COVID-19 and the 2020 Election: Executive Pandemic Political Accountability at the State and Federal Level

by

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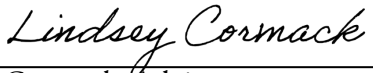

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COVID-19 AND THE 2020 ELECTION: EXECUTIVE PANDEMIC POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY AT THE STATE AND FEDERAL LEVEL

ABSTRACT

Constitutionally, each state is responsible for handling its own elections. This setup presents plenty of opportunities for states to conduct elections in various and disparate ways but when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in early 2020 differences between state capacity and willingness were made starker. On top of election duties, states were left to craft their own policy responses to the public health crisis leading to divergent outcomes for infections and deaths. Given the lack of national consensus on pandemic policy and expanded access to voting, the electorate of each state had to reflect on the competence displayed by their incumbent President and Governor during times of natural disaster. Previous literature suggests that voters are reflective and punitive, but also specific, holding their incumbents accountable to their decisions by rewarding them with reelection or punishing them with an end of term. This project examines six states' presidential and gubernatorial elections to uncover the relationship, if any, between a county's COVID-19 death rate and its subsequent impact on voter turnout and incumbent favorability. These variables, in addition to measures of a states' previous history of voter disenfranchisement and differences in demographic and economic conditions, are used to assess the relationship between overall voter turnout and voter preferences. This research seeks to understand in which ways the COVID-19 infections and death rates affected the 2020 general election turnout. It also explores how voters held their incumbent politicians accountable to their pandemic response relative to the severity of the infection and death rate.

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Dedicated to Christine Soriano and Lindsey Cormack for their contributions to my emotional and intellectual growth. This thesis and my degree would not be possible without your endless support.

Tables

Table 1: Gubernatorial Results, Death & Infection Rate on Incumbent Republicans

State	Incumbent During COVID	2020 Share of Vote	2016 Share of Vote	Death Rate By Pop	Infection Rate By Pop
Indiana	Eric Holcomb	56.5%	51.4%	0.051%	1.59%
Missouri	Mike Parson	57.2%	51.3%	0.027%	1.52%
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North Dakota	Doug Burgum	65.8%	74.3%	0.022%	2.05%
Vermont	Phil Scott	67.0%	52.9%	0.027%	0.27%
West Virginia	Jim Justice	64.8%	42.3%	0.015%	0.71%

Table 2: 2020 and 2016 Presidential Election Results and Turnout Rates

State	2020 Turnout %	2016 Turnout %	Trump 2020 Share of Vote	Trump 2016 Share of Vote
Indiana	65.0%	58.0%	57.0%	56.5%
Missouri	68.7%	66.6%	56.8%	58.4%
New Hampshire	73.5%	75.0%	52.7%	47.3%
North Dakota	62.7%	61.3%	65.1%	63.0%
Vermont	73.3%	68.0%	30.7%	29.8%
West Virginia	63.5%	57.5%	68.6%	68.5%

Table 3: Number of Early Voting Days in Studied States

State	Early Voting Duration (Days)
Indiana	28
Missouri	0
New Hampshire	0
North Dakota	16
Vermont	45
West Virginia	10

Table 4: Correlations Between Dependent and Independent Variables

Independent Variable	Trump 2020 % Share of Vote	GOP Governor % Share of Vote	Turnout
Infection Rate	0.004	-0.190*	-0.133*
Death Rate	-0.109*	-0.292*	-0.139*
Percent Non-White	-0.314*	-0.353*	-0.435*
Unemployment Rate	-0.093	-0.180*	-0.496*
Poll-Per-Capita	-0.181*	-0.203*	-0.025*
Early Voting Duration	-0.371*	-0.397*	-0.047
Same-Day Registration	-0.630*	-0.093	0.179*
VRA Provision	-0.267*	-0.088	0.011

N=444

Table 5: Effect of Death and Infection Rate on 2020 Presidential and Gubernatorial Incumbent Elections

	Turnout	Presidential		Gubernatorial	
Infection Rate	0.548	- 0.583*		- 1.911***	
Death Rate	- 1.135		- 19.92**		4.183
Percent Non-White	- 0.208	0.067**	0.062**	- 0.446***	- 0.502***
Unemployment Rate	- 2.979***	- 0.151	- 0.108	1.668***	1.753***
Polls per Capita	- 0.209	- 0.219	- 0.108	-4.722***	- 5.121***
Early Voting Duration	- 0.064	0.000	0.000	- 0.003 ***	- 0.003***
Same Day Registration	0.334	- 0.009	- 0.007	- 0.287***	- 0.274***
VRA Provision 4b	0.755***	- 0.013	- 0.012	- 0.010	- 0.009
Intercept	2.473***	0.022	0.014	0.394***	0.380***

Significance codes: 0 `***` 0.001 `**` 0.01 `*` 0.05 `

N = 444

Figures

Figure 1: Death Rate Regression Dot-and-Whisker Plot

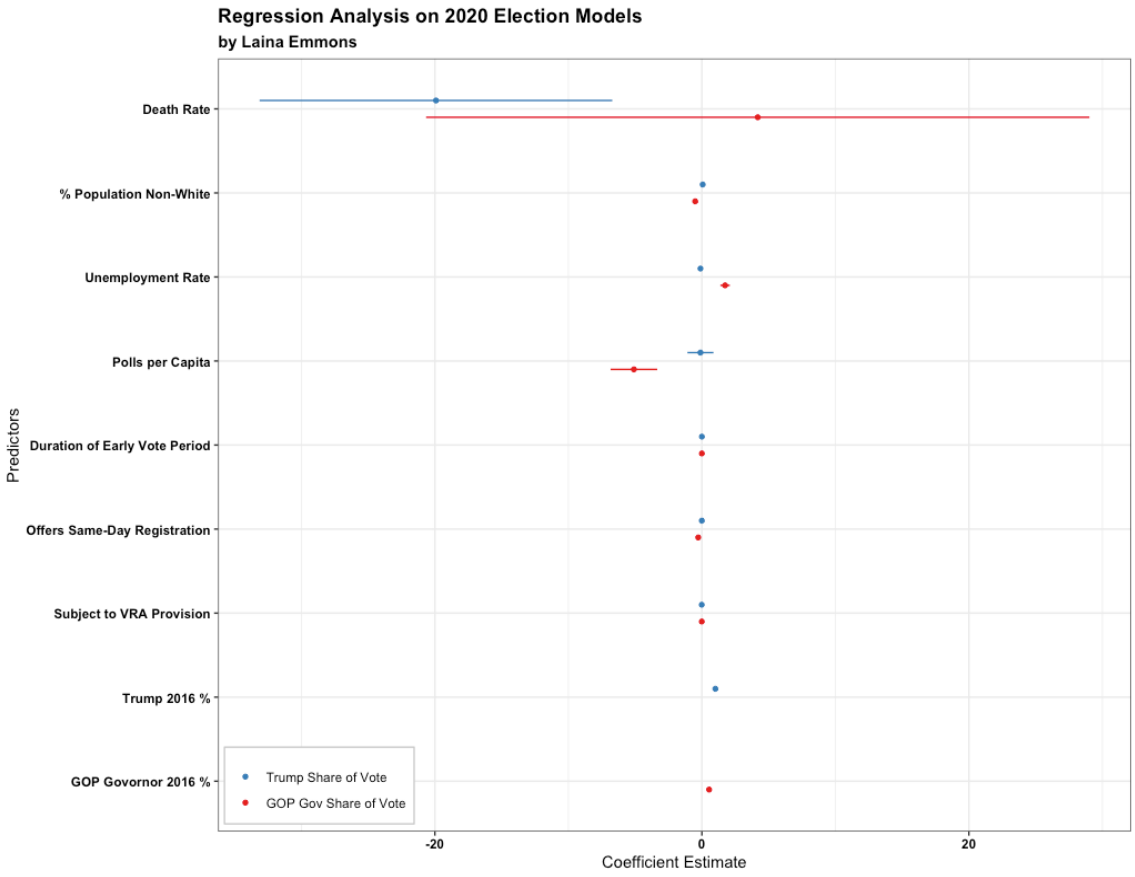
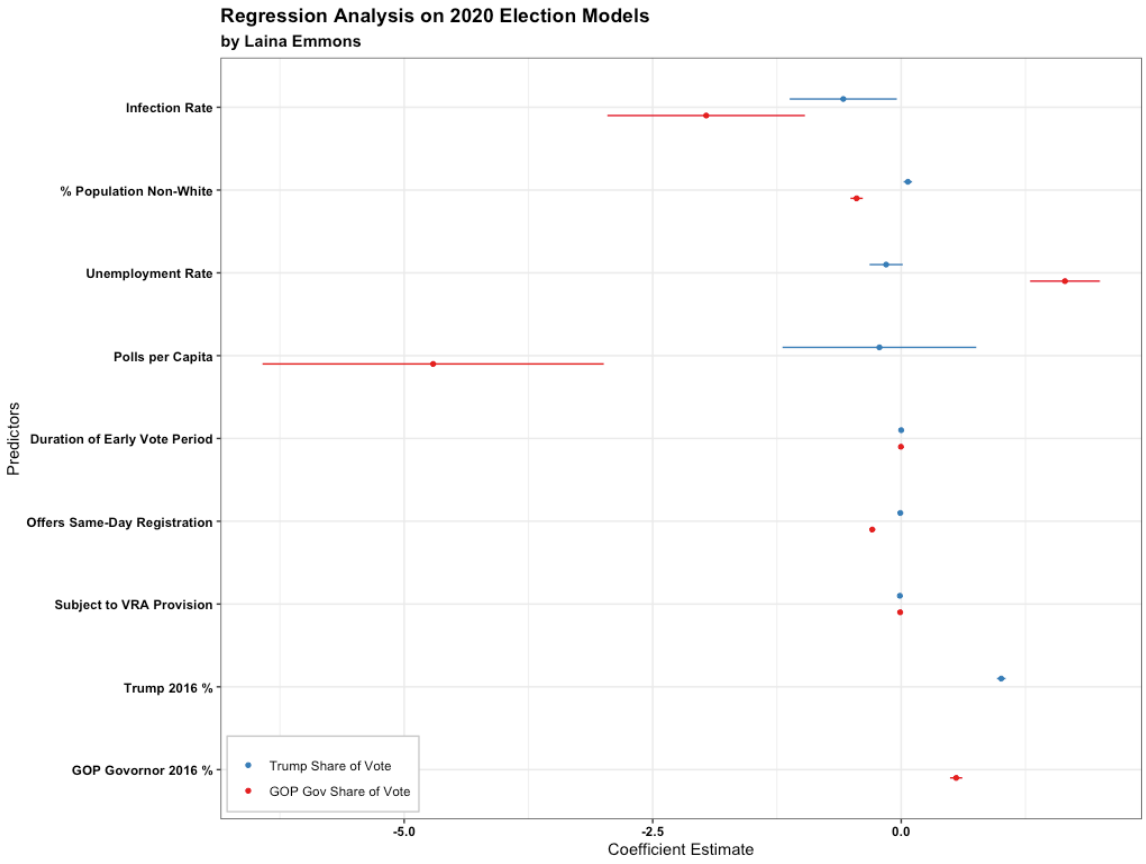


