



# EXAMINING THE ROLE OF WEDGE ISSUES IN SHAPING VOTER BEHAVIOR: INSIGHTS FROM THE 2020 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

## Examinando el papel de los *wedge issues* en la configuración del comportamiento electoral: el caso de las elecciones presidenciales de 2020 en EE. UU.

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

*Cada elección presidencial está marcada por temas específicos que resultan determinantes para el resultado electoral. Los llamados wedge issues, temas contruidos intencionadamente para dividir a los votantes del adversario, pueden influenciar al electorado hasta el punto de movilizarlo hacia un partido u otro. Las elecciones presidenciales estadounidenses de 2020 se caracterizaron por la pandemia de la COVID-19, la crisis económica resultante de la pandemia, las acusaciones de fraude electoral y los altos niveles de desinformación, así como la brutalidad policial contra las minorías raciales, dejando un país muy dividido y a un electorado decepcionado con las instituciones políticas. El objetivo general de esta investigación es explicar el efecto del discurso político en la movilización de los votantes, principalmente el impacto que juegan los wedge issues, centrándonos en tres temas específicos de la campaña: la brutalidad contra las minorías raciales, el prestigio de las instituciones políticas y la COVID-19.*



Elections; COVID-19; race issues; prestige of the political institutions; discourse; wedge issues.

*Elecciones presidenciales; COVID-19; temas raciales; prestigio de las instituciones políticas; discurso electoral.*



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## 1. Introduction

The assault on the Capitol after Joe Biden was elected the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States (U.S.) reflected the heavy polarization among the American electorate and a loss of confidence in the political system (Urta, 2021). The 2020 U.S. presidential election saw a historical record number of participants, with a turnout of two-thirds of the eligible voting population, more than in any of the previous 120 years (Schaul, Rabinowitz, & Mellnik, 2020). Joe Biden amassed 74 million votes as of November 6th, whereas Donald Trump received around 70 million votes, achieving the largest and second-largest number of votes, respectively, in U.S. election history (Deane & Gramlich, 2020). This heavy polarization was the result of candidates' exploitation of issues such as COVID-19, accusations of electoral fraud, police brutality, and high levels of misinformation. When these issues are intentionally constructed to divide the electorate to gain political advantage, they are called wedge issues (Wiant, 2002, p. 276). These issues, added to conflicts, polarization, fear, and a loss of trust in the institutions, have the potential to mobilize voters to one candidate's party.

All elections are dominated by a few main issues, and it is the candidates' role to find out which of these issues succeed in mobilizing the most voters to their party. The overall objectives of this research are to explain whether wedge issues have been a determinant factor in the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, focusing on three specific issues of the campaign: race issues, the prestige of the political institutions, and COVID-19; and the impact these issues had on voter mobilization, based on an analysis of the discourses used by each candidate.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This section will review the main concepts and approaches that will be used for the analysis regarding voter behavior and how wedge issues are key to mobilizing voters. First, the importance of cross-pressure voters during the elections will be analyzed, followed by the psychological model of voter behavior, which explains what voters take into consideration when deciding between candidates. Finally, a definition of what a wedge issue is and the role these issues play during the elections will be discussed, with a further look into the saliency of said issues and how these are key in party competition.

### 2.1. Voter behavior

Candidates' efforts to exploit controversial issues can be explained through cross-pressured voters, who are partisans closer to one of the main parties, but that disagree with their affiliated party on a policy issue that is personally important to them, causing an internal conflict (Shields & Hillygus, 2008). To attract voters from the opponent, candidates need to recognize who the cross-pressured voters are and target them with issues that are important enough to them to mobilize them to the candidate's party, usually done through wedge issues (Lakoff, 2004).

To reach voters more effectively, candidates need to understand how different voters behave. As we are trying to understand the impact of issues on voters — focusing on cross-pressured voters — the psychological perspective will help us understand how mental structures work and how they can be modified through discourse to mobilize voters for one party or the other. Other approaches, such as the economic approach, would fail to explain why someone may

*The 2020 U.S. presidential election saw a historical record number of participants, with a turnout of two-thirds of the eligible voting population, more than in any of the previous 120 years*

vote based on prioritizing the common well-being of society even if it does not coincide with maximizing their personal interest. The sociological approach — which explains how an issue, when correctly targeted to a social group and with an elaborate discourse, can help mobilize different social groups — would also fail to explain why people within a specific group can vote for different candidates depending on the election.

Following the psychological approach and according to George Lakoff (2004), everyone has mental frames that affect their thinking process. This process starts with mental structures that condition the way we see the world and how we reason, called frames. This idea that frames create meanings was first developed by Robin Lakoff in *The Language War* (2000). Words are also defined in relation to conceptual frames so when we hear a word, its frame is activated in our brain. Following George Lakoff's theory, conservatives and progressives have different ways of understanding morality which come represented by two family models: the strict father and the nurturant parent model. Each of these two models illustrates a different view of the world, either as a dangerous and competitive place or based on empathy and responsibility. Political opinions are dominated by one of the two models, but everyone has both, either actively or passively. Knowing which model voters have in different aspects of their lives helps us find the best narrative to approach them.

