just enough virtue in this republic to save it; sometimes none to spare".

Prof Richard M. Perloff

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White evangelicals and white born again Christians in 2020

Prof Ryan Claassen

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In 2016, more white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump than had voted for the Republican in any election since 2004 (*The Hill).* In 2020, exit polls estimated support among white evangelicals at about 76%—5% off of the 81% exit poll estimate in 2016. What do these numbers tell us about the political divide in American religion? On one hand this stunning divide might show signs of modest decline in this age of hyper polarization. On the other hand, this exit poll measure greatly exaggerates the political divide along religious lines and care must be taken in the 2020 postmortem to capture religious diversity more accurately.

To begin, these numbers are stunning because it is difficult to find large groups within the American public in which the partisan split is so stark. 76% and 81% rival the split among Democrats and Republicans—and "white evangelicals and white born-again Christians" are a fairly large group, 27% of the electorate according to the exit poll. These groups are very, very rare. In fact, the ONLY SOCIAL group that bests this partisan split in the exit poll is race. The 2020 exit poll estimated 87% of black voters supported Biden and were about 12% of the electorate. Only 66% of Hispanics supported Biden. Sex, age, union membership, and so on are nowhere near these levels of division. What gives?

First, it is telling that race is the only rival split in the exit poll because white evangelicals are, well, WHITE. The exit poll designation is a *Frankengroup*—a group created by political analysts that does not occur in nature. This is problematic because much of the partisan divide in this item is about race, not religion. Yet many pundits analyze the percent of white evangelicals that vote for the Republican as if it confers the approval of a religious group. To be sure the racial divisions elsewhere in American society are very much a part of religious life, but the exit poll item confounds race and religion by using the question about race to create the group, "white evangelical or white born-again Christian." Tobin Grant (Professor of Political Science at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale) estimates that if evangelical and born-again Christians were NOT divided by race in the exit poll item, the percentage voting for the Republican would be closer to 50% than 80%. Many black voters are evangelical or born-again Christians.

But even if race were removed, the "evangelical or born-again Christian" designation is also problematic. Unfortunately, again, no such group exists in nature. The Southern Baptist Convention is an American denomination with institutional structure and whose members share history and governance. Many Southern Baptists answer in the affirmative to the exit poll question about whether one is an evangelical or born-again Christian, but they share little history or governance with other groups that also answer in the affirmative.

Academics studying religion and politics also combine groups in order to analyze evangelical protestants, but they attempt to do so in ways that capture inter-denominational cooperation and preserve broader religious differences (e.g. theological differences). Unfortunately this more rigorous approach requires a battery of survey questions about the specific church and denomination each individual attends. Tobin Grant also estimated support for Republican candidates among evangelicals using a more rigorous measure of evangelical affiliation (and again, no racial question) and arrives at a number closer to 60%. This number is somewhat higher than the one obtained by only removing race as a criterion, reflecting ongoing racial divisions within American religion. But the main point is that the political divide in evangelicalism—let alone within American religion—is much lower than the exit poll item implies.

Perfect alignment between religion and partisanship would pit religious and non-religious groups in existential political battles. Unfortunately analyses of the exit poll item identifying white protestants make it seem like that frightening reality is nearly at hand. It is important to remember, however, that a portion of what appears to be a religious divide is a racial divide. This divide is also terribly important and it is also terribly important to be able to identify it as a racial divide. In addition, the artificial group formed using the survey prompt to identify "evangelicals or born-again Christians" also seems to underestimate the amount of political diversity among real evangelical groups. And of course there are many religious groups in American society besides evangelicals (and those groups tend to be even more politically diverse)—and so over-reliance on the exit poll item creates a false dichotomy between evangelical and born again Christians and the non-religious. To conclude, the religious divide in American politics is terribly important and more analyses are needed before we can feel confident about where things stand in 2020.

Angry voters are (often) misinformed voters

Emotions have always been central to politics but over the last several decades the American political environment has grown increasingly hostile such that anger toward political opponents is often now the default political feeling. National polls—as well as my own surveys—fielded during the 2020 election in the United States suggest we may have reached a boiling point; Republicans were very angry at Joe Biden and his supporters, while Democrats expressed outrage at Donald Trump and the people who support him. This anger could be problematic for many reasons but the heightened emotional atmosphere surrounding the 2020 U.S. election served to undermine truth and facts by further injecting misinformation and misperceptions into the campaign.

Political anger during the 2020 U.S. election encouraged misinformation and false beliefs to thrive. Anger is a powerful motivator of political behavior and exacerbates many of the negative characteristics of partisanship and political identities. For example, angry voters are more likely to consume news and information from like-minded partisan outlets that often spread false and misleading political content. Anger also enhances partisan biases when people evaluate political information, which makes them more prone to believing information unsupported by facts or evidence. So how exactly did political anger increase exposure to and belief in misinformation about the candidates and election in 2020?

Anger Encouraged Partisan Media Use and Engagement
The rise of anger in American politics today has likely contributed to the loss of faith in high-quality sources of information, as well as the growing popularity of hyper-partisan sites online and on social media. If people are angry at mainstream media, they will look elsewhere for political information and increasingly they are turning to partisan pages on Facebook that only further reinforce that anger. Research my colleague and I are conducting on the popularity of hyper-partisan political pages on Facebook mirrors reporting by Kevin Roose at *The New York Times* indicating that the most engaged (likes, comments, shares) political pages on Facebook tend to be highly partisan and very conservative. In many cases, we find that engagement with posts on the most popular conservative pages outpaces posts from popular mainstream pages by a ratio of more than 5 to 1. While we know few people use these partisan sites or pages exclusively, several of these pages have amassed large audiences and many have several million followers. The problem, of course, is that these sites do not adhere to journalistic standards, are designed to trigger emotional responses in their ideological audiences, and often spread false or misleading content. To

make matters worse, this false, emotional content gets shared at a greater rate than less emotional, true information. It is clear that anger amplified partisan content online—some of it false—reaches far beyond its original or intended audience. Looking at this through the lens of anger helps illustrate why highly emotional conspiracy theories like Qanon or Hunter Biden and Burisma received so much traction online in 2020.

Anger Promotes Belief in Political Misinformation
Anger also enhances existing partisan biases when people are exposed to political information, which helps explain some widespread misperceptions during the 2020 campaign. Angry individuals are more likely to process information—including false information—in a way that is consistent with their existing political attitudes or beliefs, leaving them more susceptible to believing misinformation that is damaging to political opponents. Given that much of the political misinformation in circulation during the 2020 election was designed to elicit anger, it is unsurprising that so much misinformation was taken as true.

To better understand the intersection of anger and misinformation in the 2020 election, I fielded a nationally representative, multi-wave survey that asked voters whether they believed several false statements and conspiracy theories about the two candidates for president. These included well known conspiracies theories about Qanon and the coronavirus, as well as prominent claims about Hunter Biden and Donald Trump's health. What I found was astounding. In every instance—across more than ten false claims about both candidates—the more anger people felt about the candidates, the more likely they were to believe the false statements. For instance, anger at Joe Biden was by far the strongest predictor—even outweighing partisanship—of whether respondents believed false claims about Joe and Hunter Biden's involvement in Ukraine. Angry voters were even more likely to believe these claims over time—essentially doubling down on their beliefs as the election approached. This was true for both Republicans' and Democrats' belief in claims about Biden and Trump.

While there remains much debate about the long-term implications of misinformation, including whether misperceptions affect political behaviors like voting, the pattern from the 2020 U.S. election was unmistakable: angry voters were significantly more likely to be exposed to and believe political misinformation.

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A Black, Latinx, and Independent alliance

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African Americans, Latinx, and Independents were the critical margin of victory for President-elect Joseph Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris when the state of Pennsylvania called the contest in their favor just before noon on Saturday, November 7, securing enough Electoral College votes to win the presidential election. In a close and deeply divided partisan race in which nearly 160 million voters in the United States—a record number of American voters—participated, it was the swing constituency of independents along with Black and Latinx voters who helped to put the Biden-Harris ticket over the top, both in the popular vote and in key battleground states.

According to national exit polling data conducted by Edison Research, political independents (the approximately 43% of voters nationally who self-identify as such according to Gallup) favored Biden-Harris 54%-40%. Four years ago, Donald Trump had a 4-point edge among non-aligned voters. In 2008, Barack Obama won them by 8 points. The 14-point margin among independent voters was the most for a presidential candidate since 1988, when Republican nominee George H. W. Bush won independents over Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis by the same margin.

Jacqueline Salit, President of Independent Voting, the nation's largest network of independent voters seeking to reform the political process, observed, "Independents are a volatile community of voters. They elected two successive 'outsider' presidents, in the hopes of establishing a new direction, something other than the status quo. In this cycle, they elected a consummate insider who says he can bring unity and balance to government in a time of crisis. Their impact was huge. But no one should interpret this vote as a pledge of party allegiance [for the Democratic Party]. If anything, it's a vote that says, 'get us out of this partisan sinkhole." Salit added, "If you were to combine the independent voter community with the African American and Latino communities, both of which heavily influenced the outcome, you'd have the makings of a potent third force that defies political categories."

This all-important margin is evident both at the national level in the popular vote and in the states that put the Biden-Harris ticket over the top. At this point in the national vote count, nearly 22 million independents cast votes for Biden-Harris and 16.2 million voted for Trump-Pence. Biden's independent margin is 5.7 million votes, well over his 4 million vote lead in the overall national vote count.

It was also the independent vote that provided the Democratic ticket with a margin of victory in two of the three pivotal Rust Belt states that Trump won in 2016: Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Independents in Pennsylvania chose Biden-Harris by 8 points, 51%-43%. Specifically, 689,000 independents in Pennsylvania cast ballots for the Democratic ticket as compared to 581,000 for Trump. This margin of 108,000 votes among independent voters exceeds Biden's 41,200 vote lead in Pennsylvania overall. Meanwhile, Biden won Wisconsin independents by 55%-41%, outpolling Trump by 580,000 to 433,000. There, Biden's lead among independents is over 147,000 votes, well more than the 20,500 votes that constitute his margin of victory in the state.

Just as African Americans in South Carolina propelled Biden to the Democratic Party nomination in the summer, so did black voters and Latinx voters come out in force for the Biden-Harris presidential ticket. Upwards of 87% of black voters supported Biden-Harris nationally, and in critical states, such as Arizona, Latinx voters came out 2 to 1 in their favor (but fell shy in Florida where Latinx voters favored Biden just above 50% over Trump). Across the country young and first-time voters bolstered the President and Vice President-elect, fueled in much part by the Black Lives Matter movement.

Together, Black, Latinx and Independent voters also elected the first female-Black-South Asian (Afro-South Asian) vice-presidential candidate. Harris' history-making accomplishment grew on the barriers broken by Dr. Lenora Fulani in 1988 as the first woman (and African American) on the ballot in all fifty states in 1988 running for president as an independent and President Obama in 2008 as the nation's first black president. In 2020, we see the makings of a potentially powerful Black, Latinx, and independent alliance, or as Salit puts it, "a potent third force that defies political categories."

Black Lives Matter Plaza, Washington D.C. 11/8/20 - Picture by: Victoria Pickering, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Believing Black women

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In 2016, Hillary Clinton's candidacy was marred by past sexual assault allegations against her husband, former President Bill Clinton. Hillary defended her husband, making it hard for her to fully assert that she, as the nomenclature goes, "believes women." In 2020, there is a renewed call to believe women. This time it is less about assault accusations against the nominees. Rather, part of this call dates back to a moment in 1991 and how that moment reverberates today and affects voters, especially Black women.

In 1991, Clarence Thomas was nominated to the U.S. Supreme Court. Anita Hill accused Thomas of workplace sexual harassment. A three-day, televised hearing included Hill testifying in graphic detail in front of an all-male, all-white Senate Judiciary Committee. After Thomas's confirmation, women's anger contributed to a record-breaking number of women winning elections, making 1992 the "Year of the Woman." The chairperson of that 1991 committee was Joe Biden. Biden was criticized for his handling of the hearing and mistreatment of Hill. Biden expressed "regret," though Hill largely rejected this as an apology because "an apology, to be real and sincere, has to take responsibility for harm." Biden didn't publicly take responsibility until a 2019 interview. After this interview, as well as a phone call with Biden before his campaign announcement, Hill said she thinks Biden has evolved. In September 2020 she announced she would vote for Biden.

Anger and rage can be powerful motivators. Rebecca Traister wrote about the "revolutionary power of women's anger," and spoke about the relevance of Hill's experiences in contemporary politics. Dr. Brittney Cooper wrote about the power of Black women's eloquent and righteous rage. Modern parallels echo the 1992 wave of female engagement after female marginalization: fallout from sexual assault allegations against President Donald Trump, Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, and Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh resulted in events like the Women's March, the #MeToo movement, and a record-breaking number of women elected to Congress in 2018.

Anger and rage can fuel revolutions, but change also requires demonstrable outcomes. Believing Black women means meeting them where they stand. Dr. Cooper stresses the need to know what wrong was done to Black women and get "a clear sense of how the harm can be repaired…[and focus on] what Black women actually need."

Hill made her desired repair work clear when voicing support for Biden. She said the issue is bigger than her: it's "about the survivors of gender violence." She wants to work with the next president on issues of sexual harassment, gender violence, and gender discrimination, and believes Biden, not Trump, will hear her. In response to Hill's announcement, Dr. Cooper tweeted, "Pretty clear drawing of lines here by Anita Hill about why it needs to be Biden over Trump. And if y'all say you trust Black women then you should read this article and listen to her." In response, another user tweeted, "She's skipping over black issues and going over to women's issues." To which Dr. Cooper responded, "Black women's issues are Black issues."

As a disenfranchised group based on their gender and race, Black women's intersectional identities face challenges and oppression that are distinct from White women or Black men. Black women were cut off from the suffragist movement, and gender equity issues were sidelined during the Civil Rights Movement—prompting Malcom X to unequivocally state, "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman." Therefore Black women need different repair work.

Hill's endorsement of Biden probably did not cause a wave of new Biden support. According to CNN exit polls, 94% of Black women in 2016 and 91% in 2020 voted for the Democratic nominee—more than any other race-gender group in either election. Even Kamala Harris's VP nomination did not spur a large uptick in Biden support. Rather, Harris's nomination helped recognize Black women as the long-standing bedrock of Democratic support, and prompted Black women to use their influence in the community to "overperform in getting out the vote." Hill's endorsement also had the power to energize Black women's mobilization efforts, which was crucial in 2020 when COVID-19 heavily restricted retail politics and forced Black people, who have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19, to assume "personal risks to line up and vote in many states, especially where Republican efforts to suppress mail-in voting are successful."

Polarization and negative partisanship are likely to endure, making mobilization all that more important. Black women are vital to the Democratic Party's mobilization efforts. Therefore, it is crucial that the party meet Black women where they stand with more than platitudes every election year. The party needs to hear Black women, believe Black women, and invest in Black women's repair work.

The sleeping giant awakens: Latinos in the 2020 election

2020 has been a year for the record books and the presidential election is no exception. During this electoral cycle, we saw states, once considered reliably red, like Arizona, Florida, Texas, Georgia, and Pennsylvania, become battleground states. It is no coincidence that these states have experienced record Latino population growth (roughly half of all U.S. population growth between 2010 and 2019). Latino population increases resulted in a subsequent growth of eligible Latino voters in Arizona (+8%), Nevada (+10%), Florida (+9%), and Texas (+8%). In Florida, Latino voters accounted for a record setting 17% of registered voters. Simultaneous electoral eligibility declines among non-Hispanic whites magnified the electoral outcomes of the Latino population surge. Non-Latino whites in battleground states saw eligibility fall dramatically: Arizona (-12%), Nevada (-18%), Florida (-13%), Texas (-12%). On balance, this means that the Latino vote was pivotal in the statewide partisan shifts of 2020.

Turnout and engagement

Despite their population surge, Latinos have long been accused of "punching below their weight" when it comes to voter turnout. At the time of going to press, final turnout tallies had yet to be released, but NALEO estimates that Latino turnout would increase by 15% compared to 2016. If these estimates are correct, such an increase could put historically lackluster Latino turnout rates, usually hovering just shy of 50% since 2008, up around 63%. Higher than normal voter enthusiasm among Latinos voters hint at abnormally high turnout rates, as well. Latino Decision/NALEO tracking poll suggests that 70% of Latino registered voters consider their 2020 ballot to be more important than 2016. Among Latino registered voters, 48% of survey respondents reported that they had already cast their ballot as of November 2nd. 41% of those remaining said that they were "almost certain to vote." A majority of Latino early voters (54%) cast absentee ballots through the U.S. postal citing strong trust in the system.

Vote choice and issues

In 2020, Latinos voted overwhelmingly in support of democrat Joe Biden at 70%. Far from a monolithic voting bloc, 27% of Latinos voted for Donald Trump. Latino support for Trump increased by 9% over 2016. This may have resulted from the Trump campaign's pivot away from immigration policy to pandemic related issues. Moreover, Latinos in 2020 were less likely to say that President Trump was "hostile" to Latinos (26%) and more likely to say that he simply "didn't care" about Latinos (47%) than in 2016. In 2016, these numbers were 55% and 29%, respectively.

A comparison with non-Latino whites provides strong evidence of a widening racial and ethnic political divide in U.S. politics. The Latino Decisions Election Eve Poll showed a majority of non-Latino whites (56%) voted for Trump. Only 41% supported Joe Biden. There is question as to whether Latino support for Democratic candidates has increased as part of a larger shift towards the democratic party or if it is reflective of unfavorable Republican candidates.

Favorability ratings for Joe Biden (70% favorable) among Latinos were higher than for other democratic contemporaries. For example, among Latinos, Nancy Pelosi received a 54% favorability rating. Two important points emerge from this comparison. First, democratic party identification does not ensure a sky-high favorability rating among Latinos. Second, Latinos genuinely seem to like Joe Biden as a favorable choice for president.

Election 2020 & COVID-19

The election of 2020 has been widely discussed as a referendum on President Trump's COVID-19 response and Latino political behavior supports this perception. Latino survey results reveal that 70% of Latino respondents disapproved of President Trump's handling of the pandemic, the same percentage reporting a vote for Joe Biden. A look at the impact of COVID-19 by race and ethnicity help explain their feelings of disapproval. According to the CDC, Latinos are 2.2 times more likely to contract COVID-19 than non-Hispanic whites, 4.6 times more likely to be hospitalized and 1.1 times more likely to die as a result of COVID-19. Latinos are also shown in tracking polls to be most likely to experience a COVID-19 related job loss than non-Latino whites by 9% or or experience a reduction in hours or pay due to COVID-19 by 14%. In light of these statistics, the top election issues for Latinos are not surprising: (1) Covid-19 response, (2) health care costs, and (3) Improving wages and job creation. This is sharp shift from 2016 when the top issue for Latinos were: Immigration, the economy and education.

In sum, Latinos proved decisive in election 2020. The growth in the Latino voting population turned strongholds into battlegrounds. Their enthusiasm for voting may have finally "awoken" the proverbial sleeping giant that has effectively lain dormant for decades. The question now becomes: will the giant stay awake in coming elections?

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Trump won the senior vote because they thought he was best on the economy – not immigration

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Voters aged 65 and over have chosen the Republican candidate at every United States presidential election since Al Gore became the last Democrat to win them, in 2000. Many pre-election polls showed Joe Biden might buck the trend: YouGov's final poll had Biden ahead among seniors by 4 percentage points, for example. The pandemic provided a potentially strong reason for seniors to pick Biden, given the increased risk from COVID-19 for older people. But the early post-election polls showing that despite his wins in the popular vote and the Electoral College, Biden lost senior voters by 51-48% nationally. This was an improvement on Hillary Clinton's 52-45% loss among seniors in 2016, but Democracy Corps, which carries out post-election polls following every national election cycle in the U.S., found an even wider margin among senior voters in the battleground states, 57-43% in favour of President Trump over Joe Biden.

The pandemic had some impact on older voters, but not enough to swing them decisively to Biden. The Democracy Corps poll asked people who voted for or considered each candidate what factors (from a given list) drew them toward that candidate, and pushed them away from the other. For seniors, the single biggest factor that drew them to Biden was "to deal with COVID", but it only attracted 30% of them, a smaller share than for any other age group. Similarly, 32% said that Trump's handling of the pandemic put them off, but again this was a smaller factor than it was for voters under 40. A direct comparison of the candidates in terms of their ability to deal with a pandemic showed a majority of seniors actually favoured Trump, although a smaller majority than that which voted for him.

Seniors picked Donald Trump largely because they thought he would be best for the economy. 47% of seniors who chose or considered Trump said it was because he created a strong economy and could end the recession. No other factor was picked by more than 25% of these voters. Furthermore, when asked to compare the candidates' ability to handle the economy, seniors said Trump would be better than Biden by an even bigger margin than they ended up voting by.

Smaller factors helping Trump among senior voters were law and order, and his stance toward China. Being tough on China was the second-most popular reason to pick Trump among this group, and in a direct comparison of the candidates they again favoured Trump's stance on China over Biden's by a bigger margin than his vote share. Similarly, Trump outscored Biden on law and order among this group by more than his vote share.

Trump's 2016 candidacy and the early years of his presidency were characterised by an emphasis on immigration, including his proposed border wall. Yet this was not such a significant factor this time for the senior voters who picked Trump. While they favoured Trump over Biden to deal with immigration, this was by a smaller margin than their votes for Trump; and further, only 20% picked his border wall and tough stance on immigration as a reason to vote for Trump.

Overall attitudes toward immigration and diversity among senior voters should also discourage the view that they picked Trump for these reasons. By a margin of 64-26%, senior voters in the Democracy Corps battleground poll picked the statement "Immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents", rather than "Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care". They also picked a statement in support of racial and ethnic diversity over one criticising it by a margin of 76-15%. Only on a pair of statements about racial discrimination against Black people did seniors equivocate: equal numbers (44%) picked each of: "Racial discrimination is the main reason why many Black people can't get ahead these days" and "Black people who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition". This is in contrast with other age groups, all of which endorsed the statement blaming racial discrimination.

Seniors have been a solid voting bloc for Republican presidential candidates this century, and despite indications that that would change this cycle, Trump managed to retain a majority among them. His exploitation of law and order was a factor, but the key to his over-performance among this group was the economy and their belief that he had the credentials to get the U.S. out of its recession. This dominated any reservations they had about his handling of the pandemic.

Did German Americans again support Donald Trump?

In our analysis of the 2016 Presidential election, we showed German Americans paved Donald Trump's road to the White House through Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania. We argued the failure of many polls to accurately predict the 2016 elections, especially in so-called American Heartland, must be attributed to the failure of recognizing the distinct electoral behavior of the overlooked German Americans. IN 2020, the Midwest was again a contested battleground and again, analysis of the electoral behavior of German Americans allows better understanding voting patterns in critical swing states.

The German American Experience
Forty-four million Americans claim German ancestry. They constitute a large heritage group, and the largest by far in the Midwest. Between 1850 and 1890, Germans arrived in the millions to settle, transforming the frontier wilderness into farmland and fuelling the Midwestern industrialization with manpower and entrepreneurial spirit. Politically, they were never a unified voting bloc. Many were freethinkers, fighting against slavery and for women's suffrage. They founded newspapers and led labor movements. Others were leading Evangelicals, forming the Missouri Synod, one of the most conservative religious bodies of the country. For decades, political parties vied for the vote of this heterogeneous immigrant group.

Things changed in the wake of two world wars. To avoid stigmatization, German Americans stopped speaking German, anglicized their names and became outwardly more American than any other European immigrant group. As a result, most contemporary German Americans are barely recognizable and are perceived as "white" or "rural" voters. Yet, despite their low political profile, German Americans have shown common voting patterns for decades.

'Ghost Pain of the Past'
Today's German Americans are more conservative than their ancestors. Most counties of heavy German American heritage are rural and vote Republican. We suggested in 2016 the steady economic decline in agriculture and domestic manufacturing in the Midwest made German Americans receptive to populist messages with racist overtones, a view implied by other political scientists and sociologists. A new, empirical study suggests German Americans' support of Trump in 2016 was not a simple outcome of party affiliation or an articulation of racism. Rather, German Americans were enticed by Trump's isolationist agenda, an ideological preference their communities had developed long before 2016. In fact, presidential candidates with policies of protectionism and anti-interventionism have consistently benefited from the German American vote. In the 1992 race, third-party candidate Ross Perot opposed NAFTA and the first Gulf War. He shared many views on trade and foreign policy with Trump and performed better among German Americans.

Interestingly, the tendency to support anti-interventionist presidential candidates even extended to Obama, who proved more successful than any Democrat among German American voters, Obama proposed a foreign policy agenda that contrasted sharply with that of John McCain, who offered a continuation of George W. Bush's interventionism in the Middle East. German American support for America's first African American president reached close to 60% in many counties of America's heartland, making it very unlikely that racism was the primary force behind the swing toward Trump in 2016. Rather, this shows a consistent attraction to isolationist candidates rooted in the first half of the 20th century. That's when German Americans vehemently opposed U.S. military intervention in Europe while being forced to rapidly assimilate.

But can past traumas still influence voting behavior? Research on the persistence of historical legacies such as voting behavior in former slaveholding counties in the South shows political attitudes can be passed down over generations even while the experiential link to their origin is lost. It appears German American attraction to isolationism is a ghost pain of the past.

What happened in 2020?
Considering German American's attraction to isolationist candidates, Trump faced few vulnerabilities as a result of his "America First"- doctrine: He abolished NAFTA, withdrew from the Paris Agreement on climate change, pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal, started trade wars, snubbed military leaders and announced troop withdrawals from NATO allies. However, a central tenet of isolationism is a strong desire to stay out of trouble through non-involvement. Trump's inability to deescalate domestic crises and his incendiary response to Black Lives Matter protests, in particular, led to a polarization of Midwestern German Americans along the lines of the rural and urban experience. Trump attracted even larger numbers of German American voters in rural areas than in 2016 while urban German Americans withdrew their support. In a rare scenario, Iowa and Wisconsin parted ways in their preference. Judging by the margins, German Americans were highly relevant to the outcome in the Midwest as Cuban Americans were in Southern Florida. This election again showed the inefficacy of coarse concepts such as the "white vote" and the "Hispanic vote" for making accurate regional predictions.

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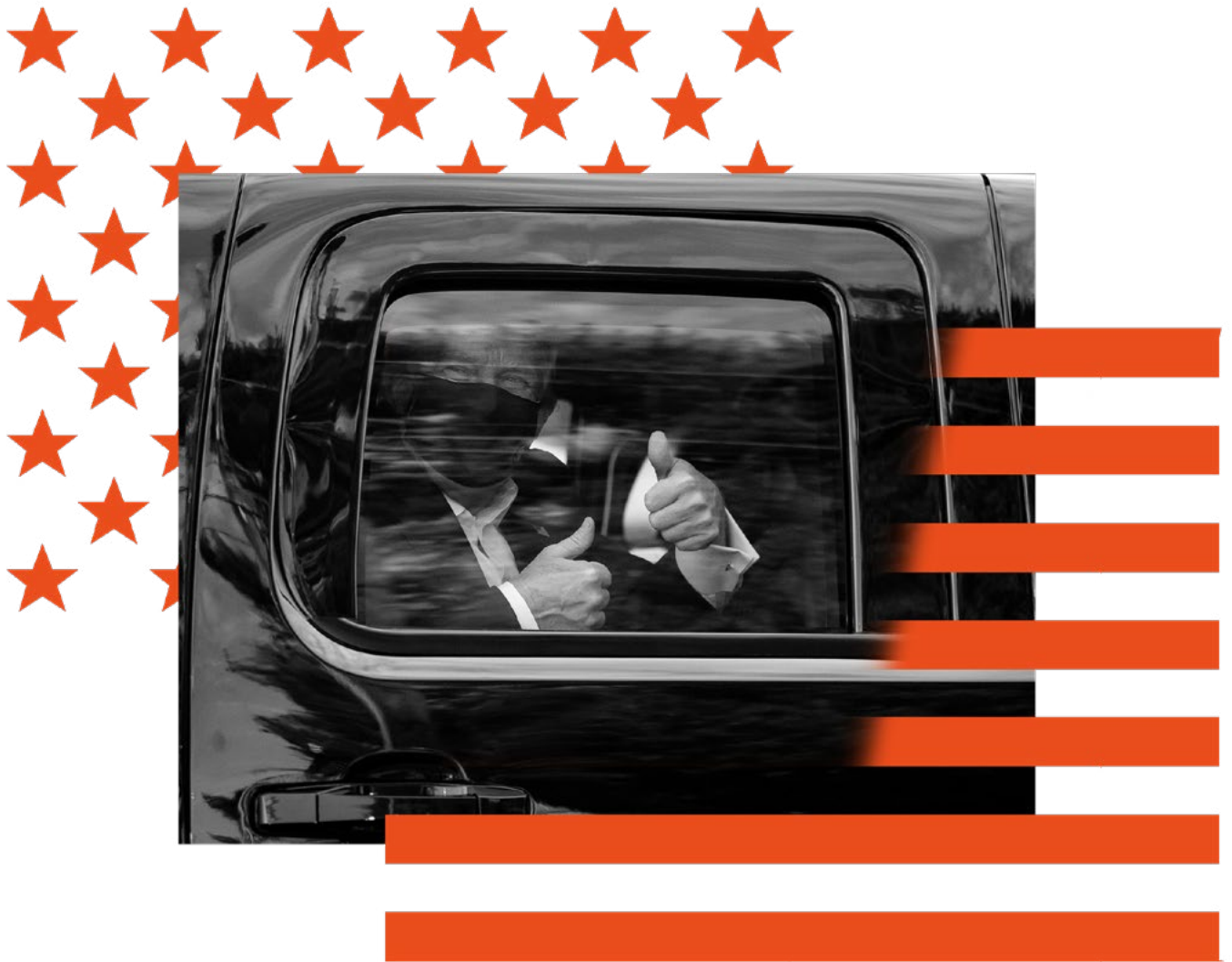
Candidates and
the campaign

The emotional politics of 2020: fear and loathing in the United States

We usually expect presidents to be in command of their emotions. By contrast, Donald Trump has always been characterized by his emotional volatility and unreliably, often compared to a tantrum-throwing toddler. Marina Hyde, reflecting on the president's response to his impending election loss in a *Guardian* article on November 6, 2020, suggested that for "parents of small children, Donald Trump's latest meltdown is extremely, totally, instantly recognizable." At the time of writing, the hashtag #trumptantrum is trending on Twitter, with users sharing memes and video clips poking fun of the president's refusal to accept defeat in the election.

Trump's emotional register, however volatile, has always been dominated by anger. This is significant because the recent history of U.S. politics has been largely characterised by emotional regimes of positivity. In particular, presidents often draw on the positive and forward-looking emotion of hope. For example, Barack Obama's "Hope" poster became iconic in his campaign, while Bill Clinton branded himself "The Man From Hope" – conveniently, of course, he originally hailed from Hope, Arkansas.

By contrast, although Trump's mantra, "Make America Great Again," embodied hope for a transformative future, this was countered by his consistently and essentially angry rhetoric.

Trump's anger has been put to good use and could be seen as essential to his brand of politics. I have previously made the case that we can see Trump's brand of "angry populism" as an indication of a change in the "emotional regime" – or the dominant ways of talking about emotions in public which underpin political regimes. Trump's anger propelled him to office because it allowed him to voice the discontent of voters who have felt left behind by globalization, economic transformations and cultural change. But in doing so, it also signaled the salience of an angrier form of politics more generally – a shift we have seen played out over the past four years.

While Trump's angry populism clearly continues to resonate with his core voters, with more than 70 million casting their ballots for him, it also appears to have lost some of its shine amid the profound crises facing the world and the United States in 2020. Perhaps most obviously, it is easier to be successful as an angry challenger than an angry incumbent.

However, more importantly, there is evidence to suggest a shift in the emotional regime as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. While there is no doubt that the Black Lives Matter protests were driven by anger at the injustice of police violence, the overwhelming mood of 2020 has been one of fear. People are afraid of the virus itself, as well as of its economic and social consequences. Although theorists of emotion often view fear as an emotion driven by irrationality, in this case the fear could be seen as both reasonable and justified given the frankly terrifying circumstances.

And here, the responses of Trump and Biden to this fear have reflected an important and fundamental difference between their responses to this fear. Trump's strategy has been one of denialism. From the very earliest days of the pandemic, when he reassured citizens that the disease would disappear "like a miracle," to his insistence, after returning from hospital treatment for coronavirus at the Walter Reed Medical Center, that Americans shouldn't "be afraid of it," he has consistently sought to minimize the severity of the pandemic which has so far killed 237,000 citizens.

By contrast, Biden has made the coronavirus the key theme of the election, leading to a surge in support among older voters who have been justifiably concerned about Trump's handling of the pandemic given their greater vulnerability. He has consistently emphasized the need for a clear plan for handling the pandemic, tackling the fears head on.

Biden may not come across as the most charismatic and energetic presidential candidate, but much of his appeal can be ascribed to the fact that *he* is not Trump. As such, he has benefited from another negative political emotion – loathing of Trump.

Fear and loathing do not offer a promising starting point for an optimistic vision for the future. But the ambition of facing the fears – and taking action to solve its causes – offers a more hopeful emotional politics, and possibly the best way forward. The scenes of celebration on the streets of New York, Philadelphia and Washington D.C. following on from networks calling the election for Biden also highlight the importance of positive emotions – including joy and relief. While Biden's path ahead is rocky given the intense polarization and division of the U.S., whipped up by the force of angry populism, it also holds the possibility of a future of overcoming the fears that has for so long seemed out of reach.

Prof Karin Wahl-Jorgensen

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Character and image in the U.S. presidential election: a psychological perspective

Prof Geoffrey Beattie

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My latest book is on a topic a million miles from politics, but not a million miles from Donald Trump, it seems. It's on the psychology of trophy hunting - men and women who kill the majestic 'Big Five' (lion, elephant, rhino, buffalo and leopard) so that they can sit beaming at the camera with the dead animal at their feet. They pose with their rifle or cross-bow, the instruments of killing in a little iconic tableau representing power and dominion, representing their authority.

They have narratives about the hunt, of course, about how they love the animals, about how hunting allows them to get close to nature, about human bonding and, of course, the evolutionary 'naturalness' of killing large prey. But it's never about this; it never has been. Killing large prey was never about providing food for the family, it generates too much meat to even share in a reciprocal exchange, it has always been about display - display of knowledge, cunning and resolve. Social scientists evoke 'costly signalling theory' and talk about its evolutionary implications. And it is display that drives trophy hunting today – but now it's about the display of wealth and resource (trophy hunting is a very expensive activity).

It's all about the image; everything else is secondary. Image is especially important in this narcissistic age of ours. Those with weak self-esteem can boost it with these images, their Duchenne smile of achievement on display, the fatal wound of the animal temporarily hidden. Most narcissists stick to parading in different clothes on Facebook and counting their likes but those whose personality fall within the Dark Triad of narcissism, Machiavellianism and (non-clinical) psychopathy seem drawn to it. Indeed, a lack of empathy and a degree of callousness (characteristic of the Dark Triad) may be necessary conditions for trophy hunting, and trophy hunting and its depiction in images and films clearly facilitate the maintenance of narcissistic flow (another necessary condition). Such individuals don't feel for the animal, the animal is secondary, it's only a prop for the main actor. It's all about the person with the rifle, the main man.

And so to politics - in an interview with David Frost in 1987 (now hastily rediscovered) when Joe Biden first ran for the presidency, he said that the most important attribute for any Presidential candidate is 'strength of character'. We all know what he meant. He meant 'strength of good character'. Character allows some attempt at truth and justice, and consistency. Bad character allows something else - winning at any cost, all about me, the flooded gurgling steam of narcissistic flow necessary to keep the fragile ego watered and intact. Like the trophy hunters, the narrative has to be different to make it palatable, to stop it being risible. 'Make me feel great again' becomes 'Make America Great Again'.

And narcissists can be incredibly myopic - they only see what they want to see, to stop them getting upset. Trump never saw climate change nor Coronavirus and when I say 'saw', I mean it quite literally. In our lab, we have analysed individuals with particular personality characteristics as they read climate change articles. Optimists who suffer greatly from 'optimism bias' and believe wholeheartedly in the 'power of positive thinking' (written by Norman Vincent Peale – Trump's favourite author, and his family's pastor when he was growing up) skim over the articles and their longest gaze fixations are on any sections of the articles disputing the science. That's the 'good' news that they like to hang on to, even if there's little scientific basis for these critiques. But that's all they see. And this biased pattern of fixation feeds into their perception of the threat of climate change - it won't affect them – maybe other countries, maybe their children's children, but not them personally. Therefore, they do nothing.

