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Impact of Demographics on Shifts in the Electorate since 2000

Andrew Wang[1*]

[1] Panther Creek High School, Cary, NC USA

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Abstract

Political analysts have long studied demographic shifts and their relation to the electoral change in the United States. This study conducts a qualitative analysis of 19 case-study counties to determine the limitations and accuracy of using race and age as indicators of presidential election margin shift from 2000 to 2020. Post analysis, four types were created to explain the overarching shift themes: normal, urban, Rust Belt, and group status. The normal type followed initial assumptions on age and race, that older populations voted more Republican and more diverse populations voted more Democratic. The urban-type highlighted the larger magnitude of Democratic shift seen in diverse urban areas. The Rust Belt type characterized the majority-white and aging populations of the Rust Belt undergoing Republican shifts. Finally, the group status type showed the limitation of racial diversification being positive for Democratic candidates. The social psychology concept of group status is applied to show a backlash effect of diversifying counties, whereby counties undergoing significant racial shifts become more Republican.

Keywords: Demographics, Race, Age, Political Science, Electoral shift

1. Introduction

The United States has undergone profound demographic change in the last two decades. Through this significant shift, it is vital to maintain an understanding of the relationship between demographic change and electoral shift. Electoral changes have been subject to much analysis between past presidential elections because of the insight they provide on the United States population and what they show about culture and ideas across the United States (Bacon, 2018; Brown, et al., 2011; Frey, et al., 2020; Garnham, 2020; Hudak, 2016; Jacobson, 2016; Major and Major, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2015; The Economist, 2019). As the United States population continues to change, a few leading demographic factors have been proposed as reasonable indications of electoral shift.

1.1 Background Literature

The role of minorities has become more pronounced in recent decades, as the United States population has diversified and voting rates among minorities have increased. Traditionally, minority voters have tended to favor Democratic candidates, and since the year 2000, the Democratic vote percentage among minority voters has risen (Hudak, 2016). In the 2000 presidential election, around 57% of the Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) electorate voted Democratic, rising to 73% by the presidential election of 2012 (Hudak, 2016). This trend is similarly reflected for Black voters, shifting from 90% to 93% Democratic between 2000 and 2012, and for Hispanic voters, shifting from 65% to 73% Democratic over the same period (Hudak, 2016). Though minority populations have all

* Corresponding Author
aywang71j@gmail.com

Advisor: Amanda McCubbins
arm4zz@virginia.edu

increased over the last few decades, the Hispanic population, in particular, has seen significant growth - projected to double by 2050 (Budiman and Igielnik, 2020). This increase in Hispanic voters has been forecasted to make Southwestern states more competitive for Democrats (The Economist, 2015). For instance, many politicians predict Texas will become increasingly competitive for Democrats because of this diversification (The Economist, 2019). However, this increase in diversity has been observed to create an opposite effect too. This was highlighted in 2016, where Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump targeted older White conservatives, rallying Republican voters with his anti-immigration rhetoric (Jacobson, 2016). Though this pushed away young and nonwhite voters, more White voters voted Republican, a "backlash" effect on the country's increasing diversity (Jacobson, 2016; Maggio, 2020). That being said, increasing diversity has tended to be positive for Democratic candidates. Based on past trends, as the role and size of minority populations increases, votes for Democratic candidates are also expected to increase.

Age has become another prevalent factor in analyzing voter shift, as political views shift between generations. Democrats have a 24% margin with Millennials, compared to only a 5% margin with Generation X. For generations older than Generation X, such as Baby Boomers, Republicans win the margin (Frey, et al., 2020). Though the Baby Boomers were the largest generation, the role of younger generations is projected to increase with time. Millennials and Generation Z are predicted to compose over 50% of the electorate by 2032 (Frey, et al., 2020). Though there is some conservatizing effect as voters age, possibly due to life milestones such as marriage and homeownership, the consistency of these shifts is uncertain (Frey, et al., 2020). For instance, there has not been a significant conservative shift among older Millennials (Frey, et al., 2020). As citizens get older, this constancy of political views may indicate increasing affective polarization, which limits movement across party lines (Iyengar, et al., 2012; Iyengar, et al., 2019). Though the complexities of generational shift remain to be seen at large, for this study, the general political leanings of current generations are appropriate.

