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1

The Storm Is Here

"WHEN DO WE START WINNING?"

That was what a friend of Ashli Babbitt's asked on Twitter the week before Congress met to certify the 2020 presidential election. Babbitt replied, "January 6, 2021."

Babbitt was a thirty-five-year-old Air Force veteran who lived outside San Diego with her husband. She owned a struggling pool-supply company. She also was an ardent supporter of Donald Trump and his crusade to overturn the results of the 2020 election. On January 5 she had tweeted, "Nothing will stop us. They can try and try and try but the storm is here and it is descending upon DC in less than 24 hours . . . dark to light!"[1] The next day, with a Trump flag tied around her neck, Babbitt joined a mob that breached the U.S. Capitol and interrupted the certification of the election.

Babbitt had traveled to Washington to attend a "Save America" rally that Trump and his allies organized for that morning. At the rally, multiple people spoke in violent terms about what needed to happen. Rep. Mo Brooks, a Republican from Alabama, said, "Today is the day American patriots start takin' down names and kickin' ass. Are you willing to do what it takes to fight for America?" One of Trump's sons, Donald Jr., said that "red-blooded, patriotic Americans" should "fight for Trump." Trump adviser Rudy Giuliani called for "trial by combat." At noon,

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Trump himself spoke for an hour, declaring that he would "never concede" the election and telling supporters, "We fight like hell and if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore." He called on supporters to go to the Capitol and "demand that Congress do the right thing."[2]

Thousands of his supporters heeded Trump's call. By 1:00 p.m., some breached the temporary fences on the Capitol grounds and clashed with Capitol Police officers. A little after 2:00 p.m., protesters broke a window and began to enter the Capitol. At 2:30, the Senate, including Vice President Mike Pence and several members of his family, was evacuated. Protesters, including a few who were armed or carried zip-tie restraints, soon occupied the Senate chamber. Approximately 800 eventually entered the Capitol. The protest had become a riot—or, as some would later say, an insurrection.

Babbitt was among a group that targeted the House chamber, where some members of Congress still remained, hiding under desks. The rioters attacked the glass doors that opened into the Speaker's Lobby, a room just outside the chamber. One yelled "Fuck the blue!" at the officers standing there. The group hit the doors with their hands, flagpoles, and other objects.

When one door broke, Babbitt tried to climb through. Michael Byrd, a Capitol Police officer standing on the other side, shot her. Babbitt received medical attention on the scene from police and was transported to a local hospital, where she died of her injuries.[3]

Babbitt was the only rioter to be killed that day, but she was otherwise similar to the types of people who entered the Capitol. Most who were charged with a crime had no connection with far-right groups, militias, or white nationalist organizations, although such groups, including the Proud Boys and the Oathkeepers, were represented among the rioters. Court records showed that most of these people said they were only doing what Trump had told them to do: defend him and keep Biden from winning a "stolen" election. This was Babbitt's goal, too.[4]

Trump welcomed their efforts. Indeed, he had long been willing to downplay, countenance, or even encourage violence on his behalf. In his first presidential campaign he praised supporters who assaulted

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protestors at his rallies, offering to pay their legal bills. In his second campaign, rather than disavowing the support of extremist groups, he encouraged them. In the presidential debate on September 29, 2020, he told the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by."

And so it was no surprise that Trump was "initially pleased" when his supporters stormed the Capitol, according to White House officials who later spoke with reporters. The violence was well underway before Trump finally tweeted, at 2:47 p.m., "Please support our Capitol Police and Law Enforcement. They are truly on the side of our Country. Stay peaceful!" Even then, one official said that Trump had not wanted to include "stay peaceful."[5]

Members of Congress and White House aides implored Trump to speak out more forcefully. Trump sent a second tweet at 3:25, calling for people to "remain peaceful" and saying, "No violence!" But he refused to condemn the violence outright or tell his supporters to leave the Capitol. At 4:22 p.m. he published a video message in which he said that "we have to have peace" and told his supporters to "go home." But he also said that "we love you, you're very special" and repeated his false claim of election fraud. At 6:25 p.m., after the rioters had finally been cleared from the Capitol, Trump praised them again, tweeting, "These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long." He added, "Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever!"[6]

It was a jarring sentiment even at that point, and it would become more so when the full toll of that day was clear. Ashli Babbitt was dead; the Capitol building had been damaged extensively; and the Capitol Police had suffered devastating harm and loss—approximately 140 officers were injured by rioters, who beat them with baseball bats, flagpoles, and pipes. One officer, Brian Sicknick, died the following day of a stroke that was possibly linked to the injuries he had received when a rioter pepper-sprayed him. Four officers committed suicide in the months following the riot.[7]

Beyond the toll on people and property was the cost to American democracy itself. A hallmark of democracies is the peaceful transfer of

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power after an election. That did not happen. Another hallmark is the willingness of election losers to consent to the outcome, thereby upholding the legitimacy of the system even as they regroup and seek to win next time. That did not happen, either. Not only did Trump continue to insist that the election was stolen, but on the night of January 6 he was joined by eight Senate Republicans and 139 House Republicans, all of whom voted to object to the election results when Congress reconvened only hours after members were forced to flee for their lives.[8]

The 2020 election and the attack on the Capitol were the culmination of a long year of casualties and crisis in the United States. There was the COVID-19 pandemic, which took the lives of over 350,000 Americans in 2020 alone and put at least 14 million people out of work,[9] and there were yet more deaths of African Americans at the hands of police officers, most notably the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, on May 25, 2020, which led to massive protests. The Trump White House saw its own series of crises, culminating in Trump's impeachment in early 2020 and then a second impeachment in early 2021 because of his actions—and then inaction—during the insurrection.

These extraordinary events seemed initially as if they might transcend the powerful partisanship that usually characterizes American politics. Perhaps Americans would come together to beat a deadly virus; as one *Washington Post* columnist noted in February 2020, "a global crisis . . . could unite the planet and encourage everyone to pull together." Or perhaps they would be united by the gruesome spectacle of a police officer kneeling on the neck of a man for nine minutes. As one headline after Floyd's murder put it: "Will This Be the Moment of Reckoning on Race That Lasts?" But anything like unity or a reckoning proved fleeting at best. Political leaders stoked partisan divisions with predictable, even violent, consequences. Thus, politics shaped how the central events of the election year played out as much, if not more, than these events shaped politics.[10]

In turn, this had important consequences for the presidential election. For an incumbent like Trump, the combination of impeachment, a pandemic, and a recession seemed like a recipe for a landslide defeat.