Connect up optimism bias with narcissism, and you have a nexus of traits driving attention and perception, only noticing certain things, fixating on this word rather than that, it is predictive and anticipatory. It maintains and reaffirms a mind-set but without necessarily any conscious awareness driving it. These gaze fixations are measured in micro-seconds but help establish a world view that most of us cannot recognise.

So Trump lost, he misread COVID, he never saw it; he misread climate change, he never saw it. He spent too much time watching the iguanas fall from the trees in Florida when he was golfing at Mar-a-Lago in that cold snap of December 2017 - frozen iguanas persuading him that climate change was a hoax, fake news. But the weather isn't climate, cold snaps don't contradict climate change, fragments aren't the whole, moments aren't the final story, they can't be.

Images fade, no matter how desperately you want them to be indelible. They fade like footprints in the snow, as the season changes, leaving just dirty looking puddles behind. That was the indelible image of the U.S. Presidential election in 2020 - for me at least.

Branding and its limits

The 2020 Presidential election shows the power and limitations of branding. Branding can overcome a struggling campaign organization (Trump), a divided party (Democrats) or a less-than-ideal candidate (Biden). Branding comes with significant limitations. First, the market can suddenly change leaving a brand badly positioned. Second, branding works if the product it is supporting works. Third, establishing a brand narrative, values and story allows competitors to position themselves as just being the opposite. Such an oppositional positioning strategy elected Biden because it let people vote against Trump who might usually vote for Republicans but it did little good for the rest of the Democratic field much of which lost after being successfully branded by Republicans as far left ideologues.

Trump's re-election campaign originally centered around the country's strong economic performance and the promises he had kept during his first term and trying to brand his Democratic opponent as an unacceptable alternative. In February, Trump looked positioned to win relatively easily but the world changed during that month when a novel coronavirus developed into a global pandemic. COVID could have been a showcase for the underlying product and boosted Trump to an easy re-election. Instead, it was a marketing disaster as the Administration's slow and inconsistent response and its strict adherence to the highly targeted emotional brand that swept it into office undermined the Trump brand promise and limited its ability to attract new supporters. During COVID, Trump didn't seem like the effective manager, strong leader and problem solver his brand promised and the crises COVID set into motion were hardly making American great again. Instead he seemed to blame others for the crisis and, as he said in his own words "take no responsibility" for the crises or decisions his administration made about handling it. Trump held regular briefings about the crisis that often went on too long while devolving from their stated theme into shouting matches and expressions of mutual disdain between him and the media. These events showed that the Trump product might not work as the brand had promised. Second, COVID undermined Trump's brand by undermining the economy. Third, COVID amplified extant racial tensions and allowed Trump's opponents to again question his racial attitudes thus tapping into questions of identity and equity that were raging in in the country during his term. Fourth, restrictions on public gatherings in most of the country limited Trump's ability to hold rallies. Rallies served several purposes for the Trump campaign including 1) exciting the committed by bringing the brand to life thus generating positive buzz around the Trump brand 2) attracting the wavering and undecided by showing that it was OK to support Trump, 3) providing the campaign with live customer data and 4) giving the candidate and campaign a test bed for new themes and issues. It is no coincidence that late in the campaign, when Trump started doing live events again that the campaign's messaging improved. Given the way that the voting rules had been relaxed to allow more early voting, it was too late by this point for Trump to show the wavering and undecided that it was OK to support him or that he was more competitive than the polls were saying as it turned out was so.

The Biden campaign was aided by environmental conditions, by Trump's performance and by Trump's refusal to adjust the brand to a changed market. Biden's campaign shows the importance of the power of having the right brand value combination at the right time (competence, inclusion and empathy) plus an aspirational message about the future (build back better). The Biden camp also demonstrated the power of segmentation when it restricted the level at which new taxes would kick in to $400,000 meaning upper middle-class Americans appalled by Trump could vote for Biden unafraid of a tax rise.

Both campaigns and the brands that they developed are a testament to what the political scientist Alan Abramowitz has termed "negative partisanship". Biden turned the campaign into a referendum on Trump by staying out of the way thus allowing Trump to become the face of the crisis. This elected Biden but it did not give him a mandate to do anything in office aside from not act like Donald Trump. This helped down ballot Republican candidates who presented their opponents as supporting their party's left-wing figures and their agenda, especially those that the Biden team had endorsed. By campaign's end both parties had given voters things to reject but little to support. Biden won, the Republicans held a skinny Senate majority, picked up House seats and did well at the state level; something that is important as House redistrict takes place within this term.

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Celtic connections: reading the roots of Biden and Trump

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As elections become more driven by the marketability of the personalities of individual candidates, so increases the emphasis placed on their backgrounds. Personal narratives are brought to the fore, invoking a rich inheritance of adversity and triumph. For all that, there has been a lack of sustained attention given to the claimed and projected heritage myths around presidents and presidential campaigns. This gap in the literature is surprising, since national ancestry has frequently been a factor, not just in the image-building around candidates, but also in the negative mobilisation of ethnic and religious belonging. Examples range from the anti-Irish Catholic strains in the campaign against Kennedy to the racist undertones of the "birther" movement against Obama.

Biden in Ireland
In spite of historic anti-Catholic prejudices, scholars have long highlighted the power of the Irish American vote. In this context, the Democrat candidate Joe Biden has made a virtue of his Irish forebears, quoting Seamus Heaney in speeches and using the first presidential debate to assert an ancestral heritage characterized by tenacity. Indeed, his Secret Service codename is widely named as "Celtic." Biden campaigners, moreover, established an "Irish Americans for Biden" committee, describing Biden as a "fellow Irish American" and "a friend of Ireland and Irish America". In Ireland itself, obvious links with previous Democrats are highlighted, with journalist Niall O'Dowd predicting "the most Irish election since John F. Kennedy". Also, a hook for a sidebar story was provided by a local relative eccentrically campaigning for Biden in his "homeland." However, the bulk of coverage in Ireland centres on what importance may be attached to Biden's "5/8ths" Irishness in securing U.S. votes, and the final weekend of the campaign sees the *Irish Examiner* emphasise the potential of the Irish diaspora in the potential swing states of Florida and Ohio, along with the ultimately significant Pennsylvania. In terms of its utility, Biden's association with Ireland draws myths around self-betterment, social class and a culture of religious observation. These are discourses that reach beyond the Democrat constituency to appeal to elements of the conservative right, while remaining entangled within complex mythologies around the left-leaning fight for Irish self-determination.

Trump in Scotland
While incumbent President Trump's ancestral association with Scotland is more palpable – his mother was born on the Scottish island of Lewis – the greater focus within Scotland is on his business interests in the local leisure and hospitality sector. While there have been strained links between Trump's political style and the often rancorous politics of Scotland, the political consensus in Scotland is some way to the left of the President. While Trump has a minority of well-wishes – a recent poll found that 15% of Scots would give him their vote – Scots media tends to portray Trump disobligingly, as a cartoonish blowhard. In the public sphere more broadly, an iconic image of Scottish comedian Janey Godley bearing a handwritten sign insulting Trump is widely shared whenever there is deliberation of the president's character. The irreverent humour enabled by Trump's singular personality and demeanour even extends to conventional news coverage, with local Scottish newspaper the *Ayr Advertiser* producing a parodic cliché of parochialism in the Trump-related headline "Turnberry hotelier tests positive for coronavirus".

Conclusion
As attitudes towards Trump in Scotland tend to show, shared heritage does not necessarily equate with goodwill, and remains subject to deeper ideological commitments. Moreover, the previous focus by Trump on President Obama's heritage points to a malign articulation between national origins and deeper cultural and racial prejudices. While discourses of Scots/Irish origins sit safely within a conservative United States mythology, a more diverse candidacy seem likely to generate more complex and dynamic set of alternatives. Future research should be alert to the shifting racial and ethnic hierarchies within which these heritage claims are circulated and reproduced.

Kamala Harris, Bobby Jindal, and the construction of Indian American identity in political campaigns

Democratic Vice President elect Kamala Harris's public embrace of her multi-ethnic identity in the 2020 presidential race starkly contrasts former Republican presidential candidate Bobby Jindal's presentation (or rather, neglect) of his racial identity in 2015. Identity has had an increasingly important role to play in U.S. politics, contributing to the ever-expanding divide between Republicans and Democrats. The differing presentation of identity between these two Indian American candidates illustrates the divide in racial politics between the parties. As Lilliana Mason articulates in *Uncivil Agreement,* race is one of the many social identities through which American political parties have become sorted - "with Democrats now firmly aligned with identities such as liberal, secular, urban, low-income, *Hispanic, and black*" and "Republicans now solidly conservative, middle class or wealthy, rural, churchgoing, and *white*".

One underrepresented, left-leaning racial-ethnic group that has had increased visibility in the 2020 election thanks to Kamala Harris are Asian Americans. Her appeals to the South Asian American community through references of her Indian immigrant roots in addition to the South Asian voter outreach efforts of the Biden-Harris campaign seemed to have energized this increasingly politically active population. Towards the end of her presidential campaign, Harris released a video with Indian American celebrity Mindy Kaling in which they made masala dosas and bonded over their shared South Indian heritage. Harris performed various "isms" of Indian culture such as addressing Kaling's father as "uncle," and celebrating the fact that he stored spices in Taster's Choice Jars (a unique commonality amongst Indians in the diaspora). Recently, Harris's use of the Tamil word "chitti" meaning "mother's younger sister" in her speech at the 2020 Democratic National Convention sparked a wave of excitement, especially amongst Tamil Americans. It set off the creation of the Chitti Brigade, "a political sisterhood of 150-200 members stretching across 20 states" committed to the election of Biden-Harris.

In her 2020 study, Sara Sadhwani found that a co-ethnic candidate on the ballot stimulates Indian American voter turnout. If this is the case, then we should have expected more support from the Indian American community during the campaign of the only other Indian American to run for the White House, Bobby Jindal. However Sadhwani notes, "For Harris, if Indian Americans *perceive her as sharing their identity* as an Indian, she will probably see not only strong support but a boost in voter turnout from Indian Americans."

Jindal's campaign did not include any direct appeals to Indian Americans that would enable them to perceive him as "sharing their identity," nor did he promote his own Indian heritage. While Harris shared a sense of pride in her Indian roots, speaking frequently about her Indian immigrant mother and celebrating immigrants as an integral part of America, Jindal focused on the elimination of hyphenated identities, the need for immigrants to assimilate, and the belief that race does not matter in the election of a candidate. Jindal eclipsed his status as a racial minority in the Republican party by embodying a conservative, and very prominently, a Christian identity, that would appeal to his majority white base. Members of the Indian American community on both the Left and the Right criticized this dissociation with his Indian immigrant background. Celebrities such as comedian Hari Kondabolu coined #JindalSoWhite, while comedian Hasan Minaj placed Jindal on the "Mount Rushmore of shitty Indians" in an episode of *Patriot Act*. Sampat Shivangi, a physician and founding member of the Republican Indian Council and the Republican Indian National Council said, "We were supporting him all these years because he's one of us. ... It hurts when somebody says that I am no more Indian-American. A lot of people felt that he used Indian-Americans to rise up to where he is. Once he got in, he just abandoned all of us."

Given the existing literature on affective polarization and social sorting, it makes sense why Harris and Jindal approached their presentation of ethnic identity so differently. Scholars suggest that candidates attempt to take on the identity of their constituents to increase their chances of being perceived as a legitimate representation of their party. In considering the Democratic party's more celebratory approach to diversity and immigration compared to Republicans, Harris is enabled by the discursive framework around diversity that is part of the Democratic party rhetoric but is unavailable to Jindal as a member of the Republican party. Nevertheless, Harris and Jindal present a case through which to understand the role of racial and ethnic identity in American presidential politics. More broadly, this presidential race highlighted the massive polarization in the American electorate, and elucidated the ways in which non-white candidates of each party are likely to present themselves in future elections. This will be increasingly important to examine as America is projected to move towards a non-white majority in the coming decades.

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Stratagems of hate: decoding Donald Trump's denigrating rhetoric in the 2020 presidential campaign

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During the first presidential debate in 2020, President Donald Trump raised eyebrows when he refused to condemn white supremacy but, instead, summoned its proponents to his defense. "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by," he said, during an exchange with Joe Biden about public demonstrations against police brutality; protests that had sometimes become violent. Trump's entreaty to the Proud Boys hailed a known far-right and neo-fascist all-male organization known for promoting political violence in the United States and Canada. It was hardly the first time he had engaged in such dog whistling.

We first wrote about Trump's tendency to engage hate speech as a political tactic following his election in 2016. Hate speech is not merely language that can hurt someone's feelings. Rather, we are concerned with words and phrases that, as Jae-Jin Lee writes, are "abusive, insulting, intimidating, and harassing," and "may lead to violence, hatred, or discrimination." Our work includes language so coarse and provocative it becomes campaign strategy. Such "hate stratagems" work like tactics of war. Candidates use them like missiles to linguistically invade elections and destroy opponents using epithets, threats, and baseless lies.

Trump and his team used hate stratagems throughout the 2020 contest. Mostly, these stratagems took one of four basic forms, first identified in earlier research: appeals meant to inflame the emotions of followers; denigrate the outclass; inflict permanent and irreparable harm on an opponent; and to conquer.

Inflaming the emotions joins arguments with moral sentiments to draw in people who share similar beliefs. When leaders use speech to generate anger or malice, something sinister happens: logic gives way. In June 2019, Trump, in a tweet, accused Democrat opponents of engaging "the ultimate act of moral cowardice" by not defending border patrol agents, their silence evidenced a lack of "character, virtue, and spine." The president's attack called his supporters to anger, but the signifier for their wrath was not entirely clear. From whom and for what were the Democratic candidates supposed to be defending the agents? Such silencing rhetoric is common in hate stratagems that inflame emotions.

Stratagems that denigrate the outclass includes language that frames Black Americans, especially those in the inner cities, as lacking in values and virtue, and not taking personal responsibility for what happens in their lives. Going back to at least the Nixon administration, Republicans have run campaigns emphasizing a rhetoric of law and order. Trump takes this line even further, and divides the nation between (white) Americans who built the nation and represent its best values, and everyone else who poses a threat. During the summer of 2020 when cities in the U.S. erupted in violence following the police murder of George Floyd, Trump tweeted in support of law enforcement, and against protestors, "These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won't let that happen… when the looting starts, the shooting starts." By calling the protestors thugs, the president was marking them as "other," suggesting they had reduced rights to speech and dissent as provided in the first amendment. Twitter marked the tweet as in violation of site conduct rules, a significant step to take against the President.

Stratagems that inflict permanent and irreparable harm: In the leadup to the second presidential debate, Donald Trump attacked the moderator, NBC's Kristen Welker, as a "radical Democrat" who was "unfair" and "no good." Such denigration of the media as necessarily bad for democracy is common to the 45th president, who famously began his tenure as president by calling the mainstream media "the enemy of the people." Such language is delegitimizing past its moment of utterance. It requires the hearer to decide which side they are on, and discard the other. In such circumstances, no opportunity for discernment remains, only joining a bandwagon and holding on.

Stratagems that seek to conquer are about winning the election. One way to win is to go toe-to-toe on the issues. The other is to emphasize a difference in approach and personality. Trump did this successfully against Hillary Clinton in 2016. In the days before his first debate against Biden, Trump doubled-down on this approach, tweeting "I will be strongly demanding a Drug Test of Sleepy Joe Biden prior to, or after, the Debate on Tuesday night. Naturally, I will take one also. His Debate performances have been record setting UNEVEN, to put it mildly. Only drugs could have caused this discrepancy???" This tweet gave Trump two avenues for victory, neither requiring him to prepare or do well in the debate. The first was that if Biden performed well, it had to be drugs, which would be proved by a test (that Biden almost surely wouldn't take, a refusal that would also impugn his character). The second was that if Trump seemed worse than Biden, the answer was to be found in his abstinence, and so a bad performance was not due to his inadequacy or inferiority to Biden, but because the latter was juiced.

Hate stratagems work in campaigns when one side wants not only to win, but to rhetorically destroy the opposition. No one has used the technique with more mastery than Donald J. Trump. His defeat in 2020 leaves open the question as to whether a polarized electorate will continue to produce candidacies like his.

Campaign finance and the 2020 U.S. election

There is an old adage that "money isn't everything." However, in politics money equals success in elections. Without it, candidates cannot seriously mount a campaign, and certainly the candidate with the most money has an advantage. In fact, the issue of money in U.S. campaigns has been an issue for over a century. Ironically, while there is a level of money that permits entry into American political contests, there are limits to its impact. The 2020 Election shows that full campaign coffers do not always guarantee victory.

Pundits prior to election night predicted a "blue wave," almost guaranteeing a repudiation of President Trump and the Republican Party's policies over the past four years. What resulted, however, was a picture of the United States that showed a razor-sharp split between Republican and Democratic voters. While the winner of the presidential election is former Vice President Joe Biden (although litigation will continue for some time to come), what is clear is that the U.S. is split, more or less, evenly. We know that, not just because of the results, but because of the impact (or lack thereof) of the money spent in the 2020 election.

The money spent by Democrats on Senate and House races in the U.S. in 2020 demonstrates there was a clear cash advantage in several races. Democrats targeted Senate races in Kentucky (Mitch McConnell), Maine (Susan Collins), and South Carolina (Lindsey Graham), and spent hundreds of millions of dollars only to lose all of those races. Moreover, Democrats spent millions of dollars on House races, only to have Republican candidates pick up congressional seats.

Democratic spending in the 2020 election did end up with some obvious successes. They held their majority in the House, won the Presidency, and have a chance to win the Senate majority. But taken as a whole these victories are not overwhelming, which begs the question what is the power of money in American politics?

The answer to this question suggests three things about modern American campaigns. First, candidate message matters. Some Democrats blamed the Green New Deal and Defund the Police movements for Democratic losses in competitive districts. Likewise, President Donald Trump's tone and combativeness is blamed for turning away traditionally Republican suburban voters, especially women. Messages can be amplified, spread and promoted, but message quality is ultimately free. Resonance of political message matters, and it is one of those intangible aspects to a political campaign that cannot be bought.

Second, candidate quality matters. There were some very competitive House and Senate races in 2020. Senate races in Georgia, North Carolina, and Arizona were close, perhaps because those races were reflections of the Presidential election. Still, other races that were thought to be extremely competitive weren't. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell handily defeated a Democratic challenger who raised millions of dollars. Senator Lindsey Graham defeated his well-financed Democratic opponent. Senator Susan Collins, considered by many an extremely vulnerable Republican in a very Democratic state, retained her seat. What is the similarity in these three races? The incumbents had a longstanding relationship with the electorate. It appears that the voters in those states still liked them, and despite money amplifying the opponent's message that was not enough to unseat them.

Third, campaign finance as a political issue has lost the traction it once had. The 1990s and early 2000s was a time when money in politics was a major political issue. The McCain-Feingold Act (formally the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002), and the Citizens United v. FEC decision in 2010 were major political issues that garnered national attention. In fact, President Barack Obama chided the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in Citizens United in his 2010 State of the Union speech, stating that the decision allowed "special interests" and "foreign corporations" to give money to campaigns. Famously, Justice Alito mouthed "not true." However, the issue of campaign finance as a campaign issue is largely over. Parties have figured out the new norms of super-PACs and small donor funding online. While candidates may criticize each other over who their contributors are, the end result is that there is no current movement politically to change much of the way campaigns are financed.

With the results of 2020 election still contested, and election litigation ongoing, what should we make of campaign finance? It seems that if 2020 has shown anything it highlights that admission to the campaign arena is expensive, but success requires something money cannot buy.

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The Emperor had no clothes, after all

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One of the most telling moments during the cumbersome U.S. election process, happened on Thursdafy, November 5. With the counting process well under way, President Trump held a press conference in the White House, denouncing what he considered massive electoral fraud. The most amazing thing, however, was that almost all the major networks simply cut away from the press briefing and went on with their own news program. Obviously, something had already changed. The change did not occur in the rhetoric of the president, since for a long time he had been complaining about mail voting and the counting process. Almost every one of his claims had been voiced before, without bringing in new evidence.

It has to be remembered that on that moment, President-elect Biden had not achieved a majority in the Electoral College yet, so formally President Trump was still fully in power. It took two more days for the media to feel sufficiently confident to project Joe Biden as winner of the elections. While the contest was still fully open, it was clear to everyone who kept an eye on the counting process that the Biden-Harris ticket would gather sufficient support.

The comments following the Trump statement were even more clearly devastating. Most reporters denounced the false claims by the president, and the dreaded word "lie"—something they had hesitated to voice previously—was now openly used. So, on Thursday evening, it was already clear that Trump was no longer treated with the respect and the decorum that one associates with a U.S. president. In the days following that statement, the announcement that the team of President Trump wanted to launch various legal procedures, was seen as irrelevant. It was clear for everyone that Donald Trump from now on could be considered as a loser and an outsider.

This abrupt reversal of a deferential attitude toward the incumbent president is extremely revealing about the dynamics of the Trump presidency. Former U.S. presidents are usually treated with respect. Even if their term in office was not an unqualified success, after a relatively short period they easily can dress in the cloak of a senior statesman, reflecting back on the political process. There is not much a former president can do wrong, given that visibility traditionally is highest when opening presidential libraries and attending funerals.

The very quick and abrupt withdrawal of respect for President Trump suggests that this kind of venerable future will not be self-evident for this president. The rapid fall from grace is much more a pattern we find in authoritarian regimes: once it is clear that the authoritarian leader no longer is able to cling to power, he rapidly loses every form of respect, and he is even singled out for mockery. This is a process we could clearly observe in 1989, when the authoritarian regimes of Central and Eastern Europe were toppled. The rapid fall from grace of Donald Trump fits this pattern; it is not the standard exit for a legitimate and democratically elected head of state.

One could say that the loneliest place in hell is reserved for former dictators: they do have followers as long as they are in power, but as their hold on power is based on fear, and not on loyalty, this vanishes from the moment they are expelled from the corridors of power. The fall from grace, therefore, illustrates the way authoritarian leaders exert power. The statements of Donald Trump on November 5 did not have anything exceptional: already years ago he made a habit of sending out twitter messages sowing doubts about the legitimacy of the electoral process. Already during the summer of 2020, *The Washington Post* estimated that, while in office, President Trump had publicly uttered more than 20,000 "false or misleading claims". As long as he was well shrouded in regal habit, apparently these claims were faithfully reported by the news media. This tells us a lot about the dynamics of authoritarian regimes: even when it is very clear to everyone that the leader has lost any sense of reality, no one actually dares to voice that sentiment. Over the past years, President Trump has made a number of statements that are clearly wrong, and some of them even endangered public health. However, there was not a single news outlet that decided to stop repeating those misleading claims.

The four years of President Trump have raised numerous questions about the stability of liberal democracy. To some extent, this might even be the most important question: the respect that is routinely attributed to political leaders, to a large extent renders them immune for normal intellectual scrutiny. Liberal democracy is based on a free exchange of ideas, but the system clearly was not designed to withstand a whole barrage of systematic misinformation, that is duly accepted as being within the norms of the acceptable. We all know that screaming "fire" in a crowded movie house can cause immediate harm. One could wonder whether that strict provision is sufficient to safeguard the future of liberal democracy, in an era of increasingly sophisticated misleading communication efforts, and the apparent readiness to accept such claims.

Trump's tribal appeal: Us vs. Them

The narrow margin in the 2020 presidential election underscores a now-familiar question: how to explain the enduring and stable support for Donald Trump, even in the face of economic distress, scandals, and global pandemic? Part of the answer lies in how he has crafted his political appeal over the last four years, but with an institutional cost. As approached by political communication researchers, traditional issue framing contests involve partisans promoting policies that deserve political support in a deliberative arena, supported by political institutions and the journalistic routines that map onto them. But the press has been under attack, particularly during the last several years, and these contests are in disarray - resistant to conventional argumentation, freed from norms of restraint, and fed by a climate of weaponized misinformation. Trump has both helped create and exploit these conditions, while pursuing a strategy that hardened a remarkably stable base.

Reflecting on the 2016 election results, I argued in this report that Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) slogan-frame was a logical xenophobic extension of the foundation laid by former President George W. Bush's Global War on Terror (GWOT). But I anticipated that voters would eventually recognize Trump's inability to deliver on his hyperbolic promises to restore the old mythical ways. But his failure to do so hasn't dented his appeal to nearly half the electorate, who perceive he speaks for them. Indeed, if anything he has gained support, with an identity-based appeal that taps into something primal, allowing him to ward off the usual political consequences for his many transgressions (including impeachment). If the GWOT encouraged a fear of the non-U.S. "other," geo-political security threats have been downplayed under "Trumpulism" in favor of more local fear-based appeals around immigration and border walls. Underlying this strategy and built into MAGA was an appeal to preserving the general order of things, among those who feared it being taken away. Thus, the GWOT became turned inward toward the domestic political other. Social justice movements and their wide-spread recent protests were cast as threats to law and order, creating a self-fulfilling prophesy when, following its "protest paradigm," delegitimating news coverage served to attract militarized responses from police and right-wing militia groups.

So, what now is the organizing principle that, as I've put it before regarding issue framing, helps to "meaningfully structure the social world"? Trump has aligned himself with certain policies (e.g., abortion, trade, deregulation), that can be located within conventional political narratives, but more powerfully encompassing is *Us against Them*. The tribe and the leader *are* the principle. Invoking political scientist Robert Entman's widely-cited framing elements, Us vs. Them makes the very existence of the other side the *problem definition*. In addition, the frame carries an often-explicit *moral evaluation*. (Trump, for example, declared Democratic vice-presidential candidate Kamala Harris a "monster.") And it implies a *causal interpretation*, that electoral defeat means the loss of a way of life. The *treatment recommendations* are obvious: not only must the unworthy other side be defeated politically but destroyed (or at least "locked up").

That approach may have made Trump's base impervious to erosion these last few years, but it has come at a great cost to civic health and the machinery of governance, the traditional institutions designed to mediate conflicts over social visions. Such a polarizing and Manichean framework yields an asymmetrical contest, where one side, convinced of an existential threat against it, is willing to cast aside traditional norms (losing means the process was illegitimate, by definition), and encouraged to do so by a self-reinforcing counter-institutional media willing to do the same. Institutions require commitments, trusting that the overall interests of the community will be served, even if those of the tribe are momentarily not. Us vs. Them opposes these commitments.

The pandemic has helped further reveal that schism, with even the simple act of wearing a mask becoming politicized and a visible symbol for the divide. Like institutional commitment, masks reflect concern for others, protecting them against one's own transmission, but to be effective the entire community must embrace them. No wonder they have become a tribal marker; they don't fit an Us vs. Them, anti-institutional mentality. Trump has attacked the value of expertise and the press, rendering him and the country ill-equipped to effectively respond to this public health threat, an enemy he couldn't humiliate or completely deny. And yet his base remained intact, as Trump attempted to declare victory by executive decree: "We're rounding the corner." The tribalist strategy was effective for Trump up to a point, but failed to win over a majority while taking a toll on the national political infrastructure. No matter the electoral outcome there would have been major repair work needed in the years to come.

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News and
Journalism

When journalism's relevance is also on the ballot

The closing of the polls on Tuesday, November 3, 2020, marked the opening of a campaign waged by Donald Trump and his allies to discredit the counting of mail-in and provisional ballots that were sure to erode—and eventually overtake—Trump's lead in in-person voting in several key states. By Thursday night, when Trump's lead was nearly permanently gone, claims of election fraud reached a fever pitch among the primetime news hosts on the right-leaning Fox News Channel. Sean Hannity, on his eponymous program *Hannity*, launched a relentless diatribe delegitimizing the vote counting in deeply Democratic Philadelphia County in Pennsylvania. At one point, he interviewed Newt Gingrich, a Fox News contributor and former Republican congressperson who had served as Speaker of the House of Representatives in the late 1990s. Gingrich did not mince words in describing the ongoing ballot counting: "No one should have any doubt, you are watching an effort to steal the presidency of the United States." Gingrich added, "This is a genuine deep crisis of our survival," and he called for the arrest of ballot counters and the dismissal of legitimately cast votes. Even with all the heated allegations of unfounded wrongdoing, Gingrich's statements were frighteningly anti-democratic. But this is not some marginal figure appearing on some marginal media channel on the fringes of society. Instead, here was the former Speaker of the House appearing on a major news outlet watched by millions of people to discredit a democratic election and call for the arrest of government officials in charge of tallying ballots.

What does this rant, and its amplification by a news channel, tell us about journalism in 2020? We believe it signals how much our media culture has changed. That is, even if traditional journalistic practices remain more-or-less intact, the overall media environment has changed radically in recent times. This is true of the supply of media content, particularly through the right-wing media machine of Fox News, talk radio, and digital news sites like Breitbart and the Daily Wire, but also in the distribution of information generally through social media platforms that operate wholly outside traditional news channels—as in the case of Facebook groups promoting QAnon and anti-vaxxer conspiracies. What is at stake, as we argue in a forthcoming book, *Redefining Journalistic Relevance: The Struggle to Claim What's True*, is the very relevance of journalism in our contemporary media culture.

The relevance of journalism—in its mainstream, neutral, evidenced-based form—is in danger in no small part because identity politics have weaponized what news we watch. Historically, our theories of media—especially around media consumption—have been based on characteristics of information. Give people good, relevant, accurate information about public affairs, this perspective assumes, and a vibrant democracy shall follow.

With ideological media machines in overdrive, however, journalism and political communication scholars have come to realize that the world is no longer defined by information, but by identities. Trump supporters see in their candidate their own unspoken—and, perhaps for many, unacknowledged—values such as fear that immigrants will steal their livelihoods. Central to this is a decades-long cultivation of a belief that mainstream news outlets spout liberal agendas littered with "fake news," a term that Trump has so effectively deployed to capture many people's pre-existing frustrations with journalists and to undermine any future confidence in the press. Trump supporters listen when he tells them to ignore journalists—the "the enemy of the people," he calls them—and get their information only from him or his sanctioned sources such as Fox News.

Meanwhile, for those on the left, investment in mainstream journalism organizations became symbolic of their commitment to democracy, which they conflated with the Democratic candidate. For the first time in decades, the needle on media trust markedly ticked upward—but only for those leaning left. Recent surveys show that, in America today, your media choices are driven primarily by your ideology. And even while fears about online filter bubbles are mostly overblown, research shows how people overall inhabit increasingly divergent information worlds: you watch Fox News or you watch MSNBC, you listen to friends and family who think the same way you do and you dismiss everything else as fake news. And doing so makes us feel secure in our righteousness, secure in our sense of self. As Daniel Kreiss wrote in describing Tea Party members, "Fox News was less about 'information' than 'family'"—reinforcing the power of identity for understanding contemporary media and politics.

Even once the dust settles on Election 2020, this dynamic of "identity over information" will endure as polarization deepens. Journalists in recent years have tried to figure out how to better reach communities that seem beyond their grasp, from people of color to rural whites. But journalists will never rebuild trust among people who feel marginalized by news by simply offering more of the same—more helpings of "just good, accurate news." Doubling down on high-quality information is not without merit, but it misses the essence of the challenge ahead: How does one do journalism in a way that appeals to people's core identities, particularly as those identities fracture and diverge and confound traditional universals?

In hindsight, this election may be seen as a pivotal test of mainstream journalism's relevance and the difficulty of doing news that matters in the emergent media culture.

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Beyond the horse race: voting process coverage in 2020

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In October 2020, a group of political communication researchers came together to form a scholarly network of experts, the Election Coverage and Democracy Network, with the intent to assist journalists with the difficult job of covering an extraordinary election. The group produced a white paper detailing recommendations for covering the election, taking into account journalistic constraints. Among the recommendations included in this white paper was for journalists to elevate voters and election administrators, producing coverage that focuses on the *process of voting*.

This sort of coverage, what I call voting process coverage, is valuable to news outlets as it features human-interest, showing everyday acts of civic duty, and also permits journalists to distance themselves from the partisan fray. Voting process coverage is also likely to appeal to news consumers, who are more likely to be voters. I define voting process coverage as coverage that includes a discussion of electoral administration, electoral institutions, and electoral processes.

Voting process coverage might include interviews with poll workers, discussion of how ballots are counted, or footage of long lines at polling places. Such process coverage is likely featured throughout the election cycle but is more likely to be allocated airtime in the days immediately preceding Election Day and during early voting. This is particularly true for television news coverage, during which time there is more opportunity for compelling visuals to accompany coverage. Importantly, this coverage can also be of utility to news consumers as they prepare to cast their ballot.

At least anecdotally, this sort of coverage was in heavy rotation during coverage of the 2020 election. While national outlets like Slate covered how the AP will decide when to make calls, and *The New York Times* reported on estimated ballot counting timelines state-by-state, local news outlets ran features on the teams that process ballot drop boxes and poll workers.

And yet, researchers have heretofore neglected the study of this subset of electoral coverage. I argue that voting process coverage is worthy of scholarly attention as it differs in important ways from the two types of electoral coverage that researchers focus on. First, unlike strategic game coverage, which discusses strategies and tactics and polls, putting campaigns and candidates at the center, voting process coverage centers citizens. Second, often issue coverage is lauded as the substantive alternative to the horse race, and yet research shows it makes up only a fraction of coverage, in part because it is unlikely to make journalists' agenda. On the other hand, co-author Christopher Mann and I find that voting process coverage is substantial and more likely to be included in broadcasts in the lead up to elections.

So how much of 2020 election coverage featured voting process? While it will take time to carefully parse the data, some insights can be gleaned from the Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer. This program analyzes a dataset featuring over 270,000 hours of television news programming and commercials, including Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC. In tandem with a voting process dictionary, validated on a manually coded dataset of 2016 and 2018 national television news election coverage, I use their search function to query caption text, pulling all instances of search terms included in the dictionary on all 3 cable networks from January 1, 2020 to November 4, 2020. As the default setting of the program captures only the utterance of the word and coverage includes more than just the term itself, I include in this query 30-second windows around each term, or the screen time equivalent of 2-sentences. To put the amount of screen time into context, I also estimate the amount of coverage given the total amount of coverage on all 3 networks. This series can be found in Figure 1. This series shows the total estimated screen time dedicated to coverage of all search terms from the voting process dictionary

As the Figure shows, a substantial amount of airtime is dedicated to voting process coverage, but this is particularly true in the days leading up to Election Day. The ratio of voting process coverage was at its highest on November 3, 2020 (0.358), with the second-highest ratio falling on Election Day (0.354).

These data underscore the argument made herein, that while horse race coverage has (understandably) been the topic of scholarly focus, this focus neglects a subset of coverage that is of empirical and normative interest: voting process coverage. While much analysis of the 2016 election focused on media failures, as scholars unpack the role of the media in the 2020 election, the story of voting process coverage may be a compelling example of democracy-worthy news practice.

text = "voter suppression | id | voter participate | turnout | ballot | absentee ballot | early vote | vote |voter |precinct number |vote machine | v
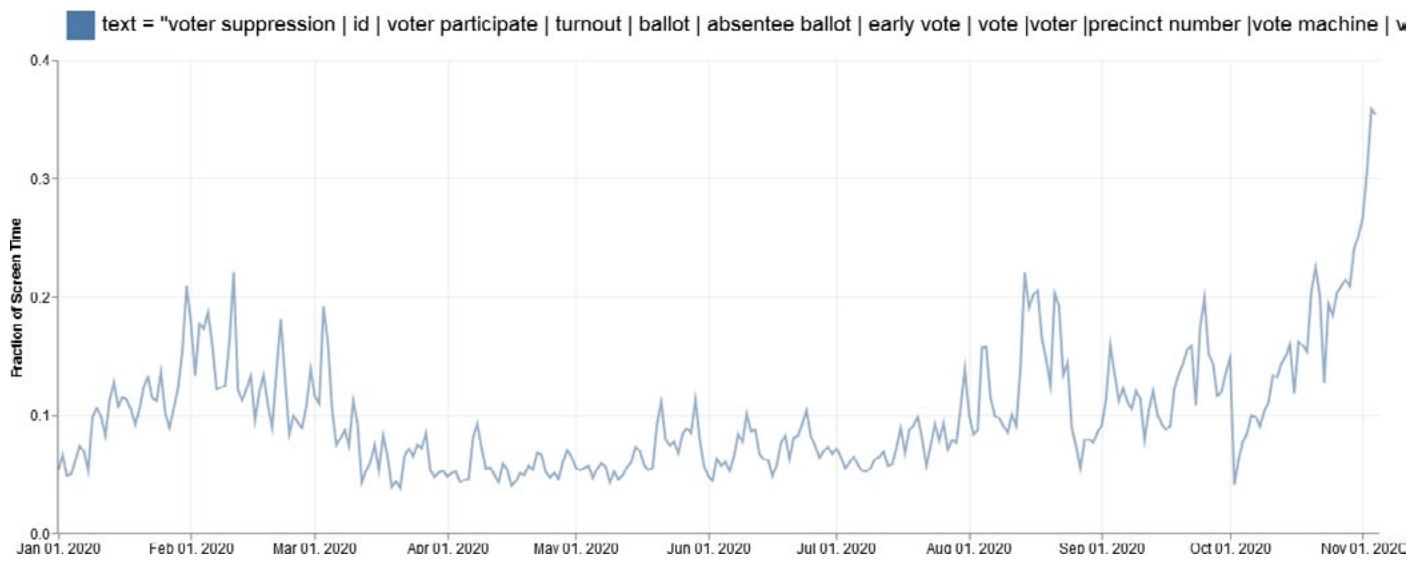
**Figure 1: Ratio of airtime on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News
dedicated to voting process coverage**

YouTube as a space for news

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During the 2020 election, YouTube was a popular space for campaign-related news and information. While the platform houses videos on a wide range of topics—everything from cooking tutorials to music videos—Americans are increasing relying on YouTube as a way to get news. According to a recent Pew report, about one quarter (26%) of U.S. adults say they get news on YouTube, and of these people, seven-in-ten (72%) characterize it as "important" in their keeping up with news.

