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Understanding How Campaigns Matter

This book examines the time-honored yet unsettled question of whether campaigns ultimately shape citizens' assessments of the competing candidates. To be sure, the historic 2020 US presidential campaign is a fascinating setting to explore this question. This election captured the attention and interest of tens of millions of Americans and people across the globe. The number of citizens who voted in 2020 was a high-water mark for contemporary US presidential elections, with over 159 million ballots cast, representing over 66 percent of the voting-eligible population.[1] The 2020 presidential election was also the costliest election in US history, more than doubling the expenditures in the 2016 presidential election, with spending topping $5.7 billion.[2]

The political context of the election was dramatic. The entire presidential campaign was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The incumbent president, Donald Trump, not only contracted the virus but was hospitalized on October 2, 2020, for three days, generating a national and international media frenzy. A *New York Times* article published on October 2 captured the intensity and anxiety of the moment:

> President Trump was hospitalized on Friday evening after learning he had the coronavirus and experiencing what aides called coughing, congestion and fever, throwing the nation's leadership into uncertainty and destabilizing an already volatile campaign only 32 days before the election. Mr. Trump was flown to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center after being given an experimental antibody treatment as the White House rushed to cope with a commander-in-chief

[1] www.electproject.org/2020g

[2] www.opensecrets.org/news/2021/02/2020-cycle-cost-14p4-billion-doubling-16/

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infected by a virus that has killed more than 208,000 people in the United States. (Baker and Haberman, 2020a)

President Trump was released on October 5, followed by a barrage of coverage focusing on his treatment and recovery. By the eve of the election, the United States led the world in cases and deaths due to COVID-19, with over 9 million Americans having contracted COVID-19 and more than 232,000 deaths from the illness.

The COVID-19 pandemic also plunged the nation and much of the globe into a recession. The Dow Jones Index, measuring the stock performance of the thirty largest companies on the US stock exchange, lost 37 percent of its value between February 12 and March 23. By April, the market began to recover, and by Election Day, stocks were trading in near record territory. The pandemic dramatically slowed economic growth by April 2020, halting a strong economic first quarter. But the economy began to improve during the summer and early fall. For instance, the percent change in the growth of the gross domestic product (GDP) from the first to second quarter of 2020 dropped by over 30 percent, representing the biggest contraction ever recorded, but the GDP rebounded in the third quarter. Finally, the unemployment rate increased from 3.5 percent in February to 14.8 percent in April, with over twenty million people out of work and wiping out a decade or more of employment gains. By October, the unemployment rate had dropped to 6.9 percent.[3] The COVID-19 pandemic produced an economic rollercoaster that Americans would ride from early spring through the fall of 2020.

The summer of 2020 saw the largest and most intense racial unrest in the nation since 1968 in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King. In 2020, the protests were ignited by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police over the Memorial Day weekend. Protests, demonstrations, marches, and gatherings took place across the nation, involving millions of people. The largest single day of protests may have occurred on June 6, 2020, with approximately 500,000 people in the streets in almost 550 cities and towns from coast to coast (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel, 2020). In total, as many as 26 million Americans participated in demonstrations and protests across the summer. While the vast majority of social justice marches were peaceful, property was vandalized and destroyed in multiple cities and thousands of protesters were arrested. The COVID-19 pandemic, a volatile economic recession, and racial unrest set the landscape for the 2020 general election contest. American citizens were

[3] www.bbc.com/news/world-45827430

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intensely polarized around the two parties' nominees, holding strong preferences for their preferred candidates (French, 2020; Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck, 2022). To heighten partisan anxieties further, tracking polls during the fall campaign suggested that Joe Biden was leading, but given the polling errors in the 2016 election predicting a comfortable Clinton victory, the status of the race was difficult to assess (NPR, 2020).

The highly polarized environment produced a set of unusual incidents. For example, the first presidential debate was intensely negative and unruly, with the moderator unable to keep order during the ninety-minute fracas. The behavior of the candidates led to unprecedented changes in the debate rules prior to the second debate, with the Commission on Presidential Debates deciding to mute the microphone of the candidate not speaking in order to minimize interruptions. Second, the incumbent president openly questioned the integrity of the election as the campaign moved toward Election Day. Sensing he was behind, Trump began to sow doubt regarding the security of the electoral process, repeatedly alleging that mail voting was fraught with fraud. While he had made allegations about voter fraud during the 2016 campaign, the frequency and intensity of claims was significantly greater in the 2020 campaign (Graham, 2020; Kessler and Rizzo, 2020). Interwoven with Trump's assertions about fraudulent ballots was his refusal to say he would accept the results of the election if he lost (Kapur, 2020).[4]

Electoral campaigns play a fundamental role in a representative democracy, helping citizens make decisions about their future leaders. Did events and issues during the 2020 presidential campaign influence people's views of the candidates, affecting their ultimate voting decisions? In *The Bitter End*, Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck (2022: 245) show that the 2020 campaign did not sway voters but "intensified long-term trends toward greater polarization and calcification." In another ambitious examination of the 2020 campaign, Levendusky et al. (2023) show that different types of voters were exposed to different informational environments. Voters who were unwavering in their choice for president were often safely ensconced in echo chambers, reinforcing their preferences. In contrast, wavering voters often experienced a more complex and diverse media environment. By linking voters with their information environments, Levendusky et al. (2023) show how central issues of the campaign, like Trump's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, affected voters' decisions.

[4] During the final presidential debate in 2016, Trump said he might not accept the results of the election if he felt it was rigged against him (Healy and Martin, 2016).

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In our examination of the 2020 election, we are interested in exploring three key questions: How do citizens interpret salient issues and events during the months of the fall election? What are the different types of lenses utilized by citizens when they view and assess these events and issues? And do these assessments of events and issues shape how citizens evaluate the competing candidates and make choices between the candidates? We develop an original theory to help us answer these questions: the *citizen-centered theory of campaigns*.

We argue that the contemporary media landscape provides accessible, cheap, and numerous opportunities for citizens to follow the candidates and the campaign. This environment allows citizens to be more active in their search for information, increasing the importance of citizen characteristics, including psychological predispositions, when assessing the candidates, campaign events, and campaign issues. We hypothesize that psychological predispositions provide a lens for potential voters to understand and interpret the events and issues of the campaign. We will show that people's psychological predispositions consistently and powerfully influence views of the campaign and candidates, even taking into account people's partisan proclivities, their views of the economy, and their attention to partisan news sources. We turn first to review the state of the literature on "campaign effects" before elaborating on the theoretical framework guiding our investigation.

HOW CAMPAIGNS MATTER: THE STATE OF THE LITERATURE

The first systematic study of campaign effects was conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet when they studied the 1940 US presidential election between President Franklin Roosevelt (Democrat) and Wendell Willkie (Republican). This election, too, was a historic presidential election as Franklin Roosevelt was the first president to seek a third term. After witnessing the rise of Hitler and the persuasiveness of propaganda in Nazi Germany during the 1930s, the researchers were interested in examining the impact of the mass media in presidential campaigns in the United States. Relying on an innovative and ambitious design, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) conducted a panel study of 600 people from Erie County, Ohio. These panel respondents were interviewed each month for the seven months leading up to the November presidential election.

The results of the study, reported in *The People's Choice*, found that newspapers and radio did not have a profound impact on voters' decisions.

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Instead, the news media largely reinforced preexisting predispositions. For example, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet report that over half of the panel respondents had decided on a candidate by June of the election year and only 8 percent of the sample switched their vote choice from one candidate to another during the course of the campaign.

While the findings of the study disconfirm the hypodermic needle theory of communication (i.e., people passively accept media messages), the authors maintain that campaigns do matter for the outcome of the election.[5] They argue that "political communication served the important purposes of preserving citizens' prior decisions instead of initiating new decisions. It kept the partisans 'in line' by reassuring them in their vote decision; it reduced defection from the ranks" (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948: 87). In other words, the authors find that campaigns activate preexisting preferences.[6] For voters who are undecided or unsure of their voting decision, the campaign can activate predispositions.

The lack of persuasive effects described in the Columbia studies were later reinforced by research showing that presidential election outcomes can be predicted by factors in place well before the start of the general election campaign, such as the state of the economy and the popularity of the president (e.g., Hibbs, 2000; Lewis-Beck and Rice, 1992; Rosenstone, 1983; Tufte, 1978). For example, Gelman and King (1993) find that fundamental conditions (e.g., economic conditions) can predict the results of the election more accurately than polls taken during the campaign.

In addition, studies looking at contemporary elections have identified "minimal effects" of campaigns. For example, Coppock, Hill, and Vavreck (2020), examined the impact of nearly fifty political advertisements in a series of unique experiments over the course of the 2016 presidential election and find that these advertisements produce only small average effects on candidate favorability and vote choice.[7] Similarly, Kalla and Broockman (2018), conducted a meta-analysis of more than forty field experiments as well as designing and implementing their own field experiments prior to the 2016 election and find that, on average, campaign contact does not persuade voters. Aggarwal et al. (2023) utilized a massive field experiment involving two million people in five battleground states to examine whether an eight-month social media campaign altered turnout in the 2020 election. While the overall effect

[5] See Iyengar and Simon (2000) for a discussion of the hypodermic approach to persuasion.

