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Revisiting Realignment Theory:
Transformation in Suburban and Rural America from 2008 to 2020

By

Nathaniel Philip Hutton

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
the Department of Political Science

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Introduction

My thesis topic evaluates Democratic and Republican electoral performance in suburban and rural areas through the lens of realignment theory. Aided by GIS maps, my analysis utilizes election data from the 2008 and 2020 presidential elections. I went about this by first reviewing relevant literature on realignment theory, beginning with its genesis in by V.O. Key in 1955. I then began reviewing literature on rural and suburban voting patterns, as well as research on geographic influences on electoral coalitions. My original research is thus aimed at bridging the gap between three distinct fields of political science literature: geographic sorting/polarization and electoral geography, research on rural and suburban voters and their aggregate voting behaviors and patterns, and realignment theory.

After reviewing existing literature, I conducted my research by creating individual GIS maps of the 2008 and 2020 elections in an array of suburbs and states based on a randomized sample. By comparing maps of the same region in different elections, we can visualize and track shifts in rural and suburban voting patterns; this allows us to ascertain the geographic bases of each party's support, and ultimately determine whether a realignment has or has not occurred in each region contained within the sample. Ultimately, I find that a substantial, but potentially tenuous, realignment – in favor of the Democratic Party – has occurred in each of the suburban areas I analyze and map. Conversely, I find mixed results in my analysis of rural areas, with the Republican Party unambiguously gaining substantial ground in Ohio, Texas, and Pennsylvania but making limited progress in certain rural areas of Massachusetts and Arizona. Following discussion of the GIS maps in chapters three and four and the resultant findings, I discuss and evaluate electoral implications for each party's coalition in the conclusion. I also suggest areas for further research and discuss important limitations and constraints.

The impact of this research is twofold. First, I advance a novel conception of realignment theory, grounded in a geography-first approach that departs from traditional realignment criteria focused on top-line election results and moves toward a model of gradation. I argue that even if overall margins in elections remain stable across time, significant changes in regional support merit close examination. Additionally, this thesis also enhances our understanding of the contemporaneous electoral landscape for both parties, which potentially offers clarity for where they are headed in the future.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Chapter 1 of this thesis will consist of a thorough literature review, which aims to provide an account of scholarly research that is adjacent to – or is related to – suburban and rural realignment. This account will ultimately function as a foundation for the analysis of each realignment in subsequent chapters. I first provide an overview of scholarly treatments of realignment theory, characteristics of realignments and critical elections, examples of past electoral realignments, and conflicting views on realignment. Then, I examine literature about suburban voting patterns and the political characteristics of suburbs. For comparison, I review research relating to the partisan allegiances of rural areas. I also discuss the importance of geographic sorting along partisan lines. I end the review by discussing the importance of studying suburban electoral realignment and previewing the path forward for this thesis following the literature review.

Realignment Theory

In his treatment of realignment theory, P.F. Nardulli (1995) argues that “if properly defined, the concept of a critical realignment is a powerful tool in the study of electoral behavior” (11). Indeed, this broader principle regarding realignment theory will serve as the lodestar for this thesis’ examination of contemporaneous suburban electoral dynamics. However, prior to discussing realignment in suburbs, it is crucial to broadly review research conducted on realignment theory generally. This section will define what a realignment is, provide examples of past realignments, and explain disagreements between scholars studying realignment theory. This will, in turn, provide a foundation for this chapter’s subsequent review of suburban realignment literature.

Realignment has had a long and contentious history since it was first introduced as a concept by Key (1955), who made several important contributions within his foundational publication. The first contribution was his definition of a “critical election,” wherein voters are highly motivated, participate at high rates, and significantly alter the electoral status quo (4). Subsequent realignment literature has clarified aspects of critical elections beyond Key’s general description. Nardulli, for instance, identified critical elections as the bookends of electoral eras, where one critical election precipitates a realignment and another results in a subsequent disruptive realignment after some period of time (16).

Crucially, Key also theorized that critical elections produce electoral realignments. He did not provide a precise definition of what constituted a realignment; rather, he outlined its broad characteristics. For instance, he described realignments as “both sharp and durable,” (11) but declined to expand much beyond that description besides explaining that realignments seemed to “persist in several succeeding elections” (4).

Before going farther into realignment literature, it is necessary to provide widely recognized examples of past electoral realignments to provide context to the principles that are central to the theory. To this end, Campbell (2006) provides a brief but comprehensive summary of these realignments. First, 1896 is generally one of the most prominent elections discussed within realignment theory. In fact, the 1896 election seems to have formed the basis of Key’s research, and consequently shaped the tenor of the realignment field overall. Paulson (2000), for example, notes that the 1896 election established Republican national dominance of the White House and Congress thanks to a dominant coalition in the East that countered Democratic support in the West (7). This dynamic between the two parties following the 1896 election is, in large part, why it features so heavily in realignment literature. Schofield, Miller, and Martin

(2003) provide an overview of E.E. Schattschneider's interpretation of 1896, which details the dynamics at play in the realigning election:

[T]he Populist, William Jennings Bryan, instigated a radical agrarian movement which, in economic terms, could be interpreted as anti-capital. To counter this, the Republican Party became aggressively pro-capital. Because conservative Democrat interests feared populism, they revived the sectional cleavage of the civil war era, and implicitly accepted the Republican dominance of the North. According to Schattschneider, this 'system of 1896' contributed to the dominance of the Republican Party until the later transformation of politics brought about in the midst of the Depression by FD Roosevelt.

In the aftermath of the 1896 election and until 1928, Republicans won an overwhelming seven out of nine presidential election, and dominated Congressional elections: "After 1894 the party system significantly shifted in the Republican direction ... Republicans on average gained 6.3 percent of presidential votes and 11.5 percent of House seats in the 1894-1928 era" (369). In 1932, the next widely recognized realignment, Democrats reversed post-1896 losses and increased their "expected presidential vote percentage by 10.5 points and their percentage of House seats by 16.4 points" (369).

For elections after the 1932 realignment, there is a degree of disagreement among scholars about which elections ought to be considered realignments. Campbell argues that the 1964 election should be considered a realignment, because "Republican gains among white southerners took a big step forward in 1964 despite Lyndon Johnson's landslide defeat of Barry Goldwater" (370). This election, he argues, "was the onset of the post-New Deal party system," (378) which lasted until the congressional elections in 1994, where Republicans gained massively in the South and subsequently won six consecutive majorities (379). In sum, these elections ultimately signify changes in the electoral status quo, and are associated with several distinctive characteristics that are outlined by David Mayhew (2000).

Mayhew provides an excellent overview of realignment theory based on literature from E.E. Schattschnieder, James L. Sundquist, and Walter D. Burnham. Through analyzing the broad claims of realignment literature, Mayhew outlines his interpretation of the characteristics of realignments. First, he observes that Burnham (unlike Key and Sundquist) believes that realignments occur once every thirty years (452). Next, he asserts that realignment proponents believe that “[a] dynamic exists that motors history through this pattern of cyclical oscillations into and out of realignments” (453). Furthermore, he argues that “[v]oter concern and turnout are unusually high in realigning elections,” (453) and that a “new dominant voter cleavage” on policy supersedes the previous one. According to realignment advocates, these voters “expresses [themselves] effectively and consequentially during electoral realignments, but not otherwise.” (455). Additionally, he notes that Burnham believes that disruptive ideological forces that challenge the existing political order are central to electoral realignments (454). Complementing Burnham’s unique contribution, Mayhew also points out the work of David W. Brady, who argues that realigning elections are exceptionally nationalized relative to non-realigning elections that have an emphasis on local issues; this is especially true for Brady, Mayhew observes, of Congressional elections (454). To this end, Mayhew notes that realignment proponents believe that “[e]lectoral realignments are associated with major changes in government policy” in their aftermath and that they catalyze the institution of redistributive policies (454-455). Finally, Mayhew notes the prominence of the 1896 realignment in Schattschneider and Burnham’s work, which they say granted “political and economic supremacy to the American business class ... for a ‘determined’ 36 years” (455).

Mayhew’s analysis of realignment theory elucidates several disputes among scholars regarding realignments – regarding scope, regularity, and impact. This has, over time, led to a

number of different approaches to assessing realignment's applicability, given that many of the realignment criteria offered by Schattschneider, Sundquist, and Burnham have been criticized by Mayhew. Mayhew characterizes realignment theory as fraught with inconsistencies and theoretically fallible. For instance, he contends that the results of subsequent elections after realignments are comparable to "runs of heads and tails that would be expected from coin flips." (471).

But proponents of realignment theory have pushed back on some of these critiques. Nardulli's approach emphasized trends over time and geographical distribution both regionally and nationally (11). Among other findings, Nardulli noted that "critical realignments are temporally structured and geographically concentrated phenomena that represent marked and enduring breaks in regional electoral patterns." This conclusion represents a rebuke of Mayhew's critiques of realignments. Whereas Mayhew argued that "the claims of the realignment genre do not hold up well" overall, Nardulli's data and findings state otherwise. This divergence of opinions is part of the contested nature of realignment literature referenced previously.

Like Nardulli, Paulson (2000) offers a defense of realignment theory. But Paulson takes a different tack than Nardulli, in that he directly responds to arguments that realignment ought to satisfy a set of criteria. Indeed, Paulson advocates for a looser interpretation of critical elections and their associated realignments. To this end, he claims that the "periodic markings of sea change in the party system should not be analyzed by ... a checklist that must be satisfied. Rather, realignment, if it is to add grounding in history to electoral analysis, should be understood contextually in terms of the system change it represents" (19).

A third perspective on realignment theory originates from Schofield, Miller, and Martin. Rather than focus primarily on voters and coalitions involved in realignments, they emphasize

the role of candidate policy positions and their utility for maximizing voter support. In this model, “rational political candidates attempt to balance the need for resources with the need to take winning policy positions,” while voters react accordingly by choosing the candidate that aligns closely with their interests (219). To this end, they effectively depart from the model of a sharp transformation of the electorate advanced by Key.

Finally, Abramowitz and Saunders (1998) adapted realignment and, echoing Burnham’s views on ideology, examined Republican victories in the 1994 and 1996 elections:

[T]he Republican victories in the 1994 and 1996 congressional elections reflected a long-term shift in the relative strength and bases of support of the two major parties and that this shift in the party loyalties of the electorate was in turn based on the increased ideological polarization of the Democratic and Republican parties during the Reagan and post-Reagan eras. Clearer differences between the parties' ideological positions made it easier for citizens to choose a party identification based on their policy preferences. The result has been a secular realignment of party loyalties along ideological lines.

In contrast to other realignment theorists, Abramowitz and Saunders emphasize the role of polarization among the electorate. And while they satisfy Burnham’s conception of critical elections and realignments vis-à-vis ideology, they notably violate other realignment tenets as defined by Mayhew. For instance, they note that shifts within the electorate had been occurring over a long period of time (639), which contradicts Key’s original idea of a “sharp” realignment.

Abramowitz and Saunders’ work is symbolically important in this regard, insofar as it demonstrates the fluidity of the realignment genre generally. Like Paulson and Schofield, Miller, and Martin, they avoid the rigid approach of satisfying each criterion on a proverbial checklist. Indeed, they recognize that realigning elections are often incongruous with each other and can manifest in different forms.

Suburban Voting Patterns

Prior to analyzing potential realignment in suburban areas, it is crucial to review relevant literature on suburban voting patterns. Though there is limited scholarly research regarding suburban voting patterns, the existing body of work primarily centers around civic engagement, party identification, and voter elasticity.

First, scholars have noted that suburban voters have distinct attitudes about civic engagement in their communities. Oliver and Ha (2007), for example, observed that – contrary to popular notions about apathetic attitudes towards politics in suburbs – suburban voters exhibit significant interest in elections, especially in socially, racially, and economically diverse suburban communities. In a separate work, Oliver (2001) emphasized that suburban residents were just as civically engaged as citizens living in other communities, but with unique views that are shaped by their community.

Party identification among suburban voters has also been studied by numerous scholars. Gainsborough's (2001) research was among the first to examine whether there was a positive correlation between residing in a suburb and identifying with certain political parties. Notably, she found that beginning in the 1980s, suburban voters were consistently more likely to identify as Republicans. Further, she found that after controlling for other factors, "living in a suburb did significantly increase the probability of voting for the Republican candidate." (Gainsborough, 2001). Gainsborough (2005) investigated this relationship further by comparing suburban residents and urban residents with similar views on social spending and government.

In this vein, Gainsborough (2001) found that suburban voters were more likely to espouse negative views about motivating political issues like spending on social programs and the role of government. This finding lends insight into the unique attitudes possessed by suburban voters, which ultimately influences partisan identification. When taken together, Gainsborough's 2001

and 2005 publications thus paint a picture of a median suburban voter who tends to vote for the Republican candidate and holds conservative views on the scope of social spending and government. Even when controlling for other factors not discussed by Gainsborough, suburban residents were still less likely to identify with and support the Democratic Party versus urban residents. McKee and Shaw (2003) found a similar relationship between living in a suburb and voting for Republicans. They found that the relationship was strongest during the Reagan and Bush presidencies, thus affirming Gainsborough's (2001) findings. However, they also found that this relationship diminished considerably during the Clinton era, which consequently demarcated suburban voters as a highly competitive voting bloc. A third author, David Hopkins (2019), also observes that "Democratic presidential candidates began to attract a greater share of the suburban vote after the decisive national losses of the 1980s."

McKee and Shaw's research leads to an important area of discussion regarding the elasticity of suburban voting patterns. Elasticity in the context of electoral politics refers to the likelihood that a voter will change their partisan allegiance from election-to-election. To this point, suburban voters are significantly less aligned to their party, especially when compared with urbanites (Gainsborough, 2001; McKee and Shaw, 2003). Furthermore, these voters "are more likely to base their decisions on the candidates' stances on specific issues rather than party affiliation or personal traits" (Oliver and Ha, 2007, 404).

Hopkins (2019) further explores the potency of Democratic posturing in relation to motivating issues for suburban voters that began during President Clinton's first and second election victories. He asserts that the Democratic Party recognized the untenable suburban voting patterns during the Reagan and Bush years and consequently shifted the party's strategy to appeal to suburban voters: "Clinton's campaigns openly maneuvered to direct its appeals to the

perceived concerns of the suburban electorate, touting the candidate's support for policies like middle-class tax cuts, welfare reform, and the death penalty that were not traditionally associated with the Democratic platform" (6). This shift was a calculated one, as the importance of suburban voters in national elections came to the forefront following Republican electoral victories that preceded Clinton.

