

# **Democracy and Disinformation: An Analysis of Trump's 2020 Reelection Campaign**

**Brian M. Conley, Suffolk University**

## **Abstract:**

As a candidate and as president, Donald Trump defied most of the conventions that traditionally shaped political behavior in the US. He chafed at established boundaries on the scope of executive authority, disavowed the principle of balanced powers, and openly questioned the importance of an independent judiciary. Traditionally, anyone of these actions would have undermined the legitimacy of his presidency, and weakened his reelection prospects. However, their impact on Trump, particularly among partisan Republican voters, was negligible. This circumstance raises questions not only about the political marketing strategies that Trump and his reelection campaign used to engineer his political resilience, but also about the lasting impact his campaign may have on the practice of democratic governance in the US.

Keywords: Donald Trump, Democracy, Disinformation, Voter Targeting and Positioning

Word Count: 5,637 (with References: 6,463)

## **Introduction:**

As a candidate and as president, Donald Trump defied most of the conventions that traditionally shaped political behavior in the US. In government, his administration chafed at the established boundaries of executive authority; disavowed the principle of balanced powers, and openly questioned the importance of an independent judiciary. As a candidate, in 2016 and again 2020, Trump ran highly divisive campaigns, designed to affirm his positioning among targeted voter segments by maligning the interests and values of other groups (Conley 2018; Haberman, Karni and Martin 2020). On the campaign trail, Trump routinely engaged in personal insults and innuendo, demonized real and manufactured opponents, popularized a litany of false claims and accusations, and challenged the integrity not only of his opponents, but of the US system of representative democracy itself. This was compounded by his decision to politicize the COVID19 pandemic, claiming at one point that people who wear masks were doing so to criticize him rather than to prevent the spread of a deadly virus (Bender 2020). Traditionally, any one of these actions would have undermined the legitimacy of his presidency and weakened his reelection prospects. However, the impact on Trump, particularly among Republican voters, has been negligible. Despite being impeached in late December 2019, and ultimately defeated by Joe Biden in the 2020 Presidential Election, Trump's popularity among Republicans never dipped below 90% during the fall election (Gallup 2021). Trump's popularity raises questions not only about the political marketing strategies that he and his reelection campaign used to engineer his political resilience, but about the lasting impact his campaign may have on the practice of democratic governance in the US.

Despite solid support among Republicans, Trump's 2020 campaign knew, even before the COVID19 crisis upended the last year of his presidency that the reelection effort

was in trouble. The numbers needed to win a second term were just not there (Haberman, Karni and Martin 2020). This did not, however, result in any serious review of the campaign's core reelection strategy. As it had in 2016, the Trump campaign would be a study in how to deploy market research to position a candidate – often independent of the policy particulars of their time in office – with targeted voter groups. It would not depend on showcasing what Trump had delivered in office, or even on the consistency of his policy pronouncements. Nor would it be constrained by prevailing norms discouraging the use of false or misleading information. Rather, Trump and his lead strategists opted for a campaign based on an inverted form of populism that sought to reaffirm his loyalty to targeted voter groups by at once obscuring the elite-focus of most of his policies and engendering intra-group conflict through an emphasis on the threats posed by less politically influential social groups. His dependence on sophisticated political marketing strategies to do so has only heightened concerns about whether a market-orientation has any legitimate place in a democratic politics. **But, in the end, what the Trump campaign demonstrated is that political marketing represents little more than the leading edge of strategies used to win elections and gain power within modern, elite-led democracies.**

To examine how the Trump campaign brought together an admixture of political marketing, populism and disinformation, and the impact it may have had on the practice of democracy in the US, I examine first debates over how political marketing strategies are thought to be undermining democracy, specifically in relation to the use of populist appeals that employ market research to connect with targeted voter groups. I then look at the degree to which Trump's 2020 reelection campaign represented the joining of market and populist strategies to advance an agenda that defended elite interests by vilifying social groups that had less rather than more accumulated power.

## Literature Review

As it has developed over the last few decades, political marketing has been subject to two generic critiques: 1) that the concept is oxymoronic; that politics and the market are distinct, and in important way incompatible things; and 2) that these differences become even more pronounced when we compare the principles of democratic governance with the particulars of how markets are thought to function. "For its critics," write Henneberg, Scammell and O'Shaughnessy (2009) write, "political marketing' will be perennially suspect and anathema in relation to 'democracy'" (p. 181). Indeed, for many, the term itself is a regrettable "linguistic juxtaposition," they continue, "which would appear to merge a significant activity, politics, with a seemingly trivial and inherently insignificant one, namely marketing" (p. 181). And, given the centrality of market-oriented strategies to Trump's **purportedly populist 2020** reelection effort there can be little confusion about either the persistence of such concerns or about the need to closely examine how marketing is transforming **mass democracy** in the US and beyond.

Politics and the market are, to be sure, unique social structures that cannot be fully collapsed into each other, analytically or otherwise (Collins and Butler 2002). That said, there is no disputing that in many political systems the two structures interact with, and shape each other, almost at a definitional level. Nor is there any doubt that practitioners in one system often learn from and adopt strategies originally developed in the other (Shaws and Jones 2005).

