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What's in a Vote?
Voter Choice in the 2008 through 2020 Presidential Elections

Matthew Gillett '22

Senior Honors Project

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the graduation requirements
of the Westover Honors Program**

Westover Honors Program

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Abstract:

Perhaps the most important question in American politics asks what motivates a voter on Election Day? Voter's decisions affect the direction of our country over the next four years. A long running debate in political science deals with the rationality of voters, concerning itself with the main indicators of vote choice, which include party versus policy. The paper advances these debates to the 21st century, addressing the results from the 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 general elections using data sets from the ANES Data Center. The data sets were analyzed using a logistic regression to operationalize each explanation.

The results of this regression analysis point to three major factors that impact voter choice, party identification, economic issues, and qualities of a candidate. The data made clear that party identification provided the most powerful explanation around voter choice, with a notable increase in partisan voting from 2008 to the 2020 election. The research also pointed to the fact economic issues were incredibly important to voters, arguing voters who have a negative outlook on the economy typically vote for the out party. The conclusion points to the nuance of vote choice, proving that each factor of voter choice relates to one another.

Introduction:

On Saturday, November 7th, 2020, socially distanced supporters flocked around a stage in Wilmington, watching and celebrating President-Elect Joe Biden declare victory. Four years prior, on a Wednesday morning in November 2016, Americans awoke to the news that the Republican Candidate Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton to become the 45th president of the United States. And in November 2008, history had been made as Barack Obama was elected America's first black president. Historically, the first Tuesday after the first Monday in

November of every fourth year offers one of the most important days in American political history, serving as election day for the American democratic republic. Political scientists have long marveled over election day, poring over data predicting which candidates might win, but perhaps just as important, determining what happened on election day. This has compelled political scientists to deduce what led voters to choose Barack Obama, a junior Senator from Illinois, who was constantly questioned about the legitimacy of his American birth, over a war hero and political maverick in John McCain or a former governor and venture capitalist in Mitt Romney. This has also pushed political scientists to ask why voters elected Donald Trump, who represented an emblem of American wealth and whiteness with a promise to make America great again, over the former Secretary of State, Senator, and member of an American dynasty in Hillary Clinton, and what compelled Americans to replace Donald Trump with Joe Biden, a 77-year-old former Vice President, and long time Senator who represented the Democratic party establishment. Not only were there differences in the demographic qualities of these candidates, age and race, but there was also significant difference in their platforms. President Obama favored the implementation of a new way to achieve the American dream and expanding diplomacy worldwide, through the promise of affordable healthcare, ending the war in Iraq, strengthening global partnerships, and a stimulus plan to rebuild the economy following the economic crisis in 2008. President Trump, a political outsider, offered a nativist, America First message which centered on the key issue of building a wall at the border and having Mexico pay for it, as well as dismantling the JCPOA, the ACA, and DACA, all while being a major leader behind questioning the legitimacy of President Obama's birthplace. President Biden offered a plan to restore the soul of the nation, pushing back against the nativist message propagated by the 45th President, in addition to providing a steady hand amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. This

leads to one of the most important questions in a democracy. What causes voters to choose such different candidates on successive Election Days? A question of vital importance to our democracy. Why? Because voters' decisions affect the direction of our country over the next four years. Our republic is based on the premise that leaders who are elected will implement policies that affect each and every American. My focus will be on the presidential general elections from 2008 to 2020 because of their pivotal role in American politics. Each of these elections signify a pivotal moment in American political history. Through his victory, Barack Obama recaptured the White House for the increasingly liberal Democratic party. Just 8 years later, President Trump ushered in a rebranded Republican party that sought to undo much of what had been done during the Obama administration. While Joe Biden entered office amidst turmoil and uncertainty, fighting against an insurrection and a global pandemic. My goal will be to discern what led 81 million people to vote for President Biden in 2020, 62 million people to select President Trump in 2016, and 69 million people to vote for President Obama in 2008.

This paper will address a question raised by scholars such as V.O. Key, and Angus Campbell: do voters make choices based on the issues that are important to them or on their party identification? The hope of this paper is to address the dilemmas raised in the book *The American Voter*. The goal will be to expand upon the debate between proximity theory, which argues that issues are most important for voters, and directional theory, which argues that party identification reigns supreme in relationship to voter choice. In addition testing how the control variables such as socioeconomic status and socialization factors such as education and religion raised in *The American Voter* hold up today. This paper will take the steps to apply the theories found in the literature to the 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 Presidential Elections, testing whether party identification or issues best explain voting patterns. This research will create the

opportunity to see which of these theories explains recent voter choice the best and if those explanations have changed over the last two decades. This paper will seek to answer the question, is party identification more important, or are the short term political issues. The debate between issues and party identification is not a new one, however, my hope is to understand which one impacted more voters in the 21st century, and how that changed between elections over the last two decades.

Literature Review:

In a democracy, voting is a fundamental act. In America there are countless elections held to preserve our status as a constitutional republic, but one election stands out from all the rest, the Presidential election. For decades, scholars have attempted to determine what motivates voters to choose certain candidates over others. These works have produced many different theories about what causes voters to choose certain candidates, which will be detailed through the rest of this section and then tested in the last four Presidential elections.

When reviewing literature, not only are the theories surrounding voter choice important, but the factors that led to the selection of a candidate play an important role. Several possible factors include candidate qualities, policy disputes which can align with proximity theory, and socialization which can affect party identification (Miller and Shanks 1996).

Directional Theory:

Perhaps the oldest voter choice theory is directional theory, which is the idea that party identification is more important than the voter's or the candidate's policy positions. If a voter fits this theory they choose a candidate of the same political party regardless of that candidate's policy positions (Campbell 1960; Kropko and Banda 2018; Tomz and Houweling 2008; Williams

2018). Directional theory reinforces the long held belief by many political scientists that party matters more than issues. This argument reflects the ideas originally outlined in *The American Voter*, which argued that party was the most important factor in voter choice. In addition, *The American Voter* argued that association with a political party provided a lens for voters, through which they could view political issues (Campbell et al. 1960). Party identification influences elections a great deal. While some argue that this desire to remain loyal to a party regardless of issues leads only to fierce polarization that harms the political system. Directional theory voting makes clear that voters who vote with their party do so because they agree with the political lens the party has provided.

Perhaps the most basic determination of voter choice can be found in the funnel of causality. The goal of the funnel was to outline the causes of the causes (Campbell et al. 1960). The main cause supported by the funnel of causality was that of socialization, which impacted party identification, and subsequently, voter choice. This work places all the emphasis on the party of the voter and argues, that the socioeconomic factors of a voter are incredibly important, especially the influence of one's parents. In addition, the work stresses the fact that issues do not matter in regards to voter choice, as voters are much more likely to vote along party lines in their opinion. (Campbell et. al 1960). This work continues to serve as the foundation for the understanding of voter choice.

In addition to the scholarship put forth by Angus Campbell, it is important to acknowledge the 1996 book by Warren Miller and J. Merrill Shanks titled *The New American Voter*. This work used *The American Voter* as a touchstone, expanding on the debate of voter choice in many important areas. Miller and Shanks further the belief that party identification is the fundamental source for voting patterns in the American political system, citing party

identification as the fundamental aspect of a voter's decision making, which impacts the short term forces in an election. Miller and Shanks identify the cause of the decline in partisan voting in the 1970's as the natural political life cycle, which was corrected as post-new deal voters came of age. The work emphasizes the importance of groups' voting behavior, offering explanations for vote choice among groups based on religious beliefs, race, the gender gap, education, and income (Miller and Shanks 1996). The *New American Voter* epitomizes directional theory's emphasis on the stability of party identification as a fundamental aspect of vote choice.

