COVID's impact on the US 2020 election:
insights from social media discourse in the early campaign period
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Abstract

The impact of COVID on the upcoming November 2020 US election will be an important topic in the coming months. In order to contribute to these debates, this data memo, the final in our summer 2020 series on COVID, considers this question based on an analysis of social media discourse in two week-long periods in late May and early July. We find that only a very small proportion of tweets in election-related trends concern both the election and COVID. In the May period, there was much evidence of conspiracy-style and misinformative content, largely attacking the Democrats, the seriousness of COVID and postal-voting. Tweets also showed that the stances of the Presidential nominees towards the coronavirus has emerged as a major point of political differentiation. In the July period, tweets about COIVD and the election were dominated by the influence of a new anti-Trump Political Action Committee's viral videos, with the hashtags associated with these videos found in 2.5% of all tweets in election-related trends across the period. However, this criticism was not mirrored in the wider dataset of election-related or political tweets in election-related trends. Criticism of Trump was frequent across all time periods and samples, but discourse focused far more on Trump especially in the July period in which tweets about Trump outnumbered tweets about Biden 2 to 1. We conclude that these patterns suggest the issue of COVID in the US has become so highly politicised that it is largely only one side of the political spectrum engaging with how COVID will impact the US election. Thus, we must ask going forward not how COVID will impact the process and outcome of the election but rather how COVID will be used as a political and campaign issue in the coming election.

COVID upends political processes worldwide

The year 2020 has been defined by the COVID pandemic that has swept across the world, infecting more than 26 million and killing more than 860,000 (as of the start of September). To date, the US has been the hardest hit country, with more than 6 million cases and 180,000 deaths (CDC, 2020). While its high population plays a part, this high figure is also due to the reluctance of the US, under President Trump, to impose social and economic restrictions to control the spread of COVID. These restrictions have been common in other countries, but have been largely piece-meal and short-lived in the US

with variation between different states and localities.

In addition to affecting social and economic life, COVID has also affected political life in many countries. New Zealand's national election due to take place 19 September has been rescheduled for 17 October (BBC, 2020b); a constitutional referenda in Chile that was a key demand of protests in late 2019 was delayed from 26 April to 25 October (McGowan, 2020) and, in the midst of a rapid and ongoing encroachment on democracy, elections for the Hong Kong city legislature were postponed for a year until 5 September 2021 (Withnall, 2020). As of the end of August, the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

counts at least 88 elections that have been postponed due to COVID (IDEA, 2020).

One important election likely to be affected by the ongoing COVID pandemic is the US 2020 election. On 3 November, US citizens will vote for their president, all 435 seats in the House of Representatives, 35 of 100 seats in the Senate, 11 state and 2 territorial governorships, and numerous other state and local elections and ballots. This is a hotly watched election, with incumbent President Donald Trump facing Democratic nominee Joe Biden, former Vice President under Barack Obama.

COVID and the US 2020 Election

COVID has already had an effect on the US election. Numerous presidential primaries were delayed. Although the two main party nominees were largely decided before delays, the final democratic challenger, Bernie Sanders, cited the COVID crisis as precipitating his decision to suspend his campaign in early April (Pearce & Halper, 2020). Both the Republican and Democratic national conventions, major multi-day events that mark the end of the primary elections, were replaced with shorter, online events.

However, the two main Presidential campaigns are approaching the pandemic in different ways. Democratic nominee Joe Biden has announced he will not hold campaign rallies while the COVID pandemic continues in the US (BBC, 2020a). In contract, Trump continues to hold campaign rallies, some of which have been implicated in increasing COVID cases in that area (Spocchia, 2020). Even just based on their decisions surrounding campaigning, stance towards the COVID pandemic is already defining the campaigns of the two main candidates.

To avoid social contacts and virus spread, increases in postal voting have been proposed for the 2020 election. Postal voting has been used in the US for military service personnel since the American Civil War; however, regulations for postal voting vary widely. Five states conduct elections almost entirely by mail; 29 states allow any registered voter to apply for a mail-in ballot; and 17 require a reason for mail-in ballot requests. Many states are moving towards allowing all voters to request a mail-in ballot, however, these efforts are being blocked in some states (Moreno, 2020).

For instance, the Texas Attorney General stated in April that "fear of contracting COVID does not amount to a sickness or physical condition as required" for mail-in voting applications (Johnson, 2020). In July, the US Supreme court refused to expedite a case by Texan Democrats contesting the Texas Attorney General's decision, meaning that it is unlikely that the country's highest court will hear the case before the November election (de Vogue & Ehrlich, 2020).

