8

Change (and More of the Same)

IT WAS NOVEMBER 7, a Saturday morning, when Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election. After the ballots had finally been counted in Pennsylvania, Biden's home state, he had a 306–232 advantage in the Electoral College, almost identical to Donald Trump's 304–227 margin in 2016.[1] After two unsuccessful presidential campaigns, in 1988 and 2008, and a difficult decision not to run in 2016, Biden would finally occupy the office he had sought on and off for over thirty years. In a speech that day, Biden said he was "honored and humbled." Elated Biden supporters celebrated in the streets of Philadelphia, New York, San Francisco, Washington, DC, and other cities.[2]

In many ways, Biden's was an unusual victory. Across the history of presidential elections, incumbent presidents have won two-thirds of their races.[3] It is especially rare for incumbents to lose after their party has held the White House for only one term. Indeed, since the Twenty-Second Amendment has limited the number of terms a president can serve, Jimmy Carter and Trump are the only two incumbents to lose in this circumstance.

But to many in the Democratic Party, it did not feel like a victory. They had hoped that strong voter turnout would produce a complete repudiation of Trump and the GOP up and down the ballot. Preelection

polls seemed to suggest a blowout was coming: Biden led by over 8 points in national polling averages and Democrats seemed poised to expand their House majority and reclaim the Senate majority.[4]

Instead, the election delivered much less. Biden's victory was excruciatingly narrow. Despite his 4.4-point margin in the national popular vote, Biden won by very small margins in the key battleground states (49.2%–48.9% in Arizona, 49.5%–48.8% in Wisconsin, and 49.9%–48.7% in Pennsylvania). Indeed, the Democratic Party's disadvantage in the Electoral College—how much it underperformed in key swing states compared to the national popular vote—was actually larger in 2020 than in 2016.[5]

Moreover, the Democrats barely eked out a Senate majority, needing victories in two runoff elections in Georgia to get to fifty seats and having to count on Vice President Kamala Harris to break ties. In the House, Democrats ended up controlling thirteen fewer seats than they had after the 2018 midterm election, leaving them with a slim, nine-seat majority. Biden would take office with unified Democratic control of Congress, but with very few votes to spare as he pursued an ambitious agenda. The morning after Election Day, Politico's influential "Playbook" newsletter called the election "an abject disaster for Democrats in Washington."[6]

Explaining the election's outcome requires an account of two things: why Biden won, but also why the election was so close. Of course, there are myriad reasons why the election turned out as it did. What we seek to do is place 2020 within the framework of factors that shape a typical presidential election, and to address some prominent claims about "what mattered."

Any explanation of Biden's victory must start with Trump's chronically low approval rating. Indeed, Trump's 4-point loss was consistent with the historical relationship between presidential approval and presidential election outcomes. This fact throws into sharp relief the consequence of decisions by Trump that appeared to cost him even a few points of approval. Had Trump been able to maintain the short-lived bump in approval he received because of the pandemic, he likely could have won the election.

The closeness of the election stemmed from the ideological and affective polarization between the two parties that has helped create an increasing calcification of people's political choices. That calcification would characterize the 2020 outcome was arguably unexpected. After all, the surge in turnout gave Biden over 15 million more votes than Clinton received, while Trump won about 11 million more than he had in 2016. And yet, between 2016 and 2020 there were only small shifts in outcomes in both states and counties as well as among individual voters. Indeed, within U.S. counties, the shifts between 2016 and 2020 were the smallest in the past seventy years of presidential elections.

Polarization was visible in how the public perceived the candidates: Trump was perceived as more conservative than in 2016, and Biden was perceived as more liberal than Hillary Clinton. Unsurprisingly, voting behavior was also more polarized: Trump gained votes among conservatives and Biden gained votes among liberals. This helped explain surprising aspects of the election, such as Trump's stronger performance among Latino voters: Trump's gains among moderate and conservative Latinos exceeded his losses among liberal Latinos. Polarization also meant that the changes in the candidates' coalitions largely offset each other, making it difficult for Biden to build a dominant coalition and thus a landslide victory.

A final consequence of calcification is that the election year's important events did not appear to affect the outcome very much. Local voting patterns did not depend much on Biden's advantage in televised campaign advertising. There was also little local impact of the rate of COVID infections or deaths in communities across the country. Even the racial justice protests and ensuing debate about criminal justice had an ambiguous impact at best, despite the prevailing concern after the election that they hurt Biden.

On its face, it might seem obvious that the 2020 election was characterized by partisanship and polarization. But that was hardly a certainty as the campaign was coming to a close. For some, it looked not like a year of electoral calcification, but the exact opposite. In October 2020, one political writer, George Packer of *The Atlantic*, saw the potential for

a different kind of moment, one in which "an ossified social order suddenly turns pliable" and "prolonged stasis gives way to motion." Quoting the philosopher Gershom Scholem, Packer said the moment was a "plastic hour."[7]

But when all the votes were counted, the "plastic hour" had not come. True, a new president had won. But American politics seemed as set in stone as ever.

THE ECONOMY AND TRUMP'S APPROVAL RATING

To understand the 2020 election, a useful beginning is the basic factors that have long structured presidential election outcomes. Chief among them are the state of the economy and the incumbent president's public standing. In chapter 3, we showed that as of early 2020, those factors forecast a close election, with Trump losing narrowly because his unpopularity outweighed the economic growth during his first three years. Although the economy then went into a recession, we showed in chapter 7 that this pandemic economy had an unusual ambiguity: although the country's economic output shrank and Americans lost jobs, their incomes actually increased because of the federal government's stimulus package. As a result, Americans' evaluations of the economy were not nearly as negative as during previous recessions. But once again, Trump's approval rating moved little in response to these events, declining a few percentage points in the spring of 2021 and then rebounding in the fall—but only to his previous level of unpopularity (chapter 5).

How well, then, did the 2020 election fit the historical patterns between the fundamentals and previous presidential election outcomes? Figure 8.1 compares the incumbent party's major-party vote share to presidential approval and to three economic indicators that captured the ambiguity: changes in the size of the economy (measured with the gross domestic product, or GDP), changes in people's incomes, and evaluations of the economy. Major-party vote share refers to the incumbent party's share of the vote that goes to the Democratic and Republican candidates, excluding third-party or independent candidates. In