[6] See also Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee's (1954) study of the 1948 presidential election.

[7] Also, see Coppock, Green, and Porter (2022) for similar small effects with digital advertising in the 2018 US midterm elections in Florida.

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on turnout was effectively zero, the authors did find evidence for a small differential mobilization effect. That is, the advertising campaign had a small mobilizing effect among Biden leaners and a small demobilizing effect among Trump leaners.

Scholars, however, do not dispute that the influence of the fundamentals, such as the partisan distribution of the electorate and the economic health of the country, plays a key role in determining the outcome of elections. The fundamentals set the parameters for the presidential campaigns. More specifically, political campaigns are a mechanism where poorly informed voters learn about the contours of the election (e.g., how the state of the economy connects to their partisan predispositions). Vavreck (2009: 158) makes exactly this point when examining presidential elections from 1952 to 2008, saying, "The economy matters because the candidate who benefits from it talks about it a lot during the campaign and this makes voters more aware of the condition and this candidate's relationship to it." Precisely because campaigns send messages about key fundamentals, these factors become increasingly predictive of people's vote preferences as the campaign progresses (e.g., Campbell, 2008; Erikson and Wlezien, 2012; Gelman and King, 1993; Sides and Vavreck, 2014; Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck, 2022).

In addition, a number of studies demonstrate that campaign events, like national nominating conventions and debates, can make a difference to voters (e.g., Hillygus and Shields, 2009; Holbrook, 1996; Panagopoulos, 2012; Shaw, 1999; Sides and Vavreck, 2014). For instance, Kenski, Hardy, and Jamieson (2010) and Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson (2004), relying on large rolling cross sections of respondents over the length of the campaign, find voters respond in a systematic way to specific campaign events. Presidential debates, especially one-sided affairs, can alter the fundamentals of an electoral contest (Panagopoulos, 2012; Shaw, 1999; Weinschenk and Panagopoulos, 2016). For example, Hillygus and Shields (2009), when examining the dynamics of the 2000 presidential election, find that 16 percent of cross-pressured partisans (e.g., citizens who hold policy positions incongruent with their partisanship) and 20 percent of independents changed their vote preference after the presidential debates. Both presidential debates and national conventions can be consequential because citizens' attention is focused on the candidates and the campaign for a sustained period of time and citizens are likely to learn about the candidates' policy positions, personal characteristics, and issue priorities.

Political advertisements may also influence citizens' choices by providing information about the competing candidates (e.g., Brader, 2005;

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Fridkin and Kenney, 2019; Huber and Arceneaux, 2007; Valentino, Hutchings, and Williams, 2004). For example, Huber and Arceneaux (2007), exploiting a natural experiment in the 2000 presidential election and matching records of locally broadcast presidential advertising with the opinions of National Annenberg Election Survey respondents, find that paid campaign advertising is successful in producing changes in vote preferences. More recently, Sides, Vavreck, and Warshaw (2022) look at the relationship between televised political advertisements and vote share between 2000 and 2018. They find that political advertising in presidential elections has a modest but significant impact on vote share, with advertising effects growing in strength in down-ballot contests. Some scholars also demonstrate that direct mail, personal canvassing, and phone calls can be persuasive (e.g., Arceneaux, 2007; Doherty and Adler, 2014).

More generally, the messages being sent by the candidates, political parties, and interest groups, as well as the coverage of these communications via traditional and online news, can inform voters about the competing candidates. For instance, numerous scholars demonstrate that voters learn about the issue stances of candidates during electoral campaigns, ultimately influencing voting decisions (e.g., Alvarez, 1998; Conover and Feldman, 1989; Dalager, 1996; Franklin, 1991; Holbrook, 1999). Alvarez and Glasgow (1997) use panel data from the 1976 and 1980 presidential elections as well as content analysis of campaign coverage and find that voters become better informed about the positions of candidates on a number of issues and these changes are related to the information flow of the campaigns. In addition, political campaigns can shape people's assessments of the candidates' character, leadership, empathy, and integrity, and these assessments influence overall evaluations of the candidates and eventual vote choice (e.g., Fridkin and Kenney, 2011; Popkin, 2012; Peterson, 2009).

Political campaigns are also influential in changing people's priorities among political issues. Candidates compete to set the public's agenda on specific issues that favor their candidacy. In the 1992 presidential election between President George H. W. Bush and his Democratic challenger, Bill Clinton, the Clinton campaign emphasized the country's economic woes during the general election campaign. In fact, in order to keep the campaign staff focused on the central issues of the campaign, Clinton's campaign manager, James Carville, posted a sign in the campaign headquarters saying "It's the economy, stupid" (Bennett, 2013).[8] By focusing

[8] The posted sign also included the phrases "Change versus more of the same" and "Don't forget about health care."

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on the economy, an issue that would favor Clinton over Bush, the Clinton campaign sought to "prime" voters to think about the economy when evaluating the competing candidates. More generally, during campaigns, opposing candidates seek to adjust the importance voters attach to different considerations by emphasizing issues (or personal traits) that benefit their candidacy (Hillygus, 2010).

Several studies demonstrate the importance of priming specific considerations during political campaigns. For instance, researchers show that the impact of partisanship on candidate preferences increases as Election Day approaches (e.g., Erikson and Wlezien, 2012; Levendusky et al., 2023; Sides and Vavreck, 2014; Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck, 2022). The campaign can also prime ideology (e.g., Hillygus and Shields, 2009), specific policy issues (e.g., Kenski, Hardy, and Jamieson, 2010), personal traits (e.g., Druckman, 2004), and affect (e.g., Kühne et al., 2011).

Thus far, we have considered how campaigns via political events, the news media, and campaign messages influence citizens' understanding of the candidates' issue positions, personal characteristics, and ideology. And we have discussed how campaigns influence the criteria voters think about when evaluating competing candidates. Campaigns, in addition, can influence voters by increasing (or decreasing) their likelihood of participating in the election. An extensive number of sophisticated field experiments examine how contacts by campaign organizations can prompt citizens to go to the polls on Election Day. A recent review of field experiments by Green and Gerber (2019) suggests that personal contact is most effective. For example, the authors estimate that door-to-door canvassing increases turnout by about 2.5 percentage points. Phone banking is less influential, but volunteer phone calls are more effective than commercial phone banking. Automated phone messages, in contrast, are ineffective.

Moving beyond traditional modes of mobilization, Malhotra et al. (2011) conducted two field experiments to explore whether text messages urging people to vote increase turnout. In both experiments, the authors find that text messages significantly increase mobilization, and these effects are most pronounced for habitual voters in low salient elections.[9] More recently, Mann (2021) conducted a field experiment where participants were randomly assigned to receive a mobilization treatment where they were reminded by a political chatbot (Resistbot) to vote.

[9] Similarly, Shaw, Dun, and Heise (2022), relying on a field experiment in three competitive congressional districts in California in 2018, also find text messages increase turnout.

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These participants were also provided with information on polling locations. Mann finds that the experimental treatment increases turnout by nearly 2 percentage points.

The negativity of campaign messages, too, influences turnout in elections (e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1999; Kahn and Kenney, 1999). A review of the literature suggests that negative messages including relevant information about the targeted candidate can increase participation in elections (e.g., Finkel and Geer, 1998) while negative messages packed with uncivil and irrelevant attacks may decrease turnout (e.g., Fridkin and Kenney, 2019).[10] Further, the important issues of the day may push people to the polls. For example, Burden and Wichowsky (2014), analyzing county-level data from 1976 to 2008, find that economic discontent mobilizes people to vote. In addition, polarization in people's views of the rival candidates increases people's likelihood of voting in an election (e.g., Abramowitz and Stone, 2006; Hetherington, 2008; Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018).[11] Finally, research suggests that divisive primaries may affect participation in the general election (e.g., Fridkin et al., 2017). For example, Makse and Sokhey (2010), looking at voters in Ohio's Franklin County in 2008, find that Clinton primary voters participated less frequently in the fall campaign when compared to Obama primary voters.

In summary, the literature examining the impact of campaigns on voters indicates campaign communications and news media coverage are unlikely to persuade voters to switch from their existing preferences of one candidate to voting for another candidate. Further, fundamentals, such as the partisan distribution of the electorate, the state of the economy, and the popularity of the incumbent president, set the parameters for each electoral contest. However, events like presidential debates and national nominating conventions can influence views of the competing candidates and affect voting decisions. Further messages from the candidates, political parties, and the news media do inform voters about the candidates' policy positions, policy priorities, and personal characteristics. And campaign messages, via the candidates or the news media, can alter the criteria voters consider when evaluating the competing candidates. Finally, aspects of the campaign (e.g., mobilization messages, the

[10] Some scholars suggest that competitive campaigns will push people to the polls, but there is little evidence of a direct effect of the closeness of the race on turnout (e.g., Gerber et al., 2020). Instead, close contests lead campaign strategists to spend more money on mobilization efforts to encourage turnout (Cox and Munger, 1989).