Finally, the urban-rural divide has become an increasingly important factor in considering demographic and electoral shifts, as urban areas tend to vote Democratic while rural areas vote Republican. This divide is also widening. In 2012, Democrats had a 5% margin in urban areas, rising to 17% by 2018. Opposingly, the Republican margin grew from 29% to 38% in rural areas in the same period (Milligan, 2019). Though this idea is reflected in news and literature, there is no consensus on why urban areas are more Democratic (Maxwell, 2019; Niskanen Center, 2019). Some leading reasons include educational differences, higher diversity seen in urban areas, socioeconomic differences between urban and rural areas, and simply the policy stances of each party regarding spending (Brown et al., 2018). The significant socioeconomic differences between rural and urban areas, such as education and wealth, are likely one of the leading factors for Democratic urban areas. With more tech-centered and globalized urban areas, people in urban areas are more likely to have a favorable view of immigration and economic shifts (DelReal and Clement, 2017). According to the Pew Research Center, Democrats lead by 22% among adults with post-graduate degrees and 7% among adults with college degrees (Pew Research Center, 2015). Additionally, there is some resentment among rural communities of the "liberal elite," the idea that those living in cities look down on residents of rural areas. This idea often creates the perception that government and government services are inherently anti-rural, and therefore many rural communities are against larger governments (Cramer, 2016; DelReal and Clement, 2017; Hudson, 2019). As cities across America become more urban, current voting trends suggest that traditionally Republican-dominated states will become more competitive for Democrats (Bacon, 2018; Garnham, 2020).

1.2 Study Scope

This study conducts a qualitative analysis of 19 case-study counties over the last 20 years using yearly demographic data from the United States Census Bureau and presidential election data from MIT's election data lab (U.S. Census Bureau,

Population Division, 2012; MIT Election Data and Science Lab, 2018). All counties' demographic factors of race and age are analyzed for their indicative ability of electoral shift. In counties where electoral change did not match hypothesized demographic trends, other factors, such as the local economy (unemployment, significant industries, etc.) and local politics (percent citizenry, campaign spending, etc.), were considered.

2. Materials and Methods

This study compiled census data from various United States Census Bureau datasets. In finding county distributions for age and race over 20 years, multiple sources had to be assembled and cleaned for a consistent final dataset. From 2010 to 2020, a dataset called "Annual County Resident Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2019" was used, providing both age and race data for the period (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2020). Two other datasets, "Intercensal Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for Counties: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2010" and "Intercensal Estimates of the Resident Population by Five-Year Age Groups and Sex for Counties: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2010" were combined to provide age and race data for the period from 2000-2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2012). Finally, a data set called "County Presidential Election Returns 2000-2020" was retrieved from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab to model election margins by count over the last 20 years (MIT Election Data and Science Lab, 2018).

2.1 Data Preparation and Cleaning

This study used six groupings for race: White, Black, Native American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic populations, reported as a percentage of the total county population and monitored over 20 years. The final dataset for race was 18,828 rows by 24 columns, accounting for about 3,138 of the 3,142 counties in the United States. For age, this study measured residents from ages 15 and up, with age demographics in 10-year increments. Furthermore, all residents above 75 were grouped into one category, called "75+". This number was converted into a percentage for better comparisons between counties. However, because only residents ages 15 and up were recorded, the percentage composition of the counties tends to fluctuate more because it does not have residents ages 0-14. The final dataset for age was 21,946 rows by 24 columns, covering roughly the same number of counties as the age dataset.

Following data cleaning, 19 counties were selected for a qualitative analysis and case study. Counties were chosen to give the widest variety of electoral and demographic shifts, representing anomalies where demographic trends do not match electoral shifts. Some factors used in county selection included significant margin shifts, frequent party flipping, areas of sizable demographic change, and counties that went against the state's norm. A table with the reasoning for selecting each county is below:

Table 1. Selection reasoning for case study counties.