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It was not. In the national popular vote, Biden's margin of victory was only about 2 points greater than Hillary Clinton's in 2016. In the key battleground states, the margins were even closer than in 2016.

Of course, Trump still lost, and the attempts by his supporters and allies in Congress to overturn the election failed. Joseph R. Biden Jr. became the forty-sixth president of the United States. In his inaugural address, Biden expressed his own hopes of unifying the country, saying, "We can join forces, stop the shouting and lower the temperature. For without unity there is no peace, only bitterness and fury. No progress, only exhausting outrage. No nation, only a state of chaos. This is our historic moment of crisis and challenge, and unity is the path forward."[11]

But how leaders responded to the events of 2020—and especially how Trump and his allies responded to the election and its aftermath—only exacerbated divisions that had been years in the making. Understanding those divisions helps explain why the election came to such a bitter end, and why this bitter end may only signal the beginning of a new democratic crisis in American politics.

A CALCIFIED POLITICS

That Americans are politically divided is obvious, but it is important to clarify what this means. Generalizations about a divided America do not tell us what issues are most divisive, when those divisions emerged, and whether we are deeply divided or merely closely divided. This makes it hard to say what has happened in American politics, what is causing it, and what it implies for the future. We seek to push beyond simple generalizations to identify the facts and trends that provide insight into the politics of the Trump presidency, the 2020 election, and the election's aftermath.

Our argument centers on three elements. First, long-term *tectonic shifts* have pushed the parties apart while making the views within each party more uniform. This is the familiar trend toward gradually increasing partisan polarization. Second, shorter-term *shocks*, catalyzed especially by Trump, have sped up polarization on identity issues—those

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related to race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. And third, it is precisely these identity issues that voters in both parties care more about—exacerbating divisions even further and giving politicians every incentive to continue to play to them.

The upshot is a more *calcified politics*. As it does in the body, calcification produces hardening and rigidity: people are more firmly in place and harder to move away from their predispositions. Growing calcification is a logical consequence of growing polarization, but the concepts are not identical. Polarization means more distance between voters in opposing parties in terms of their values, ideas, and views on policy. Calcification means less willingness to defect from their party, such as by breaking with their party's president or even voting for the opposite party. There is thus less chance for new and even dramatic events to change people's choices at the ballot box. New events tend to be absorbed into an axis of conflict in which identity plays the central role. And this means smaller fluctuations from year to year in election outcomes.

But perhaps paradoxically, a more calcified politics does not produce the same winner year after year. This is because increasing partisan polarization has coincided with increasing *partisan parity*. In sheer numbers, Democrats and Republicans are more narrowly divided than they used to be, meaning that any movement in elections from one year to the next could change who governs the country. This combination of calcification and parity raises the stakes of politics—and makes them more explosive.

Tectonic Shifts in Partisan Attitudes

Over the long term, the Democratic and Republican parties have become more internally homogeneous and more different from each other in political ideology, certain demographic characteristics, and certain policy issues. They have increasingly unfavorable views of each other, too.

It is worth unpacking this trend. First, the "long term" refers to a period that is measured in decades. This means that certain partisan divisions were visible at least by the 2000s and in many cases by the

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1990s or even 1980s. "Internally homogeneous" means that each party is more consistently on "one side" of an issue—that is, Democrats are more consistently liberal and Republicans more consistently conservative. "More distant" means that, on average, Democrats and Republicans have become more different from each other or farther apart on some underlying ideological dimension.

These changes are tectonic in the sense that they are slow-moving and, like the shifts of tectonic plates in the earth's crust, accumulate to alter the landscape. These changes travel under different labels, such as "partisan sorting" or "partisan polarization," but the upshot is the same: a growing alignment between people's party identification and certain demographic attributes and political views.

For example, political science research and public opinion data shows that Democrats and Republicans increasingly diverge in their self-described political ideology. Between 1994 and 2020, the percentage of Democrats who called themselves liberal increased from 25 percent to 51 percent, and the percentage of Republicans who called themselves conservative increased from 58 percent to 75 percent—although substantial fractions of both parties still call themselves "moderates" (as of 2020, 35% of Democrats and 20% of Republicans).[12]

Moreover, Democrats and Republicans increasingly differ demographically, including by gender, race, and religiosity. For example, compared to earlier periods of time, men have become less likely, and women more likely, to identify with the Democratic Party. African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans have also become more likely to identify with the Democratic Party. And especially among white Americans, religiously observant people and evangelical Protestants (not mutually exclusive groups, to be sure) have become more likely to identify as Republican. The exact magnitude and timing of these trends differs; for instance, the shifts among African Americans were larger and occurred much earlier than shifts among Hispanic Americans.[13]

Democrats and Republicans increasingly diverge on many political issues, too. Between 1972 and 2016, for example, Democrats and Republicans came to take more distinctive positions on the role of government

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in the economy—visible in issues including the overall size of government, whether it should spend more or less on various policy areas, and whether it should play a larger role in regulating economic markets, such as by guaranteeing people jobs or providing health care or health insurance. Polarization on these issues has been driven primarily by growing conservatism in the Republican Party. The parties have also diverged on noneconomic issues. The most obvious one is abortion, with Democrats shifting to the left and Republicans to the right.[14]

These various and growing partisan differences are related, unsurprisingly. One's self-described ideology and views on policy issues are not synonymous—not every person who identifies as "conservative" favors cuts to government spending, for example—but it makes sense that they both exhibit partisan polarization. Polarization by demography and ideology are also linked: the gender gap in party identification has grown because men and women have different views of certain policies, the parties have polarized around those same policies, and thus men and women now differ more in their partisan loyalties.[15]

But this pattern of polarization or sorting does not characterize everything. Catholicism used to be more strongly correlated with party when Catholics were a linchpin of the Democratic-leaning New Deal coalition. Now, Catholics are evenly split between the parties.[16]

Partisan polarization in the public has been led by polarization among politicians and activists. In the first half of the twentieth century, both political parties had an ideologically diverse mix of elected officials and interest group leaders. The Democratic Party had its northern liberals and its southern conservatives; the GOP had its Goldwater conservatives and its liberal Rockefeller Republicans. As time went on, conservative southern Democrats were replaced by Republicans. Ronald Reagan's support of tax cuts and deregulation and opposition to abortion helped to position the GOP more firmly as a party of the right.