[11] On the other hand, some research suggests that increases in polarization lead moderates to disengage from politics (e.g., Fiorina and Levendusky, 2006; Rogowski, 2014).

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negativity of the campaign, salient issues, national crises) can encourage or discourage participation in the election. We turn next to articulating our theoretical expectations regarding how we expect campaigns to influence voters' decisions.

CITIZEN-CENTERED THEORY OF CAMPAIGNS

With the literature as our anchor, we present a framework for understanding how people's predispositions influence interpretations of campaign events and issues, ultimately affecting evaluations of the competing candidates and vote choice. Citizens sit at the center of our theory. In today's media landscape, citizens take an active role in deciding what information they choose to acquire about candidates and campaigns (Arceneaux and Johnson, 2013). They can access a plethora of information widely and continuously via social media apps, internet sources, legacy news sources (e.g., newspapers, broadcast news), and partisan news outlets.[12] In a recent column in the *New York Times*, Frank Bruni makes precisely this point when he writes,

> Thanks to the sprawling real estate of cable television and the infinite expanse of the internet, we live in an age of so many information options, so many news purveyors, that we have an unprecedented ability to search out the one or ones that tell us precisely what we want to hear, for whatever reason we want to hear it. We needn't reckon with the truth. We can shop for it instead.[13]

Citizens' preexisting values and beliefs drive how they search and assimilate information during presidential elections. We have known for a long time that partisanship strongly influences how citizens view candidates during campaigns (e.g., Bartels, 2000, 2018; Campbell et al., 1960). The growth of partisan news outlets makes it easier for people to seek out partisan-congruent information, if they choose, thereby strengthening the impact of partisanship in contemporary campaigns (Levendusky et al., 2023; Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck, 2022).

While people's political proclivities clearly influence the impact of campaigns, it is important to move beyond political predispositions and begin to systematically examine how psychological characteristics of

[12] More than nine in ten Americans have internet access, with 72 percent of adults using social media platforms, increasing the ease of acquiring information consistent with one's preexisting political attitudes. See the following PEW Research Center fact sheets for information about internet use and social media use. www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/ www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/

[13] www.nytimes.com/2023/04/13/opinion/tucker-carlson-murdoch-fox.html

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citizens influence their interpretation of electoral contests. There is widespread consensus among scholars that preexisting beliefs influence the assimilation of new information (e.g., Coppock, 2023; Gawronski, 2012; Jost, Baldassarri, and Druckman, 2022).[14] These preexisting beliefs may be driven by partisan proclivities as well as psychological predispositions. Further, these psychological and political characteristics influence people's receptiveness to different types of incoming information. In the end, people are a bundle of predispositions, and these predispositions will influence the acquisition and processing of new information.

To illustrate how psychological predispositions may influence the acquisition and interpretation of information, we consider people who believe in conspiracies. These individuals will be more likely to seek out information confirming their belief in conspiracies and will be more likely to dismiss reports that disconfirm their beliefs. For example, people suspicious about the safety of the COVID-19 vaccine may turn to YouTube to find out about possible side effects from the vaccine, including infertility and impotence. Similarly, these individuals may click on stories appearing on their Facebook feed reporting serious reactions to the COVID-19 vaccines and avoid other stories hailing the success of these vaccines. Further, since algorithms used by online platforms shower people with stories related to their initial searches (Barnhart, 2021; Finkel et al., 2020), concerns about the vaccines may be reinforced and accentuated by the plethora of stories disseminated to the screens of people who have previously searched for information on vaccine side effects. Finally, when confronted with information validating the safety of the COVID-19 vaccine, individuals may dismiss the evidence altogether, may be motivated to continue to search for confirmatory information, or may become more entrenched in their initial view about the vaccines (e.g., Glinitzer, Gummer, and Wagner, 2021; Ma, Dixon, and Hmielowski, 2019).

The idea that psychological predispositions may inform how citizens make decisions during campaigns is not new. More than sixty years ago, Lane (1955: 175) explained: "Each election, then, varies not only in the degree to which it evokes decisions determined by personality, but also with respect to the nature of the personality syndromes which are relevant." In fact, Lane found a relationship between authoritarian attitudes (versus equalitarian attitudes) and vote choice in the 1948 and 1952 presidential elections.

[14] While scholars disagree about the mechanism (i.e., motivated reasoning, Bayesian updating), they do not disagree that prior information influences the processing of incoming information (e.g., Coppock, 2023; Bullock, 2009; Druckman and McGrath, 2019; Gerber and Green, 1999; Redlawsk, 2002).

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There are numerous examples exploring the link between psychological predispositions and vote choice. Kinder and Kam (2010) find that ethnocentrism, a deep-seated "psychological predisposition" rooted in tensions found in-group and out-group conflict, affected voters' assessments of McCain and Obama in the 2008 election. Uscinski et al. (2021), examining the 2020 election, identify an "antiestablishment dimension" of opinion (i.e., conspiracy thinking, populism, and Machiavellianism) that is orthogonal to the traditional left–right spectrum and associated with positive feelings toward Trump and Sanders but not related to views of Biden. Several scholars have examined the link between the Big Five Personality traits (i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism) and turnout in elections. For example, Mattila et al. (2011) find that extraversion and agreeableness increase participation, while Gerber et al. (2011) show that conscientiousness is negatively related to participation. Looking at vote choice in the 2004 presidential election, Barbaranelli et al. (2007) find that citizens with higher levels of agreeableness and openness are more likely to vote for the Democrat candidate, while conscientiousness and emotional stability are positively related to voting for the Republican candidate.[15]

In the context of the 2020 election, we identify a set of psychological predispositions we expect to be particularly salient given characteristics of the rival candidates and the important issues of the day. In particular, we theorize that five psychological predispositions are especially important for understanding people's assessment of the 2020 campaign: racial resentment, hostile sexism, authoritarianism, conspiratorial thinking, and conflict avoidance. Our key goal is to embrace Lane's (1955) observation and to systematically incorporate measures of psychological predispositions alongside political predispositions when exploring citizens' understanding and assessment of the campaign.[16]

In the next few pages, we dedicated a significant amount of time reviewing these concepts and explaining their relevance for the electoral

[15] These examples are illustrative. Not surprisingly, scholars have looked at the impact of additional personality characteristics on people's political attitudes and behaviors, such as the need for chaos, empathetic ability, and the need for cognition (e.g., Arceneaux et al., 2021; Feldman et al., 2019; DeZala, Golec, Cislak, and Wesolowska, 2010).

[16] To be sure, these five psychological predispositions do not represent an exhaustive list. However, if we can demonstrate these specific psychological characteristics affect how citizens perceive the events and issues of campaigns, then future scholarship can explore the importance of additional psychological predispositions. In the concluding chapter, we identify and discuss additional psychological characteristics and hypothesize how these characteristics may influence citizens in future campaigns.

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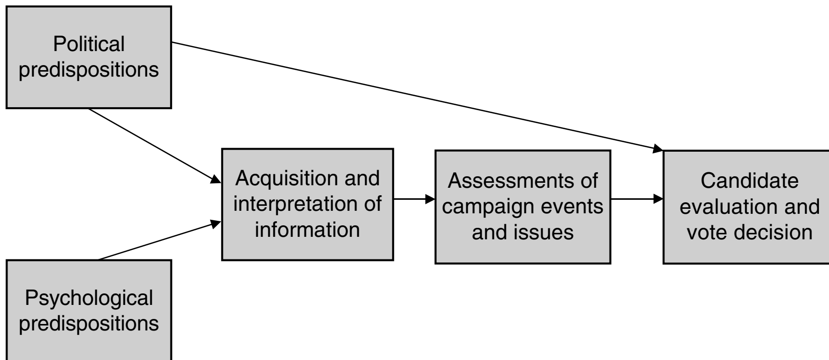

FIGURE 1.1 How people's predispositions influence the consequences of campaigns

contest between Trump and Biden. And, in the chapters to follow, we demonstrate that these psychological predispositions consistently and powerfully influence how people interpret campaign events and issues, even when people's political proclivities are taken into account.