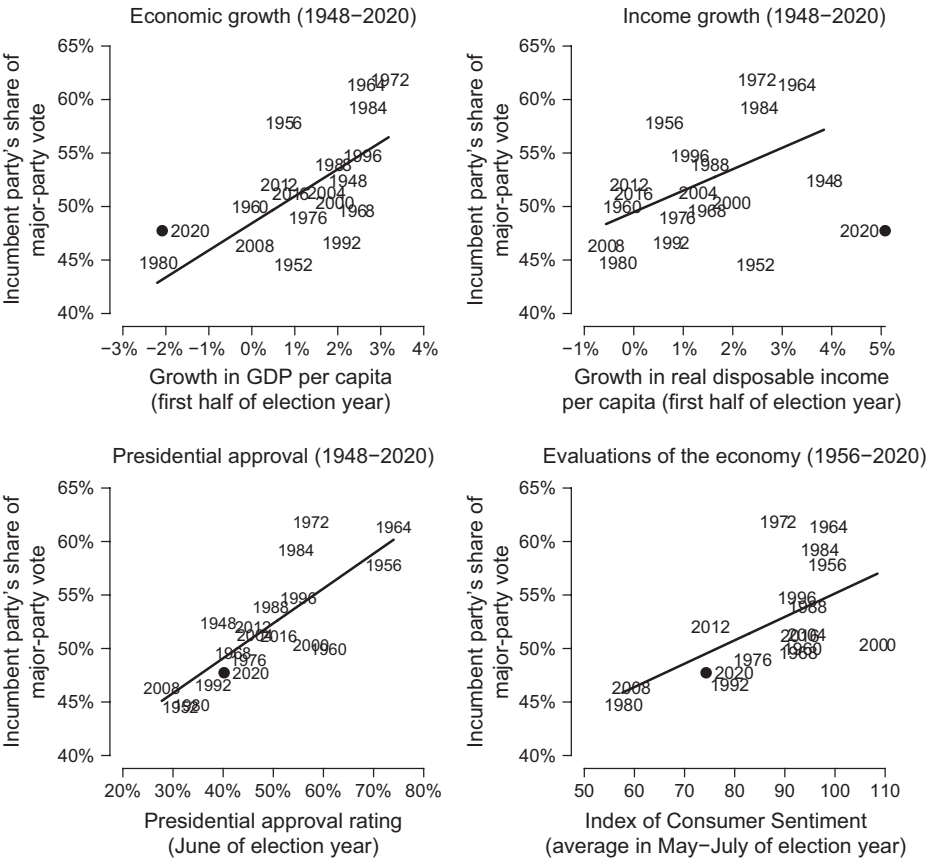

Figure 8.1.
How Economic Indicators and Presidential Approval Relate to Presidential Election Outcomes. All economic growth rates are nonannualized. Presidential approval is an average of all polls conducted in June of the election year. The diagonal fit lines are estimated excluding the 2020 election year. *Sources*: US Election Atlas; St. Louis Federal Reserve FRED Database; University of Michigan.

2020, Trump won 47.7 percent and Biden 52.3 percent. In each panel in figure 8.1, the diagonal line captures the relationships between election outcomes and these factors prior to 2020, thus showing how the 2020 outcome compares to these historical patterns.

Three findings stand out. First, the 2020 election outcome was more consistent with a shrinking economy than with the growth in incomes.

Trump's share of the vote was somewhat higher than the change in GDP would have predicted, but far lower than what income growth would have predicted. In other words, the election was closer than both of these economic measures predicted. Second, the outcome was mostly in line with people's subjective economic evaluations, which did forecast a narrow defeat for Trump.

Third, the outcome in 2020 was very much in line with what Trump's approval rating predicted. Figure 8.1 depicts approval ratings as of June of the election year, simply to see how well election outcomes can be forecast from the political environment several months before Election Day. As of June, the historical pattern suggested that Trump's average approval rating (40%) would translate into a major-party vote share of 49 percent. This was only about 1 point more than Trump actually received.

One implication of these relationships between these fundamental factors and presidential election outcomes is that the 2020 outcome was not that hard to forecast. Of course, there is no way to know the exact "right" combination of factors to forecast a presidential election. But one summary of ten models found that the average prediction was a Trump two-party vote share of 47.3 percent, or almost exactly what he eventually won.[8] Even if the polls suggested Biden could run away with it, forecasts that built in other factors—or ignored polls entirely—showed that, although Trump was in trouble, the election would not be a Democratic landslide.

A second implication is that even a small increase in Trump's popularity could have swung the election in his favor. Before 2020, the historical relationship between presidential approval in June of the election year and major-party vote share suggested that each 1-point increase in approval leads to a 0.33-point increase in vote share. Assume, for example, that Trump's approval had stayed at 46 percent, where it was at the end of March 2020, when he began to take the coronavirus outbreak more seriously and then received a small bump in his approval rating. That would have left his approval rating 6 points higher than it actually was as of June 2020, after Trump's push to reopen the economy and his angry reaction to the George Floyd protests. That 6-point difference

could have translated into 2 additional points of vote share, other things being equal. That means Trump would have received 49.7 percent of the major-party vote instead of 47.7 percent, turning the national popular vote into a toss-up. Given the Electoral College bias in the GOP's favor, a national popular vote margin of only 1 point in favor of the Democrats implies a Trump victory.

Of course, such a scenario is a conjecture at best. But it is a plausible one. Had Trump taken the pandemic more seriously—as did the many other governors and world leaders who experienced durable increases in their approval rating—he could have won. The 2020 election illustrated just how much small shifts can matter when the parties are so narrowly divided.

THE POWER OF PARTISANSHIP

There was another fundamental factor at work in 2020: partisanship. Well before Trump took office, growing differences between Democrats and Republicans helped make Americans' party loyalties a stronger force in their political thinking and voting behavior (chapter 1). During Trump's presidency, strong partisanship helped stabilize Trump's approval ratings, driven both by the resolute antipathy of Democrats and the continued support of Republicans (chapter 3). All of this contributed to a more calcified politics before the election year began. And then the dramatic events of that year—the pandemic, massive protests for racial justice—failed to fundamentally rearrange the political alignments that years of polarization and calcification had created. The 2020 election would only cement those alignments further.

The power of partisanship is visible in the *stability* of people's choices in 2020 compared to 2016. There are three places where that stability was evident: states, counties, and individual voters. The state-level results are depicted in figure 8.2 by comparing the presidential vote in pairs of adjacent elections: 2008 and 2012, 2012 and 2016, and 2016 and 2020. In all three cases, there is a strong relationship between how a state votes in one election and how it votes in another. But there is variation in the extent of the stability and the pattern of any changes.

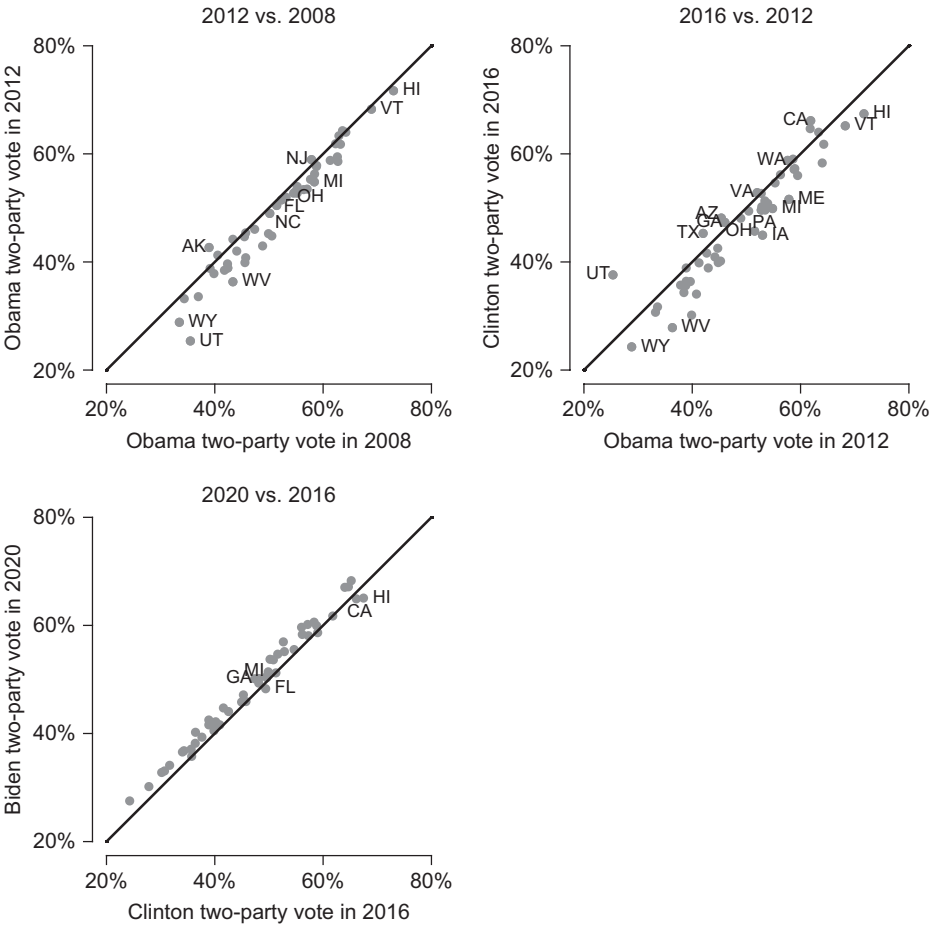

Figure 8.2.
Changes in Presidential Vote in the States, 2008–20. *Source*: US Election Atlas, https://uselectionatlas.org/.