Another aspect of socialization that has affected voter choice is education. Education offers an interesting challenge to understand the impact in relation to voter choice as there have been massive changes in levels of education over the last several decades. Levels of education do seem to play a role in partisan choice, making education subject to the directional theory. It appears that college graduates are predominately liberal. College graduates also appear to be more liberal in regard to social issues in a majority of the population. However, *The New American Voter* found that in the south the movement towards the Republican Party occurred among the better educated, solidifying the South for the Republican party (Miller and Shanks 1996). This offers another avenue where socialization can impact the voter choice of an individual. This socialization is also clear as individuals who have low levels of education are more likely to surround themselves with other individuals with low levels of education (Sosnaud et al., 2013). This allows for a silo effect of information, which results in members of the same educational standing holding similar beliefs.

Socialization offers a key element to the understanding of voter choice. A key aspect of socialization can be found in religion. While it is often thought that religious attendance plays a role in political participation, it is in fact a deeper belief that plays a larger role (Driskell et al.

2008). Attendance merely explains that a voter attends a religious service, it does not offer a direct connection to the voter agreeing with the message of the service. Religious beliefs, as well as the religious tradition that a voter is involved with can shape how a voter understands politics and can impact voter choice. In addition, a different religion or lack of religion can also impact a voter's decision. This posits the idea that belief is more important than behavior in terms of political participation. (Miller and Shanks 1996; Driskell et al. 2008). This offers a new approach into understanding religious socialization. This implies that a deeper belief in a cause would result in it playing a role in that individual's political participation and ultimately their selection of a candidate. This line of thinking indicates that the teachings, or lack thereof, from a religious faith will provide a lens for voters and add another important facet to their decision in the ballot box.

Understanding class status is important to understanding the relationship between education and voter choice. Education is one of the major components in determining true social class. Income also serves as a defining aspect of socialization, with wealth determining a voter's socioeconomic status status. Wealth and education are woven together when determining a voter's social class, and in turn their political leanings based on directional theory. The literature posits that each social class has varying political attitudes, with members of the upper classes showing a greater probability of voting for the liberal candidate, with the inverse being true for members of lower classes (Zingher, 2020). This can largely be attributed to the educational divide between the classes, which is perpetuated by the economic disparity between classes which makes it difficult for those in the lower classes to obtain an education. This relationship between class, education, and income is prevalent as many individuals who fall in the lower class who have lower levels of education hold hostile views towards out-groups (Zingher, 2020).

Not only is there a definite relationship between social class and education, but there is also an important relationship between social class and race. Black Americans form a coalition that heavily favors the Democratic Party (Teigen et al., 2017). This leads black Americans to rally together and join in causes, forming a coalition. The strong coalition formed by black Americans indicates that race is a strong component of voter choice (Teigen et al., 2017). This fierce loyalty to a political party offers an example of the directional theory.

Candidate Qualities:

Candidate qualities offer an interesting debate in their relationship to voter choice. Candidate qualities have become even more central to the debate around voter choice in our modern media environment. It is common for candidates to gain notoriety among the major news networks and as a result the general public for their unique actions. Both charisma and leader narcissism are key examples of candidate characteristics that play a role in the modern media environment surrounding voter choice (Williams et al. 2018). In a study that researched how leader narcissism related to charisma and voter choice, it was found that narcissism negatively impacted a candidate's position. However, it was also argued that voters are willing to look past negative traits if a candidate supports their policy issues (Williams et al. 2018). This line of thinking directly supports the proximity theory, as voters are willing to look past negative attributes if they believe the candidate shares their support for key issues.

In determining candidate traits, voters are often willing to project an image onto a candidate. Many factors could impact a candidate's traits, all of which are based on perception. When using traits to define a candidate, they typically are a result of many impressions. Common characteristics that are often cited, such as honesty, are formed through actions, while

other traits are often derived from partisan sympathies (Miller and Shanks 1996). While understanding candidate qualities can result in the use of the proximity theory, this also provides an example of the directional theory. This makes clear that some voters are willing to project issues onto and vote for their party's candidate in support of their party, even if they are unaware of the actual policies that candidate advocates for.

Proximity Theory:

One of the other common theories of voter choice is proximity theory. Proximity theory indicates that a voter will focus more on the policies of a candidate as opposed to the party they belong to. This leads a voter to select a candidate whose policy positions they align most closely with, regardless of party (Key 1966; Page 1978; Tomz and Van Houweling 2008; Kropko and Banda 2018). Proximity allows for voters to not be tied to any single party, but instead to a particular set of issues. This also creates the possibility for split ticket voting, because voters are not tied to a party. Even when not mentioned by name, this theory is common among the literature regarding voter choice. For example, these voters could also be potential "switchers" based on their ability to vote rationally surrounding a policy position (Key 1966). In addition, this can be defined as "value congruence" based on the fact that both the voter and the candidate share the same values (Williams et al. 2018). This theory is typically measured by determining the relationship between the policies a voter supports and the policies that the candidate endorses.

While *The American Voter* represents the directional theory, the work *The Responsible Electorate* offers an early example of the proximity theory, as it focuses on issues. However, this also places a great deal on rationality and voting decisions. Key outlines that "switchers" can

change parties for rational reasons, and that voters are capable of making up their own mind implying that voting based on party identification is irrational. Key summarizes the argument against *The American Voter* stating “voters are not fools” (Key 1966). This work highlights the importance of short term political issues having a significant impact on voting patterns. These issues drive “switchers” to vote for the candidates who support issues based on the political preference of the voter, mainly issues such as the state of the economy. The argument that voters are rational, and vote based on the issues that affect them serves as a dissent to directional theory and the notion that party identification is the most important factor for a voter. Not only does this rationality debate involve electoral politics, but it begs the question of human agency. Proximity theory is based around the concept that voters are not tied to a party and are capable of making up their own mind. This theory ultimately argues that voters are rational beings who have the freedom to make their own decisions, not a decision predicated by a political party.

When comparing the theories of voter choice, the most common debate is between that of directional theory and proximity theory. While the past literature has failed to come to a clear consensus, many possible answers have been presented. One such study posits that proximity theory seems to be twice as common as directional theory, based around the idea that voters desire a candidate who support the policies they identify with (Tomz and Van Houweling 2008). Proximity is often based on short term issues, due to the fact that policy issues shift from election to election. In addition, proximity theory will push a candidate to be more moderate, as they must obtain the support of voters with issues similar to their own (Kropko and Banda 2018; Page 1978). This is the case because a candidate seeks to obtain the most number of votes possible. If a voter is not squarely in the camp, but instead is a switcher who holds moderate views, then they look to a candidate who runs on a moderate platform that is closest to the voters’ own beliefs.

When analyzing voter choice, it is important to understand the different theories as lenses for how voters decide. If proximity theory is indeed the most prevalent, then that would indicate that voters prefer moderate candidates as opposed to partisan candidates. However, the inverse can be stated for directional theory, which is evident in this era of increased partisanship and polarization.

Each of these three areas of literature have propelled the study of vote choice in Presidential elections. The debate continues over which theory is most accurate. This paper seeks to provide greater clarity to these debates moving forward. This analysis of the literature opens the door for discussing the methods in which I will collect my data.

Methods:

My research focuses specifically on recent presidential elections, including 2008, 2012, 2016, 2020 and a time series ranging from 2008-2020. The 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 presidential elections offer a unique look into voter choice. A number of these elections – 2008, 2016, and 2020 – ushered a new party into the White House, making evident the fact that voter choice can be affected by various factors. Among these factors are party identification, which deals with socialization factors such as education, religious beliefs, age, race, and socioeconomic status, and voter issues including support for a candidate's economic policies, and the qualities of a candidate. This paper offers hypotheses for how each of these factors directly impacted how a voter chose the President. One of the most important aspects to understand about these elections is the shift from a progressive Democrat in Barack Obama to a nationalist Republican in Donald Trump to an institutionalist Democrat in Joe Biden. These hypotheses seek to answer whether or not the voters changed their views, or if the candidates themselves played a significant role.

