# 2020 Post-Election Analysis

May 2021

THIRD WAY

THE COLLECTIVE
★★★★★ POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE

LATINO VICTORY

# Project Overview

The fundamental question: What happened down ballot in 2020?

## A Message from Marlon Marshall and Lynda Tran

Our team set out to conduct a postmortem analysis of the 2020 cycle that would offer an honest and data-driven look at both what worked well for Democrats running for the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate – and where the challenges our candidates experienced call for meaningful solutions before voters head back to the ballot box in just two short years.

While we did not embark on the project with preconceived notions about what strategies, tactics, or issues impacted electoral outcomes, we believe we performed our work with eyes wide open to the public discourse and historic health and economic crises that touched every major campaign – and every individual in America – in 2020. We knew it was important to explore the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on everything from how campaigns reached their supporters to whether and how voters were able to make their voices heard. And we were professionally and personally conscious of the heightened role that race played in these elections – both in the GOP's bold-faced efforts to divide Americans and in helping to drive civic engagement and voter enthusiasm in critical races nationally.

We also went into the analysis grounded in many cycles of experience and data on voter participation and longitudinal turnout trends. As such, we understood the "blue wave" 2018 elections to

be a standout in the last half-century of congressional gains for Democrats and approached our analysis with tempered expectations about what "should" have happened across the battleground maps. Lastly, we were conscious of the ongoing debate around polling accuracy and effectiveness, and we evaluated the public and proprietary polling we received accordingly.

Over 6 months, we explored the national and regional message themes that played out in the campaigns' own media and other assets, reviewed the infrastructure and ecosystem that supported these campaigns, and conducted our own deep dive into the data and analytics using both final state voter files and public and proprietary polling. While we intentionally devoted the bulk of our time and effort to gathering first-person observations based on the campaigns' lived experience, throughout the project, we continually sought out additional data, integrated new analyses of 2020 demographics and outcomes, and incorporated the wisdom and experience of expert voices from across the Democratic political spectrum.

**Although we explicitly focused our efforts on answering the question of "What happened in 2020?" rather than prescribing what should happen next, we hope this analysis informs Democratic Party and broader movement leaders as they begin planning for 2022 and beyond.**

# What We Found

# Our findings

1. Voters of color are persuasion voters who need to be convinced

2. Republican attempts to brand Democrats as "radicals" worked

3. Polling was a huge problem – even after 2016 adjustments

4. COVID-19 affected everything

5. Year round organizing worked, as did cross-Party collaboration

6. Our hopes for 2020 were just too high

# 1. Voters of color are persuasion voters who need to be convinced

# Our approach to voters of color significantly hurt our outcomes

**Our assumptions about Dem support among voters of color – and the lack of differentiation in our messaging and outreach within demographic groups – cost us support in key races**

- As in previous cycles, Democrats generally treated Black, Latino, and AAPI voters as GOTV targets, concentrating outreach efforts closer to Election Day and in some cases after early vote was already underway

- Despite historic turnout, even where Black voters were key to Democratic successes this past cycle – including in GA, AZ, and MI – the data show drop-off in support in 2020 compared to 2016 and 2018

- Drop-off in support among Latino and Hispanic voters were the lynchpin in Democratic losses in races in FL, TX, and NM – especially among working class and non-college voters in these communities

- Drop-off in AAPI support fueled losses in key races in CA, especially among Vietnamese and Filipino voters

- Campaign messaging to these groups typically did not account for differing perceptions among gender, age groups, educational attainment, geography, or country of origin – and there was a dearth of message research on Black voters in particular

- Black, AAPI, and Latino and Hispanic voters were targeted by misinformation and disinformation efforts both online and on-the-ground – yet campaigns were largely unable to either assess the reach or respond in real time

# The Party treated voters of color as a monolith – especially Latino voters

**We heard that there were substantial Party and campaign misfires for engaging key demographic groups as a monolith – most notably Latino and Hispanic voters**

- National strategy failed to take into account regional and local differences, socioeconomic status, urbanicity, or country of origin – despite higher support for Democrats among voters from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic compared to Cuban-American voters

- Latino and Hispanic voters were broadly treated as GOTV targets rather than audiences for persuasion earlier in the cycle, and the modeling, polling, and subsequent campaign decision making reflected this assumption

- Campaign messaging didn't always reflect the differing values and priorities of urban Hispanic voters vs. rural Hispanic voters, much less account for what would most persuade Hispanic men in the Rio Grande Valley, oil and gas workers in New Mexico, or Latinas in South Florida

# Latino voters made a difference in top races

**Turnout among Latino voters grew dramatically in 2020 - rising by more than 30% compared to 2016**
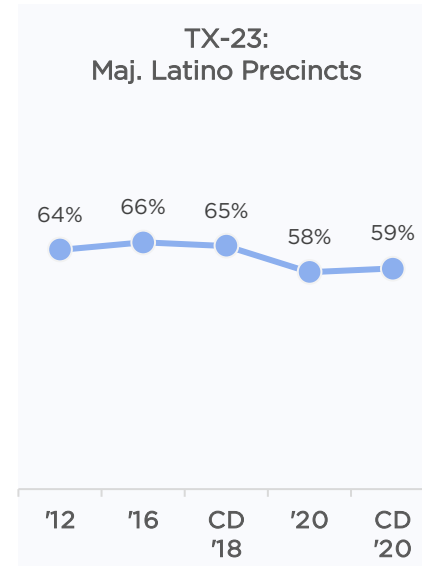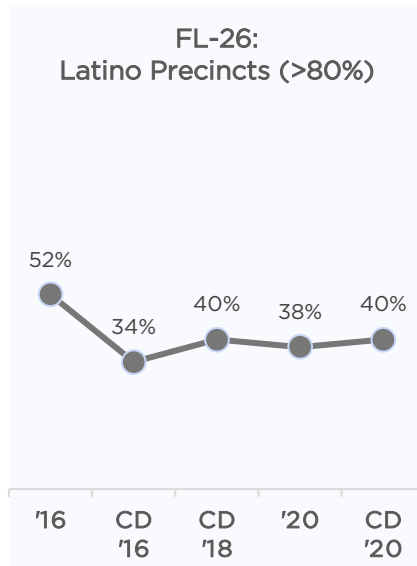
- Latino support was critical for the top of the ticket but especially in tight states like AZ, PA, and NV where the margin of victory among Latino voters exceeded Biden's win margin with the overall electorate

- Latino voters were also a lynchpin in Sen. Kelly's win in Arizona where his support nearly matched 2016 levels – but Biden saw heavier losses among Latino voters, indicating that some split ticket voting took place

**Despite increased Latino turnout overall, Democrats saw a significant dip in support in places with high concentrations of Latino and Hispanic voters – including in south FL and west TX**

- Part of the underperformance in 2020 is a reflection of Clinton's strength with Latino voters in 2016, when she outperformed Obama's 2012 support

- In **FL-26**, Republicans took a big lead in voter registration in 2020, saw higher turnout among Latino voters, and netted more of their support

- In **TX-23**, despite growing their share of the overall electorate, support among rural Latino voters shifted right by 13 points in 2020, mostly due to higher turnout among Latino Republicans

# Latinos continue to be 10 points more Dem than the rest of the electorate, but our advantage has shrunk*

Latino voters have grown their share of the electorate in recent cycles, but in 2020, Democratic support among Latino voters dropped in South Florida and parts of Texas
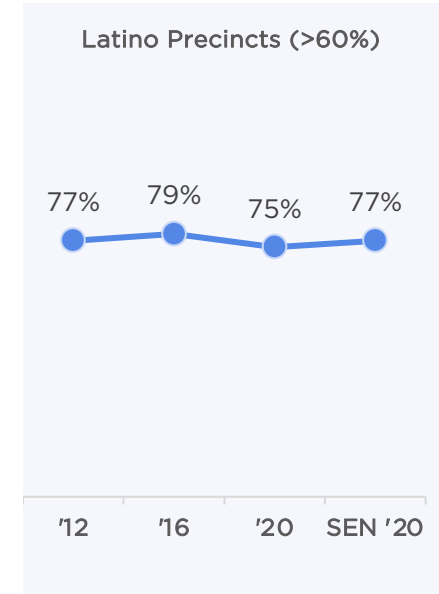


FL-26:
Latino Precincts (>80%)

52%  34%  40%  38%  40%

'16   CD    CD    '20   CD
      '16   '18         '20

TX-23:
Maj. Latino Precincts

64%  66%  65%  58%  59%

'12   '16   CD    '20   CD
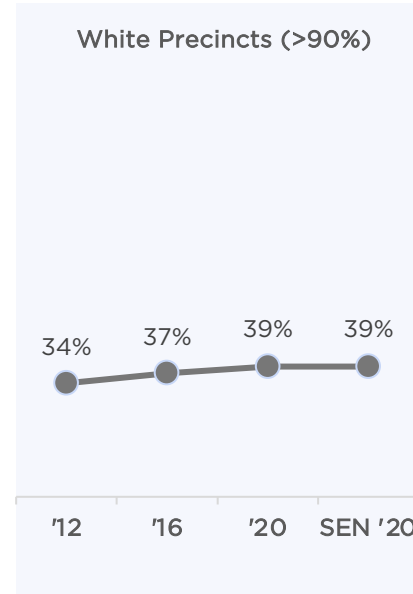            '18         '20

*Source: Immigration Hub Analysis on Latino Voters in 2020

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# Even in Arizona where Mark Kelly retained support from Latino voters, Republicans made inroads at the top of the ticket
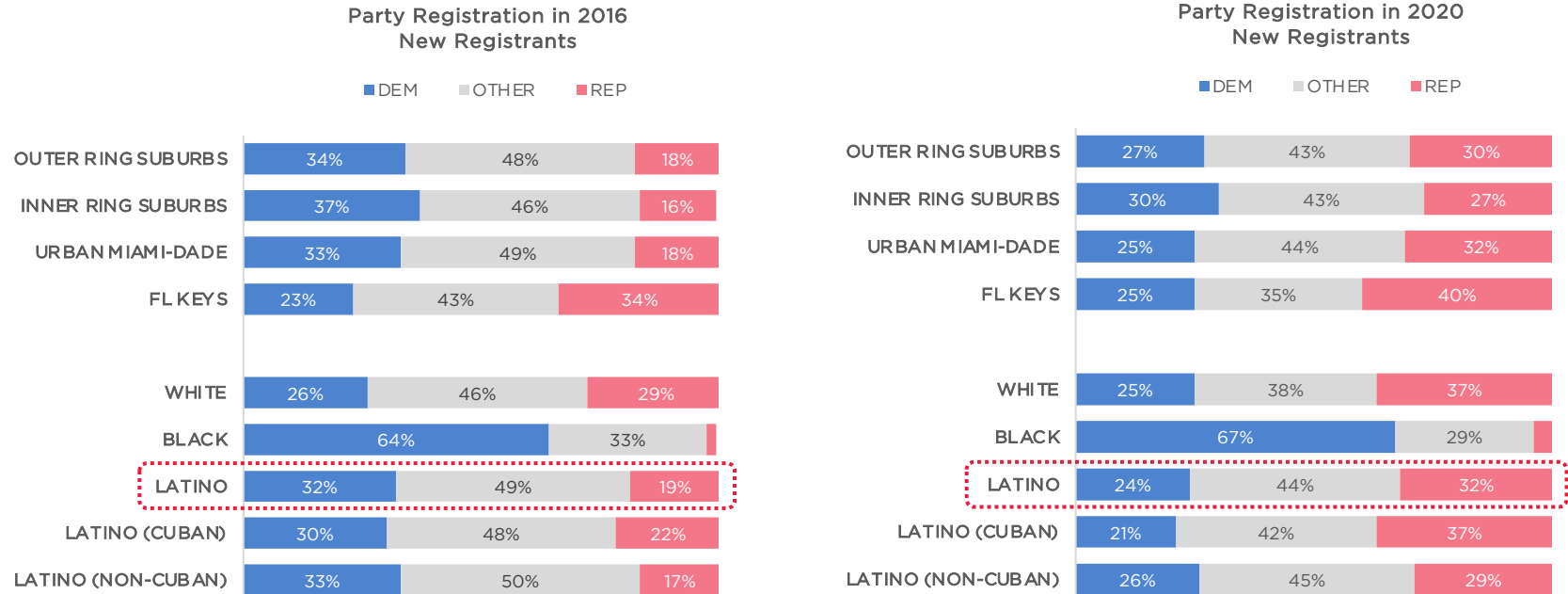
Support-wise, **Sen. Kelly was able to retain near 2016 level support among Latino voters**, while Biden saw heavier losses among Latinos than Kelly - indicating some split ticket voting took place