Yet understanding the role YouTube plays as a news space, especially during an election, is marked by several contradictory factors. First, YouTube includes channels from mainstream news organizations as well as alternative media and hyper-partisan channels. Second, some YouTube news channels have a large number of subscribers with videos that garner millions of views, while other channels have a smaller audience. And third, YouTube is both a video distribution platform and a social space for commenting, liking, and sharing.

These factors create a unique space for news and raise concerns about channels that propagate extreme political viewpoints and disinformation, and the potential for viewers to become more polarized, especially if algorithms recommend a steady dose of hyper partisan videos to certain users.

Partisan media YouTube channels

During the first six months of 2020, I examined video content from six partisan media channels (3 conservative and 3 liberal) and one mainstream news channel (*ABC News*). I drew a random sample of 50 videos from each YouTube channel and coded the videos for several factors. Overall, I found that partisan channels have several characteristics that facilitate political commentary and viewer involvement.

For example, partisan channels overwhelmingly use a "presentation" video format where the host(s) talks directly to the camera/viewers with no interactions with guests/experts (see Figure 1). Across the six partisan channels, presentation videos accounted for 72% to 96% of a channel's videos. This is in stark contrast to *ABC News*, where only 22% of videos were in a presentation format (a majority of videos were in a "hosted" format featuring conversations with guests/experts).

Partisan channels were more likely to focus exclusively on stories about politics and government, while *ABC News* had a wider set of topics they also covered (see Table 1).

And lastly, partisan channels employ several practices to increase viewer involvement with video content (see Figure 2). Certain techniques—like encouraging viewers to watch additional videos or to follow the channel on other social network sites—were common and not distinct to partisan channels. The same was not true for other techniques, like making direct appeals to viewers,

telling personal stories/anecdotes, and providing comment prompts. Although these practices were not as frequent, they were more likely to occur within partisan channels, and particularly those with lower number of subscribers.

These findings illustrate some of the ways that partisan YouTube channels differ in format, focus, and facilitating involvement. The 2020 election severed as a backdrop for these practices.

The 2020 election

During the 2020 election, YouTube faced pressure to quickly identify and limit the spread of election-related conspiracy theories. A notable case was the October 14th *New York Post* story about a recovered laptop that allegedly belonged to Hunter Biden (son of Democratic candidate Joe Biden) that contained information of shady business dealings involving his father. The story was criticized for a lack of verifiable evidence and for being part of a Russian disinformation effort to sway votes from Joe Biden.

In response, YouTube did not take any direct action to remove the *NY Post* video story, but did reaffirm their commitment to taking down conspiracy videos that promote violence. This decision stands in contrast to the efforts of Facebook, which limited sharing of the *Post's* story until third-party fact checkers could verify it, and Twitter which initially blocked the story and the *Post's* main Twitter account.

By Election Day, the *Post's* YouTube video amassed only a modest 174,695 views, likely due to its limited circulation on Facebook and Twitter. Yet, the YouTube reach of the story is far greater than a single video. The story was fodder for many YouTube channels, particularly partisan media channels. By one estimate, over 1,983 videos about the "Hunter Biden laptop" story were published in the remaining weeks of the campaign. The most popular of these videos have millions of views, and, with the exception of the *Daily Show*, are from channels associated with a conservative perspective (see Table 2).

Ultimately, many U.S. voters encountered election-related news and information on YouTube. As the Hunter Biden laptop story shows, the potential for sharing and believing election disinformation is real, especially at the hands of partisan media channels that focus on political commentary and prioritize viewer involvement. However, this potential is not equal across all YouTube users, and reflects the complicated space that YouTube now occupies as a source for news.

The Young Turks (L) | David Pakman Show (L) | Niko House & The MCSC Network (L) | The Daily Wire (C) | Common Sense Show (C) | Next News Network (C)

ABC News

- filmed event
- hosted
- presentation
- text over visual
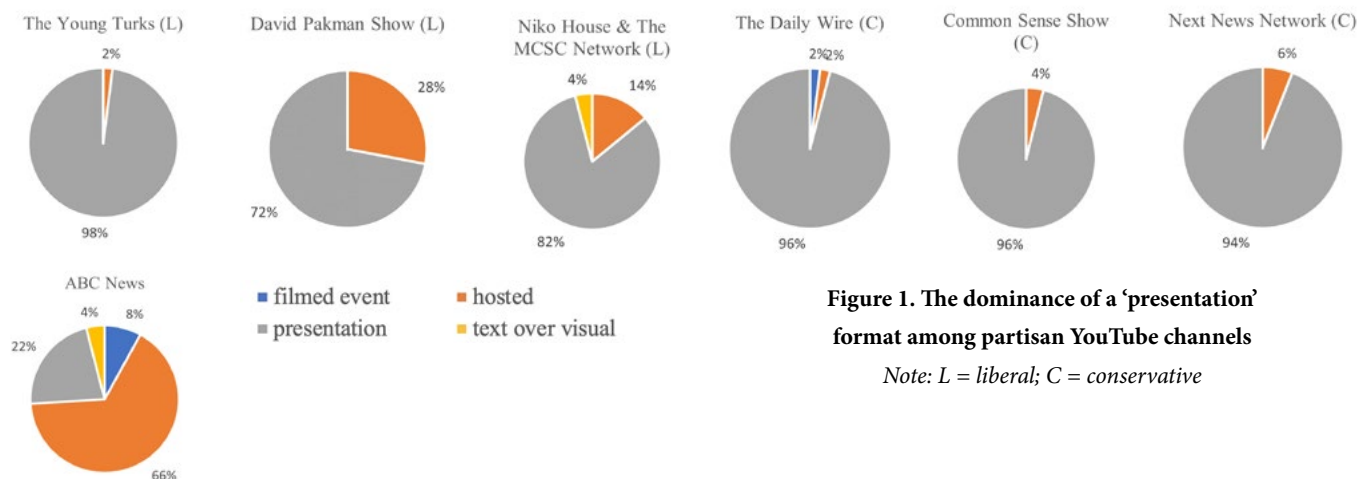
Figure 1. The dominance of a 'presentation' format among partisan YouTube channels

Note: L = liberal; C = conservative

Table 2. Most popular YouTube videos about the Hunter Biden laptop story

	Channel	Title	Views
1.	Sky News Australia	EXCLUSIVE: Joe Biden's son emailed shop owner about hard drive to 'get it back': Former Trump chief	4,869,812
2.	The Daily Show with Trevor Noah	Jordan Klepper Hits One Last Trump Rally Before the Election	4,495,002
3.	Fox News	Tucker exclusive: Tony Bobulinski, ex-Hunter Biden associate, speaks out on Joe Biden	3,645,258
4.	Fox News	Ted Cruz grills Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey for 'censoring' Hunter Biden story	2,464,575
5.	Fox News	Tucker: Hunter Biden documents suddenly vanish	2,058,828
6.	StevenCrowder	EXCLUSIVE: Giuliani Shows New Hunter Biden Evidence ON AIR	2,026,201
7	Fox News	Tucker: Hunter Biden documents suddenly reappear	1,975,989
8.	Fox Business	DNI Ratcliffe: Hunter Biden's emails are 'not part' of Russian disinformation campaign	1,376,583
9.	Newsmax TV	I looked through the Biden hard drive	1,372,033
10.	Fox News	Twitter CEO speaks out after tech giant suppresses NY Post's Hunter Biden story	1,338,597

Note: from Oct 14 to Nov 3, 2020

- watch other videos
- follow other SNS
- provide comment prompts
- respond to viewer comments
- adress audience directly
- tell personal story
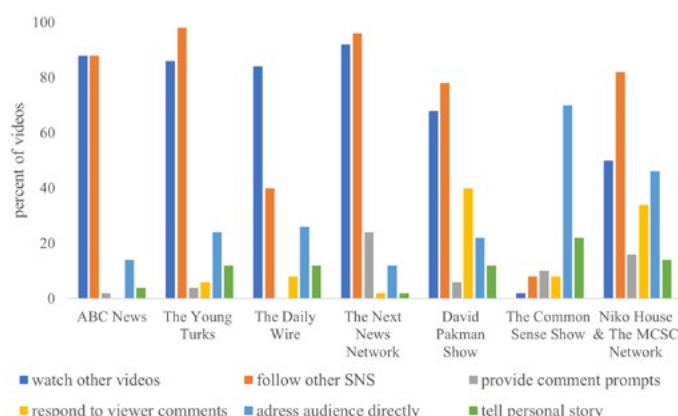
Figure 2. Viewer involvement practices across YouTube channels

Note: Channels ordered from highest number of subscribers to lowest

Table 1. Political focus among partisan YouTube channels

	Percent of a channel's videos about politics / government
ABC News	44%
The Young Turks (L)	78%
The Daily Wire (C)	74%
Next News Network (C)	82%
David Pakman Show (L)	82%
Common Sense Show (C)	50%
Niko House & The MCSC Network (L)	82%

Note: Channels ordered from highest number of subscribers to lowest;

L = liberal; C = conservative

2020 shows the need for institutional news media to make racial justice a core value of journalism

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"This is vindication for a lot of people who have really suffered...you know, the I can't breathe? That wasn't just George Floyd. That was a lot of people that felt that they couldn't breathe...and you spent so much of your life energy trying to hold it together" – Van Jones, CNN

After CNN called the election, commentator Van Jones, a Black man, choked up on screen, sharing his emotions and a narrative about how Black people in American felt more unsafe than ever before just going about their daily lives in Trump's America – just going to Walmart, as he explained, might result in someone shouting a racist slur.

Trump was not a spigot who turned on racism in this country, but he was the faucet that let it flow at full blast. Many other Americans breathed a sigh of relief because that hate will not come from the highest office of the land, in fact, with Kamala Harris, there is a Black woman in that high office as second in command. The fight is only just beginning…again.

The most alarming point the U.S. needs to reckon with is that 71 million Americans voted for Trump, a man who went so far as to signal his support to white supremacists from the presidential debate stage. Institutional news media needs to lead the way: it is clear that the whiteness of the institutional news media, along with its heteronormativity, its fundamentally secular bent, and its belief in neutrality, leads to many blind spots. I argue this point in *News for the Rich White and Blue*, my forthcoming book, and suggest commercial pressures are unlikely to pave the way for much reform in terms of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Like many white Americans, I could not fathom how so many Trump voters could brush away his racism. Unfortunately, the Black voices (and BIPOC generally) who work at institutional news outlets are left explaining to white readers and viewers that racism doesn't go away in a summer of national reckoning. These voices are still on the sidelines. Even though *The New York Times* is led by Dean Baquet, a Black man, voices that would argue that anti-racism is a core value of journalism are still not empowered to do so at *The Times*, unless it is a historical project, as with Nikole Hannah Jones' 1619, or as opinion contributors.

This 71 million turnout of people endorsing racism is a reminder that the U.S. has not interrogated its past and the institutional news media has largely avoided doing so. One explanation is the lack of power accorded to minority voices in newsrooms, where newsrooms, including television, appear diverse but real power is still held by white decision-makers. Another explanation is the reluctance to see racial equity as a basic news value rather than as a political orientation. This is objectivity gone wrong.

Just this summer, the AP style guide suggested capitalizing Black, and in 2019, instructed news organizations to avoid using ambiguous language like "racially-charged" or "racially-motivated" - pushing news organizations to make a call that something or someone is racist. Still, for journalists working in institutional media, to endorse Black Lives Matter is to move from neutrality to political activity. This will be a lasting challenge for any effort for newsrooms that try to tackle systemic racism.

My colleague at Illinois, Pulitzer-winner Leon Dash, sued *The Washington Post* in 1972 with six other Black journalists while working there for workplace discrimination. He told me a story about how at the time, he watched a Black reporter wearing a Black Power necklace get fired for refusing to take it off. I wonder about this - what was the *Post* thinking? Would the necklace come off and suddenly, the journalist no longer find Black injustice as part of his professional worldview? The sad fact is that Black journalists are still taken off coverage of Black Lives Matter because of their "compromised" objectivity. This is a mistake and a failure to reckon with white privilege in newsrooms. As transgender journalist Lewis Raven Wallace writes, "Obviously, I can't be neutral or centrist in a debate over my own humanity."

The question that remains for me is this: how can U.S. newsrooms reckon with racism better and get to the not-so-deep underbelly of why 71 million Americans saw no problem voting for Trump? White newsrooms cannot keep having people of color doing it for them (and us). To do so requires interrogating core values and viewing racial justice not as politics but as a core value of journalism.

As Wendi Thomas, award-winning investigative journalist and editor of social justice news outlet MLK50 wrote to me after I asked for ways to make this very argument to my other colleagues, "Newsrooms have always operated under some foundational truths: It's good for people to have enough food to eat. Shelter is important. Quality education matters…..That expanding those truths - in the face of undeniable and incontrovertible quantitative and qualitative evidence that Black life is devalued and endangered in every way that can be measured - strikes the old guard as a violation of objectivity shows that the facts don't matter as much to your senior colleagues as much as they might argue."

Newspaper endorsements, presidential fitness and democracy

The overwhelming majority of endorsements by large American daily newspapers in the 2020 presidential race can be read as saying with urgency, 'I told you so. Now, please listen this time before it is too late.'

What did the newspapers tell voters? *The Tampa Bay Times* in Florida reminded readers its endorsement of Democrat Joseph R. Biden in 2020 -- that it warned in 2016, "Donald Trump is stunningly unprepared and temperamentally unfit for the presidency, and he has played upon our deepest fears and worst impulses with reckless rhetoric, wild promises and flagrant disregard for the truth" (October 8, 2020).

The term "unfit" or "fit," questioning candidate Trump's aptitude and decorum for the presidency, was used at least 30 times in 2016 by large daily newspapers in endorsements of his opponent, Democrat Hilary Clinton, whom the newspapers found well-suited for the position. (I had access to most but not all of the newspaper endorsements.) In 2020, the terms "unfit" or "fit" were used at least 13 times, but the smaller number does not reflect less concern about Trump's character and temperament. In fact, there was greater concern as newspapers now had a record of his behavior as president to focus on rather than largely descriptions of his personality.

That record led 47 of the top 100 circulation newspapers to endorse Biden for president in the 2020 election. That number includes 15 newspapers which did not make an endorsement in 2016 but felt compelled to do so in 2020. Still, 47 was a decrease from the 57 that endorsed Hilary Clinton in 2016, partly because 8 newspapers in the top 100 were a part of the McClatchy chain, which did not allow endorsements unless newspapers could interview both candidates.

President Trump, who was endorsed by only two of the top 100 newspapers in 2016, saw his support among newspapers rise to 7. Another 26 newspapers did not endorse, either as a matter of principle or chose none of the candidates, compared to 31 in 2016.

In addition to their continuing frame of President Trump as unfit for the office, the newspapers favoring Biden framed the president as dangerous to democracy because of his propensity to ignore facts, spread falsehoods, and attack the press as well as his authoritarian proclivities. The words 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' did not appear in the 2016 endorsements, but appeared at least 10 times in the 2020 endorsements in reference to Trump's loose way with words.

The Los Angeles Times was so alarmed, it endorsed Biden on September 10, much earlier than newspapers typically endorse. In the editorial *Joe Biden isn't just 'anybody but Trump.' He's the right fit for our polarized time,* the newspaper observed, "Nothing less than the health of our constitutional democracy is at stake," and there was nothing the president could do to change their mind. The *Philadelphia Inquirer,* in Biden's home state, assailed the president's "nonstop assault on American democracy" in the editorial *Pennsylvania needs Biden* (October 11, 2020)

and the *Detroit Free Press* proclaimed that the president represented "an existential threat to democracy itself" in the editorial *Joe Biden is the anti-toxin America needs* (September 20, 2020). So concerned was *USA Today* for "the future of America's democracy," it broke tradition and for the first time in its 38-year history endorsed a presidential candidate in the editorial *Elect Joe Biden. Reject Donald Trump* (October 20, 2020). The newspaper accused Trump of making more than 20,000 false statements as president.

As noted, the president had the support of a number of newspapers, although not unqualified. *The Las Vegas Review-Journal,* one of only two large dailies that endorsed Trump in 2016, acknowledged in the editorial *Endorsement: President of the United States* that the president's "impulsive and often distasteful rhetoric" can be problematic, which allowed Biden "to make this race about presidential character" (October 3, 2020). *The New York Post*, which did not endorse in 2016, gave the president a full-throttle endorsement in *The New York Post endorses President Donald J. Trump for re-election* (October 26, 2020). However, in an unenthusiastic editorial headlined *With misgivings, vote Trump for president and Inslee for governor*, *The Spokesman-Review,* in the state of Washington, called the president "a bully and a bigot" as well as a "a wretched human being" but said vote for him anyway because his "policies and instincts for helping America thrive are generally correct" (October 25, 2020). It was the only newspaper to flip from Clinton in 2016 to President Trump.

None of the endorsements supporting the president mentioned the criticism of him as a threat to democracy; rather, their sentiments were expressed by the *The Las Vegas Review-Journal* which stated, "For all his flaws," vote for him anyway because he is moving the country forward "while embracing rather than destroying the principles of liberty and freedom that have made the United States a beacon for the rest of the world" (October 3, 2020).

Just moments ago on this Saturday, after four days after tense vote counting, the question of presidential fitness has been resolved and democracy restored. Maybe. Joe Biden has been declared the 46th president of the United States.

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Alternative to what? A faltering alternative-as-independent media

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The promise of alternative media is found in their independent, adversarial voice. What happens when that voice changes?

When discussing alternative media, the proposition has been a straightforward one: Alternative media are politically-outspoken, doing little to disguise their subjectivity. They are also ardently independent, seeing themselves as adversaries of traditional media. Particularly online, alternative media and their journalists see theirs as a better version of the news, free from the corporate pressures and proximity to power they say is corrupting establishment political journalism. These media, normally, push back on those in power – across all sorts of ways of understanding it – and see traditional media among those in power.

But is this still the case? At the close of 2020 campaign, it's this alternative-as-independent voice that appears to be faltering, and perhaps more so on the right than the left, as the distance between alternative and traditional conservative media narrows.

An entrenched conservative ecosystem

A first sign of a blurring distinction between alternative and mainstream content emerges in the conservative alternative media coverage of the end of the 2020 campaign, quickly making common cause with their corporate media counterparts. RedState defended Fox News, attacking CNN's Jake Tapper for having "the actual chutzpah to try and dictate journalistic standards to a rival news network that CNN simply cannot touch". Elsewhere on RedState, they attacked mainstream media through obsequious praise for Fox News' Tucker Carlson, who "points out in his typical excellent fashion how terrible our intellectual betters in the media are at their jobs." On that ground, this is familiar: alternative media attacking the mainstream. Indeed we expect partisan media to fire such pot shots, with MSNBC and CNN regular targets for right-wing sites like PJ Media, and Fox News regularly called to task by left-wing sites like Talking Points Memo.

Yet over and over, at the heart of much of this, is Tucker Carlson, who may be an arch-conservative, but certainly works for one of the largest media corporations. He is regularly treated as somehow 'outside' the corporate mainstream, lauded at Breitbart for "calling out" Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), and elevated at Daily Caller (a site he co-founded) where a hypothetical Carlson 2024 presidential campaign is acknowledged. In praising Carlson, a link between the alternative right-wing media and the conservative corporate media is made stronger. And a healthy distinction between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' is weakened.

What do we see on the left at the same time? On blogs like *Talking Points Memo*, *Daily Kos*, and others, they certainly attack the conservative Fox News. But 'liberal' networks like MSNBC simply aren't given the same sort of unabashed support on the alternative left. Instead, they are regularly criticized, for being more corporate, more traditional, and simply, less-alternative. *Daily Kos* describes cable news networks as "milking this moment of heightened attention [the end of the campaign] for all the ratings points and ad dollars they can rake in". On *Jezebel*'s politics site 'The Slot', they list 'terrible tweets' skewering political commentators from both the left and right, including MSNBC, the never-Trump Lincoln Project, and Crooked Media founder (and former Obama speech writer) Jon Favreau.

In other words, from the alternative liberal media we see *both* predictable attacks on ideological enemies, and a willingness to critique ideological friends, including along alternative/mainstream distinctions.

Alternative to what?

At first glance, this signals a faltering alternative-independent voice among conservative alternative media. In substance, we see little distinction between their content and Fox News', in part, and between theirs and Tucker Carlson's, in particular.

It's fair to ask how much this abandonment of 'alternativeness' among the right also reflects an ideological moment. The tie that binds seems to be an unflinching allegiance to Trump, in a further calcification of the conservative media ecosystem Robert Faris and colleagues identified in 2016. Conservative alternative media could be propping up other conservative media like the *Wall Street Journal, New York Post*, or *Fox News* to reinforce Trump's all-out assault on news media that critique him (and lambast them when they don't). It is also fair to wonder whether we'll see a similar left-ward dynamic as Biden enters the White House (though the residue of progressive-centrist primary battles suggests this is unlikely).

What remains striking is not the ideological fraternity of right-wing voices, but the degree to which 'alternativeness' has been lost. Setting aside a cynical conclusion that like-minded media would naturally reinforce each other, these shifts suggest a more fractured media ecosystem where conservative media, whether alternative or traditional, operate according to their own logics.

There is a compelling argument that a pluralistic and heterogeneous media system composed of both mainstream and alternative voices is a boon to democracies. Disagreement between media can foster better journalism as a check on complacency and offer a wider public more opportunities for news content. But now? This pluralism is less apparent, and given conservative alternative media's allegiance to both the sitting president and one of the largest corporate news companies, it certainly raises the question: Alternative to what?

Collaboration, connections, and continuity in media innovation

When it comes to the 2020 United States Elections, newsrooms will likely see that there is a fine line between news innovation for the election and how the industry is pivoting during the pandemic. With the shift to digital and a shattering of silos across different types of media (e.g., web analytics tools and even products like podcasts to their offering or toolkits), news organizations have been tinkering, developing one-off types of innovation and rethinking how to best position themselves in the media market. Covid-19 and now the U.S. elections have made these dynamics even more salient. The political climate in the U.S., along with the pandemic, have created a crisis for newsrooms. Maria Konow-Lund and colleagues argued that innovation occurs through crises, or moments of significance such as elections, particularly through shock, start-up, and transformation. Elections have always been spaces for digital news innovation such as with visuals or chatbots. Thus, with changes among audiences and new newsroom organizational realities, news organizations have been engaged in a range of innovation practices leading up to the elections. These include collaboration, connections, and continuity in innovation.

Collaboration

Media organizations started rethinking how to collaborate either through cross-media industry or within their own organizations. For example, First Draft, a project to fight mis- and disinformation online, rolled out a 14- day text message course titled "Protection from deception." This course helped teach journalists and others about tactics and techniques of disinformation, such as verifying images or media manipulation. Trusting News, a project of the Reynolds Journalism Institute housed at the University of Missouri, and the American Press Institute have similarly launched a free text message training focused on election coverage. Hearken launched The Citizens Agenda, an online guide for news organizations to ensure that citizens get information they need to vote. SOS Election fellowship matched students and recent grads with newsrooms across the U.S.

While media organizations admit that collaboration, which is central to the business of journalism, has been harder with the pandemic, during the election, news organizations have continued to develop water cooler opportunities through outdoor meetings, Zoom sessions, and Slack among others. Cross-media, especially through the influence of American media foundations, and internal collaboration during the elections has been a dynamic process emphasizing some of the principles of cross-media collaboration such as content sharing, convergence and coopetition.

Connection

Although the types of news innovations can be incremental or project-based, across the industry or within R&D or product teams, the elections have shown innovation in terms of newsgathering, format and storytelling (i.e., automated journalism, enhanced data visualizations, and automated fact-checking within and across media industry and platforms) as well as audience engagement centered on connection. Nuances and audience trust-building efforts have been central components of newsgathering and storytelling innovations. For example, after the 2016 criticism that FiveThirtyEight polling favoring Hillary Clinton winning over Donald Trump has been fraught, in 2020, the organization started forecasting uncertainty through simulation in their poll to represent a range of potential outcomes. FiveThirtyEight also took into account economic uncertainty, overall volume of important news which offset greater polarization, among other things. Buzzfeed news also recruited "Teen Ambassadors" to create election-themed TikTok and Instagram videos. In this sense, connection has occurred within a range of different influencers: from platforms, data-driven innovation to enhanced visualizations.

Continuity

Whether or not the 2020 election news innovation has been transforming the news industry or a continuation of how the industry has been adapting to the realities of the pandemic, news organizations have had to adapt themselves by finding new ways of collaborating and connecting within their own organizations and across the news industry. For example, Zoom news interviews of candidates are likely to remain relevant even in a post-election and pandemic world. But for collaboration and connection to be successful, newsrooms need buy-in and continuity beyond the elections and even the pandemic. Boundaries across news media organizations are dissolving just as what counts as news media does, thus, what factors and mechanisms facilitate the forms of collaboration and connections in innovation seen throughout the elections is going to be a good point of departure for understanding the competencies and operationalization of innovation in media industries and how through this trust in journalism can be rekindled.

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Learning from the news in a time of highly polarized media

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It is not surprising that in in a highly polarized system, people seek out the media most congenial with their views. Few people consume a "balanced diet." The American right follow a diet consisting almost entirely of Fox News. Liberals lean heavily on a few outlets, such as the *New York Times*, NPR and MSNBC. Most people, however, are media omnivores, taking in local as well as network television news, news websites, social media and some newspapers. What kinds of messages and meanings are constructed and how and what does the public learn from news in this polarized media environment?

President Trump is an active participant in the consuming and making of news, especially Fox News. He often quotes Fox News, calls directly into Fox shows, and is chummy with several of Fox News personalities. President Trump has three main outlets for his views – the "bully pulpit" of the presidency when he speaks directly to the American people as he does in news conference or coverage of his rallies, his Twitter account, and the bullhorn of Fox News. The presidency and a dedicated news channel are a powerful combination. The evidence is overwhelming that Trump/Fox affects opinion, values, beliefs, and most importantly, the behaviors of their adherents. In the current pandemic, the Trump/Fox alliance has spread false information, underplaying the risks of COVID 19 with deadly consequences. The alliance has also mobilized followers in ardent support of the President.

The President is on record, actually on tape, purposely down-playing the coronavirus pandemic. Although a member of Trump's inner circle sent a memo to the President about the potential seriousness of the disease, in an interview with Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward in January of 2020, the President admitted that he held back information from the public because he did not want to "panic" people. Initially he even praised President Xi of China for handling the Covid outbreak. In hindsight, it appears that President Trump was mostly worried about panicking the stock market which was running strongly – a good sign for his reelection campaign. In any case, President Trump ignored the virus and spent time travelling. Trump did not begin to communicate concern about the virus until mid- March, when he established a Covid Taskforce. Analysis of the President's remarks during the Covid Taskforce briefings showed a consistent pattern of downplaying the seriousness of the virus and claiming credit for his administration's handling of the public health crisis[1]. It is widely believed that the President and his Administration had little to be proud of in their management of the Covid epidemic. States and municipalities were forced to compete for scarce personal protective equipment, testing was delayed and inadequate, and first responders faced severe risks. The U.S. has the worst record in the world for numbers of cases and deaths. The U.S. is currently in a third virus peak with no end in sight.

The complicity of Fox News in downplaying the seriousness of the virus and denigrating the appropriate public health measures to contain it, especially social distancing and mask wearing, cannot be underestimated. The Fox audience was encouraged to ignore protective measures and to belittle public health mandates. It is not a surprise that there was a significant virus outbreak in the White House itself that eventually included the President and people at Fox News. A single Presidential gathering celebrating the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court – with no social distancing or masks and topped by an indoor party -- turned into a "super-spreader event" -- affecting several members of the Congress and Senate, including key players on the Senate Judiciary Committee that was scheduled to hold hearings on the nomination. The viewers of Fox News more than any other media audience believed conspiracy theories about the virus, such as its origination in a Chinese laboratory and that it was purposely spread. Fox viewers believed that the other media exaggerated its seriousness and thought the President managed the Covid crisis well. They were the only ones to praise the President and Fox News.

People do learn from the media, as we found in *Common Knowledge*, but what they learn in a polarized media environment is not the same thing. In a major pandemic, a minority who are encouraged by the President and a major news outlet to disregard expert advice are not only deadly to themselves but a great danger to everyone else.

1 Just, Marion, Joseph Saraceno and Ann Crigler. Forthcoming (2020). "Presidential Home Style: Trump in the Era of COVID-19." The Forum 18(3).

Partisan media ecosystems and polarization in the 2020 U.S. election

The modern political era is defined by polarization. Democratic and Republican members of Congress are more likely than any time in the last century to vote in partisan blocks on legislation. Watching NFL or wearing masks signifies individual partisan loyalties. Maybe most troubling is that affective polarization—increasing animosity between members of different political parties—is at a generational high. Meanwhile, social media platforms continued their ascendance as powerful gatekeepers of political information during the 2020 election campaign. While many critiques about social media's role in our polarized system are warranted, social media has wrongly become the bogeyman of polarized tribalism.

Outrage about social media's role in campaigning can be traced to the Cambridge Analytica scandal and discovery of attempted Russian election interference via bot networks in 2016. However, there is little evidence these events had consequential impact on the 2016 election. Despite this dearth of evidence, the argument laid out by documentaries like The Social Dilemma and countless feature articles is social media's algorithmic and social recommendations narrow users' perspectives, trapping them in an echo chamber resulting in increasing polarization.

On the contrary, the polarized 2020 election illustrated the reciprocal relationship between easily accessible partisan media ecosystems and their presidential candidates across platforms. The partisan systems on the right and left are not symmetric. The conservative media ecosystem centers around Fox News, but also includes online news sites, talk radio, and even fringe messageboards that proffer Q-Anon conspiracies, creating an environment ripe for polarization and misinformation. For example, conservative media amplified Trump's messaging that Coronavirus would quickly disappear and absentee votes would not be properly counted. Thus, wearing masks and voting from home became polarized partisan identifiers. His observably false claims became central to the campaign and contributed to his defeat. Trump employed distinctly polarized rhetoric that demonized his political opponents, including some fellow Republicans. This echoed across the whole right-wing ecosystem.

The liberal media ecosystem included considerably more diverse viewpoints. Many mainstream news organizations confronted Trump's polarization and demonization by abandoning norms of unbiased coverage and tacked leftward, clearly favoring Biden. Yet, these news organizations were more likely to adhere to journalistic norms of fact-based reporting and made room for conservative viewpoints. This mirrored Biden's more centrist vision of a science-based administration that would adhere to pre-Trump political norms. This less polarizing messaging eventually won the election.

While Trump used Twitter as his main communication platform, the vast majority of Americans do not read his tweets. Instead, most of his base learn about Trump's Twitter messages through news coverage, from interpersonal communication, or on other online platforms. Twitter is a tool for Trump, but he could leave in favor of another social media site, message board, or website. Regardless of where he lands, the conservative media ecosystem could choose to amplify his voice. But, when Fox turned on Trump, as they did on election night by being the first to call Biden the winner in Arizona, Trump had a harder time getting national traction.

Most Americans are apathetic to or even repelled by news and politics. The modern information environment, including the internet and social media, provides endless free and cheap non-news content. The lack of attention to journalism comes at a time when less polarized local news organizations have become victims of the fragmented media system, including the internet. This silent majority, detached from politics, encounter news incidentally in conversation or while browsing social media. However, people who momentarily linger on Fox News or MSNBC or speak with likeminded friends are far less likely to encounter opposing viewpoints than when they scroll through their social media newsfeed.

Social media plays a gatekeeping role by filtering users' newsfeeds. Facebook and Twitter deserve some credit for making more effort to identify and label misinformation compared to 2016. They were more active in identifying coordinated manipulative bot networks. But social media can be problematic for polarization in many ways, including allowing politically extreme ideas to seep into public discourse and a lack of consistent application of their own moderation policies. They grant alarmingly little transparency to allow regulators or researchers to monitor information flows. While these issues deserve attention and continue to play a role in electoral campaigns, they are not the central story of polarization in 2020. Even if all the important problems surrounding social media's role in news dissemination were solved, we'd still be stuck with a partisan and polarized electorate and partisan media ecosystems would remain entrenched. The reciprocal relationship where partisan ecosystems produce their candidates and the candidates' ethos echo back across the ecosystems would persist.

The for-profit information economy, money in politics, rampant injustice and corruption, and growing inequality create an environment for polarization and tribalism to thrive. The polarized nature of our federal government is reciprocal in that it resists structural change and creates incentives for further "winner take all" power to prevail. We need political leadership, not transformation of our social media, to exit this cycle.

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What do news audiences think about 'cutting away' from news that could contain misinformation?

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One of the defining moments of the media coverage during the 2020 U.S. presidential election came when several major U.S. TV networks decided to cut away from President Trump's White House press conference on November 5th.

NBC, ABC, and CBS all cut their feeds mid-way through Trump's sixteen-minute speech, taking the decision to stop broadcasting it to their viewers because of concerns over baseless claims about election fraud. Other networks, including CNN and Fox, broadcast the whole speech, but reported afterwards that the President had offered no evidence for his accusations.

Some observers have applauded the decision to cut away, heralding it as the moment when news organisations finally worked out how to deal with false and misleading claims from politicians.

But what do news audiences think about 'cutting away' from news that could contain misinformation?

Before turning to that, we should note that the decision made by some networks to cut away was unusual, and so were the circumstances surrounding it. The stakes were extremely high, journalists suspected in advance that the speech would be used to question the legitimacy of yet-to-be-counted votes, and the President, it seemed, would not be the president for much longer, rendering him somewhat less newsworthy and less powerful. And, last but not least, journalists were covering someone who—according to fact-checkers at the Washington Post—had made over 22,000 false or misleading claims since January 2017.

But this situation is not typical of much day-to-day political reporting. The circumstances are rarely as clear-cut or as heightened, journalists can be caught off guard by what politicians say, real time fact-checking is very difficult, and completely ignoring important politicians cannot always be justified.

Rather, when reporting on statements from politicians that could be false, journalists often face a difficult choice between some version of: (i) prominently reporting what they say because it is important for the public to know that they said it, or (ii) not emphasising what they say because it would give them unwarranted attention.

To understand how news audiences think about this dilemma we asked respondents in our 2020 Reuters Institute Digital News Report—an annual online survey across 40 different markets—which of the two options above comes closer to their view about what the news media should do when dealing with politicians that have made a statement that could be false?

In the U.S., half (50%) said "report the statement prominently because it is important for the public to know what the politician said" comes closer to their view (see Figure 1), with only 22% selecting "not emphasise the statement because it would give the politician unwarranted attention" (the remaining 28% said "Don't know"). (Importantly, we might expect this preference for reporting to be even stronger if statements are reported *as false*—but as said, this is not always possible.)

These results were largely consistent across all of the 40 markets surveyed as part of the project, including countries like Germany, Spain and the UK, which have very different media systems to the U.S. Furthermore, as I wrote in June, this general preference for reporting on potentially false claims "… appears to be consistent across a range of different socio-demographic groups like age, gender, and political leaning. Even in the U.S., where some might assume partisan differences due to different political styles, a majority of those on the left (58%) and right (53%) would prefer potentially false statements to be reported prominently – though perhaps for different reasons."