The more vexing question is whether, and to what extent strategies adopted from commercial marketing are remaking politics, particularly within more representative systems of government. However, despite a tendency to disparage market-based strategies, it is a dilemma that follows as much from explaining what a “market-orientation” entails than clarifying what is meant, normatively, by “democracy.” We know a lot, for example, about how different market-based strategies work. But, as emerges in the literature, we know less about how marketing strategies are reshaping representative political systems, either for the better or for the worse because what is meant by democracy, specifically, how such a political system operates is rarely fully fleshed out (Henneberg, Scammell and O’Shaughnessy 2009). It not clear, for instance, whether the threat a market-orientation poses to nominally democratic systems is the promise of too much representation, or too little; that market-oriented politicians are likely to adhere too closely to the will of the people, or attempt to manipulate it. As Jennifer Lees-Marshment (2019) notes, critiques of political marketing often center on claims that deploying market-based strategies in politics “reduces policy innovation;” promotes short, rather than long-term thinking; results in the overrepresentation of targeted voter segments, and ultimately encourages candidates and elected officials to adopt policy positions based on whatever polling data or market research suggests is most popular among targeted voter groups (p. 251, 252). Indeed, scholars are particularly concerned, she argues, that a market-orientation, given its reliance on a research-driven understanding of voter needs, will undermine political leadership, or the willingness of elected officials to defy what is popular in the interest of what is needed or is morally just (Lees-Marshment et al 2019; Henneberg, Scammell and O’Shaughnessy 2009; Palmer 2002). Under such conditions, politics could become either too populist, or beholden to the will of the masses, or too top-down, as politicians skillfully employ market strategies to mold public opinion. But it is not at all clear which threat the critics are most concerned about since it is not clear which model of democratic government they are trying to defend.

However, uncertainty about exactly how representative democracies are in practice, or in theory does not absolve political marketing scholars from criticisms that a market orientation is a potentially disruptive development within more or less representative systems of government. Rather, it points to the need to clarify our terms so that we can consider how market-based strategies may be remaking the way politics is being done in many countries around the world. We need, in particular, some working definition of democracy. If we can agree, for instance, that most contemporary democracies assign ultimate authority to a voting public, understood to be equal and possessing certain inalienable rights, but otherwise limits political participation and decision-making power to an institutional framework administered by political elites, we can see that what is commonly meant by democracy is a system of government that borrows elements from both elite and deliberative theories of democracy (Schumpeter 1943; Terchek and Conte 2001; Christiano 1996; Habermas 1996; Henneberg, Scammell and O’Shaughnessy 2009). In democratic systems, the voting public matters, and institutionally exercises authority over most political – though not all economic – decisions. Yet the system is nonetheless led by elites, institutionally defined by their decision-making authority, who have secured a position of power by way of either a competitive election or meritorious appointment process.

In such a system, then, where structurally the public forms a wide base upon which a governing elite rests, the central question regarding any change in strategy, whether market-oriented or not, is how such strategies are exercised by political leaders. In democratic systems, the dilemma posed by market-based strategies is not necessarily the threat they pose to leadership, in the sense that a politician might be unduly captured by the will of the people, but the opportunity they afford elites to guide or shape public opinion, for either constructive or destructive purposes. Market strategies are not likely to further constrain popular participation, for example, since it is already limited in institutionally prescribed ways. In fact, if anything, a market approach might open additional informal channels for the public to engage with politics. But there is a risk that market-based strategies, notably the use of market research and sophisticated targeting and positioning strategies, may allow political elites to refine their capacity to manipulate and mislead targeted voter groups. Marketing strategies, in other words, may promote the public interest and improve political leadership by strengthening elite understanding, and thus representation of the public interest. But they may also empower political leaders to win popular support for policies that defend elite rather than public concerns. That elites have such a choice is not a result of marketing strategies being introduced into politics, but a consequence of the institutional power elected leaders enjoy within modern democratic governments.

Given the success market-oriented political organizations and campaigns have had developing more and more sophisticated, research-driven strategies, candidates and other elected officials now have an opportunity to not only meaningfully connect with specific voter groups, but also to potentially mislead and manipulate them. This has become particularly problematic within supposedly “populist” campaigns, where parties or candidates or other “elites” seek to position themselves with targeted voters as either genuinely being “of” the group, or somehow organically representing their way of living and thinking. Historically, candidates sought to position themselves among the people not only to distinguish themselves from other elites, but more importantly, to potentially mobilize public support for challenges to established systems of power (Judis and Teixeira 2002). It was, in short, a way one group of elites could rally public support for checking the behavior of other elites, in or outside of politics. And, over the last several decades, it has been common for populist campaigns and candidates to rely on market-oriented strategies as a way to connect with voters (Busby 2009). But, as scholars note, over this same time-period, the thrust of many populist campaigns, and with it the market strategies they deploy have increasingly been remade, indeed inverted, so that appeals to the public are now commonly made to win support for a politics that defends rather than challenges prevailing power dynamics in society. This is done not by winning public support for a check on elite power, but by mobilizing public opinion against those who have less, rather than more power. Describing this shift, Kazin (1995) writes that “the vocabulary of grassroots rebellion now served to thwart and reverse social and cultural change rather than to promote it” (p. 4). The desired outcome is deflection, away from groups with accumulated power, and disorientation, among a voting public that might otherwise push for some level of change in the prevailing power structure.

Trump’s campaigns represent a convergence of the two trends in US politics: marketing and inverted populism. Relying on a skillful use of targeting and positioning strategies, Trump’s 2020 campaign sought to win popular support for a political agenda

that reaffirmed existing power differentials in society by mobilizing public opinion within targeted voter segments against social groups with limited or less political power. He did so by positioning himself in 2020 as a populist leader who would liberate hard working, and mostly white Americans from overbearing liberals, who used the levers of government to advance a socialist politics that prioritized the rights and interests of radical, leftist social groups. By doing so, the Trump reelection campaign made clear that the key question confronting political observers, in a time of rising “populism,” is not whether political marketing is anathema to democracy, but whether marketing strategies are being employed by political elites for the purposes of targeting those who have more or less power in a society.