Figure 2: Infection Rate Regression Dot-and-Whisker Plot



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Introduction

Election day of 2020 in the United States was a day for American citizens to choose their representatives with the previous six months of the COVID-19 pandemic in mind. Natural disasters, including the pandemic, pose a unique opportunity for incumbent leaders seeking reelection to prove their competence in managing governmental disaster relief efforts. Would the electorate choose to keep their executives in charge of these efforts, or would they opt for new leadership due to an unsatisfactory response from the incumbent? On November 3, 2020, incumbent Republican President Donald Trump and eleven incumbent Republican Governors stood in elections as a testament to their ability to minimize the inflicted damage on their constituents and provide relief during a universally difficult time. Executives of the U.S. government maintain the highest level of control over the health departments of their constituents and are of the greatest likelihood to face responsibility for their policies.

This study explores the relationship, if any, between U.S. counties with increased rates of COVID-19 infections and deaths and 2020 Presidential and Gubernatorial election results of six states in which Republican incumbent Governors seek reelection. Voters reflect on their elected officials' responses to the pandemic and hold them accountable to their respective responsibility at the polls. This study finds that the incumbent Republican President and Governors each lost support in counties with high COVID-19 rates; the President greatly lost support in counties with high death rates whereas the Governors lost support in counties with

high infection rates. All six governors won their reelection, but President Trump did not; the differentiation of results indicates voters can isolate their leaders' actions and vote accordingly.

Executives are also in charge of departments that oversee how elections are run and have power over voting safety procedures on election day. Some states expanded voting options to thin the crowd at the polls while others kept the usual procedures in place. The risk of contracting the coronavirus would theoretically lessen voter turnout, especially in areas that have higher rates of infections and deaths. Upon analysis, however, the infection and death rate of counties did not influence the overall voter turnout rate. Expanded voting access likely contributed to turnout remaining relatively the same between counties of differing COVID risk.

Turnout remaining constant across counties allows for a more accurate picture of incumbent accountability. The good will of voters is questioned in competing disaster politics research, but this study outlines and favors the model of the targeted punitive voter rather than the blindly retributive voter. The retributive voter after a natural disaster has no further intention in a vote than punishing the incumbent for acts of God beyond their control. The punitive voter, however, reflects on the work their incumbent has already done, what could have been done, and what has yet to be done. Presidents and state executives have different responsibilities to their constituents and voters recognizing and acting on those differences suggests that American democracy is alive and well.

Previous Literature

COVID-19 was a unique shock to the US elections because it is a slow-burn disaster instead of a one-off incident or more chronic issue oftentimes involved in political campaigns. Six months after the election, health experts are still in the dark about key details that will mean an end to quarantine, business closures, and social distancing. The whole country will be feeling a semblance of each other's pain and will be thinking about the choices their elected officials made about their welfare. It is reasonable for a voter to act on the hardships they experience, especially if that hardship is a result of longstanding factors that amplified the disaster when it hit.

Research on how voters react subsequent to a natural disaster is often divided into two interpretations, the blindly retributive voter that will "... kick the government, justifying themselves with whatever plausible cultural constructions are made available to them," (Achen and Bartels, 2012), and the targeted punitive voter that acts as a "rational god of vengeance and reward" (Key, 1962; Stout, 2018) tries to determine who was responsible for a problem and remove their previous support or choose to support others. Achen and Bartels argue that voters make election decisions based on their welfare and that incumbents face consistently tough reelection odds after a natural disaster, even though natural disasters are - for the large part - out of the control of politicians. In 2016, Anthony Fowler and Andy Hall recreated Achen and Bartels' experiment and found Achen and Bartels' results to be mostly statistically insignificant and if significant, by such a small margin that is not statistically distinguishable from zero (2018). That is to say, Fowler and Hall determine Achen and Bartels' results are

invalid and ought not to be used as a model. Most of the research that assumes the blindly retributive voter for their study references Achen and Bartels' findings, thus based on questionable data and since contested. This study will not use the concept of the blindly retributive voter for this reason, but rather will assume the targeted punitive voter because the research is broader and more reliable.

Research on voter behavior conducted via political surveys indicates American voters are unsophisticated and politically ignorant (Campbell et. al, 1960), but studies on election results find that voters *do* appear to punish or reward politicians according to their reactions to disaster (Fowler and Hall, 2018). The reaction to disaster is the essential piece to most political responses to natural disaster literature because "... actions weigh more heavily on the electorate than outcomes" (Gasper and Reeves, 2011; Abney and Hill, 1966; Reeves, 2011; Stout, 2018). Directly impacted voters will be more inclined to punish their incumbent if they feel that they or the municipality they head are responsible for the extent of disaster fallout, mediating the anxiety and frustration of constituents is essential to an incumbent hoping for another term in office (Arceneaux and Stein, 2006).

A study of tornado damage in the United States measured the reaction of voters relative to the amount of economic damage caused by tornadoes. The governor's share of the vote increased if they responded to storms with a national declaration of emergency in collaboration with the President, and once an emergency was declared, the amount of damage did not alter the outcome for incumbent politicians (Healy and Malhotra, 2010). Incumbent

governors were adversely affected when there was no declaration of emergency due to an uncooperative president (Healy and Malhotra, 2010), showing that citizens punish politicians for what is under control rather than pointing the blame for random acts of God.

