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**Does political discourse
limit our freedom of
thought?**

An Analysis of the U.S. Elections in
2020

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ABSTRACT

Every American election has been shaped by determinant wedge issues, issues that are intentionally constructed to divide and polarize the electorate. When used correctly by candidates, these issues have the potential to mobilize the electorate towards one party or another. The U.S. Presidential elections of 2020 have been characterized by the pandemic COVID-19, the economic crisis resulting from it, accusations of electoral fraud and high levels of misinformation as well as police brutality against minorities. This situation left a highly divided country and a disappointed electorate with the political institutions. The overall objective of this research is to explain the impact on voter mobilization, primarily, the impact wedge issues play, with the three specific issues of the campaign being: race issues, the prestige of the political institutions and COVID-19.

Key words: elections, COVID-19, race issues, prestige of the political institutions, discourse, wedge issues

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1. INTRODUCTION

A pandemic that has killed around 576,724 people and infected 32.4 million people in the United States. An election with accusations of electoral fraud, high levels of misinformation, and conspiracy theories regarding the intervention of foreign countries in the 2020 US elections. National manifestations as a consequence of police brutality. The ban of the President on Twitter and his second impeachment. All these added to the high levels of fear and polarization which led to the assault to the Capitol are some of the events that have surrounded the American elections of 2020.

These events coupled with the political battle between Biden and Trump, based on the exploitation of the issues that most concerned the electorate, have left a highly divided country and disappointed with the political institutions. The purpose of this research is to study whether wedge issues have been a determinant factor in the outcome of the 2020 US Presidential election. All elections are dominated by a few main issues, and it is the role of the candidates to find out which of these issues succeed in mobilizing the most voters to their party. In this study, we will focus on three wedge issues: COVID-19, race issues and prestige of the political institutions.

In the first part, we will begin introducing the basic elements to have a better understanding about the US electoral system and the behavior of its voters. Moreover, we will provide a first introduction on the role of the electoral campaign, the different types of issues, and the role they play in the elections. In the second part, the theoretical framework will be established in order to define the concepts and definitions used in the analysis, focusing on the importance of wedge issues in the elections. Followed, the objectives and hypotheses of the research and the methodology that will be used in the analysis are outlined. The analysis will be divided in two main parts: the first one to verify if the three issues proposed are wedge issues and a second one analyzing if these issues have had a substantial impact in the outcome of the US Presidential elections. The research will finish verifying if the hypothesis we established were correct and further steps for future research.

2. AIM & JUSTIFICATION

The 2020 US Presidential election has seen an historical record number of participation, with a turnout of two-thirds of the eligible voting population, more than in any of the previous 120 years (Schaul, Rabinowitz, & Mellnik, 2020). Joe Biden amassed 74 million votes as of November 6th, whereas Donald Trump received around 70 million votes, achieving the largest and second-largest number of votes respectively in U.S election history (Deane & Gramlich, 2020).

The backdrop surrounding this election was the ongoing and ever more threatening COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, there was a mass wave in the number of people registering for mail-in voting, with this topic causing massive rifts between the opposing parties. COVID-19 also brought with it a seismic economic downturn, caused by forced closures of the majority of industries and international borders in an attempt to combat the rapid spread of the virus. In the middle of all this was the rise of the social movement "Black Lives Matter", a movement that aimed at rectifying the social injustice that ethnic minorities have continued to face, even in contemporary America. Ultimately, this movement led to political polarization, with many Republicans calling on more "law and order" to stop the demonstrations they termed 'riots' (Deane & Gramlich, 2020). This race exposed the deep wounds that American politics have continued to cover-up with the rise of division seen on the political spectrum, there is disagreement not just on policy, but what are the true core American values.

Historically, a sitting president seeking re-election has won seven out of the last eight times since 1948, with George Bush Sr. falling short to Bill Clinton in 1992 (Abramowitz, et al., 2016). It is unusual for a sitting president not to win re-election, thus, either an issue, or a group of issues, must have arisen that were strong enough to mobilize demographics to end Trump's presidency. As it is a recent event, there is not literature yet regarding which are the specific issues that helped mobilize this historical amount of voters or if these issues were key for Biden to win the election.

This paper has two aims. The first one is to analyze whether wedge issues have been a determinant factor in the outcome of the 2020 US Presidential elections. To do this, we will identify and analyze the main topics during the campaign, the position of each candidate and see if they can be defined as wedge issues. The second goal is to analyze the discourse and concepts used by each candidate in order to determine a relation between the narrative on wedge issues and voter mobilization. Thus, explaining the determining factors that contributed to Donald Trump's reelection failure. Ultimately offering an insight to future elections, and how a certain stance on a particular wedge issue could cause voter mobilization for or against you.

The overall objective of this research is to explain the impact on voter mobilization, primarily, the impact wedge issues play, with the three specific issues of the campaign being: race issues, the prestige of the political institutions and COVID-19.

3. LITERATURE: REVIEW

This literature review will establish an overview of the US election process by reviewing the electoral system as a whole. Three classical models of voter behaviour will be analysed — sociological approach, psychological approach and economic approach — determining through these theories what voters take into consideration when deciding between candidates. A definition on what a wedge issue is and the role these issues play in elections will be discussed, with a further look into the saliency of said issues and how these are key in party competition. Moreover, a final look to determine how electoral campaigns do indeed work in the United States and their evolution in recent years; including micro targeting techniques.

3.1. The US electoral system

The American electoral system is built around the electoral college, a system where states have the same number of electors that is equal to their congressional delegation. Therefore, we have seen results, such as, Al Gore (2000 presidential election) and Hillary Clinton (2016 presidential election) in which both won the popular vote — received more overall votes than their rival — but lost the overall presidency due to not gaining enough electors via the electoral college. Hence, this system has been highly criticized for not being representative enough and giving too much power to voters of certain states, the so-called “swing states” (Johnson, 2005).

“Swing states” are a subset of states whose party allegiance is undetermined. To be considered as a swing state, they need to have the additional feature of being states in which the result of the presidential contest is expected to hinge on, or those in which the two major parties vote percentages are within five percentage points from each other (James & Lawson, 1999). On the other hand, “Spectator states” are those that have not been competitive for any of the last ten presidential elections.

These “swing states” are accused of gaining advantage from the electoral system. Due to their importance of determining election outcomes, they are prioritized by both parties in terms of time and resources in an effort to sway the voters, subsequently ignoring the so-

called lost causes and allocating little to no time or resources to the safe states. Moreover, these battleground states have demonstrated to have higher participation rates than other states and the voters are more informed about the position of each candidate on different issues. These states are sought after as they can lean towards either party with a sea of potential undecided voters that can be won over or mobilized. It is important to highlight that the battleground or swing states are not the same ones in every election and they can be either small, medium or large states. Hence, this the main reason why some authors believe that the system is not completely biased (Johnson, 2005).

The US electoral system emphasizes the differences among the voters' spectrum. According to an analysis conducted by Pew Research Center of American' partisan identification, approximately a third of registered voters in the US (34%) consider themselves Independents, 33% Democrats and 29% Republicans. If we take independents' leanings into consideration, 49% of all registered voters classify themselves as Democrats or lean or the party opposed to a 44% identified as Republicans or lean to the party (Gramlich, 2020).

3.2. Voter Behaviour

There are three main approaches regarding voting behavior: the sociological approach, the psychological approach and the economic approach. In order to explain voter behavior, each approach takes different things into consideration in order to understand what issues are constructed around the voters' concerns. So, understanding how different voters behave, candidates can know how to reach them more effectively.

3.2.1. The sociological approach

The sociological approach is based on the premise that the electorate can be divided by social classes, they will participate in political conflict as an organized group as they share specific interests. Later on, the concept of social classes will be evolved, being replaced by the concept of "cleavages".

The concept “political cleavage” is one approach to try to explain voter’s behavior, however, the evolution of the concept has left different theories that have variations in the definition. Political cleavage and political conflict are linked together, however, authors disagree in the specification of these links. All these authors work towards the central assumption that the specific way in which members of a society divide from and work together in regard to political issues, has major consequences for political conflict (Zuckerman, 1975). “Some political cleavages correspond to ones differentiating social groups within which solidarity and cohesion already exist on other than purely political grounds, while certain other such cleavages lack any such correspondence” (Allardt & Pesonen, 1967, p. 325).

The starting point of the concept could be attributed to Karl Marx in his work *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), who used the term social class to refer to a particular type of political divisions which are not limited to economic or social categories. According to him, classes are not constituted until they participate in political conflicts as organized groups. This last characteristic involves the association of people who share a class situation in a party or a political organization and implies the creation of class consciousness. This allowed the group to transform the objective class interests into formulated goals of organized action. Classes are different from the category of social and political division due to the perceptions of mutual interest, the size of the group and the engagement in political conflict to achieve the interests of the group. Later on, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) use the concept “cleavage” to refer to conflict groups based on perceptions of association. They believe that these cleavages are created in the social sphere and become politicized, as they become issues of large-scale conflict and get linked to political parties. Some political cleavages are religious, ethnic, regional and social class.

“Segmental cleavage”, as Eckstein in his book *Division and Cohesion in Democracy* (1966, p.34) labels cleavage, is a specific kind of political division, “This exists where political divisions follow very closely, and especially concern lines of objective social differentiation, especially those particularly salient in a society”. Daalder (1966), while developing important political cleavage-types in Europe identifies two, nationality and regime cleavages, that are not necessarily tied to social divisions. Political cleavage differs from the general category of political division by the persistence over time and extensiveness of membership shown in electoral behavior. When studying the French

political cleavages, he labeled them as those political divisions that come as a result of crucial events in French history that have left layers of opinions. Dahl (1965) defines cleavages as differences in political attitudes and behavior which is persistent over long periods of time and contributes to bouts of severe conflict.

Partisanship can increase voter turnout as is based on group attachment or group identification, serving as a strong motivator to follow the interests and expectations of the group. Partisanship, as a type of group identification, can encourage voting, as casting a vote for one's party provides benefits for the whole group (Binning, Sherman, Cohen, & Heitland, 2010). This can influence mobilization as well as to allow voters to evaluate policy depending on how strongly they identify with the party proposing the policy (Bergan, 2012).

3.2.2. The psychological approach

The psychological approach was first introduced by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center with a study of the 1952 Presidential elections. The basic premise of this approach is that socialization, emotional ties, past performance of governments, and mental frames play an important role in determining voter behavior.

Early studies of voter behavior perceived parties as organizations that managed to mobilize citizens through ties of socialization and affect. Scholars from the Michigan model relied on social psychology and saw party identification as an emotional tie to a party which shapes voting behavior throughout a voter's life (Stokes, 1999). This perspective was replaced by theories that stated parties competed for the support of voters who had a more rational and instrumental posture. Downs (1957) proposed that voters choose their vote based on the proximity of a specific party's issue position to their policy ideal point.

Contrary to Downs theory, Key (1966) believed that voters assess not only issue positions but also past performance of governments. An extension of this view is the "running tally" which states that party labels summarize a party's past performance. The theories that believe that there exists a convergence of parties, notably at the preferred position of the median voter, could not be observed in the real world and soon the voter was said to perceive politics in dichotomous terms. A party could be on "my" side of an issue or on the

“other” side. In order to let voters know on which side is each candidate, parties send intense or extreme messages.

Another approach to understand why would someone identify himself as a Republican or a Democrat is through psychology. Everyone has mental structures that condition how we see the world and how we reason, called frames. Words are refined in relation to conceptual frames; when we hear a word its frame is activated in our brain (Lakoff, 2004). George Lakoff (2004) defines two different family models which represent two ways of understanding morality: the strict father and the nurturant parent model. Each of these two models illustrate a different view of the world, either as a dangerous and competitive place or based on empathy and responsibility. Our political opinions are dominated by one of the two models but everyone has both of them, either actively or passively. Knowing which model voters have in different aspects of their lives helps us find the best narrative to approach them.

The perspective of the Michigan Model expects consistency between party identification and issue preferences, as they reflect the partisan paradigm which dominates the political thinking of an individual. Candidates cannot win the elections just with their partisan base alone so they need to exploit the tensions on wedge issues to attract as many “cross-pressured voters” as they can, as they use the campaign information to help form a decision.

Some scholars have classified these groups as “the least politically informed and least interested citizens are also the least partisan voters and most likely to change their vote” (Pedersen, 1978, p.18) or “it is the least informed members within the electorate who seem to hold the critical balance of power, in the sense that alterations in governing party depend disproportionately on shifts in their sentiment” (Converse, 1962, p.578). We can also find scholars who state “many individual voters act in odd ways indeed; yet in large the electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of alternatives presented to it and the character of the information available to it” (Key, 1966, p.92) or the theory that the voters who find themselves at odds with their party, use the campaign to decide whether partisan loyalty or issue preferences have a bigger impact on their vote decision (Shields & Hillygus, 2008).

These types of voters have been traditionally known as “swing voters”, often defined as someone who is not solidly compromised with one candidate or the other and their final decision is in doubt until Election day. Swing voters have been classified as political independents, party switchers — who changed parties from one election to the following one — undecided or cross-pressured (Mayer, 2007). Cross-pressured voters are closer to one of the main parties but disagree with their affiliated party on a policy issue that is personally important to them, causing an internal conflict (Shields & Hillygus, 2008). Candidates must recognize who the cross-pressured voters are and target them with issues that are important enough to them to mobilize them to the candidate’s party, usually done through wedge issues (Lakoff, 2004).

3.2.3. The economic approach

This approach is based on the rational choice perspective, which states that the electorate vote guided by the aim to maximize action’s utility. According to this theory, citizens will vote for the party in which they rationally assess will provide more benefits in accordance with their own interests.

Differences between low and high income citizens have resulted in disparities in accessing civic and engaging political opportunities (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) as well as political participation (Leighley & Nagler, 2014). Musick & Wilson (2008), for instance, explain that Americans living in poor neighborhoods often have insufficient resources to develop and maintain civic associations, resulting in fewer opportunities for political participation.

On the other hand, the rational choice perspective also assumes coherence between issue positions and party identification but because voters support the party that is closest to their ideological point of view (Shields & Hillygus, 2008). Anthony Downs (1957) on his work *An Economic Theory of Democracy* develops the concept of rational choice theory. This theory tries to explain voter behavior relating economic parameters with a political outcome. It creates an analogy between consumers, voters, enterprises and political parties. This theory is based on the three premises becoming the most influential when decisions are made by both voters and political parties, they are seen as rational and guided by the principle of maximization of action’s utility. According to this theory voters and political

parties behave in line with their own interests and so, they will vote to the party they believe that will provide the voter with more benefits than the competence. It has also been proposed to perceive political utility in terms of economic rewards and losses. The results of a party's choice are evaluated by the voter in relation to his personal economic situation (pocketbook voting) or in terms of the economic wellbeing of the nation (sociotropic voting) (Fiorina, 1981).

In summary, there are three different models that explain voting behavior: the sociological approach, the psychological approach and the economic approach. The sociological approach is based on the division of "cleavages" among the electorate which share specific interests to benefit the whole group. The second approach, the psychological, takes into consideration mental frames, which help shape the way each person sees the world and shapes their reasoning process. Lastly, the economic approach relies on rational choice theory and base the voting election on the candidate that can maximize the fulfillment of the voter's own interests.

