

Special Issue

# The 2020 U.S. Elections: A Mixed Result for the Political Parties

Mark J. Rozell<sup>a</sup>

Keywords: election

Vol. 36, Issue 1, 2021

Without a doubt, the biggest story of the 2020 U.S. elections was the defeat of the incumbent president Donald J. Trump.<sup>1</sup> For the previous nearly four years, President Trump dominated the U.S. political landscape. Long experienced at self-promotion and previously the star of a popular reality television show, Trump knew how to use mass media to command constant public attention. Whether through savvy use of social media, or continual stoking of political conflict and controversy, Trump made himself and his presidency the dominant presence in U.S. politics throughout his term in office. After his unlikely election to the presidency in 2016, every election campaign in the U.S. leading up to 2020 – even many local and state-level races – was cast as a referendum on Trump and his presidency.

Presidents typically dominate the U.S. political landscape, although Trump raised the presidential focus to a new level altogether. It is thus no surprise that almost all of the attention in the 2020 U.S. election cycle was on one office – the presidency. And judging from the post-election news coverage and political analyses, anyone would reasonably conclude that the Democratic Party had achieved a major political breakthrough in defeating the president and in winning the two U.S. Senate elections in Georgia that effectively secured for the party majority status in the chamber. It was even unprecedented that in cities across the nation there were large spontaneous crowds of celebrations and dancing in the streets after television networks on Saturday, November 7, 2020 declared Democratic Party nominee Joe Biden the winner of the Electoral College. The U.S., these images and political analyses conveyed, had turned a corner with Biden's victory and could soon return to political normalcy. Democrats were elated.

The analysis presented here is that the 2020 elections were actually a mixed result for the two major political parties. The Republican Party had a hugely successful election overall in “down-ticket” races, and the Democrats utterly failed in their quest in the election to banish “Trumpism” from the U.S. political scene. Other than the presidential race and control of the U.S. Senate, there really was not much for the Democrats to celebrate about the elections. Democrats had hoped to defeat numerous prominent pro-Trump Republicans, but most of those GOP officials held on to their offices.

Once the celebrations and the dancing stop, Democrats need to reflect on how much they actually lost in the elections, and the leadership challenges that President Joe Biden will confront in a deeply divided nation. Whereas his political party right now controls the executive and the legislative branches, the margins of control in Congress are extremely thin. If the historical pattern of the president's party losing congressional seats in midterm elections holds in 2022, then President Biden will end up in the second half of his term with divided government, with Republicans in control of one or, more likely, both houses of Congress.

The Republicans in 2020 made big gains throughout the country in electoral contests, and the party staved off well-funded Democratic attempts to flip multiple Senate seats, numerous governorships, state legislative bodies, and many local offices. The Democrats had pinned their hopes on not only thoroughly defeating Trump and his party, but in winning such a large national landslide that they could vanquish Trump and Trump-Republicanism permanently from the political landscape. On almost all accounts other than defeating Trump's reelection bid, and narrowly taking control of the U.S. Senate, the Democrats failed.

To understand the largely mixed results of the elections requires first an examination of what was at stake other than the presidency. Following that is an analysis of key voting groups in the 2020 elections that showcase potential future trouble for the Democratic Party.

## Separation of Powers and Federalism Define U.S. Politics

“The president is not the presidency. The presidency is not the government. Ours is not a presidential system”.<sup>2</sup> The distinguished political scientist Charles O. Jones opened his influential book *The Presidency in a Separated System*, first published in 1994, with these three sentences. Most telling is that Jones believed that he had to set the framework for understanding the operation of the U.S. governmental system by explaining the very fundamental point that the presidency is not everything, and the president himself is not the institution. Most government policies and actions that influence the daily lives of Americans happen outside the White House, and outside of Washington, DC.

a Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University, Virginia, USA, E-mail: mrozell@gmu.edu

1 In the national vote, Joe Biden won 306 Electoral Votes to Trump's 232 (270 needed to win). Biden won 81,283,098 (51.3%) and Trump won 74,222,958 (46.8%).

2 Charles O. Jones, *The Presidency in a Separated System*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2005 (second edition), p. 1.