## Research Design

To examine the degree to which Trump’s reelection campaign depended on an inverted, market-based populism, it is essential to explore the extent to which Trump campaign messaging relied on garnering public support for key policy positions by targeting social groups that have less rather than more power. To achieve this, it is necessary to assess the extent to which his campaign messaging relied on the dissemination of accurate or inaccurate information, specifically, disinformation, or the intentional use of false information to undermine rather than strengthen public understanding of an issue (Benkler et al 2018, 2020; Bennett and Livingston 2018; Ross and Rivers 2018). It is essential, in other words, to evaluate the extent to which Trump and his campaign functioned within what Benkler et al (2018) describe as a more or less open and neutral information and media system, or a mostly closed, and self-referential “propaganda feedback loop” (p. 79). In more open, “reality-check” information systems, the media is more likely to perform a critical fact-checking function that discourages the use of disinformation by politicians, and social media users (p. 77). In a “propaganda feedback loop,” by contrast, both the media and political actors embrace partisan “identity-confirming” information, independent of its factual accuracy, and punish each other for reporting or policies that deviate from prevailing ideological doctrine (p. 79). A disproportionate reliance on disinformation, circulated within a closed, propaganda feedback loop can be measured, they argue, by, among other factors, levels of “induced misperception,” or the presence of “politically active beliefs that are false” within public opinion (p. 34).

To evaluate how Trump campaign messaging worked, in terms of relying on a more open or closed feedback loop, I examine the content, distribution, and impact, on public opinion of campaign communications on two issues that emerged as central to Trump’s positioning as an illiberal, anti-government populist: 1) ANTIFA, and protests against police brutality in the summer of 2020, and 2) socialism. I look first at how Trump and his campaign discussed both issues, paying close to how each was used to help differentiate Trump from his opponents and to affirm his loyalty to core voter groups. Next, I examine how both issues were covered, and discussed, in leading national news outlets in contrast to the coverage they received on the left or the right sides of the media landscape. Finally, I assess the effect Trump’s messaging had on levels of public perception of each subject. For data, I rely primarily on the open-source web platform *Media Cloud* to analyze both aggregate and randomized data from US media sources across the ideological spectrum.



The result was an analysis of over 190,000 print and digital news stories published in the US between May and November 2020.

## **Analysis:**

### **Protests/ANTIFA: The Message**

Trump's response to the protests against police brutality that took place across the US in the summer of 2020, along with the partisan divide evident in both the media coverage and public opinion of the demonstrations closely parallels the functioning of a closed, market-driven propaganda feedback loop. To reaffirm his positioning with targeted voter segments as an inverted populist, who would protect his supporters from liberalism Trump mobilized public opinion against the people involved in the protests by describing them as, among other things, a looming threat to the safety and well-being of the white suburbs.

Protests first erupted in late May following the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25. Images of people taking to the streets, by the thousands, demanding police reform could hardly be ignored by public officials, and Trump was quick to react. Trump put out a statement on Wednesday, May 27, two days after Floyd's death, saying that his "heart goes out to George's family and friends" and that he has "asked for [an] investigation to be expedited." "Justice," he asserted, "will be served." However, by Friday of that week, when press coverage of the protests in Minneapolis was dominated by the burning of a police station in the city the night before, Trump's rhetoric abruptly changed. Rather than continue to call for justice, or calm, or even acknowledge the issue of police brutality, Trump attacked the protestors on Twitter as "thugs," and stated, rather ominously, that "when the looting starts, the shootings starts." He also delivered an ultimatum to a "very weak Radical Left Mayor, Jacob Frey" in Minneapolis, that he either "get his act together and bring the City under control, or I will send in the National Guard & get the job done right."

Trump's shift in emphasis from the circumstances of Floyd's death to the behavior of the protestors themselves, which came to define his response to the protests, enabled him to not only sidestep any serious discussion of police reform in the country, but also to arbitrarily assign blame for any instances of violence that occurred. This was true even though, as research shows, only a small percentage of the protests saw any violence (Craig 2020). Indeed, one day after delivering his ultimatum to Mayor Frey, Trump seized on a new target that, along with Black Lives Matter, became a staple in his attacks on the protests: ANTIFA. As the FBI itself acknowledged, ANTIFA is more a philosophy and political stance – anti-fascism – than an organized group with an established political presence in the country (Tucker and Fox 2020). For Trump, it nonetheless came to represent one of the groups principally responsible for the violent unrest he believed was gripping the country. "The violence and vandalism is being led by Antifa and other radical left-wing groups," he told reporters at a May 30 event at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. "It's ANTIFA and the Radical Left," he tweeted the same day. "Don't lay the blame on others!" But, by summer's end, Joe Biden, his Democratic presidential opponent, also came to bear direct responsibility for the threat Trump believed ANTIFA and others posed to the country. "When is Slow Joe Biden going to criticize the Anarchists, Thugs & Agitators

in ANTIFA?” Trump tweeted on August 30. A September 1 text message from the Trump campaign was even more explicit about the association and the threat: “Biden & Dems HATE America. They support ANTIFA wrecking our cities. Show them this is OUR country NOT theirs.” In fact, by September, the threat was no longer contained to cities. It had made it the proverbial doorstep of middle, and implicitly white America, as the following campaign texts made clear: “ANTIFA ALERT They’ll attack your homes if Joe’s elected.” “ANTIFA THUGS WILL RUIN SUBURBS!”

That no credible link existed between Joe Biden and “ANTIFA,” or that the Democratic nominee vigorously condemned acts of violent protest as early as May 31 had no discernable impact on the contours of Trump’s messaging. The problem was groups like ANTIFA, and their Democratic supporters, led by Biden himself. Or, as a September 8 Trump campaign text neatly summarized: “It’s Biden & ANTIFA vs Pre. Trump & America!” It was a message largely unencumbered by either a lack of supporting evidence or the need to meaningfully address the factors that led to the unrest.

### **Protests/ANTIFA: The Coverage**

Despite the absence of any widespread violence over the summer, from ANTIFA or any other group associated with demonstrations against police brutality, Trump’s indictment of the protestors as “thugs,” and Biden, and other, mostly local Democratic officials as “weak” or “radical” effectively set the tone for the media coverage of the protest movement, particularly on conservative media.