Between 2008 and 2012, the main change was a shift to a smaller margin for Barack Obama than he had in 2008. This pattern, whereby most states shifted in a uniform direction, resulted from changes in the political environment. In 2008, Obama was running against the incumbent party in the midst of a punishing recession. In 2012, he was the incumbent running amid a modest economic recovery, conditions that were favorable to his reelection but not as favorable as the conditions that

led to his initial victory. Any exceptions to this pattern were due to idiosyncratic factors. For example, Alaska was an outlier because its governor, Sarah Palin, was on the Republican ticket in 2008 but not in 2012.

Between 2012 and 2016, by contrast, the state-level shifts were larger in absolute magnitude and not in a uniform direction. In absolute value, the average shift from 2012 to 2016 was 3.3 points, compared to 2.5 points from 2008 to 2012. Some shifts were in the pro-Democratic direction: Hillary Clinton did better than Obama in Arizona, California, Texas, and Virginia. She did worse in other states, especially Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. These countervailing shifts stemmed from how the 2016 campaign helped to create a changing alignment sometimes called the "diploma divide": states with a larger fraction of white voters with college degrees shifted to Clinton and states with a larger fraction of white voters without college degrees shifted to Trump. In turn, this diploma divide can be traced to issues related to race and immigration: education is strongly related to people's views on those issues, and the 2016 campaign made those issues much more salient than had the 2012 campaign. This was the "identity shock" described in chapter 1.[9]

The shifts between 2016 and 2020 told a different story, however. First of all, those shifts were much smaller than between 2012 and 2016 or between 2008 and 2012, averaging only 2 points in absolute value. Second, unlike between 2012 and 2016, those shifts were much more uniform. Biden did better in almost every state than Clinton did in 2020. Thus, the altered alignment that 2016 created largely remained intact in 2020. What made the difference for Biden was that these shifts were just large enough to give him the lead in key swing states, which in turn gave him the victory in the Electoral College that eluded Clinton. This shows, once again, how much small shifts matter in an era of partisan parity.

The small size of the shifts between 2016 and 2020 was also apparent at the county level (figure 8.3). As we noted in chapter 1, the shift or "swing" between one election year and the next has been declining for some time. But the shifts between 2016 and 2020 stand out as particularly small. On average, counties shifted about 1.9 points in absolute

Figure 8.3.
Trends in the Magnitude of Election-to-Election Swings in Presidential Voting at the County Level. The figure depicts the average absolute value of county-level shifts in the Democratic candidate's percent of the major-party vote.

value, compared to 6.6 points between 2012 and 2016. Despite all of the twists and turns of the Trump presidency, the pandemic, George Floyd's murder and the ensuing protests, and the substitution of Joe Biden for Hillary Clinton, one could predict county outcomes in the 2020 election very well simply by knowing the outcomes in 2016.

Finally, there was also a very high level of stability at the individual level among people who voted in 2012, 2016, and 2020 (see table A8.1). This is visible in the Views of the Electorate Research (VOTER) Survey, which interviewed the same respondents in 2012, 2016, and 2020. Among respondents who voted in both 2012 and 2016, most voted for the same party: 81 percent of Obama voters reported voting for Clinton and 84 percent of Romney voters reported voting for Trump. But that stability was even greater from 2016 to 2020, when about 95 percent of both Clinton and Trump voters reported voting for their party's candidate.

Switching between parties—most famously exemplified by the "Obama-Trump" voters of 2016—was far less common.

One reason why the stability between 2016 and 2020 was greater than between 2012 and 2016 was that people who switched parties between 2012 and 2016 remained loyal to the party they supported in 2016. In the VOTER Survey, the vast majority of the Obama-Trump voters (87%) reported voting for Trump in 2020. Similarly, most of the Romney-Clinton voters (83%) supported Biden. That both groups stuck with the party they supported in 2016 helps explain why the 2016–20 county-level shifts were smaller than the shifts between 2012 and 2016. In short, most of 2016's swing voters looked like reliable partisans by 2020.

Another illustration of partisanship's power was visible in the Democratic Party specifically. A competitive presidential primary always raises the question of whether the party will unite around the nominee. That was no different after Biden emerged as the presumptive nominee. For example, an April 8, 2020, *New York Times* story noted Biden's "stunning political comeback" but warned "the challenge of uniting the party around him is just beginning." The headline of the story was "Now Comes the Hard Part for Joe Biden."[10]

However, we showed in chapter 4 that Biden actually emerged from the primary with relatively favorable feelings among the supporters of his chief opponent, Bernie Sanders. That translated into more support in the general election as well. To be sure, most Sanders supporters reported voting for Hillary Clinton in 2016—about 79 percent, according to VOTER Survey interviews conducted after the primaries and after the general election in 2016.[11] But in 2020, that fraction was even larger. In VOTER Survey interviews, 87 percent of Sanders supporters reported voting for Biden.[12] Of course, Biden also went to considerable lengths to woo Sanders supporters, including establishing teams that included more progressive or Sanders-aligned Democrats and were tasked with formulating proposals in various policy areas. There is no way to know exactly how much Biden's efforts mattered, but the upshot is clear: the partisanship visible in the general election results stemmed in part from the willingness of Democratic primary voters to get behind Biden.

PERPETUAL POLARIZATION

Even if differences in overall outcomes between 2016 and 2020 were small, the differences that did exist were consequential. In particular, the overall stability across counties and individuals concealed changes in the candidates' coalitions, including Biden's stronger performance among white voters with college degrees as well as Trump's stronger performance among Black and Latino voters. By one estimate, Trump did 3 percentage points better among Black voters and 8 percentage points better among Latino voters than he did in 2016. The fact that Trump could do better with these voters after four years of hard-line policies on immigration and civil rights surprised many observers. The difference among Latino voters was particularly striking and seemed to hurt Democratic candidates in many places, from south Florida to the Rio Grande Valley. To be sure, voters of color still favored Democrats by a substantial margin and they were integral to Biden's coalition and thus his victory. But few expected Biden to do worse than Clinton. One *New York Times* headline summed it up: "Liberals Envisioned a Multiracial Coalition. Voters of Color Had Other Ideas."[13]

What helps explain these changes in the candidates' coalitions is the same polarization that has been ongoing in American politics for decades but intensified between 2016 and 2020. Americans perceived even more ideological polarization between the two parties and became more polarized themselves. Their own political ideology and issue positions became even more strongly related to their vote in 2020 than in 2016. This was true across a range of racial and ethnic groups. In fact, as we will show, this ideological polarization helps account for Trump's surprisingly stronger performance among Latino voters, many of whom are conservative.

Changing perceptions of the political parties are visible first in how Americans' perceptions of Donald Trump's politics changed. Throughout his presidency, many more Americans came to see him as conservative. This is the logical consequence of how he governed. As we discussed in chapter 2, Trump's ideologically ambiguous campaign, where he flirted with ideas like taxing the wealthy, gave way to a conservative agenda as president.

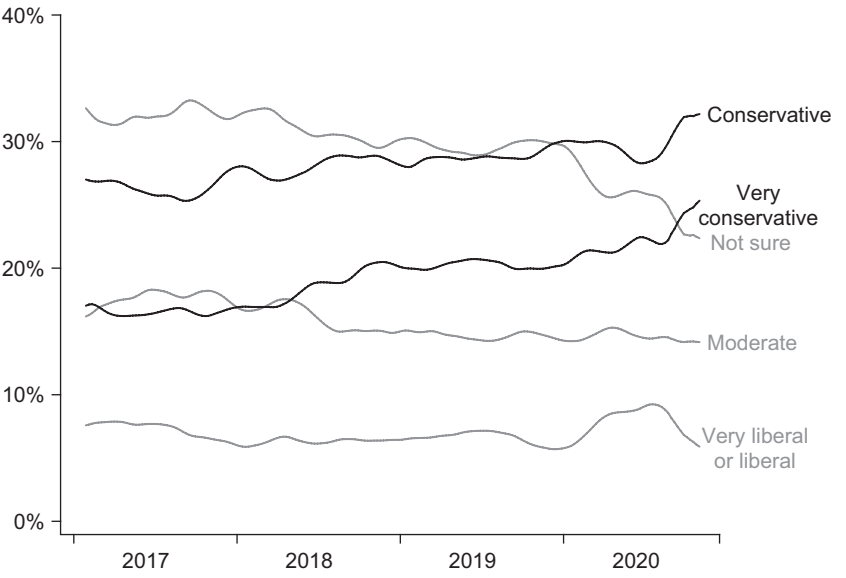

Figure 8.4.
Trends in Perceptions of Donald Trump's Ideology. *Source*: YouGov/*Economist* polls.