Leveraging institutional power to mediate response to natural disasters, especially when it is publicized, is observed to typically have positive effects on an incumbent candidate's vote share (Healy and Malhotra, 2010; Stout, 2018; Velez and Martin, 2013; Gasper and Reeves, 2011). Healy and Malhotra performed a study on the impact of tornado damage in United States elections; they measured the results of elections following tornadoes compared against whether or not political leaders issued emergency declarations. Their first method was to look at how economic damage vs. fatalities reflect onto the incumbent President's voter share and they found that for everyone 1% increase in per capita tornado damage, the incumbent President loses 0.014%, but found no correlation to fatalities anywhere in their model (Healy and Malhotra 2010). Healy and Malhotra hypothesized that voters are emotional and retributive, so they anticipated a greater emphasis on fatalities negatively impacting the incumbent's score, but rather found that voters care about damage to their counties, damage to surrounding counties, and sufficiency of government response (2010).

Gasper and Reeves, in their study on the impact of weather events on government accountability, assessed each presidential and gubernatorial county-level general election results from 1974-2006 to compare against the number of disastrous weather events occurring in the county. They found that voters did not greatly punish governors for the severity of

storms, though scores did marginally decrease due to damage (Gasper and Reeves, 2011). They also found, when overlaying gubernatorial election results with the number of disaster declarations, that a single declaration is worth nearly +4 percentage points in the county vote and a denied declaration is worth +2.7 points (Gasper and Reeves, 2011). Healy and Malhotra ran a similar study but on tornado damage emergency declarations and found similar results; despite the damage, if an emergency declaration is approved the voter share increases for the incumbent President (2010). To test for voter particularity, Healy and Malhotra ran the same regression constrained to the years of the Clinton presidency because he expanded FEMA, disaster preparedness, and governmental response to a disaster. If voters respond positively to the competent actions of politicians, Healy and Malhotra should find that Clinton's reelection results are not negative; the results affirm this theory because, unlike the incumbents from the 1974-2006 regression, Clinton has no correlation nor statistical significance to tornado damage (2010).

Healy and Malhotra do not explore the impact on governors nor how denying a declaration reflects on the President. Gasper and Reeves, however, do explore the relationship between the Governor/President power dichotomy and how voters react in the polls. The same analysis was performed as with the gubernatorial regression, but with Presidential election results, and it was found that the President would gain ½ a point when approving an emergency declaration but would lose nearly 1 point if they denied it (Gasper and Reeves,

2011). Thus, it seems voters are attentive to their government's response to natural disasters, can correctly assign responsibility, and punish/reward the politicians accordingly.

A study of Superstorm Sandy posits that incumbent President Obama won Virginia against former Governor Romney because of the state's high amount of storm damage, but Obama lost North Carolina because there was significantly less damage there (Velez and Martin, 2013). The study assessed Virginia and North Carolina in the 2012 Presidential election because they are highly contested swing states hit hard by Hurricane Sandy; the other states that experienced Hurricane Sandy were comfortably Democratic states. The public perception of their leaders' reaction to Sandy was sufficient to the majority, popularity scores for President Obama, NY Governor Cuomo, NYC Mayor Bloomberg, and FEMA all went up in areas impacted by the storm (Siena, 2012). Velez and Martin found that this positive reception, the timeliness of the storm (October), and the damage to particularly contested political areas contributed to an increase of 4 percentage points for incumbent President Obama that he would not have achieved without the storm (Velez and Martin, 2013). Hurricane Sandy gave Obama a chance to exhibit his ability to provide relief to the public when it is needed.

Glenn Abney and Larry Hill's study on how flooding impacted the New Orleans Mayoral election of 1965 further affirm that publicization of direct institutional action can result in a favorable image to voters. They find that a politician's ability to work within a post-disaster political environment and smooth the bridge between the government and the citizens

can uplift the incumbent from voter punishment (Abney and Hill, 1966). Victor Schiro was up for reelection in 1965 but two months before the election the city was hit by the destructive and fatal Hurricane Betsy. After the storm, Schiro initially took heat for turning down an investment project for emergency flood preparation when it was presented to him, a point his opposition was quick to tout (Abney and Hill, 1966). Given previous literature suggesting voters punish incompetent politicians by removing them from office, it would be expected that Schiro loses his reelection (Stout 2018; Reeves 2011). But because as much as voters hold a stake in the incumbents' actions while in office, incumbents' reactions to exogenous events serve as a kind of pressure test for the electorate. "[Voters] are sensitive to intervention by the government following disaster ... because a disaster provides the opportunity for voters to reap immediate, tangible, and excludable benefits directly from these authorities" (Velez and Martin, 2013).

Victor Scharioʻs saving grace was his connections to Washington D.C. as well as his presence in the community after the storm. It was locally publicized that Schiro attended meetings with the President and Congress to secure legislation and funding for rebuilding New Orleans, but he also attended to constituents "... in the heart of the disaster area with his shirt sleeves rolled up" proving his competence in disaster management and constituent advocacy (Abney and Hill, 1966). Though Schiro initially fit the role of incompetent leader, he compensated for his shortcomings by stepping up his response to the storm and won the following election.

Studies on other countries' electoral response to natural disasters find similar results as the studies in the United States. In a study on the 2002 flooding of Elbe, Germany, Michael Bechtel and Jens Hainmueller found that the incumbent Chancellor of Germany, Gerhard Schröder, would've likely lost reelection in a landslide, but instead won because of his sufficient response to the flooding a month prior to the election (2011). His loss would have been attributed to his failure to prove himself a competent leader based on his initial election promises of increased employment, which ultimately worsened under his administration (Bechtel and Hainmueller, 2011). Like Schiro, Schröder was able to use his position in the institution to provide relief to his electorate and prove his competence as a leader.

The reaction to the flooding was not only generous and personal, but also incredibly swift. Schröder's Minister of Defense reacted immediately to the flooding, rushing to the sites of the first flood reports to assure citizens that German forces will do everything they can to help, and only three days after the first report 45,000 soldiers had already been deployed to reinforce water/flooding infrastructure, evacuate people, and serve any other needs of the affected areas (Bechtel and Hainmueller, 2011). At the same time, the Chancellor created an emergency disaster relief program including immediate payments to each affected person, each owner of damaged residential property, and each employee of damaged businesses, and checks began distributing just two days later (Bechtel and Hainmueller, 2011). Bechdel and Hainmueller estimate that each 2002 vote in favor of Schröder cost €63,000 ($75k USD) in relief spending (2011).

Though an expensive price for a vote, it paid off for Schröder, who won his reelection. Bechtel and Hainmueller found that the incumbent party gained an impressive 4 percentage points in affected districts but lost 3 percentage points on average across unaffected districts (2011). This indicates that voters in affected districts rewarded the incumbent for a swift response to the flooding, whereas the non-affected districts did not favor Schröder because they did not reap the economic benefits nor witness the swift, competent response to the disaster. Bechtel and Hainmueller ran comparison analyses against the incumbent parties' competitors to test relative popularities before and after the flood and confirmed that there were no other factors that contributed to gains in the incumbent party's popularity (2011).

The turnout rate also has the ability to influence election results because if select groups of people are restricted access to vote, whether it's through disenfranchisement, economic hardships, or disaster destruction obstructing their ability. Natural disaster research on voter turnout discovered that turnout increases in communities that experience the most damage because mobilization on an individual level takes place (Sinclair et al., 2011). Post-disaster voters that already engage with elections will look to punish the leaders responsible for damage and likely convince their neighbors and friends to do the same.

There are many key differences between exogenous natural disasters occurring shortly before an election and a pandemic outbreak nearly six months before the election. While studies reinforce the idea that voters will hold their elected officials accountable for shortcomings in minimizing voter challenges, such as infections and death rates in this sort of

circumstance, the coronavirus poses a unique set of obstacles that complicate the ability to vote, especially in the highest-impact areas.

First, natural disaster politics and pandemic politics involve different responses because natural disasters such as weather events pose an imminent threat to the physical infrastructure of property, and human fatalities and injuries can be avoided with proper evacuation procedures. While there are pandemic response plans created by governmental and non-governmental organizations, there is little precedence for handling a virus such as COVID-19 and even less guidance for holding Presidential elections during such a pandemic. The last comparably destructive nationwide pandemic was the 1918 Influenza pandemic during an already complicated midterm election, a sizable portion of American men were overseas wrapping up WWI and thus struggling to cast their vote. Given the fact that midterm elections do not have comparable turnout to Presidential elections and that turnout was already anticipated to be lower on account of overseas soldiers, exploring similarities between the 1918 Influenza pandemic and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic would be a stretch.

