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# The 2020 Presidential Election

Key Issues and Regional Dynamics

*Edited by*  
Luke Perry

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# Palgrave Studies in US Elections

Series Editor

Luke Perry, Utica College, Utica, NY, USA

This Pivot series, established in collaboration with the Utica College Center of Public Affairs and Election Research, brings together cutting-edge work in US Politics focused on trends and issues surrounding local, state, and federal elections. Books in this series may cover but are not limited to topics such as voting behavior, campaign management, policy considerations, electoral social movements, and analysis of significant races. While welcoming all projects on US elections within and across all three levels of government, this series proceeds from the truism that all politics is fundamentally local. As such, we are especially interested in research on state and local elections such as mayoral races, gubernatorial races, and congressional elections, with particular focus on how state/local electoral trends influence national electoral politics, and vice versa. This series is open to any relevant scholar and all methodological approaches.

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Luke Perry  
Editor

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Palgrave Studies in US Elections

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*This book is dedicated to everyone harmed in the January 6, 2021 domestic terrorist attack on the U.S. Capitol.*

## PREFACE

This Palgrave Series in U.S. Elections, established in collaboration with the Utica College Center of Public Affairs and Election Research, brings together cutting-edge work in U.S. Politics focused on trends and issues surrounding local, state, and federal elections. Books in this series cover topics such as voting behavior, campaign management, policy considerations, electoral social movements, and analysis of significant races.

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Utica, USA

Luke Perry

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This book would not be possible without the work of my friends and colleagues who persevered through a pandemic to produce an extraordinary body of work. I am humbled and grateful to share in this collaboration.

Luke Perry

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# Introduction

*Luke Perry*

**Abstract** This chapter introduces scholarship on presidential elections and the approach to this book.

**Keywords** Presidential elections · 2020 election · 2016 election · Joe Biden · Donald Trump · Electoral College · Swing states · COVID-19 · Economy

The 2020 presidential election was the most dramatic election in recent memory unfolding during a once-in-a-century global pandemic. The unorthodox and strident politics of Donald Trump prompted an embattled campaign with both sides contending the soul of the nation was at stake. Joe Biden dispatched Trump and restored the priorities of the Obama administration, though the state of U.S. democracy and party politics were decidedly different than 2016.

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Trump refused to concede, launched several unsuccessful lawsuits challenging the results in pivotal states, which culminated in an unprecedented insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, the day Congress formally certified Biden's victory. Trump's speech beforehand and response afterward will forever cloud his presidency. A majority in both chambers of Congress, consisting of Democrats and Republicans, voted to impeach and convict Trump in an unprecedented second impeachment, though fell shy of the two-thirds Senate requirement to remove him from office.

Trump became the first one-term president in nearly 30 years, though his presidency was significant. 226 of Trump's nominations for federal judges were confirmed, including 54 U.S. Court of Appeals judges, and three new Supreme Court Justices.<sup>1</sup> Under unified government, Republicans failed to repeal The Affordable Care Act, after years of related campaign pledges, but passed The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, a federal income tax cut comparable to recent GOP presidencies. Following the 2018 midterm, ushering in divided government, Congress passed The First Step Act, bipartisan criminal justice reform, and five COVID relief bills in 2020. The U.S. economy experienced several years of economic growth following the Great Recession with G.D.P. growing 2.5% annually during Trump's first three years, nearly identical to President Obama's final three years.

Trump rejected the pro-active military approach in foreign affairs emblematic of his Republican predecessor George W. Bush, and favored by other recent GOP presidential nominees, such as John McCain and Mitt Romney. In turn, Trump pivoted away from a wartime presidency consumed with terrorism that dominated the office during the early twentieth-first century. Trump revolutionized mass communication by using social media like no other president, Tweeting 24 hours a day from a personal account in unfiltered direct messaging. Trump incorporated this medium into U.S. political communication akin to previous presidents who engaged twentieth-century technologies, including radio and television, to help promote their political agendas.

Joe Biden ran on change, experience, and temperament. Biden prioritized ending the pandemic, turning the economy around, racial justice, and combating global climate change. This book examines how Biden won, how the outcome was a product of various state and regional dynamics that often get overlooked in understanding presidential elections, and how several prominent issues influenced the 2020 campaign.

This chapter introduces scholarly research on presidential elections and provides the framework for the rest of the book.

## UNDERSTANDING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Scholars have employed many perspectives in seeking to analyze and make predictions about presidential elections, including political considerations and economic considerations. Presidential incumbents have fared better than challengers throughout U.S. history. Since 1788, incumbents were reelected 22 times and defeated 11 times.<sup>2</sup> Open seat contests were closer on average than those with incumbents. 12 of 26 open seat races experienced less than a five-point difference in the popular vote between candidates.

