





The heightened role of state and local politicians in national partisan competition is rooted in long term changes to the American party system, in particular the rise of the president as party leader, the homogenization of the national party bases in the electorate, and the development of party organizations such as the Democratic and Republican Governors Associations (DGA and RGA) and the Democratic and Republican States Attorneys General Associations (DAGA and RAGA), which, taken together, promote state and local actors to that is, to consider how their actions are being interpreted by political actors across the country and how the desires of local constituencies are rooted in national partisanship. Put another way, state and local party officials, especially elected officials, are now forced to grapple with what their actions mean for contestation between the parties at the national level despite the party system still being decentralized in a formal sense. I do not mean to argue that state-level elected officials and party organizations have only now become important in shaping national elections. Rather, I argue that the ways in and extent to which state and local actors have been implicated in national partisan contestation has reached a new peak.

I begin by discussing the long-term trends of party nationalization and integration, particularly changes to the organizational form of the parties, the rise of presidents as party leaders, and the nationalization of the American electorate, as historical background in order to situate the case of 2020. I proceed chronologically, first discussing the roles of state-level actors during the campaign season highlighting how national party affiliation structured policy and rhetoric regarding the pandemic and racial justice protests. State-level responses and rhetoric mirrored the messaging coming from national party actors and national party organizations such as the RGA. I then discuss how partisanship manifested in voting behavior on Election Day. While federalism allowed for heterogeneity across the states, partisanship was still highly



the party-as-organization has undergone several transformations, including the rise of new

efforts to discipline the party in or

nominations, mainly congressional Democrats.<sup>7</sup> These efforts largely failed but set a broader historical precedent. Presidents and national party elites have become increasingly involved in party nominations and general election contests in congressional and later state and local races. They have sought to promote unity within the party in order to more easily achieve their goals.<sup>8</sup> This was true in 2020 in the GOP under Trump, which saw some states cancel presidential primaries and alter their selection procedures despite former Governors Bill Weld of Massachusetts and Mark Sanford of South Carolina and

interdependence in the sense that neither level of party is necessarily subordinate to the other. Thus, conceptually, integration must be measured both in terms of state party involvement in national party affairs and national party involvement in state party affair <sup>10</sup> Aldrich has

party committees. That is, these organizations promoted coordination by state and national party officials amongst each other, particularly on questions of party messaging or branding.<sup>12</sup>

While the emergence of these organizations signifies a more integrated form of partisanship, and perhaps a diminution of the autonomy and independence of state and local actors, it must be noted that these organizations served the electoral interests of their members. These organizations expanded the resources available to state-level actors within the context of elections, provided venues for these actors to coordinate and exchange ideas regarding policy and electoral messaging, and provided ample opportunities for press coverage, thus allowing





States controlled by Democrats were also more likely to institute mask mandates than those controlled by the GOP, most of which were implemented by executive order. By the end of August 2020, only Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, and Wyoming did not have some form of mask requirement imposed by state government though it should be noted that many states and health departments were recommending masks as tools that could slow the spread of the virus even if the state did not require masking.<sup>18</sup> All of these states had Republican governors. This trend continued after the election. As of the end of July 2021, as the Delta variant led to a surge in cases, only California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Nevada, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Washington State, Virginia, and Washington D. C. had some indoor mask requirement, either still in effect or reimposed at some point. All of these states had Democratic governors. Thus, patterns that manifested in 2020 based on partisanship have continued into 2021.

The response to the pandemic also manifested in decisions regarding the voting process itself because of concerns that polling places could become venues for the virus to spread. Numerous states postponed their primaries in the spring. More broadly, states instituted a number of changes to balloting procedures in order to limit in person contact at polling places including dramatic expansions of voting by mail, setting up outdoor drop boxes at local election board offices, and expansions of early in-person voting options. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, 29 states instituted legislative reforms leading into Election Day, most of which were originally considered temporary. Eight states increased eligibility for mail-in balloting in some way. Only two, Missouri and South Carolina, had unified control of government by the GOP. Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Virginia, and Washington D. C.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. <[https://ballotpedia.org/State-level\\_mask\\_requirements\\_in\\_response\\_to\\_the\\_coronavirus\\_\(COVID-19\)\\_pandemic,\\_2020-2021.](https://ballotpedia.org/State-level_mask_requirements_in_response_to_the_coronavirus_(COVID-19)_pandemic,_2020-2021.)>





for larger in person events. These plans were, however, scrapped after a surge in coronavirus cases in the state.

