Featuring an inside look at Democratic strategy with Tom Perez and Howard Dean and an interview with Dr. Dov Levin on the problem of partisan electoral intervention
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**Carnegie Mellon University**

**Center for International Relations and Politics**
Dear Reader,

This is the ninth edition of the CIRP Journal, sponsored by Carnegie Mellon University's Center for International Relations and Politics (CIRP) and Institute for Politics and Strategy (IPS). This special issue is the first, however, to reflect submissions that we commissioned from participants in the Carnegie Mellon University Washington Semester Program (CMU/WSP).

I believe that giving our growing cohort of students in Washington, DC, the opportunity to contribute to public discourse is in line with the journal's original goal of encouraging the CMU community and students to engage in academic discourse and policy debate.

Founded in 2014, the Washington Semester Program brings students to live, intern, and study in Washington, DC, coming into direct contact with political, business, and community leaders and learning about the most pressing policy issues of the day. In the spring of 2020, despite the disruptions caused by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, students in DC were able to continue to engage in their internship and professional experiences (even if remotely). They were also able to speak directly with both Democratic and Republican thought leaders, from Tom Perez to Michael Steele, to gain insights into the 2020 election cycle. We are so excited to share those insights with you in this edition of the CIRP Journal.

This year also has been a year of transition at the CIRP Journal. Hillary Tanoff, who served as the lead staff editor for the last five editions of the journal, got married this summer and moved to Texas. I wish her the best as she starts the next chapter of her life and thank her for her dedication to the CIRP Journal over the last two years. John Chin, the new CIRP research coordinator, has taken over as managing editor starting with this edition.

The common thread across the articles in this special edition is the centrality of politics and strategy in an election year. This November’s elections will have far reaching ramifications for years to come, whether President Donald Trump wins re-election or not. As a result, the articles in this special edition of the CIRP Journal can provide useful insights into election year politics.

We welcome your feedback and thank you for participating in these important election year conversations. And please, don't forget to vote.

Sincerely,

Kiron K. Skinner
Publisher and Editor-in-Chief
Since Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 election, the Democratic Party and the Democratic National Committee (DNC) have been organizing fervently to deny President Trump a second term. With so much at stake in the 2020 election, and given Democrats have not challenged a sitting Republican president since 2004, it is worth asking: what actions are the Democrats taking to ensure their victory? And how has the coronavirus pandemic affected their approach? To answer these questions, we spoke with former DNC chair Howard Dean and listened in on a virtual event hosted by Georgetown University with current DNC chair Tom Perez. While Perez spoke to the current DNC leadership’s goals and plans (as of April 2020), Dean provided us with additional insight on how the DNC has historically approached presidential elections.

The State of the Race: Tom Perez’s Perspective

Defeating Trump in the presidential election is the top priority for the DNC in 2020. Perez described the 2020 election as “a fight to preserve democracy as we know it,” citing the country’s need for someone who is experienced and competent, commands respect domestically and internationally, can handle current crises, and can bring back common decency to the White House.

To accomplish this goal, the DNC’s first goal is to come out of the primary season united as a party behind the nominee. As of this writing in May 2020, the Democratic Party has a presumptive nominee: former Vice President Joe Biden. Every other major candidate—including Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Pete Buttigieg, Amy Klobuchar, and Andrew Yang—have endorsed Biden as the Democratic nominee in an attempt to unite the party behind Biden. According to Perez, having a presumptive nominee so early before the national convention is not unprecedented, but remarkable nonetheless, especially since the Democratic Party began the primary season with over two dozen candidates—the most in history. Additionally, Perez mentioned that having a presumptive nominee this early makes organizing in each state easier.

Despite the large number of Democratic candidates, Perez said the DNC wanted to ensure that every candidate was given a fair chance by allowing the voters to determine the nominee. Although Joe Biden is the presumptive nominee, Bernie Sanders remains on the ballot to continue collecting delegates in order to influence the party’s official platform. Perez explained that the DNC treats the official platform like a declaration of the Party’s values. Therefore, Sanders’ efforts to influence the official platform can seen as a bid to shape the core values of the Democratic Party. The platform will be decided during the Democratic National Convention, which is now scheduled for August 2020.

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There is some concern that Sanders supporters are reluctant to back Biden as the Democratic nominee. Perez assured the audience that he does not believe that the Democratic Party is entitled to the Sanders vote, so the DNC will work diligently to gain their support. Perez was also encouraged by polling that revealed that a vast majority of Democratic primary voters say they will vote for whoever the nominee is—even more than in the 2016 election. With these numbers and support from previous candidates, Perez is optimistic that voters will rally behind Biden and the Democratic Party will emerge victorious in the 2020 election.

A second, and related, priority for the Democratic Party this election cycle is increasing voter turnout and making the action of voting as easy and accessible as possible. With higher voter turnout, the DNC believes there is a greater chance that Biden will be elected president and more Democrats will be elected down the ballot. The DNC’s main method to boost voter turnout is to provide as many different voting options to voters as possible, including day-of-voting, early voting, no-excuse absentee voting, and vote-by-mail options.

The Republican Party, by contrast, advocates for voter identification requirements and other laws that Perez says amount to voter suppression. Perez pointedly defend voting by mail by noting that President Trump and Vice President Pence regularly vote by mail and that voter fraud using this method is a non-issue; numerous studies, he noted, show that vote-by-mail voter fraud simply does not exist to the extent that the Republican Party claims it does.

Looking to the future, a third priority for the DNC is to strengthen their primary process, especially in light of well-publicized challenges faced during the Iowa caucus in February 2020. For this election cycle, the DNC already began implementing reforms to the superdelegate system and the number of primaries and caucuses during primary season. Back in August 2018, the DNC voted to remove some of the power that superdelegates hold in the primary process. Superdelegates are now no longer able to vote in the first ballot unless a presidential candidate has already secured a majority of the pledged delegates. In effect, superdelegates are no longer able to change the outcome of the Democratic primary. Perez supported this decision as one that brings more transparency and inclusivity into the Democratic primary process.2

At the same time, the DNC has also made efforts to increase the number of primaries and decrease the number of caucuses in order to promote voter turnout on primary days. Perez proudly stated that the Democratic Party had made great progress in this area; a total of fourteen caucuses were held in 2016 and only seven caucuses will be held in 2020. The main lesson learned from the Iowa caucus debacle, according to Perez, is that political parties “should be in the business of winning elections—not running elections.” For future elections, Perez hopes to continue reducing the number of caucuses and increasing the number of primary elections to increase voter turnout and possibly change the order of primaries and caucuses.

The 2020 Election: Howard Dean’s Perspective

On April 24, 2020, we had the opportunity to interview Howard Dean, the DNC

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Carrie Haney and Timothy Kusuma

chair from 2005 to 2009. Although Dean is not currently a member of DNC leadership, his experience as a political leader provides him with a unique perspective on presidential elections. We discussed a broad range of topics about the Democratic Party’s election strategy, including challenging an incumbent, party messaging, voting blocs, swing voters, and more.

According to Dean, Democrats must focus on establishing party unity and a unifying message, which can affect not only the presidential election but also Senate, House representatives, and other down-ballot races. Dean believes that “[Republicans] are much better organized than [Democrats] are.” Republicans, he says, thus tend to adopt similar talking points, which makes them consistent in their messaging and provides the voter with a coherent message. While Dean considers this GOP approach to be a strong strategy for the campaign trail, he believes it ultimately leads to poor governance due to lackluster support for specific policies or ideas.

By contrast, Dean told us, “[Democrats] believe in [their] cause...that means [Democrats] don't work in tandem together.” With varying positions and different voices within the Democratic Party, Democratic representatives are prone to argue amongst themselves over policy. Voters can become overwhelmed with what policy positions the Democratic Party takes during these cases of infighting. As DNC chair, Dean “positioned [the DNC] to talk about the things we knew were going to upset people about the incumbent.” For example, Dean “tagged [Republicans] with a culture of corruption” and thus was able to unify the messaging of the Democratic Party and thereby bolster the Democratic Party’s organizing efforts. The Democratic Party is taking a similar approach today. While disagreeing over certain issues (healthcare plans, for example), the Democratic Party’s message for the 2020 election is to unify behind the goal of defeating Donald Trump and encourage voters to “Elect us—we are not Donald Trump.”

A second obstacle Democrats must face as a challenging party is lack of control over their narrative. As Dean explains, the 2020 election is essentially a “referendum on the president.” In other words, voters will respond more to the successes and failures of the incumbent than the strengths of the challenger. New ideas for Democrats must therefore derive from policy areas where the incumbent is weak and voters are upset with the status quo.

A third challenge, according to Dean, is bolstering the Democratic Party’s support for its down-ballot candidates, especially in local elections. In addition to the DNC, the Democratic Party has organizations such as the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee that help distribute donations and support Democratic candidates running for the Senate and the House of Representatives, respectively. Unfortunately, when it comes to local elections, there is little funding for Democratic candidates. Republicans, on the other hand, tend to have strong funding for their local candidates.

Dean did point out that there has been some movement to increase funding for local races. For instance, Dean has been working with organizations such as Color of Change and Indivisible to support local races and increase funding for local campaigns. Dean places great emphasis on grassroots campaigning for local offices, stating that “[getting] candidates into lesser known offices...is how you really build a party.” Dean believes that increasing support for local Democratic candidates will ultimately strengthen the Democratic Party.

To win in 2020, another priority for the Democratic Party must be to appeal to different voting blocs. Dean strongly believes that there are no “safe” voting blocs; this belief is the primary motivation for the fifty-state strategy he implemented during his time as DNC chair. The fifty-state strategy is a campaigning method in which candidates campaign in all fifty states—even in states that are not considered “swing states.” Using this method, Dean believes that the Democratic Party can appeal to voters outside their usual voting blocs.

While swing voters are often considered voters who switch between voting Democrats

3 For this and all that follows hereafter, unless otherwise noted: Howard Dean, interviewed by authors, virtual, April 24, 2020.
and voting Republican, Dean argues that swing voters are also voters who do not vote in every election. Dean agrees with Stacey Abrams of Georgia, stating that “it’s not really about getting out every vote—it’s about getting out your votes.” With these details in mind, the Democratic Party must not only focus on appealing to voters on the fence, but also excite voters in their usual voting blocs to turn out on election day.

Dean cites women voters as an example. While some might assume that women will not support Republican candidates because of their stance on women’s rights, if these voters are not excited enough about the Democratic candidate to show up to the polls, the Democratic Party is essentially losing support from an incredibly important voting bloc.

**Election Challenges During Coronavirus**

Reduced turnout due to the coronavirus has many in the Democratic Party worried. Dean put it this way, “Trump is right...the more people who vote, the less likely it is that a Republican is going to win.” However, with the coronavirus causing voters to prioritize their personal health and safety over practicing their right to vote, the Democratic Party is at a crossroads.

Given that Democrats like Dean believe higher voter turnout will increase chances for Democratic candidates to win elections, a related priority for the Democratic Party must be protecting the wellbeing of their voters during this pandemic. If the Democratic Party fails to make voters feel safe when voting, they are less likely to come out to vote, increasing the likelihood that Republicans will win.

Both Perez and Dean understand the potential negative effects the coronavirus could have on voter turnout. Democrats across the country are calling for a universal vote-by-mail option to accommodate in case stay-at-home orders remain. As Dean reiterated, “we should get as many mail-in ballots out as we possibly can...the more people who vote, the less likely it is that a Republican is going to win [the presidency].” Dean believes voting by mail is essential during this pandemic because providing that option will create a reason for voters to cast their ballot in support of the Democratic Party.

Perez shared the same sentiment, noting that it is the DNC’s goal to provide as many voting options as possible, which has only gained traction during the pandemic. TSome examples of how the Democratic Party is adjusting to organizing during a pandemic involve no longer doing door-to-door canvassing, but instead holding fundraisers over Zoom and organizing more online voter registration pushes.

**Howard Dean’s Career in Politics and Advice for Students**

Looking beyond the immediate horizons of the 2020 elections, we also seized the opportunity to ask Howard Dean about his career and his advice for students who are interested in politics. Interestingly, Dean had no interest in politics growing up. It was not until someone nominated him for student council in high school that Dean found a passion for politics. However, the poor handling of the Vietnam War from both a Democratic and a Republican president caused Dean to feel an aversion to politics, leading him to initially pursue non-political careers. After working on Wall Street for a year and a half, Dean decided to pursue a medical career and become a doctor. After taking night classes, putting himself through medical school, and then practicing medicine as a doctor for ten years, Dean got involved in politics yet again.

“[T]he Democratic Party’s message for the 2020 election is to unify behind the goal of defeating Donald Trump and encourage voters to ‘Elect us—we are not Donald Trump.’”
Dean was drawn into politics because he liked President Jimmy Carter and he decided to get involved in Carter’s re-election campaign. Two older women on the Carter campaign (a state senator and her sister) took Dean under their wing, which “accelerated [his] rise through the ranks.” He then held positions as a public official in the state of Vermont such as county chair, state representative, and lieutenant governor—all while continuing his medical practice. Dean did not pursue a run for Vermont governor because he wanted to continue his work as a doctor part-time. However, in an unfortunate turn of events, Vermont Governor Richard Snelling passed away in office and Dean assumed the governorship by order of succession. Dean went on to serve as governor of Vermont for twelve years, ran for president in 2004, and was elected as chair of the DNC in 2005. As chair of the DNC, Dean implemented his signature fifty-state strategy, modernized the DNC’s data system, and focused on grassroots campaigning.

When we asked Dean about what advice he would give to students interested in politics or public policy, he wasted no time expressing the faith and urgency he places on the younger generation. To Dean, the younger generation is a source of optimism because young voters are an incredibly influential voting bloc and young individuals are poised to assume the reins of power in the near future. His ultimate message is that “you have to be involved [in politics]...if you are not involved, don’t expect to live in a democracy because no one is going to build one for you.” According to Dean, voting in elections is the absolute bare minimum of being involved in politics. Other ways an individual can be involved include running for office, helping others run for office, and contributing to campaigns—it is never too late to start.