Mail-in voting during the pandemic is widely supported by the US public but with dramatically different levels of support between Democrats and Republicans; a PEW survey of almost 5,000 US adults found that, while overall 70% of the public supports allowing any voter to vote by mail if they want to, among Democrats this number is 87% and among Republicans it is 49% (PEW, 2020).

This difference is likely linked to Republican Party claims that mail in voting has high rates of fraud and allegations that Democrats will use fraudulent mail in ballots to "steal the election." This argument was advanced by President Trump in an August tweet that read:

So now the Democrats are using Mail Drop Boxes, which are a voter security disaster. Among other things, they make it possible for a person to vote multiple times. Also, who controls them, are they placed in Republican or Democrat areas? They are not Covid sanitized. A big fraud!

Earlier this year, Trump had stated in an interview on the Conservative talk show *Fox and Friends* that "you'd never have a Republican elected in this country again" if Democratic-led voter reform was allowed to pass (Levine, 2020). The reforms in question attempted to facilitate elections in the context of COVID through

mechanisms such as mail-in voting, same day voter registration and early voting.

There is, however, little evidence to support claims of widespread voter fraud in mail-in ballots. While data is hard to obtain, a study by the Brookings Institute of data collected by the Heritage Foundation (a right-wing think tank that campaigns against electoral reform) found miniscule levels of voter fraud in the five states that had been using postal votes prior to 2018 (Kamarck & Stenglein, 2020). Across the eight states the researchers found a total of 29 attempted fraudulent postal votes out of almost 50 million votes cast over the studied time period, concluding that the benefits of postal voting far outweighed the risks (ibid).

There is also no evidence to support the popular assumption that reforms allowing more people to vote or making voting easier will benefit more left-wing parties. Research on the impact of universal mail-in-voting in Oregon found that it did not result in any influx of new voters (rather it made it easier for current voters to continue to participate) and did not change the partisan composition of the electorate (i.e. it did not benefit either party's election outcomes) (Berinsky et al., 2001). However, whether and how elections go ahead is not the only way COVID can affect the electoral process.

Potential effects of COVID on public support

Military conflicts, terrorist attacks and, to a certain extent, other crises such as natural disasters are often seen as boosting popularity for political leaders, at least temporarily. One oft-cited example is President George W. Bush's 35-percentage-point jump in popularity after the September 11 attacks. Presidents with lower approval ratings before these events tend to have a higher spike in popularity (Baum, 2002).

This phenomenon, known as the rally-round-the-flag effect, was first described by Mueller in 1970, who found this effect occurred in dramatically and sharply-focused international events including military and diplomatic actions, and major technological developments and summit meetings in the context of geopolitical issues. These events resulted in a spike in popularity for sitting Presidents followed by a growing weariness and decline in popularity, which in the case of military actions was hypothesised to be associated with mounting casualty numbers (ibid).

Although Mueller focused on the US, this effect has been shown in numerous other contexts, such as the 1982 Falklands War that Norpoth estimated resulted in a six-point electoral gain for the Thatcher government in the UK in the following year's general election (1987).

These effects provide more benefits for right-wing leaders, who tend to be perceived as more hawkish (supportive of warlike foreign policy) , compared to left-wing leaders, who tend to be perceived as more dovish (peaceful and conciliatory) (Stevens, 2015). Research has also found larger rally effects in times of higher economic distress (Baum, 2002).

Media coverage also appears to play a role in this effect. This has been hypothesised to be based on a state of political consensus in the initial stages of the event, resulting in opposition support for the leader and one-sided media coverage (Baum, 2002). In addition to bi-partisan support, the extent and nature of a rally is associated with both media coverage and the administration's 'spin.' For instance, research found that headline stories in the *New York Times* generated larger rallies, with these paper-leading stories often prompted by administration communication activities such as presidential statements, press releases and televised addresses (Baker & Oneal, 2001).

Although Mueller's original definition would apply to the COVID crisis, later research in this area derives largely from studies of military events. However, based on this research, it seems as if Trump, as a Republican incumbent, might stand to benefit from this effect in the early-stages of the pandemic. He is a hawkish, right-wing leader and COVID has resulted in an unprecedented economic downturn both of

which have been found by research to result in larger rallies.

