



Elections Research Center
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2020 Annual Report

The challenging environment created by the coronavirus pandemic and suspicion about the conduct of the presidential election made the Elections Research Center an even more valuable public presence in 2020. Amid the tumult of the election season, the ERC served as an essential resource, offering smart, nonpartisan analysis of the campaign and the electoral system itself.

The center continued to support various research initiatives and provide extensive election analysis in 2020. Graduate and faculty affiliates produced impactful scholarly research. Faculty affiliates were featured frequently in international, national, state, and local news media. The ERC also hosted valuable virtual events and conducted its first election surveys in three battleground states.

These successes have been made possible with the financial support of Jeffrey and Susanne Lyons, the Mai Family Foundation, and other generous donors along with the involvement of a Steering Committee of three faculty members and the affiliations of 13 other faculty and nearly 30 students from the Department of Political Science, Law School, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, and other units on campus.

Publications and Research

Affiliates of the Elections Research Center produced impactful research in 2020 on a wide variety of topics. These books and articles complement the many conference presentations and talks where affiliates presented scholarship supported by the center. Here is a sampling of recent research.

“Trump, Twitter, and News Media Responsiveness: A Media Systems Approach”
by Dhavan Shah, Ayellet Pelled, and Jon Pevehouse with others (*New Media and Society*)

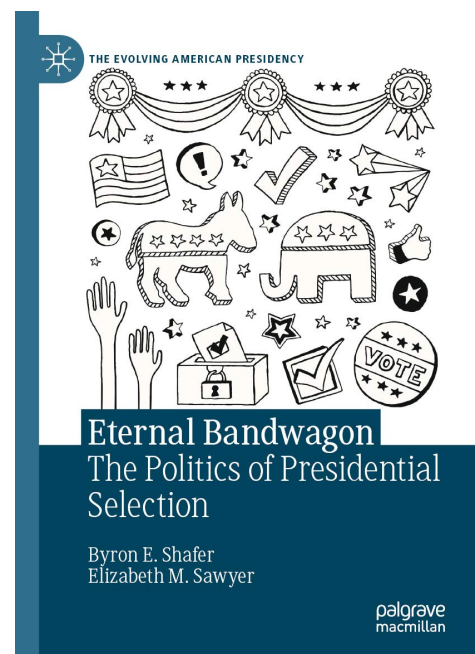
***Mediated Democracy: Politics, the News, and
Citizenship in the 21st Century***
by Michael Wagner with Mallory Perryman

***Eternal Bandwagon: The Politics of Presidential
Selection***
by Byron Shafer and Elizabeth Sawyer

**“Waiting to Vote in the 2016 Presidential Election:
Evidence from a Multi-county Study”**
by Barry Burden and Kenneth Mayer with others
(*Political Research Quarterly*)

**“Political Advertising, Digital Platforms, and the
Democratic Deficiencies of Self-Regulation”**
by Robert Yablon (*Minnesota Law Review*)

**“Understanding the Role of Racism in
Contemporary US Public Opinion”**
by Katherine Cramer (*Annual Review of Political
Science*)



Media

The Elections Research Center and its affiliates engaged with the public through various news media outlets in 2020. Our experts provided extensive election analysis and timely input on the most salient current events. Affiliates gave hundreds of interviews via TV, print, radio, and podcasts. And many wrote columns explaining how their research relates to current politics.

Featured in the News

Affiliates were quoted and featured in a variety of prominent stories published by high-profile news media outlets. Among others, these media organizations included *The Washington Post*, CNN, *The New York Times*, *Politico*, PBS, *The Atlantic*, *National Public Radio*, C-SPAN, *Wisconsin State Journal*, and *USA Today*.



Our faculty affiliates commented on diverse topics such as 2020 presidential campaigns, Trump’s legacy, misinformation, and election forecasting. A sampling of these appearances includes:

“The Cities Central to Fraud Conspiracy Theories Didn’t Cost Trump the Election”
featuring Barry Burden (*The New York Times*)

“What Trump Showed Us About America”
featuring Katherine Cramer (*NPR*)

“‘He Stuffed Our Party’: Bloomberg Doubts Resurface as He Speaks at D.N.C.”
featuring Eleanor Powell (*The New York Times*)

“Silicon Valley is Losing the Battle Against Election Misinformation”
featuring Young Mie Kim (*Politico*)

“There’s No Evidence of Voter Fraud in Mail-in Ballots, Part Infinity”
featuring Kenneth Mayer (*CNN*)