Dean described a moment between him and a former student at Hofstra University where Dean gave this student advice to make a tough decision. The student was managing a state representative’s campaign for the New York Assembly with the possibility of being invited to serve as this candidate’s chief of staff if elected. The student asked Dean: “what do I do if he wins?” Dean’s blunt advice was to “drop out of school and go be his chief of staff! Where do you think you are going to get a better education? In the New York Assembly or in Hofstra? You can come back and finish Hofstra.” This conversation is just one example of the importance Dean places on directly involving yourself in politics in order to make a difference, especially among young, motivated individuals. He believes that it is up to the younger generation to “be angry and impatient” and use that frustration to impact politics.

Conclusion

The 2020 election falls during an unprecedented time. As of this writing (early May 2020), the attention the 2020 election is receiving seems to pale in comparison to the coverage of the coronavirus pandemic. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, the DNC continues to prepare for the upcoming elections in November, aiming to provide as many voting options as possible. With the Democratic Party already having a presumptive nominee in Joe Biden, the focus of Democratic campaign strategists now is to defeat President Trump. The 2016 election proves that there are no certainties in politics. The only thing that is certain is the future of the country is in the hands of the people in this election, and the younger generation.

We want to thank Howard Dean for taking the time to speak with us about his thoughts on the 2020 election, the Democratic election strategy, and his experiences in politics. Dean ended our interview with the following piece of wisdom: “What I hope the message is, from my generation to yours, is to be angry and impatient and insist on perfection even if it does not make any rational sense. I’ve been in the business now for [fifty] years, if you’re angry and impatient and you keep at it you are going to win.” Dean’s message of persistence is one Democrats and the DNC would do well to heed for the remainder of the 2020 election cycle.
Free, fair, and secure elections are critical for the democratic process, ideally allowing the people to govern themselves. Honest elections are the rudimentary foundation on which the public’s faith in a democratic system rests. Election security is therefore vital, for democracy cannot long survive if citizens lose faith in the methods by which their government is elected. Like most institutions, elections are constantly subject to an evolving variety of risks, which policymakers have taken piecemeal steps to address. In this article we review novel risks to the integrity of the vote in the 2020 election— including the challenges posed by remote voting. With congressional redistricting on the horizon, protecting the 2020 election is especially important for the integrity of our representative democracy in an era of political polarization.

Vulnerabilities of Virtual Voting in 2020

Online voting systems and electronic voter databases now play a significant role in the voting process in many localities. In practice, the decision to use voting technology falls largely to individual states and counties, since local elections are run with very limited oversight from the federal government. In some areas, administrators at voting sites use technology to determine whether a voter has already voted or is registered elsewhere. Others offer constituents the option to register to vote online, for which voters must enter personal details—even digital copies of their signature to verify their identity—into a database. Privately-funded pilot programs for online voting programs will allow voters to return ballots electronically in the 2020 primaries.
in Utah, Oregon, Colorado, and Washington, and Delaware. Meanwhile, election agencies are tasked with protecting voter databases and the information they contain, but cybersecurity experts have consistently warned that such systems remain vulnerable targets.

The discovery of Russia’s interference in the 2016 election and subsequent events have only heightened fears that 2020 US elections are vulnerable to cyberattack and that the US may lack the capacity to securely hold virtual elections. Russia’s attacks during the 2016 election lacked sophistication: some experts compared the necessary skill level to that of the average first-year computer science student. Yet hackers were able to exploit the same weaknesses to interfere with voting activities before the 2018 midterm elections. Given rapid changes in cyberspace, it is impossible to anticipate how Russians or others could hack the 2020 election.

The vulnerabilities of virtual voting do not always involve hackers or meddling by foreign powers either. During the first presidential caucus of 2020, Iowa Democrats attempted to expedite the voting process by using an app to collect and direct the results of the caucus. However, the technology ended up having the opposite effect and malfunctioned during the night of the caucus, delaying the announcement of the results. The failure was caused by the premature use of a system that was not equipped for an election of that scale.

In 2020, US election systems are also faced with the unexpected challenges of a global pandemic, and leaders are struggling to adjust the familiar procedures to account for a scenario where citizens cannot physically cast their votes. To prepare for elections at any level, the administration must correct the weaknesses previously discovered in virtual election systems, and ensure that states are equipped with backup plans for as many scenarios as possible. To make changes in infrastructure needed for a successful virtual election, state and local officials need to make full use of existing resources and work cohesively with the federal government.

Many Americans have doubts about the security of virtual elections. In a January 2020 poll conducted jointly by NPR, PBS NewsHour, and Marist Poll, summarized in Figure 1 below, 41 percent of respondents said that the United States is not very prepared or not prepared at all to host elections online. However, opinion is divided sharply along partisan lines: two-thirds of Democrats think the country is not prepared, 85 percent of Republicans think it is.

Candidates at All Levels of Government Fall Victim to Cyberattacks

Election security issues related to the presidential elections receive the most attention. What made the headlines in 2016, for example, was Russian interference in the form of misinformation campaigns that used Twitter bots and manufactured Facebook events to undermine Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign in favor of candidate Donald Trump.

Yet election security is crucial down the ballot as well. As shown in Figure 2 below, cyber espionage against campaigns and candidates is a key strategy for American adversaries to sow divisions between social groups in the United States. Candidates running for the US House representatives, for example, have also fallen victim to cyberattacks and breaches of data privacy by external actors. In 2016, several Democratic House candidates were targeted in a Russian influence operation that brought thousands of pages of documents stolen by hackers from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) in Washington to light as Florida

reporters and bloggers used the material to create their own content. For Annette Taddeo, a Democrat who lost her primary race after secret campaign documents were made public, “it was like [she] was standing out there naked.”

Candidates in Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Ohio, Illinois, New Mexico and North Carolina were also affected. Intrusions in House races in these states could be traced to “tens of thousands of pages of documents taken from the [DCCC], which shares a Capitol Hill office building with the Democratic National Committee.” Russian hackers, under the collective fabricated name Guccifer 2.0, worked with political bloggers and reporters across the United States through social media platforms to further distribute the documents.

Guccifer 2.0 not only targeted challenged House candidates but also went for the chairman of the DCCC, Representative Ben Ray Luján, demonstrating that the hackers were intent on hurting Democrats on all levels within the party. To make the already complex situation even more complicated, some members of the Republican Party chose to use the leaked document caches for their own political benefit in order to gain an upper hand over their opposition. As Mr. Luján proclaimed, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC)’s “use of documents stolen by the Russians plays right into the hands of one of the United States’ most dangerous adversaries. Put simply, if this action continues, the [NRCC] will be complicit in aiding the Russian government in its effort to influence American elections.”

There must be bipartisan effort in order to ensure that the US electoral system is resilient against cyberattacks from adversary powers.

Disinformation and Mail-In Ballots during COVID-19

2020 began much like any other election year. There were debates, the challenging party’s candidate pool narrowed, and primary delegates were tallied. Though each state utilized different polling machines and employed varying levels of identity verification protocols, the one underlying commonality was the essence of showing up to vote.

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Then the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic spread. As of this writing in May 2020, the majority of states are still in lock-down/shelter-in-place or just beginning to reopen. With the uncertainty facing 2020 elections, an increasing number of states are considering all mail-in ballots. States have different rules and mandates on mail-in voting and legislatures must not expect a sudden overhaul to mail-in ballots to come without problems. Though mail-in ballots are not new in the election system, a nation-wide transition to the analog system will no doubt take much more preparation than current circumstances may allow.

Rather than fraud per se, problems surrounding mail-in voting largely revolve around the transition to digital mail, disinformation, and accountability. We are particularly concerned about the potential impact of disinformation campaigns. False information about not needing to register to vote because the entire nation is voting by mail, dates and deadlines, inconsistent polling data, and potential tabulation errors ultimately can have the largest effect on the district-level and county-level election systems. Committing to a set mail-in voting system in the summer (as ample time is needed to plan and execute the overhaul) provides perpetrators more time to spread falsehoods on social media. Assistant Attorney General John Demers questioned, “Is it possible, in particular for a foreign actor, to cause enough mischief in the vote-by-mail process to raise a question in the minds of Americans, particularly Americans perhaps whose candidate has lost, that somehow the result of this election is unfair?”

Conspiracy theories are already proliferating on Facebook, Twitter and Reddit that suggest “Democrats are hyping the pandemic to push for mail-in voting or that forecasts of a second wave this fall are part of a ploy to cancel an in-person vote.” Bret Schafer, a media and digital disinformation fellow at the German Marshall Fund, fears that “When you have this ambiguity and uncertainty, that’s fertile ground for pushing out false information.”

12 Ibid.
For House candidates, district turnout is crucial. District turnout, in turn, may be affected by social media disinformation, the pandemic, and database security. This problem can be exacerbated if a significant part of the population votes in-person and the other by mail. Research also suggests that the longer the time frame for a given task, especially a voluntary task such as voting, the less likely a positive result will be yielded, either due to the loss of responsibility over time or putting off said task (i.e. procrastination).13 Mail-in ballots require ample time so that state organizers can ensure that every person receives their mail and processes it. Thus, turnout rates could fall, even in the absence of foreign actors with significant resources, such as Russia or China, accessing and meddling with voter registration data.

Fieldwork organization will radically change as campaigns shift their resources for a vote-by-mail reality. People will be less likely to open their doors to strangers, but may be more willing to pick up their phones. This is also changing the way campaigns spend their money. Campaigns have to spread out their spending to contend with the possibility that ballots will be sent out in September. With less personal interaction, incumbents have a significant advantage come election-day. Challengers, for whom voters may have less information, will have to find creative solutions to address the inability to canvas and secure turnout. A 2007 study found that people who score higher in terms of political knowledge are significantly more likely to vote. The most knowledgeable individuals are, “other things equal, almost one third more likely to vote than a person at the bottom of the knowledge distribution.”14 To the extent getting informed is more difficult in 2020, participation rates should suffer. Hence, the intrinsic relation between election security, uncertainty from a global pandemic, and the dissolution of orthodox campaigning activity may jeopardize the integrity of the upcoming election.

Conclusion

Democracy is and always will be a grand experiment that requires the work of its people so that it may work for the people. Our modern representative democracy has been challenged many times, with each instance demonstrating the stubborn resilience that keeps our path true. However, like any man-made construct, if it is subject to enough strain, it can falter. Every election cycle presents leaders and citizens with unique challenges, and this year will be no different. Influential actors both domestic and abroad will try to manipulate groups of people to mobilize the narrative in the favor of their agenda. With the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, growing cybersecurity and disinformation concerns, and obstacles to in-person voting, this year will undoubtedly present challenges to election security.

The core function of democracy is made possible through the electoral process, which confers a significant amount of importance on election security. Observed collectively, the many components of election security are equally deserving of immediate attention from our policymakers —particularly in today’s polarized political climate.

Campaign Advertising in the 2020 Presidential Election

NARAM HAJJAR

Americans have witnessed every kind of presidential campaign advertisement possible. Whether campaigners use catchy slogans, over-promoted merchandise, or even funny campaign ads that leave the candidates in pain, Americans have seen it all.1 The road to get to these marketing ploys might be pure luck or a tactical move; what’s important is the ripple effect that these strategies have. Presidential candidates exhaust every single trick in the marketing playbook and even sometimes create new tricks during their campaign. By necessity, presidential candidates must use the newest and most effective marketing tools while also staying vigilant to counter the effective campaign strategies of his/her opposition. In this article I briefly discuss the challenges of modern political campaign advertising and then go on to compare and contrast the ad campaigns strategies of the 2020 presidential candidates.

Donald Trump’s MAGA Brand

As a presidential candidate in 2016, Donald Trump put the slogan “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) at the center of his campaign brand. Although Trump’s campaign rode the technological wave in 2016 and employed significant digital advertising, his campaign also employed old-fashioned techniques such as sloganeering and official campaign merchandise.

Trump’s iconic red “Make America Great Again” hat is a great, and ultimately successful, example of the latter.2 Initially the hat was created as swag for the Trump campaign but slowly it became an object that was present in every news shot and image of the campaigner. The hat allowed people to see and be seen promoting Trump’s message without audio. Ultimately this was a winning move for the Trump campaign because even with still photographs Trump’s message could reach target audiences.

Look at social media as a marketing tool in the 2016 elections, Trump’s success was due to a multitude of factors. Although some ads promoted Trump himself, other more negative ads sought to simply discourage Clinton’s voters from going to the polls and voting. A number of thorny ethical questions arise, but to this day there are no legal boundaries that forbid this latter marketing method nor put a limit to the amount of the budget spent on these tactics. In recognition of a job well done in 2016, Brad Pascale, the digital campaign manager of Trump’s 2016 campaign, was promoted to campaign manager for Trump’s 2020 re-election.3

One of Trump’s strong suits is managing conversation during interviews. He has a businessman’s charisma and a politician’s ability to dodge unwanted questions. However, with the


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coronavirus pandemic, as of this writing in May 2020, he hasn't been able to take part in these interviews to the same extent in 2020 as he did in 2016, which is a blow to his campaign.⁴

Meanwhile, Trump's 2020 campaign continues to update their marketing tactics and improve their digital ad campaign.⁵ As present, Trump's digital advertisements are not limited to Facebook. In fact, Trump run personalized advertisements on many mobile apps. In 2020, Trump may be able to build on his first mover advantage in these new digital ad spaces.

**Financing Campaign Ads**

With the advent of increasingly technologically advanced marketing techniques and the need to get their message out in new ways, the budget spent on presidential campaigns has increased exponentially.⁶ The competition between candidates for the number of advertisements and their reach potential as well as the length of the campaign, which usually begins around a year before elections, has also contributed to this growth in campaign spending.⁷ Fundraising is therefore more important than ever to pay for campaign advertising.

**Targeting Ads and Fake News**

Unlike in the past, campaign funds invested in a digital campaign now have the ability to target specific audiences with tailored messages (micro-targeting and nano-targeting), and then track their reaction. This personalized ad technology has become a highly effective method with potential voters. However, one troubling aspect of political digital marketing that I would like to highlight is that one candidate can simultaneously run different ads that promise completely different things and promote different ideals in front of different groups of people.⁸

Contrast two types of political ads. Positive ads are used to paint a candidate in a favorable light. By contrast, negative attack ads aim to paint the opposing candidate in the worst light possible so that potential voters are less inclined to vote for them. The benefit of a candidate using negative targeted advertising works in effective by tarring their competitors' reputation. As there are no special laws that restrict this type of advertising (beyond general slander laws), there are virtually no boundaries or limits to the marketing team's imagination and creativity, which in turn can push negative campaign ads to the borders of fake news.

