Polarization and Democratic Accountability in the 2020 Presidential Election

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Abstract

In a year marked by a global pandemic, economic collapse, and social unrest, the most striking feature of presidential polling thus far is its consistency. The hyperpartisanship of this polarized era of American politics has made most voters impervious to changing conditions. This raises serious questions about the utility of elections as means of democratic accountability.

Keywords 2020 election · Presidential election · Trump · Biden · Hyperpartisanship · Negative partisanship · Polarization · White grievance politics

The 2020 presidential contest is the seventh to occur within this era of polarized politics. Nowadays, polarization and hyperpartisanship affect the electorate, not just elites, in part because voters identify the major political parties with particular ideologies and sort themselves accordingly. Most analyses of the 2020 election will treat it as an isolated event, but this is a mistake because polarization now ties our elections together into one collective story reflecting broader trends in American politics.

In order to *really* understand election 2020, one must understand why America finds itself holding an election on the precipice of a mounting democratic crisis of a magnitude not seen here since the election of 1860, an event that sparked the American Civil War. This summer has been marked with social upheaval over racial injustice and police violence, while a once-a-century pandemic rages unabated through most of the country, disrupting normal life and schooling for most Americans. As of early September, 6.4 million Americans have become infected and 190,000 have died. - a death toll expected to rise significantly by year's end. President Donald Trump's pandemic response, driven by a desire to reopen the country quickly and avoid imposing mandates on states, made matters worse. The strategy was designed to achieve the goal

of limiting the amount of time the economy would be stagnated. However, the strategy backfired. In states that reopened without controlling the pandemic, infection rates skyrocketed, depressing demand and revealing the limits of self-regulated behavior.

The severity of the pandemic has also been affected by President Trump's politicization of mask-wearing. Widespread public cooperation with mask-wearing has been key for other countries' ability to "crush their curves" and reopen without new waves. But in the United States, mask mandates became a "culture war." The public's widespread rejection of masking is highly conditioned on elite signaling. Voters received signals from a powerful elite, the President of the United States. Trump's posture on masks, which ranged from dismissive to hostile, undermined the official efforts of his administration, which was simultaneously urging widespread use of face masks and compliance with mandates. Perhaps not truly recognizing the power of the "bully pulpit," Trump unwittingly undermined his own administration's efforts to manage the pandemic, and thus compounded the pandemic's severity.

Yet, despite this once-a-century pandemic that has killed more Americans than all the wars since the Korean War and leveled a significant portion of the American economy, the fall general election begins almost exactly where it was before the pandemic occurred. In a nation in the grips of a trifecta of crises - a pandemic, a racial justice crisis, and a democratic crisis - the president's approval rating presents as a steady, flat line across months of chaos and unrest.

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Doing the Political Math in a Polarized Era

Democrats entered 2020 with a powerful structural advantage over Republicans for both the presidential contest as well as congressional elections. Due to negative partisanship, the negative emotions partisans feel toward the opposition party, turnout by the Democratic coalition (including partisan Democrats and independents that lean left) has surged in what I call the “Trump Effect.”

Further, the intra-party factionalization that plagued the Democratic Party throughout the 2016 cycle, powering Bernie Sanders’ surprisingly strong challenge for the party’s nomination, has been dramatically reduced as attention has shifted to interparty conflict. Some of the third party “defectors” Democrats lost in the 2016 cycle have “returned” to the party. Although Green Party candidates continue to draw votes, consolidation around Joe Biden among Democrats has come quickly. By mid-summer, polls were reporting party unity rates in the 90s among Democrats, a degree of unity Clinton never achieved in 2016. Pure independents have also favored Democrats since 2016, partly because they tend to break against the status quo (party in power), but also because of Trump’s conduct in office.

As predicted by my forecast model, turnout in the 2018 midterms increased significantly over turnout in the preceding midterm. While the 2014 cycle produced historically low turnout, the 2018 midterm produced historically high turnout, improving overall by more than 13 percentage points.¹ Increased turnout benefited both party’s coalitions, but disproportionately benefited Democrats.

Though the media perception is that the 40 House districts Democrats flipped required significant numbers of Republican voters defecting to Democratic candidates, data analysis of those districts reveal that the underlying demographics of the voters in those districts changed. Turnout increased among college-educated women, Latino voters, Black voters, and voters under 30, making the percent of Democrats in the district better equalized to the percent of Republican voters. Further, turnout also surged among independent voters, bringing a mix of independents to the polls who were more friendly to Democratic candidates than the lower-turnout pool of 2014. Ultimately, in the polarized era, competitive elections boil down to this simple “political math” problem of turnout. The party that solves it best, ensuring their party is best represented at the polls, will usually come out on top.²

