The determinants of Trump's defeat: what if the COVID-19 pandemic did not matter?

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While the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the lives of many people worldwide, it is currently unclear whether it led to the defeat of incumbent Donald Trump in the 2020 American presidential election. We address this issue by testing different factors of Trump's support, including both pandemic-related considerations and other mainstream explanations of the vote choice. Using a counterfactual strategy, we also investigate how aggregate support for Trump would have looked like if the coronavirus pandemic had lower or no influence in citizens' electoral decision-making compared to real world conditions. For the analysis, we use the ANES 2020 Exploratory Testing Survey. Results show that Trump's electoral defeat depended on multiple factors, including the spread of *partisan* feelings in the electorate and voters' evaluation of the president's record in various areas. Moreover, aggregate-level analyses also suggest that Trump would have received more support had the health crisis not been relevant to voters.

Keywords

American Politics, 2020 Presidential Election, Covid-19 Pandemic, Trump, Government Trust

Introduction

While the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the lives of many people worldwide, whether it led to the defeat of incumbent Donald Trump in the 2020 American Presidential Election is debatable. A recurring mantra in American political commentary has been that the COVID-19 pandemic, with its "horrific toll on human life and its devastating effects on millions of people's economic and psychological wellbeing" (Whiteley et al. 2020) played a crucial role in Trump's electoral defeat as more and more voters judged that he mishandled the health crisis. This would also explain the visible decreases in Trump's approval ratings after February 2020. However, many such commentaries often only considered Trump's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic absent of external factors, likely due to convenience. In fact, just prior to the pandemic, the economy was performing well: in 2020 US dollars, GDP per capita rose from 60,109.65 USD in 2016 when Trump was elected up to 65,297.52 USD in 2019, until a large and sudden drop to 63,543.58 USD in 2020 (The World Bank 2021a). Furthermore, while Trump is often considered a polarizing individual, he enjoyed strong support among Republican voters during his term. That is not to say that Trump's term in office is one without problems, as he forced institutions into crucibles never before considered, while approaching political rhetoric and both domestic and international policy in manners never before imagined from an American president. These have yielded mass protests and demonstrations, an insurrection at the capitol, and a potential erosion of trust among politicians and American political institutions. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic may represent only a partial explanation of Trump's defeat and thus additional factors necessitate consideration.

We address this issue by examining different mainstream and pandemic-specific explanations for Trump's 2020 presidential election loss. We combine this with a "counterfactual" approach, by which we investigate how aggregate support for Trump would have looked if, everything else being equal, the coronavirus pandemic had lower or no influence in citizens'

electoral decision-making compared to real world conditions. Using data from the pre-electoral ANES 2020 survey, we manipulate the effect size of pandemic-related considerations in US citizens' electoral calculus by means of a simulation strategy requiring the use of multiple regressions to observe the consequent changes in aggregate support for the two 2020 presidential candidates. Analyses suggest that the Trump's electoral defeat depended on multiple factors, including his handling of the health crisis, the spread of *partisan* (Democratic vs. Republican) feelings in the electorate, voter evaluations of the president's record towards the economy and immigration, as well as variations in trust towards electoral institutions. By means of the counterfactual strategy, we also show that COVID-19 pandemic had a significantly negative impact on Trump's support during the 2020 presidential election, such that Trump would have received more support had the health crisis not occurred.

Is it just about the pandemic? The explanations behind Trump's defeat

In this paper, we want to test what have been the determinants of Trump's loss at the 2020 American Presidential Election. In order to run a comprehensive test of the vote explanations, we focus on two different sets of factors: pandemic-specific factors (i.e., a combination of loss of health and life, as well as social instability), which we assume to have impacted a feedback loop consisting of government trust among voters and incumbent performance, which in turn affected candidate support, and a series of alternative factors (i.e., partisanship, the state of the economy and Trump's anti-immigration stance).

In the sections that follow, we elaborate on each section of the model. First, we present the primary factors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic: loss of health and life and social instability. Second, we introduce the issue of government trust, how it varies in terms of "diffuse support" and "specific support.". Third, we introduce the matter of incumbent performance as a factor in elections. Fourth, we discuss the associated feedback between trust and incumbency within

the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it impacts candidate support. Finally, we elaborate on the alternative explanations of Trump's defeat and discuss important factors which we account for in our model. We follow with an analysis and discussion of these factors and their impact on the intention to vote for Trump in the 2020 presidential election.

COVID-19 Factors: Loss of health and life, Social Instability

To understand the impact on politics, we first provide some background on what COVID-19 is as well as its unique place in the current state of American politics and society. COVID-19 is a respiratory disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus—a novel coronavirus belonging to the same family of viruses that caused the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak from 2002-2004 (i.e., the SARS-CoV-1 virus) as well as the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak in 2012 (i.e., the MERS-CoV virus). The 2019 novel coronavirus was identified and detected by the World Health Organization (WHO) in December 2019 (World Health Organization 2021). However, then American president Donald Trump did not act until 13 March 2020, which was two days after the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic (White House 2020). While the health crisis has significantly impacted the world, it is one of the rare instances where the United States was severely afflicted.

The combined loss of health and loss of life during the election period should have negatively impacted presidential candidate popularity given the gravity of the health crisis. Unlike the SARS and MERS outbreaks, COVID-19 hit the United States in a deadly manner. At time of writing, the United States has experienced a significant loss of life, surpassing the 1 million death toll mark on 11 May 2022 (Caspani 2022). This number increased significantly during the pandemic in the United States and, between 1 March 2020 and 31 October 2020—the week before the 2020 presidential election—the CDC reported 67,508 laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 associated hospitalizations, with a positive trend among all age groups although especially those 65 years of

age and over (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). In fact, the reported death toll on the day before election day was 1,130 people, with a 7-day average of 847 deaths (New York Times 2020). In contrast, only eight people in the United States were infected during the SARS outbreak, and only two people were infected during the MERS outbreak—both incidents leading to no deaths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016, 2019). As the United States had not experienced a significant pandemic since the 1918 Spanish Flu outbreak, it is reasonable to think that the significant loss of health and life served as one factor in Trump's decline in popularity.