My research featured a panel research design to measure multiple voter choices at different points in time. The data was based on the results from the individual elections collected by the American National Election Survey (ANES) in 2008, 2012, 2016, 2020 and across a wider time series that includes the combined results of the 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 data sets. This ANES data offers a comprehensive scientific survey on each presidential election, asking both broad and incredibly specific questions to respondents.

The data will be analyzed through implementation of a logistic regression employing the statistical software IBM SPSS. The data collected from the ANES website for each variable is to be imported into SPSS in order to perform the logistic regression analysis. The logistic regression analysis is necessary due to the fact that the variables being analyzed are categorical or dichotomous variables which is the case when the dependent variable has two or more categories. Logistic regression allows for the modelling of a nonlinear relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable while keeping all other independent variables constant. This nonlinear function indicates how the independent variable changes as a result of changes in the dependent variable. The logistic regression generates several important pieces of data including the Beta value along with the level of statistical significance and standard error.

The Beta value will inform the hypothesis, proving or voiding it, representing the magnitude of the influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable. The Beta value is in the form of log odds, which must be converted into the more easily understandable probability in order to be useful. The formula to accomplish this involves adding the constant to the beta times the mean value of every independent variable except for the variable being tested, this beta value of this variable is multiplied by the minimum or maximum value of that variable. Following this computation, the value is taken to the power of Euler's number e divided by one

plus the value of the prior computation to the power of e . This process is repeated using the opposite value, minimum or maximum for the same variable, and then for the minimum and maximum for every independent variable.

The dependent variable for my research is the way each voter cast their ballot in the 2008 and 2016 presidential election, as well as across the time series. The ANES question that will be used to measure this dependent variable is: For whom did the respondent vote for President? The valid codes were 1 for the Democrat candidate, and 2 for the Republican candidate.

Directional Theory:

My first hypothesis, based on directional theory which relies on party identification positions (Campbell et al. 1960; Williams et al. 2018; Tomz and Van Houweling 2008; Kropko and Banda 2018), is that members of a political party they are more likely to vote for the candidate from that party. The ANES question that will be used to measure this concept is: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” This variable was coded as a pre-election variable. Pre-election variables were used to judge the voter’s lens prior to election day. The valid codes were 1 for Republican, 2 for Independent, 3 for Democrat.

The second hypothesis states that voters with higher levels of formal education are more likely to cast votes for liberal candidates. The understanding would be that an individual who graduated college would have more liberal views than someone who only attended some high school. This is often the case because higher education tends to offer a more liberal worldview. The ANES question used to measure this concept is: “What is the highest degree that you have earned?” This variable was coded as a pre-election variable. The valid codes were 1 for people

with a grade school education of 8 grades or less, 2 for those with a high school education and without a diploma, 3 for a high school graduate or equivalency, 4 for someone with 12 grades, diploma or equivalency plus non-academic training, 5 for someone with some college, but no degree; or a junior/community college level degree, and 6 for those with a College Degree, or advanced degree.

My next hypothesis reads: The stronger the religious belief of a voter, the more likely they are to vote for the Republican candidate. While many have posited that church attendance is what plays a key role, recent literature has suggested that religious belief is more influential. (Miller and Shanks 1996; Driskell et al. 2008). The ANES question used to operationalize this concept is: “Would you say your religion provides some guidance in your day-to-day living, quite a bit of guidance, or a great deal of guidance in your life?” This variable was coded as a pre-election variable. The valid codes for the first question are 1 for yes, it is important, and 2 for no, it is not important.

The next hypothesis deals with gender and voting practices. This hypothesis indicates that men are more likely to vote for the republican candidate while females are more likely to vote for the democrat. Literature suggests that women are more likely to support the Democratic candidates while men support the Republican (Miller and Shanks 1996). The pre-election variable was operationalized in the ANES data asking whether the respondent was male or female. The valid codes were 1 for male and 2 for female.

Additionally, wealthier voters are more likely to vote for the conservative candidate, middle class voters are more likely to split their votes between liberal and conservative, while poor voters are more likely to vote for the Democrat. A person who is considered upper class typically makes more than \$100,000. A person who is considered middle class typically makes

between \$40,000 and \$100,000. A person who is in poverty makes less than \$40,000. The socioeconomic status of voters is something that has been thoroughly studied by scholars (Miller and Shanks 1996; Sosnaud et al., 2013; Zingher, 2020). The literature suggests that the pro-business policies of the Republican party create the attraction for wealthy Americans. However, literature also suggests that individuals are more likely to inflate their class status. Therefore, it is important to take into account income. The ANES questions used to measure income are: “I am going to read you a list of income categories. Please tell me which category best describes the total income of all members of your family living in your house before taxes. This figure should include salaries, wages, pensions, dividends, interest, and all other income. Please stop me when I get to your family's income.” This variable was coded as a pre-election variable. The code was the recorded level of income.

The sixth hypothesis reads: Older voters are more likely to vote for conservatives. The literature outlines many examples of Americans’ views shifting as they age for a variety of reasons (Miller and Shanks 1996). The independent variables for this hypothesis would be the age of the voter measured in ANES by: “What is the month, day and year of your birth?” This variable was coded as a pre-election variable. The valid codes are recorded numerically based on the age of the respondent, where a 75 year old would be coded as 75, while a 23 year old would be coded as 23.

The seventh hypothesis is in two parts and deals with two minority groups in America. African Americans are more likely to vote for liberal candidates. However, Hispanic voters will not act as a monolith, and support both candidates. The minority population in our country is growing, which increases their influence, but also shows how their views are becoming more diverse. Literature providing strong empirical evidence that black voters are much more likely to

elect a Democratic candidate since the 1960s (Miller and Shanks 1996). The ANES questions used to measure this concept are: “What racial or ethnic group or groups best describes you? In addition to being American, what do you consider your main ethnic group or nationality group? Are you of Spanish or Hispanic origin or descent?”. This variable was coded as a pre-election variable. In my data, I separated out the data relating to Black Americans and Hispanic Americans. The codes for the first data set were: 1 for those who were not a Black American (all other races), and 2. Black American. The codes for the second data set were 1 they were not a Hispanic American (all other races), and 2 they were a Hispanic American.

Candidate Qualities:

The eighth hypothesis reads: Voters are more likely to vote for candidates they perceive to possess the qualities of strong leadership, honesty, and being knowledgeable. The ANES questions used to measure this concept are: “What about 'provides strong leadership'? Does this phrase describe -Democratic/Republican Presidential candidate name- extremely well, very well, moderately well, slightly well, or not well at all?” Other phrases that are asked include 'honest' and 'knowledgeable'. This variable was coded as a pre-election variable. The valid codes for all of these questions were on a scale from 1 meaning the phrase the candidate provides strong leadership describes the Democrat or Republican candidate extremely well, to 5 meaning the phrase the candidate provides strong leadership describes the Democrat or Republican candidate not well at all.

Proximity Theory:

The final hypothesis is based on proximity theory, which values issue voting over party identification, the hypothesis states: If a voter believes the economy is successful, then they will vote for the candidate who will continue those policies. This states that the political issues, in this case economic views, of the voter are more important than the political party they belong to, and they are going to vote for the candidate with the closest views. Certain literature argues that a voter is twice as likely to choose a candidate based on their issue views (Miller and Shanks 1996; Tomz and Van Houweling 2008). The ANES questions with this topic include: “Now thinking about the economy in the country as a whole? Would you say that over the past year the nation's economy has gotten better, stayed the same or gotten worse? (IF BETTER:) Would you say much better or somewhat better? (IF WORSE:) Would you say much worse or somewhat worse?” The valid codes were a scale from 1 meaning the economy has gotten much better to 5 meaning the economy has gotten much worse.