*Presidential + 2020 Senate Special*
*Dem vote share by demo composition*

### White Precincts (>90%)

34%    37%    39%    39%

'12    '16    '20    SEN '20

### Latino Precincts (>60%)

77%    79%    75%    77%

'12    '16    '20    SEN '20

# In FL-26, Democratic registration among Latino new registrants dropped by 8 points since 2016, while Republicans saw a 13-point increase

Meanwhile, Latino voters across Miami-Dade were less likely to identify as Democrats in 2020 relative to 2016 and more likely to identify with neither party

### Party Registration in 2016 New Registrants

■DEM  ■OTHER  ■REP

| | DEM | OTHER | REP |
|---|---|---|---|
| OUTER RING SUBURBS | 34% | 48% | 18% |
| INNER RING SUBURBS | 37% | 46% | 16% |
| URBAN MIAMI-DADE | 33% | 49% | 18% |
| FL KEYS | 23% | 43% | 34% |
| WHITE | 26% | 46% | 29% |
| BLACK | 64% | 33% | |
| LATINO | 32% | 49% | 19% |
| LATINO (CUBAN) | 30% | 48% | 22% |
| LATINO (NON-CUBAN) | 33% | 50% | 17% |

### Party Registration in 2020 New Registrants

■DEM  ■OTHER  ■REP

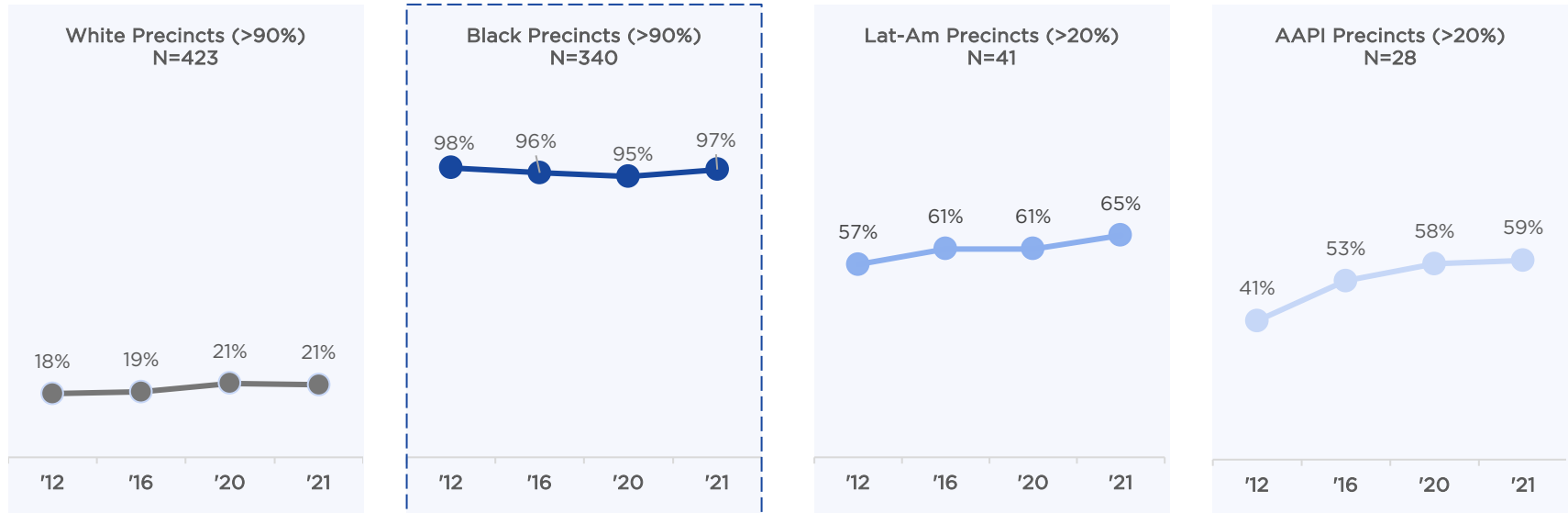| | DEM | OTHER | REP |
|---|---|---|---|
| OUTER RING SUBURBS | 27% | 43% | 30% |
| INNER RING SUBURBS | 30% | 43% | 27% |
| URBAN MIAMI-DADE | 25% | 44% | 32% |
| FL KEYS | 25% | 35% | 40% |
| WHITE | 25% | 38% | 37% |
| BLACK | 67% | 29% | |
| LATINO | 24% | 44% | 32% |
| LATINO (CUBAN) | 21% | 42% | 37% |
| LATINO (NON-CUBAN) | 26% | 45% | 29% |

# Black voters made a difference in top races

**The data show that strong vote share among Black voters – despite some downward trends – likely made the difference in top races**

- Dramatic shifts in the electorate helped many Tier 1 districts become bluer in 2020 – but Biden was more successful in cementing this baseline support while many Congressional candidates lagged behind, including in CA-39, TX-23, and TX-24

- Although Democrats saw a modest dip in support among Black voters (particularly in VA-07 and the NC Senate race), Black voter turnout increased substantially nationally — resulting in more net Democratic votes from Black voters in 2020 than in 2016

- Black voters were critical to Democrats' victories in the Georgia runoffs — with higher turnout and less drop-off than other groups heading from the general into the runoff elections

# Black voters were critical to Democrats' victories in the Georgia runoff elections and helped cement Democratic control of the U.S. Senate

Although turnout among Black voters dropped relative to 2016, Sen. Warnock overperformed both Clinton's 2016 and Biden's 2020 support, and performed similarly to Obama's 2012 margin

*GA: Presidential + 2021 Runoff*
*Dem vote share by demo composition*

**White Precincts (>90%)**
**N=423**

18%  19%  21%  21%

'12  '16  '20  '21

**Black Precincts (>90%)**
**N=340**

98%  96%  95%  97%

'12  '16  '20  '21

**Lat-Am Precincts (>20%)**
**N=41**

57%  61%  61%  65%

'12  '16  '20  '21

**AAPI Precincts (>20%)**
**N=28**

41%  53%  58%  59%

'12  '16  '20  '21

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# Black voters turned out in big numbers – but their overall share dropped

**In 2020, Black voters comprised a smaller share of the overall electorate.** A substantial boost in turnout netted Democrats more raw votes from Black voters than 2016, but the explosive growth among white voters in most races outpaced these gains

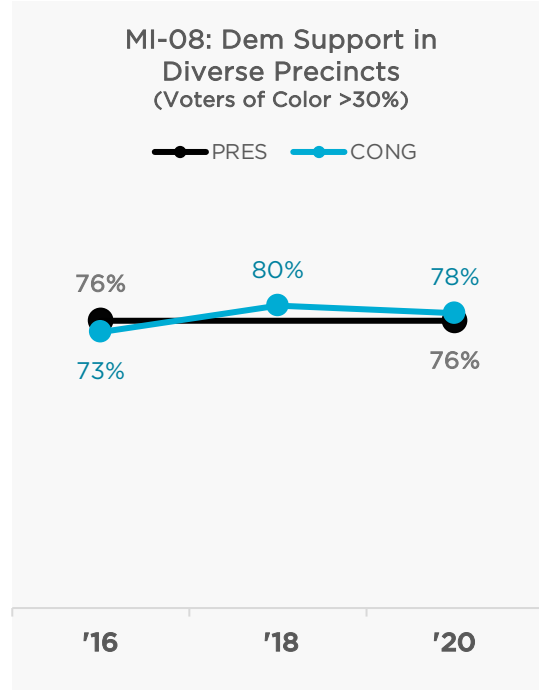**Despite increased turnout, Democrats saw a modest dip in support**

- In the North Carolina Senate race, Black voters grew their share of the electorate in 2020 and saw increased turnout over 2016 – but the GOP also saw a slight improvement among Black rural / exurban voters

- In VA-07, the turnout gap between all voters of color and white voters increased compared to 2016, benefiting the GOP. Democrats' support also fell in majority Black precincts, although turnout in these areas was up relative to 2016

**Still, Black voters were critical to Democratic wins in the GA runoff elections and helped cement Democratic control of the U.S. Senate**
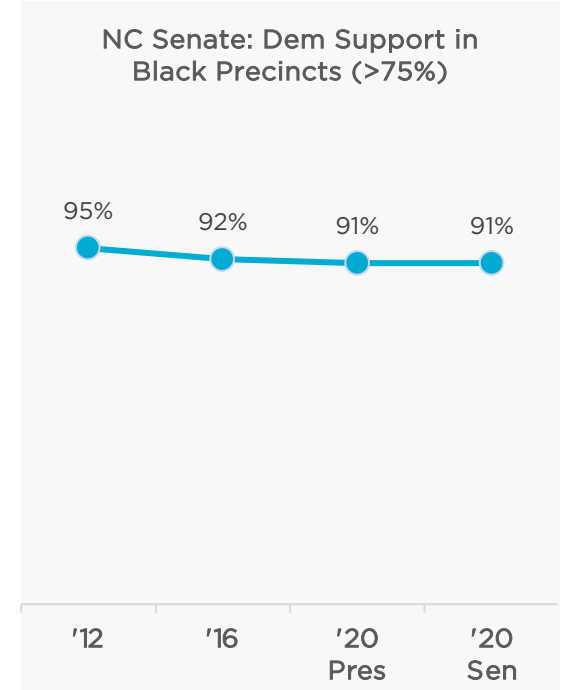
- Turnout among Black voters dropped relative to 2016, but Sen. Warnock overperformed both Clinton's 2016 and Biden's 2020 support, and performed similarly to Obama's 2012 margin

- While turnout among all racial groups dropped heading into the runoffs, the drop-off was the least concentrated among Black voters

- Drop-off was also less prominent among voters in urban/inner ring areas – key constituencies for both Dem candidates – while drop-off was steeper for white rural voters (which hurt Republican candidates)

# Despite robust support from Black voters, there are warning signs for Dems

In **MI-08**, Slotkin made gains over 2016 Dem performance in areas with more voters of color, but lost some support since her first cycle in 2018
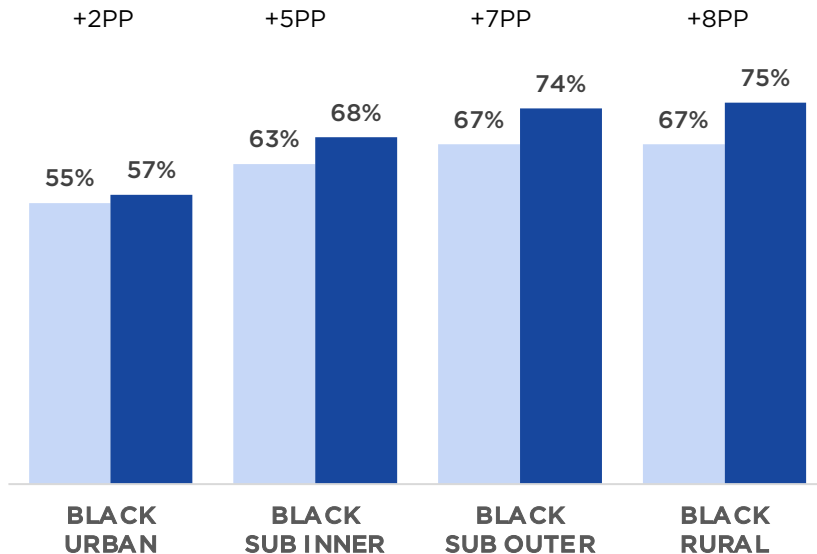
## MI-08: Dem Support in Diverse Precincts
### (Voters of Color >30%)

PRES ——  CONG ——

76%        80%        78%

73%                   76%

'16         '18         '20

Democratic support has slightly eroded in majority-Black precincts in **NC** over the past three cycles

## NC Senate: Dem Support in Black Precincts (>75%)

95%      92%      91%      91%

'12       '16       '20      '20
                   Pres      Sen

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# In NC, Republicans made greater gains among Black supporters, particularly in non-urban areas