As leaders became more ideologically similar within each party, many rank-and-file partisans did too, especially people attentive enough to politics to know where leaders stood. However, because many people are not political junkies, party polarization among citizens has always

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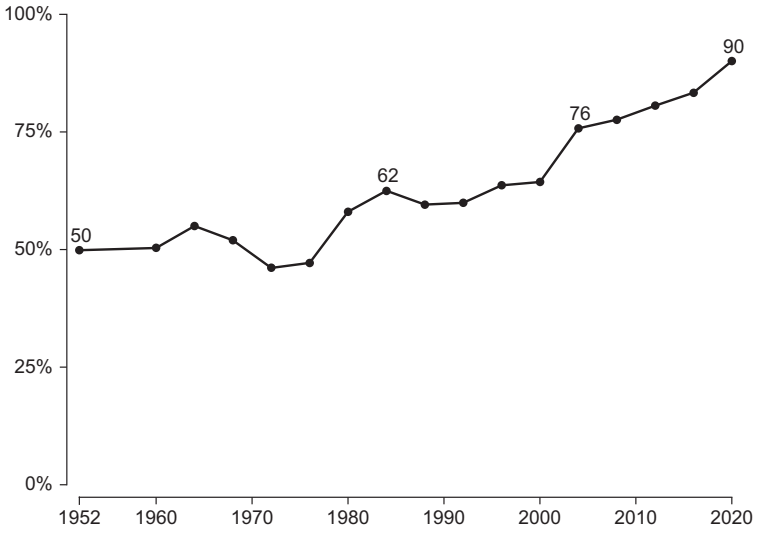

Figure 1.1.
A Growing Number of Americans Perceive Important Differences between the Parties.
Source: American National Election Studies conducted in presidential election years.

been more modest than among political leaders. Many ordinary voters continue to have at least some views that are out of step with the reigning ideas in their party.[17]

Nevertheless, partisan polarization is meaningful and, crucially, it is visible to Americans. When asked, "Do you think there are any important differences in what the Republicans and Democrats stand for?," Americans increasingly say yes (figure 1.1). In 1952, only 50 percent did; by 1984 it was 62 percent, by 2004 it was 76 percent, and in 2020 it was 90 percent. These trends were apparent among men and women, different racial and ethnic groups, both Democrats and Republicans, and so on. In other words, the trend in perceptions of the parties is not due to changes in the demographic composition of the American public, such as its growing racial and ethnic diversity; it is more the result of changes in the parties themselves. As a result, the vast majority of Americans—as well as all kinds of Americans—now reject the old George Wallace

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quote that there is not a "dime's worth of difference" between the two major parties.[18]

An increasing percentage of voters can place the two parties on the liberal-conservative spectrum with basic accuracy—meaning, they place the Democrats to the left of the Republicans. Moreover, voters tend to see an increasing distance between the parties on various issues, and especially to see the opposing party as more distant from their preferred party.[19]

As the parties have polarized and as people have perceived those differences, they have also come to *feel* differently about the two parties. Thus, partisan divides are not only about substantive political issues—more taxes or fewer taxes, say—but about whether the other party and those who support it are fundamentally good or bad.[20] In a 2019 Pew Research Center survey, substantial fractions of Democrats and Republicans said that members of the other party are more closed-minded, unintelligent, immoral, or unpatriotic than other Americans. For example, 55 percent of Republicans said that Democrats were more immoral than other Americans, and 47 percent of Democrats said this of Republicans.

This dislike of the opposing party has become more prevalent over the past decades—a phenomenon known as "affective polarization" or "negative partisanship."[21] The trend only continued into 2020. In particular, when asked to evaluate the two parties on a 0–100 scale, where 100 indicates the most positive feelings, Americans increasingly rate the opposing party unfavorably—that is, below 50 (figure 1.2). Data from American National Election Study (ANES) surveys shows this trend since the question was introduced in 1978. Between 1978 and 2016, the average rating of the opposing party declined from 48 to 31, while the average rating of a person's own party was largely stable. In online surveys conducted by the ANES since 2012—including in 2020, when the pandemic prevented face-to-face interviewing—unfavorable feelings were even more prevalent, in part because people appear to feel more comfortable expressing negative opinions when they are not being interviewed by another person.[22] In 2012 the average rating of the opposing party among online respondents was 25; in 2020 it was 19. And

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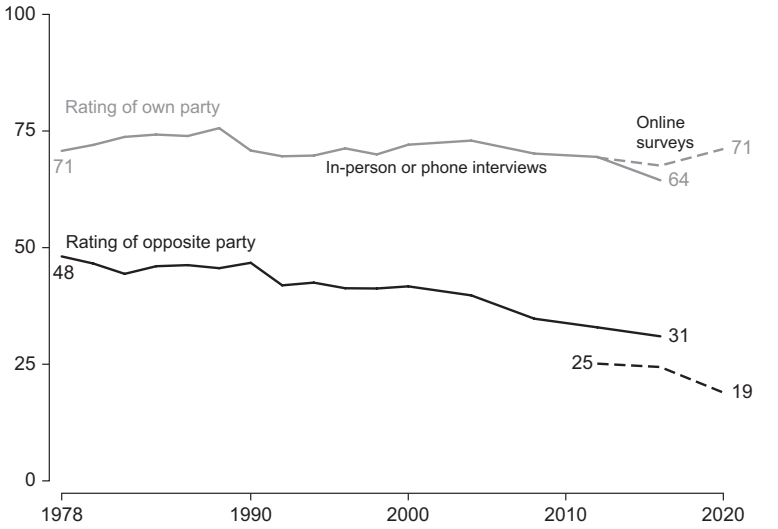

Figure 1.2.
Views of the Opposing Party Are Increasingly Unfavorable. The lines represent average ratings on a 0–100 scale among Democratic and Republicans (including those who lean toward a party). *Source*: American National Election Studies.

because views of respondents' own party rebounded, 2020 saw a record level of affective polarization.