Many journalists and commentators may disagree with this preference, and others might reject the idea that journalistic practice be dictated by the audience. Furthermore, this binary choice does not fully capture the nuances of the different journalistic approaches, and it is certainly possible that people think differently about the specific case involving Trump's speech on November 5th. Also, the role of platforms should not be forgotten—as they face similar decisions about labelling and content moderation.

But the data from the Digital News Report reminds us that much of the public are generally uneasy about the news media taking the decision to keep information from them, even if the intentions are noble.

Many welcomed the decision to cut away from Trump's speech, and given the circumstances, a strong case can be made that it was the right thing to do—just as a case can be made for showing the speech in full and then fact-checking it immediately afterwards.

But we should think carefully about whether this is a good precedent for political coverage more generally. We should ask whether it is something that journalists can realistically do in practice, but also whether it is something that audiences actually want them to do in the first place, and what they will ultimately think of news media who choose to do so—especially prominent politicians that millions of people, who are often already sceptical of the news media, have voted for.

If a politician makes a statement that could be false, the news media should ____

	US	UK	Germany	Spain
Report the statement prominently because it is important for the public to know what the politician said	50%	44%	46%	53%
Not emphasise the statement because it would give the politician unwarranted attention	22%	26%	29%	32%
Don't know	28%	31%	25%	16%
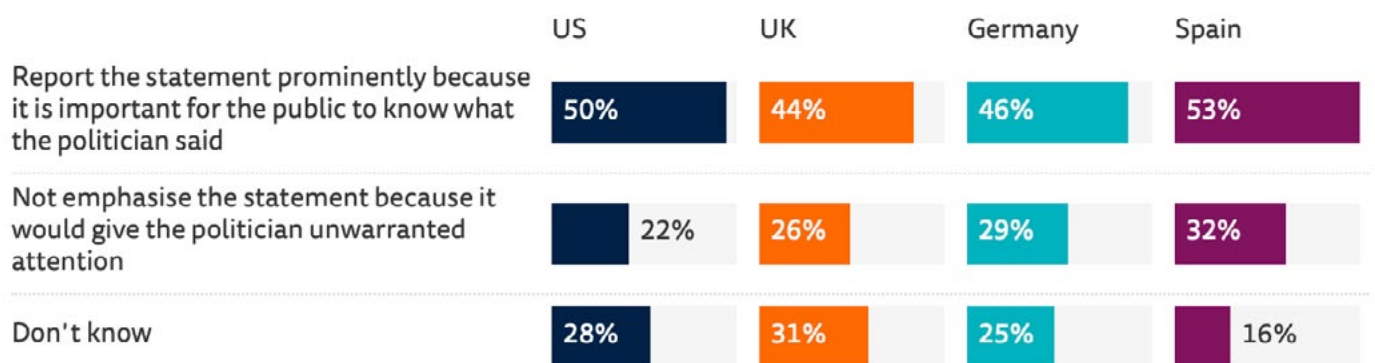
J1_2020. Thinking about how the news media covers politics, if a politician makes a statement that could be false, which comes closer to your view about what the news media should do? *Base: US = 2055, UK = 2011, Germany = 2011, Spain = 2006.*

Source: 2020 Reuters Institute Digital News Report

**Figure 1. What should the news media do
with statements from politicians that could be false?**

The day the music died: turning off the cameras on President Trump

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Broadcast networks made a revolutionary decision during the Trump press conference the day after the polls closed in the 2020 elections. As votes mounted to oust the president from office, Trump appeared for rambling, repetitive accusations of electoral fraud based on the flimsiest of evidence. One by one, many networks decided to stop airing the press conference. Instead, some returned to their studio announcers to criticize the president for lying.

This is the moment when U.S. media norms, under enormous pressure from Trump-led disinformation, switched from full libertarian values to a stronger watchdog role. This was a seismic shift under enormous provocation, but the U.S. media rapidly adapted to a new reality.

The U.S. media are defined by the libertarian system, first described by Siebert et al. in their 1956 book *The Four Theories of the Press.* The scholars outlined the relationship between states and media systems, noting that the American state fosters a commercialized model of the media in which advertising funds the flow of information. There is little interference in the media sphere from the state and broad protection of freedom of speech. Unlike any other powerful nation, the United States has no dominant state or public broadcasting sector.

While the work by Siebert et al. is certainly dated, the central principles of a libertarian media still hold in the United States. The advent of cable and the subsequent information explosion from the internet have stretched the notion of "let the audience decide" to breaking point. The enormous rise of disinformation under the Trump administration warped the system still further. The president often pushed or even invented conspiracy theories (such as that COVID-19 was not serious or injecting bleach would kill the virus). A rightwing echo chamber, anchored around Fox News, provided a significant amplification to a credulous, right-leaning audience.

Trump's inauguration in 2017, in which his spokesman refused to admit he was lying about the size of inauguration crowds, ushered in four years of turmoil for the American media still dedicated to libertarian principles. The concept of media libertarianism dictates that journalists are conduits from information sources to the public. The problem was that key information sources such as the White House had become wellsprings of disinformation, setting up a paradox for serious journalism. The libertarian system dictated that they had to present the President's words – even when they knew them to be inaccurate – to the public.

While there was growing unease among journalists about the rising tide of falsehoods from the White House, responsible media outlets felt they had to cover what the president said. They tried to balance this by contextualizing the information and countering disinformation with reporting. Unfortunately, this had the joint effect of amplifying the disinformation while at the same time allowing the president to complain to his supporters that the media were "fake" and too critical.

By the day after the 2020 election, three things happened to switch off the full libertarian model and usher in an era in which media networks felt comfortable switching off the president.

First, journalists had come to realize that the game was rigged. Trump and his supporters were parasites in the libertarian media system, taking advantage of how they could assert disinformation and still get covered. What changed is that journalists realized that the libertarian model dictates that media must cover the *news* – but should avoid *propaganda.* By accepting and embracing that messages from the White House were now propaganda and not news, the networks were liberated to stop the flow of disinformation for the good of democracy. And protecting democracy, after all, is at the heart of the libertarian model of the media.

More pragmatically, there were two other factors that no doubt contributed to shutting the cameras off. By the evening after the election, math made it clear that Trump was a lame duck president (whether he chose to accept this fact or not). The media, targets of a campaign of hate supported by Trump, had much less to fear from him.

In addition, the journalists practice intermedia agenda-setting, meaning that once they saw one network cut off the president, they felt liberated to do the same. Not all media outlets cut away, but enough to make a strong statement that firmly moved the president from an important source of national information to a propagandist working against the interests of democracy.

When worlds collide: contentious politics in a fragmented media regime

Political differences—regarding the most important issues facing a nation and the role government should play in addressing them—are part and parcel of democratic systems, especially those as diverse as the United States. Elections are a primary mechanism for debating these differences and deciding, even if crudely, where the public interest resides. For this to work, however, it requires some agreement on the facts, and faith in the process by which those are used to shape debate and ultimately chart a collective course.

For over four years, however, Americans have been living in different political "realities" that work against this process. For some, we are a country whose democratic institutions and norms are under siege, and whose progress towards greater social, political, and economic justice has been lost. For others, we are in the midst of a revolt against global and domestic trends that threaten their values, status, and livelihoods, and of a movement to "make America great again." While more nuanced, sometimes overlapping camps based on class, race, identity, and ideology exist, the overall result is an unprecedented degree of political polarization, not only regarding opinions, but also the underlying facts themselves. Consider, for example, that Americans are more divided along partisan lines on how their government has addressed the health and economic ramifications of the coronavirus pandemic than citizens in other advanced democracies, that nearly 40 percent of conservative Republicans believe that the virus was developed either intentionally or accidentally from a laboratory (compared to 15 percent of liberal Democrats), and that over 70 percent of voters who consider wearing a face mask a matter of personal choice supported Trump (compared to the 64 percent vote for Biden by those who consider it a public health responsibility).

While there are many reasons for this bifurcation of beliefs and opinions, crucial is the media regime that has emerged over the last few decades. Consisting of a mix of legacy, partisan, and online actors and media institutions, this regime has blurred distinctions between fact and opinion, news and entertainment, information producers and consumers, and mass mediated and interpersonal communication, creating an information environment that is both "multiaxial" (i.e., in which control of the public agenda emerges from multiple, shifting, and previously invisible or less powerful actors) and "hyperreal" (i.e., in which the mediated representation of reality becomes more important than the facts underlying it).

This information ecosystem has been fertile ground for the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and the selective use of facts from both domestic and international sources, including the President himself. This, coupled with the new media regime's high choice environment, allows citizens to be selective in constructing their media diets, creating "echo chambers" that largely reinforce existing views and beliefs. The use of algorithms by internet and social media services magnifies the effects of selection bias by fore-grounding new information that is consistent with users' political and ideological predispositions.

The impact of the competing realities facilitated by this information environment is starkly evident in the 2020 election. For example, consumers of different information sources held widely different views on the likelihood of fraud resulting from mail voting, a view that played out in the actual behavior of Republicans (who voted largely in person) and Democrats (who voted largely by mail), and in Trump's dangerous questioning of the legitimacy of the election outcome. According to exit polls, Trump and Biden supporters differed on the most important issues influencing their vote, with the former focusing on the economy and crime, and the latter on racial inequality, the coronavirus pandemic, and health care policy. They differed on the candidate qualities they deemed most important, with Trump voters looking for someone who was "a strong leader," and Biden supporters someone who could "unite the country" and "has good judgement" (tellingly, they split evenly on the importance of someone who "cares about people like me"). They differed dramatically on which candidate had the temper-ament and mental and physical health to serve effectively as president. Perhaps most worrisome, the vast majority of both Trump and Biden voters said they would feel "concerned" or "scared" if the other candidate were elected.

One might argue that the (apparent) defeat of a sitting president is evidence that the walls between mediated worldviews can be broken down. Perhaps. But as of this writing it appears that Biden's victory resulted from increased turnout (the highest percent since the 19th century), and not the erosion of Trump support. Indeed, more Americans voted for him in 2020 than in 2016.

The implications of this fragmented informa-tion environment for U.S. politics and even U.S. democracy are still unclear. But, coupled with the wicked domestic and global issues the new adminis-tration faces, there is certainly reason for concern.

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Forecasting the future of election forecasting

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"Can we please be done with polls now?" tweeted Molly Jong-Fast on the day after the U.S. presidential election. "Ban election forecasts, or at least ignore them" read the subhead on a widely-circulated piece in *Slate*.

Over the course of a week-long slog in which much of the world livestreamed the counting of in-person, mail-in, drop-off, and provisional ballots, the most heated of hot takes about the apparent uselessness of pre-election polls and forecasts began to look premature. As results came into sharper focus, the election map began to resemble something that looked a whole lot like what the polls had predicted—albeit by much closer margins in some key states.

To be sure, those margins were noteworthy—especially given how much they replicated similar errors in the 2016 results. After that race, thoughtful leaders in the opinion research world undertook extensive efforts to diagnose what might have contributed to "large, problematic errors" in many of these same places. The task force wrote reassuringly that despite many complex changes in modes and methods, the science of survey research remained largely sound. (On average, polls are, in fact, as accurate as ever.)

Many likely culprits were singled out about that election: historically large numbers of undecided and third-party voters, too few pollsters weighting samples for response bias by education, a lack of state-level polls late in the race when events caused significant movement toward Donald Trump. As of now, none appear applicable to this cycle. Even well-respected state-level polls from the *New York Times*/Siena College and the *Washington Post*/ABC News were off by double digits, making it hard to shake the feeling that the entire industry may be dealing with more fundamental, structural problems. Are conventional methods disproportionately failing to reach the disaffected, distrusting voters most drawn to Trump's brand of right-wing populism, underestimating their likelihood of turning out to vote, or both? Knowing more about the campaigns' internal polls, which may have used different assumptions, along with final updated voter files will eventually help answer some of these questions.

It should be underscored that *some* polls did hold up exceptionally well. On the eve of the election, venerated Iowa pollster Ann Selzer released results that previewed the eventual outcome almost exactly, showing Republicans holding on to a much larger share of voters than almost any other reputable pollster. Results were often explained away as an outlier; *The New York Times* told its anxious readers to "put it in perspective" as "only one poll." Such advice may be eminently reasonable, but this year the flaws in that approach have been laid bare.

"In averages we trust" has become a mantra for many political journalists trying to avoid overemphasizing any single error-prone survey estimate. But averaging polls only helps correct for random sampling-induced error; it does not help if results are collectively skewed due to faulty methods, modeling assumptions, or "herding." In a polling landscape where best practices are legitimately in flux and where grifters and opportunists seek headlines to gin up publicity and exposure, averaging may lead to over-confidence about election outcomes that are in fact a lot more variable than suggested by sampling error alone.

"You don't really have many reporters, in my experience, who are doing the work of looking at the methodology," Ann Selzer pointed out in an interview with the *Columbia Journalism Review* five years ago. Doing that work will require greater transparency from public pollsters—perhaps even a push for pre-registration—and more attention paid by journalists and polling aggregators to individual pollsters' methods instead of lumping results together. (Correcting for black box "house effects" or past predictiveness may not be nearly enough.)

Election forecasters themselves will no doubt resist calls for any kind of reckoning of their own. They will point to the final tabulation as proof of having appropriately handicapped the flawed underlying data they were provided. After all, as Nate Silver reminded readers on the eve of the election, his 89% forecast of a Biden victory only ever indicated that "it's a fine line between a landslide and a nail-biter," and the result, predictably, was somewhere in between.

But that of course is the problem. Forecasters must grapple with whether they seek to be anything other than a diversion for obsessed hobbyists. I don't fault them for emphasizing how uncertain their predictions actually are. But there is something deeply unsatisfying about this form of prognosticating punditry, which simultaneously claims superior decimal-point precision while humbly insisting that its declarations should only ever be treated impressionistically. As long as the main take-away really isn't much more than ¯_(ツ)_/¯, the future of election forecasting may not be bright.

A new horse race begins: the scramble for a post-election narrative

The ballots had barely settled in Pennsylvania when various interest groups scrambled to establish their preferred narratives. Many of these projections adhered to predictable patterns of emphasis and omission.

For example, regardless that American majorities support progressive positions—from nationalizing healthcare to raising taxes for free public education—some media and political elites heralded a confirmation that the U.S. was inherently a centrist nation. With the Senate remaining in Republican hands (pending the Georgia run-offs in early January), even the stock market seemed to react positively to the prospect of gridlocked government hamstrung in its ability to implement serious regulatory reform.

Falling back on false equivalences that the electorate had rejected both right and left extremes, this centrist narrative aligned with the oft-repeated truism that most Americans occupy the middle of the ideological spectrum. According to this view, Americans didn't want dramatic change, but rather a return to "normalcy" and to re-establishing old norms.

Relatedly, centrist Democrats pointed an accusatory finger at the party's left flank, asserting that progressive activist slogans such as "defund the police" set up vulnerable moderates to be ruthlessly red-baited as socialists and consequently lose their races. For their part, many progressives convincingly pushed back against these storylines.

At the same time, early analyses suggest that a groundswell of "Biden Republicans" never materialized. While the so-called never-Trumpers behind the Lincoln Project and their slick, gut-punching ads made many liberals swoon, it was actually progressive groups, especially in states like Georgia and cities like Philadelphia, that arguably pushed Biden over the top.

Another major narrative assumes that, at least according to expectations set by pollsters, Democrats performed poorly in down-ballot races. Despite the lack of a "blue wave", it's noteworthy that the elections did see a wide range of progressive victories, including the resolution to increase the minimum wage to $15 an hour in the Trump-backing state of Florida.

The role of media

The media's role in all of these relationships was contradictory, as always. In one historic moment, the major networks cut away from Trump during a major address as he launched into a tirade of lies. Some observers wondered if media organizations had suddenly, at this late stage, realized how best to handle Trump. Others noted that such an abrupt about-face actually demonstrated that media outlets could have been more adversarial all along, but the perceived shift in power finally emboldened them to be less timid toward the president.

We shouldn't be surprised. An abiding reliance on official sources and deference to power is historically a common cornerstone of professional journalism. This power relationship runs deep and is bound up with media firms' core business model, driven by advertising revenue and the ultimate objective to actualize profits at any social cost. The fact that commercialism so often trumps democracy is also why scolding individual journalists and news outlets for being irresponsible often misses the systemic root of the problem.

While it's refreshing that many media organizations have finally stopped deferring to Trump, we must look seriously at the role they have played in normalizing fascistic politics—as well as the structural factors that cause these institutions to predictably fail in advancing democratic aims.

The role of media scholars

Understanding these power relationships is necessary but insufficient. The point should be to *change* the current system. Low-quality information runs rampant through many of our news and communication systems—from Facebook to Fox News—while actual journalism is rapidly disappearing. Media and political communication scholars ideally would help assist reform efforts toward restructuring these systems and creating new institutions.

One potentially growing undercurrent in the field of communication research appears to be a new variant of the "limited effects" model, which assumes that, lacking clear causal relationships, media have relatively little influence over political behavior, and therefore, by implication, are unworthy of structural reform efforts.

Communication research needs a new normative framework that's guided by social justice. Instead of accepting things as they are, I call upon my colleagues to seize this historical moment and help broaden our political imaginary as to what kind of media system is possible. We can dare hope for media institutions that serve democratic needs and not just corporate profits.

Ultimately, it's likely that all of these forces—both major political parties, media institutions, and even academics in their own way—will seek to resurrect an Obama-era status quo. But if the U.S. is to tackle the daunting problems it faces—climate change, deep structural inequalities, monopoly power, mass incarceration and other forms of systemic racism—the status quo should not be preserved; it should be radically changed. Whether Biden and his administration are up to the task—and whether progressives and other social pressures from below can help steer them in the right direction—remains to be seen.

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Social media

Media and social media platforms finally begin to embrace their roles as democratic gatekeepers

During the 2020 election, media outlets and social media platforms assumed roles as "democratic gatekeepers." In Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's influential book, *How Democracies Die,* they discuss the crucial role of institutions such as parties in keeping anti-democratic leaders from power. But parties, courts, etc. are not solely responsible. Media institutions have an important role. Kirsten Adams developed the concept of "civil gatekeepers" to analyze journalists' roles to communicate "ideas about what is (and is not)" democratic to the public – a role journalism institutions largely failed to live up to in 2016.

In 2020, haltingly, unevenly, but unmistakably, journalistic organizations and social media platforms became democratic gatekeepers. Journalists asserted their foremost democratic commitment to the public through coverage that cast President Trump as anti-democratic. Social media platforms for the first time affirmed their role in protecting democratic institutions through regulatory policies and enforcement actions on presidential speech, and more broadly on electoral disinformation.

This was new. In 2016, the Republican Party was beset with an avowedly anti-democratic candidate in Donald Trump and failed to keep him from political power. Media institutions, from journalism outlets to social media platforms, also failed to fulfill their democratic gatekeeping role. As Adams showed, rather than acknowledge and guard against Trump's anti-democratic speech and actions, journalists turned to moral equivalence to preserve partisan balance. Platforms, too, failed to anticipate how their systems could be subverted to undermine the very democratic institutions necessary for their existence, such as allowing Trump to engage in a social media campaign to discredit Barack Obama's birthplace, citizenship, and legitimacy as president, dating from 2011 (when Obama was on the ballot) to 2014 (when Trump was planning to be) .

Journalists have long grounded their legitimacy in concepts such as balance and objectivity. Platforms, meanwhile, have generally grounded theirs in free expression. Neither journalists nor social media platforms have historically grounded their normative vision and legitimacy in terms of what explicitly promotes and protects *democracy*. Between the 2016 and the 2020 elections, slowly and haltingly, legacy journalists became more adept at covering the president, including adopting fact-checking and asserting their moral authority to protect democratic institutions and norms. This was on display during the period of early voting, Election Day, and the days after – where there was generally clear repudiation of the president's many false, anti-democratic claims. Even Fox News checked the president *on democratic grounds*, condemning both premature assertions of victory and attempts to de-legitimize the vote count.

Platforms have faced similar challenges. How do they prevent election disinformation when it comes from the highest level of political office, aided and abetted by ruling party media such as Fox News and given legitimacy, validation, and amplification by Republican Party elites? The answer – up until recently – was not well. After all, it was just over a year ago that Facebook's CEO, in response to growing public pressure to prevent politicians from lying on Facebook and criticisms of poor enforcement of existing rules against hate speech, embraced the notion of the platform being guided by "free speech" values. This "free speech" orientation subsequently proved unworkable as numerous crises demonstrated disinformation was causing imminent harm during the pandemic and 2020 presidential election.

 During these conflicts, Facebook reversed course many times – but in general moved *toward* a more robust defense of democratic institutions. Facebook, and its counterparts, implemented more stringent policies against electoral disinformation, began enforcing policies on elected officials through labeling dubious claims and, in some instances, taking down content, and even went so far as to ban new paid political advertising entirely (Twitter) or in the week before and after the election (Facebook) to prevent disinformation and premature declarations of victory.

While some of these policies were counterproductive and did not go nearly far enough, and there was significant variation among platforms with respect to the actions they took, their underlying logic was unmistakable. Platforms generally expanded their conception of themselves as communicative institutions that have a responsibility to defend democratic processes. Election night bore this out – as the president posted unfounded allegations about a fraudulent election and claimed a lead, Twitter labeled these tweets, obscuring their content, and prevented liking and retweeting. Meanwhile, Facebook added a disclaimer to presidential posts about the vote count process and applied links to its voting information center. While these are limited actions – they are actions that have the clear normative stance of protecting democracy.

Assertive press and platforms willing to defend the public's right to hold its leaders accountable at the ballot box and beyond it is an important, and overdue, development. While they cannot fully solve the vast political problems facing America, especially the growing counter-majoritarianism and illiberalism of a major political party, they are buying us time. And, as foremost a political problem, securing democracy is not something these institutions can do on their own – but the public needs them to try.

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Did social media make us more or less politically unequal in 2020?

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The 2020 election has once again laid bare a defining feature of American life: some citizens yield far greater political power and influence than others. Despite record voter turnout, there is evidence of persistent gaps in voter engagement, campaign donations and political advertisement targeting, across lines of class, age, gender, and race. These political inequalities are not only a product of systematic disenfranchisement, but also reflective of enduring social inequalities that often leave people from marginalized groups with fewer of the resources they need to engage in elections.

Yet the past four years have also taught us that groups that have been politically marginalized for centuries *are* exercising political voice and influence, often in innovative ways that are decisive for the American story. Think of the young people who mobilized around gun control after the Parkland mass shooting in 2018 or Black activists who led historic mass mobilization against racial violence in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd in 2020. At the center of these movements have been social media platforms, tools that have sometimes been positioned as a potential equalizing force in American politics. As campaigning increasingly shifts to social media, it is unclear how these technologies are shaping political inequality in electoral contexts.

Despite well-founded concerns about the often contentious, uncivil, and partisan nature of political communication on social media, research suggests that *who engages on social media matters.* Social media can be key sources for learning about elections and might serve as "gateways" to further participation in campaigns. In addition, social media are now where reporters go to gauge public opinion and where political campaigns go to target voters. Yet, when researchers have examined digital political inequality more closely, they have often found that those who already have political resources or interest reap the benefits.

Our past work from the 2016 election tells a nuanced story of political inequality on social media. Across 2016 survey datasets, we find that Americans from traditionally marginalized groups (e.g., those with lower socioeconomic resources, or racial/ethnic minorities) are sometimes less politically engaged on social media. However, these trends are inconsistent and sometimes reversed. For example, in one survey, young voters (18 to 24) with *lower* (vs. higher) socioeconomic status were more likely to express their political views on social media. Another survey found that racial/ethnic minorities engaged in *more* symbolic types of political expression (e.g., hashtags, changing profile pictures) than white users.

Early data from the 2020 election paints a similar picture. For example, a higher percentage of white respondents reported engaging in traditional political behaviors on Facebook, while a higher percentage of racial/ethnic minorities reported using Facebook to get information about protests or to post about discrimination and injustice.

Looking at the mixed evidence in this area, we offer three points to consider when thinking about social media's role in shaping political inequality in the 2020 election. First, we need to acknowledge that those with the most political power and political resources continue to have advantages in expressing their voices on social media. As long as some groups (e.g., those with higher education, white people) disproportionally possess resources like political knowledge and interest, certain types of political behavior will continue to be unequally distributed on social media. Second, to see the potentially equalizing power of social media, we need to look more deeply at how marginalized groups use these technologies. When scholars have done so, they find that social media offer essential spaces for social movement organizing, building political solidarity, and sharing experiences of injustice. We take seriously the ways in which social media can help the politically rich get richer, while also urging that more attention be paid to how marginalized groups are using social media to reclaim political voice. Finally, it may be that social media's impact on political inequality is more *indirect* than we suspect. For example, journalists and scholars might need to zoom out to see how movements like #BlackLivesMatter shaped the 2020 election by framing racial justice as a key issue. Such indirect influence may be difficult to see if we only look at individual election-related behavior on social media.

The 2020 post-mortem is sure to cast social media in a primarily negative light; as engines for political misinformation, partisan conflict, and perhaps even electoral violence. As with any technology, we need not completely resign ourselves to social media being a net evil for democracy. Scholars like Ethan Zuckerman are already exploring ways to build more equitable social media platforms. Others are pushing for technology companies to take more responsible approaches to moderating political communication on social media. In these efforts, reducing inequality between the political haves and have nots should be central. Social media are not going anywhere. Our only option is to try to make them better tools for democracy.

Platform transparency in the fight against disinformation

22,247. That is the *estimated* number of false or misleading claims that President Donald Trump has made since assuming office until the end of August, 2020. The 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States challenged journalists and fact-checkers in numerous ways, especially when it comes to sorting false from correct information. During the final stretch of the 2020 election campaign, Donald Trump has increased the amount of false or misleading claims, averaging 50 false claims a day. There were so many claims that the fact-checkers have not been able to track all of them and have raised questions about when to decide to fact-check. In the eye of the public, the 2020 election will partly be remembered by the rise of new actors, tools, and practices in coordination to re-imagine the intensifying fight against mis- and disinformation. For scholars and practitioners, questioning the role of these actors and tools is becoming even more pressing.

Since introducing the meaningful social interaction algorithm (MSI) in 2018 Facebook, has reduced the overall visibility of news content on their proprietary platform. At the same time, people have been provided with more opportunities for convening and interacting in private spaces, such as mobile chat applications like WhatsApp groups and Signal that are not public facing but rather so-called "dark social". Creating tools to fight disinformation, journalists and fact-checkers are seeking to adapt by finding new ways to help communities make sense of mis- and disinformation. At the same time, scholars have sought to unpack these reconfigured power dynamics and how mis- and disinformation may be best tackled to have an impact on public perceptions of truth and truthfulness. But this election has intensified new forms of power dynamics in the disinformation ecosystem — and shown the hard limits of what fact-checking can accomplish without greater support from platform companies for the researchers, journalists, and fact-checkers seeking to understand and limit the spread of harmful misinformation.

The 2020 election shed light on dis- and mis-information becoming a beat particularly in legacy news organizations such as NBC, the New York Times, and the BBC. But these beats wouldn't be legitimized without the help of platforms non-proprietary to them that dictate the ways in which information may be understood from and shared to the public. For example, since 2016, fact-checking organizations have been working with Facebook to reduce disinformation. And Facebook has been requiring these organizations to be signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network's (IFCN) Code of Principles, which value the principle of transparency at each stage of the fact-checking process.

As a result, platform companies such as Twitter and Facebook have become "arbiters of truth" and that is "without the methodology or transparency," a position that these companies have avoided since their inception. Social media oriented platform companies have been engaging in content moderation for a long time, but for disinformation they follow community principles rather than abide by policy or law (with a few countries making exceptions). Twitter has been fact-checking Trump, and our analysis shows that out of 71 tweets Trump posted or retweeted between November 4 and 7, 20 are marked or hidden by Twitter for breaking the company's Civic Integrity Policy. But the transparency asked from the IFCN has not always been followed by these platform companies.

Disinformation has been intensifying during this election. They also show that the fight against disinformation has involved a plethora of actors seeking to "do their best in fighting disinformation" that have different incentives and complicate the public's understanding of what might be the closest thing to facts.

When considering recent digital innovations in automated fact-checking for the identification, verification, and correction of disinformation, similar ethical questions come to mind. Such innovations do not cover the judgement and sensitivity that human fact-checkers deploy in their practice. As in the case of content moderation, there is limited explanation of and transparency about authoritative and open-sourced data.

In sum, the power to decide what is true is mediated through platform companies online as media organizations and diverse other actors essentially are taking advantage of platform affordances, and their inefficiency or unwillingness to actively moderate such activities. Fact-checkers and journalists alike, have sought to find a meaningful footing. Going forward, platforms companies should be held to the same transparency standard many fact-checking organizations embrace, by providing a clear explanation of the principles and methods they employ to combat mis- and dis-information. Sharing information with researchers and fact-checkers about the spread of problematic content on social networks, and about the effectiveness of different interventions, would provide a vital boost to their efforts.

In The Source Criticism and Mediated Disinformation (SCAM) project, we are seeking to look at key industry representatives in tech and platform companies, tech and media industry associations and fact-checking organizations around the world and examine how these actors experience the effects of digital technology on and develop new approaches to the critical evaluation of sources and information.

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Why Trump's determination to sow doubt about data undermines democracy

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It's said that data speaks for itself. And ahead of the U.S. election, there was a lot of data from scientists, economists and pollsters that pointed to an uphill struggle for President Trump.

The outcome wasn't as clear cut, with no sign of the predicted blue wave sweeping the nation. But then, it is hardly surprising after a sustained campaign by Trump and his allies to undermine and discredit both the sources of the data, and the media reporting on it.

The ability of the public to make informed, conscientious and balanced decisions, an ideal at the core of deliberative democracy, has been consistently destabilized by the misinformation super-spreader formerly known as the president of the United States.

More broadly, the election cycle of 2020 highlighted how the contested media ecosystem of the 21st century has evolved much faster than the institutions of state, the academy and the media have been able to respond.

What the data said

In the months and weeks leading up to November 3, data was making itself heard loud and clear. By the time Americans went to the polls, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 was edging towards 10 million, as tracked by John Hopkins University. As daily cases rose, Trump continued to falsely claim the country was "rounding the corner."

More than 226,000 people had died from during the coronavirus pandemic. That's almost four times the American lives lost in the Vietnam War and edging close to the 291,557 American lives lost in battle in World War II.

GDP was hit hard, down by 9.1 percent in the second quarter of 2020. According to the Brookings Institute, it was the steepest decline since record keeping began in 1947.

It meant that millions of Americans lost their jobs as the pandemic hit in early 2020, with more than 20 million claiming unemployment insurance by May. Though that figure had dropped to 7.3 million by October, it was still well above pre-pandemic numbers. The economic shutdown hit women, non-white workers, lower-wage earners and people with less education hardest.

Against such a backdrop, national polls point to a sweeping victory by Joe Biden. Learning their lesson from 2016, most media organizations handled the polling data with care. These ranged from offering qualifiers about variations from state to state or digging into the electoral college system to explain the scale of the challenge facing the Democratic contender.

There were even warnings ahead of November 3 that the results may not be clear on election night, as indeed turned out to be the case.

I want to believe (in Trump)

While millions of Americans listened to the data, millions more were deaf to what it was telling them. They chose not to listen to, and believe in, the message, be it scientific or economic reports from reputable institutions, or the messenger, the mainstream U.S. media.

Instead they wanted to believe in the man in the White House. It is astonishing to note that Trump has made more than 22,000 false or misleading claims since coming to office.

It is less astonishing that millions of Americans didn't believe the data or the journalists reporting it. After all, these are the journalists labelled as "enemies of the people" by Trump, reporting on inconvenient facts written off as "fake news."

The persistent strategy of Trump and his allies has been to cast doubt on what have traditionally being respected and reputable sources of data. It is not just about sowing uncertainty about what is true and what isn't, but also about undercutting the sources of the data.

This is a leader who has dismissed journalists as "enemies of the people", denounced inconvenient truths as "fake news", and has repeatedly lashed out at the country's top infectious diseases expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci.

The clarion call from Trump to his supporters has been that you can't trust the source, and you certainly cannot trust the messenger. Rather, you can only trust the plain-speaking, tell-it-how-it-is leadership of me, Donald Trump.

Data faces a tough fight in the arena of public opinion. Data is always shaped by where it came from, who provided it, how it was communicated and by whom.

In this election cycle, data designed to inform the public was discredited, demeaned and doubted in political discourse. It was an attack on the message, as well as on the messenger – the "fake news" media of Donald Trump.

Data cannot have a voice when there is no trust in where it is coming from, who it is coming from and who is disseminating it to the public.

A banner year for advertising and a look at differences across platforms

Advertising in the 2020 presidential cycle broke all kinds of records. While the bulk of the spending is still on television, the share of digital advertising continues to grow, and the sheer amount of money spent on digital advertising alone is staggering.

According to the Wesleyan Media Project, Donald Trump's campaign spent over $201 million (47 percent of his ad budget) on digital advertising between April 9 and October 24, 2020. Though Joe Biden's campaign focused less on online platforms, it still spent about $116 million on digital, one third of his ad spending. To help put these figures in perspective, Barack Obama's 2008 campaign, which was widely praised for its use of online ads, spent only about $8 million on digital advertising, and Donald Trump spent roughly $83.5 million between July and November in 2016 on digital.

The dominance of Facebook and Google

While Facebook (including Instagram) has been the dominant digital platform for political campaigns, the 2020 presidential campaigns spent almost as much on Google (which includes YouTube). Trump invested about $108 million on Facebook and $93 million on Google while Biden spent $84 million on Facebook ads and $79 million Google ads. By contrast, even though the Biden campaign allocated more than $3.1 million to Snapchat advertising (which compared to only $0.2 million by Trump might have given Biden an advantage in reaching Generation Z voters), the total pales by comparison to spending on the big platforms.

Assessing unique content across platforms

It is widely understood that campaigns use different platforms for different outreach. To examine how the content on each platform differed by campaign, we conducted a preliminary analysis of the textual content of ads on TV, Facebook, Google, YouTube, and Snapchat with a method designed to determine the words that most distinguish one category from another (automated speech-to-text methods were used to transcribe video ads from TV, YouTube, and Snapchat and we collapsed to unique creatives across all sources by campaign).

For Biden, search advertising on Google revolves around appeals to vote, voter registration, deadlines, and voting by mail, including Spanish-language words associated with voting, suggesting a focus on get-out-the-vote and Latinx outreach. Biden's Facebook ads, by contrast, feature references to Trump, defeating Republicans, and winning combined with donation appeals, which seem designed to stoke partisan identity and out-partisan animosity. In TV ads, substantive content is more prevalent, with references to healthcare, the virus, jobs, and families. Biden's YouTube ads touch on similar themes, but seem slightly more upbeat, featuring emotive words such

as feel, care, and love. Snapchat ads revolve around the Black Lives Matter movement, with references to civil rights, the police, and racism.

Trump's ads follow a similar pattern. His Google search ads revolve around getting-out-the-vote, but feature more requests for donations than Biden as well as campaign merchandise. His Facebook ads are not quite as focused on his opponent, but still feature attacks against the media, Democrats, and "Sleepy Joe." Similar to Biden, fundraising appears to be the primary goal on Facebook. TV also provides Trump with room for more substantive content, with references to healthcare, illegal immigrants, taxes, and China. YouTube follows a similar pattern, touching on family, the military, God, and reopening schools.

What to make of it?

The sheer amount of money spent suggests that advertising remains a central way campaigns reach citizens even if ad effects are known to be small and fleeting, and the growing share of digital advertising reinforces the importance of a multimodal approach. Yet the variation in content underscores that digital platforms serve different purposes. Consistent with prior analyses, Facebook content is more partisan while Google's search advertising seems devoted to get-out-the-vote efforts, which may have been heightened in a pandemic. Both large platforms appear to be used for fund-raising, which yields funds for further advertising. Similar to TV, YouTube lends itself to persuasive arguments with more substantive content through audiovisuals - but with the advantages of the digital realm, and Snapchat serves younger audiences.

Electoral success does not necessarily "vindicate" the winner's strategy. There is much yet to unpack about the 2020 election results and their correspondence with the volume, content and targeting of TV and digital advertising, and the different ways that campaigns deploy their messaging across platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic may have played a role in record spending, as money that might otherwise have gone into events may have been funneled into advertising. Finally, the fact that both campaigns spent almost as much on Google as they did on Facebook is noteworthy and worthy of further exploration.