*A wedge issue is a rhetorical strategy, usually focused on a social concern, that is intentionally constructed to divide party voters and polarize the public*

## 2.2. Wedge issues

Parties struggle for attention as the electorate and media have limited information-processing capacities, and this attention is crucial for a party's electoral (Hobolt, De Vries, & van de Wardt, 2014). The concept of issue salience plays a major role in elections, as parties define their policies by emphasizing certain issues more than others. However, there is a debate on whether parties always emphasize the same "owned" issues or if they emphasize different issues in different elections to win votes (Budge, 2015). "The theory of issue ownership finds a campaign effect when a candidate successfully frames the vote choice as a decision to be made in terms of problems facing the country that he is better able to "handle" than his opponent" (Petrocik, 1996, p. 826).

Candidates can actively exploit issues to make them salient. The increased salience of an issue is associated with an increment of knowledge of its possible causes and solutions, stronger opinions, a reduced likelihood of taking a neutral position, and a higher likelihood of participating in politics (Weaver, 1991). Choosing the right issues to make them salient can help candidates mobilize voters.

These issues become wedge issues when candidates rely on divisive themes to mobilize voters in their favor or to control the agenda, so to move it away from other issues that may rally voters in favor of their opponent (Shields & Hillygus, 2008). "A wedge issue is a rhetorical strategy, usually focused on a social concern, that is intentionally constructed to divide party voters and polarize the public in order to gain political advantage" (Wiant, 2002, p. 276). Some of the most common wedge issues are abortion rights, gun ownership, gay marriage, minimum wage, or immigration, which force people to choose a side, for or against. Another characteristic of these wedge issues is that they divide voters through code words, labeling, and other strategies to gain a political advantage (Shields & Hillygus, 2008).

How these wedge issues are used by both candidates during campaigns can shape voter behavior and election outcomes. The impact of the campaign will have little effect on some voters, especially partisans, but for others, the campaign provides critical knowledge to choose between

the candidates (Shields & Hillygus, 2008). For cross-pressured voters, the campaign is critical as it determines if their internal conflict regarding an issue is exacerbated or assuaged by altering the salience of that specific issue. Ultimately, the purpose of resorting to wedge issues is not to change people's minds, but to mobilize voters by targeting people who do not have a solid opinion on a specific issue and lack strong party loyalty (Peterson & Fayyad, 2017).

The challenge for political parties in every campaign is to identify the most important issues for the electorate and use them to attract voters to a specific party. Campaigns serve a dual purpose: reinforcing the loyalty of the candidate's base (Campbell, 2016) and attracting cross-pressured voters, as the partisan base is not sufficient to win the elections.

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

There is evidence to suggest a link between internal conflict and susceptibility: "By regulating the degree of conflict experienced, the persuader can make it more likely that the persuadee will choose the option desired by the persuader" (O'Keefe, 2002, p. 81). Other authors state that when the underlying structure of an attitude is less consistent, that attitude is more responsive to new information (Eagly & Chaiken, 1995). In cases where an opinion is not consistent, voters are more open to new information and motivated to increase their knowledge about the issue. In this process of seeking new information, voters will rely mainly on the campaign as a source of information.

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### 3. Hypotheses and methodology

The main objectives of this paper are to determine whether the three wedge issues we have identified were a determinant factor in the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election and to assess the impact of these issues on voter mobilization. To achieve these objectives, we present the following working hypotheses:

1. COVID-19, the economic crisis caused by it, the prestige of the political institutions, and the race issue were the main wedge issues in the 2020 U.S. presidential election.
2. The massive mobilization observed in the election — that beat historical records — was a consequence of the polarization caused by the exploitation of these wedge issues.
3. Joe Biden's framing of COVID-19 was more successful than Donald Trump's, resulting in a new framework that resonated with voters.

To test these hypotheses, the analysis is divided into two main parts:

- » First, we will verify whether the proposed issues are wedge issues.
- » Second, we will analyze whether these issues had a substantial impact on the outcome of the U.S. presidential election.

The analysis will be conducted among different ethnic groups to better identify the impact these issues had within each group. By examining cases where an ethnic group intended to vote

for a particular candidate, but also had concerns about a specific issue, and observing if their voting preferences were modified as a result, we can determine the impact of a candidate's narrative on that particular issue as well as the issue salience's impact on voters' behavior.

Due to the limited extent of the analysis and its main objective, we will only be taking into consideration the impact of the three identified wedge issues on the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. However, while outside the scope of this paper, a comprehensive understanding of the election outcome would require the analysis of many other variables, such as the historical context, perception of each candidate by the voters, sociopolitical dynamics, etc.

### 3.1. Verifying the issues proposed are wedge issues

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

For the analysis of wedge issues, the definition of Wiant (2002, p. 276) presented in the theoretical framework will be used. We will assess each of the three issues following this structure:

1. Introduction: A brief introduction will provide the reader with contextual information about the issue.
2. Polarization: We will analyze the discourse of both candidates during the presidential debates to identify divisive approaches and the specific wording used by each candidate, as the aim of explaining the use of wedge issues is to create division among the electorate.
3. Media coverage: To identify the salience of the issues proposed, we will analyze the articles written by the New York Times between February 1st and November 3rd of 2020 through an API to identify when keywords appear. This newspaper was selected as it is the third most sold in the U.S. and the only one that offered a free-to-use API to access its archive of data. Even though it is considered to lean towards the Democratic party, it is only being used quantitatively to establish the number of times these issues have been covered in the media.
4. Public opinion: We will examine public opinion to determine if the narrative of an issue caused any reaction among the electorate. This analysis will consider the time frame from the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2020, to the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2021, as some key events that need to be considered for evidence took place after the elections.

