The Presidential and Congressional Elections of 2020: A National Referendum on the Trump Presidency

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JOSEPH BIDEN DEFEATED THE incumbent president, Donald Trump, in the 2020 election by taking five states that Trump had won in 2016: three in the industrial heartland (Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania) plus Georgia and Arizona (Figure 1). Biden’s victories in these states were much narrower than pre-election polls had projected; in three, his margin was less than 1 percentage point. The national vote was also considerably closer than pre-election projections, with Biden winning by 4.4 percentage points compared to the 8-point average of polls taken in the final month of the campaign. After 2016, the main analytical task was to account for the improbable victory of someone with Trump's character, conduct, and history;¹ for 2020, the challenge is to explain why, despite a chaotic and scandal-ridden presidency, a shambolic response to the COVID-19 crisis, approval ratings that never reached net positive territory, and a much more popular opponent than in 2016, Trump came close to winning reelection. Biden ultimately prevailed in the electoral college, 306–232, while amassing a national margin of 7.06

million votes, compared to Hillary Clinton’s 2.86 million vote margin in 2020. But if Trump had won the three states where Biden won by less than 1 percentage point, he would still be president.

Partisan fervor on both sides, driven to extremes by Trump’s relentlessly polarizing presence, inspired the highest voter turnout in more than a century, estimated at 66.7 percent, up from 59.2 percent in 2016. Trump’s better than expected performance in a high-turnout environment helped down-ticket Republicans, denying the Democrats a second “blue wave” and narrowing their House majority by 12 seats, leaving them 222 to the Republicans’ 213.

With victories in the two Georgia runoff elections held in January 2021, however, Democrats gained a net three Senate seats, producing a 50-50 tie that gave them control the chamber through Vice President Kamala Harris’s tiebreaking vote. The election thus left the Democrats with tenuous control over both the legislative and executive branches.

THE TRUMP REFERENDUM
The 2020 elections were above all a referendum on one person: Donald Trump. His unremitting effort to command center stage in the American
political drama succeeded, though his performance was ultimately self-defeating. Trump had taken office in 2017 as the leader of a deeply divided country and, over the next four years, divided it further. Past presidents had at least paid lip service to the idea of being “president of all the people,” if only out of strategic self interest in enlarging their electoral base. Trump barely pretended. Having gained the White House by mobilizing grievances, sowing discord, spinning lies, and savaging his critics in politics and the media, he continued in this vein throughout his time in office. His campaign for reelection was no exception. Trump pursued victory by inflaming social and political divisions to mobilize supporters, but the effect was to mobilize his Democratic opponents at least as much.\(^3\) Like most of his actions as president, Trump’s campaign hardened the mutual antipathy between people who embraced his vision of what constituted American greatness and people who were appalled by it.\(^4\) Trump continued to stoke partisan discord after the election, declaring Biden’s victory fraudulent, calling on courts and state legislatures to nullify it, refusing to concede, impeding the complicated work of transition to the new Biden regime, and finally provoking a mob invasion of the Capitol by his supporters in a futile effort to prevent formal ratification of Biden’s victory.

Trump’s strategy of divide and conquer fell short, but more than 74 million Americans, 46.9 percent of the electorate, voted to give him another four years in the White House. The first four had featured a remarkable succession of seemingly damaging events and revelations that, even more remarkably, left his overall standing with the public almost unchanged. An incomplete list would include such highlights as Robert Mueller’s lengthy but ultimately inconclusive investigation of links between Russia and Trump’s 2016 campaign; the conviction of several close Trump associates for perjury and obstruction of justice; a government shutdown over funding an unpopular wall on the Mexican border; the cruel separation of young children from their parents seeking asylum there; the revelations of payoffs to silence Trump’s paramours; the attempt to extort Ukraine into investigating Joe Biden that led to


Trump’s impeachment in the House and acquittal in the Senate; the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that by Election Day had killed more than 233,000 Americans, a crisis Trump met with deceit, callousness, and denial of responsibility; the painful economic fallout from that crisis; the wave of popular protests, a few violent, against police brutality and for racial justice that Trump treated as an occasion for race-baiting; record turnover of presidential appointees and staff, some of whom went on offer to scathing indictments of Trump’s ignorance, dishonesty, and incompetence; disclosure of his minimal federal income tax payments in recent years; a threat, subsequently carried out with appalling consequences, to reject the 2020 election results if he did not win; and the White House itself becoming a coronavirus hot spot, with Trump, his wife, and more than a dozen of his office and campaign staff, some top military brass, and several Republican senators and White House reporters testing positive for the disease.

Remarkably, none of these things, individually and collectively, had more than a marginal effect on aggregate public evaluations of Trump, which remained both highly stable and extremely polarized along party lines throughout his presidency (Figure 2). Polarization and stability went hand in hand; extraordinarily strong partisan priors placed both a floor and a ceiling on Trump’s popular support, and his overall approval ratings varied over a narrow range around the 40 percent mark. Stability was not total, to be sure. Trump’s approval levels dipped during his first year in office after the failed and unpopular attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act but recovered with the successful effort to enact tax cuts in December 2017. His standing improved a couple of points around the time of his impeachment as Republicans rallied to his side, and it rose another couple of points in March 2020 during the early stages of the pandemic. But that small surge, fueled mainly a portion of Democrats and independents willing to rally around the president in a time of national crisis, quickly faded, as COVID-19 cases surged and Trump’s responses to the protests spawned by George Floyd’s murder by a Minneapolis policeman in late May met widespread disapproval. These variations were, however, very small by historical standards, and in view of the tumultuous course of Trump’s presidency, the stability of opinion on his job performance remains its most striking feature.

5The mean for all respondents in Figure 2 is 40.1, with a standard deviation of 2.9.
Stable opinions of Trump’s performance were the product of extreme polarization. Partisans expressed starkly contrary opinions of Trump from the start of his presidency, and the partisan gap grew irregularly over the next four years. It reached a record high for the postwar Gallup series of 91 points in October 2020, with 94 percent of Republicans but only 3 percent of Democrats approving of Trump’s performance. Polarization tends to peak during years when presidents seek reelection, but Trump outdid all of his predecessors, inspiring a partisan approval gap averaging 84 points in Gallup Polls taken in 2020—91 percent of Republicans, 7 percent of Democrats approving—a gap 9 points wider than the previous election-year records set by George W. Bush and Barack Obama (75 points).

Both the extreme polarization and durability of attitudes toward Trump had a profound effect on the 2020 elections, from Joe Biden’s nomination to the final results. Despite a few modest if crucial shifts, the

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7Partisan opinions of Trump’s performance grew stronger as well as more disparate; in the Quinnipiac Polls, for example, the proportion of Republicans who approved strongly of Trump’s performance grew from below 60 percent in late 2017 to 80 percent in September 2020, when the proportion of Democrats who disapproved strongly hit 91 percent; see https://poll.qu.edu/national, accessed 28 September 2020.
2020 election largely replicated the regional, demographic, and ideological divisions revealed in the 2016 vote. Although Biden flipped five states, the underlying continuity of the partisan geography was striking; the correlation across states between Trump’s share of the major-party vote in the two elections he was on the ballot was .992, the highest ever for this measure.

Why did partisans develop such disparate opinions of Trump? Democrats came to loathe Trump for what they saw as, among other things, his misogyny, racism, narcissism, cruelty, bottomless mendacity, corruption, incompetence, authoritarian impulses, contempt for democratic norms and institutions, disparagement of traditional allies, and fondness for authoritarian rulers, as well as his policies on health care, the environment, regulation, taxes, and immigration. That Trump’s job approval ratings among Democrats reached as low as 2 percent in multiple major national polls is stunning but not surprising.