3.3. Issues

The dynamics of issue competition are key when analyzing party competition. Parties struggle for attention as the information-processing capacities of the electorate and the media are limited, but this attention is crucial for a party's success in elections (Hobolt, De Vries, & van de Wardt, 2014). The concept of issue salience plays a major role in the elections. In US politics, it has been demonstrated that issue salience directly affects public opinion on a presidency, moreover, if a specific issue is especially imperative and the President handles it well, his ratings will benefit. However, if the President fails to handle said issue, his popularity will suffer accordingly (Epstein & Segal, 2000).

McCombs and Reynolds (2002, p.1) stated that agenda-setting is "establishing issue salience among the public so that an issue becomes the focus of public attention, thought, and perhaps even action". On the other hand, other scholars believe that there is a possibility that behavioral engagement is in an issue that can be encouraged by personal importance rather than national importance. This personal concern comes from either a material self-interest or identification with specific groups or values. If the later was true,

then voters would not shift their personal issue priorities easily or often (Miller, Krosnick & Fabrigar, 2016)

Salicency comes from the idea that parties define their policies by emphasizing certain issues more than others, especially in public documents and debates. However, there is a debate on whether parties always emphasize the same “owned” issues or if they emphasize different issues during different elections with a view to winning votes (Budge, 2015).

“The theory of issue ownership finds a campaign effect when a candidate successfully frames the vote choice as a decision to be made in terms of problems facing the country that he is better able to “handle” than his opponent” (Petrocik, 1996, p.826). Budge and Farlie (1983) built the idea that parties have linkages to certain issues and that election campaigns could be characterised in terms of the domination of one party’s favourable issues over the other.

From a historical point of view, parties are associated with certain issues, whether they are favorable or not. For example, conservatives with military strength or liberals with civil rights. The specific circumstances that surround the elections also play a determinant role and will ultimately dictate the agenda, as we have seen with the COVID-19 crisis in the 2020 election. Salience-based theory helps in shaping party strategic behavior, as parties will structure their discourse by emphasizing each of the different topics in which they have an advantage, rather than opposing the other candidate directly on the same topics. As it has been mentioned before, parties have associations with certain topics, these remain stable from election to election and contrast to the topics emphasized by opposing parties, helping the electorate to differentiate the various parties. Lastly, parties are rewarded when the issues in which they are associated with are more prominent in the public agenda during the election campaign (Budge, 2015).

In contrast, there are those that believe issue attention is variable and not constant in party competition (Damore, 2004). Opening the door to the fact that certain issues may not always fall into categories associated with one party. Competition between two rival parties is underlined by the efforts of the minority party to increase their stake, in the importance they accredit, to an issue that is most likely to split the majority coalition in order to move voters to their party (Carmines & James, 1989). In other words, the opposition’s

“fundamental heresthetical device is to divide the majority with some new alternative” (Riker, 1986, p.1).

There are different measures of perceived issue positions of parties, with two of the most famous ones being: the proximity model and the directional model. The proximity model assumes that a voter is able to establish his own position for each of the issues in the campaign and to have a specific issue position for each political object. The latter questions the assumption of the proximity model that voters can locate themselves and political objects precisely on issue dimensions. The directional theory, developed by Rabinowitz and Macdonald in their work “A comparative spatial analysis of European party systems” (1990), allows voters to organize information about political objects in a more dispositional location of their own issue preferences and issue position of those objects. This model challenges the traditional “rational choice” which assumes that political objects should be responsive to the median of a given voter distribution to maximize their votes, as the directional model states that maximum electoral support is achieved if an issue position is occupied as extreme as possible but inside a “region of acceptability” (Kramer & Rattinger, 1997).

“A wedge issue is a rhetorical strategy, usually focused on a social concern, that is intentionally constructed to divide party voters and polarize the public in order to gain political advantage” (Wiant, 2002, p.276). Some of the most common wedge issues are abortion rights, gun-ownership, gay marriage, minimum wage or immigration, which force people to choose a side, for or against. Divisive issues become wedge issues when they are raised as an attempt to take a portion of the opponent’s supporters (Shields & Hillygus, 2008).

Wedge issues have been considered to coarsen political discourse by the exploitation of factions. A faction is “a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the [...] interest of the community” (Madison, 1961, p.1). Aristotle on his work *On rhetoric: A theory of civic discourse* observed that these factions arose from perceptions of inequality, potentially leading to a change in government, showing how these elements play a determinant impact on mobilizing and uniting people.

Both political figures and interest groups have attempted to exploit these factions through wedge issues, which are a subcategory of divisive issues. An issue comprises two opposing claims. However, wedge issues divide voters and parties through code words, labeling, and other strategies to gain political advantage (Wiant, 2002). How these wedge issues are used by both candidates during campaigns can shape voter behaviour and election outcomes. The impact of the campaign will have little effect on some voters, especially in the partisans, but for others, the campaign provides critical knowledge for choosing between both candidates (Shields & Hillygus, 2008). The ultimate goal is not to change people's minds, it is about targeting people who do not have a solid opinion on something and to mobilize them (Peterson & Fayyad, 2017).

When we have established a frame for a specific issue and we receive information that is not consistent with our frame, our brain rejects the information and keeps the frame (Lakoff, 2004). The opposite is also true, when the structure is less consistent, the attitude of the voter is more open to new information. Moreover, there is evidence that voters with internal conflicts regarding an issue are more motivated to seek out information and carefully analyze everything new they learn about that issue (Shields & Hillygus, 2008).

According to John Zaller (1999), the politically sophisticated voters are “rigid, moralistic, and partisan” as well as resistant to new information which could create conflict with their voting predisposition. Shields and Hillygus in their book *The Persuadable Voter* (2008) suggest that citizens judge policy positions and support the candidate who is closer to their personal preferences on the salient issues of the campaign.

3.4. Campaigning

A final set of literature to review is the topic of campaigning in the US. If we link this section with the previous one on issues, a campaign is successful when it finds the issues in which a specific party has an advantage and manages to mobilize more voters.

The electoral campaigns in the United States have evolved from “party-centered” to “candidate-centered” politics. The basis of the latter relies on mobilization to achieve a victory on the polls. In order to achieve this mobilization, campaign strategists use sophisticated databases of voter information to contact, register and mobilize subgroups to the population by highlighting the specific issues that groups care about most (Sides & Karch, 2008). When analyzing campaigns, there is evidence of a relationship between campaign activity — as spending — and the rate of voter turnout (Cox & Munger, 1989) or how an enrichment of contact from the campaign increases the chances of voting (Kramer G. H., 1970).

The challenge in every campaign is to find which issues are the most important for the electorate and use them to attract them to a specific party. Individual voters may be more susceptible to campaign messages when they emphasize personally important issues to them. As most American voters lack the inclination or resources to follow politics in detail, many will only pay attention to the issues that concern their own personal interests, the interests of the group in which they feel more identified, and for those issues that are related to particularly relevant values of said voter (Sides & Karch, 2008).

However, voters vary in the issues they consider important and different groups within the electorate respond differently to different campaign messages, that is why it is important to pay attention to the campaign messages. There are three main message strategies in presidential campaigns. The first one are messages designed to wage war either competitive or substantive (if they intend to sell the candidate). This strategy views presidential campaigns as war in which the goal is to improve one candidate’s position while simultaneously harming the opponent (Scammell, 1998). Within the competitive strategies we can find positive competitive messages — which attempts to frame one candidate as the leader — or negative competitive messages which directly attack the opponent (Haynes, Flowers, & Gurian, 2002).

The second strategy is the substantive positioning or, in other terms, targeting key groups and mobilizing voters as the key to win the elections (Holbrook, 1996). These messages are designed to capture different groups by presenting the candidate in a way that appeals to specific groups. This can be done through stating a policy position or responding to a specific event.

The last strategy is information dissemination which provides information about the candidate's schedule and offers access to him and his staff. This strategy is designed in a way that the candidate is in an environment he controls such as a press conference. Although this provides basic information, it is a crucial part of the campaign as is critical to the overall messaging strategy of every candidate (Flowers, Haynes, & Crespín, 2003).

Campaigns have a dual purpose, on the one side, it is a way to reinforce the loyalty of the candidate's base (Campbell, 2016) but also aims to attract cross-pressured partisans. During conventions and debates, candidates control the flow of information about policy priorities and it has been demonstrated that rallies are especially likely to activate and mobilize partisans (Shields & Hillygus, 2008). There is also evidence that links the salience of an issue with a knowledge increase of its possible causes and solutions, stronger opinions, less probability of being in a neutral position and increased probability of active participation in politics (Weaver, 1991). However, there are other factors that influence the perceived salience of an issue such as party reputation or issue ownership, which determine if a party is seen as the most competent on a specific issue (Bélanger & Meguid, 2005).

The partisan base is not sufficient to win the elections, that is why candidates need to mobilize cross-pressured voters. As we have seen, the importance of catching persuadable voters has made candidates allocate their resources in the battleground states in which more persuadable voters live. Finding what are the important issues for these voters can determine the success of a candidate. It is important then to understand how these voters take decisions, where they are and how to approach them. As Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro state "differences in people's social and economic surroundings, conditions of life, historical experiences, knowledge, and cognitive abilities all give rise to group-related differences in policy preferences" (Page & Shapiro, 1992, p.318).

During the 1960s and 1970s discourses were covered by the national press, which made it difficult to communicate unique messages to different voters and inevitably made wedge issues part of the national campaign. The improvements on the dimension of information today have helped to identify potential wedge issues and with the amount of information political parties have about individual voters, it is easier for them to calculate the costs and benefits of emphasizing a particular position (Shields & Hillygus, 2008).

Contemporary data techniques have evolved and made it easier to identify potential wedge issues and microtarget different policy messages to different voters, increasing the precision and sophistication of these issues. Microtargeting, according to the journalist Steven Levy, is “a way to identify small but crucial groups of voters who might be won over to a given side, and which messages would do the trick” (2008). Microtargeting became a key tool in the 1990s but it has been used since the 1960s, as Richard Nixon in his 1968 campaign shaped the discourse to appeal to White voters in the South. These voters considered civil rights legislation the most important issue of the campaign, so Nixon implied that this legislation was going too far and that it should be repealed, allowing him to win over persuadable voters in the South (Bunting, 2015). Moreover, President Ford backed in 1976, was advised that “actions to get target constituency groups [...] should be rifle shots aimed at the specific group involved” and also recommended targeting Hispanic voters with specific messages by creating a direct mail program containing specific issues that would appeal to their particular special interest group (Shields & Hillygus, 2008, pp: 151-155). However, President Clinton during his campaign in 1996, became the first president with well-documented consumer data that helped identify voter profiles. He hired the firm Claritas, specialized in collecting consumer data for advertising, and classify voters according to their lifestyle. For instance, with this information it allowed him to know that Democrats were heavier TV-watchers than Republicans and that young voters watched more television at night. With this information, he knew that appearing on late-night television would help him raise support among younger liberal voters (Bunting, 2015).

These are just some examples to illustrate the capacity of microtargeting and how it allows candidates to be able to target a message to the voters who are more likely to care about an issue in which they have an advantage over their opponent. As we have explained, microtargeting is not a new campaigning technique and candidates have been using it since the 1960s. However, changes in technology and knowledge gained from commercial marketing and grassroots mobilization have made microtargeting more precise, efficient and individualized in recent years.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, we are going to explain the different theories and concepts that we will be applying in the analysis. We will start with the concept of “cross-pressured” voters and the approach on voter behavior it has been chosen. Then, we will explain the role of discourse and how it can be used as a tool to mobilize voters. Lastly, as in the literature review, we will analyze the role of issues in general, focusing more specifically on wedge issues in this section.

4.1. Voter’s profile and sociology

As it has been previously explained, the concept of swing voter defines this kind of voter as someone who is not aligned with a specific candidate and their decision is in doubt until Election day. The category of swing voters often includes political independents, party switchers, undecided voters or non-voters. However, as the ultimate goal of this paper is to see how specific wedge issues mobilize voters, we are going to use the concept of cross-pressured voter, as it will help us identify which part of the electorate switch their vote because they agree with the opposition on a policy issue that is personally important to them. If a candidate manages to attract cross-pressured voters from the opposition, it will be assumed that is because his discourse over a specific issue is more attractive than the opposition’s.

As mentioned previously in the section of the psychological approach (see section 3.2.2.), cross-pressured voters are closer to one of the main parties but disagree with their affiliated party on a policy issue that is personally important to them, causing an internal conflict (Shields & Hillygus, 2008). This subset among swing voters is interesting for the purpose of this paper, as this group is the target of candidates as they are under the possibility of changing parties. Moreover, the key element is that it is the campaign and the discourse of each candidate that influences these voters to switch parties.

Contrary to the theories of Converse (1962) and Pedersen (1978), I do not think this group is the least politically informed or least interested citizens. Not only I disagree with these statements but I think it works the opposite way. If a voter is not politically informed there is no reason for him to change his vote from one election to the following one as there are

no external factors that impulse the citizen to switch parties. There are always exceptions and one cannot establish universal rules in social sciences, but in my opinion, if a voter switches parties it is because that citizen is informed enough about a specific issue and gives more value to that issue than to partisanship.

Also, in the literature review, we have seen that there is evidence on the connection between the salience of an issue and a knowledge increase of its possible causes and solutions, stronger opinions, less probability of being in a neutral position and increased probability of active participation in politics (Weaver, 1991). This reflects a link between a knowledge increase and an active participation in politics, so uninterested voters or non-informed voters will have lower participation in politics. When your knowledge about a political party increases, so do the possibilities that you find something you disagree with your party, which encourages you to switch to the opposition.

Among the different perspectives that explain voter behavior that have been covered in the previous section. We will be applying the psychological approach in our analysis, with a particular emphasis on Lakoff's theory. We are trying to understand the impact of issues on cross-pressured voters, this perspective will help us understand how mental structures work and how they can be modified through the use of discourse, in order to mobilize voters for one party or the other. The economic approach would explain cross-pressured voters as citizens that change their vote because their candidate offers an option that fits better with their own interests, regardless of the discourse. This perspective, as it is based on rational choice theory, does not explain why someone may vote prioritizing the common wellbeing of society even if it does not coincide with maximizing his personal interest. The sociological approach better explains how an issue, correctly targeted to a social group and with an elaborate discourse, can help mobilize different social groups. However, this model fails to explain why people within a specific group can vote for different candidates depending on the election.

Following the psychological approach and according to George Lakoff (2004), everyone has mental frames that affect the thinking process. This process starts with mental structures that condition the way we see the world and how we reason, called frames. Words are also defined in relation to conceptual frames so when we hear a word, its frame is activated in our brain. Following Lakoff's theory, conservatives and progressives have

different ways of understanding morality which come represented with two family models: the strict father and the nurturant parent model.

The first model is based on a set of assumptions such as the world is a dangerous and competitive place, there will always be winners and losers, and there exists an absolute right and an absolute wrong. The strict father model compares the voter with a child and the father with the state. The model claims that the child follows his impulses and the task of the father is to be the moral authority who teaches his child the difference between right and wrong. The goal of the father — or the state — is that the child learns how to pursue his own self-interest, becoming prosperous and self-reliant, linking morality with prosperity. There is a connection between this view and free market capitalism, if everyone follows their own self-interest, then, thanks to the invisible hand, the self-interest of all citizens will be maximized (Lakoff, 2004).