Lastly, as the aim of this research is to demonstrate the effectiveness of political discourse when used correctly to mobilize voters, we will see if the model of wedge issues strategies can predict which voters were mobilized.

### 3.2. Analyze if these issues had a substantial impact on the outcome of the U.S. presidential election

In this section, we will measure the impact of the three issues in terms of mobilization. If a candidate's discourse is effective and the polarization is perceived by the voter, it will result in mobilization.

*The aim of this research is to demonstrate the effectiveness of political discourse when used correctly to mobilize voters*

To measure this mobilization, we will conduct an analysis of the different voters' profiles by ethnic group and their sociology. Furthermore, we will examine the main issues of the 2020 U.S. presidential election and then, specifically, the issues more relevant to Democrats and Republicans. For the analysis of these issues, we will be using two surveys conducted by Pew Research, the first one conducted between July and August 2020 and the second conducted right after the elections in November 2020. The purpose of doing this is to identify any changes in the importance given to any of these topics in the months leading to Election Day and during the presidential debate period.

Subsequently, we will analyze how the three issues proposed were perceived by each party's supporters to identify, if any, the differences between Trump supporters and Biden supporters, assessing the role of party affiliation in issue prioritizing. Finally, we will analyze the results of the exit polls by ethnic group to see how specific groups prioritized these issues. If an ethnic group was inclined to vote for a candidate but also expressed concern about a specific issue, and this concern led to a modification in the percentage of support for that candidate, we can conclude that the narrative of a candidate on that issue had an impact on the voter.

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## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Verify if the issues proposed are wedge issues

#### 4.1.1. COVID-19

##### Introduction

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

##### Polarization

To analyze each candidate's position on these issues, we are going to rely on the two presidential debates<sup>1</sup>.

The vaccine played a significant role in Trump's discourse, as the electorate was extremely concerned about the situation. Proving that Trump could have the vaccine before Election Day was decisive to the elections' outcome, so he clearly stated during his speech that logistics were ready to start delivering the vaccines as soon as they were available, implying that this moment was not far in time. In relation to the vaccine, Biden knew that acquiring a vaccine before the

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

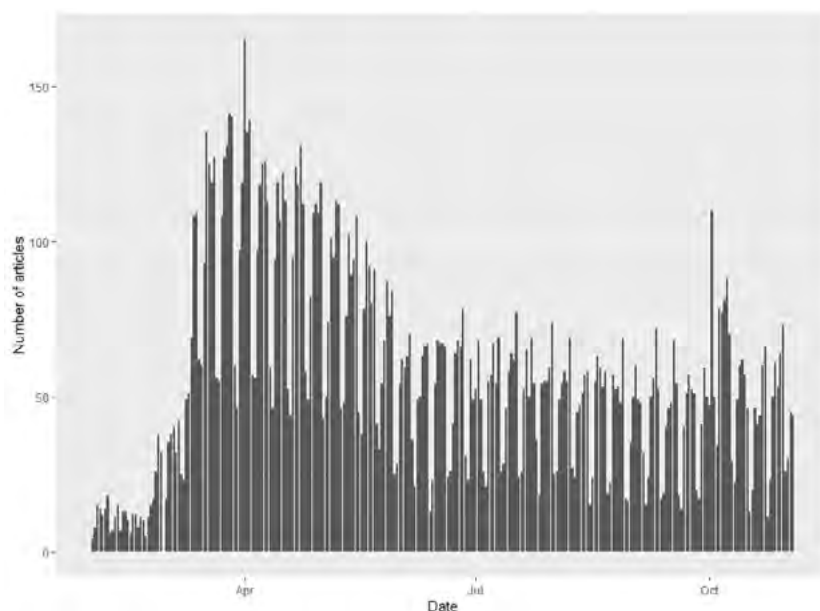
elections could potentially harm his campaign, so he attempted to discredit Trump's statements about having the vaccine before the elections.

The economy played a substantial role in this issue, as the country's economic situation and the number of jobs a president manages to create are key in determining public opinion about the president. Biden's motto regarding the economic crisis was "You cannot fix the economy until you fix the COVID crisis". Trump also introduced fear in his discourse as he mentioned several times that Biden wanted to shut down the economy and said: "We can't keep this country closed [...] People are losing their jobs. They're committing suicide. That's depression, alcohol, drugs at a level that nobody has ever seen before". Biden's discourse during the second debate was more dramatic, aiming to place blame on Trump's management during the pandemic "Anyone responsible for that many deaths should not remain as President of the United States of America".

### Media coverage

To identify the salience in the media, we have analyzed the number of articles written in the New York Times between February and November 2020 that included the keyword "COVID". As can be seen in the graphic, since its entrance into the U.S., COVID-19 became a salient issue, especially between March and June 2020. The average number of articles written regarding COVID-19 exceeded 50 per day, demonstrating that this issue was consistently salient throughout the whole time frame established.

**Graphic 1. Plot of the amount key words were used in articles over time**



Source: Personal elaboration based on articles by the New York Times



## Public Opinion

The lockdown restrictions prompted protests in the U.S., with people taking to the streets in states like Texas, New Hampshire, Ohio, and Wisconsin. In New York, counter-protests were held, and fake body bags were delivered to Trump International Hotel by citizens angry at Trump's approach to the crisis (BBC News, 2020a).