The methodological instructions laid out here provide guidance that can be used to appropriately measure vote choice variables. In addition, the hypotheses laid out will provide the basis for the analysis of the data.

Data Collection

Table 1, 2, and 3 represent the results of a binomial logistic regression run using SPSS with the dependent variable being vote choice, with a vote for the Democratic candidate coded as 1 and a vote for the Republican as a 2. The independent variables operationalize influences on voter choice identified by the literature. The table reports results from 5 different regression models, the first using data from the 2008 Presidential general election, the second using data from the 2012 election, the third using data from the 2016 election, the fourth using data from

Table 1: Logistic Regression for 2008 and 2012

	2008				2012			
	B	S.E.	Sig.	Magnitude	B	S.E.	Sig.	Magnitude
Party Identification of Respondent	-2.172	0.138	0.000	73.5% Min 3.5% Max 70.0% Diff	-2.385	0.095	0.000	85.3% Min 4.7% Max 80.6% Diff
Respondent Education	-0.032	0.071	0.648	N/A	0.029	0.047	0.537	N/A
How Much Better or Worse Economy in Past Year	-0.299	0.128	0.019	34.0% Min 13.5% Max 20.5% Diff	1.287	0.066	0.000	2.3% Min 79.9% Max -77.6% Diff
How Much Guidance from Religion	0.352	0.079	0.000	8.8% Min 21.8% Max -13.0% Diff	0.358	0.051	0.000	16.8% Min 37.1% Max -20.3% Diff
Respondent - Age	0.017	0.006	0.004	11.0% Min 20.9% Max -10.0% Diff	0.011	0.004	0.003	21.5% Min 30.9% Max -9.5% Diff
Respondent-Gender	-0.127	0.187	0.496	16.2% Min 14.6% Max 1.7% Diff	-0.319	0.123	0.010	29.7% Min 23.5% Max 6.2% Diff
Respondent Family - Income Group	0.258	0.096	0.007	13.1% Min 20.1% Max -7.1% Diff	0.266	0.059	0.000	22.5% Min 33.1% Max -10.6% Diff
Black Americans	-4.346	0.733	0.000	33.7% Min .7% Max 33.1% Diff	-3.326	0.315	0.000	38.6% Min 2.2% Max 36.4% Diff
Hispanic Americans	-0.808	0.242	0.001	17.8% Min 8.8% Max 9.0% Diff	-1.092	0.176	0.000	30.1% Min 12.6% Max 17.5% Diff
Constant	9.141	1.173	0.000		3.790	0.633	0.000	
	N=1342				N=3871			
	***Sig ≤ .01; **Sig ≤ .05; *Sig ≤ .1							
	DV: 1 = Democratic Candidate; 2 = Republican Candidate							

Table 2: Logistic Regression for 2016 and 2020

	2016				2020			
	B	S.E.	Sig.	Magnitude	B	S.E.	Sig.	Magnitude
Party Identification of Respondent	-2.269	0.107	0.000	90.6% Min 9.3% Max 81.3% Diff	-2.468	0.073	0.000	87.2% Min 4.7% Max 82.6% Diff
Respondent Education	-0.294	0.062	0.000	72.6% Min 37.9% Max 34.7% Diff	-0.215	0.042	0.000	54.8% Min 29.3% Max 25.5% Diff
How Much Better or Worse Economy in Past Year	1.150	0.086	0.000	7.4% Min 88.9% Max -81.4% Diff	-0.770	0.040	0.000	81.0% Min 16.4% Max 64.6% Diff
How Much Guidance from Religion	0.374	0.058	0.000	33.4% Min 60.7% Max -27.2% Diff	0.451	0.046	0.000	20.7% Min 50.3% Max -29.6% Diff
Respondent - Age	0.004	0.004	0.281	N/A	0.006	0.003	0.050	30.9% Min 36.9% Max -6.0% Diff
Respondent-Gender	-0.300	0.142	0.035	51.0% Min 43.5% Max 7.5% Diff	-0.030	0.095	0.752	N/A
Respondent Family - Income Group	-0.129	0.071	0.070	50.0% Min 43.6% Max -6.4% Diff	0.046	0.042	0.277	N/A
Black Americans	-2.817	0.391	0.000	53.3% Min 6.4% Max 47.0% Diff	-2.064	0.273	0.000	38.7% Min 7.4% Max 31.3% Diff
Hispanic Americans	-1.552	0.277	0.000	51.3% Min 18.2% Max 33.0% Diff	-0.711	0.183	0.000	35.8% Min 21.5% Max 14.3% Diff
Constant	7.228	0.843	0.000		10.245	0.549	0.000	
	N=2360				N=5558			
	***Sig ≤ .01; **Sig ≤ .05; *Sig ≤ .1							
	DV: 1 = Democratic Candidate; 2 = Republican Candidate							

Table 3: Time Series Logistic Regression

	Time Series incl. 2008, 2012, 2016, 2020				Time Series with Candidate Qualities			
	B	S.E.	Sig.	Magnitude	B	S.E.	Sig.	Magnitude
Party Identification of Respondent	-2.502	0.044	0.000	86.2% Min 33.8% Max 52.4% Diff	-1.282	0.070	0.000	63.2% Min 11.7% Max 51.5% Diff
Respondent Education	-0.223	0.023	0.000	47.0% Min 22.5% Max 24.5% Diff	-0.078	0.040	0.047	35.7% Min 27.4% Max 8.4% Diff
How Much Better or Worse Economy in Past Year	-0.041	0.023	0.070	30.4% Min 27.0% Max 3.4% Diff	0.030	0.043	0.490	N/A
How Much Guidance from Religion	0.440	0.025	0.000	16.4% Min 42.4% Max -26.0% Diff	0.291	0.042	0.000	20.9% Min 38.8% Max -17.9% Diff
Respondent - Age	0.007	0.002	0.000	24.8% Min 31.2% Max -6.3% Diff	0.611	0.058	0.000	23.7% Min 34.7% Max -11.1% Diff
Respondent - Gender	-0.122	0.057	0.031	29.6% Min 27.1% Max 2.5% Diff	0.850	0.050	0.000	N/A
Respondent Family - Income Group	0.061	0.027	0.022	27.3% Min 29.8% Max -2.5% Diff	0.336	0.057	0.000	27.7% Min 32.4% Max -4.7% Diff
Black Americans	-2.910	0.161	0.000	36.6% Min 3.1% Max 33.6% Diff	-0.609	0.056	0.000	34.2% Min 9.1% Max 25.1% Diff
Hispanic Americans	-0.933	0.094	0.000	34.9% Min 17.4% Max 17.5% Diff	-0.580	0.054	0.000	31.1% Min 20.3% Max 10.8% Diff
How well does _provides strong leadership_ describe: Democratic Presidential candidate					-0.455	0.057	0.000	9.9% Min 55.7% Max -45.9% Diff

How well does _honest_ describe: Democratic Presidential candidate					0.012	0.003	0.000	5.6% Min 64.2% Max -58.6% Diff
How well does _knowledgeable_ describe: Democratic Presidential candidate					0.113	0.097	0.243	18.7% Min 46.9% Max -28.2% Diff
How well does _provides strong leadership_ describe: Republican Presidential candidate					0.112	0.045	0.013	64.2% Min 13.6% Max 50.7% Min
How well does _honest_ describe: Republican Presidential candidate					-1.648	0.226	0.000	66.9% Min 16.5% Max 50.3% Diff
How well does _knowledgeable_ describe: Republican Presidential candidate					-0.574	0.149	0.000	55.8% Min 17.0% Max 38.8% Diff
Constant	9.014	0.320	0.000		3.126	0.552	0.000	
	N=13131				N=12340			
***Sig ≤ .01; **Sig ≤ .05; *Sig ≤ .1								
DV: 1 = Democratic Candidate; 2 = Republican Candidate								

the 2020 election and the fifth using data collected from the ANES time series dataset for the 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 presidential elections. The sixth data set reports results from a regression model using data from the 2008 through 2020 time series, but also included additional variables that dealt with candidate qualities. The sixth data set will be referred to as time series with candidate qualities throughout this study to differentiate between the first time series. The

first time series, without the candidate qualities variables, will be used more frequently in this analysis.