Over time, through the leadership of some powerful personalities in the White House, the expanding role of the federal government, the emergence of the U.S. as a global power, and the rise of mass media that personify the chief executive as the embodiment of the U.S. government, presidents became the primary focus of media, scholarly, and public attention on the U.S. government. It became as though the president himself is the presidency, the president is the government, and the U.S. is a presidential system.<sup>3</sup> None of that is what the founders of the Republic had in mind when they created the complex system of separated powers and of federalism, that divided and dispersed government powers and thus limited the authority of the nation's chief executive.<sup>4</sup> The very idea of a single person dominating the U.S. political landscape repelled the founders of the Republic. As the scholar Louis Fisher wrote: "Political idolatry of any stripe, including the divine right of kings or waiting for the Great Man, found no support among the framers. They did not put their faith in a single person. Fearing concentrated power, they believed in process and structural checks."<sup>5</sup>

The founders of the Republic in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were deeply suspicious of executive power and of centralized authority. Having fought a war of independence overthrowing the rulership of the British Monarchy, the founders of the U.S. system established initially a system of entirely decentralized authority under the Articles of Confederation, in which the national government was merely a Congress of the states, there was no executive or judicial power at the national level, and in which the states were independent and largely sovereign governing entities. Although the Articles did not long last, the delegates of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 framed a new system of separated powers in which the executive authority would be limited and constrained by the other branches of the government. It was no accident that the legislative article of the Constitution is Article I, in which the most formidable powers of the national government – including lawmaking, taxation, and declaring war – belong to the Congress. Article II, the executive article, is by contrast brief and grants few formal powers to the president, and only one unilateral power – to issue pardons and reprieves. Clearly, the U.S. system was not established to be one of presidential dominance.

With presidents now the focus, in our quadrennial election cycles there is relatively little national attention on what happens in other electoral contests. Even in the midterm elections in which the president is not on the ballot, analyses tend to emphasize the totality of the national elections as a referendum on the president's leadership. These emphases deeply misrepresent the nature of the U.S. governing system that is based on separated powers and federalism. In brief, the election campaigns "down-ticket"

in presidential years matter a great deal, but they tend to get lost in the hyper-focus on the presidential election. Even in non-presidential election years, the role and the political standing of the president loom large in political analyses.

The complexity of the U.S. governing system is what in part drives the heavy presidential focus, as it is extremely difficult to create a clean and direct analytic narrative out of thousands of public offices. The separation of powers structure provides for 535 elected seats to Congress. The federalism structure gives substantial powers to approximately 90,000 governing units throughout the country – states, territories, the District of Columbia, counties, cities, townships, villages, and such entities as school boards, library boards, land use and conservation boards, railroad boards, and judicial offices, among many others. Additionally, many of the states allow for direct voting on popular initiatives (referendums and other ballot initiatives) and even popular vote recalls of some elected officials.

In what follows, I provide a broader analysis, beyond the presidency, to unpack the meaning of the 2020 election outcomes and what they portend for future two-party competition. I also present a somewhat contrarian analysis of the meaning of the presidential election itself, as an encouraging sign for the future of the Republican Party given the impressive grassroots mobilization of GOP voters and the party's successful inroads into certain key demographics.

### **What Was at Stake in the 2020 Elections Besides the U.S. Presidency?**

The election ballot that I received at my Montgomery County, Maryland residence from the Maryland Board of Elections was two-and-a-half long pages. Compared with the ballots in a number of states, that was relatively short. And yet on that ballot alone were not only the presidency, but also the House of Representatives candidates in my congressional district, circuit court judge, court of appeals judge, court of appeals at-large members, at-large elected school board members, the local school district school board member, a constitutional amendment on the state budget process, a commercial gaming referendum, a county council charter amendment to limit rates of property tax increases, a county council charter amendment to increase the membership of the elected council from nine to eleven members, and a county council charter amendment to instead alter the composition of the existing nine districts. Voters in California had even more issues to consider as they voted on thirteen state ballot initiatives in areas such as taxes, affirmative action, law enforcement, bonds, housing, business regulation, health care, ending cash bail, and extending suffrage to 17-year olds for primaries and certain special elections.<sup>6</sup>

3 An excellent overview of the rise of the U.S.'s devotion to a strong and dominant presidency, and the consequences of the intensified focus on presidents, is Gene Healy, *The Cult of the Presidency: America's Dangerous Devotion to Executive Power*. Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2008.

4 Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, *Federalism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 14-32.

5 Lou Fisher, *Appreciating Congress: The People's Branch*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2010, pp. 41-42.