In YouGov/*Economist* polls conducted throughout Trump's presidency, the percentage of Americans who said Trump was "conservative" increased from about 27 percent to 32 percent between January 2017 and Election Day 2020 (figure 8.4).[14] The percentage who said he was "very conservative" increased from 17 percent to 25 percent. Meanwhile, the percent who said they were not sure or said he was "moderate" declined. In other words, more Americans came to have an opinion about Trump's ideology and most of them believed, arguably correctly, that he was conservative. This was true among different demographic groups as well. For example, the percentage of Latino voters who said Trump was conservative or very conservative increased from 34 percent to 49 percent.

Americans not only believed that Trump had moved to the right, but also tended to believe that Biden was to the left of Clinton. This was evident in the American National Election Study, which interviewed the same people in the fall of 2016 and the fall of 2020 and asked them how

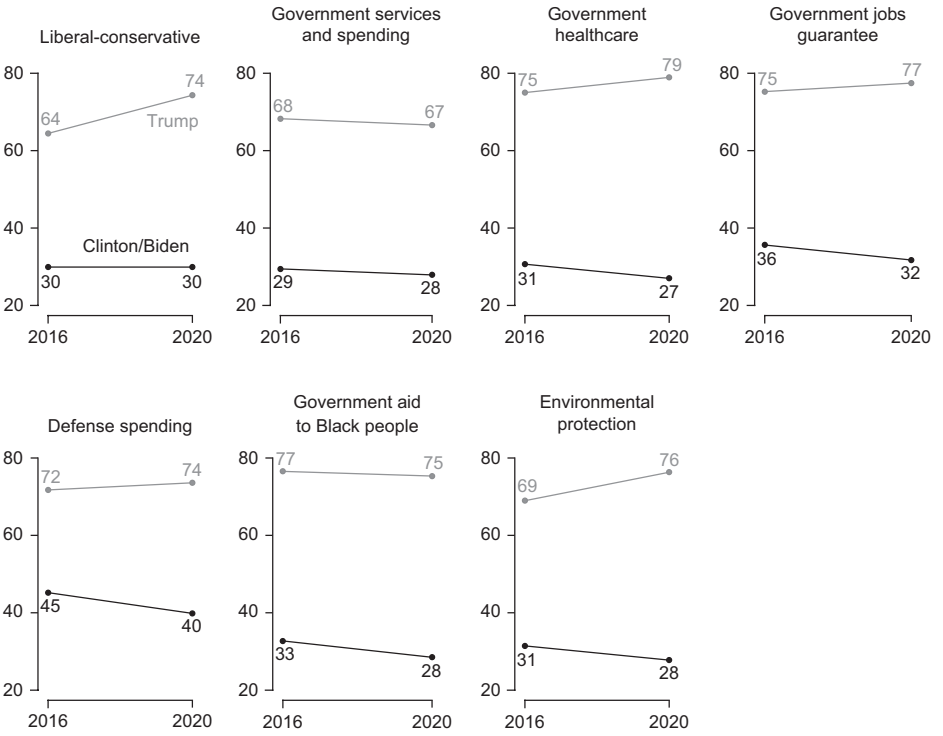

Figure 8.5.
Perceptions of the Issue Positions of the 2016 and 2020 Presidential Candidates. The graph shows average placements of Trump and Clinton (2016) and Trump and Biden (2020) on 7-point scales recoded to range from liberal (0) to conservative (100). *Source*: 2016–20 panel interviews from the American National Election Study ($N = 2{,}509$).

they perceived the ideology of the presidential candidates as well as their positions on various issues.[15]

Here again, there was a notable shift in perceptions of Trump's ideology, from 64 to 74 on a 100-point scale (figure 8.5). Moreover, on almost all of the issues on which people placed the candidates—the role of government in various domains, spending on national defense, environmental regulation—their perceptions of the candidates were more polarized in 2020 than in 2016. In 2020, Americans tended to place Trump further to the right or Biden further to the left (or both), compared to where they placed Trump and Clinton in 2016.[16]

The fact that they perceived Biden as more liberal than Clinton is interesting, given that Biden sometimes tried to distance himself from the more liberal wing of the party—for example, on issues like policing. The perception may reflect the longer-term liberal shift within the Democratic Party and the fact that, although Biden and Clinton may be relative moderates within the party, they are themselves moving to the left along with the party. Certainly, Biden took positions on health care and the environment that were more liberal than Clinton's. For example, compared to Clinton, Biden proposed to allow even more Americans to buy into a government insurance plan and proposed a more ambitious, and expensive, plan to reduce carbon emissions.[17]

If the two parties are further apart ideologically and if Americans perceive those differences, then one consequence should be a stronger association between people's own ideological predispositions and their voting behavior. That is exactly what transpired in 2020 compared to 2016. On balance, Trump gained support among conservative-leaning voters and Biden gained support among liberal-leaning voters. These gains came from some combination of voters who voted in both 2016 and 2020 as well as voters who did not vote in 2016 but did vote in 2020 as part of the surge in turnout. The result was more ideological polarization in voting behavior.

One survey project, the Cooperative Election Study (CES), demonstrates this polarization. In 2016 and 2020, the survey interviewed separate samples of over 60,000 Americans. Because the CES includes data from administrative turnout records in each state, we also know whether voters actually voted in 2016 and 2020. In both years, the CES asked respondents the same questions about their ideological identification on the liberal-conservative spectrum, their attitudes about gun control and abortion, and their perception of the extent of racism in the United States. For illustration, we divided Americans into three groups (conservatives, moderates, and liberals) on each issue and calculated how Biden and Trump performed among that group, relative to Clinton and Trump in 2016. For ideological identification, these three groups reflect the terms that people used to describe themselves. For the other issues, the three groups are derived from building

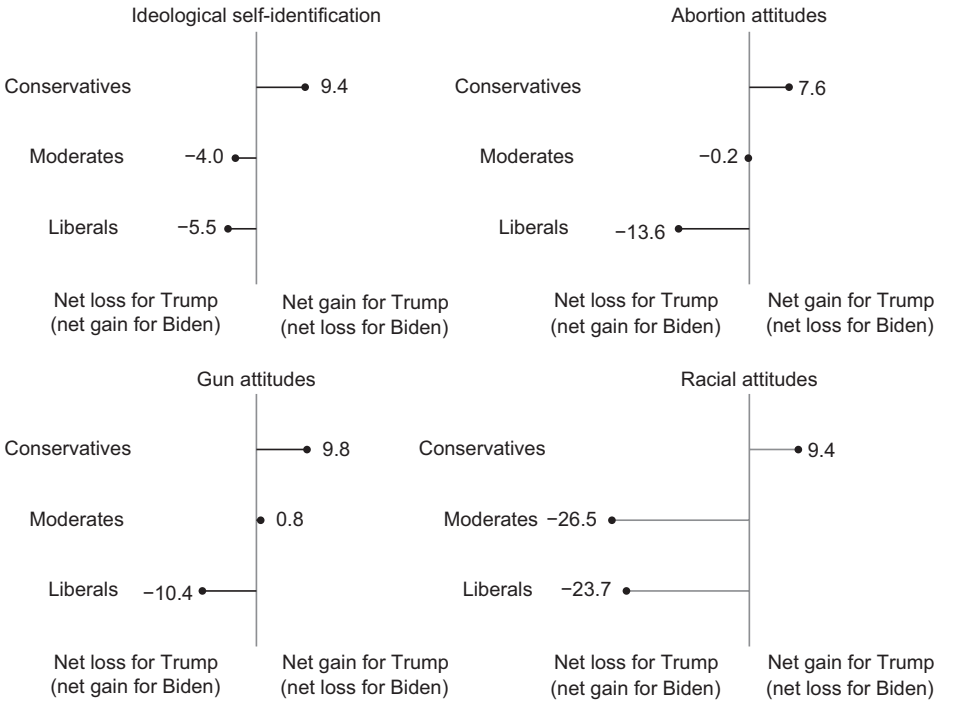

Figure 8.6.
Ideological Polarization in 2020 Voting Behavior (Percentage Point Gains or Losses for Biden and Trump vs. 2016). *Source*: 2016 and 2020 Cooperative Election Surveys.