COVID deaths continue to mount in the US, which would generate weariness and a gradual decline of the initial rally. However, these mounting deaths are seen by many as associated with a resumption of economic activity. Harvard economist Jason Furman who chaired the Council of Economic Advisors under Barack Obama, has predicted that COVID will cause a "quick and steep decline in economic activity (in the US) followed by a quick and steep rebound" that will allow Trump going into the November election to "brag — truthfully — about the most explosive monthly employment numbers and gross domestic product growth ever" (Lizza & Lippman, 2020).

Social media and media messages during COVID

One major difference between the numerous studies of rally-round-the-flag effect and the current COVID crisis in the US is the changed media environment. Although public health crises tend to see a direction of attention to healthcare professionals, Trump has attempted to maintain control of the narrative, heading frequent press-briefings. The briefings were put on hold after media backlash at Trump's comments on the potential of high-powered UV-light and injections of disinfectant to prevent and treat COVID but were restarted in July as US cases continued to mount (Woodward, 2020). The backlash of traditional media, medical and emergency professionals and the public against Trump's comments demonstrates how the media environment may have profoundly changed since the days of one-sided media coverage in crisis events based on political consensus and administration control of the media narrative (Bolsover & Tokitsu Tizon, 2020).

Indeed, there is evidence that the Trump administration has not successfully controlled the message about the nation's approach to COVID via media, as was suggested by early studies of the rally-round-the-flag effect. For instance, one study found that people trust medical advice less when it is attributed to Trump

compared to CDC, state health departments, local health departments or even not-sourced (Boyton et al., 2020).

Rather than traditional media, social media is now the main venue through which this discursive environment is enacted. It has been used, for instance, by the Trump administration to bypass normal information dissemination channels, announcing new policy positions and spreading misinformation such as allegations of postal-voter fraud.

It is important to note, however, that in the context of the COVID pandemic social media platforms have made significant changes to control the spread of COVID misinformation, including Twitter labelling Trump's aforementioned tweet as "making misleading claims that could potentially dissuade people from participation in voting." These measures are particularly important as social media has now become a major venue for political campaigning, especially as some have suspended in-person campaigning, in light of COVID.

In addition, discussion on social media has been found to be a useful means for understanding public opinion among its user population and a predictor of election outcomes. For this reason, in order to understand how COVID might impact the US 2020 election, we turn to discourse on Twitter, the largest open online social media platform and an important facet of online political campaigning for both Presidential candidates.

Examining Twitter discourse

We focus on two weeklong periods to collect a sample of social media discourse that might elucidate the emerging impact of COVID on the 2020 US election: 25 – 31 May and 6 – 12 July. These periods both represent different stages in the current fast-moving, socio-political climate in the US of what is normally the early campaign season.

The late May period came as the US was transitioning out of lockdowns in numerous

states. Although social and economic restrictions had been lifted or partly lifted in many states several weeks earlier, this week was when the US rekindled political activity, with the largest protests in US history after the death of George Floyd at the hands of police. The interaction of COVID with these historic Black Lives Matter protests was the subject of our previous memo in this series (Bolsover, 2020a). In the current memo, however, we focus instead on discussions about the election and the impacts of COVID on the election at this time of heightened political attention and activity across the US.

The early July period was chosen as it encompassed a number of presidential primaries that were delayed due to concerns about COVID: Louisiana, Delaware, New Jersey and Puerto Rico. The primaries of both parties were held in Delaware and New Jersey on 7 July and Louisiana on 11 July. The Puerto Rico Democratic Primary was held on 12 July, with the Republican primary held by online caucus vote on 5 June in lieu of an actual primary. This period was, thus, designed to capture any relevant discussion about the process of voting emerging around these primaries and that would be relevant to the November election.

Many research projects intending to monitor social media discourse on Twitter collect data from within a group of pre-selected hashtags and keywords. However, this strategy risks missing emergent or unselected topics. It is thus severely limited in its ability to speak to the body of online discourse, particularly during fast-moving events, and is subject to significant researcher bias based on the selection of hashtags and keywords to follow. To avoid this limitation, this project collected a sample of data from all trending topics within the US in the two weeklong periods.

Using custom Python scripts to interface with the Twitter API, the project collected the most recent 100 tweets associated with each of the top 50 trending topics in the 64 locations for which Twitter collates trends (including one for the entire country) every 15 minutes during the target period. This data collection captured 3,434

unique trends in the May period and 3,024 unique trending topics in the July period.