None of the particulars that made Trump so repugnant to ordinary Democrats shook his support among ordinary Republicans. Most evidently appreciated his voicing of their grievances, resentments and illiberal opinions and admired what Democrats despised about him: his America-first nationalism, disdain for nonwhite immigrants and assertive minorities, attacks on mainstream news media as “enemies of the people,” defiance of elite and expert opinion, scorn for “political correctness,” mistrust of government institutions, contempt for Democratic leaders and their party, and blanket assault on Barack Obama’s legacy. Trump persuaded millions of disaffected white Americans, troubled by adverse economic and cultural trends, that he was on their side, that his enemies were their enemies, and that by attacking him they were attacking them. Even those Republicans who found his manner and character off-putting could appreciate his policies on taxes, deregulation, trade, immigration and Israel, as well as his exits from the Paris Accords on climate change and the Iran nuclear agreement and his stacking the federal courts with conservative judges. And before the pandemic did its damage, they could point to steady economic growth, very low unemployment, and a booming stock market as additional reasons to support him.

These deeply divergent views of Trump were reinforced by news coverage of his presidency. Mainstream news organizations were quick to

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point out his lies, instability, trampling of democratic norms, alienation of allies, and incompetence in staffing and managing the executive branch. The implicit but unmistakable subtext of their coverage was that Trump was unqualified by character, temperament, knowledge, and experience for the presidency. Trump’s response was to make mainstream news sources the target for his supporters’ wrath, attacking them as “enemies of the people” and purveyors of “fake news” in a sustained effort to delegitimize their reporting and avoid answering for his actions. The effort largely succeeded among Republican voters, helped along by conservative news and opinion outlets, led by Fox News, whose most popular personalities routinely delivered uncritical praise and support for Trump’s actions along with constant disdain for his critics. The media ecosphere thus contributed importantly to the extreme polarization of opinions of Trump.9

THE DEMOCRATIC NOMINATION
Loathing for the Trump administration and fear of its extension were prime shapers of the contest for the Democratic nomination. The contest attracted 29 candidates, the largest field in history, eclipsing the record of 17 set by the Republicans in 2016. The field included a former vice president, eight senators (seven sitting), four governors (three sitting), seven U.S. representatives (five sitting), five former or current mayors, a state senator, plus three people who had never held elective office. It also set records for diversity, with six women (four of the senators), two Blacks, three Latinos, an Asian American, and one openly gay mayor. The candidates ranged in age from 38 to 90; 10 were under 50, and the average was 58.10 Despite this display of youth, diversity, and fresh new faces, the nomination went to former vice president Joseph Biden, a white male septuagenarian who had been a fixture in Washington since his election to the Senate in 1972. Among the reasons Biden prevailed, the most important was Donald Trump.

Biden’s path to the nomination was anything but smooth. Figure 3 displays the trends in support for the top six candidates (defined as those who reached at least 15 percent in a major national poll or a smoothed average of 10 percent at some point on this chart) from 309 surveys compiled by 28 polling organizations and reported at

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10Former Alaska senator Mike Gravel was the oldest at 90; Pete Buttigieg was the youngest, turning 38 in January 2020.
FiveThirtyEight. At the beginning of 2019, Biden led in the polls, with Bernie Sanders in second place, both benefiting from name recognition and an existing following, Biden from serving as Barack Obama’s vice president and Sanders from his strong challenge to Hillary Clinton in the 2016 primaries. Biden’s support rose after he formally announced his candidacy in April 2019, but then he lost ground over the next nine months. Sanders, too, got a boost after his February 2019 announcement but then stalled until the end of the year as Kamala Harris, then Elizabeth Warren, then Pete Buttigieg, and finally Michael Bloomberg enjoyed periods of rising support. Several other candidates also polled above 5 percent in some surveys; those not displayed here collectively averaged about 12 percent in 2019. Before finally reaching a consensus on Biden, Democratic activists and voters auditioned multiple aspirants.

The auditions were formalized in 11 debates between the candidates held from June 2019 through early 2020. The Democratic National Committee

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11The data are from https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/?ex_cid=irpromo, accessed 16 December 2020; lowess smoothing is essential because these data are very noisy.
managed the crowded field by setting minimum requirements for support in major polls and, later, fundraising for participation, and making them stiffer over time. Twenty candidates qualified for the first two debates, both held over two evenings for groups of 10 to accommodate the demand; by the final debate, only Biden and Sanders still qualified. Candidates who had relatively strong debate performances saw their support rise—Harris (after June), Warren (after September), and Buttigieg (in November)—but none could sustain momentum. Biden, ahead in the polls, was initially everyone’s target and took some hits in the early debates, but he stuck to a strategy of maintaining comparatively moderate issue positions and, more importantly, presenting himself as the strongest candidate against Trump while letting the other candidates mix it up in the remaining debates.

Warren and Sanders competed for the progressive vote; Warren led in September–November 2019, but Sanders ultimately moved ahead of her. Buttigieg and a late entrant, billionaire and former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, offered themselves as moderate alternatives to Biden, whose prospects looked bleak after his disastrous performance in the 3 February Iowa caucuses (fourth place) and the 11 February New Hampshire primary (fifth place). Sanders took the straw poll lead for several weeks after finishing first by narrow margins in these states, although with support from only about one-quarter of the voters. Sanders also came in first in the 22 February Nevada caucuses with 40 percent of the vote, with Biden finishing second with 19 percent.

Biden then staged a dramatic comeback that within three weeks ensured his nomination. First, he won a huge victory in the February 29 South Carolina primary, receiving overwhelming support from the party’s large Black electorate, helped by a timely endorsement by James Clyburn, the longest-serving Black Democrat in the House and a powerful figure in South Carolina politics, as well as by his close association with Barack Obama. Biden won 49 percent of the vote to Sanders’s 20 percent, with no one else getting more than 10 percent. His victory inspired a cascade of endorsements from party leaders and former competitors. Biden parlayed the momentum into Super Tuesday (3 March), winning 10 states and finishing second in the other four. A week later, he won all five states holding primaries, losing only in North Dakota’s caucuses, and was the victor every subsequent primary. Only Sanders remained viable after Super Tuesday but he, too, withdrew on 8 April and endorsed Biden.

Biden’s steep rise in support reflected his success in reestablishing the belief after the South Carolina primary that he would be the strongest candidate against Trump. This was a priority for Democrats that became more important as the nomination season progressed. Between January
and September 2019, Democrats were, on average, nearly evenly split between preferring a candidate closer to them on the issues (44 percent) and one who could defeat Trump (47 percent). Thereafter, and coinciding with the impeachment period, the respective averages were 36 percent and 60 percent. Biden enjoyed a clear advantage on the question of who had the best chance of defeating Trump in every poll except the one taken immediately after his losses in Iowa and New Hampshire. Before then, he was given the best chance by an average of 45 percent of Democrats, with the second-highest Democrat (usually Sanders) averaging 16 percent. After South Carolina, 60 percent said Biden was the strongest candidate against Trump.

Biden’s success in rallying Democrats behind him in the primaries after New Hampshire both rested on and strengthened Democrats’ belief in his superior electability. That belief was, according to the various matchups posed in surveys taken during the nomination season, justified. On average, Biden matched up against Trump better than any other Democrat. In paired comparisons against other Democrats in the same polls, Biden ran an average of 1.7 points better than Sanders (107 polls, $p < .001$), 4.4 points better than Warren (83 polls, $p < .001$), 2.8 points better than Buttigieg (38 polls, $p < .001$), and 2.9 points better than Bloomberg (17 polls, $p = .028$).