On the other hand, we have the nurturant parent model which is, according to Lakoff, how progressives understand morality. Again, in this model, Lakoff compares the parents with the state and the child with the citizen. This model is gender neutral (both parents are equally responsible for their child) and it is based on empathy and responsibility. It believes that children are born good and can work to become better. Protection also plays a huge role in this model as it is directly linked to being able to empathize with your children. The moral responsibility of a parent is to teach their children to be a fulfilled person who wants others fulfilled as well (Lakoff, 2004).

According to Lakoff's theory, we have a political opinion dominated by one of the two models. However, as the two models are highly represented in our culture, everyone has both models, either actively or passively. Reagan realized that blue-collar workers with nurturant opinions in their labor unions were often strict parents at home. Knowing this, he used metaphors based on the home and family and managed to attract those voters to the Republican Party (Lakoff, 2004).

As Reagan, every candidate aims to find those controversial issues that mobilize voters to their party. Candidates' efforts to exploit controversial issues can be explained through cross-pressured voters, composed by partisans who disagree with their party on a specific policy issue which is personally important to them (Shields & Hillygus, 2008).

As George Lakoff states, a voter may be a strict father in certain aspects of his life but encounter an issue which activates the nurturant parent model and it is personally important enough to produce a change on his voting decision. Candidates must recognize who are the cross-pressured voters and target them with issues that are important enough to them to mobilize them to the candidate's party, usually done through wedge issues. When we have established a frame for a specific issue and we receive new information that is not consistent with our frame, our brain rejects the information and keeps the frame (Lakoff, 2004). The opposite is also true, when the structure is less consistent, the attitude of the voter is more open to new information. Moreover, there is evidence that voters with internal conflicts regarding an issue are more motivated to seek out information and carefully analyze everything new they learn about that issue (Shields & Hillygus, 2008).

4.2. Discourse

The aim of this research paper is to demonstrate the effectiveness of political discourse when used correctly to mobilize voters. I could have chosen different approaches such as the ability of the media to change readers' opinions or how external factors shape the final outcome of the vote. However, to demonstrate that candidates play an active role in mobilizing voters, analyzing how they shape their discourse and choose the issues that will be addressed and the approaches to these issues, this can be demonstrated.

Through the discourse, candidates can choose the issues they want to cover, as they feel they are in a considerable advantage compared to the opposition or addressed issues in which they have the support of public opinion. Nevertheless, candidates have to deal with issues that change from one election to the following one and depend on external factors. But even in these situations, candidates can gain or lose advantage depending on the approach they decide to take, the wording or codes they use to address the topic or how fast they react to that topic are some factors that influence the final decisions of the voter.

For instance, in the 2020 US Presidential Elections, the spread of COVID-19 played a major role in the agenda-setting. Both candidates had the opportunity to decide the approach they were going to take regarding the virus, they could not choose whether to address that issue or not, but they could choose their wording to shape their strategy. The discourse goes together with nonverbal messages that the candidates send. For instance,

during this campaign Biden reduced the amount of people that could go to his rallies and he was always wearing a face mask. On the other hand, Trump did not set a maximum of people that could attend his rallies as his objective was to send another message regarding the pandemic.

The discourse is a useful tool that, when used correctly, can make cross-pressured voters switch parties. Even though, as it was mentioned before, candidates have to deal with issues imposed by external conditions, these can become an advantage if the discourse's approach manages to reach the right audience. Voter behavior cannot be fully understood without taking into account campaign information and the behavior of both candidates rely fundamentally on perceptions about what voters care about and how they make up their minds during the campaign. As it was previously mentioned, cross-pressured voters are the main target to candidates as they disagree with their party on a personally important policy issue and they turn to campaign information to help decide between the candidates (Shields & Hillygus, 2008). That is why I argue that campaign information can influence voter decision making in a situation of conflict for a voter

There is evidence that a link between internal conflict and susceptibility exists "By regulating the degree of conflict experienced, the persuader can make it more likely that the persuadee will choose the option desired by the persuader" (Okeefe, 2002, p.81) or authors that state that when the underlying structure of an attitude is less consistent, that attitude is more responsive to new information (Eagly & Chaiken, 1995). When an opinion is not consistent, the attitude of a voter is more open to new information and will be motivated to increase his knowledge about that issue, and in this process of looking for new information, he will rely mainly on the campaign.

The campaign is the opportunity for both candidates to exploit wedge issues and gain an advantage over the opposition. For persuadable voters, the campaign is critical as it determines if their internal conflict regarding an issue is exacerbated or assuaged by altering the salience of that specific issue. On the other hand, some voters might know that they will not agree on everything with their party and the only question is if the incongruent issue will become salient to their vote decision. Other partisans will only learn their issue disagreements as campaign advances (Shields & Hillygus, 2008).

Moreover, there is a considerable difference in how the campaign impacts voters depending on the state they live in. In battleground states there is more money invested which results in more television advertising, more personal canvassing, higher levels of political discussion, more coverage on media and more visits from candidates (Holbrook, 1996). The discourses of candidates can only activate the incongruent issue to the extent that voters receive that message during the campaign, that is why the amount of cross-pressured voters vary from state to state. Campaigns have a dual objective, they aim to reinforce the loyalty of partisans while attracting cross-pressured voters from the opposition. However, campaign alone does not activate partisanship, what a citizen will end up voting depends mainly on the messages received during the campaign (Shields & Hillygus, 2008).

Thanks to advances in technology and the amount of personal information of the voters available, it has been possible to narrow the messages and direct different messages to different groups of voters depending on the issues that concern them the most, this is known as “voter targeting”. Even though social media has become a new way for candidates to spread their message, fake news and misinformation have increased considerably and it is hard to control and verify all the information available. The Facebook scandal of 2016 was the first time voters realized the power they had given to social media and how it turned against them. Personal information of voters was taken without consent to create a system that could profile individual US voters in order to target them with personalized political advertisements (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018).

4.3. Wedge issues

In every election, there are key issues that play a major role in determining the outcome of the election, for instance, immigration, in the 2016 US Presidential election, abortion in the election of 2012 or terrorism in 2004, but these are just a few examples. Each candidate has some issues that historically have become a characteristic of the party, such as the Democrats with health care or the Republicans with military investment. Depending on the external conditions, a party might benefit as one of their predominant issues has an increased relevanced during some specific elections.

However, candidates can play an active role in exploiting issues to make them salient. The increased salience of an issue goes together with an increase of knowledge of its possible causes and solutions, stronger opinions, less likelihood of taking a neutral position and more likelihood of participating in politics (Weaver, 1991). Choosing the right issues to make them salient can help candidates to mobilize voters.

However, when taking a stand on a wedge issue, candidates risk losing voters that were previously supporting them as they do not agree with their party's position on that issue. This is why the strategy of using a specific wedge issue relies on having all the information about the needs and desires of the persuadable voters among the electorate. Candidates are looking for issues that will bridge their base supporters and the persuadable voters. Any issue has the potential to become a wedge issue but they ultimately become a wedge issue when raised in order to peel away some portion of an opponent's potential supporters. The aim is to create a policy concern that manages to divide the opposition's potential winning coalition (Shields & Hillygus, 2008). Ultimately, the purpose of wedge issues is not to change the electorate's mind but to target people who have not formed an opinion about a specific issue yet. As it was previously mentioned, what parties try to do, is to manipulate the salience of a divisive issue as a way to change the probabilities that people will make a decision based on it (Peterson & Fayyad, 2017).

For the purpose of this research paper, I am going to use the definition of Wiant (2002, p.276) that states that "a wedge issue is a rhetorical strategy, usually focused on a social concern, that is intentionally constructed to divide party voters and polarize the public in order to gain political advantage". Another characteristic of these wedge issues is that they divide voters through code words, labeling, and other strategies to gain political advantage. Therefore a wedge issue has a dual function: it is used to divide the electorate and to weaken the position of the opposing candidate. These wedge issues can be either hypothetical or symbolic, as their purpose is to create division, the issue itself may be essentially irrelevant (Wiant, 2002).

Fear also plays an important factor in the creation of dividing the electorate and creating wedge issues, "Whenever it is better that they (the audience) experience fear, he should make them realize that they are liable to suffering" (Aristotle, 1991, p.1383a). Another characteristic is the use of code words and labeling which carry two denotative meanings:

one for the general public and a hidden meaning for the target audience. Related to this last point, the audience has to be taken into consideration while constructing wedge issues as, in order to be successful, it has to be perceived as protecting or advancing their own interests (Wiant, 2002).

How these wedge issues are used by both candidates during campaigns can shape voter behaviour and election outcomes. As Lakoff (2004) states, candidates need to work with frames, and through creating new frames for specific issues, they can obtain an attitude more open to new information from the voter.

In summary, this theoretical framework has presented all the definitions and approaches that are essential in order to carry out our analysis. Firstly, our focus will be on cross-pressured voters, as it will facilitate the identification of the part of the electorate that switches its vote as a consequence of an internal conflict that can be created through the exploitation of wedge issues. Also, it has been explained how the psychological approach is the best perspective to understand how mental structures can be modified through the use of discourse in order to mobilize voters towards one party or the other. It has been proven how discourse is a powerful tool to attract and mobilize voters. Moreover, with microtarget techniques it is possible to direct different messages to different groups. Lastly, it has been explained how wedge issues are relevant to the candidates and how they can be used to divide and polarize voters in order to gain political advantage. Overall, we have established the relevant definitions and approaches that are crucial for understanding US voters and the electoral system as a whole.

5. OBJECTIVES & HYPOTHESES

The purpose of this research paper is to answer the following research question:

Have wedge issues been a determinant factor in the outcome of the 2020 US Presidential election?

To do so, we present the following working hypotheses:

1. COVID-19, the economic crisis caused by it, and the race issue have been the main wedge issues for these elections.
2. The massive mobilization — that has beaten historical records — has been a consequence of the polarization caused by the exploitation of these wedge issues.
3. Biden has managed to create a new framework regarding COVID-19 that was more successful than Trump's.
4. The excessive polarization that these issues have created, has destabilized the US democratic system.

6. METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this paper is to determine whether wedge issues have been a determinant factor in the outcome of the 2020 US Presidential election. In order to do this, we are going to divide the analysis in two main parts:

- Verify if the issues proposed are wedge issues.
- Analyze if these issues have had a substantial impact in the outcome of the US Presidential elections.

In this section we are going to develop further the methodology used in the analysis of each part:

1. Verifying the issues proposed are wedge issues.

The main issues I proposed are race issues, prestige of the political institutions and COVID-19. These issues have been selected on the basis of them being dominant topics of the debates and in a survey conducted by Pew Research Center (2021) on the public's top priorities. Among the different issues, dealing with the coronavirus outbreak was considered to be a top priority by 78% of people, improving the political system by 62% and addressing issues around race by 49%.

The issue of COVID-19 has been especially salient and the population was highly divided on the use of face masks, on closing or not closing businesses and schools, etc. This election had to face high levels of misinformation and accusations of electoral fraud. Trump has repeated during his campaign that there would be election fraud and that voting by mail, which ballooned due to the COVID-19 pandemic, could not be trusted. Conspiracy theories, debates regarding the intervention of foreign countries in the 2020 US elections, the abuse of power of both candidates to benefit their relatives, and the exploitation of controversial issues have led to a loss of confidence in the political institutions. Lastly, race issues have been present in previous elections in the U.S., but this year, with the occurrence of police brutality against Black people and the resulting protests under the Black Lives Matter movement, have also made this topic an important one, especially for minorities, which represent a higher percentage of the electorate than ever.

Other important issues could have been analysed such as immigration, health care, the economy or climate change. However, due to the space constraints of this dissertation and the easier operationalisation of the issues selected; as they contain certain keywords, we will just focus on the three issues previously explained.

Once the issues have been selected, we need to specify what we consider to be a wedge issue and, as it was explained in the previous sections (See section 3.3.), we are going to use the definition of Wiant (2002, p.276): “a rhetorical strategy, usually focused on a social concern, that is intentionally constructed to divide party voters and polarize the public in order to gain political advantage”.

As a rhetorical strategy, it is also common to use code words, labeling and other strategies to divide voters and gain political advantage. As it was mentioned in the theoretical framework, fear also plays an important factor in the creation of division among the electorate and exploiting wedge issues as the perception that the voter is in danger increases, the voter is more likely to mobilize to avoid the pain. Related to this last point, the audience has to be taken into consideration while constructing wedge issues as, in order to be successful, a wedge issue has to be perceived as protecting or advancing their interests (Wiant, 2002). It has also been mentioned that a wedge issue is intentionally constructed. This means that the candidate plays an active role in exploiting these issues to make them salient. The increased salience of an issue goes together with a gain of knowledge of its possible causes and solutions, stronger opinions, less likelihood of taking a neutral position and more likelihood of participating in politics (Weaver, 1991). Choosing the right issues to make them salient can help candidates to mobilize voters.

Parties struggle for attention as the information-processing capacities of the electorate and the media are limited, but this attention is crucial for a party's success in an election (Hobolt, De Vries, & van de Wardt, 2014). It has been demonstrated that issue salience directly affects the President's public opinion, moreover, if a specific issue is especially imperative and the President handles it well, his ratings will benefit. However, if the President fails to handle that issue, his popularity will suffer accordingly (Epstein & Segal, 2000).

In order to get the information previously explained and know if these issues are truly wedge issues, we will assess each topic following this structure in our analysis:

- **Introduction:** small introduction to give the reader some context about the issue.
- **Polarization:** as the aim is to create division among the electorate, we will analyze the discourse of both candidates in the 2020 presidential election during the presidential debates. The aim of this section is to identify the different approaches used by each candidate and to analyse the wording they use when talking about that topic.
- **Media coverage:** this will be the first element to identify the salience of the issues and it will be done through an analysis of the articles written by the New York Times during February 1st and November 3rd using an API to identify when key words have appeared (Annex I). This newspaper has been selected as it is the third most sold in the US, and the only one that offered a free to use API in order to access their archive of data. Even though it is considered to lean towards the Democratic party, it is only being used in a quantitative manner to establish the amount of times these issues have been covered in the media.
- **Public opinion:** this will be the second element that will help us identify the salience of the issues proposed, as it will show if the narrative of that issue has caused any reaction among the electorate. For this part, the time frame considered is going to be from the 1st of February 2020 to the 31st of January 2021, as some key events that need to be considered for evidence took place after the elections.

Lastly, as the aim of this research is to demonstrate the effectiveness of political discourse when used correctly to mobilize voters, we are going to see if voters actually were mobilized.

2. Analyze if these issues have had a substantial impact in the outcome of the US Presidential elections.

This second part has the main purpose of determining the impact of the issues introduced in the previous section. Even though there are a lot of different aspects that played a role in the elections and in the voter's ultimate decision, we will try to measure the impact of the three issues in terms of mobilization. As it was mentioned in the theoretical framework: “by regulating the degree of conflict experienced, the persuader can make it more likely that the persuadee will choose the option desired by the persuader” (Okeefe, 2002, p.81). So if the discourse of a candidate is effective and the polarization is perceived by the voter, it will result in mobilization.

In order to measure this mobilization, we will go over the different ethnic groups for these elections using different surveys. This will be done through two surveys conducted by Pew Research, the first one conducted between July and August and the second one right after the elections. The purpose of doing this is to identify if the importance given to any of the topics have changed in the months previous to the Election day and during the presidential debates period.