Most importantly, on the ballots throughout the country were the following:

1. President of the United States.
2. All 435 seats to the U.S. House of Representatives.
3. 35 U.S. Senate seats.
4. 86 of the nation's 98 partisan state legislative chambers, with 5,876 legislative seats contested.
5. Eleven governorships
6. Thousands of other state and local offices.
7. 120 Ballot measures, including, among others, referendums and bond questions.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas historically in a landslide victory such as Joe Biden's the party winning the White House picks up a significant number of seats in Congress, in 2020 the Democrats lost substantial ground.<sup>8</sup> Most telling of all, in the U.S. House of Representatives elections, not a single Republican incumbent who ran for reelection lost, and the GOP picked up thirteen seats in the chamber. In the past 100 years (1920-2020), only five times has the winning presidential candidate's political party lost seats in the U.S. House of Representatives in the national election. The 2020 election constituted the second largest number of seats lost in that scenario.<sup>9</sup>

In the Senate, the Republicans had held a 52-48 majority going into the election and the Democrats put enormous energy and resources into attempting to flip several Republican-held seats. In this cycle, only 10 Democrats were up for reelection, and 25 Republicans, making the odds strongly favoring the Democrats to gain substantial ground. Yet the Republicans on Election Night held a 50-48 lead, with two races in Georgia remaining to be decided in runoff elections. Democratic donors poured unprecedented sums of money into a number of targeted Senate campaigns to try to unseat Republican incumbents, only to see most of the incumbents easily be reelected.

For the Democrats, the major bright spot was winning the two run-off elections in the state of Georgia in January 2021. Georgia requires a candidate to win a majority of the vote on election night, not a mere plurality, to be officially elected. In Georgia's two U.S. Senate races, there was no one who won a majority, which triggered the runoff elections. Few expected the Democratic candidates to win against the GOP incumbents, until President Trump repeat-

edly declared the election process a fraud, which effectively signaled to his own supporters that their votes would not change the outcome of what he called a "rigged" process. Trump attacked Republican elections officials and even the GOP governor of the state for not overturning the outcome of Georgia's popular vote for president, and thus further alienated Republican voters. The two victories gave the Democrats a 50-50 tie in the U.S. Senate, and as the Vice President of the U.S. is the presiding officer of the chamber, she casts the tie-breaking vote that gives her party control.<sup>10</sup> That Democrats though could not pick up more seats severely weakens their chances of maintaining control of the chamber beyond the first two years of Biden's presidency.

In the state-level elections, the GOP held on to its 27-23 control of a majority of governorships. Again, the odds had favored the Democrats, as in the eleven gubernatorial campaigns eight Republicans and three Democrats were up for reelection. Regarding the 86 state legislative chambers up for reelection, 59 were held by the GOP and 39 by the Democrats. The Democrats targeted nine state legislative chambers that they believed they could flip from GOP to Democratic control. Yet, the Republicans flipped three legislative chambers, the Democrats did not win any. Further, the Republicans gained a remarkable 179 state legislative seats over the Democrats nationally.<sup>11</sup>

These state legislative elections were especially important in 2020 because of the decennial census taking place and state legislative bodies in most states control the redistricting process that will establish the competitive framework for the two parties in congressional and state legislative races for the next decade. The GOP successes in state elections in 2020 promise to be a boon to the party for years.

Voting against President Trump for many Americans did not mean voting against the Republican Party. This was an election in which there was a significant amount of split-ticket voting, reflecting at once a rejection of Trump's leadership but also a rejection of the widely perceived increasingly Left-leaning ideology of the Democratic Party throughout the country. All over the country, progressive Democrats lost races in state and local contests in districts where voters soundly rejected Donald Trump. Important progressive popular referendums, such as one in California that would have reestablished affirmative action policies<sup>12</sup>, went down to defeat throughout the country in places

6 Ballotpedia, "California 2020 Ballot Propositions", [https://ballotpedia.org/California\\_2020\\_ballot\\_propositions](https://ballotpedia.org/California_2020_ballot_propositions) (accessed December 30, 2020).

7 Ballotpedia, "Ballot Measure Scorecard, 2020", [https://ballotpedia.org/Ballot\\_Measure\\_Scorecard\\_2020](https://ballotpedia.org/Ballot_Measure_Scorecard_2020) (accessed December 27, 2020).

8 Ballotpedia, "Results of US House Elections in Presidential Election Years, 1920-2020". [https://ballotpedia.org/Results\\_of\\_U.S.\\_House\\_elections\\_in\\_presidential\\_election\\_years\\_1920-2020](https://ballotpedia.org/Results_of_U.S._House_elections_in_presidential_election_years_1920-2020) (accessed December 27, 2020).

9 Ibid.

10 The majority party of each chamber chairs all the committees and subcommittees as well as the flow of legislation. There is precedent for the parties to agree instead to a power-sharing arrangement given the 50-50 tie, but at this writing no such agreement has been made to do that in the current Congress. Had the GOP held one of the Georgia seats, Biden would have become the first Democratic president since Grover Cleveland in 1885 to assume the presidency without his party controlling both houses of Congress.