These trends in polarization are significant enough on their own. But they take on even greater significance in the minds of ordinary Americans, whose perceptions of the parties are often exaggerated and stereotyped. For example, Americans see the parties as farther apart on issues than they really are, as well as more demographically distinct from each other. Republicans think that almost half of Democrats are Black, about twice the real number. Democrats think that about 45 percent of Republicans are very wealthy, making $250,000 or more a year; the true number is more like 2 percent. Partisans also exaggerate the extent of affective polarization itself: they think the other party feels more prejudice against their own party than is really true. One reason for these rampant misperceptions seems to be that Americans' mental picture of

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the political parties includes mainly party leaders, activists, and ideologues—that is, the type of partisans who are most likely to illustrate the pattern of polarization.[23]

These trends in polarization have important implications for elections. One is higher levels of partisanship in presidential approval and voting behavior. Most partisans approve of their own party's president but disapprove of the opposing party's president. Similarly, most partisans vote for their party's candidates up and down the ballot. Presidential candidates typically win 90 percent or more of their party's voters. And split-ticket voting—such as voting for the Republican presidential candidate and the Democratic congressional candidate—is in decline.[24]

A second, and related, implication is the weakening power of other factors that have traditionally affected evaluations of presidents and voting in presidential elections. Most important is the state of the national economy. In the past, incumbent presidents benefited from economic growth and suffered from economic downturns. But strong partisanship has weakened the relationship between the economy and presidential approval, in part because people are loath to give the opposing party's president credit for a growing economy or to punish their own party's president when the economy goes south. Similarly, a more polarized political environment may make presidential election outcomes less sensitive to changes in the economy because so many partisans are unwilling to support the opposing party's candidate under any circumstances.[25] In short, recent election outcomes seem to depend less on achieving shared goals, like peace and prosperity, and more on the clashing views increasingly visible in party politics.

A third implication is that there are smaller shifts in presidential election outcomes from year to year. If factors like the economy do not affect presidential approval or elections as much, and if partisan loyalty is strong, then one year's election outcome is not likely to differ much from the previous outcome.[26]

But smaller shifts do not mean no shifts—and even small shifts can be consequential given partisan parity. In the 1952 ANES survey, 59 percent of Americans identified with or leaned toward the

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Democratic Party but only 36 percent identified with or leaned toward the Republican Party—a Democratic advantage of 23 points. But this advantage declined over the years, and by 2016 it was only 7 points (46% vs. 39%). This parity is visible not just at the national level but also in crucial battleground states; in 2016, the outcomes in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin were all decided by less than 1 percentage point. This increasing party parity matters all the more because American elections tend to use winner-take-all rules. A narrow win gets you four years in the White House or a House or Senate seat, but a narrow loss gets you nothing.[27]

It makes sense, then, that these long-term changes are crucial to explaining the dramatic events of 2020 and the violent aftermath of a narrowly decided election.

Sudden Shocks in Identity Politics

Over the short term—years, not decades—the Democratic and Republican parties have rapidly divided on issues related to identity, especially race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and gender. Of course, some party divisions on these issues were apparent years ago. But recently there has been a sharp increase in the magnitude of these divisions. If the process of partisan sorting or polarization was tectonic, like the slow creep of the earth's crust, the pace of partisan polarization on identity-inflected issues more resembles the shocks of an earthquake. These shocks stem directly from the identity, rhetoric, and decisions of political leaders and how the public has reacted to them. A central part of this story is Trump himself.

One example of an "identity shock" concerned immigration. Since 1965, Gallup has asked Americans, "In your view, should immigration be kept at its present level, increased, or decreased?" From 1965 to 1993, restrictive views became increasingly common, as more and more Americans wanted to decrease immigration (figure 1.3). Since the mid-1990s, restrictive views have receded overall, although there have been occasional spikes in the percent who favored decreasing immigration, such as after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

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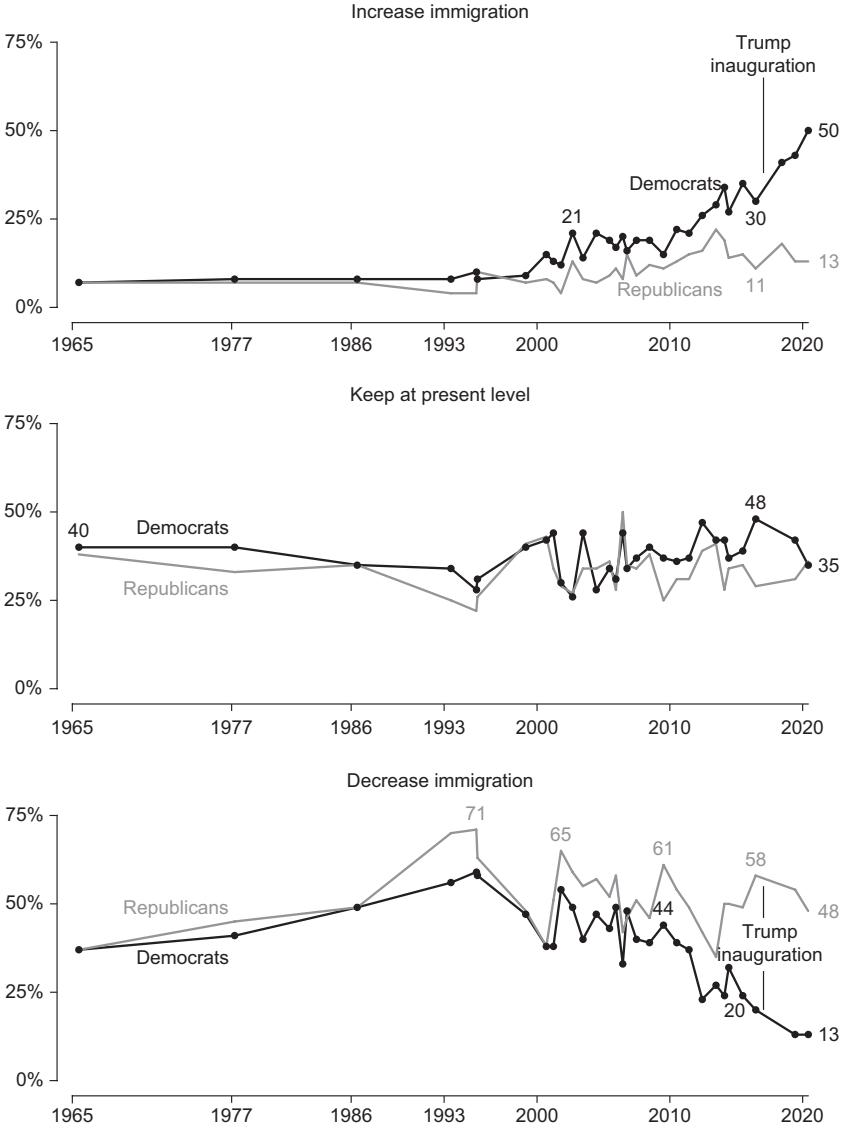

Figure 1.3.
Trends in Democratic and Republican Views of Immigration Levels. *Source*: Gallup polls.

