Ohio, Texas, and the Future of American Politics

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The emergence of the urban-rural divide in American politics over the past few decades is a critical development in America's voting patterns. Today, rural areas vote predominantly for Republicans, while urban areas vote for Democrats. As a result, America's suburbs have increasingly become a swing region. I discussed this development in broad terms in a previous report. In this report, I look at the political development of two states—Ohio and Texas—which illustrate how “urbanicity” has transformed the United States’ political makeup.

While Ohio has historically been considered the nation’s premier swing state, its votes have become more concentrated in rural areas, thereby strengthening the GOP’s performance statewide. Rural areas began moving toward the Republican Party in the 1970s, a movement that accelerated in 2016 with Donald Trump on the ballot. On the other hand, the rapid growth of Texas’ cities has pushed the state into more competitive territory for the Democrats. Despite the rural and small-town vote shifting toward Republicans, the leftward bolt in Texas’ large cities and megacities has contributed to better performance for the Democrats. If these trends continue in future elections, Ohio will become solidly red, while Texas may go blue in the next few cycles.
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This report is part two of a four-part series on the status of American politics and of the two parties. The first report focused on the emergence of the rural-urban divide in contemporary America and the transformation of the suburbs from a bastion of conservative sentiment to a swing region. This installment explores two states that serve as synecdoches for the larger transformations occurring in the US: Ohio and Texas. The final two reports will expand on the themes introduced in the previous installments and offer broader claims about the nature of political development in the 2020s.

In 2020, Democrats were hopeful about carrying Texas. This prospect would have seemed absurd to most neutral observers a decade ago, as John McCain had carried the state handily in 2008 despite Republicans being wiped out on the national level. At the same time, Ohio was considered a long shot for Democrats in 2020. This, too, would have seemed improbable just a decade earlier. Ohio was the ultimate swing state. It had been at the center of the parties’ electoral strategies for decades and had only voted for the loser in presidential elections twice since the 1890s.

Why is Ohio moving toward Republicans while Texas moves into competitive territory? Understanding these disparate moves helps as a transition from the first report, which concerned itself with national trends, to the third and fourth reports in this series, which look at the electoral prospects of the parties. In other words, this report takes the national trends discussed in the first report and maps them onto states, which is where democracy in the United States takes place.

As an introductory housekeeping matter, this report assumes a reasonable level of familiarity with the basic geographies of the states (where cities are located, where key counties lie, etc.). For people who may want some help, maps of Ohio and Texas are located in the appendix, with key counties and major core-based statistical areas (CBSAs) labeled.

Texas Political Development, 1924–2020

When one thinks of Texas, dusty plains, tumbleweeds, longhorn steer, and cowboys likely come to mind. However, this is largely divorced from the reality of the state today (though there are still plenty of longhorns), but there never was a time when this image characterized the state as a whole. Instead, this is a mostly accurate description of Texas north and west of the Balcones Escarpment—a ridge that runs diagonally across the state in a southeast-to-northeast direction—particularly before the discovery of oil. The population of the state has always clustered along the coastal plain.

The coastal plain itself is maddeningly diverse. An entire report could be written on its physical geography alone. To simplify matters significantly, the piney woods region in the northeastern portion of the state resembles the Deep South, both physically and politically, while the fertile grasslands of east central Texas support much of the state’s population. To the south of San Antonio, the Rio Grande Valley is a desert, with many similarities to western Texas.

Regardless of this geographic diversity, politically, the state voted for only one party after
Reconstruction: Democrats. From 1871 to 1961, the state never sent a Republican to the Senate. It waited another 18 years to elect a Republican governor. Even at the county level, this state was deeply blue, as Figure 1 displays.

As you can see with the 1924 Republican lean of Texas, little of the state was remotely competitive for Republicans. (Partisan lean is explained in more detail in the endnotes.) There was a pocket of Republican strength in the Hill Country, which was settled by antislavery Germans in the 19th century, while Republican machines still retained strength in a few counties along the Rio Grande.