To summarize, the citizen-centered theory of campaigns leads us to expect that people's predispositions (both political and psychological) will drive the procurement and assimilation of information, influencing how individuals evaluate campaign events and campaign issues, and ultimately how these evaluations influence their views of the competing candidates and their voting decisions. We describe this process in Figure 1.1. First, people's psychological and political predispositions are expected to affect the type of information accessed as well as the interpretation of this information. Second, acquired information will directly influence people's evaluations of major campaign events and issues. Third, people's assessments of these components of the campaign will shape evaluations of the candidates and decisions about voting. Political predispositions, such as partisanship, will indirectly and directly influence evaluations of the candidates as well as vote choice. In contrast, since psychological predispositions do not have a clear political direction, we do not expect psychological predispositions to directly influence views of the candidates and vote decisions.[17]

We turn next to discussing the five psychological predispositions we consider especially salient during the 2020 election. We discuss our reasoning for including each of these predispositions, offer our expectations

[17] Nevertheless, we will test for a direct link between psychological predispositions and overall evaluations of the candidates and vote preference.

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about how each will influence assessments of the campaign, and present details about measurement.

Racial Resentment

The first psychological predisposition we examine acknowledges the importance of racial attitudes in America. The issue of race predates the republic itself and is emblazoned into the nation's founding documents and history. The struggle with slavery and its tragic consequences, such as the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, have plagued the nation for more than two centuries. American citizens across generations have formed, altered, shared, and harbored views about race and many of its consequences (e.g., Du Bois, 1903; Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Myrdal, 1944; Sniderman and Piazza, 1993). There are trigger moments when views about race come to the fore such as the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in the fall of 1963, a prelude to the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the murder of Martin Luther King in the spring of 1968, with subsequent protests across the country; and the epidemic of killings of Black men at the hands of police in 2014 (e.g., Eric Garner in New York City on July 17, 2014; Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014), spurring the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement.

In the context of the 2020 campaign, views about race were inevitably going to be salient. The sitting president had a history of controversial behavior regarding race. In the 1970s, the US Department of Justice sued Trump and his father for violating the Fair Housing Act of 1968 by refusing to rent apartments to people "because of race and color" (Dunlap, 2015). Decades later, Trump became a political force when he embraced "birtherism" with the false charge that the nation's first Black president, Barack Obama, was not born in the United States (Abramson, 2016). And approximately six months into Trump's presidency, hundreds of neo-Nazis and white supremacists marched in Charlottesville to protest the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee. On the day of these protests, August 12, 2017, a Black man named DeAndre Harris was beaten by at least four white supremacists. On the same day, a twenty-year-old white supremacist from Ohio drove his car into a crowd of counterprotesters, killing thirty-two-year-old Heather Heyer and injuring thirty-five others.[18]

[18] www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/18/charlottesville-mayor-opposes-robert-e-lee-statue-a-lightning-rod-for-terrorism

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Speaking a few days later at a news conference, Trump said, "I think there's blame on both sides. If you look at both sides – I think there's blame on both sides…and you had some very bad people in that group, but you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides." Joe Biden said Trump's comments at the August press conference motivated him to challenge Trump in 2020: "With those words, the president of the United States assigned a moral equivalence between those spreading hate and those with the courage to stand against it" (Holan, 2019).

Based on the citizen-centered theory of campaigns, we expect people's views of race to influence their search for information and how they subsequently interpret and evaluate the candidates, campaign issues, and campaign events. As an illustration, Trump launched his successful presidential campaign in the summer of 2015 saying, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending the best. They're not sending you; they're sending people that have lots of problems and they're bringing those problems. They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime. They're rapists and some, I assume, are good people" (Gamboa, 2015). Citizens who were sympathetic to Trump's message may have sought to acquire additional information confirming the link between immigration and crime and may have turned to news sites and social media platforms producing such content.[19] We argue that the easy availability of information supporting divergent viewpoints makes it possible for people to acquire communications consonant with their predilections, thereby affecting people's interpretation of racial messages during political campaigns.

We know that racial attitudes influence voting preferences (e.g., Valentino, Hutchings, and White, 2002), support for government policy (e.g., Gilens, 1995), and approval of the president (e.g., Tesler, 2013). While scholars have offered alternative measures of racism (for a review, see Huddy, Feldman and Sen, 2023), we utilize the racial resentment scale.[20] Kinder and Sanders (1996: 105–106) explain that racial resentment is a form of racism that rests on the view "that Blacks do not try hard enough to overcome the difficulties they face and they take what they have not earned." We rely on the following four items to measure

[19] For example, individuals sympathetic to Trump's message may have listened to a story appearing on Fox News that "shines light on the shocking crimes committed by illegal immigrants." www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MpAahd-Q6g

[20] According to Cramer (2020), the racial resentment scale has been the dominant measure of symbolic racism and strongly predicts political preferences and evaluations of political figures. Nevertheless, as Cramer discusses, alternative measures are available, including racial threat measures, implicit association tests of racism, and explicit racism measures.

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racial resentment: (1) "Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors." (2) "Over the past few years Blacks have gotten less than they deserve." (3) "It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder, they could be just as well off as whites." (4) "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class" (Henry and Sears, 2002: 260–261). Respondents are asked to agree or disagree with each of the statements on a five-point scale.[21]

Hostile Sexism

The second psychological predisposition we examine recognizes the history of sexism in the United States. The dynamic nature of public opinion about women's rights and opportunities have formed the backbone of several large mass movements working to acquire greater equality for women in society, including the Women's Suffrage Movement as part of the Progressive Movement (1890s–1920s), the Second Wave Feminist Movement (1960s–1970s), and the #MeToo Movement (2006–present).[22]

While women's role in society has improved over the arc of US history, sexism remains a pernicious fact in contemporary society. For instance, women are still paid less than men, regardless of their level of education (Barroso and Brown, 2021). Further, women hold less than 30 percent of the seats in the US Congress and only 18 percent of the governorships (CAWP, 2021), and only 8 percent of the 500 largest corporations in the United States have women CEOs (Mazzoni, 2021). A poll conducted in the summer of 2020 showed that a majority (57 percent) of respondents believe "the U.S. hasn't gone far enough when it comes to giving women equal rights with men" (Barroso, 2020). Among respondents who think the country has work to do in achieving gender equality, 77 percent say sexual harassment is a major obstacle to women's equality; 67 percent say women do not have the same legal rights as men; 66 percent say

[21] Items 1 and 3 are scored such that high agreement indicates high levels of racial resentment while items 2 and 4 are scored such that high disagreement indicates high levels of racial resentment. With our survey data, Cronbach's alpha for the racial resentment scale is .82. The mean (and standard deviation) of the racial resentment scale for our sample is 12.23 (4.42). The scale ranges from a low of 4 to a high of 20.

[22] See Grady (2018) for a discussion of the different waves of feminism.

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societal expectations are different for men and women; and 64 percent say women are less likely to be in positions of power compared to men.

With this backdrop, the candidacy and election of Donald Trump in 2016 was seen by some as an assault on women, spurring the Women's March on the day after Trump's inauguration in January 2017. Hundreds of thousands gathered in Washington and thousands more protested in cities across the country (Hartocolli and Alcindor, 2017). Trump has a long history of misogyny, sexual harassment, sexism, and unwanted sexual advances (Nelson, 2016). A total of eighteen women publicly accused him of sexual misconduct (Keneally, 2020). Further, he repeatedly disparaged women's looks, such as calling comedian Rosie O'Donnell "a big fat pig," "disgusting," "a slob," and "a very unattractive person."

Biden's history with women was not unblemished. For instance, he faced sharp criticism for his treatment of Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas hearings in 1991. However, since those hearings more than thirty years ago, Biden worked to "redeem himself with women" by advocating for women, such as introducing the Violence against Women Act in 1994 (Kranish and Viser, 2020). In March 2020, he committed to picking a woman to be the vice president if he secured the Democratic nomination. A few months later, he made good on his promise by picking Kamala Harris as his running mate (Schwartz, 2020). Harris was a historic choice: the first Black woman and the first person of Indian descent to be nominated for national office by a major party (Burns and Glueck, 2020).

A growing literature suggests that people's attitudes toward women influence their views of politics, including assessments of presidential candidates (e.g., Filindra, Kaplan, and Buyuker, 2021; Glick, 2019; Ratliff et al., 2019; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta, 2018). While sexist attitudes have been measured in a number of ways (e.g., Larsen and Long, 1988; Spence and Hahn, 1997), we turn to Glick and Fiske's (2001: 116) ambivalence sexism theory that highlights the "coexistence of power difference and intimate interdependence between the sexes." This conceptualization produces two dimensions of sexism: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism justifies men's power through sexist antipathy and predicts hostility toward women who are seen as challenging men's power. Benevolent sexism legitimizes men's power by promising women that men will take care of them, predicting benevolence toward women who behave in a way consistent with conventional gender norms.