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How Joe Biden conveyed empathy

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Joe Biden ran – in part – on empathy. CNN anchor Jake Tapper called it the trait Biden kept emphasizing and the one Donald Trump struggled to communicate. A great example from the first presidential debate in September: after Trump bragged about all the jobs he had created, Biden faced the camera and said: "You folks living in Scranton and Claymont and all the small towns and working-class towns in America … how well are you doing?" While Trump later mocked that move as a gimmick, Biden used TV moments like that to demonstrate empathy. But one interesting aspect of his digital campaign was how well he (and his social media team) communicated that trait online.

Take his approach to Twitter. Biden's campaign made explicit references to the candidate's empathy. In January, Joe Biden tweeted: "Empathy matters. I think it's important — not only for leaders — but for everybody to treat people with respect." And in October, Jill Biden tweeted: "Empathy is on the ballot." Biden did not just talk about empathy though; he used his Twitter account to *perform* it. And he did that through the language of his tweets. In addition to "empathy words" like *treat*, *people*, and *respect*, Biden used second-person pronouns to strike a conversational tone and signal his understanding of the problems afflicting voters. Take this tweet about Trump's decision to stop negotiating a second coronavirus relief package: "If you are out of work, if your business is closed, if your child's school is shut down, if you are seeing layoffs in your community, Donald Trump decided today that none of that matters to him." Or this one from National Coming Out Day: "I want every member of the LGBTQ+ community to know you are loved and accepted just as you are – whether you've come out or not. I'll fight every day in the White House to create a country where you can live open, proud, and free – without fear." Trump, on the other hand, used most of his "you's" to thank people for showing up to his rallies.

And that distinction, between Biden's personal touch and Trump's fan cult, was evident on Instagram too. There, Biden often posted the kinds of images that read as compassionate. Of the 249 photos and videos his campaign shared in October 2020, 11 featured kids, 12 featured Biden interacting one-on-one with people, and 40 featured individual supporters instead of the candidate. These kinds of content reinforced the narrative that Biden knows voters. He also used a lot of "you's" in his captions. On October 5, for example, he posted a photo of himself talking to a voter with this caption under it: "I've been traveling to different communities across the country to talk to folks like you. I want you to know that I'm listening and I hear you. Thank you for sharing your pain and loss, and your hopes and dreams. You inspire me every single day." Now compare that to Trump's

Instagram account: 55 of 143 photos and videos the campaign shared in October showed the massive crowds at Trump's rallies, but none showed Trump interacting one-on-one with voters. Just one featured kids, and only two featured individual supporters instead of the candidate. Trump's captions were also short and impersonal. And some posts had no caption at all. While Trump's account depicted him as a "rock star" candidate, it also evoked a sense of detachment. Biden's, on the other hand, emphasized his personal connection with voters.

Well, so what? Trump was not running on empathy anyway. He had different goals – like bolstering his populist image – to achieve on social media. And he used different tactics to get there. But comparing his approach to Biden's is useful because Trump's amateurism on social media, and the perceived success of that approach in 2016, highlighted one of the potential drawbacks of professionalized accounts in political campaigning: the perception of inauthenticity. For example, Hillary Clinton's campaign took some heat in December 2015 for a social media post some people read as pandering to Hispanic voters. Biden's effective use of professionalized accounts to communicate and enhance one of his character traits shows that candidates' social media can be professional *and* authentic. It also highlights a potential drawback of *amateur* accounts: missed opportunities to promote qualities that appeal to a lot of voters.

We do not have a sense yet if or how the digital campaigns affected public opinion; exit polls will not be weighted to reflect the general electorate for a while, so we will have to wait to find out who voters thought cared more about them, and – even then – we will have to take those results with a grain of salt. But we do know that Biden used the affordances of social media far better than Trump did to communicate empathy. And that could be instructive for other campaigns.

The debates and the election conversation on Twitter

Debates are now a regular feature in political campaigns. Candidates facing off draws a crowd. But do they have an impact on the flow of communication in the election? Campaigns are times when citizens share their thoughts about the candidates. Does what they share change from before to after the debate?

In the first debate of the U.S. presidential election the rather standard questions were asked. "If elected, what would you do about one domain of policy after another?" When Biden was answering questions Trump did something unusual. He kibitzed -- loudly. He talked over Biden as Biden was answering questions. That received quite a lot of attention in the news media along with answers to the questions.

We look at what citizens did by collecting their communications on Twitter. We did separate searches, for Biden and Trump, two days before the debate, the day of the debate, and two days after the debate. The total was roughly 1,200,000 tweets per day. Seventy percent of tweets are re-tweets, which is persons encountering a tweet and deciding to share it with their followers. We are using the 20 most re-tweeted messages a day for analysis. The number of times a tweet was re-tweeted ranged from 2,000 to 20,000 with an average of 5,000 times. The followers who would have access to the re-tweets numbered in the millions, ranging from 5 million to 40 million per re-tweeted tweet. These tweets were widely shared in the campaign.

September 27 (two days before the debate): The most re-tweeted message in both the Trump and Biden collections was the endorsement of Biden by former Department of Homeland Security Secretary and Governor Tom Ridge (R-PA). Three of the top 20 re-tweets in the Trump collection and five in the Biden collection mentioned this. Five of the top 20 in the Trump collection addressed the president's taxes. Twelve of the top 20 in the Biden collection were positive; 18 of 20 in the Trump collection were negative toward the president.

September 28 (one day before the debate): The most re-tweeted message in the Trump collection was from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez noting the $70,000 in hairstyling fees Mr. Trump wrote off on his taxes. Again, the most re-tweeted messages in the Trump collection were negative, typically focusing on his tax returns. Only four were positive; two were ambiguous. In the Biden collection, a claim that Biden's Texas political director was harvesting ballots was most re-tweeted, and it was the focus of two other top 20 re-tweets. Only two of the most re-tweeted messages were positive (with one ambiguous). The attacks on Biden were multi-pronged, including charges of corruption, nepotism, incompetence in dealing with the 2009 swine flu, and election cheating.

September 29 (debate day): The most re-tweeted messages included several focused on the debate. Ten of the top 20 re-tweets in the Biden collection were positive, 8 in the Trump collection. In both collections, the most re-tweeted message was from the candidate. Re-tweets referencing the debate were found only in the Biden collection.

September 30 (day after the debate): The tone of tweets turned more negative in both collections (7 of 20 were positive or pro-Trump in the Trump collection and 6 positive in the Biden collection). Tweets about the debate were prominent in both collections (13 of 20 in the Biden collection and 11 in the Trump collection) including the most re-tweeted message in both collections. Two of the top five most re-tweeted messages in the Biden collection were from Joe Biden, including one calling out the president's "racist dog whistles" and saying Mr. Trump would not know the suburbs unless he took a wrong turn. One re-tweeted message pointed out that the president's debate demeanor, widely seen as noxious and belligerent, coincided with Trump's best hour of fundraising ever.

October 1 (two days after the debate): Debate tweets were still present in the top 20 (6 in the Biden collection, 5 in the Trump collection). Half the messages in the Trump collection were positive, but the only positive ones mentioning the debates were criticisms of the moderator.

The debates clearly became part of the election conversation, both in real time and in the days that followed. What is remarkable is what is *not* present in the conversation: the candidates' plans for the next four years. Only two of the most re-tweeted messages addressed the coronavirus pandemic. None spoke to the beleaguered economy. Affirmative rationales for supporting Joe Biden were rare and nonexistent for Donald Trump. Pro-Trump messages focused insinuations of voter fraud, claims of media bias, and personal attacks on Biden's family. Pro-Biden messages targeted the president's failure to pay taxes, his inability to condemn white supremacists during the debate, and Mr. Biden's defense of his family. The tweets over these five days fully reflect the miasma of American politics in the Trump years.

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Did the economy, COVID-19, or Black Lives Matter to the Senate candidates in 2020?

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The 2020 Senate elections were some of the most closely watched in recent history. Everyone around the country has been glued to their televisions waiting to find out if the Senate, which is currently controlled by the Republican Party, would tilt its partisan control to the Democrats. There were 35 seats up for grabs this year, with 12 of those ranked by the Cook Political Report as either toss-ups or leaning (on September 23rd). Democrats would only need to flip three or four of the Republican held seats to achieve majority status in the Senate (three if the next President was Joe Biden and four if President Trump won re-election).

Massive turnout has resulted in closely divided Senate results, and we may not have an answer for which party controls the Senate until January, but exit polls have now revealed that voters cared about three key issues in this election: the economy; racial inequality; and COVID-19. Approximately 60% of President Trump's voters said the economy was their most important issue, while one-third of former Vice President Joe Biden's voters said racial inequality was theirs.

Given that voters cared about these topics, candidates should have cared about them too, especially to attract voters. One way that candidates can signal their issue positions to voters is through their social media. To see if candidates were talking about these topics, we collected every tweet and re-tweet sent by all candidates running for these Senate seats for the last two months of the campaign (from September 3rd to November 2nd). Our data includes all major and minor party candidates, and we collected these tweets from the campaign accounts for all candidates where possible. In total, we collected 31,065 tweets for 89 candidates. We also collected demographic and district level information (gender, partisanship, and competitiveness).

First, our data reveal that, as expected, candidates in competitive races sent more tweets/re-tweets during this election (371 on average compared to 333 for those in non-competitive races). Next, we searched these tweets for all mentions of keywords associated with the economy, racial inequality, and the pandemic. A list of those key words is given in Table 1.

Our results show that, when it comes to these three issues, there were more tweets sent overall about COVID-19 (5.1%) and the economy (5%) than racial inequality (1.4%). As Figure 1 shows, unlike COVID-19 and the economy, there were very few tweets about how to address racial inequality from anyone. When we split our sample into those in competitive races (N=36) and those who were not (N=53), we find that those in competitive races paid more attention to all three issues than those in non-competitive races. Women and Democrats also sent more tweets about the economy and COVID-19, while racial equity was rarely discussed. Women sent approximately the same number of tweets about those topics than men, while Democrats sent fewer tweets about racial inequality than Republicans.

When we explore our data further, we see that most of the tweets sent by Republicans about racial inequality were negative in nature, and were almost all against defunding the police. There was only *one* tweet from a Republican (Cory Gardner) that was positive about moving forward regarding race in this country. Democrats, on the other hand, only discussed positive steps that could be taken about racial inequality, but sent very few tweets overall about these key words/phrases. Only 15 candidates in our dataset sent any tweets about Breonna Taylor, for instance, with most being from Democratic candidates.

Given that the public cast ballots this year caring the most about these three issues, it is our hope that our decision-makers in Washington will pay more attention to these issues, especially racial inequality. It is embarrassing that so few tweets were sent about these words and phrases in a time when citizens across the country felt like "I can't breathe." Senatorial candidates need to do better.

Table 1: Words/phrases regarding the economy, racial inequality, and the pandemic

	Search Terms
Economy	Economy, economic, tax, deficit, debt, budget, spend
Racial inequality	Racism, racist, Rayshard Brooks, Daniel Prude, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Philando Castille, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, BLM, #justiceforbreonna, #justiceforbreonnataylor, #breonnataylor, #sayhername, #sayhisname, #saytheirnames, #icantbreathe, #blm, #blacklivesmatter, #georgefloyd, #justiceforfloyd, #nojusticenopeace
COVID	COVID, Coronavirus, Pandemic, Virus

Figure 1: Number of tweets about the economy, racial inequality, and COVID-19
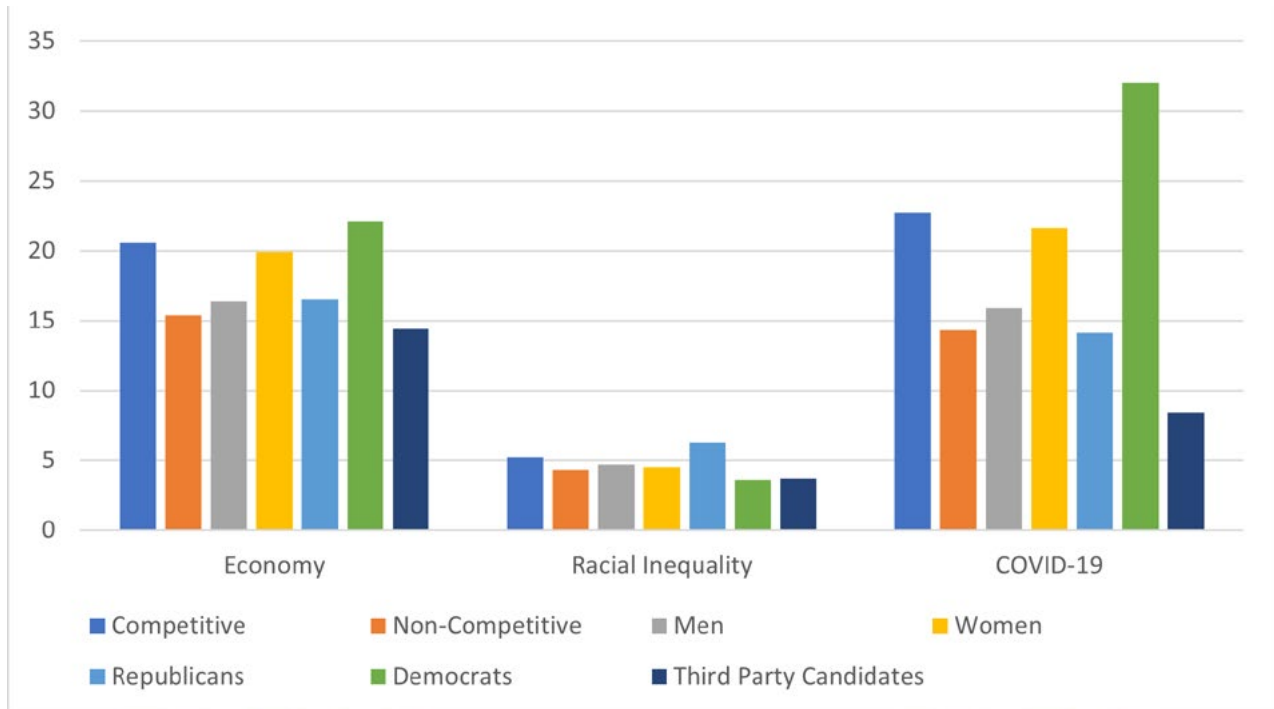
Leadership through showmanship: Trump's ability to coin nicknames for opponents on Twitter

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From 'Crooked Hillary' and 'Crazy Bernie' to 'Mini Mike', 'Sleepy Joe' and many others, Donald Trump has coined concise memorable nicknames which carry character-destroying meanings. This trend begun in the 2015-16 Republican primaries, it continued during his first presidential campaign and it did not stop in the 4 years of his administration. Unsurprisingly, the same strategy has been employed in the 2020 presidential campaign. The preferred medium for delivery has also been the same: Trump's personal Twitter account, his favourite tool to communicate directly to followers, to by-pass the journalistic filters and with a final aim to build the agenda.

'Crooked Hillary' soon became part of the general media discourse, 'Sleepy Joe Biden' is a widely known epithet. Table 1 provides numbers for this particular tactic: 'Crooked Hillary' remained in President Trump's tweets and it has been even mentioned in the 2020 campaign (when she was almost completely out of daily politics). 'Sleepy Joe' already appeared in 2015 but was only during the 2020 Democratic primaries that it became consistently present in Trump's Twitter feed. Rivals and preferred targets change and evolve throughout time: at the beginning there were 'Lying Ted Cruz' and 'Lightweight Jeb Bush', then several reporters popped-up for some of Trump's recurring feud with media and news outlets. Finally, Joe Biden became the preferred target (although not as extensively as 'Crooked Hillary' four years earlier). Unpacking the frequency of Trump's use of nicknames provides a timeline for his political enterprise: 'Lying Ted Cruz' and 'Dope Karl Rove' for the 2016 Republican primaries; 'Nervous Nancy Pelosi' and 'Shifty Adam Schiff' for the four years of dispute with the Democratic-controlled U.S. House of Representatives; and the well-known 'Crooked Hillary' and 'Sleepy Joe Biden' for the two presidential runs.

Why such a strategy? Because emotions play a crucial role in establishing an empathetic relation between the political leader and their audience. Trump is able to construct the character of his opponents using simple and short descriptions; setting the ground for informal, everyday language, and distracting the audience from serious issues and complex policies. He knows how to calculate words and how to play with social media and TV; how to cheer the audience and how to impress it; how to play with symbols and symbolic images. He is an experienced and skilled performer who aims to establish a relation of confidence and full complicity with the audience. He has worked on TV for years and he knows the "rules" of the showbiz and of the infotainment. Every time he wants to show that he has nothing to do with old-style serious politics he jokes, he makes fun of his opponents. Average citizens have limits in assimilating data and information and fully react only to emotional acts. And Trump's attempts to make opponents looking ridiculous serve him to offer voters with an experience of a sensation of full identification with the speaker, with simple solutions offered in a pleasant and funny framework, equipped with jokes, nicknames and mockeries.

Candidate Trump and President Trump are speaking the same language: in disarticulating old-style political discourse, they are privileging slogans over thought, emotions instead of contents. With the crucial aid of his Twitter's based disintermediated communication, Trump's nicknames and inflammatory mockeries are invented to serve his populist strategy, to personify the 'everyday man' who fights against the elites. And that has been true for both presidential campaigns and for his full term as President. Trump's hyper-simplified and politically-incorrect language is the language that millions of Americans speak at home, among friends, or in their families. When they hear a candidate (a president!) speaking like them, they feel at ease, comforted. It is the true language of populism.

Trump's rhetoric has never become presidential and his political communication has been set into a comedy-style model, limiting the space for complex reasoning and complicated contents. Moreover, his ability to coin nicknames for almost every political opponent, disdained journalists and mainstream media has been picked up by his social media followers and conservative-aligned media such as Fox News. Literally, Trump has been able to build the agenda throughout his social media strategy of de-politicized, clowning-style communication.

Focusing on this ability to coin and impose ridiculous nicknames for opponents also opens up room for reflection on two relevant political concepts. The first one concerns Trump as the epitome of the modern notion of permanent campaign. His inflammatory communication never changed: from candidate to President to candidate again (incumbent). The blurring boundaries between time of campaign and time of governing makes presidents being perceived as more partisan, less "presidential". And this brings to the second long-term consequence: throughout this divisive rhetoric, once typical of election campaigns, Donald Trump represents a key factor in the increasing polarization of U.S. politics.

Table 1. Words' mention in Trump's tweets (nicknames for opponents):

Nickname	Opponent	Candidate period (2016 Election)	Presidential period	Candidate period (2020 Election)	Total
Crooked	Hillary Clinton	231	92	37	360
Lightweight	Marco Rubio	19	0	0	19
	Jeb Bush	4	0	0	4
	miscellaneous	19	3	3	25
Lying	Ted Cruz	21	0	0	21
	miscellaneous	12	25	5	42
Dope/Dopey	Mort Zuckermann	8	0	0	8
	Karl Rove	7	0	0	7
	miscellaneous	21	0	1	22
Dummy	*miscellaneous*	26	0	5	31
Crazy	Bernie Sanders	3	4	27	34
	Nancy Pelosi	0	17	30	47
	Mergyn Kelly	10	0	0	10
	Maxine Waters	2	3	0	5
	miscellaneous	26	22	21	69
Cryin'	Chuck Schumer	0	11	16	27
Pocahontas	Elizabeth Warren	10	4	16	30
Goofy	Elizabeth Warren	24	0	0	24
Sleepy Eyes	Chuck Todd	13	5	7	25
Shifty	Adam Schiff	0	37	19	56
Mini	Michael Bloomberg	0	6	52	58
Nervous	Nancy Pelosi	0	18	4	22
Phony	Kamala Harris	0	0	5	5
Sleepy/Sleepin'	Joe Biden	0	43	176	219

Source: Author's elaboration on Trumptwitterarchive.com (2020).

Note: Total tweets from @realDonaldTrump.
*Candidate 2016 period: June 16, 2015-November 8, 2016 (500 days: 7787 tweets).
**Presidential period: January 20, 2017-January 20, 2020 (1095 days: 14242 tweets).
***Candidate 2020 period: January 20, 2020-November 3, 2020 (283 days: 10424 tweets).
Transition period (November 9, 2016-January 19, 2017) not included.

Election countdown: Instagram's role in visualizing the 2020 campaign

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The photo-sharing app, Instagram, has become the hottest place to learn about the 2020 campaigns, offering a visual connection between candidates and potential voters. As of October 2020, Instagram boasted 140 million active U.S. users, with young people mainly engaged on the platform. To reach and interact with this population, the 2020 presidential primary candidates employed Instagram to increase their visibility and garner engagement. A robust and organic reach is built upon a steady flow of engagement on Instagram, particularly likes and comments. Therefore, understanding the types of posts or messaging that not only are used but also enhance engagement during a campaign period is essential.

Between December and February 2020, a look at the Instagram posts among the remaining Democratic candidates, Biden, Gabbard, Sanders and Warren, and the Republican incumbent, Trump, revealed three widely used messaging strategies: informational (i.e., posts discussing a candidates platform or educating the consumer); transformational (i.e., posts that evoke a sense of emotion, identify to the core identity of the brand, campaign events, and social issues); and interactional (i.e., posts about current events, personal posts with friends or family, creation of a sense of community, voter relation, and mobilizing posts).

Interactional posts, specifically Instagram posts about current events, garnered the largest number of likes. For example, in January 2020, Warren's timely post on the assassination of Soleimani received over 60,000 likes and Sander's post on the high cost of insulin snagged over 150,000 likes. Informational posts that educate and inform, such as posts illustrating recent polling results, also garnered more likes than other informational strategies, such as posts about a candidate's platform or policy agenda. Interestingly, interactional posts on Instagram that focused on mobilizing, get-out-the-vote, and donations did not solicit a high number of likes. For instance, Gabbard's picture of her with a group of supporters, along with a fundraising goal (and a "donate now" button) collected about 8,000 likes. The most "commented on" Instagram posts were interactional, specifically personal posts and current event posts. Biden's vintage family photo of him as a single parent of two boys collected over 3,500 comments, and Trump's post of him playing golf for a little exercise exceeded 35,000 comments. Candidates who Instagrammed about current events (i.e., interactional) and educational posts (i.e., informational) also were rewarded with more commentary. The least commented on posts covered the candidate's platform (i.e. informational) and social issues. To summarize the 2020 primary campaign on Instagram, candidates' interactional posts – current events and personal pictures - elicited the most engagement. Yet, what types of posts were used in the lead up to the November 3rd general election and which posts had the highest levels of engagement? Did Biden and Trump differ in their countdown approaches?

A comparison of the presidential candidates Instagram accounts a week prior to the November 3rd election revealed very different communication strategies. Most of Trump's posts were primarily coded as experiential (i.e. transformational) and brand community (i.e. interactional). More specifically, his posts predominately focused on him speaking to large crowds and thanking them. Engagement rates for these types of posts ranged from approximately 400,000-800,000 likes. There were a number of notable posts that deviated from focusing solely on crowds that received large engagement numbers. Several posts had high production levels that mimiced formulistic movie trailers (i.e. soaring or mixed music, professional narration, and aerial perspectives). The content contained within these videos highlighted Trump's community of supporters, his achievements and American landscapes, as well as a "dystopian-like" world that a Biden administration would bring. These posts were coded as emotional (i.e. transformational) and educational (i.e. informational) received engagement rates of 2.2 and 2.3 million. The most popular Trump posts included him dancing on stage with supporters to YMCA (4.7 million views) and video of the Biden bus being surrounded by Trump supporters on a Texas highway (3.7 million views). Lastly, mobilization efforts were limited to reminding people to vote and played a secondary role in the account compared to the focus on large campaign events.

In contrast, the Biden campaign communicated a much more diverse range of post content/types and varied in their aesthetic approach. Unlike the Trump campaign, mobilization (i.e. interactional) was the primary focus in the election countdown. These posts ranged from creative ways to spell out "vote" through food to detailed voting information (i.e. last day to vote early). While mobilization was the most popular type of post, the Biden campaign, with some exceptions, had a variety of content that touched upon most of the typology categories. The exception to this, was experiential posts – there were few posts that included crowds. Biden's most popular posts included an emotion/voter relations video that summarized an interaction between Biden and a little boy (i.e. 2.1 million views), an educational video summarizing Trump's bankruptcies (i.e. 1.85 million views) and humor/emotion video that had Mark Hamill reacting to Trump (i.e. 1.9 million views).

With the announcement of Biden's win on November 7th, we can now examine how candidates use Instagram when entering a new office as well as say farewell to devoted to faitherful supporters during a post-election period.

Candidates did lackluster youth targeting on Instagram

Presidential campaigns often hinge on which candidates are best at mobilizing those demographic groups who are the most predisposed to support them. For Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden, young people were a key group to cultivate and lure to the polls. Among 18- to 29-year-olds, 60 percent said they leaned toward Biden, while only 27 percent liked Donald Trump, according to a survey by the Institute of Politics at Harvard Kennedy School taken late in the campaign. Of course, young people are also the least likely age group to vote, so it takes a lot of effort to energize them enough to fill out a ballot.

One increasingly important way to reach and influence young people is on Instagram. With more than 400 million active users, the mobile photo-sharing application is larger than Twitter and trails only Facebook among social media platforms. Instagram is especially popular with young adults, who see it as the "go-to source of political news," according to a survey by Business Insider. Recent research shows Instagram's political influence. Young voters frequently turn to Instagram for information about candidates. Those who follow political leaders on Instagram say the posts can influence their views more than any other source, including friends and family. The main motives to follow political leaders on Instagram are for information and guidance, which helps to explain why followers are so receptive to the messages in leaders' posts.

While Instagram is a platform that Biden could have used to appeal to young people and convince them to vote, an analysis of his campaign's Instagram account shows the absence of a focused youth strategy. Of the 450 Instagram posts during the last two months of the race, fewer than 5% visually or verbally targeted those in their late teens or 20s. Targeting the youth vote is defined as whether the posts showed 18- to 29-year-olds, verbally mentioned young adults, or discussed issues from the youth perspective. Trump's campaign Instagram account practically ignored young voters, with less than 2% of posts focused on youth.

Biden had some posts that attempted to target the youth vote. Examples include a video compilation of several young people excited to vote for the first time. The post, which is addressed to "First-time voters," says, "Voting is a powerful tool for change." Another video montage of young people is labeled "Students react to my policies. It's so important that young people's voices are heard this election. You are the future of this country." Two other posts target young African Americans. In one, Biden says: "Historically Black Colleges and Universities are critical to the fabric of our education system. I'll make it a priority to invest in the diverse talent at HBCUs, make college affordable for Black students, and work toward equity in

education." A similar post compares Biden and Trump on various issues, including education, and Biden says he will "expand access to Pell Grants for millions of Black students." A few other posts included 20-something celebrities. In one, Biden has a conversation with 28-year-old singer and actress Cardi B. The posts reads: "You might be surprised, but @iamcardib and I have a lot more in common than our passion for talking about racial equality, free college, and affordable healthcare." Their video conversation goes on to address these issues from the perspective of young voters. These examples show that the Biden campaign was capable of doing youth-targeted posts. They simply did not do many of them.

Of course, many issues mentioned on the candidates' Instagram pages, such as the economy and the COVID-19 pandemic, matter to all ages. But voter targeting is common for other age groups, such as senior citizens, who frequently are shown in political ads while discussing Social Security, Medicare, and other age-related issues. The same effort could be put into targeting young people, but campaigns rarely bother. For example, U.S. presidential TV ads almost never target young voters, which promotes an interpretation among young viewers that political ads, and political campaigns in general, are not meant for them. Focus groups with college students indicate that young people want candidates to address them directly and create ads that stress the importance of voting in general. Doing so could boost the stature of the candidate making the appeal, as well as counteract political cynicism.

The failure to reach out to young voters is not limited to U.S. candidates. Research shows that British candidates are equally guilty. British political ad makers say they rarely pursue a youth strategy, even though low youth turnout concerns them.

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College students, political engagement and Snapchat in the 2020 general election

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Snapchat has grown among young adults, with Snapchat now claiming over 90% of Americans between the ages of 13 and 24 as users. Usually, we associate Snapchat with entertaining filters and disappearing content. However, Snapchat provides a home for political activity among young adults, too.

In 2016, we found that sending political pictures and political videos increased civic engagement among college students. Among other activities, civic engagement consists of persuading others why they should vote for or against a party or candidate, attending political meetings, and participating in political activities like marches or protests.

The 2020 election has seen record voter turnout and political participation among young people, with records being shattered in Texas, California, and Wisconsin. Does Snapchat deserve part of the credit for enhancing civic engagement? Did these politically-oriented activities on Snapchat increase civic activity among college students in 2020 as they did in 2016?

To examine those questions, we performed a survey of students at a large midwestern public university (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville) in October 2020. Students at this university are reasonably representative of college students as a whole on several dimensions including their voting rates.

Our results show that sending pictures and videos about candidates, political parties, or interest groups increased civic engagement levels, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. In both figures, the horizontal axis shows the frequency of political Snapchat activity and the vertical axis is the average treatment effect on the treated at the varying frequencies of actions on Snapchat. In addition, the solid line is the average treatment effect on the treated at each Snapchat activity level, and the dashed lines are 95% confidence intervals around these estimates.

These figures indicate that even rarely sending political pictures or videos is associated with two to three-point increases in civic engagement. Meanwhile, sending political pictures or political videos regularly on Snapchat both result in slightly over four-point increases in civic engagement. For context, a two-point increase in civic engagement is equivalent to participating rarely in two activities that one otherwise would not have engaged in or to moving from participating never in an activity to sometimes in an activity.

Meanwhile, a four-point increase is equivalent to engaging in one additional activity very often that one would otherwise not have participated in or participating sometimes in two additional activities that one otherwise would not have done. Yet, we did not find any evidence that monitoring what candidates for office, political parties, or interest groups post on Snapchat is connected with increased civic engagement.

We employed a statistical technique called matching to obtain our results. Matching allows us to isolate the impact of political uses of Snapchat among those otherwise similarly inclined to civic engagement. To do so, we considered many other factors connected with civic engagement, with a complete listing available in the online appendix.

To ensure confidence in our results, we need to address two potential limitations to our analyses. First, matching requires that we satisfy a series of stringent assumptions or else the results are not valid. Our dataset and analyses meet these assumptions.

Second, if the groups that engaged in Snapchat by sharing pictures or videos at varying levels differ from those who did not perform such activities, then we cannot determine a causal effect of these Snapchat activities. This means that we would not be able to differentiate between the effects of other, preexisting differences (like interest levels in politics) and activities on Snapchat on civic engagement. We checked to see if this occurred. After matching, there are no statistically significant preexisting differences between those who engaged in sharing pictures or videos at varying levels and those who did not. Thus, we can rule out the effects of preexisting differences.

Yet, what if we have specified our matching routines such that they conveniently produce the results that we report here? That's known as p-hacking, and it's a large, well-known problem in scientific research. To guard against this practice, we removed one of the factors that we discuss in the previous paragraph and re-ran our statistical model. We repeat that procedure for each factor and each level of monitoring what others say on Snapchat, sending pictures, and sending videos on Snapchat. Our results are robust to these alternate specifications, as 82.41% (or, 89/108) of the alternate specifications confirm our results.

In sum, political expression on Snapchat is partly responsible for higher levels of civic activity among college students in 2020. While Snapchat may not be as frequently used as social media apps like Facebook and Instagram, it provided an important vehicle for increasing civic and political activity among college students in 2020. Thus, online political engagement increases civic activity away from the internet, too. We anticipate that this trend will continue.

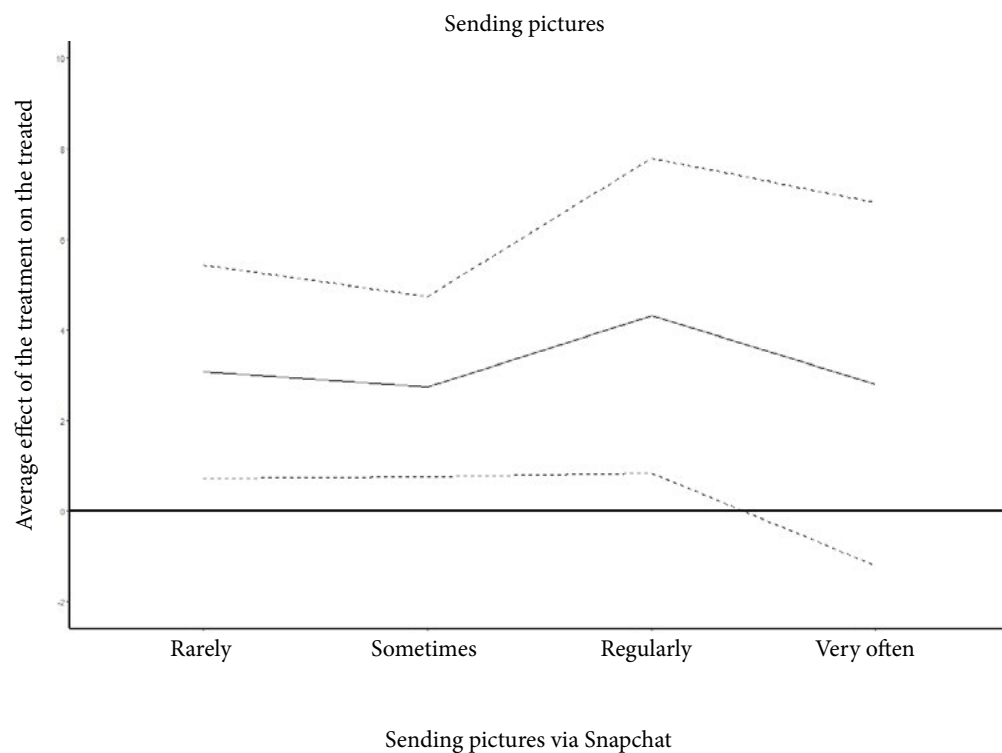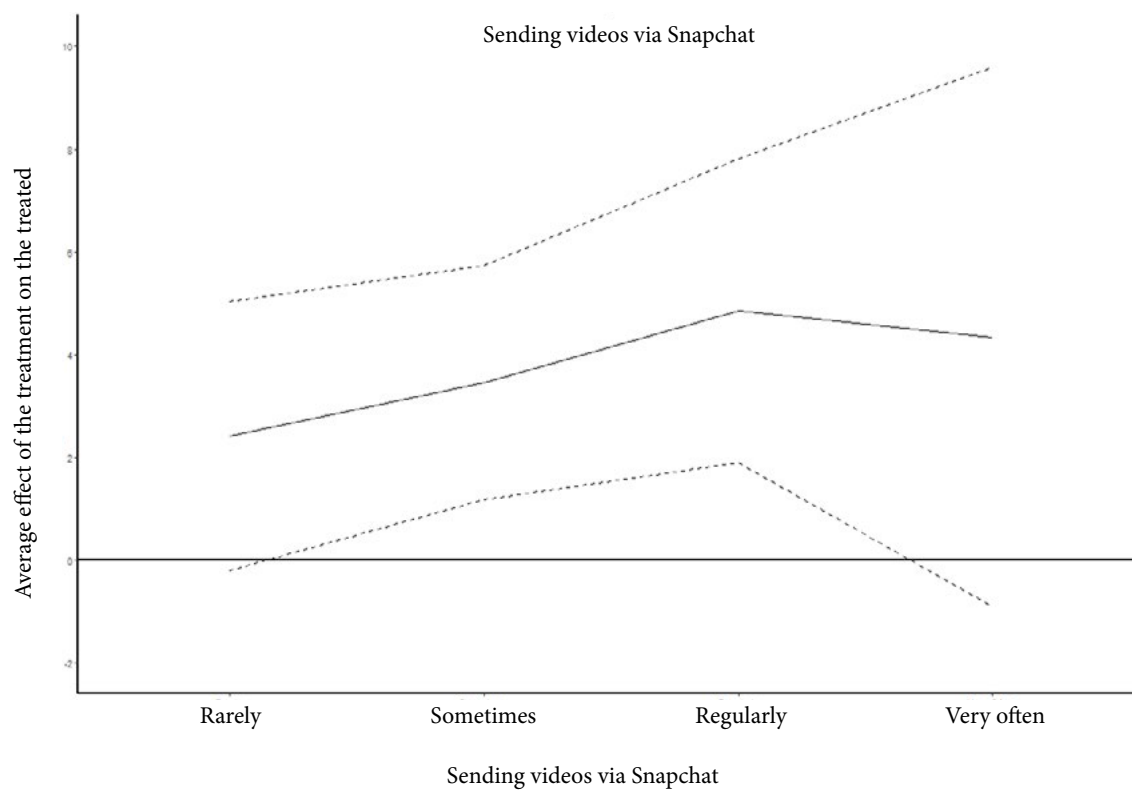**Figure 1: sending political pictures via Snapchat and civic engagement in 2020**

Sending pictures

Sending pictures via Snapchat

Figure 2: sending political videos via Snapchat and civic engagement in 2020

Sending videos via Snapchat

Sending videos via Snapchat

Advertising on Facebook: transparency, but not transparent enough

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In 2016, much concern was raised about advertising on social media, especially Facebook. A Bloomberg story at the end of the 2016 election noted that the Trump campaign used Facebook advertising specifically to target pockets of Democratic voters to demobilize them from voting for Hillary Clinton. Without any way to systematically monitor ads on Facebook, researchers were left with anecdotes to determine who was targeted and what was said.

