

Corvinus University of Budapest
Doctoral School of International Relations and Political Science
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Gone with the Wind?

The Destruction of Statues and Monuments Commemorating the Confederate States of America (CSA) in the Context of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

Elfújta a szél?

Az Amerikai Konföderációs Államok (CSA) emlékének állított szobrok és emlékművek rombolása a 2020-as elnökválasztással kapcsolatosan az USA-ban

THESIS BOOKLET

(Theses of the Doctoral Dissertation)

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I. Research Background and Rationale for the Topic

The phenomenon of the 2020 American wave of iconoclasm could equally be examined through the methodological toolkits of history, art history, media studies, or sociology. The dissertation nevertheless argues that a political science framework holds particular relevance, since the destruction of monuments took place embedded in a democratic electoral contest and was instrumentalized by its political actors. This aspect is absent from the existing literature, which is primarily focused on history and memory politics.

At the outset of the 2020 U.S. federal presidential election campaign, in parallel with the nationwide wave of protest that followed the violent death of George Floyd, the United States experienced the largest wave of public-monument destruction in its history to that point. The subject of the dissertation is a well-defined, internally homogeneous slice of this phenomenon: the destruction, removal, and alteration of statues and monuments commemorating the Confederate States of America (CSA). Of the full population of 877 Confederate statues, 76 became actual or symbolic victims of iconoclasm in 2020. The study deliberately narrows its focus to this group, since the two other theoretically relevant monument groups (monuments linked to violence against Indigenous peoples and monuments linked to slaveholding) are too heterogeneous, from a case-selection standpoint, to constitute a well-researchable, coherent set.

The significance of the topic lies in the fact that the destruction of statues was not an isolated cultural event but an integral part of the 2020 presidential campaign, one that both candidates drew on in their own political communication, and which, in the author's view, constituted a symbolically significant, precursor-like manifestation of the domestic political uncertainty of the United States at the time (the COVID-19 crisis, and subsequently the events at the Capitol on January 6, 2021). In historical comparison, the uniqueness of the phenomenon lies in the fact that in North America — unlike in Europe — only a limited degree of iconoclasm was associated with revolutionary and wartime events (the War of Independence, the Civil War), since the practice of erecting monuments only became widespread around the turn of the 19th–20th century, primarily within the framework of the “Lost Cause” movement. The year 2020 was the first occasion on which organized political groups (chiefly the Black Lives Matter movement) set out to change the established memorial order — yet no revolution followed. This is what leads to the dissertation's core research question.

The structure of the dissertation is divided into three major units: the first chapter lays the theoretical and scholarly groundwork for the concept of iconoclasm (within a semiotic,

religious-historical, and political science framework); the second situates the 2020 sequence of events in historical context; and the third presents the empirical action study, based on the database of 76 cases, broken down by state.

Research Aims and Limitations

The aim of the research is to examine the 2020 American wave of Confederate monument destruction with scholarly rigor, free of emotional bias and ideological prejudice — comparing its formal, organizational, institutional, and political-outcome characteristics with historical iconoclastic precedents. A limitation of the research is that not all American monuments damaged or removed in 2020 could be included in the study (the Confederate group remains the most researchable subgroup with a sufficient number of cases), and that no direct, individual-level causal inference can methodologically be drawn from aggregated, municipal-level data.

Research Question

In what ways do the 2020 removals of Confederate monuments in the United States resemble, and in what ways do they differ from, historical political iconoclasms in formal, organizational, institutional, and outcome terms — and what explains why an official (anticipatory) institutional logic prevailed over violent confrontation, even as the destruction of monuments, without producing a revolutionary outcome, nevertheless achieved a measurable political mobilization effect?

The territorial focus of the research covers those American states in which iconoclasm affecting Confederate monuments occurred in 2020 (North Carolina, Virginia, Alabama, Texas, Georgia, Arkansas, Florida, Arizona, Mississippi, Missouri, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C.), while its temporal boundaries are set by the beginning of the wave of protests following George Floyd's death on May 25, 2020, and, symbolically, by the events at the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Hypothesis

In formal terms, the 2020 removals of Confederate monuments in the United States conform to the known pattern of historical iconoclasm (H1); however, in organizational (H2), institutional (H3), and outcome (H4) terms they contain structurally distinguishable novelties, the most significant of which is a democratic, institutional, anticipatory logic and procedure that, rather than producing a revolutionary outcome, generated a measurable electoral mobilization effect.