We focus on hostile sexism, characterized by negative attitudes that demean women, including viewing women as untrustworthy, power-seeking, and manipulative (Glick and Fiske, 1996). Glick (2019: 715)

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explains that given Trump's "misogynistic behavior and heteronormative masculinity, hostile sexists would likely view Trump as holding similar attitudes to themselves." We rely on the following four items developed by Glick and Fiske to assess hostile sexism: (1) Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for "equality." (2) Feminists are not seeking for women to have more power than men. (3) Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist. (4) Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men.[23]

According to the citizen-centered theory of campaigns, people's level of hostile sexism will influence their search for campaign information, thereby reinforcing their views of women's role in politics and society. We expect hostile sexists to accumulate information supporting their stereotypical views of women, potentially altering how they view the political candidates and the campaign. For example, we hypothesize that hostile sexists will agree with Trump's characterization of Kamala Harris, the Democratic vice-presidential nominee, as "nasty," "mad," "angry," and "a monster" (Clifton, 2020; Summers, 2020). Further, these individuals may pursue sources and stories portraying Harris in a negative light, leading to the development of even more critical views of Harris over the course of the campaign.

Authoritarianism

The United States was founded on rebellion against the actions of a remote and unaccountable king. Charles Edel (2021) explains that the Declaration of Independence articulates "American opposition to the closed, authoritarian models of governance that they knew from abroad and feared would develop in their own country." Nevertheless, the country has dealt with authoritarian figures throughout its history, including Joseph McCarthy who stoked national fears during the Cold War and presented himself as the arbitrator of truth surrounded by deceitful enemies.

Authoritarianism among the public, too, is not new to US politics. The study of the authoritarian personality began with Adorno et al. (1950),

[23] Respondents are asked to indicate (on a four-point scale) their level of agreement with each statement from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." For items 1 and 3, strongly agree indicates high levels of hostile sexism, and for items 2 and 4, "strongly disagree" indicates high levels of hostile sexism. With our survey data, Cronbach's alpha for the hostile sexism scale is .53. The mean (and standard deviation) of the hostile sexism scale for our sample is 9.42 (2.59); the scale ranges from 4 to 16.

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who described an authoritarian as someone who admires figures of strength, disdains those who are weak, prefers conventionalism, rigidity, and stereotypical thinking, and exhibits aggression toward out-groups. More recent scholars confirm that conformity, obedience to authority, and out-group aggression are central to understanding authoritarianism (e.g., Altemeyer, 1981; Feldman and Stenner, 1997; Stenner, 2005). Finally, Butler shows (2013) that authoritarians, compared to nonauthoritarians, are more fearful of both social threats (e.g., social disorder) and personal threats (e.g., confronting a dangerous situation).

Trump, during his campaigns and while governing, showed signs of authoritarianism by embracing autocratic rulers abroad, stoking fears about immigrants (e.g., calling Latinos "animals" and "invaders"),[24] and damaging democratic norms at home, including interfering with judicial independence, attacking the news media, and questioning the integrity of the election. Also, he flattered authoritarian strongmen like Vladimir Putin of Russia, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, and North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un. According to senior aides, in a phone call with Putin in the early days of the administration, Trump was "obsequious" and "fawning," even apologizing to the dictator for not calling him sooner (Leonnig, Harris, and Dawsey, 2019).

Research on authoritarianism and politics has consistently demonstrated a strong relationship between level of authoritarian thinking and generalized prejudice, nationalism, opposition to civil liberties, and support for aggressive foreign policy (for a review, see Caprara and Vecchione, 2013). In addition, some researchers find that authoritarians are more likely to support prejudicial and restrictive government policies in response to threat (e.g., Feldman, 2003; Feldman and Stenner, 1997; Lavine, Lodge, and Freitas, 2005, but also see Hetherington and Suhay, 2011). Finally, in the 2016 election, a number of studies demonstrate a positive correlation between support for Donald Trump and level of authoritarian thinking (e.g., Choma and Hanoch, 2017; Knuckey and Hassan, 2020; Womick et al., 2019).

When Lane (1955: 173) explored the impact of the "authoritarian personality" in the 1952 presidential election, he argued that "in an electoral situation, as in any other situation, personality factors play a double role: (1) they affect the perceptions of the individual, screening

[24] www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/05/16/trumps-animals-comment-on-undocumented-immigrants-earn-backlash-historical-comparisons/
www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/03/17/trump-sees-immigrants-invaders-white-nationalist-terrorists-do-too/

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out some stimuli, distorting others, and leaving others intact; and (2) they shape the responses of a person, selecting among the various possible responses those which are more serviceable to basic personality needs." His argument is entirely consistent with the citizen-centered theory of campaigns.

During Trump's 2016 campaign, his presidency, and his reelection campaign, he presented himself as the strong leader who was needed at this moment in US history to protect Americans from dangerous elements inside and outside their borders. We expect that Trump's rhetoric will resonate differently depending on people's level of authoritarianism, thereby influencing how they obtain and process campaign news and altering assessments of the competing candidates.

To measure authoritarianism, we rely on Feldman and Stenner's (1997) measure that likens hierarchical thinking in child-rearing with hierarchical thinking in society.[25] Respondents are given the following instructions: "Although there are a number of qualities that people feel that children should have, every person thinks that some are more important than others. Read the following pairs of desirable qualities. Please indicate which one is more important for a child to have: (1) Respect for Elders or Independence; (2) Obedience or Self-Reliance; (3) Curiosity or Good Manners: (4) Being Considerate or Well-Behaved."[26] In a recent examination, Engelhardt, Feldman, and Hetherington (2021) show that the child-rearing measure of authoritarianism is related to Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), suggesting both measures are tapping the same underlying concept. Second, the authors demonstrate that the child-rearing measure assesses authoritarianism equally well for whites and nonwhites. Third, the authors find no evidence that the child-rearing measure of authoritarianism is endogenous to political and social attitudes, a critique leveled against the RWA measure. Finally, the child-rearing measure is temporally stable as one would expect from a measure tapping a "personality adaptation."

[25] Engelhardt, Feldman, and Hetherington (2021) argue that the widely used RWA scale is problematic because of endogeneity between the dependent and explanatory variables. For example, the authors point out that some of the RWA items closely mimic the rhetoric of right-wing politicians and right-leaning media sources, making it difficult to sort out causal claims.

[26] The authoritarian response is "Respect for Elders," "Obedience," "Good Manners," and "Being Well-Behaved." The Cronbach's alpha for the authoritarian index is .48 with our survey data. The mean (and standard deviation) of the authoritarian scale for our sample is 2.22 (1.20). The scale ranges from a low of 0 to a high of 4.

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Conflict Avoidance

We turn next to discussing the psychological predisposition of conflict avoidance. E. E. Schattschneider (1960: 3), in his classic book *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*, suggests politics is about conflict: "At the nub of all politics are: first, the way in which the public participates in the spread of the conflict and, second, the processes by which the unstable relation of the public to the conflict is controlled." It is no secret that conflict is baked into electoral campaigns with competition around the development of public policies, representation, and resources. Further, the conflictual nature of politics is highlighted in news coverage. In particular, news media organizations embrace the "conflict frame" by emphasizing "conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest" (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000: 95). For example, clashes between political elites of opposing parties in Congress, intraparty disagreements over policy, or news descriptions of elections often employ metaphors like "battle," "fight," and "brawl."

It is also not surprising that people vary in their comfort with conflict, with some people hoping to avoid confrontation altogether while others may actually seek it out (Ulbig and Funk, 1999). People's tolerance of conflict is important in family relationships, in the workplace, and in educational settings (e.g., Barsky and Wood, 2005; Koerner and Fitzpatrick, 1997; Weider-Hatfield and Hatfield, 1995). Tolerance toward conflict has been conceptualized as a stable disposition resulting from early childhood socialization (e.g., Bresnahan et al., 2009; Mutz, 2002; Testa, Hibbing, and Ritchie, 2014).

A number of scholars have examined the impact of conflict avoidance on a range of political attitudes and behaviors. For example, Mutz and Reeves (2005) show that exposure to incivility lowers political trust among people high in conflict avoidance. Sydnor (2019) finds that conflict-avoidant individuals are more likely to experience negative affect (e.g., disgust, anger) when exposed to incivility. And several studies have examined the link between level of conflict avoidance and political participation (e.g., Bjarnøe, de Vreese, and Albæk, 2020; Mutz, 2002; Sydnor, 2019; Ulbig and Funk, 1999; Wolak, 2020).

The 2020 presidential campaign was rife with conflict; the toxic mix of racial division, polarized politics, and a competitive presidential election produced a highly contentious campaign. Nevertheless, the two candidates differed in their penchant for discord. In a *New York Times*

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analysis published at the end of August 2020, Peter Baker and Maggie Haberman (2020b) write, "President Trump has been throwing accelerant on the fire of the nation's social unrest rather than trying to put it out, seeking confrontation rather than calm... From his time as a celebrity real estate developer, Mr. Trump has never been a conciliator, and he has long gravitated toward conflict and sought to escalate it."