This would change in the next election, though. In 1928, Democrats nominated New York Gov. Al Smith, whose Catholicism and strong anti-Prohibition stance cost him dearly in the South. Herbert Hoover carried Texas, becoming the first Republican ever to do so. But Hoover's vote share wasn't evenly distributed, as Figure 1 demonstrates. The gulf plain remained heavily blue, voting for the Catholic Smith despite his religion and permissive stance on Prohibition.

Two decades later, political scientist V. O. Key would note that throughout the South, Smith held on in areas with the highest African American populations; the prospect of Republican initiatives on civil rights held more salience here and overrode concerns about religion or alcohol. At the same time, Hoover's performance in the cities skyrocketed, enabling him to carry Dallas and Tarrant (Fort Worth) counties and almost put Harris (Houston) in his column.
Not all the news was good news for Republicans. The Catholic, German, and Hispanic populations swung toward the Democrats, helping make southern Texas a Democratic stronghold for the next 90 years. The Lone Star State’s only Republican member of Congress, Rep. Harry Wurzbach (R-TX), who was elected in the Warren G. Harding landslide of 1920 in a district that stretched from the Hill Country to the Gulf Coast by way of San Antonio, lost his seat. Overall, 1928 served as a warning to Texas Democrats that if their party became too urban and urbane, the votes of Southern Democrats could not be counted on.

Twenty-four years later, Republican candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower, a Texas native, would once again put the state into the Republican column. Eastern Texas continued to resist the Republican advance, while southern Texas largely remained a Democratic redoubt. But strong Republican showings in the western Texas oil fields, combined with growing urban areas, were enough to keep the state red. While the 1952 map in Figure 1 is probably a bit bluer overall than its 1928 version, the growth of the cities made up for the difference; the counties containing Dallas, Fort Worth, and Houston (Dallas, Tarrant, and Harris, respectively) cast 17 percent of the vote in 1928. By 1952, they combined for 27 percent of the vote.

This basic map repeated itself in fairly narrow Republican wins and losses in the Lone Star State throughout the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. In 1960 (Figure 1), Richard Nixon almost carried the state, notwithstanding Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson’s (D-TX) position on the ticket, with a map that strongly resembled the 1952 map. As shown in Figure 2, in 1976, Gerald Ford almost won the state based on his strength in the urban areas. And in 1980, Ronald Reagan won with a map that looked suspiciously like Eisenhower’s 28 years earlier.

The essential similarity of these maps tells us something useful regarding the nature of the Southern realignment. Although it is often presented as something that occurred suddenly, because of the GOP’s Southern strategy that grew out of the backlash to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, in fact it developed gradually over time. The same pattern appears in elections such as 1928 (when the GOP was still the party of civil rights) and 1952 (when both parties presented themselves as pro-civil rights). It was apparent in elections such as 1956 (not shown), after Chief Justice Earl Warren, the 1948 Republican vice presidential candidate and Eisenhower’s first appointment to the bench, penned an opinion desegregating public schools, and in 1960, after a Republican administration committed to forcibly integrating those schools if need be. It appeared in 1980, with a Republican presidential candidate who spoke earnestly about the importance of “states’ rights.”

The Democratic coalition in Texas remained anchored in the piney woods of rural eastern Texas.
well into the 1980s, and the region continued to send moderate Democrats to Congress into the 2000s. This is not at all to say that the Southern strategy narrative is a myth; everything in the South touches on race in some way, and the GOP undoubtedly moved rightward on race as Democrats moved leftward. Reality is often messy and complicated, and the reality of race in the South likely interacted with other factors as much as it was a stand-alone cause.

Rural western Texas finally began to realign in earnest in the 1990s. By 2012, the state presented as a red monolith (Figure 3). While liberals hoped Texas would eventually become blue due to the fast-growing Hispanic population—examined in more detail in the third report—the evidence that this was actually happening in the Lone Star State was pretty thin. Democrats dominated in the Rio Grande Valley and the area around Austin, but otherwise the state was a sea of red.