Once Biden assumed the lead in primary votes and delegates, leaders and voters across the Democratic Party’s ideological spectrum threw their support his way. The high premium on party unity was a legacy of 2016 and the ensuing Trump presidency. Despite very real differences on ideology and policy, Democrats were anxious to avoid any internal divisions that might weaken Biden’s candidacy, as they had Clinton’s. They broadly endorsed his selection of Kamala Harris as his running mate, a move that balanced the ticket with a younger, more progressive woman of color who was nonetheless a comfortable fit with Biden’s relative moderation. The main purpose of the Democrats’ virtual convention was to unify and mobilize their diverse coalition, and Sanders’s speech wholeheartedly endorsing Biden stressed that the threat posed by Trump made unity imperative: “The future of

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12 Averages are from ABC News/Washington Post, Gallup, Ipsos, Monmouth University, and NBC News/Wall Street Journal polls (seven through September 2019, 10 thereafter).
14 Data from 270 surveys by 35 polling organizations acquitted through FiveThirtyEight and the organizations’ websites.
our democracy is at stake. The future of our economy is at stake. The future of our planet is at stake.”

Biden’s ultimately successful campaign strategy, clear in the convention, was to make Trump’s character and performance, particularly in handling the COVID-19 crisis, the focus of the election, offering himself as the anti-Trump, just as Trump had offered himself in 2016 as the anti-Obama.

**TRUMP’S RENOMINATION**

Donald Trump’s renomination was never in doubt, and the Republican presidential primaries (those that were actually held) were uneventful affairs. Trump was simply too popular with the Republican base for any challenger to get traction. By the beginning of 2020, his takeover of the Republican Party was virtually complete, if not entirely uncontested. Trump’s dominance was evident in the overwhelming opposition to impeachment and conviction among congressional Republicans and among the party’s voters. Only one Republican in either chamber voted against Trump (Senator Mitt Romney supported one article of impeachment), and 95 percent of Republicans identifiers approved of his acquittal.

It was the Republican convention, however, that illustrated how thoroughly Trump had eclipsed the old Republican Party. It was all about him. For the first time in its history, the party wrote no platform, instead re-adopting the 2016 version word for word in a resolution prefaced by “The Republican Party has and will continue to enthusiastically support the president’s America-first agenda.” That is, the party’s positions would be whatever Trump said they were. Trump appeared on all four nights of the event, concluding it by delivering the longest acceptance speech in history. Featured speakers included his wife, four of his children, and two of their significant others. Conspicuously absent were any former Republican presidents, vice presidents, presidential candidates, or senior cabinet officials from previous Republican administrations. Even Ronald Reagan was barely mentioned. Most of the Republican politicians who did speak were ardent Trump loyalists. The central theme of the convention was that Trump

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alone stood between civilization and anarchy. And the volume of lies and fabrications that issued from the event left no doubt that a thoroughly ugly and mendacious campaign would follow.\textsuperscript{19}

**THE CAMPAIGNS**

Prior to the exogenous shocks delivered by the coronavirus pandemic and police killings of Blacks that sparked widespread protests, the competing campaign strategies seemed set. As always, both campaigns sought to frame the choice in personal and political terms favorable to their candidate. The Biden campaign wanted the election to be first of all about Trump’s character and performance, emphasizing the litany of offenses that made ordinary Democrats so hostile to Trump. On the policy side, the Biden campaign emphasized standard Democratic concerns such as health care (extend coverage through a “public option”), inequality ($15 national minimum wage, access to higher education), and protecting the environment (combating climate change). It also pointedly stressed Biden’s civility, empathy, reliability, integrity, and respect for democratic practices and institutions.

Trump’s campaign also sought to frame the campaign in favorable personal and policy terms. It impugned Biden’s mental acuity and stamina, accused him of corruption through association with his son’s activities in Ukraine and China, and claimed he was in thrall to the radical left. That charge meshed with Trump’s central case for four more years: the economy’s performance during his watch. Biden’s Democrats, he argued, would destroy prosperity by imposing ruinous socialist policies if they prevailed.

These themes were never abandoned, but both campaigns were profoundly upended by the onset of the COVID crisis, which ultimately worked in Biden’s favor by reinforcing his critiques of Trump’s character and competence, as well as curtailing the mass rallies that were the lifeblood of Trump’s campaigns. A second crisis provoked by the police killing of George Floyd in May also probably helped Biden’s case, although the ensuing protests, some violent, and demands by some Democratic activists to “defund the police” tempered his advantage on the racial justice issue and may have hurt down-ballot Democrats. Neither crisis was guaranteed to help Biden’s or hurt Trump’s cause, however; it was Trump’s responses and

the Biden campaign’s exploitation of them—essentially letting Trump be Trump—that probably sealed Biden’s victory.

THE COVID-19 ELECTION
In early 2020, while impeachment absorbed the nation’s attention, the coronavirus quietly spread from China to the rest of the world, not least the United States, which eventually led the world in confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths. The pandemic’s social and economic devastation gave Trump the defining challenge of his presidency and a singular opportunity to expand his appeal beyond his loyal base. A deeply divided nation suddenly faced a crisis that called for a coherent, focused, and collaborative response from both elected leaders and the public. Uniting the nation against a common threat is basic to the president’s job description. Trump claimed the mantle of “wartime president” after his 13 March declaration of a national emergency, but he could summon neither the will nor the capacity to craft and stick to a unifying message. Instead, he followed his standard playbook as the crisis unfolded, using his press briefings and tweets to praise himself and rewrite history while issuing crude attacks on anyone in politics or the media who dared to question his administration’s decidedly questionable performance. In a crisis demanding coordinated, methodical, and informed national action, Trump continued to preside as always: impulsively, erratically, and ignorantly, with contradictory messages that extended to floating quack remedies and cheering on populist protests against his own administration’s recommended policies.20

Although he had been warned of the virus’s potential to kill tens of thousands of Americans,21 Trump chose to minimize the threat in public, asserting repeatedly, and as late as August, that the virus would just vanish.22 He was no less dismissive of the danger when cases rose steeply over the next several months. Trump downplayed the threat from the start because facing in squarely would require closing down large parts of the economy (as it eventually did), undermining the foundation of his case for reelection (as it eventually did). But this approach left him

looking reckless and incompetent as cases surged, and it forfeited the politically rewarding role of national leader in a time of crisis. The wasted opportunity is suggested by the brief rally in support for Trump after his declaration of a national emergency visible in Figure 2. His standing among Democrats and independents reached the highest point of his presidency, as approval of his handling of the pandemic itself rose to more than 20 percent among Democrats and into net positive territory among all respondents (Figure 4).\(^{23}\) The incipient rally fizzled, however, in the face of Trump’s erratic and ineffective leadership and the surge in COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths. Opinions of his handling the crisis decline steadily through July among partisans of all persuasions. Thereafter, Republicans became more positive and Democrats even less so as the approaching election primed partisan biases. Independents also became increasingly critical through the summer.

As on every previous occasion when Trump’s actions had raised questions about his fitness to serve as president, people who were not already supporters condemned his performance, while those who were remained unshaken. By any objective measure, Trump’s handling of the pandemic was deficient on multiple fronts.\(^{24}\) To his detractors, Trump’s performance simply reaffirmed in the starkest way his utter unfitness for his office, and in circumstances where thousands of American lives were at stake. That it did not erode his support among ordinary Republicans revealed once again their readiness to ignore, disbelieve, discount, or reject as irrelevant any information suggesting that he might not deserve their backing; such sustained exercises in motivated reasoning signal strong motivation, firmly rooted in identity politics and tribal loyalties in the culture wars.\(^{25}\) As the pandemic worsened over the summer and fall, Republican support for Trump’s reelection rose.