Modeled Dem Turnout Prev Reg

- 2016 TURNOUT
- 2020 TURNOUT

+2PP  +5PP  +7PP  +8PP

55% 57% | 63% 68% | 67% 74% | 67% 75%

BLACK URBAN | BLACK SUB INNER | BLACK SUB OUTER | BLACK RURAL

Modeled GOP Turnout Prev Reg

- 2016 TURNOUT
- 2020 TURNOUT

+1PP  +6PP  +9PP  +11PP

51% 52% | 58% 64% | 61% 70% | 61% 72%

BLACK URBAN | BLACK SUB INNER | BLACK SUB OUTER | BLACK RURAL

17
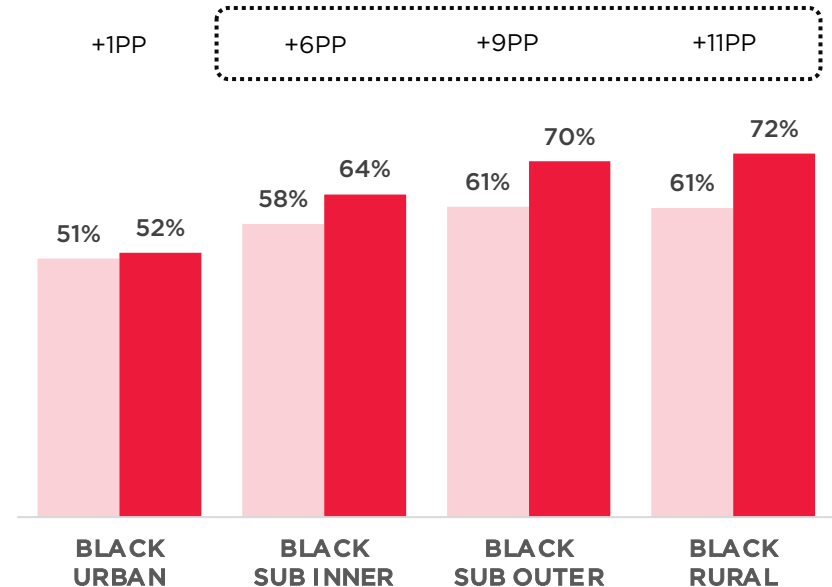
# AAPI voters made a difference in top races

**The data show rising electoral participation from AAPI voters likely made the difference in top races – including some of the closest presidential contests this cycle**

- AAPI voters saw significant growth in their electorates with large increases in registration and turnout

- Over 4 million ballots were cast by AAPI voters in 2020 – a 47% increase over their 2.8 million turnout in 2016 and a substantially sharper rise than the 12% increase among all other voters

- Georgia saw the second highest state-level increase in AAPI votes in the nation with the surge exceeding Biden's win margin – AAPI votes grew by almost 62,000 votes over 2016 in a state where Biden won by just 12,000 votes

- Arizona was among the top ten states that experienced a surge in AAPI voters

- In CA-39, AAPI voters now comprise a quarter of the electorate (a 6-point growth since 2016)

- While Biden grew support among this community since 2016 (three points in TX-24, one point in CA-39), congressional candidates underperformed him significantly in both districts

# In CA-39, the share of AAPI new registrants has been steadily increasing since 2016 and in 2020 – now accounting for nearly 1 in 3 *new* voters

Although Cisneros was unsuccessful in his re-election bid, the growth in registration and higher turnout among AAPI voters helped Biden improve on 2016 support

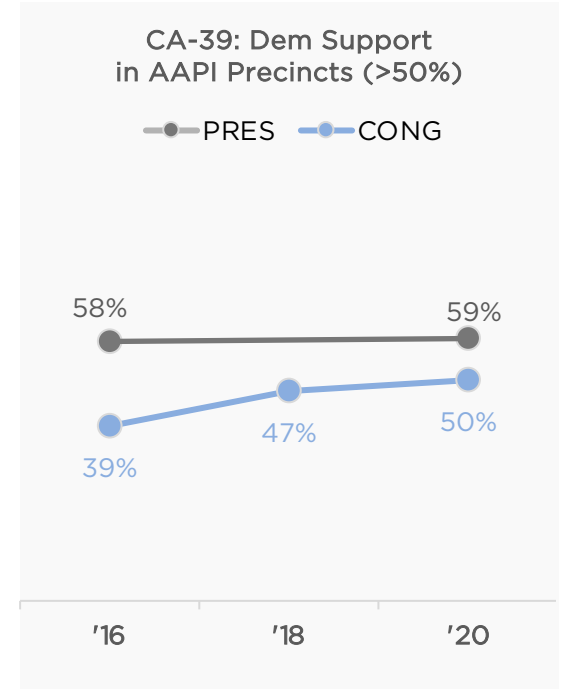*CA-39: Composition of New Registered Voters, 2016-2020*
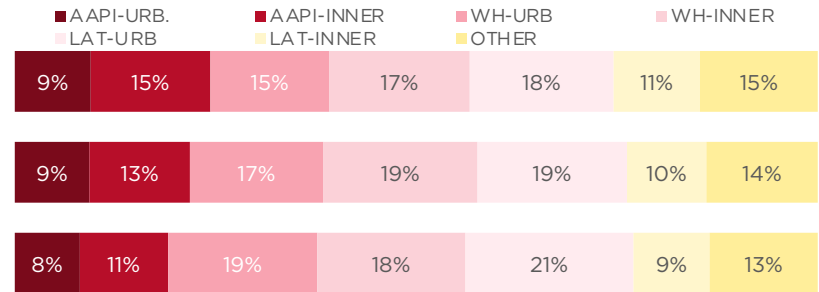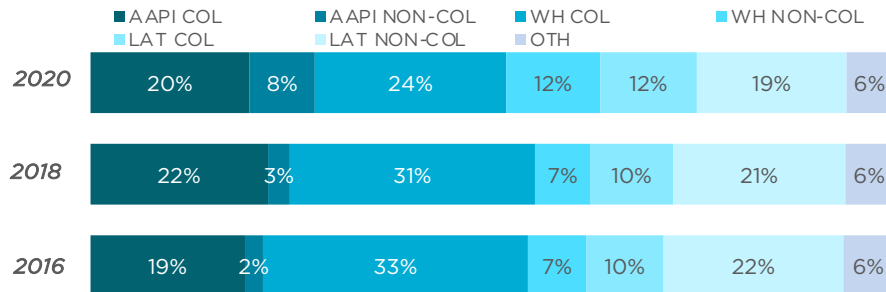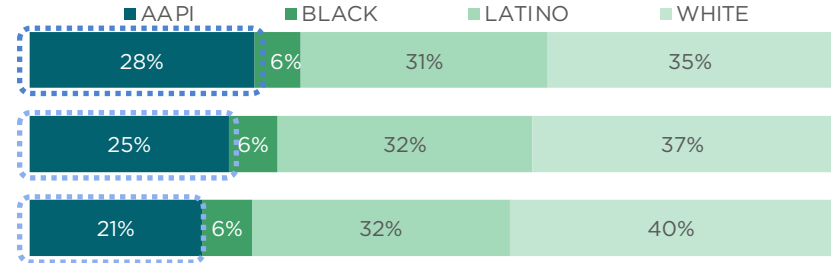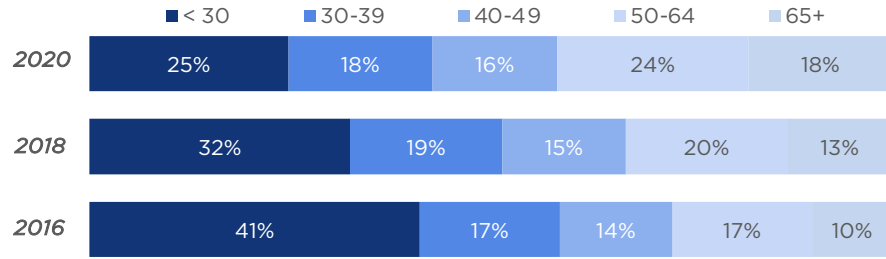
# Congressional candidates underperformed Biden with AAPI voters

In TX-24, growth in the AAPI electorate did not translate into votes for Valenzuela, who underperformed Biden 2020 and Clinton 2016 support

### TX-24: Dem Support in AAPI Precincts (>20%)

48% — '12 Pres
60% — '16 Pres
63% — '20 Pres
59% — '20 CD
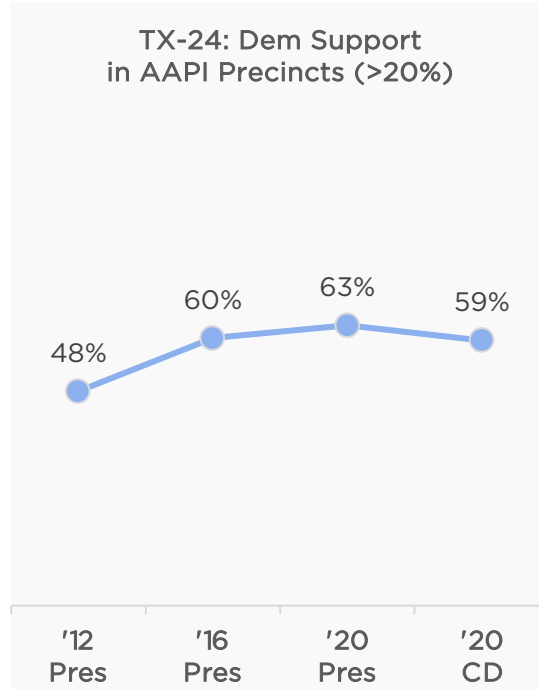
In CA-39, although Cisneros improved on his 2018 support in Asian American precincts, he still received roughly 9 points less than Biden

### CA-39: Dem Support in AAPI Precincts (>50%)

PRES · CONG

58% — 59% (PRES, '16–'20)
39% — 47% — 50% (CONG)

'16   '18   '20

# 2. Republican attempts to brand Democrats as "radicals" worked

# Messaging mattered – in good ways and bad

**Win or lose, self-described progressive or moderate, Democrats consistently raised a lack of a strong Democratic Party brand as a significant concern in 2020**

- Campaign public discourse – in paid media, earned media, and direct voter contact – and message and opinion research indicated that voters recalled attacks related to "radical socialists," "Defund the Police," and related messages
  - In the districts we looked at, those in which "law and order" or "socialism" was a continued drumbeat also saw a higher share of Latino/AAPI/Black voters who supported the GOP
  - Districts with significant rural populations required in-person voter contact to effectively push back on these attacks, but most chose not to do so

- Campaigns that were able to reach constituents with local messages – especially incumbents who could point to specific legislative wins – fared best

- Anecdotally, messages about jobs, the economy, and rebuilding post-COVID were most effective – but the GOP successfully branded Dems as the Party that would keep the economy shut down

- Republicans (Trump) successfully raised concerns about election security and VBM – potentially dampening their own voters' enthusiasm

- GOP media organizations and overall structure made them more effective than Dems

**Race was a primary focus throughout the cycle – most notably as Black Lives Matter protests and the Defund the Police movement took off in the summer of 2020**

- One candidate's internal campaign polling in summer 2020 showed that voters didn't believe they "shared their values," a notable shift from earlier research that they interpreted as a need to address the Defund the Police movement – which they did in ads featuring a former Republican law enforcement officer as a validator for the candidate's values and character
- In NY-02, when Jackie Gordon was asked if she supported defunding the police, she responded by pointing to her decades long career in law enforcement, as a military police officer, working with the police as a member of the Babylon town council, and then as a guidance counselor, inviting police into her school – internal polling indicated that constituents didn't buy this line of opposition attack
- In NE-02, Kara Eastman refuted the claim that she wanted to defund the police both in debates and on social media, and cited her past experience working with police departments as a social worker, but she did not feel her approach blunted the attacks

**Campaigns and practitioners widely described 2020 messaging as nationalized with Trump at the top of the ticket**

- One theme that arose was Party messaging that leaned too heavily on "anti-Trump" rhetoric without harnessing a strong economic frame
- As a former Member of Congress described the issue, Democrats focused on arguing that Trump was bad, not why a Democratic majority would help voters, "It was the lack of an economic plan that really hurt"
- Some campaign teams we spoke with felt that the Party didn't have a message beyond "Donald Trump sucks," and this void led to split-ticket voting for Biden at the top of the ticket and Republicans down ballot (leading to split outcomes in 16 districts nationwide)
  - In this absence of strong party branding, the opposition latched on to GOP talking points, suggesting our candidates would "burn down your house and take away the police."
  - Dana Balter described NY-24 not as a swing district, but a split ticket district, where "we vote Democrat for president and Republican for congress"