Rural Realignment

Amid shifts in suburban voting patterns, changes in rural areas also merit examination. To this end, several scholars have examined these shifts in voting patterns. Hopkins' (2019) data yields compelling findings that demonstrate these shifts. For instance, he found that "while rural residents supplied Jimmy Carter with 24 percent of his total vote in 1980, by 2016 only 9 percent of Hillary Clinton voters lived outside metropolitan America" (8). Ultimately, he finds that while suburban voting patterns have looked promising for Democrats in recent years, "the expanded presence of suburban voters and representatives in the Democratic Party since the 1980s was accompanied by a dramatic contraction of Democratic strength in rural areas" (14).

Lang, Sanchez, and Berube (2008) draw a similar conclusion, finding that "[i]n national elections, the Democrats need a large share of the top 50 metropolitan vote to offset losses in small towns and rural parts of the U.S." (18). McKee (2008) also found that loss of Democratic support in rural areas – particularly in the South – is a key factor in producing lopsided election results; to this end, he analyzed the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections and found that gaps in levels of partisan support between rural and metropolitan areas is one of the main predictors of competitiveness in elections (101). McKee's examination is somewhat limited in comparison to Lang, Sanchez, and Berube, however, because his work emphasized the Southern United States rather than national electoral dynamics.

Further analysis has shown that this dichotomy between rural and metropolitan areas is associated with density. Lang, Sanchez, and Berube (2008) point out that as the density of a given area or community declines, Democratic support declines correspondingly. Further, they note that the partisan environment is a deciding factor for where elections are decided; in 2002, Republican support was firmly grounded in fast-growing suburbs while 2006 saw Democrats competing for votes in these same areas (26-27).

McKee's work underscores the importance of geography within electoral coalitions. Because partisan success in U.S. elections is in part dependent on geography, it is crucial to discuss the electorate's geographical distribution. Indeed, as Gainsborough (2001) notes, U.S. elections are centered around "a political system that provides representation on the basis of geography" (62).

Geographic Sorting

The subject of voter behavior in suburban and rural areas, respectively, is intertwined with a broader literature on the significance of geographic sorting among the U.S. electorate. Geographic sorting refers to the propensity of voters to self-select their community based, at least in part, on partisan alignment (Gainsborough 2001). Several scholars have studied the existence of a link between voters' selection of communities based on their corresponding partisan alignments. Within their treatments of geographic sorting, scholars have debated the significance of this link (if it indeed exists) in comparison to other voting behaviors, the weight that voters assign to partisanship versus other factors when they select their communities, and the implications of this phenomenon on American politics broadly.

Before examining the specific findings of scholars who have studied geographic sorting, it is important to note that the debate between proponents and opponents of the theory is not

settled. Broadly speaking, the question at the center of this debate is whether there is “clear evidence of significant spatial polarisation of support for the country’s two main political parties” (Johnston, Manley, and Jones 2016, 13). Though this debate has been ongoing for some time, data have emerged to suggest that geographic sorting is a veritable and growing phenomenon: “over the ... elections between 1992 and 2012 there has been greater spatial polarisation in the percentage voting for the Democratic Party candidates at presidential elections” (Jones and Manley 2016, 11).

The primary critique of geographic sorting originates from Abrams and Fiorina (2012), who respond to Bill Bishop’s popular book *The Big Sort*. They argue that “there is no evidence that a geographic partisan ‘big sort’ like that described by Bishop is ongoing,” but qualify this statement by saying that they do not categorically deny minor instances of geographic sorting (208). In their negation of Bishop’s claims, they cite survey data and scholarly literature on the hesitancy among voters about outwardly sharing their political beliefs (207). Accordingly, they make an implicit argument that because voters are reticent about divulging their political beliefs, – especially with neighbors they do not know well – they do not intentionally sort geographically based on partisanship. Mummolo and Nall (2017), on the other hand, adopt a nuanced critique of geographic sorting. Unlike Abrams and Fiorina, they find “evidence that partisans will rate more politically compatible communities higher and even stronger evidence that partisans differ on a range of correlates of partisanship, including race and urbanism” (57). However, they conclude that, based on responses to their survey, partisanship is ultimately a relatively insignificant factor in the minds of voters when choosing where to live (57). Mummolo and Nall’s overall work, though, points to a crucial association between one’s community and one’s political identity. In essence, they suggest that voters are likely to favor communities that mirror their political

beliefs. Their findings therefore suggest that the rural and suburban voting trends discussed above are inherently linked to the association that voters make between their political beliefs and their community.

Several pieces of literature contain different findings that contradict Mumullo and Nall's claims about the insignificance of partisan sorting. Jesse Sussell (2013), for example, found that "partisan segregation—as measured within California and across the period 1992–2010—is increasing over time" by analyzing U.S. Census and county-level data (771). Similarly, Jones and Manley (2016) find that in 29 out of 49 U.S. states examined, "there was significantly greater between-County polarisation in percentage voting Democrat within the State [in the elections from 1992 to 2012]" (10).

It is important to situate geographic sorting within the broader context of this literature review. As data and the scholarly literature cited herein continues to suggest the presence of this phenomenon in the national political environment, there are significant consequences to consider. Assuming geographic sorting holds, certain geographic areas are becoming increasingly homogenous in their partisanship; For this thesis, the main consequence of partisan geographic sorting is that increased polarization translates to rural areas becoming more Republican and suburbs more Democratic.

The Path Forward

The body of literature on realignment theory, geographic voting patterns, and geographic partisan sorting provides a clear path forward for this thesis. While much has been made in the news media about dramatic swings in suburban areas – especially in the wake of former President Donald Trump's presence in the 2016, 2018, and 2020 elections – there is a dearth of literature addressing whether this suburban realignment has, in fact, occurred. While it may be

interesting to determine why this void exists, this thesis ultimately aims to address whether a suburban realignment has occurred, through both qualitative and data analysis.

This literature review has thus established several key points that enable such an examination to occur. First, it outlines the various arguments and perspectives scholars have proffered about realignment theory. As the first part of this chapter has demonstrated, realignment is a contested theory with several interpretations that have been advanced throughout the years. Nonetheless, realignment theory offers a robust framework for analyzing changes in suburban electoral trends. Notwithstanding critiques from Mayhew and others, realignment theory has a healthy body of literature and has evolved greatly since its inception. Next, this review provides a cursory examination of literature on suburban and rural voting patterns. Overall, this literature suggests that rural residents are a declining source of Democratic support while suburbs have been transformed from Republican bastions to hotly contested electoral battlegrounds. Finally, the review establishes the importance of geographic sorting by partisanship. Still, the literature leaves many key questions unanswered. As alluded to above, scholars have notably eschewed examining recent electoral trends in suburban America even though they acknowledge that there is a correlation “between living (or choosing to live) in the suburbs and political opinion.” (Gainsborough 2001, 62).

Much of the research on suburban voting trends that does exist tends to focus on policy issues or proposals and their reception by the electorate, not on the significance of shifting partisan loyalties within the suburbs. Other works focus on voting patterns in regional areas (e.g., Southern states) rather than a specific type of community. Yet more literature – tangentially related to the topics discussed within this literature review – often focuses on specific subsets of voters, whether by class, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, or race. This area of

voting behavior certainly merits further study, but suburbs are increasingly diverse (Lang, Sanchez, and Berube 2008, 2), and are located throughout the United States. The absence of literature on suburban realignment leaves a gulf between popular perceptions of suburban voters in recent elections and analysis of the veracity of such perceptions. This gulf is significant because several prominent political commentators have hypothesized that suburban voters were crucial to Democratic control of the U.S. House of Representatives following the 2018 midterm elections and eventual unified control of Congress and the White House following the 2020 elections. These commentators often claim that Republican support within suburbs after the 2016 election is declining precipitously, but scholarly literature has yet to address this supposed recent realignment. When such research is published, the voting data presented within publications is expressed in an unhelpful manner.

Analysis of contemporaneous suburban realignment (and the coinciding rural realignment) also yields clues about future electoral trends, which further underscores the importance of this thesis. The following chapters will serve to address these concerns in several ways. First, it will use outputs generated by GIS software to express changes in the electorate in a visual manner, especially in suburban regions. While it is not feasible to map multiple elections in each suburb in the U.S., I aim to select key electoral areas that are illustrative of broader voting patterns and trends. I also hope to explore and discuss the potential for suburban reversion, considering recent high-profile gubernatorial and legislative elections in Virginia and New Jersey. Finally, I hope to discuss the electoral futures of each party given the trends observed within this thesis' chapters.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This thesis is primarily meant to address whether a realignment has occurred in either suburban or rural areas. As chapter 1 has outlined, there are four separate bodies of literature involved in answering this question – ranging from works on realignment to the behavior of suburban and rural voters. The goal of this thesis, then, is to create a nexus among these distinct areas of research, and to make original contributions in the process of doing so.

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. First, it aims to contextualize my thesis within existing works. My thesis occupies a unique position relative to existing works, so delineating similarities and differences between it and those works is crucial. The second purpose of this chapter is to detail and explain the technical aspects of the software used to create maps in subsequent chapters. GIS is a tool used for, among other purposes, geographical social and political data analysis. This makes it an ideal tool for examining how voters behave relative to their geographic location. Unfortunately, GIS has a rather steep learning curve that negatively affects its accessibility. The methodology section of this chapter attempts to address this by detailing steps used to create maps in later chapters. With the instructions outlined below, lay readers should be able to recreate each map that appears in my thesis.

Contextualizing this Thesis and Existing Research

As alluded to in chapter one, realignment and suburban political literature occupy two rather separate worlds. On the one hand, realignment literature is mostly composed of theory on electoral systems and candidates, anchored by historical manifestations of the theory. Realignment literature is also focused on the qualities and hallmarks of realigning elections. Suburban electoral literature, on the other hand, tends to focus on suburban voter values, motivations, and mobilization. Juliet Gainsborough's work on suburban voters, for example,

reflects this focus and functions remarkably well as a window into the essence of this unique bloc of voters. Yet Gainsborough does not directly address realignments or realignment literature in her work. This dichotomy illustrates the gaps between the two bodies of literature. The same observation applies to works involving rural voting patterns, too.

My thesis is intended to address whether realignments have or have not occurred in suburban or rural areas since former President Obama's election in 2008. This question serves as the lodestar for my analysis in subsequent chapters. To resolve this question, my analysis will hinge on indicators that will either point to an affirmative or negative answer. First, it will examine whether significant shifts have occurred since 2008. If the electoral status quo in a certain area is maintained (as indicated by little to no variation in a GIS map from one election to another), it follows that a realignment has not occurred. Conversely, if an area has rapidly changed partisan allegiances, it follows that a realignment has occurred.

Another important aspect to consider is a reconsideration of realignment as a binary concept. I argue that realignment is not necessarily binary, but rather might occur in gradation or degree. Indeed, as this thesis has shown, contemporaneous realignment can occur at a more granular level.

To this end, I argue that scholars ought to depart from strictly top-line realignment analysis. For instance, if a certain state has consistently awarded its electoral votes to the Republican nominee over a period of ten or more years, with minimal change in the overall margin between that candidate and the Democratic nominee, classical realignment scholars would not consider that state to have realigned. But if that state has experienced significant change in regional voting patterns that counteract one another (for instance, a suburb and a nearby rural community undergoing concurrent realignments), that certainly merits closer

examination. A binary examination of top-line election results does not do realignment theory justice. Rather, a more exhaustive and thorough methodology is needed, which this paper seeks to provide. Thus, the overall interpretation of realignment theory contained within this thesis' original research will lie closer to the works of Nardulli (1995) and Paulson (2000), rather than Mayhew's (2000) interpretation of the literature. Such an approach is consistent with the malleability and evolution of realignment theory writ large.

This thesis also intentionally utilizes GIS technology as a means of visualizing the data behind suburban and rural voting patterns. Data expressed solely in written form often loses its significance, failing to convey its true impact. GIS maps address this problem by presenting the same data in a compact, visual format. Because presenting election(s) data through GIS ties the data to a specific geographic area, we can visualize regional electoral patterns and understand where partisans are distributed within a city, county, or state. This is particularly valuable information that cannot be gleaned from a simple spreadsheet or chart displaying vote margins in a place. Simply put, a lengthy table containing election results by precinct does not facilitate a reader's understanding of an election versus a map that presents the same information through a different medium. Though many analysts use this technology to understand election results, it is not used as widely in formal political science literature. This research therefore attempts to reverse that trend.

To be sure, the inclusion of GIS maps in this research is not intended as an ultimate method or a panacea for analyzing elections. It is rather meant to facilitate the achievement of the primary goals of this thesis and enhance discussion of voting patterns in suburbs and rural areas through studies of selected regions and states. GIS technology provides an excellent avenue to do so, by visualizing voluminous data in a compact manner. Additionally, GIS helps shed light

on the phenomenon of geographic sorting by partisanship. Indeed, GIS is perhaps an ideal medium for analyzing trends in geographic sorting because it combines electoral data to a specific area in a visual manner. In this context, my thesis is significantly different than many works on geographic sorting. With each of these factors in mind, this thesis attempts to bridge the gap between realignment literature and works on suburban and rural voting patterns. Indeed, I hope to place contemporary suburban and rural electoral politics within the realm of realignment literature, with my central research question serving as a guide throughout.

Technical Methodology:

Prior to discussing the technical methodology behind the GIS maps contained in this thesis, it is necessary to justify my research and data-gathering methods. United States federal elections are a rare example of an area of government that is nearly exclusively controlled by states rather than the federal government. There are notable exceptions to the devolution of this control, but states have significant leeway to conduct their elections as they see fit. There are benefits and drawbacks to this approach overall, but the drawbacks are especially pronounced with mapmaking.

One such drawback for this thesis is data collection and reporting. States are generally free to report election results in any format or manner – no matter how inconvenient a particular medium may be to the public. Thus, there is no standardized method among states for distributing election results. In practice, the disparities between states can be drastic. Indiana, for example, does not require counties to report election results by precinct, meaning that only county-wide results are available. This makes it practically impossible to analyze election results from Indianapolis and its surrounding suburbs, for instance. On the other side of the spectrum,

Minnesota's Secretary of State makes precinct-level shapefiles and maps accessible to the public on its website. Additionally, some states make data-entry mistakes while others are diligent about publishing clean results data. These issues are merely a handful of the boundaries that impede the public's access to data suitable for mapmaking.