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

## Conclusion

To determine whether COVID-19 is a wedge issue, we must verify if it satisfies the three main requirements: polarization, salience in media coverage, and triggering a reaction among the electorate. Firstly, we can see a clear polarization in the discourse of both candidates taken from the presidential debates, and the use of fear as a political tool. Trump's approach was to prioritize the economy, stating that businesses had to remain open and promising that the vaccine would be ready before Election Day. On the other hand, Biden stated that the economy couldn't be fixed until the COVID-19 crisis was resolved. Moreover, according to CNN's exit polls (2021), for the question "Who would better handle the coronavirus pandemic?" 4% of Biden supporters thought it was Trump, and 6% of Trump supporters thought it would be Biden, proving that this issue created division among each candidate's supporters and that they each managed to take a portion of their opponent's voters. Regarding salience, the issue was constantly present in the media after the virus started spreading in the country. Lastly, the lockdown restrictions triggered protests in various states, displaying a stark divide between those who disagreed with Trump's management of the pandemic and those in Democrat-governed states such as North Carolina, who crowded to demand the reopening of the state. Given it satisfies all the required elements, we can conclude that COVID-19 was indeed a wedge issue in the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

*As a result, citizens lost confidence in the information provided by both the candidates and public institutions*

### 4.1.2. Prestige of the political institutions

#### Introduction

The constant stream of fake news was supported by conspiracy theories, such as the ones spread by QAnon questioning the system. The suspicions surrounding mail voting fraud were encouraged by Trump's statements, as a majority of Democrat voters would vote by mail. The exploitation of wedge issues and the spread of controversial information on social media culminated in Trump's suspension from Twitter due to the risk of inciting violence. As a result, citizens lost confidence in the information provided by both the candidates and public institutions. Due to the number of various issues that have influenced the prestige of political institutions, for this research, we will focus on two main events that contain keywords facilitating the analysis of media coverage: the appointment of Ruth B. Ginsburg's successor as associate justice of the Supreme Court and the accusations of election fraud.



First, when Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, a political battle started to appoint her successor. Her passing occurred just weeks before the presidential election, causing a debate over who should nominate her replacement. This decision was controversial as, if Republicans chose the successor, it could solidify a conservative majority in the country's highest court (BBC News, 2020b). Second, throughout his campaign, Trump repeated that there would be election fraud and that voting by mail, which ballooned due to the pandemic, could not be trusted. When Biden won the election, Trump went to court in six states in which Biden's margin was higher, arguing that the elections were fraudulent. All the fear and the polarization among the electorate ended up in the assault of the Capitol and a second impeachment of Trump for "incitement of insurrection" (Gerhart, 2020).

### Polarization

During the first debate, the selection of a successor to Ruth Bader Ginsburg generated significant controversy. Biden's narrative centered on "The American people have a right to have a say" and he insisted that the right to decide who would choose the nominee should wait until after the election result. Trump's approach regarding choosing the nominee was that having won the 2016 election, it was his right to choose the successor, "I am not elected for three years. I am elected for four years" which he repeated during different parts of the debate.

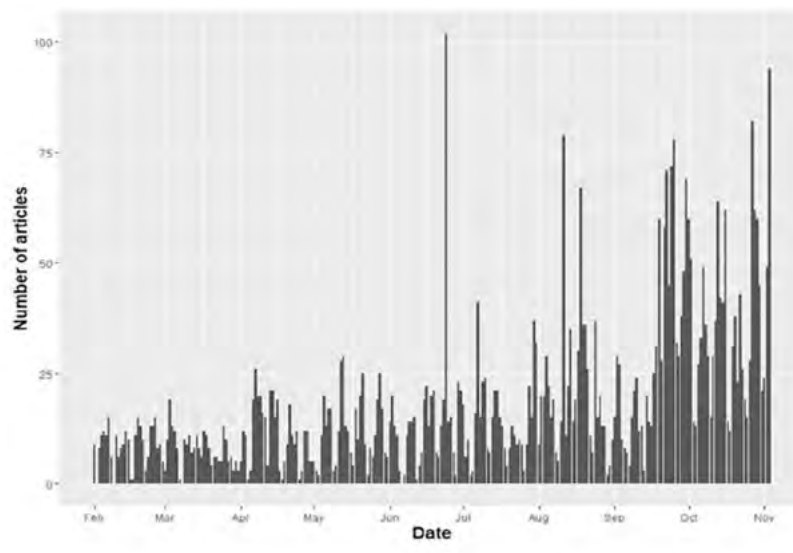
Regarding election integrity, Trump claimed that more ballots were being sent than there should have been "They sent two in a Democrat area [...]. This is going to be a fraud like you've never seen", also claiming that ballots were being sold. He also aimed to mobilize his voters: "I'm urging my supporters to go into the polls and watch very carefully". On the other hand, Biden attempted to prove that there was no evidence that the elections would be fraudulent, "His own Homeland Security director, as well as the FBI director, says that there is no evidence at all that mail-in ballots are a source of being manipulated and cheating", as he also encouraged people to vote early if their state allowed it.

### Media coverage

The keywords used to search these articles were "Supreme Court", "Vote Fraud", "Fraud Election", and "Vote-by-Mail".

As can be seen in the graphic, this issue was not especially prominent during the initial months. However, as Trump started to introduce it in debates, it became increasingly salient in the months preceding the Election Day. The peak months were October and November in which the electorate was more concerned about this issue, as both candidates were debating who should nominate Ruth Bader Ginsburg's successor to the Supreme Court and Trump introduced the topic of election fraud. The relevance of this issue continued increasing, ending up in the assault on the Capitol in January.