# Candidates mattered

**The top of the ticket ultimately mattered the most, but the personal record and bio of federal candidates mattered, too – especially where campaigns had early funding**

- Consistent with previous cycles, presidential performance had the largest impact on down ballot races – just 16 of all federal races in 2020 saw split-ticket outcomes

- Most federal candidates that had the resources to offer up their bio earlier – and to maintain a bio track in their paid media for the duration of the cycle – fared best, winning by an average margin of D+1.8 (for Senate candidates) and D+5.4 (for House candidates) and some outperforming the top of the ticket

- Candidates who won districts that President Biden did not relied on local knowledge, a personal bio that resonated with voters (often with a background in national security), and disciplined campaigns that stayed on message and seamlessly shifted its operations in a tumultuous campaign cycle

**Candidates with strong, homegrown biographies that had the resources to stay on that message throughout their campaigns tended to win**

- In MI-08, Congresswoman Elissa Slotkin's team developed their messaging in January of 2020 focused on her biography and used it to build a bridge to the voters in her district who weren't predisposed Democratic base voters
  - Rep. Slotkin messaged on health care, sharing the personal story about her mother's cancer and lack of health insurance
- In NY-19, Congressman Antonio Delgado spent 2019 doing 33 town halls across all 11 counties in his district, ensuring that the message of being available and working hard for his constituents was front and center
  - When the pandemic hit, the campaign stayed focused on meeting the needs of constituents, which served as a way to inoculate themselves from outside narratives
- In the Arizona Senate race, Senator Mark Kelly's campaign went up early – the first full week of September – and focused heavily on his bio and appealing to multiple demographics needed to win statewide
  - As one strategist noted, people responded to different parts of his story in extremely positive ways: "Seniors loved that he is an astronaut, Latinos loved his commitment to family, and non-college educated white men loved that he is a combat veteran"
    - The campaign was disciplined and focused on his bio for the duration of the campaign, weaving in positive and negative messaging closer to Election Day

> Positive messaging and branding worked – especially early on. Later in the cycle, the narrative was too cemented to break through no matter how much a campaign spent in its closing days.

"This election, Republicans tended to reach people and connect at an emotional level and Dems tried to connect with people at an intellectual level."

*– National media consultant*

## Incumbent Democratic candidates focused their COVID messaging on constituency services

- In NY-19, the Delgado team called constituents to see what they needed rather than to ask for their vote
- In NJ-03, the focus was on being in this together, and Representative Kim was able to visit small businesses (while following COVID safety protocols)
- In MI-08, Representative Slotkin utilized messaging about PPE being "Made in America," which was specific to her district because of its industrial nature
- In GA-06, Rep. Lucy McBath's campaign research showed that messaging on how the Congresswoman has delivered for veterans by sponsoring the HAVEN Act to "stand up for our veterans by amending current bankruptcy law and supporting disabled veterans' eligibility for relief during financial hardship" resonated with voters

## But Republicans successfully painted Democrats as the Party that wanted to keep the country shut down

- According to a leader of a national nonprofit organization, "We were right to shut down the economy and mandate masks, but we also needed to make clear that was because we stood for getting the economy, schools and stadiums open ASAP. There is a line between being the adults in the room and being the nanny state, and during the election cycle, we did not make clear that we were the party of solutions [in the way President Biden has done so successfully since taking office.]"
- In FL-26, where a substantial portion of the population works on cruise ships, in hospitality, and in the tourism industry, constituents didn't want to hear the message of "stay home," but looked to leaders for answers on when they would be able to get back to work

> When Democrats focused their COVID messaging solely on health care without talking about the economy, it exposed them to GOP attacks.

**Republicans universally attacked Democrats with the "socialist" label, and moderate Democrats struggled to counter since some within the Party identify as Democratic socialists**

- The socialism attack was called out by many Members of Congress and candidates who were not successful who believe it hurt campaigns in states and districts with immigrant populations that fled socialist governments, including among Venezuelan, Cuban, Vietnamese, and Filipino voters
- In NJ-07, the Tom Malinowski campaign focused their messaging on issues and their Republican opponent's record in the state senate – but challenger State Senator Tom Kean's campaign promoted QAnon conspiracy theorists and connected Malinowski to pedophiles, drowning out any conversations about policy
- As the Malinowski campaign reported, "We were talking issues and our opponent's record in the state senate. They were talking about pedophiles. QAnon became a huge presence in our race, And drowned out conversations about policy. It felt like messaging became a wash. In a district as tight as this turning out the base is what mattered, and their motivator was partisanship"

The "Dem potpourri" of attacks meant to brand Democrats as "radical" was effective – especially where there wasn't enough positive bio early and where campaigns failed to respond to the lies.
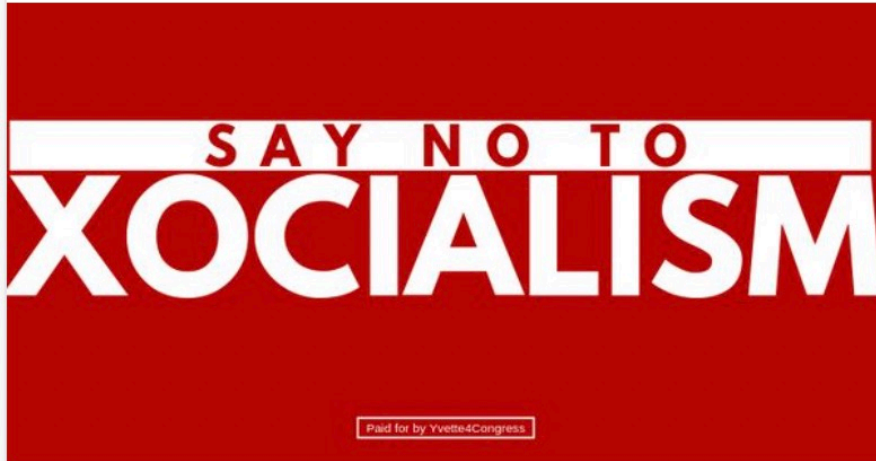
**While practically everyone – candidates, journalists, Party leaders, and pundits – has focused on the impact of Defund the Police as a solo variable, it was just one of the multiple issues that Republicans used to paint Democrats as radicals**

- This "Dem potpourri" included efforts to tie candidates to socialism, Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, Nancy Pelosi, AOC and "the Squad" (in these cases all framed as equally radical). These attacks were used to a greater or lesser degree depending on the unique constituencies of a given district
- There was no one best way to counter these attacks, nor was there clear agreement even that we should address the issue in paid communications
- The GOP consistently framed the moment in "law and order" terms, which resonated with voters on both the right and the left – including Latino men and women, as the April 2021 EquisLabs report "Portrait of a Persuadable Latino" called out

**How much Defund the Police dominated public discourse – and by extension how much it required campaign resources to address the issue – varied widely by state and district**

- At one end of the spectrum, candidates like Rep. Spanberger (VA-07) shared widely reported concerns that Republican efforts to paint all Democrats as socialists who would defund the police cost us multiple seats this cycle
- Similarly, Cameron Webb's campaign (VA-05) constantly had to bat back claims that he supported defunding the police, even after running ads that featured local law enforcement as validators, and after the paper of record, the Roanoke Times, debunked the claim. It was particularly difficult for candidates of color to avoid these race-based attacks
- In other districts, Defund the Police was perceived as a minor blip among the other "Dem potpourri" attacks. For example, in FL-26, attacks against former Rep. Debbie Mucarsel-Powell focused more on messages of socialism and support for women's choice – issues that were more effective with her Hispanic and Latino constituents
- And in some races, such as the North Carolina Senate race, Defund the Police "was in the bloodstream because it was part of the presidential back and forth," but it was never really a huge part of the Senate campaign messaging on either side

> Based on interviews, data analysis, polling, and ads analysis, where Defund the Police had a significant impact, it was as a part of culture-based attack on Democrats that sought to stoke fears among voters about any candidate with a 'D' after their name

**None of the candidates or campaigns included in this analysis supported defunding the police, but nearly all were targeted with paid ads claiming they did**

- In our review of the 20 digital ads with the highest number of impressions run by each candidate in 19 races (760 total ads), 52 mentioned Defund the Police – with 2 run by Democrats and 50 run by Republicans
- Overall, Defund the Police was mentioned in 14% of the GOP digital ads with the highest number of impressions compared to just 1% of the Democratic digital ads with the highest impressions
- Even in races where Defund the Police did not appear in paid advertising, candidates reported that constituents asked about it during campaign events, indicating that the message was breaking through in other channels

Whether and how candidates responded to these attacks depended on the interplay of district and candidate demographics and background

**Some candidates reported that it was difficult to determine whether Republican Defund the Police attacks were effectively landing – and that challenge impacted whether and how they responded**

- Some campaigns that did not specifically test "Defund the Police" in their polling reported their belief that other indicators that they were tracking – such as "shares my values" – were a proxy for how these attacks were impacting their overall favorability among voters and made messaging decisions accordingly
- Candace Valenzuela's polling in TX-24 showed that attacks related to Defund the Police weren't any more impactful than other attacks, but the candidate reported that "people are missing the forest for the trees" and suspected these attacks were more pernicious and damaging than polling indicated
- One well-resourced campaign reported that while they believed that Defund the Police and some of the more extreme "radical Democrat" lines of attack might have resonated with voters, they ultimately did not use their prepared response ads, because their opponent did not put money behind any of these attacks
- Some candidates opted against responding directly to Republican assertions, believing that addressing this complicated issue would only give more oxygen to a message that voters weren't buying, particularly when that push back might alienate some of the candidates' activist bases who made up the majority of volunteers

- Many consultants reinforced this conventional wisdom that candidates shouldn't give oxygen to attacks, and counseled sticking to their core positive campaign messages – with the notable exception of one pollster, who advocated strongly to candidates that they should tackle the issue head on. As he put it, "You have to show up to the debate if you're going to win it."

**Perceptions among voters on Defund the Police varied depending on how the issue was framed – in-cycle and post-election research has continued to show conflicted views across and within demographic groups**

- Polling conducted by Brilliant Corners' Cornell Belcher last summer for Run For Something and the Collective PAC found that "defunding the police does not have wide appeal, but Black voters are divided on the issue," however, the same poll found that "Reallocating police department funding is popular amongst Biden supporters and Black voters"
- Similarly, findings from an Avalanche Research poll in April 2021 found that while 63% of voters disagree with "defunding the police," 52% agree with "redirecting resources from police and funding community programs"

**Responses that featured endorsements from local law enforcement have been widely hailed as "effective," but in hindsight some candidates and Party leaders expressed regret that there wasn't a more forceful emotion- and values-based counter**

- Law-enforcement endorsement ads addressed the substance of the issue but avoided/missed the emotion of Republican attacks and didn't call them what they were – racist distractions from the issues voters cared about most
- Some Party leadership indicated they wished they had called out Republicans for distracting from ACA and other important issues

"The primary problem with Defund was not Defund, but the lack of an economic message. We became the party of shutting down the economy, the party of wearing masks, the party of taking kids out of school — not the party of solutions and science."

