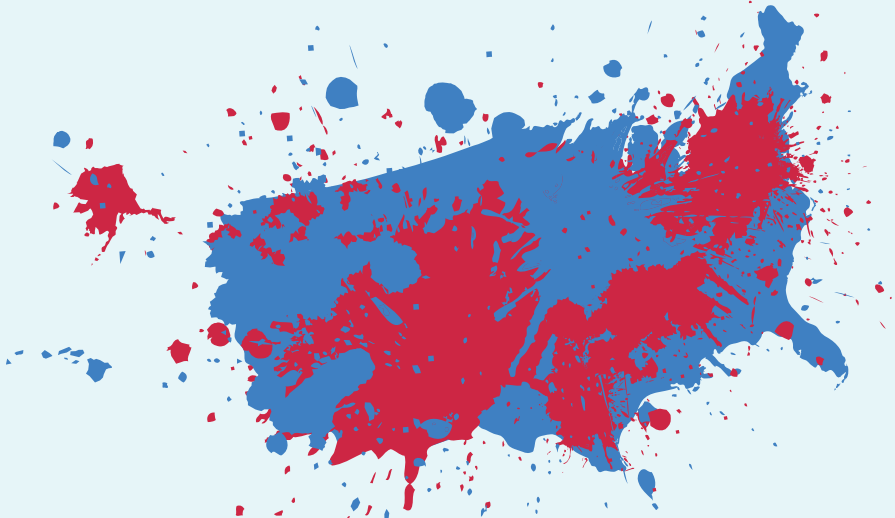
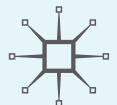


*Edited by  
Sean D. Foreman, Marcia L. Godwin  
& Walter Clark Wilson*



# **THE ROADS TO CONGRESS 2020**

**Campaigning in the Era of  
Trump and COVID-19**



# The Roads to Congress 2020

Sean D. Foreman · Marcia L. Godwin ·  
Walter Clark Wilson  
Editors

# The Roads to Congress 2020

Campaigning in the Era of Trump and COVID-19

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*Editors*

Sean D. Foreman  
Department of History and Political  
Science  
Barry University  
Miami, FL, USA

Marcia L. Godwin  
Public Administration  
University of La Verne  
La Verne, CA, USA

Walter Clark Wilson  
Department of Political Science and  
Geography  
The University of Texas at San  
Antonio  
San Antonio, TX, USA

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*To the memory of Melanie Blumberg, a valued contributor to The Roads to Congress book series and to the study of American democracy. She inspired students to fully engage and participate in the political process and poured her soul into her service and teaching duties. Mel's wit and wisdom and friendly demeanor always made conversations with her bright and thoughtful.*

## PREFACE

Although there are times when every American would refuse to acknowledge it, each biennial congressional election holds up a mirror through which we can see reflected America's political character. It is not always a pretty sight. The pandering, mudslinging, dishonesty, and exploding influence of moneyed special interests diminish public trust and feelings of political efficacy. We will never run short, it seems, of flaws that rend the pluralist ideal. Today, voters across the political spectrum are, in one way or another, agitated by the perception that democracy's promise is being run over by increasingly unequal distributions of wealth, power, and influence. Those with an appetite for the cringeworthy aspects of American politics will find plenty of disturbing sustenance in the pages that follow.

The vices of American democracy tend to grab our attention, but it is important to also recognize the virtues that shine through. Perhaps the election "mirror" is cracked and dirty, but look closely and you will discover that, even when congressional politics seems a tired story you've seen before, change is afoot. And even among its many blemishes, we can see noble individuals who engage collectively each year, not knowing one another or even coordinating beyond a shared commitment to democracy, to ensure that the American experiment lives on to fight another day.

While the election mirror can show us important aspects of who we are, both good and bad, it is also important to remember that self-reflection is mostly important for understanding not who we are, but who we can

be, and what must be done. This book is an effort to hold up a mirror on the political soul of the USA so that readers can better understand the current state of democracy in America, and more effectively engage as citizens in the future. Its chapters offer varied insights from scholars of different backgrounds, regions, and perspectives. To accelerate here, or change lanes there, take the on or the off ramp, good drivers always first check the mirrors. So, examine the chapters of this book with care, and then get in the democratic driver's seat reserved just for you, citizen. We'll see you down the road.