Fortunately, political scientists and volunteers have worked to remedy many of these issues by making accurate precinct-level data widely available. Three sources were used to obtain this data. The first was the Voting and Election Science Team (VEST)¹, the second is the Harvard Election Data Archive (EDA)², and the third is the Metric Geometry and Gerrymandering Redistricting Lab (MGGG)³ from Tufts University. Each of the maps from the 2020 election uses data from VEST, while maps from earlier elections use data from Harvard EDA and Tufts MGGG, depending on which state the election was held in.

The software used to create each map was QGIS. There is an array of other GIS software available – some free and some paid – but it is important that each of the maps produced for the purpose of this thesis be easily replicable by any reader. To this end, QGIS is an ideal software choice because it is free to use, open source, and is a common choice among election map creators. The steps outlined below are intended for readers to recreate the maps if they wish.

First, I downloaded state shapefiles from the VEST, EDA, or MGGG websites. These shapefiles contain fields with results by precinct categorized by the votes received by major party candidates, third parties, and write-in votes. This precinct data is suitable for the purposes of this thesis because voters are assigned to their precincts based on where they reside. Then, in QGIS' style manager, I created a color ramp gradient that indicates a candidate's support in each

¹ Harvard Voting and Election Science Team. 2022. <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/electionscience>

² Harvard Election Data Archive. 2018 <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/eda>

³ The MGGG Redistricting Lab. 2022. <https://mggg.org/>

precinct. Each website provides shapefiles, which can be loaded into an application like QGIS as a layer. Shapefiles are akin to “instructions” for the GIS software. The files contain data and values associated with that data. They also contain geometric data, which guides the software’s initial rendering of the file. With the relevant shapefiles loaded in QGIS, I used a National Spatial Reference System projection to correctly render the shapefile into a geographically accurate product. After using the projection, I edited the shapefile’s symbology and applied the color ramp gradient. I applied the gradient by using the standard following expression (with additional variables for any applicable third-party candidates and write-in votes):

```
ramp_color('RdBuGrad', scale_linear(( "G20PRERTRU" - "G20PREDBID" ) / (  
"G20PRERTRU" + "G20PREDBID" + 0.01),-1,1,0,1)).
```

Ramp_color is the function used to edit the map’s fill, “RdBuGrad” refers to the name of the color ramp gradient I created and *scale_linear* in conjunction with the mathematical operation is used to assign the Republican vote to the red portion of the color ramp and the Democratic to the blue. The numbers at the end of the expression ensure accurate mapping with the gradient. The expression was applied to the fill color section of the QGIS symbology menu, in lieu of the randomized color QGIS initially assigns the layer. Stroke width in the symbology menu was set to the lowest possible setting (“hairline”) to avoid as much visual distortion as possible. Final map images were created using QGIS’ layout manager feature.

The selection of states and suburban areas was also an important consideration. Using a list of the 25 most populous metropolitan areas in 2019⁴, I used a random number generator to select eight areas to map. These areas were: Chicago, Illinois; Houston, Texas; Dallas, Texas;

⁴ US Census Bureau. 2019. *City and Town Population Totals: 2010-2019*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-total-cities-and-towns.html#tables>

Fort Worth, Texas; Columbus, Ohio; Boston, Massachusetts; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Phoenix, Arizona. The primary purpose of selecting these areas at random was to avoid researcher bias and subsequently produce a neutral analysis. Despite the random nature of the selection of areas to analyze, each locality presents a fascinating opportunity to analyze voting trends. Each area has unique and differing demographics, education levels, and densities. Together, they will compose a well-rounded sample of suburban areas that are ripe for examination. Conversely, the states that these areas are in will be fascinating case studies for the voting patterns of rural areas. Indeed, examining suburbs and rural areas in the same state, one can directly compare trends and patterns that are happening just miles away.

Due to rendering issues relating to QGIS' interactions with Illinois shapefiles, I could not include maps in chapters three and four. Although these issues prevented Illinois from being included in this thesis' written analysis, my results would have remained the same for both rural Illinois and suburban Chicago.

Careful attention was also paid to the selection of election years for analysis. This thesis uses the 2008 and 2020 presidential elections as benchmarks for analysis of realignment. The 2008 election is an ideal choice for several reasons. First, prior elections do not have easily accessible data that can be feasibly processed and utilized within the given time constraints. The 2008 election also represents a highwater mark in terms of Democratic electoral performances in the past quarter century. Former President Obama won 365 electoral votes and won a range of states – from Indiana to Florida.

The 2020 election is an ideal choice for comparison with the standard set by Obama. For one, the election happened just over a year ago from this writing; the 2018 and 2016 elections have been well-documented and thoroughly researched by scholars. For example, Hopkins

(2019) includes extensive data on rural and suburban voting patterns for both elections. The body of research on the 2020 election, on the other hand, is still developing. Because this thesis aims to make timely and original contributions, the 2020 election seems fit for my analysis. The 2020 election is also a strong fit for this thesis' original research because it is focused on recent realignment(s), not past realignments. Much of the realignment literature discusses elections in the distant past, which further differentiates my research's original contributions. 2008 and 2020 were also selected because they were general elections, not midterms. Unlike midterms, general elections are a useful gauge or indicator of the national electoral environment. By contrast, midterm elections are localized to specific states or congressional districts, making it hard to draw general conclusions about national trends based on the performances of hundreds of individual candidates.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, my research aims to answer whether realignments have or have not occurred in suburban or rural areas since former President Obama's election in 2008. GIS technology will be used to facilitate my analysis of these important questions and will enable a detailed examination of trends and shifts in eight specific suburbs and rural areas of states in the 2008 and 2020 general elections. By performing such an analysis, my research aims to both build upon existing research and bridge gaps between several distinct bodies of scholarly literature that are not traditionally connected. However, it is also important to clearly delineate areas that are plainly irrelevant for my research. For instance, it would be imprudent to conclude whether suburban or rural performances by candidates resulted in candidates winning or losing; many other factors determine this including fundraising and spending, advertising, candidate quality,

and the presence (or lack thereof) of grassroots supporters and activists, to name a few. A central component of this contribution is a revisiting of the criteria for realigning elections. Each of these topics deserves serious discussion and examination, which will follow in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3: Suburban Realignment

On a nearly daily basis leading up to the 2020 general election, television pundits discussed Trump's troubles with suburban voters, often referencing the 2018 midterm elections that gave Democrats the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives. Of course, this was after he narrowly won these voters over Hillary Clinton in 2016. How did Trump suddenly find himself underwater with this key subset of voters after only four years? This chapter aims to illustrate this dynamic by profiling and analyzing several different suburban areas, detailing exactly where Democrats found ground over Trump's Republican Party.

First, it will set the scene prior to the 2020 election and work to provide context as to why such a dramatic shift was taking place. Then, I will analyze election results from 2008 and 2020 to answer a principal research question regarding whether suburban areas have realigned post-Obama. Next, I will discuss the benefits and drawbacks of having suburban voters in an electoral coalition. Finally, I will briefly touch on the intersections of suburban realignment with a potential realignment among Hispanic voters that could further change the electoral landscape.

Setting the Scene

"Suburban women, will you please like me?" crowed then-President Donald Trump at an October 2020 rally in Johnstown, Pennsylvania – approximately 56 miles from Pittsburgh (Axelrod 2020). In the grand scheme of the 2020 presidential campaign, this offhand comment is hardly notable. Yet, in some ways, it is one of Trump's most revealing remarks. Trump's rally happened nearly two years after the Democratic Party took back the U.S. House of Representatives thanks in part to substantial suburban performances from officials like Representative Conor Lamb, whose district was mere minutes from Trump's rally. This time,

however, Trump was fighting for a second term in office, and his divisive brand of politics was being put to the test.

Trump's striking and spur-of-the-moment appeal to suburbanites at the rally was thus emblematic of a broader campaign to win back suburban voters – mostly by fearmongering. This campaign manifested both on rally stages, in advertising, and on Trump's now-suspended Twitter account. From the summer of 2020, for example, Trump began lambasting an obscure Obama-era Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) rule tied to the Fair Housing Act focused on “affirmatively furthering fair housing” (O'Donnell 2020). In one July tweet, for instance, Trump informed his followers that he was “studying the AFFH housing regulation that is having a devastating impact on these once thriving Suburban areas,” and charged now-President Biden with wanting to “make them MUCH WORSE” (O'Donnell 2020). Around two months later, he issued another missive to his followers: “Sleepy Joe Biden has pledged to ABOLISH Suburban Communitites [sic] as they currently exist by reinstating Obama's radical AFFH Regulation. There goes Suburbia!” (Trump 2020). Taken together, these comments are plainly consistent with “dog whistle” messaging towards white voters in suburban America.

To be sure, Trump's 2020 campaign often included other outlandish and wide-ranging predictions about what a potential Biden presidency might portend. Yet Trump's rhetoric regarding suburban areas of the country demonstrates an outmoded understanding of the suburban electorate and their motivations. As mentioned in chapter one, Oliver and Ha (2007) noted that suburban voters are not monolithic in their demography and observed that these diverse communities are especially civically engaged. Biden's campaign messaging acknowledges this reality,

Biden, on the other hand, displayed a better grasp of the suburban electoral landscape.

Consider this exchange from the infamous first debate between himself and Trump, moderated by former Fox News journalist Chris Wallace:

TRUMP: . . . our suburbs would be gone. By the way, our suburbs would be gone. And you would see problems like you've never seen before.

BIDEN: He wouldn't know a suburb unless you took a wrong turn. He was, he was. . .

TRUMP: Oh, I know suburbs so much better than you.

WALLACE: Gentlemen wait a minute.

BIDEN: I was raised in the suburbs. This is not 1950. All these dog whistles and racism don't work anymore. Suburbs are by and large integrated. There's as many people today driving their kids to soccer practice and/or black and white and Hispanic in the same car as there have been any time in the past. What's, what really is a threat to the suburbs and their safety is his failure to deal with COVID. They're dying in the suburbs. His failure to deal with the environment, they're being flooded, they're being burned out because his refusal to do anything. That's why the suburbs are in trouble (Galán and Lindsay 2021, 51).

In this dialogue between himself and suburban voters, Biden reframes the debate and focuses on the salient policy issues that typified the 2020 campaign – namely, the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. As evidenced by Gainsborough's (2001) research, suburban voters are – in large part – motivated by their own self-interest and the policy views that are congruent with that interest. In practice, an asymmetry existed between Trump's rhetoric and the reality for suburban voters in Phoenix, Atlanta, Dallas, Philadelphia, and other similar communities across the country in 2020.

While Trump's rhetoric – at least on face value – largely did not include substantive, policy-based appeals, Biden met these suburban voters where they were. Biden's campaign platform, for example, repeated the successful 2018 midterm election strategy of focusing on protecting the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in the face of Trump's threats to repeal it (Biden 2020). He supplemented this by taking aim at Trump's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and

promising to mitigate the virus (Biden 2020). Trump’s 2020 campaign, on the other hand, contained little to placate suburbanites. Instead, Trump touted “America First” foreign policy initiatives, immigration restrictions, and lambasted COVID-19 restrictions and unrest amid Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 (BBC 2020).

Suburban voters who cast a ballot in the 2020 presidential election were thus forced to make a binary choice between these two major candidates and platforms. The majority voted for President Biden in a decisive fashion, relative to previous elections. According to estimates by Pew Research Center, Hillary Clinton lost suburban voters overall to Trump by a two-point margin; by contrast, Democrats won these voters by a margin of seven points in the 2018 midterm elections and Biden won them by 11 in 2020 (Hartig, Igielnik, and Keeter 2021, 13).

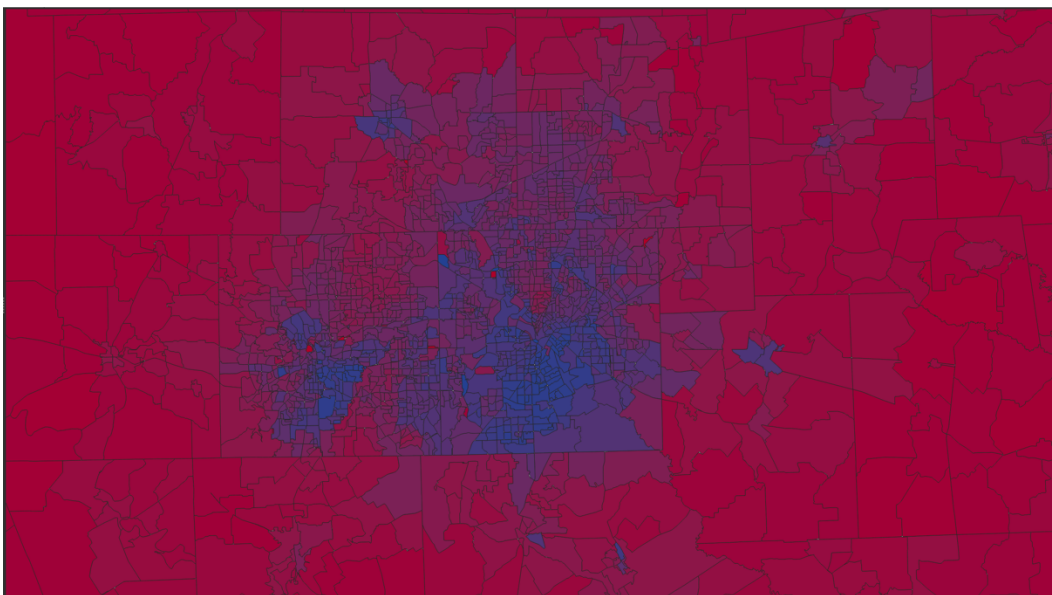
Crucially, Biden’s large margin among these voters occurred within a less favorable electoral environment compared to the 2018 elections. Even the most impressive Democratic performance in a general election in the past 20 years does not come close to this performance; according to Pew, former President Obama had a mere two-point advantage among suburban voters in his 2008 victory, despite winning the Electoral College 365 to 173 (Rosentiel 2008). Amid an unprecedented era of negative partisanship, this shift is quite significant because of its intensity and haste. Those two characteristics are indeed hallmarks of past realignments.