scales based on responses to several questions about the issue. We then divided the sample roughly into thirds based on issue positions, meaning that labels like "conservative" or "liberal" reflect relative differences on these scales, not discrete groups.[18]

Figure 8.6 presents the differences in voting behavior between the two elections. For example, among all 2020 voters who identified as conservative or very conservative, Trump did 9.4 percentage points better than he did among conservatives who voted in 2016. Meanwhile, Biden performed 5.5 points better with voters who identified as liberal or very liberal, compared to how Clinton did among 2016 voters. This increased polarization, as Trump's performance among conservatives and Biden's performance among liberals made Americans' ideological identification a stronger predictor of how they voted in 2020 than in 2016.

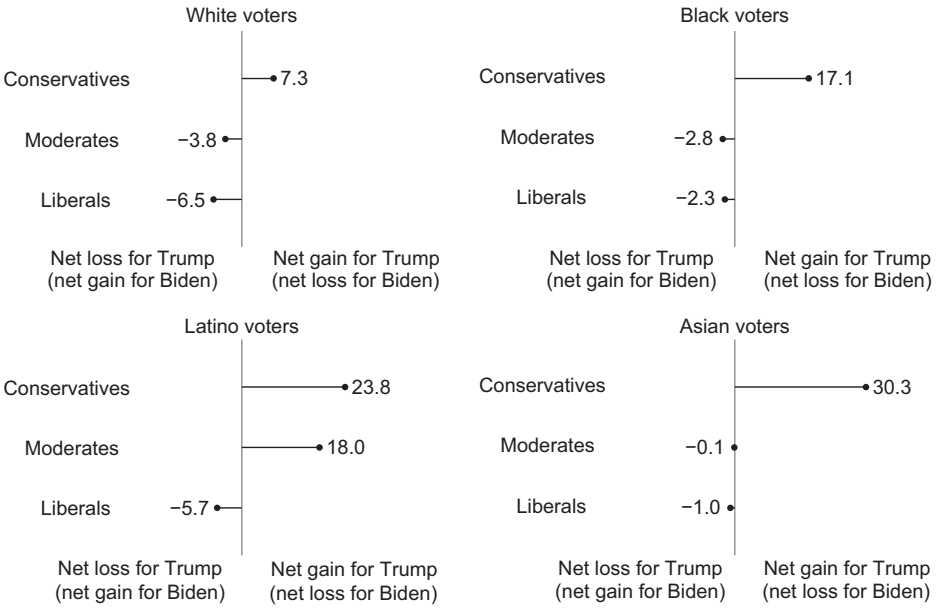

Figure 8.7.
Ideological Polarization in 2020 Voting Behavior among Racial and Ethnic Groups (Percentage Point Gains or Losses for Biden and Trump vs. 2016). Ideology is defined as respondents' self-identification as conservative, moderate, or liberal. *Source*: 2016 and 2020 Cooperative Election Surveys.

That was true of other issues as well. In 2020, Trump did better among people with conservative views on abortion and on gun control. He did better among people with conservative views on race—in this case, people who tended to see racism as a less important problem. Biden did better among liberals on these issues. The magnitude of these gains or losses varied with the issue, but the broad pattern was clear: not only did voters perceive larger ideological differences between the candidates in 2020, but their own ideological beliefs were more strongly related to their choice between Biden and Trump than they were to their choice between Clinton and Trump.

This pattern occurred among all major racial and ethnic groups (figure 8.7). Trump improved his performance among self-identified conservatives who identified as white, Black, Latino, or Asian American. For example, in 2016 Trump won Latino conservatives by a margin

of 59 percent to 33 percent; in 2020 he won them by a margin of 74 percent to 24 percent. Biden improved his performance among self-identified liberals in every racial group. Ideological polarization was a widespread phenomenon, not something confined to certain racial groups.

This polarization helped explain Trump's surprising performance among a group like Latinos. Although Biden gained vote share among the 34 percent of Latino voters who identified as liberal in 2020, this was more than offset by the vote share he lost among the 38 percent who identified as moderate and the 28 percent who identified as conservative. Biden's weaker performance among these latter two groups ended up costing him among Latinos overall.

THE SOURCES OF POLARIZATION

This growing ideological polarization in voting behavior could come from different sources. One is turnout: new voters in 2020 may have voted in a polarized fashion. Another is shifts in candidate choice among the consistent voters who voted in both elections. If Trump gained votes among conservative Clinton voters, or Biden gained votes among liberal Trump voters, then this would have created more ideological polarization. Certainly there was evidence for this in 2016, when Trump won over some white Obama voters who had conservative attitudes on racial issues and immigration.[19]

But in 2020 there were many fewer voters who switched to the other party's candidate. This means that the ideological polarization in voting behavior was more likely to come from a third source: voters changed their issue positions in ways that aligned with their partisanship. For example, if Clinton voters moved left between 2016 and 2020, while Trump voters moved right, then voting in 2020 would look more ideologically polarized even if every Clinton voter voted for Biden and every Trump voter stuck with Trump. There was some precedent for this in 2016 as well: Democrats and Republicans appeared to shift their views on issues like race and immigration during the 2016 campaign itself, with Democrats moving left and Republicans moving right.[20]

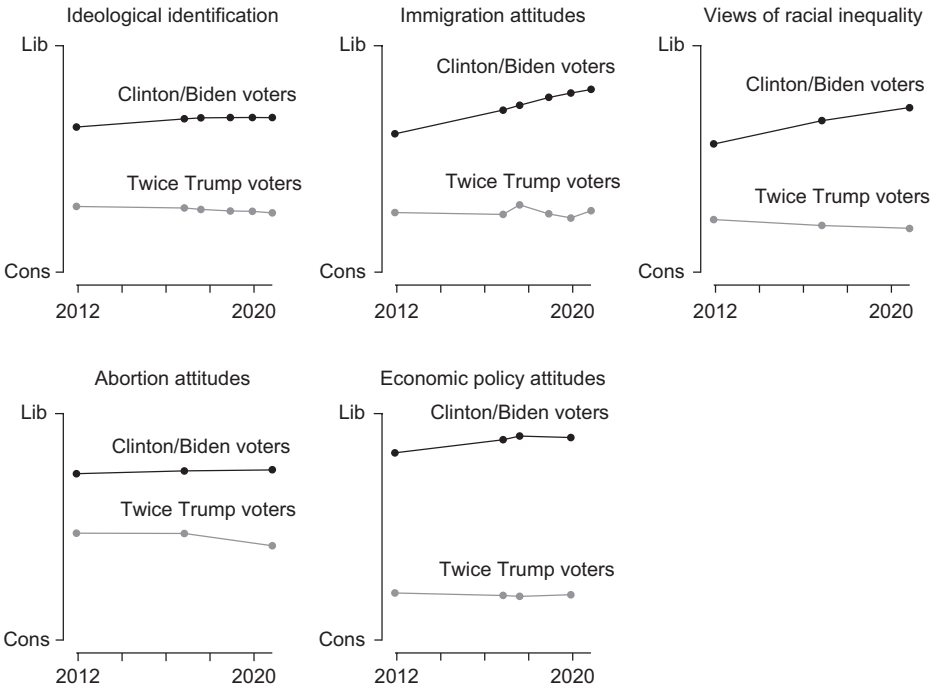

Figure 8.8.
Ideological Polarization among Consistent Democratic and Republican Voters. The figure presents trends in averages on different issue scales where higher values indicate more liberal positions and lower values more conservative positions. *Source*: Views of the Electorate Research Survey.