**COVID-19 Effects on Campaigning**

During a time where going outside and participating in big social events puts people's health and lives in danger, presidential candidates have to use alternative ways to communicate with voters. Traditional campaigning methods such as giving speeches and rallies seem out of the question since they involve gathering large numbers of people in a confined space.

President Trump has taken advantage of his position as the president and has been using the daily coronavirus briefings to campaign for his re-election, as basically free ad time.⁹ Critics find it distasteful that the current President is using such a big platform to campaign and talk up his accomplishments as president rather than to more narrowly discuss strategies to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

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There has also been talk about a situation/election where the candidates might be incapacitated.\textsuperscript{10} As both Trump and Joe Biden are in their seventies, they are both at a higher risk of health complication if they contract the virus.\textsuperscript{11} Should either candidate contract the virus, it could pose challenges (and perhaps opportunities) for their advertising campaigns.

\textbf{2020 Democratic Presidential Candidates’ Digital Campaigns}

Having now laid out Trump's advertising record and discussed some of the central issues in 2020 election advertising in general, I now turn to review the advertising campaigns of the leading presidential candidates during the 2020 Democratic Party primary race.

\textit{Joe Biden}. Biden was one of the very few candidates who had a substantial budget for digital marketing from the start of his presidential campaign, making up 20 percent of his $280 million ad budget.\textsuperscript{12} Although this budget may have been slowly reduced, Biden campaign staff have also noted that untraditional advertising channels such as Spotify, Hulu and Amazon have been used to spread Biden's message.\textsuperscript{13} In 2020, Biden has “more than tripled the amount of money his campaign is spending on Facebook ads.”\textsuperscript{14} That increase was most probably due to both his Super Tuesday success and COVID-19 lockdowns.

Biden has also been a victim or target of fake advertising. In April 2020, for example, twitter reported that it was taking down a fake Biden ad, which showed the candidate in an unflattering way with a beam of light coming from his chest.\textsuperscript{15} The source of the ad is unknown but Trump's campaign staff wasted no time retweeting it. Former Trump campaign staff have confirmed the use of targeted negative attack ads in the 2016 presidential campaign, but as of now there is no confirmed use of that type of advertisement in the 2020 campaign.

\textit{Mike Bloomberg}. Bloomberg spent half a billion dollars on advertisements alone, the bulk of which were television TV ads.\textsuperscript{16} Bloomberg has managed to dominate this area of marketing and was sometimes the only candidate that advertised on television.\textsuperscript{17} Yet more and more of his ads are also concentrated on social media websites such as Facebook and Google.

It is also worth mentioning Bloomberg’s Instagram advertisements. His “Meme 2020 project” involved asking Instagram accounts and influencers with a big following to post memes about Bloomberg in order to promote himself to a younger audience.\textsuperscript{18} Bloomberg asked these social media accounts to create funny memes about himself and post them in their accounts as sponsored advertisement. Bloomberg seemed to want to achieve what Trump naturally received: popularity on social media, exposure, and resonance with younger voters.

Peter Buttigieg. Buttigieg implemented a “go everywhere” strategy throughout his campaign, according to Buttigieg’s campaign strategist Lis Smith.\(^{19}\) This strategy is built on taking advantage of every opportunity and every chance of exposure even if the news and media outlets that are used are not a traditional pairing for the candidate. Buttigieg also heavily used mailing lists during his campaign to connect the candidate with like-minded individuals that are very likely to vote for him. However, mailing lists have many limitations as they are restricted to current subscribers and do not reach potential voters who are not included.

Bernie Sanders. Sanders’ campaign team used a combination of technology-driven and grassroots strategies throughout the campaign. He and his team identified a social media strategy that resonates with his young audience. Out of all the Democratic presidential candidate hopefuls, Sanders has been the most consistent with his advertisement content and messages, which has in turn garnered appreciation and respect amongst many Democratic voters.\(^{20}\)

During the coronavirus pandemic, Sanders has used Twitter and Instagram as digital platforms to connect with his audience. For example, he collaborated on a livestream on both Twitter and Instagram with artist Cardi B (who has 64.2 Million followers on Instagram) and left her fans and his supporters shocked to say the least.\(^{21}\) He has managed to initiate and maintain contact with his target younger audience but has failed to expand that kind of support and maximize his support base.\(^{22}\)

Elizabeth Warren. Warren’s advertising strategy focused on the grassroots, as exhibited through her penchant to take selfies with potential voters, engage in one-on-one conversations, and travel state to state in order to promote her campaign.\(^{23}\) Warren’s campaign relies heavily on such personalized marketing techniques.\(^{24}\) Her campaign is based on establishing personal connections with undecided Democratic voters in order for them to deepen their trust in her.

Warren also ran Facebook ads that were subject to scrutiny. These ads were mostly news articles about her and her campaign. The link to these advertisements sent the individual straight to the publisher of the article and not to Warren’s campaign website. She got some backlash for using this tactic because it appeared that these news publishers were endorsing her and that their journalists were part of Warren’s advertising team. Warren also used one of Bloomberg’s news outlet to promote herself and redirect to another news website called Salon.\(^{25}\)

Conclusion
Marketing strategies and advertising can be crucial for the success or failure of presidential campaigns. Candidates should not disregard new marketing techniques because of their unfamiliarity. Technology will always serve the advertiser, so candidates should embrace new methods. However, there are ethical boundaries that candidates should not cross with negative attack ads. Better legal frameworks are also necessary to prevent the proliferation of misleading online ads.

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Navigating the Networks: How News Shapes Public Opinion During Elections

M. CRISTINA PULLEN

As a democracy, we are unified under two great pillars: an elected government and freedom of speech. The two pillars work together to establish public opinion, which is defined as the common views and perspectives of the country that arise within the general population. As such, the news media has become a central figure of American politics and presidential elections, determining what and how information is spread through a medium typically present in the average household. The news connects millions of voters in the electorate to their candidates, film events happening worlds away, and broadcast experts and public figures who discuss both candidates and events alike. The elections are live – and America is watching.

In fact, millions of Americans watch the morning or evening news, or tune in to the Sunday morning political talk shows on one of the major networks. With the 2020 election coming up, news media coverage of the campaigns and presidential debates will inevitably influence public opinion. In this article I outline how the news has come to shape the political agenda, construct reality for their viewers, and even help defend democracy during elections.

The Making of News as a Political Platform

The news media established their place in American politics over half a century ago. While presidential candidates were already advertising their platforms on national television, news outlets had their real debut during the John F. Kennedy v. Richard Nixon presidential election. In 1960, millions of Americans tuned in to watch the first televised presidential debate held in NBC studios in Washington, DC.1 Among the panel of mediators was American journalist, Howard K. Smith, along with famous commentators from NBC, ABC, Mutual News, and CBS. Media access to politicians became so entrenched over the following decades, especially during election season, that in 1984 the New York Times published an article criticizing President Ronald Reagan for his tendency to close off the media from the White House during the presidential election against former Vice President Walter Mondale.2

Media influence in politics has grown over time. It has become not only popular, but expected, for candidates to open up to the public through the lens of journalists and reporters. The news media, of course, does not only “report the facts.” During the closest presidential race in history, the news coverage between George W. Bush and Albert Gore Jr. in 2000, only 30 percent of all coverage was strictly factual (i.e., not opinion-led), meaning that viewers, and hence, voters, might have valued the argumentative conversations happening within outlets.3


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Navigating the Networks: How News Shapes Public Opinion During Elections

By the 2008 Barack Obama v. John McCain election, the use of the internet had exploded, with about 75 percent of the American population obtaining their political news online. The internet allowed for quick spread of information and mass communication in a matter of seconds. Today, television and news outlets will broadcast events happening over social media as part of their election coverage, and social media works to share the news across platforms. Together, social and news media have developed an extremely broad audience base, and thus, are able to construct, publicize, and impact the political agenda.

The Press and the Political Bias Spectrum

Few question the presence of bias in almost every news outlet. After all, broadcasting is a business, and these businesses need to keep their audience engaged. The 2016 presidential election pitting Hillary Clinton against Donald Trump revealed how the general population, and election news coverage, has become increasingly polarized. However, all news outlets fall on a bias spectrum, or a level of how liberal, conservative, or centrist coverage is produced. Figure 1 shows where popular news and media outlets fall on this ideological spectrum:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liberal/Left</th>
<th>Generally Centrist</th>
<th>Conservative/Right</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>Wall Street Journal</td>
<td>Fox News</td>
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<tr>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>BBC News</td>
<td>The Blaze</td>
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<tr>
<td>MSNBC</td>
<td>USA Today</td>
<td>National Review</td>
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<td>CNN</td>
<td>NPR, CBS, NBC</td>
<td>Daily Mail</td>
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Figure 1: The Ideological Orientation of Popular News and Media Outlets

Producing ideologically-based news is not necessarily a negative practice – it can debrief electorates on the values that matter most to them, and work to keep all candidates accountable. For instance, liberal outlets will report events that prove the importance of affirmative action, environmental conservation, gun control, or free healthcare. Conservative outlets will report events that showcase the success of a strong national defense, a free market, bans on abortion, or an oil and gas economy. Centrist outlets, by contrast, tend to offer little opinion and report all types of events. They are often seen by electorates on either side of the political spectrum, and can sometimes serve as “fact checkers” for other news outlets.

However, relying on outlets for primary information on either end of the spectrum can be damaging. People make decisions based on their perceptions of the world around them, and unfortunately, biased news sources will not always paint an accurate picture of reality. Fairleigh Dickinson University conducted a study that asked 1,185 people about their news consumption and asked them five questions about recent domestic events and four questions about foreign affairs. On average, people only answered 1.7 of the five questions correctly. Figures 2 and 3 break down knowledge levels by the primary news source respondents’ consumed.

People are generally uninformed when it comes to either domestic or foreign affairs. However, as shown in the figure above, people who consume Fox News are slightly less informed than people who consume no news at all, or those who consume news from other

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outlets. People who watch MSNBC or CNN are only slightly more informed than those who consume Fox News. All three news outlets are on either ends of the political bias spectrum, and all three collectively grab the attention of about 5 million people a year, meaning many voters will not be getting the information they need to make a well-informed decision during election season. This study illustrates that people can be misdirected and led astray by biased news media sources.

**News Tactics for Content**

The news media uses many tactics to popularize election content. Mostly, news outlets frame their content in ways that best grab the attention of the audience, which has caused many Americans to mistrust the media. President Trump popularized the term “Fake news” to marginalize outlets that attempted to discount his credibility during the 2016 election. This term continues to be used today to describe the manipulation of language or information among election coverage amongst all kinds of outlets. However, most news is not completely made up but merely an extension of the truth with anecdotes that viewers show an interest in. Below are descriptions of popular methods used by news sources to produce these anecdotes.

*Agenda-setting.* Media set the agenda of the hour/day/week/month based on what they believe is important, which eventually becomes what viewers perceive to be important. After studying the 1968 presidential election, professors Max McCombs and David Shaw originally produced “agenda-setting theory,” which provided evidence that (1) the media shapes, rather than reflects, events that happen, and (2) the more the media broadcasts an issue, the more importance the general population places on said issue. News media does this by replaying or scrutinizing single political events or candidate information over and over, and ignoring others.


Framing the Narrative. At times, news outlets will broadcast only positive OR negative content of a candidate and/or their ideology during elections and exaggerate events or the successes/failures of a campaign. According to political scientist Regina Lawrence, we tend to “seek out news sources that don’t fundamentally challenge what we believe about the world,” and when news outlets consistently reinforce our beliefs through a framed narrative, we continue to select this kind of exposure. Without an honest narrative, we are not challenged.

Emotional Appeal. News media often broadcast election-related political events to cause or trigger an emotional rather than logical response. One instance of this is showing a photograph of a candidate kissing a baby on the forehead; electorates may empathize and connect with a candidate shown to value family and love children. Another instance might be broadcasting a video of a candidate yelling at a staff member without context. Whether or not this candidate may have had a good reason to yell, electorates might be turned off by a candidate who seems unable to control their emotions or show respect to a middle-class staff member. While these are dramatic examples of an outlet appealing to emotion, a baby-kissing or staff-yelling candidate can make a difference in their campaign’s image over long periods of time.

Importance of News Media

Overall, the news media provide a very important tool for electorates: an undisputable video record of an election. Electorates can keep their candidates accountable in this way for the actions they have taken and the promises made. A candidate can try and argue that they did not say one thing or the other, but broadcasted evidence will tell otherwise, and that sort of evidence is very difficult, if not impossible, to erase given media evidence. As a result, people will always

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depend on news media to keep a video record of every presidential election.

The new media is important for several other reasons as well. As stated above, we vote based on our perceptions of the world around us, and the news provides a lens into the events that we may or may not be present for. The news offers perspective; it establishes a platform from which our candidates can express their beliefs and dispute amongst each other for votes. This form of mass communication can allow electorates to remain educated and keep their candidates accountable for the promises they have made and for the stands they take, especially when electorates consume coverage across the political bias spectrum.

Election coverage also provides constant result monitoring. The news is relatively accessible, fulfills our desire to be involved, and offers basic information. As long as the freedom of the press continues, so does the freedom of politicians and voters to stay publicly engaged.

Conclusion

The news media has a significant influence on the voting public, even if some question whether the news is trustworthy. While voter turnout and voting outcomes are ultimately influenced by many factors, such as campaign strategy, news media can and do shape the basic perceptions of the government and the presidential candidates during election season. It is important for people to be aware of such media influence – and bias – in order to make better decisions that will maintain their values and the integrity of the election process, and all the while, take advantage of the coverage, consistency, and accountability news media provides.

“Overall, the news media provide a very important tool for electorates: an undisputable video record of an election. Electorates can keep their candidates accountable in this way for the actions they have taken and the promises made.”
Campaigns for elected office in the United States are increasingly expensive, making fundraising one of the most important jobs of any candidate who runs for office. Money is needed to buy advertisements, pay fieldworkers, purchase supplies, and more. In order to run for president, an individual must raise a minimum of $100,000, or at least $5,000 in at least twenty states. The large price tag for campaigns has important implications for power and influence in American politics, who wins elections, and what policies are passed once the candidate is in office. Middle class Americans can only afford to donate so much to a presidential campaign, while wealthier Americans can donate large sums to many campaigns.