GIS Analysis

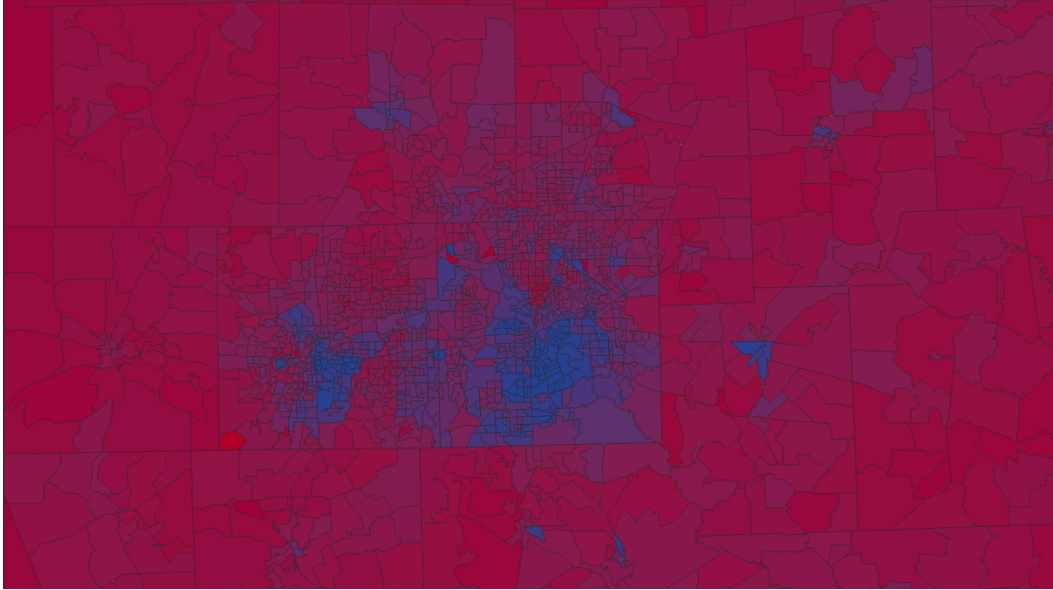
QGIS is a useful aid in understanding and visualizing realignment in suburban areas. To this end, this section will contain maps from the 2020 and 2008 general elections in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Boston, Phoenix, Columbus, and Philadelphia suburbs. For each map below,

precincts are colored with gradations of red, blue, and purple, signifying their partisan lean in the election depicted.

Perhaps more than any other state, Texas exemplifies the rapid influx of suburbanites into the Democratic coalition. Paradoxically, from the early 2000s and through today, Texas is the epitome of a Republican stronghold, serving as a launching pad for Republican elected officials like former President George W. Bush, Senators Kay Bailey Hutchinson, John Cornyn, Ted Cruz, Governor Greg Abbott, and dozens of prominent Republican U.S. Representatives, owing in part to the state's large population. Indeed, despite winning the national popular vote by more than seven points in 2008, Obama lost Texas by over 12 (U.S. Election Atlas). Over time, however, Texas has steadily become more competitive, especially after the 2016 election. This trend came to a head when former Representative Beto O'Rourke fell short of beating Cruz by roughly two points (Politico 2019). Though Biden did not replicate O'Rourke's margin, he was able to turn in strong showings in the state's major suburban areas, as seen in the maps below.



2020 Election by Precinct, Dallas-Fort Worth Area

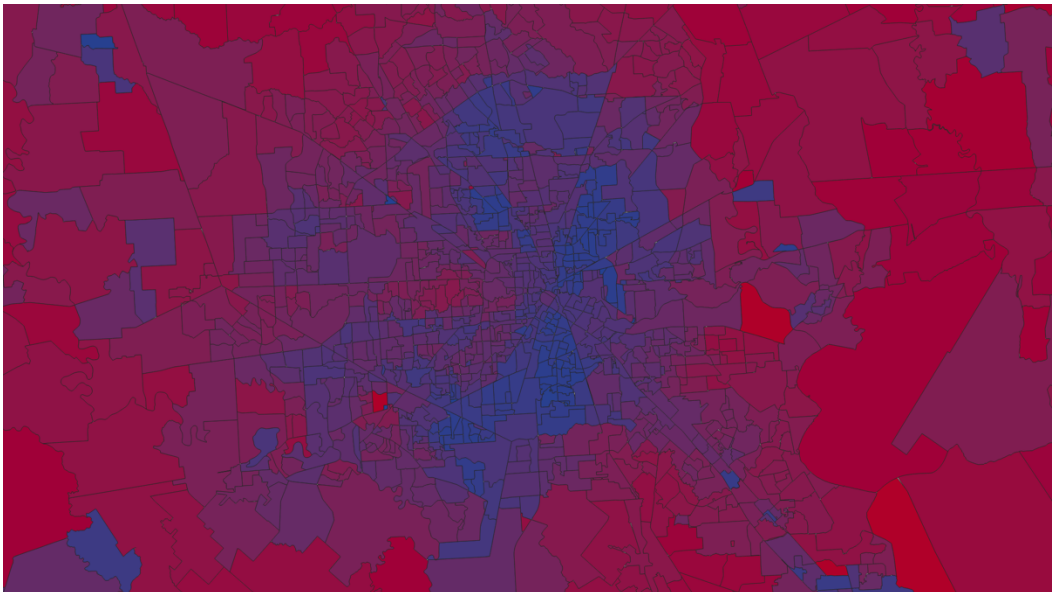


2008 Election by Precinct, Dallas-Fort Worth Area

For example, in the expanding Dallas-Fort Worth Area, Biden was able to turn once-red suburban precincts blue, as well as increasing his support into now-competitive exurban areas. Notably, Biden was also able to maintain most of Obama's coalition, creating an ideal scenario where future Democratic nominees are likely positioned to improve further. This led to Biden flipping Tarrant County (depicted above) from Republican to Democratic (NBC News 2021). Curiously, though, Texas' former 24th Congressional District (contained within Tarrant County) was won by Republican Representative Beth Van Duyne by 1.8 percent despite Biden carrying the district by nearly five and a half points (NBC News 2021). This fascinating result suggests that some voters have realigned at the top of the ticket (at least in the snapshot of the 2020 general election) but are still elastic enough to split their ticket down ballot. There are numerous potential explanations for this discrepancy, and each voter behaves according to their own reasoning and logic, but it indicates that there are a sizeable number of voters who are still open to supporting Republican candidates running for lower offices.

This phenomenon has important implications for this thesis. For one, it suggests that – at least in the Dallas-Fort Worth suburbs – realignment might be blunted by a reverse coattail effect for lower-level offices. Whereas presidential nominees can turn out reliable partisans who do not split their tickets, suburbanites might be casting votes in favor of a divided government. Alternatively, especially in this instance, they may perceive Republican congressional candidates as working to advance their interests. It is impossible to determine with certainty whether either of these theories are correct. But for this analysis, a high number of split tickets indicates that a cascading realignment is not occurring – at least not yet.

A similar situation emerges in Houston, where Biden flipped scores of suburban precincts while increasing Democratic margins (relative to 2008) in exurban areas further from the city. These changes are particularly noticeable in the southeastern and western suburbs, where once-red precincts turned purple.



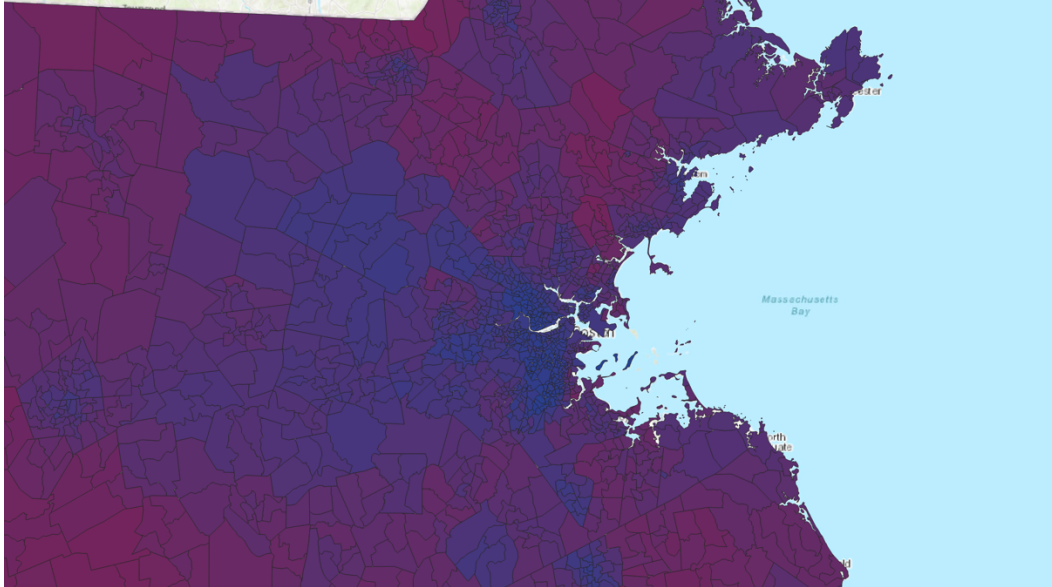
2020 Election by Precinct, Suburban Houston



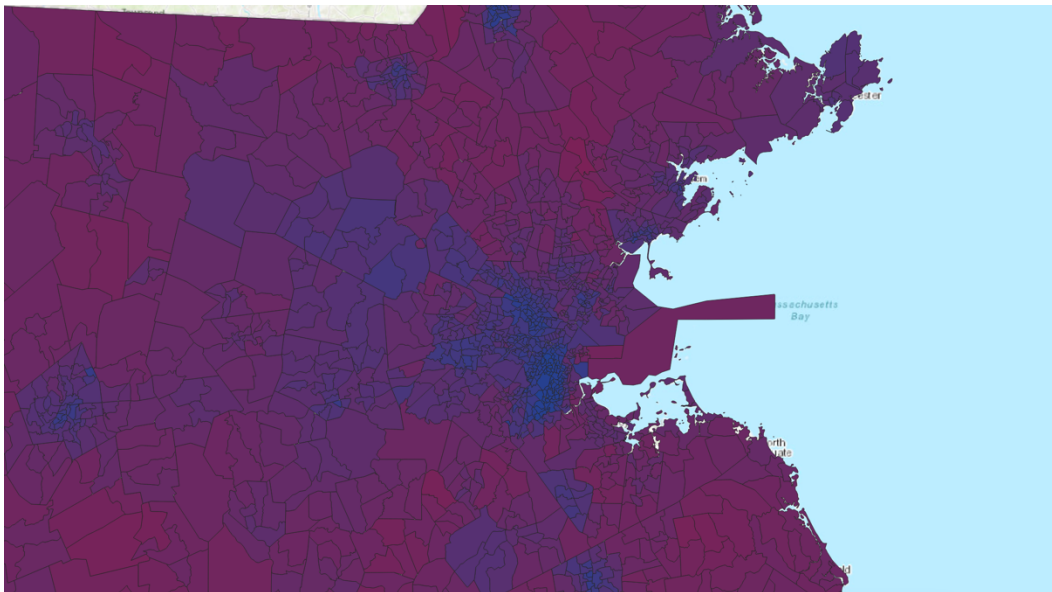
2008 Election by Precinct, Suburban Houston

Overall, a consistent picture emerges from across suburban Texas. Democrats have clearly made significant inroads in key areas outside of major population centers. Time will tell if this remains the case – if the realignment continues to unfold as it has, there is certainly reason for optimism on the part of Democrats.

Unlike Texas, Massachusetts has remained firmly Democratic in federal elections since Ronald Reagan won it in 1984. While areas close to Boston have largely remained very Democratic, important shifts have occurred in the more competitive northern and western suburbs.



2020 Election by Precinct, Metro Boston

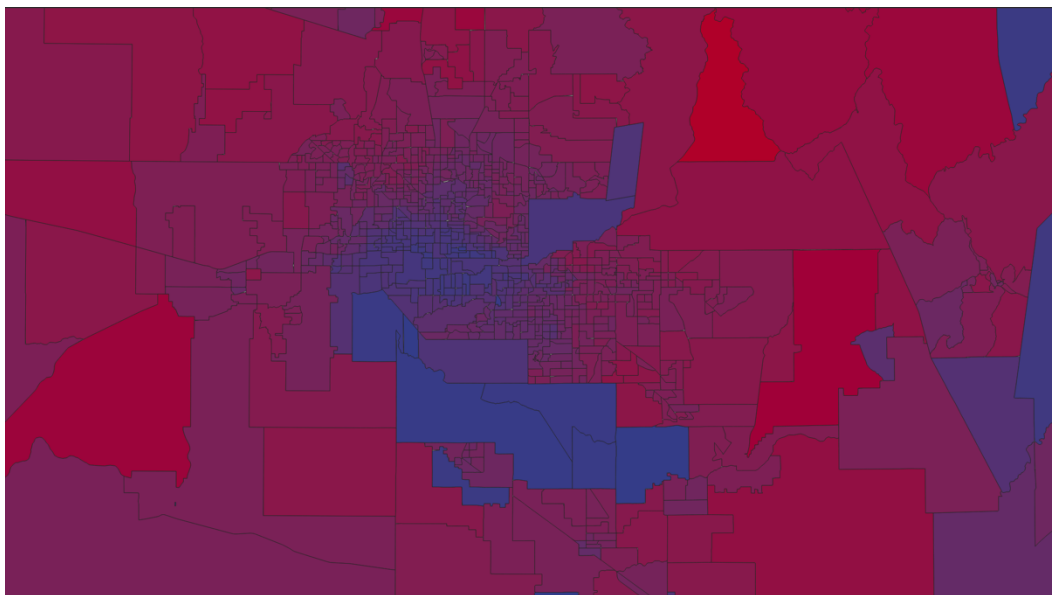


2008 Election by Precinct, Metro Boston

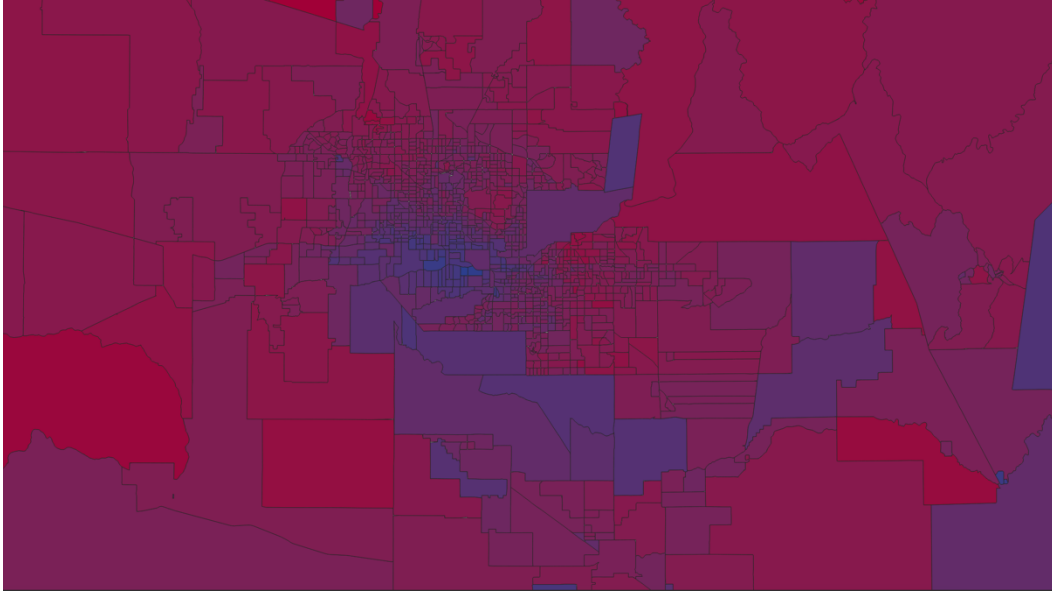
As seen in the maps above, Biden was able to flip and improve in several precincts in Middlesex County, including Malden, Lexington, Concord, Weston, and Hopkinton. Though these areas are smaller in population and area than the suburbs in Texas, the same trend is still clearly visible. In the more distant North Shore (Essex County) areas, Biden's improvements are

more modest relative to the more immediate suburban regions of Boston. There could be multiple explanations for this dynamic. First, Essex County is generally more rural or less dense than Middlesex County, making some of the towns more “exurban” than suburban. As seen with the Texas maps, exurban areas generally tend to have a higher Republican vote share. Biden also improved on the South Shore, flipping several precincts from red to purple or blue.