II. Methods Used

The methodology of the research rests on three mutually complementary pillars. Contextual analysis uncovers the historical and political embeddedness of the destruction of monuments (Krippendorff, 2019). Building on this is the comparative method of process tracing (George & Bennett, 2005; Beach & Pedersen, 2013), which compares the 1789 Parisian and the 2020 American sequences of events along Tarrow's concepts of contentious politics (trigger, modular repertoire, protest cycle, diffusion) as a *tertium comparationis* (Tarrow, 2011; Bennett, 2010).

The study identifies a five-step causal chain: trigger event (Floyd's death) → opening of a political opportunity window → activation of the modular repertoire → institutional reaction → diffusion and outcome.

This dual logic is brought together by Brady and Collier's concept of a "nested research design" (Brady & Collier, 2004), to which the third pillar — quantitative database analysis — is linked via Lieberman's principle of "nested analysis" (Lieberman, 2005).

The independently compiled database of the research records the 76 affected monuments along 34 variables (location, date, type of perpetrator, party preference in 2016 and 2020, population size, share of African American population, afterlife, etc.); the selection of variables follows the logic of King, Keohane, and Verba (King et al., 1994), while case selection combines Seawright and Gerring's principles of "typical" and "most similar" cases (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). The quantitative analysis rests on descriptive, secondary data analysis (Vartanian, 2010), drawing on public census, electoral, and opinion-poll sources (census.gov, FEC, Pew Research Center, Statista, Catalist); chi-square tests, phi coefficients, Fisher's exact test, and point-biserial correlation are used to uncover relationships (Fisher, 1922; Cohen, 1988). As a methodological limitation, the author explicitly addresses the problem of ecological correlation: no individual-level causal inferences can be drawn from aggregated data, and the findings are therefore associative in nature (Robinson, 1950). Descriptive statistical analysis methodologically belongs to the basic toolkit of social science research methodology, which allows for the transparent comparison of a large number of cases even where formal significance testing is not warranted given the nature of the available data (Babbie, 2020).

In the course of methodological preparation, the author made use of the Claude language model (Anthropic, 2026) as an auxiliary tool for performing and verifying statistical calculations, transparently and in accordance with Corvinus University’s Executive Committee Resolution No. 12/2025; responsibility for the data, the direction of the analysis, and the conclusions drawn rests with the author.

III. Scientific Results of the Dissertation (Presented as Points)

According to the database, of the 76 affected monuments, the largest number (25) is located in North Carolina, followed by Virginia (12), Alabama and Texas (9 each), Georgia (5), Arkansas and Florida (3 each), Arizona (2), and five further states (1 each). In 91% of cases (69), the monument was removed by the authorities through an orderly procedure; only 9% (7) fell victim to direct protester violence.

By location, the largest number of monuments disappeared from a single municipality, Richmond (Virginia, 7), followed by Dallas, Texas (5) and Raleigh, North Carolina (3). The violent, protester-driven topplings (9 attempts, 7 of them successful) are also well delimited in space and time: the overwhelming majority occurred in June 2020, around the days surrounding Juneteenth (June 19), and were geographically concentrated overwhelmingly in Richmond and in two Alabama cities (Birmingham and Montgomery) — a pattern suggesting the possible coordinated action of a small, experienced group of perpetrators, similar to the itinerant image-breakers of the Dutch Beeldenstorm.

State	Monuments Removed (No.)	Democrat (D) / Republican (R) District (2020)
North Carolina	25	16 D / 9 R
Virginia	12	12 D / 0 R
Alabama	9	5 D / 4 R
Texas	9	7 D / 2 R
Georgia	5	5 D / 0 R
Arkansas	3	2 D / 1 R
Florida	3	2 D / 1 R
Arizona	2	1 D / 1 R

Missouri, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Washington, D.C.	1–1	–
Total	76	51 D / 25 R

