DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS IN THE 2010S: A STUDY ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN US POLITICS

2010'LARDA DEMOKRATLAR VE CUMHURİYETÇİLER: ABD SİYASETİNDE SİYASAL İLETİŞİM ÜZERİNE BİR ARAŞTIRMA

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ABSTRACT

The presidential elections in the United States of America (USA), which has a long-established tradition of democracy, are an important platform where voters can express both their established/embedded values and their perspectives on current issues. The Republican Party and the Democratic Party, which have different traditions, values and political attitudes, are prominent institutional actors in the country's political history. This study aimed to understand the key determinants of the US elections in the 2010s and the political communication strategies developed by the actors in response to these determinants. Although the study did not systematically adhere to a single research method, it could be categorised as qualitative research using content and discourse analysis techniques.

The study focused on how candidate image and the parties' different approaches to issues related to the economy and conservative values affected political communication strategies and voter preferences in the elections held in the 2010s. According to the results of the study, the image of the presidential candidate was the most important determinant of voter preferences in the US elections. In other words, it was determined that the winners of the US presidential elections were candidates, not political parties. Therefore, political communication campaigns were designed in a leader-oriented way. In addition, economic issues remained important in US politics, especially in the election cycles of the 2010s. The Democrats, who placed economic issues at the centre of their campaign

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promises, had a relative advantage over the Republicans, especially in times of economic crisis. However, the sociological evolution of the American society, especially since the 1990s, has caused conservative values to lose their decisive influence on the US elections.

Key Words: *US Politics, Democrats, Republicans, Political Communication, Political Campaign*

ÖZ

Köklü bir demokrasi geleneğine sahip olan Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde (ABD) gerçekleştirilen başkanlık seçimleri, seçmenlerin hem yerleşik/gömülü değerlerini hem de güncel konulara ilişkin bakış açılarını ifade edebilecekleri önemli bir platform hüviyetindedir. Farklı siyasi geleneklere, değer setlerine ve siyasal tutumlara sahip olan Cumhuriyetçi Parti ile Demokrat Parti ise ülkenin siyasi tarihinin önemli kurumsal aktörleridir. Bu çalışma, ABD'de 2010'lu yıllarda gerçekleştirilen seçimlerin temel belirleyenlerini tespit etmeyi ve siyasi aktörlerin bu belirleyiciler karşısında geliştirdikleri siyasal iletişim stratejilerini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Sistematik olarak tek bir araştırma yönteminin kullanılmadığı çalışmayı, içerik analizi ile söylem analizi yöntemlerinin belirli tekniklerinden yararlanılmış olan nitel bir araştırma olarak kategorize etmek mümkündür.

Çalışma; aday imajının ve partilerin ekonomiyle ve muhafazakâr değerlerle alakalı konulardaki yaklaşım farklılıklarının 2010'lu yıllarda yapılan seçimlerdeki siyasal iletişim stratejilerini ve seçmen tercihlerini ne şekilde etkilediği konusuna odaklanmıştır. Çalışmanın bulgularından hareketle, başkan adayının siyasal iletişim kampanyası sürecinde ortaya koyduğu lider imajının seçmen tercihlerinde en önemli belirleyici olduğu sonucuna varılmıştır. Diğer bir ifadeyle, ABD başkanlık seçimlerinin kazananının siyasi partiler değil, adaylar olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Bu nedenle söz konusu seçimlerdeki siyasal iletişim kampanyaları, lider odaklı olarak tasarlanmıştır. Diğer taraftan ekonomi temelli konulara yaklaşım, ABD siyasetindeki belirleyicilik vasfını 2010'larda da korumuştur. Ekonomiyi merkeze alan seçim vaatleri ve politika önerileriyle Demokratlar, özellikle ekonomik kriz dönemlerinde Cumhuriyetçilere karşı kayda değer bir avantaj elde etmiştir. Bununla birlikte Amerikan toplumunun özellikle 1990'lardan itibaren tecrübe ettiği sosyolojik dönüşüm, muhafazakâr değerlerin ABD seçimleri üzerindeki belirleyiciliğini önemli ölçüde yitirmesine sebep olmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *ABD Siyaseti, Demokratlar, Cumhuriyetçiler, Siyasal İletişim, Siyasal Kampanya*

Introduction

Elections are mechanisms for filling a post or an office through preferences made by a designated community of people, namely voters (Heywood, 2007: 253). Elections, as an important element of democratic regimes, are also a fundamental tool for American citizens to declare their choices about who will use political authority to govern for the next four-year term and to express their thoughts about the policies pursued by the existing administration and to intervene in the direction of those policies (Herrnson, 1998: 1). Voters can support the incumbent party by voting for it, or they can oppose the policies of the incumbent party by voting against it. The electoral process can therefore be seen as an evaluation of current policies. If there is dissatisfaction with current policies, an election can be seen as an attempt to find a better alternative.