In order curb corruption and promote participation and confidence in the election process, the Federal Elections Commission (FEC) administers and enforces campaign financing laws. Currently, individuals can only donate $2,800 to a candidate per election, a relatively small amount of money compared to how much candidates spend on an election. However, individuals can also donate up to $5,000 to a Political Action Committee (PAC), $10,000 to state and local party committees, $35,500 to national party committees, and an unlimited amount of money to so-called “Super PACs.” Although Super PACs cannot give money to individual campaigns, they can spend unlimited amounts of money on political advertising that can influence the outcome of elections. Therefore, donations to Super PACs have the potential to have a major influence on both political campaigns and policy.

In light of debate over Super PACS in recent election cycles, in this article we seek to survey for readers the history of campaign finance, the impact of the Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission decision, and the effect of corporate donations on US elections.

A Brief History of Campaign Finance to 2010

Campaign finance restrictions are as old as the republic itself. In 1757, George Washington himself financed his campaign for the Virginia legislative assembly and even

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bought and distributed alcoholic drunks to get voters to vote for him. In response, the Virginia legislature subsequently passed a law to prohibit giving out food and money for votes.³

Federal campaigns were unregulated prior to the early twentieth century. In 1867, the Naval Appropriations Bill prevented officers and employees of the government from making donations and soliciting naval yard workers for votes.⁴ The real impetus for campaign finance limits came as a result of the 1904 presidential campaign, however. Accusations surfaced that corporations gave large sums of money to Theodore Roosevelt in exchange for influence in government policy. Roosevelt denied the accusations, but further investigations showed that the Republican Party received large sums of contributions. In 1907, Congress passed the Tillman Act, which prohibited corporations and national banks from contributing money to federal campaigns.⁵

In 1971, Congress passed the landmark the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA).⁶ The FECA required campaigns to file quarterly disclosure reports of contributions and expenditures.⁷ President Nixon supported the act as realistic and enforceable, saying that it would “guard against campaign abuses and will work to build public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process” by “giving the American public full access to the facts of political financing.”⁸ President Richard Nixon’s 1972 reelection committee nevertheless secretly received millions of dollars before Congress set a $1,000 individual contribution limit and a $5,000 PAC limit for each election and established the Federal Elections Commission to enforce the FECA provisions.⁹

In 1976, Congress amended FECA to comply with the Supreme Court ruling in Buckley v. Valeo that mandatory spending limits violate free speech.¹⁰ In 1979, Congress permitted donations to political parties instead of candidates for the first time. In 2002, Congress passed the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) with the main purpose of limiting the use of “soft money,” or unregulated money spent on political campaigns for things like issue advertising and get-out-the-vote initiatives.¹¹ The BCRA defined political ads as “electioneering communications” and prohibited soft money contributions to the national political parties and strictly limited such contributions to state and local parties.¹²

In Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, the Supreme Court ruled in 2010 that it is unconstitutional for the government to restrict corporations’ political expenditures.¹³ Before the 2008 presidential elections, Citizens United, a conservative nonprofit organization, produced a movie called “Hillary the Movie,” which criticized the democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and presented her as unfit for office. The FEC ruled that the movie as illegal due to

a variety of restrictions to “electioneering communications” (per section 203 of the BCRA).\textsuperscript{14} Citizens United sued in the US District Court for the District of Columbia, arguing that section 203 of the BCRA violated the first amendment (free speech) rights of corporations. In addition, they stated that spending money falls under protected free speech. Their argument won out.

As a result, corporations can now effectively spend as much as they like to advertise and convince the electorate to vote for or against a candidate. Unlike PACs that can only donate limited money to parties or candidates, Super PACs, or Independent Expenditure-Only Committees, may raise unlimited amounts of money from corporations, unions, associations, and individuals to advocate for or against a candidate as long as they do not donate directly to the candidate.\textsuperscript{15}

How Campaign Financing Affects Elections and Policy

\textit{Citizens United} opened the door for corporations and wealthy Americans to donate unlimited amounts of money to Super PACs without having to disclose their donors. Super PACs thus enable anonymous donations and “dark money” campaigns, just the kind of secret and non-transparent donor activity that the FEC was originally designed to prevent. As a result, the wealthiest Americans now have the ability to impact elections like never before.

Campaigns for Congress or the presidency are increasingly expensive. For example, Hilary Clinton’s campaign in 2016 spent $768.5 million.\textsuperscript{16} Because candidates must depend on outside contributions to fund their campaigns, donors may be able to gain access to lobby for their policy preferences – receiving tables at fundraising events and one-on-one meetings and – thus gain outsized policy influence. Due to income inequality, only a very small and unrepresentative minority of Americans have such a large voice. According to the American National Election Studies, only 12 percent of Americans contributed to a campaign in 2012.\textsuperscript{17} What’s more, only 0.23 percent of American citizens contribute more than $200 to campaigns.\textsuperscript{18} Furthermore, campaign contributors are usually older, wealthier, and better educated than the average American citizen.\textsuperscript{19} With so few Americans donating to campaigns it is easy to see how a small group of Americans can have more influence and gain the ability to set a policy agenda.

The amount of outside spending has increased dramatically since \textit{Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission}. For example, in 2010, independent expenditures totaled $203.9

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} “Donor Demographics,” Open Secrets, The Center for Responsive Politics, access date, www.opensecrets.org/overview/donordemographics.php.
\item \textsuperscript{19} John Craig and David Madland., “How Campaign Contributions and Lobbying Can Lead to Inefficient Economic Policy,” May 2, 2014.
\end{itemize}
million; in 2016, it was $1.48 billion. Furthermore in 2018, “each of the top three outside
spending groups were establishment-connected super PACs: the House GOP-aligned
Congressional Leadership Fund ($136 million), Harry Reid-connected Senate Majority PAC
($112 million) and Mitch McConnell-linked Senate Leadership Fund ($94 million).” These
super PACs have a direct connection to candidates running for office. For example, the CEO of
the Senate Leadership Fund was Mitch McConnell’s Chief of Staff from 1991 to 1997. In this
case it is clear that large donors have a direct impact on policy and can set the political agenda.

Why do Candidates Spend so Much on Campaigns?
The Supreme Court decision in the
Citizens United case has made it easier for donors
to contribute large sums of money to Super
PACs. More spending by major political parties
and candidates, in turn, tends to increase the
percentage of votes they win. That is, whoever
spends the most money usually wins. According
to the Center for Responsive Politics, as shown in
Figure 1, “94 percent of biggest spenders in House
races won, up slightly from 2012 and 82 percent of
biggest spenders in Senate races won, up from 76
percent in 2012.” Campaigns, in their bid to win,
are engaged in a campaign spending arms race in
which they try to outspend their opposition.

The Effect of Donations from Corporations
Campaign financing has a direct impact on who influences policy. As previously stated,
a donation to a campaign is a vote on a policy or platform of a candidate and may buy a measure
of access. Businesses use this to their advantage to push for policies beneficial to them. In fact,
“some researchers have concluded that wealthy people and business interests have [fifteen] times
the political efficacy of the rest of the population.” According to a 2014 Princeton study, policy
makers are more likely to respond to the opinions of wealthy Americans rather than average
Americans. Whereas the opinion of average citizens has a negligible influence in changing
policy outcomes, the opinion of wealthy Americans carries a lot of weight. When a minority
of corporate interest groups or wealthy Americans support a policy, the probability of policy
change is only 16 to 18 percent; but when a majority of interest groups or the wealthy support a
policy, the odds of policy change go up to 45 to 47 percent.

Implications for 2020
Campaign finance will have a huge effect on who wins the 2020 presidential campaign,

money-and-elections-a-complicated-love-story/.
oligarchy.
which ultimately could change the future of American democracy. As a candidate, Bernie Sanders famously refused money from Super PAC’s, leading most Democrats to also refuse corporate PAC money. But after Senator Bernie Sanders ended his presidential bid, his former top advisors began working to form a Super PAC to support former Vice President Joe Biden’s campaign. With a strong opposition to corporate campaign financing continuing, the Democratic Party may mount a convincing argument to reform campaign finance law.

Social media companies like Facebook have provided a large platform for political ad campaigns. The 2016 election was an example of how powerful new social media tools can be, particularly with the use of data mining by companies such as Cambridge Analytica. The FEC has yet to successfully regulate political advertising on Facebook and other social media platforms. It remains to be seen how social media advertising will affect the 2020 election.

The 2020 election has seen the most money spent on a campaign in history. Michael Bloomberg financed his campaign with his own money and refused outside donations. Instead of donating to a candidate, he decided to be the candidate. It will be interesting to see if more super rich Americans run for office in the future and if the trend of self-financing continues.

Conclusion

Campaign finance will play a vital role in the 2020 presidential campaign. The history of campaign finance in America until Citizens United was largely one of ever imposing growing restrictions and closing loopholes that allow individuals or interest groups to “buy elections.” Citizens United has given rich people and large corporations the ability to gain greater influence in politics. Without further campaign finance reform to give the American public more transparency and control, the future of American democracy itself may be at risk.

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A week after the United States inaugurated its first African-American president, the Republican National Committee (RNC) elected Michael Steele as its first African-American chairperson. Inheriting a party whose message had been “wholesale rejected by the public,” Michael Steele transformed a near cataclysmic loss into remarkable gains for the Republican Party within just two years, flipping 11 state legislatures and winning 760 state legislative seats, 8 governorships, and 63 House seats for the Republican Party in the 2010 midterm elections.1

While 2010 was not a presidential election year, it was arguably more significant: it was a census year. Every ten years, following a counting of its citizens, the United States redraws its congressional and state legislative districts in a process known as “redistricting” to account for population shifts. At least, that is the goal. In actuality, redistricting more often serves as a tool for incumbents to secure their positions of power (e.g. via gerrymandering). If you control the lines, you can control who wins the election. Thus, victory is vital in a census year.

The 2020 election may be even more consequential, coming as it does in a census year with Donald Trump’s re-election to the presidency at stake. When Donald Trump won the Republican presidential nomination in 2016, he blew away any hopes that the Republican Party would follow the doctrine outlined in their 2013 “autopsy” report, which prescribed better relations with ethnic minority voters (namely Hispanic), younger voters, and female voters in response to the disastrous results of the 2012 election cycle for the Republican Party.2 In the years since the 2010 census, Republican affiliation among these three groups has dropped slightly.3

As we approach November 3, the battle for these demographic groups, redistricting power, and quite possibly the future of the country will be waged with increasing ferocity with state legislative races at its core. In this article, we draw on a variety of sources – including our interview with former RNC chairman Michael Steele in April 2020 – to outline the strategies that the RNC has used to maintain state legislative supremacy in a census year.

Background on Redistricting and Gerrymandering

In order to fully appreciate the significance of a census-year election, it is important to understand what redistricting is, how it works, and the effects it can have.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, redistricting is “the process of redrawing state legislative and congressional district boundaries every [ten] years following the decennial US Census.”4 This process of redrawing of district boundaries varies by state.

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1 Michael Steele (former chairperson, Republican National Committee), in discussion with the authors, April 2020.

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Republican’s Struggle to Control State Legislatures on the Eve of Redistricting

Some states, such as California and Michigan, allow independent or political commissions to draw the lines. Most states give state legislators this power, allowing them to define the very boundaries that are responsible for their incumbency. While any human-influenced process is sure to have bias, allowing the state legislature to redraw districts invites gerrymandering, when district boundary lines are manipulated in such a partisan way to favor one party.

While gerrymandering is partisan by definition, it is not unique to one party. A few years ago, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania deemed the congressional redistricting of Pennsylvania to be unconstitutional and redrew the lines itself after the Republican-led legislature and Democratic governor failed to approve a new map. The original map was notable for having districts with jagged lines that split communities; one such district was so absurdly shaped that it was nicknamed “Goofy kicking Donald.” In the early 1990s in Texas, Democrats drew congressional district boundaries to give themselves 70 percent of the seats when they won only 49 percent of the statewide vote. The most egregious example from this case study was how residents of five counties spanning several hundred miles were crammed into one district based solely on their voting affiliation. Redistricting allows parties to claim disproportionate numbers of legislative seats when compared to their margins of victory.

The Role of the RNC in State Legislative Elections under Michael Steele

In the early 2000s, the Republican Party created the Republican State Leadership Committee (RSLC) and the Republican Legislative Campaign Committee (RLCC) to aide Republican candidates in state legislative elections. When asked about these organizations, for which there is little public information available, Michael Steele said that he did not remember “doing anything” with the RSLC nor having “any particular charge for that organization” during his tenure as RNC Chairman. Mr. Steele gave the following rationale: due to campaign finance laws, the RSLC and the RLCC must work separately from the RNC. As Mr. Steele says, the RSLC is “not an arm of [the RNC].” The extent of their relationship is that the RSLC tells the RNC about notable state legislative candidates who deserve a national focus.

Prior to Michael Steele’s tenure as RNC chairperson, races below the national level received little attention from the RNC, even with the existence of nominal ties to the RSLC and the RLCC. With the exception of gubernatorial races and a few easily flippable state legislatures, federal dollars were not spent on the state level. Enter Michael Steele. As a former chairman of the Maryland Republican Party and lieutenant governor of Maryland, he brought a grassroots perspective to the RNC, recognizing the need to focus on state legislative races. His

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primary objective, after getting the party back into fighting shape, was to “re-engage the party in communities across the country so as to reestablish [the RNC’s] credibility.”

Michael Steele knew the importance of census elections from his time as state chairman in Maryland. During his two-year tenure as chair, immediately following the 2000 census, Mr. Steele was one of several individuals, including Robert P. Duckworth, who sued the governor of Maryland over the latter’s redistricting plan. He saw the effects of discriminatory redistricting firsthand in his home county. Prince George’s County, with an 80 percent African American population and eight state senatorial seats, had just three black state senators. Mr. Steele could only ask himself one question: “how the hell does that happen?” And so, it is no surprise that it is Michael Steele’s firm belief that “the only way you’re going to begin to affect wholesale change is to change the legislatures, win legislative races.”