PROTESTS AGAINST RACISM

A second national crisis arrived on 25 May, when the excruciating video of a white Minneapolis policeman killing a Black arrestee, George Floyd, by kneeling on his neck for almost nine minutes while his colleagues stood by watching, provoked a series of demonstrations in all 50 states against racially biased policing and systemic racism more broadly. Although some

\(^{23}\)Figure 4 displays the smoothed results from 243 surveys provided by 25 polling organizations and accessed through FiveThirtyEight and the organizations’ websites.


protests turned violent, strong majorities, including majorities of whites, supported the protesters and the idea that bias against Blacks and other minorities was indeed systemic and demanded remedial action. Trump’s response was again true to form and broadly unpopular. His past advocacy of aggressive policing, scorn for assertive Blacks, and sympathy for white supremacists, aimed at connecting with his conservative white base, now put him on the wrong side of public sentiment, but Trump made no effort to adapt. He sought to frame the protests as a “law and order” issue, focusing on the violence he blamed on radical leftists and threatening to use the military to impose order, but most Americans found these responses deficient. On average in polls conducted from June through August, 57 percent of Americans disapproved of his response to the crisis, including 88 percent of Democrats, 60 percent of independents, and even 19 percent of Republicans (73 percent approved). But tellingly, this reduced his broader support among Republicans very little; in these same polls, their overall job approval ratings averaged 85 percent.

Source: See note 23.

27Averages from 31 June and July polls taken by 13 polling organizations and accessed through listings provided by FiveThirtyEight at https://fivethirtyeight.com.
Reacting to the protests, Trump doubled down on race-baiting rhetoric, posing as defender of the confederate flag and the statues of rebel generals erected as markers of white dominance in the post-Reconstruction South, retweeting a video of a supporter shouting “white power” at demonstrators in Florida, and vowing to protect suburbanites from low income housing that could attract minorities to their neighborhoods. This stance failed to broaden his support, but it may have excited fears among his constituency of older white voters outside urban areas, motivating them to vote and arguably narrowing Biden’s margins in some battleground states. By the end of the campaign, approval of Trump’s handling of the protests was up to 83 percent among Republicans, paralleling the rise in their approval of his handling of the coronavirus (Figure 4).

MONEY AND MOBILIZATION
The powerful sentiments that inspired extraordinary turnout in 2020 also inspired extraordinary levels of campaign contributions and thus spending. The final numbers are not yet available, but data through early January 2021 show that the combined financial resources of the Biden and Trump campaigns and the outside groups supporting them reached $3.98 billion, nearly twice the 2016 total. The Biden campaign had raised $1.044 billion, 85 percent more than Clinton; the Trump campaign had raised $774 million, 132 percent more than in 2016. Spending by outside groups was up even more, with a total of $ 578 million supporting Biden (up 180 percent from 2016) and $312 million supporting Trump (up 211 percent).

Trump had been raising funds virtually since his inauguration and began with a large lead, but Biden pulled ahead in August; by then, the Trump campaign had already spent a large portion of its take, leaving it short of cash for the final push. Television ads were pulled from some battleground states, including Wisconsin and Michigan. But in the end, it probably did not matter. Trump had won in 2016 despite a 2:1 financial disadvantage. His campaigns relied less on television advertising and more on grabbing media attention and reaching voters through rallies, tweets, emails, and grassroots

30Data are from the Center for Responsive Politics, accessed at https://www.opensecrets.org/2020-presidential-race, 7 January 2021.
canvassing. And although the pandemic curbed Trump’s signature mass rallies of the MAGA faithful, risky as potential hot spots for virus transmission, he held dozens of smaller events anyway, mostly at airports.

Echoing Trump’s nonchalance about masking and social distancing protocols, his campaigners did much more face-to-face and door-to-door canvassing than Biden’s. Biden set the tone for his party by conducting most of his campaign remotely, mainly from his home base in Delaware, although he made a few forays into battleground states. His campaign operations mirrored his caution, with limited on-the-ground activities and heavy reliance on virtual campaigning. Biden’s low-key approach was strategic as well as precautionary; it showed how seriously he and his party took the pandemic, in stark contrast with Trump and his party. It called attention to Trump’s defective COVID-19 leadership while underlining their differences in character, temperament, and respect for science. It also left the spotlight on Trump, who served Biden’s purpose by ignoring the pandemic and its victims and attempting to change the subject by, among other things, accusing Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama of imaginary crimes. Trump’s most timely gift to Biden was a bizarre, hyper-aggressive and, to most Americans, off-putting performance in their first debate on 29 September, shortly before Trump contracted the virus. In the post-election Pew Research Center survey, 54 percent of Biden voters said their vote was mainly against Trump rather than for Biden, a result unlikely to either surprise or bother the president-elect.

NATIONAL POLLING
Some Democrats worried that Biden’s approach was too low-key and that their side was being outhustled in the hustings and on the ground; the gap between pre-election projections and Biden’s much narrower victory has been attributed in part to the Republican’s more effective ground game. The evidence is not yet available to evaluate this claim, but the Biden team’s contrasting treatment of the coronavirus threat was probably a net positive for them. Trends in the pre-election surveys taken over the election year suggest that the candidates’ reactions to this crisis and to the protests against racism had only modest effects that were, nonetheless, large enough to put Biden over the top. In view of the actual election results, these polls certainly exaggerated Biden’s lead, as did polls in most battleground states. A full explanation of these discrepancies awaits examination of more complete data. The causes are no doubt multiple,

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but one intuitively plausible explanation is that strong Trump supporters were systematically undersampled because they were more likely than other citizens to refuse interviews, distrusting and disliking the media and academic institutions that typically sponsor the major surveys. People who regard pollsters as part of the “fake news” industry will be disinclined to participate. Whatever the reasons, pre-election polling results cannot be taken at face value, but the trends they display are still informative under the reasonable assumption that their biases remained consistent over the election year. With that in mind, Figure 5, which shows the smoothed trends in the prospective vote for Biden and Trump by all respondents and by partisan subgroups from 231 national polls taken during the election year,\textsuperscript{32} serves as a guide to the evolution of the preferences.

Biden began the year with a lead that shrank by about 3 points to its narrowest margin in the weeks following Trump’s declaring the coronavirus pandemic a national emergency. It widened again (by about 4 points) in polls following the protests provoked by George Floyd’s death on 25 May, shortly after COVID-19 deaths had passed the 100,000 mark. The two national conventions, held in August, did not alter the dynamics of the race, but Biden’s lead showed signs of narrowing until the first presidential debate on 29 September, which featured Trump at his most boorish and was followed a few days later by Trump’s hospitalization for the virus as it spread through the White House. At the end of the campaign, Biden’s lead stood at about 8 points, 3.6 points wider than the final result. Prospective party loyalty grew over time in both parties, but from June on, Democrats consistently polled a couple of points more loyal than Republicans. Independents favored Biden all along, and his margin widened over the final month of the campaign. Overall, though, support for the candidates among all groups was much more stable than it had been in 2016.

THE RESULTS
Although Biden’s victory was not the landslide projected by the polls, it was unambiguous (Table 1). Nationally, the final tally gave him 81.3 million votes to Trump’s 74.2 million and an electoral college majority of 306–232 (exactly matching the margin Trump had celebrated in 2016 as a landslide). Trump raised his total by 11.3 million votes over 2016, but Biden outpolled Clinton by 15.4 million votes. Biden’s share of the

\textsuperscript{32}Data are from 232 surveys by 25 polling outfits, accessed at https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-general/, 16 December 2020.
national vote was larger than Obama’s in 2012, 51.3 percent compared to 51.1 percent, and Trump won a smaller share than Romney, whom he repeatedly mocked a “loser,” 46.9 percent compared to Romney’s 47.2 percent. Biden’s 4.4 point margin over Trump was 2.4 points higher than Clinton’s; the average increase in the Democratic vote in the ten battleground states listed in Table 1 was 2.2 points. Biden’s margins in three of the five states he flipped (italicized in the table) were very small in percentage terms, albeit large enough in numbers to withstand the recounts demanded by Trump’s lawyers. Biden’s victories in Arizona and Georgia followed unusually large increases in voter turnout and above-average gains in vote share over 2016, although those in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin were below average on both counts. Not surprisingly, the increase in turnout tended to be greater in battleground states, but participation was substantially higher than in 2016 even where the outcome was not in doubt.