American political history has been shaped by two opposing perspectives, the Republicans and the Democrats. However, American electoral history has witnessed the contentious rivalry between the two political parties. Since 1968, when Richard M. Nixon was elected as the thirty-seventh president of the United States, it has been observed that the presidency has consistently passed from one party to another in every presidential election. Meanwhile, Gerald Ford served as US President from 1974 to 1977 without any electoral victory. The only exception was another Republican, George H. W. Bush, who was elected as the US President immediately after Republican Ronald Reagan (WHHA, 2023). The fact that power in the US switches so easily between the two parties demonstrates the need for the parties to offer original prescriptions on current issues that transcend the historical ideological divide. A meticulously and masterfully designed election campaign is therefore of vital importance for political parties and especially for presidential candidates.

This study aims to understand the fundamental determinants of voter preferences in the 2010 US elections and the political communication strategies developed by the two political parties during the campaign processes. The US elections of the 2010s include the presidential elections of 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2020, which shaped the political atmosphere of the 2010s. Within this framework, qualitative analyses were carried out in the study, using certain tactics of content analysis and discourse analysis methods in a non-systematic way. Data sources include speeches by political leaders, texts in their books, election slogans and posters. The results of previous empirical studies also provide important contributions to this research.

Historical and Ideological Democratic-Republican Cleavage

The two deep-rooted political parties in US political history differ in many fields such as policy priorities, fundamental values, and worldview. The Democratic Party is the oldest continuous political party in the US and in the world (Shafer, 1991: 169). The party was founded in 1828 and dominated the US politics until 1860. During its foundation years, the party became identified with the southern parts of the country

(Scruton, 2007: 171-172). Its position was mainly shaped by 1780s anti-federalism and by its opposition to the Federalist Party. It was composed of elements and forces that were against adoption of the US Constitution as a result of its anti-federalist approach (Shafer, 1991: 169). Moreover, the Democratic Party was the most prominent institutional defender of slavery. Even most Democrats outside the South refrained from criticising this so-called 'peculiar institution'. In 1854, Under the presidency of Democrat Franklin Pierce, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, passed by the Congress controlled by the Democrats, paved the way for an even stronger sectionalism in US politics on the issue of slavery. The Whigs, the main rival of the Democratic Party, were regionally divided on this issue. The irrevocable split between Northern and Southern Whigs allowed the rise of a new Northern party, the Republican Party, which opposed slavery (Prokop, 2016).

The Republican Party, on the other hand, was founded in 1854 with a strong anti-slavery sentiment in its early years (Jones, 1991: 534). The first successful presidential candidate of the Republican Party was Abraham Lincoln, elected in 1860, despite the fact that he had not been on the ballot in many southern states. Although the southern states of the country had a reputation as the "Solid South" because of its staunch opposition to the Republicans after the American Civil War, the party has managed to achieve great success at the national level throughout the twentieth century (Cunningham, 2008: 712).

In a unique way in the world political history, the Democratic Party completely substituted its position with the Republican Party. The party abandoned its agrarian and conservative images and adopted an enlightened *dirigisme*, by which active role of the government for the dependent and the poor were combined with American ideals of self-determination and liberty. After the Great Depression, the party designed a comprehensive economic project comprising government interventions and a social welfare system based on Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal (Scruton, 2007: 171-172). With the abolition in 1936 of the party rule requiring a two-thirds vote to nominate a presidential candidate, the more conservative members of the party, concentrated in the South, were stripped of their veto power over liberal candidates. Now dominated by a liberal leadership, the party has begun to advocate federal power, a loose interpretation of the US Constitution, and more government spending to solve the country's social and economic problems (Sheckels, 2008: 175).