True to his grassroots perspective, Michael Steele placed great importance on the state parties, emphasizing the need to talk and coordinate with them. The RNC allocated federal funds to state Republican parties on the condition that they presented a plan upfront. States submitted plans that ranged from flipping state legislatures to winning mayoral and state Supreme Court races. Each plan was developed by the state parties themselves with little to no influence from the RNC; rather, the RNC relied on state parties to propose the best candidates.

Michael Steele also created the coalitions department at the RNC during his tenure. Originally, outreach funding to minority groups was handled by the political department. According to Mr. Steele, when an election cycle arrived, “you would find that there would be no money to do the ‘outreach’ that [the RNC] claimed they wanted to do.” The new coalitions department was designed to exclusively manage this funding. The goal was to have Republican activists who lived in the communities and were minorities themselves engage in outreach with these groups. But once Steele’s successor Reince Priebus came into office, the department was swiftly eliminated for reasons unclear, depriving the RNC of a streamlined method to finance Republican candidates in districts with high numbers of ethnic minority voters.

**Donald Trump and State Legislative Elections Today**

Today, the RNC strategy is to leave the finer aspects of campaigning to the state parties and the candidates themselves. For state legislative candidates who do not agree wholly with the national platform of the Republican Party (e.g. pro-business, pro-Second Amendment, pro-life), the RNC recognizes that it is often best for them to campaign on the issues that best resonate with their districts. The question for the RNC, as Michael Steele posits, is this: “Do you want to win the seat, or do you want to score philosophical points?” Current RNC chairperson Ronna McDaniel echoed this sentiment recently, paraphrasing Ronald Reagan: “if you agree with me 80 [percent] of the time, you’re my friend.”

President Trump, meanwhile, has pulled the RNC into a tighter political orbit around the White House, syncing the messages of the two organizations more than ever before. Mr. Steele discussed how before President Trump’s election, Republican Party messaging “would be developed and coordinated with the legislature, the House and the Senate, from a policy perspective.” Republican officials would consider the political implications of the policy input

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12 Ibid.
14 Michael Steele (former chairperson, Republican National Committee), in discussion with the authors, April 2020.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ronna McDaniel, “Chat with the Chairs’ ft. Republican National Committee Chair Ronna McDaniel,” interview by Mo Elleithee, Georgetown University Institute of Politics and Public Service.
19 Michael Steele (former chairperson, Republican National Committee), in discussion with the authors, April 2020.
from Republican legislators and generate the talking points that “you would hear on Meet the Press or Face the Nation on Sunday shows.” Today, Republican messaging is instead driven through a direct pipeline from President Trump to “the megaphone of Fox News.” In other words, the White House has “absorbed the RNC.” This shift in messaging systems limits the RNC’s ability to tailor narrative to support Republican candidates for state legislatures.

President Trump has also eroded the barriers that traditionally separated presidential and local politics. President Trump’s constant communication with the American people leaves local Republican candidates with little political oxygen to run their campaigns in the most effective way. For example, Republicans who want to focus on their plan to revitalize their legislative district’s economy might be forced to respond to President Trump’s comments at the latest White House COVID-19 briefing. Instead of promoting their economic plan, candidates are then forced to defend President Trump’s comments.

This may prove especially damaging if the candidate is trying to win a district that heavily opposes the president. Even where this is not the case, responding to questions about the president’s comments distracts local Republican candidates from their main campaign message, hurting their electoral chances. According to Mr. Steele, when President Trump makes a controversial comment, Republican candidates for state legislatures find themselves “answering questions that have very little to do with [their] race for the state legislature.”

In the 2018 midterm elections, Democrats succeeded in flipping the US House of Representatives due in large part to their disciplined focus on healthcare, not President Trump. Mr. Steele hopes that Republican candidates for state legislature will learn from the Democrats’ 2018 strategy — focus on local issues, not the President.

The Fight for State Legislatures in 2020

In order to assess what actions the RNC should take to win state legislative majorities and enable Republican-led redistricting, we must first understand which state legislatures are controlled by each party and which states are in danger of flipping to the other party. Currently, Republican incumbents control 52.3 percent of all state legislative seats, Democrats control 46.9 percent, and independents control the remaining 0.8 percent. Republicans currently hold a majority in 59 state legislative chambers, Democrats hold a majority in 39 chambers, and the two parties share power within one chamber – the Alaska State House.

In most states, a single party controls all power over the redistricting process, but this is not true across the board. There are thirty-six states where a single party controls both legislative chambers and the governorship; this is called a trifecta. Democrats control fifteen trifectas and Republicans control twenty-one, leaving fourteen states where power is split between the parties. Currently, Minnesota is the only state where “Democrats control one legislative chamber and Republicans the other.” In the remaining thirteen states, the governor’s office is controlled by one party and the legislature is controlled by the other.

In some states, redistricting is fully controlled by the legislature, and in others, the legislature must seek approval from the governor. The landscape is further complicated by the nine states that use independent commissions to redraw congressional districts. Finally, more populous states tend to matter more. States with larger populations control more congressional seats, awarding a disproportionate advantage to whichever party controls the redistricting

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
process in the most populous states. Figure 1 shows the states with the legislative chambers that are likely to be most competitive in 2020.

Texas is a major prize for political operatives in the Democratic and Republican parties who are focused on redistricting. Texas currently commands thirty-six seats in the US House of Representatives and could gain up to three more seats in the upcoming redistricting cycle due to rapid population growth.\textsuperscript{26} Democrats are trying to flip at least one of two Texan legislative houses, but that will be a serious struggle since Republicans command strong majorities in each chamber. Texas is unlikely to become a highly competitive race.

Republican organizations are certainly aware of the significance of the 2020 redistricting cycle. The RSLC, for example, created its “Right Lines 2020” campaign to focus Republican resources towards the 2020 redistricting race. As part of this campaign, the RSLC asserts that “expert, public estimates reveal that winning as few as 42 state legislative seats could determine as much as a 136-seat swing in the [US] House of Representatives – for the next ten years.”\textsuperscript{27} The RSLC failed to source this information, making it difficult to confirm or refute. However, the RSLC clearly defines its legislative targets, as shown in Figure 2. Its list of targets include Texas, where the RSLC will seek to maintain its advantage in both legislative chambers. The RSLC also recently partnered with the WinRed online fundraising platform to expand access to state and local Republican campaigns; this expansion will enable state legislative candidates to “tap into the same suite of technology tools used by President Trump’s re-election campaign and hundreds of Republicans in Congress to fundraise from small-dollar donors.”\textsuperscript{28}

It is unclear to what extent the RNC and RSLC have mobilized fundraising efforts towards redistricting. The RSLC has not publicized a fundraising goal for the upcoming election cycle, but during the 2017-18 election cycle, the RSLC raised $50 million for state legislative and down-ballot statewide races. The RSLC has been very successful in its early 2020 fundraising efforts; the organization broke its previous record for first-quarter fundraising.\textsuperscript{29} We can reasonably expect the RSLC’s fundraising target to exceed the $50 million it raised for statewide races in 2017-2018.\textsuperscript{30} We know even less about the RNC’s fundraising for state legislative

If we assess the public statements of the RNC chairperson Ronna Romney McDaniel, state legislative races do not appear to be a top priority for the organization.

**Recommendations for 2020 Elections and Conclusion**

If the Republican Party is serious about winning enough state legislative seats in the 2020 election cycle to control the upcoming redistricting cycle, the party and the RNC should make two key changes in accordance with Mr. Steele's insights.

First, the RNC should revitalize its coalitions department to promote outreach to minority. The RNC's coalitions department was likely a key reason for Republican success in the 2010 elections and, if revitalized, could enable the Republican Party to achieve similar success in the 2020 legislative elections. Reince Priebus's elimination of the coalitions department deprived the organization of a streamlined method to finance Republican candidates in districts with high numbers of ethnic minority voters. In 2012, the following election year, Republicans struggled to compete with Democrats among ethnic minority voters, leading to the autopsy report that encouraged the Republican Party to refocus on ethnic minorities, particularly Hispanic voters.

Second, the RNC should encourage Republican candidates for state legislature to run on redistricting as an issue. Republican congressional candidates implemented a similar strategy in 2016 focused on the Supreme Court: they made the case to voters that, if elected, they would appoint conservative Supreme Court justices to the bench. This message succeeded among conservative voters and contributed to electing a Republican President, US House of Representatives, and US Senate that election cycle. The Republican Party should adopt a similar strategy and argue to voters that electing Republicans to state legislatures in 2020 will give conservatives a structural advantage over liberals for the next decade. The RSLC has already adopted this message which is prominently displayed on the Right Lines 2020 website.

The same cannot be said for the RNC, whose messaging is focused on the presidential and congressional elections. In order to galvanize the Republican voter base around the issue of redistricting, the RNC will need to indicate to Republican candidates that redistricting is a priority to the party. As a census year, the 2020 election brings with it an opportunity to reshape districts countrywide. The RNC would be remiss not to focus heavily on state legislative elections that will determine which party will hold the high ground in the years to come.
The 2020 Democratic Party primary elections have drawn attention to several flaws in the Democratic primary system and the need for primary reform. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders has been a prominent public advocate of primary reform since 2016. Behind the scenes, other leading Democrats have also highlighted related issues surrounding caucuses, the electoral college, and female representation. This past spring, we interviewed one such Democratic thought leader, Neera Tanden, currently president of the prominent liberal think tank, the Center for American Progress (CAP). Ms. Tanden is also the former director of domestic policy for Barack Obama’s presidential campaign and policy director for Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign. In this article we share her insights and review the challenges of primary reform.

The Case against Caucuses

The 2020 Democratic primary got off to a rough start. On February 3, the results of the Iowa Caucus were delayed several days after a failure to report results, due to the decision to report the caucus results using a largely untested app produced by the for-profit Shadow Inc. This app, combined with the outdated system of head counting votes, resulted in a highly inconsistent system which many caucus volunteers struggled to use. After the long period of waiting, several candidates requested recanvassing efforts in order to ensure accuracy in the results, which ended up being a very close call between Pete Buttigieg and Bernie Sanders. While the caucus system’s implementation in future Democratic primaries remains uncertain, the fiasco in Iowa has reinvigorated the debate in the DNC over its controversial existence.

When we interviewed Ms. Tanden about the democratic primaries, she responded first by saying “there’s been a lot of flaws in the system,” and went on to explain that primaries don’t leave a lot of room for people who are newer to politics, citing South Bend Mayor Pete

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Buttigieg’s campaign as an exception to that rule. Ms. Tanden went on to discuss how caucuses do not allow for full participation, citing Washington state, which held a caucus in 2016 and a primary in 2020, and saw ten times the participation in the latter compared to the former.

Tanden explained how caucuses are difficult for people with disabilities to participate in because they involve lots of standing and moving around. They are also difficult for lower income people who cannot afford to give up an afternoon of work because there’s no absentee system in place. Caucuses are also difficult for introverts because they require publicly arguing a case, often to a room full of strangers. On top of that, there is a lack of diversity in caucuses. “You find [less] participation of people of color than you find in primaries,” Tanden said.

Tanden is a strong proponent of transforming every caucus into a primary, having made the case directly to the Democratic National Committee (DNC) in 2017 that caucuses relied on outdated methods and led to inevitable inaccuracy in the vote counted. In the end, her proposal to outlaw caucuses in the DNC lost by one vote. “I do think the DNC regrets it,” she admitted, arguing that this 2020 election cycle will be the last election with any caucuses.

The Case against the Electoral College

The Electoral College is another obstacle in Democrats’ path to a presidential victory in November 2020. In 2016, the Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton lost the presidential election to Donald Trump in an electoral landslide of 232 electoral college votes to 306 electoral college votes. However, Secretary Clinton dominated the popular vote, with almost three million votes more than President Trump. This significant difference in outcomes between an electoral college election and a (democratic) popular vote-based election led to an uproar over the existence and prevalence of the Electoral College in a modern United States electoral system.

Needless to say, Neera Tanden is not a fan of the Electoral College system. At the time Trump was declared winner in 2016, Ms. Tanden was traveling internationally. “In every country,” she narrated, “the people who get the most votes, win. That’s how that works. Here, it was shocking to them that a person who got almost three million more votes lost.”

While Ms. Tanden recognizes that the Electoral College was created with good intentions by our founding fathers, she sees its potential as outweighed by its detrimental consequences. Out of the last six presidential elections, Democrats have won the popular vote five times but have only won the presidency three times (George W. Bush lost the popular vote but won the presidency in 2000, and was true of Trump in 2016). Tanden thinks this “creates a schism in peoples’ faith in democracy.” For Ms. Tanden, the Electoral College “creates a deep sense of cynicism and distrust in the political system,” though she doesn’t expect the system to go away soon.

4 Neera Tanden (President and CEO of the Center for American Progress) in discussion with the authors, March 2020.
5 Ibid.
7 Neera Tanden (President and CEO of the Center for American Progress) in discussion with the authors, March 2020.
8 Ibid.
10 Neera Tanden (President and CEO of the Center for American Progress) in discussion with the authors, March 2020.
In addition, Tanden attributes this flawed electoral system to the fact that the Electoral College hails from a time which favored land-owning, white, male elites over the majority of its citizens. Despite widespread support for electoral reform both among ordinary citizens and DNC members, removing or altering the Electoral College requires amending the United States’ Constitution, which would prove to be an extremely difficult and lengthy task.

Women and Minority Candidates in the 2020 Democratic Primary

The field of presidential candidates during the 2020 Democratic primary was the most diverse in history. Early in the Democratic primary, candidates of color such as New Jersey Senator Cory Booker, former Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, and former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Julian Castro filled the debate stage podiums. Female candidates like Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren and Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar were also prominent figures in the Democratic primary for quite a while. However, as the primaries continued, the diversity amongst the final candidates dropped significantly, with the final five candidates all being white and the final two candidates both white men.

The first two states in the primary elections, respectively, are Iowa, which is 90.7 percent white, and New Hampshire, which is 93.2 percent white. This lack of minority representation in the first few states within the Democratic presidential primaries inevitably hinders the minority candidates’ ability to remain in the race after the first few primary elections. Although both of the final two candidates have a strong record on issues and a large number of supporters within the Democratic Party, Neera Tanden pointed out that they are still white men, which follows the disappointing historical trend of racial and gender homogeneity in Democratic primary elections. Although the Democrats maintain a very diverse group of supporters and members, a solid plan of action to resolve the lack of minority and women’s representation in the Democratic primary remains unannounced and uncertain.