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More notable, though, is the pattern of partisan polarization. Early on, there was almost none. In the 1965 poll, which was conducted right before Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the views held by Democrats and Republicans were almost identical. That matched the signals that party leaders were sending, as large bipartisan majorities in both the House and Senate voted for this bill. The 1977 poll and the 1986 poll likewise showed little division between parties. But in the mid-1990s, a partisan gap opened up—visible mostly in the larger percentage of Republicans who wanted to decrease immigration—though it disappeared within a few years. In a February 1999 poll, for example, roughly equal numbers of Democrats (7%) and Republicans (9%) wanted to increase immigration. Only beginning in the early 2000s was there any consistent partisan gap, with Democrats generally being more open to immigration than Republicans. For example, in a poll conducted in June 2016, 30 percent of Democrats wanted to increase immigration, compared to 11 percent of Republicans.

In the four years since that 2016 poll, however, there has been a sea change in Democratic attitudes. While Republican support for increasing immigration moved up only slightly, to 13 percent in 2020, the percentage of Democrats who wanted to increase immigration shot up from 30 percent in 2016 to 50 percent in 2020. This produced much more polarization in a very short time. The gap in Democratic and Republican support for increasing immigration was 2 points in 1999 and 19 points in 2016—a 17-point increase in polarization. Between 2016 and 2020, there was a 20-point increase (from 17 to 37). In other words, more polarization occurred in those four years then in the previous seventeen. That is what a sudden shock looks like.

The same pattern characterized attitudes on other immigration topics and identity-inflected issues: any longer-term partisan gap quickly became much larger. One set of survey questions that captured this gap focused on how Americans explain the disadvantages facing Black Americans and specifically whether they attribute those disadvantages more to Black Americans' lack of effort or to structural forces like slavery or discrimination. For example, one question asks whether people

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agree or disagree that "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class."[28] Since the 1990s, white Democrats have been more likely than white Republicans to attribute racial inequality to structural forces. Thus, party differences on these questions are not brand new. Nevertheless, in surveys conducted in 2016 and after, there was a sharp increase among Democrats in their endorsement of structural explanations for racial inequality, but virtually no change among Republicans. Democrats also became more liberal on other questions related to civil rights for African Americans. And they became more favorable to Islam and Muslims.[29]

On other identity issues, recent partisan polarization has been more symmetrical, with both parties moving away from each other. For instance, Democrats have become more sympathetic to claims of sexual harassment while Republicans have become less so. For example, in 2008, 73 percent of Democrats disagreed with the statement "Women who complain about harassment cause more problems than they solve." By 2018, that had increased to 82 percent. By contrast, the percentage of Republicans who disagreed dropped from 52 percent to 39 percent. There was also an increase in the percentage of Democrats who disagreed with the statement "When women demand equality these days they are actually seeking special favors" (from 71% to 78%). Republicans went in the opposite direction (from 49% to 39%).[30]

Meanwhile, on many other issues not as closely tied to racial, ethnic, and gender identities, partisan polarization over this period was more muted. In 2016, the two parties were 63 points apart on the question of whether the government should provide universal health care and in 2020 they were 71 points apart. Polarization increased even less on the question of whether abortion should be legal. In 2016, 51 percent of Democrats said abortion should be legal in all cases, compared to 9 percent of Republicans; in 2020 those fractions were nearly the same, 53 percent and 9 percent.[31]

What has brought about this partisan polarization specifically on identity-inflected issues? The chief explanation, as it was for the more general pattern of partisan polarization, has to do with the political

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leaders who provide cues for ordinary voters. Dating back to the 1930s, activists and leaders within the Democratic and Republican parties diverged on civil rights for African Americans. In the 1980s, activists and leaders within the parties diverged on immigration as well. In 1986, when Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act—which, among other things, legalized undocumented immigrants who had arrived in the country before 1982—there was much more Republican opposition than there was when Congress passed the 1965 immigration bill. Even though Ronald Reagan supported and ultimately signed the bill, the majority of House Republicans opposed it. Although it took time, those differences among political elites were gradually reflected in public opinion, such as opinion on immigration in the 1990s and early 2000s.[32]

The more recent and rapid transformation began with the campaigns and presidency of Barack Obama. Obama's status as the first African American president helped clarify the partisan politics of race in a new way, despite years of partisan debates about racialized issues ranging from affirmative action to welfare programs. Even though scholars found that Obama actually talked about race less than other recent Democratic presidents, his mere presence in the Oval Office changed how Americans perceived the parties' positions on racial issues. They came to see larger differences between the Democratic and Republican parties and, in particular, to believe that the Democratic Party was more supportive of government action to help African Americans. Moreover, people's racial attitudes became significant predictors of Americans' attitudes toward almost anything connected to Obama. For example, racial attitudes were much more strongly associated with support for Obama's health care reform proposal than the one Bill Clinton had proposed in 1993. Racial attitudes also predicted attitudes toward figures in his administration, such as Hillary Clinton, as well as Americans' party identification and their votes in both the presidential and midterm elections during Obama's tenure. During his tenure, police killings of African Americans and the resulting Movement for Black Lives also helped push the Democratic Party (and perhaps Obama himself) toward more liberal positions on racial issues.[33]

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The rise of Donald Trump was even more consequential for polarization on identity-inflected issues. Trump put these issues at the center of his presidential campaign and talked about them in a more inflammatory way than most politicians. During his campaign he was condemned, including by fellow Republicans, when he called for a ban on Muslims traveling to the United States and a database of Muslims living in the country, when he declined to disavow the support of Ku Klux Klan grand wizard David Duke and other white nationalists, and when he said he would not get fair treatment in a lawsuit because the judge was of Mexican descent—a remark that House Speaker Paul Ryan said was "the textbook definition of a racist comment."[34] Trump's casually sexist treatment of women emerged multiple times during the campaign, most infamously in the *Access Hollywood* tape in which Trump was recorded describing kissing women and grabbing their genitalia without their consent.