We then undertook a content analysis of each hashtag or keyword that had trended at least 50 times across the 64 locations in both time periods. This means, for example, a coded topic could have been trending in almost all US locations in one 15-minute period or in just one US location for more than half a day. The content analysis employed an established coding frame used in previous research to determine the broad content of social media posts in a variety of political contexts and events (Bolsover, 2017, 2018). During the May period a total of 324 hashtags or keywords trended more than 50 times across the 64 locations; during the July period 447 hashtags or keywords trended more than 50 times.

During the late May period, 184 trends were political (57%), 106 were commercial (33%), 30 were informational (9%) and four were personal (1%). Of these trends, 14 (4%) concerned the 2020 election. During the early July period, 205 were political (46%), 165 were commercial (37%), 57 were informational (13%), 18 were personal (4%) and two (<1%) that were predominantly in Japanese could not be coded due to language issues. Of these trends, 31 (7%) explicitly concerned the election.

As such, we see only a small number of trends concerning the election in both periods (although almost twice as many in the July period, potentially due to the focus on BLM during the May period). The small number of trends about the election is notable compared to a large number of trends about politics in general in both periods
We conducted intercoder reliability checks on the 100 most popular trends from the late May period. Percentage agreement for trend topic was 79% with a Kappa of 69%.

Examining tweets in election trends

In order to analyse these tweets, we randomly selected 250 tweets from trends that were about the election for analysis from both the May and

July periods. We also randomly selected 100 tweets each from trends focused on the Democratic Party, trends focused on the Republican Party and trends focused on neither party during the July period for supplementary analysis to uncover any differences in discourse between partisan-affiliated groups.

During the May period of the 250 tweets in trends coded as being relevant to the election, 93 (37%) of the tweets actually concerned the election. Fifty-three tweets (22%) concerned COVID in the US. Only 18 (7%) of tweets concerned both COVID and the election. During the July period of the 250 tweets in trends about the election, content about the election increased, with 132 posts relevant to the election within election-related trends (52%). Content about COVID decreased to 38 posts (15%). Only 17 (7%) concerned both COVID and the election. This indicates that COVID continues to be a significant topic in election-related trends but direct discussion of the intersection between COVID and the US's upcoming election is relatively rare.

We conducted intercoder reliability tests on 100 randomly selected tweets from political trends from a previous weeklong period. Percentage agreement for being about COVID was 96% with a Kappa of 93%. Percentage agreement for being about the election was 96% with a Kappa of 79%.

Results were similar in the partisan subsets from the July period (100 tweets each from trends focused on the Democratic Party, trends focused on the Republican Party and trends focused on neither Party). In each case, election-related tweets constituted the largest proportion in election related trends (61%, 45% and 56%, respectively). A significant proportion discussed COVID (11%, 15% and 11%, respectively). Only a small fraction concerned both COVID and the Election (9%, 7% and 9%, respectively).

Although relatively infrequent in number, it is these posts that concern both COVID and the election explicitly that we first focus on, as they can most directly help answer our research

questions about how COVID is impacting and will impact the 2020 US Presidential Election.

Nature of COVID-election posts in May period

A number of the tweets that concerned both COVID and the election during the May period contained significant levels of partisanship, incivility and repetition of the allegations of postal voter fraud and Democratic beneficiaries of postal voting advanced by Trump:

It's blatantly obvious that the Democrat Congress, the Democrat state politicians and the Democrat media...ARE ALL WORKING TOGETHER TO ORCHESTRATE A NARRATIVE TO FIRCE A MAIL IN VOTE ABD STEAL 2020... ITS FN OBVIOUS...

🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸 *REPUBLICANS SUE PELOSI AND THE DO NOTHING DEMOCRATS OVER PROXY VOTING SCHEME, REPUBLICANS FILED A LAWSUIT IN THE D.C. COURT TO BLOCK PROXY VOTING AND END THE DEMOCRATS CYNICAL, TAXPAYER FUNDED EXTENDED VACATION " PELOSI CON JOB IS UNCONSTITUTIONAL*

The influence of Trump seems powerful here, not just in content but in form, from the use of capitals to the epithets such as "do nothing Democrats." Also, of note is the use of three American flag emojis to start the second tweet, equating Democratic speaker of the House of Representative's Nancy Pelosi's actions not just as "unconstitutional" but unpatriotic. This mirrors similar hyper-partisan labelling and framings of the patriotism in posts that opposed economic and social restrictions to control the spread of COVID discussed in a previous memo (Bolsover, 2020b). This labelling showcases classic authoritarian techniques of in-group/out-group creation and existential threat. However, there were also others who contested this narrative, including one who wrote:

Agreed. My state, Utah, is the second most Republican State in the nation. We always vote by mail and gave overwhelming support to Trump in 2016. Why do Republicans continue to call this fraud?