We spoke with Neera Tanden the day after Senator Elizabeth Warren’s decision to suspend her presidential campaign, which Tanden said “profoundly saddened” her. Tanden paid equal homage to the failed campaigns of Senators Amy Klobuchar, Kamala Harris, and Kristin Gillibrand. Having worked extensively on Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign, Tanden said she was “deeply familiar with the particular challenges these women candidates face on basic issues.” “You know,” she matter-of-factly explained, “it’s hard to become the nominee without critiquing somebody in the race, and then when you critique people in the race, you have an added risk” of blowback as a female presidential candidate.

Similar to what Secretary Clinton faced back in 2016, each of these women in one way or another experienced backlashes and criticism when they critiqued their male colleagues. “Men are rubber, women are glue,” one author notes, “if you’re a female candidate, you know that your attacks on your male rivals may bounce off him and stick to you.” While it is widely accepted – almost celebrated – for men to go on the offensive on the political stage, women face scrutiny for the same. “It’s hard to navigate that in any situation,” Ms. Tanden remarked.

Ms. Tanden added that many women and minorities feel under assault. “A lot of women think that Donald Trump is president because we have misogyny in America,” Ms.
Tanden concluded, referencing the thirteen credible accusations of sexual assault he had against him, “so sort of axiomatically, people are accepting misogyny in order to elect this man.” She added that “people of color feel particularly under assault. A lot of African-American voters thought that we have Donald Trump because the country is willing to accept a level of racism.” Beginning around 2011, Trump was one of the first to push the outlandish conspiracy that former President Barack Obama was born in Kenya instead of Hawaii. Tanden cited birtherism as an example of the deeply rooted racism that ostracizes the African-American population of the United States.

Neera Tanden explained the lack of diversity among the final candidate as the result of “cautious voting,” with many voters afraid to vote for women and minority candidates due to the false assumption that they are weaker against Trump. In 2008, Democratic voters were confident a Democrat could win the general election, and were more comfortable putting a woman such as Hillary Clinton, or an African-American man, like Senator Barack Obama, forward as its nominee. In light of Trump’s victory over Clinton in 2016, Tanden was not overly surprised that a woman or person of color (specifically mentioning Kamala Harris and Cory Booker) did not make much headway in the 2020 primary. “If a woman as qualified as Hillary Clinton couldn’t beat Donald Trump in 2016,” Tanden acknowledged, it might pose too much of a risk to put up another minority this Wyear. Ms. Tanden remained hopeful that “once we get rid of Trump, voters will be less anxious about the perceived risks of having a woman or a person of color or a woman of color as a presidential nominee.”

“[O]nce we get rid of Trump, voters will be less anxious about the perceived risks of having a woman or a person of color or a woman of color as a presidential nominee.”

- Neera Tanden

Conclusion

In our interview, Neera Tanden predicted that we would see a shorter primary season in 2020 than the one in 2016, which was not over until May. Ms. Tanden’s prediction proved correct. Bernie Sanders suspended his bid for the 2020 presidency on April 8 of this year, paving the way for former Vice President Joe Biden to become the Democratic nominee.

As the 2020 the Democratic primary comes to a close as of this writing in May 2020, several issues within both the United States’ electoral system and the Democratic Party’s primary electoral system remain unsolved. The Iowa Caucus’ delay of primary results and the rapid dropout of diverse Democratic primary candidates have highlighted enduring issues in the Democratic primary system in real time. The presumptive Democratic nominee, Joe Biden, will also still have to navigate the same hurdles in the Electoral College in November this year that denied Hillary Clinton the presidency despite winning the popular vote in 2016.

DNC members such as Neera Tanden are fighting to resolve these issues in order to preserve the Democratic Party’s image of diversity, acceptance, and equal opportunity for all and most importantly, to defeat President Trump and usher a Democrat into the White House.

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17 Ibid.
19 Neera Tanden (President and CEO of the Center for American Progress) in discussion with the authors, March 2020.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
Incumbent Advantage in the Senate

DAVID FIENBERG AND OLIVIA SNAVELY

While the presidential election routinely receives the lion’s share of press coverage, Senate elections are pivotal given the important role that senators play in the functioning of the country. Senate races are often predetermined, with over 80 percent of incumbents reclaiming their seats since 1964. While this often makes Senate races less interesting to follow than presidential races, it raises important questions regarding the senatorial election process. Why do incumbents win so frequently, and is it actually what the American people want? This article discusses several factors that play into Senate incumbency rates, exploring why incumbents are so successful and what might be done to level the playing field for challenging candidates.

Incumbent Advantage 1: Name Recognition

The first and most obvious advantage incumbent officials have is name recognition. Incumbent senators are more likely to be known to their constituents by name, if not by policy, than any challengers. Incumbents are able to access constituent mailing lists and have a direct line to local media that challengers do not, making it much easier for incumbents to ensure they are seen and heard from throughout a campaign. Thus, they have an advantage in obtaining the votes of constituents who do not actively familiarize themselves with candidates.

Incumbent Advantage 2: Campaign War Chests

Raising funds to mount a statewide campaign is a massive operational undertaking and increasingly daunting as campaign expenditures have skyrocketed in recent years. In the eighteen months prior to the November 2018 elections (including special elections in Mississippi and Alabama), Senate candidates spent $353.2 million – an average of nearly $1.5 million over 237 campaigns. Incumbent are usually able to raise money more easily than challenging candidates. Incumbents are also more likely to be funded by political action committees (PACs), labor groups, and single-issue groups. Even ideological groups, which are more likely to give money to challenging candidates than other donating organizations, only gave 23 percent of their total budget to challengers in 2018, compared to nearly 58 percent of their budget for incumbents. Surprisingly, research demonstrates that campaign spending is significantly less effective for incumbents than for challengers. However, the fact that incumbents receive so


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much more funding than challenging candidates, yet typically do not need to spend as much as challengers to run a successful campaign, creates roadblocks to challengers. For example, in the event an incumbent becomes mired in a scandal, campaign money can be instrumental to mitigate the damage from bad press, effectively undercutting one of the few advantages a challenger might have. A 2016 analysis of state legislature elections suggests that candidates who spent more were more successful. Furthermore, “Get Out The Vote” campaigns were found to affect voter turnout, implying candidates who can fund such efforts are able to boost turnout among their supporters. There is a clear electoral advantage to having a greater pool of funds, and as such incumbents clearly have an advantage over political newcomers.

Elected senators can also set aside unspent campaign funds into reelection campaign “war chests.” In the 2018 election cycle, Senate candidates were left with roughly $226.5 million in unspent donations. Winning candidates have a lot of discretion with what they can do with these funds. They can give the money to charity or return the money to donors, which is rarer, or they can donate these funds to other campaigns in need, a political action committee (PAC), or to a political party. The Federal Election Commission (FEC) also allows Senators to put leftover funds in “war chests.” While senators are restricted from accessing war chest funds for personal use, the funds can be spent on re-election campaigns and can accumulate over several terms. Four senators retired or resigned during the 2018 election cycle, leaving behind an average war chest of nearly $4 million accumulated over twelve collective election cycles.

With war chests this large, many senators can fund a massive re-election campaign with nothing more than the money left over from prior campaigns. This poses a major challenge to political outsiders who do not have the advantage of years of previous fundraising efforts. Scholars have long considered the effects of a strong war chest on challengers, and a study conducted on Senate elections between 1980 and 2000 indicated that the size of a war chest would not significantly affect challenger quality. Nevertheless, war chests allow incumbents to spend less time fundraising than challengers while still running successful election campaigns.

Incumbent Advantage 3: Public Perceptions of President and Congress

Regardless of a senator’s individual track record, public perception of the competence of a senator’s party influences their likelihood at reelection. Incumbent Senators can sometimes piggyback on the popularity and successes of presidents of the same party, especially if the president is well-liked and the economy does well under their term.

By the same token, an unpopular president of the same party can be a drag on Senators’

7 This figure includes Senator Orrin Hatch – the sixth longest-serving member of the US Senate. Excluding Senator Hatch, the other three Senators left behind an average war chest of more than $3.6 million accumulated over just five collective Senate terms. Matthew Kelley, “Retiring Members of Congress Have $50 Million in Their Campaign Coffers. Where Will It Go?,” OpenSecrets, The Center for Responsive Politics, February 27, 2018, https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2018/02/cash-on-hand/.

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re-election prospects, especially at midterms. Midterm elections generally see the White House-controlling party lose seats in the Senate, because “voters who are dissatisfied with [the president’s] performance may take out their discontent on candidates representing his party.”

Even though Congress has low approval ratings overall, according to Gallup polls, almost half of Americans say they approve of the job their representative is doing. This implies that the public tends to blame other members of Congress for decisions they dislike, and thus opens the door for senator re-election. Drain the swamp, sure. But don’t throw out our senator. In short, incumbents tend to have an advantage in that regardless of what they individually accomplish or do not accomplish in Congress, their constituents will tend to continue supporting them, assigning the blame for any political failings to senators from other states.

Given that the 2020 election will include a presidential election incumbent Republicans may have better odds at retaining their seats, especially as the COVID-19 crisis caused Congress’s approval ratings to improve, while President Trump’s approval ratings decreased from the initial bump he gained when the crisis first hit. These numbers could be indicative that rather than assigning Congress responsibility for any party-based disdain, voters will instead punish the President’s handling of the crisis, thus giving Republican incumbents further advantage over challengers.

### Incumbent Advantage 4: Weak Challengers

One of the biggest advantages that incumbents have in winning reelection is based on the quality of challenging candidates, and lack thereof. Because incumbency rates are widely available, challengers are well aware of the difficulty of unseating an incumbent senator. Therefore, candidates with stronger chances of success – usually ones who have been in an elected office before – tend to run for open seats rather than challenging incumbents. This often leaves only weaker and less-experienced candidates challenging incumbents, who often report senatorial races as not realistically designed to win office but to achieve other goals like personal growth or promoting their own private businesses. The result is that incumbent senators tend to have little to no competition for their seats, and are reelected accordingly.

Recognizing the inherent disadvantages of running a Senate campaign against a sitting senator, it is necessary to consider both challengers and incumbents as rational, risk-averse actors. Although their actions can vary widely, every actor in an election risks defeat. While losing an election is not political suicide, it is an embarrassment that many candidates are not willing to suffer. In some cases, senators will go so far as to retire to avoid the shame of losing an election. This usually only occurs when an incumbent’s policy beliefs no longer align with those of their constituents. Such ideological congruence is key to the success of incumbents and offers some explanation for the lack of high-quality challengers in Senate elections.

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10 Ibid.
14 Ibid, 1001.
In general, money, policy, and politics come together and create significant barriers to entry for political newcomers in the Senate, leading risk-averse challenger to often avoid entering a costly election to begin with.

**Overcoming Incumbent Advantages in the Senate**

Lowering the barriers to Senate challengers requires an honest assessment of the political system and, potentially, significant institutional change.

**Limit War Chest Spending**

Considering the clear advantage given to Senate incumbents by a strong war chest, some additional regulations to war chest spending may serve to level the playing field. Eliminating the war chest altogether would be impractical and could simply result in all war chest funds being given directly to political parties. Aside from campaigning, war chests are used to maintain several offices both in a senator’s home state as well as in Washington, DC. Paying for office spaces, furniture for those offices, and populating those offices with staffers is expensive. As such, senators should no doubt retain a large chunk of war chest money to fund all of these expenses.

Rather than eliminating war chests, the FEC could build on existing regulations to limit the size of war chests beyond necessary expenditures. Senators could be given a limit on the size of their war chest at any given time, or they could be required to donate or return some funds at the beginning of a new term. There are several ways this could occur but limiting the size of war chests would limit the ability for senators to win re-election by simply outspending their challengers. As previously mentioned, the strength of a war chest does not deter experienced or “quality” challengers. Challengers would be of equal quality, but senators would lose their funding head start. Ideally, this will remove a significant barrier of entry for political newcomers and incentivize all parties to have more ideological congruence with their constituencies.

**Reform the Senate Committee System**

Another significant barrier to entry imposed on challengers is the structure of the Senate committee system. Though no official ranking system exists, certain committees are undoubtedly more lucrative for sitting Senators than others. Groups such as the Rules and Administration Committee have much more influence on the Senate than, say, the Agriculture Committee. Placement on these high-profile committees usually goes to the senators who have been in Congress the longest. Though it may not have been intended that way, this practice gives an electoral advantage to senators who have held their seats longer.

In a Senate race between two equally favorable candidates, voters may prefer the incumbent simply because they already sit on an important committee. Essentially, legislators instituted a seniority-based system knowing that it would benefit them more and more each time they are re-elected. Recognizing how seniority is rewarded and wanting their state to gain more political influence, voters are more likely to re-elect incumbents. Incumbents, for their part, gain more and more power with each re-election, thus improving their electoral claim with each election cycle. This model identifies a clear advantage for incumbents, and continually raises the barrier to entry for challengers. Unlike campaign financing, removing this advantage would require an overhaul of the committee appointment system.

As is, the Senate committee selection process grants an increasing electoral advantage to the most senior senators. Committees are able to sort themselves into subcommittees as they

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see fit, but political parties decide all of the members and designate a chair.\textsuperscript{17} To begin, the Senate could amend this procedure to more closely resemble the lower chamber of Congress, where representatives take a part in the placement process by indicating which committees they wish to serve on.\textsuperscript{18} While seniority has been presented as an unfair electoral advantage, it is worth noting that some form of seniority is desirable as it allows legislators to ‘specialize’ in specific policy realms. The House system recognizes this, allowing members to contribute to policy areas they are the most well-informed on. While senators gain electoral advantage from committee seniority, it could also be argued that sitting on one committee makes them the best to legislate in specific areas. Recognizing that there is both an electoral and a legislative benefit to long-term committee service, any systematic change would, ideally, balance these two advantages.

Legislative term limits have failed to gain traction in Congress but could see more success if applied to the committee system. If, for example, Senators could only serve two concurrent terms on one committee, they would still have a significant amount of policy expertise while not gaining a massive seniority advantage. While legislators would gain significant experience over a twelve-year period, instituting term limits would likely also lead to an injection of more diverse perspectives in each committee every two to six years. Some researchers have argued that term limits could backfire as term-limited incumbents no longer feel pressure to fall along party lines.\textsuperscript{19} Adding term limits to committee service and not Senate service could mitigate any party rebellion, as senators would have an opportunity to continue serving on a different committee.