Between 2016 and 2020, partisans did continue to polarize in their views on a range of issues. One way to see this is to isolate consistent Democratic and Republican voters—those who reported voting for Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020, and those who reported voting for Trump in both elections. The VOTER Survey, which interviewed the same people several times between 2011 and 2020, allows that (figure 8.8). Consistent Democratic voters shifted to the left in how they identified themselves ideologically.[21] For example, in late 2011, 49 percent of consistent Democrats called themselves liberal or very liberal. By late 2020, that had increased to 56 percent. The percentage of consistent Trump voters who called themselves conservative or very conservative increased

from 67 percent to 73 percent. Consistent Democrats moved even more rapidly toward a liberal view of racial inequality (as we showed in chapter 6) and especially immigration (as we showed in chapter 1). If anything, loyal Trump voters became more likely to have a conservative view of racial inequality. Loyal Trump voters also moved right on abortion, while loyal Democratic voters moved to the left on economic policies.

The same pattern of polarization emerged in other surveys, too. The American National Election Studies also interviewed the same respondents in both 2016 and 2020, and consistent Democratic and Republican voters were further apart in their views of the same issues on which they also perceived the candidates as more polarized.

Undoubtedly, ideological polarization does not explain all of the differences in voting behavior between 2016 and 2020. But polarization does provide a simple and general explanation, in the style of Occam's razor, as opposed to a series of boutique explanations for the behavior of specific groups. For example, after the election, prominent news stories said that Biden lost votes among Cuban and Venezuelan Americans in Florida because they disliked the socialist regimes in Cuba and Venezuela and were concerned that the Democratic Party had become too left-wing or "socialist," and he lost votes among Mexican Americans in the Rio Grande Valley because they feared losing oil-industry jobs under a Democratic president who wanted to wean the country from fossil fuels.[22] Perhaps those explanations were true for some voters. But since Biden lost votes among all kinds of Latino voters in all parts of the country, it is important to seek an explanation that can account for this broader pattern among Latinos and that can help understand differences in voting behavior among other groups as well. Ideological polarization helps to accomplish that.

THE LOCAL EFFECTS OF COVID-19 AND CAMPAIGN ADVERTISING

Focusing on ideological polarization to explain the differences between 2016 and 2020 might seem to ignore the distinctive events of the election year itself—and especially the pandemic and the historically expensive

presidential campaign. In particular, it seems plausible that local election outcomes could depend on how hard different places were hit by the pandemic or by which candidate won the "air war" in televised campaign advertisements in different local media markets. Both factors seemed as if they could benefit Biden in particular. Trump was the incumbent in office as the country suffered thousands of COVID-19 deaths. And Biden vastly outspent Trump on the airwaves, as we described in chapter 7.

But there was little evidence that either of these things affected voting behavior at the local level. Biden did not win a larger share of the vote in counties with more COVID-19 deaths or where he had an advantage in ads. This was yet another reason the election was relatively close, despite conditions that seemed to favor Biden.

To be sure, there was clearly the potential for the pandemic to affect local election outcomes. The study of military casualties in war and presidential elections has shown that not only do overall casualties appear to hurt incumbent presidents or their parties at the national level, but casualties may also cost incumbents vote share in the communities where soldiers were from. One reason may be that military deaths get attention in local media, heightening any blame that local residents place on the incumbent party. A similar dynamic could have characterized deaths from COVID-19. Indeed, early research linking weekly Nationscape surveys to data on COVID deaths in survey respondents' county or state between March and August 2020 found that the number of COVID deaths at the state and county level was associated with a lower likelihood of intending to vote for Trump as well as Republican candidates in down-ballot races.[23]

But this pattern did not emerge in the election outcome itself. After accounting for other factors, there was not a statistically significant relationship between the cumulative number of COVID infections per capita and Biden's share of the vote, compared to Clinton's (see table A8.2). That is, counties that experienced more COVID infections did not appear to shift toward Biden to a statistically discernible extent. Paradoxically, Biden actually did *worse* in counties that experienced more cumulative deaths from COVID-19 compared to counties that experienced fewer

deaths. We suspect that this is not because COVID-19 deaths somehow created support for Trump or opposition to Biden; rather, there was likely another factor at play. Given that many conservatives took the pandemic less seriously (see chapter 5), it is possible that very conservative areas had more COVID deaths and particularly high support for Trump. Regardless, the results indicate that the electoral impact of deaths from COVID-19 was not like that of military casualties in the past. The current pandemic better resembled one of the last major pandemics, the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, which also had little local impact on voting for either governors in 1918 or the president in 1920.[24] Thus, to the extent that the pandemic hurt Trump and helped Biden, it was at the national level more than the local level.

Previous research has also shown that televised campaign advertising affects local presidential election outcomes in the places where those advertisements are aired. The most comprehensive assessment, which examined how broadcast advertising data in the 2000 through 2016 presidential elections affected outcomes in U.S. counties, found that the side that aired more ads over the last two months of the campaign—combining candidate, party, and outside group ads in the presidential race—did win more vote share. The size of this relationship was modest, to be sure: for every 100 more ads a candidate aired relative to their opponent, they received 0.02 more points of vote share (that is, two-hundredths of a percentage point). Given that the average advantage in local broadcast advertising in counties was 400 airings, that would translate into 0.08 points.[25]

But as we demonstrated in chapter 7, Joe Biden's advantage in television advertising was much larger than usual for a presidential campaign. Combining local broadcast ads aired over the last two months, Biden's average advantage across U.S. counties was 1,100 ads. But his advantage was even larger because he also aired ads on national broadcast and cable television, which would have aired in every media market in every state. This means that over the last two months of the 2020 campaign, Biden's average advantage over Trump was closer to a whopping 13,000 ads.

However, it is not clear that this advantage ended up helping him. Among survey respondents interviewed weekly as part of the Nationscape

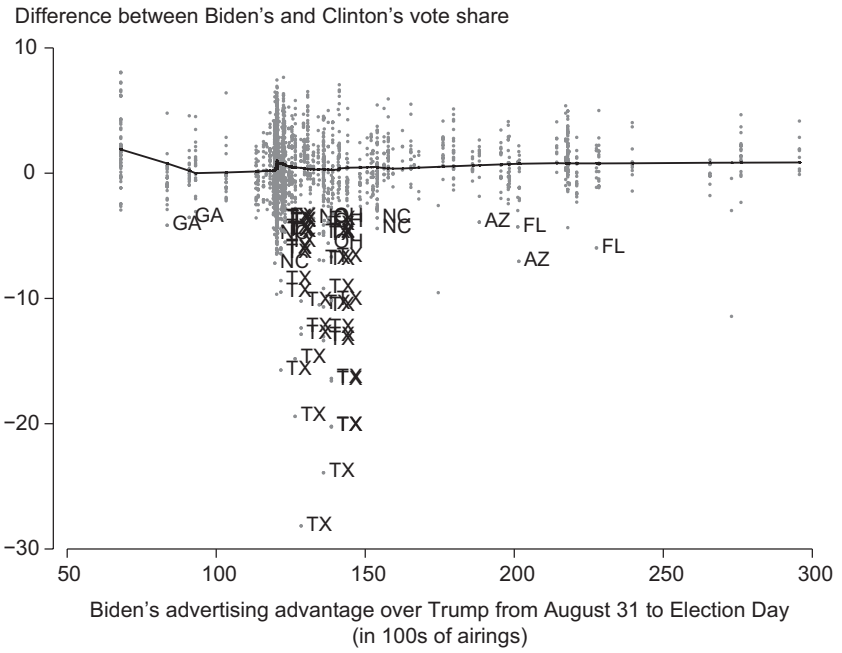

Figure 8.9.
The Relationship between Biden's Advertising Advantage and County Shifts in Vote Share from 2016 to 2020. Each dot represents a county, with certain outlying counties labeled with their state. *Source of advertising data*: Kantar Media.

project, there was no consistently meaningful relationship between the balance of advertising in their county and whom they intended to vote for. For example, respondents who were interviewed right after a period in which Biden's advertising greatly outpaced Trump's were not more likely to say they would vote for Biden, compared to respondents interviewed after a period in which Biden's advertising advantage was smaller (see table A8.4).

