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Social Movements and Electoral Outcomes: Analyzing the Impact of Political Violence on the US 2020 Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how the violent elements of the recent racial justice protests in the US impacted electoral politics. It analyses how pre-existing political structures and their interaction with activists increased the movement's proclivity towards violence, and how public perception of the demonstrations declined subsequently. Moreover, it draws parallels between the 2020 and the 1968 presidential election and discusses how the similarities in circumstances vis-à-vis social movements affected the candidates' chances.

Keywords: Elections, social movements, violence, Joe Biden, Donald Trump, protests.

I. INTRODUCTION

Joe Biden, despite President Trump's unfounded legal challenges, emerged victorious in the 2020 presidential election held on November 3rd. He won the popular vote by a convincing margin of five percentage points and the electoral college vote by 306-232. The circumstances surrounding this particular election were extremely unique and unprecedented, considering the existential threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. The candidates shifted large parts of their campaigns online as they sought to adapt to the new lockdown rules. Moreover, in the midst of an already chaotic year, the United States witnessed the emergence of the biggest racial justice movement in its history following the deaths of several unarmed black men, such as George Floyd, at the hands of the police (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020). Several organized and unorganized groups of people amassed on the streets in the middle of a deadly pandemic to demand police reform and racial justice. This paper will critically analyze the impact of the Black Lives Matter protests on the presidential election, with specific emphasis on how violent elements of a social movement affect the political climate.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Violent revolution in the face of grave injustice is a tradition deeply embedded in American

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values. From the revolution of 1776 that freed the 13 colonies, to the civil war of 1861 that freed the slaves, Americans have never hesitated to offer armed resistance against what they perceive as immoral. As America progressed and modernized, the socio-economic conditions of the white majority population improved significantly. Now, people sought to solve problems via institutional means such as pressuring legislators to pass certain laws. The injustice against African- Americans, however, persisted, and the institutions weren't as sympathetic to their demands. The Federal Fair Housing bill², for instance, was the most filibustered³ legislation in US history till it eventually passed in 1968 (Hannah-Jones 2015). This meant that African Americans had to organize and fight for their rights, and thus the civil rights movement was born. Even as the political establishment remained unmoved, the protests associated with the civil rights movement were largely peaceful. On March 7th, 1965, about 500 civil rights protesters marched from Selma to Montgomery, to demand access to voting rights for African- Americans. As they marched calmly, they were interrupted by a wall of police officers who proceeded to brutally attack them with night sticks and tear gas, which left a lot of the protestors severely injured. Remarkably, the civil rights movement remained stalwart in its commitment to non-violence following this incident. The optics of a peaceful group getting assaulted by the state apparatus for seemingly no reason made for powerful imagery. As millions of Americans turned on their televisions the following day, they were dismayed at the callous brutality of the Alabama State Troopers. This galvanized popular support for the movement and put political pressure on lawmakers to pursue reform (Klein 2015). Unsurprisingly, the Voting Rights Act⁴ was signed into law a few months after the Selma incident. Three years later, as the fight for racial equality continued, Martin Luther King Jr. was suddenly assassinated on the balcony of his hotel room in Memphis, Tennessee. After centuries of oppression with only slow, incremental improvement in their socio-economic conditions, the assassination of the most influential civil rights leader unleashed the angst within the black community. That coupled with the growing resentment for the Vietnam War, led to widespread rioting across America, particularly in majority-black inner cities. Businesses were looted, cars were burned, and entire streets were flooded with angry demonstrators (Taylor 2018). Richard Nixon, the republican nominee of the 1968 presidential election was able to capitalize off the unrest as he campaigned on a message of law and order to court scared and disaffected white voters. Omar Wasow, a professor of politics at

² The Federal Fair Housing Act sought to end racial discrimination in housing policy.

³ A filibuster is a political strategy used in the US senate to block a bill from being brought to a vote.

⁴ The Voting Rights Act removed barriers to voting such as poll taxes and literacy tests that disproportionately affected African Americans.

Princeton, explains that there were a large number of white moderates in America who wanted to advance racial issues, but also cared about maintaining law and order (Chotiner 2020). Nixon's opponent, Democrat nominee Hubert Humphrey on the other hand was perceived as being more sympathetic to the civil rights movement. He also failed to forcefully denounce the violence that had erupted across America. Illinois, a state that had voted for democrats in the two prior presidential elections, went to Nixon, in large part due to the rioting in Chicago. The suburbs of Cook county (the county that contains Chicago), swung sharply towards Nixon in the 1968 presidential election. Bordering counties saw similar swings (McClelland 2020).