“A Math Whiz on How to Stop Stressing About Election Forecasts”
featuring Jordan Ellenberg (*The Atlantic*)



“The continued insistence that there are material levels of intentional voter fraud is itself a form of fraud.”
- Kenneth Mayer
The New York Times

Authored Columns

Our affiliates also authored op-ed columns in well-known media outlets. Here are a few examples of what they wrote:

“More Voting by Mail Would Make the 2020 Election Safer for our Health. But It Comes with Risks of its Own.”

by Barry Burden (*Washington Post*)

“How Media Consumption Patterns Fuel Conspiratorial Thinking

by Jordan Foley and Michael Wagner (*Brookings Institute*)

“Wisconsin is Scheduled to Vote Today. How Will the Pandemic Affect Turnout?”

by Jordan Foley, Michael Wagner, Lewis Friedland, Dhavan Shah, Katherine Cramer, and Ceri Hughes (*Washington Post*)

“Why Biden is Winning the States Trump Wants Most”

by Eleanor Powell (*Washington Post*)

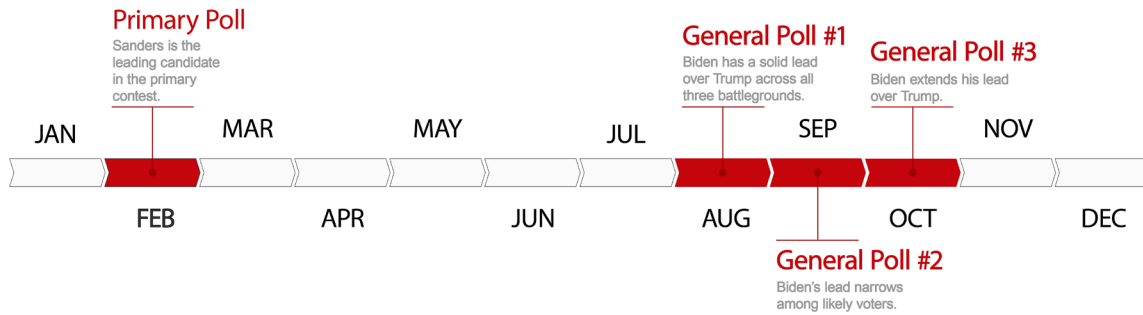
2020 Election Surveys

The Elections Research Center conducted four surveys during the 2020 presidential primary and general election. The surveys asked the same set of potential voters in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin their thoughts about the candidates and various issues as the campaigns evolved. Polls were conducted in all three states in February, August, September, and October.



2020
Election
Survey





The first poll in February revealed that Senator Bernie Sanders was leading over former Vice President Joe Biden in all three swing states. Regardless of the candidate, head-to-head matchups against Trump revealed extremely close general election contests in all three states.

After Biden ultimately captured the nomination in August, our next three polls showed Biden with a discernable lead over Trump in all three states. Biden’s lead was from both consolidating the Democratic vote and, most importantly, attracting voters who had previously supported minor party candidates or did not vote in 2016. Trump struggled to attract similar numbers of white voters as he did in his first election.

Though later polls showed a tightening of the race, Biden continued to remain near the 50% mark in all three states. Results also revealed clear differences in how the candidates’ supporters viewed the race. Trump supporters were focused first on the economy, whereas Biden supporters gave highest priority to the coronavirus outbreak. Voters remained steadfast in these issue priorities despite protests over racism in policing and the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court.

Election Symposium



The ERC hosted its biennial election symposium on December 4th. The virtual event was open to the public and drew hundreds of online attendees. It featured election experts from across the country, offering their insights into key issues in the 2020 elections. Topics included the top concerns of voters, partisanship in the electorate, consequences of the pandemic, and swing state dynamics. Invited speakers were national election experts Jonathan Ladd, Michael Wagner, Rachel Blum, Chryl Laird, and Chris Tausanovitch.

Campus and Community Engagement

The ERC and our affiliates also engaged with the broader community. Many faculty affiliates were guests on the political science department's podcast "1050 Bascom." Barry Burden, Kenneth Mayer, and David Canon teamed up to give presentations about the 2020 election to hundreds of online viewers through the Wisconsin Alumni Association.

Alumni Association Presentations



Kathy Cramer, Barry Burden, Lewis Friedland, and Michael Wagner all came together to speak in the Crossroads of Ideas series hosted by the Discovery Building on Campus.