In addition to loss of health and life, the COVID-19 pandemic is responsible for social instability, which has in turned led to decayed mental health among the population due to increased fear and insecurity. For example, Debata, Patnaik, and Mishra (2020) suggest that probable loss of livelihood has increased fear among people, which is manifest through stigma towards those with cold or flu-like symptoms that may not necessarily be COVID-19 related. A study by Holingue et al. (2020) focusing on the impacts of the health crisis on Americans found that people in states with high COVID-19 cases at the start of the pandemic experienced significantly higher rates of increased mental distress, although they suggest overall national levels of mental distress were similar. Increasing levels of mental distress among the population should reflect negatively among politics in the United States due to its impact on voters' mental health. A recent psychiatric study by Samuels et al. (2021) found that engaging in recommended COVID-19 transmission prevention behaviors was significantly associated with an increase in the severity of obsessive-compulsive symptoms among Americans, even among participants who reported no lifetime history of obsessive-compulsive disorder. These studies suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant traumatic effects on Americans' mental state, which should then translate to negative reactions towards the administration in power in the form of decreased trust towards the government.

Constituency Feedback Loop: Government Trust and Incumbent Performance

Government trust and incumbency performance together form a feedback loop in our model that can become vicious for incumbents with bad performance. To understand how this works, we first need to understand trust and its complexities. Political trust is typically considered how people evaluate the government's performance relative to their normative expectations of how said government should be performing (Coleman 1990; Hetherington 2005; Hetherington and Husser 2012; Miller 1974; Stokes 1962), with distrust in government stemming from incongruencies between these two dimensions. Distrust been an issue of interest in the literature since Miller (1974) and Citrin (1974), who suggested dissatisfaction with policies across both parties negatively impacts trust or dissatisfaction towards particular leadership. However, the literature distinguishes between different types of trust in politics. Easton (1965) distinguishes between trust as "diffuse support," or opposition to the political system as a whole; and trust as "specific support," or opposition to leaders and public policy. Distinguishing between these types of trust, a study by Intawan and Nicholson (2018) examining why Americans continue to trust existing institutions found that Americans express positive "diffuse support" towards the political system, but negative "specific support" towards governmental processes and policies. These findings suggest that voters are complex and may choose to punish politicians (specific support) if they fail to respond properly even if the reasoning behind such failures are institutional in nature; that is, due to restrictions by existing political institutions (diffuse support). The support of interest in our model is specific support, given that it is predicated on, and impacted by, incumbent performance.

How an incumbent behaves while in office matters given it can determine whether voters will treat the incumbent favorably come election time. This is because elections can be used by voters to reward or punish incumbents based on their past and future performance (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966; Kramer 1971; Manin 1997; Powell 2000). An incumbent that has kept their promises or

promoted policies their supporters like will likely be rewarded with re-election. However, an incumbent who fails to do this will be less popular, which can be detrimental to their ability to govern. For example, Hetherington (2005) finds that lower levels of trust undermine the government's ability to promote their agenda, such as passing redistributive policies. If the government is unable to advance their policy agenda, this can hurt the incumbent's reputation, which can snowball into a vicious cycle. All other things equal, this vicious cycle suggests a continuous reduction in the incumbent's reputation due to distrust, followed by continuous declines in voter trust towards the incumbent, *ad infinitum*. The result of such a vicious cycle is that the opposition in a two-party system may benefit from an incumbent's failings, with distrustful voters becoming more attracted to the opposition (Citrin 1974) or even opting for a viable third party as an alternative to the incumbent (Hetherington 1999). In both cases, there are incentives for the incumbent to perform in a manner favorable to their supporters.

While bad governing can hurt an incumbent's performance through the vicious feedback cycle, other factors can impact this cycle given that politics does not occur within a vacuum. One such factor is the occurrence of a significant political event, which can have positive or negative ramifications on the president's popularity (Mueller 1973; Brace and Hinckley 1992; Brody 1991). A significant political event can impact the government's ability to govern outside of the trust and performance loop. When such an event occurs, voters are left to consider two possible mechanisms to judge the incumbent: retrospective voting, and prospective voting. The retrospective voting approach focuses on rewarding and re-electing incumbents who have performed well while punishing and voting out those who have performed badly (Key 1966; Kramer 1971). In this manner, an incumbent's leadership skills, rhetoric, and policy performance are scrutinized to determine whether they reasonably achieved what they set out to achieve. Prospective voting, however, suggests voters will support whoever seems more likely to improve the situation among