The position of the Democrats can be defined as to the left of the Republicans on the US political spectrum (Scruton, 2007: 172). Thusly, the Republican Party can be positioned as a more "right-wing" political party according to a European sense of political left-right spectrum. The positioning of parties on the political spectrum is similar to market segmentation and market targeting in business. Just as marketers direct their product and promotional campaigns only to those who are likely to buy them, political parties also seek to determine which people should be targeted by their efforts to allure. From this point of view, the Democratic Party has historically identified minorities and the poor as its main target group (Newman & Perloff, 2004: 22). On the other hand, the

voter profile of the Republican Party has traditionally been composed of those people with high income, social status, and education. The party has associated itself with big business circles, rather than labour movements (Jones, 1991: 535). In 1980s, the party's appeal groups have been broadened to include white Southerners, urban Catholics, evangelicals, social conservatives, disaffected labour, anti-Communists, and libertarians (Cunningham, 2008: 712). Today, the party advocates a financial approach of '*laissez-faire*, *laissez-passer*', opposes welfare state, and defends less government intervention for a better governance (Laone & Laone, 2012: 1).

Candidate Image as the Starting Point of Political Campaigning

Political marketing, and political branding as an element of it, has become one of the most important determinants of US elections, especially in the last three decades as communication technologies have developed. In political branding, symbols and signs are combined with a name and designed to communicate personality, vision and the values of a political entity, namely a political leader or an organisation (Moufahim, 2022: 2). Branding a political leader is an integral phase of political branding. It comprises designing "a simple and distinctive vision with values that connect with the target audience, that gains a strong awareness amongst the public and that stimulates positive associations" (Lees-Marshment, 2014: 106). At this point, an important feature of the US elections is that the main emphasis during the electoral process is on candidates, but not on political parties. Therefore, it is not the political parties but the candidates that burden the outcomes of the elections (Herrnson, 1998: 1-6). This situation causes political branding in US politics to be perceived entirely as candidate branding.

The brand of Barack Obama created in 2008 can be regarded as "the most commonly known political brand" in the world (Lees-Marshment, 2014: 107). The 'Obama brand' was designed as a consensus-builder, a unifier, and a virtually post-political leader (Dorning & Parsons, 2007). His campaign team's mastery of candidate image and brand building led to Obama being named '2008 Advertising Age's Marketer of the Year' (Zavattaro, 2010: 123). Biden also positioned his brand on the branding legacy of the two previous Democratic presidents, namely Clinton and Obama. Thus, he successfully built a bridge between the past brand that voters are used to and feel comfortable with and the current brand. Moreover, the centrist positioning of 'Biden brand' provided voters the opportunity to vote against Republican candidate Trump without being exposed to radical change (Cosgrove & Shrader, 2022: 41). Considering American elections in general, therefore, it can be argued that all election processes are a race for 'candidate branding' between parties.

An important instrument for creating a candidate brand is the election campaign executed by incumbent and challenger candidates. In 1993, Republican George W. H. Bush could not be re-elected and was defeated by Democrat candidate Bill Clinton by the help of a studiously designed political communication campaign. It can be argued that the

success of Clinton in US elections was due to his electoral ability and his loyalty to intense and effective electoral campaigns. His campaign was perceived as clear and sympathetic by a significant part of voters. His rhetoric was successfully designed. Moreover, he benefited from television and other campaign means very skilfully (Crotty, 1998: 205). He was presented as a popular popstar figure by appearing on the cover of People Magazine, morning talk shows, MTV, and Arsenio Hall in the six-week period from the California primary to the Democratic National Convention (Ifill, 1992). By the 2010s, election campaigns that presented presidential candidates as 'saviours' (or 'modern heroes') had penetrated people's daily lives with the increasing influence of social media.

The success of Barack Obama in the 2008 elections proved the vital role of candidate-focused political campaigns during electoral process. Social media and technology were important elements of Obama's political campaign strategy, which enabled him to raise funds and motivate his volunteers. 5 million adherents were gathered on internet-based platforms. He roughly got 2.5 million Facebook supporters, more than 4 times of McCain's supporters; and more than 115.000 Twitter followers, 23 times more than the number of McCain's followers (Aaker & Chang, 2010). These numbers revealed that one of the main reasons of McCain's failure in the election stemmed from Obama's success in political campaigning and usage of social media and technology.