Additionally, a curious feature of the 2020 RNC was that the convention adopted the 2016 party platform nearly as is. No significant changes were made despite the pandemic and the significant impact the virus had on the activities of the White House and politicians at all levels of government.<sup>23</sup> One resultant criticism of this decision was that it would not allow the party to

governments, which Democrats could then sell as leadership by governing officials at these levels. At the convention, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo gave a speech tying polarization in the US to

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initial division. The division created Trump. He only made it worse. Our collective strength is exercised through government. It is in effect our immune system and

2020 with unemployment rising to double-digits from record lows in a matter of weeks. And these differences reflected national partisan discourse regarding the response to the pandemic.

Another issue on which partisan messaging diverged considerably concerned issues of crime and racial justice in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd. RGA press releases available through the organization of Republican campaign messaging across the country, in the presidential contest as well as down-ballot races. Of the 35 press releases between September 1<sup>st</sup>

Gianforte.<sup>31</sup> The DGA, for its part, invested heavily in boosting its online fundraising, a move -person events and live canvassing activities.<sup>32</sup> In sum, significant resources were channeled into state and local races through these organizations demonstrating that state and local actors can go well beyond the geographic constituencies they represent in building their campaign infrastructure. That is, the 2020 campaign season saw a high level of integration of the parties in terms of policies enacted at the state level, overlap between campaign rhetoric emerging at the national and state parties, and a high level of coordination within party organizations.

### **Election Day 2020 and the Nationalization of the Electorate**

A second indication of the nationalization of the parties in the 2020 contest can be seen in voting behavior and voter attitudes expressed in polling. American elections have often been







shutdowns or become a more authoritative voice on t

<sup>38</sup> According to exit polls, Cooper led voters who were confident their votes would be counted accurately by 7 points but trailed Forest among those who lacked confidence in the voting process by 11 points. Cooper led voters who favored containing the virus over reopening the economy by a 4 to 1 margin. Forest won those who favored reopening the economy by a similar margin. Approval of President Trump was also st those who disapproved of Trump but Forest winning 89 percent of those who approved of the President.<sup>39</sup>

In Montana, Greg Gianforte defeated Democrat Mike Cooney to replace popular Democratic Governor Steve Bullock, who lost a bid for a Senate seat against incumbent Republican Steve Daines. Gianforte won despite reportedly attacking a reporter in 2017. The Montana race was the only contest in which a state flipped from one party to another, giving of President Trump was strongly predictive of the decision to support Gianforte with 86 percent of those approving of Trump backing Gianforte and 89 percent of those disapproving supporting Cooney. Cooney was supported by 76 percent of those who said containing the coronavirus was

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*A Return to Normalcy?: The 2020 Election that (Almost) Broke America.* Larry J. Sabato, Kyle Kondik and J. Miles Coleman. Eds. Lanham; Rowman and Littlefield. 137.

<sup>39</sup> Exit Polls. North Carolina. CNN. <<https://www.cnn.com/election/2020/exit-polls/governor/north-carolina>>



## After the

Perhaps the most contentious element of state politics in the context of the 2020 election concerned the aftermath of Election Day. In the United States, elections are run at the state and local levels and most of these activities – processing voter registrations, managing polling places, tabulating ballots, etc. – are typically invisible elements of the voting process to most voters. That was not true in 2020 with the ballot counting process being scrutinized to an unprecedented degree.