An analysis of media sources across the political spectrum makes clear that, in the context of the 2020 protests, ANTIFA as a story was largely a product of Trump’s social media activity. Among leading US newspapers and digital outlets, ANTIFA was mentioned only 64 times in the five months prior to Floyd’s death in May. It did receive more attention in conservative media, where it was mentioned 2,083 times over the same period. Following Floyd’s death, however, when Trump began publicly linking the protests and protest-related violence to ANTIFA, references to the “group” quickly spiked. On June 1, the day after Trump stated that he planned to designate ANTIFA as a terrorist organization, there were 132 references to ANTIFA in leading “mainstream” or “top US sources”<sup>1</sup> newspaper and digital media sources, and 774 in conservative media. This trend continued throughout the summer and fall, when 60% of references to ANTIFA, and more than 50% of references to Trump and ANTIFA occurred in conservative media outlets. This compares to the limited attention they received – 13.5% and 12.5%, respectively – in mainstream media sources.

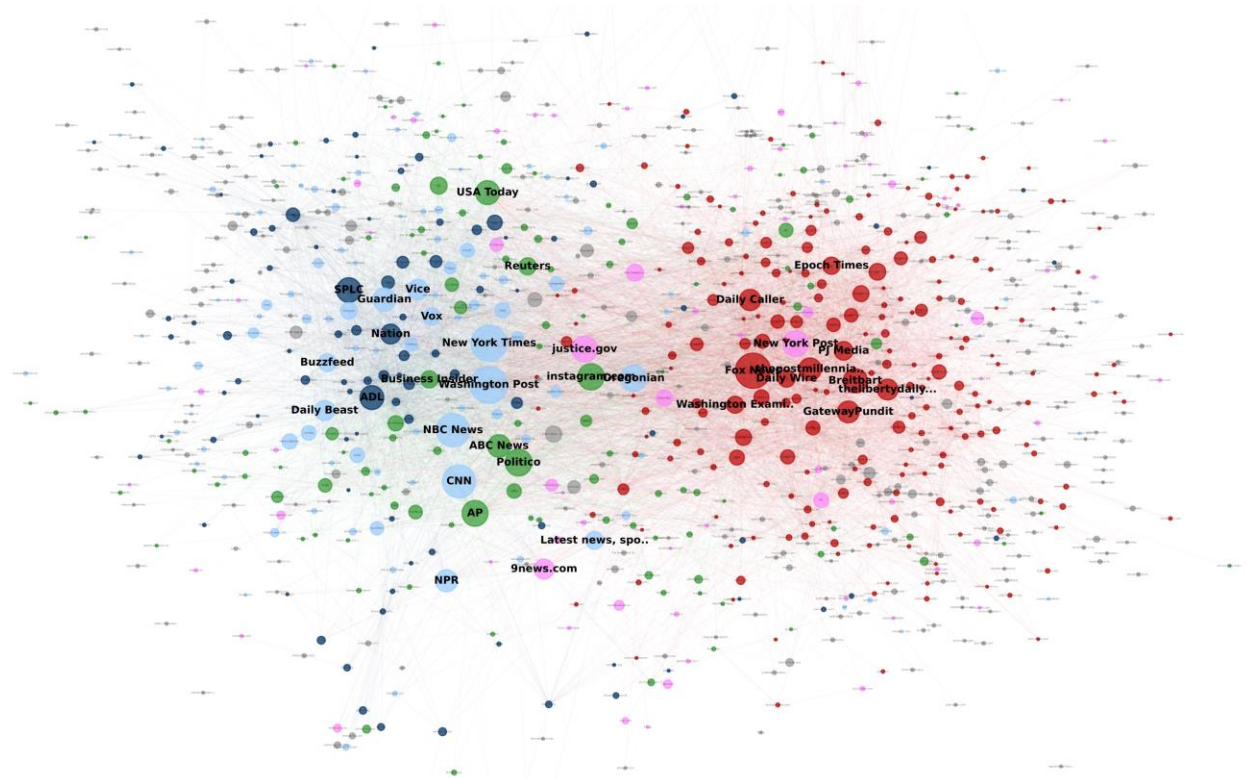
Just how divergent, and partisan the coverage was becomes even more clear from a network analysis of how different media sources discussing ANTIFA over the same time period linked to each other on Twitter. It reveals two distinct clusters, one centered around leading mainstream media outlets, like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and encompasses sources from the center to the left, and another, almost entirely separate one on the right, centered around *Fox News*, *Daily Wire*, and *Breitbart*, and is largely limited to

---

<sup>1</sup> In the *Media Cloud* platform, the “Top US Sources 2018” collection includes 87 media sources ranging from the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times* to *Buzz Feed*, *Politico* and the *Daily Beast*.

other conservative sources (Figure 1 [Caption: N = 52,058 stories, 3,456 Media sources and 16,185 Media Links]).

Figure 5.1 ANTIFA Media Cloud



The partisan nature of the coverage is also apparent from a comparative review of a random sample of stories from mainstream and conservative media sources on ANTIFA. In the mainstream media, most mentions of ANTIFA came in coverage of statements made by various Republican figures, from White House officials to candidates for office whose remarks closely mirrored those of Trump. An August 11 *Washington Post* article, for example, describes an ad aired by a Republican congressional candidate in Georgia warning ANTIFA to “stay the hell out of northwest Georgia,” while an August 27 story in the *Twin Cities Pioneer Press* described how personal Trump Attorney, Rudy Giuliani, claimed, during his speech to the RNC Convention, that ANTIFA had “hijacked the protests into vicious, brutal riots” and, together with other groups, was pressuring Biden to support their “pro-criminal, anti-police policies” (Bade 2020; Lemire, Price and Freking 2020). In the conservative media, the coverage, and the language was decidedly less neutral. In a July 5 article on *Gateway Pundit*, for instance, ANTIFA is described as a “mob” of “anti-American guerrillas” that destroyed a statue of Christopher Columbus in Baltimore, while an October 30 article in *Breitbart* accuses Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia of “propagating biased



information that consistently favors the political left” and of promoting “the agenda of groups such as Antifa and Black Lives Matter” (Taylor 2020; Adler 2020). Unlike the mainstream reporting, then, which consisted mainly of verifiable, and more ideologically balanced information, the conservative coverage was more editorial in nature, and intended to reinforce the claim that ANTIFA was a central protagonist in violent, anti-police protests sweeping the country.