Visual-1: Obama's "Hope" Slogan on a poster (Fairey, 2008);
Visual-2: Obama's "Yes We Can" Slogan on a poster (Fairey, from Honda, 2016).

Lam, Cheung and Lo (2021) underlined the effectiveness of photographs and videos of a candidate in attracting voters' positive responses on social media; namely the favourable reactions of 'Love' and 'Like'. As can be seen on Visual 1 and Visual 2, Obama's photographs were successfully used during his campaigning process. In the photograph, Obama's head is facing the audience, but he is looking ahead (towards the goals he desires the country to achieve). The photographs were supported with one-word slogans such as "Hope", "Progress", and "Change". Those slogans can be regarded as a

map that reveals the policy-direction of possible Obama governance. "Yes We Can" might be one of the most memorable slogans in the history of political communication. The slogan emphasised that all national goals could be achieved with a Democratic Party government under Obama's competence that would succeed the two-term Bush administration. The expression of 'yes' emphasised that the voters shared the same thoughts with the candidate and that Obama actually endorsed this belief of the voters.

A controversial trend in American style of political campaigning is the use of 'attack' or 'negative' spots, namely the advertisements that emphasise so-called weaknesses of the rival rather than the positive qualities of the candidate herself/himself (McNair, 2018: 114). Negative campaigning is a major obstacle to the competition of candidates' vision and projects in the electoral arena. Sarah Palin, the Republican Party's and John McCain's vice-presidential candidate in the 2008 US presidential elections, whipped up the crowd by saying that Obama was "palling around with terrorists", to which the audience responded with chants of "Off with his head!" and "Kill him!" (Lowndes, 2017: 241). Presidency election in 2012 was also characterised by Republicans' negative campaigning. "Obama isn't working" was another prominent election slogan of Romney's 2012 election campaign. The slogan was adapted from victorious 1979 election campaign of Margaret Thatcher in the UK. Thus, Obama was accused of causing social warfare in the country (McGreal, 2012). The difference in attitude towards the opponent between the Democratic and Republican campaigns continued in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. In the process of 2020 presidential election, Democrat politicians posted more advocacy messages on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, while Trump posted more contrast and attack messages than advocacy messages (Hemsley, Stromer-Galley, Rossini & Smith, 2021: 3-4).

Visual-3: Obama with the slogan of "forward" in 2012 (4President.org, 2015).

Main theme in the 2012 election campaign of incumbent President Obama was "forward", which aimed to affirm achievements of previous four years in governance and the direction of his second term in presidency. In the 2012 presidential elections, the Republican handicap led to the defeat of Mitt Romney. Despite the emergence of a strong

opposition to President Barack Obama, the Republicans failed to generate sufficient enthusiasm in favour of their candidate. Turnout was 10 per cent lower than in the 2008 presidential election. Romney, who was believed to have been leading for a long time, failed to arouse excitement among the grassroots (Kirby & Ekins, 2012: 2).

The populist attitudes and discourses of political leaders is an important determinant of their image in the eyes of voters. For many reasons, the USA can be considered the homeland of populism. The People's Party of the US, or the Populist Party as it was popularly known, emerged in the late nineteenth century as a foundational and historical moment in the history of populism by introducing the term into the literature. Moreover, many populist political figures such as Huey Long, Pat Buchanan, George Wallace, Sarah Palin, Ross Perot and Donald Trump have appeared on the political scene and influenced the populist style of politics all over the world (Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo & Ostiguy, 2017: 9). The primary text to understand Trump's populist rhetoric is his book, "*Great again: How to fix our crippled America*". In the book, he explained the dispute with the town council of Palm Beach because of his American flag in front of his house as follows:

> *"After I bought it (a house in Palm Beach, Florida), I wanted people to know how proud and grateful I am to be an American, so I decided to fly an American flag in front of my house, an American flag that nobody could miss, a flag fitting for this beautiful house.*
>
> *So I raised an extra-large flag, 15 feet by 25 feet on an 80-foot-high flagpole. Watching that flag catch the wind and fly proudly was a beautiful sight. Except the city of Palm Beach decided my flag was too big. They claimed it exceeded zoning regulations. Who knew there was a law about the size of flag you are allowed to fly? When I politely informed them I had no intention of taking down my American flag, they began fining me $250 a day until I removed it.*
>
> *... One of the officials who wanted me to lower it admitted, "This flag now has become a symbol, and to the people in this community this flag symbolizes patriotism." So we won that fight! As we all know, the flag is much more than a red, white, and blue cloth rectangle. It is a symbol to me, to you, and to people around the world. It represents equality, hope, and fairness. It represents great courage and sacrifice."* (Trump, 2015, s. 101-102)