1. No Substantial Novelty in Formal Terms (H1)

The comparison conducted along Tarrow's seven dimensions (trigger, modular repertoire, symbolic politics, protest cycle, diffusion, institutional reaction, movement–institution relationship) shows strong agreement between the 1789 French and 2020 American sequences of events in four dimensions, moderate agreement in one, and weak agreement in two (Tarrow, 2011). The trigger event (Floyd's death and the bloody dispersal of the crowd), the modular repertoire (actions carried out with rope, indicative of an experienced circle of perpetrators), and the protest cycle (a peak period of a few months with a sharp end) show strong parallels in both cases; diffusion, however, differs (hierarchical versus networked spread), and the direction of institutional reaction (as point 3 also shows) differs substantially. According to Harrison's concept of evaluative conflict, the BLM–UDC discourse war (Harrison, 1995), and according to Koselleck's theory of sediments of time, the historical layers simultaneously carried by the statue (Koselleck, 2003), do not structurally diverge from the patterns of historical iconoclasm. Since most formal features coincide, the phenomenon cannot, in formal terms, be regarded as without historical precedent: H1 can be considered confirmed. At this point the dissertation also draws on Le Bon's thesis of crowd psychology (Le Bon, 1913): the political mobilizing power of easily grasped symbols holds regardless of historical era, which further reinforces the argument for formal continuity.

2. Two Structural Novelties Identified in Organizational Terms (H2)

The study reveals two organizational features without precedent in historical iconoclasm. First, a women's organization stood on each side of the symbolic struggle: the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), which had erected the monuments, and the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation (BLMGNF), which provided the movement's backing. This is captured by Harrison's concept of production conflict, though the literature had not previously described this particular configuration (Harrison, 1995). Second, the BLM's cell-like, decentralized network organization stands in sharp contrast to the UDC's hierarchical structure; this is explained theoretically by Assmann's distinction between communicative and

cultural memory (Assmann, 1999) and by Koselleck's thesis of modernity (Koselleck, 2004). The BLM's low-coordination-cost, future-oriented network reacts more quickly than the UDC's past-oriented hierarchy, which supplements Tarrow's theory of diffusion (Tarrow, 2005) with a previously undescribed dimension of organizational sociology. Since both features are without historical precedent, H2 can be considered confirmed.

3. Anticipatory, Local-Government Decision-Making as an Institutional-Level Novelty (H3)

91% (69 of 76) of the removed monuments were taken down by the authorities. Removals typically took place during the day (63%) and on Wednesdays (30%) — that is, ahead of the crowd rather than under its pressure. This is the most important structural divergence from the 1789 French revolutionary model, in which institutions acted reactively, after the fact. A medium-to-strong, significant relationship exists between party preference and the secondary use of a monument ($\phi = 0.37$, $p = 0.001$ for intent; $\phi = 0.36$, $p = 0.002$ for actual implementation; Fisher's test: $p = 0.002$): in Republican-leaning districts, an intention to re-erect the monument arose in 77% of cases (realized in 66%), whereas in Democratic-leaning districts this occurred in only 14% of cases (realized in 7%). The relationship between municipality size and party preference ($r = 0.358$, $p = 0.002$) confirms that this is a political rather than a size-dependent effect. Correlations involving the share of African American population, by contrast, are weak and not significant — that is, the phenomenon is primarily political-institutional rather than demographic in nature. On the basis of this statistically supported, anticipatory-local-government pattern, H3 can be considered confirmed. Assmann's conceptual pair of canon and counter-canon (Assmann, 1999) also helps interpret the party-dependent handling of the monuments' afterlife: Democratic local governments opted for the elimination of the canon (incorporation), while Republican local governments opted for its peripheralization (relocation). This particular distinction is without historical precedent.

4. Revolution Did Not Occur, but a Measurable Political Mobilization Effect Did (H4)

91% of the monuments (801 of 877) remained untouched at the end of 2020; holding Trump accountable was not successful (though his removal from office was), and no revolution took place (in light of Harrison's concept of survival conflict and Koselleck's concept of revolution, this can be interpreted as a redistribution of symbolic capital rather than a defeat) (Harrison, 1995; Koselleck, 2004). At the same time, however, the 2020 campaign demonstrably

mobilized young voters (38% of first-time voters in 2020 were under 30) and African American voters — 95% of Black women voters cast their ballot for Biden — which was politically relevant in the closely contested states affected. In North Carolina, Georgia, and Arizona, the final margins were 1.34, 0.24, and 0.4 percentage points, respectively. Since a measurable electoral effect can be demonstrated even in the absence of a revolutionary outcome, H4 can be considered confirmed. According to Koselleck’s concept of the horizon of expectation (Koselleck, 2004), the semantic gap between the BLM’s revolutionary expectation and the American institutional space of experience (democratic stability) precluded revolution from the outset; yet the mobilization observed in Georgia and Arizona confirms that a forward-looking expectation can produce a political outcome even without revolution.