Conclusion
Regardless of the source of their advantage, it is clear that incumbents are far more likely to defeat a challenger than be unseated. This is problematic because the incumbent advantages discussed in this paper do not necessarily speak to the quality of a senator, but rather result from our structure of government. Thus, as long as Senate incumbency goes unaddressed, potential challengers will continue to be dissuaded from running against incumbents, resulting in a stagnate Senate that likely reflects a version of the United States from several elections ago, rather than the representing the views that Americans currently want in their government. Incumbency advantage has been widely studied, but that is no longer enough – now the work must begin to mitigate incumbent advantage.

\textsuperscript{17} "About the Senate Committee Senate System," United States Senate, accessed May 7, 2020, https://www.senate.gov/general/common/generic/about_committees.htm.
The Consequences of An Unqualified Judiciary

RUEL BERESFORD AND EOIN WILSON-MANION

In August 2017, President Donald Trump nominated Leonard Steven Grasz to fill a vacancy on the Eight Circuit Court of Appeals, which serves Arkansas, the Dakotas, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Nebraska. Normally a routine appointment that would have sailed through the Judiciary committee with no fanfare, this particular nominee found himself the subject of notable controversy. Grasz was deemed unqualified by the American Bar Association (ABA), with the legal body even drafting a letter cementing their claim. The ABA standing committee that deemed him unqualified with near unanimity (one person abstained) was concerned that he would be unable to separate his role of advocate from judge. These qualms were largely ignored, and by a nearly party-line vote, he was confirmed by the Senate.

This case highlights the growing threat in recent years of an increasingly unqualified judiciary, which may undermine the pillar of legal professionalism upon which the entire legitimacy of the judicial system rests. Under the current judicial nomination system, the ABA technically has no formal role. Despite its authority to speak on the judicial qualifications of its members, ABA grades of judicial nominees are purely advisory. The only thing that matters, at the end of the day, is whether Senators, first in the Judiciary Committee, and then in the body as a whole, deem the judicial nominee to be competent and worthy of confirmation.

In this article, we provide background on the problem of unqualified individuals filling judicial bench seats, which has grown under the Trump administration, and outline three negative consequences of the president nominating and the Senate confirming unqualified judges. First, such appointments may increase partisanship within the judicial system itself, replicating the bruising and increasingly polarized partisan battleground that now characterizes American politics. Second, an unqualified judiciary will be less legitimate. Third, unqualified judges have the potential to hurt millions of US citizens, to the extent they are more likely to act as mere advocates instead of pure arbiters and issue more arbitrary rulings.


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Background: The American Bar Association and the Courts

The American Bar Association has been a professional legal entity since its formation in 1878, when seventy-five legal professionals from at least twenty jurisdictions decided to add a layer of professionalism to their craft. Ever since, this professional organization has had a profound effect on the development of the US legal apparatus. The ABA plays an important role in accrediting law schools, publishing legal ethical guidelines, and providing continuing legal education. As a result, the ABA has garnered substantial legitimacy in the legal and policy world. Thus, when the Eisenhower administration in 1956 requested that they review their picks for the federal judiciary, the ABA accepted and has continued to do so ever since.

In the sixty-four years that the ABA has been reviewing the potential appointees for the federal judiciary, they have used a specific set of criteria so that their rulings are standardized and easily understandable to the Senators, executive branch members, as well as any other members of the public that may be interested with judicial appointments. A quick summary of the ABA judicial evaluation procedure boils down to their committee appointment process, their evaluation criteria, and parameters for making their final ruling.

ABA reviews of judicial appointments are carried by a fifteen member committee, which is composed of two members that are supposed to represent the ninth circuit, one from each of the other twelve circuits, and the chair, all of whom are appointed by the ABA president to staggered three-year terms. The committee is supposed to evaluate the judicial nominee on three categories: integrity, referring to the nominee’s overall character within the legal community, professional competence, which refers to the technical ability of the appointee to serve as a judge, and judicial temperament, referring to traits such as compassion, temperament, freedom from bias, commitment to equal justice under the law. Afterwards, the ABA will rate a nominee as: Well qualified, referring to the best of the best, Qualified, referring to an appointee that satisfies the committee’s high standard, and Unqualified, referring to the appointee that fails to meet the committee’s standards.

Historically, ABA opinions have been heeded and generated little controversy. The ABA’s qualifications have traditionally been held in high regard, and if the ABA deemed a nominee unqualified, usually their nomination would be withdrawn. However, according to historical data, in the last thirty years or so the occurrence of unqualified appointees being successfully confirmed to federal judicial opportunities has been increasing. There have been twenty-one nominees deemed not qualified from 1989 to 2019, and out of them sixteen have been confirmed to the judicial positions. Out of those who have been successfully nominated, three were from President Clinton, five from President W. Bush, and eight from President Trump. In short, the instances of unqualified justices getting nominations has been increasing. As we alluded to above, this trend may have a wide host of detrimental effects.

Problem 1: Increasing Judicial Partisanship

One large consequence of the judiciary gaining judges that the ABA deems are not qualified is the potential for the partisanship of the court to increase. Instead of being viewed as an arena in which a law’s merits are constitutionally arbitrated and impartially interpreted for the benefit of the entire US populace, the judiciary may become viewed increasingly as a place where a set of ideological viewpoints are rammed through. The judiciary may come to become rubber stamp, not a final check, on legislation that may benefit the few rather than the many.

3”ABA Ratings during the Trump Administration,” Ballotpedia, Lucy Burns Institute, accessed April 14, 2020, https://ballotpedia.org/ABA_ratings_during_the_Trump_administration#The_role_of_rating_organizations_in_the_nomination_process.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
Partisanship in the judicial system was never intended to be a major issue in the United States due to the intention of the Judiciary to be a simple arbiter of the constitutionality of the actions the executive branch and laws passed by the legislative branch. However, according to a recent Stanford University analysis, twenty percent of William Rehnquist and John Roberts-led Supreme Court cases since 1986 have ended in a 5-4 ruling, compared to only two percent between the years of 1801 and 1940. Many of these rulings split this way due to the partisan natures of the justices ruling on them. This uptick in 5-4 rulings suggest that the apolitical standard that the Court has been held to no longer exists.

The consequences of this are not only evident on the Supreme Court level, but on the lower levels of the judiciary as well. The two political parties vet potential nominees for years in advance, attempting to find the candidate most likely to rule similarly to their political leanings. This goes against what the ABA deems good leadership, as here nominees are not selected for their ability to interpret law, but for their ability to serve as advocates. As a result of these unqualified nominees serving as advocates, partisanship will only increase, and the two sides of the political spectrum may be unable to reconcile. The consequences of having a partisan judiciary formed only from advocates has further detrimental consequences as well.

Problem 2: Decreasing Judicial Legitimacy

Appointing unqualified judges as partisan advocates risks the loss of the judiciary system’s legitimacy, both in the eyes of the public and of political officials. Since the judicial branch of the government holds no power to enforce the rulings it lays out, the perception of courts as a legitimate arbiter of the law is critical to the public’s acceptance and the executive’s enforcement of the law. Often, judges are nominated based on their predicted, or even promised, voting patterns related to divisive political issues. Considering the increasing relevance of court cases that parallel litmus-test issues for voters, the politicization of courts is growing, both in its pervasiveness and in its impact on America’s legal ecosystem.

When the appointment of judges becomes a powerful and politically useful tool for presidents, the court system loses its legitimacy as a protector of the constitution. Instead of challenging and addressing concerns of a law’s constitutionality, judges may be expected to vote essentially along party lines.

Unqualified judges are especially threatening to the legitimacy of the court system. As they are technically unqualified according to the ABA and as a result should not expect an appointment to the federal bench, these judges are more beholden to the administration that appoints them than their non-partisan and qualified counterparts are. Additionally, unqualified and successfully appointed judges are generally selected and approved as a result of their distinctly partisan legal history. While both sides of the American political spectrum have claimed and will claim that political bias is responsible for “unqualified” ratings or nominations despite such ratings, it cannot be ignored that a significant section of the populace perceives unqualified appointments as illegitimate. In fact, Americans’ faith in and approval of the Supreme Court is reaching all-time lows.

The more this trend increases, as it appears to be, the less respect that both parties will have for the court system and its decisions. Indeed, this problem may compound itself; as courts become more of a political tool than an impartial arbiter, future administrations will have fewer reservations when appointing otherwise unqualified judges.

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
Problem 3: Actual Harm to Americans

The third major consequence of appointing unqualified judges is an increased likelihood for unnecessary harm coming to ordinary Americans. If the protections of the constitution are eschewed for the temporal desires of a few arbiters, then the many who would have benefited from a pure constitutional interpretation instead are harmed and their lives worsened.

Unqualified judges are more likely to advocate for a predetermined position. Judges who act as advocates rather than arbiters are not acting in the interest of the constitution and the citizens it protects, but instead in the interest of advancing their party or policy goals. Constitutional law has, throughout the existence of the United States, been upheld as a consistent and apolitical legal basis to which new laws must adhere. Normal citizens and policymakers alike have relied upon the federal judiciary to set the standard for law, answer big questions with far-reaching impact, and to protect the rights of everyone under the constitution. When unqualified judges believe that advocacy is one of their primary objectives as a federal appointee, they inherently risk failing to equally protect all under the law.

The first casualties of partisan judges are those who should have been protected by an otherwise impartial decision. Regardless of political alignment, any politically-motivated court decision cannot be seen as entirely just. Unjust decisions, in turn, have victims. Nearly every controversial decision brought before the court results in one or more parties claiming injury in the aftermath, but such complaints do not hold much weight when the decision-making process of the court is strictly based on impartial consideration of a centuries-old document. When the decision-making process is instead based on the political utility of the court’s final word, however, the grievances of the harmed are suddenly far more legitimate.

As congressional gridlock makes the House and Senate increasingly difficult arenas to achieve major changes or decisions in policy, presidential administrations turn to judicial appointees and Supreme Court nominations to more directly influence controversial, constitutionally indecisive, and politically polarized issues like same-sex marriage, abortion and contraception rights, and campaign finance. Taking just one deeply politically polarized issue — abortion rights — as an example, the results of court decisions may literally be the difference between life and death for those affected. When judicial appointees like Sarah Pitlyik, with an “unqualified” ABA rating, having “never tried a case as lead or co-counsel, whether civil or criminal… never examined a witness,” and boasting a career of attacking abortion rights as well as constitutionally protected contraception rights are nominated, it becomes clear how a political agenda might unjustly affect the lives of Americans.

Conclusion

For the last three decades, the federal judiciary has seen a marked increase in the appointment of judges rated “unqualified” by the ABA. Though only sixteen of these judges have so far been nominated and successfully approved, half of those have come from the Trump administration - indicating a growth in this dangerous trend and potentially setting a precedent for future judicial appointees. Courts have become more partisan and more polarized. Controversial political issues are more easily addressed by courts that any administration can fill with dedicated advocates of their party’s position. As a result, instead of fair arbitration of the Constitution, Americans get a system that serves not the entire citizenry but a select few. The Court System serves as the spoils of political gamesmanship, and our country gets no reward. These problems deserve to be highlighted before the important 2020 election.

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Interview with Dov Levin

John Chin, managing editor of the journal, interviewed Dov Levin via zoom on October 6, 2020. Dr. Levin is an assistant professor of international relations at the University of Hong Kong. From 2016 to 2018, Dov was a post-doctoral fellow in the Institute for Politics and Strategy (IPS) at Carnegie Mellon University. He received his PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2014. Dov Levin is an expert on election interference and has published in leading academic journals on this topic. His first book, Meddling in the Ballot Box: The Causes and Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions, has recently been published by Oxford University Press. The interview has been lightly edited for conciseness and flow.

John Chin: Dov, thanks again for time taking the time to speak with me. So you're one of the world's foremost experts on partisan electoral interventions. I'm just wondering, could you maybe clarify for our readers, just what are partisan electoral interventions?

Dov Levin: Basically when I talk about partisan electoral interventions, I am talking about a situation in which a foreign power intervenes in another country's elections in an attempt to determine who wins that election for a very costly message. This could either be covert and secret or overt and in public.

And it can involve multiple types of activities, for example campaign funding. The foreign power literally gives, in some cases, literal bags of cash to one of the sides contesting that election so that they have more money to run their campaign. It can also mean something like dirty tricks, things like releasing fake or real information where if you don't want to win the pool, at least it will be embarrassing to it.

It can also involve public and specific threats or promises. Like a few days before the election, someone coming and saying, if you vote for this guy, you will suffer. Or if you vote for this guy, you will gain additional increases in foreign aid. It can also mean campaigning assistance. In other words, training some members of that political party in various techniques of how to get out people to vote, how to mobilize voters, how to run better campaign ads or in some cases sending in campaigning experts to exactly give that undecided advice. In other cases, it can mean things like giving or taking foreign aid. Right before the election, cutting down on foreign aid if you don't want the government to win or increasing foreign aid right before the election to help the government. So those are some of the main tactics and what this type of intervention usually means in practice.

John Chin: Can you say a little bit about how you became interested in this topic?

Dov Levin: It was a sheer coincidence. I was a PhD student at UCLA and I was looking for a new dissertation topic after my two previous ones did not work out for various reasons. Because I am a history buff, I went to the main UCLA library and was looking for something to read in my spare time. And by sheer chance they had a new book on the shelf, in the new releases section, about Italy in the late 1940s, which prominently discussed one case of such an intervention. So I read the book and I said to myself, “oh, this looks like an interesting topic for a PhD dissertation.”

Of course, I was worried. If this is such an interesting topic, I thought that there must be many other pieces of research on it. Then, I checked and I didn't find any. And I say, wow, this must be a good option. But, I have to ask my advisor and see if they think that this is indeed a good research topic and if they know about any past research on this that cannot be found through regular methods. So then I go to him and he says to me, “oh, that's actually a great topic on which almost nothing was done to my knowledge, you should try to write your proposal on
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this.” And that’s how I launched my research and discovered this topic.