### **Protests/ANTIFA: The Effect**

The partisan nature of the protest coverage also had a visible impact on the contours of public opinion. In the weeks following Floyd’s death in May, public opinion data showed broad support for the protests. A June *Pew* survey found that 67% of respondents supported the “Black Lives Matter Movement.” This included 60% of whites, 92% of Democrats and 37% of Republicans (Thomas and Menasce-Horowitz 2020). Similarly, data from compiled by *Civiqs* shows that there was an almost ten percentage jump – 43% to 52% support for BLM in the week following Floyd’s death (Civiqs 2020). But, as the protests spread and began to attract more attention, particularly negative attention from Trump, who, as we have seen, capitalized on instances when the demonstrators became violent, public support began to slip. By September, the *Pew* data recorded a 12-point drop in support for BLM overall, including a 15 point drop in support among Whites and a 4-point drop among Democrats. But the sharpest drop was among Republicans, whose support declined by 21 points (Thomas and Menasce-Horowitz 2020). *CNN* tracking polls captured a similar partisan trend, not only in the belief that racism remains a problem in the US, but in support for protests. In June, 43% of Republicans believed racism was a “big problem in society,” and 79% supported “peaceful protests.” By early September, those numbers had dropped by 21 and 19 points respectively, to 22% and 60%. Among Democrats, there had only been a 6-point drop, to 84%, in support for the idea that racism is a problem (Agiesta 2020). By October, *Pew* data also showed that a majority of Americans had either heard “a lot” about ANTIFA (22%) or “a little” (50%), a political orientation with unknown number of adherents in the country and a limited organized presence (Pew 2020).

### **Socialism: The Message**

Trump’s warnings about socialism and socialists, which only became more dire as the November election approached, followed a similar pattern. By attacking a largely fanciful enemy, coverage of which then bounced around –without limited attempt at verification– within the closed circuit of the conservative media, Trump sought to affirm his positioning as an advocate for “forgotten Americans” against a socialist horde pushing for government policies that favored non-elite interests.

Even before it was known who his General Election opponent would be, Trump and his campaign made it clear that the threat posed by the Democrats was equivalent to a state-sanctioned socialist takeover the country. To be sure, Trump could have faced Vermont Senator, Bernie Sanders, a self-identified democratic socialist in the General Election. However, the fact that Sanders was defeated in the Democratic Primary by former Vice President Joe Biden, an avowed centrist far removed from Sanders on the ideological

spectrum had no discernable impact on Trump's admonitions about socialism and the Democratic Party. Trump started the election year by tweeting, in characteristically dichotomizing language, that the "Democrats are now the party of high taxes, high crime, open borders, late-term abortion, socialism, and blatant corruption. The Republican Party is the party of the American Worker, the American Family, and the American Dream!" And, in case someone missed the point, he re-sent the tweet, with slight modifications – "the total destruction of your Second Amendment" was added to the charges against the Democrats in February – over the next two months. Biden, Trump asserted in his RNC acceptance speech in August, was "a Trojan horse for socialism" (Trump 2020a).

But Trump and his campaign saved some of its most vitriolic attacks for campaign emails, which over the summer and fall offered a steady diet of warnings to subscribers. "Our nation is at risk of falling into the hands of Radical Democrats," warned Donald Trump, Jr in a July 27 email. Not only do Democrats want to "bail ANTIFA THUGS out of jail," he claimed, they also "choose BIG GOVERNMENT socialism over American prosperity." However, as the election neared, the rhetoric became even more frantic. "Slow Joe and Phony Kamala are losing it," explained an October 20 email. "We're just 14 DAYS from Election Day and it's become clear that AMERICA is REJECTING their CORRUPT SOCIALIST agenda." Another assured supporters that, "these BIG GOVERNMENT SOCIALISTS know they can't win - not when I have YOU on my team." And, on election eve itself: "This will determine the future of America for DECADES - will we be a BIG GOVERNMENT SOCIALIST Nation or will we remain a FREE Nation that puts AMERICANS FIRST?"

On the campaign trail, Trump, and a gaggle of Republican surrogates also pounded away on the theme. At rallies across the country, Trump blasted Biden for either being socialist himself, or being captive to the socialists in his party. "Socialism is the mainstream of the Biden campaign," Trump bellowed at a rally in Arizona in August, but "it's not the mainstream of America. Remember I said, we will never have a socialist country" (Trump 2020b). "Not all Democrats are socialists," exclaimed Florida Senator, Marco Rubio, at a Miami Trump rally just days before the election, "but all socialists are Democrats" (Vigliucci, Smiley, Grinspan, and Degado 2020). Vice President Mike Pence even got in on the action. "We stand at a crossroads of freedom," he claimed, while speaking at Ripon College in July, "Our road leads to greater freedom and opportunity. Their road leads to socialism and decline" (Pence 2020).