Two elements of the GOP response to the election stand out in this regard. The first of results in the courts. GOP state attorneys general joined a broader challenge by Trump loyalists to have the courts intervene in the certification of election results. The second was the call by GOP state legislators for audits of the election results, some of which, including one in Arizona, have been accused of doing more to sow distrust in the electoral process rather than rebuild it. Ultimately, the court cases and audits of the election illustrate that state powers – legal and investigatory – could be used to further national political agendas and branding efforts.

Regarding the former, the most-high profile, though ultimately unsuccessful, case in this regard was that of *Texas v. Pennsylvania* in which Texas, led by State Attorney General Ken Paxton, along with sixteen other states, all with Republican , challenged the election results of Pennsylvania, Georgia, Wisconsin, and Michigan on the grounds that election laws were unconstitutionally altered by executive officials and courts and therefore the results could be voided. In the initial motion to file a Bill of Complaint, Paxton noted that he and

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tures with



One criticism of the case was that it was filed merely as a publicity stunt. Richard L.

<sup>46</sup> Again, I do not wish to relitigate the legitimacy or strength of the arguments presented in this or any of the cases brought before the

The plaintiffs in the case challenged state laws and practices rather than federal laws or guidelines.

A second feature of the post-2020 election environment is the extent to which partisan challenges to the results proliferated and became markers of loyalty to and affiliation with the Republican party, and to former President Trump in particular. Republican legislators have







previous election are being targeted as illegitimate go beyond mere regular jockeying for electoral advantages through rule changes. These challenges also seem to be motivational forces for the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>.

### **Conclusion: State Parties, National Partisanship**

The 2020 election cycle is one in which state and local politics mattered a great deal but this was because the actions of state and local party actors and the voting behavior of state and local constituencies reflected national partisan priorities and conflict to an unprecedented degree. The actions taken by governors and mayors in terms of the coronavirus pandemic, rising crime, and racial justice protests were actions with significant implications at the state and local levels. However, despite the autonomy inherent in executive office and the diversity of policies enacted allowed by the United States federal constitutional design, national partisan affiliation became reflected in the policy prescriptions and approaches taken by local and state officials in response to these challenges.

These differences were reflected during the 2020 campaign season. In particular, national party organizations, including the DGA and the RGA, incorporated the disparate responses of Democratic and Republican governors in their messaging with GOP governors attacking lockdowns, mask mandates, and economic restrictions and Democrats critiquing their Republican counterparts for not taking the pandemic seriously enough. This messaging reflected the rhetoric emerging from the Trump White House. Likewise, the Biden campaign emphasized a commitment to public health and racial justice, and included response to the pandemic, in particular the pres to slow the spread of the virus. Moreover, support for Democrats and Republicans at the state-level reflected national splits over President Trump, responses to the pandemic, and attitudes

toward issues of race. That is voting behavior of the public mirrored the differences in approaches to national crises seen during the campaign season.

refusal to concede the race resulted in the prolonging and amplification of partisan warfare. State and local officials became implicated in this contestation of election results to an extent not seen since 1876. What makes this element of the 2020 election cycle unique is the extent to which state and local officials became agents not in preserving the role of states in the electoral process but in challenging the results of the election in other states, though certain officials including GA Secretary of State Brad Raffensberger and AZ Governor Doug Ducey did defend the voting process and results in their respective states. This was especially true in the case of Texas v. Pennsylvania

of *other* states. That the partisan audits have dragged on into 2021 also indicates that believing tied to identification with the Republican party.

It has become commonplace for political scientists to quote former Speaker of the House somehow qualify the statement based on their findings. I feel compelled to do so here: increasingly state and local politics constitute state and local venues for national politics. The organizations, among other factors, have resulted in a partisan landscape defined by high polarization and out-partisan hostility, often referred to as negative partisanship.<sup>55</sup> State and local actors remain incredibly important in the American political system. They retain constitutional

and statutory authorities that are impactful. In the final analysis, the integration and nationalization of the American party system has not diminished the importance of these actors.

political contestation between the parties. State and local elected officials are members of national political parties and their powers are perhaps now more than ever being interpreted in light of national politics.