*— Major Democratic funder*

**Republicans used Defund the Police attacks to best effect against candidates of color in swing districts with large white populations**

- Candidates we spoke to universally shared dismay and deep anguish in response to George Floyd's murder, and supported widespread popular demands for criminal justice reform – and many Frontline members expressed their desire to leverage their position to support these efforts
- Sitting U.S. Representatives including Lauren Underwood (IL-14), Abigail Spanberger (VA-07), Debbie Mucarsel-Powell (FL-26), Andy Kim (NJ-03), Elissa Slotkin (MI-08), Xochitl Torres Small (NM-02), and Gil Cisneros (CA-39) turned that energy into legislation and passed the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020
- Some candidates of color reported feeling particularly wary of amplifying discussion or debate of Defund the Police out of fear for their own safety
- Some candidates from more conservative districts, or who had law enforcement-related backgrounds, did respond directly to attacks in paid communications – Sen. Ben Ray Lujan (NM), for example, ran ads featuring local law enforcement officers endorsing his candidacy
- Jackie Gordon (NY-02), a combat veteran who served at

Guantanamo Bay as military police, responded to questions about defunding the police with "I *am* the police." Her ads similarly reinforced her background as a military police officer, without addressing Defund the Police directly
- Both Party committees commissioned message research conducted by longtime Democratic strategists Cornell Belcher and Karen Finney, provided these resources to all their campaigns, and encouraged candidates to do follow up polling in their districts. Many candidates chose not to, but likely would have benefited from research on messaging that would be effective in particularly challenging districts, either due to the demographic makeup or other local dynamics

> Responding to Defund the Police attacks was most challenging and complicated for candidates of color and they found generic response strategies extremely frustrating

# Some districts where "law and order" or "socialism" was a drumbeat also saw a higher share of Latino/AAPI/Black voters who supported the GOP

### GOP Support Among Voters of Color
### 2016 - 2020



**Latino Precincts (>30%)**

TX-23: 2016 Pres. 34%, 2018 CD 35%, 2020 CD 41%
FL-26: 2016 Pres. 48%, 2018 CD 60%, 2020 CD 60%
NM-02: 2016 Pres. 31%, 2018 CD 28%, 2020 CD 35%
CA-39: 2016 Pres. 31%, 2018 CD 31%, 2020 CD 36%

**AAPI Precincts (>20%)**

TX-24: 2016 Pres. 40%, 2018 CD topline not avail., 2020 CD 41%
CA-39: 2016 Pres. 42%, 2018 CD 53%, 2020 CD 50%

**Black Precincts (>50%)**

VA-07: 2016 Pres. 25%, 2018 CD 21%, 2020 CD 25%

35
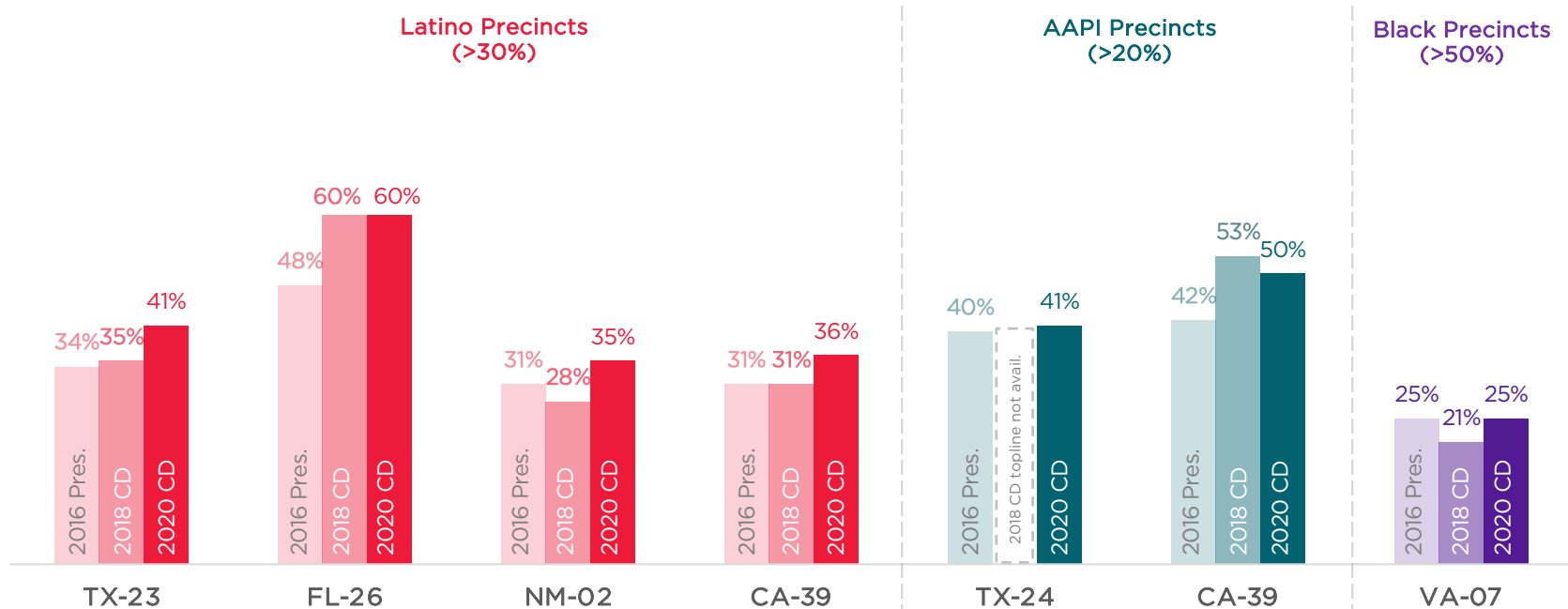
"[Republicans] were going to churches and having pastors spread misinformation that Democrats were baby-killers, that we were in favor of killing babies right before a mother was giving birth, they were showing very graphic images...[W]hen you hear it enough times, you start to believe it."

*— Former Rep. Debbie Mucarsel-Powell*

# 3. Polling was a huge problem — even after 2016 adjustments

# Polling was a huge problem

**Campaigns and experts reported that polling was a problem despite adjustments made after 2016 and was not always well-understood by campaigns as tools for decision making**

- Polling failed to reach the right people – especially white non-college voters – and the methodology changes made in the wake of the 2016 cycle to weight for education level were insufficient to ensure accurate sampling

- First-time candidates especially needed support in interpreting the content and implications for taking risks or being creative in a year that forced everyone to revise their campaign playbooks

- These challenges led to an overly optimistic map and the Party chasing races that have not historically been in play, such as the Iowa Senate seat

**Polling in the 2020 cycle was widely viewed as a catastrophic misfire from the top of the ticket down**

Certainly, there were some examples where pre-election polls aligned with the ultimate electoral performance – polls quite precisely predicted the outcome of the Warnock-Loeffler runoff election in Georgia and the Kelly race in Arizona. However, candidates, campaign and Party leadership, and leading practitioners universally agreed that the dramatic overestimation of Democratic support in both publicly-released and proprietary polls reviewed as part of this analysis had an indisputable impact on races in every part of the country:

- Inflated polling led Democrats to believe some stretch races were competitive and to take for granted other races as easy wins, leading to an overly-expansive electoral map
- Supporters poured resources into races where historical trends showed a Democratic victory was unlikely but polling suggested was winnable
- Campaigns made budgetary decisions based on polling – and in some cases were risk averse in their messaging, voter contact, and media plans when they believed their races were especially close – or if they thought they were winning by wide margins

- The Party committees invested their financial and staff resources in statewide races and congressional districts that were either landslide victories (where additional funding was not needed) or wide losses based on close polling (where additional funding couldn't surmount district-specific obstacles)
- Declining response rates further exacerbated issues of non-response bias and led pollsters to miss Republican support
- Insufficient sample sizes of Latino voters in pre-election polls greatly contributed to the Party failing to anticipate shifts in support

While Democratic polling professionals are continuing to evaluate what happened in 2020 – and importantly, are doing unprecedented knowledge sharing across the industry to inform future work (Source: Democracy Docket post) – pollsters and operatives interviewed for this postmortem indicated they are considering methodology and the unique variables at play with Donald Trump on the ballot.

What's clear is the "soul-searching" that followed the 2016 election and precipitated changes for the 2018 cycle (such as increased use of mobile numbers over landlines and more multi-modal surveys) did not change the fundamental approach. Current polling relies heavily on past practices with experienced pollsters weighting according to their assumptions about the electorate – which impacts both the sampling and the outcome.

## The myth of the "shy Trump voter"

- Despite being debunked in 2016, the "shy Trump voter" theory that polling issues were due to Trump supporters' reluctance to share their honest opinions leapt back on the scene in the 2020 cycle with so many polls showing Democrats with a wide lead
- Following the 2016 election, the polling industry concluded that issues were caused by a lack of proper educational weights applied on survey data and late movement among undecided voters
- In 2020, pollsters reported that while Trump voters were not "shy," they also did not answer surveys and were consequently massively undercounted

Polling misfires in 2020 laid bare a challenge that the survey research industry has feared for decades: there is a systematic difference between people who take surveys and those who do not

## The 2020 election cycle reinforced concerns about non-response bias – especially among white non-college educated voters

- The success and accuracy of polling is predicated on the idea that the people who participate in a survey are an accurate representation of the larger population – but as survey participation falls, concerns about the representativeness of those respondents increases
- Over the course of the 2020 cycle, voters were inundated with polling calls and texts – particularly in competitive states and districts – and declining response rates contributed to growing concerns of how representative the survey was, especially in regions with large concentrations of non-college educated white voters
- These declining response rates further exacerbated the issues of non-response bias, which led some pollsters into missing Republican support (Source: FiveThirtyEight)
- In recent months, pollsters and academics have theorized that the COVID-19 pandemic led Democrats to be overrepresented in some polls – because Democrats are more likely to work remotely than Republicans and their anti-Trump energy made them more likely to answer surveys – further exacerbating non-response bias issues

**Latino voters are not a monolithic group and should comprise a larger proportion of polling samples**

- One of the most surprising findings of the 2020 election was Democrats' underperformance with Latino voters relative to 2016 levels
- While the magnitude of the shift was beyond expectations, it was hinted at in pre-election polls which showed Trump faring better among Latino voters than he did four years prior (Source: Matt Barretto, Latino Decisions)
- Although Latino voters as a whole tend to be more Democratic than Republican, they don't vote as a single bloc and should no longer be targeted under this lens, particularly in pre-election polls – how Latinos vote in Florida can be very different from how Latinos in the Rio Grande Valley or on the West Coast vote, and Democratic support among Latinos can greatly vary by country of ethnicity
- Many polls conducted in the 2020 cycle did not take these factors into account, nor did they ensure that Latino voters comprised a large enough share in their polling samples
- These misfires in polling led campaigns and organizations to overlook gaps and drops in Latino support

**Challenges remain in the future of polling, despite the adjustments made after 2016**

- In 2020, despite the efforts undertaken by pollsters to ensure the proper educational composition of the electorate (particularly in states and regions with high concentrations of non-college educated whites), these methodological adjustments proved insufficient to correct the continued underestimation of Trump and Republican support

Polling errors made some campaigns run as if they were winning – which led to more risk aversion and less responsiveness to changing circumstances.

# In VA-05, polling showed a consistently tight race for Webb since early October and significantly underestimated his final margin

Ultimately, Good won by 6 points despite multiple public polls that showed Webb with a slight lead – a ten-point swing overall



VA-05: 2020 Congressional Support Among Likely Voters

42
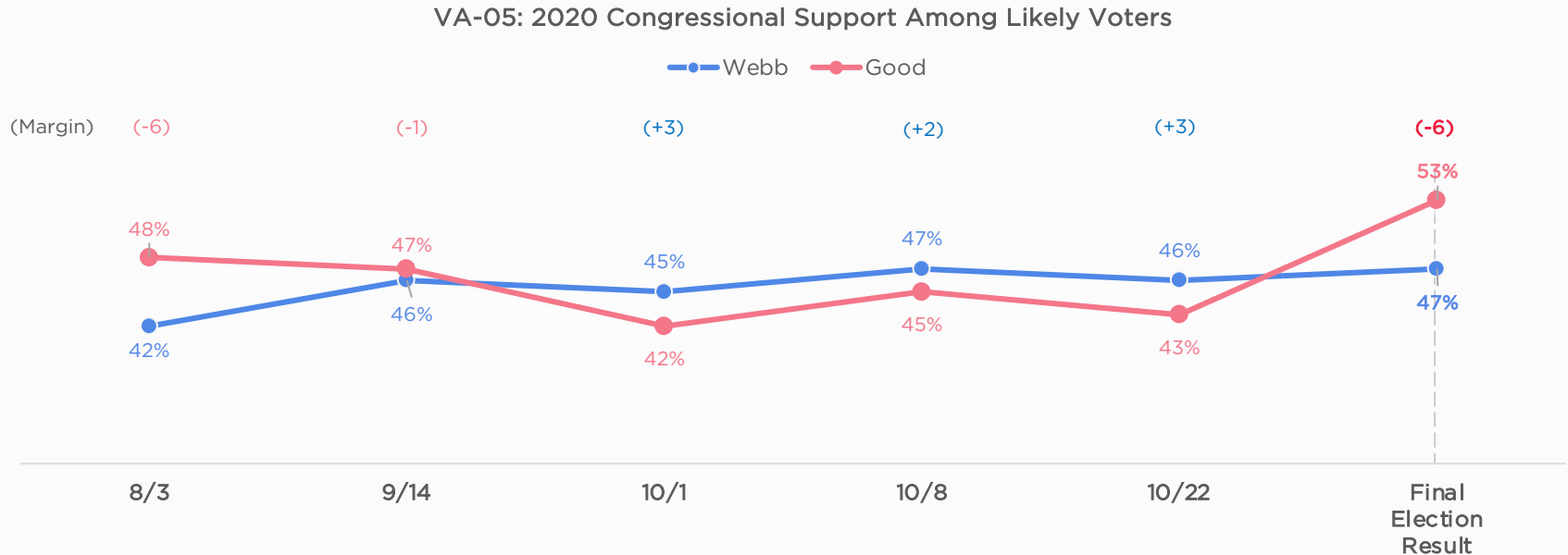
# 4. A Unique 2020 Challenge: COVID-19 affected everything