Trump's incumbent defeat was preceded by three incumbent presidential victories. Trump was narrowly elected in 2016 with the third lowest popular vote margin ever (-2.1%), ahead of only Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876 and John Quincy Adams in 1824, two instances when no candidate won an Electoral College majority.<sup>3</sup> Trump was clearly vulnerable upon taking office, but George W. Bush transformed a popular vote loss in 2000 into a reelection victory, in part thanks to presidential leadership responding to the national crisis.

Whether voters want more of the same or desire change is a fundamental question every four years with or without an incumbent running.<sup>4</sup> Since 1952, the incumbent party in the White House lost 88% of the time (eight out of nine) when in power eight or more years. Conversely, the incumbent party won 77% of the time (seven out of nine) when in power just four years.<sup>5</sup> Trump benefited from empirical crosswinds facing Democrats in 2016, irrespective of candidate or campaign particulars, then failed to capitalize on these same trends in pursuing reelection. 2020 was just the second time in 70 years the incumbent party lost after only four years of controlling the White House.

Increased parity among vote shares for each party has contributed to close presidential elections over the last 40 years, including the last three presidential cycles. During the twentieth century, landslide elections were common with many contests settled by double-digit popular vote margins.<sup>6</sup> Since the 1960s, voters are more closely connected to the party that fits their ideological preferences and overwhelmingly vote to support these candidates. Ronald Reagan's reelection in 1984 was the only landslide victory in the last forty years. Reagan had a 58% job

approval rating on Election Day in 1984, when he secured 49 of 50 states. Reagan's number fluctuated throughout his presidency, often hovering around 50%, while also spiking to nearly 70%.<sup>7</sup> Job approval has been a core element of forecasting presidential elections for decades.<sup>8</sup> Every incumbent president with job approval ratings around or above 50% have been reelected over the last 72 years since polling began.<sup>9</sup>

The growth of non-white voters since 1992 has created a modest but significant advantage for Democrats, particularly among Latino-American and Asian-American voters.<sup>10</sup> The share of eligible non-Hispanic White voters fell in all 50 states over the last 20 years with 10 states experiencing double-digit declines.<sup>11</sup> The largest growth of Hispanic voters occurred in the South and West in states like California, Texas, and Nevada. This growth has impacted swing states, such as Florida, and Arizona. The percent of eligible Hispanic voters in Florida doubled this century to 20% of eligible voters, and grew to one-quarter of the electorate in Arizona, which narrowly voted Democratic in 2020 for the first time since 1996, and just the second time since 1952.

Democrats have a strong advantage among people of color, though white adults historically register to vote and turn out to a larger degree than other racial and ethnic groups. Moreover, increased growth and participation by racial and minority groups may amplify and reflect various sub-group identities and disparate political attitudes, complicating predictions of Democratic dominance in presidential elections with an increasingly multi-racial and multi-ethnic electorate. At the same time, Republicans have won the popular vote just once since 1988. Following Mitt Romney's 2012 defeat, party leaders identified greater inclusion of Hispanic, Black, and Asian Americans as a top priority of the Republican National Committee in its post-election autopsy, the "Growth and Opportunity Project." This was before Trump upended Republican Party politics, including the fault lines of race, ethnicity, and immigration, creating uncertainty about the focus of the party moving forward.

Voters reward or punish incumbent presidential candidates depending on the economy,<sup>12</sup> particularly incumbent presidents. Key economic variables include GDP, income, consumer confidence index, inflation, unemployment, and job creation.<sup>13</sup> Scholars examine existing rates at set times within a presidential campaign and rates of change over time. One challenge is that the actual state of the economy and perceptions of economic performance among voters do not always neatly overlap.

Economic assessments are predominately retrospective for incumbent presidents and prospective during open seat presidential elections.<sup>14</sup>

Economic conditions were going to be the foundation of Trump's reelection campaign prior to the COVID pandemic, beginning in March of 2020. Trump's messaging hyperbolically touted the economy as the best ever in U.S. history. Journalists deemed the economy Trump's "golden ticket" to reelection up until February of election year, just prior to the national COVID spike in March.<sup>15</sup> Public health measures around the country contributed an economic recession, which brought the largest single decline (31%) in GDP for a quarter during the second quarter of 2020.

Trump voters were less likely to have lost their job or income than Democratic or independent voters.<sup>16</sup> The president enjoyed majority support for his management of the economy leading up to Election Day and was preferred over Biden in this capacity.<sup>17</sup> GDP rebounded in the third quarter, rising 35%, ending in September, though unemployment remained high, settling at 6% in December after peaking at 14% in April, the highest level since 1948.<sup>18</sup> The economic situation was far from ideal, generally, and particularly for an incumbent president, whose handling of the COVID pandemic was not held in high regard. Prior to the election, Biden had a 17-point advantage on handling the pandemic with only 40% of voters expressing confidence in Trump.<sup>19</sup>

## APPROACH OF THIS BOOK

Trump's upset victory in 2016 sparked many books examining the outcomes and implications.<sup>20</sup> These dissected campaign strategies, forecasting models, national voting behavior, campaign finance, and the impact of societal forces, such as the news media and mass communication. One gap in the literature is the limited attention paid to regional dynamics and campaign issues. Some books included a chapter on issues,<sup>21</sup> while others focused exclusively on swing states,<sup>22</sup> emphasizing what makes states "swing," not regional or sub-cultural dynamics.