If there was a bright spot emerging for the Democrats, it was that the large urban areas were no longer to the right of the state’s center. In fact, Dallas County was a touch to the left of the country as a whole. In Texas, which is a heavily urban state, that fact was promising for Andrew Jackson’s party. At the same time, the suburban counties that ring the Dallas–Fort Worth metroplex and Houston remained overwhelmingly red, allowing Mitt Romney to carry the state by 15 points while losing nationally by four. Two years later, Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) won reelection by 25 points, while Gov. Greg Abbott defeated a well-funded, high-profile Democratic challenger by 20 points. Once again, the suburbs provided the core of Republican support.

And then it all changed. In 2016, Donald Trump carried the state by just nine points, while in 2020, he won by a little under six points. How did this happen? Looking at the change in the partisan lean of the state’s counties helps explain this (Figure 4).

Much of Texas was fairly stable or even moved a touch toward Trump during these years. But the densely populated I-35 corridor from San Antonio to Dallas–Fort Worth, Houston, and Waco all moved against Republicans. Most ominously for Republicans, Collin and Denton Counties (northern Dallas suburbs) also moved against the Republicans, as did Fort Bend and Brazoria Counties to the south and west of Houston. Even Montgomery County, long a GOP mainstay (Romney carried it by 61 points), swung leftist. Republicans were losing the suburbs.

Drilling down to voting district and congressional district levels provides a clearer picture (Figure 5). The Democratic vote share didn’t actually improve all that much in these areas so much as Trump’s vote share dropped. For example, in Texas’ 31st district, located in suburban Austin, Hillary Clinton’s vote share exceeded Barack Obama’s by only two points. (She earned 40 percent compared to his 38 percent.) Trump’s vote share plummeted, however, to 53 percent from Romney’s 60 percent. Gary Johnson’s 5 percent vote share helped turn a 22-point Romney district into a 13-point Trump district, without the Democratic performance increasing appreciably. Indeed, Johnson’s vote was concentrated in areas with...
Figure 4. Change in Republican Lean of Texas Counties, 2012–16

Note: Red represents shift toward Republican. The scale is truncated at 10 percent in either direction.

Figure 5. Republican Share, Two-Party Vote, Texas Metro Areas, 2012–16

Note: Red represents Republican.
many upper-middle-class suburbanites: northwestern Austin, north central Dallas, and western Houston. This should be unsurprising, as Johnson’s and running mate Bill Weld’s internal polling showed that three-quarters of their voters preferred Trump to Clinton. Johnson gave an outlet to disaffected Republicans who disliked Trump but couldn’t stomach Clinton either.

In 2018 and 2020, however, different alignments emerged in the suburbs (Figure 6). The blue-purple blob in the middle of Dallas has expanded and now encompasses almost all of Dallas County while spreading substantially into Collin and Denton Counties. Southwestern Houston, a Republican redoubt since George H. W. Bush won the newly created seventh district in 1966, is now almost entirely bereft of solidly red voting districts. The outskirts of Travis County (Austin) are red, but everything else is marginal for Republicans at best.

The northern San Antonio suburbs are likewise marginal territory now.

What happened? One explanation is that Johnson was a bit of a gateway drug for upscale Republicans to experiment with voting “not Republican.” In 2018 and 2020, they turned to the hard stuff. Trump’s 50 percent vote share in the 31st district was down a bit from his 53 percent in 2016, but Joe Biden’s vote share jumped seven points over Clinton’s. More dramatic was the 32nd district, where Trump’s 44 percent in 2020 was little different from his 46 percent in 2016 but Biden’s 54 percent represented a solid improvement over Clinton’s 48 percent.

Another Austin-based district, the 25th, saw similar movement. Clinton improved just two points over Obama’s showing, while Trump dropped five points from Romney’s showing; four years later, Trump dropped just a point, while Biden improved over
Clinton’s showing by four points. The net effect of this was the transformation of a district that Romney won by 22 points into one that Trump carried by just 10. The key is that this wasn’t part of a steady progression.\(^8\) It proceeded in steps, with suburban voters first going to Johnson, before deciding not voting Republican wasn’t so bad and beginning to pull the lever for Democrats.