However, in the emotionally driven and fast-paced world of Twitter, it is the former sentiments, with their attention-grabbing capitals and repetitive emojis, that will receive much more attention compared to the latter. Allegations of Democratic conspiracy and misinformation have been common across all four data memos of this series (Bolsover, 2020a, 2020b; Bolsover & Tokitsu Tizon, 2020). These allegations also spilled out into alleging that COVID was a democratic plot to distract from the problems of their presidential candidate, Joe Biden:

It's not completely far-fetched that Democrats are keeping an entire nation locked in to avoid #GropingJoe having to face an unmanaged press conference with real journalists asking hard questions (not CNN ass-lickers)...

Although this poster presents their position as speculation ("it's not completely far-fetched") and may have been doing so humorously, these kind of statements contribute to more widespread narrative of conspiracy and doubt that has been nurtured on social media.

There was also a similar sentiment from an apparently left-wing poster alleging that Bernie Sanders was pressured into dropping out of the Democratic race, using BLM hashtags in an apparent attempt to attract attention to the posting:

Sorry to continue repeating this, but I think Bernie / his family were threatened. There is no other explanation. We can still WIN this. #SuperBernieTuesday #BernieOnTheBallot #NotMeUs #COVID #BlackLivesMatter #Medicare4All #JoeBidenIsARacist #CentralParkKaren

Across these tweets, we see statements of absolute certainty, without the provision of evidence, such as "there is no other explanation" and "its blatantly obvious," reflecting tactics frequently used by Trump in unsubstantiated assertions. Two tweets (from the 18 that concerned both the election and COVID in the

May sample) appeared to reference evidence but twisted it to suit their meaning.

The first of these included a screengrab of a Reuters story titled *Divided by COVID-19: Democratic U.S. areas hit three times as hard as Republican ones* writing:

If it weren't for #Democrat failures there would be exponentially fewer deaths. #Democrats killed Americans by shoving them into nursing homes. #DemocratsAreDestroyingAmerica #DictatorDemocrats

The post did not provide a link to the original article for viewers to easily assess the veracity of this claim; however, the original article attributed this difference largely to the fact that Democratic-voting areas are more likely to be high-density cities and Republican-voting areas more likely to be sparsely populated and rural. Ethnic minority populations, who disproportionately support the Democratic party, are also disproportionately affected by COVID (Godoy & Wood, 2020; Public Health England, 2020).

The second of these posts referenced the statements by the Harvard economist, discussed earlier, that COVID will cause a "quick and steep decline in economic activity (in the US) followed by a quick and steep rebound" that will allow Trump going into the November election to "brag — truthfully — about the most explosive monthly employment numbers and gross domestic product growth ever" (Lizza & Lippman, 2020).

The post was a retweet of a post by Texan Republican Dan Crenshaw that linked to the article and wrote:

"This is my big worry," said a former Obama White House official who's still close to the former president. So your "big worry" is a great American economic recovery? That's the kind of people coming back to power under a Biden presidency. Enough said.

Again, the source material does not support the statements made about it and busy viewers are

unlikely to check, especially if the post was made by someone they trusted, such as a Member of Congress. Although the sample size of tweets about COVID and the election is very small, only 18 out of 250 randomly-selected posts in trends relevant to the election, the amount of misinformation, conspiracy-content and mis-representation of source material is significant.

Most of the rest of the tweets in this set focused on how the two candidates were navigating the COVID crisis, showing again how the different partisan approaches to COVID are shaping how both candidates and voters are defining their positions during the election campaign.

