



Voters to Washington in 2020:

“Split Decision”

An analysis of the 2020 Presidential Election

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Overview

Going into the November election, Joe Biden enjoyed a sizable lead, according to most media polling. He had positioned himself as someone who would bring restraint and calm to the presidency. Additionally, given the social unrest that emerged last summer, Democrats believed the country was moving toward the left; and that, as a result, the political environment was also moving significantly in their direction. If they could tie Republican Congressional candidates in swing districts/states to Trump, while the electorate was moving left, Democrats believed they could pick up a significant number of seats in both the House and the Senate.

Meanwhile, Donald Trump's campaign was focused on finding and turning out new voters, similar to the working class voters in the Rust Belt who carried him to victory in 2016. The central challenge for Trump was getting to 50% given that in 2016 he got only 46%.

At the Congressional level, most believed the Republican effort should be focused on simply trying to hold onto to the Senate and minimizing House losses. However, there was a strategic effort by Mitch McConnell and Senate Republicans to move the political debate toward policy and achievements, as seen in the Maine race, while Kevin McCarthy and House Republicans put together a policy agenda for their conference called Commitment to America. By focusing on policy, GOP House and Senate candidates hoped to blunt the Democrats' efforts to make the national election hinge on candidates' personal qualities alone.

Making the election about personality worked to Biden's advantage, but that strategy did not translate for Democratic candidates down ballot. The general center-right nature of the electorate produced a temporary two seat advantage for Republicans in the Senate and a pickup of 12 seats in the House (14 overall from the 2018 election), and numerous state legislative wins. The "blue wave" had collapsed, and Republicans found themselves in a much stronger position than anyone anticipated.

For Republicans, victories in the Senate were remarkable, especially Tillis, Ernst, and Collins. Susan Collins, who never led in any public surveys done in the fall, won by 9% overall, and won 18% of the Biden vote in her state — a stunning achievement in winning crossover votes. Despite the financial disadvantage Lindsay Graham faced against a Democratic opponent armed with over \$100 million, he showed that money was not the central reason why candidates win, and that positions on issues were still more important than money.

The most dramatic result occurred at the House level, with House Republicans expected to lose 10-18 seats but instead winning 12 seats. Based on the exit polls and historical comparisons, in 2020 the country shifted slightly more conservative and slightly more Republican. Both groups increased as a percentage of the electorate. With those shifts, it was a more favorable electorate for Republicans than in 2016.

While the coronavirus was a central issue, the economy was the larger concern for the 2020 electorate, but the two were closely intertwined. Democrats and Biden won among voters whose top concern was the coronavirus; Republicans and Donald Trump won among voters concerned about the economy. Partisan news stories like Trump's tax returns were important to the Democratic base and the Hunter Biden emails were important to the Republican base, but were low priorities for Independents, and as a result, were negatively received overall.

While there were very positive and unexpected developments for Republicans that led to their wins at the Congressional level, the negating factors for Donald Trump were an ineffective response on handling the coronavirus and a bad first debate at the end of September. According to the exit polls, when the focus of the presidential campaign was about issues, Trump did well; when it was about personality, Biden had a significant advantage.

For both Donald Trump and Congressional Republicans, there were some improvements among Hispanic and African-American voters, but these gains were not enough to offset losses in other groups. Trump lost decisive ground with the political center, Independents, and with the ideological center, moderates. His poor overall performance among women continued, but expanded to include rural women.

Congressional Republicans outperformed Trump among several key groups such as Independents and Hispanics. However, challenges remain for Republicans, particularly with Independents and women.

Ultimately, this was a two-tier election. Biden defeated Trump for the presidency, but results down ballot showed support for center-right ideas and governance. Overall, a split decision.