Turning to the Phoenix suburbs located in Maricopa County, Arizona, Biden was again able to rack up impressive margins. Like the Texas suburbs, Maricopa County is a booming area, and has a rapidly shifting electorate. In 2008, Senator John McCain turned in a strong performance in Maricopa County and comfortably carried most of suburban Phoenix on his way to winning his home state. A different story emerges in 2020, however. As seen below, Biden flipped scores of precincts, turning most of Phoenix and its environs blue or purple. This is even more impressive considering the massive population growth since 2008. Exurban Phoenix, however, mostly maintained the 2008 status quo, which is perhaps still impressive, given McCain’s home state status.

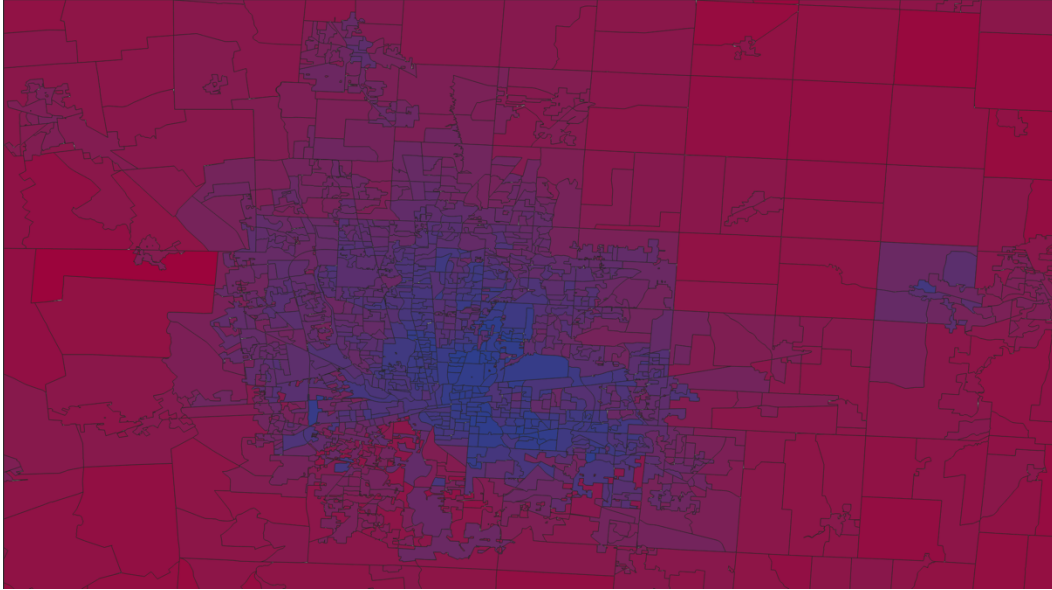


2020 Election by Precinct, Phoenix Metro Area

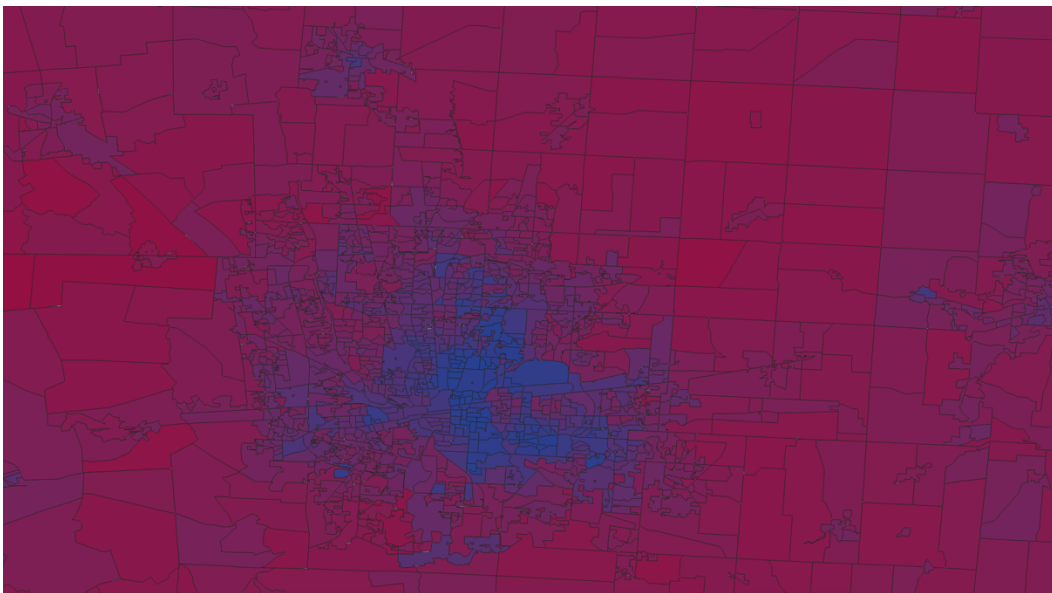


2008 Election by Precinct, Phoenix Metro Area

In the Midwest, Columbus, Ohio is a mixed bag. Biden was certainly able to improve upon Obama's performance in the city, but not to the degree of the other areas profiled thus far. One reason for this deficit could lie with the Republican Party's strength in the Midwest, with Obama being the last Democratic nominee to win Ohio and other Midwestern states with similar demographics. However, Biden was still able to expand Democratic support in Columbus' suburbs and exurbs, consistent with the pattern displayed in the states analyzed above, if only to a lesser degree.



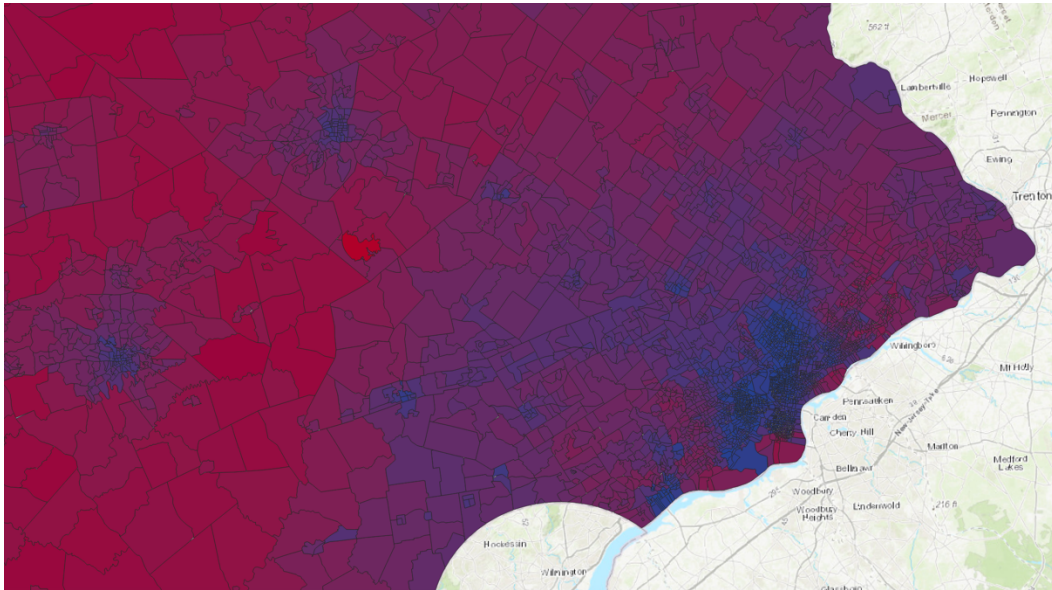
2020 Election by Precinct, Columbus Metro Area



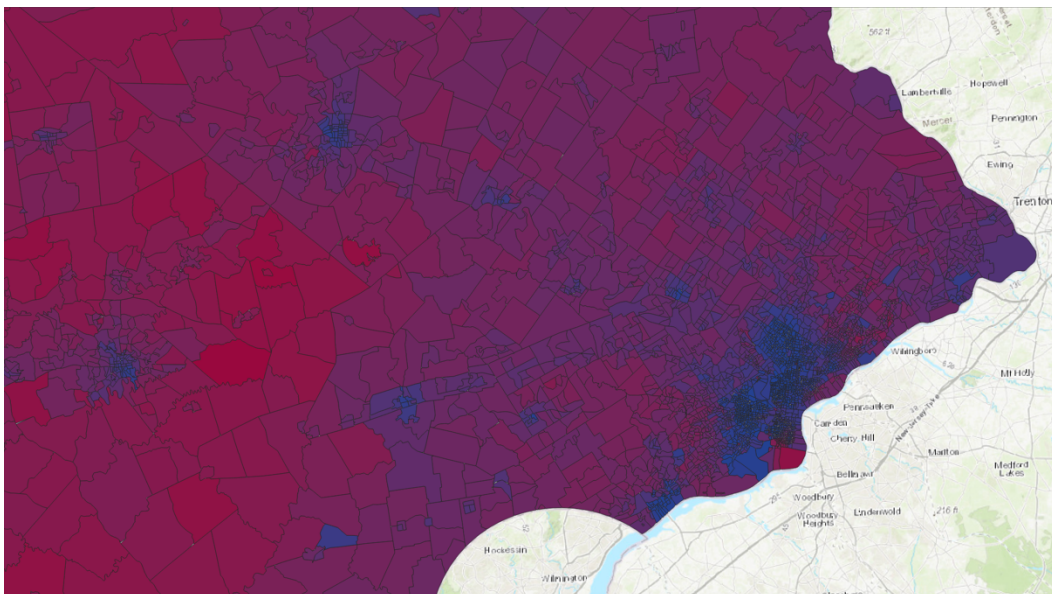
2008 Election by Precinct, Columbus Metro Area

Finally, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's suburbs, a similar story emerges. In the city's immediate suburbs, Biden manages to mostly improve on Obama's margins while still managing his margins at the exurbs. This is an impressive feat, considering that Obama's overall margin in

2008 was over 10 points, while Biden won the state by just over one point. Crucially, Biden won the “Main Line” suburban counties of Bucks, Delaware, and Montgomery.



2020 Election by Precinct, Philadelphia Metro Area



2008 Election by Precinct, Philadelphia Metro Area

Each of these maps works to establish the presence of realignment in the suburbs analyzed; this raises the question of the durability of an increasingly suburban Democratic Party. To this end, suburban voters assign less value to partisanship when deciding which candidate or party to support and more to specific issues that motivate them (Oliver and Ha 2007, 404). In other words, suburban voters possess less loyalty to a given party and are thus more elastic. This factor potentially catalyzed the present post-Obama suburban realignment in the first place. It also means that there is a potential opening for reversion in the suburbs, especially in unfavorable electoral environments.

Governor Glenn Youngkin's victory over former Governor Terry McAuliffe in Virginia's 2021 gubernatorial election exemplifies this principle. According to Professor Lauren Bell, Youngkin managed to substantially lower McAuliffe's margin in suburban counties (Bell 2021, 3), which helped him eke out a narrow victory in a state that Biden won by more than 10 points (Virginia Department of Elections). Bell notes three factors that favored Youngkin's candidacy: McAuliffe's ineffective attempt to nationalize the race, Youngkin's focus on salient local issues, and effective mobilization of voters in key areas (Bell 2021, 2-3).

As mentioned above, these factors strike at the heart of suburban voting behavior. According to Bell, Youngkin was particularly effective at honing his campaign messaging towards suburban Virginians. Most notably, he focused heavily on Virginia's public schools, which were subject to substantial COVID-related restrictions and disruptions. This was a particularly salient message in Northern Virginia, a booming suburban area with some of the nation's best public-school systems, and a corresponding high cost of living. Many residents choose to live in Northern Virginia in part because of these relatively high performing schools. Youngkin was thus, in large part, able to connect with suburban voters who were weary of

COVID restrictions and disruptions that disproportionately impacted Northern Virginia school systems. By contrast, McAuliffe attempted to frame the race as a referendum on Donald Trump and GOP extremism (Bell 2021, 3). For suburban voters who value candidate stances on issues relevant to them, this was an arguably wrong approach from McAuliffe. Together, these influences worked in concert to put Youngkin in the Governor's mansion, ending a years-long GOP drought in statewide elections.

The potential for broader suburban reversion beyond Virginia lays bare the delicate balance that Democrats must strike with suburban voters. These voters are clearly willing to vote for Democrats, as evidenced by their leftward realignment since 2008. Yet, they are clearly willing to either split their ticket or vote for GOP candidates under certain circumstances. Going forward, this is a quandary that Democrats must grapple with or risk ceding suburban voters back to the GOP.