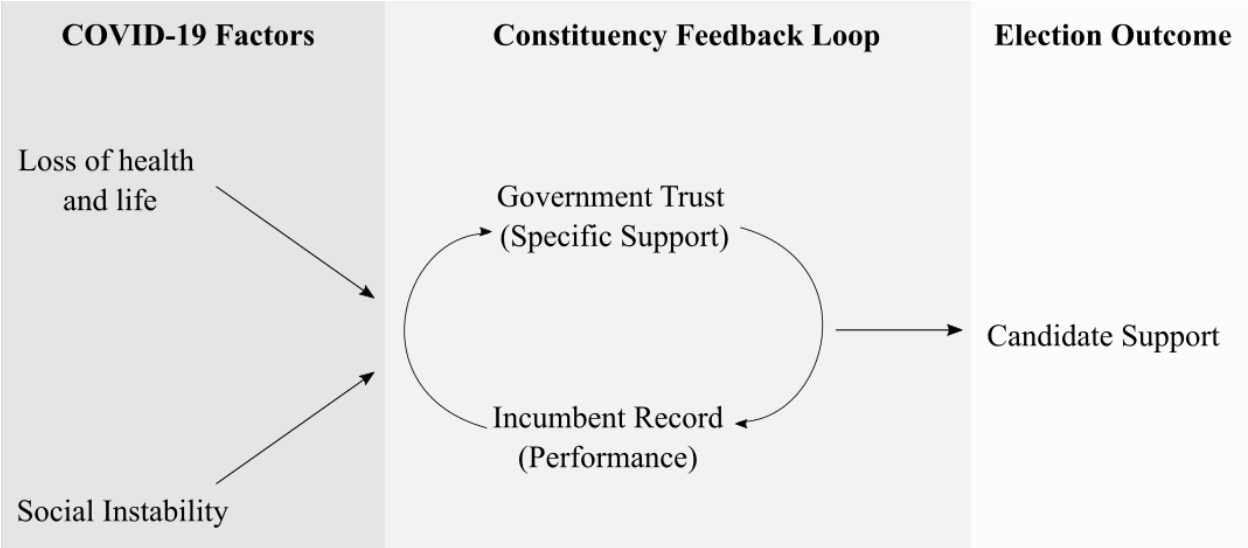
competing actors (Lewis-Beck and Tien 1996; Lockerbie 1992). Although empirical research has reached mixed conclusions so far as to which of the two mechanisms prevails, it is generally acknowledged that both of them can be relevant in explaining voting behavior (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000). In both scenarios, the incumbent is judged by voters, which can influence, and is influenced by, the specific support approach to government trust. From here, a candidate will see an increase or decrease in voter support.

The electoral effects of COVID-19

According to the model in Figure 1, the COVID-19 pandemic factors led to diminished levels of government trust within the feedback loop, which in turn leads to decreased incumbent support come election time, for several reasons. First, the COVID-19 pandemic is a significant political event that modified the feedback loop in an interesting way: specific support varied at the start of the crisis compared to later in the crisis. Following initial outbreaks, Jennings (2020) found that trust toward political authorities increased over time. For example, a study by Kritzinger et al (2021) suggests a substantial increase in trust towards the government occurred in Austria, although opposition supporters became more critical view of the government as the pandemic prolonged. Increases in trust have suggested the presence of "rally round the flag" dynamics, or a short-term boost in presidential popularity when an international crisis or a similar event occurs (Mueller 1970). These rally dynamics require specific criteria to establish a rally point, which then lead to increased popularity. Mueller (1970) specifically states that a rally point is established when an event is international, involves the United States and president directly, and is "specific, dramatic, and sharply focused" (21). These criteria were expanded to include events with significant front-page coverage by major newspapers (Kernell 1978), with two branching sets of coding schemes for future classifications taking shape soon after through either a six-category typology (see Ostrom Jr. and Simon 1985) or a four-category typology (see Brace and Hinckley 1992). Although both coding

schemes typically adopt similar criteria for events, they typically lead to dramatically different lists of events (see Gronke and Newman 2003).

Figure 1. The electoral effects of COVID-19: summary scheme



While rallying effects have varied in longevity across crises, Trump may have indeed benefitted from "rally round the flag" dynamics at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. As news of COVID-19 began to spread, we can determine popularity using approval ratings given they are significant electoral indicators predictive of an incumbent's vote share in re-election bids (Lewis-Beck and Rice 1982). Trump began the pandemic with an increase in approval ratings from a low of 42.1 on March 7, 2020, which then steadily increased and peaked at 49.2 percent one month later on April 1, 2020 (Mithani et al. 2021). This is in line with other crises wherein the American President has experienced boosts in popularity: after the 9/11 attacks, for example, presidential approval increased by 35 percentage points and popularity was maintained for over one year (Gaines 2002). However, soon afterwards the effect diminished (Hetherington and Nelson 2003). This latter phenomenon also occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic: after its peak in April 2020, Trump's popularity trended negative, dropping to 44.4 percent on May 1, 2020, before reaching a low of 39.8 percent right before election day on November 2, 2020 (Mithani et al. 2021). Adopting the reasoning

in Hetherington and Nelson (2003), the temporary increased approval rating associated with rally effects are a function of people evaluating government using crisis-induced criteria, and so subsequent decrease result from people returning to their usual criteria. Deviating from this pattern, however, the positive rally effects from the COVID-19 pandemic were more short term and led to negative impacts on presential approval.

If we compare COVID-19 to the 9/11 attacks, there are significant differences between the two that explain the short-term boost in popularity, followed by negative impact on presidential approval. While loss of life occurred early during the 9/11 crisis, there was also a clear conceptual "enemy" to rally against after the initial attacks: terrorism and terrorists, which the United States associated with specific leadership and countries. With the President adopting a "war" against terrorism, and Americans no longer suffering direct losses of life within the country after the initial attack, the President had a clearer agenda that was easier for society to accept and rally behind. In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic yielded sustained loss of health and life while proliferating distrust and paranoia (social instability) both at initial breakout and post-initial breakout. While the President attained popular support at the initial breakout phase, the lack of a clear "enemy" to fight made it difficult for the government to sell a "war against COVID-19."