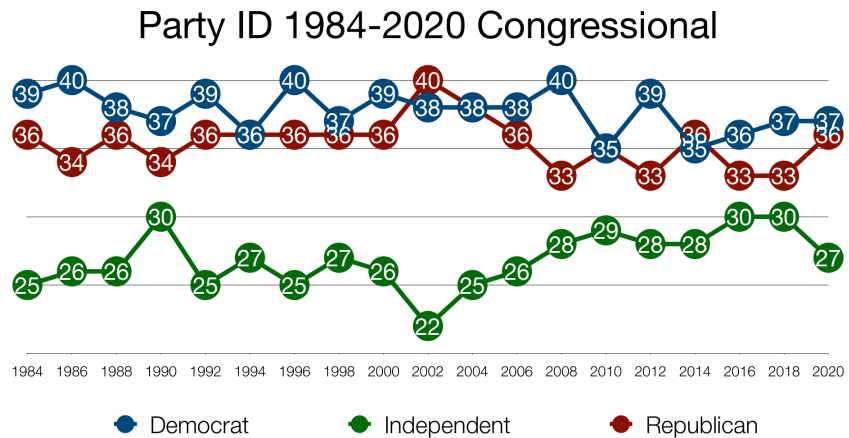
2020: A More Favorable Electorate for Republicans than 2016

The leftward move of the Democratic Party, particularly among those House Democrats that were most visible on cable, was in conflict with the ideological direction in which the country was heading. Prior to this election, the country was already center-right, but both the exit polls and our Winning the Issues election survey of Congressional voters indicate the country became even more center-right in the 2020 election. Remarkably for Trump, the political and ideological make-up for the electorate ended up being much better for him than in 2016.

Looking at party identification, based on the national exit polls, Republicans comprised 33% of the electorate in the three presidential elections prior to 2020. But, in this election, the percentage of Republicans in the electorate was 36% — a 3-point increase since 2016.

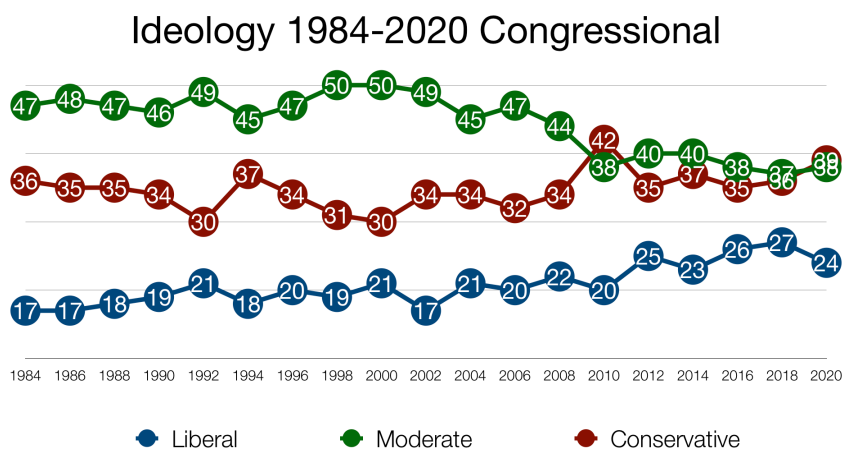
Looking at the composition of the electorate, this was the highest percentage of Republicans in a Presidential year election since 2004. This is remarkable given the high turnout.

Democrats increased one point as a percentage of the overall electorate — 37%, up from 36% in 2016. However, this represents an underperformance in contrast to Presidential elections 1984 through 2012, where Democrats



had comprised 38% of the electorate or higher. In the 9 previous Presidential elections, only in 2004 was there a more favorable partisan environment for a Republican Presidential candidate than 2020.

This election also marked a historic conservative proportion of a presidential year electorate. In terms of ideology, there was a 4-point increase in the percentage of conservatives as a proportion of the electorate at the House level – 39%, up from 35% in 2016.



Additionally, the country became more center-right as the advantage that conservatives have over liberals increased from +9 in 2016 to +15 in this election.

This trend was generally seen in the eight most competitive states. These were states where the Presidential winning margin was less than 4%. Trump won two of these states (Florida and North Carolina) and Biden won six (Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin). In all eight states, the party ID margin (the difference between Republican and Democrat) improved from 2016 for Republicans, ranging from an improvement of +2 to +9. For example, in Wisconsin in 2016, party ID favored Democrats by 1 (35D-34R) and in 2020 favored Republicans by 5 (32D-37R), an overall shift in the margin of +6 for Republicans.