Natural disasters result in the destruction of physical infrastructure like roads, houses, polling locations, electricity, and so on. Pandemics differ in that the direct threat to physical infrastructure is minimal, if at all. The necessary physical equipment to run an election remains intact during a pandemic, but the social infrastructure required to carry out an election breaks down under COVID safety guidelines. April 2020 primary elections around the country provided early insight into what pandemic voting looks like in November. In

Milwaukee, WI, so many poll volunteers quit due to COVID-19 concerns that the city closed 175 of its 180 polling locations, leaving only 5 left (Bradner, 2020). Polling volunteers were replaced by 500 members of the National Guard. Because of the shortage of polling locations, lines stretched for blocks with citizens waiting hours before casting their votes. Two weeks after the election, 52 people have been confirmed with COVID-19 that were in-person voters or poll volunteers, with only 7 of the 52 reporting they may have been exposed elsewhere (Bauer, 2020).

On top of this, thousands of mail-in ballots were thrown out because a Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling decided ballots must be postmarked by April 7th else they not be counted. The post office, however, occasionally will postmark general dates like "APR 2020" making the ballot potentially uncountable, or sometimes not postmark the ballot at all (Schulte and Marley, 2020). Early horror stories of elections during COVID-times cast national doubt that non-traditional ballots are not secure and/or could get lost or rejected for reasons outside of the voter's control. This could have a negative impact on 2020 general election turnout, whether or not it is the case that these events transpire.

Natural disasters also differ from pandemics in that weather events have little to no capacity to be controlled by means of policy and response. The spread of COVID-19, however, does fall within the capacity of the government to minimize damage and provide incentives for citizens to avoid danger. There was a six-month period between the emergency pandemic declaration and the November election, which is significantly more time than the

studies previously mentioned to reorganize an election's infrastructure to prioritize voter safety and security assurance.

The last difference between pandemics and other natural disasters is that natural disasters are almost always specific to a physical region of the country, whether it be a town like New Orleans or an entire coastline like the east coast after Hurricane Sandy. There is not a county in the U.S. that has avoided the spread of COVID-19, so first the first time in a century the federal government had 53 states and jurisdictions in natural disaster emergency status. This, in theory, would result in a nationwide effort to enact policy on the federal and state level to cohesively move past the global pandemic.

Theory and Hypotheses

As the incumbent, President Trump had the advantage over his Democratic opponent Joe Biden for many reasons, but primarily because it is accepted knowledge that incumbents have a much higher chance of being reelected. Another reason is that throughout the pandemic President Trump had unlimited access to addressing the public and in turn, the public had a vested interest in listening to what he says. Biden did not have the same spotlight as he held no official positions at the time of his candidacy, thus his audience was limited to those already invested in his ideas. Biden had political power as a Democratic party elite but had no institutional power to enact policies surrounding the pandemic, just the power to criticize the incumbent's reaction in an attempt to paint his opponent as an incompetent

leader. In Trump's case, this was not enough of an advantage to survive the electorate's punishment.

There are three hypotheses explored in this study to create an understanding of the willingness of voters to hold incumbents accountable via elections following the COVID-19 pandemic. The dependent variables studied to draw conclusions on these hypotheses are the 2020 voter turnout rate, the incumbent Republican President, and the six incumbent Republican Governors running for reelection in 2020. Election results are compared against the COVID-19 infection and death rate of each county in the six states with incumbent Governors, as well as against variables that control for economic factors of a county, access to voting, and county demographics.

The first hypothesis is that voter turnout will decrease in counties with the highest death rate. Previous literature does suggest that counties with the most damage following a natural disaster actually show up in greater numbers to cast their ballots, but in this case, COVID still poses an ongoing threat to voters. It may have not been the case that greatly damaged counties in New Orleans would have the same turnout should the election had been during Hurricane Katrina. The looming threat of contraction and death hovers over the electorate in 2020.

Like most of the literature that explores disaster politics, the second hypothesis is that incumbents will be punished in counties that have high infection and death rates. This

hypothesis is plausible if regression results show that increased infection and death rate correlates with decreased support of the incumbent.

The second hypothesis is that the electorate will attribute varying levels of responsibility to their President and Governor and hold them accountable accordingly. If this is true, regression results will show differential impacts of the President and Governors' share of the vote. Should it be the case that executives are held accountable in different ways for increased infection and/or death rates, what about each rate particularly reflected on the incumbent, and why?

Healy and Malhotra suggest that voters punishing incumbents for higher death counts instead of economic damage may be acting more emotionally and retributively than punitively. Though this could be the case, deaths *are* emotional and traumatic to communities and reflect on the incumbent if their preparedness and/or response are inadequate. COVID-19 is also a unique natural disaster in that its initial spread was largely out of the control of politicians, but over time, controlling the spread became more of a reality, and increased infections and deaths are the responsibility of elected officials and policy makers. Fatalities are no longer a tragic, exogenous, and uncontrollable consequence like they are during weather events because the resource being damaged by COVID is human life.

This study does not focus on each politician's specific policy responses like mask mandates and other COVID-19 minimization efforts. Elected politicians at all levels implemented a wide variety of mandates with varying levels of enforcement so while a measure

of response may be useful, it is better in concept than in practice. The success of a mandate in one state does not equate to the success of another because state executives did not have a cohesive response. Because of this, compliance was spotty and there are no ways to measure compliance with COVID mandates to control for this discrepancy. The best way to measure the efficacy of the President and Governors' response to COVID is to measure who is sick and who is dying under their leadership.

In addition to this, aggregate data studies cannot account for individual voter decisions nor isolate reasons behind election outcomes. Macro-level election research on natural disasters, like this and the other studies mentioned, are not interested in the *who and why* results of the election, but rather, interested in what trends appear and how that can change results. Perhaps if previous literature consistently found that quality of response translates to improved election outcomes for incumbents then creating a measurement would be worth considering, but there is more evidence to support the claim that "... actions weigh more heavily on the electorate than outcomes" (Gasper and Reeves, 2011). Therefore, it is not relevant to measure the quality of executive response to the pandemic for the purposes of this research.

A counterargument to overlooking policy decisions of candidates could be that perhaps infection and death rates may be higher in individual states because some prioritized minimizing the economic impact of the virus with actions such as reopening schools and restaurants, allowing businesses to increase capacity, and so on. I respond by insisting it is still

irrelevant to this study. There are pros and cons to all disaster policies and negative economic impact from the damaged physical infrastructure is assured no matter how sufficient politicians' reactions are. When comparing the election results with only infection and deaths I can observe a unidimensional relationship of how incumbent Republicans were held accountable.

As outlined in the previous section, themes across literature support the claim that incumbents do worse subsequent to a natural disaster according to the adequacy of their response. The coronavirus pandemic differs in that election infrastructure did not collapse as it would in a weather catastrophe. Rather, voting options were expanded in some states to include mail-in ballots, early voting periods, ballot drop-off boxes, among other options. The regression analysis will compare turnout in 2020 with infection and death rates to test the actual effect the pandemic had on turnout and incumbent support on the county level.

Data and Analysis

Table 1 lists the states involved in this study, the name of the Republican incumbent running for reelection, their share of the vote they received overall for 2020 and 2016, and the overall deaths and infections rate under their jurisdiction. This table is to provide the general context of the 2020 election and not a comprehensive list of contributing factors to this study.[1] For the purposes of this study, all politicians involved in the data are Republican incumbents; specifically, President Trump and six Governors.

Table 1: Gubernatorial Results, Death & Infection Rate on Incumbent Republicans

State	Incumbent During COVID	2020 Share of Vote	2016 Share of Vote	Death Rate By Pop	Infection Rate By Pop
Indiana	Eric Holcomb	56.5%	51.4%	0.051%	1.59%
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Vermont	Phil Scott	67.0%	52.9%	0.027%	0.27%
West Virginia	Jim Justice	64.8%	42.3%	0.015%	0.71%

Because of the high number of elements involved in any election, this paper explores many possible correlations between relevant variables. The dependent variables are 2020 voter turnout percentage, President Trump's 2020 percentage share of the two-party vote, and the Republican incumbent gubernatorial candidates' 2020 percentage of their share of the two-party vote. The 2016 results for each candidate served as a control variable against the 2020 election results. I chose to look at specifically the Republican incumbent governors to remain consistent with the incumbent Republican President. This study does not discuss dynamics between political parties nor outcomes involving ideology or partisan favorability because incumbency influences individual elections more than partisanship, especially in

[1] The full original dataset is available on my GitHub here.

unprecedented turmoil. There were eleven Gubernatorial elections in the 2020 general election, three incumbents were Democrats, all but two states had incumbents running, and every incumbent Governor won their reelection.[2]

The independent variables used to measure against the dependent variables are broken into two sets; 1) demographics, and 2) factors that play into voting accessibility. The demographics I collected for each county were total population to create the "___ by population" percentages, the percent non-white people, and percent unemployed. The voting accessibility variables were primarily state-wide policies except for polls-per-capita which is county-specific, and the dummy variable for whether or not a county and/or state were subject to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 special provision 4b. The state-wide voting variables were the duration of the early voting period if any, and a dummy variable for whether the state offers same-day registration.