Conclusion

In sum, much has changed in the suburbs over the course of just over a decade. As mentioned in the previous chapter, realignments can happen in degrees or gradation, and that is exactly what has happened in the suburbs. In major metropolitan areas across the United States, suburbanites have substantially realigned towards the Democratic Party, especially during the 2020 election. Biden, recognizing the window of electoral opportunity, was able to modulate his message and offer policies that met suburban voters where they were. These voters were and are particularly valuable for the Democratic Party because they have a generally high degree of mobilization and civic engagement, giving them an edge in lower turnout elections. There are, however, risks to these voters comprising a greater proportion of the Democratic coalition,

namely, the potential for reversion. As seen in Virginia's recent gubernatorial election, many suburban voters are still elastic and capable of being substantially persuaded to revert to the GOP given the right circumstances. Finally, there are other potential realignments on the horizon that could give the GOP the opportunity to transform into a more diverse coalition.

Chapter 4: A Rural Reckoning

In the wake of the 2020 presidential election, Republican operative Josh Holmes was quoted in *The Washington Post*, claiming that if it were possible to “replicate [former President Trump’s] draw amongst rural, working-class voters without the insanity, you have a permanent governing majority” in favor of the Republican Party (Dawsey, Debonis, and Gearan 2021). Of course, Holmes has plenty of motivation to outwardly project confidence about his party’s prospects, but the implications of his claim are nonetheless significant considering the broader history of the Democratic and Republican parties. Consider, for instance, the resumes of past Democratic presidential nominees. Before former President George W. Bush won in 2000, former Vice President and Senator Al Gore represented the State of Tennessee and outgoing President Clinton was governor of Arkansas. Before Gore and Clinton, former President and peanut farmer Jimmy Carter served as governor of Georgia.

Today, only vestiges of this bygone Democratic Party remain, with a handful of Democratic state and federal elected officials representing predominantly rural states or districts (Hopkins 2019). How, then, did this downward trajectory come about? What has changed in the years since Obama was first elected? Do these changes constitute a realignment? These are the critical questions that this chapter will seek to address within the ensuing discussion. Among other topics, the discussion will invoke campaigns, candidates, and policy. Complementing this chapter’s evaluation of voting trends will be analysis of electoral performances using GIS maps.

From the Fifty State Strategy to 50 + 1

In 2005, former Vermont governor and Democratic National Committee (DNC) chairman Howard Dean proposed a ground-up revitalization of the Democratic Party’s infrastructure. The plan came to be colloquially known as the “fifty-state strategy.” As Professor Elaine Kamarck

(2006) explains, the strategy made investments in each state's Democratic Party: "Both red states and blue states got attention. In Kansas they focused on the re-election of Governor Kathleen Sebelius; in South Dakota they focused on recruiting 90 legislative candidates compared to only 66 in the previous midterm election years and on defeating a ballot measure that would have banned all abortions ... And New York State got organizers who focused on the often-neglected Republican counties in upstate New York" (Kamarck 2006, 2). Kamarck's analysis strikes at the heart of the strategy's ethos. By adopting a comprehensive approach that was inclusive of traditionally ignored rural areas, Dean was able to orchestrate a "Democratic sweep" in the 2006 midterms, with majorities in nearly half of the country's state legislatures (Kamarck 2006, 3).

During his first presidential campaign, Obama replicated Dean's dogma and invested campaign resources into mostly rural states that were not traditionally Democratic (Galvin 2008, 19). On face value, this strategy worked, as Obama rode to victory as the last Democratic presidential nominee to win in Iowa, Ohio, Indiana, and North Carolina. Yet, amid broader shifts evidenced by Hopkins' (2019) data, the fifty-state strategy did not produce the Democratic equivalent of Holmes' "permanent governing majority."

Instead, Democrats today are caught in the thralls of an ongoing loss of rural support (Hopkins 2019), leaving the party grasping for answers. Indeed, infamous gaffes from prominent party figures strike at the heart of this quandary. Consider Obama's 2008 remarks at a San Francisco, California fundraiser during his primary campaign, for example:

You go into these small towns in Pennsylvania and, like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing's replaced them. And they fell through the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration, and each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are gonna regenerate and they have not. And it's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations (Smith, 2008).

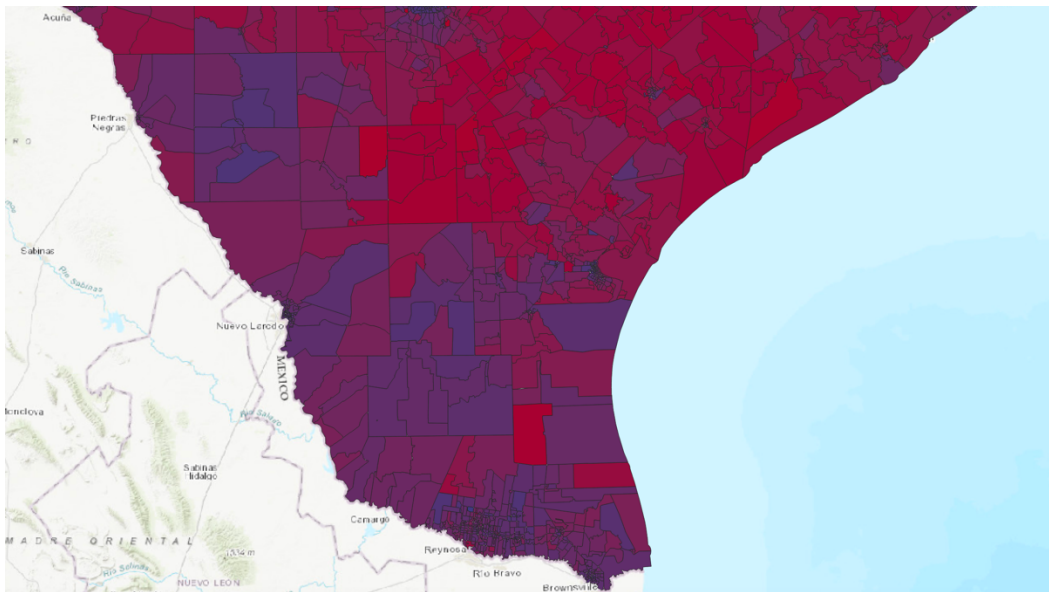
Regardless of the veracity of his claims, Obama's message laid bare the party's awareness of declining rural support that, unbeknownst to them, had yet to fully kick in. As this chapter will demonstrate, Obama's cognizance of this dynamic marked the beginning, not the end of this ongoing shift. According to Pew's survey of validated voters, former Senator and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was underwater with rural voters by 25 points, while Biden's margin worsened to -32-points (Hartig, Igielnik, and Keeter 2021, 13). This is a stark difference from 2008, where Obama lost rural voters by only eight points (Rosentiel 2008).

The erosion of rural Democratic support has carried over down ballot as well, with the defeats of Representatives like Colin Peterson (MN) and Anthony Brindisi (NY), as well as the narrow victory of Representative Cheri Bustos (IL) – all Democratic Representatives who represent(ed) mostly rural districts. Indeed, rural Democratic politicians are becoming a rare breed. As of this writing, the party's majority-making U.S. Senator from West Virginia is Joe Manchin, who touted a National Rifle Association endorsement, boasted of suing the Environmental Protection Agency, and shot a mock version of Obama's "cap and trade bill" in a single campaign ad (Manchin, 2010). Hopkins makes an analogous argument in his paper with the U.S. House Democratic caucus, writing that from 1992 to 2018, "the share of rural districts declined from 24 percent to 5 percent of all Democratic seats. As this chapter will demonstrate, based on overall data and analysis of GIS maps included below, rural areas have broadly experienced a bona fide realignment, punctuated by a continuance of deepening Republican gains.

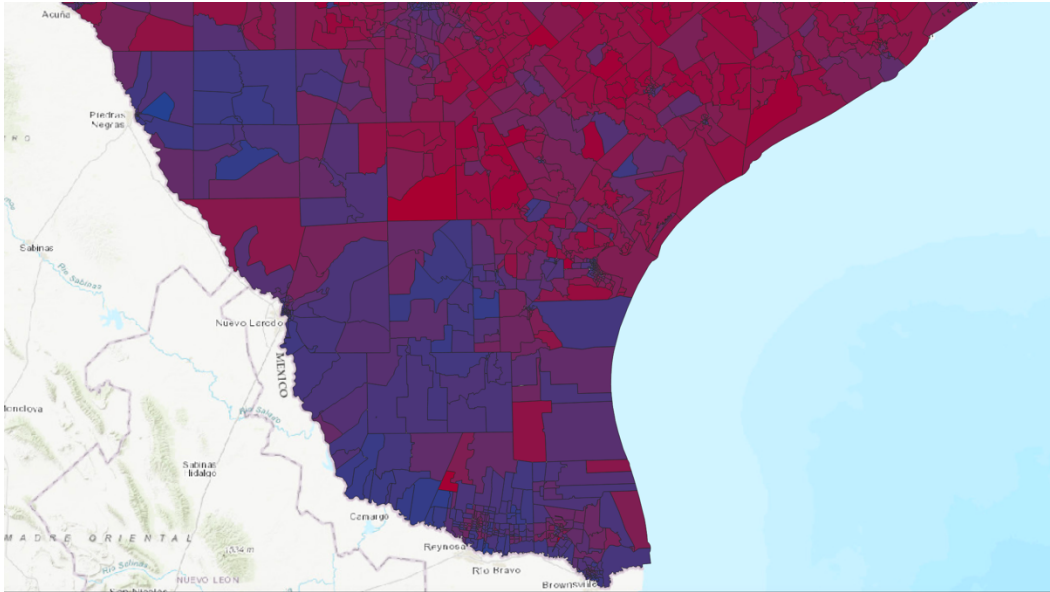
GIS Analysis

Like the previous chapter, this section will compare the 2008 and 2020 elections, viewing them through the lens of realignment. Again, the main goal of this chapter is to determine whether a realignment – typified by significant and widespread shifts in regional or geographic partisanship – has taken place in the rural areas analyzed below. Furthermore, this chapter will aim to compare the shifts in suburbs depicted in the previous chapter with the changes seen in rural areas.

First, Texas’ rural areas present a simultaneously fascinating yet confusing case study that is ripe for discussion. To this end, the Rio Grande Valley (RGV), located in deep South Texas, is an important area that is rapidly trending towards Republicans. As seen in the maps below, Biden drastically underperformed Obama’s 2008 margins.



2020 Election by Precinct, Rio Grande Valley

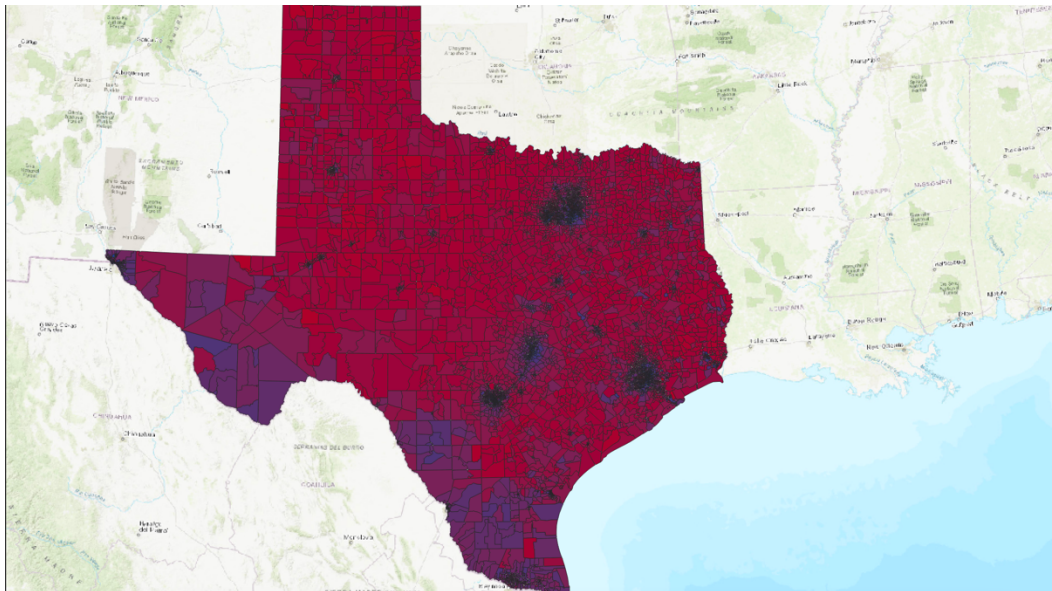


2008 Election by Precinct, Rio Grande Valley

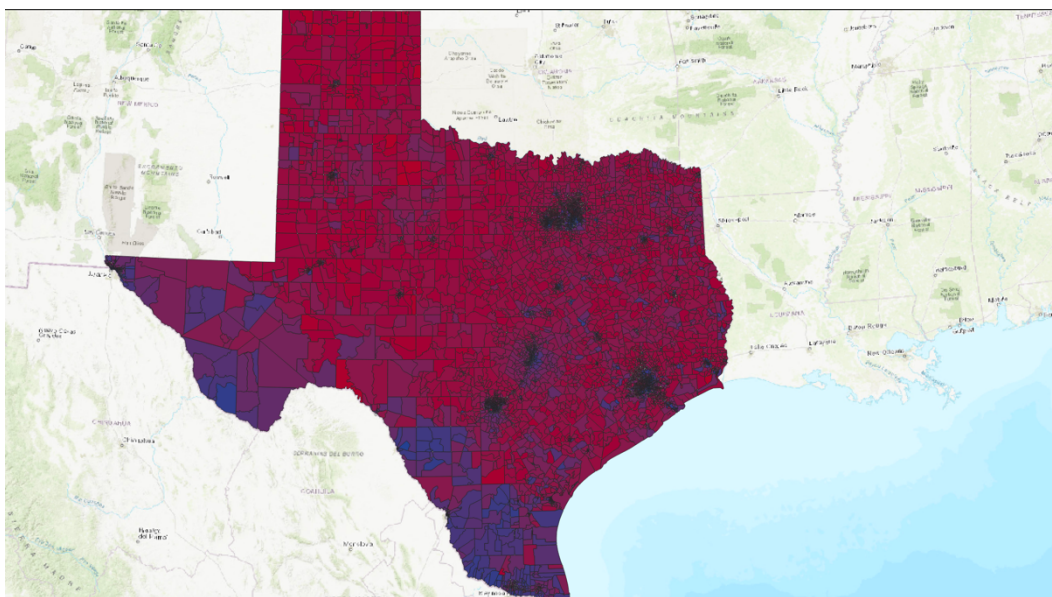
In these insets of the RGV, we can see a clear shift towards Republicans by the 2020 election, signified by solidly blue precincts in 2008 turning purple or red in 2020. The RGV is typified by a predominantly Latino electorate and is influenced by the region’s proximity to the border with Mexico.⁵ The region’s rightward lurch is thus surprising, given the Democratic party’s focus on Trump’s hardline border and immigration policies. Scholars from the Latino Data Project conclude that data from the RGV “suggest that the Republican victory in [Texas] may well have been the result of Latino support for the Republican candidate” (Latino Data Platform, 2021). Democrats have also lost footing in other rural areas. In the central and eastern

⁵ See generally: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/28/us/politics/border-grievance-politics.html>

portions of the state, many purple precincts have now turned bright red, signifying a loss in competitiveness for Democrats.