Hillary Clinton's campaign made the contrast with Trump very clear. Her positions on racial issues were more explicit and liberal than Obama's—one of her first speeches as a candidate discussed systemic racism—and she frequently criticized Trump for his treatment of women. As a result, voters came to see even larger differences between the parties on racial issues than they had under Obama. And Americans' attitudes on issues like immigration, the treatment of Muslims, racial inequality, and sexual harassment were more strongly associated with voting for Trump in the primary and general elections than in other recent elections. In short, political cues, especially from Trump, helped make identity-inflected issues a more polarizing force.[35]

That only continued into Trump's presidency. Indeed, the rapid shifts among Democrats, such as their increasingly positive views of immigration, were likely due to President Trump's push for restrictions on immigration. As political science research has shown, people form political opinions not only by taking cues from their political allies but also by reacting against their political enemies.[36] Democrats' extraordinary animosity toward Trump meant that any Democrats with conservative positions on issues like immigration confronted the incongruity of opposing Trump but sharing, at least to some degree, his positions on

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identity-inflected issues. The easiest way for these Democrats to resolve this incongruity was to shift their positions away from Trump's. Indeed, even before he became president, Trump's push for a U.S.-Mexico border wall appeared to make it less popular among Democrats.[37]

This increasing alignment of partisan politics and identity politics has transformed the Democratic Party. For many years, Democratic politicians had to manage tensions within its coalition between African Americans and white Democrats with liberal views on racial issues on the one hand and a significant number of white Democrats with conservative views on the other. Politicians did this by maintaining support for civil rights but also sending racially conservative signals—for instance, presidential candidate Bill Clinton's 1992 criticism of the rap artist and political activist Sister Souljah for her comments about white people, including a song in which she said, "If there are any good white people, I haven't met them." Even in 2012, a large number of white Obama voters expressed conservative views on identity-inflected issues, attributing racial inequality to African Americans' lack of effort or opposing a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. But the defection of those voters to Trump in 2016, as well as the subsequent shifts in Democratic attitudes during Trump's presidency, lessened the intraparty coalitional tension for Democrats. Democratic candidates could support immigration or express concern about the Black Americans killed by police officers with less fear of alienating many Democratic voters. This is not to say that Democrats speak with one voice or are uniformly progressive on identity-inflected issues. Nevertheless, the contemporary Democratic Party is much different than the one that Bill Clinton or even Barack Obama led.

Political Priorities

The third element of our argument centers on Americans' *political priorities*. As early as 2019, Americans prioritized the same identity-inflected issues that have come to define our politics. Here, political priorities refer to the issues that people think are important. People have opinions on many issues, of course, but do not care equally about all of

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them. When an issue is important to people, they are more likely to take action on that issue, vote based on candidates' positions on the issue, and so on. The importance attached to issues is relevant not just to individual voters but also to the shape of political conflict overall. If the most important issues are the ones Americans disagree on, then more conflict is likely to result. Politics gets angrier when people deeply care about their disagreements.[38]

To gauge Americans' political attitudes and priorities throughout the 2020 campaign, we conducted one of the largest survey projects fielded during an election campaign. This project, called Nationscape, interviewed about 500,000 Americans between July 2019 and January 2021. We will draw on this project throughout the book—to map trends, compare opinions among groups of Americans, shed light on what factors affected choices at the ballot box, and ascertain political priorities.

It can be challenging to measure political priorities, however. Surveys routinely ask people to rate the importance of various issues, but it is not clear that this approach generates meaningful responses. People who rate an issue as more important, for example, do not appear to rely more on that issue when they choose between candidates.[39]

A better way to measure political priorities is what we might call a "show, don't tell" strategy. Within Nationscape, we designed an experiment that allowed people to reveal, or show, which issues they care about rather than simply asking them to tell us.[40] In this survey, we asked people whether they supported or opposed forty-four policies, such as instituting universal background checks for gun purchases, raising the minimum wage to $15 an hour, and providing a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. We also asked about some nonpolicy considerations, such as impeaching Trump and electing a woman or gay man to the White House. Then we randomly selected items from that list and presented respondents with two competing "packages" of between two and four policies. One package could have been instituting universal background checks, raising the minimum wage, and not providing a path to citizenship. The other package would have the opposite

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positions on those three issues. The packages sometimes had exclusively liberal or conservative positions and sometimes a mix (as in this example). The point is that respondents had to choose which package they preferred. Respondents saw ten sets of packages and had to make ten choices. (More information on the survey and the experiment appears in the appendix to this chapter.)

By examining these choices across respondents, we generate the "revealed importance" of each issue. Revealed importance captures how much more likely people are to choose a set of policies when the set includes that particular issue. The higher the importance, the higher the priority Americans attach to that issue.

So what issues do Americans care about? It is instructive to focus initially on the salient issues during the Trump presidency: whether to impeach Trump, immigration policy, taxes for both the middle and upper classes, the role of the government in health care, whether transgender people should be able to serve in the military, trade policy, and paid maternity leave. All of these reflect priorities for Trump and were the subject of debate between Trump and Democrats. Altogether, there were sixteen specific policies included in the Nationscape survey experiments that were relevant to these issues.

Figure 1.4 presents the revealed importance of these sixteen issues. Specifically, this figure shows the increase in the share of people who choose a package of issues when their position on a particular issue is included in the package. For example, the revealed importance of "impeaching Trump," 0.35, means that when a set contained the respondents' position on this issue (whether for or against impeaching Trump), 67.5 percent of people chose that set and 32.5 percent did not, for a difference of 35 percent.

The results from the 2019 surveys show that in the run-up to the election year, far and away the most important issue to Americans—Democrats and Republicans alike—was the impeachment of Trump (figure 1.4). Below impeachment were a number of policies related to immigration: whether to deport all undocumented immigrants, build the border wall with Mexico, separate children from undocumented

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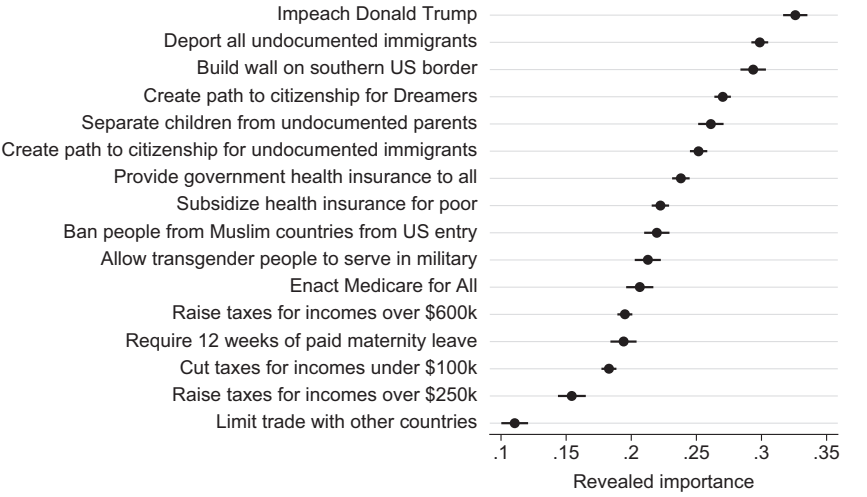

Figure 1.4.
Revealed Importance of Selected Salient Issues during the Trump Presidency. The graph displays estimates of revealed importance and 95% confidence intervals. *Source*: Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape surveys (July–December 2019).

parents at the border, and create a path to citizenship. Different policies for the government's role in health insurance, all of which were debated in the Democratic primary, follow next. Everything else was less important, including tax policy and trade, despite the debates over the 2017 tax cuts passed by Republicans and the tariffs and other restrictions on trade enacted by the Trump administration.