Despite his impressive national margin, Biden’s electoral college victory was a close thing; if the three states that he won by less than 1 percent of the vote had gone to Trump, the electoral vote would have
been tied, 269–269, leaving the decision to the new House of Representatives. The Constitution mandates that the House vote by state delegation, 27 of which are majority Republican, so an Electoral College tie would have reelected Trump. For all the chaos, lies, incompetence, and assaults on American institutions that distinguished Trump’s presidency, the combination of unwavering support by MAGA enthusiasts, votes from other conservatives who appreciated his policies if not him, and the distorting filter of the electoral college could easily have given Trump four more years.

THE ELECTORATE
The major academic election studies are not yet available for analysis, but the data in hand suggest that despite the sharply higher turnout and reversal of party fortunes, the continuity between the 2016 and 2020 electorates was high, echoing the strong correlation between results at the state level between the two elections. Post-election polls reiterated the very high levels of party-line voting anticipated in the pre-election polls (Figure 5). In the 8–10 November Economist/YouGov survey, 96.6 percent of Democrats said they voted for Biden, 3.0 percent for Trump; in a comparable poll from 2016, it was 90.5 percent for Clinton, 7.5 percent for Trump. Republican loyalty was slightly lower and more similar to 2016: 94.7 percent voted for Trump, 4.8 percent for Biden, compared to 93.8 percent for Trump and 4.0 percent for Clinton in 2016. The equivalent percentages in the 2020 national exit poll were 94 to 5 among Democrats, and 94 to 6 among Republicans. These are historically high loyalty rates and underline the crucial importance voter
mobilization in 2020. The majority of independents had backed Trump in 2016, but Biden ran 12 points better than Clinton in the exit poll and 13 points better in the Economist/YouGov poll among independents, reflecting their low ratings of Trump’s overall job performance and his handling of the coronavirus and racial protests.33 Another notable change from 2016 was the drop in votes for minor-party candidates, who received only 1.8 percent nationally after taking 5.1 percent four years earlier. The share of undecided voters in pre-election polls was also much lower than in 2016. The high stakes and stark contrast between the candidates evidently made the decision easier and discouraged voting for preferred but hopeless candidates.

The Economist/YouGov and exit polls found that Trump and Biden supporters had very different issue priorities. Biden won the votes of people who rated health care, dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, civil rights and racial equality, education, or climate change as the most important issue. Trump won the votes of people who prioritized the economy, crime and safety, immigration, taxes, or guns. However, these contrasting priorities are so strongly linked to party and so reflective of the competing campaign frames that the extent to which issue preferences influenced the vote or voters simply agreed with and echoed their side’s talking points remains indeterminate.

The preliminary evidence from these polls also suggests that, after four years of Trump, the parties’ demographic bases have shifted, but only marginally. Trump’s Republicans remain the party of older, white, less educated male voters residing outside metropolitan areas, and Biden’s Democrats, the party of younger, nonwhite, better educated, and female voters living urban areas. A few demographic differences between 2016 and 2020 reported in the Economist/YouGov polls are worth noting, however. Biden did better than Clinton among men, 48 percent compared to Clinton’s 44 percent), while winning about the same share of women’s votes (56 percent). Biden also did better among whites (45 percent, up from 39 percent), while Trump improved his numbers among Hispanics (34 percent, up from 31 percent). The 2020 election delivered a strong reminder that “Hispanic” and “Latino” are heterogeneous categories. Trump did much better among Latinos in South Florida and South Texas in 2020 than he had in 2016. They contributed importantly to his enlarged vote share in Florida, but a surge in turnout by Latinos in Arizona was crucial to Biden’s flipping the state. Blacks in this survey voted overwhelmingly for the Democrat in both elections (92 percent

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33In the exit poll, independent voters favored Trump in 2016, 46–42, and Biden in 2020, 54–40; they split evenly in the Economist/YouGov poll, whose independent respondents were consistently more favorable to Trump than those in other surveys throughout his presidency.
in 2016, 94 percent in 2020), although the national exit poll detected an increase in Black support for Trump, 12 percent, up from 8 percent in 2016, attributable mainly but not entirely to men. A full account of the evolving the demographic structure of the party coalitions awaits additional data, but Trump’s stamp seems destined to register for years to come.34

THE CONGRESS
The congressional elections of 2020 were, like the previous two held with Donald Trump on the ballot or in the White House, notable for extreme levels of party loyalty, polarization, nationalization, and presidential influence on the vote choice.35 They also set new records for campaign spending, voter turnout, and women pursuing and winning congressional seats. Despite Biden’s substantial popular vote margin, Republicans gained seats in the House of Representatives, but they lost control of the Senate. Like Trump, the Republican congressional candidates performed considerably better than pre-election polls had projected.

The congressional results are summarized in Table 2. Every Republican House incumbent running in the general election won, and court-ordered redistricting in North Carolina accounts for two of the three open seats they lost. Thirteen Democratic incumbents lost, and a Republican took one of the 14 open Democratic seats. Republicans did not fully recover from the blue wave that had cost them control of the House in 2018, but they undid some of the damage and are within striking distance of a majority in 2022. Democrats defeated four Republican Senate incumbents, two in the Georgia runoffs, while losing one of their own, leaving the Senate tied and Vice President Kamala Harris the tiebreaker (the two independents vote with the Democrats on organizational matters).

THE HOUSE ELECTIONS
Although election data are still incomplete, the 2020 House elections appear to be the most nationalized, partisan, and president-centered ever. Table 3 summarizes the evidence. The district-level presidential vote is not yet available for 2020, but the 2016 vote is suitable proxy in light of the extremely high state-level correlation across the two elections. The correlation between the 2016 presidential and the 2020 House vote was .98, the highest ever. A simple logit model estimating the effects of the presidential vote on which party wins each seat predicted the 2020

results with 94.7 percent accuracy, similar to 2016 although below the even more impressive 2018 figure.\textsuperscript{36} Another measure of electoral nationalization is provided by the standard deviation of the major-party vote swing from the previous election across stable, contested districts: the smaller the standard deviation, the more uniform the swing across districts, and thus the more nationalized the election. The standard deviation of the swing between 2018 and 2020 is the smallest yet observed: 3.0.\textsuperscript{37} With elections increasingly nationalized and the presidential choice becoming such a dominant electoral force, the value of incumbency, measured in vote share, has dropped to levels last seen in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{38} The incumbency advantage—the estimated additional vote share gained by running as an incumbent—in 2020 was a mere 1.6 percentage points, one-fifth of its value at the beginning of this century.

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{Membership Changes in the House and Senate during the Trump Era}
\begin{tabular}{lrrr}
\hline
& Republicans & Democrats & Independents \\
\hline
\textbf{House of Representatives} & & & \\
Elected in 2016 & 241 & 194 & \\
Elected in 2018 & 199 & 235 & \\
Prior to the 2020 election & 201 & 233 & 1 \\
Elected in 2020 & 213\textsuperscript{a} & 222 & \\
Incumbents reelected & 165 & 205 & \\
Incumbents defeated & 0 & 13 & \\
Open seats retained & 34 & 13 & \\
Open seats lost & 3 & 1 & \\
\textbf{Senate} & & & \\
After the 2016 election & 52 & 46 & 2\textsuperscript{b} \\
After the 2018 election & 53 & 45 & 2\textsuperscript{b} \\
After the 2020 election & 50 & 48 & 2\textsuperscript{b} \\
Incumbents reelected & 14 & 10 & \\
Incumbents defeated & 4 & 1 & \\
Open seats retained & 3 & 1 & \\
Open seats lost & 0 & 0 & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

Source: Compiled by author.
\textsuperscript{a}Two Republican victories were by fewer than 20 votes and are not yet considered final.
\textsuperscript{b}The independents caucus with the Democrats.