*Candidates were debating who should nominate Ruth Bader Ginsburg's successor to the Supreme Court and Trump introduced the topic of election fraud*

**Graphic 2. Plot of the amount key words were used in articles over time**

Source: Personal elaboration based on articles by the New York Times

## Public Opinion

This crisis of trust left the country highly divided as, according to the exit polls by CNN (2021), in response to the question “how confident that votes will be counted accurately”, 12% of the voters stated that they were not confident, with 33% of them being Biden supporters. This proved that this issue managed to draw a portion of the Democrats towards the Republican party. Trump’s tweets were claimed to have encouraged his supporters to take action as the elections were being “stolen”, as evident in tweets like “We are up BIG, but they are trying to STEAL the Election. We will never let them do it. Votes cannot be cast after the Polls are closed!” (Sardarizadeh & Lussenhop, 2021).

After Biden was elected President, Trump’s supporters broke into the Capitol while lawmakers were conducting a ceremonial count of Biden’s victory. This assault resulted in five deaths and several officers injured (King, 2021). Evidence also emerged of online mobilization on platforms frequently used by Trump supporters, such as TheDonald.win, as well as on Facebook and Twitter using hashtags such as #StormTheCapitol or #StopTheSteal (BBC News, 2021).

## Conclusion

First, we can identify differing positions between the candidates: Biden believed they had to wait until Election Day to choose Ruth B. Ginsburg’s successor, while Trump stated he had the right to do it as he was still President. Also, regarding election integrity, Trump claimed that the elections were fraudulent and that mail-in ballots were being manipulated, managing to attract a portion of Biden’s supporters. As for salience, it has been shown that this issue gained importance especially since it was brought up during the debates and culminated with citizens, mainly Trump supporters, storming the Capitol, leading to a loss of trust in the institutions by voters. As it has all the elements required, we can conclude that the prestige of the political institutions was a wedge issue in the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

### 4.1.3. Race

#### Introduction

Race is an issue that has been present in U.S. history since its formation, and it has played a role — big or small — in every election. However, cases of police brutality have increased, such as the tragic death of George Floyd on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2020 (Hill et al., 2021). Another case occurred on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, when Breonna Taylor was shot in her apartment in Kentucky by three police officers (Oppel et al., 2021).

#### Polarization

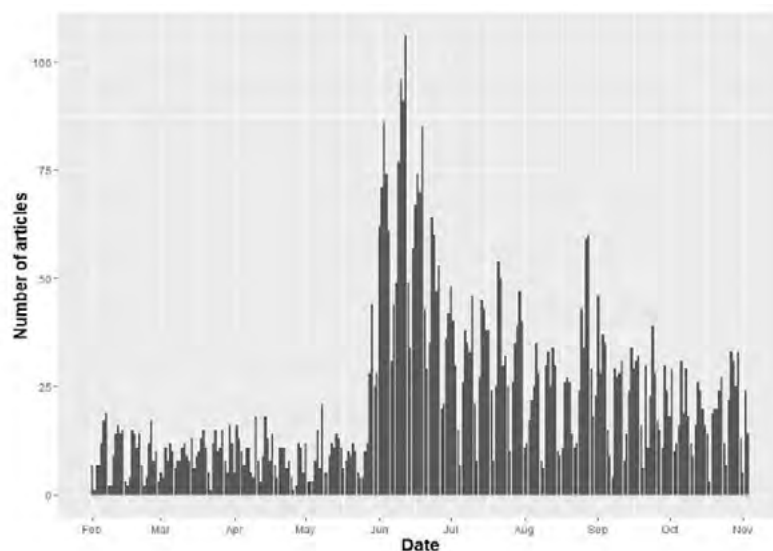
Biden supported the Black Lives Matter movement, and when speaking about the “peaceful protests in front of the White House”, he stated that Trump “came out of his bunker, had the military use tear gas on them so he could walk across to a church and hold up a Bible”. Biden tried to position Trump as a privileged citizen while aiming to be seen as closer to the average citizen. Biden also highlighted during his discourse that COVID-19 affected more African Americans than the rest of the electorate, stating, “One in 1,000 African Americans has been killed because of the coronavirus”. In this last quote, it is worth noting that he did not say that African Americans died because of the coronavirus, but he uses the word “kill”, personalizing the virus and implying that African Americans were the main victims.

In his discourse, Biden used numerous examples to identify himself with the situation that African Americans have to live with. For instance, during the second debate, he said “I never had to tell my daughter if she’s pulled over, make sure that you put both hands on top of the wheel and don’t reach for the glove box because someone may shoot you [...]”. Trump’s position regarding race issues was backed up by the fact that Biden created a crime bill in 1994 and referred to African Americans as “super predators”. His discourse was based on the slogan “law and order”, stating that Biden did not support law enforcement because he is a “radical left Democrat”. Trump’s messages also included reminding the voters that Biden had been in government for 47 years and never accomplished anything.

#### Media coverage

The keywords used to find these articles were Black Lives Matter, Racism, and Law and Order. As can be seen in the graphic, this issue was always present during the elections, but it became a salient issue in June 2020 after the death of George Floyd at the end of May. The peak between June and July can be attributed to the mobilization of the Black Lives Matter movement through social media, which initiated strikes and ended up with a majority of people crowded outside the White House. As shown, after this peak, the frequency of articles regarding this issue increased considerably.