For a final look at Texas (for now), Figure 7 displays the change in the various metro areas in...
more detail. Here it is clear that places like southern Dallas and Grand Prairie didn’t have a significant shift toward Democrats over the decade—quite the opposite (something to be explored in more detail in the next report). The wealthy enclaves of Highland Park and University Park (just north of the center of the county) swung overwhelmingly toward Democrats. Places such as Garland, Mesquite, and Richardson likewise shifted leftward; it is a similar story in the outer suburban counties.

In Houston, it isn’t the central city itself that moves away from Republicans. Rather, it is the ring of precincts surrounding the city and a clutch of precincts on the western edge of town. Austin itself didn’t get any weirder, but Pflugerville and Round Rock saw significant changes in the way they voted.

In other words, Texas illustrates many of the shifts explored in the first report of this series. Over the past few decades, the split between rural and urban areas gradually grew. For a time this worked to Republicans’ advantage, but as the suburbs gradually aligned with the Democrats, the state swung against the GOP. Trump’s showing in Swisher County—which Reagan lost twice—was the strongest ever for a Republican presidential candidate. At the same time, his showing in Dallas County was the weakest for a Republican since the 1940s, and he came perilously close to losing suburban Denton County (the other two being Barry Goldwater and Nixon in his 1968 run).

I explore exactly why this worked the way it did in the concluding pages of this report. Looking ahead, I will explore perhaps the most remarkable feature of the 2020 presidential election—the shift of Hispanics toward the Republican Party—in the third report of this series. Specifically, I will consider a state that saw similar movements but in a way that benefited the Republican Party.

**Ohio Political Development, 1824–2020**

When Kyle Kondik, managing editor for Sabato’s Crystal Ball⁹ published his well-regarded book *The Bellwether: Why Ohio Picks the President* in 2016, the subtitle was spot-on.¹⁰ From 1952 through 2012, Ohio regularly cleaved to the center of American politics (Figure 8). It never had a partisan lean of more than three points in either direction. On average, the state leaned just a point toward Republicans across these years.

In 2016, though, something changed. The state lurched far to the right, landing five and then six points to the right of the national average. Understanding the reasons for this stability and change requires a brief overview of Ohio’s political history. This, in turn, gives a better understanding of what is going on in America today and how the demographic shifts at work can help the Republicans and hurt them.

As Michael Barone memorably put it, “Ohio was the first entirely American state.”¹¹ All the states admitted to the Union before the Buckeye state joined in 1803 as the 17th state had some quirk. Vermont had been an independent nation before its admission to the Union in 1791, while Kentucky and Tennessee were carved out from Virginia and North Carolina, respectively. Ohio, on the other hand, was created from the Northwest Territory, the vast swath of land north and west of the Ohio River, which America had won as a concession at the conclusion of the American Revolution. Like the United States overall, Ohio was settled in a patchwork manner, by people from various backgrounds. That variation spills over, in turn, to explain Ohio’s unique voting patterns.

As a result of the settlement of the Northwest Indian War, which ended in 1795, the northwestern quadrant of the state was initially closed to White settlement, at least in theory. The northeastern portion of the state was owned by the state of Connecticut. The state sold its rights to a separate company, which in turn filled the region with Yankee settlers (a small segment of it, the so-called Firelands, had been set aside for residents of Connecticut whose towns had been burned by the British during the American Revolution).

The southern half of the state, however, was generally open to White settlement and was gradually settled through a series of corporate and governmental
land grants. The first such endeavor, funded by the Ohio Company, led to the establishment of a settlement named Marietta in 1788, at the confluence of the Muskingum and Ohio Rivers; the Seven Ranges district was surveyed shortly thereafter. The Virginia Military District was an area set aside for Revolutionary War veterans from Virginia, while the Congress Lands were areas of the state that members of the public could purchase.

Figure 9 shows the approximate locations of these areas. These borders are not precise; the map was created from a shapefile of contemporary county lines, which did not always line up with land grants. In reality, the southern border of the Treaty of Greenville Area is a straight diagonal line; the borders of the Virginia Military District were delineated by rivers, not straight county lines; and the Ohio Company Purchase encompassed only the western half of what is now Washington County. Nevertheless, this should give a sense of where the initial grants were located and help illustrate how their settlement affected Ohio politics decades later.