\textsuperscript{36}Logit is a variation on ordinary least squares regression that is more suitable for dependent variables taking only two discrete values—win or lose; the equation estimates the probability of voting for the Republican depending on Trump’s vote share in 2016, with probability estimates (above or below .5) compared to actual results.

\textsuperscript{37}This statistic cannot be computed for years ending in 2 because redistricting destroys comparability.

\textsuperscript{38}The value of incumbency is estimated here by a modified version of the Gelman-King index, which substitutes the district-level presidential vote in the current or, for midterms, most recent presidential election for the lagged vote, allowing years ending in 2 and districts redrawn between apportionment decades to be included; for details, see Gary C. Jacobson, “It’s Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections,” Journal of Politics 77 (July 2015): 861–73.
For the same reason, the effect of candidate quality as measured by previous experience in elected office has also shrunk; its estimated value was only 0.8 percentage points in 2020, the lowest for the postwar period.39

Although the incumbency advantage measured in votes was small, House incumbents were very successful in 2020, with Republicans winning all of their general election contests and Democrats winning 94 percent of theirs. This was not because they were incumbents, however, but rather because they ran in districts that favored their party in presidential voting. Eight of the 13 losing Democratic incumbents represented districts that had gone to Trump in 2016; six of the eight were seats they had taken from Republicans in the 2018 blue wave. Two of the three Democratic open-seat victories were in districts where Hillary Clinton had outpolled Trump, so that altogether, 11 of the 18 seats that changed party hands in 2020 went to the party of the 2016 presidential winner. Of the 51 open seats contested in 2020, the party of the 2016 presidential winner in the district won 49.

RECRUITMENT AND DIVERSITY

Democrats have consistently fielded the greater number of women running and winning House seats during this century. The Democrats’ lead in this regard increased sharply in 2018, when women accounted for 183

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of their general election candidates and 89 of their winners; the comparable figures for Republicans were 52 and 13, respectively. The galvanizing force was clearly the shock Democratic women experienced with Trump’s election in 2016 and his subsequent performance in office.\textsuperscript{40} Republicans congressional leaders concluded that their relative paucity of women candidates was a problem and in 2020 made a concerted effort to recruit and fund more of them. The effort paid off, nearly doubling their count of women candidates to reach 96.\textsuperscript{41} Eleven of the 14 Republicans who took seats from Democrats were women, including nine of the 12 who recaptured seats lost in 2018; four of them defeated incumbent Democratic women in the process. Democrats still fielded twice as many women did Republicans did in 2020 (201), and a larger share of them won (44 percent compared to 31percent), but women’s representation in the Republican conference in the 117th Congress will be their largest yet.

Republicans also fielded a larger than usual number of nonwhite House candidates in 2020, 76, up from 53 in 2018. Twelve of them won, compared with four in 2018. Of the 11 Republican women who took seats from Democrats, four were women of color. Two of the other three Republican takeaways were accomplished by nonwhite men: Miami mayor Carlos Gimenez, born in Cuba, and in Utah, Burgess Owens, a Black former professional football player. The Democrats retained a wide lead in fielding nonwhite candidates (149, up from 131 in 2018) and in electing them (94, up from 92 in 2018), but Republicans made progress in diversifying their House delegation, with the proportion of white males dropping from 91.5 percent after 2018 to 80.8 percent after 2020. Nonetheless, the diversity gap between the House party delegations remains very wide; only 36.0 percent of the Democrats in the 117th Congress are white males.

**TRUMP’S INFLUENCE ON HOUSE VOTING**

Attitudes toward Trump had strongly affected voting in the 2018 midterm; in post-election surveys, about 93 percent of respondents reported votes aligned with their opinion of the president, for the Republican if

\textsuperscript{40}In the June 2018 Pew Research Center survey, only 16 percent of Democratic women said that Trump respected women, while 79 percent of Republicans said he did. In the 24 Economist/YouGov surveys taken during the first half of 2018, 81 percent of Democratic women disapproved of how Trump was handling “women’s rights,” and only 9 percent approved. Their opinions on his handling of health care, immigration, and the environment were nearly identical; in the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, 96 percent of Democratic women disapproved of Trump’s performance, 89 percent strongly.

approving, for the Democrat if disapproving.\textsuperscript{42} Such a high level of consistency is unprecedented; the previous record holder was Obama, at 87 percent. Pre-election generic House polls projected that Trump’s influence on the House vote would be at least as potent in 2020. Again, about 93 percent of prospective votes were consistent with views of Trump.\textsuperscript{43} Vote choice consistency was even greater; Pew’s October survey found only 4 percent of voters planning to vote for either Biden and a House Republican or Trump and a House Democrat.\textsuperscript{44} In the 26 weekly \textit{Economist}/YouGov surveys taken between June and November, and average of 97.2 percent of respondents who reported preferences in both elections chose the same party’s candidate.\textsuperscript{45} The first post-election poll reported a straight-ticket voting rate of 96.8 percent among voters for major-party candidates, with 93.2 percent cast votes consistent with their opinion of Trump’s job performance.

Straight-ticket voting is primarily a function of party loyalty, which in pre-election polls was even higher in House than in presidential voting. In the 26 \textit{Economist}/YouGov polls, prospective House defections averaged only about 3 percent in both parties. Similarly low defection rates were reported in other pre-election polls. The post-election \textit{Economist}/YouGov poll reported partisan defection rates of 1.9 percent among Democrats and 4.6 percent among Republicans. These are by historical standards extremely low defection rates and will almost certainly be higher in the major academic surveys, but 2020 seems on track to set new records for party loyalty as well as straight-ticket voting in House elections, a major reason why incumbency and candidate experience were such minor influences and why the 18 changes in party control were so strongly related to Trump’s district performance in 2016.

THE SENATE ELECTIONS
The 2020 Senate elections, like the House elections, were largely driven by reactions to the top of the ticket (Figure 6). In 2016, for the first time ever, every Senate seat went to the party that won the state’s electoral votes for president. The 2020 elections did not quite match that record; Maine Republican Susan Collins won handily in a state Biden won by

\textsuperscript{42}Jacobson, “Extreme Referendum.”
\textsuperscript{43}The average is from 114 surveys by five polling outfits examined by the author.
\textsuperscript{45}The \textit{Economist}/YouGov results are reported at https://today.yougov.com/topics/economist/survey-results.
more than 7 points, but every other seat, including the two in Georgia settled by January 2021 runoffs, went to the party of the presidential winner. The other Republican Senate candidate who outperformed Trump significantly was Ben Sasse of Nebraska. Collins and Sasse had been at least occasional public critics of Trump, certainly more often than other Republicans seeking reelection to the Senate. Evidently, their votes from crossover Biden supporters more than offset any votes withheld by Trump supporters offended by their apostasy.

Like the House elections, the 2020 Senate elections extended the long-term trend toward ever more nationalized and president-centered elections (Table 4). The proportion of split outcomes is the second lowest on record, exceeded only in 2016. The correlation between the state-level vote for president and Senate is slightly higher than in 2016, when it was substantially higher than in any previous election. The number of senators representing states where their party won the most votes in the most recent presidential election reached an all-time high after the 2020 elections (94), and the number of states with split Senate delegations—one
Republican and one Democrat—fell to an all-time low of six. The separation of red and blue in the Senate now mirrors the separation of red and blue in presidential voting with great fidelity. At the individual level, available data suggest that party loyalty prevailed in Senate as well as House elections. Only 4 percent of prospective partisan voters in Pew’s October 2020 survey preferred the rival party’s Senate candidate, and exit polls in the competitive states reported, with two notable exceptions, similarly low defection rates. Aside from Maine, where 13 percent of Democrats reported voting for Collins, and Arizona, where 12 percent of Republicans reported voting for Democratic challenger Mark Kelly, the average defection rate in competitive states was 4.5 percent.