Trump's behavior during the health crisis further exacerbated these problems within the feedback loop, as it was often mixed and dysfunctional due to his populist approach to politics. Populism is a "thin-centered ideology" that suggests society is separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and that the general "will of the people" should dominate politics (Mudde 2004, 543). According to Boucher and Thies (2019), Trump's rhetoric focused on three themes that typically dominated his social media and non-social media deliberations: anti-elitism, a virtuous people, and a threat to rule by the people from a dangerous "other" (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Ernst et al. 2017; Mounk 2014; Schulz et al.

2018). These themes made up the basis of Trump's electoral and ruling strategies during his presidency, which led to negative consequences once the COVID-19 pandemic was underway due to his contradictory approach to presidentialism.

Trump's actions led to contradictions in his approach to politics, the most apparent being in the case of vaccines. While the Trump administration supported the development of COVID-19 vaccines in the United States, his track record of anti-vaccine rhetoric towards measles and influenza clashed with his about-face support once he assumed the presidency. This ranged from blaming autism on vaccinations in 2007, to calling influenza vaccines dangerous in 2009, referring to vaccines as "monster shots" in 2012, and then suggesting he never gets vaccinated in 2015 (Hoffman 2020). Once he assumed the presidency, however, a measles outbreak in 2019 led to him shouting at reporters that vaccinations for influenza are important, before going on to meet and praise pharmaceutical companies in 2020 for their potential turnaround on a COVID-19 vaccine (Hoffman 2020). However, Trump simultaneously refused to wear a facemask, which was touted as a means of reducing the likelihood of viral spread and slow infection, mocking them as late as September 29, 2020 (Givhan 2020). This likely led to a decrease in trust towards Trump among moderates who may be undecided on whether to support Trump or Biden, as well as those who already supported Biden, but what about Trump loyalists? Since trust can increase non-compliance if elites signal a favorable perspective towards non-compliance (Goldstein and Wiedemann 2020), it may be the case that Trump loyalists perceived his shift in opinion towards vaccines and subsequent mask claims as signs of bad leadership. This is problematic because trust towards the government in the context of COVID-19 has been associated higher compliance with mitigation measures, such as frequent handwashing and avoiding crowded spaces (Han et al. 2021). While a study by Van Bavel et al. (2020) found that increased regulation and government organization applied to responsive measures during the COVID-19 pandemic can increase support and trust in government, trust opted for the

opposite. By politicizing mitigation efforts during the pandemic through conflicting action, Trump may have not only prolonged the pandemic, but also succeeded in prolonging his declining approval ratings.

Trump's actions during the health crisis led to a mix of prospective and retrospective voting that hurt Trump due to the gravity of the situation, as well as his track record and reaction to the health crisis, which impacted trust towards his administration and reduced his support among voters. While voters can vote retrospectively based on previous track records (Fiorina 1978, 1981; Lewis-Beck 1988), given Trump's track record on salient issues (see Bélanger and Meguid 2008 for more on issue salience) had been mixed, retrospective voters likely had little reason to support Trump over Biden. In terms of prospective voting, since the COVID-19 pandemic at the time had no meaningful end in sight among voters, it is possible that voters decided to support Biden simply because the Trump administration had failed to resolve the crisis. In short, approval rating declines after the initial "rally round the flag" support boost suggests that the Trump administration's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic is responsible for his declining specific support among voters. This yields our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *As discontent with handling of the COVID-19 pandemic increases, we should see a decrease in the intention to vote for Trump*

Due to this above-mentioned mechanism, it is also reasonable to expect that voters' evaluation of the administration's performance under the COVID-19 crisis impacted the aggregate electoral support for Trump. By means of a simulation statistical strategy, we are able to explore this issue counterfactually and so we expect the following corollary hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: *Decreasing the impact of COVID-19 related considerations among voters should increase aggregate support for Trump*.

Alternative explanatory factors

We also consider factors beyond COVID-19, and especially those commonly established in the voting behavior literature that could potentially explain Trump's decline in electoral support in 2020. While the extent is not immediately clear during times of crises, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that partisanship played a role in the 2020 election as is often the case in American politics. Indeed, partisanship has been recognized as a crucial determinant of voting decisions since the 1952 Michigan election study (Campbell et al. 1954). Although Bartels (2000) has suggested there may be variations in the effect of partisanship over time, with the effect wavering at some points in time, it nevertheless remains an essential explanatory element for both why people vote and for whom people vote.

Trump's history with the Republican party has suggested he has managed to become the dominating voice, ultimately redefining the party. Although Trump was a registered Democrat between 2001 and 2009 before switching back to Republican in 2012 (Chasmar 2015), he managed to find support across party members. In fact, his largest group of supporters were less-educated blue-collar working men, many of whom felt resentment towards the political system as a whole due to their declining economic prospects and loss of cultural hegemony in society (Pew Research Center 2016). In line with these findings, since his rise to the upper echelons of the Republican party, research has suggested that conservative racial attitudes made white voters overall increasingly more likely to support Trump in 2016 (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018; Schaffner et al. 2018; Jardina 2019), as well as Republican congressional candidates in 2016 (Algara and Hale 2019) and in 2018 as well(Algara and Hale 2020). For these reasons, we consider the potential role of partisanship in the intention to vote for Trump for our second hypothesis: strongly identifying as Republican should lead to increased support for Trump.

Hypothesis 3: *Increased identification with the Republican party should lead to an increase in the intention to vote for Trump*.

As the economy is no doubt an important factor in presidential approval ratings, it is important to consider whether this impacted support for Trump. In their seminal work on the presidency, Neustadt (1980) argued that there is a connection between the political and economic environment and the public's assessment of presidential performance through three factors: peace, prosperity, and security. In a follow-up literature review, Gronke and Newman (2009) argued that the economy is one of the main drivers of approval. Regardless of the type of economic perspective adopted in models—whether they focus on objective economic conditions (Kernell 1978; Mueller 1973; Newman and Ostrom Jr. 2002; Ostrom Jr. and Simon 1985) or perceptions of the economy on approval (Clarke and Stewart 1994; MacKuen et al. 1992; Norpoth 1996)—the economy has some effect on forecasting a candidate's victory.