Overall Result

All four of the four points (H1–H4) were confirmed: the 2020 American wave of monument removal does not contain substantial novelty in formal terms compared with historical iconoclasms, but it does in organizational, institutional, and outcome terms. As an additional observation, the author notes that the BLM’s race-centered belief system constitutes, in ideological terms, a novelty without historical precedent; the hypothesis’s original assumption — based primarily on the tension caused by the COVID pandemic — therefore had to be partially rejected at this point. The table below summarizes the result of the four points and the most important supporting data.

Point	Dimension	Result	Main Support
1.	Formal (Tarrow’s 7 dimensions)	Confirmed – no substantial novelty	4 strong, 1 moderate, 2 weak matches
2.	Organizational (women’s organizations, networking)	Confirmed – two structural novelties	UDC vs. BLM; networked vs. hierarchical
3.	Institutional (anticipatory local-government logic)	Confirmed	91% removed by authorities
4.	Outcome-related (revolution absent, mobilization present)	Confirmed	91% of monuments untouched; close result in NC/GA/AZ

Scientific Novelty and Practical Significance

The novelty of the dissertation lies in the fact that it is the first to analyze the 2020 American wave of iconoclasm expressly from a political science perspective, focusing on the largest subgroup of iconoclasm by case number (N = 76) — the Confederate monuments — by combining archaeological documentation procedures with political science analytical methods.

In doing so, the dissertation supplements the currently available literature, which is focused primarily on history, art history, and legal history, by answering the question of what the acquisition of political power through elections has to do with public monuments considered as symbolic political instruments. On the contested question in the international literature of whether the 2020 wave is related to the Cape Town “Rhodes Must Fall” movement (Deschepper, 2021) or rather to an anticolonization wave dating back to the 1970s (Orr, 2025), the dissertation adopts a cautious position: anti-racism is merely one of many political motivations behind local variations of iconoclasm.

The practical significance of the research lies in providing empirical evidence that an anticipatory removal procedure, conducted at the municipal level during working hours, is statistically demonstrably more effective at avoiding violent confrontation than a reactive or delaying strategy, and that events involving symbolic contestation of space can have a measurable effect on the mobilization of young and minority voter groups, particularly in closely contested electoral districts. A promising direction for further research would be a causal explanation for the survival of the roughly 801 Southern-themed monuments that remained standing in 2020, as well as a comparison, using the present methodology, of the lessons of the 2024 electoral cycle — namely, the Republican camp’s intensified mobilization efforts among non-white voters.

Among the limitations of the research, it should be noted that no direct, individual-level causal inferences can be drawn from aggregated, municipal-level data (the problem of ecological correlation). Furthermore, a complete physical survey of all 76 cases (apart from fieldwork conducted in Washington, D.C. and Richmond) was not feasible. These limitations, however, do not weaken but rather delineate the scope of validity of the dissertation’s findings: the research makes associative, pattern-based claims, whose statistical reliability is supported by significant relationships confirmed by Fisher’s test.

In summary: in answer to the research question posed in the introduction — namely, what explains the dominance of an anticipatory institutional logic, and the measurable political mobilization effect achieved in the absence of a revolutionary outcome — the dissertation’s answer is as follows. The 2020 American wave of Confederate monument removal follows a historical pattern in formal terms; yet, owing to the distinctive, municipal-level, anticipatory mode of operation of the democratic institutional system, it charted a new, previously undescribed path in organizational, institutional, and outcome terms. Institutions managed the

symbolic conflict early, converting it into an electoral instrument, thereby avoiding both protracted violence and systemic change.

From a methodological standpoint, the research also demonstrates that a small ($N = 76$) but carefully delimited case population, when combined with comparative process tracing and descriptive statistics, can be suited to uncovering patterns that neither a purely qualitative case study nor quantitative analysis alone could reliably identify. According to the dissertation, this type of approach — combining an archaeological data-collection logic with political science analysis — may in the future also be adaptable to the study of other, similarly small- N but politically charged symbolic event series (e.g., street renamings, or the renaming of buildings or municipalities).

Finally, the dissertation's findings also indicate that the relationship between symbolic politics and electoral mobilization is not incidental. The magnitude of the mobilization effect measured in states with close electoral outcomes was comparable to the vote margin that decided the final result, suggesting that action against public monuments — however symbolic it may appear — became, in 2020, a genuinely effective and quantifiable instrument of modern American electoral politics.

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V. List of the Author's Own Publications Related to the Topic

In connection with the topic of the dissertation, the author has published the following peer-reviewed publications, which address the political dimensions of symbolic space-claiming and collective memory.

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