State	County	Selection reason
DELAWARE	KENT	Frequent electoral swings
FLORIDA	PINELLAS	Frequent electoral swings
GEORGIA	FULTON	Location of Atlanta
KENTUCKY	ELLIOTT	Traditionally Democratic county which flipped hard in 2016
LOUISIANA	ASSUMPTION	Democratic county which went Republican in 2008
LOUISIANA	POINTE COUPEE	Democratic county which went Republican in 2008
MAINE	KENNEBEC	Only county in Maine which flipped back to Democratic in 2020 after flipping to Republican in 2016
MAINE	PISCATAQUIS	In a traditionally Democratic state this county has voted Republican in every election

MICHIGAN	LAKE	Traditionally Democratic county which flipped Republican in 2016, voted Democratic in 2000 and 2004 in a state which largely voted Republican in those elections
MICHIGAN	SAGINAW	A Democratic county which flipped in 2016 and was the only county in Michigan to flip back to Democratic in 2020.
MINNESOTA	BIG STONE	A county with a large Republican shift that voted Democratic in 2000 and 2004
MINNESOTA	NOBLES	Notable Republican party which has shifted largely due to demographic influences, mentioned in media as well
MINNESOTA	PINE	County with a large Republican shift in 2016 but previously slim margins between Democratic and Republican
MINNESOTA	RAMSEY	A county where the margin has been moving Democratic though most counties have been shifting Republican. Anomalous county
MISSISSIPPI	JEFFERSON	County with huge margins for Democrats, one of the largest in the country
PENNSYLVANIA	ERIE	A notable 2016 county and a bellwether county
TEXAS	BEXAR	Location of San Antonio, the county has seen large demographic shift
TEXAS	DALLAS	Location of Dallas, another county with large demographic shift
WASHINGTON	KING	Location of Seattle, urban and rapidly changing area

Appendix A is a map of the United States, with case study counties in red. Additionally, Appendix B holds the presidential election margins over the 20 years for selected counties. Frequent electoral swings are defined as a county having switched parties at least 3 times in presidential elections between 2000 and 2020.

2.2 Control Variables

This study used the initial demographic assumptions that racial diversification would favor Democratic candidates and a greying population would favor Republican candidates. These hypotheses are proven correct through control counties for both demographic factors. The hypothesis that racial diversification favors Democratic candidates is seen in Ramsey County, MN, Dallas County, TX, and King County, WA. These counties all had very slight age shifts (less than 2%) with sizeable racial diversification (greater than 14%) and matched the hypothesis of increased Democratic shift. The hypothesis that greying populations favor Republican candidates is seen in many Midwestern counties, such as Piscataquis County, ME, Lake County, MI, and Big Stone and Pine counties, MN, with low racial diversification (less than 4%) with a large age shift (greater than 7%).

Following selection, counties were evaluated qualitatively for factors that would explain their electoral shift. Counties were analyzed with the initial assumptions that a decrease in the percentage of White people in a county would support Democratic candidates, and a greying county, where the county has an increasing proportion of older voters (greater than 55 years), would support Republican candidates. Based on whether or not these hypotheses tracked for the given county and electoral shift, further analysis was conducted to determine additional influential factors.

3. Results

Following data consolidation and analysis, a final dataset was produced. Below is a table indicating the race and age classification for all 19 counties studied that summarizes age and race shift into one of three categories: slight, moderate, and substantial.

Table 2. Race and age change for all selected counties.

State	County	Racial diversification*	Population aging*
DELAWARE	KENT	Moderate increase	Slight aging

FLORIDA	PINELLAS	Moderate increase	Moderate aging
GEORGIA	FULTON	Moderate increase	Slight aging
KENTUCKY	ELLIOTT	Slight increase	Moderate aging
LOUISIANA	ASSUMPTION	Slight increase	Substantial aging
LOUISIANA	POINTE COUPEE	Slight increase	Substantial aging
MAINE	KENNEBEC	Slight increase	Moderate aging
MAINE	PISCATAQUIS	Slight increase	Substantial aging
MICHIGAN	LAKE	Slight decrease	Substantial aging
MICHIGAN	SAGINAW	Slight increase	Moderate aging
MINNESOTA	BIG STONE	Slight increase	Moderate aging
MINNESOTA	NOBLES	Substantial increase	Slight aging
MINNESOTA	PINE	Slight increase	Substantial aging
MINNESOTA	RAMSEY	Moderate increase	Moderate aging
MISSISSIPPI	JEFFERSON	Slight increase	Substantial aging
PENNSYLVANIA	ERIE	Slight increase	Moderate aging
TEXAS	BEXAR	Moderate increase	Slight aging
TEXAS	DALLAS	Substantial increase	Slight aging
WASHINGTON	KING	Substantial increase	Slight aging

*Definitions for each kind of shift classification are in Appendix C.