Perhaps given these diverse origins it should be unsurprising that Ohio was a swing state from early in its history. In 1828, Jackson defeated John Quincy Adams with 56 percent of the vote nationally; in Ohio, Jackson received 52 percent. A closer look shows the impact of the initial settlements on the state’s political orientation. The Connecticut Reserve voted overwhelmingly against Jackson, much as its parent state had. This pattern would continue late into the 19th century. Likewise, the Ohio Company lands were anti-Democratic, while the Congress Lands, perhaps reflecting their openness to the public, were a Democratic-leaning mixture.

Perhaps most surprisingly, the Virginia Military District leaned toward the National Republican Party, notwithstanding Virginia’s heavy affinity for Jackson. But Ohio, much like the nation as a whole, was undergoing a wave of immigration from Germany; many of
these settlers followed Zane’s Trace to central Ohio and began to influence the politics of these counties. Looking carefully at the map of 1828, one can still see the impact of native Virginians in the counties at the southern end of the district, along the Ohio River (Figure 10). Although northwestern Ohio had been opened to White settlement around 1820, much of it remained unorganized by the time of Jackson’s election; those counties are represented in gray. Their votes were frequently counted in neighboring counties.

Even as late as the eve of the Civil War, the original settlement patterns of Ohio were reflected in the state’s political map, with the Western Reserve, Ohio Company lands, and Virginia Military District voting for the Republican candidate John Fremont and with other areas reflecting the overall political balance of the nation (Figure 11).

This pattern reappears in postbellum Ohio. In fact, the stability of Ohio’s politics after the Civil War is striking. Although Ohio was considered one of the most important swing states in the nation—there is a reason it produced so many presidential and vice presidential nominees during these years—as Figure 12 demonstrates, the partisan lean of the Ohio counties barely budged during the decades post-Reconstruction, even at the county level.

In the years that followed, most of Ohio continued to see only marginal shifts in political orientation. The big exception was the old Western Reserve. Northeastern Ohio swung heavily toward the Democrats. This was because Ohio was enjoying yet another wave of immigration, this time from places such as Ireland, Italy, and Poland.

These new immigrants were more divided in their political loyalties or even leaned Democratic.
Figure 11. Republican Vote Share in Ohio, 1856

Note: Red represents Republican. The scale is truncated at 33 percent and 66 percent of the vote.

Figure 12. Change in Republican Lean, Ohio Counties, 1876–1996

Note: Red represents shift toward Republicans. The scale is truncated at 10 percent in either direction.
They filled jobs in the growing steel and shipbuilding industries of Lake Erie and the Mahoning River Valley and helped propel huge population growth in that corner of the state. To be sure, the northeast was not blue—again, this map shows the change in the Democratic lean in the counties of the region—but by neutralizing the old Yankee culture, northeastern Ohio became a swing region. Cincinnati and Columbus were largely nonindustrial cities, so they failed to attract these immigrants at the same rate; their political leanings remained mostly stable.

This trend continued after the New Deal, as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s pro-labor, pro-relief policies proved popular among White ethnic workers in the northeastern reaches of the state. “Workfare” and things like rural electrification proved strong sellers in Appalachia. The 1932 elections saw surprisingly little movement in what would become known as the Rust Belt in 50 years; it was after the 1936 elections, when the impact of Roosevelt’s programs was being felt, that northeastern Ohio became a Democratic redoubt in the state. The farm belt—especially in the old Virginia Military District—proved more resistant to Roosevelt’s charms. It even lurched rightward in 1940 and 1944 as the isolationist strain in midwestern politics asserted itself in the run-up to World War II.

After the upheaval of the New Deal years, Ohio once again entered a period of relative stability. The fundamental politics of the state remained the same through 1988; the Democratic coalition was anchored in heavily unionized, White ethnic northern Ohio, particularly in the northeast, with a substantial assist from the African American population in cities. It received support from Appalachia, which was the state’s swing region. The farm areas and small towns of the plains were Republican, and the GOP drew strength from the Cincinnati and Columbus areas, which had not received the inflow of White ethnics that the Great Lakes region received.