11 <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/ncsl-state-elections-2020.aspx> (accessed December 15, 2020). See also, Thomas B. Edsall, "Honestly, this was a Weird Election", *New York Times*, December 2, 2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/02/opinion/biden-trump-moderates-progressives.html>) (accessed December 15, 2020).

12 Proposition 16 was a constitutional amendment to overturn Proposition 209 (1996) that prohibits government and public institutions

where they were considered likely to succeed. The split-ticket voting was a function of the following:

First, President Trump was unpopular throughout his presidency. He consistently held historic and near-historic lows in public approval ratings throughout much of his term in office, although he also sustained a base of supporters who were deeply loyal to him and intense in their support – about one-third of respondents to presidential support opinion polls. No one thought the president could command a popular vote majority in the election, so his victory would only happen with another perfect configuration of Electoral College votes – always a slim possibility.

Second, as Americans tend to be retrospective voters, rewarding or punishing leaders based on performance in office, the public judged Trump to have been a failed leader on the major issue of 2020 – managing the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Under these circumstances, Trump was a long-shot to win reelection all along. As Trump's personality so thoroughly dominated the political landscape, it was easy for many voters to separate their judgments of him from other Republican candidates for offices.

Third, the intensified activism and at-times overheated rhetoric of the American Left in 2020 turned off many anti-Trump voters from supporting the Democratic Party's candidates down-ticket. U.S. national elections often are focused on "swing voters" who align neither with the Democrats nor the Republicans and tend to be politically centrist. Analysts identify swing voters as predominantly white middle class and upper-middle class suburban and exurban residents. Exit polling data show that as many of these voters rejected Trump, they also rejected what they perceived as a Democratic Party that had pulled too far to the Left.<sup>13</sup> A telling example was Georgia, a Republican-leaning state that Joe Biden won, but two progressive U.S. Senate candidates of his party could not win majorities on Election Night.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement demonstra-

tions, during which Americans saw in their cities multiple days of violence, looting, businesses destroyed, even the White House property barricaded, along with Democratic Party leaders embracing the movement and its protesters, became a huge turn-off for many of the swing voters, as well as some other minority voters. Politically extremist slogans such as "Defund the Police" and images on television of some demonstrators carrying "Fuck the Police" banners, or verbally assaulting diners in restaurants who refused to raise their fists in solidarity with the BLM movement, all were broadcast repeatedly on network and cable television and spread widely on social media. Add to that the seemingly utter hypocrisy of Democrats and mainstream media outlets that had condemned any political gathering of Trump supporters as endangering public health during the pandemic, and yet had little or nothing critical to say of the mass protests in cities, and in many cases lent their strong support to the protests.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, some leading Democrats with high public profiles, including Senator Bernie Sanders (VT), and Congressmember Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY), among others, pushed for radically controversial policies to be embraced by the party, including the Green New Deal, college loan forgiveness by the federal government, and Medicare for all, further hampering the party with an extremist image for many voters. To secure support from discontented progressives who had never embraced Biden, the Democratic nominee joined with the democratic-socialist Sanders in a unity platform of policy positions that fueled suspicions that the progressives were in control of the party.<sup>15</sup>

To use the common phrase, the voters could have their cake and eat it too – get rid of Trump, but also reject the perceived extremes of the Democratic Left by voting Republican in the down-ticket races. Aiding this scenario as well was the nomination of a moderate Democrat (Biden) for the presidency, as well as a former public prosecutor for vice president (Senator Kamala Harris), giving the anti-Trump/

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from granting "preferential treatment to persons based on race, sex, ethnicity, or national origin in public employment, public education, and public contracting". Proposition 16 failed by 57.23-42.77%, despite the fact that advocates of the Proposition raised and spent over \$20 million in their campaign to pass it, whereas the opposition raised and spent less than \$1.5 million. See *Ballotpedia*, "California Proposition 16, Repeal Proposition 209 Affirmative Action Amendment (2020)", [https://ballotpedia.org/California\\_Proposition\\_16\\_Repeal\\_Proposition\\_209\\_Affirmative\\_Action\\_Amendment\\_\(2020\)](https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_16_Repeal_Proposition_209_Affirmative_Action_Amendment_(2020)) (accessed December 27, 2020).