A similar finding emerged in the actual election results. Biden's advertising advantage in the last two months of the campaign was not associated with a higher vote share in U.S. counties, relative to Hillary Clinton's 2016 vote share (figure 8.9). The relationship was mostly flat. If anything, there could be a small negative relationship, which is what the statistical models also show (see table A8.2). That a historically large gap in advertising did

not translate into additional votes may again reflect the stability between the 2016 and 2020 elections and the difficulty of moving many voters.

THE RACIAL JUSTICE PROTESTS AND "DEFUNDING THE POLICE"

To many observers, the most electorally consequential events of 2020 were the murder of George Floyd, the racial justice protests, and the debates about criminal justice policy. After the "abject disaster" of the election, many prominent Democrats blamed the party's unexpectedly poor performance on the unpopular idea of "defunding the police," which figured not only in Trump's advertising but in Republican advertising in congressional races as well. Two days after the election, there was a contentious conference call among Democratic members of Congress in which Rep. Abigail Spanberger, a moderate Democrat from Virginia, summed up the view of many, saying, "Don't say defund the police when that's not what we mean" and declaring, "If we are classifying Tuesday [the election] as a success . . . we will get fucking torn apart in 2022."[26]

Although racial justice and policing were frequently cited in explanations of the election's outcome, solid evidence was hard to come by. Part of the challenge is that many potentially important things happened in quick succession: Floyd's murder, the racial justice protests, Trump's criticisms of those protests, Trump's attacks on Biden on crime and criminal justice, the debate about "defunding the police" specifically, Biden's own statements and explicit opposition to defunding, and so on. It is difficult to disentangle them. Another part of the challenge is just the usual struggle to separate correlation from causation, especially when so much of voters' reaction to these events was driven by their own partisanship, as we showed in chapter 6. For this reason, people's views of the police or Black Lives Matter (BLM) may have been mostly a consequence of how they tend to vote, rather than a direct cause of how they voted in 2020.

Ultimately, we find that various dimensions of the racial justice protests and criminal justice debates did not hurt Biden and could possibly have helped him. Four different pieces of evidence speak to this.

National Trends

One initial piece of evidence comes from the national polling, which we described in chapter 7 but is worth noting again. Polling showed that in June and July—the period when there was the most news coverage of Floyd's murder and the racial justice protests—Biden actually gained support. He led Trump by about 5.5 points the week before Floyd's murder. This increased to nearly 9 points by mid-June before declining slightly to roughly 7 to 8 points, where it would stay for the rest of the campaign. If the protests or the issues they raised were politically damaging to him, it did not show up at precisely the moment when it should have.

Moreover, it was not clear that Biden suffered among groups within the electorate who were supposedly turned off by the protests or the idea of defunding the police. For example, some postelection reporting argued that Biden lost support among Latinos for this reason.[27] But weekly Nationscape surveys showed that Biden's margin among Latinos was declining well before Floyd's murder, and there was no clear punctuated drop afterward. Indeed, if anything, the rate of decline slowed down somewhat after Floyd's murder, instead of accelerating as it should have if the debate over policing and racial justice caused a sudden surge of Latino support for Trump.

Local Impact of Racial Justice Protests

Another piece of evidence comes from examining the local impact of the racial justice protests that took place in the spring and summer of 2020. Here, there was reason to think that these protests could influence the actual outcome of the election—just not any consensus on whether they would help Biden or Trump.

One scholarly account, the political scientist Daniel Gillion's book *The Loud Minority*, argues that protests aligned with liberal causes have tended to help Democrats. For example, liberal protest activity in congressional districts between 1960 and 1990 was associated with a higher vote share for Democratic candidates and a lower share for Republican

candidates. Moreover, Gillion found that African American turnout in congressional districts that experienced BLM protests in 2016 increased relative to 2012, even as African American turnout dropped overall.[28]

But one question is whether all types of protest activity help Democrats and, in particular, whether protests that are accompanied by violence can actually elicit a backlash and help Republicans. One study of Black-led protests in the United States between 1960 and 1972 concluded exactly that. The study, by political scientist Omar Wasow, found that counties in which nonviolent protests occurred saw a 1–2 percentage point increase in Democratic vote share in the 1964, 1968, and 1972 elections. Counties in which violence occurred shifted in the opposite direction, with Republican candidates gaining about 2 percentage points. Wasow also found that the violent protests that occurred after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968 may have had an even larger effect: counties where those protests occurred shifted approximately 5 points toward the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon. This was a large enough shift that the Democrat, Hubert Humphrey, would likely have won the election if those protests had not occurred.[29]

Wasow's research figured in a bigger debate in 2020 about whether the election year would become a replay of 1968. Some commentators feared that violence at racial justice protests after George Floyd's murder would help reelect Trump. Others noted key differences between 1968 and 2020. For one, nonviolence was by far the norm after Floyd's murder, and at times any violence was perpetrated by police against the protestors, rather than by the protesters themselves.[30] For another, Trump was the incumbent in 2020, while Nixon was the challenger in 1968. Any unrest or violence in the country might reflect poorly on the incumbent, much like an economic recession does. Complicating this debate was that the academic research does not consistently find that violence at racial justice protests has hurt the Democratic Party. One study of the riots after the 1992 Rodney King verdict in Los Angeles—when the police officers who beat King were acquitted—found that in areas proximate to the riots, more new voters (both white and Black) subsequently registered with the Democratic Party than with the Republican Party.[31]

To examine the potential impact of the racial justice protests in 2020, we again draw on data from the Crowd Counting Consortium, which recorded the incidence of these protests as well as various characteristics, including whether there were arrests, injuries to protestors, injuries to the police, or property damage. We then divided counties into three groups: the 57 percent that had no protests between May 25, when George Floyd was murdered, and Election Day; the 35 percent that had protests but did not have any arrests, injuries, or property damage; and the remaining 8 percent that had protests in which one or more of those things occurred. To be clear, in cases where there were arrests or injuries to protestors, it may not have been because protesters were violent. The arrests could have been for other reasons, such as staying out past a curfew. Moreover, in some cases injuries to protesters resulted from violent police actions. But this simple three-part categorization provides initial purchase on whether voters in counties where racial justice protests occurred voted differently than voters in counties without these protests.

One way to examine this question is to leverage the weekly Nationscape surveys conducted during the protests. This speaks to the question of whether people changed how they intended to vote based on whether a protest took place in their county. We found little evidence of any impact: people in counties with racial justice protests in the weeks immediately before their interview did not change their vote intention, compared to people in counties without protests (see table A8.3.)

Another way is to look at the county-level vote returns. Here, there were differences based on whether a county had experienced a racial justice protest—but the differences were not in the direction that many observers suspected. If anything, Biden did *better*, relative to Clinton in 2016, in counties where these protests occurred (figure 8.10). In counties with no protests, Biden's share of the major-party vote was nearly identical to Clinton's (an average shift of only −0.2 percentage points). In counties that had protests with no arrests, injuries, or property damage, Biden outperformed Clinton by 1.4 points. In counties with protests that had some combination of arrests, injuries, and property damage, Biden outperformed Clinton by 1.7 points.