This book adopts a regional approach to understanding 2020 presidential election outcomes. Incorporating this perspective into the analysis of presidential elections is necessary and beneficial to understanding the tribalism that has come to define contemporary U.S. politics<sup>23</sup> and building a path to 270 Electoral College votes.<sup>24</sup> The U.S. is the third largest country in the world<sup>25</sup> and the third most populated.<sup>26</sup> The country

consists of many sub-cultural units, shaped by history, geography, politics, economics, and the arts. Regions vary by heritage, demographics, and worldviews. U.S. government has multiple ways of delineating American regions. The number varies from four, for the U.S. Census Bureau, to ten “standard federal regions,” developed by the Office of Management of Budget and utilized by several federal agencies. This book seeks to capture this nuance with four chapters devoted to specific regions and states.

In Chapter 2, Luke Perry, Quinlyn Beaver, and Jamie Nelson examine how Biden was able to rebuild “the blue wall” in the Midwest with strong support in urban centers and among women and college graduates in Michigan and Wisconsin. Though these two states typically vote Democratic in presidential elections, replicating Biden’s success is not guaranteed moving forward, particularly in Wisconsin, considering historically high turnout via absentee balloting in 2020 and a strong desire for change over the last two election cycles.

In Chapter 3, Kevan Yenerall explains how Biden similarly benefited from an enthusiastic base in Pennsylvania, big suburban gains, and preventing the expansion of Republican margins with non-college-educated white voters. Biden’s success did not provide coattails for down-ballot Democratic candidates; however, reflecting a decidedly purple state beneath Pennsylvania’s Democratic propensities in presidential elections.

Arizona and Georgia were the two most surprising pick-ups for Biden in 2020. In Chapter 4, Lawrence Becker and Tyler Hughes examine the Sun Belt, the large Southern region encompassing 15 states, half of whom have experienced double-digit population growth. Increased urbanization and diversification of the electorate help explain Biden’s success. This is part of a larger shift toward competitiveness in the region, which will likely become a new path to Electoral College success in the near future.

In Chapter 5, Kristi Andersen examines the rise of grassroots organizing in response to Trump’s election in 2016. Following his inauguration, women’s marches took place throughout the country. Over a million people downloaded *Indivisible*’s political organization guide and formed over 5000 groups nationwide. Andersen compares “the resistance” to other recent movements, such as the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street, and provides a firsthand account of internal dynamics from upstate New York. Grassroots organizing clearly benefited Democrats in the 2018 and 2020 elections, though how to understand this dynamic—past, present, and future—remains fluid and uncertain.

From this foundation, the book aspires to provide a comprehensive assessment of prominent issues in 2020, considering both national significance and regional variance. Six issue-based chapters address four core questions: (1) How did each campaign engage this issue in terms of policy and strategy? (2) What is similar and different about the approach in 2020 compared to previous presidential campaigns? (3) How did regional dynamics and considerations influence public opinion and campaign politics regarding this issue? (4) What are the future implications for this issue over the next four years and 2024 campaign?

In Chapter 6, Phillip Klinkner examines the political implications of the COVID pandemic, the most significant issue in 2020. COVID quickly became politicized as the pandemic unfolded during a presidential election year. President Trump was hindered by unfavorable national perceptions of his handling of the pandemic. Klinkner uses county-level analysis to illustrate how the impact of COVID on voting behavior was not particularly harmful beneath the surface.

The ability to fill a vacancy on the Supreme Court helped Trump get elected in 2016. In Chapter 7, Daniel Tagliarina examines Trump's efforts to similarly accentuate the courts in 2020. Remaking the federal judiciary was arguably the most impactful accomplishment of the Trump presidency. In contrast to 2016, this generated substantial anti-Trump enthusiasm among Democrats, heightened by the nomination and confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett just prior to Election Day.

White Evangelical Christians were the cornerstone of Trump's electoral coalition. In Chapter 8, Christopher Cronin explains how Trump engendered and retained Evangelical support throughout his political rise in 2016 and fall in 2020. White Evangelicals are not monolithic religiously, though share a deep and wide allegiance to the Republican party. This partisan devotion is cultivated by conservative candidates and strategic party appeals, mitigating potentially weaker support among White Evangelicals for less religious presidential candidates, like Trump.

Guns have been a perennially divisive political issue over the last decade. In Chapter 9, Robert Spitzer explains how gun-related issues infused the campaign and election aftermath. Statewide gun reforms did not appear on any ballots, due to signature challenges resulting from COVID, but guns were a central component to protests against COVID restrictions, the use of deadly force by police officers against unarmed black people that animated the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Capitol insurrection on January 6.