- 13 The popular political analysis website 538 carried a somewhat misleading headline and analysis post-election, suggesting that swing voters were not all that important in 2020. Whereas the analysis is correct that in most states the difference between Biden's popular vote total and that of the Democratic Party U.S. Senate candidates was less than five percentage points, a difference of a few or several percentage points is usually determinative of election outcomes. Thus, the small margins between Biden's and down-ticket Democrats' votes were ultimately what enabled Republicans to hold the U.S. Senate, increase their numbers in the House, achieve substantial gains in state and local elections, and defeat a number of progressive ballot measures across the country. Biden won the popular vote nationally by about seven million voters. Typically, such a large popular vote margin results in the victor's party achieving large gains in down-ticket races, not substantial losses. See Nathaniel Rakich and Ryan Best, "There Wasn't THAT Much Split-Ticket Voting in 2020", 538, December 2, 2020, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/there-wasnt-that-much-split-ticket-voting-in-2020/> (accessed December 28, 2020).
- 14 To be clear, this analysis is focused on the shaping of public perceptions and how they affect voting. There were important differences between the Trump rallies and the BLM demonstrations, with the former often held indoors and with many people not wearing masks, whereas the latter were all outdoors and most participants were wearing masks. Preliminary studies showed significant community spread of COVID-19 after Trump rallies, but very little in communities where there were BLM protests. These nuances are important from a public health perspective, but not so much to political perceptions. For an academic analysis of the effects of COVID-19 spread from Trump rallies, see B. Douglas Burnheim, Nina Buchmann, Zach Freitas-Groff, and Sebastian Otero, "The Effects of Large Group Meetings on the Spread of COVID-19: The Case of Trump Rallies", SSRN, December 18, 2020, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3722299](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3722299) (accessed December 28, 2020).
- 15 "Biden-Sanders Unity Task Force Recommendations", <https://joebiden.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/UNITY-TASK-FORCE-RECOMMENDATIONS.pdf> (accessed December 27, 2020). Ocasio-Cortez was cochair of the task force.

anti-Left swing voters an easy choice for the presidential ticket. Even with the push by the progressive wing of the party to bring Biden to its side, the Democratic nominee in the campaign skillfully stuck to a middle ground while allowing Sanders, unity task force co-chair Ocasio-Cortez, and other leading progressives to assure the party's Left-wing that electing Biden was critical to their agenda. Ultimately, Biden did not suffer the fate of many down-ticket Democrats because he alone was running against Trump, and ending the Trump presidency was the one goal on which the progressive Democratic activists and swing voters could all agree.

Thus, separation of powers and federalism gave Republicans meaningful victories in an election year in which they nonetheless lost the top office in the nation. In the long-term, that may be the best outcome for the future of the Republican Party. The GOP not only strengthened its position in the House of Representatives and in state and local elections, it can possibly hold Trump's constituency in the future without the burden of Trump himself holding national office.

Looking at the separation of powers, the Republicans are well-positioned to thwart the Biden Administration's agenda in Congress over the next four years, and if the historical pattern holds – the party out of the White House almost always gains seats in the congressional midterm elections – the GOP will strengthen its position significantly in the 2022 elections. With an unprecedented number of federal judgeships filled in one presidential term by Trump, including three conservatives on the U.S. Supreme Court, the Republicans can look forward to a long period of conservative judicial philosophy dominating the federal courts. The GOP may also be able to stop a number of Biden's judicial nominees from being confirmed in the Senate.

Regarding federalism, the GOP not only held its strong majorities of governorships, it improved the party's hold on state legislative chambers, state legislative seats, and local offices, as well as defeated many key progressive initiatives, and it will control redistricting in most states over the next decade. Additionally, local and state elected officials provide a rich pool of future candidates for federal offices.

Finally, less discussed but important to the future of the parties' positioning for the nation's top office, Joe Biden will be 82 years of age in 2024. Normally a party in such an election cycle as this one would be positioning for a second-term quest by the incumbent president, but that seems highly unlikely now given Biden's advanced age. Rather than the advantage of incumbency in 2024, the Democratic Party most likely will, like the Republicans, have an open presidential nomination contest. The biggest bright spot for the Democrats in 2020 turns out to be for a single term presidency, with the president surrounded by much Republican

opposition during his one term.

## 2020 Voting, Demographics and the Future of Partisan Competition

About 66.7% of eligible voters voted, the highest percentage in 120 years.<sup>16</sup> The COVID-19 outbreak was surely one factor in that outcome, as increased access to voting through mail-in ballots and early voting significantly aided higher turnouts. Also, the intensity of feelings about the president, both negative and positive, drove the higher turnouts. Joe Biden received the most votes of any presidential candidate in history. Donald Trump though received the second most.

The Democratic and Republican parties are necessarily broad coalitions organized around general “left-right” ideological positions. Over the first 150 years of their contests, key issues had been slavery, tariffs, and monetary policy. Then between 1964-2016, the main division regarded a larger (Democratic) or smaller (Republican) role for the federal government, especially as regards domestic policy spending and the welfare state.