Miami, USA  
La Verne, USA  
San Antonio, USA

Sean D. Foreman  
Marcia L. Godwin  
Walter Clark Wilson

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Sean Foreman acknowledges that without Walt Wilson and Marcia Godwin and their tremendous work and encouragement, this project may have stalled. Foreman fed from the enthusiasm of the coeditors and the dedication of the contributors to persist with the project through the COVID-19 global pandemic of 2020–21. What follows is a testament to the benefits of working collaboratively and a collective desire to keep alive this decades-old forum for studying congressional elections and highlighting crucial case studies and campaign themes. Foreman also appreciates his family’s love, patience, and support, as always, along the way.

Marcia Godwin appreciates colleagues, contributors, and students for their support of higher education, scholarship, and public service during the pandemic. Students and alumni of the University of La Verne continue to inspire with their dedication to providing service in the most challenging of times. Appreciation also goes to her parents and brothers for their support and contributions. Specific to this volume, Godwin appreciates Gina Woodall for accepting her invitation to join as a contributor. Sean Foreman and Walt Wilson are fantastic colleagues and editors in *The Roads to Congress* series.

Walter Wilson thanks Sean Foreman and Marcia Godwin for their friendly collaboration on this project. Participating as an author and editor



for the *Roads to Congress* series has been an enjoyable and rewarding experience. He also thanks the many new and repeat contributors to the 2020 edition and looks forward to future collaborations.

Finally, a word about Melanie Blumberg's contributions. She was a font of knowledge and insight about American electoral politics. The last email exchanges with her were about the then-crowded Democratic 2020 primary field for president. Her emails were pithy, humorous, and insightful—sure to brighten the day and reassure us about American democracy.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**William C. Binning** is a Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Youngstown State University. He is the coauthor of *Ohio Government and Politics*.

**Douglas M. Brattebo** is a Professor of Political Science at Hiram College. He writes about presidents, political parties, public policy issues, and campaigns and elections.

**C. Tyler Godines Camarillo** is a graduate student in the Department of Political Science at the University of Oklahoma.

**William Curtis Ellis** is a Professor of Political Science and Dean of the College of Arts and Cultural Studies at Oral Roberts University.

**Heather K. Evans** is the John Morton Beaty Professor of Political Science at the University of Virginia, Wise.

**Sean D. Foreman** is a Professor of Political Science and Chair of the Department of History and Political Science at Barry University in Miami, FL. He is a coeditor of six *The Roads to Congress* books including this one and *The Roads to Congress 2018* with Palgrave Macmillan. Foreman and Marcia L. Godwin edited *Local Politics and Mayoral Elections in 21st Century America: The Keys to City Hall* with Routledge in 2015. Foreman is the author of many articles and book chapters on public policy and elections, including “Obama and Congress,” in *Leadership and Legacy: The Presidency of Barack Obama*, edited by Tom Lansford, et al.

(2021), and “Money in Politics,” in *Divided Union: Structural Challenges to Bipartisanship in America*, edited by Dario Moreno, et al. (2021). He was the President of the Florida Political Science Association (FPSA) in 2012, he has served as secretary of FPSA since 2015. Foreman is co-chair of the Campus Democracy Project at Barry University, promoting civic learning and democratic engagement, serves on several community boards, and is a frequent commentator on politics and elections for numerous local, national, and international outlets.

**Christopher J. Galdieri** is an Associate Professor of Politics at Saint Anselm College. He is a frequent commenter on New Hampshire elections and presidential primary politics and the author of *Stranger in a Strange State: The Politics of Carpetbagging from Robert Kennedy to Scott Brown* and *Donald Trump and New Hampshire Politics*.

**Bryan T. Gervais** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and Geography and coordinator of the Digital Politics Studio at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

**Marcia L. Godwin** is a Professor of Public Administration and Master of Public Administration (MPA) Director at the University of La Verne. She is a longtime contributor to *The Roads to Congress* series and became a coeditor in 2016. Her research has been published in *Administrative Theory and Praxis*; *Journal of Public Affairs Education*; *Policy Studies Journal*; *Politics, Groups, and Identities*; *State and Local Government Review*; *Teaching Public Administration*; and other publications. She also has served as coeditor and contributor, with Sean D. Foreman, of *Local Government and Mayoral Elections in 21st Century America*. Godwin provides commentary on California politics and local government issues to regional, national, and international media.