The Bill Clinton years saw surprisingly little change in Ohio’s underlying political DNA. Even as he remade the country’s politics by bringing the suburbs increasingly into the Democratic fold (as explored in more detail in the fourth report of this series), Ohio remained stubbornly stable. Appalachia moved a touch toward Republicans, and Columbus moved a bit toward the Democrats, but overall, 1996 in Ohio was not that dissimilar from 1988. In 2000, there was some noticeable movement toward Republicans in Appalachia, while the “big three” counties of Cuyahoga, Franklin, and Hamilton moved toward Democrats. Ohio’s initial settlement patterns still show up on this map, albeit in less dramatic form.

The 2000s saw gradual changes in Ohio: The major urban centers—Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Columbus—shifted toward the Democrats, but these shifts were countered by shifts toward Republicans in the rural areas (Figure 13). The 2016 elections, however, were particularly dramatic, as rural Ohio shifted toward the GOP while affluent counties such as Delaware County shifted toward Democrats.

By 2020, the state’s political transformation was complete (Figure 14). The counties containing the major metropolitan areas in the state were blue, while the counties containing the smaller cities, such as Dayton and Toledo, were light blue. The suburban counties, once strongly Republican, were now light red. The old Western Reserve, long a well of Democratic votes, now ranged from swing to deep red. And rural Ohio was a sea of crimson.

The end product mimics what was seen in Texas. Trump’s 81 percent of the vote in rural Noble County in 2020 was the best showing for a Republican ever, higher than his 79 percent of the vote in 2016 and eclipsing the 69 percent received by Nixon in 1972 (who was winning in a landslide nationally). He became only the third Republican to carry Mahoning County (Youngstown) since 1928 and the first to do so without winning a national landslide.

At the same time, Delaware County, which contains many of Columbus’ wealthy suburbs and has voted for the Democratic presidential candidate only twice in the past 172 years, gave Trump just 53 percent of the vote. This was the 10th worst showing of all time for a Republican in this county. He barely exceeded Hoover’s 52 percent of the vote in the disastrous Republican year of 1932 and fell far short of Reagan’s record 77 percent of the vote in 1984.
Figure 13. Change in Republican Lean, Ohio Counties, 2004–20

Note: Red represents a shift toward Republicans. The scale is truncated at 10 percent in either direction.

Figure 14. Republican Lean, Ohio Counties, 2020

Note: Red represents Republican. The scale is truncated at a partisan lean of plus or minus 16 percentage points.
Conclusion: Why Is Ohio Getting Redder While Texas Is Getting Bluer?

In the first report of this series, I explored the political development of party coalitions in post-war America. I noted that the traditional ideological and demographic divides that defined the party coalitions were increasingly giving way to an urban-suburban-rural divide.

I examined these trends by dividing American counties into six categories, following CBSA levels. Rural counties were not a part of any metropolitan or micropolitan area. Counties that were part of micro or metro areas were divided into small and large towns and small and large cities and megacities, depending on the population of the metro area. To use Ohio as an example, Dayton would be considered a small city, while Cleveland would be considered a large city. Ohio has no megacities, but outside examples include Chicago, Houston, or New York City.

At first blush, one might expect that the growing difference between the two states simply reflects changes among the electorates. Perhaps Ohioans are just voting more Republican, while Texans are voting more Democratic. But as the preceding figures illustrate, it is more complicated than that. Certain parts of Ohio and Texas voted more Republican over the past few years, while certain parts of both states moved in the opposite direction. Overall, the trends in these two states run in parallel.

Figure 15 illustrates this vividly. Both states show a marked divergence in how rural areas, towns, and cities voted over the past 30 years or so—a divergence that was either present or not present in much more subdued form before then. They also diverged similarly: Rural areas became the most Republican (the opposite was true in Texas until about 50 years ago), while cities became more Democratic. There are some differences; small cities in Texas are the most Democratic portion of that state, but this owes mostly to the unique prevalence of small cities such as El Paso on the Texas-Mexico border.