	Overall Vote			Party ID			Ideology		
	(Trump-Democrat)			(Republican-Democrat)			(Conservative-Liberal)		
	2016	2020	Change	2016	2020	Change	2016	2020	Change
National	-2.1	-4.5	-2.4	-3	-1	+2	+9	+14	+5
AZ	+3.5	-0.3	-3.8	+4	+9	+5	+14	+20	+6
FL	+1.2	+3.4	+2.2	+1	+8	+7	+11	+20	+9
GA	+5.1	-0.2	-5.3	+2	+4	+2	+20	+18	-2
MI	+0.2	-2.8	-3.0	-9	0	+9	+9	+12	+3
NC	+3.7	+1.3	-2.4	-4	+3	+7	+21	+20	-1
NV	-2.4	-2.4	0.0	-8	0	+8	+11	+12	+1
PA	+0.7	-1.2	-1.9	-3	+1	+4	+6	+10	+4
WI	+0.8	-0.6	-1.4	-1	+5	+6	+9	+11	+2

In six of the states, the improvement in the party ID margin was 5% or greater. In terms of the ideological margin (the difference between conservatives and liberals), the margin improved in six of the eight states. The two states where the margin decreased were

Georgia (-2) and North Carolina (-1). In both those states, however, the existing margin conservatives had over liberals was very high, +18 in Georgia and +20 in North Carolina. In all these states, conservatives had a double-digit edge over liberals. (Note: the margin nationally at the Presidential level was +14 for conservatives, but at the Congressional level it was +15.)

This reflects a much better environment for Republicans than in 2016. Just looking at the three key Rust Belt states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, the change in the Republican party ID advantage in each was +4 or better, and the change in conservatives' ideological advantage was +2 or better than in 2016. The obvious question this raises is: how could these swing states improve for Republicans and yet the results end up so different?

The key reason is Independents. Trump lost significant ground with this key voter group. Nationally,

	Overall Vote			Independents		
	(Trump-Democrat)			(Trump-Democrat)		
	2016	2020	Change	2016	2020	Change
National	-2.1	-4.5	-2.4	+4	-13	-17
AZ	+3.5	-0.3	-3.8	+3	-9	-12
FL	+1.2	+3.4	+2.2	+4	-11	-15
GA	+5.1	-0.2	-5.3	+11	-9	-20
MI	+0.2	-2.8	-3.0	+16	-6	-22
NC	+3.7	+1.3	-2.4	+16	-4	-20
NV	-2.4	-2.4	0.0	+13	-6	-19
PA	+0.7	-1.2	-1.9	+7	-8	-15
WI	+0.8	-0.6	-1.4	+10	-12	-22

he went from winning them by 4 in 2016 to losing them by 13 in 2020, a shift in the margin of -17. As a point of comparison, the last Presidential candidate to lose Independents by a larger margin was Walter Mondale in 1984; his margin was -27. Michael Dukakis in 1988 was closer, losing Independents that election by 12. This pattern was very much evident in the eight competitive states. The shift in the margin among Independents ranged from -12 to -22. In the Rust Belt states, the shift in the margin was -22 for Michigan and Wisconsin, and -15 in Pennsylvania. In the surprise state of Georgia, the shift in the margin was -20.

Issue Positions versus Personal Qualities

Brand Images of Presidential Candidates

Even with the increases in Republicans and conservatives as percentages of the electorate, a significant advantage for Biden was his positive brand image compared to Trump's. In 2016, both party frontrunners had negative brand images in the exit polls, with Hillary Clinton at 43-55 favorable-unfavorable and Trump at 38-60 favorable-unfavorable. The negative brand images for both led to late decision-making and volatility compared to previous elections. In 2016, about 1 out of 5 voters (18%) had an unfavorable view of both Clinton and Trump, and they broke for Trump 47-30. Among those who voted for Trump in 2016, 20% had an unfavorable view of him. But in this election, the brand image dynamic was different.