Symbols are the essence of politics. Appeals based on values and symbols are undoubtedly the most influential of all political communication messages (Newman & Perloff, 2004: 29). In the text, Trump directed the attention of readers to American flag by emphasising what it symbolises for American people. He created an antagonist duality between himself and the town council of Palm Beach by associating himself with the

symbolic meanings (namely; hope, equality, fairness, sacrifice, and great courage) of American flag. The official's admission about the meaning of 'patriotism' that the American flag has acquired thanks to Trump means that Trump has proven his ability to symbolise the country's values. Since he regarded this controversy for the size of the flag as winning a so-called fight, he positioned himself as a pioneer fighting on the front line for the symbols of the country.

Visual-4: Trump with his vice president on the election poster (DJTW, 2016).

The catchy slogan of "Make America Great Again" was used by Trump in both the 2016 and 2020 elections. The "Let's Make America Great Again" version of the slogan was originally used by Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush in their political campaign during 1980 presidency election (Tumulty, 2017). The slogan can be regarded as a reference to the single superpower era of the USA in the world history. The main premise is that the USA is not 'great' at the moment due to the incompetence of previous governments and a future Trump governance is the best option to reach the 'Great America' vision of the American nation.

Trump's populism went beyond the rhetorical dimension and became an incitement to physical violence within American society. His presidential campaign in 2016 was marked by violence in his rhetoric and rallies, fuelled by white nationalists. In particular, negative comments about Muslims and Latino immigrants drew crowds to Republican rallies where physical attacks on Latino and black protesters were frequent (Lowndes, 2017: 242). A dramatic example for the outcomes of Trump's rhetoric encouraging violence was the assault of two brothers from South Boston targeting a middle-aged Mexican immigrant while he was sleeping outside the station in 2015. After the incident occurred, Trump made the following statement:
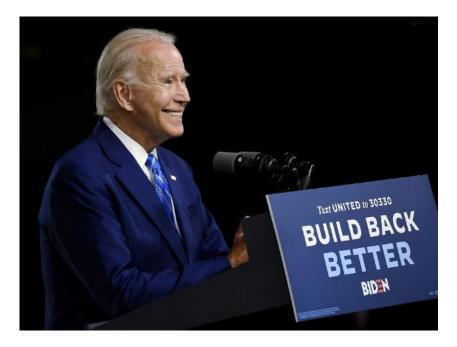
> *"It would be a shame. . . . I will say that people who are following me are very passionate. They love this country and they want this country to be great again. They are passionate."* (Walker, 2015)

The attacker's words "Donald Trump was right; all these illegals need to be

deported." are important for revealing the social problems that can be caused by political leaders' populist discourses during political campaigns. Both during his political campaign and during his presidency, Trump has repeatedly used rhetoric that increased social hatred and paved the way for an increase in hate crimes.

Biden has achieved to become the second Democrat leader to take over power from the Republicans in the last two decades. His prominent promises during his 2020 election campaign were restoring the soul of the nation, providing experience in an era of crisis, and governing the nation with empathy (Alter, 2020). 'Restoring something' refers to recognise that there has been a departure from the previously achieved level and to take corrective action to achieve that level again. A soul is the main component of a body that provides vitality and character. Therefore, restoring a nation's soul is based on the promise to achieve the previous level of vitality and regain the deeply-rooted character of the nation. This also means that the spirit of the nation under the Republican rule has been damaged and is far from the vitality that it should normally be.

Visual-5: Biden giving a speech on the dais (Douliery, 2021).

As can be seen on Visual 5, "Build Back Better" was another prominent slogan of Biden's election campaign in 2020. It is based on the premise that the better option cannot be built in the period of the Republican Party and his governance is ready to provide the better option for the country. The word "back" is a reference to the country's relatively 'better times' in the past. From this point of view, Republican administrations are portrayed as periods of stagnation between 'better times' of the country.