Afterwards, we will analyze how the three issues proposed are seen by each party's supporters in order to identify, if any, the differences between Trump supporters and Biden supporters, to see if affiliation played a role on issue prioritizing. Finally, we will analyze the results of the exit polls by ethnic group to see how specific groups prioritize these issues. If an ethnic group was going to vote for a candidate but also was concerned about a specific issue, and they end up modifying the percentage for that candidate, we can say that the narrative of a candidate in that issue had an impact on the voter.

7. ANALYSIS

7.1. Verify if the issues proposed are wedge issues

7.1.1. COVID-19

- Introduction

Between January and May 2020, the disease has spread to every state, killing around 576,724 people and infecting 32.4 million in the United States, although due to testing delays and scarcity of tests left many cases and deaths undiagnosed. During March and April, local authorities started limiting large gatherings, closing non-essential businesses and ordering residents to stay in their homes, triggering a national shutdown. With measures trying to slow down the virus spread, the economic toll became a debate over when and how businesses and schools should continue with their in-person operations and whether the measures both the federal and local governments were taking were too restrictive or not restrictive enough (Hernandez et al., 2020).

- Polarization

In order to analyze each candidate's position on this issue, we are going to rely on the two presidential debates.¹

Trump's discourse regarding COVID-19 includes blaming China for what happened and comparing the US position in relation to other countries as an example of good management of the crisis, "The excess mortality rate is way down and much lower than almost any other country". When talking about when he closed the borders, Trump sees himself as one step ahead Biden, "If we would've listened to you, the country would have been left wide open, millions of people would have died, not 200,000 (...) I closed it and you said [referring to Biden] "He's racist and xenophobic" because you didn't think I should have closed our country".

¹ All the quotes are taken from the debates' transcripts via <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-joe-biden-1st-presidential-debate-transcript-2020>

When talking about COVID-19, Biden also provides data comparing the situation of the US in relation to other countries but in a more negative way than Trump “We, in fact, have 4% of the world’s population, 20% of the deaths, 40,000 people a day are contracting COVID-19. In addition to that, about between 750 and 1,000 people a day are dying”. He also tries to show Trump as weak and without the capacity to deal with this crisis “He knew all the way back in February how serious this crisis was. He knew it was a deadly disease (...) He said he didn’t tell us or give people a warning because he didn’t want to panic the American people. You don’t panic. He panicked”.

Trump also tries to discredit Biden in both debates as he states that Biden would have acted slower than he did causing more deaths “He was way behind us” and he talks about the swine flu that Biden had to deal with under Obama’s administration “His own person who ran that for him (...) said “It was catastrophic. It was horrible. We didn’t know what we were doing” Now he comes up and he tells us how to do this”. Another resource that Trump uses often is using states under a Democratic governor in order to make people imagine that what is happening in those states, would be extrapolated to the whole nation “New York is a ghost city (...) It is dying (...) Everybody is leaving New York”.

The vaccine plays a big role in Trump’s narrative, as the electorate is extremely concerned about the situation, proving that Trump could have the vaccine before the Election Day was decisive to the elections’ outcome, so he made clear during his speech that logistics were ready to start delivering the vaccines as soon as they had them and implying that it would not be really far in time “And now we are weeks away from a vaccine”. Regarding the vaccine, Biden knows that getting a vaccine before the elections could do some serious harm to his campaign so he tries to discredit Trump’s statements about having the vaccine before the elections “Every serious company is talking about maybe having a vaccine done by the end of the year, but the distribution of that vaccine will not occur until sometime beginning of the middle of next year to get it out, if we get the vaccine”.

The economy plays a huge role in this issue, as the economic situation of the country and the amount of jobs a president manages to create are key in determining the public opinion about the president. Biden uses the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 and says “The fact is that he has worked on this in a way that he’s going to be the first President of the United States to leave office having fewer jobs in his administration than when he

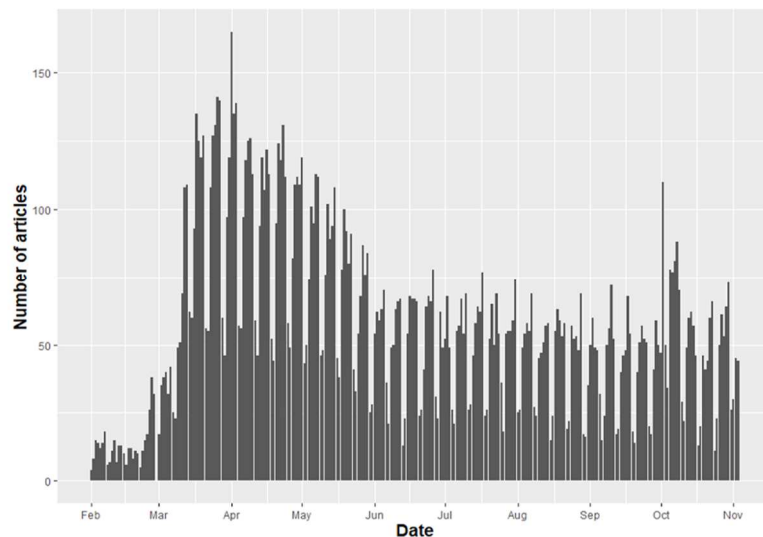
became President”, also, his motto regarding the economy is “You cannot fix the economy until you fix the COVID crisis”. Trump states that Biden wants to shut down the economy and talks about the side effects of shutting the economy such as drug addiction, alcoholism and depression. Trump also introduces fear in his discourse as he mentions several times that Biden wants to shut down the economy and says “We’re not going to have a country. You can’t do this. We can’t keep this country closed (...) People are losing their jobs. They’re committing suicide. That’s depression, alcohol, drugs at a level that nobody has ever seen before”.

Both candidates use fear when talking about this issue as it is a way of mobilizing voters. During the second debate, Trump’s narrative is less aggressive and he justifies the decisions taken at the beginning of the pandemic by saying “We have learned and studied and understand the disease” but he also highlights that having Biden in the government could have lasting harmful consequences in the country “We can’t close up our nation. We have to open our schools and we can’t close up our nation, or you’re not going to have a nation”. Biden’s discourse during the second debate is more dramatic and aims to add fear “Anyone responsible for that many deaths should not remain as President of the United States of America”. A common feature in Biden’s discourse is that he tries to position as another citizen rather than a politician and aims to highlight how Trump is privileged and would not understand average citizens “You should get out of your bunker and get out the sand trap in your golf course and go into the Oval Office (...)”. Biden also looks directly at the camera when talking, trying to look directly at the electorate and uses metaphors and situations that the average citizen could identify with such as “Look, you folks at home. How many of you got up this morning and had an empty chair at the kitchen table because someone died of COVID? How many of you are in a situation where you lost your mom or dad and you couldn’t even speak to them, you had a nurse holding a phone up so you could in fact say goodbye?” or “This is not about my family or his family. It’s about your family, the American people”.

- Media coverage

To identify the salience in the media, we have analyzed the number of articles written in the New York Times between February and November 2020 that had the key word for this issue. The key word used to find these articles was COVID. As it can be seen in the graphic, since its entrance in the US, COVID-19 became a salient issue, especially between March and June. However, the average of articles written regarding COVID-19 was above 50 per day. This issue has been consistently salient during the whole time frame established.

Figure 1: Plot of the amount key words (COVID) were used in articles by the NYT over time²



- Public Opinion

The lockdown restrictions prompted protests in the US with people, taking the streets in states like Texas, New Hampshire, Ohio and Wisconsin. In New York, counter-protests were held and fake body bags were delivered to Trump International Hotel by citizens angry at Trump's approach to the crisis (BBC News, 2020a). The restrictions vary among the different states and around 20 states have had protests against these measures, as closing restaurants and bars, and banning large gatherings were seen as unconstitutional measures (Maqbool, 2020).

² The figure above shows the amount of times the key words (COVID) were used in articles by the New York Times between February 1st and November 3rd using an API to identify when key words appeared (Annex I contains the code used). Personal elaboration based on articles by the New York Times.

In Raleigh, North Carolina, a state governed by Democrats, dozens of protesters crowded to demand that the state reopens faster than its neighbors to the south. Some high-profile dissenters also flouted openly shutdown orders, as Elon Musk defied California officials to arrest him for reopening his factory against local restrictions. President Trump supported Elon Musk by tweeting “California should let Tesla & @elonmusk open the plant, NOW. It can be done Fast & Safely!” (Shepherd, 2020).

- Conclusion

In order to determine whether COVID-19 is a wedge issue, we have to verify if it has the three main requirements: polarization, salience in media coverage and trigger a reaction among the electorate. First, we can see a clear polarization in the discourse of both candidates taken from the presidential debates. Trump’s approach is to prioritize the economy, stating that businesses have to remain open and he promises that the vaccine will be ready before Election day. On the other hand, Biden states that the economy cannot be fixed until the COVID-19 crisis is fixed. An element that can be found in both discourses is fear as Trump threatens that with Biden there will not be a country and that people are committing suicide as a consequence of the pandemic. Moreover, Biden also talks directly with the audience and reminds them of the situation they are living because of Trump’s management of the crisis “How many of you got up this morning with an empty chair?”. Regarding salience, it has been shown that the issue has been constantly present in the media since its entrance in the country. Lastly, the lockdown restrictions triggered protests among different states and they were highly divided between those who did not agree with Trump’s management of the pandemic and those in Democrat states such as North Carolina, crowded to demand the reopening of the state. As it has all the elements required, we can conclude that COVID-19 is a wedge issue on the 2020 US Presidential elections.

7.1.2. Prestige of the political institutions

- Introduction

The constant fake news, supported by conspiracy theories, such as the ones spread by QAnon³ questioning the system. The suspicions behind mail voting fraud, encouraged by Trump statements, as a majority of Democrat voters would do it by mail. The debate into whether this election would be intervened by foreign countries such as Russia or Iran. Moreover, both candidates have been accused of using their political influence to benefit their relatives. Biden's son has been accused of making money from Ukraine, by taking advantage of his father's position. Trump, on the other hand, has also been accused of giving powerful responsibilities in the government to his closest family members, for instance, Ivanka Trump attended the G20 summit with world leaders in Japan. Lastly, the exploitation of wedge issues and the spread of controversial information on social media has ended in Trump's suspension on Twitter as a risk to incite violence. The citizens have lost confidence in the information provided by candidates, making the improvement of the political system a necessity. With lasting harmful consequences into the political credibility and the radicalization driven by fear, as was shown in the assault on the Capitol. All these issues have damaged the prestige of the political institutions leading to an environment of uncertainty, polarization and a substantial increase of violence.

However, due to the amount of various issues that have influenced the prestige of the political institutions, for this research, we are going to focus on two main events that contain key words that simplify the analysis of media coverage: the appointment of Ruth B. Ginsburg's successor and the accusations of election fraud.

When the Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, a political battle started in order to appoint her successor. Her death was weeks before the presidential election, causing a fight regarding who should nominate her replacement, as Biden insisted the decision should wait until after Election Day while Trump stated that he was still President

³ QAnon is a conspiracy theory that started in 2017 when an anonymous user posted in the 4chan forum that he had access to classified information of the Government of the United States. This theory states that President Trump is leading a secret war against elite Satan-worshipping pedophiles in government, business and the media (Wendling, 2021)

until November and he had the right to choose Ginsburg's successor. This decision was controversial in the fact that if Republicans chose the successor, it could lock in a conservative majority on the country's highest court (BBC News, 2020b). Trump has repeated during the whole campaign period that there would be election fraud and that voting by mail, which ballooned due to the pandemic could not be trusted. When Biden won the election, Trump went to court in six states in which Biden's margin was higher arguing that the elections were fraudulent. All this fear and the polarization among the electorate, ended up in the assault of the Capitol and a second impeachment to Trump for "incitement of insurrection" (Gerhart, 2020).

- Polarization

In order to analyze each candidate's position on this issue, we are going to rely on the two presidential debates.⁴

During the first debate, the selection of a successor to Ruth Bader Ginsburg generated a lot of controversy. Biden's narrative was around "The American people have a right to have a say" and insisting that they should wait until the election result to decide who would choose the nominee. Biden also tries to link the selection of the nominee with health care issues "what's at stake here is, the President has made it clear, he wants to get rid of the Affordable Care Act (...) which will strip 20 million people from having health insurance now", he also links it to women's rights and claim to experience a change if Trump chooses the nominee "A woman could pay more money because she has a pre-existing condition of pregnancy. They're able to charge women more for the same exact procedure a man gets". A phrase Biden uses among different issues, also in this one, relating it Trump's health care plan "He does not have a plan".

Trump's approach regarding choosing the nominee is that he won the 2016 election and it is his right to choose the successor, "we won the election and therefore we have the right to choose her" or "I am not elected for three years. I am elected for four years" which he repeated during different parts of the debate. When Biden introduces the issue of

⁴ All the quotes are taken from the debates' transcripts via <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-joe-biden-1st-presidential-debate-transcript-2020>

HealthCare in this section and the Affordable Care Act, Trump aims to scare the electorate and says that Biden's objective is to eradicate private health care "Your party wants to go socialist medicine and socialist healthcare".

Regarding election integrity, Trump claims that the Democrats are going after him and that they spied on his campaign. He also claims that more ballots are being sent than they should be "They sent two in a Democrat area. They sent out a thousand ballots. This is going to be a fraud like you've never seen" also claiming that ballots are being sold. He also aims to mobilize his voters "I'm urging my supporters to go into the polls and watch very carefully, because that's what has to happen". On the other hand, Biden tries to prove that there is no evidence that these elections will be fraudulent "His own Homeland Security director, as well as the FBI director, says that there is no evidence at all that mail-in ballots are a source of being manipulated and cheating" he also encourages people to vote early if their state allows it.

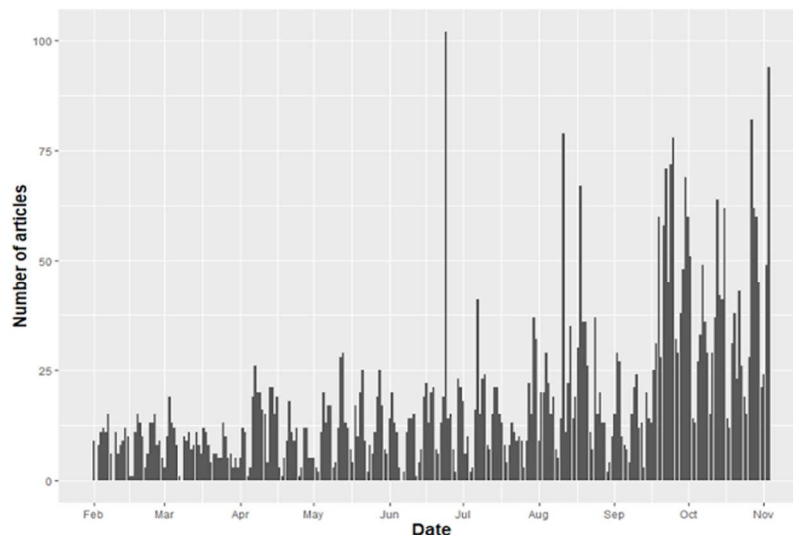
Moreover, both candidates tried to show the opponent had links with foreign countries that are trying to intervene in the elections. Trump tries to link Biden and his family with China and Ukraine "His son didn't have a job for a long time (...) as soon as he became vice-president (...) I heard they paid him \$183,000 a month and they gave him a \$3 million upfront payment, and he had no energy experience" while Biden tries to prove Trump has links with Russia "I don't understand why this President is unwilling to take on Putin when he's actually paying bounties to kill American soldiers in Afghanistan".