County Name	1964 Result	1968 Result	Swing
Cook	63% (D)-36% (R)	50% (D)-41% (R)	18% towards R
DuPage	60% (R)-40% (D)	66% (R)-25% (D)	21% towards R
Lake	51% (D)-41% (R)	56% (R)-35% (D)	31% towards R
Will	56% (D)-43% (R)	49% (R)-35% (D)	27% towards R

Table 1.1- Presidential vote comparison in Illinois counties that were near riot zones⁵

Source: The author (Data collected from ourcampaigns.org archives)

Evidently, how a social movement is perceived by the relatively apolitical public is very important. As a movement grows more violent, it risks alienating people from the political organizations associated with it. The Democratic party establishment, although with great trepidation, embraced the cause of civil rights in the 1960s. As the movement got more violent, it sunk the Democratic party with it, as is evident from their losses in the 1968 and 1972 presidential elections.

III. 2020 ELECTIONS

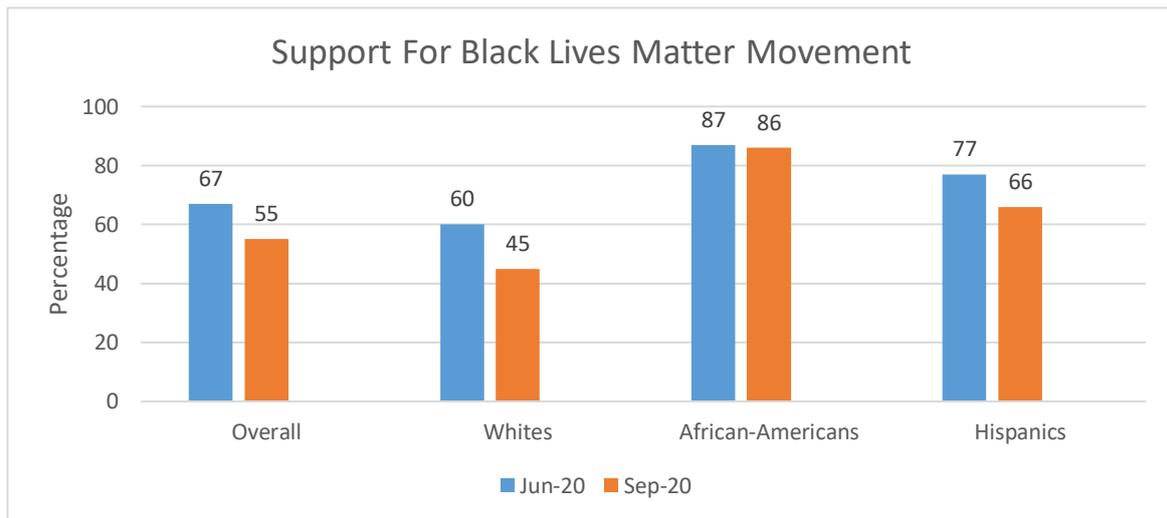
The 2020 election occurred under similar circumstances. The deaths of several unarmed black men by law enforcement in 2020 put a spotlight on the racial disparities in policing. A few days after the murder of George Floyd, the US saw its largest protest demonstration in history. About 26 million people took to the streets all over the country to fight for racial justice (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020). The support for the Black Lives Matter movement skyrocketed consequently. The callous disregard for Floyd's life shown by police officers

⁵ 'D' refers to the Democratic party and 'R' refers to the Republican party.