During his presidency, Trump's economic track record was positive until the health crisis and campaign season. While GDP per capita grew in absolute terms from 60,109.65 USD to 65,297.52 USD between 2017 and 2019, it dropped swiftly to 63,543.58 USD in 2020 when the pandemic hit (The World Bank 2021a). Moreover, economic growth as an annual percentage slowed during this same time: GDP per capital annual growth was 1.687 percent in 2017, peaking at 2.456 percent in 2018, followed by a sharp decline to 1.697 percent in 2019, and a crash to -3.824 percent in 2020 (The World Bank 2021b). During this same time, unemployment as a percentage of total labor force fell from 4.36 percent in 2017 to 3.9 percent in 2018 before peaking at a low of 3.67 percent in 2019. Once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, however, unemployment skyrocketed to 8.31 percent in 2020 (The World Bank 2021c). In addition to high levels of unemployment, the health crisis also led to disruptions in supply chains, which culminated in hardships for American families (Keith-Jennings 2020). This is significant because, going back as far as Stigler (1973), research has

suggested that parties in the United States have electoral incentives to maintain both high levels of employment, and high and steady rates of growth of real income. Indeed, so long as we assume that voters can use the past to make rational political judgements (Key 1966), and that the economy will influence their vote (Erikson 1990; Radcliff 1988), then we should expect these factors to influence Trump's support given not only their impact on the macrolevel economy, but potential impact on the microlevel economy (Blount 1999). The slowing and ultimately failing economic record going into the 2020 election may have then informed voters that the current administration was unable to turn things around. Hence, we hypothesize that economic disapproval should have a significant effect on the intention to vote for Trump.

Hypothesis 4: *As dissatisfaction with the economic record increases, we should see a decrease in the intention to vote for Trump*

Trump is a unique presidential case given he is strongly associated with a particularly salient issue among the American polity: immigration. During the Trump administration, immigration was the centerpiece of domestic policy through a focus on deportations, building a wall across the southern border with Mexico, and an international focus via visa restrictions (Pierce et al. 2018). However, this policy was very much on partisan lines, with Democrats typically against these hardline policies while Republicans were typically supportive of it. Trump's anti-immigration stance could have, in fact, mobilized more Democratic support against him in the 2020 election. As it is important to control for this effect, we posit that disapproval with immigration should impact the intention to vote for Trump.

Hypothesis 5: *As discontent with executive immigration policies increases, we should see a decrease in the intention to vote for Trump*

However, immigration was not the only unique feature of the Trump administration: Trump was a populist and often used populist rhetoric during his time in office. Specifically, Trump

advocated for populist messages such as anti-establishment rhetoric, which in turn resonated with his supporters (Oliver and Rahn 2016). While Trump's approach to attacking the establishment has sometimes referred to individual politicians or policies (in terms of specific support), it has generally attacked American political institutions and labeled them as corrupt. The most apparent example of Trump attacking institutions is through his claims that elections are rigged against him if he loses, which is a claim he was making even before the 2020 presidential election (Liptak 2020). This is what Easton (1965) refers to as diffuse support, or support for existing government institutions. Since Trump managed to initially become president using populist rhetoric attacking institutions, we expect Trump supporters would find such populist rhetoric appealing. We thus posit that distrust in electoral institutions (diffuse support) should have a positive effect on the intention to vote for Trump.

Hypothesis 6: *As distrust in electoral institutions increases, we should see an increase in the intention to vote for Trump*

In addition to testing these hypotheses, we also control for several additional factors. We consider the age of supporters since, with few exceptions (see Kam and Palmer 2008), young voters actually vote less often than older voters (Fraga and Holbein 2020). We also control for education and gender since Trump's largest support base is made up of less-educated male voters (Pew Research Center 2016). Finally, given Trump's ability to mobilize white voters (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018), we control for race as a factor for deciding to vote for Trump.

Data and Methodology

We use the pre-electoral ANES 2020 dataset in our analysis due to its unique characteristics: the fieldwork started in August 2020 and continued until Election Day, Tuesday 3 November 2020. The dependent variable is the *intention to vote for Trump*. This is a binary variable, with intention to vote for Trump coded 1, and while the intention to vote for any other candidates is coded 0.

We also have several independent variables to test our hypotheses. First, we have *presidential disapproval handling COVID-19*. This variable ranges from 'strongly approve' to 'strongly disapprove' on a 4-point scale. Unlike previous studies focusing on questions asking respondents whether they or someone they know have been diagnosed or died from the virus (Mendoza Aviña and Sevi 2021), this measure explicitly refers to COVID-19 as a political issue possibly affecting voters' candidate evaluations. Second, we have a *partisanship scale* variable, which ranges from feeling 'strongly Democratic' to feeling 'strongly Republican' on a 7-point scale. Third, we have an *economic disapproval* variable, which ranges from perceptions of the economy improving relative to the previous year, to perceptions that the economy is getting much worse relative to the previous year. Fourth, we have a *presidential disapproval handling immigration* variable. This is a dichotomous variable, with approval coded as 1, and disapproval coded as 2. Finally, we have a *distrust towards election officials* variable. This ranges from 'Not at all' to 'A great deal' on a 5-point scale.