- Media coverage

To identify the salience on media, we have analyzed the number of articles written in the New York Times between February and November that contained the key words of this issue. The key words used to find these articles were Supreme Court, Vote Fraud, Fraud Election and Vote-by-Mail. As it can be seen in the graphic, this issue was not especially salient during the first months. However, Trump started to introduce this issue in the debates and became a salient issue in the months preceding Election Day. It can be seen that the peak months were October and November in which the electorate was more concerned about this issue, as both candidates were talking about who should nominate the successor to Ruth Bader Ginsburg in the Supreme Court and Trump started to introduce

the topic of election fraud. The salience of this issue continued increasing, ending up in the assault on the Capitol in January.

Figure 2: Plot of the amount key words (Supreme Court, Vote Fraud, Vote-by-Mail) were used in articles by the NYT over time⁵



- Public Opinion

This crisis of trust left the country highly divided, among Trump voters, 40% believe that he “definitely” won the election and another 36% believe that he “probably” won the elections, while only 7% of his supporters believe that Biden definitely won the 2020 elections (Pew Research, 2021a). Trump tweets are claimed to have encouraged his supporters to take action as the elections were being “stolen”, this can be seen in tweets “We are up BIG, but they are trying to STEAL the Election. We will never let them do it. Votes cannot be cast after the Polls are closed!” (Sardarizadeh, S., & Lussenhop, J.,2021).

After Biden was elected President, supporters of President Trump broke into the Capitol while lawmakers were conducting a ceremonial count of Biden’s victory. This assault left five dead and several officers injured (King, 2021). There is also evidence about an online mobilization in platforms frequently used by Trump supporters such as TheDonald.win but

⁵ The figure above shows the amount of times the key words (Supreme Court, Vote Fraud, Vote-by-Mail) were used in articles by the New York Times between February 1st and November 3rd using an API to identify when key words appeared (Annex I contains the code used). Personal elaboration based on articles by the New York Times.

also in Facebook and Twitter using hashtags such as #StormTheCapitol or #StopTheSteal (BBC News, 2021).

- Conclusion

In order to determine whether prestige of the political institutions is a wedge issue, we have to verify if it has the three main requirements: polarization, salience in media coverage and trigger a reaction among the electorate. First, we can identify two different positions from each candidate as Biden thought they had to wait until the Election Day to choose Ruth B. Ginsburg's successor and Trump stated he had the right to do it as he was still President. Also, regarding election integrity, Trump claims that these elections are fraudulent and that mail-in ballots are being manipulated. Regarding salience, it has been shown that this became an important issue, especially since it was brought up during the debates and ended up with citizens mobilizing, mainly Trump supporters breaking into the Capitol and a loss of trust in the institutions by voters. As it has all the elements required, we can conclude that prestige of the political institutions is a wedge issue in the 2020 US Presidential elections.

7.1.3. Race issue

- Introduction

Race is an issue that has been present in US history since its formation, and it has played a role — big or small — in every election. However, the increasing cases of police brutality such as the tragic death of George Floyd on the 25th of May, a 46-year-old black man who was accused of having bought cigarettes using a counterfeit \$20 bill in Minnesota. When the police arrived to arrest Mr. Floyd, officers started taking a series of actions that violated the policies of their Police Department, as they left him unable to breathe (Hill et al., 2021). Another recent case occurred on the 13th of March when Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old African-American woman, was shot in her apartment in Kentucky when three police officers forced entry into her house as part of a drug dealing investigation that involved Taylor's boyfriend (Oppel et al., 2021).

- Polarization

In order to analyze each candidate's position on this issue, we are going to rely on the two presidential debates.⁶

Biden supports the movement Black Lives Matter⁷ and when speaking about the “peaceful protests in front of the White House” he states that Trump “came out of his bunker, had the military use tear gas on them so he could walk across to a church and hold up a Bible”. Once again, Biden tries to position Trump in a privileged position while he aims to be seen as closer to the average citizen. Also, Biden highlights during his discourse that COVID-19 has affected more African Americans than the rest of the electorate “One in 1,000 African Americans has been killed because of the coronavirus”. In this last quote, it is remarkable to say that he does not say that African Americans have died because of coronavirus, but he uses the word “kill”, personalising the virus and implying that African Americans were the main victims.

Biden uses similes to compare inequality in the US such as during the first debate “It’s a little bit like how this guy and his friends look down on so many people. They look down their nose on people like Irish Catholics, like me, who grow up in Scranton. They look down on people who don’t have money. They look down on people who are of a different faith. They looked down on people who are a different color. In fact, we’re all Americans”. He is trying to position himself in a situation comparable to that of the working class. Reminding the voters that he is from Scranton is a big part of his discourse, because it brings him closer to the people.

In his discourse, Biden uses a lot of examples to identify himself with the situation that African-Americans have to live with, for instance, during the second debate he said “I never had to tell my daughter if she’s pulled over, make sure that you “put both hands on top of the wheel and don’t reach for the glove box because someone may shoot you, but a

⁶ All the quotes are taken from the debates’ transcripts via <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-joe-biden-1st-presidential-debate-transcript-2020>

⁷ The movement Black Lives Matter was created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi in the US in 2013 after the not guilty verdict obtained by George Zimmerman, a man accused of shooting to death Trayvon Martin, a black teenager. The movements’ purpose is to fight racism and violence, especially in the form of police brutality (BBC News, 2020c).

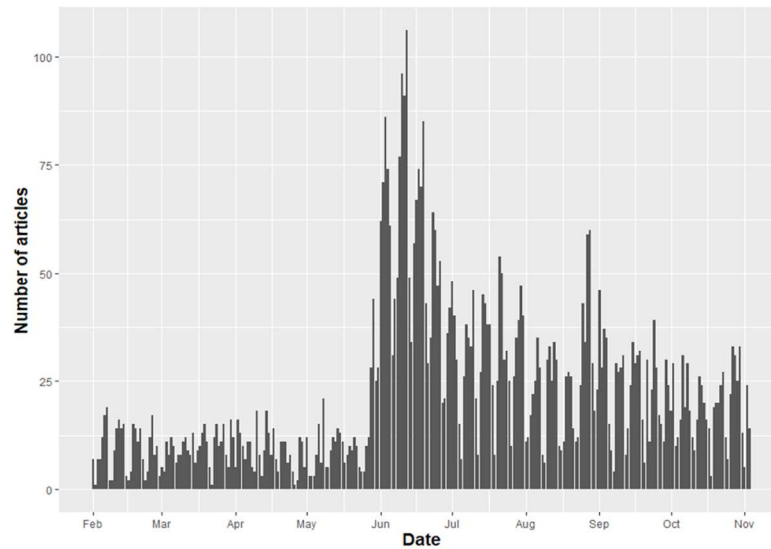
Black parent, no matter how wealthy or how poor they are, has to teach their child, when you're walking down the street, don't have a hoodie or when you go across the street (...)"

Trump's position regarding race issues is backed up by the fact that Biden created a crime bill in 1994 and called African-Americans "super predators". His discourse is based on the slogan "law and order", stating Biden does not support law enforcement because he is a "radical left Democrat". His messages also include remembering the voters that Biden has been in government for 47 years and never did anything "You were vice president along with Obama as your President, for eight years, why didn't you get it done? (...) Because you're all talking and no action Joe". Trump states during different times in the debate that "nobody has done more for the Black community than Donald Trump, with the possible exception of Abraham Lincoln" and repeats that message every time the race issue comes up.

- Media coverage

To identify the salience in the media, we have analyzed the number of articles written in the New York Times between February and November that contained the key words of this issue. The key words used to find these articles were Black Lives Matter, Racism and Law and Order. As it can be seen in the graphic, this issue has always been present during the elections but it became a salient issue in June, after the deaths of George Floyd at the end of May. The peak between the months of June and July can be attributed to the mobilization through social media of the BLM movement that started strikes and ended up with a majority of people crowded outside the White House. As it can be seen, after this peak, the frequency of articles regarding this issue increased considerably.

Figure 3: Plot of the amount key words (*Black Lives Matter, Racism, Law and Order*) were used in articles by the NYT over time⁸



- Public Opinion

What happened with Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, was the trigger to the Black Lives Matter movement, created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi (BBC News, 2020c). The movement expanded all over the country leading to protests in more than 130 cities and 4.400 arrests. Although the majority of the protests have been pacific as more than 93% involved no serious harm to people or properties (Beckett, 2020). However, some protests became more violent as looting began, stores were set on fire and protesters attacked police officers. Also, some protesters broke into the Minneapolis Third Police Precinct and set the building on fire and the group Anonymous hacked Chicago police radios as a sign of solidarity with the protesters (Al-Arshani et al., 2020). The demonstrators of the Black Lives Matter movement, formed by a majority of Black people, crowded outside the White House on 1 June. The crowd was charged by a force composed by Washington police, US Park police, 5,000 national guard troops and federal agents (Borger, 2021).

⁸ The figure above shows the amount of times the key words (*Black Lives Matter, Racism, Law and Order*) were used in articles by the New York Times between February 1st and November 3rd using an API to identify when key words appeared (Annex I contains the code used). Personal elaboration based on articles by the New York Times.

- Conclusion

In order to determine whether race is a wedge issue, we have to verify if it has the three main requirements: polarization, salience in media coverage and trigger a reaction among the electorate. First, we can see two different positions of the candidates, Trump bases his discourse on “law and order” while Biden supports the minority rights and directs his discourse to the African Americans among the electorate. Regarding salience, it has been shown how media coverage increased after the death of George Floyd as it was followed by the protests. During the months previous to the Election day, the salience decreased compared to June but it was still higher than before the death of George Floyd. Lastly, this issue was able to mobilize voters and ended up in a crowd outside the White House. As it has all the elements required, we can conclude that race is a wedge issue in the 2020 US Presidential elections.

7.2. Analyze if these issues have had a substantial impact in the outcome of the US Presidential elections

Once we have established whether the issues are wedge issues or not, it will be conducted an analysis to determine if voters were mobilized as a result of these wedge issues. This will be divided into four main parts. First, an analysis of the different voters’ profiles by ethnic group and their sociology; followed by the main issues of the 2020 US Presidential Election, then specifically the issues more relevant to Democrats and Republicans and lastly, the most relevant issues by ethnic group.

7.2.1. Voters’ profiles by ethnic group

Not only the candidates and the main issues of the campaign differ from one election to the next one, but also the electorate is in constant change as more citizens turn the legal age to vote or more immigrants become citizens. In order to understand the outcome of the 2020 Presidential Elections, we need to understand the heterogeneity among the voter spectrum. For these elections, non-whites amount to a third of eligible voters, their largest

share ever, and one-in-ten eligible voters are members of Generation Z (between the ages of 18 and 23) (Cilluffo & Fry, 2020).

According to a Pew Research Center analysis of American' partisan identification, approximately a third of registered voters in the U.S (34%) consider themselves Independents, 33% Democrats and 29% Republicans. The majority of independents lean towards one party, taking independents' leanings into consideration, 49% of all registered voters classify themselves as Democrats or lean to the party opposed to a 44% identified as Republicans or lean to the party (Gramlich, 2020). However, just because a voter leans toward a specific party, it does not imply that he will end up voting for that party.

White voters share of registered voters has diminished from 85% in 1996 to 69% in 2020 affecting both parties. However, White voters represent a much higher share of Republican or leaning Republican registered voters than of Democratic voters (81% vs 59% as of 2019). White voters represent 67% of eligible voters nationally in 2018, but this representation is even bigger in different key battleground states such as Wisconsin (86%), Ohio (82%), Pennsylvania (81%) and Michigan (79%). The racial composition varies greatly among the 50 states (Gramlich, 2020).

Black American voters have been crucial in battleground states as they have reached a record of 30 million in this election with more than one-third living in the most competitive states (Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin). Black eligible voters amount nationwide to 12.5% of the electorate compared to 11.5% in 2000. For this election, 63% of Black registered voters have stated to be motivated to vote and over a third (35%) support the Democratic party. Black voters have recorded high turnout rates compared to other racial groups, closely matching White turnout rates in 2008 and 2012. However, across the competitive states, there are huge differences within this group, as they vary in terms of education, age, income or immigrant status (Budiman, 2020).

In these elections, Latinos are expected to be the largest ethnic minority reaching a record 32 million voters eligible to vote, accounting for 13.3% of all eligible voters. Latino voters could make a difference for the Democratic Party, as 62% of registered voters identify themselves or lean toward the party, while 34% lean toward the Republican Party. Two-

in-three Latino voters live in just five states, California (holding roughly a quarter of the nation's Latino electorate), Texas, Florida, New York and Florida. However, the number of Latinos who live in the country is 60 million, meaning that only half of the nation's Hispanics are eligible to vote, making this group the smallest share of any racial or ethnic group (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020).

However, this group has also expressed less interest in the presidential campaigns and they are less likely than all U.S voters to say that they are extremely motivated to vote in the 2020 Presidential Elections. Historically, they have voted at lower rates than U.S voters overall. In 2016 only 48% Latino eligible voters actually voted, similar to the percentage of 2012, compared to the 61% of all U.S eligible voters. The voter's engagement varies among Hispanics, as college graduates and voters age 50 and older are more likely to vote.

Since 1984, women have turned out to vote at slightly higher rates than men, in 2016, 63% of women eligible to vote said they voted in the presidential election, compared to 59% of men. Traditionally, voter turnout differs by race and ethnicity, with White and Black American voters being more likely to vote than Hispanic and Asian American voters. Within each of these groups, the gender gap continues being widest among Black voters, as women have had higher rates of voting than men consistently for the past 30 years, reaching 64% in 2016 compared with 54% of Black men. Among White voters this gender gap is smaller, with 67% of White women and 64% of White men voting in the 2016 elections. The gender gap among Latino voters has not been consistent, but in 2016 women outvoted men (50% vs 45%). Among Asian Americans, it is difficult to establish a pattern due to the small size of the same, as voter turnout data only goes back to 1992.

Adding to the gender gap in voter turnout, partisan preferences also vary widely by gender. In 2019, the Democratic Party held a substantial advantage with women as 56% of female registered voters identified themselves as Democrats or leaned toward it, compared with the 38% who identified as Republican or leaned towards this party. In contrast, 50% of men identified themselves as Republicans and 42% as Democrats.

Party affiliation differs greatly by race and ethnicity, but overall women are more likely than men to vote for the Democratic Party. In 2019, 48% of White women considered themselves Democrats while only 35% of White men were Democrats. In contrast, White

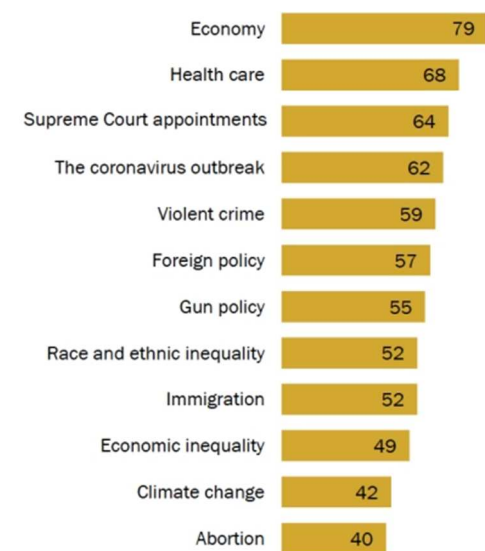
men are more likely to identify as Republicans (58%) than White women (47%). Among Latino voters, majorities of men and women identify themselves as Democrats (67% of women and 58% of men). Black women were more likely (87%) than Black men (77%) to identify as Democrats, even though majorities of both did (Igielnik, 2020).