4. Discussion

Through the qualitative analysis, counties were sorted into four primary types based on how age and race could explain their electoral shift and overall themes: normal, urban, Rust Belt, and group status theory. However, outside of demographic and societal factors, presidential candidates, such as Obama and Trump, also significantly affect partisan shifts. Multiple counties fall under various types because there is crossover in the factors which influenced their change. What follows is an explanation of each type, the counties that constitute it, and a discussion of the type.

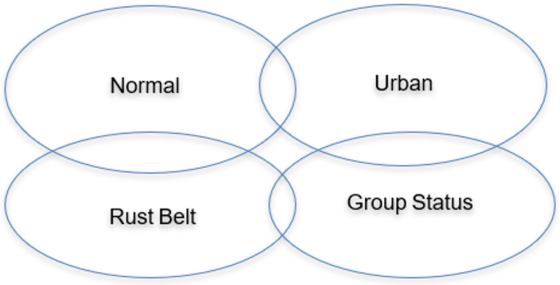

Fig 1. Four Primary Types of Counties

4.1 Normal Type

The normal type encompasses all counties that matched the initial race and age shift hypothesis. These are the counties that aligned with predictions about their voter shift. Counties in this group include Big Stone, Pine, and Ramsey counties in MN, Lake and Saginaw counties in MI, Piscataquis County, ME, Erie County, PA, and King County, WA. Essentially, the magnitude and direction of electoral shifts could be predictable for presidential elections over the last 20 years. For instance, Piscataquis County, Maine, had a 15% total Republican shift over the previous twenty years, going from an 11% Republican margin to a 26% Republican margin in 2020. This shift aligns with the county's slight racial change, where the White population decreased by 3%, from 98% to 95%, between 2000 and 2020.

Furthermore, the Republican shift can be further indicated by their greying population, a 10% increase in the proportion of the population older than 55 years. Therefore, the low racial diversification and greying population match up with a forecasted Republican shift. Another example is Ramsey County in Minnesota, which saw sizeable racial

diversification but a slight shift in age structure. Ramsey County had a 14% decrease in the White population and a negligible (less than 1%) change in its share of voters older than 55 years. This corresponds to a 25% Democratic shift in the last 20 years, matching demographic predictions.

4.2 Urban Type

The urban type describes counties with a large urban population, typically counties holding large cities. The threshold for being an urban county was possessing a population of one million or more and having a large city. These counties saw disproportionately large Democratic shifts compared to their race and age changes, typically approximately a 20% increase in Democratic voter share over the last 20 years. Unusually, the counties in the urban type also shifted Democratic in 2016, though most counties in the study and across the United States at large moved Republican (Parlapiano and Lai, 2016). This can be attributed to their sizeable nonwhite population. Urbanity seems to exacerbate Democratic shifts. The counties in this group are Bexar and Dallas counties in TX, Fulton County, GA, and King County, WA. These counties had populations close to or above one million residents, with large nonwhite populations (between 42-73% of the population is nonwhite in each county).

A notable example is Dallas County, Texas, which contains the city of Dallas, housing 1.3 million people. Dallas county has a sizable Hispanic population which has increased since 2000. In 2000, Dallas had a 30% Hispanic population and a 44% white population, leaning 8% Republican. Since then, Dallas County has seen a significant racial shift, with a 16% decrease in the White population. In 2020, Hispanics were the largest ethnic group in Dallas County, composing 41% of the county. This racial shift correlates to Dallas's electoral shift, moving 40% in favor of the Democrats since 2000. The county flipped parties in the presidential election of 2008, moving 17% in favor of Democrats. This shift can be dually attributed to the Democratic candidate Barack Obama and the financial crisis in 2008 and Hurricane Ike and Hurricane Gustav. Finally, Democratic campaign spending in 2008 dwarfed Republican campaign spending. Obama's campaign spent 9.9 million in Texas, while McCain's only spent $33,000. This combination of factors likely contributed to the significant shift seen between 2004 and 2008.