# COVID-19 affected everything

**COVID-19 dramatically transformed campaign strategy and the suite of tactics employed by both Senate and Congressional campaigns**

- The decision to stop canvassing and halt most in-person voter contact activities was weathered well by campaigns that were innovative – making the pivot to virtual tactics quickly and later finding ways to be physically present in their districts with socially-distanced events

- Campaigns that were unable to rely on virtual campaigning to reach voters – either due to broadband constraints, local expectations about in-person outreach, a dearth of creativity, or a combination of factors – concluded the lack of canvassing was a critical factor in their loss or tighter-than-expected margin

- Vote-by-mail education and ballot chase became an exponentially larger budget priority for independent efforts in particular, with some organizations investing tens of millions of dollars in these efforts

## COVID changed everything about health care conversations

- As soon as coronavirus descended upon the U.S. and became the dominant issue of 2020, candidates' messaging and campaign activities focused on addressing the immediate health crisis and the collapse of local healthcare systems as infections surged around the country
- Of 740 digital ads that had the highest impressions for both Democratic and GOP candidates, 12% mention COVID, again mostly run by Democratic candidates
- Among all references to COVID-19 in the digital ads assessed, the vast majority (70%) were in ads run by Democrats
- Candidates hosted PPE give-away events and shared the latest information about the pandemic featuring local doctors and nurses
- But as school and job closures dragged on, much of the public narrative around COVID shifted to the economic impact of the pandemic: When would schools re-open? When would workers who couldn't work from home be able to go back to work?

## Many Democrats missed the opportunity to talk about COVID through an economic lens as the cycle progressed

- As the cycle continued into the fall, many Democrats did not pivot along with public discourse – when they spoke about COVID, it was still in the context of access to PPE, wearing masks, and trusting science, without further connecting those issues to the critical necessity of re-opening the economy
- And some Democratic health coverage messaging that worked well in 2018 fell flat despite the pandemic: "People aren't worried about health insurance when they don't have jobs" according to a former national Party official
- In some places, the GOP successfully framed Democrats as out of touch on the economy because they prioritized messages about staying home while most working-class jobs can't be done remotely – especially in districts with larger Latino populations
  - In Debbie Mucarsel-Powell's district (FL-26), "Voters didn't want to hear 'stay home,' they wanted to hear 'when am I getting back to work.'"
- Sen. Ben Ray Lujan's campaign attributes some of their success to emphasizing the economic impact of COVID, efforts to get PPP loans out the door to help businesses keep their doors open, and their plans to get constituents back to work

## COVID-19 changed the way Democratic campaigns and organizations reached voters

- While most Republicans quickly resumed canvassing and in-person events after a universal pause in March of 2020, most Democrats never returned to canvassing or in-person events
- Relational organizing and remote voter contact tactics absorbed the significant volunteer capacity of this cycle
- Despite COVID-19, many of the best-performing candidates found more creative ways to safely get back in front of voters in the field – from socially-distanced live gatherings held outdoors in town squares and parking lots to drive-thru charity events
- While nearly every campaign, organization, and political professional acknowledged that the decision not to canvass was the right call given what we knew about coronavirus at the time, many of those included in this analysis said in hindsight Democrats could have been on doors safely in more places – and Democrats would have won several close races if they had gone back on the doors either sooner or in a more robust way than they did

## COVID-19 changed the way Democratic campaigns raised money – potentially for the foreseeable future

- Campaigns raised huge sums of money through Zoom fundraisers that involved all kinds of new donors traditionally left out of this critical aspect of campaigning – both from the perspective of hosting and attending fundraising events – with young people and less-affluent voters taking part in small-dollar gatherings that provided added value to the campaigns because they did not require the candidate to travel
- Related, candidates raised money from all across the country without incurring additional financial cost to the campaign or burning through every campaign's most valuable resource: the candidate's time
- Candidates and campaigns universally expressed excitement about the possibility of continuing these virtual fundraising events post-pandemic

> It's impossible to evaluate the 2020 election cycle without acknowledging how COVID-19 dramatically impacted every aspect of every campaign, up and down the ballot

# 5. Year-round organizing worked, as did cross-Party collaboration
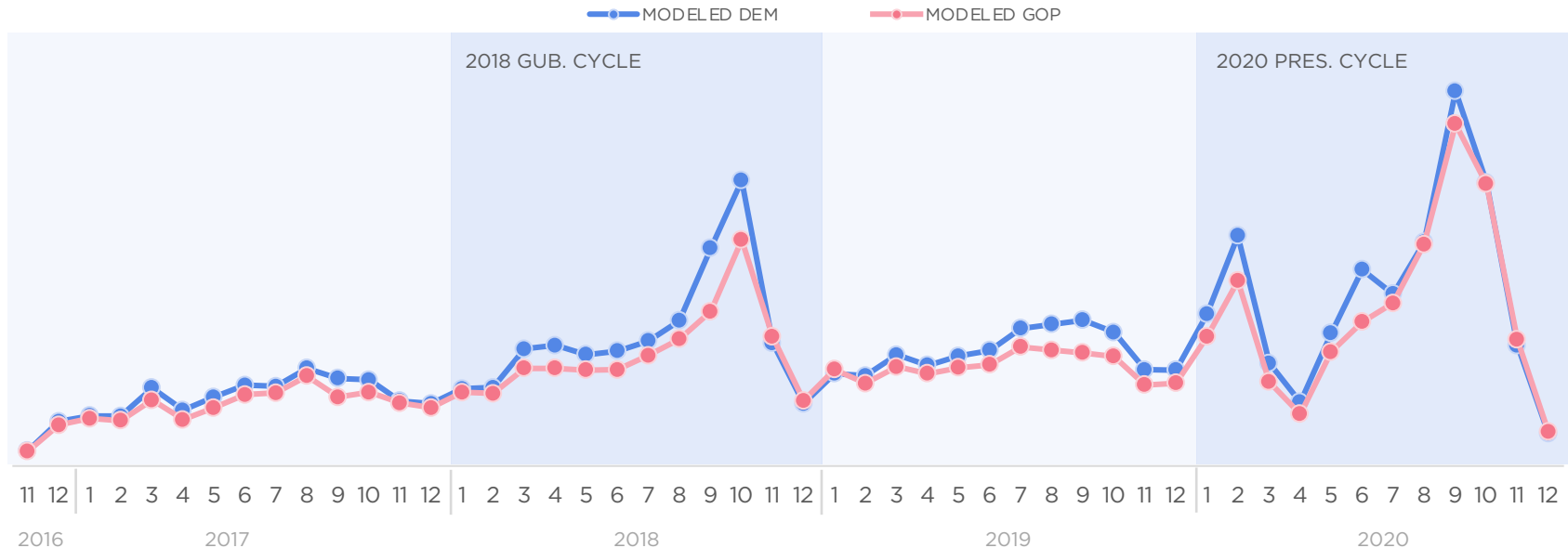
# Long-term investment produced better results

**Races that did not have the benefit of longer-term infrastructure investments – voter registration, continual in-person organizing and outreach – suffered most**

- Where candidates had either started voter registration before the pandemic or where state-based groups had invested long term in bringing more people into the democratic process Democrats either won or lost by narrow margins

- Consistent relationship-building through year-round organizing made a difference – especially in communities of color, whether the organizers were Democrats (as was the case in Georgia) or Republicans (as was true of The LIBRE Initiative in Texas and Florida)

- As one longtime Democratic operative described organizing voters of color, "It's not a side deal, it's got to be core"

# Georgia saw record setting turnout in both the presidential and runoff elections – nearly 5M in the general and 4.5M in the run-offs

In 2020, Georgia turnout far surpassed the 4 million who turned out in 2016, and a big factor in this increased turnout was a substantial increase in registration – 2 million voters were added to the voter file between 2016 and 2020

Georgia: Total new reg by month since 2016 presidential



MODELED DEM    MODELED GOP

2018 GUB. CYCLE    2020 PRES. CYCLE

11 12 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

2016    2017    2018    2019    2020

49

# The Party coordinated better than ever

**Democratic coordination in the face of a common national foil – Donald Trump – led to extraordinary collaboration across the Party ecosystem**

- Leading Democratic donors and funders took part in collaborative tables in 2020 organized around supporting on-the-ground work in battleground states and districts

- Similarly, funders proactively organized others in the space to resource anticipated voter education and voter protection needs – the "Count Every Vote" movement – in the face of threats to the democratic process telegraphed in advance by the Trump campaign organization

- The 2020 cycle witnessed the first successful data sharing operation across organizing efforts on the hard and soft sides, with campaigns and external organizations consistently touting the value of the Democratic Data Exchange (DDx) in generating efficient voter contact universes for persuasion, mobilization and ballot chase, and voter education

# 6. Our hopes for 2020 were just too high

# Our hopes for 2020 were just too high

The map assumed the midterm electorate was predictive for 2020

**We heard that Dem expectations for pickups in the Senate and House – and for retaining seats won during the "blue wave" of 2018 – were too optimistic given historical trends for presidential cycles**

- Inaccurate polling compounded these assumptions and broadened an already expansive map

- Our extrapolations about the behavior of first-time voters incorrectly assumed Democratic support at proportionate rates to regular voters based on their demographics

- The key challenge of 2020 – the coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent shutdown of American life – severely limited the toolkit available to Democrats, with the constraints on in-person events and canvassing harming first-time candidates the most

- We heard from campaign strategists that the Party drove up expectations by publicly signaling it expected to win everywhere it made a play

**But our miscalculation likely benefited us as much as it hurt us**

- The conventional wisdom that high turnout was a positive sign for Democrats informed GOP strategy as well – so Republicans put resources and energy into races that appeared close in polling but ultimately did not require their investment

"Our anchoring assumption is that we should've just kept everything that we got in 2018 and that was reinforced by the polls. But if you go down deeper at what seats we lost, we're basically losing seats we shouldn't have had."