The charts for each data set include 4 pieces of information which are the Beta value, Standard Error (S.E.), the level of statistical significance, and the magnitude. The Beta value for each independent variable is represented in a positive or negative result, indicating whether or not it supports or negates a hypothesis. A positive value for the coefficient indicates a positive relationship between the independent and dependent variable, whereas a negative value for the coefficient indicates the opposite relationship.

The level of statistical significance is important to note when analyzing the Beta value generated by the logistic regression and is represented as a p value between 0 and 1. The smaller the p value, the more likely it is that the null hypothesis can be rejected, meaning that there is a relationship between the two variables. In other words a p value of .03 is much more likely to occur than a p value of .4 because the .03 value indicates 97% in the relationship while .4 only indicates 60% confidence. In political science .1, .05, and .01 are the standard levels of significance and are labelled as such in tables 1-3. Any independent variable that does not meet the threshold of .1 or 90% confidence is deemed not to be statistically significant in this study.

As noted earlier, the Beta value must be converted from log odds to a probability using the formula stated above to determine magnitude. The magnitude is indicated by a percent which shows the minimum, maximum, and the difference between the minimum and the maximum. This provides easy to analyze evidence of the effect the independent variable, i.e. party identification, has upon the dependent variable, a vote for the Democratic candidate or the Republican candidate.

Directional Theory:

The first independent variable represents the impact of party identification on vote choice. Research since *The American Voter* has hypothesized voters are more likely to vote for candidates from the party they belong. It is notable that this is a statistically significant relationship. The beta value is negative in each of the regressions which shows the party identification data coded with 1 being Republican, 2 being independent, and 3 being Democrat, moving in opposite directions. In this model the beta moves in a negative towards the democratic candidate, suggesting Democrats are more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate. The magnitude indicates a strong relationship party identification and vote choice. The results indicates that 73.5% of those who identified as a Republican in 2008 voted for a Republican while only 3.5% of self-identifying Democrats voted for the Republican candidate in 2008. This indicates that a Republican was 70% more likely to vote for a Republican than a Democrat in 2008. That difference grows to 81% in 2012, and remains at 81% in 2016, and climbs to 83% in 2020. In the time series data set the difference in 52%. Based on this data, the hypothesis is found to be correct, and there is a relationship between party identification and vote choice.

The second independent variable represents the relationship between education and voter choice. Hypotheses for this variable include voters with higher levels of formal education are more likely to cast votes for liberal candidates. The beta value is negative, which, as stated earlier, indicates a relationship with the Democratic candidate. This indicates that the hypothesis is proven true as the data indicates that a person with more formal education was 35% less likely to vote for a Republican in 2016, and 26% less likely to vote for a Republican in 2020. Across the time series a person with more formal education was 25% less likely to vote for a

Republican. The data recorded in 2008 and 2012 did not represent a significant relationship between education and vote choice.

The third independent variable represents the relationship between voter choice and religion. The hypothesis states: the stronger the religious belief of a voter, the more likely they are to vote in line with their religious sect, with evangelical religious traditions voting for Republicans while ecumenical religious traditions vote for Democrats. The data provided clarity regarding the relationship between whether or not one is guided by religious beliefs. The beta for this variable is positive, which indicates that people who have stronger religious views are more likely to vote for the Republican candidate. The data supports this hypothesis as voters who identified as guided by religion were 13% more likely to vote for the Republican in 2008, 20% in 2012, 27% in 2016, and 30% in 2020. This is again made evident as the Time Series data indicates that someone who is guided a great deal by religious beliefs is 26% more likely to vote for the Republican.

The fourth independent variable considers how members of each gender voted. The hypothesis posits that male voters were more likely to vote for the Republican candidate while female voters were more likely to vote for the Democrat. The 2008 data shows that men were 1.7% more likely than women to vote for the Republican. In 2012, men were 6% more likely and in 2016 they were 8% more likely to vote for the Republican. Across the time series they were 3% more likely than women to vote for the Republican. The 2020 data proved not to be significant.

The fifth independent variable concerns income and how that is related to voter choice. The hypothesis related to this variable posits wealthier voters are more likely to vote for the conservative candidate, middle class voters are more likely to split their votes between liberal

and conservative, while poor voters are more likely to vote for the Democrat. The 2020 data for this variable proved not to be significant. The 2008 and time series data both show a positive beta value which indicates that there is a relationship between wealthier Americans and voting Republican, which proves the hypothesis correct. Based on magnitude in the time series data individuals in 69th to 95th percentile were 2.5% more likely to vote for a Republican. In 2008 wealthier individuals were 7% more likely to vote Republican, in 2012 they were 11% more likely, and in 2016 they were 6% more likely to vote for the Republican.

The sixth independent variable deals with age and the relationship to vote choice. The hypothesis for this variable is that older voters are more likely to vote for conservatives. The beta is positive in all of the three instances, indicating the hypothesis is correct and older Americans are more likely to vote for the Republican. The 2016 data was not found to be significant. While the data indicates a relationship, it is very weak. The time series found that a 70-year-old voter is only 6% more likely to vote for a Republican in the time series data than a 25-year-old. In 2008 a 70 year old was 10% more likely than the 25 year old to vote for the Republican, in 2012 they were 10% more likely, and in 2020 they were 6% more likely to vote for the Republican.

The next two independent variables in Table 1 both deal with race and voter choice. The hypotheses related to these read: Black Americans are more likely to vote for liberal candidates. However, Hispanic voters will not act as a monolith, and support both candidates. The data related to Black American voters yields a negative beta in all three data sets indicating the hypothesis is correct and there is a relationship between Black American's vote choice and the Democratic candidate. The magnitude indicates that this is a strong relationship because the time series data suggests someone who is not black is 34% more likely to vote for the Republican than someone who is black. Hispanic Americans offer a different data set. The beta is found to be

negative in all three data sets which indicates a relationship between Hispanic Americans and voting for the Democratic Candidate. However, the relationship is not as strong as Black Americans. In 2008, Hispanic Americans were 9% more likely to vote for the Democrat than non-Hispanic Americans, they were 18% more likely in 2012, 33% more likely in 2016, 14% more likely in 2020, and 17.5% across the time series. This indicates that the hypothesis was correct, and that Hispanic Americans do not vote as unified of a monolith as Black voters. Even though this is not as strong of a relationship as Black voters, there is still a majority of Hispanic Americans voting for the Democratic candidate.

Candidate Qualities:

In addition to the other variables listed to this point, voters views regarding candidate qualities offer an important lens to understanding vote choice. The times series with candidate qualities offers a reexamination of all of the variables mentioned in Table 1 with the addition of candidate qualities. This data was not used to analyze the other variables because the N was smaller, in addition to the fact that the variables would have had different weight than the individual election years. The hypothesis related to candidate qualities reads: voters are more likely to vote for candidates they perceive to possess the qualities of strong leadership, honesty, and being knowledgeable. The beta values related offer two wildly different outcomes. Each of the beta values for the Democrat questions are positive and the inverse is true for the Republican question. In regard to magnitude, it is clear that these issues are important factors in vote choice. This is evident through the honesty question when, in reference to the Democratic candidate, those who saw the Democrat as very honest were 59% less likely to vote for the Republican.

There are similar facts for the Republican candidate, as those who view the Republican as very honest are 50% more likely to vote for the Republican.