understandably shocked the entire nation and opened people's eyes to the injustices African Americans face at the hands of law enforcement. However, support for the movement began to plummet as certain fringe elements turned to violence. As Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly discuss in their paper on contentious politics and social movements, protests usually turn violent either when activists struggle with police and other professional guardians of public order; when activists of a given persuasion and competing, or hostile activists confront each other; and when groups committed to direct action use or break away from non-violent movement gatherings such as demonstrations and public meetings to outbid former comrades (Tarrow and Tilly 2009, 19). The first two reasons were the most prevalent in this instance. Huge swathes of excessively militarized law enforcement were deployed on the streets that constantly antagonized protestors with aggressive tactics. There was also a sizeable presence of right-wing counter protestors who clashed with BLM and ANTIFA demonstrators⁶. We can thus infer that incidences of violence can occur due to reasons exogenous to the movement. The way in which external institutions affect collective political action is known as the 'Political opportunity structure' (Tarrow and Tilly 2009, 6). How open a government is to the demands of a movement, and the subsequent implementation of those demands has a considerable impact on how political actors behave. The US has a reputation of being relatively closed and weak in the implementation of demands. The issue of police brutality has been an issue for decades, but the lawmakers haven't yet been persuaded to take action despite constant political pressure. This type of neglect can lead to the emergence of violence in political movements, since activists may view it as the only available recourse to get their voices heard. Even still, the overwhelming majority of demonstrations remained peaceful (Chenoweth and Pressman 2020). However, since the presence of violence is more profitable for media outlets, clips of demolished buildings, looted stores, and burning cars were played constantly on news channels. This created the perception of widespread violence in the eyes of the American public.

Joe Biden was somewhat receptive to the calls for police reform from the movement. Although it's worth noting that he denounced the violence and was hesitant to embrace the more radical demands of the movement such as 'Defund the Police' (Reuters 2020). Donald Trump, on the other hand, was much more forceful in his condemnation of the movement. He explicitly rejected their concerns, actively courted the support of various law enforcement organizations, and branded the protestors as domestic terrorists (Dewan 2020). His election strategy was to emphasize law and order and tie Biden to the more extreme elements of the

⁶ BLM is used as an acronym for Black Lives Matter and ANTIFA for Anti Fascists.



Graph 1.1- Popular support for BLM over time

Source: The author (Data collected from Pew Research polls)

movement in order to win over moderate voters, much like Nixon did in 1968. Since Joe Biden ultimately won the election, it may seem like Trump’s gambit failed. However, one must consider that Biden’s margin of victory was extremely narrow. Because of America’s electoral college system, if ~60,000 Biden votes (which is only 0.03% of the total votes cast) across four swing states were switched to Trump, Biden would have lost the election.

State	Biden’s Margin of Victory
Arizona	+10,457
Nevada	+33,596
Wisconsin	+20,682
Georgia	+11,779

Table 1.2- Biden’s margin of victory in key states

Source: The author (Data collected from the office of the Secretaries of State of the respective states)

Trump was a historically unpopular incumbent, his tenure was riddled with controversy, and his administration failed to control a deadly pandemic to the extent that the US became the worst hit country in the world. This election was supposed to be a referendum on the Trump administration, one that Biden should have won convincingly. However, some elements of this election were quite reminiscent of the one in 1968. For instance, although Biden narrowly carried Wisconsin, Trump made gains in Kenosha county. Kenosha county is of particular interest as it witnessed massive unrest and rioting following the shooting of yet

another unarmed black man, Jacob Blake. An estimated 50 million dollars' worth of property was destroyed, and yet again, Trump's message of law and order resonated with the voters (McAdams 2020).

County Name	2016 Result	2020 Result	Swing
Kenosha	47.2% (R)-46.9% (D)	50.7% (R)-47.5% (D)	2.9% towards R