— *Veteran national political strategist*

**Extraordinary turnout driven by increased access to VBM ballots and excitement about the Presidential election benefited Republicans**

- In NM-02, a swell in Republican voter turnout in 2020 led to a Republican victory and the loss of Frontline Member Xochitl Torres Small
  - Turnout in NM-02 jumped 9 points with almost 89,000 more votes cast in 2020 than 2016 – however, it was the Republican base that showed higher levels of enthusiasm
- While personal scandal was likely a deciding factor for NC Senate candidate Cal Cunningham given his steady strong performance in internal and public polling ahead of the news of his extramarital affair, increased Republican turnout in red areas far exceeded expectations and eclipsed the margins the campaign anticipated in its pathway to victory
  - In the NC Senate race, although Democrats gained with White urban voters, GOP improvement among rural and exurban Black voters gave Democrats a narrow edge but not enough to flip the state
- Former Rep. Gil Cisneros (CA-39) reported that because of the demographic makeup of the district, his team focused significant resources on turning out the voters of color who had been key to his 2018 victory – particularly AAPI and Latino/Hispanic communities

- Yet despite high turnout and enthusiasm among the Democratic base, Cisneros underperformed Biden across all racial groups, particularly AAPI voters who grew their overall share of the electorate by 6 points since 2016

The 2020 elections made clear that turnout efforts don't just benefit Democrats

"We always think that if turnout is up, that's going to be beneficial for us. That's not the case, Republicans vote too and they're doing a very good job at it. So, when turnout is up, we need to ask who instead of just being excited about it."
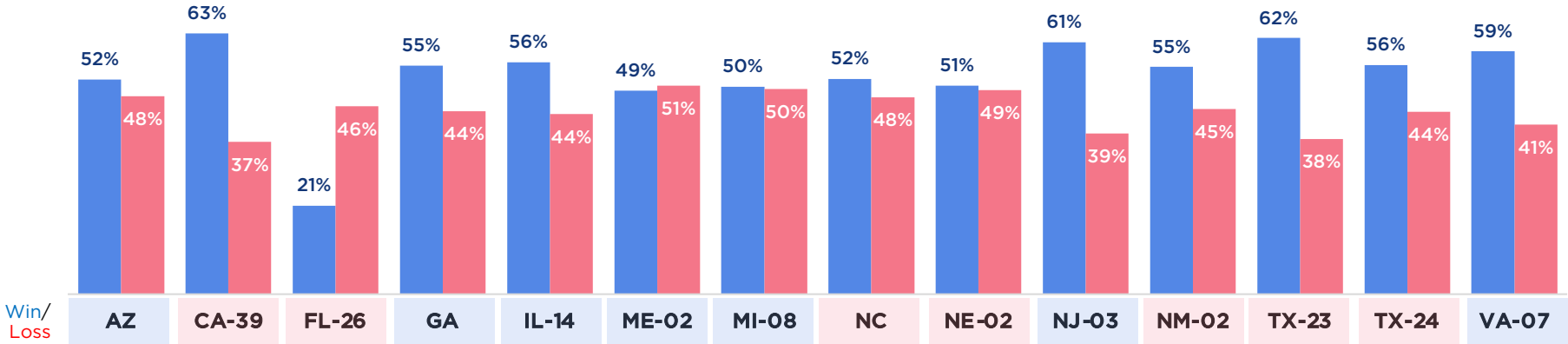
– *NC political operative*

# In 2020, two-thirds of the voting eligible population voted – more than in any other election in 120 years

Turnout was especially high in many battleground states and districts and grew by an average of 27% from 2016 across the Tier 1 races analyzed. Both parties benefited from this explosive growth in turnout.

**Percent Increase in Votes Cast, by Party***
2016 – 2020

■ DEM   ■ GOP



| Win/Loss | AZ | CA-39 | FL-26 | GA | IL-14 | ME-02 | MI-08 | NC | NE-02 | NJ-03 | NM-02 | TX-23 | TX-24 | VA-07 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| DEM | 52% | 63% | 21% | 55% | 56% | 49% | 50% | 52% | 51% | 61% | 55% | 62% | 56% | 59% |
| GOP | 48% | 37% | 46% | 44% | 44% | 51% | 50% | 48% | 49% | 39% | 45% | 38% | 44% | 41% |

*Based on modeled party in most states

56

**Campaigns, strategists, and pollsters alike said polling blind-spots and methodological difficulties led to an overly optimistic map**

- Polling difficulties, especially in rural districts where many Frontline and Red to Blue candidates are based, made these districts look more likely to flip in 2020 than the post-cycle data show
  - Election forecasts predicted the TX-23 race to be in Gina Ortiz Jones' favor – with FiveThirtyEight forecasting a 6-point advantage for the Democratic candidate
- These polling difficulties filtered their way down to the Red to Blue list and shifted Party resources to races that were ultimately unsuccessful, some by large margins
- Some strategists and campaigns reported concern that the Party publicly telegraphed a significant focus on expanding the House majority instead of positioning the election as an effort to protect Frontline members, including those seats gained in 2018
  - While the DCCC spent $3 million more on the Frontline program than the Red to Blue program – investing early in these districts and adding field organizing staff in spring of 2019 – several Frontline candidates and their staff expressed their belief that protecting incumbents was not a top priority for the DCCC

- Frontline incumbents expressed a range of feelings towards the DCCC – some felt it wanted too much influence in on-the-ground decision-making, while other freshman Members expressed the desire for more support and guidance from the DCCC

**The expansive map and inaccurate polling also hurt Republicans, who put money in non-competitive races and diverted resources and attention from races they could have won**

- With such a large battleground map, campaigns and strategists indicated that Republicans "followed us" to districts like TX-23 and TX-24 that the GOP already held, instead of investing in other, more traditionally vulnerable areas for Democrats, like Michigan House races where they might have picked up seats
- Given heavy resourcing for these unexpected campaigns reported in numerous media outlets from late summer into the fall, Republicans spent less elsewhere, allowing a number of vulnerable Democratic Frontline incumbents to win close races, including Rep. Abigail Spanberger (VA-07), Jared Golden (ME-02), and Rep. Elissa Slotkin (MI-08)
- Even in NY-19, where Rep. Antonio Delgado ultimately won by nearly 12 points, lack of Republican attention was a significant factor in a district with demographics that could have made the Congressman vulnerable
  - As one Party executive said, "A can of coke with an R next to its name could have won against Delgado," but rosy predictions about Democratic gains in 2020 kept Republicans from investing in the race or recruiting a strong challenger

The map had important implications for fundraising, staffing, and messaging that ultimately shifted the outcomes in several key races across the country. While the Party secured the Presidency, we lost Frontline House seats and were unable to close the gap in several high-profile Senate campaigns that were widely perceived to be pick up opportunities.

# Conclusion

Parting thoughts from the authors on the 2020 cycle

## A Final Note from the Authors

Throughout this analysis, one of the things we reflected on most was the impact and the implications of race in our political discourse. During the course of nearly 150 interviews that included elected and Party leaders, candidates and donors, campaign operatives and leading practitioners across the Democratic ecosystem, the single most-cited challenge apart from the COVID-19 pandemic was our inability – or unwillingness – to address race head-on.

**The Democratic Party needs to be unapologetic about race. And we need to explain to all Americans why doing so is beneficial to everyone.**

Those of us who have worked in and around politics know in our bones that what we witnessed in 2020 was not new. Sadly, race baiting and fear mongering have long been part of the political maneuvering and cultural dynamics of this country. But 2020 witnessed a revival of "dog-whistle" politics and an overt racism that increasingly flourished under the candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump. And where voters probably regularly default to voting based on culture over policy issues, 2020 whipped up stereotypes and caricatures to a level we haven't seen in recent electoral cycles and undoubtedly had an impact on voting decisions around the country. As Dr. Cameron Webb's campaign manager, Ben Young, put it, "If it wasn't 'Defund the Police,'

Republicans would have found another racist dog whistle or fear mongering tool to paint Democrats as out of touch radicals who are trying to destroy the America we know and love."

At the highest levels of the Party ecosystem, cultural competency was a continual concern in 2020. Campaigns shared anecdote after anecdote of the most well-intentioned Democratic supporters displaying a stunning lack of cultural competency in an electoral cycle where "culture" drove practically every outcome – from the suburban white women who berated a Black woman candidate for not attending the Black Lives Matter protest those women had organized, to political operatives who advised another Black woman candidate not to be overly concerned with responding to attacks on her "Defund the Police" stance, to Party Committee staffers pushing candidates of color to pump their "networks" as if the same rolodex-driven approach to fundraising translates in a non-white, non-privileged world.

> We've seen the same tactic before.
> In 2008 and 2012, the messages were centered on government takeover of health care and class warfare. In 2016, the message was "Build the Wall," which morphed into claims in 2018 that all Democrats wanted to "Abolish ICE" and "open borders" for caravans of migrants.
> "Defund the Police" was 2020's dog whistle.

The good news is that the 2020 experience has shined a spotlight on areas the Democratic Party and Democratic leaders can make gains in the future – from defining and sharing a vision on race and racial justice to grappling with the Democratic brand to shoring up our small "d" democratic institutions for the future. At a minimum, this past cycle should make clear the urgency around combatting GOP voter suppression efforts, so often a thinly veiled attempt to exclude communities of color and in 2021 an open backlash to expanded early vote and vote-by-mail that made it easier for more voters than ever before to make their voices heard.

The opportunity coming off of 2020 is in how we deal with and define race issues in the future. Here are some ideas:

*Reimagine our Democratic Party message and narrative.* The Republican Party has long had a collective gospel about having small government, low taxes, and a strong military. Our gospel should be about championing all working people – including but not limited to white working people – and lifting up our values of opportunity, equity, inclusion. We need to make it exciting to be a Democrat and to ensure voters believe we not only mean well, but we understand their priorities and they trust we are actually fighting for them – something that the series of focus groups with swing voters recently conducted by Third Way shows continues to be a challenge. The only way to do this well is for the Party to do more, better research with voters of color and, based on what we learn, to be more differentiated and targeted in how we

communicate across these many-splendored communities.

*Commit to early investment and year-round organizing.* Victories in Georgia, Nevada, Arizona, and other states this cycle were built on years of organizing and community servicing led by some of our best political and labor organizers. This orientation is especially critical in communities of color that we know value relationships but whom we often treat in a transactional way, showing up every 2-4 years instead of being continually present and engaged. If Democrats fail to organize communities of color – making the continual case for how we're standing up for justice, jobs, health care, a quality education and more – we can be sure Republicans will fill that void.

*Reallocate our spending to reflect our commitment to the communities we rely on to win.* It's not just about investing in key communities for Democrats – it's also about ensuring a more equitable allocation of our resources overall. As one longtime Latino elected leader put it, "It's great that we spent more in 2020 on Latino voters than ever before. But what did we spend before?" Or as Leslie Small, the Executive Director of America Votes in Georgia told us, "We have, for years as the Democratic Party, have treated these mythical white voters as the panacea, and so if you have ten dollars, they're going to give nine and a half to try and get this white voter…For once, Georgia and voters of color were not under invested in. And by investing in them at the level that they should be invested in, you saw the results."

*End the "persuasion vs. organizing" debate and focus on getting votes, period.* Campaigns typically think persuasion needs to start early and mobilization should happen right around voting time. But that approach doesn't work, and it isn't helpful for long term Party-building. When it comes to persuasion and turnout, it's "both-and" but needs to happen all the time.

Too often campaigns view persuasion as a tactic to get white Americans who may not be with us on our side, and turnout as a tactic to get our base out (which implicitly means people of color). We should be trying to persuade all voters to support the ideas we care about – and that means engaging year-round, especially with communities of color.

Where we do need to focus on persuasion, it's to make the unequivocal case that ending systemic racism is good for everyone. Right now, people think addressing racial injustice means they are losing something, or that someone is taking something away from them. Last year, when the conversation became about "Defund the Police," we were stuck on defense instead of telling a proactive story about necessary systemic changes to policing that would stem the violence and still prioritize and provide public safety. There's a way for a "Defund the Police" advocate and someone who isn't convinced we should divert police funding to agree to disagree but to lift up the value of what everyone needs. We need to be on offense on what we care about, why this is important, and what we should be doing differently.

In 2021, we are more aware than ever of the disparate challenges for communities of color that are continuing to play out in the aftermath of the Trump era – including the rising violence against the AAPI community that is impossible to separate from the former President's insistence on calling COVID-19 the "China virus," "Kung-flu," or the "Wuhan virus." Despite the hope sprung by the verdict in the Derek Chauvin trial, Black men and women in every state are continuing to lose their lives to police violence and racial injustice that is far too often forgotten when today's headlines line tomorrow's waste baskets. And Latino and Hispanic people remain a political football, alternatively portrayed as an electoral prize or the infamous "Other" from which American communities must be shielded.

The question is, what are we as a Party willing to do about it.

> "Diversity for diversity's sake is not the goal. It's about the country being a better country, about the government being a better government."
> *– Quentin James, Founder and President, The Collective PAC*

# Appendices

# Process & Approach

# Our approach

This study relied on four categories of analysis

1. **Live interviews** with candidates and staff, Members, Party leaders, external organizations that were major players in the 2020 cycle, major funders, and top strategists and vendors

2. Review of publicly available **polling** and proprietary polling where possible

3. Content analysis of **TV ads** for priority races aired by the campaigns and independent expenditure efforts and broader **online paid media** spending by the campaigns

4. Independent assessment of the **data analytics** and modeling using the final voter files released by the states in early 2021

## TIER 1

Tier 1 campaigns were selected by Third Way, Latino Victory, and the Collective PAC to reflect a broadly representative set of the most competitive races in the 2020 cycle, with candidates, District, and campaign dynamics designed to provide a better understanding of what happened across the political landscape. The groups aimed for regional and demographic representation, Districts with anticipated voter performance and electoral issues that were shared with other races beyond this list, and politically-significant campaigns with a cross-section of both wins and losses.