Increased turnout via negative partisanship sped up or increased long-term political realignments in each party’s voter coalition. Once a rural, working-class party, the Democratic Party is now an urban party of educated professionals. The

Republican Party now carries the banner of working-class whites, even those that rely on unions for their financial well-being. Although America’s suburbs are changing partly because of partisan shifts among older white voters (predominately independents but also some former Republicans), much of the partisan change in the suburbs is driven by generational replacement and increased racial and ethnic diversity. Turned off by the modern GOP’s extremism, conservative positions on social issues, and racial attitudes, Generation Z and Millennial college-educated whites are disproportionately Democrats. Millennials became fully enfranchised for the first time in the 2016 cycle, when the youngest part of the cohort reached 18. The front end of Generation Y became enfranchised in time for the 2018 midterms, and 2020 will be that generation’s first presidential election.

Because college-educated populations are largely concentrated in urban and suburban areas, we are now seeing the two parties transform their geographic bases of power. This transformation goes beyond the regional changes that marked the past few decades, as the Republican Party came to dominate the American South and the Democratic Party the West Coast. Now, blue-collar areas of Midwestern states with large union presences, long-term bases of the Democratic power, are increasingly breaking for Republicans. If Joe Biden carries Pennsylvania, it will be because of overwhelming margins in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and in their suburbs. Biden would no doubt scoff at this, but he will almost certainly do worse than Obama in his hometown of Scranton, and will likely do better in the suburbs. This has nothing to do with Joe Biden. The story is the same across the Midwest.

The Changing Suburbs

Although President Trump’s focus on suburban housewives appears outdated, many analysts share his blind spot. While the suburbs were once disproportionately white, today the suburbs are racially and ethnically diverse. A “soccer mom” in 2020 is quite different than the 1990s version. (Today’s soccer mom knows the sport is called futbol and shops at Whole Foods.) Diversity, as well as high levels of education and generational replacement, are allowing Democrats to win suburban House districts held by Republicans. At the state level, Joe Biden is leading in places such as Arizona because of large metropolitan areas and their suburbs where the Democratic coalition is highly motivated to vote.

Even if rioting and looting soften voter support for the Black Lives Matter movement, it is unlikely that Trump’s “law and order” strategy, complete with racial dog whistles, will resonate in today’s suburbs. Although Trump carried Kenosha, Wisconsin in 2016 by the thinnest of margins, the area broke for Barack Obama in both the 2008 and 2012 cycles, when Democratic coalition turnout was high and before an additional

¹ Data from the United States Election Project, <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data>

² I discussed this at length in my article for *The New Republic*, “Hate Is on the Ballot,” Feb. 26, 2020. <https://newrepublic.com/article/156402/hate-ballot>

decade of voter realignment had occurred. The Trump victory in 2016 was also assisted by high levels of third-party balloting and write-in balloting in Wisconsin, which comprised more than 6% of the vote, the highest of all the battleground states. Trump's "law and order" campaign theme will resonate better in what is known as the exurbs- the suburbs of the suburbs on the borders of rural America. In 2018, Republicans dominated these areas, – where the moms are still mostly white and Whole Foods markets are scarce. Exurban and rural residents are increasingly loyal to the GOP.

The Myth of the Disaffected Republican

Rogue bands of Republicans, such as "Never Trumpers" and The Lincoln Project, a super PAC created by self-exiled Republican campaign consultants, tend to receive a great deal of media attention. But among actual voters, there has been no evidence of the "disaffected Republican" who often appears on liberal news outlets such as MSNBC. Although we saw massive turnout surges from Democrats and Independents in 2018, a "lost narrative" from the cycle is the strong turnout surge from Republican voters. Notably, the Republican surge occurred while their party fully controlled the government. When Democrats were in a similar condition during the Obama administration, their turnout collapsed.

In 2020, Joe Biden and congressional Democrats are benefitting from Donald Trump's mismanagement of the pandemic. But the effect is only modest and confined to independent voters. In this hyperpartisan era of polarization, Trump receives high marks from Republicans for his handling of the pandemic.

This illustrates a key feature of the polarized era: the inelasticity in public opinion data. Today, voters assess everything via a partisan lens, keeping the effect on one's own tribe foremost in mind. When a Republican voter is asked to assess Trump's handling of the pandemic (or any other public issue), protective partisan instincts kick in, even at the cost of expressing sentiment that may not reflect true attitudes. For example, a recent CBS/YouGov poll reported that 57% of Republicans asserted that 170,000 COVID deaths (the figure at the time of the poll) were "acceptable," while 31% of independents said the same.³ This Republican majority may well have found the number disturbing – but they also were aware that their answer reflected on Trump's job performance, which they are compelled to defend. Even so-called independents, such as the one-third who found the COVID death toll acceptable, often have partisan leanings even though they may be embarrassed to state them out loud. (About 35% of independents actually lean toward the Right ideologically.)