7.2.2. Main issues of the 2020 US Presidential Elections

Based on a survey conducted by Pew Research (2020) between the 27 of July and the 2nd of August 2020, the top issues for voters in the 2020 election were the economy (79%), health care (68%), Supreme Court appointments (64%), the coronavirus outbreak (62%), violent crime (59%), foreign policy (57%), gun policy (55%), race and ethnic inequality (52%), immigration (52%), economic inequality (49%), climate change (42%) and abortion (40%).

Figure 4: Top priorities for the electorate between July and August 2020⁹

% of registered voters saying each is 'very important' to their vote in the 2020 presidential election



Note: Based on registered voters.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 27-Aug. 2, 2020.
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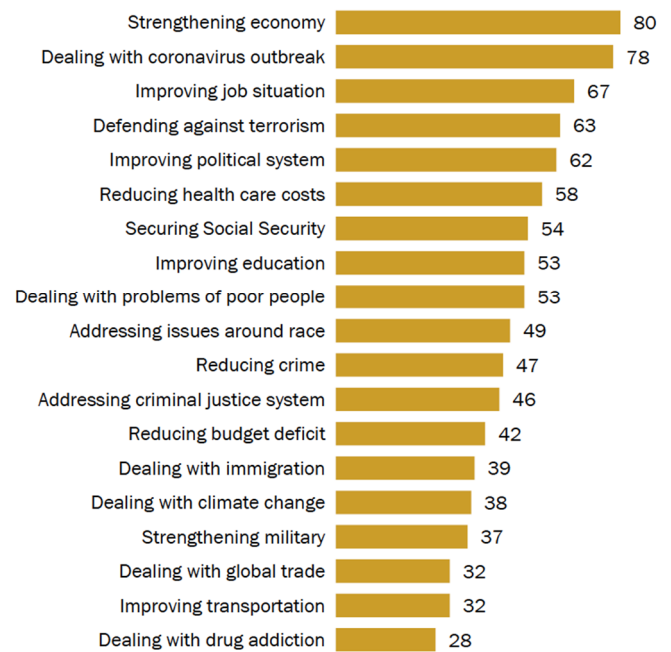
The coronavirus affected the economy as many businesses had to close and people lost their jobs. The recession raised concerns among the electorate about the economic situation of their country, making the economy the top issue. However, the economy is always a top voting issue, as in a similar survey in 2016, the economy was also on the top of the list (Pew Research, 2016). In this first survey, registered voters said that Trump could do a better job dealing with the economy (49% vs 40%), law enforcement and criminal justice (46% vs 42%), terrorism (46% vs 37%), gun policy (48% vs 43%), foreign policy (44% vs 42%) and the federal budget deficit (42% vs 39%). On the other hand, Biden was thought to do a better job in handling climate change (58% vs 27%), abortion policies (51% vs 36%), health care (51% vs 37%), public health impact of COVID-19 (47% vs 35%), issues involving race and ethnicity (49% vs 37%) and immigration (48% vs 41%).

⁹ The figure above shows the issues considered top priorities by the electorate between July and August 2020. Source: (Pew Research, 2020).

After the elections — between the 8th and 12th of January — the same survey by Pew Research (2021b) was conducted to see the evolution of the priority issues when voting. The top issues were strengthening the economy (80%), dealing with coronavirus outbreak (78%), improving job situation (67%), defending against terrorism (63%), improving the political system (62%), reducing health care costs (58%), securing Social Security (54%), improving education (53%), dealing with problems of poor people (53%), addressing issues around race (49%), reducing crime (47%), addressing criminal justice system (46%), reducing budget deficit (42%), dealing with immigration (39%), dealing with climate change (38%), strengthening military (37%), dealing with global trade (32%), improving transportation (32%) and dealing with drug addiction (28%).

Figure 5: Top priorities for the electorate in January 2021¹⁰

% who say ___ should be a top priority for the president and Congress to address this year



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-12, 2021.

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As it can be seen, the economy has maintained its position being the top issue for voters and, as for the issues analyzed, the coronavirus outbreak had increased from a 62% to a 78%, the prestige of the political institutions — or Supreme Court appointments in the first survey — accounted for a 64% and was replaced by improving the political system which accounted for 62%. Lastly, the race question was considered a top issue by 52% of the voters in the first survey and it decreased to a 49% in the second survey.

¹⁰ The figure above shows the issues considered top priorities by the electorate in January 2021. Source: (Pew Research, 2021b).

7.2.3. Main issues of the 2020 US Presidential Elections by party

The same surveys previously mentioned, were conducted to analyse the differences between Trump supporters and Biden supporters, to see which issues were prioritized depending on the affiliation.

For the purpose of this research, we are not going to analyze all the issues, just the ones that are the subject of study. In both surveys, it can be seen the polarization among the electorate, as the differences regarding issues are vast. For instance, the survey conducted between July and August shows that the coronavirus outbreak was considered a top issue for 39% of Trump supporters and 82% for Biden's. This difference can be explained because of the different messages each candidate was giving at the time regarding COVID-19. However, in the same survey conducted after the elections, dealing with the coronavirus outbreak became a top issue for 60% Republicans and 93% Democrats (Pew Research, 2021c).

Regarding race and ethnic inequality, during July, only 24% of Trump supporters viewed it as a "very important issue" to their vote, compared to 76% of Democrats. (Pew Research, 2020). This trend slightly changed after the elections as Democrats who considered this issue a top priority decreased to 72% (Pew Research, 2021c). This could be explained as during July, voters had more recent the protests for George Floyd's death so the salience was higher and citizens were more aware of the problem. On the other hand, Trump's position on race was defined by "law and order", as in the surveys this category cannot be found, we are going to use the results of "violent crime" as it is the closest to what we want to analyze. Violent crime was considered by 74% of Republicans as a "very important issue" in comparison to 46% of Democrats in July (Pew Research, 2020, while after the elections this number decreased and "reducing crime" was considered a top issue by 55% Republicans and 39% Democrats (Pew Research, 2021c).

The Supreme Court appointments were considered as a top issue to 66% Democrats and 61% Republicans (Pew Research, 2020). In the survey conducted after the elections this issue does not appear and it is replaced by improving the political system, considered as a top priority by 60% Republicans and 64% Democrats (Pew Research, 2021c).

Figure 6: Issues considered top priorities by parties between July and August 2020¹¹

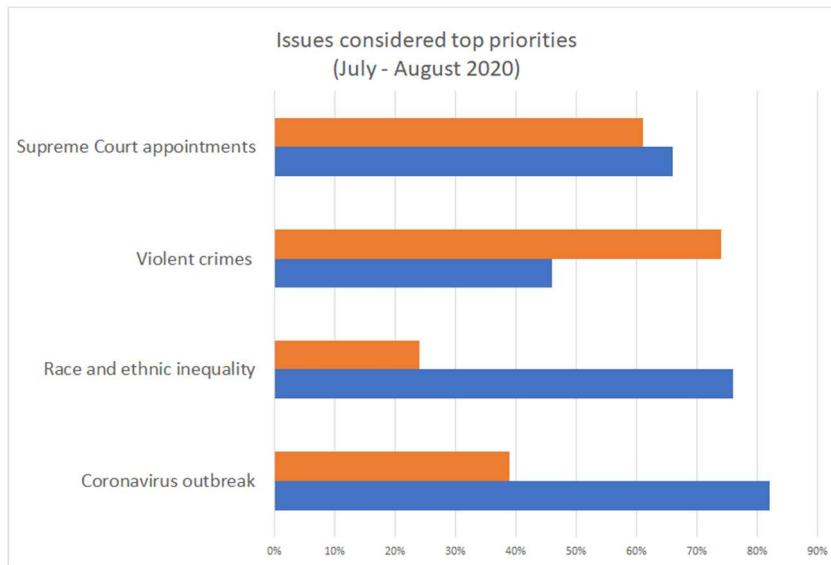
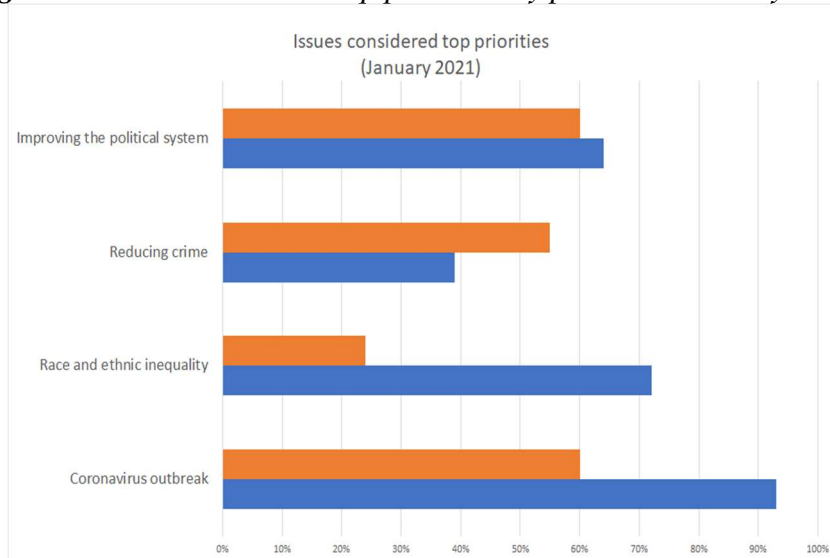


Figure 7: Issues considered top priorities by parties in January 2021¹²



¹¹ The figure above shows the issues considered top priorities by parties between July and August 2020. Personal elaboration based on (Pew Research, 2020).

¹² The figure above shows the issues considered top priorities by parties in January 2021, after the Election Day. Personal elaboration based on (Pew Research, 2021c).

7.2.4. Main issues by ethnic group

Among the voter spectrum, there have also been differences regarding what they consider the most important issues in the campaigns or the major reasons to vote for one candidate and not the other.

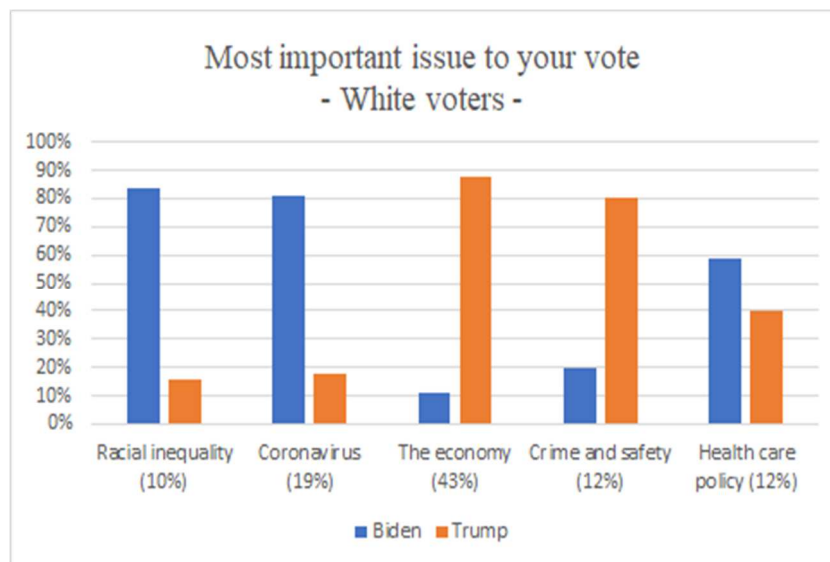
Different ethnic groups differ in the importance of various issues. For instance, addressing issues around race has been said that it should be a top priority to address this year by 83% of Black voters, 68% of Latino voters and only 40% of White voters. When analyzing the coronavirus outbreak, it is considered a priority by 95% of Black voters, 82% of Hispanic voters and 72% of White voters. Lastly, improving the political system is a priority to 74% of Black voters, 64% of Hispanic voters and 61% of White voters. There are also differences between men and women, as 56% women consider a priority addressing issues around race compared to 41% men. Dealing with coronavirus outbreak is a priority to 80% women and 75% men and improving the political system is an important issue for 64% women and 61% men (Pew Research, 2021d). To analyze the 3 different voters' preferences, it has been used the exit polls conducted by CNN (2021).

- White voters

The majority of White voters are Trump supporters, despite their age. When asked "How confident are you that the votes will be counted accurately, the majority replied "very confident" by 51% (46% Biden supporters vs 53% Trump supporters), "somewhat confident" by 37% (38% Biden supporters vs 60% Trump supporters) and "Not very confident" amounted 8% of the responses (18% Biden supporters vs 81% Trump supporters). When dealing with the coronavirus issue, there are extreme differences among the electorate. It is considered "the most important factor" by 17% (42% Biden supporters vs 57% Trump supporters), "an important factor" by 38% (40% Biden supporters vs 59% Trump supporters), "a minor factor" by 22% (10% Biden supporters vs 89% Trump supporters) and "not a factor at all" by 18% (4% Biden supporters vs 95% Trump supporters). There were differences when asked "In vote for president, Supreme Court appointments were", but 49% of respondents considered this an important factor (54% Trump supporters vs 45% Biden supporters).

When asked “Racism in the U.S. is” respondents said it was “the most important problem” by 11% (81% Democrats vs 16% Republicans), “an important problem” by 52% (52% Democrats vs 46% Republicans), “a minor problem” by 22% (11% Democrats vs 88% Republicans) and “not a problem at all” by 11% (8% Democrats vs 91% Republicans). Regarding the question “Most important issue to your vote”, racial inequality amounts a 10% (84% Biden supporters vs 16% Trump supporters), coronavirus accounted 19% (81% Biden supporters vs 18% Trump supporters), the economy 43% (11% Biden supporters vs 88% Trump supporters), crime and safety 12% (n/a)¹³ and Health care policy amounted 12% (n/a). As the economy was considered the main issue for white voters, the next question was “who is better in handling the economy” 59% chose Trump and 40% Biden.

Figure 8: Most important issue to your vote (White voters)¹⁴



Lastly, the question “Party ID” helps us identify if there were voters from one party who ended up voting for the opposition or how we have called them “cross-pressured” voters. Among the White voters 28% identified as Democrats (93% voted for Biden vs 7% voted for Trump), 46% identified as Republicans (5% voted for Biden vs 95% voted for Trump) and Independents amounted 26% (51% voted for Biden vs 46% voted for Trump).

¹³ Subgroups indicated with an n/a were interviewed for this exit poll, but the sample size may be too small for estimates within those groups to be projectable with confidence to their true values in the population.