MONEY IN THE CONGRESSIONAL CAMPAIGNS
The fidelity with which the House and Senate vote echoed the presidential vote in 2020 is all the more remarkable considering the sums spent to influence these races. As of the 23 November reporting date, spending by House candidates in 2020 averaged $1.8 million, a number sure to be higher when the final reports are in but already 9 percent more than in 2018 and twice as much as in 2016. Spending in support of candidates by outside groups, including political party committees, reported through November for 2020 averaged $822,000. Campaign contributions and outside spending are always concentrated in the most competitive districts. In 2018, the average combined spending by and for candidates in the 71 districts rated by the Cook Political Report as toss-ups or just leaning toward one of

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Table 4
The Nationalization of Senate Elections, 1980–2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Same Party Victory (%)</th>
<th>Senate/President Vote Correlation</th>
<th>Senators From Party of Presidential Winner</th>
<th>Split Senate State Delegations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>81.8</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>97.1</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by author.

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Data on campaign spending are from the Center for Responsive Politics, accessed at https://www.opensecrets.org/races, 22 November 2020.
the parties was $8.9 million for Democrats, $6.6 million for Republicans, totals much higher than in any previous election. For the 58 toss-up or leaning contests in 2020, the averages, with incomplete data, were already $9.8 million and $8.2 million, respectively. In 2018, about 43 percent of the Democrats’ total support and 48 percent of the Republicans’ total support in these most competitive races was supplied by outside groups, and the proportions for 2020 were 49 percent and 60 percent, respectively.

How did such lavish spending affect the outcomes? High spending levels were strongly associated with Democrats’ takeovers in 2018 and with the sharp increase in Democratic turnout that contributed to them; Democrats won 23 of the 26 Republican-held districts where total spending by and for their candidates exceeded $10 million. However, 16 of these districts had given a majority of their votes to Clinton in 2016. Overall, Democrats won 14 of 15 Clinton districts where spending on their side exceeded $10 million, but also 8 of 10 where it did not. Spending lavishly may have helped, but it also signaled a level of enthusiasm that drove Democrats to the polls in great numbers in all districts regardless of what the campaign spent.

In 2020, with Republicans as motivated to vote as Democrats, money could not save Democrats in high-risk districts. In the 14 Republican takeover districts, the average total spending by and for Democrats was $13.2 million; for Republicans, it was $10.5 million. The losing Democrats had greater financial backing in 11 of these contests. In at least 32 other districts, Democrats invested more than $5 million in attempts to replace Republicans, but only one was successful. Despite unprecedented levels of spending in the district campaigns, the House outcomes were almost completely dominated by what happened at the top of the ticket.

Spending to influence Senate contests grew even more steeply than spending in House elections during the Trump presidency. Even with incomplete data, the total as of mid-January 2020 was $3.43 billion, already 145 percent higher than the final total for 2018, previously the most expensive set of Senate campaigns ever. The 2018 midterm had produced six Senate contests in which combined spending exceeded $100 million; in 2020, there were at least 12 such contests, and in seven the total exceeded $200 million; total spending in the two Georgia races requiring runoffs approached $900 million.


Democratic groups and individuals, aided by the technology developed by Act Blue to channel funds to liberal candidates, invested heavily in winning control of the Senate by taking out Republican incumbents in red and purple states. Republican donors responded generously in their defense, but as the data in Table 5 show, Democrats were supported by significantly more money in nine of the ten most expensive contests, all but one in states held by Republican incumbents. They were successful in Arizona and Georgia; all of the other states except Maine went for Trump. The polls in most of these states had given them a false sense of hope by overstating the Democrat candidate’s support, just as they had overstated Biden’s support, and the outcomes ended up generally matching his margins. Overall, Democrats were better financed than Republicans in 25 contests; of these, they lost in the 12 states won by Trump and won in 12 of the 13 states won by Biden, the exception again being Maine, where by some accounts the tsunami of Democratic money, amounting to $125 per eligible voter, actually turned off voters and hurt their candidate’s cause. They also won the Georgia contest where their candidate was outspent, but Jon Ossoff’s $226 million was evidently sufficient. The reality is that in every plausibly competitive contest both sides had far more than adequate resources to make their cases, and the results, like those in House races, suggest that for the most part the main effect of these very expensive efforts was to cement Trump-centered partisan loyalties.

AFTERMATH
The reaction of Trump and his supporters to Biden’s victory epitomized both Trump’s warped character and his unshakable hold on ordinary Republicans—and through it, his ability to intimidate other Republican politicians. Trump claimed victory on election night and refused to concede long after the accumulated results left no doubt that Biden had won, insisting as he had all along that he could only lose a rigged election. Alleging rampant fraud in the voting and counting (which had actually gone amazingly well considering the disruptions occasioned by the pandemic), Trump’s lawyers challenged the results in Nevada, Minnesota, and the five states Biden had flipped. Bereft of evidence for any of the risible conspiracy theories Trump’s legal team floated in its public

statements, the court challenges went nowhere, but for weeks Trump adamantly refused to admit defeat or to allow his administration to cooperate with Biden’s team in the complex process of transitioning to a new administration. It was a flagrant and potentially dangerous violation of the bedrock principle that in a functioning democracy, the loser accepts the voters’ verdict and moves on.

True to form, most of Trump’s voters seemed willing to endorse his rejection of the results and refusal to concede, at least when they were responding to pollsters. In the Economist/YouGov survey taken a week after the election, 86 percent of Trump’s voters said Biden was not the legitimate winner (99 percent of Biden’s voters said he was); 78 percent said Trump should not concede, 88 percent said he should pursue court cases aimed at throwing out Democratic votes, and 62 percent thought the court cases would change the outcome of the election. Two weeks later, the same survey found 85 percent of Trump voters still denying that Biden’s victory was legitimate. In the Global Strategies Group’s post-election survey taken 10–12 November, 64 percent of Trump’s voters said

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>% Vote</th>
<th>Candidate Receipts</th>
<th>Outside $</th>
<th>Total $</th>
<th>$ Per Voter</th>
<th>% Outside</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GA</td>
<td>David Perdue (R)</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>89,126</td>
<td>181,271</td>
<td>270,397</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>67.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jon Ossoff (D)</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>138,257</td>
<td>88,112</td>
<td>226,369</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GA</td>
<td>Kelly Loeffler (R)</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>92,136</td>
<td>106,440</td>
<td>198,576</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>53.6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raphael Warnock (D)</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>124,278</td>
<td>76,260</td>
<td>200,538</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Tom Tillis (R)</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>25,341</td>
<td>100,699</td>
<td>126,040</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>79.9</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cal Cunningham (D)</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>51,257</td>
<td>117,898</td>
<td>169,155</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>69.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Lindsey Graham (R)</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>107,056</td>
<td>32,471</td>
<td>139,527</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>23.3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Jaime Harrison (D)</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>130,609</td>
<td>17,018</td>
<td>147,627</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>11.5</td>
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<td>IO</td>
<td>Joni Ernst (R)</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>30,198</td>
<td>75,612</td>
<td>105,810</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>71.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Theresa Greenfield (D)</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>55,601</td>
<td>96,862</td>
<td>152,463</td>
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<td>AZ</td>
<td>Martha McSally (R)</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>71,484</td>
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<td>114,519</td>
<td>22.1</td>
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<td>Mark Kelly (D)</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>99,043</td>
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<td>ME</td>
<td>Susan Collins (R)</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>29,835</td>
<td>50,241</td>
<td>80,076</td>
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<td>Sara Gideon (D)</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>74,495</td>
<td>61,068</td>
<td>135,563</td>
<td>124.9</td>
<td>45.0</td>
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<td>MI</td>
<td>John James (R)</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>48,156</td>
<td>47,039</td>
<td>95,195</td>
<td>12.6</td>
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<td>Gary Peters (D)</td>
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<td>100,625</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>48.9</td>
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<td>Mitch McConnell (R)</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>67,985</td>
<td>13,318</td>
<td>81,303</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>16.4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Amy McGrath (D)</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>94,134</td>
<td>16,351</td>
<td>110,485</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>14.8</td>
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<td>MT</td>
<td>Steve Daines (R)</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>32,819</td>
<td>48,371</td>
<td>81,190</td>
<td>97.0</td>
<td>59.6</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Steve Bullock (D)</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>48,726</td>
<td>59,363</td>
<td>108,079</td>
<td>129.1</td>
<td>54.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO</td>
<td>Cory Gardner (R)</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>28,225</td>
<td>22,190</td>
<td>50,415</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Hickenlooper (D)</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>42,908</td>
<td>15,568</td>
<td>58,476</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Spending data are from the Center for Responsive Politics, https://opensecrets.org.
Note: Incumbents are italicized.
*aResult is from January 5, 2021 runoff election.
he should not concede, 66 percent approved of his response to the election results, and 83 percent said they trusted him to tell the truth about those results. Fifty-two percent of Republicans in the Reuters/Ipsos poll taken a week later said that Trump had “rightfully won” the election. As late as the 3-5 January Economist/YouGov survey, 76 percent of Trump’s voters were still saying he should not concede. Some of this might simply be partisan cheerleading—supporters giving answers favorable to Trump regardless of genuine beliefs—but even as such, it testifies to their fealty.