³ "Most Republicans say the number of coronavirus deaths is acceptable," August 25, 2020. <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/08/25/most-republicans-say-number-coronavirus-deaths-acc>

The inelasticity of public opinion is also displayed in the longitudinal polling of the head-to-head ballot test between Biden and Trump, which has been publicly available all year. At the start of 2020, before the Democratic nomination contest began, Biden held an average 9.5 percentage point advantage, according to the *Real Clear Politics* polling average. Biden's road to the nomination was rocky and he suffered a significant amount of negative news coverage. By the time he righted his campaign, his lead over Trump had declined to 5.8% by mid-March.

Then the pandemic hit, as well as an opportunity for the president to display crisis leadership. It is plausible that the president could have responded with policies that demonstrated leadership competency, as was done in some other democratic countries. Resulting public approval had the potential to override the negative polarization fundamentals working against him and at least put him into competition for reelection. None of this came to pass – but nevertheless the pandemic had only modest impacts on Trump's head-to-head polling against the Democratic nominee. – Biden's post-March polling advantage over Trump only increased 1.4%, compared to the pre-pandemic period.

So why are voter preferences in 2020 so inelastic? Typically, presidential election polling produces a competitive race that widens and narrows, and even switches leaders. Yet, the 2020 data has been almost flatlined and even the introduction of a major political crisis barely registers in the data. Polling numbers have remained so consistent because partisan voters have become so insensitive to political stimuli. In mid-March, just as the pandemic was beginning to shut down the country, 86% of Republicans approved of the job Trump was doing, according to the *YouGov/Economist* tracking poll.⁴ Some five months later, 84% of Republicans approve. In March, 88% of Republicans said they planned to vote for the president's reelection. At the end of August, after a global pandemic tested his leadership abilities and left the American economy at the verge of a depression, 88% of Republicans are still voting for the president.

Democrats show similar consistency. In the latter stages of the nomination contest in March, 89% of Democrats said they would vote for Biden. That portion rose to 93% in August as Democrats quickly coalesced behind the former vice president. The Democrats' infighting of 2016 has been replaced by high party unity in 2020, at least around this central mission of defeating the president.

But polarization is not regulated to partisans. Most independents are in fact "leaners" who gravitate toward one party or the other and display polarized behaviors. (Klar and Krupnikov 2016). The pool of pure independents is actually quite small, between 10 to 15% of most electorates. All in all, – when polarization and hyperpartisanship are high and exerting large effects as they are now- there is little room for political stimuli and events to have large impacts. As of September, Biden led

⁴ <https://today.yougov.com/topics/economist/survey-results>

among independents by 4 points in the *YouGov/Economist* poll. In March, Trump led Biden by 4 points. This modest swing of 8 percentage points in the polarized era is the equivalent of a 15-point swing in an earlier era. The movement of independents suggests that even through a heavy fog of polarization, democratic accountability is functioning – but not nearly as strongly as when our body politic was not suffering from the fever of polarization.

In a healthy democracy, political events exert strong effects on voters who assess the performance of their elected representatives the old-fashioned way- on the merits. In the 1980 presidential election between incumbent Democratic President Jimmy Carter and Republican challenger Ronald Reagan, the country faced both a long-term economic crisis as well as a national security crisis that Americans came to see Carter as mismanaging. Like Trump, Carter found himself running for reelection as a deeply unpopular incumbent. But unlike Trump, Carter ran for office in an era before hyperpartisanship came to provide what amounts to electoral immunity from one's own political party.

When the Iran hostage crisis first began, Carter benefited from a robust “rally around the flag” effect, but as the hostage situation dragged on without resolution, voters soured on his handling of the crisis. Reagan also benefited from the presence of an independent candidate on the ballot, John B. Anderson, who began to gain serious traction. The elasticity of voter opinions, among both independents and even partisans, was high. Voters, much more free from the polarization and hyperpartisanship that plagues today's politics, assessed Carter's performance on the merits to a much greater extent.

Nowadays, though, partisanship has transitioned into a matter of social identity for many, one that must be protected

along “tribal” lines (Mason 2017). Hyperpartisanship, alongside the development of “white identity politics”- the perception that whiteness is threatened and marginalized (Jardina 2018)- will play defining roles in the outcome of the 2020 cycle. Although Democrats enjoy a turnout boost from negative partisanship (which is as much about fear as it is about hate), the white grievance politics on display at the Republicans' national convention taps into negative partisanship as well. For all the talk about the middle of the electorate and Obama-to-Trump voters, the outcome of the 2020 election will be highly determined by the turnout of each party's coalition, and the ability of each party to recognize and tap into the realigning elements of those coalitions with their electioneering strategy.

Further Reading

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