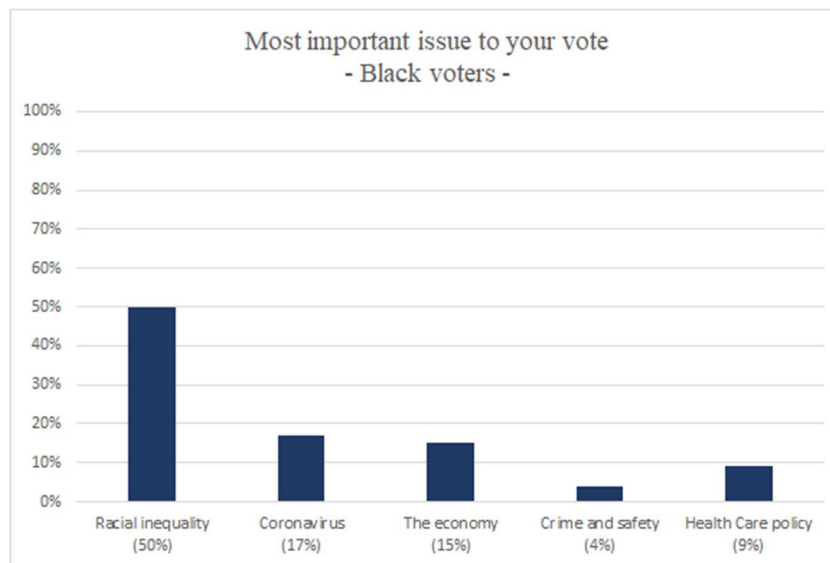
¹⁴ The figure above shows the most important issues for the voting decision of White voters. Personal elaboration based on the exit polls conducted by CNN (2021)

- Black Americans

The majority of Black voters are Biden supporters, despite their age. When asked “How confident are you that the votes will be counted accurately, the majority replied “very confident” by 33% (68% Biden supporters vs 32% Trump supporters), “somewhat confident” by 54% (95% Biden supporters vs 4% Trump supporters) and “Not very confident” amounted 8% of the responses (n/a). When dealing with the coronavirus issue, it is considered “the most important factor” by 49% (93% Biden supporters vs 6% Trump supporters), “an important factor” by 35% (89% Biden supporters vs 9% Trump supporters), “a minor factor” by 5% (n/a) and “not a factor at all” by 3% (n/a). There were differences when asked “In vote for president, Supreme Court appointments were” as 22% considered it “the most important factor” (n/a), 33% “an important factor” (91% Biden supporters vs 8% Trump supporters), 15% considered it “a minor factor” (n/a) and 26% “not a factor at all” (88% Biden supporters vs 12% Trump supporters).

When asked “Racism in the U.S. is” respondents said it was “the most important problem” by 39% (98% Democrats vs 2% Republicans), “an important problem” by 45% (87% Democrats vs 12% Republicans), “a minor problem” by 7% (n/a) and “not a problem at all” by 7% (n/a). Regarding the question “Most important issue to your vote”, racial inequality amounts a 50% (99% Biden supporters vs 1% Trump supporters), coronavirus accounted 17% (96% Biden supporters vs 4% Trump supporters), the economy 15% (n/a), crime and safety 4% (n/a) and Health care policy amounted 9% (n/a).

Figure 9: Most important issue to your vote (Black voters)¹⁵



Lastly, the question “Party ID” helps us identify if there were voters from one party who ended up voting the opposition or how we have called them “cross-pressured” voters. Among the black voters 75% identified as Democrats (97% voted for Biden vs 3% voted for Trump), 7% identified as Republicans (13% voted for Biden vs 87% voted for Trump) and Independents amounted 18% (73% voted for Biden vs 21% voted for Trump).

- Latinos

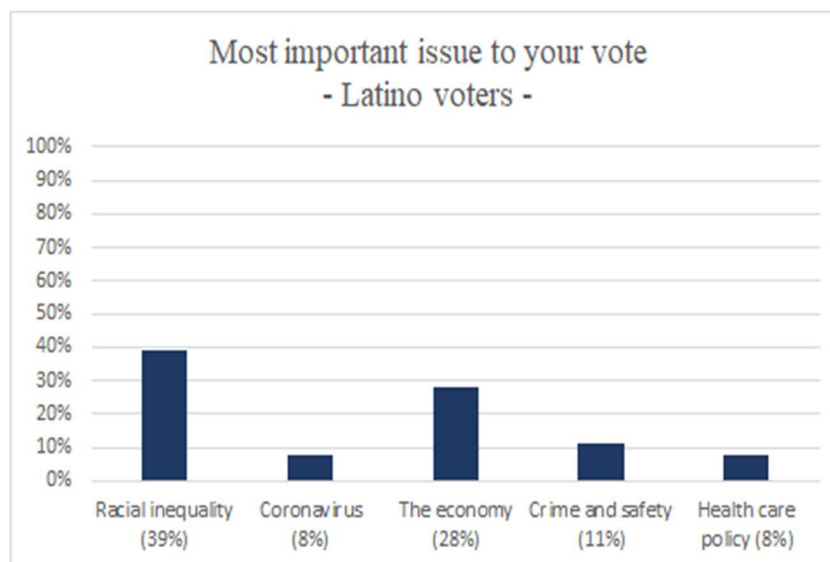
The majority of Latino voters are Biden supporters, despite their age. When asked “How confident that votes will be counted accurately”, 44% answered “very confident” (75% Democrats vs 23% Republicans) and “somewhat confident” by 38% (72% Democrats vs 25% Republicans). When dealing with the coronavirus issue, it is considered “the most important factor” by 40% (74% Biden supporters vs 23% Trump supporters), “an important factor” by 32% (58% Biden supporters vs 40% Trump supporters), “a minor factor” by 8% (n/a) and “not a factor at all” by 11% (n/a). There were differences when asked “In vote for president, Supreme Court appointments were” considered by 24% “the most important factor” (53% Biden supporters vs 45% Trump supporters), 47% “an important factor”

¹⁵ The figure above shows the most important issues for the voting decision of Black voters. Personal elaboration based on the exit polls conducted by CNN (2021). As the sample size may be too small for estimates within those groups to be projectable with confidence in their true values in the populations, there is no distinction between Democrats and Republicans.

(62% Biden supporters vs 36% Trump supporters), 12% considered it “a minor factor” (n/a) and 14% “not a factor at all” (n/a).

When asked “Racism in the U.S. is” respondents said it was “the most important problem” by 36% (89% Democrats vs 9% Republicans), “an important problem” by 45% (74% Democrats vs 23% Republicans), “a minor problem” by 13% (n/a) and “not a problem at all” by 4% (n/a). Regarding the question “Most important issue to your vote”, racial inequality amounts to 39% (95% Biden supporters vs 5% Trump supporters), coronavirus accounted 8% (n/a), the economy 28% (18% Biden supporters vs 81% Trump supporters), crime and safety 11% (n/a) and Health care policy amounted 8% (n/a).

Figure 10: Most important issue to your vote (Latino voters)¹⁶



Lastly, the question “Party ID” helps us identify if there were voters from one party who ended up voting the opposition or how we have called them “cross-pressured” voters. Among the Latino voters 52% identified as Democrats (93% voted for Biden vs 5% voted for Trump), 22% identified as Republicans (11% voted for Biden vs 86% voted for Trump) and Independents amounted 27% (55% voted for Biden vs 40% voted for Trump).

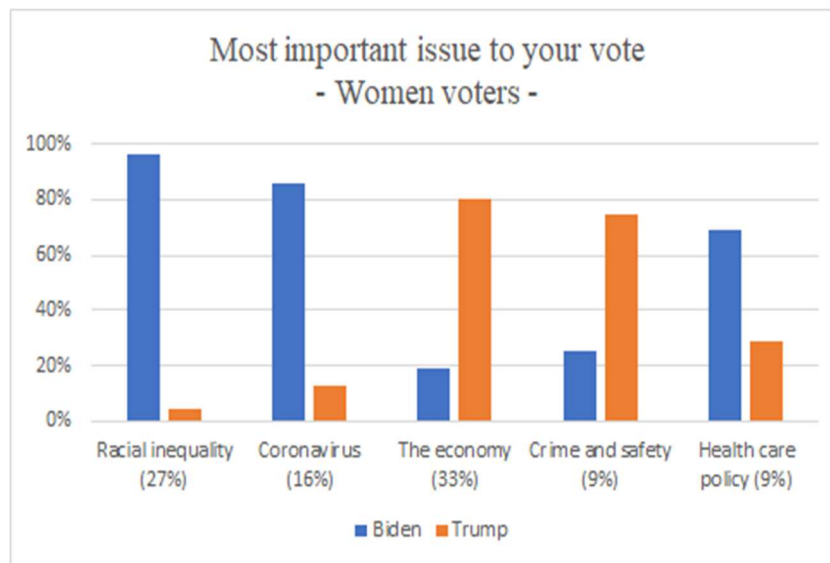
¹⁶ The figure above shows the most important issues for the voting decision of Latino voters. Personal elaboration based on the exit polls conducted by CNN (2021). As the sample size may be too small for estimates within those groups to be projectable with confidence in their true values in the populations, there is no distinction between Democrats and Republicans.

- Women

Women who responded the survey were 61% White (44% Biden supporters vs 55% Trump supporters), 16% Black (90% Biden supporters vs 9% Trump supporters), 15% Latino (69% Biden supporters vs 30% Trump supporters) and 4% Asians (58% Biden supporters vs 40% Trump supporters). The majority of Latino voters are Biden supporters regarding the age. When asked “How confident that votes will be counted accurately”, 42% answered “very confident” (56% Democrats vs 43% Republicans), “somewhat confident” by 44% (64% Democrats vs 34% Republicans), “not very confident” by 8% (n/a) and “not at all confident” by 4% (n/a). When dealing with the coronavirus issue, it is considered “the most important factor” by 26% (63% Biden supporters vs 35% Trump supporters), “an important factor” by 39% (49% Biden supporters vs 50% Trump supporters), “a minor factor” by 16% (15% Biden supporters vs 85% Trump supporters) and “not a factor at all” by 13% (9% Biden supporters vs 89% Trump supporters).

When asked “In vote for president, Supreme Court appointments were” considered by 17% “the most important factor” (51% Biden supporters vs 48% Trump supporters), 43% “an important factor” (57% Biden supporters vs 42% Trump supporters), 17% considered it “a minor factor” (54% Biden supporters vs 46% Trump supporters) and 20% “not a factor at all” (56% Biden supporters vs 41% Trump supporters). When asked “Racism in the U.S. is” respondents said it was “the most important problem” by 21% (88% Democrats vs 10% Republicans), “an important problem” by 55% (65% Democrats vs 34% Republicans), “a minor problem” by 16% (18% Biden supporters vs 80% Trump supporters) and “not a problem at all” by 7% (7% Biden supporters vs 93% Trump supporters). Lastly, to the question “Most important issue to your vote” 27% answered racial inequality (96% Democrats vs 4% Republicans), coronavirus by 16% (86% Democrats vs 14% Republicans), the economy by 33% (19% Democrats vs 80% Republicans), crime and safety by 9% (25% Democrats vs 75% Republicans) and health care policy by 9% (69% Democrats vs 29% Republicans).

Figure 11: Most important issue to your vote (Women voters)¹⁷



Lastly, the question “Party ID” helps us identify if there were voters from one party who ended up voting the opposition or how we have called them “cross-pressured” voters. Among women 43% identified as Democrats (94% voted for Biden vs 5% voted for Trump), 33% identified as Republicans (5% voted for Biden vs 95% voted for Trump) and Independents amounted 23% (60% voted for Biden vs 36% voted for Trump).

7.3. Conclusion

This analysis had two main objectives: on the one hand, it had to verify if the issues proposed, COVID-19, race issues and prestige of the political institutions were wedge issues. To do that, we had established in the methodology that they had to polarize the electorate, have salience through media coverage and have an impact on public opinion, which ultimately results in mobilization. After verifying if they met the requirements, we could determine that the three issues proposed were wedge issues.

In the second part of the analysis we analyzed if these issues had been determinant in the outcome of the US Presidential elections. In order to do this, we saw the heterogeneity among the electorate and their preference towards one party or the other to have a general

¹⁷ The figure above shows the most important issues for the voting decision of Women voters. Personal elaboration based on the exit polls conducted by CNN (2021)

overview of the 2020 electorate. We have seen the main issues of the 2020 US Presidential elections through two surveys, the first one at the end of July and the second one after the elections. This comparison has been done to see if the electorate has changed their opinion regarding the top issues. As the debates happened in the period between the two months, they could have had an impact on these changes, being the COVID-19 the issue that saw the biggest increase, from 62% to 78%.

Then, we considered the differences of issue perception depending on the party affiliation. For instance, 82% of Biden's supporters considered COVID-19 a top issue while only 39% of Trump's supporters saw it in the same way. Regarding race, 76% of Biden's supporters considered it a very important issue compared to 24% of Trump's supporters. As it was mentioned in the literature review, some parties emphasize "owned" issues and it has "a campaign effect when a candidate successfully frames the vote choice as a decision to be made in terms of problems facing the country that he is better able to "handle" than his opponent" (Petrocik, 1996), In this case, Biden has managed to be seen as the best candidate to handle those issues. Lastly, the differences regarding the prestige of the political institutions between both parties are less significant.

The last part of the analysis aimed to show the differences among the voter spectrum by ethnic group. White voters were mainly Republicans and their most important issue to decide their vote was the economy by 43% followed by coronavirus by 19%. The majority of Black voters were Democrats and their most important issue to decide their vote was racial inequality by 50% followed by coronavirus by 17%. The majority of Latinos were also Biden supporters and their most important issue to their vote was racial inequality by 39% followed by the economy by 28%. Among women, just White women were Trump supporters while minorities lean towards the Democratic party and their most important issue to their vote was the economy by 33% followed by racial inequality by 27%. Biden was able to make race and coronavirus "own" issues through his discourse.

An important factor for our research was the role played by "cross-pressured" voters. If done well, candidates must have found issues that cause internal conflict among the voters and exploit the tension on wedge issues to attract as many as they can to the candidate's party. In the case of white voters Trump managed to attract 7% of the Democrats to his party while Biden attracted just 5% of Republicans. In the case of Independents, Biden was

able to mobilize more voters 51% to his party compared to Trump (46%). Among Black Americans, Trump managed to attract just 3% of the Democrats to his party while Biden achieved to attract 13% Republicans to his party. In the case of Independents, the difference was also considerable as 73% ended up voting Biden while just 21% voted for Trump. In the case of Latino voters, Trump mobilized 5% of the Democrats to his party while Biden attracted 11% of Republicans to his party. Independents voted 55% for Biden while 40% voted for Trump. For women voters, Trump attracted 5% of Democrats and Biden attracted as well as 4% of Republicans. Independents voted by 60% for Biden while 36% voted for Trump.

As it has previously explained, Biden knew that minorities were more affected by two of the wedge issues analyzed, race and COVID-19 so they were the main target of Biden discourses, which helped him achieve a record mobilization and allowed him to win the 2020 elections.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research was to answer one main question: Have wedge issues been a determinant factor in the outcome of the 2020 US Presidential election? In order to answer that question, four hypotheses were established:

1. COVID-19, including the economic crisis caused by it, and the race issue have been the main wedge issues for this election.

As it was stated in the literature review, parties compete for the attention of the electorate, this enables candidates to transmit how they stand on specific issues to citizens. Issue salience directly affects the public opinion on a presidency. The idea of saliency comes from parties emphasizing specific issues more than others. Looking back on the definition we used to define wedge issues as “rhetorical strategy, usually focused on a social concern, that is intentionally constructed to divide party voters and polarize the public in order to gain political advantage” (Wiant, 2002, p.276). The challenge of every campaign is to find the most important issues for the electorate and use them to attract them to a specific party. This difficulty is increased when some issues are not raised by candidates, but by the context of the elections. This is the case of COVID-19, which became an important issue in the agenda-setting for its economic and health impact on the citizens.