In 2018, Facebook created an ad library for journalists and researchers. Our project, Illuminating 2020, tracked the spending, targets, and content of ad buys on Facebook and Instagram and created a dashboard to visualize the data.

Using computational techniques to classify the content in ads, with at least 75% accuracy for each category, we find noteworthy differences in how the campaigns communicated on the platforms. Our research suggests that advertising largely reflected the demographic trends of the Republican and Democratic Parties and the rhetorical trends of the candidates. Unfortunately, because of the limitations of data reporting from Facebook, it is challenging to ascertain fine-grained micro-targeting practices.

Overall Spending and Trends
Facebook advertising was a major focus of total overall ad spending by Donald Trump and Joe Biden. As much as $1.5 billion was spent overall on advertising, from television to radio to digital media, between April 6 and October 25. A major share of that spending was on Facebook. Our analysis suggests that, of the ads associated with their official campaign pages, the Biden campaign spent $76.9 million between June 1 and November 1, and the Trump campaign spent $87.2 million. This amount is significantly more than the campaigns spent in 2016: Trump spent an estimated $44 million and Clinton spent $28 million between June and November, according to a Facebook report.

Although the Trump campaign spent more on Facebook overall, between October 5 and November 1, 2020 Biden outspent Trump 4:3. Biden had his largest new ad buys on Facebook over the second presidential debate, which took place on October 22nd, spending over $10 million as compared with Trump's $7.5 million (See Figure 1).

Demographic Targets
When looking across the five months of the campaign, from June 1 until November 1, 2020, the overall targeting of demographic groups matched the demographics of the political parties. Biden overweighted women in his targeted spending, which reflects the gender skew in the Democratic party (See Figure 2). The two campaigns had distinctly different age targeting strategies. The

Trump campaign prioritized ad spending to people 45 and older, while the Biden campaign focused heavily on the 25-44 age brackets, mirroring the differences in age demographics of the two parties. Millennials are more likely to lean Democrat, while the Silent Generation is more likely to lean Republican. Neither campaign focused resources heavily on the youngest voters - those in the 18-24 age bracket - even though this group most heavily uses social media, especially Instagram. Both campaigns heavily targeted the 65+ category, even though less than 50% of Americans in that age bracket are on any social media platforms. To us, that speaks to the power of social media advertising for micro-targeting the nations' most motivated voters (See Figure 3). Lacking in Facebook data is information about education level, race and ethnicity, religion, and location data beyond the level of the state to ascertain micro-targeting strategies.

Messaging
At a high level, Trump's advertisements on Facebook looked much like his campaign rhetoric. He attacked his opponents - Biden, Harris, and the news media – and did so often with an uncivil tone. The Biden advertisements tended to emphasize his personality and ability to lead and were overwhelmingly civil.

Nearly all ads call targets to action in the text - ranging from fundraising to polls to petitions. Beyond that, there are distinct differences in messaging strategy. Biden spent more on advocacy ads, while Trump spent more on attack ads. When Trump attacked, he was more likely to attack Biden's policies, while when Biden attacked, he was more likely to attack Trump's persona - his character, personality, and ability to lead.

We also analyzed whether an ad exhibited uncivil language. We operationalize incivility as hateful, disparaging, and derogatory remarks targeted at another individual or group. Nearly one-third of Trump's ads contain evidence of incivility, while a fraction of Biden's ads were uncivil in tone. (Figure 4)

Conclusion
Our analysis suggests that party demographics drove targeting strategy. We also found that the rhetoric in the advertisements largely matched the rhetoric by the candidates on the campaign trail. Trump's ads show evidence of the same personal attacks and self-aggrandizement as his campaign speeches. The challenge for researchers is the lack of fine-grained targeting data to ascertain whether the campaigns undertook the same demobilization approaches in 2020 as reported in 2016. While we gain a high-level view, the extent of microtargeting is unfortunately left to guesswork.
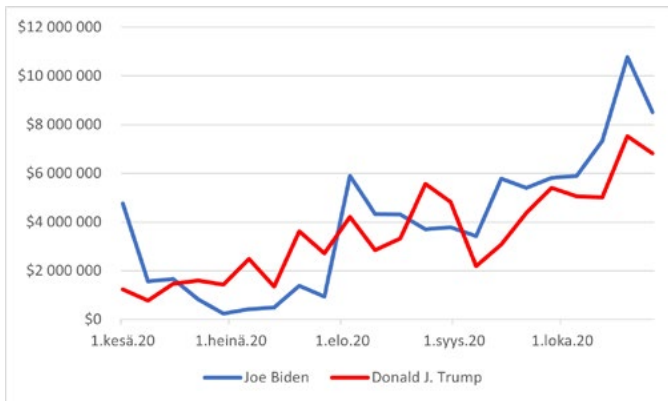
**Figure 1: Facebook ad Spending over time
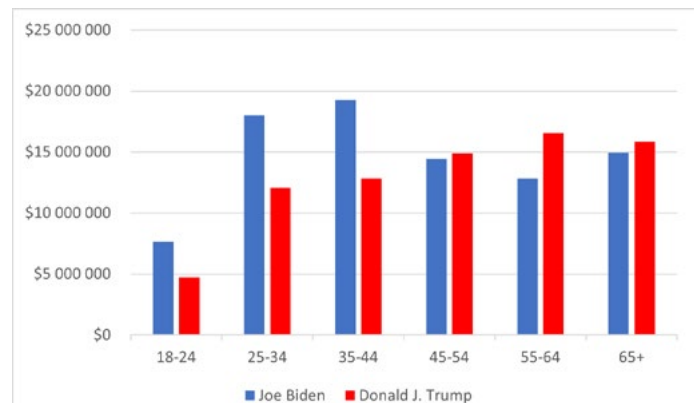by Biden and Trump, June 1 to Nov. 1, 2020**

**Figure 2: Facebook ad spending by age category
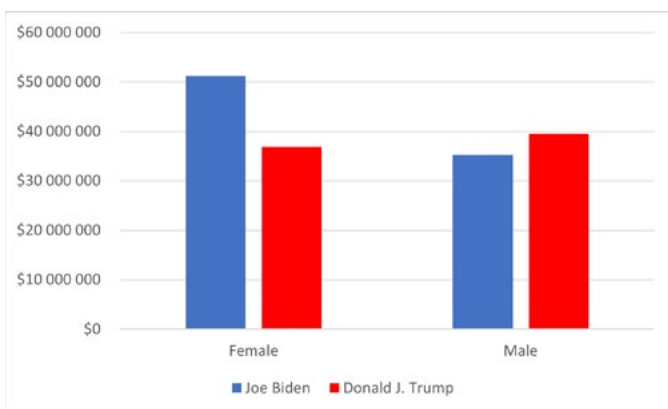between June 1 and Nov. 1, 2020**

**Figure 3: Facebook ad spending by gender
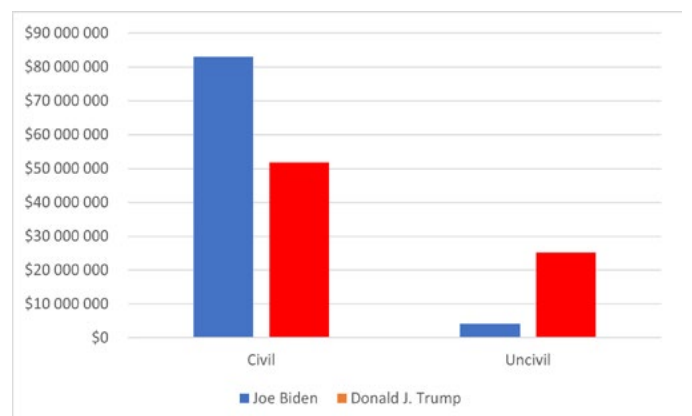between June 1 and Nov. 1, 2020**

**Figure 4: Facebook ad spending by civility
between June 1 and Nov. 1, 2020**

Detecting emotions in Facebook political ads with computer vision

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Set against the backdrop of a pandemic and polarized political climate, this election was sure to be emotional. Therefore, we used computer vision to examine the emotions expressed by Biden and Trump in their Facebook political ads. Our aim was to see if the candidates expressed different emotions in images where they presented themselves versus how they depicted opponents in attacks.

Indeed, we found that Biden primarily expressed happiness in his Facebook ads, whereas his attack ads depicted Trump as angry. Meanwhile, the Trump campaign presented their candidate as a calm leader, while Biden was often shown expressing confusion. Overall, both campaigns' Facebook ads largely focused more on promoting their own candidate rather than on attacking the opponent.

To collect and analyze images in Facebook ads, we used two open science software tools that we developed. The first, FBAdLibrarian, assists researchers in collecting images from the Facebook Ad Library. The second, Pykognition, leverages Amazon's facial detection algorithms to classify emotions expressed in faces.

We collected ads from the official Trump and Biden Facebook pages in the week before Facebook's ad pause on October 27th. Due to controversies around this ad pause, the data we collected from Facebook may be incomplete, and it appears that Facebook removed all information about dates from the data.

In total, we obtained 202,000 Trump ads and 109,287 Biden ads. Using FBAdLibrarian, we collected 98,830 images from Trump ads and 69,941 images from Biden ads. This means that in our dataset, 49% of Trump's ads and 64% of Biden's ads contained still images (the remainder were videos).

We then removed all images that did not depict Trump or Biden. This includes ads that were infographics, promoting merchandise, or featuring other high-profile politicians. Many of the remaining images were copies, so we removed duplicates and ended up with a dataset of 634 images for Trump and 1,148 for Biden.

We further divided these images into three ad categories used in previous research: Promote, Contrast, and Attack. Promote images show only the candidate, Contrast images show both the candidate and the opponent, and Attack images show only the opponent. We divided the images this way to see whether campaigns strategically change the emotions displayed by their candidate versus the opponent.

Emotion Classification Results

We ran all images through Amazon's Rekognition API with our software, Pykognition. This process categorizes faces into eight emotional categories: Angry, Calm, Confused, Disgusted, Fear, Happy, Sad, and Surprised. Each face is classified with a unique identifier ("FaceID"), an emotion, and a predicted score for that emotion. In Figure 1, we show examples from the Biden page for each category: Promote, Contrast, and Attack.

We manually checked the algorithm's classification for each image. In cases where we disagreed with the algorithm, we changed the emotion to the one we considered most accurate. Overall, we agreed with the algorithm in 73% of cases.

Interestingly and unique to this election cycle, candidates (and Biden in particular) wore protective facemasks in response to the coronavirus pandemic. This proved problematic for the facial detection algorithm, which predicted pictures with facemasks to display emotions such as sadness and fear but with unreliable confidence. We therefore reclassified all images where candidates wore a mask into a new category: "MASK". With the images classified, we were able to link our coded data to all other ads in the dataset using the same image. In Figure 2, we present our overall results per candidate page and for each ad type.

Overall, we find that in terms of the number of ads sent, both campaigns emphasized promoting their own candidate rather than attacking the opponent. Biden was most often depicted as 'Happy', and he wore a facemask in approximately 10% of images. By contrast, the Trump page issued ads promoting the candidate as the 'Calm' leader and wore a mask in less than 1% of images. In Figure 3, we also report each category in proportional terms, to better understand the distribution of emotions per ad type.

For Biden, there was a clear distinction between his own portrayal as "Happy" and Trump as "Angry". For Trump, we see his page's ads depicting him as "Calm", whereas Biden was most often depicted as "Confused" in attacks.

Our analysis reveals how campaigns preferred to show their candidates in Facebook ads: Biden as warm and happy, and Trump as the calm leader. In addition, we see how the campaign's broader attack narratives were also depicted in images: Biden attacked Trump as an angry despot, and Trump attacked Biden as a confused candidate in mental decline.

It is important to note that we did not factor in the spending amount or number of people who saw these ads; we only studied the raw number of ads issued by the campaign. And, due to limitations imposed by Facebook, we do not know the dates of when these ads were issued. Nevertheless, we encourage other researchers to use the open science tools that we developed to further analyze emotions in political images.

Figure 1: Promote, Contrast, and Attack ad examples from the Biden Facebook page
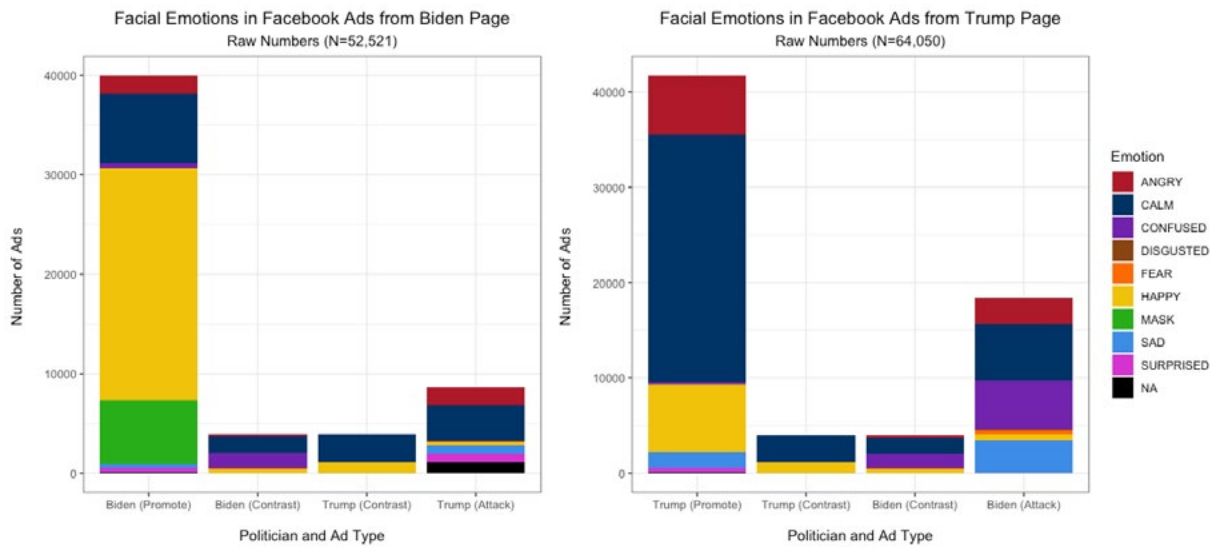

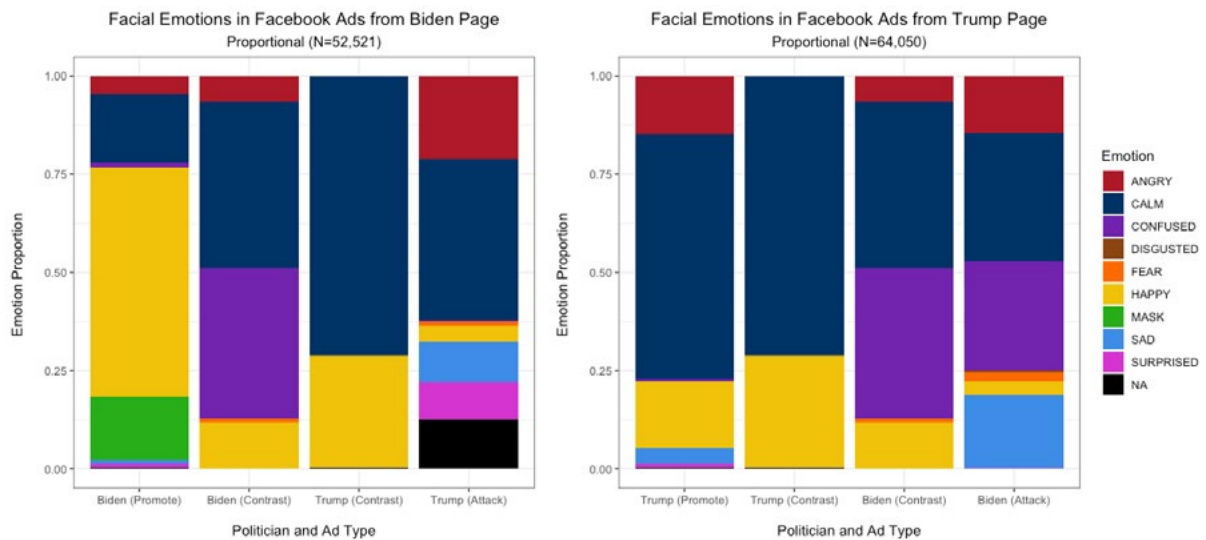**Figure 2: Overall emotion classifications by candidate and ad type**

Figure 3: Proportion of emotion classifications by candidate and ad type

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Popular culture
and public critique

On campaigns and political trash talk

Just before Election Day in 2020, President Donald Trump appeared at a campaign rally in Scranton, Pennsylvania. In characteristic fashion, he played to the crowd with familiar appeals to his own popularity and the alleged diminishing popularity of sports leagues such as the National Football League and the National Basketball Association. Echoing previous comments of his own and other conservative commentators, he turned his attention specifically to superstar LeBron James and the low ratings for the NBA Finals. "How about basketball? How about LeBron?" he primed his supporters. Concluding that James' (and others') activism was responsible for the decrease in viewership of sports, he added, "When they don't respect our country, when they don't respect our flag, nobody wants to watch. . . . You got to stand for our flag, you got to be really great to our flag and to our anthem, and if you don't do that, we're not watching!"

The crowd responded to the sports reference as though they were actually at a game, beginning a chant of "LeBron James sucks!" A pleased President Trump stood back and declared, "What a crowd! What a crowd!"

This moment was far from the first time a political crowd turned to enthusiastic chants either to praise their candidate or to mock their opponent. During the 2016 election, Trump supporters routinely shouted "Lock her up!" to confirm their contempt for Hillary Rodham Clinton. And, political communication scholars have long observed the parallels between politics and sports, best symbolized by the persistence of "horse race" coverage. Yet Trump's frequent references to sports have coupled with increasing partisan polarization to extend the legitimacy of treating elections as little more than a game to be won. In such a climate, and amplified by social media, it is no surprise that partisans understand themselves less as citizens and more as fans, turning to a win-at-all-costs mindset and invoking forms of discourse that are characteristic of sports fans' trash talk.

It is one thing when voters behave as though they are at a pre-game tailgate party or are shouting down their rivals from the stands. It is yet another when candidates for elected office similarly mimic these behaviors. In a notable convergence of politics and sports, former college football coach Tommy Tuberville was elected last week to the U.S. Senate in Alabama. Tuberville's campaign unsurprisingly traded on his football background, most notably his ten years at Auburn University where he was especially successful against his principal rival, the University of Alabama. Tuberville thrived on the rivalry, emphasizing his own team's unity and relishing the opportunity to taunt opposing—losing—fans. This combativeness was featured in a campaign ad for incumbent Senator Doug Jones,

in which Tuberville was criticized for his record of abandoning the teams he coached. The ad concluded with footage of the former coach while at the University of Cincinnati where, in 2016, he responded to one of his own team's disappointed fans by yelling, "Go to hell! Get a job!"

If we can agree that political polarization increasingly understands citizenship in terms of fan affiliation, then perhaps no candidate in 2020 was better suited than Tuberville to mock his opposition when the outcome became clear. In a speech to celebrate his victory, Tuberville quickly thanked his supporters and then turned his attention to his rivals. "If you allow me to quote one of my opponent's many campaign ads, they can all go to hell and get a job as far as I'm concerned!" Rather than signal to Alabamans a commitment to working on behalf of all citizens of the state, he instead seized the opportunity to reward his supporters by belittling his rivals.

Trump's influence on U.S. politics has been substantial, but it is difficult to predict how much other Republican politicians will adopt his tone moving forward. Perhaps Tuberville will be content with his victory lap. Maybe tweeting, "Cry more, lib," won't be representative of Congressman-Elect Madison Cawthorn's term in North Carolina. What is clear is that Republicans in particular seem to delight in this kind of political trash talk. This isn't to suggest that Democrats are always or necessarily noble. Nevertheless, we might contrast the comments above with those of President-Elect Joe Biden, whose victory speech addressed the supporters of his rival directly, saying, "To make progress, we must stop treating our opponents as our enemy. We are not enemies. We are Americans." Such words are not, by themselves, sufficient. However, they are a necessary first step in reimagining our political rivals as adversaries worthy of mutual respect rather than the subjects of ridicule and contempt.

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It's all about my "team": what we can learn about politics from sport

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Modern politics in the United States has seemingly become akin to sport, as Americans affiliate themselves with the red/Republican or blue/Democrat team. This shift is illustrated in the rise of Trumpism, as his supporters fly Trump flags, attend rallies similar to sporting events, and wear branded merchandise showcasing attachment to a person and brand. Succinctly stated, politics in 2020 have ascended to fandom above policy, and sport can gelp ascertain what this could mean for democracy moving forward.

Sport communication scholars often examine fan behavior through the concept of team identification, explained by Daniel Wann as an emotional connection to a team where their performances become self-relevant. Essentially, team wins feel like personal victories, leading one to Bask-In-Reflected-Glory (BIRG), and team losses feel like personal defeats, leading one to Cut-Off-Reflected-Failure (CORF). Sport communication literature provides evidence that those who are highly identified with their team are more likely to BIRG during their teams' success and less likely to CORF after losses. Unlike any U.S. President in modern history, President Trump has turned politics into sport, complete with blind and unadulterated fandom.

So what can we learn about the 2020 election from sport fandom? First, let's consider the role of cognitive dissonance and identity protection. Looking back to 2014, Devlin and Billings conducted a longitudinal analysis of highly identified USMNT fans during the 2014 World Cup. As the tournament progressed, the team failed to meet (*unrealistic) e*xpectations, resulting in decreased nationalism, or the belief that your country is better than another country, and smugness, the belief that your country is superior to all countries attitudes among a national sample. Interestingly, once the USMNT was *eliminated* from the tournament, smugness scores increased to their highest level, indicating highly identified fans not only refused to CORF, but instead, doubled-down and *declared* themselves the best despite evidence to the contrary.

We are witnessing a similar effect occurring with political identity. For highly identified Trump fans, the electoral loss poses a personal identity threat that must be mitigated accordingly. Therefore, denying the election results and refusing to concede provides psychological insulation from the loss. Rationale for this can also be explained by social psychological findings suggesting a success/failure attributional bias exists, which helps internalize success and externalize failure. Sport communication research has found that one's degree of team identification is major predictor for attributing a loss to external forces such as referees and opponents' cheating, resulting in denial of the outcome, or worse, behaviors such as increased aggression. Leon Mann noted that when supporters of opposing teams were asked to recap a game,

it seemed they witnessed two completely different events. Supporters of the losing team overestimated objective and measurable events, such as free kicks given to the opponent, and attributing the loss to external factors and dirty play rather than admitting their team's poor performance.

This research mirrors what we are currently witnessing from Trump, who seems unable to internalize the electoral defeat, and instead, has refused to concede and is trying to cast doubt on the integrity of electoral process through unfounded claims of fraud, cheating, and subsequent lawsuits holding no merit. His fans are levying similar claims on various social media platforms while feeling spurned by certain platforms' attempts at fact-checking their election claims.

With reports that Trump hopes to continue contesting the election result with lawsuits and additional rallies, highly identified Trump supporters will continue to echo his claims. However, it is important to note that identification occurs on a spectrum, and not all supporters are highly identified (even if those highly identified supporters are the "loudest" on social media). Unfortunately, highly identified supporters are more likely to believe misinformation that confirms their in-group beliefs (political identity hypothesis) and form false memories of events. Additionally, those of populist leanings will continue to view the mainstream media as hostile toward their beliefs.

While seemingly grim, there is one predictive insight to be gleaned if modern politics continues to mirror sport: a return to normalcy. Communication scholars have noted inconsistent findings regarding attributional bias, arguing that a responsibility norm exists for individuals to eventually accept a loss. Recently, research suggests the aforementioned bias phenomena was weaker among less identified fans, which is notable considering not all Trump voters are necessarily *highly-identified* supporters. Like sports fans, as more begin to believe that the game is truly over, Trump supporters will shift their attention to next season.

Granted, in sport, there are no pep rallies after a defeat, no emails to fans requesting donations to contest the results, and no communication strategies intended to cast doubt on a final score. So, it remains to be seen how highly identified Trump supporters will react if Trump continues to dominate headlines and if the mainstream media continues providing attention surrounding rallies, misinformation, and lawsuit filings.

Should the campaign continue to lose in court and should the media shift their attention away from Trump, Devlin and Billings' work lends empirical evidence to a popular saying that "time heals all wounds." Perhaps a similar pattern will emerge once the sensationalism of the election declines and the media ceases to give attention to former President Donald Trump.

Kelly Loeffler uses battle with the WNBA as springboard into Georgia Senate runoff

It was widely-known that Donald Trump's status as the *de facto* face of the Republican Party had a tremendous impact on most of 2020s down-ballot elections. That impact took a bizarre turn in the summer of 2020 when Kelly Loeffler, an incumbent Republican candidate in one of Georgia's two senatorial races, took political aim at the professional sports league in which she has co-owned a franchise since 2011. In June, with Loeffler running in a unique special election that featured opponents on her left *and* right flanks, she publicized a letter she wrote to Cathy Englebert, commissioner of the Women's National Basketball Association. In that letter, published amid the civil unrest wrought by the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Loeffler argued that the league should distance itself from the Black Lives Matter movement. Given the history of the WNBA, and the context of the senatorial race, Loeffler's maneuver was a politically motivated attempt to demonstrate her allegiance to a Republican Party that had aligned itself with Donald Trump.

At the time Loeffler published her letter, the WNBA was preparing for the start of its season, delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic, and the league and its players were not reticent about demonstrating their support for the Black Lives Matter movement. This support should not have surprised anyone familiar with the WNBA; over the last decade, the league has been more proactive in its political progressivism than any other professional sports organization in the U.S. Political activism is integral to its brand. Those who enter WNBA fandom therefore go into it knowing that does not hesitate to voice its support for disregarded communities.

Before being appointed by Georgia's GOP governor to fill the state's suddenly-vacated seat in the Senate in early 2020, Loeffler was a fast-riser at International Exchange, a Fortune 500 financial service provider. She had a history as an investor in her own right (a history that came under intense scrutiny for alleged insider trading not long after she took office) and built up enough assets to purchase a 49 percent stake in a professional sports franchise, the WNBA's Atlanta Dream. In other words, Loeffler possessed at least a modicum of business acumen. To think that Loeffler might have been surprised or even offended by the political actions taken by the WNBA would be therefore naïve at best. In fact, as political scientist Audrey Haynes told *Sports Illustrated,* the WNBA's brand "was part of [Loeffler's] brand, too. And suddenly it isn't." Why did Loeffler, a noted women's basketball fan, turn on her own league? The context of her senate race – and of Trump's standing within the Republican Party – offers answers.

As a result of the senate vacancy left by Johnny Isakson at the very end of 2019, the Georgia state constitution allowed the state's governor to appoint a temporary replacement until a special election could be held the following fall. That special election, which did not allow for a primary election to decide who would represent the major political parties, was a 21-candidate free-for-all that is now headed to a two-candidate runoff. Loeffler therefore found herself not only fending off Democrats like Matt Lieberman and Rev. Raphael Warnock *but also* fellow Republicans such as Doug Collins, who was initially passed over as Isakson's replacement. Collins, a staunch supporter of President Trump, worked to cast Loeffler as not conservative enough. Others, like the Susan B. Anthony List, an anti-abortion organization, initially disapproved of Loeffler's appointment (before endorsing her for reelection). Suffice it to say, Loeffler had plenty incentive to prove herself a worthy member of a political party that has become more divisive in its tone since nominating Trump for president in 2016.

To wit, when members of the Atlanta Dream pushed back against Loeffler by demonstrating their support for Warnock, Loeffler declared that it was a symbol of "cancel culture," a tactic often employed by the Republican Party to delegitimize criticisms lobbed against the right and to create a boogeyman in the left. In addition, amid a global pandemic that has killed hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens, Loeffler co-sponsored legislation that would have made it illegal for transgender girls to play girls' sports. The bill, which would have needed to be approved by the Democratic-led House, had little chance to become law. Like her efforts to root Black Lives Matter out of the WNBA, however, co-sponsoring the Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act was an act of political grandstanding that served no other purpose than to prove to the Georgia electorate that, like Collins, Loeffler was willing to align herself with Trumpism.

Finishing second only to Warnock in the special election, Loeffler appears to have successfully proved her bona fides among conservative Georgian voters. If she loses the runoff to Warnock, that same battle with the WNBA that might have vaulted her into the runoff might also cost her a seat in the Senate.

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Made for the fight, WNBA players used their platform for anti-racism activism in 2020

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On Sunday, November 8, U.S. media outlets called the 2020 presidential election for Democrat Joe Biden to mark the unofficial end of the chaotic term of Donald Trump, a playboy real estate mogul-turned reality TV host-turned polarizing politician.

Moments after the call, WNBA superstar Sue Bird posted to Instagram a video from a month earlier of herself in ski goggles, draped in remnants of the basketball net, spraying Moet & Chandon champagne on teammates after clinching her third league championship. The caption read: "I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR THIS!!!!#BidenHarris2020 LETS GOOOO @joebiden @kamalaharris"

The 40-year-old basketball legend had struggled to find her political voice early in her career, infamously remaining silent when same-sex marriage was on the ballot in the state of Washington in 2012, for example. But, Bird's voice was loud and clear in 2020. She embraced a major role in leading the WNBA Players' Association to the forefront of the activist stage in 2020.

That stage, however, had many leading cast members. Before the season began, the Washington Mystics' Natasha Cloud and Renee Montgomery of the Atlanta Dream opted out to focus on the fight for social justice. Cloud was no stranger to political activism. The season before, she staged a media "blackout," refusing to talk about any other topic than gun violence. In 2019, the Mystics won the WNBA championship. Cloud signed an endorsement deal with Converse and prepared to defend the title. Then, the video of a white police officer kneeling on the neck of black man surfaced. The images of a Minneapolis cop killing George Floyd were too much for her.

She wrote in a May 30 Players' Tribune essay: "Because right now……. there's only one thing that's on my mind. Right now, if we're being really real? As a black person in America, there's only one thing that could possibly BE on my mind. And that's fearing for my life. It's fearing for my life, and for the life of every other person who is guilty of nothing more than belonging to a race that this country has been built on oppressing. *It's wanting to stay alive* — in a time where the reality for a lot of people is that my staying alive doesn't matter." Montgomery joined NBA superstar LeBron James' *More Than A Vote* campaign, focusing her efforts largely on getting out the vote at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

When COVID-19 pushed the WNBA season and its players into an isolated "bubble" in Bradenton, Florida in 2020, basketball took a backseat to vigils, strikes, t-shirts, public campaigns, endorsements, and strong words from the league's most prolific athletes. Before the opening jump of the virus-delayed season, Bird's Storm and the New York Liberty took a knee for the national anthem and recognized a 26-second

silence in honor of Breonna Taylor, who was killed by Louisville police officers during a botched search. All season long, Taylor's name was stitched under the players' names on their jerseys.

On Aug. 26, players for the Dream, Mystics, Minnesota Lynx and Los Angeles Sparks kneeled together in solidarity on the court as they refused to play in the evening's scheduled games to protest the Milwaukee police shooting of Jacob Blake. Mystics players wore white t-shirts spelling out Blake's name on the front with seven bullet holes printed on the back. (Police shot Blake seven times in the back.) That night, the entire league gathered for a candlelight vigil organized by WNBPA members. ESPN reporter Holly Rowe reported via Tweet from the vigil: "After games were boycotted Wednesday night, the entire @wnba bubble organized and participated in a candlelight vigil. People were encouraged to speak their heart. They are in this together."

The activism didn't stop after the Storm swept the Las Vegas Aces for the championship, either. On Oct. 21, the Storm franchise collectively endorsed Biden over Trump. The Connecticut Sun, whose season slogan was "Change Can't Wait" and included many educational and political actions, used Instagram to post 10 GOTV posts the week before the election. Individual players endorsed Biden, as well as Rev. Raphael Warnock, a Democrat running against Kelly Loeffler, co-owner of the Atlanta Dream, in the U.S. Senate race.

The demographic composition of the WNBPA is 100% women, 83% identifying as people of color, and a "substantial proportion" identifying as LBGTQ+. In other words, it's a league of people whose very existence in the professional arena and whose very presence in the athletic world have been a fight to achieve. It was a no-brainer that the fight would continue beyond the out-of-bounds lines. And, as Bird revealed in her post, it was something to celebrate.

Do National Basketball Association (NBA) teams really support Black Lives Matter?

The role corporate voices play in presidential and congressional campaigns often goes unnoticed by much of the public. However, given the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, the efforts of corporate voices were under more scrutiny come election season. Weeks of protest and a summer of racial reckoning led several companies to release public statements touting their support of Black Lives Matter and committing to action that would address institutionalized racism. Sure, we had been here before, experiencing periods of reflection after similar fatal incidents; but, this time seemed different. From Amazon, IBM, and Facebook to NASCAR, Adidas, and Nike, never before had we seen so many big-time corporate voices take a stand in the fight for racial justice in the United States. But was it genuine?

The National Basketball Association (NBA) has garnered much attention in recent years with regard to Black Lives Matter. Like many companies did in the wake of George Floyd's death, the NBA and its member organizations communicated their anger and condolences. What made the NBA different from many other corporate entities during this time was that they already had programs in place to address social justice concerns. For example, take the league's NBA Voices program, or other programs such as the Boston Celtics' Playbook Initiative, and the Milwaukee Bucks' Barbershop Mondays. Meanwhile, for the restart of their 2019-2020 season, Black Lives Matter was painted on the NBA courts and players were also allowed to replace their names on the back of their jerseys with league-approved social justice messages.

However, what if I told you that the same league that is considered to be leading on social justice also has team governors (formerly called owners) whose actions don't really align with the messaging coming from the league and its teams? For instance, there was not a consensus from all of the NBA governors concerning Black Lives Matter being painted on the court, as revealed by ESPN's Adrian Wojnarowski on his podcast [around 25:40]:

Not every owner in the NBA was enthusiastic about having 'Black Lives Matter' on the court. I know they all weren't. Some are extremely supportive. Some less so. None of them publicly [critical].

In terms of the campaign, many of these same governors donated to Donald Trump, who has referred to Black Lives Matter as "thugs", "discriminatory", "bad for Black people" and a "symbol of hate", among other characterizations. Trump also called companies that support Black Lives Matter "weak" and that they are led by "weak people." This would mean that he is criticizing the very same NBA governors who may have signed off on public statements in support of Black Lives Matter. John Gonzalez, a staff writer for The Ringer, highlighted the contradiction of governors sending one message with public statements but another with their giving:

"Some of the owners who purport to be allies in the fight against systemic racism and police brutality have also contributed massive amounts of money to Trump and the GOP [Grand Old Party], a president and a party that stand in direct opposition to a specific position the players want to see advanced—law enforcement accountability and reform…"

The Nation's Dave Zirin further emphasized the contrast between statements versus reality in the NBA. In his article, he focuses on Detroit Pistons governor, Tom Gores, who recently resigned from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) Board of Trustees. His resignation came after mounting pressure from people and organizations about his role in profiting off of prisoners and their families. Rashad Robinson, president of Color of Change, stated the following in response to the news: "As owner of Securus, Gores has exploited incarcerated people and their families — who are overwhelmingly Black and low-income — with exorbitant fees for prison phone calls."

What's more is that Securus was sued (and settled) for illegally recording 14,000 attorney-client conversations, providing these calls to police and prosecutors. It doesn't stop with Gores, though. Dan Gilbert (Cleveland Cavaliers), the Devos Family (Orlando Magic), James Dolan (New York Knicks), Tilman Fertitta (Houston Rockets), and Micky Arison (Miami Heat), among others have all given massive amounts to Donald Trump, the Republican Party and/or Trump super political action committees. EPSN and FiveThirtyEight did a breakdown of this giving across professional sports.