Although Biden cannot be categorised as a highly charismatic politician, his moderate and calm attitude towards many issues following an extremely populist period of Trump might be regarded as a reasonable explanation for his victory in 2020

presidential election. His political branding was built on a promise of returning to normalcy, personal decency, certain policies appealing to Democrats and some of independent voters, and a competent solution to COVID-based social problems (Cosgrove & Shrader, 2022: 35). In his speech at the Democratic National Convention, he purported that:

> *"We can choose the path of becoming angrier, less hopeful, and more divided, a path of shadow and suspicion. Or we can choose a different path, and together, take this chance to heal, to be reborn, to unite. A path of hope and light…"* (Collinson, 2020)

This message can be interpreted as an opportunity for overall American voters to escape Trump's populist anger. The 'Biden brand' promised fewer negative incidents, calmness and peace. The results of the 2020 presidential election confirmed that American voters were tired of populist adventures. Therefore, it is important for a political leader to identify and articulate the discourses that society is deprived of and needs to hear during political campaigns.

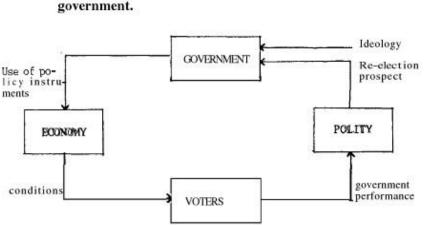### Economy as a Determinant of Political Campaigning

It was in 1992, when Democrat Bill Clinton used the slogan of "It's the economy, stupid!" (Abramowitz, 1995: 185). The economy has also managed to become the most important issue for voters in the 2020 presidential election, with a 79 per cent acceptance rate of "very important" (Pew Research Center, 2020). It may be argued that the economic views of two political traditions about how to overcome income inequality in society, how to create new jobs, how to provide social security opportunities for people, and how to determine tax rates for different income groups are determinative on election results. This is especially true in times of crises, as seen in the examples of the mortgage crisis between 2007 and 2010, and of the global economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020.

While the issue of economy is included in the election campaigns of political parties, the main determinant is which party embraces which social segments and which economic policy promises will facilitate people's lives. At this point, a candidate benefits the most from advertising on topics over which he/she can claim 'ownership' (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994). Voters tend to believe that the party that 'owns' an issue is more successful on that issue. Thus, the Republican Party 'owns' issues such as illegal drugs, taxes, and national defence. The Democratic Party 'owns' issues such as labour force, education and health care (Benoit & Hansen, 2002: 140-141). The Democrats are considered to be more successful in domestic policy-related issues, while the Republicans generally show that they claim ownership of (and therefore competence for) foreign policy issues (Kaid, 2004: 163). Those domestic policy-related issues mainly include economy-related topics such as general economic outlook of the country, unemployment, social security system, and taxation system. Wright, Clifford and Simas (2022) argued

that polarisation in politics and partisanship of voters narrow the potential impact of issue ownership. However, it should be considered that people's partisanship takes its roots from antagonisms emerged as a result of former discussions on issues that are currently owned by a party. Therefore, it can be argued that partisanship is an outcome of sensitivities on certain issues.

How voting behaviour is affected by economic conditions felt by voters is a significant point that shapes the design of political campaigns. The Figure 1 shows that if the economy gets worse, the satisfaction rate of voters diminishes and the voters regard the incumbent government as responsible for their economic conditions. According to the politico-economic system model of Schneider in Figure 1, there is an interdependent link between economy and policies, and accordingly the voting preferences of people are based on their economic conditions. As a result of this, the re-election opportunity of a government depends on its capability to enhance the economic conditions of people (Schneider, 1985: 16). At this point, it can be interpreted that bad economic conditions in a country during election periods are more decisive than good economic conditions. Bad economic conditions in a country provide a significant advantage to those political parties that can convince voters that they are more successful in managing the economy. The power shift from the Republicans to the Democrats after each economic crisis in the last two decades revealed that people anxiously tended to escape from the uncertainty of crisis moments.