These variables were chosen to create a broader understanding of how COVID-19 spread and how response may have impacted voter turnout and voter preferences for incumbent governors and the president. The interests of this study are primarily the results of the gubernatorial elections because the majority of regulations and policy come from the state,

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[2] Though partisan relationships are not evaluated in this study, correlation and regression analyses were conducted on the two incumbent Democratic governors seeking reelection, but results were found to be statistically insignificant and thus little contribution to the purposes of this study.

Table 2: 2020 and 2016 Presidential Election Results and Turnout Rates

State	2020 Turnout %	2016 Turnout %	Trump 2020 Share of Vote	Trump 2016 Share of Vote
Indiana	65.0%	58.0%	57.0%	56.5%
Missouri	68.7%	66.6%	56.8%	58.4%
New Hampshire	73.5%	75.0%	52.7%	47.3%
North Dakota	62.7%	61.3%	65.1%	63.0%
Vermont	73.3%	68.0%	30.7%	29.8%
West Virginia	63.5%	57.5%	68.6%	68.5%

rather than the federal level. But I include measures of the presidential election because previous literature suggests voters can observe the government's reaction to natural disasters and will isolate and assign responsibility to politicians accordingly.

Should this be true, infection and death rate regression results should be different for the President and Governor. If results show a consistent pattern across the President and Governors, it could either be interpreted as a down-ballot attribution of responsibility for COVID infections and deaths or could be evidence favoring the blindly retributive voter model.

COVID-19 Infections and Death Data

The COVID-19 statistics are all sourced from The New York Times open-source GitHub datasets. This project followed counties' infection and death numbers starting in

March. For each month from March until September 13, I have a measure of total infections and total deaths by county. I choose September as the endpoint for this data because September 13th is two weeks before the first early voting period opened in the states. Infection and death rates per population were also calculated from the total population per county to account for the difference in population density between the states assessed.

Election Results

The data collected to represent election results were 2020 and 2016 republican share of the two-party vote for president and gubernatorial elections. The states included are ones that had a Republican incumbent running in a gubernatorial election in 2020: Indiana, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia. New Hampshire elects governors every two years, rather than the usual four, but only 2016 election information was collected as a lower turnout is expected in the 2018 midterm election.

There is no large database that contains county-level election results data, all 2020 and 2016 election data was collected directly from each states' Secretary of State website or election portal. Occasionally, states will only provide raw numbers of registered voters and total ballots cast. In this case, raw numbers were transformed into turnout figures by dividing by the number of registered voters to achieve a percentage measure.

Economic Indicators

Economic data are collected to provide socio-economic context for each county. Ease of access to voting typically refers to same-day registration, early voting, and so on, but another

restriction to access is economic hardship. People experiencing economic adversity are significantly more likely to withdraw from politics and have consistently low turnout rates because politics are often secondary to at-home needs (Rosenstone, 1982). Rosenstone concludes, "when the [benefits] from attending to an immediate stressful personal problem ... is greater than the [benefits] from participating in politics, the ... costs of participation are higher" (1982). The unemployment rate for each county is thus used as a variable to control for this feature of a population.

Percent Non-White

Predominantly Black counties experienced the highest death rates around the country and when put in comparison to other counties. From COVID-19, Black people are dying in disproportionately high numbers (Rashawn 2020). In Milwaukee County, Wisconsin as of April 3, black people make up 44% of COVID-19 cases and account for 81% of deaths (Johnson, 2020). This number is staggering considering Black people only make up 27.2% of the total population of this county, whereas white people make up 64.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). This same pattern echoes around counties and cities around the entire country that have been underserved and neglected, "... environmental, economic and political factors have compounded for generations, putting black people at higher risk of chronic conditions that leave lungs weak and immune systems vulnerable: asthma, heart disease, hypertension and diabetes," (Johnson & Buford 2020). Black and Latino Americans are three times more likely

to contract the coronavirus than white Americans and are nearly twice as likely to die from it (Alvarez, 2020).

People of color are also significantly more likely to be in jobs deemed as *essential* and thus not able to stay safe at home. This phenomenon typically occurs under the radar, but New York City serves as a model to understand the country's workforce. In NYC, 60% of essential workers are black, Hispanic, or Asian (Singer, 2020). Essential workers are working each day, potentially exposing themselves to the circulating virus, then going back home and exposing their families and their communities (Goba, 2020). This is made worse by the fact that 55% of essential workers rely on the MTA to travel to and from work in NYC and in other cities (Singer, 2020). Brooklyn houses the majority of essential workers in NYC at 28% (Singer, 2020), and on April 18th Brooklyn passed Queens as the borough with the most COVID-19 related deaths, accounting for 34.1% of cases as of May 11th (NYC Health, 2020). There is a clear socio-economic factor in seeing which communities are hit the hardest by coronavirus death rates, and Black Americans appear to have and maintain the highest rates.

A study done on Superstorm Sandy found that the damage caused by the storm disproportionately impacted the Latino vote in New Jersey, confirming their hypothesis that "existing vulnerabilities are magnified by natural hazards, even within the context of voting behaviour," (Debbage et. al, 2014). Black Americans are the hardest hit by the virus's health effects, the economic downturn of stay-at-home policies, as well as facing hurdles in

participating in political activity that is essential to the democratic process and holding the leaders in power accountable for their actions.

Non-white voters are, theoretically, inclined to further hold their elected officials accountable for not only a failure to minimize the infections and deaths of their constituency but also for exasperating existing systems of oppression and inadequate care. Measuring non-white population by total population is the best way to gauge the turnout and preferences for elected officials by non-white voters. It is an imperfect measurement because the variable only controls for the total non-white population of the county, so results will show the counties' overall support of incumbents rather than support by non-white persons.

Voting Accessibility

Elections are complex without the help of a raging virus so other variables, like economic indicators and ease of access to casting a ballot, need to be considered as well. To capture the ease of voting across counties I have a set of variables that measure different features. These variables are the number of polling locations per person, the duration of an early voting period, whether the state offers same-day voter registration, and whether or not the county had been covered under the provision of special conditions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to control for a documented history of disenfranchisement.

Polls-per-person data was collected from the Election Administration and Voting Survey 2016 results. Each state provided the number of polling locations per county, so that was calculated against each county's population to get a polls-per-capita percentage. This

variable serves to test the impact that a greater number of access points to casting a ballot has on overall voter turnout and election results. Places like Milwaukee county, Wisconsin cut polling locations by 97% in 2020 and it served as a major blow to the accessibility of voting (Bradner, 2020). The proximity to polling locations available to voters can serve as an incentive or a barrier to casting a ballot. Polls-per-capita was chosen over a polls-per-sq-mile because more densely populated areas make it easier to access a polling location, as opposed to a rural area where the population may be disproportionately small to the geographical size of the county (Plutzer, 2002).

Early Voting

Early voting is a practice of voting that became especially popular in the 2020 election because it allowed voters to cast their ballot early to avoid excess crowding on election day. Each state implements its own early voting policy, the state and the duration of the voting period are displayed in Table 3. Theoretical assumptions about early voting, long before the pandemic, suggest general turnout improves in states that offer the option because it eases any burdens of casting a ballot on election day by providing more convenient times to vote (McDonald and Popkin, 2001). Empirical evidence generally supports this theory but by most accounts turnout increases by a small but statistically significant amount (Neely and Richardson, 2001). This variable is included to control for differences in access to casting a ballot.

Table 3: Number of Early Voting Days in Studied States

State	Early Voting Duration (Days)
Indiana	28
Missouri	0
New Hampshire	0
North Dakota	16
Vermont	45
West Virginia	10

Same-Day Voter Registration

Same-day registration, also known as election-day registration, is another kind of election policy intended to expand access to casting a ballot by offering registration up to and including election day. This is opposed to states' typical practice of closing the registration period a few weeks before election day. The relationship between same-day registration and general turnout has been empirically studied and found that states that offer it see an increase in turnout (Neiheisel and Burden, 2012). Same-day registration is a binary variable with 1 indicating the states offered same-day registration, 0 for those that did not. This information was collected from Ballotpedia's comprehensive list of states' same-day registration policies. Only four of the six states in this study offer same-day registration. This variable is used to control for differences in expanded voting access between states.