Yet, given the applause the NBA has received for their social justice efforts, it's surprising that more attention has not been given to Gores and other team governors whose contributions are incongruent with messages coming from the league and its teams. These financial contributions and the means through which NBA governors underwrite their wealth should give us all reason to pause and ask critical questions. While public statements portray support of Black lives, their financial giving suggests otherwise. Yes, statements and current programs serve as great optics, but a look beyond the surface will keep observers skeptical as to whether the NBA's efforts are authentic or merely social marketing.

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The presidential debates: the media frames it all wrong

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The template set by the historic Lincoln-Douglas debates was a battle of ideas. Modern American political debates, by contrast, occupy a stage where both candidates move to the middle and try to capture centrist or independent voters.

President Donald J. Trump shattered this conventional frame in 2016, using his platform to deepen his base and to clearly articulate his ideological positions rather than using ambiguous language for fear of offending any potential voting blocs. Actor Rashida Jones aptly captured the mood of the debates in the preceding election cycle in her tweet: "His condescending interjections and interruptions and mansplaining are hitting the deepest part of my womanly frustration." That may have been true for her, except for the fact that Trump carried half the white female vote. While Trump emerged as a bad hombre in jokes and memes, the annotated transcript of the debate with Hillary Clinton in *The Washington Post* sounded no less funny than the jabs hurled by satirists.

In 2020, Trump continued following the script that had given him the earlier victory, while the media kept pursuing the frame they had got so wrong. In the first 2020 presidential debate, Trump successfully pushed Joe Biden to denounce his "far left" Bernie Sanders supporters, an important part of the base he needed to consolidate, while at the same time Trump declined to openly critique the white supremacists, telling the Proud Boys to "Stand back and stand by," which has now become their logo.

The second presidential debate was more restrained and substantive, with the media quickly declaring Biden the winner of this debate as well, and the polls reflecting a jump in Biden's support. The fly on Vice President Mike Pence's hair stole the limelight of the vice-presidential debate, as neither contender was able to articulate a comprehensive plan to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Their proposed solutions fell into binary oppositions of masks versus no masks, or listening to science versus economic shutdowns, triggering ready-made parodies for mutually exclusive audiences.

The media has always berated Trump for not being presidential enough, for lacking decency and decorum, and for bullying behavior. While these accusations may be true, Trump was never playing by the rules set by the media. He was projecting himself as a strong leader, always in charge and not afraid to fight, someone who would never abandon his supporters. This impression was not intended for anyone who was undecided or making a rational decision to vote, but rather the non-voter who might get passionately aroused and head to the polling booth. Instead of moderating the tone and tenor of his message, the tone and tenor *was* the message in both his campaigns.

Saturday Night Live presented a thorough critique of both candidates, ostensibly focused on mannerism and locution, while at the same time revealing the hollowness of their respective platforms. *SNL*'s exposés often contain extemporaneous social or political introspection that escaped the radar of most media and popular culture venues. The argument about who built the cages and put migrant children there was at least allowed in satire, especially in tweets and memes, compared to the news media's lack of political analysis of the systematic dehumanization embodied in asylum policy occurring over multiple presidencies.

Trump constructed a distinctive brand in 2016—anti-liberal elite, anti-immigration (both legal and illegal), anti-corporate power, anti-global war—which found takers in the loyal Republican base as well as new voters for whom the message resonated. Four years into power, some of the economic promises have been shattered by the tax cuts, trade wars, and global pandemic, yet the battle over culture has reached a pinnacle. The Trump brand of nationalism is carved out of the economic frustration of the working poor who feel left behind, as they seek to claim the cultural space from which they have been absent so long. The 2020 presidential debates reflected a renewed commitment toward Trump's message that had worked in the previous election.

Despite the abhorrent mismanagement of the pandemic and the resultant spike in deaths, tens and thousands of people attended the Trump rallies as the polls prior to Election Day kept narrowing. Biden eked out a victory based on razor-thin margins in battleground states, but the space for Trumpism in American politics and culture will be much harder to dissolve. Neither the news media nor satire had an explanation for passionate attendance at Trump rallies, except to denigrate them as superspreader events. A rare plausible analysis came from Tucker Carlson who focused on the needs of the attendees rather than Trump. Herein lies the abject failure of popular culture, whether serious or funny, offering a singular frame of dismissiveness toward Trump presidency, while missing the consistent paradigm of Trumpism.

The role of satirists should be to uncover neglected recesses that contain significant meaning for cultural or political life. The role of journalists should be to provide nuanced backstories to contextualize current events. But both journalists and satirists have been focused too much on Trump's provocative statements and actions and their offending nature, disregarding the reason for the appeal of such statements to a huge segment of Americans. Trump has articulated the frustrations of a large group of people who feel disposable in the global economy, and they will continue to claim allegiance to a committed leader, whether it is Trump or a successor.

Live... from California, it's Kamala Harris.

The junior senator from the Golden State entered the political spotlight and America's consciousness as the lone black female in the U.S. Senate and then as the lone black female in a deep pool of Democratic presidential hopefuls. The national notoriety pushed "Kamala Harris" further into the limelight on TV's *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*.

Played for laughs (and an Emmy) by Maya Rudolph, the persona of Harris during the presidential primary season ranged from sexy and in vogue, complete with pop culture references, to the self-proclaimed "smooth-talking lawyer lady" delivering one-liners, embodying stereotypical sass, i.e. a sharp tongue and a lightning-quick ability to dress down verbal adversaries. Rudolph as Harris at the 2019 DNC Town Hall: "I'm America's cool aunt. A fun aunt. I call that Funt. The kind of funt that will give you weed, but then arrest you for having weed. Can I win the presidency? Probably not. I don't know. Can I successfully seduce a much younger man? You better funting believe it."

The description of political parodies, such as that of Harris on *SNL*, is represented on a spectrum of accurate evaluations to brutal takedowns. Parodies spoof subjects by means of satiric imitation. Caricatures are built from consistent gestures and movements. Speech, both what was said and how it was said, is often targeted. Harris's iconic "I'm speaking" declaration to an interrupting Vice President Mike Pence during the vice-presidential debate was recreated to great comic effect by Rudolph.

Left almost completely out of the *SNL*'s comedic takeoff is Harris's diverse background, a Jamaican father and a mother from South Asia. The jokes aren't found in those areas. The relevance of Harris's life and her moment in the spotlight, however, is not completely ignored as a parody relies on social significance. So, the show's writers clearly knew that Harris represented a number of historic firsts as a daughter of immigrants and a black (and Indian) woman vice president. It also would not be surprising if mentions of a Harris presidency had been thrown around the writing table. After all, it's plausible that the aging Biden will serve only one term, leaving Harris as a front-runner for the 2024 nomination.

For the most part, the jokes involving Harris are not rooted in monumental political outcomes. The funny stuff is mined from Rudolph presenting the politician as America's cool aunt whose reaction faces are meme-worthy and who isn't afraid to be seen with a martini glass. Leading up to Election Day, the character of Kamala Harris appeared regularly with jokes touching on race and racial realities in the United States. For example, this line from Rudolph as Harris at the 2020 vice presidential debate: "Now I'd like to hear the vice president's response, and while he speaks, I'm going to smile at him like I'm at TJ Maxx and a white lady asks me if I work here."

Harris's blackness is front and center as a matter of fact and as context for parody. The faces, the body language, and the pointed takedowns all fall in line with widespread representations of black women in entertainment media. Rudolph's portrayal of Harris has garnered praise and overwhelming support as the former regular only returns to *SNL* to play characters for which she has a special affinity and, in this case, a similar look. Rudolph is also biracial. No claims of problematic stereotyping have been cast at *SNL* or Rudolph. Using the lens of race to view *SNL*'s parody of Harris, however, is an area that raises questions of intent and impact. If social commentary leading to public awareness is the intended impact, it would be difficult to say that *SNL* missed the mark. It is in the show's DNA to make America look at and evaluate its leaders like Harris. Neither could you call Rudolph's portrayal anything but a success, if belly laughs and memorable lines to repeat and to post on social media was the goal.

Does the parody of the first black female vice president have significant influences on the black community? While Harris's pick as Biden's running mate was at least partially meant to engender favor with minority voters, the use of her as target of humor and social commentary was not a nod to the black community. It simply seems meant to acknowledge Harris as a presence on the national stage and give a favorite *SNL* actress a chance to get laughs. In terms of representation, a black woman has reached a level of political power and fame that few others have or will. Even as the show has caricatured the senator's manner, it has mostly portrayed her in a positive light. For some, it will be aspirational, feuling daydreams and bolstering hope. *SNL* still captures America's attention, setting the agenda for public discourse. In this way, the profile of America's fun and cool black aunt has certainly been boosted.

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Who needs anger management? Dismissing young engagement

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At the World Economic Forum in early 2020, President Trump was asked about teenage activist Greta Thunberg. Should politicians listen to her more, recognize and act on climate change? His reply? She needed to work on her "anger management." And: "How old is she now?" He then commented on her cover of *Time Magazine* ("she beat me out") and said she should focus on countries that pollute more than the U.S. does.

This was typical of Trump – he'd tweeted about her anger before – but really, it's typical of the adult world responding to young people's political engagement. Other contemporary youth-dominated movements like March for Our Lives or Black Lives Matter are similarly dismissed. Paradoxically enough, responses can be quite childish. Thunberg is too angry, young, and popular, not to mention the whataboutism. And while most activists understand that antagonism is part of the political game, it's relevant for those of us interested in how people in general become politically engaged. What does such dismissiveness or even ridicule mean for the development and motivation of young citizens?

Young people become targets of our hopes for the future, yet are often considered silly, cynical, apathetic or conversely, overly emotional or annoyingly idealistic. But citizenship norms shift. While modern era citizen ideals echo those of the good student, who does as they were told, keeps quiet and trusts in authority and "the system," these ideals are increasingly questioned: were citizens ever really that well behaved, and is that what we really want?

Whether it be the issues or ways they engage, young citizenship is studied persistently, prodded and policed at times, in different fields of research. The threat of losing young people to political apathy seems to co-exist with an essentialist dismissiveness based on their supposed naïveté or inexperience. When we lament how they engage – through citizen journalism, political entertainment, social media, or slacktivism, movement and identity politics – we might need to focus more on understanding why these might be preferred, and why we are so instinctively skeptical.

And in this process, factor in that age links to generational privilege and election politics. Born 1996 or later, "Generation Z" is more diverse and educated than previous generations. In the short-run, however, they're especially hit by pandemic unemployment and uncertainty. According to the Pew Research Center, July marked a shift: more than half of 18-29-year-olds now live with their parents, surpassing Great Depression levels. In the longer run another important marker of adulthood, becoming financially independent, is shifting globally. Pew notes that in the U.S., the rate of financially independent 22-year-olds has dropped from 32 percent in 1980, to 24 in 2018. Such factors potentially influence young people's political efficacy – their belief in "the system" and themselves.

In March, 70 percent of Gen Z said government "should do more to solve problems." Often, the issues concerning Gen Z and Millennials aren't addressed in campaigns – further explaining their engagement in media and movements that do. My work on young adult satire engagement exposes an uneasy citizen negotiating between political criticism and idealism, performance anxiety and self-ascribed naïveté and cynicism. As Nina Eliasoph wrote in 1998, political or economic disenfranchisement can encourage "cynical chic solidarity," where individuals distance themselves from politics to protect integrity. It signals "that they have not been fooled into wasting their time on something they cannot influence and cannot be held responsible for whatever happens." Protecting integrity through various kinds of impression management is increasingly important in (and at) an age where identity is everything, and large parts of what we do or say is archived and searchable online.

Contemporary expressions of young adult engagement can be understood as symptomatic of the state of political efficacy. For instance, the use of irony and trolling in memes and satire can provide pleasure, protect integrity and efficacy, while processing opinions, trust, and criticism. During the 2020 marathon vote count, memes referencing topics like Trump's "STOP THE COUNT!" tweet, the role of the media, or the election's worldwide attention flooded online spaces.

There is reason to believe we sometimes lack the ability to separate young people's lacking efficacy and criticism from cynicism or apathy. The ancient Greek distinction between cynics (fatalistic, disengaged) and kynics (subversive, critically engaged) is helpful in understanding young engagement. As we keep forgetting, young people are growing up in a world we created. When adults dismiss or ridicule their actual engagement, and simultaneously ignore the context they find themselves in, it's not exactly encouraging.

This might be though: two days after the election, Greta Thunberg satirically engaged Trump on Twitter. Mirroring his recurring anger management comment, she retweeted his "STOP THE COUNT!" adding: "So ridiculous. Donald must work on his Anger Management problem (…) Chill Donald, Chill!"

Meme war is merely the continuation of politics by other means

If the U.S. presidential campaigning is pop culture, as I claimed in 2016, the deployment of memes by Joe Biden and Donald Trump indicate the mainstreaming of the once-fringe, subcultural enterprise.

"We actually elected a meme as president," ran a headline from *The Washington Post*, on November 9, 2016. The quote came, in a post accompanied by an image of Pepe the Frog, from 4chan. This reviled image board was, along with its uglier younger sibling 8chan, and r/The_Donald on Reddit, the wellspring for the offensive memes and rhetoric that defined much of the online support for Trump, coming to be known as the alt-right.

That 8chan and The_Donald subreddit have since been banned reflects not the rejection of memes as a means of doing politics, but rather its integration into the mainstream. Again, in 2016 I cited Stuart Hall, who wrote that popular culture "is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured." Those who enjoyed and gained an identity from operating in the resistant murky underbelly of the internet continue to congregate on 8kun and TheDonald.win, while campaigns around the world have consented to the use of memes as political communication.

While it is of course hyperbolic to claim that memes won Trump the presidency in 2016, they do help explain the enduring passion and nature of his support. Trump's outsiderness worked well with meme culture in his 2016 campaign, carving out a new rhetorical space in the political landscape that in opposition to the Democrats but was outside the GOP, and in which his supporters could play and organise under the banner of MAGA.

Crucially, Trump's 2016 campaign, whether by design or thrift, did not create any memes of its own. Trump was merely an amplifier for the frowned-upon fringes, a malleable identity that could be adopted by anyone.

Funnily enough, it is perhaps the Clinton campaign's explainer about Pepe the Frog that signalled both the power of this outsider status and its demise. Donald Trump Jr.'s infamous re-post of The Deplorables meme, with photoshopped heads from Trump's inner circle (including Pepe) replacing the cast of the film, *The Expendables*, *without* any explainer demonstrates how the Trump campaign harnessed the power of political outsiderness, and twisted the meaning of institutional labels (Clinton calling Trump supporters a "basket of deplorables") to its own purposes. By taking seriously the effort to make Pepe the Frog a hate symbol, the Clinton campaign at once realised this effort and missed the joke. But not getting the joke also undoes its magic, and jimmies the methods of meme-making onto the conventions of traditional political communication.

This posture was not possible in 2020. Trump has been the most powerful man in the world, the U.S. president, for four years. His ineffective response to the coronavirus reflects a failure of governance that he cannot pin on someone else, no matter how hard he tried to spread, like a meme, "China flu."

Joe Biden had a previous (and positive) meme life during the early days of Trump's presidency as Obama's overzealous and avuncular defender, which remains in play even if 2020 opposition memes target senility and sexual misconduct. Biden's earlier meme life gave his campaign a base on which they could generate their own memes, playing on a nostalgic, ironically knowing lameness that is nonetheless inflected by the integration of MAGA into the mainstream. To wit: The Occupy Democrats Facebook page (initially created in response to the Tea Party movement) created a meme page, Ridin' With Biden. Just as Trump repurposed Clinton, the Biden campaign now uses Trump's slogans in memes against him: "Get In, We're Draining Trump's Swamp and Making America Sane Again!"

The MAD-like parity of the presidential meme wars is evident in each campaign spending roughly $83 million on YouTube advertisements. Perhaps as a legacy from his earlier meme success, but also reflecting the way he has continuously innervated his base, Trump's channel gets over ten times as many views as Biden's. But instead of amplifying the voices of supporters, the channel creates its own content, such as "Prevent a Zombie Uprising." A thirty-minute loop of a ten-second ad, with Biden (the titular zombie) turning green, alongside zombie and ghost emojis, this melding of memes and traditional television advertisements cements the integration of meme culture into mainstream politics. The videos, and their thumbnails, are designed to look like those produced by young YouTubers. The close-up of an excited face, Impact font, bright, high-contrast colours, two or three emojis, are interchangeable with a video game review or an unboxing reveal. With its YouTube home page takeover on Election Day, the Trump campaign went from authentic and mischievous outsider to the familiar and mainstream insider—and lost something.

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Satire failed to pack a punch in the 2020 election

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In June, Joe Rogan welcomed former Daily Show host, Jon Stewart to his podcast, declaring "I miss you on TV, this is the perfect time for you. It's kinda crazy that you're not hosting that show anymore".

Rogan raised a valid point; we are in the midst of a global pandemic where well over 200,000 American's have lost their lives, and we have experienced a divisive election tainted by aggressive partisanship and conspiracy theories. Stewart's sharp-witted satirical monologues would have been the comedic voice of reason we all needed during these turbulent moments of 2020.

Of course, since Stewart's departure from TV satire an abundance of similar programs emerged to fill the void. But they have tackled a very different political landscape compared to Stewart and the result is that TV satire's reporting of the 2020 election has often appeared tired and uninspiring.

This isn't just an election problem. It started at the beginning of Trump's presidency when questions were raised about whether America's political system was beyond comedic criticism. For four years, this has posed a series of dilemma's for late-night comedy hosts in how they approach their satirical take downs of the Trump administration. One of the most pressing matters was how could they use satire, a genre defined by its use of irony, exaggeration, and ability to expose stupidity and vices, to lampoon Trump when he embodies many of these characteristics in real life.

Despite these issues there have been many examples of good practice in the last 4 years. My research on Last Week Tonight with John Oliver and Sam Bee's Full Frontal found that both programs adopted advocacy reporting strategies in an attempt to engage their audiences in more meaningful forms of civic participation. We saw Stephen Colbert embody the role of critical journalist when taking John Bolton to task for holding back criticism of Trump until he received a lucrative book deal. Similarly to Jon Stewart's passionate activism for the Zadroger Act, current Daily Show host Trevor Noah became an advocate for the Black Lives Matter movement and regularly discussed the issue of systemic racism on his show.

Given the craziness surrounding this year's election, there was hope that TV satire would offer the same level of sharp analysis that The Daily Show's 'Indecision' coverage delivered in 2000 and 2004. These were defining moments that saw comedy become a serious contender in the world of political journalism. According to The Washington Post, this is because Jon Stewart's nightly analysis was able to cut through the election noise and offer thoughtful and accurate takes on what was happening. Unfortunately, satirical news coverage of the 2020 election was nowhere near as scintillating in its analysis of the campaign.

Part of the problem was that many of the hosts became stuck in a perpetual cycle of calling out Trump's lies and hypocrisies, with some perfected impressions thrown in for good measure. This was once a successful reporting model for these programs but, more recently, the critical elements of this practice have since been adopted by the hosts of MSNBC and CNN, leading to huge ratings gains for the networks. Indeed, humor may be absent from cable news, but what TV satire offered was often limited to Trump parodies, an approach that reached saturation point and that's why the humor fell flat. Consequently, satire audiences have been stuck in a never-ending loop of political outrage like that found on cable news, albeit with the inclusion of tired Trump impersonations.

The late-night host that fared best in their coverage of the election was John Oliver. Because his program rarely followed the news values of the mainstream media, he was able to explain and dissect unreported topics like immigration policy that had very nearly disappeared from the election news agenda. There is no disguising the fact that Oliver was once a correspondent on *The Daily Show* as he approaches satirical storytelling with the same veracity that Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert applied to unpublicised stories like the 9/11 first responders bill and campaign finance reform. But the disadvantage of Oliver's show is that it only airs once a week, thus it fails to deliver what Jon Stewart did on *The Daily Show* which was offering nightly guidance and analysis to help audiences make sense of the election.

Returning to the Joe Rogan interview, Stewart's response to a TV satire come back was one of reluctance as he described the format as "redundant." Interestingly, he praised Rogan's creative control over his podcast as he "gets to curate" the content. Perhaps then it is the commercial imperatives of TV satire that have blunted the critical edge it once had. This is why it needs a dramatic reboot that takes into consideration the flexible boundaries of the genre. Stewart succeeded in doing just this by incorporating political reporting and activism into his programming. Now is the time for TV satirists to show the same level of tenacity and creativity so that the genre can remain a powerful tool of critical insight and investigation.

Election memes 2020, or, how to be funny when nothing is fun

During the 2020 Vice Presidential Debate, a fly landed on Mike Pence's head and Twitter went wild. It felt like old times; like 2012, when Mitt Romney's binders full of women and Barack Obama's burn about bayonets heralded a verifiable meme election. Or 2016, when Ken Bone captivated the crowds and blobfish Ted Cruz kept the good times rolling through an election cycle that was supposed to be a laffer. That fly landed, Mike Pence let it just *sit* there, and all the old fun cascaded out. Pop-up Twitter accounts. Zany photoshops. YouTube remixes. Run-of-the-mill election memery. Same as it ever was.

And yet all that old fun didn't feel right. Not anymore. It was hollow. Brow-furrowing. At least it was for us. We'd both been giddy participants in the presidential memeing of 2012. By 2016, we'd grown increasingly wary of the pollution potentially carried by the memes people share. By 2020, we had little laughter left, just gnawing exhaustion. Being confronted by this rare moment of silly retro internet fun wasn't a reprieve. It was a reminder. We're in an emergency, and what does it even mean to have fun in an emergency?

With hindsight, it's clear that this emergency isn't solely a product of the Trump era. Like vast swaths of the U.S. political landscape, internet culture fun has long been dangerous. At its worst, the memey fun of 2012, and certainly of 2016, was explicitly bigoted. A lesson many, including ourselves, learned the hard way.

Even when internet culture fun wasn't explicitly dehumanizing, it too-often ignored anything beyond the joke. For years, the only serious rule was to take nothing seriously. The hallmarks of this fun were irony, fetishization, and aloof antagonism, and they left no room for context, no room to consider the consequences for those outside the laughter. Context and consequences didn't have to be addressed by the laughing *us,* because the laughing *us* tended to be protected from the harms inspiring their laughter and the harms that resulted from it.

Even as many have learned those lessons, fetishistic fun still exists in 2020. It remains a giant, billowing red flag, especially for those of us worn down to gnawing exhaustion. Laughter that acts like 500 immigrant children aren't still separated from their parents; laughter that doesn't carry the weight of the 230,000 Americans dead from COVID-19; laughter that ignores Kamala Harris' stern rebuke of systemic racism because while she was speaking that fly landed right on the other guy's head, lol.

Still, there's room—and for many, there's need—to be funny even when things are the opposite of fun. The problem isn't laughter itself; it's a specific kind of laughter that ignores context, consequence, and the life and death stakes for those struggling to survive. Approaches to Mike Pence's fly illustrate this distinction. David Frum, writing for *The Atlantic*, leans into context in his response to the fly, pointing out just what it said about the Trump administration. The fly is a metaphor for inaction; it illustrates an utter lack of situational awareness. It is an apt vision of moral rot. This is humor that understands the weight of the moment, not fancy-free absurdity.

Likewise, comedian Sarah Cooper has persistently resonated during the 2020 election cycle for her short pantomime videos lip-synching Trump soundbites. With little more than Trump's own words, Cooper channels the theater of the absurd we collectively experience every day. Her humor doesn't deny the depth or the consequences of this absurdity, it leans right in, reminding us that we've been living through multiple never-ending emergencies, exacerbated, if not orchestrated, by a commander-in-chief who cares not one whit about making things worse. Cooper reminds us of one such emergency in an October 22 video about Trump's climate change denial, a video she ends with a shot of a breaking glacier. Emblazoned words appear over the footage: "Climate denial is not a joke. Help us fight back."

Cooper and Frum's examples offer strategies for being funny when nothing is fun. In an emergency, even our humor has to convey the significance of the moment, and to avoid the traps of irony, fetishization, and aloof antagonism. In an emergency, context must be foregrounded, not denied. And in an emergency that has disproportionately affected the most at risk and marginalized, we need humor to punch up at the causes, not down at the recipients. We don't need humor trampling those already trampled or humor pretending that power imbalances don't exist at all.

In the right tenor, when it works against the impulse to fetishize, funny can do a lot of good. Funny can be a razor-sharp indictment or a source of solidarity. Or a gadfly landing on the crown of oppression. We need funny more than ever; we just need to be careful that our funny doesn't spoil things for everyone else.

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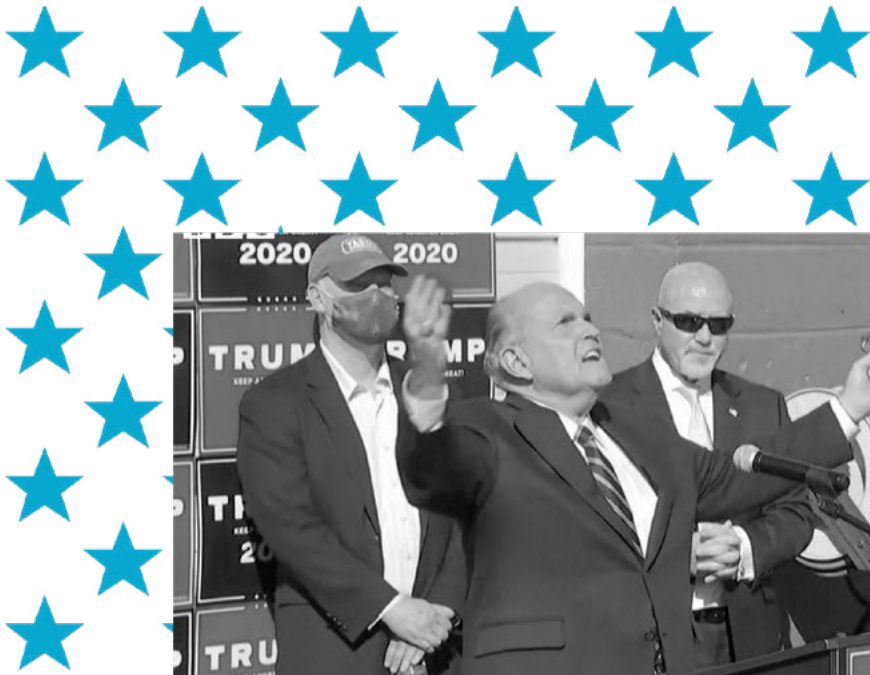
Democracy
in crisis

Social media moderation of political talk

If the post-2016 story was about the content that was on social media platforms – from Russian bots to Macedonian teens – the post-2020 story is gearing up to be about what was *not* on social media platforms – or at least not all the way on them. For all their cautious line-toeing in the run up to the 2020 election, platforms like Twitter and Facebook showed a remarkable appetite to make moderation decisions from which they had previously shirked. Though they had resisted the label earlier, social media platforms became clear arbiters of political truth in 2020 – when they saw democracy at risk and acted to protect it (as well as their bottom lines).

Before the election started, we saw lots of moves from platform companies how they would handle the 2020 election. First, Twitter banned political ads. Facebook said it would not correct false claims in posts or ads from politicians. Throughout the summer, protests against police brutality and for racial justice swept the nation – often encouraged through social media activism (#BlackLivesMatter) but also threatened by it (such as when the president tweeted threats of violence against protestors). Twitter first signaled its appetite for policy enforcement against the president when it took action against the aforementioned tweet. Then, as the president made crystal clear that he would not accept any outcome other than victory, stirred violence, and refused to commit to a peaceful transfer of power – platforms moved, almost swiftly, to proactively (if also perhaps belatedly) protect democracy. Twitter labeled – and limited the reach – of an unprecedented amount of the president's tweets as they baselessly alleged voter fraud and falsely claimed electoral victory. It's unclear as to whether Facebook limited the reach of the president's posts, but it did append labels to them that pointed users in the direction of truthful contextual information about the election. Facebook also removed groups organizing around false claims of electoral fraud ("Stop the Steal" groups) – though more continued to pop up.

What is most remarkable about these actions is that they were taken specifically on the accounts of political leaders, especially the president himself. Finally, social media platforms acknowledged that political elites – both elected officials but also their surrogates – were the largest purveyors of political misinformation. What makes political misinformation from political leaders particularly pernicious is that it often casts politics in identitarian terms – that media, and especially social media, are essential sites for constructing and conveying a politician's identity as well as the groups of constituents they purport to represent. Though the information – about "stolen" ballots or electoral fraud – is indeed false, these posts are not about the information per se. Instead, they communicate whose votes matter, whom should be seen as citizens, wield power, and ultimately what types of people get a say in electing presidents.

Platforms are downstream from politics and political life. What animates our politics also animates our politics on platforms – and is shaped by platforms. While algorithms may put their thumb on the divisions in our country, they do not deterministically create them. Simply put: our social reality is reflected and distorted – no created – on social media platforms. We have a political problem in this country: right-wing misinformation, shorn up by making in-group identity threats salient and aimed at undermining public trust in institutions – the press, the electoral process, public health – is pervasive. Any attempt to craft these political issues as problems simply of social media and information risks centering another four years of academic, press, and press attention around the wrong targets.

In the wake of 2016, the press and academia focused on the informational quality of posts on social media. We trained our eye towards whether information in these posts was true or false, toward how many people potentially encountered false information, and whether or not it swayed voters towards electing Trump. As my colleagues and I have argued – this attention is misguided and has clearly had an outsized impact on public opinion about the effects of misinformation. Research in this area should focus on how mis- and dis-information entrenches existing divides along the lines of our partisan identities. And it should embrace a focus on the very sort of elite communication against which the platforms – finally – took action. As Francesca Tripodi observed, "… there is reason to believe [Trump] and other conservative politicians are priming their constituents to think that Big Tech rigged the 2020 election in Democrats' favor."

If the post-2020 story becomes informational in focus – not about what was on social media platforms, but what was moderated by social media platforms – we will again miss the mark. Another four-year cycle of public discourse, press attention, and research focus centered narrowly around platform moderation would be a mistake – this is not a platform problem, but a political problem. And Trump, the Republican party, conservative elites, racial structures, and more broadly – politics – should be at the center of and lead research on social media moderation.

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Dr Shannon C. McGregor

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The speed of technology vs. the speed of democracy

Dr Ben Epstein

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The speed of technological innovation moves at a very different pace from the speed of democracy, which can be frustrating. Technology changes fast, much like the hare. Democracy is more deliberate and methodical, resembling the tortoise. In the 2020 election the steady and slower pace of our democracy proved to be resilient. We should be thankful for that.

Historically, changes in technology caused great disruptions to our political system and democratic institutions. The shift from print to broadcast to digital communication reshaped the way that political elites and news organizations distribute political information and how Americans consume it. Since the 1960s the speed of computing power has grown at an exponential rate. Moore's Law , which refers to the doubling of the components on an integrated circuit approximately every two years, accounts for the remarkable growth of computing power and technological progress for over a half century. Since the mid 1990s the internet, and specifically social media platforms, have consistently increased the speed, volume, and interactivity of political information and communication. These technological innovations have redefined how we interact with political information, communicate about politics and participate in the political process. News cycles have shifted from 24 hours to increasingly shorter periods of time. Major stories can emerge and fade in a matter of hours. The entire journalism industry has been disrupted. Meanwhile, Americans have grown to expect technology to be increasingly fast, user friendly, convenient, and affordable. And though they might want our democratic process to move at a similar pace, the speed of elections is slower.

Despite advances in technology, voting in particular is still a very human process. Voters fill out ballots, which are collected in over one hundred thousand precincts across the United States, counted in hundreds of counties in all 50 states, and then reported to media outlets who add them up and make decisions about if and when to call the elections. The presidential election of 2020, arguably the most anticipated election of the past 50 years, was a great reminder that, however fast technology moves, democracy, if done thoughtfully and securely, cannot be rushed. Even though it is difficult we must be patient.

Many have clamored for the ability to vote online for years, to make our electoral process easier and faster. However, experts in vote security note that online voting would open up far more avenues for potential vote manipulation and interference in our electoral process and democratic institutions. It is simply not a secure method of voting, at least not yet. And decisions about how elections are conducted and what technologies can and should be used are far from streamlined.

Throughout the history of the United States, elections have been run by states, and each state has distinct rules around voter registration, early voting, and Election Day voting procedures. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, many states temporarily expanded absentee and mail-in voting in order to provide safe options for people to participate in the 2020 election. Americans responded by voting in massive numbers. Nearly 160 million people voted, more voters than any election in American history, and at a voting-eligible turnout rate over 66 percent, a rate not reached since William McKinley was elected president in 1900.

The voter turnout was remarkable not only because of the challenges posed by the pandemic, but by President Trump and his supporters, who attacked the legitimacy of the election and trust in democratic institutions. And yet, the elections themselves were successfully conducted with virtually no known issues of vote tampering, voter fraud, electoral interference, or disruption.

The 2020 election reminded us that conducting elections remains a very human process, even during a pandemic. Election officials and poll workers do the work of conducting our elections. Their work is shared with news organizations who interpret these results and eventually call races. Americans have become accustomed to the immediate and updated political information and the ease of creating and sharing content that comes with consistent technological innovation. And while the speed of technology continues at a rapid pace, democracy moves slower, at a pace that requires patience, even if the American electorate does not have much of it. Fair democratic elections simply take time. And that is a good thing.

The future of election administration: how will states respond?

It is not hyperbolic to say that the 2020 election was one for the record books. Estimates suggest that an unprecedented 158 million votes were cast in the general election, resulting in a presidential race decided by a thin margin in the midst of a global pandemic.

Despite the fact that the policy framework of the United States contemplates in-person Election Day voting as the primary way citizens express vote choice, state-level initiatives and concern over COVID-19 led to a shift away from this practice. Almost 102 million voters cast ballots early or by mail in 2020. This expanded, non-traditional voting brought worry of technological, logistical, and security challenges. The country's electoral system responded surprisingly well, with few reports of administrative dysfunction or security breaches. Yet, the decentralized nature of the process raises practical and legal questions about how the system will function in future elections.

A decentralized election system

The Elections Clause of the United States Constitution operates to place the regulation of elections primarily in the hands of the states. As a result, the legal framework that governs administration of the electoral process varies across the country.

In part, this is by design. The Framers of the Constitution purposefully constructed an electoral system that allowed for divergent, localized interests. State-by-state regulation accommodates a range of citizen representational needs and can help diffuse political power.

However, as the 2020 election highlighted, this local flexibility is not without cost. The same state and local factors that a decentralized system accommodates can also result in variation in citizen experience with the electoral process. Disparities in the capacity of governmental units to administer elections raise legal questions that have consequences for the balance of authority across the political system.

Litigation showcases challenges for the future

Between March and October, litigants have filed over 300 COVID-19-related election cases in federal and state courts across at least 44 states. This litigation largely was unsuccessful. For example, despite President Trump's repeated and unfounded claims of voter fraud in states like Pennsylvania, legal arguments that changes in election law create unconstitutional opportunities for voter fraud failed to persuade federal and state courts. At the same time, Democratic arguments that the states who did not relax pre-COVID-19 restrictions on mail-in votes created an unconstitutional burden on the right to vote in the midst of a pandemic generally failed as well.

The one area in which legal questions remain is in election administration. Sudden changes in policy often bring concern that, in their rush to promote new initiatives, policymakers fail to invest in the infrastructure required to administer the changes. Courts' responses to administrative variation in how and when states require ballots to be delivered and under what standards states verify the identity of registered voters have been mixed. These disparate judicial responses highlight two key questions in the elections system.

First, who has the authority to change the rules? The United States Constitution contemplates that legislatures would regulate elections. Yet, over time, legislatures have delegated much authority in this area to administrators. This reflects a general transfer of power towards the executive branch that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated.

There has also been a shift in the role of the courts. For example, in the wake of Election Day, President Trump and the Republican Party filed lawsuits making a variety of claims relating to the counting and processing of ballots. The move was unusual, as candidates typically do not involve the courts until after the counting has finished and the outcome is uncertain. In part, this is because longstanding judicial precedent cautions courts against altering rules in the midst of the electoral process. Doing so injects unelected judges into the political system.

Second, how will states administer countless other elections over the next several years? The 2020 election was a high-profile event, with the presidency at stake and officials such as Secretaries of States and election commissioners stepping into the spotlight. In response, states funneled a tremendous amount of resources towards administrators to ward off criticism of their processes.

Decreases in state revenue due to the COVID-19 pandemic likely mean that states will have a hard time recovering and cannot afford to invest in election administration at such high levels. Even in the best of times, elections offices tend to be underfunded and understaffed. In fact, the most universal complaint from those who administer elections is a lack of resources.