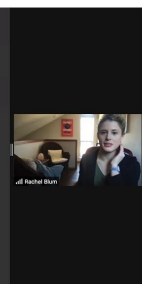
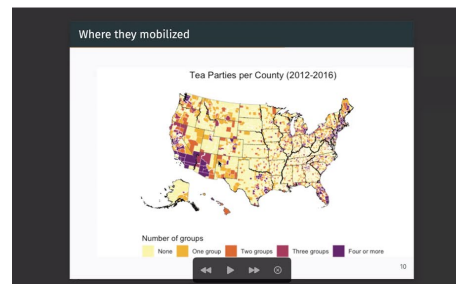
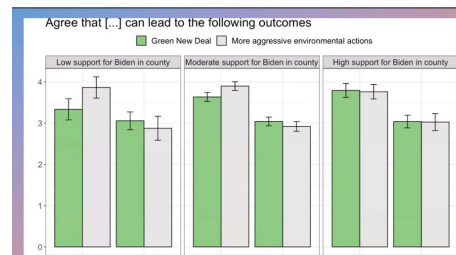
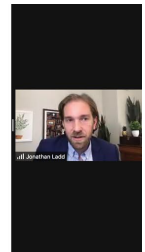
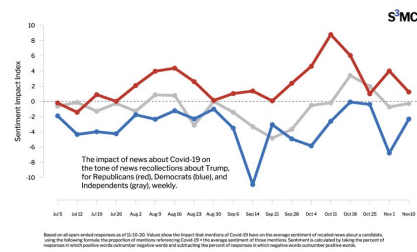
Serving Students

The ERC and its faculty supported students in many ways throughout 2020: teaching popular courses, advising graduate and undergraduate student research, and supporting the engagement of students in the electoral process.

Financial Support for Student Research

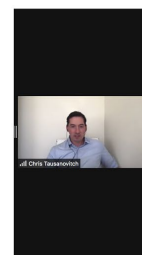
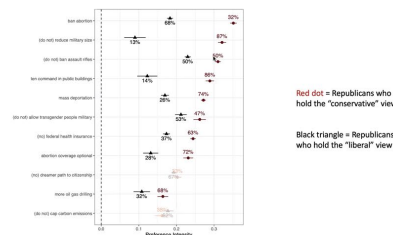
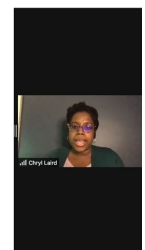
Several graduate students received support to participate in online conferences. One student, Chau Tong, had an article that previously received financial support from the ERC published in *Mass Communication and Society*. Additionally, the Rose Family Undergraduate Research Project award made funds available for undergraduate research on elections.

Election Symposium Presentations



Racialized Social Constraint

Racialized social constraint is a process of enforcing the norms of black political behavior. It includes well-defined, racially specific social rewards and penalties, which are used to compel compliance with group-based expectations of political behavior.



Course Offerings

Faculty taught a range of high demand undergraduate, graduate, and professional courses last year:

- Introduction to American Politics
- Political Communication
- Understanding Political Numbers
- Presidential Debates
- Elections and Voting Behavior
- The American Presidency

Badgers Vote Coalition

The Badgers Vote Coalition led by Katherine Cramer and supported by the Elections Research Center helped coordinate voter education activities for UW-Madison students. The cross-campus coalition of students, faculty, and staff won the 2020 SLSV award for removing barriers and increasing access for students.



Awards and Professional Activities

Our affiliates also received prestigious awards and engaged in a variety of professional activities beyond their responsibilities to the University.

Award and Grants

- Facebook selected Young Mie Kim to conduct research on the platform's impact on the 2020 election for which Michael Wagner served as independent observer for the broader initiative.
- Kenneth Mayer won the WARF Discovery Initiative award to serve as the principal investigator for a multi-disciplinary study of redistricting and gerrymandering.
- Graduate student affiliates Jordan Foley and Michael DeCrescenzo received their Ph.Ds.

Professional and Notable Activities

- Young Mie Kim served as a visiting scholar at The Annenberg School of Mass Communication during the fall semester.
- The ERC welcomed election law expert and incoming dean of the UW-Madison Law School Daniel Tokaji as a faculty affiliate.
- Mathematics Professor Jordan Ellenberg became a faculty affiliate.
- Kathy Cramer continued her work with the Local Voices Network, a nonprofit with the goal to foster conversation in communities and in the media that improves our understanding of one another.
- David Canon, Michael Wagner, and Nils Ringe all served as editors for academic journals.