From here, we use several control variables. The first variable is *age*, which is measured continuously. We also control for the effects of education by measuring *highest level of education* among voters. This is a categorical variable with five categories ranging from less than high school to earning a graduate degree. In addition, we control for *gender*, which is binary with 'female' coded as 1. Finally, we control for *ethnicity* using multiple dummy variables. We use *White Non-Hispanic* as the reference category, followed by dummy variables for *Black Non-Hispanic*, *Hispanic*, *Asian/Hawaiian/Pacific*, *Native American*, and *Multiple Races (non-Hispanic)*.

Using this data, we explore determinants of Trump support at the individual level based on a series of regression models. In these models we tested the effect of each potential factor of Trump's support both individually (along with the socio-demographic controls just mentioned) and simultaneously (see Results section). We also perform a simulation (i.e., counterfactual regression

analysis) to determine whether, all else being equal, Trump's aggregate support would be lower had the COVID-19 pandemic not occurred. To do this, we first estimated the models found in Table 1. Here, we estimate one model for each hypothesis based on the aforementioned predictors, with the exception of our counterfactual hypothesis (i.e., Hypothesis 2). We estimate the resulting predicted probabilities of voting for Trump using binary logistic regression.[1] For our simulation model testing Hypothesis 2, we proceeded to count all respondents with a probability higher than 0.5 as Trump voters under 'baseline' conditions, while all others were assigned a value of 0. We then followed with computing three additional models in which the effect of COVID-19 related assessments in voters' minds are gradually reduced to half, one quarter, and none of its original impact (i.e., the 'zero effect' scenario). In each instance, we computed the corresponding 'counterfactual' probabilities to vote for Trump and aggregated them into 'counterfactual' vote shares. We provide the results for this analysis in Table 2.

It is important to note that baseline electoral support for Trump is estimated based on the same regression model estimated in the 'counterfactual' scenarios. Since all regression estimates include a certain amount of error, relying on a different procedure to identify real world conditions would compromise the comparability of the results across scenarios (see Camatarri 2022; Walter and Van der Eijk 2016).

[1] To account for the potential clustering of respondents' characteristics into higher-level units, we estimated the same model based on state-level clustered standard errors and state-level fixed effects. Results do not show any significant deviation from those already shown in Table 1 both in terms of strength and significance of the effects ($p < 0.05$). The models are available in the Appendix.

Results

We find support for all of our hypotheses across our staggered models (i.e., Models 1 through 5) and in the full model (i.e., Model 6). Starting with Table 1 and our first hypothesis, we found the coefficient for presidential disapproval handling COVID-19 was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) in Model 1, suggesting a negative effect on the intention to vote for Trump. When we convert the log odds to predicted probabilities, we find that this is a decrease of approximately 99 percent in the intention to vote for Trump in Model 1.

We also found evidence supporting several of additional factors. Starting with the third hypothesis, we found that identifying as a strong Republican yields a statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) increase of about 99 percent probability in intention to vote for Trump in Model 2. The coefficient for our economic disapproval variable suggests support for our fourth hypothesis in Model 3: we found statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) evidence that a bad evaluation of the economy hurt the intention to vote for Trump during the 2020 election by approximately a 98 percent probability. We also found support for our fifth hypothesis, as there is a statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) negative effect towards intention to vote for Trump among those who disapprove of his approach to handling immigration in Model 4, suggesting a decreased probability of supporting him by approximately 99 percent in Model 4. Finally, we found statistically significant evidence ($p < 0.01$) for our sixth hypothesis that distrust toward election officials positively influences the probability to support Trump by approximately 87 percent.

Table 1. Binary Regression Results

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
President disapproval (COVID-19)	-6.603***					-3.309***
	(0.149)					(0.181)
Partisanship scale (Dem to Rep)		7.428***				4.360***
		(0.175)				(0.228)
Economic disapproval			-3.880***			-1.068***
			(0.110)			(0.214)
President disapproval (immigration)				-5.090***		-2.298***
				(0.102)		(0.137)
Distrust toward election officials					1.893***	0.808***
					(0.100)	(0.230)
Age	0.466***	0.504***	0.664***	-0.373**	0.985***	0.327
	(0.178)	(0.160)	(0.113)	(0.182)	(0.103)	(0.246)
Education	-0.613***	-1.573***	-1.142***	-0.795***	-1.366***	-0.609**
	(0.182)	(0.165)	(0.116)	(0.183)	(0.104)	(0.237)
Gender (female)	-0.237**	0.0787	-0.231***	0.0278	-0.330***	0.221*
	(0.0964)	(0.0863)	(0.0613)	(0.0976)	(0.0545)	(0.127)
Black Nonhispanic	-2.366***	-1.468***	-2.805***	-2.650***	-3.032***	-1.426***
	(0.279)	(0.235)	(0.186)	(0.234)	(0.174)	(0.295)
Hispanic	-0.605***	-0.403***	-1.045***	-0.0373	-1.082***	0.0584
	(0.181)	(0.156)	(0.117)	(0.173)	(0.105)	(0.215)
Asian/Hawaian/Pacific	-0.161	0.0329	-0.963***	-1.066***	-0.699***	-0.213
	(0.255)	(0.238)	(0.178)	(0.259)	(0.157)	(0.310)
Native American	0.300	-0.0376	-0.216	-0.404	-0.544***	0.00208
	(0.311)	(0.257)	(0.214)	(0.340)	(0.195)	(0.375)
Multiple races (nonhispanic)	0.221	0.0307	-0.543***	-0.561**	-0.638***	0.0317
	(0.252)	(0.221)	(0.180)	(0.273)	(0.156)	(0.322)
Constant	4.417***	-3.569***	3.065***	3.191***	-0.287***	1.213***
	(0.199)	(0.178)	(0.131)	(0.185)	(0.111)	(0.328)
Pseudo R2	0.65	0.60	0.28	0.64	0.13	0.79
Observations	6,662	6,668	6,654	6,658	6,665	6,623