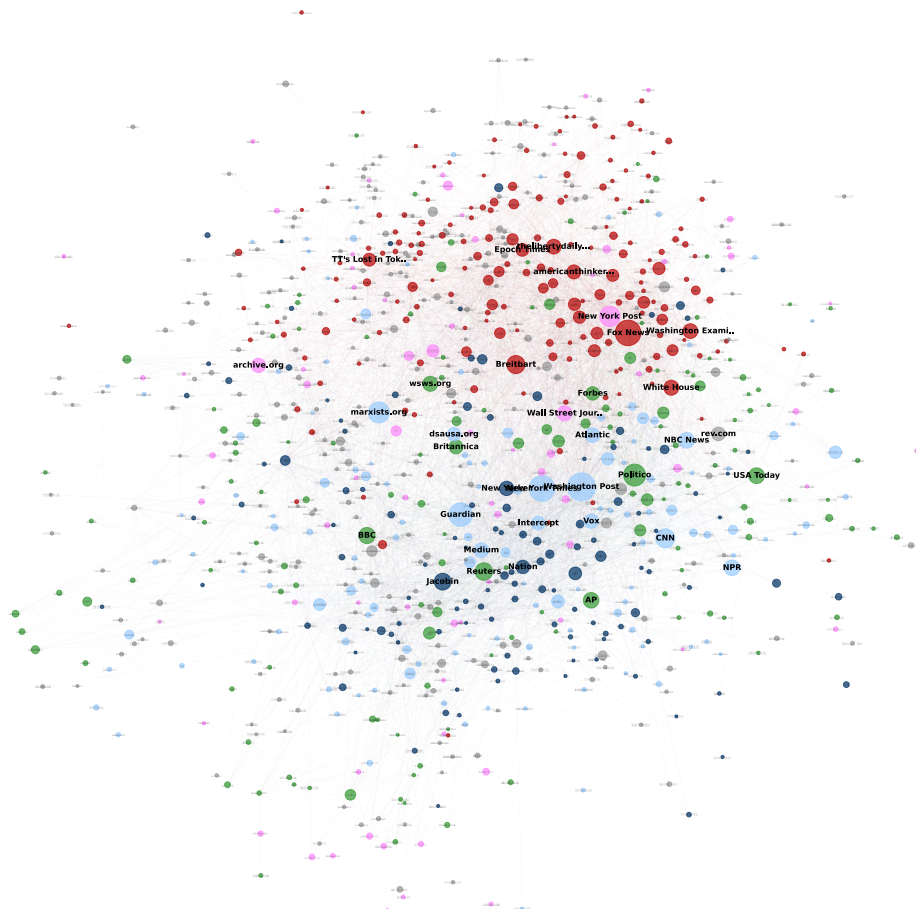
## **Socialism: The Coverage**

Much like the coverage of ANTIFA and the police brutality protests, the media coverage of socialism in 2020 was a story that began and ended with Trump and was largely a creature of the conservative media. Overall, across the media spectrum, there were a little more than 80,000 stories between May 2020 and the November election that either discussed or mentioned "socialism" or "socialist." Of these, 10% appeared in mainstream sources; 14.5% appeared in left-leaning media sources, while 40.3% and 34.5% appeared in "center" and "right" sources, respectively. When either Trump or Biden are brought into the analysis, the dominance of right sources becomes more evident: 37.3% of articles mentioning Trump and socialism or socialist appeared on the right, compared to 17.4% in the mainstream, 30.7% in the "center," and 14.5% on the left; while 41.7% of

articles mentioning Biden and socialism or socialist appeared on the right, compared to 11.3% in the mainstream, 32.7% in the “center,” and 14.3% on the left.

And, as was the case with ANTIFA, the partisan nature of the coverage of socialism is evident both in a network analysis of aggregate Twitter links between leading media sources, which reveals two relatively distinct clusters centered on mainstream and more conservative outlets, and in a comparative review of the content of randomly selected articles. (Figure 2 [Caption: N = 106,305 stories; 7,407 Media sources and 19,379 Media Links]).

Figure 5.2 Socialism Media Cloud



Among randomly selected sources, the coverage in mainstream sources is more-or-less neutral and largely factual compared to coverage in sources on the right, which is more likely to be ideological in tone and opinion-based. For example, a November 2 *Associated Press* story quotes Georgia Senator, David Perdue as saying that he and Trump have been working hard to strengthen the economy and to counter the “onslaught of socialism” coming from the Democrats, while a July 17 story in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reported on Pence’s speech at Ripon College railing against socialism (Associated Press 2020; Marley 2020). On the right, an article published online by the *Heritage Foundation* in July links a perceived resurgence of socialism in the US to Bernie Sanders, the surprise 2018 win of Representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez in New York and a higher tolerance for the idea among millennials. But it concludes by editorializing that “socialism” is “a pseudo-religion grounded in pseudo-science and enforced by political tyranny.” It is “a god that failed, a science that never was, a political system headed for the ash heap of history” (Edwards 2018). Meanwhile, a July 1 article on *Real Clear Politics* blamed the nation’s universities, and a “campus creed” of socialism for the “poorly educated and yet petulant” young people calling for the removal of memorials and monuments seen as celebrating a history of racial hierarchy in the country (Hanson 2020).

### **Socialism: The Effect**

Given its vintage, and failure to materialize in the past, despite equally alarming warnings, it is some wonder that Trump and his allies thought that invoking the specter of socialism could still work to attract public attention in the US. To be sure, the support Sanders received in 2016 and 2020 certainly invited its return to popular discourse. Of course, one might also expect that Sanders’s defeat in both elections to moderate Democrats would have assuaged most of the concern, or at least toned-down Trump’s rhetoric the scope of the media coverage it received and whatever impact it had on public opinion. But, as we have seen, it had no such effect, on Trump, the conservative media, or on an already deeply divided public. Aggregate data compiled by *Gallup* at the end of 2019 shows that over the previous decade, public opinion of socialism had actually been “quite stable,” with about 60% of respondents holding an unfavorable view (Newport 2020). Of course, the ratings diverged sharply based on party affiliation. Among Republicans, favorable views of socialism had reached as high as 24% in 2012. But, by the end of 2019, three years into Trump’s presidency, the percentage had plummeted to a 9%. Among Democrats, on the other hand, favorable views of socialism moved in the opposite direction over the same time period, improving by 14 points to 65% between 2012 and 2019 (Jones and Lydia 2019). But, here too, the prominence of Trump’s attack on the idea during the 2020 election, along with its repetition in the conservative media may have also had an effect. Polls in both the spring and fall of 2020 suggest that among Democrats, support for socialism dropped by as much as 15 points, or to between 50% and 56% (Montanaro 2020; Schulte 2020).