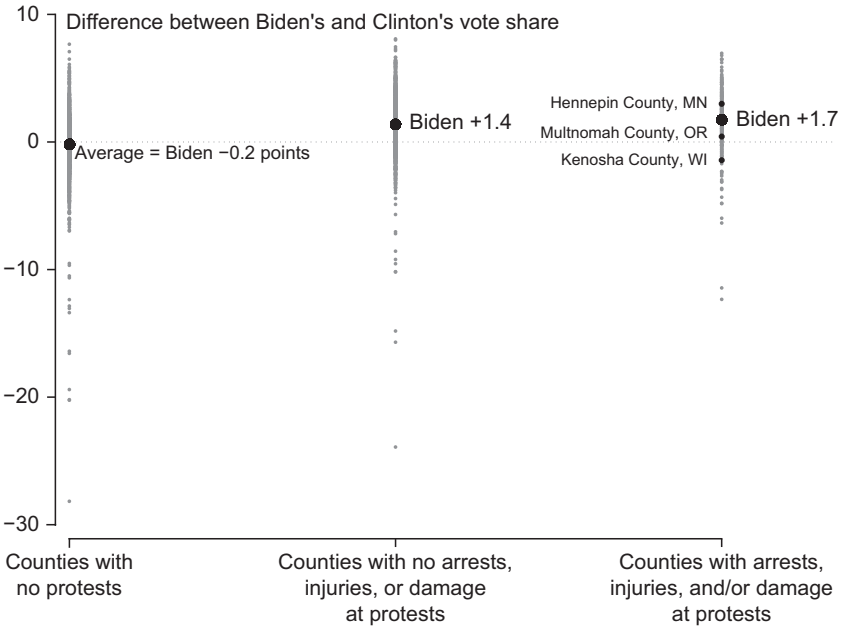

Figure 8.10.
County Shifts in Vote Share, 2016–20, Based on Presence and Circumstances of Racial Justice Protests. *Source for protest data*: Crowd Counting Consortium.

Figure 8.10 also makes clear that these average differences conceal substantial variation. For example, among counties that saw arrests, injuries, or damage, there were certainly places where Biden lost vote share. One was Kenosha County, Wisconsin, where there were protests and violence after the police shooting of Jacob Blake on August 25, 2020. The protests attracted counterprotesters, one of whom, Kyle Rittenhouse, shot and killed two men. In Kenosha County, Biden's share of the vote was 1.4 points lower than Clinton's.[32] But in other cities with substantial protests and violence—including Minneapolis itself (Hennepin County, MN) and Portland (Multnomah County, OR)—Biden's share of the vote was higher than Clinton's.

Of course, the places in which protests occurred were not a random set of counties. But even when we account for other county attributes—their

racial composition, educational composition, median income, and population size—Biden still did approximately 1 point better than Clinton in counties with protests, regardless of whether those protests were accompanied by arrests, injuries, or property damage (see table A8.2).

There is, however, no way to determine from this evidence that the protests actually *caused* Biden to win more votes in the places where those protests occurred. But certainly the evidence does not suggest that Biden was hurt in those places. If that is true, then 2020 was different from 1968 after all.

Effect of Trump Ads on Crime and Public Safety

A third window into the electoral effects of Floyd's murder and its aftermath centers on the counternarrative of Donald Trump. After the election, there was much speculation that Trump's argument about crime, violence, and policing had hurt Biden and other Democrats, especially given how few Americans appeared to support defunding the police. One way to test this is to examine the impact of Trump's advertising on this topic. We showed in chapter 7 that issues related to "public safety" were a prominent theme in Trump's advertising, but there was variation over time in how frequently it was discussed. And of course, there was variation in where those ads aired as well.

The question is whether Trump gained support when and where those public safety ads were aired. By marrying the advertising data to the Nationscape surveys, we can speak to this. The answer is that there was *no* significant association between Trump's advertising on this issue and how people intended to vote. Specifically, the number of Trump ads about public safety in either the week or the month before people were interviewed did not appear to affect whether they intended to vote for Trump or Biden. In short, exposure to hundreds or even thousands of these ads in a short period of time did not change people's attitudes (see table A8.4).

This is perhaps unsurprising, given that television advertising overall did not appear significantly correlated with election outcomes in counties. Moreover, it is possible that Trump's public safety message failed

to resonate because so many Americans disapproved of how he reacted to Floyd's murder, because more Americans appeared to trust Biden on issues related to public safety, and because Biden himself was clear in opposing "defund the police" (see chapters 6 and 7). In short, Trump may have thought he had a winning message, but that was ambiguous from the outset. Studying the effect of this message through the lens of his advertising cannot supply conclusive evidence, of course, but it does suggest again that Biden was not obviously damaged.

Feelings about the Police and Black Lives Matter

A final question is whether people's views about the police or the BLM movement actually influenced their vote. For example, perhaps Biden lost more votes among those who favored the police or opposed defunding than he gained from people who felt less favorably about the police and supported reforms like a ban on chokeholds. Unsurprisingly, it is easy to show correlations between people's views about the police, policing procedure, or BLM and how they feel about Biden or Trump. In chapter 6 we showed how there were significant and, in some cases, growing partisan divisions on this topic.

But people's views of the police or BLM may have been more a consequence of people's voting behavior than a cause. We have already seen evidence of growing division in political attitudes, even among people who did not change the party they voted for in 2016 and 2020 (figure 8.8). The same thing is true in how they viewed the police. For example, among Clinton/Biden voters, the overall rating of the police dropped from 67 to 58 on a 0–100 scale. Among voters who supported Trump in both elections, their ratings stayed about the same (87–88).

A more formal statistical analysis leverages these 2016 and 2020 interviews among the same respondents to examine whether people's views of the police and BLM affected their choice of candidates or whether people's choice of candidates affected their view of the police. That analysis shows much more evidence that people's view of the police or BLM changed, not their voting behavior (see table A8.5). This echoes the findings in chapter 6 and in other research: Americans are

changing their attitudes on racially charged issues in ways that reinforce their partisanship.[33]

Again, this is not conclusive evidence. We lack the ability to do similar tests with views of criminal justice policy, separate from views of the police overall. But this evidence still raises an important cautionary note. In the Trump era, when an already polarized public often confronted even more polarizing messages from political leaders, people tended to take their cue from their party's leaders, changed their attitudes in ways that reinforce their partisanship, and rarely considered voting for the other party's leader. In 2020, this may have kept policing from being the wedge issue that Trump hoped it would be and that Democrats feared.

CONCLUSION

Biden's victory capped an election year that was both historic and horrifying. There were historic protests about racial justice. There was a historic surge in turnout. There were the horrifying deaths of George Floyd and many who fell ill during the pandemic.

In explaining Biden's victory, however, what stands out is something more mundane: an unpopular president lost his bid for reelection. Unpopularity did not doom Trump in 2016, when he was not the incumbent and faced a relatively unpopular opponent in Hillary Clinton. Four years later, however, Trump had different and arguably bigger challenges. He was the incumbent during major national crises, and the majority of Americans judged his performance unfavorably. At the same time, Americans viewed Biden more favorably than they had Clinton. Trump was in a weaker position and had to face a stronger opponent.

At the same time, the narrowness of Biden's victory testified to other familiar patterns in our politics. The polarization endemic in American politics for decades only continued. Democrats and Republicans were even further apart than they had been four years before. People's partisan predispositions were even more ossified, with few shifts since 2016. The remarkable events of 2020 did not necessarily sway many voters

and, indeed, intensified these long-term trends toward greater polarization and calcification.

On November 7, Biden gave his victory speech in Wilmington, Delaware. Amid the many thank-yous—to his wife and family, to Kamala Harris, to his campaign team, to the voters who supported him—Biden tried to sound a very different note than what Americans typically heard from Donald Trump. Biden said, "I pledge to be a president who seeks not to divide but to unify, who doesn't see red states and blue states, only sees the United States." He said, "It's time to put away harsh rhetoric, lower the temperature, see each other again. Listen to each other again. And to make progress, we have to stop treating our opponents as enemies." He said, "This is the time to heal in America."[34]

But Biden was about to learn just how far Trump and his Republican allies would go to prevent Biden from having the chance. They would pose a challenge not only to Biden's presidency, but to American democracy itself.