Figure 15 usefully depicts the transition that began to happen a few years ago, but it is too messy to really see the details of how different groups were moving.

Figures 16 and 17 are more useful in that regard. Figure 16 shows the movement in Ohio over the past 108 years.

Here, the shifts in the Democratic lean of Ohio’s urban groupings become plain. Rural areas moved toward the GOP beginning in the 1970s, before shifting dramatically in that direction in 2016; the same is true of small and large towns. Small cities had a shift toward Republicans, although it was much less dramatic among the towns. Large cities shifted leftward in the ’90s and then stayed more or less constant.

These data can gloss over changes on more granular levels; the stability in the “large city” grouping conceals a shift leftward in the Greater Columbus metro area, countervailed by a shift rightward in Greater Cleveland.

In Texas (Figure 17), one sees much the same. (These figures are truncated at partisan leans of plus or minus 30 percent for readability purposes; the disconnected dots exist on some figures because the Democratic leans of rural, small town, large town, and megacity Texas are around 45 percent to the left of the country as a whole in those years.)

What stands out here is how inconsequential the ’60s are in these trends; if one didn’t know the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, one would have no reason to suspect anything unusual happened in those years. The sequence from 1944 to 1952 is much more consequential (corresponding with the adoption of a strong civil rights plank in the Democratic Party platform at a time when Republicans were likewise pro–civil rights). Regardless, the trends are much the same: Rural and small-town Texas shifted toward Republicans, while the large cities and megacities shifted leftward, although to a small degree. Again, the small cities stand out as a counterexample, but that is because of unique Texan factors I will explore in the third report.

Figure 18 brings much of this together. It also requires a bit of explanation. This figure shows the average absolute difference between similar groups in Texas and Ohio.

In other words, in a particular year, take the Republican vote share in Texas rural areas and subtract it from the Republican share in Ohio rural areas. The
The figure then shows the absolute value of that difference. For this analysis, it doesn’t matter whether rural Ohio is, say, 10 points more Republican or 10 points more Democratic than rural Texas is. What matters is that there is a 10-point difference between the two.

Rather than examining how Republican or Democratic a level of urbanicity is, the figure looks at how dissimilar they are politically.

Then do the same thing for other levels—small towns, large towns, small cities, and large cities. Omit
megacities, simply because Ohio has no megacities. Average these differences to get an overall sense of how much the states diverge from each other, controlling somewhat for urbanicity.

As can be seen, Ohio and Texas are quite dissimilar pre–World War II. An “urban level” in Texas was as much as 45 points divergent on average from Ohio during this period. But during the postwar years, that Southern exceptionalism quickly collapsed.

During the 1960s and ’70s, the different regions of Texas and Ohio were not dissimilar at all. The dissimilarities gradually grew during the 1990s, as Northern suburbs generally migrated toward Democrats while Southern suburbs largely stayed put. But in 2016 and 2020, they converged. If one were to eliminate small cities—again, small cities in Texas are unique given their heavily Hispanic tilt—these dissimilarities would be about half of what is shown.

In short, over the first half of the 20th century, Texas gradually grew similar to Ohio. This accelerated as Democrats abandoned their opposition to civil rights in the 1940s. By the 1970s, despite knowing the type of urban area that a voter lived in and their voting preference, it would have still been difficult to correctly identifying whether they resided in Texas or Ohio. Today, the difference is pretty small—about five points. Given that, say, rural voters in Texas have voted in roughly the same way as rural voters in Ohio for much of the past 50 years, it is difficult to explain the divergent political paths that the two states have walked over the past few cycles in urban voting patterns alone.
So what explains it? The answer is that the compositions of the states have changed (Figure 19).

As can be seen in Figure 19, Ohio’s CBSA groupings have been fairly stagnant since the 1950s. Ohio’s large cities have increased their share of the vote from 43.7 percent in 1952 to 51.1 percent of the vote. Rural areas and towns have seen their vote share decline from 32.8 percent to 27.1 percent. These are not earth-shattering shifts.