Standard errors in parentheses. (* $p<0.1$, ** $p<0.05$, *** $p<0.01$)

Table 2. Trump's Predicted Electoral Support Under Counterfactuals

Scenario	%
COVID-related considerations behave as in the real world (baseline model)	41.18
The strength of COVID-related considerations is quite weaker than in the 'real world' scenario (half of the baseline effect)	46.04
The strength of COVID-related considerations is much weaker than in the 'real world' scenario (one quarter of the baseline effect)	49.92
No effect of COVID-related considerations in electoral decisions	56.19

N=7,686

Importantly, all the hypothesized relationships hold also when tested in a single regression simultaneously (see Model 6). We found the coefficient for presidential disapproval handling COVID-19 was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), suggesting a decrease of 96 percent in the probability of supporting Trump in Model 6. We also see that identifying as a strong Republican yields a statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) increase of 99 percent in the probability to support Trump. The coefficient for our economic disapproval coefficient here was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) as well, suggesting a bad evaluation of the economy hurt the intention to vote for Trump during the 2020 election by approximately a 74 percent probability. Disapproval of Trump's approach to handling immigration also yielded a statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) coefficient, suggesting a decreased probability in the intention to vote for him by approximately 90 percent. Finally, distrust toward election officials increases the intention to vote for Trump by a 69 percent probability.

With respect to our counterfactual expectation (i.e., hypothesis 2), we expected to find evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly hurt aggregate support for Trump. Examining these results, we found an interesting pattern: predicted support increases as we remove the

influence of COVID-19 considerations on voters' decisions. Including full COVID-19 pandemic considerations in the model suggests a baseline of 41.21 percent, which increases by 4.62 percent when we halve the baseline effect of those considerations. When we halve it once more to a quarter of the baseline effect, predicted electoral support increases once more by 4.61 percent between the half-effect and quarter-effect categories. This yields an absolute increase of 9.23 percent between the baseline and quarter-effect categories. Finally, comparing the quarter-effect category to the no effect category, we notice that removing the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on considerations yield's an increase of 56.08 percent on Trump's predicted electoral support; an increase of 5.64 percent between these categories. This sudden increase is more profound when compared to the baseline category: the difference between the baseline full-effect category and the no effect category is a difference of 14.87 percentage points in predicted electoral support for Trump. In short, we find evidence that, had Trump's administration management of the pandemic been irrelevant to voters' decision-making, Trump's electoral fortunes would have probably been significantly higher than they actually were during the 2020 presidential election.

Conclusions

In this article we addressed a recurring mantra in US political commentaries, i.e., that absent the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 presidential election would have looked different, and in particular that Donald Trump would have won a second term. We investigated this issue by exploring the general determinants of Trump's electoral support, followed by a specific counterfactual regression approach to determine the real effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on support for Trump. In this respect, our analyses clearly demonstrate that Trump's electoral performance depended on multiple factors, including his handling of the health crisis, the spread of *partisan* (Democratic vs. Republican) feelings in the electorate, and voters' evaluation of the president's record towards the economy and immigration.

Focusing specifically on the role of the pandemic, the findings suggest that voter COVID-19 related assessments have a significant role in explaining individual support for Trump during the 2020 presidential election. More precisely, we observed a unitary increase in disapproval for the way Trump handled the COVID-19 pandemic, which decreased the probability of electorally supporting him by 97 percent at the individual level. To discern this effect at the aggregate level, we estimated a counterfactual model demonstrating that, once COVID-related assessments are removed from the electoral calculus ('no effect' simulation) Trump's consensus drastically increased by a staggering 14.87 percent. These results clearly suggest that, beyond mainstream factors, the choices and performance of Trump's administration in the matter of the COVID-19 pandemic played a decisive role in Trump's popularity and likely negatively influenced his electoral fortunes on November 3, 2020.

Our findings have broader implications for the literature on government trust and support for the presidency. Support for incumbents (i.e., specific support) can generally fluctuate widely based on performance during a crisis. This impact may be significant the closer an election is given voters often look for strong, consistent leadership during time of crisis as evident through "rally round the flag" boosts in popularity. The American president in particular is often seen as an authority figure and leader during times of crisis, and so it may be the case that even more controversial leaders may experience rally effects at the start of a crisis.

Nevertheless, the findings in our study suggest that not all significant political events will provide large, or even long-lasting, rally boosts in popularity. For example, Trump's specific circumstances suggest the rally boost in popularity he experienced at the start of the health crisis may have been tempered by his existing reputation as a leader. At the same time, inconsistent rhetoric and lagging performance may diminish the initial boost and even lead to declines in popularity among voters relative to pre-crisis conditions over time.

Our findings also provide further support for the findings in Intawan and Nicholson (2018): Americans continue to trust institutions (i.e., diffuse support) in spite of issues with politicians (i.e., specific support). We saw this through the lack of evidence that Trump's populist rhetoric impacted voters. Specifically, we had no evidence that distrust in the government impacted Trump's electoral viability in spite of his common anti-systemic rhetoric.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge our analyses suffer from several limitations. The first is the fact that we rely only on pre-electoral data. Focusing on vote intentions offers an interesting opportunity to observe how political support for Trump (and the determinants of said support) looked during the campaign period, aside from rationalization dynamics that usually affect voters after the election (e.g., Lau and Redlawsk 2006). However, post-electoral surveys represent another important part of the picture and electoral studies should take care of integrating both these elements in the future.