Proximity Theory:

The final independent variable shows the relationship between the economy and vote choice. The hypothesis for this variable reads: if a voter believes the economy is successful, then they will vote for the candidate who will continue those policies. This data is informed based on the current president, so the time series does not offer the necessary information. The beta value is negative in 2008 and 2020 and positive in 2012 and 2016. Based on the magnitude, someone who believed the economy was much worse in 2008 was 21% less likely to vote for the Republican, in 2012, someone who believed the economy was much worse was 78% more likely to vote for the Republican, in 2016, someone who believed the economy was much worse was 81% more likely to vote for the Republican, and in 2020, someone who believed the economy was much worse was 64% less likely to vote for the Republican. While this might seem counterintuitive, 2008, 2012, and 2020 saw a Democrat win and 2016 saw a Republican win. Therefore, the data supports that a negative view of the economy causes a voter to choose the opposite party's candidate.

Analysis:

These results reveal several important findings. Based on the logistic regression, party identification is the most influential of the independent variables based on the time series data and even more in each of the regression models. Additionally, voter's views on the economy – starting in 2008 with the great recession, continuing into 2016 with increased economic

disparity, and the Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020 and the significant impact on the economy – served as a deciding factor in every election. I will examine these economic issues in the discussion of proximity theory. The voter data also points to several factors that impact voter choice beyond party identification and the economy, including religious belief, candidate qualities, and education.

Directional Theory:

Americans have always gravitated to political parties, going all the way back to the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans to the modern Democrat and Republican party. Political parties offer an important look into how voters will select a President. This theory which ties vote choice to party identification is known as directional theory. According to the data, directional theory is the most influential indicator in vote choice, based on the 2008, 2016, and time series models. Just as Angus Campbell et al. found in *The American Voter*, party identification continues to be an incredibly influential factor in presidential elections (Campbell 1960). It is also relevant to note how the importance of party has ebbed and flowed, where New Deal voters, Reagan era voters, and 21st century voters value party, post-New Deal voters did not place a strong emphasis on party identification (Miller and Shanks 1996). Although there has been divergence in the past, this study offers evidence that we are in a time where party identification is influential. Not only is there a strong relationship between vote choice and party identification, but it is also evident that there is a trend that voters have become less likely to vote for someone who is not from their party. This relationship appears to always be present, however it does vary in intensity. In 2008, a Republican was more likely to vote for John McCain than Barack Obama, with 73% of Republican identifying voters and 3.4% of Democrat

identifying voters choosing John McCain. However, by 2020, a Republican was much more likely to vote for Donald Trump over Joe Biden, with 87% of Republican identifying voters and 4.7% of Democratic identifying voters choosing Donald Trump. These results offer support for increased partisan polarization, especially when considered in concert with the data from 2012 and 2016, which offers evidence of a growing trend. In 2012, 85% of Republicans and 5% of Democrats voted for Mitt Romney, and in 2016, 91% of Republicans and 9% of Democrats voted for Donald Trump. This makes it clear that while party plays a major role, there are always defectors, or switchers. This is clear in our data as 27% of Republicans voted for Senator Obama, and 3.4% of Democrats voted for Senator McCain, while in 2020 12% of Republicans voted for Vice President Biden, while 5% of Democrats voted for Donald Trump. The 2016 election offers a striking example as 9% of Democrats voted for Donald Trump which was nearly double the amount of any other year. These results make the case that the 2020 election saw a much more partisan result than the 2008 election, specifically on the Republican side. This offers evidence that Americans are still rational and responsible, as posited by Key, as there is definite vote switching occurring, with Republicans unifying around Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020, while this was not as strong of a case with Senator McCain. It is also evident that Democrats were not as united in the 2016 election as they were in 2008, 2012, or 2020 with 9% voting for Donald Trump in 2016, while only 3% voted for Senator McCain, 5% for Governor Romney, and 5% for Donald Trump in 2020. This division among Democrats in 2016 could serve as a possible explanation as to why Secretary Clinton was defeated, due to the fact that the democratic candidate was successful in each year when the party maintained at least 95% of their supporters. This sheds light on the loyalty voter's show to their party, which is the quintessential description of directional theory.

While the increasing relationship between Party identification and vote choice offers important insight into these elections, it also shines a light on the polarizing nature of the recent Presidential election. Americans tend to gravitate towards political parties that represent individuals with similar interests and traits to their own. These socioeconomic factors create a lens through which voters peer through as they are making decisions at the ballot box.

Just as the literature suggests, a voter's background is important in guiding individuals to one political party or the other. This mirrors the "funnel of causality" that was laid out in *the American Voter*, which argued that socialization is incredibly important to voter choice (Campbell 1960). My research took note of three aspects that contribute to this political socialization and the shaping of an individual's identity, those being education, religion, and economic class. Each of these variables inadvertently drove individuals to join a political party with like-minded individuals with similar interests to their own. However, further research is needed to determine what pushes members of political parties to break rank and vote for the other side's candidate. Answering the question why did 27% of Republicans vote for Senator Obama, and only 12% vote for Vice President Biden?

Education has been touted as one of the primary factors for political division in our modern landscape. Similar to my hypothesis, many believe that individuals who accrue a greater amount of education are more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate (Zingher, 2020). Although, *The New American Voter* found educated southerners, especially males, voting in greater numbers for the Republican Party starting in the 1980s, my data suggested that educated voters are more likely to vote for the Democrat. The data suggests that there is a relationship between vote choice and education, however, the same cannot be said when it comes to 2008 or 2012 when the specific data was found not to be significant. However, this also can provide

important insight as it shows that education became a greater factor of importance from 2008 to 2016. Along these lines, it is apparent the education was not a factor when voters were choosing between John McCain and Barack Obama which means people with all educational backgrounds voted for both candidates. However, the data suggests education played an important role in 2016 because a voter with at least a four year college education was 35% more likely to vote for Hillary Clinton than someone with an eighth grade education or less, and in 2020 a voter with at least a four year college degree was 26% more likely to vote for Joe Biden. This offers support that education served as a more substantial component in the 2016 and 2020 elections than it did in the 2008 and 2012 elections. It is important to note that education played a more significant role in 2016 than it did 2020.

Religion serves as another important piece of political socialization. The data offers evidence that religious beliefs do have an impact on vote choice. This research steered away from the question of whether or not someone attended church, and instead focused on whether or not religion was a guiding factor in someone's life. The data indicated that a stronger religious belief implies a voter will choose the conservative candidate. Although some argued that Barack Obama received a decent portion of the Evangelical vote in 2008, John McCain still received a large majority of this faction (Goodstein 2008). My data backs this up, as people who felt strongly guided by religion were only 12.5% more likely to vote for Senator McCain. However, the trend of religious voters choosing the Republican candidate grew tremendously in the period between the 2008 and 2016 election. This trend is evident when studying the actions of the Christian right, meaning conservatives who identify as Christian Evangelical, who overwhelmingly voted for Donald Trump in 2016 (Bailey 2016). The data backs this up as 61% of those identified as very religious voted for Donald Trump as opposed to 22% who voted for

John McCain. This trend remained largely the same in the 2020 election, with white evangelicals voting largely for Trump, and those who do not identify as religious or “nones” voted for Biden. However, Vice President’s Catholicism did lead to many Catholics voting for him (Gjelten 2020). In 2020 the data illustrates that 50% of religious voters choosing Donald Trump while only 21% of “nones” voted President Trump. This trend of religious voters supporting the Republican candidate is also evidenced in my research as those who were guided more strongly by religion were 26% more likely to vote for the Republican candidate based on the collective time series data. Religion offers an important lens for vote choice, and it is evident that the Christian right is a large factor influencing voters who identify as guided by religion, which causes those voters to be more likely to vote Republican.