### **Conclusion:**

Trump’s dependence on market-oriented strategies to win reelection in 2020 has again raised questions about the compatibility of Political Marketing and Democracy. But,

upon closer inspection, it is evident that the issue at hand has less to do with Political Marketing than with democracy itself. Although critics have worried that a market-orientation might undermine political representation in a democracy, what threat, if any, political marketing poses to democracy, an otherwise elite-led model of government, is to potentially expand the channels through which representation might occur. The more substantive issue is the institutional power modern democracies afford political elites, and whether or not they choose, independent of the strategy they use, to lead or mislead the public. As Trump's attacks on ANTIFA and socialism demonstrate, a market-orientation may enhance their ability to manipulate public opinion, specifically, to mobilize targeted voter segments around an inverted notion of populism that rests on disinformation circulated within a largely closed media feedback loop. But that is as likely a consequence of the strategic tool being used than the power differentials implicit to the institutional framework in which it is being applied.

## References:

- Adler, T.D. 2020. Verifiability, Not Truth: How Wikipedia Buries Stories Like the Biden Corruption Scandal. *Brietbart*, October 30.  
<https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2020/10/30/verifiability-not-truth-why-wikipedia-is-not-the-answer-to-fake-news-big-tech-claims/>
- Agiesta, Jennifer. 2020. CNN Poll: Views on Racism, Protests Grow More Partisan this Summer. *CNN*, September 4. [https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/04/politics/cnn-poll-racism-protests/index.html?fbclid=IwAR225\\_r5Sfn8BDmTJDK2YQWImFMUEYhTicFaawhkempnJiNcm1uDUxBlaDI](https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/04/politics/cnn-poll-racism-protests/index.html?fbclid=IwAR225_r5Sfn8BDmTJDK2YQWImFMUEYhTicFaawhkempnJiNcm1uDUxBlaDI)
- Associated Press. 2020. Obama, Trump Stop by Georgia in Closing Days of the Campaign. *US New and World Report*, November 2. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/georgia/articles/2020-11-02/obama-trump-stop-by-georgia-in-closing-days-of-the-campaign>
- Christiano, Thomas. 1996. *The Rule of the Many: Fundamental Issues in Democratic Society*. New York: Routledge.
- Craig, Tim. 2020. "The United States is in Crisis": Report Tracks Thousands of Summer Protests. Most Nonviolent." *Washington Post*, September 3.  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-united-states-is-in-crisis-report-tracks-thousands-of-summer-protests-most-nonviolent/2020/09/03/b43c359a-edec-11ea-99a1-71343d03bc29\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-united-states-is-in-crisis-report-tracks-thousands-of-summer-protests-most-nonviolent/2020/09/03/b43c359a-edec-11ea-99a1-71343d03bc29_story.html)
- Bade, Rachael. 2020. Rep. Omar Vanquishes Primary Challenger, the Latest Victory for Liberals. *Washington Post*, August 11.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/rep-omar-georgia-republicans-face->



critical-primaries-tuesday/2020/08/11/f597843a-dbd-11ea-b4af-72895e22941d\_story.html

Bender, Michael. 2020. "Trump Talks Juneteeth, John Bolton, Economy in WSJ Interview." *Wall Street Journal*, June 19.

Benkler, Yochai, Casey Tilton, Bruce Etling, Hal Roberts, Justin Clark, Robert Faris, Jonas Kaiser, Carolyn Schmitt. 2020. Mail-in Voter Fraud: Anatomy of a Disinformation Campaign. *Berkman Center for Research Publication*, No. 2020 (6).  
[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3703701](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3703701)

Benkler, Yochai, Robert Faris and Hal Roberts. 2018. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bennett, Lance W., and Steven Livingston. 2018. The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions. *European Journal of Communication* 33 (2): 122-139.

Busby, Robert. 2009. *Marketing the Populist Politician*. New York: Palgrave

Collins, Neil and Patrick Butler. 2002. "When Marketing Models Clash with Democracy." *Journal of Public Affairs*, 3, 1, 52-62.

Conley, Brian M. 2018. Thinking What He Says: Market Research and the Making of Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential Campaign. In *Political Marketing in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election*, ed. Jamie Gillies, 29-48. Cham: Palgrave.

Civiqs. 2020. Black Lives Matter. April 25-December 31.  
[https://civiqs.com/results/black\\_lives\\_matter?uncertainty=true&annotations=true&zoomIn=true](https://civiqs.com/results/black_lives_matter?uncertainty=true&annotations=true&zoomIn=true)

Edwards, Lee. 2018. What Americans Must Know About Socialism. *Heritage Foundation*, December 3. <https://www.heritage.org/progressivism/commentary/what-americans-must-know-about-socialism>

Gallup. 2021. Presidential Approval Ratings – Donald Trump. *Gallup*.  
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/203198/presidential-approval-ratings-donald-trump.aspx?fbclid=IwAR0Ootp5aLoABwuH8kH-UMJR-JwaGslaiDvX4KnYp31XvFvAIqfQWTDxy7o>

Haberman, Maggie, Annie Karni and Jonathan Martin. 2020. "On Trump's To-do List: Take Back the Suburbs. Court Black Voters. Expand Electoral Map. Win." *New York Times*, February 11.

Habermas, Jurgen. 1996. "Three Normative Models of Democracy." In Seyla Benhabib ed.

*Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. Princeton: Princeton University.

Hanson, Victor Davis. 2020. Universities Sowing the Seeds of their Own Obsolescence. *Real Clear Politics*, July 2.  
[https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2020/07/02/universities\\_sowing\\_the\\_seeds\\_of\\_their\\_own\\_obsolescence\\_143590.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2020/07/02/universities_sowing_the_seeds_of_their_own_obsolescence_143590.html)

Henneberg, Stephan C., Margaret Scammell and Nicholas L. O'Shaughnessy. 2009. Political Marketing Management and Theories of Democracy. *Marketing Theory* 9 (2): 165-188.