This is potentially problematic, as elections administration is inevitably a nuanced endeavor. Yet because election administrators rarely operate under clearly defined procedural processes or have effective training, there is often variation with respect to how administrators implement the law and interact with citizens. It is precisely this lack of uniformity with respect to standards or criteria that can lead courts to intervene.

Politicians recognize the importance of how seemingly apolitical solutions to administrative problems have real consequences. "Hashing out the nitty-gritty" of administration is a political game, and the courts' mixed responses to state election infrastructure in 2020 may add increased pressure to the system.

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How the movement to change voting procedures was derailed by the 2020 election results

Prof Martin P. Wattenberg

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The coronavirus pandemic exposed many problems with the voting process in the United States. Many of these problems stem from the fact that U.S. national elections are administered with a good deal of local control and variation. However, this situation can be changed, if the national government wishes to exert more control. Article I, Section IV of the Constitution begins by declaring that "*The Times*, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof." Importantly, this clause then goes on to give the federal government power to override the states with regard to election law by stating that "the Congress may at any time by Law make or alter such Regulations."

Had the 2020 election put the Democrats in control of the presidency, Senate, and House, they would have likely used the powers granted by Article I, Section IV to reshape how U.S. federal elections are conducted. The Democratic Party's 2020 platform provided a long list of voting reforms that they proposed to enact into law. However, Republicans adamantly oppose these changes. The strong likelihood (at the time of writing) that the Republicans will control the Senate means that the American electoral process will probably not be transformed anytime soon.

The key changes the Democrats proposed to the voting process in their 2020 platform were as follows:

- Election Day would become an official national holiday.
- All states would have to implement automatic voter registration procedures, in which states automatically add people they know are eligible to the electoral roll.
- All states would have to provide for Election Day registration for eligible voters who are not already on the electoral roll.
- All states would have to provide early voting opportunities so that people can easily vote in person before Election Day, if they so choose.
- All states would have to provide a vote by mail option.
- All states would be required to restore voting rights for criminals at the end of their sentence, even if they still owe fees or fines.

All of these provisions have routinely been criticized by Republicans as infringing upon the tradition of state and local control of elections. Democrats typically respond that allowing states and localities to have so much discretion with regard to election procedures has caused quite a mess – one that they hoped to clean up with national legislation in 2021.

Campaign finance regulations are another key aspect of the electoral process that the 2020 Democratic Party platform promised to change. Among the key changes to campaign finance proposed by the Democrats were:

- Establishment of public funding for congressional campaigns through a matching system for small-dollar donations.
- Legislation to ensure that SuperPACs are wholly independent of campaigns and parties.
- Legislation to require full disclosure of contributors to any group that advocates for or against candidates.
- A constitutional amendment that would overturn the Citizens United and Buckley v. Valeo decisions by clearly stating that Congress may set limits on the raising and spending of money by candidates and others to influence elections.

Republicans object to all of these proposals, arguing that they impose unnecessary and unwarranted restrictions on free speech. One likely result of this overwhelming Republican opposition is that the chances of ever getting a constitutional amendment passed are virtually nil given the high threshold of support necessary for amending the U.S. Constitution.

On the other side, Democrats are very committed to all the voting and campaign finance reforms that are feasible through federal legislation. Soon after taking control of the House of Representatives in January of 2019, they signaled that electoral reform was their #1 priority by making sure that their comprehensive proposal was the first bill introduced in the new Congress. Known as H.R. 1, "For the People Act," this 709 page bill passed the House in 2019, with every Democratic member voting for it. Many of its provisions would accomplish the goals set out in the 2020 Democratic Party platform.

The House Democratic majority would certainly like to refocus on this issue early in 2021. Yet, they will recall that the 2019 bill died in the Republican-controlled Senate and realize that such an outcome is likely to be repeated as long as the Republicans continue to control the Senate. Had the Democrats gained control of the Senate in 2021, they could have voted to exempt voting rights bills from being filibustered and then passed the bill on a party-line vote. Finally, President Biden would certainly have signed such a voting reform bill.

In short, voting reform was probably decided at the polls in the 2020 election. By narrowly giving the Republicans a majority in the Senate, voters probably sandbagged any chance of major electoral reform in 2021 and 2022.

From 'clown' to 'community': the democratic potential of civility and incivility

In late October 2020, the Democratic and Republican Party candidates for Utah governor made a public service announcement that went viral on Twitter, attracting over 74 thousand likes and 26 thousand retweets. In the 30-second video, the two candidates swap lines, explaining that while each hoped the audience would vote for them, "we can debate issues without degrading each other's character. We can disagree without hating each other. And win or lose, in Utah, we work together." The ad stood in direct contrast to the first presidential debate a little less than a month earlier, in which both Donald Trump and Joe Biden used interruption, insults, and name-calling to derail any discussion of policy positions and issues.

Most Americans see the sort of incivility present in the first presidential debate as a problem for American society, and they fear it will only get worse moving forward. That is likely part of what made the Utah gubernatorial candidates' ad go viral—it seemed a stark contrast to the expectations of the average American. We claim to want more exchanges like that in the Utahan PSA but find ourselves getting more involved and fired up when our candidate of choice fires off a particularly good zinger. Civility cultivates mutual respect and decency while incivility prompts political engagement; all are necessary for a functioning polity. In the end, we need to stop thinking about civility as the universal good to aspire to and incivility as a universal approach to be ignored. Both can be transformative for democracy.

Take, for example, Biden's primetime address on Friday, November 6. In it, he made a pitch for moving past the vitriol that characterized the campaign (and much of Trump's time in office), saying "We're certainly not going to agree on a lot of the issues, but we can at least agree to be civil to one another. Let's put the anger and the demonization behind us." Calls for civility are popular in the wake of campaigns, as candidates shift their rhetoric to appeal to the nation as a whole rather than their own partisan supporters. But is civility—at least the civility-as-politeness that Biden is referring to—really what can improve Americans' trust in and support of U.S. institutions and elected leaders? Probably not.

Civility is, after all, the shiny veneer that masked the very real divisions around race, gender and socioeconomic status in the mid-1900s, as Biden himself was reminded during his primary campaign. One can be polite and still be racist, can avoid calling names and shouting insults and still support policies and programs that are exclusionary and unequal. Making democracy more accessible, more pluralistic, and more inclusive is necessarily going to mean more language that makes us uncomfortable and that forces us to reflect on our personal biases and the inequities that have been incorporated into American institutional design since the Founding.

Don't get me wrong, incivility, particularly incivility by elected officials, damages our trust in government. President Trump's rhetoric, combined with the rise of cable news outrage and vitriolic echo chambers found on social media, have undoubtedly shifted norms about acceptable political and public speech in ways that feel counterproductive for governance. But in some situations, uncivil expression, difficult as it can be for some of us to stomach, is vitally important to our nation's healing and to putting our national anger behind us. Bottling up our anger and frustration in the pretty packaging of civility won't change the underlying affective polarization and sectarianism that are shaping contemporary American politics.

The 2020 election did not end with the strong moral repudiation of President Trump that many Democrats had hoped for, suggesting that there is still much work to be done for each party to understand and collaborate with the other effectively. Biden is right to encourage Americans and elected officials in particular to treat each other more warmly and behave in a nonpartisan manner; evidence suggests that this can reduce polarization. But calls for a return to civility--rather than decency, empathy and openness to other perspectives—mask the very real divisions and inequalities laid bare by coronavirus, the movement for black lives, and the 2020 election.

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Searching for misinformation

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In the days leading up to the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, many voiced concerns that misinformation and conspiracy theories would circulate online, spread to the general public, and undermine trust in the voting process and results. There was a substantial fear that this misinformation, combined with a contested outcome and prolonged uncertainty, could spark protests and political violence. To determine the public's engagement with pieces of misinformation and their information seeking for inflammatory claims and conspiratorial content, I collected and analyzed Google Search data from the U.S. during the week of the election.

It is well known that social media content is not representative of the public's attitudes. A proportionally small amount of content from Twitter, Facebook, and online discussion boards spreads beyond these platforms to mainstream news. Although misinformation certainly spreads online and attracts engagement, it is historically contained within small networks of individuals. To prompt a public response, misinformation typically must cross an extremely high threshold of online activity or be promoted by elites and eventually spread through mainstream channels. However, 2020 has seen widespread misinformation regarding COVID-19 and mainstream discussion of conspiracies like QAnon. These have resulted in unrest and threats of violence, and the tense and polarized political climate may be fertile grounds for widespread misinformation about the election.

Some questions about the integrity of U.S. elections have already moved from the realm of online conspiracy into the public sphere, in no small part because of persistent elite messaging. President Trump has been a key promoter of misinformation about electoral fraud and political opponents "cheating" the election. In January 2017 he claimed that millions had voted illegally and appointed the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity. After pushback from states and a court order to share working documents with Democratic members, the commission eventually dissolved. Even though no evidence of wide-spread fraud was ever released, Trump continued to revisit the idea that substantial voter fraud had occurred in the 2016 election. As the spread of COVID-19 raised health concerns about in-person voting on Election Day, President Trump, again without evidence, regularly promoted the idea that early and mail-in voting would be fraught with fraud.

Although President Trump's repeated claims about election fraud may have damaged trust in institutional processes for some, it is unknown if the average citizen is now more susceptible to explicit and inflammatory conspiratorial claims.

One way to determine if a broad audience is interested in learning more about a topic is to track the Google Search frequency of keywords using Google Trends. By plotting the search frequency of different keywords, the prevalence of searches for topics can be assessed and compared.

Using the gtrendsR package and an R script written to scrape and combine Google Trends data across the search terms presented in Table 1, I collected hourly observations of 41 keywords from the morning of Nov. 1 to the morning of Nov. 7 (all times are presented in Eastern Standard Time). I then plotted the search frequency of all the terms (Figure 1A) and then the frequency of only conspiratorial and misinformation terms (Figure 1B). This descriptive data is a first look at salient topics and is not intended to be exhaustive or representative of all the potential topics around the election. That work is ongoing.

The data show an increase in searches for specific pieces of misinformation and disinformation over the days after the election (Figure 1B). However, the overall frequency, even for topics that trended on social media, is very small compared to the rest of the terms. People do search for general ideas of voter, electoral fraud, and official activities like lawsuits, but even these topics attract a paltry amount of attention compared to information seeking for results and candidates (Figure 1A). These findings suggest most conspiracies are not widespread and the most incendiary claims go ignored. When a President and campaign message misinformation over the course of four years, the public wants to find out more, but the conspiracy of the minute is most likely to quickly vanish. So far, the American public seems accepting of the results and political violence has been avoided. Whether or not a former president and his allies can still drive attention to misinformation remains to be seen.

Table 1. Google Trends keywords and maximum normalized hourly search volume

Keyword	#	Keyword	#	Keyword	#	Keyword	#
pennsylvania ballots found in trash	20	**trump claim**	182	election riots	1160	trump win	12,666
pennsylvania found ballots	32	*ballot fraud*	203	*election fraud*	2176	**trump twitter**	19,192
arizona ballot sharpie	60	*arizona election sharpie*	223	*voter fraud*	2263	senate results	19,959
election conspiracy	60	*stop the count*	256	did biden win	2303	facebook	45,293
trump claims win	74	*election cheating*	305	**trump press conference**	2901	cnn	49,900
steal the election	78	***trump win pennsylvania***	469	is biden winning	3546	us election	49,900
stolen election	80	**election lawsuit**	522	is trump winning	4514	fox news	76,769
late votes	87	*dominion voting systems*	545	did trump win	4606	biden	93,562
ballot dump	100	election protests	696	new york times	8444	trump	124,750
illegal votes	100	**supreme court election**	975	biden win	8828	presidential election	207,917
						election results	1,094,300

*Italics – misinformation/conspiracy; **Bold – official action; news sources and platform included for reference**
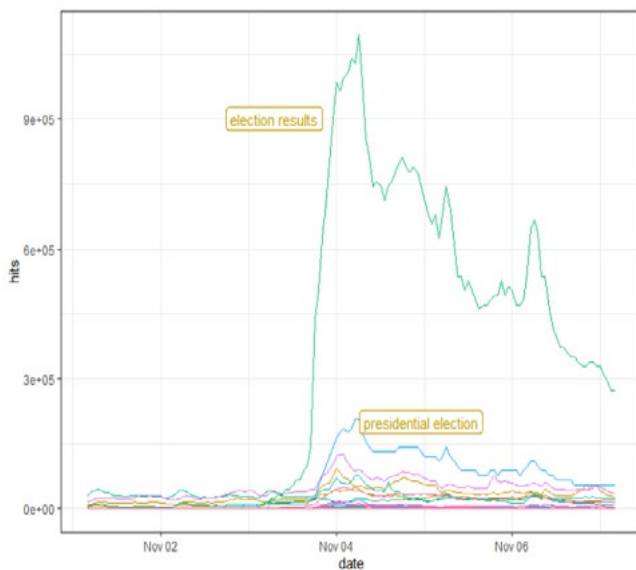

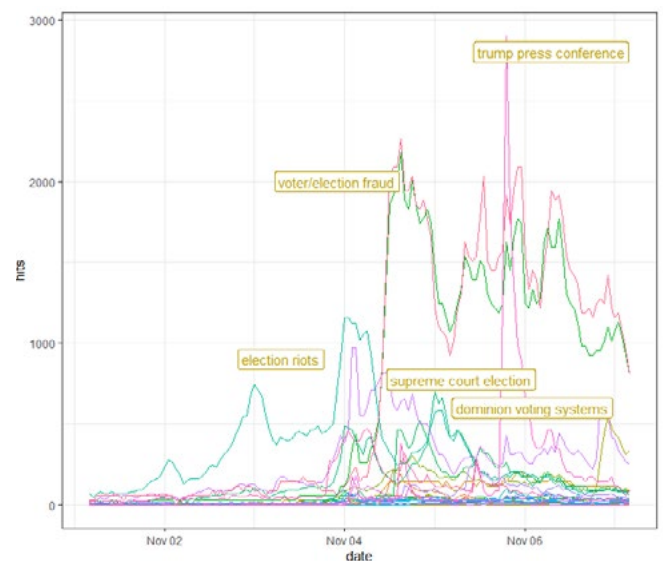**Figure 1A. Google Search hits across time for all keywords**

Figure 1B. Google Search hits across time for conspiratorial and misinformation terms

Relational listening as political listening in a polarized country

Dr Kathryn D. Coduto

Assistant Professor of Communication and Media Studies at South Dakota State University. Recent research has looked at the intersections of race and listening in political conversations, as well as gender and listening.

Political polarization in the United States is at an all-time high. The closeness of the 2020 election illustrates this. Seeing opposing views in one's online social network, according to Christopher A. Bail and colleagues, can deepen polarization instead of reducing it. A study just before the election found that individuals feel intense animosity toward those with opposing political views. This animosity outweighs their *positive* feelings toward those who share their views. This is a new extreme in our highly polarized country.

The polarization we are experiencing does not magically go away with a president-elect Biden. We are faced with disagreements so extreme that family members and friends no longer speak to each other. Scholars of interpersonal communication and relationship science will have plenty of work to do for years to come as we attempt to understand how interpersonal relationships have fractured through the last four years. In part, our job will be to understand how to rebuild those relationships that have been all but destroyed. We particularly need to look at the work of rebuilding relationships across our differences: gender, class, ability and, perhaps most significantly, race and ethnicity.

Race and ethnicity have played a significant role in the last four years, as confederate monuments were toppled, Black athletes knelt for the National Anthem, and police officers continued to kill Black Americans. Black individuals did not fare better under Trump, despite his claims of being the best president for Black America since Abraham Lincoln. Research by Diana Mutz suggested that White Americans elected Trump in the first place due to status threat and fears of becoming a minority. Following the 2020 election, author Roxane Gay put it thusly: "There is no greater identity politics than that of White people trying to build a firewall around what remains of their empire as this country's demographics continue to shift."

Part of our great divide when considering shattered relationships is our ability—or, in many cases, our inability—to *listen* to one another. In research I've conducted with colleagues at Ohio State (Chip Eveland, Osei Appiah, and Olivia Bullock), we see when listening is difficult. Much of our research has shown divides in listening by race, including perceptions of others as listeners. We find that Black individuals imagine that they will have a harder time listening in a conversation with a White person when talking about a racial issue (including those listed above). Black Americans expect to have a hard time listening, we suspect, because they themselves don't feel heard by White counterparts. We see repeatedly that Black people are tired of having to educate White people on racial issues; further, more White people voted for Donald Trump in both 2016 and 2020, implying a lack of concern about racism. This sets a stage for difficulty in conversations between White and Black individuals about political issues, especially political racial issues. Black individuals feel they are doing the work of educating Whites, without Whites demonstrating that they have heard anything in these conversations. The time has come to put in the work to listen actively and empathically.

People don't like conflict; Chip Eveland and I have additional data showing that individuals in conversations where they anticipate agreement also expect listening will be easier in those conversations. But we are in a time where agreement may not be the norm—partisan divides will perpetuate, and many issues from 2020 will not go away with a new president. Issues related to race, economic inequality, healthcare, and more will continue to challenge the country and infiltrate our conversations. We expect, in future research, to find similar divides in listening among minorities, classes, and gender identities. Relational listening will be an important part of improving our ability to listen to people who are unlike us, especially in conversations where disagreement is anticipated.

Relational listening, according to Graham Bodie and colleagues, shows concern and awareness of others' feelings and emotions. When we listen analytically, on the other hand, we focus on the details of an argument. We focus on the logic. For our interpersonal futures, we need to better emphasize and work on our relational listening. Relational listeners are more empathic (according to Bodie et al.), and empathy is critical to our future political conversations. Combative political conversations will only perpetuate our divides. Listening empathically can better equip us for constructive conversations and a deeper understanding of others. Even if we cannot *live* a shared experience, we can work to *understand* another's lived experience.

Relational listening will not cure all our interpersonal ills from the last four years. It does, however, offer a starting point for our collective recovery, and a tangible, manageable start that can lay a foundation for the rest of the work to come.

QAnon, the election, and an evolving American conservativism

Committed QAnon supporters and a majority of Republicans who believe the unsubstantiated QAnon conspiracy theory is mostly or partly true, are not happy with President Donald Trump's reelection defeat. Central to the QAnon theory is a belief that President Trump would bring about "The Storm," a day of reckoning in which his political enemies will be arrested and indicted at Guantanamo Bay, one of many predictions that have failed to come true. Similar to how Harold Camping, an apocalyptic radio preacher who wrongly predicted the end of the several times, continued to collect millions in donations from faithful followers following his failed doomsday predictions, the QAnon conspiracy theory will continue to transform American conservativism, despite President Trump's reelection loss.

What is QAnon?

QAnon is a loosely organized, far-right conspiracy theory that originated in October 2017 on the online message board 4chan. An anonymous post signed only by "Q," a reference to the highest-level security clearance in the Energy Department, alleged the imminent arrest of Hillary Clinton. Soon after, a number of conspiracy entrepreneurs began requesting donations to conduct "research" into the subsequent trail of "breadcrumbs," or coded messages, Q sends to supporters through "Q drops." This sparked the convoluted conspiracy theory in which believers "do their own research" in online echo chambers – significantly driven by social media content algorithms - and spawned easily refutable claims ranging from JFK Jr. faked his death and would reemerge from hiding to serve as Trump's 2020 running mate to prominent Democrats forced to wear ankle-bracelets following indictments for child-sex trafficking to Covid-19 anti-mask beliefs, leading to the FBI to label QAnon a domestic terrorist threat.

The conspiracy theory's popularity exploded during the COVID-19 pandemic, seeing a 200 to 300 percent increase in online interaction on the largest QAnon related social media pages, leading to some platforms to take steps to moderate the theory. Offline, QAnon supporters took to the streets over the last six months in #Savethechildren protests, in which supporters co-opted and obfuscated real concerns about human trafficking with fabricated claims of a Democrat and Hollywood-run Satanic pedophile cabal, and in the process, moved the conspiracy further into mainstream salience and deeply polarizing many Americans, including those who feel like they have lost a loved one to the conspiracy theory.

QAnon and the election

According to a recent poll, only 17 percent of people who intended to vote for Trump in 2020 answered that they definitively did not believe that Democrats were involved in child sex trafficking rings. This overlap of conspiracy theory, openness to misinformation, and Trump-era conservatism should not be a surprise. Research suggests that people susceptible to believing in conspiracy theories have feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty – particularly related to intergroup conflict, a distrust of institutions – including the government and the media - and feelings of being locked out of or ignored by the political process; feelings that resonate with some voters wooed by President Donald Trump's anti-establishment, populist, and authoritarian appeals.

However, it is the failure of President Trump, those close to him, and a number of GOP figures to fully condemn and dissociate the party from QAnon and in some cases, offer support for the conspiracy theory, that raises eyebrows. President Trump has magnified the theory through his Twitter account, praised QAnon supporters who "like [him] very much" and "love our country," and refused to denounce the conspiracy theory's unfounded claims during a live town hall. Likewise, Michael Flynn, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency and National Security Advisor to the President, posted a video featuring QAnon slogans in July and in October, White House adviser Stephen Miller claimed that "Joe Biden would be the best friend that child smugglers and child traffickers have ever had in the White House," echoing unfounded QAnon claims linking Democrats to child trafficking.

Across the United States, 25 Republican candidates with ties to QAnon appeared on the November ballot, with two candidates winning. Marjorie Taylor Greene - who received a $2,000 campaign donation from House Freedom Caucus (HFC) chairman and Trump ally, Rep. Jim Jordan, $1,000 from HFC member and Rep. Andy Biggs, and thousands more from the House Freedom Fund, the PAC arm of the HFC – won in Georgia's 14th Congressional District and Lauren Boebert – who said, "[QAnon] can be really great for our country" - won in Colorado's 3rd Congressional District. Both have also claimed to not be involved with QAnon.

While Donald Trump may be leaving Washington D.C. in January, QAnon will still have a voice in the halls of power – a voice that is being embraced with open arms - or at least not ostracized - by many in GOP leadership.

Harrison LeJeune

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President Trump, disinformation, and the threat of extremist violence

Dr Kurt Braddock

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Per *The Washington Post*, President Donald Trump and his administration have told more 22,000 lies while he has been in office, clocking in at a remarkable 16.9 lies per day. Despite the astonishing rate at which Trump and his allies spread disinformation over the first three years of his Presidency, the runup to the 2020 Presidential Election was marked by an even more concerted effort to mislead audiences. In June of 2020, Trump made more than 700 false claims. In July, he made nearly 900. By the end of the summer, the Trump administration was making more than 1,400 misleading claims per month. Over the last four years, it has become clear that the Trump administration has sought to weaponize disinformation to motivate supporters, frame his actions as unqualified successes, and in the leadup to the 2020 election, discredit and attack the then-Democratic-nominee and now-President-Elect, Joe Biden.

Of course, false claims and rhetorical attacks against one's political opponents are not unique to Trump. So pervasive is lying in politics that researchers have produced models to explore its effects, written articles describing (failed) efforts to stop it, and authored reports documenting its modern history. Although political exaggeration is nothing new, the magnitude and character of Trump's disinformation efforts have produced unprecedented effects. In addition to misleading audiences in reference to more traditional topics of political significance (e.g., economic policy, immigration), Trump has consistently sought to use disinformation to sow confusion and discord in relation to the 2020 election itself.

Poisoning the well

In the months leading up to the election, Trump made deliberately false claims about the use of mail-in ballots and the potential for foreign actors to print and submit ballots, and his supporters spread baseless claims about the likelihood of a Democratic "coup" during the election. As a result of this disinformation's proliferation and spread, a significant number of Trump's constituents went into the election believing its results would be illegitimate. Worse, during the 2020 election itself, Trump made false statements concerning alleged widespread voter fraud, laid claim to several states in which he had lost, and falsely asserted that he had won the election before all the ballots had been counted. On Saturday, November 7, when Pennsylvania was called for Biden, he was projected to be the winner of the election. As of November 9, Trump had yet to concede, citing the unfairness of the electoral process.

Disinformation and growing aggression

The disinformation groundwork laid by Trump before the election, coupled with his unfounded claims of fraud and election interference following his loss, has resonated with a significant number of supporters. In the wake of Biden's election as President-Elect, protests erupted in support of President Trump, characterized by unsupported claims of election fraud by protesters.

In addition to the protests, the disinformation perpetuated by the Trump administration has also triggered more nefarious responses. Some groups in the far-right have expressed an intent to mobilize – sometimes violently – on behalf of the President. In the wake of the election, the leader of Proud Boys, the far-right extremist group that President Trump infamously told to "stand back and stand by" during a televised presidential debate, said that "standby order has been rescinded" and that the group was "rolling out." Meili Criezis, a research fellow at American University's Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab, also found that Proud Boys Telegram channels erupted in excitement at Donald Trump Jr.'s argument that supporters should be ready for "total war" to fight the purported election fraud (see Figure 1 for a screenshot of one such channel).

Calls for violence also emerged on social media. In a review of a Facebook group entitled Stop the Steal, referring to the false claims that the election had been fraudulent, The Center for Countering Digital Hate found explicit calls for violence. Some members of the group argued that in the wake of the election, it was time to "clean the guns" and "hit the streets." Others overtly said that they must "resort to violence if [they] have to."

It has become clear that the disinformation proliferated by Donald Trump and his allies has transcended traditional political exaggeration. Trump's claims before the election effectively readied his supporters to reject the results of the election, and his claims of fraud following his loss have reinforced the false notion that he and his administration are being cheated. As he continues to refuse concession and make false claims about the election's integrity, it is likely that his more extreme supporters will grow increasingly aggressive towards the election apparatus, including Democrats, the media, and election officials themselves.

Over the course of his presidency, President Trump has used disinformation to manipulate his supporters. In the case of the 2020 election, this manipulation looked increasingly as though it could result in violence as supporters look to challenge an electoral process that Trump has falsely characterized as fraudulent.
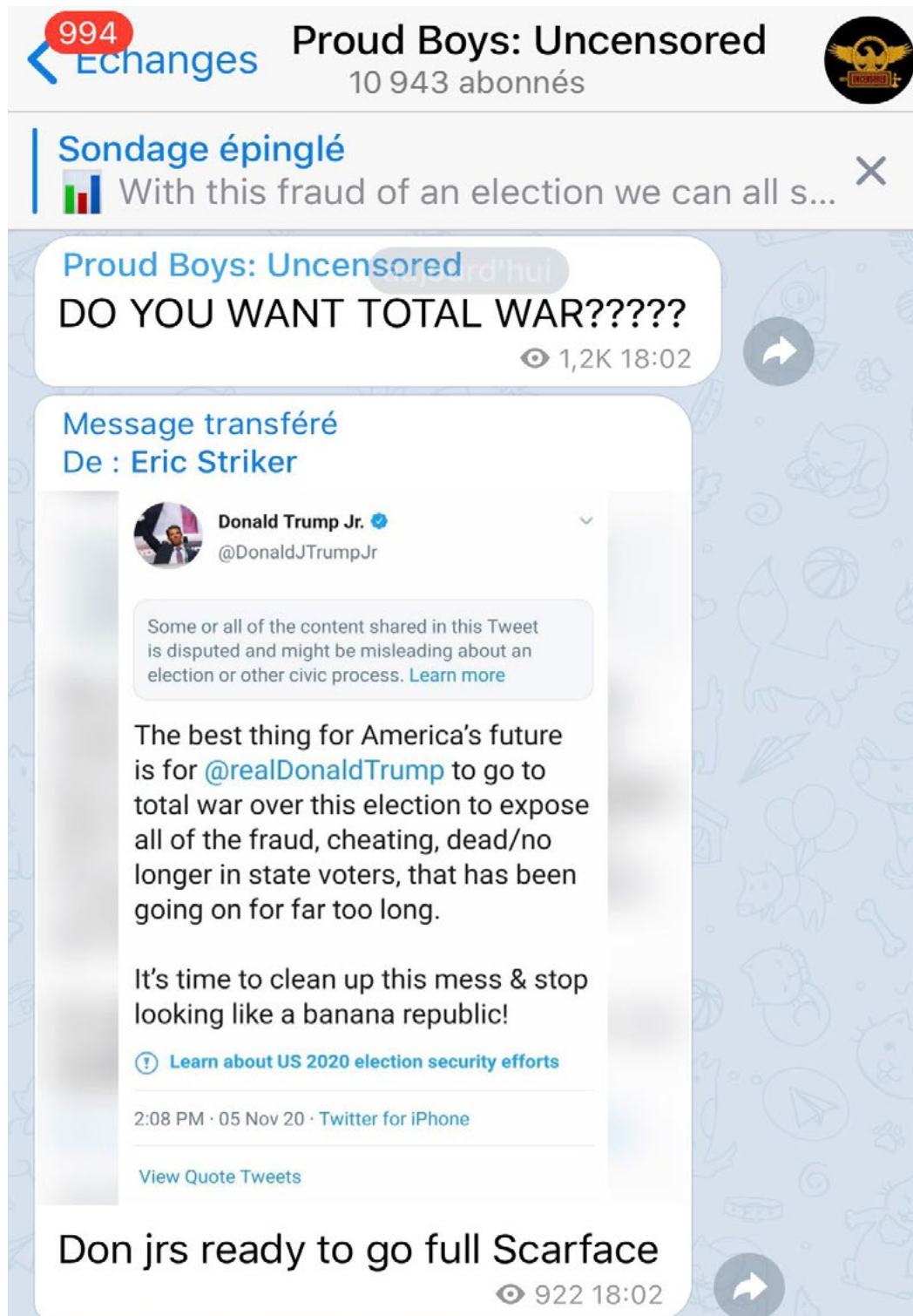
Figure 1 - Proud Boys

The disinformed election

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Perhaps four years of anxiety were misplaced. Perhaps disinformation did not affect the 2020 election after all. In the weeks and months leading up to Election Day, the biggest disinformation campaigns attempted to suppress voting in general and mail-in voting in particular. Yet, not only did Americans vote in record numbers, it was mail-in ballots — cast overwhelmingly by Democratic Party supporters — that reversed Donald Trump's early leads in key battleground states and handed Joe Biden the victory.

Nevertheless, the disinformation campaign perhaps did have an effect. It was the Republican Party, and Trump in particular, who cast doubt on the reliability of mail-in voting. The same results indicate most of his supporters did listen to him and chose to crowd the polling booths in person — even as COVID-19 cases reached record peaks in the United States — to cast their ballot.

Political scientists would call this a "moderated effect": the disinformation campaign did affect voting behavior, but the effect was moderated by party affiliation. Republicans were much more likely to be influenced by it than Democratic voters. Nor was this the first instance of such an effect: several scientific studies indicate a strong relationship between partisan bias and susceptibility to "fake news."

Hiding behind anecdotes and statistics is a deeper truth about disinformation: its acceptance relies less upon the content of a campaign itself and more upon how closely it coheres with an individual's beliefs about the world they live in— beliefs that are increasingly built around partisan boundaries. Discrete pieces of disinformation do not carry any meaning on their own. They have to fit within larger partisan narratives about social reality, narratives that feature good and evil, heroes and villains, victims and oppressors, before they "make sense" to an individual.

Congruence with a narrative — for instance, an "oppressive" Democratic Party trying to snatch the election from Republican "victims" and Trump waging a "heroic" war on behalf of those victims — is what leads a particular disinformation campaign — for instance, mail-in ballots being a fraud perpetrated by the Democrats — to appear meaningful. Those who believe in this narrative buy into the disinformation and act accordingly. Those who believe in a different narrative, in which the heroes and villains and reversed, treat it as "fake news."

Crucially though, this is not just true for disinformation but for information in general. Republican supporters considered the COVID-19 pandemic to be a hoax because the mounting toll exposed Trump's inefficiency as a president and Trump, the hero, himself played it down. The virus, arriving on the heels of the Democratic impeachment of Trump, simply did not fit into the Republican narrative of how the world works. What did fit, however, was the idea of the virus as another evil Democratic plot to bring down the good president.

Believing in and acting upon a piece of (dis)information, therefore, has little to do with truth and lies, right and wrong. Instead, it is closely related to people's partisan identities and has become a form of identity *performance* — a ritual of who you are and where you belong in the increasingly fragmented body politic. But identities are always constructed in opposition to an "other:" distrust of and antipathy toward the "other" is fundamental to the conception of the "self." That is the reason why so much of disinformation is accusatory of the "other" side or showcases one's own side as a victim of the "other's" perfidy — an instance of what political scientists call affective polarization.

Understanding disinformation and its effects in terms of identity performance has important lessons for the media. Over the past four years, so much of this effort has been directed toward "fact checking" discrete pieces of disinformation. But that does not take us very far. Disinformation is unlikely to influence those whose partisan narratives it does not fit — just like Democrats disregarding all the lies about mail-in voting. For whom it does, countering fiction with fact is unlikely to make them disbelieve. After all, four years of fact checking Trump has not made any dent in his credibility among his supporters. Indeed, such attempts may backfire and themselves be viewed as a means to censor their side — thus feeding into the cycle of polarization. For similar reasons, "media literacy" efforts to educate people to detect disinformation are unlikely to have the desired result either.

Acknowledging disinformation as a symptom of the deeper malady of affective polarization also carries lessons for politics and specifically for deliberative democracy. It exposes what Chantal Mouffe has called "a fundamental tension between the logic of democracy and the logic of liberalism": while liberalism recognizes differences in beliefs and values, deliberative democracy requires "a final rational resolution" of those differences through deliberation. But when people are willing to die for beliefs and values they know to be based on falsehoods, there is little hope for rational resolutions and consensus. Instead, democratic models need to gravitate away from deliberation toward *agonistic pluralism*, in which the "other" is not viewed as an "enemy" to be conquered but as an "adversary" to be accepted as a legitimate political voice, even if that voice disagrees with our own.

Election 2020 and the further degradation of local journalism

As has been well-documented, local journalism in the U.S. is suffering greatly. Recent research found that the U.S. has lost over 2,000 local newspapers from 2004 through 2020 – a 25 percent decline. The coronavirus pandemic exacerbated the problem. And, importantly, online-only local news outlets do not appear to have effectively filled the gap.

On top of this, a troubling new trend emerged in the run-up to the 2020 election – the rise of partisan networks of local news sites, many of which are operating under a fundamentally corrupted model of local journalism.

Partisanship in local journalism is certainly nothing new; however, as the number of newspapers serving individual communities contracted over the past four decades, the typical U.S. community was served by a single local newspaper. As a result, this newspaper would often try to appeal to the broadest possible readership by maintaining a degree of objectivity and political neutrality. This new generation of partisan local news sites operates very differently.

First, these sites are typically run as part of far-reaching networks of sites by organizations or individuals with close ties to political parties or political action committees. However, these sites often go to great lengths to conceal their ownership and funding sources from readers. In some instances, these sites have even adopted the names of defunct local newspapers, in an effort to deceive readers.

Second, as a recent New York Times investigation into Metric Media, the largest of these networks of local news sites, illustrated, during the 2020 election season Metric Media sites often accepted payment from political operatives, think tanks, and corporate executives to provide positive or negative coverage of specific candidates or issues, depending upon the wishes of the client. At this point, any pretense of being a news organization is out the window, and yet these sites continue to present themselves as such.

Finally, as our own ongoing research has shown, there is very little that is local about these sites. As much as the names of these sites might indicate that they are focused on individual communities, each site within one of these networks frequently carries much of the same content as the other sites in the network, and much of this content is algorithmically generated or repurposed from other sources.

In sum, many of these networks of sites represent not the next generation of local news outlets, but coordinated networks of semi-covert political influence that have taken advantage of the vacuum left by the decline of legitimate local journalism.

The number of these sites tripled from just over 400 in late 2019 to over 1,300 in the months leading up to the election. As these sites spread across the country, they appeared to be particularly concentrated in the swing states of the election, a pattern that suggests that national political strategy has played a role in the distribution of these "local" news sources.

Many of these sites have added an additional layer of degraded political news and information to a political news ecosystem that was already straining under the weight of algorithmically amplified disinformation, hyper-partisan cable news networks, persistent foreign influence operations, and blatant disinformation originating from our own elected leaders.

What, if any, impact these sites may have had on the election outcome is difficult to determine at this point. However, they obviously grew quite rapidly during election season. In addition, Metric Media has announced plans to launch 15,000 additional sites, and has recently begun purchasing local newspapers, as part of what the company's CEO Brian Timpone has described as an effort to "democratize community news."

Rather than democratizing community news, these developments suggest that a new template for disguising strategic political influence efforts as local journalism has been established during the 2020 election and could become the norm in future elections. The 2020 election may have provided just a small preview of what's yet to come.

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