*Biden also highlighted during his discourse that COVID-19 affected more African Americans than the rest of the electorate*

**Graphic 3. Plot of the amount key words were used in articles over time**

Source: Personal elaboration based on articles by the New York Times

## Public Opinion

What happened with Breonna Taylor and George Floyd was the trigger for the Black Lives Matter movement (BBC News, 2020c). This movement expanded all over the country, leading to protests in more than 130 cities and resulting in 4.400 arrests. These tragedies had a significant impact on further dividing the electorate, as 76% of White Republicans believed that Trump's message regarding the protests was mostly or completely right, compared to the almost unanimous agreement among White Democrats (94%) that believed that the message was wrong. (Mitchell, Jurkowitz, Oliphant, & Shearer, 2020).

## Conclusion

First, we can see two different positions of the candidates. Trump based his discourse on "law and order", while Biden supported minority rights and directed his discourse toward the African Americans in the electorate. According to the exit polls by CNN (2021), for the question "view of Black Lives Matter" 57% were favorable (78% Democrats and 20% Republicans), and 37% unfavorable (14% Democrats and 86% Republicans). These results show that this issue created division among the supporters of each candidate, and Biden managed to attract a greater portion of voters from the opposition than Trump. Regarding salience, it has been shown how media coverage increased after the death of George Floyd, as it was followed by the protests. During the months before Election Day, salience decreased compared to June 2020, but it remained higher than before the death of George Floyd. Lastly, this issue was able to mobilize voters and resulted in a crowd outside the White House. As it has all the elements required, we can conclude that race was a wedge issue in the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

## 4.2. Analyze if these issues had a substantial impact on the outcome of the U.S. presidential election

Once we have established these issues can be considered wedge issues, we will conduct an analysis to determine if voters were mobilized as a result of these issues. This will be divided into four main parts. First, an analysis of the different voters' profiles by ethnic group and their sociology will be conducted. This will be followed by an examination of the main issues of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, then specifically the issues more relevant to Democrats and Republicans, and lastly, the most relevant issues by ethnic group.

### 4.2.1. Voter profiles by ethnic group

Not only do the candidates and the main issues of the campaign differ from one election to the next one, but the electorate is also in a constant state of change as more citizens reach the legal age to vote or as more immigrants become citizens. In order to understand the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, we need to understand the heterogeneity among the voter spectrum. For these elections, non-whites accounted for a third of eligible voters, their largest share ever, and one-in-ten eligible voters were members of Generation Z (Cilluffo & Fry, 2020).

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

White voters' share of registered voters diminished from 85% in 1996 to 69% in 2020, affecting both parties. However, white voters represented a much higher share of Republican or leaning Republican registered voters compared to Democratic voters (81% vs. 59% as of 2019). White voters represented 67% of eligible voters nationally in 2018, but the racial composition varied greatly among the 50 states (Gramlich, 2020).

Black American voters played a crucial role in battleground states as they reached a record of 30 million participating in the 2020 elections, with over one-third living in the most competitive states (Budiman, 2020). Black eligible voters amounted nationwide to 12.5% in 2020 of the electorate, compared to 11.5% in 2000. For the 2020 elections, 63% of Black registered voters expressed motivation to vote, and over a third (35%) supported the Democratic party. Black voters recorded high turnout rates compared to other racial groups, closely matching White turnout rates in 2008 and 2012.

In the 2020 elections, Latinos were expected to be the largest ethnic minority reaching a record 32 million voters eligible to vote, accounting for 13.3% of all eligible voters. Latino voters had the potential to make a difference for the Democratic Party, as 62% of registered voters identified themselves or leaned toward the party, while 34% leaned toward the Republican Party.

*According to a Pew Research Center analysis of American' partisan identification, approximately a third of registered voters in the U.S. (34%) considered themselves Independents*

#### 4.2.2. Main issues of the 2020 U.S. presidential election

To analyze how the three main issues of our research were perceived by the voters, we utilized a survey conducted by Pew Research (2020) between the 27<sup>th</sup> of July and the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 2020. The top issues for voters in the 2020 election were the economy (79%), highly affected by COVID-19, healthcare (68%), Supreme Court appointments (64%), the coronavirus outbreak (62%), and race and ethnic inequality (52%).

After the elections — between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> of January 2021 — the same survey by Pew Research (2021a) was conducted to examine the evolution of the priority issues among voters. The top issues were strengthening the economy (80%), dealing with the coronavirus outbreak (78%), improving the political system (62%), and addressing issues around race (49%).

#### 4.2.3. Main issues of the 2020 U.S. presidential election by party

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

For the purpose of this research, we will not analyze all the issues, but those that are the subject of our study. Both surveys indicate polarization among the electorate, as the differences regarding the issues are vast. For instance, the survey conducted between July and August 2020 shows that the coronavirus outbreak was considered a top issue for 39% of Trump supporters and 82% of Biden supporters. This disparity can be attributed to the different messages each candidate was giving at the time regarding COVID-19. However, in the same survey conducted after the elections, dealing with the coronavirus outbreak became a top issue for 60% of Republicans and 93% of Democrats.