Second, the aim of this article was to investigate the consequences of a global crisis from a relatively short-term perspective, mostly focusing on changes in voting preferences. However, extant studies on the political consequences of crises have already gone beyond that, exploring for example how economic shocks in the European Union (such as those in the aftermath of the 2008 and 2012 financial crises) impacted not only electoral choices, but also the structure of political divisions in society in the longer run, resulting in the creation of new political cleavages (e.g., Hutter and Kriesi 2019). In light of this, it may be assumed that the pandemic, as a new and unprecedented global crisis, could also lead to deeper and longer-term changes in contemporary societies, such as the structure of political competition. Presumably, similar effects will become visible as time passes. Therefore, it is reasonable that researchers start envisioning this possibility while fine-tuning their analysis of short-term political effects in a broader comparative perspective.

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Appendix

Table A1: Binary logistic regressions with clustered standard errors at the state level

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
President disapproval (COVID-19)	-6.847***					-3.403***
	(0.160)					(0.208)
Partisanship scale (Dem to Rep)		7.513***				4.310***
		(0.238)				(0.207)
Economic disapproval			-3.972***			-1.194***
			(0.0975)			(0.166)
President disapproval (immigration)				-5.220***		-2.337***
				(0.122)		(0.143)
Distrust toward election officials					1.973***	0.791**
					(0.198)	(0.358)
Age	0.471***	0.513***	0.693***	-0.440**	1.031***	0.278
	(0.177)	(0.171)	(0.118)	(0.216)	(0.122)	(0.244)
Education	-0.696***	-1.533***	-1.141***	-0.718***	-1.402***	-0.613***
	(0.180)	(0.167)	(0.140)	(0.187)	(0.132)	(0.219)
Gender (female)	-0.250**	0.0871	-0.229***	0.0289	-0.336***	0.212
	(0.0981)	(0.0961)	(0.0679)	(0.108)	(0.0576)	(0.175)
Black Nonhispanic	-2.777***	-1.560***	-2.971***	-2.866***	-3.218***	-1.699***
	(0.500)	(0.281)	(0.253)	(0.250)	(0.226)	(0.343)
Hispanic	-0.605***	-0.362***	-1.036***	-0.0639	-1.085***	0.0755
	(0.196)	(0.128)	(0.140)	(0.146)	(0.109)	(0.201)
Asian/Hawaian/Pacific	-0.0912	0.0168	-0.999***	-1.098***	-0.716***	-0.142
	(0.206)	(0.271)	(0.156)	(0.278)	(0.149)	(0.285)
Native American	0.548	0.0742	-0.00618	-0.151	-0.370*	0.246
	(0.435)	(0.239)	(0.242)	(0.432)	(0.214)	(0.414)
Multiple races (nonhispanic)	0.250	0.0697	-0.563***	-0.518**	-0.622***	0.0643
	(0.277)	(0.270)	(0.213)	(0.260)	(0.186)	(0.384)
Constant	4.634***	-3.677***	3.097***	3.235***	-0.326	1.433***
	(0.215)	(0.269)	(0.148)	(0.215)	(0.202)	(0.394)
Pseudo R2	0.67	0.61	0.29	0.66	0.14	0.80
Groups	51	51	51	51	51	51
Observations	6,351	6,357	6,343	6,347	6,354	6,312

Clustered standard errors in parentheses. (* $p<0.1$, ** $p<0.05$, *** $p<0.01$)

Table A2: Binary logistic regressions with fixed effects at the state level

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
President disapproval (COVID-19)	-6.926***					-3.472***
	(0.167)					(0.202)
Partisanship scale (Dem to Rep)		7.528***				4.351***
		(0.186)				(0.251)
Economic disapproval			-3.941***			-1.206***
			(0.117)			(0.235)
President disapproval (immigration)				-5.316***		-2.443***
				(0.115)		(0.152)
Distrust toward election officials					2.010***	0.804***
					(0.108)	(0.254)
Age	0.510***	0.555***	0.731***	-0.435**	1.075***	0.263
	(0.194)	(0.173)	(0.121)	(0.198)	(0.111)	(0.271)
Education	-0.733***	-1.572***	-1.121***	-0.706***	-1.335***	-0.675**
	(0.202)	(0.180)	(0.125)	(0.201)	(0.112)	(0.266)
Gender (female)	-0.256**	0.0671	-0.240***	0.00395	-0.356***	0.157
	(0.104)	(0.0919)	(0.0649)	(0.105)	(0.0579)	(0.139)
Black Nonhispanic	-2.896***	-1.694***	-3.108***	-3.077***	-3.485***	-1.848***
	(0.316)	(0.262)	(0.210)	(0.268)	(0.200)	(0.340)
Hispanic	-0.713***	-0.315*	-1.056***	-0.113	-1.039***	-0.00318
	(0.207)	(0.174)	(0.130)	(0.197)	(0.116)	(0.250)
Asian/Hawaian/Pacific	0.0462	0.147	-0.809***	-1.005***	-0.482***	-0.0258
	(0.275)	(0.264)	(0.190)	(0.286)	(0.170)	(0.349)
Native American	0.460	0.141	-0.0882	-0.121	-0.417*	0.256
	(0.331)	(0.274)	(0.234)	(0.374)	(0.214)	(0.413)
Multiple races (nonhispanic)	0.217	0.0592	-0.580***	-0.552*	-0.650***	-0.0382
	(0.278)	(0.237)	(0.193)	(0.299)	(0.165)	(0.379)
Constant	5.328***	-2.850***	3.992***	3.533***	0.713***	1.789**
	(0.509)	(0.495)	(0.306)	(0.482)	(0.267)	(0.760)
Pseudo R2	0.68	0.62	0.32	0.67	0.18	0.81
Observations	6,351	6,357	6,343	6,347	6,354	6,312

Standard errors in parentheses. (* $p<0.1$, ** $p<0.05$, *** $p<0.01$)