**Patrick T. Hickey** is a Professor of Political Science at Prince George’s Community College. His research has been published in *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *Congress & the Presidency*, *The Roads to Congress 2018* and *42: Inside the Presidency of Bill Clinton*.

**Jeffrey Kraus** is a Professor of Government and Politics and the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Wagner College. He has been a contributor to this series since 2008.

**Tom Lansford** is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Southern Mississippi. He is the author, coauthor, editor, or coeditor of

more than 40 books and the author of more than 100 essays, book chapters, and reviews on politics, elections, and international security.

**Jennifer C. Lucas** is a Professor of Politics at Saint Anselm College. Her research, which focuses on the role of gender in campaigns, public policy, and congressional politics, has appeared in *Politics & Gender*, *American Political Research*, and *Social Science Quarterly*. She is the former coeditor of the *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy*.

**John D. Rackey** is an Editorial Assistant for *Social Science Quarterly*, a Teaching Assistant in the Department of Political Science, and a Graduate Mentor with Headington College, at The University of Oklahoma.

**Thomas Ringenberg** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Rockhurst University in Kansas City. Ringenberg was an American Political Science Association Congressional Fellow in the House of Representatives in 2016. His work has appeared in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, and *Great Plains Research*.

**Annelise Russell** is an Assistant Professor in the Martin School for Public Policy and Public Administration at the University of Kentucky.

**Tauna S. Sisco** is a Professor of Sociology at Saint Anselm College. Her research interests include studies of social problems, women and politics, and healthcare practice. She is the coeditor of several edited volumes on U.S. elections. She has also published in *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy*, *Feminist Media Studies*, and the *Journal of Advanced Nursing*.

**Walter Clark Wilson** is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He is a graduate of the University of Oklahoma's Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center and is a 2006–2007 APSA Congressional Fellow. Dr. Wilson's research focuses primarily on Latino representation in the U.S. Congress. He is the author of *From Inclusion to Influence: Latino Representation in Congress and Latino Political Incorporation in America*, published by University of Michigan Press (2017), and he has published in scholarly journals including *Legislative Studies Quarterly*; *Social Science Quarterly*; *Politics, Groups and Identities*; and *Polity*. He has also been a frequent contributor to previous editions of *The Roads to Congress*, and coedited the 2018 edition. Wilson's commentary has been featured in local, state, and national newspapers, radio and television news programs, including

by *Texas Public Radio*, *The San Antonio Express-News*, *Politico*, and *The New York Times*.

**Gina Serignese Woodall** is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Politics and Global Studies at Arizona State University. Woodall has published with colleagues in the *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy*, *Political Behavior*, and the *Journal of Political Science Education*. She has also published work in *The Conversation* and the *London School of Economics American Politics and Policy Blog* (LSE APP).



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PART I

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Congressional Campaign and Election Trends



## CHAPTER 1

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# The 2020 Elections Overview: A Campaign Cycle Like No Other

*Sean D. Foreman*

### UNPRECEDENTED CAMPAIGN YEAR

The 116th Congress, (2019–2021) and the accompanying 2020 campaign cycle were unprecedented in many ways. First, they occurred during a global pandemic caused by the spread of the novel coronavirus named COVID-19. This forced candidates to be both cautious and creative on the campaign trail starting in March 2020. In-person campaigning was limited and door-to-door canvassing was often discouraged, especially by Democratic candidates, while online and virtual activities proliferated and engaged voters in new ways, sometimes directly from a candidate’s home to the homes of constituents.

The pandemic whipsawed a humming economy into recession by mid-2020 after Americans were largely confined to their homes from late March through the end of May and sporadically over the summer in different parts of the country to “stop the spread” of the virus. Travel, entertainment, hospitality, and tourism ground to a halt and caused major

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S. D. Foreman (✉)

Department of History and Political Science, Barry University, Miami, FL, USA  
e-mail: [sforeman@barry.edu](mailto:sforeman@barry.edu)

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job losses and lost revenues. The unemployment rate of 3.5% in February skyrocketed to 14.8% in April and resulted in the need for massive economic relief which took the form of two major stimulus packages, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in March 2020 and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act of 2021. These acts provided direct payments of stimulus money to individuals and families that qualified as well as a series of loan and subsidy programs targeting specific economic industries. Unemployment decreased to 6.8% in the October labor report preceding the elections, but many parts of the economy stalled and regions of the country closed due to state and local regulations and local virus conditions.