1. AZ Sen - Mark Kelly
2. GA Sen - Raphael Warnock
3. GA Sen - Jon Ossoff
4. NC Sen - Cal Cunningham
5. CA-39 - Gil Cisneros
6. FL-26 - Debbie Mucarsel-Powell
7. IL-14 - Lauren Underwood
8. ME-02 - Jared Golden
9. MI-08 - Elissa Slotkin
10. NE-02 - Kara Eastman
11. NJ-03 - Andy Kim
12. NM-02 - Xochitl Torres Small
13. NY-02 - Jackie Gordon
14. NY-19 - Antonio Delgado
15. NY-24 - Dana Balter
16. TX-23 - Gina Ortiz Jones
17. TX-24 - Candace Valenzuela
18. VA-05 - Cameron Webb
19. VA-07 - Abigail Spanberger

## TIER 2

For Tier 2 races, this analysis relied on a broader survey of the publicly-identified DCCC Frontline races and the DSCC Priority races to gather additional information and capture common themes across the Party Committees' highest priority campaigns. In addition to the multi-layered research for Tier 1 races, this postmortem includes findings based on information received from another 18 races. Their responses covered messaging, strategy, tactics, and the candidate's personal observations about the races.

1.  AK Sen - Alan Gross
2.  NM Sen – Ben Ray Lujan
3.  CA-10 - Rep. Josh Harder
4.  CA-21 - Rep. TJ Cox
5.  CA-25 - Christy Smith
6.  CA-48 - Rep. Harley Rouda
7.  FL-15 - Alan Cohn
8.  GA-06 - Rep. Lucy McBath
9.  IA-03 - Rep. Cindy Axne
10. IL-06 - Rep. Sean Casten
11. IN-05 - Christina Hale
12. MN-02 - Rep. Angie Craig
13. NC-08 - Patricia Timmons-Goodson
14. NJ-02 - Amy Kennedy
15. NJ-07 - Rep. Tom Malinowski
16. NY-22 - Rep. Anthony Brindisi
17. OH-01 - Kate Schroder
18. UT-04 -Rep. Ben McAdams

## The broader Democratic ecosystem

The team spoke extensively with other Members of Congress across the spectrum of Democratic ideology from some of the Party's most progressive voices to "pragmatic moderate" leaders – either 1:1 or as part of listening sessions organized in collaboration with Congressional Caucus staff. We interviewed members of the leadership team at the Party committees, leaders at key outside organizations that ran 8- and 9-figure independent programs in 2020, state organizations that were major players, and leading practitioners across the Democratic political space – including pollsters, data scientists, digital strategists, and message and media experts. In total, this analysis involved interviews with 143 individuals. The Members from the New Democrat Coalition, the Congressional Black Caucus, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus and staff of the CBCPAC, CHC BOLD PAC, New Dem Action Fund, and ASPIRE PAC were especially instrumental in helping to shape this study, connect the research team to candidates and their campaign staff, and provided important data and feedback about what they saw in the field.

## Additional informative research

Finally, the team reviewed major postmortem analyses by other organizations as they were released into the public domain – including the Texas Democratic Party, Higher Ground Labs, EquisLabs, Catalist, and Priorities USA. Where the findings in this postmortem used information from other research or studies that were conducted post-election, those sources are directly cited.

# Unprecedented Ad Spending

# Spending and raising money early created significant benefits for many candidates
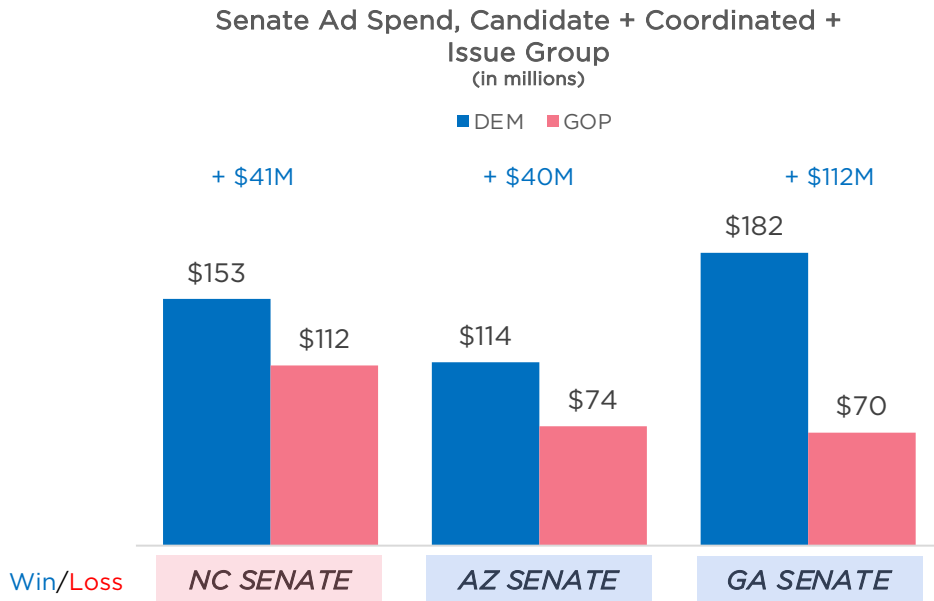
- In Michigan, one longtime statewide political operative posited that it was difficult for Republicans to recruit strong candidates to run against Rep. Elissa Slotkin (MI-08) or Rep. Haley Stephens (MI-11) because these incumbents had already amassed formidable war chests early in the cycle
- Multiple candidates reported their ability to go up on TV early in the cycle to highlight their bios and frame the narrative was hugely valuable
- Strong campaign cash allowed Rep. Lauren Underwood (IL-14) to hire field organizers early in the cycle and begin moving a locally-focused program led by both in-district and out-of-district staff who developed a deep knowledge of their turf

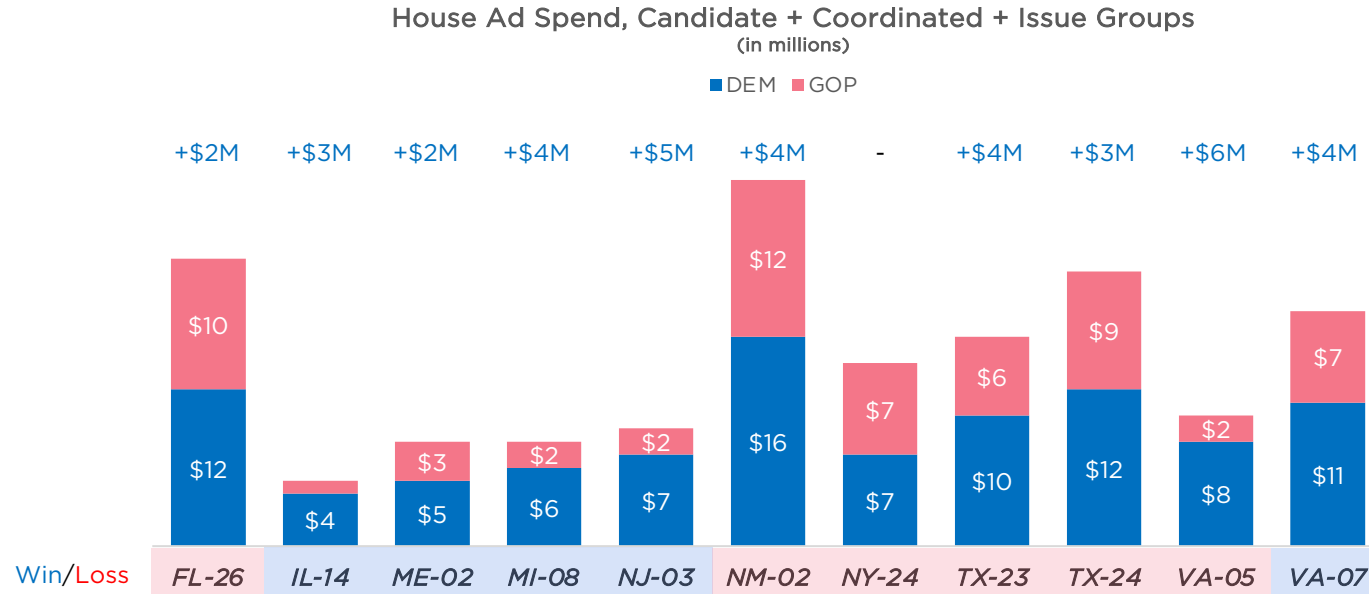| | | Dem Candidate | | GOP Candidate | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Off-the-charts fundraising didn't always ensure blowout victories – or victory at all – even if Democrats substantially outraised their opponents | | | |
| Race | 2020 Outcome | Total Receipts | Cash on Hand | Total Receipts | Cash on Hand |
| VA-07 | D+1.8 | $8,494,948 | $582,133 | $3,670,266 | $29,323 |
| IL-14 | D+1.4 | $7,862,425 | $537,898 | $3,297,857 | $90,059 |

# Senate Campaign + IE Ad Spend

*Across the ecosystem – including candidate, coordinated, and issue groups - Democrats outspent Republicans in the Senate*

Senate Ad Spend, Candidate + Coordinated +
Issue Group
(in millions)

■ DEM  ■ GOP

| | + $41M | + $40M | + $112M |

$182
$153
$114
$112
$74
$70

Win/Loss    *NC SENATE*    *AZ SENATE*    *GA SENATE*

# Congressional Campaign + IE Ad Spend

The following information regarding ad spend was available for the Tier 1 races [source: AdImpact report]
Dems outspent Republicans in all races analyzed except for NY-24, where the GOP invested just as heavily as Dems

## House Ad Spend, Candidate + Coordinated + Issue Groups
### (in millions)

■ DEM  ■ GOP



| Win/Loss | FL-26 | IL-14 | ME-02 | MI-08 | NJ-03 | NM-02 | NY-24 | TX-23 | TX-24 | VA-05 | VA-07 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| DEM | $12 | $4 | $5 | $6 | $7 | $16 | $7 | $10 | $12 | $8 | $11 |
| GOP | $10 | | $3 | $2 | $2 | $12 | $7 | $6 | $9 | $2 | $7 |
| | +$2M | +$3M | +$2M | +$4M | +$5M | +$4M | - | +$4M | +$3M | +$6M | +$4M |

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**Digital ad spending increased significantly in 2020, with Democrats typically outspending their Republican opponents – but a higher spend did not always mean Democratic victory**

- In the 2016 election cycle, 2-3% of the total political ad spend across the coordinated and independent expenditure efforts up and down the ballot went to digital media – in 2020, that spend moved up to 18%. Approximately $700-800M was spent on digital ads in the 2018 cycle, while in 2020, the spend was $1.6B [Forbes]. The 2020 election saw digital ad spending on Facebook reach $1.07B and $520M on Google [AdImpact report]
- The Democratic candidates we evaluated ran hundreds – and in some cases thousands – of digital ads ranging in spend from less than $100 per ad, up to $250,000 on a single ad [Warnock]
  - Every Democrat included in this review invested a minimum of $125,000 on Facebook advertisements alone
  - Although it is impossible to compare that figure to previous cycles since 2020 was the first time Facebook and Google have made full access to political advertising data available, digital spending widely increased in 2020
- Many Democratic candidates outspent their Republican opponents in digital advertising in the House and Senate
  - Senator Jon Ossoff's campaign Facebook page ran more than $2.7 million in ads to David Perdue's $537,686 in the 2020 cycle

- Senator Raphael Warnock outspent Kelly Loeffler by over a 4:1 ratio, with over $4 million in spending to Loeffler's $814,697, with no candidate spending outside of the 2020/2021 cycle
  - Rep. Lauren Underwood outspent her Republican opponent by a 14:1 ratio, spending over $500,000 to Jim Oberweis's $35,318
- Although there are cases where Democrats were outspent online
  - Gil Cisneros (CA-39) was outspent by Republican opponent Young Kim 2:1 on Facebook platforms, with Rep. Kim spending $834,337 to Cisneros' $492,290
  - Dana Balter was outspent by her opponent $157,612 to $136,569
- Several Democrats who outspent their opponent online did not ultimately win – including Xochitl Torres Small, NM-02 and Dr. Cameron Webb, VA-05 – but nearly every Democrat who was outspent in digital ads lost