Unlike 2016, the 2020 Democratic presidential candidate's brand image was much less problematic, with exit polls showing Biden's brand at 52-46 favorable-unfavorable. With a soft

2020 Candidate Brand Images	Biden	Trump
Favorable	52	46
Unfavorable	46	52
2016 Candidate Brand Images	Clinton	Trump
Favorable	43	38
Unfavorable	55	60

positive image, Biden was a more appealing option for voters who did not like the President, unlike Hillary Clinton in 2016.

Trump's brand image in this election was 46-52 favorable-unfavorable — a negative brand image at -6 but not overly negative. His job approval was neutral at 50-49 approve-disapprove. In fact, his brand image in this election (46-52) was significantly better than in the 2016 election (38-60), but because of the brand differential between Biden and Trump, only 3% of the 2020 electorate was unfavorable to both presidential candidates, compared to 18% of the 2016 electorate. This was an important change in the electorate as Trump won those unfavorable to both in 2020 by 52-35, which was similar to his margin in 2016 of 47-30. The difference was this group was a minor group in this election versus a major one in 2016.

This advantage for Biden made it more challenging for Trump to create a majority coalition, as Clinton's unfavorable image was a significant factor that had helped move non-Republican voters in his direction, particularly in the Rust Belt. However, this factor was significantly less present in the 2020 election and meant that it was easier for voters who did not like Trump to vote for his opponent, in contrast to 2016. This was true across the eight most competitive states. In 2016 the percentage of the electorate that had an unfavorable view of both in those states ranged from 13% to 22%, with six of the eight being 15% or greater. In 2020, that range was 3% to 8%, with seven being 5% or less.

Positions on Issues Versus Personal Qualities in Voting Decisions

As a result, a key component of voter decision making at the Presidential level was whether a candidate's position on issues or the candidate's personal qualities were more important. Clearly, the Biden campaign focused on personal qualities while the Trump campaign emphasized certain issues like immigration that reinforced his persona. This was important because the more voters focused on personal qualities, the more the center-right issue focus of the electorate, which helps Republicans, would play a decreasing role.

In terms of what was more important in how one voted, by 3:1, exit polls show that a candidate's position on the issues was by far the priority (74%) over a candidate's personal qualities (23%). Among those voters who said position on issues, Trump won by 6 points, 53-47. However, there were just enough voters focused on personal qualities for Biden to win, and those voters supported him by a margin of 33% (31-64).

Which was more important in your vote for President today?	Overall	Trump-Biden
My candidate's position on the issues	74	53-47
My candidate's personal qualities	23	31-64

One very important element was the fact that this did not completely translate down ballot for Democrats, which was clearly their hoped-for result as they tried to tie Republican Congressional and Senate candidates to Trump. Among voters who said personal qualities were more important, Democrats at the Congressional level underperformed the Biden margin by 5%.

The more that Congressional Republicans could make the election about issues rather than personality, the more this would play to the strategic advantage of being the center-right party in a center-right country, which helped offset tremendous cash disadvantages facing Republican campaigns.

This shows how much a candidate's positions matter in campaigns, and why a number of Democratic candidates with huge financial resources still lost by large margins, with Jaime Harrison in South Carolina being a prime example.

Major Issues in the Election

The driving issues in this election were the coronavirus and how and when to get the economy restarted.

Going into the election in late October, there was some increase in the belief that the virus was getting worse. From the October 23-26 survey for Winning the Issues, nearly half the electorate saw the situation with the virus as getting worse (46%) compared to 21% getting better; 21% about the same. However, exit polls showed the electorate was split in their view on how efforts to contain the pandemic were going (51-48 going well-badly). Those who thought it was going well overwhelmingly voted for Trump (18-81 Biden-Trump); and those who thought the effort was going badly voted overwhelmingly for Biden (87-11). Additionally, exit polls showed that handling of the virus was clearly a strong point for Biden and Democrats, with the electorate having more confidence in Biden to handle the virus (53-43 Biden-Trump).