The gender of the voter also provides important information in the analysis of voter choice. The literature provides evidence that women specifically are more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate (Miller and Shanks 1996). This assertion is back up by the datasets in the 2008, 2012, 2016, and complete times series data sets, with the 2020 election data not proving to be statistically significant. It is notable that the year in which women were most likely to vote for the Democrat compared to men was 2016, with an 8% difference of magnitudes, while 2008 offered the lowest margin where women were only 2% more likely than men to vote for the Democrat. This increase in 2016 can perhaps be explained based on the gender of the Presidential candidates. Hillary Clinton, who was the first woman to be nominated to the presidency by a major political party, received more votes from female voters than any other candidate in the elections analyzed.

Another aspect of socialization that this study reflected on was voter income. Income offered very little guidance on whether income was a factor in vote choice. The data makes it

apparent that voters income played a role in 2008, 2012, 2016 and across the time series data, albeit a small one. Voters in the 69th to 95th percentile of income were only 3% more likely to vote for a Republican in the time series data, 7% more likely to vote Republican in 2008, 11% more likely to vote Republican in 2012, and 6% more likely to vote Republican in 2016. The data was not found to be significant in 2020. This indicates that income was more influential in 2008 and 2012, while education was more influential in 2020, with both being important in 2016 when judging socioeconomic factors.

It is also important to analyze demographic control variables when conducting research. Demographic analysis allows for researchers to understand the makeup of the electorate. However, demographic data can also help to understand how individuals who belong to that demographic voted. One of the most common demographic variables to analyze is age. My hypothesis was that older voters were more likely to vote for conservative candidates. However, the data did not provide strong support for this hypothesis. The 2008 data only cited older voters as 7% more likely to vote for the conservative candidate, the 2012 data showed older voters were 10% more likely to vote for the conservative, the 2020 data was only 6% more likely to vote for the Republican, and the 2016 data regarding age was not found to be significant. This indicates that age does not play a significant role in vote choice.

Another important demographic variable that must be discussed in order to understand vote choice is the voter's race, particularly in relation to minority voters. My research sought to analyze how likely two major minority groups, Black and Hispanic Americans, are to vote for a certain party. Literature suggests that Black Americans are very likely to vote as a unified group in favor of the Democratic party (Teigen, Shaw, and McKee 2017). However, Hispanic Americans are less of a monolith and they are not as likely to join together and vote for the same candidate. This is proven in the data based on the fact that someone who identifies as Black is 33% more likely to vote for a Democrat than someone who is not Black. In 2008, when Barack

Obama was elected as the first African American President, less than 1% of African Americans voted for Senator McCain. It is notable that 7% of African Americans voted for Donald Trump in 2020. However, the literature suggests that although there was vote switching among African Americans in 2020, Black voters helped deliver Joe Biden key victories in states such as Georgia (Ray 2020). While there has been an increase in Black Americans voting for Republicans, the likelihood is still relatively small and indicates that a large majority still vote together. This strong party unification is not reflected across every minority group, especially among Hispanic Americans. Hispanic voters are 18% more likely to vote for the Democrat than non-Hispanic voters. This indicates that Hispanic Americans are indeed not as strong of a monolith and do not always vote for the Democratic candidate compared to Black voters. However, it is notable that this data proves to be more significant than many of the other control variables. Not only does this demographic data show the relationship between voter choice and race, but it also adds support for the directional theory. Race is an important factor in relation to socialization and the funnel of causality. This makes it apparent that Black Americans vote significantly in favor of the Democratic candidate, not just in one election, but across many.

These attributes played a role in the political polarization that has developed in recent years. Not only do they help voters decide in the current election, but each attribute becomes a part of the worldview of the voter. Just as the funnel of causality states, all these things combined lead an individual to a political party that shares their ideals. Americans typically join with those who have similar ideals to their own, and this is absolutely the case in the political realm. This reinforces the finding that directional theory is the most influential theory in vote choice, because individuals who see the world through similar lenses are more likely to join the same party and vote for the same candidate.

Candidate Qualities:

Another aspect that can influence voter choice are the qualities of the presidential candidates. If a candidate possesses qualities that are pleasing to voters then they might be more likely to vote for them. However, the literature calls for skepticism when evaluating voter choice through the lens of candidate qualities. Not only do voters typically favor the candidate of their party, but it is possible that they might even project these qualities such as knowledgeability or strong leadership onto a candidate they support (Tomz and Houweling 2008). My research focused on three candidate qualities: does the candidate provide strong leadership, is the candidate honest, and is the candidate knowledgeable?

Individuals who voted for the Democratic candidate are much more likely to view that candidate in a favorable light in all three categories. Along those same lines, individuals who voted for the Republican candidate are much more likely to view that candidate in a favorable light. This offers strong support for the idea that voters project their vision of what a candidate should be onto the candidate affiliated with their party. This assumption is based on the fact that members of a political party are much more likely to see their candidate as equipped for the job. My results show Democrats find the Democratic candidate to be 59% more honest, 46% believed the candidate to be a stronger leader, and 28% found them to be more knowledgeable than the Republican candidate across the time series. On the Republican side, Republican voters find Republican candidate to be 50% more honest, 51% believed the candidate to be a stronger leader, and 39% found them to be more knowledgeable than the Democrat candidate across the time series. This offers evidence that Democrats put a higher value on honesty, while Republican

voters value strength in leadership equally to honesty. It is also notable that neither party seems to believe their candidates are significantly more knowledgeable than their opponent.

Candidate honesty was the most influential of the candidate qualities in relation to voter choice, and whether or not a candidate was knowledgeable was the least influential candidate quality. This is notable because it was similar across both parties. Voters of both parties evidently desire a candidate who is honest. This similarity across both parties further provides evidence that voters project their desired traits onto a candidate. Americans want to believe that the candidate they are voting for is honest. This also plays into the funnel of causality and directional theory because individuals' ideals are often based upon socialization, which also directs like-minded people to similar political parties. Projection leads to candidate qualities being spurious and therefore unable to determine voter choice, however, candidate qualities provide unique context to understanding directional theory.

Proximity Theory:

Although directional theory offers an important understanding to vote choice, proximity theory is not without its merits. Short term political issues have always dominated the American political discourse, and one of the perennial issues is that of the American economy. Issues drive voters to gravitate towards a candidate who shares their opinions. Proximity theory outlines that issues, not party, influences voters. When analyzing proximity theory, my research focused on the economy and American's opinions about the state of the economy. This category is also dependent upon who is the current President. If a voter believes the economy is doing well, then they are more likely to vote to keep the policies of the current President in place, whether that be

through reelection or party continuity. However, if a voter feels the economy is worse, then they are likely to seek a change in leadership.

The economy presented a major issue in each election between 2008 and 2020. In 2008, the country was embroiled in a massive recession. The housing bubble had burst, many Americans had lost their jobs, and the stock market was in shambles. Much of the blame for the crisis was placed at the feet of President George W. Bush, whose Republican policies had led to the crash. This placed a great deal of pressure on Republican John McCain because many Americans associated him with the failed policies of President Bush. Barack Obama, on the other hand, benefited electorally from the crisis. Then Senator Obama offered voters a different approach to the economy and promised economic relief, which many viewed as a path out of the crisis (Gonyea 2009; Holcomb 2020). My research indicates that the economy was a factor in vote choice in 2008. The data indicates that people who viewed the economy as much worse than the year before were 21% more likely to vote for Senator Obama over Senator McCain. This indicates that the current economic state did drive voters to choose Barack Obama, which signified a change in party from the previous administration.

During the 2012 campaign, then Vice President Joe Biden made the statement “bin Laden is dead and General Motors is alive” indicating the success of the Obama administration (Hawkins 2012). The short term economic factors were positive for President Obama. The success is largely based on the successful auto bailout which revived General Motors and the decline in unemployment (Sullivan 2012). However, it was also evident that many voters did not agree that the economy was in a better place. Of those voters who believed the economy was worse than it had been the year before 78% voted for Governor Romney. In 2008, then Senator Obama received a greater share of votes from those who felt the economy was worse off than he

did in 2012. This reinforces the theory that voters who have a negative view on the economy are likely to seek a change in Presidential leadership. However, the desire for change was not strong enough to defeat President Obama because 98% of those who viewed the economy as improved voted for the President.