2020 Election by Precinct, Texas

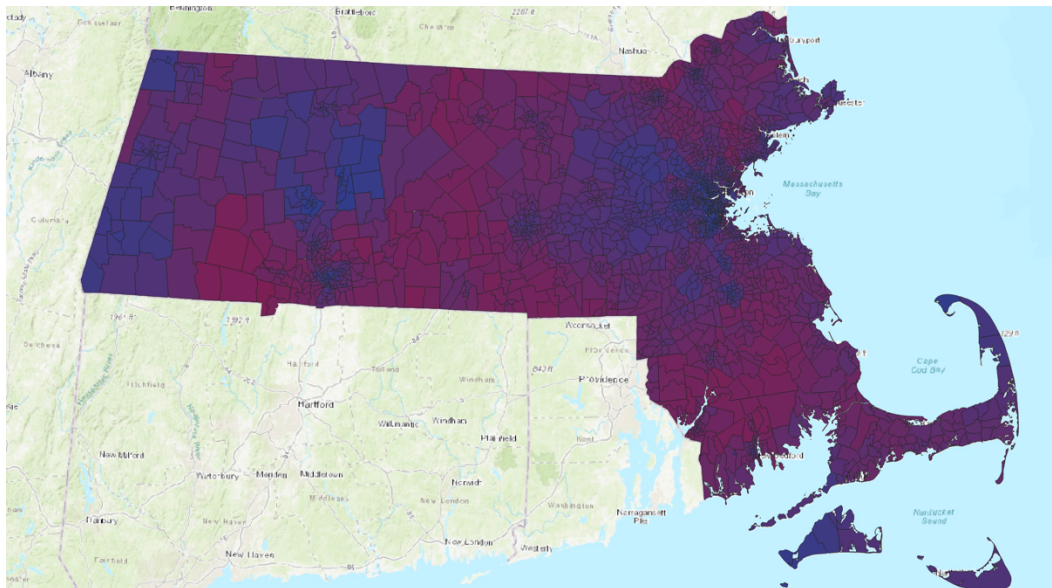


2008 Election by Precinct, Texas

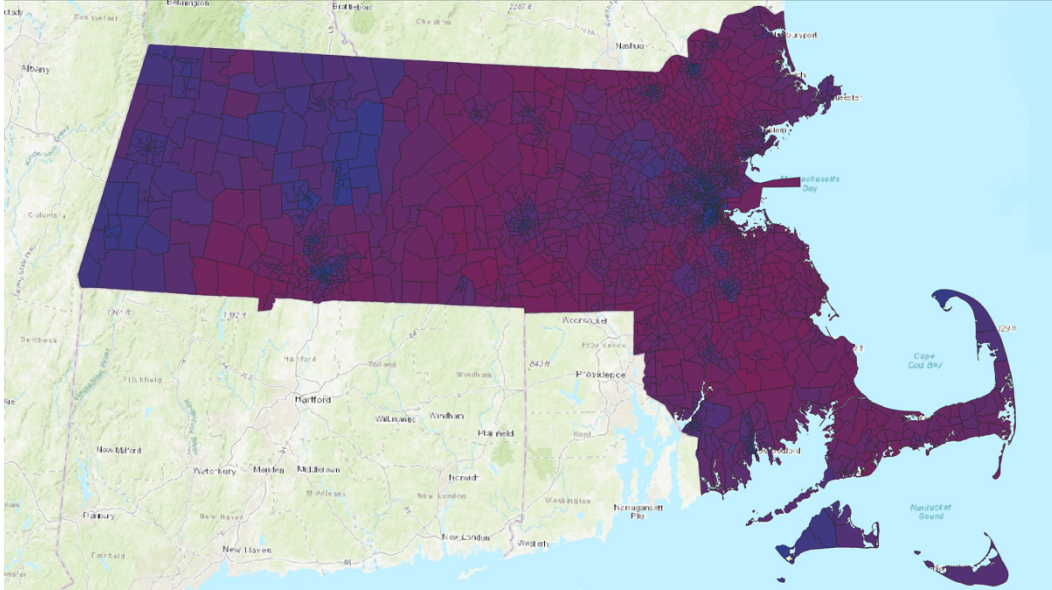
Like the realignment in the suburbs, it appears that rural areas have seen an overall reduction in Democratic support in Texas. Thus, it appears that geographic sorting has

influenced or perhaps even induced the realignment in rural areas of Texas, resulting in geographic polarization and a more homogenous electoral landscape.

In Massachusetts, a different result emerges. In Berkshire and Hampshire counties, located in the western part of the state, Republicans saw minimal inroads. Though it is impossible to precisely determine the reasons behind the absence of a realignment, the population density of these counties relative to rural counties in other states could offer an explanation. Another possible explanation lies within the partisanship of the New England region, which is seeing a decline in Republican support writ large.



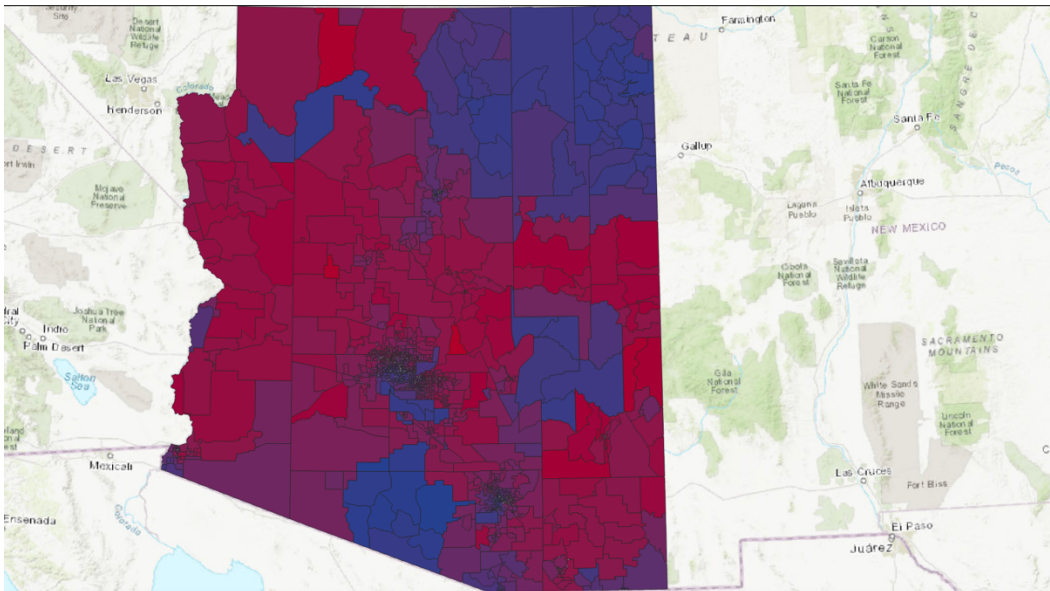
2020 Election by Precinct, Massachusetts



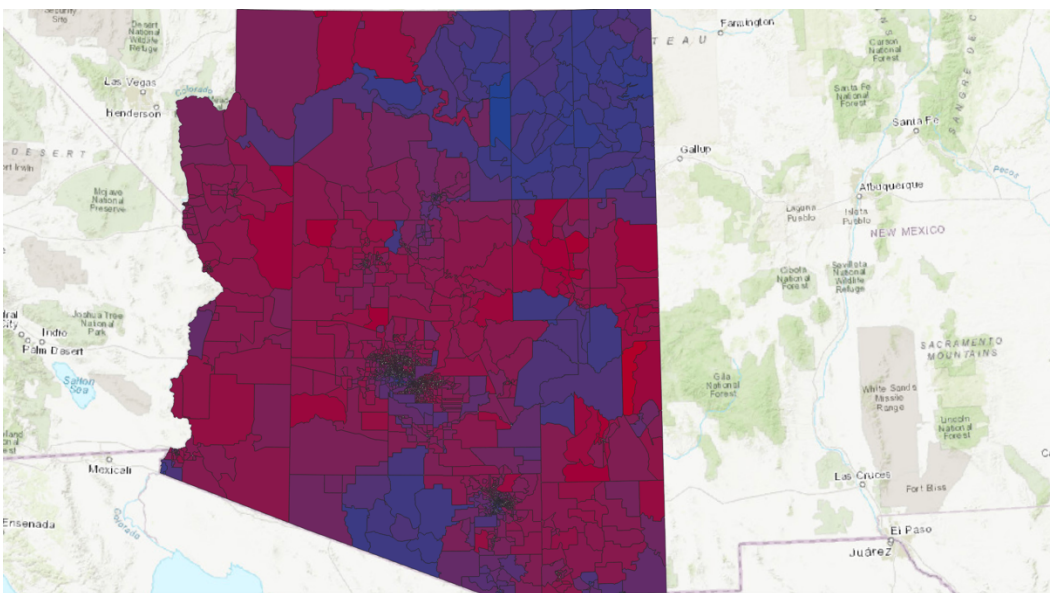
2008 Election by Precinct, Massachusetts

Arizona is yet another excellent example of a rural realignment, with important caveats. As seen below, Trump improved on McCain's margin in the central, western, and northwestern areas in the state. In Mohave County located in the northwestern part of the state, for example, Trump improved on McCain's 32.7% margin by a whopping 18.5 percentage points. However, realignment did not seem to affect Biden in Navajo and Apache counties, home to several Native

American Reservations. Thus, while majority-white rural areas swung to the right, racially diverse counties in Arizona appear to have maintained the status quo.



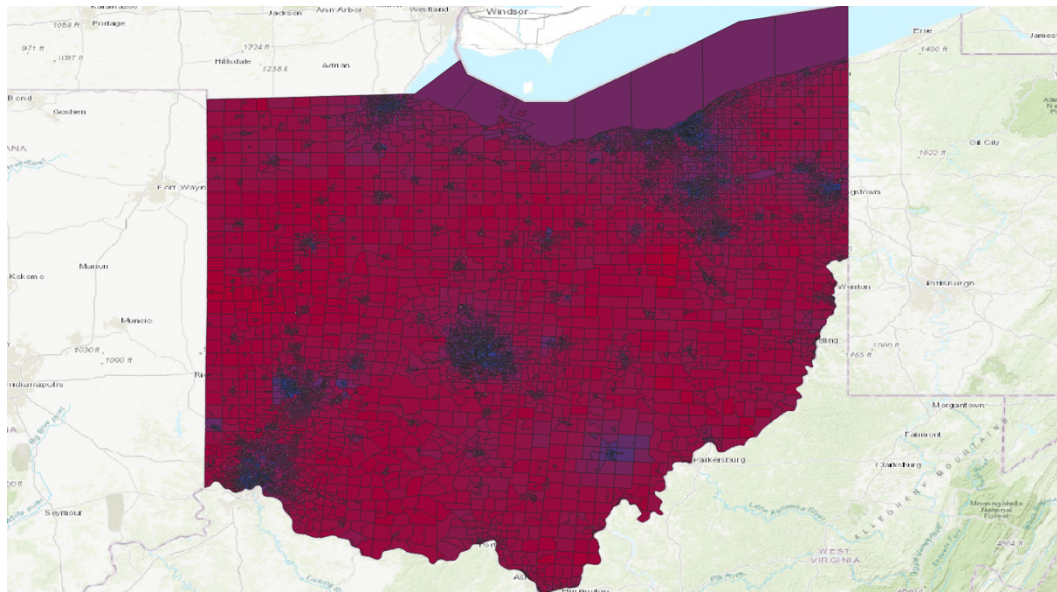
2020 Election by Precinct, Arizona



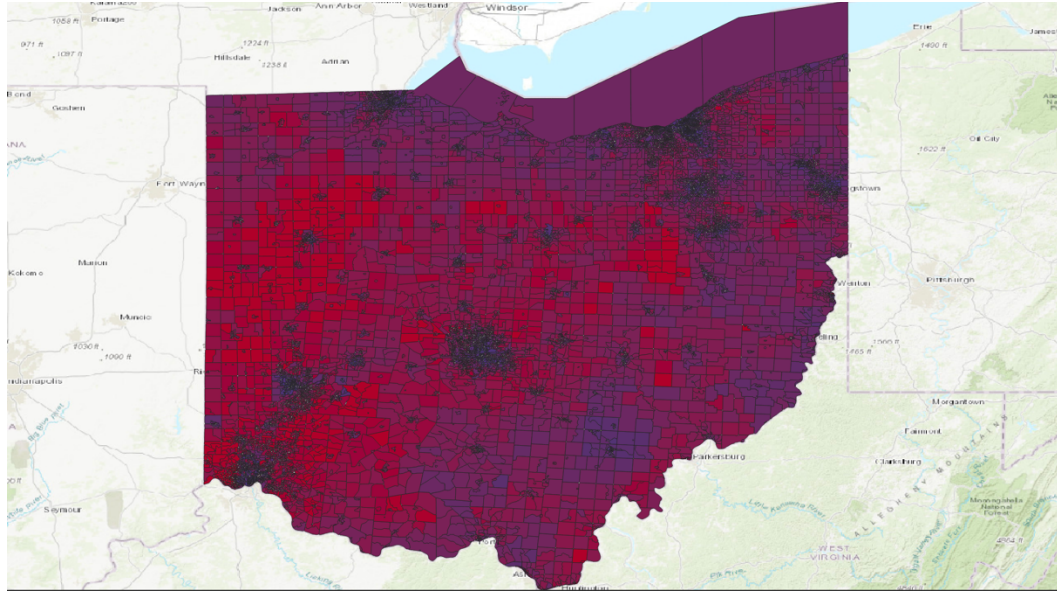
2008 Election by Precinct, Arizona

Moving to the Midwest, Ohio is yet another state where realignment has hit Democrats hard in rural regions. Indeed, rural Ohio Democrats are becoming increasingly rare. Perhaps the most prominent example of rural realignment lies with U.S. Rep. Tim

Ryan, whose populist brand of politics seeks to champion rural priorities. Ryan's seat is primarily located in the Mahoning Valley. In 2012 Ryan was reelected to Congress with a margin of over 45 percentage points (Ohio Secretary of State). Eight years later, Ryan was again reelected, but with only a seven-point margin (Ohio Secretary of State). Yet, the change in Ryan's electoral performance is merely one example of where realignment has occurred. Indeed, Ryan's dwindling support is emblematic of a much larger issue for the Democratic Party in rural Ohio. As seen in the maps below, the realignment has broadly affected much of the state – resulting in a high degree of geographic polarization. For instance, the 2020 map illustrates how realignment has particularly impacted southeastern Ohio, which is part of Appalachia.