Issue Handling

This set up an important electoral dichotomy. While voters believed the economy was the more important issue overall and had more confidence in Republicans to handle the issue of the economy, they had more confidence in Democrats to deal with the coronavirus. And, they saw dealing with the coronavirus as a prerequisite to restarting the economy.

For Republicans, their overall economic standing was a strength. From the Winning the Issues election survey, Republicans led on the economy (+8 R-D), taxes (+7), and jobs (+5). Democrats led on health care (-9 R-D) and the coronavirus (-13). As a result, the Republican lead on the economy was somewhat offset. When asked who was better able to handle restarting the economy after the coronavirus, the Republican lead dropped from +8 to +2. This still resulted in a

marginal lead for Republicans on the issues, as reflected in the exit polls among those who voted based on issues over personal qualities.

Issue Handling (R-D)	
The Economy	50-42
Crime and safety	49-42
Taxes	49-42
Jobs	49-44
Restarting the economy after the coronavirus	47-45
Health care	41-50
Public health concerns like coronavirus	38-51

Messaging from Party Candidates

Overall, the reaction to what voters heard from Democratic candidates and Republican candidates was generally similar and somewhat positive. For Democratic candidates, 50% of the electorate was more favorable based on what they heard, and 41% were less favorable. For Republican candidates, it was 48% more favorable and 43% less favorable. Independents had a less favorable response to both parties' messaging, but Republicans struggled more. Independents' reaction to Democratic messaging was 44% more favorable and 41% less favorable, and for Republicans it was 37% more favorable and 45% less favorable.

Messaging from Democratic candidates was centered on the coronavirus (33%) which was a positive message for them (57-35 more-less favorable to Democrats based on that message). At 8%, the Affordable Care Act/health care was another significant message and part of their overall virus message, which was also positively received (57-35). However, partisan attacks on the Trump tax returns (6%) and allegations of Trump ties to Russia (5%) were significant elements of their message that were negatively received, and were heard more than their economic message (4%).

Which one of these issues or news stories did you hear about most from Democratic candidates? (Issues at or above 5% only)	Percent heard	More-less favorable to vote for Dem candidates based on what they heard
Coronavirus	33%	57-35
Affordable Care Act/health care/coverage of pre-existing conditions	8%	57-35
Trump tax returns	6%	30-61
Allegations of Donald Trump ties to Russia	5%	24-68
Race relations	5%	52-46

More voters heard about negative attacks on Trump than the Democratic message on the economy.

The Republican message was more diffuse than the Democratic message that was centered on the coronavirus and health care. The most prominent Republican message was the economy/jobs at 17%, and it was positively received by more than 2:1 (66-26 more-less favorable to Republicans based on that message). Coronavirus was the second most prominent GOP message at 11%, which was also positively received (55-39). Given Democrats' lead on issue handling for the virus (-13 R-D), that Republicans had a positive message on the virus meant they had some credibility on the issue, and this helped mitigate what could have been a more difficult message for them. Being able to address the coronavirus also meant being able to transition to an issue on which Republicans typically have an advantage: the economy. The message dealing with Hunter Biden emails/allegations (10%) was very negatively received (32-60). Amy Coney Barrett's Supreme Court confirmation was also a significant message at 9%, but it was heard more among Democrats and led to a negative reception (41-57). But this does not reflect how people felt about her nomination, which was a soft positive (44-36 favor-oppose on the Oct. 23-26 survey).

Which one of these issues or news stories did you hear about most from Republican candidates? <i>(Issues at or above 5% only)</i>	Percent heard	More-less favorable to vote for GOP candidates based on what they heard
The economy and jobs	17%	66-26
Coronavirus	11%	55-39
Hunter Biden emails and allegations	10%	32-60
Supreme Court confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett	9%	41-57
Biden statements about the oil industry and fracking	5%	50-49

Differences in Presidential and Congressional Performance

One of the important dynamics of this election was the difference between the vote at the presidential level and the Congressional level. Because the presidential vote for Biden was only at 51%, making it a minimal majority, even small differences had major significance. This section looks at the differences between Trump and Congressional Republicans. The contrast for the Democrats is just the reverse. For example, among Hispanics, the margin in the result for House Republicans was 6 percent better than for Trump, which also means Biden's margin was 6% better than House Democrats.