Voting Rights Act

The VRA provision variable is another binary variable of 1 indicating a county was subjected to special preclearance provisions and 0 indicating those that were not.
The Voting Rights Act subjected several jurisdictions to special provisions requiring preclearance before implementation of changes to voting laws. Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act outlines a coverage formula for determining which county jurisdictions were to be subject to pre-clearances that were modified or renewed from 1965 until the present day. The formula provided by the Department of Justice includes only two variables; 1) whether or not the jurisdiction required a test or device restricting the opportunity to vote or 2) the Director of the Census determined the jurisdiction that more than half of eligible voters were not registered to vote OR more than half of eligible voters did not vote. Jurisdictions became subject to these provisions if they met one of these requirements within a time period determined when the provision gets renewed.

The jurisdictions applicable are no longer subject to enforcement under this provision because the Supreme Court ruled (5-4) on *Shelby County v. Holder* that the formula for determining subjection to be outdated, thus unconstitutional and no longer enforceable (Liptak, 2013). The list of jurisdictions, however, are governmentally documented accounts of voter disenfranchisement that prove useful in measuring for a history of oppression that may still affect turnout and results.

Results

Correlation Results

The first analysis run on the dataset tested the correlations between the dependent and independent variables. This initial test served to show whether or not the data correlated in a way that made sense to run further analysis. Table 4 outlines the correlation coefficients between the dependent and independent variables, a star on the coefficient indicates that it is statistically significant. President Trump's share of the 2020 vote significantly correlated with all variables except for the infection rate and unemployment rate. Correlations for death rate, percent non-white, polls-per-capita, early voting duration,

Table 4: Correlations Between Dependent and Independent Variables

Independent Variable	Trump 2020 % Share of Vote	GOP Governor % Share of Vote	Turnout
Infection Rate	0.004	-0.190*	-0.133*
Death Rate	-0.109*	-0.292*	-0.139*
Percent Non-White	-0.314*	-0.353*	-0.435*
Unemployment Rate	-0.093	-0.180*	-0.496*
Poll-Per-Capita	-0.181*	-0.203*	-0.025*
Early Voting Duration	-0.371*	-0.397*	-0.047
Same-Day Registration	-0.630*	-0.093	0.179*
VRA Provision	-0.267*	-0.088	0.011

N=444

same-day registration, and VRA provision all negatively impacted Trump, meaning that Trump's score decreases as the independent variable increases. The strongest negative correlation between the President and an independent variable is same-day registration with a correlation coefficient at -0.630, and the least is the death rate at -0.109. There were no positive correlations between Trump's 2020 share of the vote and any of the independent variables which means that Trump's score did not increase alongside any variable increase. Overall, the statistically significant correlations between Trump and the independent variables show that Trump does worse when any variable increases. For example, when the death rate increases, Trump's score decreases.

The correlation between the Republican incumbent governors' share of the vote and the independent variables provided different results than the incumbent President's. There was found to be no significant correlation between the Governors and both same-day registration and VRA provision subjugation. Like Trump, there are also no positive correlations between the Governors' share of the vote and statistically significant independent variables indicating that incumbent Republican Governors do worse when any variable increases. Three other independent variables that affected both the Presidential and Gubernatorial shares of the vote inversely were the percent non-white population, polls-per-capita, and early voting duration. As these three variables individually increase, both office's scores decrease relatively the same amount. This type of correlative relationship could indicate partisan trends surrounding county demographics or voting accessibility.

The Gubernatorial correlation results differ from Trump's, however, because the infection rate correlates negatively with the Governors' vote share, and their death rate correlation coefficient (-0.292) is more than double Trump's (-0.109). This indicates that Governors' scores are more likely than Trump's to decrease in counties with a higher death rate. The final statistically significant correlation for Gubernatorial results, the unemployment rate, also differs from Trump's results because the Presidential share of the vote was not found to correlate with the unemployment rate. The Gubernatorial unemployment rate, on the contrary, has a correlation coefficient of -0.180* meaning that as the unemployment rate climbs the share of the vote for Republican incumbent Governors decreases.

The Gubernatorial and unemployment rate correlation coefficient is, however, over half the coefficient of the correlation between turnout and the unemployment rate (-0.496). Comparatively, it is obvious that the unemployment rate has more of an impact on turnout than it does voter preferences. This is not an unexpected finding as increased economic hardship typically does correlate with lower turnout rates (Rosenstone, 1982).

Turnout negatively correlates with the infection and death rate with a similar correlation coefficient for each, -0.133 and -0.139 respectively. As the infection or death rate increases, the turnout rate decreases about the same amount for each rate. Other variables that have a negative correlation with turnout are the non-white percent of the population and poll-per-capita. The turnout and percent non-white correlation yielded the second-most negative correlation coefficient of -0.496 which shows that counties that have a higher percentage of

non-white residents correlated with lower turnout. The polls-per-capita correlation, on the contrary, had the least negative correlation coefficient of -0.025. Increased access to casting a ballot generally increases turnout so the negative correlation is unexpected, but the near-zero correlation coefficient indicates that the relationship is not incredibly strong.

Presidential Results

In Table 5, the Presidential columns represent the regression analyses of the presidential election outcomes in the counties of the six states that had an incumbent governor running for reelection. Column 2 compares infection rates against the President's share of the 2020 two-party vote, and column 3 compares death rates against the President's share of the 2020 two-party vote, with both including controls. The greatest takeaway from the analysis is

Table 5: Effect of Death and Infection Rate on 2020 Presidential and Gubernatorial Incumbent Elections

	Turnout	Presidential		Gubernatorial	
Infection Rate	0.548	- 0.583*		- 1.911***	
Death Rate	- 1.135		- 19.92**		4.183
Percent Non-White	- 0.208	0.067**	0.062**	- 0.446***	- 0.502***
Unemployment Rate	- 2.979***	- 0.151	- 0.108	1.668***	1.753***
Polls per Capita	- 0.209	- 0.219	- 0.108	-4.722***	- 5.121***
Early Voting Duration	- 0.064	0.000	0.000	- 0.003 ***	- 0.003***
Same Day Registration	0.334	- 0.009	- 0.007	- 0.287***	- 0.274***
VRA Provision 4b	0.755***	- 0.013	- 0.012	- 0.010	- 0.009
Intercept	2.473***	0.022	0.014	0.394***	0.380***

Significance codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 ' ' N = 444

that the death rate coefficient is statistically significant and related to less support of the President. The magnitudes of the coefficients are different, such that an increasing death rate decreases Trump's share of the vote by over 40x the magnitude the infection rates do, indicating that voters chose to punish Trump for both infections and deaths but found deaths as more of a reason to either withhold support and/or prefer another candidate.

The only other significant variable in column 2 shows a county's percent of non-white citizens increased Trump's share of the vote. This is contrary to the common perception that non-white areas tend to prefer Democrats but could be attributed to the uniqueness of President Trump's supporters and time in office. These results do not show that more people of color are voting for Trump, but rather that areas that have increased numbers of people of color improved Trump's share of the vote.

Gubernatorial Results

The Gubernatorial columns represent the same analysis as Presidential but for incumbent Republican Gubernatorial candidates' 2020 share of the two-party vote. The results found no indication that the death rate of a county had an impact on the Republican governor's share of the vote. In the same way the electorate held Trump accountable to infections, counties that saw increased infection rates gave less support to their Republican incumbent governor. The only variable that increases a governor's share of the vote is the unemployment rate of a county in their state, all other variables decrease the share of the vote for the incumbent.