Also in August 2020, when accepting the Democratic nomination for president in Milwaukee, Biden emphasized unity over division. He said,

> It is time for us, for we, the people, to come together. And make no mistake, united we can and will overcome this season of darkness in America... I'll work hard for those who didn't support me, as hard for them as I did for those who did vote for me. That's the job of a president, to represent all of us, not just our base or our party... America isn't just a collection of clashing interests, of red states or blue states. We're so much bigger than that, we're so much better than that.[27]

Given the conflictual nature of the 2020 presidential election as well as differences in the two candidates' preference for divisiveness, we hypothesize that people's level of conflict avoidance will serve as a lens for people to receive, interpret, and draw conclusions about the candidates and events of the campaign. To measure conflict avoidance, we rely on the "approach/avoidance component" of Goldstein's (1999) Conflict Communication Scale. This conflict avoidance scale includes five items where people are asked to indicate how much they agree with the following items on a four-point scale ranging from disagree strongly to agree strongly: (1) I hate arguments; (2) I find conflicts exciting; (3) I feel upset after an argument; (4) I enjoy challenging the opinions of others, and (5) arguments do not bother me.[28]

Conspiracy Thinking

We turn to the fifth and final psychological predisposition: conspiracy thinking. Conspiracy thinking (also called conspiracy ideation or conspiracy mentality) is a stable predisposition that leads individuals to attribute "events to a secret plot by a covert alliance of powerful individuals

[27] abcnews.go.com/Politics/full-text-joe-bidens-2020-democratic-national-convention/story?id=72513129

[28] For items 1 and 3, people who strongly agree are rated as high on conflict avoidance. For items 2, 4, and 5, people who strongly disagree are rated as high on conflict avoidance. With our survey data, Cronbach's alpha for the conflict avoidance scale is .70. The mean (and standard deviation) of the conflict avoidance scale for our sample is 14.12 (3.11). The scale ranges from a low of 5 to a high of 20.

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or to clandestine organizations rather than to more mundane human (in) activity or natural forces" (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014: 25). Conspiracy theories are universal and occur across time and cultures and in a wide variety of social settings (e.g., government, workplace, school).

One of the most enduring political conspiracies in the United States involves the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The Warren Commission, authorized by President Lyndon Johnson and led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, investigated the assassination and concluded Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the assassination of Kennedy. These findings were supported, by and large, by additional investigations by the US Attorney General's Office in 1968, by the Rockefeller Commission in 1975 and by the US House of Representatives from 1978 to 1979. Nevertheless, people's suspicions about Kennedy's assassination persist more than fifty years after the event. For example, a survey commissioned by *FiveThirtyEight* in 2017 found 61 percent of respondents believed that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone.[29]

Additional conspiracies are widely circulated in the United States including: the moon landing in 1969 was faked, the George W. Bush Administration knew about the planned 9/11 terrorist attacks and let it happen, and President Obama was not born in the United States. More recent examples of conspiracy theories include the QAnon conspiracy claiming the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles. QAnon followers believe that this cabal includes top Democrats like Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and George Soros. According to the QAnon theory, "Donald J. Trump was recruited by top military generals to run for president in 2016 to break up this criminal conspiracy and bring its members to justice."[30]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of conspiracies were disseminated regarding the virus, such as (1) COVID-19 is no worse than the flu; (2) wealthy elites intentionally spread the virus to win power and profit; and (3) wearing a mask makes people more susceptible to COVID-19 (Lewis, 2020). Additional conspiracy theories developed surrounding the safety and efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines, including (1) the COVID-19 vaccine makes you magnetic; (2) the COVID-19 vaccine makes you infertile; (3) the government put a microchip in COVID-19 vaccines to track you; and (4) the COVID-19 vaccines rewrite your DNA (Cassata, 2020).

[29] fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-one-thing-in-politics-most-americans-believe-in-jfk-conspiracies/

[30] www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html

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There is a growing literature across a number of disciplines aimed at understanding the determinants of conspiratorial thinking among individuals (for a review see Douglas et al., 2019). Research suggests that conspiracy thinking is higher among people with lower levels of trust and higher levels of alienation (e.g., Goertzel, 1994; Imhoff and Bruder, 2014). Further, people's belief in conspiracy theories is highly sensitive to social context. For example, Republicans are more likely to believe in governmental conspiracies when there is a Democrat in the White House and Democrats are more likely to believe in governmental conspiracies when a Republican is president (e.g., van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018).

The media may play an important role in increasing levels of conspiracy thinking. Hollander (2018) reports exposure to Fox News is positively related to belief in conspiracy theories; Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel (2007) find that the use of blogs and YouTube news channels stimulates conspiracy thinking; Walter and Drochon (2020) show that conspiracy thinking is higher when people turn to blogs and nonmainstream social media, compared to newspapers, for their news.

Regarding political attitudes and political behavior, researchers have linked conspiracy thinking to attitudes toward climate change (Uscinski and Olivella, 2017) and immigration (Gaston and Uscinski, 2018). Further, some studies demonstrate a positive relationship between conspiracy thinking and levels of political engagement (e.g., Imhoff, 2015; Imhoff and Bruder, 2014; Kim, 2019). However, Uscinski and Parent (2014) report that conspiracy thinking decreases people's likelihood of participating in conventional political activities while people higher in conspiracy thinking are more likely to support violence against the government.

During the 2020 campaign, Trump was aggressively promoting a conspiracy theory regarding voter fraud, especially mail voting. On July 2, 2020, Trump tweeted, "Mail-In Ballots will lead to massive electoral fraud and a rigged 2020 Election." By September 11, 2020, a fact-check by the *Washington Post* reported that Trump had "peddled imaginary threats about voting by mail" more than 100 times (Rizzo, 2020). By Election Day, Trump had made more than 150 false claims concerning "fraudulent ballots or the alleged dangers of mail-in voting" (Kessler and Rizzo, 2020). In the modern era, there has never been an incumbent president who openly and repeatedly disseminated conspiracy theories regarding the security of a US election. Therefore, we believe the 2020 presidential election is an ideal setting for examining how people's level of conspiracy thinking influences their interpretation of campaign information and evaluations of the ongoing political campaign.

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To measure conspiracy thinking, we rely on the following three items from the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire: "I think that government agencies closely monitor all citizens"; "I think that events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities"; and "I think that there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions" (Bruder et al., 2013: 5).[31] Respondents are asked to indicate their level of agreement with each of these statements on an eleven-point scale ranging from 1 = 0 percent – *certainly not* to 11 = 100 percent – *certain*.

To review, we argue that the availability of information from a variety of sources allow citizens to actively search for and assimilate information consistent with their psychological and political predispositions. We expect these predispositions to consistently influence how people interpret campaign information and evaluate campaign events, issues, and candidates. We also contend that people's psychological predispositions do not simply mirror their political proclivities. Instead, we expect that partisan attitudes will be orthogonal to psychological attitudes.

Relying on our original dataset, we examine the correlation between party identification and each of the five psychological predispositions.[32] The findings in Table 1.1 indicate that psychological predispositions are not simply a proxy for partisanship. We find the strongest correlations between partisanship and racial resentment and hostile sexism (.42 and .35, respectively). However, these correlations do not suggest that party identification is simply collinear with level of prejudice.[33] Further, the relationship between partisanship and authoritarianism, conspiracy thinking, and conflict avoidance is weak to nonexistent (i.e., .16, .10, .01, respectively).

We also look at the correlations among the five psychological predispositions. We see that the correlations between these constructs vary from a low of .03 (i.e., racial resentment and conflict avoidance) to a high of .47 (i.e., hostile sexism and racial resentment), with an average correlation of less than .18. The data in Table 1.1 suggest that the five psychological characteristics are tapping something different from partisanship,

[31] The Cronbach's alpha for the three-item conspiracy index is .81 with our survey data. The mean (and standard deviation) for the conspiracy scale in our sample is 17.99 (7.13). The scale ranges from a low of 0 to a high of 30.

[32] In the next section, we present more details regarding the timing, measurement, and waves of the panel survey.

[33] We will provide strong evidence for this claim in a large number of multivariate analyses where partisanship and psychological predispositions each contribute to explaining the variance in the dependent variables.

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TABLE 1.1 *Correlations between party identification and psychological predispositions*

	Authoritarianism	Conspiracy thinking	Racial resentment	Hostile sexism	Conflict avoidance
Party identification	.16**	.10**	.42**	.35**	.01
Authoritarianism		.14**	.23**	.27**	.10**
Conspiracy thinking			.11**	.22**	−.04*
Racial resentment				.47**	.03
Hostile sexism					−.13**

Note: The cell entries are Pearson correlation coefficients for the September wave of the panel survey ($n = 3099$).
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

and these psychological predispositions are not highly correlated with one another, with the exception of racism and sexism.

Throughout the book, we test the citizen-centered theory of campaigns with data from a three-wave panel study of more than 4,000 people interviewed in September, October, and immediately after Election Day in November 2020. We turn next to a description of the design and measurement of the panel survey.