On the one hand, both supporters and detractors commented on recent news photos of Joe Biden wearing a black face mask and dark Aviator sunglasses. In reference to a photo showing Biden saluting to someone offscreen, while holding his wife's hand with her waving in the same direction, one poster wrote: *Biden is freaking styling*

In reference to close up from the same event of Biden's face, which is largely obscured by the mask and sunglasses, journalist and political commentator Brit Hume wrote: *This might help explain why Trump doesn't like to wear a mask in public. Biden today.*

In contrast, to Biden's mask-wearing activity, several posts also criticised recent footage showing Trump golfing. One poster made his own Biden campaign video overlaying the golfing footage with statistics such as the number of Americans dead from COVID and currently out of work. The video also included Trump quotes criticising Obama for playing golf when he was President and Trump saying that when he would be President he would not have time for golf. The poster wrote:

Joe Biden needs to get on these ads right away, I made this ad in 10 minutes and I added Trump's own words! Let me know what you guys think. Please Retweet and Like #TrumpGolfsYouDie

This post is interesting in that, although it obviously supports Biden strongly, it also seems to believe that Biden's campaign is poorly conceived as is not leveraging the footage to its advantage.

This was apparently not the case as another post linked to a post by left-wing blog *The Palmer Report* entitled: *Joe Biden just figured out how to get under Donald Trump's skin*. The post alleges that Biden calling out Trump for golfing during the pandemic caused Trump to have "a berserk meltdown" and stated that the tactic was working well for the Biden campaign. Another poster retweeted a post from Biden saying:

The presidency is about a lot more than tweeting from your golf cart. It requires taking on the ultimate responsibility for the biggest decisions in the world. Donald Trump simply wasn't prepared for that. I promise you I will be.

Another poster responded to a different Biden tweet that also mentioned the golfing incident, commenting: *Raise your hand if you wish President Joe Biden was handling the #COVID19 crisis instead of Trump.* 🖐

In contrast to the idea of the video creator – that the Biden campaign might not be capitalising on opportunities to shape media discourse – the much greater influence of the Biden campaign and Biden's words on discourse about COVID and the election is notable. However, this is likely because we are examining tweets that concern both COVID and the election, and treating COVID as a serious issue is much more prevalent on the left-wing of the US political spectrum. One post spoke to this from the right-wing perspective, saying:

I live in California and haven't had the joy of attending a Trump rally yet. Now, even if Coronavirus precludes my going to one before the election, NOTHING will keep me from attending the greatest Trump rally of them all - My President's second inauguration in 2021.

Although likely somewhat exaggerated, this post further demonstrates how COVID is being

polarised within US politics, with Democrats and democratic supporters changing campaigning in light of the virus and Republicans and supporters largely going ahead with campaign and even using the seriousness with which the virus is being treated by the Democrats as further "evidence" to allege a Democratic conspiracy to lock up the country and steal the election.

Nature of COVID-election posts in July period

Although the July sample period was chosen so as to encompass a week in which several states held primaries and, thus, in which discussion about the impact of COVID on voting processes might be found, none of the 17 tweets that concerned both COVID and the election in the random sample of 250 discussed the primaries that were held during that week. Of the three partisan aligned sub-samples, only one post mentioned the election and, in this case, simply noted pride at voting for the first time and encouraged others to register to vote. With the partisan subsamples, largely mirroring those of the main sample, we focus on these in the following sections.

What was most notable in these 250 posts was the influence of a newly-established Political Action Committee MeidasTouch that was formed to oppose the re-election of Donald Trump. Five of the seventeen tweets about COVID and the election in the sample retweeted or used hashtags created/popularised in recent MeidasTouch posts: #PardonMeTrump and #LeaveMeALoan.

Using Python, we assessed the prevalence of these PAC-initiated hashtags in the wider dataset of 299,347 posts in 31 hashtags related to the election in the 6 – 12 July period (from which the random sample of 250 was drawn). #PardonMeTrump was mentioned in 3,986 tweets and #LeaveMeALoan in 3,451 tweets. Only one tweet contained both the hashtags.

Although these are relatively small percentages of the overall discourse in these trends (1.3% and 1.2% respectively), the fact that a single Political Action Committee appears to be responsible for shaping more than 2% of Twitter discourse in

election-related trends over a single weeklong period is telling of the power that these organisations with opaque funding structures can have over political discourse on social media.

Of the two MeidasTouch videos, one referenced Trump's campaign promise to "drain the swamp" (rid government of corruption) and argued that instead Trump "is the swamp" pointing to Trump's pardoning of his "criminal friends." The other video discussed the recently revealed news that Kayne West received millions in support from the Federal Pandemic Loan Program. A number of other posts from this week also shared and commented on the news about Kayne:

Wait, so Kanye West got $2-5 million in covid relief $ from the Trump Treasury Dept from the money that was supposed to go to small businesses like struggling restaurants??? Huh... no wonder he's trying to help Trump by launching a faux presidential run to split the black vote...