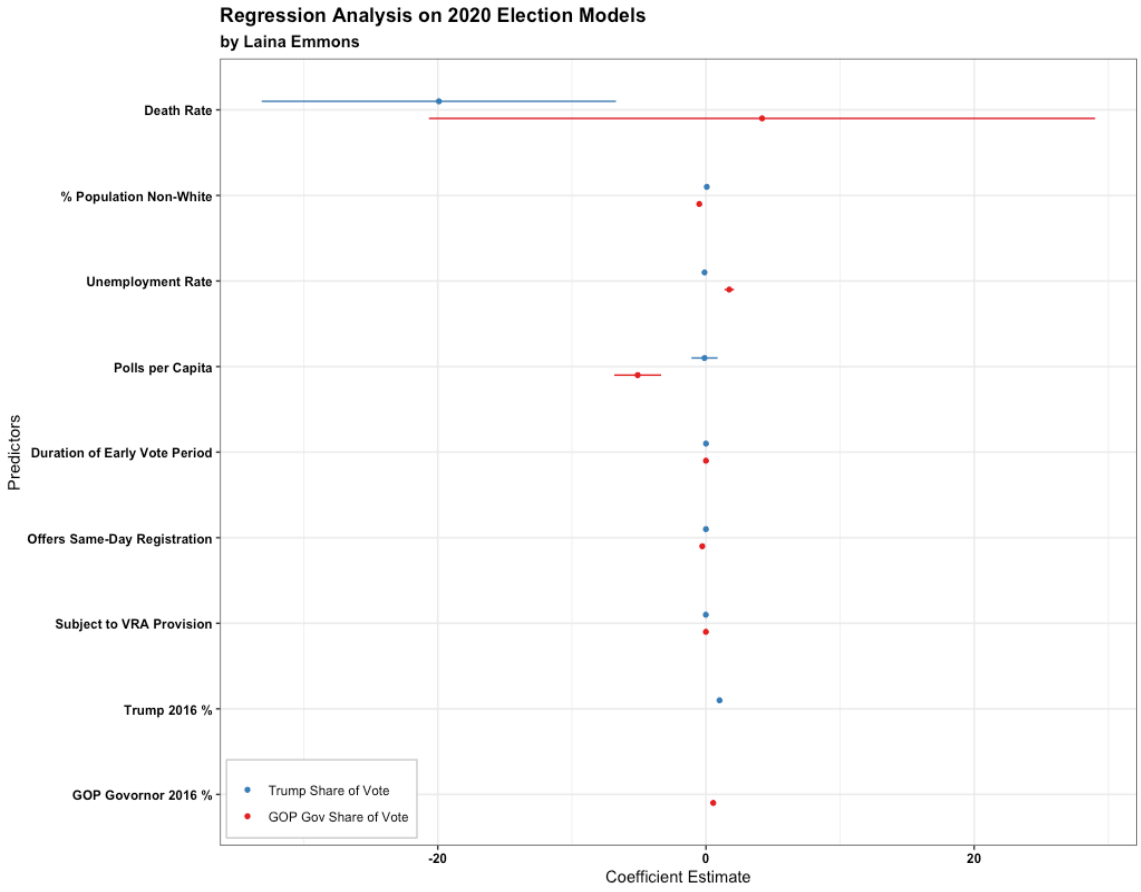
The unemployment rate is an odd result, it was an unexpected finding that the greater the unemployment rate rose, the better incumbent Governors did in the election. Typically, negative economic indicators result in the punishment of an incumbent, whether or not it is under their control, like as observed with Trump's results (though not statistically significant) (Healy and Malhotra, 2010). Polls-per-capita results align more with common-sense expectations because greater access to casting a ballot increases turnout and negatively affects the Republican party (Gronke et al., 2007). As observed in the regression and Figure 1, the polls-per-capita results negatively and substantially decrease support for the governor, relative to other dependent variables and relative to the (statistically insignificant) coefficient estimates for the Presidential election.

The VRA variable was orthogonal to the Presidential and Gubernatorial election results, having no statistical significance either way. This could indicate that elections are moving away from VRA-style voter disenfranchisement that is associated with the Jim Crow era restrictions and incredibly low registration and turnout. This is not to say voter disenfranchisement was not a factor in the 2020 election, but rather the measure I used does not show evidence of strong correlations with the election results.

The regressions for death and infection rates are displayed on dot-and-whisker plots in Figure 1 (deaths) and Figure 2 (infections). The two rates are separated because the coefficient estimates for both the President's and Governors' death rate have a significantly larger range than the infection rate. Without separating deaths and infections, all other variables but death

rate are unobservable on a plot. The dot-and-whisker uses the dots to represent the coefficient estimate and the whiskers to represent the confidence interval. The variable is statistically relevant if the whisker does not cross 0 on the x-axis. Coefficient estimates to the left of 0 means the predictor negatively impacted the incumbent's share of the vote, and vice versa.

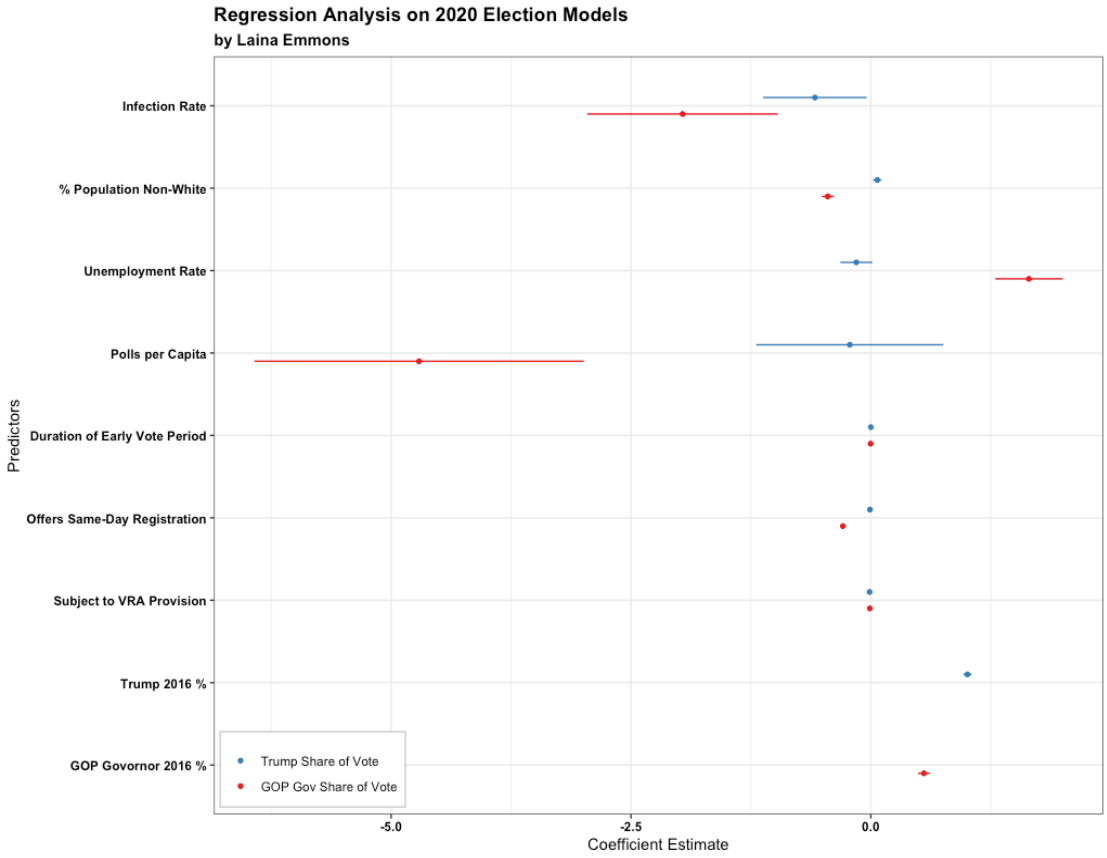
Figure 1: Death Rate Regression Dot-and-Whisker Plot



The visualization of the regression model makes it easier to compare the magnitudes of coefficient estimates. Figure 1 shows the infection rate regression results for the President and Governors' share of the 2020 vote. The infection rate was statistically significant for both

politicians indicating that they were both held accountable for the number of people getting sick in a county. They were, however, held accountable to

Figure 2: Infection Rate Regression Dot-and-Whisker Plot



infections by different magnitudes. The governors lose support by a coefficient estimate of -1.911*** compared to the President's coefficient of -0.583*, Governors lose support by a magnitude of nearly 4x that of the President. This indicates that infections are ultimately what caused the Governors' support to decrease, but also that voters held Governors more accountable for unsuccessful efforts, or none at all, to minimize the spread of the virus.

Figure 2 shows the plot of the death rate regression on President Trump and incumbent Republican Governors' share of the vote. The death rate substantially negatively impacted the President's share of the vote, especially in comparison to the remaining independent variables. The Governors also have a large coefficient estimate but statistically insignificant. The remaining variables were, even if statistically significant, relatively small. The only other predictors that stand out on the plot are the unemployment rate and the polls-per-capita for the governors.