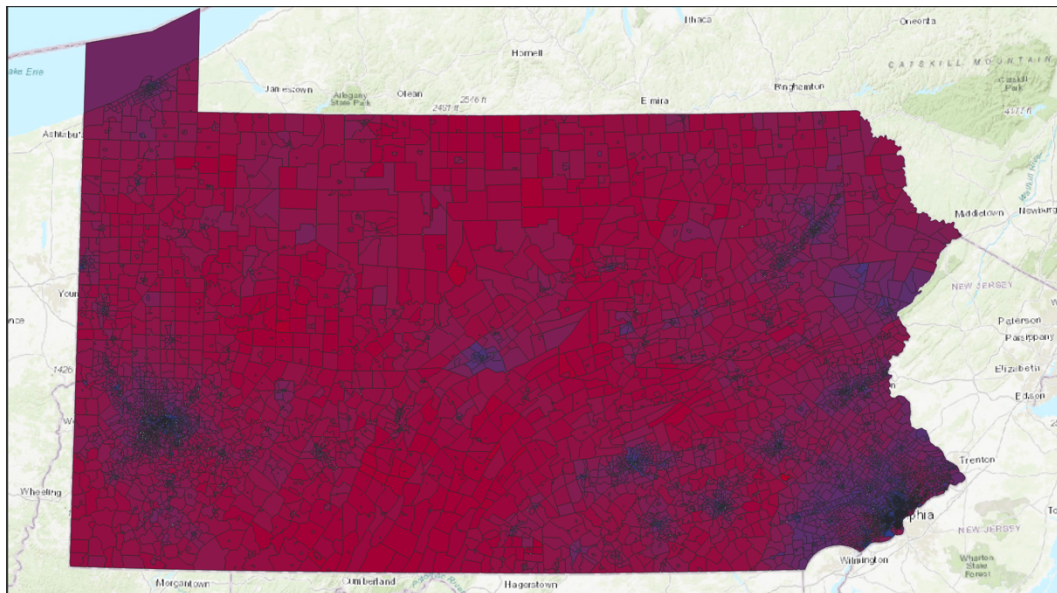


2020 Election by Precinct, Ohio

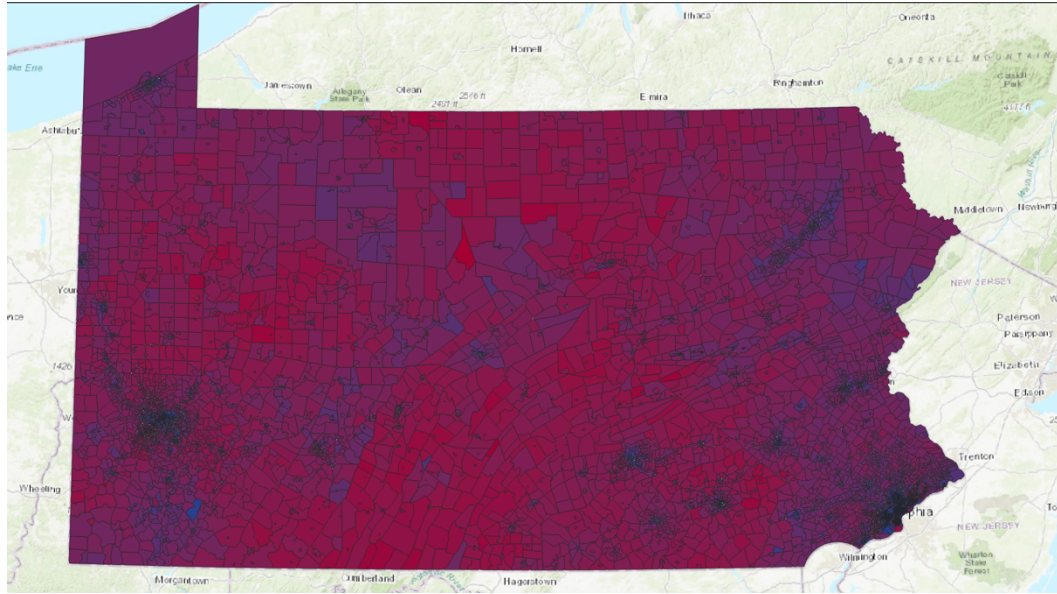


2008 Election by Precinct, Ohio

Pennsylvania has seen similar changes to Ohio, with Democratic losses particularly pronounced in the central and northern areas of the state. As seen in the maps below, these rural areas are quite far removed from major population centers like Erie, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia.



2020 Election by Precinct, Pennsylvania



2008 Election by Precinct, Pennsylvania

Conclusion

In conclusion, Republicans are clearly ascendant in the rural areas examined within this chapter. In the Sunbelt, Northeast, and Midwest, Republicans have managed to earn massive margins of support among the mostly white working-class voters that reside in Republican-dominated counties. The picture becomes murkier in racially diverse rural areas. On the one hand, Republicans performed exceptionally well among voters in the RGV in 2020, but Democrats maintained the status quo in the northeastern rural counties in Arizona, home to several Native American reservations, and in left-leaning Massachusetts. Thus, a multifaceted landscape emerges, with Republicans broadly managing to do well in a range of areas and communities, but Democrats managing to hold on in key areas.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis has sought to establish whether realignments have taken place in suburban and rural areas. Using a randomized sample, I found that suburban areas have broadly swung towards the Democratic Party, while the Republican Party has found increased support in rural areas with the notable exceptions of counties with high proportions of Native Americans in Arizona and rural Massachusetts. Such findings were facilitated by shifting away from traditional conceptions of realignment theory and moving toward analysis of regional shifts within the electorate. These findings raise important implications for each party's coalition now and into the future.

Consequences of Suburban and Rural Realignment

Although no one can predict the future course of an increasingly suburban Democratic Party with complete accuracy, we can draw insights from both existing literature on suburban voters and the analysis contained within this thesis.

Siphoning suburban voters away from the GOP has important and lasting consequences for the Democratic Party and its candidates. Suburban voters are a unique subset of the overall voting population, with many distinguishing characteristics. For instance, Oliver and Ha (2007) found that suburban voters are highly mobilized, civically engaged, and more informed about elections and candidates. Bringing these energized voters into the fold is, on balance, a boon for the Democratic Party, especially in elections with lower turnout. Indeed, Oliver and Ha (2007) detail this dynamic: "Where turnout is low, elections will be driven more by the concerns of motivated stakeholders rather than by the general group membership. In other words, the lower the turnout, the less likely that an election will hinge on a 'median voter' and the more likely that it will be determined by a highly motivated group" (Oliver and Ha 2007, 404).

This dynamic underscores the value of winning the support of suburban voters for Democrats. When suburban voters compose a greater portion of the electorate, the election is consequently more likely to be decided by which party they support in the aggregate. In practice, the behavior of suburban voters allows parties to “bank” votes from reliable and civically engaged voters and, in turn, focus their energy and resources on winning other constituencies among the electorate.

Rural realignment also has several important consequences worth discussing. First, there is a clear discrepancy between the electoral efficiency of Republicans and Democrats. An ever-present maxim in American politics is that land does not vote, people do. Yet, the American electoral system does not award legislative seats by overall margin; rather, they are awarded based on margins within district boundaries. When partisans are distributed in an efficient manner and sorted to win a majority of districts, it follows that their party wins a majority of seats in a legislature. Conversely, when a party’s voters are distributed inefficiently, it tends to suffer from “wasted votes” – votes that are helpful for statewide races, but mostly unhelpful for elections tied to a specific geographical area. Thus, as seen in most of the states profiled, rural realignment has resulted in a higher degree of electoral efficiency now versus 2008. Of course, this “trade-off” is not advantageous in states with higher degrees of density but is highly advantageous in rural states.

In the context of rural realignment, efficiency gaps result in a marked difference between statewide performance and legislative representation. This leads to important knock-on effects that can be quite consequential. One such effect is arguably an entrenchment of partisan power on the state and federal levels through partisan gerrymandering – at least in most states that delegate control over redistricting to legislatures. This can generate a vicious cycle, whereby

officials can (a) draw state legislative districts that protect their party's majority and (b) draw congressional maps with favorable boundaries for new and existing seats. The ability to gerrymander is further facilitated by the geographic polarization catalyzed by realignments. As seen in the maps above, most rural voters analyzed in this thesis increasingly reside in politically homogenous communities, map drawers can draw compact maps that nominally preserve "communities of interest" but are still gerrymandered. There are also more practical effects for parties that face favorable or unfavorable election results in rural areas. A party that stands to gain from rural realignment naturally gains a deeper bench of candidates for higher offices on the state and federal levels. The other party, of course, is forced to grapple with the opposite problem.

Limitations of This Thesis

While this thesis' findings are significant and impactful, there are also several important limitations to discuss. First, this thesis does not address the 2012 and 2016 general elections. While there are some interesting dynamics to explore in each election, I argue that the overall trajectory of the respective realignments remains intact. To this end, maintaining relevancy of my research was a key consideration. Rather than including redundant discussion of overarching trends in 2012 and 2016, I chose the 2020 election as my endpoint for my analysis. Focusing on the 2020 election gives key insights into contemporaneous and future trends. There were also logistical considerations at play in the decision to omit both elections. Time constraints, for example, prevented the creation of maps from these elections. Another limitation of this thesis stems from the impracticability of analyzing each suburb and rural community to determine if this thesis' findings are consistent with nationwide trends. Furthermore, due to the demonstrably

fluid nature of electoral coalitions, it is also impossible to conclusively determine if these trends will continue, reverse, or accelerate in the future.

Areas for Future Research

Finally, this thesis, as part of its original research contribution, offers new directions for the body of literature around realignment theory. My thesis represents a slightly new conception of realignment theory. For one, in evaluating whether a realignment has occurred, it does not prescribe a binary evaluation wherein a specific election must satisfy a list of criteria. I propose a different approach, focusing on geography first. By drilling down to subsets of the electorate (in the case of my thesis, suburban and rural voters) rather than evaluating elections based simply on magnitude of partisan support statewide or nationally, we can see realignment theory in a different light.

To be sure, there is still considerable room for future research and exploration around the subject matter of this thesis. First, realignment theory could be used to analyze other subsets of the electorate, such as race or ethnicity. One such group ripe for examination is Hispanic voters. Trump's notable inroads with Hispanic voters in 2020 speaks to the potential value of studying realignment among these voters. In the months leading up to the 2020 election, Trump's campaign released a 30 second ad entitled "Por Trump," set to the tune of an upbeat song encouraging Latino voters to vote for Trump's reelection (Trump October 2020). The lyrics to the song implored Latino voters to consider Trump's economic policies and cast a Republican vote for the betterment of their families (Trump October 2020). On face value, the ad's simple message is hardly a blip in the context of the 2020 campaign. The ad was significant, however, as it implicitly asked Latino voters to disregard Trump's immigration and border policies and

instead focus on Trump's economic track record. By all indications, it appears that this message was effective, as Trump's margin with Hispanic voters improved by 17 percent (Hartig, Igielnik, and Keeter 2021, 8).

This shift was most dramatic in Florida's Miami-Dade County, where Latino voters comprise roughly 70 percent of the county's population, according to research from Professor Laird Bergard at the Latino Data Project from the City University of New York (CUNY). In Miami-Dade, Biden's raw vote total decreased by 0.8 percent versus 2016, while Trump increased his by nearly 60 percent (Bergard 2021, 21). In a county as large as Miami Dade and as a large part of a battleground state, these changes are very consequential and could be considered a realignment, at least among the county's substantial Cuban population.

The picture becomes somewhat murkier outside of Florida, suggesting a divergence among different Hispanic groups and nationalities. The CUNY report speculates, for instance, that while Hispanic support for the GOP in Texas and Florida may have contributed to statewide victories in those states, "the Democratic victories in Arizona, Georgia, Wisconsin, and even Pennsylvania may well have been because of increased Latino voter turnout and support for President Biden, despite the fact that these states have relatively smaller Latino populations compared with Florida and Texas" (5-6). These trends indicate that further changes could very well be on the horizon.

Another area that deserves further examination is the potential link between density and partisanship. An intensive study of this relationship could involve using GIS or a regression analysis to compare rates of partisan support to the density of various communities or regions. A study to this effect could be valuable in investigating links between one's community and partisanship.

Closing Thoughts

In conclusion, much can be learned from this thesis' examination of suburban and rural voting patterns from 2008 to 2020. Indeed, each realignment has benefits and risks for both parties. For the Democratic Party, the influx of suburban voters into the party is a boon in terms of gaining reliable, high propensity voters at the top of the ticket, if they remain aligned with the party. This advantage is especially powerful in low-turnout elections, where suburban voters are more likely to be the difference-makers. This allows the party to focus their efforts elsewhere, particularly on turning out other key groups. However, these voters also tend to vote in favor of their own interests and tend to hold moderate or conservative views on social policy, raising the prospect of a backlash or reversion to the Republican Party.

Conversely, rural voters are also a boon for Republicans. Though these voters participate in the civic process to a lesser degree than suburban voters, Republicans have been able to gain a massive geographical advantage in some of the states examined in this thesis. The rural realignment has consequently fueled a yawning efficiency gap between Democrats and Republicans. In turn, this development has empowered Republican candidates down ballot, and arguably entrenched Republican control of state legislative offices through redistricting and gerrymandering.

In a broader sense, though, it is worth considering both realignments in the context of American politics writ large. Based on this thesis' research, it becomes clear that communities are becoming increasingly politically homogenous. As a result, it is increasingly possible to predict one's partisan affiliation based on their address or zip code alone. Is this a healthy development for American politics? Have we, as voters and partisans, collectively created our

own geographic echo chambers? These questions certainly merit closer examination and discussion.

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