Figure-1: The relationship between economic conditions and voting behaviour (Schneider, 1985: 16)

The fact that economy-related issues are at the centre of Obama's policies in both 2008 and 2012 has led to the emergence of a term called 'Obamanomics'. The term is a combination of the words 'Obama' and 'economics' and refers to the economic policies involving tax policies, economic stimulus programs, and healthcare reforms led

by the administration of Obama in response to the 2008 Great Recession (Fernando, 2021). His economy-policy efforts aimed to eliminate the structural barriers against shared sustainable prosperity for middle-class families, to increase growth in incomes, to overcome high levels of inequality, to lower health care costs, to minimise the reliance on oil as well as other sources that cause carbon pollution, and to create new opportunities for higher education (CEA, 2017: 22). In a similar vein, Biden has sought to restore US government's role in the quest to advance Americans' economic welfare and their standards of healthcare services by taking his roots from a common Democratic tradition that united Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson and Barack Obama (Collinson, 2020).

Based on the total posts of each party's politicians per issue during both 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, it was determined that the economy is the most emphasised subject by both parties. The total number of Democrat's social posts on economic issues was much higher than the total number of Republican's social posts (Hemsley, Stromer-Galley, Rossini & Smith, 2021: 3). Consequently, the overall economic conditions, which determine the limits of human activity in a country, continues to be one of the most important determinants of the US elections. This situation provides an important advantage to the Democrats who have proven their competence in economic management, especially in elections held in times of crisis.

Are Conservative Values Still Determinative in US Politics?

Although the degree of change varies, almost every society goes through some kind of transformation over time. From this point on, Inglehart's (1971) theory of value change emphasised that advanced industrial societies had undergone a process of political-cultural transformation. This transformation changed the basic value priorities of particular generations as a result of changing conditions affecting their basic socialisation. A significant proportion of people in Western societies went beyond the level of unsatisfied basic needs. Having taken basic needs such as water and food for granted, they began to pursue other non-economic goals beyond economic security. This tendency towards post-materialism was primarily due to generational replacement (Inglehart & Abramson, 1994: 339). In the 1990s, Layman & Carmines (1997) also noted that American politics had begun to become more "values-based" and "cultural". These new post-materialist goals included demands such as environmental protection, animal rights, personal autonomy, women's rights and LGBT+ rights.

Considering their policy priorities, it can be argued that the Democrats have adapted the party to the changing values of American society. The Republicans, on the other hand, have campaigned primarily on patriotism and family values in order to broaden the appeal of the party over the years (Cunningham, 2008: 712). At this point, an important question to answer about trends in US politics is whether or not the faith and family cards will still help Republicans win elections in the 2010s. The gradual

sociological evolution of American society after the 1990s is the main issue to focus on when seeking reasonable answers to this question.

The last three decades have seen significant sociological changes in many areas of American society. For example, between 2007 and 2014, the percentage of Christians within the composition of the Republican Party decreased by 5 per cent, while the percentage of non-Christian faiths increased by 1 per cent and the religiously unaffiliated increased by 4 per cent. The number of Christians within the Democratic Party also decreased by 11 per cent, while the number of religiously unaffiliated increased by 9 per cent (Pew Research Center, 2015). According to the GALLUP, the proportion of American adults who claim to be members of a church fell from 70 per cent to 47 per cent between 2000 and 2020 (Jones, 2021). While the number of American people who support the legalisation of abortion was 51 per cent in 2007 and 53 per cent in 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2015), it reached to 61 per cent in 2022 (Hartig, 2022).

Empirical data from the ABC News & Washington Post Poll showed that American voter support for legalising same-sex marriage increased dramatically from 32 per cent to 53 per cent between 2006 and 2011. Moreover, there was an increase in support for same-sex marriage across all voter classifications during this period. The most interesting change was among white Catholics and white Protestants. 63 per cent of white Catholics said they supported freedom for such marriages. White Protestant support increased by more than 10 per cent among both evangelical and non-evangelical religious groups between 2006 and 2011 (Langer, 2011). Moreover, according to the GALLUP, support for same-sex marriage in American society reached 70 per cent in 2021. Among Democrats, this figure has risen to 83 per cent. While support for same-sex marriage among Republicans was only 16 per cent in 1997, it rose to 53 per cent in 2021. In other words, Republicans who oppose same-sex marriage became a minority within the Republican Party for the first time in history. While support for same-sex marriage in 2021 was 60 per cent among Americans over 55, it was 84 per cent among Americans aged 18-34. This difference in rates gives an idea of the direction of sociological evolution that American society is undergoing (McCarthy, 2021).