Voter Group (Percentage of Congressional Electorate)	Trump	House Republicans	Difference
Hispanic (14%)	-33	-27	6
College graduate (42%)	-12	-7	5
Independent/other (27%)	-13	-9	4
65+ (22%)	+5	+8	3
Women (52%)	-15	-14	1

- Among Hispanic voters, there was a six-point differential in the presidential vote (-33 Trump) and the House Republican result (-27).
- College graduates comprised 42% of the electorate, with House Republicans losing this group by -7, compared to -12 for Trump.
- Trump lost Independents by -13 having won them by 4 in 2016. This was a significant area of slippage for the him. At the House level, Republicans lost them by -9, down from +6 in 2016, and this margin signals an important challenge for Republicans looking toward 2022.
- Prior to the election, the expectation was that there might be erosion among the 2016 senior vote, which Trump won by 7 points. In this election, he won seniors by +5, while House Republicans won seniors by +8.
- Both Trump and House Republicans struggled with women voters, losing women by about the same margins (-15 for Trump; -14 for House Republicans). For Trump, the 2020 vote margin was not dissimilar from the 2016 margin (-13 among women).

Georgia Senate Runoff Elections

By the time of the Senate runoff elections, there was a much different political environment. If, for the general election, Congressional Republicans had been able to minimize the role of personality, in the runoffs, that dynamic was front and center with Trump refusing to accept the outcome of the November election. This was unfortunate for Republicans, as Perdue had gotten more votes than Trump in the 2020 general election; and if Trump had gotten as many votes as House Republican candidates in Georgia, he would have won the state. Instead, the election became about Trump; and as a result, the Republican Senate candidates duplicated his performance rather than the more successful Congressional performance two months earlier. Two examples: Perdue, in the 2020 general election, lost women by 6; but in the runoff, lost them by 10. Perdue also got 43% of the Hispanic vote in the 2020 general but he fell to 36% in the runoff.

Conclusion

The central strategic interaction for this election was between a better political and ideological environment in 2020 than 2016 for Republicans versus Biden's strategy of focusing on personal qualities, given that his favorables were over 50% and Trump's unfavorables were over 50%. This produced a slim 51% majority vote for Biden, that did not completely translate down ballot to other Democratic candidates. As a result of the November election, Republicans still held a two-seat

advantage in the Senate, with two runoffs in Georgia, where Georgia Republican House Congressional candidates had won 51% of the vote. In the House, Republicans picked up 14 seats (in contrast to the 2018 result), getting them to within 5 seats of a majority. At the state level Republicans held on to their existing state legislative body majorities and added two more. But in the end, Democrats won both Georgia Senate run-offs, when the two Republican candidates performed more like Trump than how Perdue and the Congressional delegation had performed in November, leaving the Senate tied. So, the November election ended up being essentially a split decision. Biden won the presidency, but his party generally lost ground.

But the key to this split decision was Independents, both nationally and at the state level. Democrats were able to offset the Republican gains in party ID and ideology by making significant gains both at the Presidential and Congressional level among Independents. This puts Independents in a critical position for the 2022 election. For Democrats, the dynamics over the next two years will be how far their policies will go toward their base, which will move them away from Independents. Independents in 2018 were more conservative than liberal by +7. In this election, it increased to +15. However, 50% of Independents are moderates. In the last two times the Democrats captured the White House, in the next election Independents became more conservative. For Republicans, the concern has to be that in the last 19 elections, only once has the party who won the majority in the House not won Independents (2004 - Democrats won them 49-46).

Given how close this last election was at the Congressional level, the question to be answered is which party can better understand how to build a majority coalition in this very complicated environment.

Methodology

This report is based on the Winning the Issues Election survey of 1000 voters at the Congressional level (November 1-3, 2020) and Edison Research exit polls.