The 2016 election also presented an argument around economic disparity. During the nine years prior to the election, white Americans had lost 700,000 net jobs. Candidate Donald Trump ran on a message of “Make America Great Again”, which targeted working class white voters and other Americans who had been hurt economically, especially by the shuttering of factories and other blue-collar jobs (Hudak 2020; Porter 2016). While this is different from an economic recession, this economic shift created great angst among a large group of Americans. Although the economic policies brought about by President Obama offered recovery for a great deal of the country, these policies hurt working class whites who were worse off than they had been eight years before.

Donald Trump’s experience as a businessman and his message around the economy offered hope to many Americans. The data suggests the massive impact that the state of the economy had on voter choice. An individual who believed the economy was worse than before was 81% more likely to vote for Donald Trump than someone who believed the economy was much better. This follows the same pattern as 2008, because voters who felt the economy was not doing well voted against the party in power and voted for a change in leadership. This makes it abundantly clear that voters who believe the economy is declining will seek to change the leadership in the White House.

The 2020 election saw many short term political forces come to a head, many of which were stoked by the Covid-19 Pandemic. The US economy was significantly impacted by the

Covid-19 Pandemic, with record breaking levels of unemployment and the necessitation of large fiscal stimulus packages to revive the economy (Patton 2020). This led many Americans, particularly Democrats, to hold a negative view on the current state of the American economy (Pew Research 2020). This is confirmed in my research as 81% of those who viewed the economy as worse than before voted for Joe Biden, while only 16% of those who viewed the economy as much better voted for Mr. Biden. Not only was the economic impact of the pandemic important to voting patterns, but President Trump's handling of the Pandemic also played a role. According ANES data 97% of Democrats and 63% of the electorate disapproved of President Trump's handling of Covid-19. On the flip side, Only 85% of Republicans and 37% of the electorate approved of the President's handling of the pandemic. This indicates that Covid was a significant factor in the decision making of voters. This is the case not only because of the disapproval of the President's policies, but also the negative impact they had on the economy. This economic decline led many voters to vote for change in Presidential leadership which is in line with the 3 previous elections. This solidifies the trend in which an economy in decline results in a partisan change in the white house while a stable economy results in stability. While party identification is a truism in American politics, voters often change their minds based on the economy, world events, candidate qualities, and their own socioeconomic status.

Conclusion:

Voter choice in American presidential elections can impact the very fabric of the political landscape. However, voter choice is not simply the result of one decision but is based on many factors combined. The 2008 Presidential election saw the historic election of Barack Obama based around voter's views about the economic collapse and his liberal beliefs. The reelection of

President Obama in 2012 served as a sign that President Obama's policy's were popular, especially his economic policies that lifted the country out of recession. 2016 saw a strikingly different outcome with the Electoral College victory of Donald Trump based on the decline of the white working class. The 2020 general election resulted in the election of Joe Biden and was the culmination of a tumultuous year dealing with the Covid-19 Pandemic.

The goal of this paper was to answer the question why did people vote for a certain presidential candidate in 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 and which theory of voter choice was more accurate in explaining that decision. My research found that directional theory provided the most powerful explanation around voter choice in each of these 4 elections, with it being even more prominent in 2016 and 2020. This importance of Party identification is largely associated with the funnel of causality, which can also be described as the lens through which the voter sees when they analyze candidates. While supporters of directional theory might argue that this finding indicates the irrationality of voters I would caution against this. Through the funnel of causality voters are shaped by variables that impact their lives in significant ways. Throughout this paper I have argued that Party identification is shaped through religion, education, income, age, and race, which proved to be especially important. It is also important to note how voter's opinions about the qualities of candidates can be skewed based on their partisan lens. Based on the these elections it is clear that Party identification is a significant factor in voter choice.

In addition to directional theory, this paper tackled proximity theory, which found that voting based on issues, specifically the economy, offered important insight on voter choice. This theory is based around the idea that voters are rational, choosing candidates who supported issues they cared about. However, the importance of short term political issues can vary from year to year which makes this theory of secondary importance to directional. Voter's vote based

on issues they are passionate about, but they are often passionate about issues that they have deemed important based on socialization. The economy continually serves as an issue that is important to voters. Throughout these elections a voter's perception of the state of the economy did provide incredibly important information regarding vote choice. Voters who have a negative outlook on the economy typically vote for the party opposite the current President. This data made it clear that Barack Obama received more votes due to President Bush's failure in dealing with the great recession, Donald Trump benefited from the economic hardships of the white working class who were hurt by the cessation of many blue-collar jobs, and in 2020 voter's opted for partisan change in the White House based on President Trump's failures whereas Joe Biden prevailed based on his promise to rebuild the American economy in the wake of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Each president benefitted from the fact that when Americans have a negative view of the economy, they seek a change in presidential leadership.

The research of this paper points to eight possible factors that impact voter choice, party identification, education, support for a candidate's economic policies, religious beliefs, qualities of a candidate, age, race, and income. While each factor relating to voter choice can be viewed in a vacuum, it is important to understand how they relate to one another. All voters are inherently tied to many of these factors, such as age or race. Through regression analysis, these variables were tested to determine the impact each of them played on vote choice.

In terms of adding to the current literature, this paper applied these two theories to the most recent presidential elections, exploring the theories continued relevancy into more modern elections. This paper did not only contribute to the literature regarding theories of voter choice, but it also explored the importance of religious belief or religious guidance as opposed to understanding religious attendance as a more accurate way to understand religion's impact on the

voting process. This paper explored the direct link of education to voter choice. Examining the education levels allows for the study of how voters with varying levels of education make their choice, and this will lead to more concrete analysis. This paper also provided evidence that Hispanic voters are not a monolithic group, and instead voted for both major candidates by decent margins. In addition, this paper furthered the argument that economic disparity leads to a change in presidential leadership.

However, it is the hope that this paper might serve not only as an academic resource to political scientists, but that it also might be useful to a candidate or a campaign consultant. The material laid out in this paper provides clear information that could be useful to a campaign and could inform what strategies they employ when communicating with voters. Based on this analysis, it could be useful for a candidate to focus on economic issues that put their campaign in a good light. While at the same time ensuring that their partisan voters agree with the candidate and do not cross party lines to vote for the opponent. While these strategies are not groundbreaking, they can provide important confirmation of voter inclinations regarding party identification and economic influence on the election.

Further research could include a more complex analysis of social class. Due to the lack of occupational ANES data, it was challenging to accurately assess the occupation of the voter. It was also difficult to determine which religious sect a voter belonged to, due to the ANES data lumping all protestants in the same data point. Further research should place an emphasis on determining voter's religious sect. and determine the relationship between sect and vote choice. This will help inform political scientists when analyzing religious voters, and allow for the avoidance of assuming they are a monolith. In addition, future papers could determine voter qualities, such as hate, or opinions on a candidate's gender drove them to vote for a certain

candidate. Another aspect that must be taken into account is how the absence of former President Trump on the ballot will affect various aspects of voter choice. It is certainly notable that the trend of increased party identification grew on each of the elections where Mr. Trump was on the ballot. However, this cannot be determined without further research following future elections, and might not be possible until 2028 based on current political analysis. This could provide important insight into the trend of increased polarization.

No day is more important to the United States continuity of government than the presidential Election Day. Presidential elections, which always occur on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, result in the election of the leader of the free world. Election Day in 2008, 2016, and 2020 saw three very different outcomes. Much has been written about these elections; it is my assertion that party identification serves as the best explanation when understanding how voters made their choice in the ballot box.

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