John Chin: I’m curious just to follow up on that: after having researched many, many dozens of more cases, does Italy 1948 stand out as sort of unique or different, or quite typical for this type of intervention? And maybe if you could just say a few words about that case for our readers who may not be familiar with what happened that year.

Dov Levin: The funny part is that Italy 1948 is an unusual case because we actually had interveners by both sides, both the United States and the Soviet Union. Both were intervening on different sides of the political map there. The Soviet Union intervened for the Italian communist party, the PCI, while the United States mainly intervened for the Italian Christian Democrats, the DC. So, funnily enough, the case which led me to discover this topic was actually a pretty unusual one. It was unusual in that the United States basically put in much more effort than they usually do. That is, the United States was really, really afraid in this case that the Communist Party of Italy, the PCI, would win the election and turn Italy communist and then cause it to move into the Soviet bloc.

So, the US basically threw everything in, including the kitchen sink, in order to stop it. They for example gave billions of dollars in today’s money in additional foreign aid. They also gave in today’s money, around $80 million of campaign funding to the Christian Democrats. They were sending in hundreds of campaigning experts from the United States to help prepare campaigning materials and other stuff. So it was also a pretty massive effort on the side of the United States. And it was also very large in comparison to most electoral interventions that usually do not involve the magnitude of resources like that one did. Likewise, usually you have only one side intervening and not multiple sides intervening in an election on different sides.

John Chin: I’m curious if perhaps you could maybe speak a little bit about your journey from being a student to becoming a scholar. Did you always know that you wanted to become a researcher, pursue a PhD? Did you sort of come across that as an undergraduate?

Dov Levin: Well, basically when I finished my undergraduate degree, I was not sure whether I would go into academia or not. I was thinking a lot about doing it, but was not really certain if I would do well in it or if I would like it. So, what I did is that I decided to do is to first do an M.A. at the university of Haifa in Israel where I went as an undergraduate. My assumption was that this would be basically be a testing and training period. If it worked well and I actually liked doing research and teaching, then that meant that I should go into academia and do the PhD. So I did my MA in Haifa and I found a very good and decent advisor there. And I found that I liked to do research and, after a few painful experiences when I first started teaching, I was able to eventually do a pretty good job in teaching students as a TA. So, I saw that I could produce good research and do decent teaching. I said to myself, “well, that shows that I could actually be an academic” and actually would like the job. I decided then to apply for a PhD and UCLA was kind enough to accept me.

John Chin: So you started studying electoral interventions while a PhD student at UCLA. That means you’ve been studying these interventions for the better part of a decade. I’m wondering what have you discovered along the way that surprised even yourself or contradicted some of your initial ideas?

Dov Levin: Well, first, I did not expect it to be that common. When I found the 117 cases of such
interventions by the Soviet Union or Russia and the United States, that was much more than I expected. I came to my [dissertation] proposal defense with an initial list of about 40 to 50 possible electoral intervention cases- near the borderline number of cases one needed usually in order to do a statistical analysis. So I was not sure if I'd have enough to do an analysis in my dissertation. My committee members were not sure if I had enough either and were giving me advice what to do if I don't have enough data to do statistics. And then when I finished collecting the data, after a whole hard year of work, and found that I had 117 such cases (what is now my PEIG dataset), I was pretty surprised.

So that was one surprise which I did not expect when I began working on it sometime in late 2010. And another surprise from my point of view was that most of these interventions are not some kind of a proxy war between two foreign powers. My initial assumption was that these interventions would be like in Italy 1948, where two powers intervene on different sides. In the 1948 Italian election, it was the Christian Democrats versus the communists, but it could also be almost seen as the United States versus the Soviet Union in the ballot box. So that's what I thought many of these elections would be and I actually found in practice that in most cases, one side receives such an intervention on its behalf and no one intervenes for the other side.

So I think those were the two main surprises. Naturally I was also very surprised that suddenly this stuff happened in the United States in 2016. I never expected that I would be commenting on such an intervention in a US election. I knew it had occurred here in the past, but I did not expect it to be happening in the US again any time soon.

John Chin: To that point, you are at the university of Hong Kong now as an assistant professor, but before that you were a post-doctoral fellow in IPS. And I recall during your time here that you taught several classes, including one on “So You Want to be President of the United States” in the fall of 2016. Does a memory from one of those classes stick with you? What would you tell some of your students who took your class with the hindsight of a few years?? If you had that class in front of you again, what would you say to them?

Dov Levin: One important memory from that [2016] class was, of course, the surprising victory of Donald Trump. I did not expect him to win- and I was basically in agreement on that with almost the whole political science profession. So now I knew I would have to come to my next class and explain to them how did this exactly happen. Thankfully, I did inform my students in the weeks beforehand that many of the election prediction models of senior political scientists were much closer than what the pre-election surveys were expecting and some of these models predicted a nail biter. And when elections are very close in their key characteristics, surprises can happen. So then I did the post-election class explained that point and it went pretty well despite this very big surprise.

We now have clear evidence based on my research and what came out since 2016, that basically the Russian intervention played an important role in this unexpected victory by Donald Trump. Something I did not know at the time, but that I discovered while I was preparing my book on such electoral interventions was that, based on pre-election surveys and other lines of evidence, one reason why he won was because of the Russian intervention on his behalf.

The pre-election leaks by WikiLeaks played a big role in shifting public opinion in his favor. I found that some of those exposés reduced, for example, the impact of the Access Hollywood tape on the American public’s voting intentions. So something that I did not know at the time that I’d be happy if my class would know is that this Russian intervention played such an important role- as my pre-2016 published research found was the case in many other elections. I did not know that in 2016 and I was caught by surprise as everyone else, but now I
know, and if I could go back in time, that is what I would inform them.

**John Chin:** You mentioned your recent book, “Meddling in the Ballot Box: the Causes and Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions,” which Oxford University Press has recently published. Speaking to your chapter on the US elections in 2016 and related research, did it matter whether Russia’s intervention was overt or covert? That is, whether the voters knew about it or not at the time that they were voting, do you think things would have been different in terms of political effects of intervention, if more was known about the Russian intervention earlier on?

**Dov Levin:** Well, there was already some exposure of the intervention in the lead up to the election. In other words, there was already pretty clear evidence in the lead up that there was a Russian intervention and it was designed to assist one of the sides. I find in my research that one thing that could reduce the effectiveness of covert electoral interventions was their unplanned exposure. So basically the fact that it was exposed and by mid-October more and more Americans were clearly understanding that those WikiLeaks leaks were not coming from some disgruntled employee in the DNC, but they were coming in fact from Russia were reducing its overall impact. This led a certain share of the populace to backlash against it, and to become more supportive of Hillary Clinton in reaction to these leaks.

So, there was already probably some backlash that was reducing its effect, but it was not as large as it could have been if there was more credible information out on it. In other words, there already was some backlash, but not enough to eliminate all of its effects. I, for example, expected when the information about the Russian intervention began to come out in June 2016 that the exposure would lead this meddling to have no effect, but clearly there was not enough information to convince everyone before the vote.

**John Chin:** There’s always a lag in publishing, so you’ve continued to do research beyond what has hit the presses. Could you speak a little bit about some of your more recent research, even beyond the book?

**Dov Levin:** I can discuss another research project of mine, aside from that of my book which is focused mostly on where and why this stuff occurs and whether and how it affects election results. Let’s say there was an intervention that affected the election results in that country and determined who won, what would be the effects on that country afterwards? So in one piece I published, which focuses on the effects on the targets democracy, I find that when such covert electoral interventions work, when the preferred side comes to power, they significantly increase the probability of a democratic breakdown in the target. In another piece I published, I find that when such interventions are public knowledge, when they’re done overtly, they increase the probability of terror attacks of new terrorist groups arising in the target and the overall number of terrorist attacks. These are pretty negative effects on the target in real life terms. If these types of interventions were cigarettes, they’d tape on them warning large signs that this form of meddling is bad for the target’s welfare.

**John Chin:** Do you see any trends in electoral intervention in recent years? Is it becoming more common or less common, compared to what it was in Cold War years or since 2000, which is when your published dataset ends?

**Dov Levin:** I have not collected yet the post-2000 election data in a systematic manner. From what we already know from the 1990s, it seems to have continued more or less the same way. And
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from preliminary data I have from the first two decades of the new millennium, such meddling seems more or less to be continuing at the same rate. This type of stuff has been continuing without much interruptions since the end of the Cold War. It's not like what is sometimes described in the media when they talk about 2016, that around late 2015, like in some mediocre superhero movie, Vladimir Putin went into a secret subterranean cave in Siberia, and defrosted an ancient evil locked in there since 1989 and released it back again to the world. This kind of meddling was continuing without interruptions for the whole post-Cold War. And from what I know there was no major decreases or changes from the preliminary evidence available.

John Chin: You commented on some of your research showing the negative effects for the target country of interventions, the risk of democratic breakdown going up and the risk of terrorist violence going up. If you apply that line of thinking to the United States in 2020, that may be troubling for many readers. There's plenty of angst in the US about democratic erosion, and the possibility of electoral violence this year. Do you think that your findings basically suggest those kinds of potential outcomes for the United States?

Dov Levin: Naturally, my research on this topic is statistical and like much of the social sciences it is probabilistic. It shows that there's an increased risk of this happening as a result of the meddling. It doesn't mean that it's a guaranteed outcome. We can think about it just like smoking a pack of cigarettes every day- we know for a medical fact that many people who do that will get lung cancer. That said, every few months we hear about that 95-year-old person who's been smoking for sixty years and never got sick a moment in his life or got cancer.

So I wouldn't say that it is certain that either outcome would happen in the United States. I wouldn't say that anyone needs to now run into a nuclear bomb shelter or something like that. I would just say that my research indicates that the probability of those negative events happening given the intervention in 2016 is somewhat higher. So it may not happen. I certainly hope it doesn't happen. All my research shows is that the probability of such negative events would be higher than it would have been otherwise.

John Chin: Yes, let's hope it doesn't happen. I'm curious, you made the reference about Putin not being like a superhero movie villain and starting things in 2015, but was 2016 unusual? Is it unprecedented for a major power, like the US, to meddle in Russia's elections or vice versa, or has something like that happened in the past?

Dov Levin: Well, they're not actually unprecedented when it comes to American history. Before 2016, there were at least five other such cases of interventions in US elections by various powers, from Revolutionary France, to Britain, to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union itself in two different occasions.

Many of those interventions were done covertly and have used similar tactics to those that were used in 2016. For example, in the 1940 US elections Nazi Germany intervened against FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] because they didn't want him to win a third term because they were afraid that if he would win a third term, he would get the US into a war against Nazi Germany and save the world. One of the main ways they intervened against him was basically bribing an American editor at American newspaper to publish an “exposé” five days before the US elections in 1940 that was basically a Polish government document that supposedly showed FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt] in a really bad light.

They have occurred in multiple past US elections, and they literally go all the way back to the earliest days of the American republic. The first competitive national election in US
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history was in 1796, in which John Adams was running against Thomas Jefferson. As you may remember from high school, George Washington ran unopposed in the first two elections. And in that [1796] election Revolutionary France intervened against John Adams in various ways. The United States has suffered from these things multiple times throughout its history, with 2016 being just the most recent case.

John Chin: What is the evidence for 2020 becoming the most recent case? Do you have a sense based on from the headlines coming out and various intelligence reports? How credible do you take some of these reports coming out about Russian attempts to interfere in elections again, and perhaps even other countries like China are also trying to meddle in the US election? Are you seeing similar echoes of 2016 this year or do things seem different to you?

Dov Levin: It seems so far that there is some but not conclusive evidence that Russia is intervening in this election. We have some evidence again, based on US intelligence notifications that Russia has been again spreading “fake news” and propaganda. And we have also some evidence that it was also trying to leak phone conversations from 2015 of Joe Biden with some Ukrainian officials that supposedly make him look in bad light. In contrast, there is no evidence that any other country is intervening in this election.

John Chin: Interesting. What do you think any Russian intervention means for Trump’s reelection chances in 2020? Do they help or hurt Trump’s reelection at this point?

Dov Levin: It doesn't seem to me, from what we seem to know so far about the Russian intervention in 2020, and again we still don't have conclusive evidence that it's happening, but it doesn't seem to be at the same magnitude of 2016. It doesn't look to me like it would be the kind of thing that would make the difference in 2020. That said, I am on record predicting that the Russian intervention in 2016 would have no significant effects. So, I wouldn't buy lottery tickets based on my predictions.

John Chin: Fair enough. I think plenty of political scientists' prediction records have proven less than perfect. Going back to the big picture again, what do you think the biggest myths or misconceptions might still be out there about electoral intervention in general, or in the United States in particular, that you would just like to dispel?

Dov Levin: One thing is the idea that the 2016 was unprecedented. As I mentioned beforehand, it was not unprecedented in the United States or in the rest of the world. It was also not unprecedented when it comes to that form of electoral intervention, which is pretty common. This form of intervention, which I call “dirty tricks” is actually the third most common method used since WW2. The only difference is that in 2016 it was used in a digital form, while in the past it was used in a non-digital form. It is also a pretty common electoral intervention tool by Russia. And so, there was very little that was unprecedented about 2016. So that would be one thing that I would mention in this regard.

John Chin: A final question here is if you had the ear of top US policymakers (or even Russian policymakers for that matter), what would you tell them about whether electoral intervention is a good instrument in their foreign policy toolkit? Like if, and when, it should be done? What sort of advice would you give from a policy perspective about electoral interventions?
Dov Levin: Well, I would just say like the old anti-drugs commercial, just say no.

I would say that these types of interventions, while they are many times effective in determining who wins in the target, have pretty nasty side effects on their target. They increase the chances of democratic breakdown. They increase the probability of terrorism and other negative effects. If you care about the welfare of that country and you wish it well, this is not a good tool for this purpose.

The negative effects that I'm finding exist also when such interventions are done by democratic countries, not just by Russia. So even interventions by the United States or by other democratic countries would also frequently have such negative effects.

My policy advice is to avoid such interventions as much as possible, given the harm that they frequently cause their targets. If you do them in very very special emergencies, like the second coming of a Hitler in a foreign country or something like that, it's permissible. But barring that very special exception, just say no.

John Chin: Okay. I think that's a pretty good note to end on.
In the Carnegie Mellon University Washington Semester Program (CMU/WSP), students spend a semester living, interning, and studying in the nation’s capital.

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