The summer of 2020 was also marked by massive rallies and protests in the wake of the tragic killing of George Floyd, a Black citizen, by a White Minneapolis, MN, police officer, on May 25, Memorial Day. The incident, along with revelations about the police shooting of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, KY and other high-profile incidents of violence against Black Americans, led to large gatherings in cities nationwide concerning racial justice and policing policies. The protests were loosely coordinated under the umbrella of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, though they were generally organized organically and based on local leadership and conditions. Most were peaceful as the organizers planned, but many gatherings also led to property destruction, looting, and additional violence, sometimes instigated by counter-protesters associated with white nationalist groups.

The BLM movement, which was founded in 2015, also fueled efforts to engage Black and Hispanic voters in the electoral process. A political action committee was formed to support candidates and promote legislation in favor of police reform. Fundraising efforts were geared toward helping to register voters and encouraging them to vote in both local and presidential elections. Messages about the need to vote to bring about racial justice and tangible changes to policing policies were prevalent and supported by athletes, celebrities, clergy, and community leaders. Ultimately, the movement appeared to aid Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and vice presidential candidate Kamala Harris who captured the White House, in part, by winning key states like heavily African American Georgia.

Then, there was the unusual presidential term of Donald J. Trump, chief disruptor of the Washington, DC status quo as president from 2017

to 2021. Trump stirred controversy with his rhetoric and erratic leadership style and was ultimately impeached twice by the House in two years, the first president in American history to be subjected to two Senate impeachment trials.

### *Impeachment*

From the start of the Trump presidency, there were Democrats who wanted to impeach Donald Trump. The ongoing investigation into the 2016 presidential campaign and allegations of coordinated efforts between the Trump campaign and members of the Russian government provided the most substantive justification, at least initially. The Mueller Report, named for the Special Counsel Robert Mueller who led the investigation, and officially called the “Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election,” was delivered to U.S. Attorney General William Barr in March 2019 and released to the public on April 18, 2019. Mueller did not provide any special instructions for Congress or any specific recommendations to them beyond the public release.

Analysts suggested that Mueller had laid out a roadmap to impeach Trump. The 448-page report was broken into two parts. The first part detailed specific Russian interference in the 2016 elections through the manipulation of internet and social media sites and pushing misinformation and divisive messages into the public discourse. The second part of the report focused on Trump’s firing of FBI Director James Comey in May 2017 which was viewed as a bald-faced attempt to obstruct and then outright halt the Mueller investigation. The investigations implicated some lower-level operatives associated with the Trump campaign, but the report did not include specific, direct statements of criminal charges against Trump or any senior-level officials or family members involved in the campaign.

While House Democrats spent the summer of 2019 digging into the Mueller report and seeking to draft articles of impeachment concerning obstruction of justice, new information emerged to shift and intensify the focus on Trump’s behavior. In August of 2019, a whistleblower came forward to report troubling comments by Trump in a July 25 phone call with the president of Ukraine. The readout of the call revealed Trump asking the Ukrainian president to do “a favor” in exchange for continued

shipment of U.S. military aid. The favor was to flame a dormant investigation into a Ukrainian energy company, Burisma Holdings, which employed Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, with a lucrative contract despite no experience in the field. The investigation into the company had not implicated either Biden, but Trump continued to push a story that both Bidens were financially corrupted by their dealings with Ukraine.

The call was reported by a national security official and led to a congressional inquiry that lasted from September through November. Two articles of impeachment were introduced in the House, and on December 18, 2019, the House impeached Trump on charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. No Republicans voted to impeach while all but a few Democrats voted to impeach on both charges. Jared Golden (D-ME2) voted to impeach on the second charge while Collin Peterson (D-MN7) and Jeff Van Drew (D-NJ2) voted against both charges. Van Drew soon left the Democratic Party to become a Republican and was later reelected in his South Jersey district. Peterson lost his reelection bid.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA12) stalled in delivering the articles to the Senate until Majority Leader Mitch McConnell would transparently clarify the rules for the trial. The articles were delivered on January 15, 2020, and a trial started the following week. On February 5, the Senate acquitted Trump on the two charges along a party-line vote. Only one Republican voted to remove Trump on the abuse of power charge; that was Mitt Romney (R-UT), the 2012 Republican presidential nominee, one of the few Republicans willing to publicly criticize Trump.