Turnout Results

The results find that COVID-19 infections and deaths have no relationship to voter turnout, positive or negative. This indicates that it is not the case that COVID directly impacted whether or not voters showed up at the polls, but rather that voters made different decisions on their ballots. The unemployment rate had a severe negative relationship with voter turnout, meaning that in places where there were high rates of people who were unemployed, turnout was lower than elsewhere. This is an expected result based on previous literature that suggests economic hardship results in decreased voter turnout (Rosenstone, 1982).

This finding, however, is more interesting in comparison to the Gubernatorial regression unemployment rate results, as seen in table 2. The relationship between the unemployment rate and the Gubernatorial election was contrary to expectations, the Gubernatorial share of the vote increases as the unemployment rate increases. The overall

negative coefficient estimate of voter turnout and unemployment rate in comparison to the positive coefficient of Gubernatorial results and unemployment rate tells us that the electorate favored their incumbent governors' reactions to the unemployment rate in particular.

The unemployment rate average of the six states analyzed was 5.2%, whereas the U.S. national unemployment rate in September 2020 was 7.9% (USA Facts, 2020). Since the unemployment rate was marginally lower for the states in the study, voters could be specifically showing up in favor of an incumbent Republican governor that made an observable effort to improve the unemployment rate in their state. Since Trump's unemployment rate results show no relationship, it indicates that the electorate was indifferent towards his impact on the unemployment rate. As the top executive of a state, the Governor has a more direct ability than the President to enact policy and efforts to improve the unemployment rate at home. So, despite Governors losing support in areas with higher infection rates (-1.911***), they gain about the same amount of support as the unemployment rate increases (coefficient of +1.668***), which indicates that whatever response governors had to unemployment displayed competence to the electorate. This also shows that voters were able to isolate different reactions of their elected leaders and in this case, rewarded the incumbent Republican Governors accordingly.

This study does not aim to make claims about why support shifted away from the Republican incumbents, but rather just report on what shifts and where they occur. Though support decreased for *all* Republican incumbents, every incumbent governor won their

reelection. The Republican incumbent President, however, did not win reelection. The literature review explored how even the slightest change in support could make or break an incumbent's reelection when the margin is already close (Abney and Hill, 1966). The polls leading up to election day 2020 favored a Trump loss but within enough of a margin of doubt that the race was understood to be close (FiveThirtyEight, 2020). Since this was an unexpected result of the regression, the extent of the analysis is limited to the unemployment rate at the time of the election, but further research should explore the relationship of the unemployment rate throughout the pandemic and the 2020 election.

Overall, the regression findings suggest that President Trump did not prove his competency enough to be rewarded by the electorate with reelection, but the governors all did win, even if they generally lost support in certain counties compared to the previous election. Trump received heavy criticism regarding his political and economic response to the pandemic and fresh in voters' minds on election day was the September release of *Rage*, a book written by a handful of Trump's former national security advisors that revealed Trump's early knowledge of the dangers of COVID but purposefully downplayed its threat (Zamarripa, 2020). *Rage* concluded that Trump's initial January/February response to the pandemic was insufficient in minimizing risks to the U.S., he was incapable of accepting responsibility for its rapid nationwide spread, he misleads the American public on the severity of the virus, and that he is unfit to serve as President because of his stubbornness and poor decision making (Gangel et al., 2020).

Specifically, Trump lost support as a result of the infection rate and the death rate, whereas the Governors were only accountable to infections. At the time of the general election of 2020, the COVID-19 death count in the U.S. was just over 230,000 people with just under 1,000 people dying per day (Johns Hopkins, 2020). The high infection and death rate in combination with the release of *Rage*, which revealed Trump's lack of regard towards minimizing the impact of COVID, led voters to the conclusion that he ought not to be rewarded with reelection. Communities are more likely to notice a high volume of their neighbors dying from COVID than just contracting it because death is the ultimate individual consequence of COVID-19. President Trump is also the ultimate leader of the U.S. in that he is the top executive authority and thus more likely to accept the responsibility for the ultimate consequence.

Conclusion

Throughout the last thirteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. public has experienced fear, doubt, anger, division, and skepticism about the systems in society, whether it be healthcare, elections, economic insecurity, or something else. Beyond the pandemic and general politics, the 2020 election was a long-awaited day and the future of the country was incredibly uncertain. Concerns surrounding the legitimacy of the election and non-traditional ballots weighed heavy on the already divisive country's psyche. The results of this study suggest there is hope yet for democracy in the United States. Though it is not possible to know the exact preferences of individual voters thus unable to confidently claim what decisions led them

to their vote, there is value in knowing that the electorate does not act in blind retribution against elected officials.

The results for this study support the hypothesis that voters are aware of the difference in responsibilities their elected officials ought to be held accountable for and can punish/reward them accordingly. The results of this study are sufficient in furthering support for the overall conception of an observant and reflective electorate. There are several measures that should be incorporated into future research on this subject based on the results observed by this study.

The first measure to consider is a further analysis of each county's partisan history over the last few elections. This paper includes the 2016 general election results to control for 2020 election results but to further understand the extent to which a county's electorate holds their incumbent accountable to their decisions, an extended history would benefit a fuller narrative. Typically, governors are subject to term limits, and the President is also subject to a max two-term limit. Since both seats consistently turnover leaders, the analysis would be about partisanship trends rather than individual/administrative decision-making. In the case that a state consistently elects one party, analysis of the primary election could better measure incumbent accountability. This paper is also not an exploratory study regarding partisanship preferences in the 2020 election, but there is still much to learn from each party's reaction to the pandemic and their success in the following election.

Another angle of this research to be explored is to look further into each incumbent's pandemic policy in March 2020 vs. late summer 2020. Previous research suggests that though voters may be able to distinguish between which incumbents took action, they still may only be reflecting on the political theatrics involved in election season. Meaning that though the results of this study support the hypothesis that voters are observant and punitive, politicians also take advantage of the short attention span of the electorate by implementing policy for short-term improvement rather than productive and effective policy (Kramer, 1971; Gasper and Reeves, 2011; Tufte, 1978). Rather than studying the outcomes of policies like mask mandates, restaurant closures, etc, measuring the type of responses enacted could uncover observations about what voters actually reflect on.

A difficult measure to be explored further that this study was unable to implement is quantifying a "disenfranchisement score" for each county in order to measure the real impacts of ballot deterring efforts. For the purposes of this study, the only disenfranchisement control was the VRA provision 4(b), which could be an aspect of the score, but is not an exhaustive measure of voter suppression. The disenfranchisement score would be a combination of quantitative data like the number of registered voters or ballots purged in a state, and qualitative data such as the reasons behind purges (signature mismatches, no ID, inactivity, etc). Building a quantitative score to measure voter suppression is a massive project, which is why this study did not explore creating it further.

The unemployment rate was initially selected as an independent variable to control for economic indicators that may allude to a lower turnout rate in that county. The results did support this assumption with a significant decrease in turnout where unemployment was highest. What wasn't expected was Republican incumbent governors to do better in counties with the highest unemployment rate. This poses questions surrounding what kind of action the governors were taking towards improving the unemployment rate in their state relative to President Trump, and what about it was so effective to their constituents. To measure this, each month's national and state-level unemployment rate should be collected from January-September 2020. Beginning in January to measure pre-pandemic unemployment rate and through September to remain consistent with the early-voting cutoff used for infection and death counts. The unemployment rate tanked in mid-to-late March and has slowly crept back up, the rate of improvement may be found to correlate with the success of the incumbent Governor which would further support the hypothesis explored in this study.

A conclusion of the unexpected unemployment rate correlations with Governors could be that voting access was expanded enough that voters were a) satisfied with the safety response and b) capable of casting their ballot. Mail-in absentee ballots became significantly more common as it allows for voting without having to physically interact with polling equipment or other people. They could also be filled out and mailed in over an extended period of time and even tracked online in some states. This provides reasons for the unchanged voter turnout between varying COVID-impacted counties. Studying the methods used for

voting could uncover trends for not just pandemic/natural disaster elections but also for elections at any time around the country. Looking into the voters' response to executives' decisions narrowed down to the method of voting may indicate partisan trends, specific policy preferences, and/or specific voter grievances.

Developing a greater understanding of how the electorate engages with their leaders in elections assists in creating an image of what elected leaders ought to be accomplishing to support their constituents. It is also essential to affirm democracy is functioning in the U.S. under the careful eye of the electorate, especially in particularly dangerous and politically divisive times. As a first-time voter in a Presidential election, the results of this study comforted my worries about the efficacy of U.S. elections due to an unengaged voter pool. The U.S. electorate is capable of reflecting on their experiences and observations and holding elected officials accountable at the polls.

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