President Trump reconfigured the party alignments significantly. Today the Republican Party is made up of business interests, libertarians, and social conservatives – similar to what, for example, the party looked like in the George W. Bush years. But now the party is made up also of nativists and advocates of disengagement from the world, and advocates of international trade barriers. The traditional factions of the GOP for the past four years have been junior partners to Trump's personalized and nationalist support elements. The traditional Republicans intensely disliked their junior partner status, and many became Trump's most vocal opponents in the 2020 campaign. Importantly to the future of the parties though is that with Trump out of office, anti-Trump Republicans will find their way back into supporting the party's next presidential nominee, and the newly mobilized Republicans most likely will remain GOP voters.

Also significant is that there is evidence in the 2020 voting data of breaks in the traditional Democratic Party coalitions. Proponents of the “demography is destiny” thesis have long argued that the Democratic Party is the inevitable majority party of the U.S., given its appeal primarily to the fastest-growing segments of the population.<sup>17</sup> Whereas the Republican Party is overwhelmingly white – about 90% non-Hispanic white, whereas the Democratic Party is about 70% – and the white population is experiencing nearly zero growth in the country, the Democratic Party's coalition of fast-growing minority populations – particularly Latino and Asian – according to the thesis, will ensure its long-term majority status.<sup>18</sup>

The flaw in this thesis is that it assumes static voting pat-

16 Statista, “Voter Turnout Rate in the Presidential Election in the United States as of December 7, 2020, By State”, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1184621/presidential-election-voter-turnout-rate-state/> (accessed December 29, 2020).

17 Ruy Teixeira and John Judis, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*. New York: Scribner, 2004.

18 A telling example of declining white electoral power in the U.S.: In 1988, George H.W. Bush won 59% of the white vote, and he won a 44-state Electoral College landslide. In 2012, Mitt Romney won 59% of the white vote, and he lost the election to Barack Obama.

terns over time among demographic groups, and does not account for the possibility that future shifts in partisan positions may shift voting allegiances of some groups. Recent election cycles have shown significant breaks in past patterns of voting behavior, and the 2020 elections outcomes offer some telling developments.

Some of the vote shifting significantly pre-dates the Trump era, although the 2016 and 2020 elections accelerated certain patterns. For example, the GOP was once the party of wealthy, educated Americans, and class was a strong predictor of voting behavior, with lower-income citizens reliably voting Democratic. The Republican Party under Trump had a much more working-class profile than before. Trump's working-class voters were overwhelmingly white, and they projected strong grievances against government policies that they perceived as giving special advantages to racial minorities, particularly blacks and Latinos.

Today, the single best predictor of voting behavior is education, with the college-educated and post-graduates heavily voting Democratic, regardless of race, and non-college educated whites voting heavily Republican. Indeed, on this variable, the fastest-growing segment of the white population now is college-educated and above, portending continued growth in support for the Democratic Party. Additionally, Donald Trump's working-class voters were a relatively older demographic, whereas the emerging educated population is much younger, portending further benefit to the Democrats with generational replacement over time. Significantly, as of 2019 for the first time in U.S. history, a majority of citizens under 16 years of age identify as racial or ethnic minority. About 40% of this group is black or Hispanic – both heavily Democratic voting.<sup>19</sup>

Whereas the above all look promising for the future of the Democratic Party, the 2020 elections results showed that there are cracks in the Democratic coalition of minorities, as well as concerns about the continued support of more highly-educated voters. Donald Trump lost reelection with declining white support over his 2016 showing, with most substantial declines from the highly-educated, yet he fared better with minority voters in his second run for the presidency. Looking at the differences in the percentages of voting Republican or Democratic for president, Trump's margin over Hillary Clinton in 2016 among the majority white voters was 20%, but only 17% over Joe Biden in 2020 (whites were 67% of 2020 voters). That is where Trump lost the election, and much of that loss may reflect only a one-time anti-Trump reaction, suggesting that with a bet-

ter candidate in 2024 the Republicans can recapture some of this loss among white voters easily.

Significantly, Trump held down his losses among minority voters in 2020. Hillary Clinton's margin over Trump among black voters was 81%, but Biden's was merely 75% (87-12%), a 6% gain for Trump over the two cycles. Notably, Trump received 19% of the black male vote in 2020. Trump in 2020 also improved his vote share among Hispanics by 5%, and among Asians by 11%. Among the category "other minorities", normally a heavily-Democratic voting segment, Trump received 41% of the vote in 2020.<sup>20</sup> Note that these are Trump's improved numbers with minority voters in an election he lost, whereas Republicans down-ticket fared better overall than the president with most demographics.