Thus, Americans' political priorities as of 2019 were focused on some of the most partisan and divisive issues of that time, and especially those with the additional emotional charge of identity politics. Indeed, the full results from the experiment—presented in the appendix to this chapter—show that these issues were as important as, if not more important than, radical policies that we included for comparison, including complete bans on abortion and guns. Of course, we do not know how long these issues have been important, since our experiments began only in 2019. But in the year and a half that the Nationscape survey was in the field, these priorities were remarkably stable. This

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suggests that these priorities are long standing and some may even have predated the Trump presidency.

One implication is that existing partisan divisions were magnified by how people defined their priorities. The types of policies where Democrats and Republicans might find some common ground were not as important as those where they strongly disagreed. When we compared the revealed importance of all forty-four issues to the partisan polarization in opinion on those issues, the relationship was positive: the farther apart Democrats and Republicans were, the more important the issue was to Americans overall.

A second implication, which we explore in later chapters, is that people whose issue positions aligned with their party's ideology—Democrats who took a liberal position, Republicans who took a conservative position—tended to care more about those issues than did people whose positions were out of step with their party. This also helped lock in partisan divisions. If partisans who were out of step, such as the substantial number of Republicans who favored tax increases on the wealthy or raising the minimum wage, cared deeply about those issues, then there would have been more potential for cross-party coalitions or for an enterprising Democratic candidate to steal away those voters and weaken partisan loyalty. But instead, the issues that Democrats and Republicans cared about tended to keep them in the party's fold—and intensify conflict between the parties.

A CALCIFIED 2020

It was far from obvious that the idea of "calcified politics" would ultimately apply to the 2020 presidential campaign. The events leading up to the election seemed like they could create big political changes. After Trump's unexpected victory in 2016, his presidency brought continuous chaos and controversy, culminating in impeachment in early 2020. As Democrats stepped up to challenge him, the party faced a crowded primary field but no dominant front-runner. Then came a global pandemic and economic recession. In the midst of all that, a brutal murder led to historic protests for racial justice. To many, the

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election year was one of superlatives—"the worst," "the craziest," and so on.[41]

And yet these events did not create the expected political changes. People's attitudes toward Trump shifted only slightly, the Democratic primary resolved quickly, and much of the impact of the racial justice protests on public opinion proved ephemeral. In key battleground states, the election was closer than in 2016. In short, the drama coincided with a great deal of political stasis. But at the same time, one big thing did change: the person who is the nation's president.

Thus, a story about the 2020 election has to address two questions: why Trump lost, but also why the election was so close. The tectonic shifts in the two political parties, the identity shocks of the past decade, and Americans' political priorities all help to answer those questions.

The story begins with the Trump presidency (chapter 2). When Trump took office there was speculation that he would not be a conventional Republican but instead an economic populist willing to embrace heterodox ideas like raising taxes on the wealthy or enacting new spending for the country's infrastructure. But in fact, he governed mostly like a traditional conservative. He cut taxes, especially on the wealthy; he weakened and hollowed out the federal bureaucracy; and he proposed increases in defense spending but large cuts in other discretionary spending. In other words, Trump did not disrupt the ongoing tectonics of partisan polarization—instead, he reinforced them.

If President Trump seemed to cast aside the economic populism implicit in his campaign, he certainly embraced his campaign's other focus: a hard-line agenda around identity. Trump moved quickly to limit travel from certain Muslim-majority countries, ramp up deportation of undocumented immigrants, and build a wall at the Mexican border. He pursued controversial measures like the separation of immigrant children from their families. When opportunities arose to pursue less restrictive policies—even popular ones like providing a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who were brought to the country as children—Trump sided with the hard-liners in his party and rejected those opportunities. Ultimately, Trump's actions as president

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furthered what his campaign had already started to accomplish: coupling partisanship with views on identity-inflected issues.

Trump's actions helped ensure that he remained a chronically unpopular president, which was an important impediment to his reelection (chapter 3). Even before his election, he was an unpopular person and candidate. His tenure in the White House did little to change that. Because he governed as a representative only of the GOP and especially its hard-line faction, he did little to increase his appeal beyond his party, which he was probably going to need, given his narrow victory in 2016. Of course, partisan polarization limits how popular any contemporary president can hope to be. But small and potentially consequential shifts in popularity are possible, and Trump was never able to lift his popularity even above the 50 percent mark.

But at the same time, Trump's approval rating showed no major decline, despite his many scandals, incendiary remarks, and governing missteps. In fact, Trump's approval was more stable than any other president's in the age of opinion polling. Two reasons were partisan polarization and Republicans' political priorities. Partisan polarization helped ensure that Republicans stuck by Trump's side through the scandals and through impeachment—especially because Trump's conventional conservatism satisfied most Republicans and because few Republicans wanted to do anything to help the Democratic Party. As Paul Ryan said when he called Trump's remark about the Hispanic judge "racist" but then backed Trump over Hillary Clinton anyway, "I believe that we have more common ground on the policy issues of the day and we have more likelihood of getting our policies enacted with him than with her."[42]

Republicans' political priorities mattered, too. Not only did most Republicans oppose Trump's impeachment and favor the linchpins of his identity agenda, but they also considered these issues to be top priorities. The smaller number of Republicans who opposed Trump's agenda did not appear to care as deeply about the issues on which they disagreed with Trump. Trump did not necessarily make the party more conservative on immigration in the sense of shifting overall GOP opinion. But he was clearly more responsive to the party's hard-liners, who

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cared most about the issue. The party's more moderate voices were increasingly marginalized.

By the beginning of the election year, then, Trump was not in an ideal position for reelection. Despite a robust economy, his approval rating was lower than that of all the incumbent presidents who went on to reelection. But steadfast support within the GOP kept him from being a massive underdog.