Heartfelt or not, the widespread denial of the reality and legitimacy of Biden’s victory among Trump’s voters made Republican politicians who expected to face future primary electorates hesitate to recognize Biden as the winner. Only a handful openly echoed Trump’s charges of widespread fraud, but even fewer urged him to acknowledge Biden’s win, and most reverted to their reflexive silence in the face of Trump’s less defensible acts. In the end, even after a Trump-inspired mob had ransacked the halls of Congress, 139 Republican representatives and 8 Republican senators supported a last ditch effort to derail Biden’s inauguration by having Congress reject the normally-routine 6 January certification of his electoral college victory, demanding first a review of exhaustively debunked claims that vote-rigging in swing states had stolen the election from Trump. That so many Republican members chose to indulge rather than resist Trump’s literally destructive attempt to subvert American democracy was a sign of how much they feared his supporters. As long as Trump retained the backing of most ordinary Republicans, most Republicans officeholders expecting to face future primary electorates sought to avoid his wrath.

Whether the disastrous results of Trump’s delusional insistence on “a sacred landslide election victory” will change this dynamic remains to be seen. Although some of Trump’s former allies and appointees broke with him, a large majority of his base remained supportive. In the NPR/Marist College

poll taken immediately after Trump’s supporters had vandalized the Capitol building, 77 percent of Republicans said they approved of his performance. Although most said they opposed the action (81 percent), 47 percent said it was mostly a legitimate protest, and 68 percent said Trump bore little (17 percent) or no (51 percent) responsibility for it. In a YouGov poll taken the same day, 45 percent of Republicans supported the incursion strongly (29 percent) or somewhat (16 percent); only 28 percent said Trump was a great deal or somewhat to blame for the event, while 52 percent blamed Joe Biden. Echoing Trump’s thoroughly debunked claim, 73 percent said enough fraud had taken place to change the outcome of the election. The myth of a stolen election seems poised to become a durable component of national politics.

THE BIDEN PRESIDENCY AND THE 117TH CONGRESS

The Trump presidency widened and deepened national political divisions, and even in defeat, Trump’s legacy will make it very difficult for Joe Biden or anyone else to heal them. Biden assumes the presidency facing challenges even more daunting than those faced by Barack Obama, who took office in 2009 during a severe recession. The coronavirus pandemic, largely ignored by the White House during Trump’s final months in office, grew increasingly dire during the final months of 2020, with records for new cases set almost daily; effective vaccines were in the pipeline but months away from general distribution. In the meantime, measures needed to slow the disease’s spread continued to disrupt the economic and social lives of millions of Americans. Biden also faces rising pressure to address the profound and persistent economic and racial inequities underscored by the two signal crises of 2020. And he must find ways to counter the growing threat to human welfare from global warming, denied by Trump and aggravated by his administration’s policies.

In meeting these challenges, Biden will be leading a fractious Democratic coalition, and he can expect little if any help from the Republican opposition. The newly elected Congress will have a smaller Democratic House majority than Obama enjoyed after 2008. The tied Senate will give the minority plenty of opportunity to obstruct; its leader, Mitch McConnell, who upon becoming Senate majority leader in 2011, had said his top priority was to make Obama a one-term president, may not be any more accommodating to Biden. Congressional Republicans hail from a world in which more than 90 percent of

their voters routinely approved of Trump’s performance as president and an even larger proportion voted to reelect him. Most Trump voters continue to believe Biden was not the legitimate winner, and even after the January debacle on the Hill, more than three quarters of Republicans continued to hold a favorable opinion of Trump.\textsuperscript{57} Trump’s petty vindictiveness is well known, and on the evidence of his post-election conduct, he can be expected to do whatever he can to torpedo Biden’s presidency. This would include berating and threatening any congressional Republican who chooses to cooperate with Biden or congressional Democrats.

Cooperation between Biden and Congress will be difficult to arrange in any case. The congressional parties are polarized over what matters as well as what should be done about what they believe matters. Climate change, inequality, and social justice are not on the list of top priorities for Republican leaders or their voters, who remain ideologically opposed to many of the policies that might address them. They do top the Democrats’ list, but they have yet to find a consensus on what to do about them. Trump’s “leadership” in the COVID-19 crisis managed to make the simple but essential steps to curb the pandemic—wearing masks and social distancing in public spaces—into partisan issues; in Pew’s post-election survey, only 16 percent of Trump voters wanted more COVID-19-related restrictions, while 44 percent wanted less; among Democrats, the preference was 66 percent more, 3 percent less.\textsuperscript{58} Biden will thus face stiff resistance to any effort to organize an effective national response to the steeply rising caseload that might require broad public acceptance. Congressional Republicans are also bound to rediscover their horror of deficits with a Democrat in the White House, limiting Biden’s ability to address the economic devastation wrought by the pandemic.

The prospect, then, is for considerably more conflict than cooperation between the parties during the 117th Congress. The gap between the average 2016 presidential vote in House districts won by Democratic and Republican representatives—an indicator of the gap between the preferences of their respective electoral constituencies—ticked up to 28.5 points in 2020, matching the record set in 2016. The Senate is divided almost entirely into Democrats from Biden states and Republicans from Trump states. The parties represent demographically and ideologically

\textsuperscript{57}https://assets.morningconsult.com/wp-uploads/2021/01/07135439/210121_crosstabs_POLITICO_RVs_v1.pdf
\textsuperscript{58}The remaining respondents in each group wanted restrictions to remain as they are; see Pew Research Center, “Sharp Divisions on Vote Counts, as Biden Gets High Marks for his Post-Election Conduct,” 20 November 2020, accessed at https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/11/20/sharp-divisions-on-vote-counts-as-biden-gets-high-marks-for-his-post-election-conduct/, 17 December 2020.
divergent coalitions that remain deeply suspicious of each other’s aims and values. Insofar as members of Congress faithfully represent the people who elected them, intense partisan conflict with a high potential for legislative gridlock is the likeliest outcome.

Biden’s prospects for repairing national institutions, restoring political norms, or reducing partisan discord are equally bleak as long as a sizeable portion of the opposition continues to believe the biggest and basest of Donald Trump’s innumerable lies, that the 2020 election was stolen from him and that Biden’s presidency is thus not legitimate. The election evicted Trump from the White House but left largely in place the attitudes, beliefs, and anxieties that put him there in the first place. Considering the fractured and dispirited country he inherits, Joe Biden will be tested like no other president since Franklin Roosevelt.