### *Congress Stands Divided*

The 116th Congress suffered from the consequences of partisan divide over the past decade, culminating in divided government again in America. Democrats took the majority in the House after the November 2018 midterm elections (see Table 1.1). This paved the path for Pelosi to become Speaker of the House for a second time. Support for her speakership within the Democratic caucus was not as unified as it was during her first stint as House Speaker, but she won the vote in 2019 with 15 Democrats defecting. After the 2020 election, Democrats faced a greater need for unity and all but five caucus members voted to keep her as Speaker. Pelosi announced and reaffirmed that she would relinquish the Speaker's seat after the 2022 elections.<sup>1</sup>



**Table 1.1** Partisan breakdown of U.S. Senate and U.S. House, 2008–2020

Year	Senate				House		
	Democrats	Republicans	Independents	Net change	Democrats	Republicans	Net change
2008	57	41	2	+8 D	257	178	+24 D
2010	51	47	2	+6 R	193	242	+64 R
2012	53	45	2	+2 D	201	234	+8 D
2014	44	54	2	+9 R	188	247	+13 R
2016	46	52	2	+2 D	194	241	+6 D
2018	45	53	2	+1 R	235	200	+41 D
2020	48	50	2	+3 D	222	213	+13 R

*Notes* Both Independents in the Senate caucus with Democrats. Numbers reflects election results and do not account for membership changes during a congressional session

Throughout Trump’s term in office, Republicans maintained the Senate majority they gained in the 2014 elections. Republicans held a diminished majority of 52 seats after the 2016 election and the election of Donald Trump. In 2018, with a favorable Senate election map, the GOP increased its majority by one seat. But in 2020, the map appeared to favor Democrats.<sup>2</sup> Still, Democrats just netted one seat out of the November election outcomes with two Georgia seats held by Republicans Sonny Purdue and Kelly Loeffler headed to the January runoff elections. With control of a Senate majority by the slimmest of margins hanging in the balance, Democrats ran a nationalized campaign in support of Jon Ossoff and Rev. Raphael Warnock. Meanwhile, Republicans were sniping at each other in the aftermath of the presidential election, spurred by Trump’s false claims that he won Georgia’s electoral votes and subsequent attempts to coerce state leaders, including Georgia’s Republican governor and secretary of state, to change the outcome of the vote. This put Purdue and Loeffler in the difficult position of needing to appeal to their pro-Trump base voters while at the same time trying to separate themselves from Trump’s attempts to overturn the election result. Combined with effective Democratic mobilization and ethical concerns facing both Republican candidates, the predicament was enough to allow both Ossoff and Warnock to prevail.

Courtesy of outgoing Vice President Mike Pence’s tie-breaking vote, Sen. McConnell (R-KY) remained the Majority Leader of a Senate that

was split 50/50 between Democrats and Republicans until the presidential inauguration on January 20, 2021. The lame duck position placed him between Senate Democrats eager to join their House counterparts in control of the chamber and Republicans more aligned with President Trump and his brand of populism than McConnell's more traditional style of conservatism. McConnell had famously said that he would do what it took to make Barack Obama a one-term president, and while he failed to contain Obama's electoral ambitions, he did succeed at curtailing his achievements, most notably by rolling back provisions in the Affordable Care Act and by withholding Senate action on a Supreme Court nominee in the final year of Obama's term. Now McConnell was faced with keeping his Republican conference in line as the ideological lines shifted across the country.

### *What's Good for the Goose...?*

When Justice Antonin Scalia died on February 13, 2016, it set off a firestorm in Washington over filling the seat. Republicans argued that the Supreme Court vacancy should not be filled by term-limited President Barack Obama because it occurred too close to a presidential election and that precedent called for waiting to fill the seat until after the American people selected a new President in the November election. Obama nominated Merrick Garland, a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit, in hopes that a moderate selection might generate bipartisan support. Instead, Republicans blocked Garland's nomination from even receiving a vote in the Senate and the "Scalia seat" vacancy became a rallying cry for supporting Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 campaign. Trump won the election and promptly nominated Neil Gorsuch, who was confirmed in April 2017, by a 52 to 48 party-line vote.