DATA AND METHODS

The Panel Design and Sample

We designed a panel study where information is gathered from the same individuals at different points during the campaign to study the dynamics of the 2020 presidential campaign. According to Finkel (1995: 1), an important advantage of panel studies is that "change is explicitly incorporated into the design so that individual changes in a set of variables are directly measured." Brady, Johnston, and Sides (2006) explain that panel designs can isolate change when the waves of the panel straddle a "treatment" such as a presidential debate.[34] For untangling

[34] Brady, Johnston, and Sides (2006) do caution that the greater the time gap between panel waves, the harder it is to isolate campaign events. In our panel survey, respondents are interviewed in waves of less than one month apart, allowing us to more accurately separate the impact of specific events from rival factors. Experiments have been

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causal relationships, such as how campaign events alter views about the competing candidates, panel designs have distinct advantages over cross-sectional designs. Precisely because we are measuring political attitudes for the same individuals across time, we can model how campaign events change people's attitudes.[35]

We conducted a three-wave panel survey during the 2020 presidential campaign with recruitment done by Dynata (formerly SSI) using an opt-in internet panel. Dynata maintains a large online panel of US adults. It uses invitations (e.g., email, web banners, phone alerts) to enroll people in research panels.[36] It screens and recruits participants with quotas (e.g., sex, age, ethnicity) in order to obtain a sample with demographics representative of the United States (Shaverdian et al., 2019). The opt-in sample is a nonprobability sample, and studies have shown that nonprobability samples can produce accurate results (e.g., Twyman, 2008; Vavreck and Rivers, 2008).

In Table 1.2, we provide a comparison of the demographic profile of the panel respondents with recent census data. The data in Table 1.2 show that the panel respondents are generally representative of the nation. However, they tend to be somewhat more educated, older, and more male compared to census numbers. In terms of partisanship, the panel respondents are somewhat more likely to identify with the Democratic party and less likely to call themselves independents, compared to a Gallup survey in the field during the 2020 presidential campaign.[37]

Respondents completed each wave of survey on the Qualtrics platform. We collected the first wave of the panel survey between September 1 and September 22, 2020, with 3,013, respondents completing the questionnaire (see Table 1.3). The second wave was conducted between October 4 and October 7, 2020, with 1,510 respondents completing the October

employed to examine the impact of campaign events (e.g., Arceneaux, 2010), but they are limited in their external validity (e.g., representativeness of the sample; artificiality of the settings, inability to look at stability of effects)

[35] Panel designs do have disadvantages, including panel attrition, panel conditioning, and panel selection bias (Lohse, Bellman, and Johnson, 2000). A recent study by Amaya, Hatley, and Lau (2021), looking at the PEW American Trends Panel, indicates that conditioning does not contribute significant error to panel estimates.

[36] Dynata uses a point system to incentivize participation in studies from their panel participants. Dynata panel members can buy items with their points, such as gift cards, or they can donate money to a preferred charity. For participation in each wave of our panel survey, Dynata panel members were given points equivalent to about $2.00.

[37] In the model estimations throughout the book, the sample is weighted based on the 2010 census data for region, sex, age, income, education, race, and ethnicity to produce results that reflect a nationally representative population of the United States.

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TABLE 1.2 *Comparison of 2020 panel survey with census data and Gallup survey data*

	2020 panel (n = 4,340) (in %)	**Census[1] (in %)**
Education		
Less than high school	2	13
High school	23	27
Some college	20	21
Associate degree	10	8
Bachelor's degree	26	19
Post-bachelor's degree	20	11
Income		
Less than $25,000	18	17
$25,000–$34,999	12	8
$35,000–$49,999	14	12
$50,000–$74,999	21	17
$75,000–$99,999	16	12
$100,000–$149,999	13	15
$150,000–$199,999	5	8
$200,000 or more	3	10
Sex		
Male	54	48
Female	46	51
Age		
18–34	20	31
35–44	15	18
45–54	17	19
55–64	21	16
65 and older	27	17
Race/ethnicity		
White	65	60
Black	16	13
Hispanic/Latino	8	18
Asian	8	6
Native American	1	1
Other	2	3
Party identification		Gallup data[2]
Democrat	38	31
Independent	31	36
Republican	32	31

[1] Census data come from QuickFacts, www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219

[2] Gallup data come from news.gallup.com/poll/15370/party-affiliation.aspx

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TABLE 1.3 *Information about the panel survey design*

Wave	September	October	October ("fresh sample")	November
Dates in field	9/1–9/22	10/4–10/7	10/5–10/18	11/4–11/6
Number of respondents	3,013	1,510	1,298	2,153
Average length (minutes)	23.10	17.95	21.63	15.13

Total number of respondents = 4,311
Respondents in full panel (September–October–November) = 1,040

wave of the panel. We also collected a fresh sample of 1,298 respondents in October between October 5 and October 18, 2020. Finally, we recontacted all of the respondents for a final wave of the survey between November 4 and November 6, 2020, with 2,153 completed surveys. During the fall campaign, we collected survey data from 4,311 respondents, with 1,040 respondents completing each of the three waves of the panel survey. The September wave of the survey took about 23 minutes to complete (i.e., an average of 23.10 minutes). The October wave of the survey took somewhat less time, averaging almost 18 minutes (i.e., an average of 17.95 minutes), while the new wave of October respondents averaged just under 22 minutes (i.e., an average of 21.63 minutes). The November wave was the shortest survey, taking an average of 15.13 minutes to complete.

The Survey Questionnaire

We ask a variety of different questions about politics and government, such as party identification, ideology, political knowledge, political trust, civic duty, and political engagement.[38] We also pose a series of questions about people's attention to news as well as their preference among different news outlets. Respondents are also queried about the most important problem facing the nation, the state of the economy, and concern about the COVID-19 pandemic and worries about the integrity of the election. Questions about support for racial justice protests and support for local police are also included in each wave of the survey.

[38] We rely on measures widely used in political science (e.g., the traditional American National Election Study seven-point party identification scale) as well as established survey measures to assess attitudes toward issues and current events (e.g., questions about racial justice protests).

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The survey instrument also contains a number of questions about people's views of Trump and Biden, including approval of Trump's performance in office, feeling thermometer ratings for each candidate, assessments of the candidates' traits (i.e., leadership, integrity, empathy, and temperament), tone of each candidate's campaign, and views of each candidate's ability to deal with a variety of issues (e.g., COVID-19, race relations, the integrity of the election).

As discussed earlier, we include established measures to assess levels of racism (racial resentment) and sexism (hostile sexism), conflict avoidance, authoritarianism, and conspiracy thinking.[39] Finally, questions about standard demographic variables, including age, gender, education, income, religion, race, and ethnicity, are asked during the first wave of the survey.[40]

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The Campaign Setting

We focus explicitly on two important events during the 2020 general election campaign. The initial event is the first presidential debate between Trump and Biden. Presidential debates have become routine events during campaigns, with debates occurring each presidential election year since 1976. Although they are highly scripted by the campaigns, detailed preparation is not always a strong predictor of how potential voters view the outcome. The first debate of 2020 was a doozy, and we examine how psychological and political predispositions influence people's views of the candidates' performances in the debate. Furthermore, since the debate occurred days before the launching of the second wave of our panel, we examine how views of the debate change people's overall evaluations of the candidates from September to October.

The second significant event is Trump's COVID-19 diagnosis and hospitalization. Trump's COVID-19 infection, unlike the debate, was unscripted and occurred well before the advent of vaccines, generating a great deal of discussion and concern about the health of the incumbent president. His diagnosis also fell between the September and October

[39] The battery of questions measuring each of the psychological predispositions are asked in the respondent's first wave of the panel survey.

[40] See Appendix A for a list of all the questions asked in each of the waves of the panel survey. The vast majority of the questions are asked in each of the survey waves, as indicated in Appendix A.

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waves of our panel survey. This serendipitous timing provides us with analytical leverage to examine how Trump's contraction of the virus alters people's views about the COVID-19 pandemic as well as changing assessments of his ability to deal with the pandemic.

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, we examine two more issues during the fall campaign. The first issue, the protest movement against police brutality, was triggered by the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police in May 2020. This event reignited the sustained, emotional, and complex issue of race in America in the midst of a presidential campaign and generated a great deal of discussion by the candidates about racial justice and policing. We measure attitudes toward the social justice movement as well as views of police during each wave of the panel, allowing us to examine dynamics in people's opinions and explore how views about racial justice and policing influence evaluations of the candidates over the course of the campaign.

Finally, we examine the issue of election integrity. This issue surfaced during the 2016 presidential campaign, but it became a focus of the 2020 campaign. For instance, during the course of the campaign, Trump and some members of the GOP questioned the legitimacy of voting by mail. While Trump's rhetoric about a "rigged election" was persistent and accelerated as Election Day approached, Biden and Democratic Party surrogates responded by emphasizing the safety and security of convenience voting. We explore the determinants of people's views about election integrity as well as citizens' assessments of each candidate's ability to ensure the legitimacy of the election results. Further, we explore how confidence in election integrity influences how people decide to cast their ballot: on Election Day, by mail, or via in-person early voting.