Regarding race and ethnic inequality, in July 2020, only 24% of Trump supporters viewed it as a “very important issue” to their vote, compared to 76% of Democrats. This trend slightly changed after the elections as the Democrats who considered this issue a top priority decreased to 72%. On the other hand, Trump’s position on race was defined by “law and order”. Although this specific category is not included in the surveys, we will use the results of “violent crime” as it is the closest aligned with our analysis. In July 2020, violent crime was considered a “very important issue” by 74% of Republicans, in comparison to 46% of Democrats. After the elections this number decreased and “reducing crime” was considered a top issue by 55% of Republicans and 39% of Democrats.

Supreme Court appointments were considered a top issue by 66% of Democrats and 61% of Republicans. In the survey conducted after the elections, this issue did not appear and it was replaced by improving the political system, considered a top priority by 60% of Republicans and 64% of Democrats.

#### 4.2.4. Main issues by ethnic group

Among the voter spectrum, there were also differences regarding what they considered the most important issues in the campaigns or the major reasons to vote for one candidate over the other.

These differences were also evident among different ethnic groups. For instance, addressing issues around race was considered a top priority to be addressed that year by 83% of Black voters,

*The coronavirus outbreak was considered a top issue for 39% of Trump supporters and 82% of Biden supporters*

68% of Latino voters, and only 40% of White voters. When analyzing the coronavirus outbreak, it was considered a priority by 95% of Black voters, 82% of Hispanic voters, and 72% of White voters. Lastly, improving the political system was a priority for 74% of Black voters, 64% of Hispanic voters, and 61% of White voters. To analyze the 3 different groups' preferences the exit polls conducted by CNN were used (2021).

### White voters

The majority of White voters were Trump supporters, irrespective of age. When asked about confidence in the accuracy of vote counting, 51% replied "very confident" (46% of them Biden supporters vs. 53% Trump supporters), 37% replied "somewhat confident" (38% Biden supporters vs. 60% Trump supporters), and 8% replied "not very confident" (18% Biden supporters vs. 81% Trump supporters).

Regarding the coronavirus issue, there were stark differences among the electorate. It was considered "the most important factor" by 17% (42% Biden supporters vs. 57% Trump supporters), "an important factor" by 38% (40% Biden supporters vs. 59% Trump supporters), "a minor factor" by 22% (10% Biden supporters vs. 89% Trump supporters), and "not a factor at all" by 18% (4% Biden supporters vs. 95% Trump supporters). There were differences when asked "In vote for president, Supreme Court appointments were", but 49% of respondents considered this an important factor (54% Trump supporters vs. 45% Biden supporters).

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

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

### Black Americans

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

*The question "Party ID" helps us identify if there were voters from one party who ended up voting for the opposition or how we have called them "cross-pressured" voters*



porters vs. 8% Trump supporters), 15% considered it “a minor factor”, and 26% “not a factor at all” (88% Biden supporters vs. 12% Trump supporters).

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

Lastly, regarding the question “Party ID”, 75% of Black voters identified as Democrats (97% voted for Biden vs. 3% voted for Trump), 7% identified as Republicans (13% voted for Biden vs. 87% voted for Trump), and Independents amounted 18% (73% voted for Biden vs. 21% voted for Trump).

### Latinos

Most Latino voters were Biden supporters, despite their age. When asked “How confident that votes will be counted accurately”, 44% answered “very confident” (75% Democrats vs. 23% Republicans), and “somewhat confident” by 38% (72% Democrats vs. 25% Republicans). When dealing with the coronavirus issue, it was considered “the most important factor” by 40% (74% Biden supporters vs. 23% Trump supporters), “an important factor” by 32% (58% Biden supporters vs. 40% Trump supporters), “a minor factor” by 8% and “not a factor at all” by 11%. There were differences when asked “In vote for president, Supreme Court appointments were” considered by 24% “the most important factor” (53% Biden supporters vs. 45% Trump supporters), 47% “an important factor” (62% Biden supporters vs. 36% Trump supporters), 12% considered it “a minor factor” and 14% “not a factor at all”.

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

Lastly, regarding the question “Party ID”, 52% of Latino voters identified as Democrats (93% voted for Biden vs 5% voted for Trump), 22% identified as Republicans (11% voted for Biden vs 86% voted for Trump), and Independents amounted 27% (55% voted for Biden vs. 40% voted for Trump).

### 4.3. Outcome of the analysis

This analysis had two main objectives: first, it had to verify if the proposed issues of COVID-19, race issues, and the prestige of the political institutions were wedge issues. Second, we examined if these issues were determinants in the outcome of the U.S. presidential election.

To do this, the analysis considered the heterogeneity among the electorate and their preference towards one party or the other to have a general overview of the 2020 electorate. Then, we considered the differences in issue perception depending on the party affiliation.

*The analysis considered the heterogeneity among the electorate and their preference towards one party or the other to have a general overview of the 2020 electorate*

The last part of the analysis aimed to show the differences among the voter spectrum by ethnic group. White voters were mainly Republicans and the most important issue determining their vote was the economy by 43%, followed by coronavirus by 19%. The majority of Black voters were Democrats and the most important issue determining their vote was racial inequality by 50% followed by coronavirus by 17%. Similarly, most Latinos were Biden supporters and their most important issue was racial inequality by 39%, followed by the economy by 28%. Biden strategically addressed race and coronavirus and made them his “own” issues through his discourse.