Some additional insight is observed from examining Asian and Hispanic voting. For the former, analysis can be frustrating due to exit polls including diverse Asian subgroups – South Asians, East Asians, Southeast Asians, Central Asians, and Pacific-Americans – in one category. Conventional political analyses suggested Trump would lose, not gain, Asian votes in 2020 due to his racist rantings about the COVID-19 spread, variably calling it the "fung flu" and the "China virus" – rhetoric that many Asian-American leaders said had contributed to an increase in hate crimes against East Asian American citizens and residents.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, other factors weighed as well, including that the president's verbal attacks on China's communist party over its deceitful handling of information about the virus outbreak, its continued human rights violations in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, and its increasingly aggressive posture in the South China Sea, resonated with many first-generation Chinese-Americans and Chinese national U.S. residents, as well as many South and Southeast-Asian Americans. "The issue of anti-communism or anti-China weighs heavily on the minds of the first generation," according to Linda Vo, a professor of Asian-American studies at the University of California, Irvine. "They see the GOP as socially conservative and anti-communist, which aligns more with their values".<sup>22</sup> Many Indian-Americans too perceived Trump as an ally of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Progressive proposals to advance the plight of certain minorities and the Black Lives Matter movement generated a backlash among some Asian-American voters, who perceived racial preference policies in education admissions, hiring, and government contracting as discriminating

19 William H. Fry, "The Nation is Diversifying Even Faster than Predicted, According to New Census Data", The Brookings Institution, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/new-census-data-shows-the-nation-is-diversifying-even-faster-than-predicted/> (accessed December 29, 2020).

20 CNN, "Exit Polls", December 18, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/election/2020/exit-polls/president/national-results> (accessed December 29, 2020).

21 Russell Jeung, Manjusha Kulkarni, and Cynthia Choi, "Trump's Racist Comments are Fueling Hate Crimes Against Asian Americans. Time for State Leaders to Step In", *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-04-01/coronavirus-anti-asian-discrimination-threats> (accessed December 29, 2020).

22 Li Zhou, "What We Know About Who Asian American Voters Supported in the Election", *Vox*, November 14, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/21561408/asian-american-voters-presidential-election> (accessed December 29, 2020).

against successful minority populations. The landslide-level defeat of California's pro-affirmative action Proposition 16 – in a heavily progressive state, but one with over 40% Asian population – demonstrated the high-potential for political backlash against Democratic-backed policies that certain minority groups perceive as discriminatory.

The U.S.'s largest and fast-growing minority is Latino, and much of the future of the political parties will depend on how they perform with this diverse demographic. The Latino population has grown more than 50% since 2000, compared to 1% growth in the white population. In 2008, there were 19.5 million adult Latinos who were eligible to vote. In 2020, there were about 32.0 million eligible. The Latino population is relatively young, with about one-third less than 30 years of age. Thus, in the next generation, there will be an explosion of Latino political participation. Again, there are frustrations in analyzing exit polling data that lump all Latinos/Hispanics, with all of their diversity, into a single category. Furthermore, many Latinos whose ancestors came to the U.S. generations ago, consider themselves white.

When Donald Trump announced in 2015 his campaign for the presidency, he not only stated his strong anti-immigration position, he characterized Mexican immigrants to the U.S. as rapists and murderers. His election campaign rantings that year on the need for a southern border wall with Mexico – and claims that he would force Mexico to pay for it – as well as advocating the detaining and removing from the country undocumented immigrants, led political observers to predict his quest for the presidency would fail due to a “Latino surge” in voting against him.<sup>23</sup> The surge never materialized. Indeed, Hispanic voting in 2016 declined over 2012 numbers, and it was slightly more Republican for Trump than it had been for GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney four years earlier.<sup>24</sup> Where the conventional analyses that year failed was in their assumption that the immigration issue alone would drive Latino voting, whereas among some Latino residents there is strong resentment toward those who did not come into the country legally, and like other Americans, Latino voters are subject to many different influences on their voting decisions, not a single issue.