In the analysis, we first demonstrated that the three issues stated, COVID-19, race issues and prestige of the institutions are wedge issues. Once this was demonstrated, in order to be an effective wedge issue, they had to be considered as wedge issues by the electorate. Determining this, we had a look at the surveys conducted by Pew Research (2021b) after the elections, between the 8th and 12th of January (See Section 7.2.2.). Among the issues the electorate considered most important were strengthening the economy (80%) and dealing with the coronavirus outbreak (78%), and addressing issues around race (49%). The economy and the coronavirus outbreak were the two main worries among the electorate so it can be considered as one of the main issues of these elections. Even though there are other issues that were considered more important than race, still nearly half of the people that participated in the survey considered it as a top issue. The importance of these issues varied among the ethnic spectrum, the coronavirus outbreak and race issues were

considered as crucial issues for minorities and the economy was the main worry among White voters.

2. The massive mobilization — that has beaten historical records — has been a consequence of the polarization caused by the exploitation of these wedge issues.

The 2020 US Presidential election has seen an historical record number of participation, with a turnout of two-thirds of the eligible voting population, more than in any of the previous 120 years (Schaul, Rabinowitz, & Mellnik, 2020). Joe Biden amassed 74 million votes as of November 6th, whereas Donald Trump received around 70 million votes, achieving the largest and second-largest number of votes respectively in U.S election history (Deane & Gramlich, 2020).

As it was mentioned in the literature review, just with the partisan base alone, candidates cannot win elections so they need to exploit the tensions on wedge issues to appeal to “cross-pressured” voters as they use the informations’ campaign to form a decision. In order to appeal to these voters, candidates have to target them with issues that are important enough to mobilize them and this is usually done through wedge issues as we have seen in the analysis, minorities were more concerned about the coronavirus pandemic and the race issues, issues exploited by both candidates. Added to this, candidates made these issues especially salient which has been proved by some authors, such as Weaver (1991), who stated there is evidence that linked the salience of an issue with a knowledge increase of its possible causes and solutions, stronger opinions, less probability of being in a neutral position and increased probability of active participation in politics, leading to mobilization. Another important factor to mobilize is that the electorate experiences fear and realizes that they are liable to suffering. Introducing fear in the discourse and the feeling of being at risk, will divide the electorate and increase the probability of mobilization.

Both candidates have exploited this fear through wedge issues, dividing voters and parties through code words, labeling, and other strategies to gain political advantage. How these wedge issues are used by both candidates during campaigns can shape voter behaviour and election outcomes. Moreover, there is evidence that voters with internal conflicts regarding

an issue are more motivated to seek out information and carefully analyze everything new they learn about that issue leading to mobilization (Shields & Hillygus, 2008).

According to Pew Research (2021) in the 2020 US elections, Americans voted in record numbers, reaching 158.4 million ballots. Nationwide, this election turnout was 7 percentage points higher compared to 2016. The reason for this rise in turnout can be explained through the political battle between President Donald Trump and Joe Biden, a pre-election survey showed a record share of registered voters (83%) believed that it “really mattered” who won (Gilberstadt et al., 2020). Moreover, turnout rates in 2020 were higher than in the 2016 presidential election for many ethnic group. White voters represented 71% voter turnout compared to 65% in 2016 and women voters’ turnout increased from 63% in 2016 to 68% in 2020. Hispanic voters’ turnout increased from 48% in 2016 to 54% in 2020 while Black voters’ turnout increased from 60% in 2016 to 63% in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

With this data we can conclude that the polarization caused by the exploitation of wedge issues was perceived among the electorate, leading to a massive mobilization in participation.

3. Biden has managed to create a new framework regarding COVID-19 that was more successful than Trump’s.

As it was explained in the theoretical framework, following the psychological approach of voter behavior, emphasizing Lakoff’s theory, helps us understand the impact of issues on cross-pressured voters. Lakoff (2004) believes that everyone has mental frames that condition the way we see the world and how we reason, called frames. Words are defined in relation to conceptual frames so when we hear a word, the frame is activated in our brain. Lakoff also distinguished two different models to understand the world for Republicans and for Democrats.

The challenge was to make voters believe that Biden was going to be better at handling the coronavirus outbreak than Trump. This is what we called in the literature review “issue ownership”, which becomes effective when a candidate successfully frames the voting choice in terms of the problems that the country is currently facing and portrays himself as

more capable to handle that issue than the opponent. In this case, we find two contrary positions.

On the one hand, Trump tried to play down the importance of the pandemic or went against the advice of doctors and scientists, which cost him the trust of many voters. Biden, on the other hand, managed to target the voters most affected by COVID-19 and appealed to them, as we could see when he talked about how the virus killed more Black people than the rest of the electorate.

Campaigns are useful for reinforcing the loyalty of the candidate's base but also to attract cross-pressured partisans. During the campaign, candidates try to make salient the issues in which they consider to have an advantage as there is a demonstrated relation between saliency and increased probability of active participation in politics (Weaver, 1991). Through discourse, Biden managed to attract Republican voters, especially Black and Latino voters, who were more affected by race issues and COVID-19. He knew some Republican Black and Latino voters supported Trump, but did not agree on the way he was handling the pandemic or the racial discrimination of the country, hence he exploited this issues, creating an internal conflict on those cross-pressured voters, which ended up in mobilization towards the Democratic party.

Biden's discourse would be successful if more voters see him as more capable of handling the coronavirus outbreak than Trump. Following the results of the exit poll of CNN, when asked "better handle the coronavirus pandemic?" Biden was considered to be better in handling the pandemic by 87% Black voters, 69% Latino voters and 56% women. Trump was seen as better handling the pandemic just by White voters (53%). With this information, we can conclude that Biden managed to "own" the issue of COVID-19 and to create a framework more successful than Trump's.

4. The excessive polarization that these issues have created, has destabilized the US democratic system.

Exploitation of issues has the ultimate goal to mobilize voters to support one candidate. However, when conflict, polarization, fear and a loss of trust in the institutions are combined it can lead to events such as the assault on the Capitol and the second impeachment of Donald Trump, leaving a great percentage of the electorate with doubts about whether these elections were fraudulent or not.

Another example of the extreme polarization is reflected in the exit polls conducted by CNN (2021) in the question “vote for president mainly” in which, among Black voters 77% voted for their candidate (83% Democrats vs 17% Republicans) while 22% voted against his opponent (91% Democrats vs 9% Republicans). Regarding Latino voters, 68% voted for their candidate (64% Democrats vs 35% Republicans) while 26% voted against his opponent (80% Democrats vs 18% Republicans). Among women, 71% voted for their candidate (47% Democrats vs 52% Republicans) while 24% voted against his opponent (81% Democrats vs 17% Republicans). Lastly, among White voters, 72% voted for their candidate (33% Democrats vs 66% Republicans) while 23% voted against his opponent (67% Democrats vs 30% Republicans).

There is a high percentage in every ethnic group that are basing their voting decision, not on choosing their favorite candidate, but on trying to avoid the victory of the opposition. Moreover, according to a survey conducted by Pew Research, the main reason the electorate supports Biden is because he is not Trump (56%) was the top reason, with his leadership performance (19%) or his personality (13%) falling behind that (Gilberstadt et al., 2020).

This heavy polarization that has led to violent events, such as the assault to the Capitol, and a losing confidence in the political system are consequences of introducing fear and exploiting the main worries of the electorate to get political success. Wedge issues have been used in politics for decades as a powerful tool of mobilization. However, this election took place in a year of a global pandemic which has caused the death of 576,724 Americans between January and May, adding restrictions of movement, closing schools and

businesses which have been seen as limitations on freedom. The unstable situation, added to the fear and anger transmitted by politicians, have led to a destabilized country.

To conclude, this research has some limitations as for the extension of this research and the space limit and only some issues have been studied. For further research, other issues that have played a role in this election such as health care or climate change can be studied. Moreover, the economic issue is an important topic in every election as one factor to evaluate the president is his ability to make the economy grow, but it is a very broad issue and it would need further study. Other lines of research could be focused on the qualities and attributes of each candidate and the impact that has on the elections.

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10. ANNEXES

I. Code used to analyze the media coverage of the three wedge issues

```
library("base")

library("curl")

library("jsonlite")

library("dplyr")

library("ggplot2")

library("norm")

library("questionr")

library("readxl")

library("stringr")

#-----Using the NY Times to establish salience-----

#NY Times API

api = "Assigned API code from NYT"

#####
###

####      function - search news article with API      ####

nytime = function (keyword,begindate,enddate,location) {

  searchQ = URLEncode(keyword)

  url = paste('http://api.nytimes.com/svc/search/v2/articlesearch.json?q=',searchQ,

             '&glocations=',location,'&begin_date=',begindate,'&end_date=',enddate,'&api-
key=',api,sep='')

  #get the total number of search results

  initialsearch = fromJSON(url,flatten = T)
```



```

maxPages = round((initialsearch$response$meta$hits / 10)-1)

print(initialsearch$response$meta$hits)

print(maxPages)

#page limit of NYT is 10

maxPages = ifelse(maxPages >= 10, (maxPages), maxPages)

#creat a empty data frame

df = data.frame(id=as.numeric(),created_time=character(),snippet=character(),
               headline=character())

#save search results into data frame

for(i in 0:maxPages){

  #get the search results of each page

  nytSearch = fromJSON(paste0(url, "&page=", i), flatten = T)

  temp = data.frame(id=1:nrow(nytSearch$response$docs),
                   created_time = nytSearch$response$docs$pub_date,
                   snippet = nytSearch$response$docs$snippet,
                   headline = nytSearch$response$docs$headline.main)

  df=rbind(df,temp)

  Sys.sleep(10) #sleep for 5 second

  print(i)

}

return(df)

}

```

```
#Key words Black lives matter, racism, law and order
```

```
BLM <- nyttime("Black lives matter", 20200301, 20201103, "United States of America")
```

```
RACE <- nyttime("Racism", 20200301, 20201103, "United States of America")
```

```
L&O <- nyttime("Law and order", 20200301, 20201103, "United States of America")
```

```
Rasicm <- rbind(BLM,RACE,L&O)
```

```
#Key words supreme court, vote fraud, fraud elections, vote-by-mail
```

```
SC <- nyttime("Supreme Court", 20200301, 20201103, "United States of America")
```

```
VF <- nyttime("vote fraud", 20200301, 20201103, "United States of America")
```

```
FE <- nyttime("fraud elections", 20200301, 20201103, "United States of America")
```

```
VBM <- nyttime("vote-by-mail", 20200301, 20201103, "United States of America")
```

```
Fraud <- rbind(SC,VF,FE,VBM)
```

```
#Key words COVID. Due to such an enormous amount of articles relating to COVID the API could  
only cope with data attaining to
```

```
#half month time intervals
```

```
COVID02 <- nyttime("COVID", 20200201, 20200229, "United States of America")
```

```
COVID03a <- nyttime("COVID", 20200301, 20200315, "United States of America")
```

```
COVID03b <- nyttime("COVID", 20200316, 20200331, "United States of America")
```

```
COVID04a <- nyttime("COVID", 20200401, 20200415, "United States of America")
```

```
COVID04b <- nyttime("COVID", 20200416, 20200430, "United States of America")
```

```
COVID05a <- nyttime("COVID", 20200501, 20200515, "United States of America")
```

```
COVID05b <- nyttime("COVID", 20200516, 20200531, "United States of America")
```

```
COVID06a <- nyttime("COVID", 20200601, 20200615, "United States of America")
```

```
COVID06b <- nyttime("COVID", 20200616, 20200630, "United States of America")
```

```
COVID07a <- nyttime("COVID", 20200701, 20200715, "United States of America")
```

```
COVID07b <- nyttime("COVID", 20200716, 20200731, "United States of America")
```

```
COVID08a <- nyttime("COVID", 20200801, 20200815, "United States of America")
COVID08b <- nyttime("COVID", 20200816, 20200831, "United States of America")
COVID09a <- nyttime("COVID", 20200901, 20200915, "United States of America")
COVID09b <- nyttime("COVID", 20200916, 20200930, "United States of America")
COVID010a <- nyttime("COVID", 20201001, 20201016, "United States of America")
COVID010b <- nyttime("COVID", 20201017, 20201103, "United States of America")
```

```
covid <- rbind(COVID010a,COVID010b,
```

```
  COVID02,
```

```
  COVID03a,COVID03b,
```

```
  COVID04a,COVID04b,
```

```
  COVID05a,COVID05b,
```

```
  COVID06a,COVID06b,
```

```
  COVID07a,COVID07b,
```

```
  COVID08a,COVID08b,
```

```
  COVID09a,COVID09b)
```

```
#Now for visualizing the data
```

```
#First of is a wordcloud in order to see most commonly used words
```

```
#example using the covid sample
```

```
library("tm")
```

```
library("SnowballC")
```

```
library("wordcloud")
```

```
library("RColorBrewer")
```

```

new_data_set <- (c(covid$snippet,covid$headline))
docs <- VCorpus(VectorSource(new_data_set))
docs <- tm_map(docs, content_transformer(tolower))

# Remove numbers
docs <- tm_map(docs, removeNumbers)

# Remove english common stopwords
docs <- tm_map(docs, removeWords, c(stopwords("english")))

# Remove your own stop word

# specify your stopwords as a character vector
docs <- tm_map(docs, removeWords, c("s"))

# Remove punctuation
docs <- tm_map(docs, removePunctuation)

# Eliminate extra white spaces
docs <- tm_map(docs, stripWhitespace)

dtm <- TermDocumentMatrix(docs)

m <- as.matrix(dtm)

v <- sort(rowSums(m),decreasing=TRUE)

d <- data.frame(word = names(v),freq=v)

covid_top_words <- head(d, 50)

set.seed(1234)

wordcloud(words = d$word, freq = d$freq, min.freq = 300,
          max.words=7000, random.order=FALSE, rot.per=0.35,
          colors=brewer.pal(8, "Dark2"))

#Plotting time frame bar plot of published articles

```

```

time_frame <- as.data.frame(as.Date(covid$created_time))

#Assigning a nominal value of one to each article
time_frame <- cbind(time_frame,1)
colnames(time_frame) <- c("Date", "No.")
df <- time_frame

# aggregate by day
ggplot(df) + aes(x = Date) +
  geom_bar() + ggtitle("Plot of the amount key pharses (COVID) were used in articles over time")
+
  xlab("Date") + ylab("Number of articles") + theme(
  plot.title = element_text(size=17, face="bold"),
  axis.title.x = element_text(size=14, face="bold"),
  axis.title.y = element_text(size=14, face="bold")
) + scale_x_date(
  breaks = as.Date(c("2020-02-01", "2020-03-01", "2020-04-01",
                    "2020-05-01", "2020-06-01"
                    , "2020-07-01", "2020-08-01", "2020-09-01", "2020-10-01", "2020-11-01")),
  labels = c("Feb", "Mar", "Apr", "May", "Jun", "Jul", "Aug", "Sep", "Oct", "Nov"),
  date_labels = "%b")

```