An Analytical Road Map

In each of the next four chapters, we focus on one issue or event. In particular, Chapter 2 examines the September presidential debate; Chapter 3 centers on President Trump's COVID-19 diagnosis; Chapter 4 looks at attitudes toward social justice protests and policing; and Chapter 5 addresses the issue of election integrity. In each chapter, we employ the same basic analytical strategy.

First, we develop models to understand people's attitudes about each event and issue. So, for example, in Chapter 2, we present models explaining people's views about the performances of Trump and Biden in the first debate. Based on the citizen-centered theory of campaigns, we expect

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people's psychological predispositions and political proclivities (e.g., partisanship) to powerfully influence views about the event or issue. In these models, we also control for rival factors that may influence assessments. For instance, when we predict people's worries about COVID-19 in Chapter 3, we include demographic factors that may influence people's concern about the coronavirus. Second, we rely on the panel design to estimate how political and psychological predispositions, along with relevant rival factors, influence *changes* in people's views of each issue or event from September to October.[41] We conclude each chapter by looking at how assessments of the issue or event influence evaluations of the competing candidates in a baseline model and in a change model. For example, in Chapter 4, we examine how attitudes toward the social justice movement and views toward policing affect attitudes toward Trump and Biden in September. Then we develop change models to estimate how beliefs about police and racial justice protests influence changes in evaluations of Trump and Biden from September to October.[42]

In Chapter 6, we develop a comprehensive model to examine how each of the campaign issues and events, along with rival factors, predict evaluations of Trump and Biden in November. In these models, for example, we see that views of the candidates' debate performance in September continue to impact views of Trump and Biden in November. In addition, we estimate changes in people's evaluations of Trump and Biden from September to November and demonstrate that campaign issues and events powerfully alter views of the candidates. We conclude Chapter 6 by examining how the major elements of the campaign produce changes in vote intention from September to November.

We conclude the empirical chapters by demonstrating that the citizen-centered theory of campaigns improves our understanding of who voted in the 2020 election as well as how people decided to cast their vote (i.e., voting on Election Day or relying on convenience voting). In Chapter 7, we begin by predicting turnout where we include psychological predispositions as explanatory variables. Based on the vast literature on political engagement, we also include a series of additional factors (e.g., strength of partisanship, civic duty, political attention). We also predict people's likelihood of voting by mail (compared to on Election Day) and voting

[41] We do not look at changes in the views of the debate from September to October since the debate occurred at the end of September, after we had completed the initial wave of the survey.

[42] When estimating these baseline models and change models, we control for rival factors, including partisanship, economic assessments, and trait assessments of each candidate.

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early (compared to on Election Day). We find that psychological predispositions play a powerful role, influencing people's decision to vote as well as affecting their reliance on convenience voting.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter 2. "A Hot Mess Inside A Dumpster Fire Inside a Train Wreck": Understanding the Impact of the First Presidential Debate

Presidential debates are now a fixture in the landscape of fall campaigns for the presidency. They attract worldwide media attention, as well as the interest of tens of millions of potential voters, and are held in close proximity to Election Day. In 2020, the first general election debate was a donnybrook. We find citizens develop clear opinions about who won the debate and who performed well; more people viewed Biden as the winner of the first debate and his performance ratings were significantly higher than Trump's ratings, except among Republicans. We also demonstrate that people who have low tolerance for conflict develop significantly more negative views of Trump's performance and are significantly more likely to consider Biden the winner of the debate. Furthermore, people's level of racism and conspiratorial thinking shape views of Trump's and Biden's performances during the first presidential debate. Finally, evaluations of the candidates' performance in the debate as well as people's views of who won the debate influence overall evaluations of Trump and Biden and produce significant changes in the ratings of Trump and Biden from September to October.

Chapter 3. The Priming of COVID-19 during the Campaign: The Consequences of Trump's Coronavirus Diagnosis

The 2020 presidential campaign occurred in the midst of the first worldwide pandemic in 100 years. The pandemic engulfed the United States for the entire length of the campaign and the incumbent president was hospitalized with the virus at the height of the fall campaign. We show that people's concern about the coronavirus pandemic increased significantly after Trump contracted COVID-19. Furthermore, and consistent with the citizen-centered theory of campaigns, we find that psychological predispositions, along with political and demographic characteristics, substantively and significantly predict changes in worry about the coronavirus from September to October. For instance, people high in

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authoritarianism and conflict avoidance become significantly more worried about the coronavirus pandemic from September to October. Finally, we show that people are more likely to consider assessments of the candidates' competence for dealing with the coronavirus when developing overall evaluations of the candidates in October – after Trump's COVID-19 diagnosis – compared to September.

Chapter 4. Protests against Police Brutality: How Attitudes about Racial Injustice and Policing Affected Campaign 2020

The murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police over Memorial Day weekend ignited sustained protests across the country and placed the issue of race front and center. By September, more than two-thirds of our survey respondents report positive views of the Black Lives Matter movement. While the salience of race began to fade as the general election campaign unfolded, we find that political characteristics of citizens, such as party attachment and partisan media exposure, influence support for the social justice movement and support for law enforcement. Further, psychological predispositions consistently and significantly influence views of social protests and policing. For example, people's level of racial resentment produces powerful changes in their views of the protests and police from September to October. Finally, attitudes about racial justice and policing influence overall impressions of Biden and Trump, producing significant changes in people's views of the candidates during the first months of the fall campaign.

Chapter 5. "A Rigged Election": How Views about Election Integrity Altered the Campaign

The incumbent president consistently and systematically sowed doubts about the integrity of the American electoral process throughout the 2020 presidential campaign. Trump's campaign tactic had effects on voters. We show that public confidence in the integrity of the election is much lower for Republicans and for people paying attention to conservative news compared to Democrats and consumers of left-leaning news. Further, a propensity to believe in conspiracy theories fuels doubts about the security of the election. In addition, we show that a number of psychological predispositions consistently influence people's assessments of Biden's and Trump's ability to safeguard the election, including people's level of racial resentment and level of hostile sexism. Finally,

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people's confidence in the security of the election is associated with positive changes in overall evaluations of Biden and negative changes in overall evaluations of Trump from September to October.

Chapter 6. How the Campaign Shapes Voters' Decisions about the Candidates

We develop a comprehensive model where we include assessments of each campaign event (e.g., September debate) and issue (e.g., election integrity, worries about COVID-19) when predicting overall evaluations of Biden and Trump in November as well as changes in feeling thermometer scores from September to November. These models show that views about the first presidential debate and attitudes toward major campaign issues (i.e., election integrity, COVID-19, social justice protests) explain views of the candidates in November and predict shifts in evaluations over the length of the campaign. Finally, we estimate changes in vote preference from September to November and we find that elements of the campaign (e.g., views about the presidential debate, support for social justice protests) produce important changes in vote preferences.

Chapter 7. The Impact of Campaign Messages on the Decision to Vote

We apply the citizen-centered theory of campaigns to help improve our understanding of participation in the 2020 election. We find a strong positive relationship between conflict avoidance and turnout, with people who dislike conflict participating in the election at a much higher rate than people who are more tolerant of conflict. We also demonstrate the significance of the campaign for understanding turnout; people who watched the September presidential debate, people who have higher levels of confidence in the election results, and people with more polarized views of the social justice movement are significantly more likely to vote in the general election. The citizen-centered theory of campaigns also informs our understanding of convenience voting. People who are more sympathetic to Trump (i.e., Republicans, people with less progressive views on race and gender) are more likely to heed his message of forgoing mail voting and going to the polls on Election Day. Further, people who dislike conflict are significantly more likely to rely on mail voting compared to voting on Election Day. Finally, views about the important issues of the campaign affect how people choose to cast a ballot; people

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who are more concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic and people with more confidence in the integrity of the election are more likely to vote by mail than in person on Election Day.

Chapter 8. How Campaign 2020 Matters

We begin by highlighting the impressive evidence for the citizen-centered theory of campaigns. In particular, we find that psychological predispositions do not simply reinforce partisan orientation. Instead, these predispositions tap distinct characteristics, influencing how people view the events and issues of the campaign. We also make suggestions about how to study campaigns in the future. While the electoral context of 2020 highlighted particular psychological predispositions, future elections are likely to put a premium on alternative psychological predispositions (e.g., benevolent racism, need for affect). We encourage researchers to be more exhaustive, systematic, and consistent in exploring the impact of people's psychological predispositions during campaigns. We also review and speculate about how candidates' campaign strategies may have helped shape the outcome, especially when we consider the razor thin vote margins in a few key states. Specifically, it appears Trump's actions worked to his detriment both in who voted and in who they supported. Finally, given the events and rhetoric associated with the 2020 campaign, we conclude by assessing the health of our representative system of government where elections play a vital role.

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