Further, similar to Professor Vo's statement about Asian-American voters, many Latinos are socially conservative and strongly anti-communist, and much of Trump's campaign rhetoric and policy positions in 2016 and 2020 connected with them. Most Latinos in the U.S. are Catholic, al-

though the fastest-growing religious identity among them is evangelical Protestant, and the Catholic and Protestant Latinos largely do not share the Democratic Party's views on life issues such as abortion rights, or on social issues such as gay and lesbian rights. Also, Trump's attacks on the Democrats as favoring socialism were intended to attract the votes of certain immigrants who had personal or family roots in oppressive countries, and this rhetoric resonated with some communities more than others, with a majority of Cuban-Americans in Florida, for example, voting for the president.<sup>25</sup>

Professor Geraldo Cadava of Northwestern University noted in a *The New Yorker* column: “Many Americans were surprised when it became clear that Trump had done better than expected among Latinos. In places such as South Florida and South Texas, he did much better, but all across the country Trump won a greater share of the Latino vote than he did four years ago. He made marked improvements in Democratic cities such as Houston, Las Vegas, and Philadelphia, and even in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, which were not the focus of the Trump campaign's spending on Latino outreach. The shift toward Trump has given Latino Republicans confidence that Latino conservatism is on the rise and will continue to grow”. As Cadava notes, pointing to the 2004 election in which George W. Bush received over 40% of the Latino vote, Latinos are not, and never have been, a solid Democratic Party vote. The fact that a president who separated families at the Mexican border actually improved his showing with Latinos in the 2020 elections shows that the Democratic message is not resonating strongly with many Latinos.<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusion: A Republican Year, and Joe Biden's Big Challenge Ahead

Many swing voters, in rejecting Trump and electing Republicans down-ticket, had cast votes against both the president and the Democratic Party. Trump saw his vote share among white voters, particularly educated whites, decline from his 2016 showing, but that does not mean that these voters moved into the Democratic Party long-term. Trump's decline among some demographics that had strongly supported him in 2016 suggests a negative retrospective judgment of his leadership in the year of the pandemic, but not necessarily a rejection of Republicanism.

Trump improved his share of the vote from minority communities, despite his racism, aggressive deportations of undocumented immigrants, and separations of families at

23 Suzanne Gamboa, “Trump Targeted Mexicans, Now Latino Vote Surge May Wall Him Out”, *NBC News*, November 8, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/2016-election-day/trump-targeted-mexicans-now-latino-vote-surge-may-wall-him-n679201> (accessed December 29, 2016).

24 CNN, “Exit Polls”, November 23, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls/national/president> (accessed December 29, 2020).

25 According to the *NBC News* exit polls, Trump won 55% of the vote from Florida's Cuban-Americans, 30% of Puerto Ricans, and 48% of “other Latinos”. See Carmen Sesin, “Trump Cultivated the Latino Vote in Florida, and it Paid Off”, *NBC News*, November 4, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/trump-cultivated-latino-vote-florida-it-paid-n1246226> (accessed December 30, 2020).

26 Geraldo Cadava, “The Deep Origins of Latino Support for Trump”, *The New Yorker*, December 29, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-political-scene/the-deep-origins-of-latino-support-for-trump> (accessed December 30, 2020).

the Mexican border, suggesting a future GOP presidential candidate without such enormous baggage could fare even better with minority voters. Put another way, the Democratic Party should be deeply concerned about this development and examine why its party messaging failed to connect with some of its presumed constituencies.

The Republican Party had a strong election showing in a year in which at the top of the party ticket was undoubtedly the most failed and incompetent president in the nation's history. Additionally, the party did well with most of its down-ticket candidates doing nothing to separate themselves from the president. Indeed, most of them publicly and unapologetically politically embraced him. Stunningly, many even embraced his unprecedented anti-democratic effort to overturn the results of the presidential election, even after the president incited violent domestic terrorism at the U.S. Capitol building. Why is there not a massive anti-GOP backlash?

Part of the answer again lies with the Democratic Party failure to appeal to many voters, and yet that usually happens to one party or the other in any typical election cycle. What is concerning is evidence of a rising anti-democratic and authoritarian tendency among many Republican Party voters, and some Republican leaders, who did not object to the nation's leader attempting to manipulate the census

and to misuse the postal service for political gain, pressure the U.S. Justice Department to investigate political opponents, and make foreign aid to an ally abroad contingent on its leader assisting with the U.S. president's attempt to investigate and smear a political opponent. The 2020 election thus saw the strange juxtaposition of the largest democratic participation in a national election in 120 years, and the second-largest vote total ever cast was for a presidential candidate with authoritarian, anti-democratic tendencies, and during a pandemic that has been raging through the country.

President-elect Joe Biden entered office January 20, 2020 under perhaps the most challenging circumstances of any president since the Great Depression, with no clear policy mandate for him and his political party, and while being left a legacy of no national leadership plan to attack the pandemic, international alliances in tatters, as well as an incumbent president who had done all he could to obstruct the presidential transition process while refusing to concede defeat and even encouraged a violent insurrection against the U.S. government that resulted in several deaths and widespread property destruction at the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021. There simply is no historical analogy or guidepost for Biden and his team.