So @KanyeWest wants to act like he's running for president, well here comes the exposure! West, who's supposed to be a billionaire, received a multimillion-dollar PPP loan given for relief to small businesses from the Trump Administration. #KanyeWest

Both of these tweets mention the fact that Kayne has, for years, discussed running for president in 2020, first announcing the intention at the 2015 Video Music Awards and filing a statement of candidacy in July 2020. With very low polling numbers and coming after the deadline for ballot access in 29 states and the District of Colombia, many political and celebrity commentators have dismissed the campaign as a publicity stunt (Kane, 2020). However, as the above posts show, the conspiracy-style theory that Kayne, formerly the most prominent African American Trump supporter, is trying to split the 'black' vote and reduce Biden's support among African Americans has also been circulated on social media.

In comparison with the posts from the May period, these tweets were notably much more anti-Trump and, to a lesser extent, pro-Biden. The only pro-Trump tweet was a retweet from

conservative TV host Laura Ingraham saying *Reminder: Biden's plan is to keep you locked down and depressed. Trump's plan is to keep you free and happy* and linking to a report of a poll putting Biden four points ahead of Trump. This might suggest that, as coronavirus deaths continue to rise in the US and incidents of mishandling of the epidemic become apparent, support has been moving away from Trump. For instance, one poster wrote *Joe Biden Has An Actual Plan To Deal With Covid-19* linking to an article by the same name from the left-wing blog *The National Memo*.

However, this assessment of a movement away from Trump support has been seen, so far, only in the small number of posts that concerned both the election and COVID. As previously discussed, Biden, the Democratic Party and left-wing voices have approached the pandemic much more seriously in the US, with Trump, the Republican party and right-wing voices consistently arguing that the severity of the disease is being overstated and that a change in behaviour is neither necessary not warranted. As such, it is important to consider the wider body of tweet about the election, that do not specifically consider COVID to assess any change in support.

The nature of general political tweets

As previously mentioned, during the May period, 93 tweets from the 250 randomly-selected tweets in trends relevant to the election concerned the election. During the July period, 132 tweets were relevant to the election. When we consider these tweets that concerned the election, but not COVID, the pattern of a movement away from Trump and towards Biden support noted in the qualitative analysis of the small number of tweets related to both the election and COVID is not supported.

In order to assess support for these candidates, we consider the selection of tweets from our random sample of 250 from both periods that are specifically election-related (93 in the May period and 132 in the July-period). We also consider the partisan alignment of all political tweets in the random sample of 250 from election-related

trends in both periods (183 in the May period and 174 in the July period).

Looking first just at the proportion of tweets about the election within election-related trends, during the May period 31% of election-related tweets were pro-Trump and 42% anti-Trump. During the July period, 21% were pro-Trump and 45% anti-Trump. Pro-Trump sentiment in election-related tweets dropped by 10%, while anti-Trump sentiment remained relatively constant. This is perhaps not surprising given that anti-Trump sentiment has been sustained since his election in 2016.

Within election-related tweets in the May period, 19% were pro-Biden and 46% anti-Biden. In the July period, supportive tweets dropped to 8% and oppositional rose slightly tweets to 23%. The patterns here seem to be not any movement from one candidate towards another but associated with wider political shifts. The number of tweets supporting both candidates dropped from the May period to July period. Anti-Biden tweets also dropped from the May to July period.

What is more notable is that the amount of discourse about Trump outpaces the amount of discourse about Biden, with a large drop between the May and July periods. In the May period, 73% of election-related tweets in election-related trends concerned Trump and 66% Biden. However, in July 67% concerned Trump and only 31% Biden. As such, these data cannot support the idea of a movement from Trump toward Biden, potentially associated with a weariness of mounting COVID causalities and mishandling of the pandemic. Election-related tweets showed a high level of criticism of Trump across both periods (roughly one in four election-related tweets in both periods). However, this criticism did not translate to support for Biden, with tweets in support dropping from 19% in May to only 8% in July.

However, when we consider the partisan position of all political tweets within election-related trends a different pattern emerges. As a proportion of all political posts within election-related hashtags, in May 24% of tweets were pro-

Trump and 48% anti-Trump. In July, supportive tweets dropped to 20% and oppositional tweets to 40%.

Much larger drops were seen in both supportive and oppositional Biden tweets. In May, 13% of tweets supported Biden and 30% opposed. However, in July this dropped to 6% of all political tweets in election-related hashtags supporting Biden and 18% opposing. The focus of discourse on Trump, whether positive or negative, could well be positive for Trump's November vote as share of media coverage (whether positive or negative) helps predict (along with favourability ratings) eventual voting outcomes (Hopmann et al., 2010; Silver, 2015).