Hyman, M. R. 2004. "Revising the Structural Framework for Marketing Management." *Journal of Business Research*. 57, 923-932.

Jones, Jeffrey M., and Lydia Saad. 2019. U.S. Support for More, Government Inches Up, but not for Socialism. *Gallup*, November 18.  
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/268295/support-government-inches-not-socialism.aspx>

Judis, John and Ruy Teixeira. 2002. *The Emerging Democratic Majority*. New York: Scribner.

Kazin, Michael. 1995. *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Lees-Marshment, Brian Conley, Edward Elder, Robin Pettitt, Vincent Raynauld and Andre Turcotte. 2019. *Political Marketing: Principles and Applications*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. New York: Routledge.

Lemire, Jonathan, Michelle L. Price and Kevin Freking. 2020. Trump Lashes Biden, Defies Pandemic on White House Stage. *Twin Cities Pioneer Press*, August 29.  
<https://www.twincities.com/2020/08/27/trump-lashes-biden-defies-pandemic-on-white-house-stage/>

Montanaro, Domenico. 2020. Poll: Sanders Rises, but Socialism isn't Popular with Most Americans. *NPR*, February 19. <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/19/807047941/poll-sanders-rises-but-socialism-isnt-popular-with-most-americans?fbclid=IwAR0FyVY5GOE9CwkNWdkRjC3BynDrwdZ76UyJYuLzn85B-fh9yM5Iw-SJb8>

Marley, Patrick. 2020. Pence Argues Against Socialism in Ripon, Wisconsin. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 17.  
<https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2020/07/17/pence-campaigns-in-ripon-wisconsin-scene-central-to-gops-founding/5453853002/>

Newport, Frank. 2020. Public Opinion Review: Americans' Reactions to the Word

- 'Socialism.' *Gallup*, March 6. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/287459/public-opinion-review-americans-word-socialism.aspx?fbclid=IwAR3InEqffQd4Rb0IZ85HdD0WcjIiaXgxdYJZ3tajzmJAGNt65bQX0jjLmm0>
- Palmer, Jerry. 2002. Smoke and Mirrors: Is That the Way It Is? Themes in Political Marketing. *Media, Culture and Society*, 24: 345-363.
- Pence, Michael. 2020. Remarks by Vice President Pence on Dangers of Socialism. *White House Remarks*, July 17. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-dangers-socialism/>
- Pew. 2020. *American Trends Panel Poll*. Roper Center at Cornell University. October 2020.
- Ross, Andrew S., and Damian J. Rivers. 2018. Discursive Deflection: Accusations of "Fake News" and the Spread of Mis and Disinformation in the Tweets of President Trump. *Social Media and Society* April-June: 1-12.
- Schumpeter, Joseph. 1943. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. London: G. Allen and Unwin.
- Schulte, Gabriela. 2020. Poll: Democracy Voters view Socialism more Favorably than Capitalism. *The Hill*, September 14. [https://thehill.com/hilltv/what-americas-thinking/516322-poll-democratic-voters-view-socialism-more-favorably-as?fbclid=IwAR0FdNPt5mLSWVDAxtvekeJUcoo\\_eiLra\\_GZ3J5bcAFnJtQliPrc\\_h32p0Q](https://thehill.com/hilltv/what-americas-thinking/516322-poll-democratic-voters-view-socialism-more-favorably-as?fbclid=IwAR0FdNPt5mLSWVDAxtvekeJUcoo_eiLra_GZ3J5bcAFnJtQliPrc_h32p0Q)
- Shaws, E.H and D. Jones. 2005. "A History of Schools of Marketing Thought." *Marketing Theory*, 5,3, 239-281.
- Taylor, Kristinn. 2020. Antifa Mob Takes Down Christopher Columbus Statue in Baltimore – No Police in Sight." *Gateway Pundit*, July 5. <https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2020/07/antifa-mob-takes-christopher-columbus-statue-baltimore-no-police-sight/>
- Terchek, Ronald and Thomas Conte, eds. 2001. *Theories of Democracy: A Reader*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Thomas, Deja and Juliana Menasce-Horowitz. 2020. Support for Black Lives Matter has Decreased since June but Remains Strong Among Black Americans. *Pew Research Center*, September 16.
- Trump, Donald. 2020a. Full Text: President Trump's 2020 RNC Acceptance Speech. *NBCNews*, August 28. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/read-full-text-president-donald-trump-s-acceptance-speech-rnc-n1238636>
- Trump, Donald. 2020b. Remarks in Yuma Arizona, On Immigration.

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?474842-1/president-trump-remarks-yuma-arizona-immigration>

Tucker, Eric and Ben Fox. 2020. FBI Director Says ANTIFA is an Ideology, Not an Organization. *Associated Press*, September 17.  
<https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-race-and-ethnicity-archive-bdd3b6078e9efadcfcd0be4b65f2362e?fbclid=IwAR2zVic4ijSLEElCnpkyta2pmzaZFWPmKojoyWQ0wbCO5LPcYD6tgBvXjWo>

Viglucci, Andres, David Smiley, Lautoro Grinspan, and Antonio Maria Degado. 2020. 'People Believe It.' Republicans' Drumbeat of Socialism Helped Win Voters in Miami. *Miami Herald*, November 7. [https://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/article247001412.html?fbclid=IwAR2s4q\\_PwKvDuy0JeG7TOLM\\_LWQQSOmdiVqV3dUKxVDNA5GPRBSx7kn7qCI](https://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/article247001412.html?fbclid=IwAR2s4q_PwKvDuy0JeG7TOLM_LWQQSOmdiVqV3dUKxVDNA5GPRBSx7kn7qCI)