The relatively quick confirmation of Gorsuch was aided by McConnell and Republicans removing the prohibition on the use of the filibuster on Supreme Court nominees. Senate Democrats started the erosion of the filibuster in 2013 for all presidential nominees except the Supreme Court in order to facilitate the confirmation of lower court judges appointed by Obama. Republicans then used their newly instituted voting rules to approve two more Trump appointees to the high Court during Trump's term.

Justice Anthony Kennedy, who was appointed by Ronald Reagan and confirmed in February 1988, announced his retirement in late June

2018. After a contentious confirmation process, Brett Kavanaugh, a former Kennedy law clerk, was confirmed in October 2018. Along with the confirmation of scores of other federal judges, Trump satisfied his electoral base with judicial nominations.

On September 18, 2020, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg unexpectedly died. Though the legendary jurist had health concerns at age 87, she appeared to be publicly strong. While this vacancy occurred less than two months before the November elections, Republicans sang a different tune in 2020 than they had when Scalia died nearly nine months before the election. Eight days after Ginsburg's death, Trump nominated Amy Coney Barrett, whom he had appointed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit in 2017. Due to the end of filibusters on Court nominees, the Senate was able to quickly confirm Coney Barrett, and did so less than a week before the election on October 30.

The flurry of activity further stoked Democratic outrage toward Trump. It may have reduced the urgency to vote on the part of some Republicans, though it probably also led others to reward the party with more enthusiastic turnout. Exit polls indicate that Supreme Court appointments were indeed an important factor to both Trump and Biden voters.

## INTRAPARTY BATTLES

An enduring feature of the past decade has been the growing ideological divide among the American public.<sup>3</sup> Both parties have witnessed unusually intense intraparty squabbles that have pulled the median Democratic and Republican voters away from the ideological center. Democrats have grappled with insurgent candidates from the left wanting to make the party more progressive and less corporate-minded. The battle lines are drawn over policies on social welfare programs, wealth inequality and wages, environmental concerns, immigration, gun control, and voting issues, in particular. Republicans have been wrestling over defining their stances on conservative positions like trade, taxes, and government spending and regulations since the election of “tea party” and Trump-aligned lawmakers and the adoption of more extreme public positions.

While four incumbents lost primaries both in 2016 and in 2018, there were eight incumbents (five Republicans and three Democrats) to lose primary challenges in 2020.<sup>4</sup> Not unlike 2018, when two newcomers, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY14) and Ayanna Pressley

(D-MA7) defeated long-term incumbents, Democrats witnessed contests with primary challenges from candidates with more progressive stances on social and environmental policies. One high-profile insurgency attempt emerged, somewhat ironically, from an iconic political family. U.S. Rep. Joseph Kennedy III attempted to defeat incumbent Senator Ed Markey in Massachusetts. Viewed as a rising star in the party, the 39-year-old Kennedy held leads in the public opinion polls over the 74-year-old Markey and highlighted, among other issues, how he was vocal in the fight for racial justice.<sup>5</sup> Markey mobilized grassroots support and some high-profile endorsements from fellow Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and from Rep. Ocasio-Cortez, with whom Markey had co-authored the climate change focused Green New Deal bill. Ultimately, Markey “out-progressived” Kennedy in the Democratic primary to hold his seat.

Ocasio-Cortez and Pressley joined with two other newly elected females, Ilhan Omar (D-MN5) and Rashida Tlaib (D-MI13) in calling themselves “the squad” and forming an informal progressive caucus. The women embraced the label even while Republican commentators and Trump used it derisively. Ocasio-Cortez endorsed several 2020 candidates, notably progressive women in Democratic primaries.<sup>6</sup> Those candidates overall had mixed success. A Texas Senate candidate and candidates for House seats in California, New York, and Texas lost primaries. Kara Eastman (D-NE2) won an open seat primary but lost the general to a Republican incumbent. Teresa Leger Fernandez (D-NM3) won a competitive primary and the open seat. Marie Newman (D-IL3) defeated eight-term incumbent Dan Lipinski (D-IL3) and won the general election.