However, it is important to remember that this analysis focuses only on two week-long periods and as such cannot necessarily represent any changes in patterns of discourse over time. Wider polling data has indicated that Biden has led Trump throughout 2020 with the gap widening slightly from May onward.

In our data, the May week could be an outlier due to the BLM protests going on during that time and the July week seems highly likely to have been influenced by the campaigns of the MeidasTouch PAC. Although the PAC has released a number of viral videos since early June, it is impossible to say if the week of consideration showed more or less engagement with these videos than in previous weeks, but does indicate the power of PACs in US election discourse, especially in the age of viral online videos.

Discussion and Conclusion

This data memo set out to discuss how COVID might be impacting the US 2020 General Election based on analysis of social media data from Twitter during two week-long periods in late May and early July. Our review of relevant literature suggested that the practicalities of the US election might change, such as a move to postal voting. Research has suggested that this move is unlikely to benefit either party, but there is a strong and unsubstantiated narrative that postal voting (and other voter reforms) would benefit the Democratic Party and even misinformation and conspiracy content advanced by President Trump that postal voting would be used by the Democrats to commit "fraud" and "steal the election."

This points to the importance of narrative and how events are framed by political parties and leaders. Little research exists that would help us understand how incumbents and challengers are affected by pandemics; however, research into major political events (which has largely focused on military activities, terrorist attacks and non-military events within existing conflicts) could provide some guidance here. These studies suggest an initial rally-around-the-flag effect that would turn to opposition as casualties mount and mishandling becomes more obvious. This, however, was largely based on studies of a traditional media environment that has been drastically changed by social media. The administration control of media message that contributed to this effect does not seem to have been the case in the current media environment of partisan network proliferation and social media dissemination.

Our May sample saw a number of posts that reiterated unsubstantiated claims of Democratic conspiracy and election stealing based on postal voting. Claims of Democratic conspiracy or manipulation in relation to COVID were also present in both samples. Given how small these samples are, the frequency within the dataset is worrying. However, this mirrors the findings of the previous data memo that discussed the summer's BLM protests in the context of COVID. It concluded that existing divisions and polarised positions were being enacted in a new event "inciting a similar playbook of accusations of Democratic, media and socialist conspiracy from BLM opposers" (Bolsover, 2020a, p. 9). The May tweets showed much similarity to Trump's tweets in style as well as content, suggesting that more action could be necessary from social media platforms to help prevent the proliferation of misinformation and conspiracy, especially that advanced by public voices.

The May sample also saw incidences of posts using sources to make statements that were not supported by the original source material as well as evidence that the different parties approaches to COVID had become a major campaigning position, in contravention of the non-political, public health-orientated approach that that would be desirable for pandemic policy and information dissemination.

The July sample saw large amounts of criticism of Trump in the sample of tweets about both COVID and the election, largely driven by the viral videos produced by an anti-Trump PAC, MeidasTouch. However, this sentiment was not mirrored across the dataset. This is likely because COVID has become such a polarised issue that it would be mostly those on the left-wing of the political spectrum who are still posting about COVID and the election in July after economic and social restrictions have largely been lifted across the US.

In the wider dataset of 250 posts in election trends from each weeklong period, criticism of candidates far outweighed support. However, support of Trump was much more prevalent than support of Biden. Discussion of Trump (whether positive or negative) was approximately twice as common as discussion of Biden in both periods. Although criticism of Trump was common, the visibility of candidates in the (traditional) media is also a powerful predictor of electoral success, quite separate from the favourability of candidates. Trump, as an incumbent, has an existing advantage of visibility, and as a candidate in 2016 appeared use erratic social media outbursts to cultivate traditional media visibility (Wells et al., 2016).

This analysis suggests that partisan voices, including the President, have been successful in making COVID a polarised political issue in the US. Thus, the question we must ask going forward is, unfortunately, not how will COVID affect the US 2020 election but how will COVID be used as a political issue in the US 2020 election.

The re-casting of the COVID pandemic as a political identity issue means that polarised positions become fixed and not amenable to debate. This opens the door for a greater amount of misinformation, hyperpartisan content, conspiracy theory and PAC influence that aim to leverage and enflame entrenched positions on this fast-evolving public health issue for political advantage.

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