Table 1.3- Vote Swing in Kenosha county, WI from 2016 to 2020

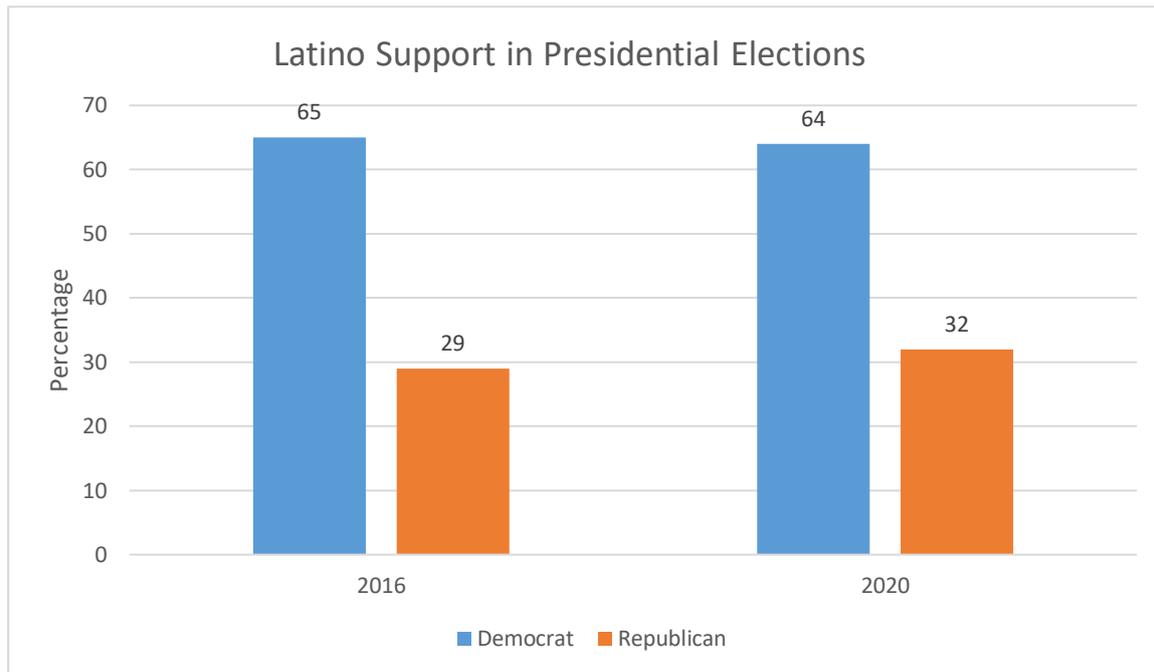
Source: The author (Data collected from Kenosha county clerk's office)

Despite his hawkish stance on immigration, another area where Donald Trump made considerable gains is with minority voters, particularly Latino-Americans. There are various issues that motivate Latino voters, and they cannot be analyzed as a monolith or a uniform voting bloc. Miami-Dade County in Florida, for instance, has a sizeable Cuban American community that swung sharply towards Trump. Cuban American immigrants are generally those who fled Fidel Castro's oppressive socialist regime and therefore tend to be apprehensive of big left-wing social movements. They were turned off by the radical elements of ANTIFA and BLM protests, and found solace in Trump's tough on crime rhetoric. Another possible reason for Trump's gains with Latino voters is the fact that many of them felt disaffected from the BLM movement. While a majority of Latinos supported the protests, their support was considerably lower than that of African Americans. The name itself, 'Black Lives Matter', excludes Latinos and Asian-Americans who face much of the same institutional prejudice and discrimination. Black Lives Matter failed to act as a unifying movement for minorities in America as it did not give a voice to the concerns of other marginalized communities.

County	2016 results	2020 results	Swing
Miami-Dade (Florida)	63% (D)-34% (R)	53% (D)-46% (R)	22% towards R
Starr (Texas)	79% (D)-19% (R)	52% (D)-47% (R)	55% towards R

Table 1.4- Vote swings in predominantly Latino counties

Source: The author (Data collected from Miami Dade and Starr County election supervisor)



Graph 1.2- Latino support in presidential elections

Source: The author (Data collected from CNN exit polls)

IV. WHY BIDEN WON

Nine out of ten voters felt that the racial justice protests were a factor in their voting, with more than three-fourths saying that it was a major factor. Of those who said that the protests were a major factor, 53% voted for Biden (Tavernise and Eligon 2020). Biden also performed particularly well in big cities with high black populations, which saw a massive increase in turnout. Even though the Biden's response to the protests hurt him with certain demographics, African American voters showed up to the polls in large numbers to deliver the presidency to him. Even though the black community viewed Joe Biden with skepticism, they still felt like he was the lesser of two evils. Moreover, Trump's poor handling of the coronavirus and his divisive rhetoric allowed Biden to make considerable gains in affluent suburban areas (Enten 2020).

V. CONCLUSION

The success or failure of any social movement eventually boils down to its optics. How people perceive a social movement carries far greater importance than the specific demands made by the activists. In the 1960s, we saw that while people generally supported civil rights for African Americans, they were turned off by the violent elements of the movement and ended up supporting presidential candidates who acted contrary to that cause. Biden almost succumbed to the same fate as Hubert Humphrey did in 1968. The support for the BLM movement steadily dropped as the protests got more violent, and Trump successfully

contrived a narrative tying Biden to the more radical elements of the demonstrations. Had Biden condemned the violence more vigorously and appealed to the issues of a more multiracial coalition while still showing empathy to the demands of the movement, he likely would have won by a far greater margin.

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