A lot, then, turned on whom the Democrats would nominate to challenge him (chapter 4). With the largest field of candidates in any modern primary, no clear front-runner, and tensions between the party's moderate and progressive wings, the scene was set for a protracted and ideologically polarizing battle. But this did not happen. Like Hillary Clinton before him, Biden showed that a multiracial coalition of supporters could help him withstand stumbles in the early caucus and primary states. The ideological battle mostly fizzled as many Democrats, including eventually Biden's opponents, were willing to back Biden if it meant getting rid of Trump.

Again, partisan polarization and Democratic priorities helped the party achieve a quicker resolution to the primary than many anticipated. The growing ideological homogeneity within the party meant that there was actually a great deal of consensus on policies. Most Democratic primary voters took liberal positions on most issues, regardless of which candidate they supported. Moreover, Democrats' political priorities reflected their deep dislike of Trump and their overwhelming opposition to his agenda and especially to his identity agenda. This made the party even more committed to defeating Trump.

As Biden sewed up the nomination, two things happened that seemed destined to reshape the election: the COVID-19 pandemic (chapter 5) as well as the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin and the national protests that resulted (chapter 6). Politically speaking, the pandemic was a potential risk to Trump's reelection bid, but it also offered him an opportunity: to rally the country and work together to defeat a deadly virus. It was an opportunity he did not take. After a brief period in March 2020 during which he warned

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Americans of the pandemic's seriousness and helped create truly bipartisan concern about the virus, he pivoted and began downplaying the virus, opposing countermeasures, and pushing to reopen businesses even as cases mounted. This ensured that the partisan polarization that characterized so many other issues came to characterize COVID-19 as well. It also meant that Trump, unlike many state governors and world leaders, did not see his approval rating increase. Moreover, his intended case for reelection—the country's economy under his tenure—became much harder to make.

The consequences of Floyd's murder for politics and public opinion followed a similar trajectory. Immediately after Floyd's killing on May 25, 2020, there was a bipartisan consensus condemning Chauvin. This led to sharp shifts in public opinion: more favorable views of African Americans and the Black Lives Matter movement and less favorable views of the police. But two things changed. First, Floyd's murder stayed in the news only as long as the national protests continued. By the end of July, the protests had dwindled and the news coverage with it. Second, Trump and his allies seized on the few instances of violence at the protests to change the subject and portray the protestors themselves as the threat. And so, as with COVID-19, the consensus disappeared and Democrats and Republicans moved farther apart once again. This only increased the ongoing alignment between partisan politics and identity politics.

That polarization continued into the fall campaign (chapter 7). While Biden's message centered on the pandemic and country's economic struggles, Trump sought to portray the country as on an upswing, one threatened by Biden and the "Radical Left." Little altered the basic state of the horse race. Partisans solidly backed their party's candidate throughout the fall. The usual campaign events, such as the candidate debates, did not shift Biden's lead. Neither did the more dramatic events, such as the death of Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, her replacement by Amy Coney Barrett, and Trump's serious battle with COVID-19. But there was a widening gap between the candidates in another respect: money. Trump struggled to match Biden's spending, which meant that Biden's ads dominated the airwaves.

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When the votes were finally counted, one thing was clear: calcified politics had produced a surprisingly close outcome, despite a surge in voter turnout (chapter 8). Party loyalty kept the election much closer than the Biden landslide that preelection polls suggested. Across counties and states, the 2020 results were strongly correlated with the 2016 results. To be sure, the small differences between the 2016 and 2020 results were enough to make Biden the winner, and Trump's low approval rating was undoubtedly important here. But several things kept the election close. One was the unusual state of the economy. By Election Day, the worst of the recession had passed. Although the country's employment numbers and economic output had not fully recovered, people's incomes were up thanks to large stimulus checks from the federal government. The implications of the economy for the election were therefore ambiguous. Additionally, the outcome of the election did not appear much affected by local conditions that could have increased Biden's lead, such as the size of his advertising advantage on television or the number of COVID-19 deaths in a county. Another factor was Trump's support among conservatives of all stripes, including, to many observers' surprise, conservative Latinos and African Americans.

To many, the closeness of Biden's win stemmed from the racial justice protests. People blamed the fact that a small number of protests were accompanied by violence, or the fact that some progressives seized on George Floyd's murder to push for "defunding" the police. But there is little clear evidence for this. If anything, it appears Biden did better in counties with protests, even ones at which there were injuries, arrests, or property damage. And views of the police and of the protests seemed more a consequence of partisanship than a cause of how people voted.

The election's aftermath turned a contentious race into a full-blown crisis (chapter 9). Trump had long promised to challenge the outcome if he lost and he followed through, filing dozens of long-shot lawsuits that gained little traction in court. He unsuccessfully pressured state election officials to "find votes" for him and unsuccessfully pressured the Department of Justice to investigate what he claimed was massive election fraud. But if Trump was wrong in thinking these officials would back him, he was right in betting that rank-and-file Republicans would.

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It appeared that GOP fealty to Trump might change after the riot. Trump's approval rating among Republicans finally dropped and a larger number of congressional Republicans supported the second impeachment effort than had the first. But with time, sentiment in the party shifted. Ashli Babbitt became a martyr as Trump and his allies sought to rewrite the history of January 6. Republican support for prosecuting the rioters declined. Once again, a singular and tragic event—an attack on the U.S. Capitol—could not transcend partisan politics. Meanwhile, Republican leaders in the states enacted new obstacles to voting and rewrote laws to take power away from the kinds of local election officials who did not cave to Trump's pressure after the election.

The GOP's actions illustrate the incentive created by an era of calcified politics and partisan parity: find any way possible to bend the rules in your favor and target your opponents. When elections and even control of the government hinge on a few states or a few thousand votes, and you think the other party is not just wrong on policy but also immoral and unpatriotic, it becomes easier to justify doing whatever it takes to win, regardless of its democratic merit. Many partisans will countenance any measure targeted at the opposition, perhaps even violence. When the 2020 election came to its bitter end, Republicans chose this route rather than reckon with the party's loss and rethink its direction.

But it did not have to be that way. Far more Republicans accepted Mitt Romney's loss in 2012, and far more Democrats accepted Clinton's in 2016. No one was told to "fight like hell" and then invaded the Capitol. Violence and democratic decay are not an inevitable consequence of calcified politics. The future depends on what political leaders do when the losses are especially bitter—and whether they will uphold democracy when the bitterness has no end in sight.

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