The impact of the BLM movement was especially prominent in a pair of Democratic primary elections. In St. Louis, Missouri-based district surrounding Ferguson, BLM activist Cori Bush defeated 19-year incumbent William Clay. Both Bush and Clay are Black, but community members found Clay to be out of touch with the pulse of the movement and backed Bush, who was aligned with the progressive Justice Democrats, all but assuring her election to represent Missouri’s 1st Congressional District. Similarly, Jamaal Bowman, a public school principal also backed by Justice Democrats, defeated 16-term incumbent Eliot Engel in the Democratic primary for New York’s 16th District. Bowman ran an anti-poverty and anti-racist platform and was inspired by the intra-party insurgency success of fellow New Yorker Ocasio-Cortez. Efforts to move the Democratic Party leftward on racial justice and other issues were

not universally successful. For example, conservative Democrat Henry Cuellar (D-TX28) survived a primary challenge from 27-year-old activist Jessica Cisneros by less than four percent of the vote. Still, these and other examples illustrate a growing appetite for leftward movement in the Democratic Party.

Several races pitted moderate Republican candidates against more conservative and Trump-aligned candidates in their primaries. There were even instances of two or more Trump-aligned candidates running against one another, such as in Virginia’s 5th District, where Denver Riggleman lost an intraparty battle during the Republican convention to select the party’s nominees.<sup>7</sup> Riggleman was endorsed by Trump in 2018 and then again enthusiastically on December 17, 2019, with this tweet: “Congressman @Denver4VA Riggleman is a true CONSERVATIVE leader who has done a great job for Virginia and will support our #MAGA Agenda. He defends our right to bear arms, protect our Borders & help small businesses. Denver has my Total Endorsement!” But the president’s support for Riggleman waned when Riggleman found himself in the crosshairs of more religiously conservative members of Congress and constituents in his district. He was criticized by some party members for officiating a gay wedding in the summer of 2019, and subsequently challenged for the nomination by Bob Good, a former athletic director at Liberty University. Then president of Liberty, Jerry Falwell, Jr. backed Riggleman while Falwell’s brother and Riggleman’s predecessor, Rep. Tom Garrett, supported Good. Good won a convention vote that Riggleman claimed was fraudulent and went on to win the general election. Other important Republican primaries between Trump-aligned candidates included Senate races in Alabama (see Chapter 11) and Kansas (see Chapter 14) discussed in this volume.

### *Sizing Up the 2020 Elections*

There were 56 rematches of Democratic and Republican candidates in 2020 from 2018. In four cases, the 2018 winner was on the losing end in 2020: in California’s 21st and 39th Districts (see Chapter 5, this volume), in Florida’s 27th District (see Chapter 6, this volume), and in New York’s 22nd District (see Chapter 7, this volume).

Five Democrats and 20 Republicans retired from the House and did not run for another public office. The Republican retirements included many moderate members who were not comfortable with Trumpism. One

was Rep. Justin Amash (MI-3), who left the GOP and became an independent before joining the Libertarian Party in April 2020. Amash was one of Trump's first and most outspoken Republican critics. After leaving the GOP and declining to seek reelection, Amash briefly flirted with a run for president but ultimately decided against that campaign as well.

As a result of the 2020 congressional elections, Democrats held the majority in the House of Representatives. Republicans won 16 of the 21 seats needed to gain the majority, dropping the partisan advantage Democrats held to 222-213 heading into the 117th Congress. Democrats flipped three seats while Republicans flipped 15, including recapturing the seat previously held by Amash. While winning at the top of the ticket with Biden, the coattails were not enough to overcome electoral conditions in certain districts across the country due to cultural or regional differences and the effects of gerrymandered districts.

Democrats needed four seats to win outright control of the Senate or to net three seats plus the presidential victory to gain the vice presidential tie-breaking vote. Indeed Biden/Harris defeated Trump/Pence by 306-232 in the Electoral College aided by winning Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, along with Arizona and Georgia. With the two Georgia races going to January runoffs and partisan control of the Senate on the line—and the disputed though discredited claims of election fraud by Trump—the campaign continued through the end of the year and into January.

## BREAKING DOWN THE ROADS TO CONGRESS 2020

*The Roads to Congress 2020* starts with a section on thematic issues. In Chapter 2, Jennifer C. Lucas, Christopher J. Galdieri, and Tauna S. Sisco examine the impact of COVID-19 on the elections. There were several changes in both how candidates campaigned and how elections were administered and a wide variety of policies across the country. But while there were concerns that the election administration and counting process would be chaotic, much like the over-hyped Y2K event two decades earlier, they proved largely unfounded thanks to the preparation and hard work of election officials. In fact, the 66.7% voter turnout was the highest nationally since 1900, when most women and people of color were barred from voting.