An important factor for the research was the role played by “cross-pressured” voters. In the case of white voters, Trump managed to attract 7% of the Democrats to his party while Biden attracted just 5% of Republicans. Among Independents, Biden mobilized more voters to his party (51%) compared to Trump (46%). Among Black Americans, Trump attracted only 3% of Democrats while Biden managed to attract 13% of Republicans. In the case of Independents, the difference was also considerable as 73% ended up voting for Biden while just 21% voted for Trump. In the case of Latino voters, Trump mobilized 5% of Democrats to his party while Biden attracted 11% of Republicans to his party. Independents voted 55% for Biden while 40% voted for Trump.

As previously explained, Biden recognized that minorities were more affected by two of the wedge issues analyzed, race and COVID-19, making them the main target of his discourses. This strategic approach led to record mobilization among voters and allowed Biden to win in the 2020 elections.

*In the case of Latino voters, Trump mobilized 5% of Democrats to his party while Biden attracted 11% of Republicans to his party*

## 5. Conclusion

The main objectives of this research were to determine whether the three wedge issues we have established were a determinant factor in the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election and their impact on voter mobilization. To do so, three hypotheses were established:

- » COVID-19, including the economic crisis caused by it, the prestige of political institutions, and the race issue, were the main wedge issues for the 2020 elections

The analysis demonstrated how the three issues stated, COVID-19, race issues, and the prestige of the political institutions are wedge issues. For the analysis we used Wiant's (2002) definition that states that: “when these issues are intentionally constructed to divide the electorate to gain political advantage are called wedge issues (Wiant, 2002, p. 276)”.

In the case of COVID-19, when asked “better handle the coronavirus pandemic?” 4% of Biden supporters thought it was Trump, and 6% of Trump supporters thought it would be Biden (CNN, 2021). Biden's discourse on COVID-19 managed to attract a greater portion of the opponent's supporters. For the issue of the prestige of the political institutions, when asked “how confident that votes will be counted accurately”, 12% of the voters stated that they were not confident and 33% of them were Biden supporters. Trump's constant message questioning the integrity of the system managed to create a division among Biden's supporters and attract them to his party (CNN, 2021). Lastly, regarding the race issue, Biden's support for the Black Lives Matter movement made him attract a greater portion of opposition voters. In this case, when asked “view of Black Lives Matter” 57% were favorable (78% Democrats and 20% Republicans) and 37% unfavorable (14% Democrats and 86% Republicans), proving that this issue caused division among the supporters of each party.

Once proven that these were wedge issues, we had to analyze their significance as the main issues in the election. To do so, we examined the surveys conducted by Pew Research (2021a) after the elections, between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> of January 2021. Among the issues the electorate considered most important were strengthening the economy (80%), dealing with the coronavirus outbreak (78%), and addressing issues around race (49%). The economy and the coronavirus outbreak were the two main concerns among the electorate, making them the primary issues of these elections. Even though other issues were considered more important than race, nearly half of the people that participated in the survey considered it as a top issue. The importance of these issues varied across the ethnic spectrum, with the coronavirus outbreak and race issues being crucial issues for minorities, while the economy being the main worry among White voters.

- » The massive mobilization — that beat historical records — was a consequence of the polarization caused by the exploitation of these wedge issues

According to Pew Research (2021), in the 2020 U.S. elections, Americans voted in record numbers, reaching 158.4 million ballots. Nationwide, the voter turnout in 2020 was 7 percentage points higher compared to the 2016 election, and for most ethnic groups. The rise in voter turnout can be attributed to the political battle between President Donald Trump and Joe Biden. A pre-election survey showed a record share of registered voters (83%) believed that it “really mattered” who won (Gilberstadt et al., 2020).

Although other factors that have not been analyzed may have had an impact on the outcome of the 2020 U.S. elections — such as the historical context, other potential wedge issues, and the voters’ opinion on each candidate — the polarization caused by the exploitation of the wedge issues analyzed played a major role in a massive mobilization in voter turnout.

- » Joe Biden’s framing of COVID-19 was more successful than Donald Trump’s, resulting in a new framework that resonated with voters.

The psychological approach to voter behavior helps us understand the impact of issues on cross-pressured voters. George Lakoff (2004) believes that everyone has mental structures called frames, which condition the way we see the world and how we reason. Words are defined in relation to conceptual frames so when we hear a word, the corresponding frame is activated in our brain. The challenge was to convince voters that Biden would handle the coronavirus outbreak better than Trump. This concept is known as issue ownership, which becomes effective when a candidate successfully frames the voting choice in terms of the country’s current problems and portrays himself as more capable to handle those issues compared to their opponent.

Through strategic discourse, Biden managed to attract Republican voters, especially Black and Latino voters who were more affected by race-related issues and COVID-19. He acknowledges that some Republican Black and Latino voters supported Trump but did not agree on his handling of the pandemic or the racial discrimination in the country, hence he exploited these issues, creating an internal conflict among those cross-pressured voters, which ended up in mobilization towards the Democratic party.

The success of Biden’s discourse hinged on whether more voters perceived him as more capable of handling the coronavirus outbreak than Trump. According to CNN’s exit poll results, when asked “who is better equipped to handle the coronavirus pandemic?” Biden

*The massive mobilization was a consequence of the polarization caused by the exploitation of these wedge issues*

was considered to be better equipped to handle the pandemic by 87% of Black voters, 69% of Latino voters. Trump, on the other hand, was seen as better handling the pandemic solely by White voters (53%). Based on this information, we can conclude that Biden managed to “own” the issue of COVID-19 and to create and establish a framework that was more successful than Trump’s.

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