Those findings might also illustrate that opposition to issues such as same-sex marriages or abortion does not provide an advantage for the Republican Party in the U.S. elections, since the support for those topics has risen dramatically in recent years. Today, the majority of US voters, including a significant proportion of Republicans, demand freedom for LGBTI+ people and women who prefer abortion. Moreover, moderation in commitment to conservative values does not disadvantage the Republican Party in terms of electoral support, since there is no political party that conservatives can support in place of the Republican Party for their conservative goals. At this point, the only option for the Republican Party is to reposition itself according to the changing demands of the voters.

It is also noteworthy that in the 2010s, important challenging voices emerged among Republican Party members and supporters against the traditional conservative position of the Republican Party. For instance, Ken Mehlman, a former Republican National Committee (RNC) chairperson, argued that the right to pursue happiness bestowed by God included the right to decide about marriage and declared that he was a gay person (Ambinder, 2012). Dick Cheney, Vice-President during the Bush era, was also a major supporter of the homosexual movement and had several disagreements with the President Bush over their approach to LGBTI+ people. His daughter Mary Cheney has been married to Heather Poe since 2012 (McGraw, 2021). During the 2021 Pride Month, Ronna McDaniel (2021), the chairperson of RNC, wrote on Twitter that;

> *"Happy #PrideMonth! @GOP is proud to have doubled our LGBTQ support over the last 4 years, and we will continue to grow our big tent by supporting measures that promote fairness and balance protections for LGBTQ Americans and those with deeply held religious beliefs."*

In July 2022, forty-seven Republicans in the House of Representatives voted with Democrats for the Respect for Marriage Act to enshrine same-sex marriage in federal law, declaring that the majority of Republican voters no longer oppose LGBTI+ unions (Lavietes, 2022). In November 2022, moreover, twelve Republican senators voted with Democratic senators to support the same bill and legalise same-sex marriage in the US (Warburton, 2022).

The Trump era can be seen as an important turning point in the normalisation of LGBTI+ rights discussions within the Republican Party. His administration had given top positions to officials who openly declared that they were homosexual (McGraw, 2021). Moreover, he criticised North Carolina Republicans for passing a bill aimed at prohibiting the use of bathrooms by transgender people, a move away from his party's conservative position on the issue (Cheney, 2016). In 2016, he tweeted as; "Thank you to the LGBT community! I will fight for you while Hillary brings in more people that will threaten your freedoms and beliefs" (Trump, 2016). With these statements, Trump declared migrants as 'harmful others' and positioned LGBT+ people on his side. Therefore, the inclusion of LGBT+ people in the group of people the Republicans are supposed to protect is an important turning point in the party's history.

Conclusion

Elections are important instruments for citizens to express their views, satisfaction and objections for a certain period. Considering elections conducted in the US history, there is a general voter tendency that constitutes the party alignments and provides those parties a certain level of guarantee votes. In other words, both the Democrats and the Republicans have loyal voter groups whose support can be predicted before the election. However, neither the Democrats nor the Republicans can maintain their winning position in every election. This circumstance proves the existence of an

electoral transition between the two parties in presidential elections.

An important determinant of voter transition between parties in US politics is the political communication strategy and election campaign of the presidential candidate. It can be argued that the elections in the USA are 'a race of candidates' rather than 'a race of political parties'. Over the past two decades, Democratic candidates have focused more on building an image based on their own policies and visions, while Republican candidates have used negative campaigning aimed at the opponent's image. The populist rhetoric that has become more common in the Trump era has turned the US presidential election into a battleground for Republican candidates. On the other hand, Obama and Biden, the two Democratic candidates of the 2010s, managed to build a calm, moderate, hopeful, and forward-looking candidate brand.

Economic issues, however, retain their place in American politics. Particularly in times of crisis, voters seeking to avoid uncertainty tend to favour Democratic candidates who are perceived as more competent in developing solutions to economic problems. This was the case after both the 2008 and 2020 economic crises, when voters switched to Democratic candidates, namely Obama and Biden.

The sociological evolution of American society has significantly reduced the decisive role of conservative values in elections. As empirical studies show, Republican voters are converging with Democratic voters on many issues, such as abortion or LGBTI+ marriage, which are indicators of adherence to or disaffection from conservative values. Moreover, Republican politicians seem to have abandoned their former rigid positions on these issues. This makes it harder for Republicans to play the faith and family card in elections. As a result, American politics, which has changed significantly in the 2010s compared with the past, may undergo even greater changes in the coming decades.

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