Moreover, that small cities, towns, and rural areas still cast 49 percent of the votes in the state makes the sharp rightward swing in the voting habits of those areas significant. Remember, “towns” in this context means small places such as New Philadelphia and Wapakoneta. It just so happens that in Ohio, there are many places like this, and they have not seen their position in the state decline significantly over the past 60 years.

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Texas is a different story altogether. To be sure, it has many rural counties. Out of Texas’ 254 counties, 126 are rural. The old stereotype of longhorn cattle and tumbleweeds really does characterize a majority of the land area of the Lone Star State. But, as the saying goes, “land doesn’t vote.” Rural Texas counties are extremely rural, and they contribute a relatively small amount of the vote. Moreover, unlike Ohio, they contribute a declining share of the vote. In 1952, one in six votes in Texas was cast in a rural county. Today, that number is more like one in 20. In 1952, 55 percent of the vote was cast in rural areas, towns, and small cities combined, compared to just around 30 percent today.

In their place, the megacities of Dallas–Fort Worth and Houston have seen their profile in the state rise. Today, those two urban areas, which simply have no parallel in Ohio, cast 51 percent of the vote. The large cities in Texas—places such as Austin and San Antonio—cast another one in five votes. Back in 1952, they combined for just 44 percent of the vote; in 1984, arguably the heyday of suburban Republicanism, they combined for 58 percent of the vote. In other words, areas as large as or larger than Cincinnati, Cleveland, or Columbus barely combine for a majority of the vote in Ohio; in Texas, it’s approaching three-quarters of the vote.

Figure 18. Average Absolute Difference Between Urban Groupings, Texas and Ohio, 1916–2020

Here is the answer to the question of Ohio’s and Texas’ shifting political loyalties. In Ohio, Republicans gaining votes in the rural areas at the expense of votes in the more heavily urban areas made sense. In fact, given the magnitude of the shifts, it was, on balance, a winning bet. If areas such as Toledo and Youngstown continue to trend against Democrats, the state will probably be more like Indiana or Kansas.
in the next few cycles—places where Democrats can win, but only under the best of circumstances.

In Texas, on the other hand, this was a losing bet. Texas is increasingly a city-state in much the same way as Arizona and Nevada (two other states that have moved against the GOP). While these Sunbelt suburbs were kept within the GOP orbit, it meant that the states would remain safe for the Republican Party. But trading the suburbs for the rural areas here was a trade of a fast-growing region for a declining one. If it continues, the state GOP will find itself in a death spiral at astonishing speed.

In the third report, I will look at ways this might be avoided. I will examine the 2018 elections more carefully and draw some conclusions about roads forward for the GOP. In the fourth report, I’ll look at problems that the Democrats may have that stand in the way of their ascendency.

About the Author

Sean Trende is a nonresident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, where he works on elections, American political trends, voting patterns, and demographics. He is also the senior elections analyst for RealClearPolitics.
Appendix

Figure A1. Texas Core-Based Statistical Areas

Figure A2. Major Counties, Texas

Figure A3. Ohio Core-Based Statistical Areas

Figure A4. Major Counties, Ohio

Notes


2. A state’s partisan lean is simply a party’s share of the two-party vote in a given state (i.e., the vote for president without third-party candidates) subtracted from the party’s share of the national vote. The motivation behind this calculation is that it helps remove national forces; Ronald Reagan carried Massachusetts in 1980 and 1984 but did so narrowly while winning national landslides. Partisan lean is a reminder that the state was, in fact, still heavily Democratic in those years. It can be applied to congressional districts, demographic groups, counties, and so forth. It is similar to Cook Political Report Partisan Voting Index (PVI), except that Cook PVI includes results from two elections. See Cook Political Report, website, https://cookpolitical.com/pvi-0.


14. Using core-based statistical area levels stretching back to the early 1900s is problematic, as many of the most heavily urban areas today were rural at this time. The population of Dallas County, Texas, was just one-tenth its present population in 1920, while Harris County’s population was just 4 percent of today’s population.