4.3 Rust Belt Type

The Rust Belt type demonstrates the Republican shift seen by many counties in the Rust Belt and Northeast. This type is more of a classification based on common geography than a demographic grouping. Counties in this group include Big Stone, Pine, and Nobles counties in MN, Lake and Saginaw counties in MI, Piscataquis county, ME, and Erie County, PA. These counties tend to follow a roughly similar electoral shift between elections: a Democratic win in 2000, followed by a smaller Democratic margin in 2004, a more considerable Democratic margin in 2008, followed by a Republican shift in 2012, and finally, a sizeable Republican shift (generally around 20%) in 2016, which saw all counties flip to Republican. The Republican shift of 2016 can almost certainly be attributed to Trump, with his rhetoric and campaign promise to revitalize American manufacturing. Trump is thought to have driven the significant margin shift in 2016 and through the 2020 presidential election. Between 2016 and 2020, there was little resultant change, and counties had shifts of around 2.5%.

Furthermore, the counties of the Rust Belt type tend to be very similar demographically. Racially, they had slight diversification (around 3-5%) and remained overwhelmingly White. Age-wise, these counties had older populations and saw a sizable (approximately 10%) increase in residents older than 55 years. However, the growing percentage of older people could reflect two things: the population at large is aging (this would be a standard demographic transition), or the population is declining, and young people are moving out. For most counties of this type, it seems like a general demographic transition. The birth rate is falling, and the population is growing older, as the total population between censuses remains relatively consistent.

The best example of the Rust Belt type is Lake County, Michigan. A county of about 12,000 people,

Lake County, went from a 13% Democratic margin in 2000 to a 26% Republican margin in 2020. Its demographic shifts are precisely in line with the other counties of the Rust Belt type. The proportion of White people in the county increased, growing from 83% to 86% between 2000 and 2020. Age-wise, the county saw a 10% increase in residents older than 55 years, with a 13% decrease in residents between 15 and 34. The county's whitening and aging population indicate a Republican shift, proven true in the 2016 presidential election, where it moved 28% in favor of the Republicans. This enormous shift highlights Trump's impact on similar predominantly White Rust Belt counties. His campaign promises to "Make America Great Again" appealed greatly to the economically declining Rust Belt, as manufacturing had been offshored mainly due to globalization. Furthermore, Trump's conservative stance on immigration would have appealed greatly to the dominant White population of the county (Major and Major, 2018).

4.4 Group Status Type

The group status type describes a set of counties that do not follow the demographic hypothesis that racial diversification creates a Democratic shift. These are counties with large minority populations (averaging 20-30% of the county's residents) and large Republican margins. Counties in this group include Elliott County, KY, Assumption and Pointe Coupee Parishes, LA, and Nobles County, MN. A possible cause for this reverse effect includes voter policy and citizenship rates, as the minority population may not be naturalized or able to vote. Another potential reason is rooted in social and group psychology. Theories like the group status theory and the racial threat hypothesis give insights into this shift; increases in a minority population are perceived as threatening to the majority population because they threaten to disrupt the power structure and status quo (Todak and Wang, 2016; Major and Major, 2018). Many White Americans view race relations as a zero-sum game, in which gains for a minority group means a loss for the majority group(Wilkins and Kaiser, 2014). Therefore, social psychology theories about identity and intergroup relations predict that White Americans will become more conservative if they feel increasing minority populations represent a threat to White American resources and values (Tajfel and Turner, 2004; Todak and Wang, 2016). This ties in heavily with presidential candidates such as Trump, whose America first stance appealed to many White Americans. In these counties, the increased diversification has worked against the Democrats, rallying White residents to vote Republican in a conscious or unconscious attempt to maintain their power structure in the community.

One example of this kind of electoral shift is seen in Assumption Parish, Louisiana. Between 2000 and 2020, there was a 1% change in the White population, moving from 66% to 65% white. However, the county also has a large Black population, composing 30% of the county's residents. Age-wise, there was a 9% increase in residents older than 55 years. With a substantial Black population, initial demographic assumptions propose a Democratic lean in the county. However, it actually saw a Republican shift of 38%, going from an 8% margin Democratic in 2000 to a 30% Republican margin in 2020. The Republican party is overwhelmingly dominant in campaign spending, spending $169,000 to the Democrat's $10,000. Votes cast per election showed the total number of votes cast remained roughly the same. As opposed to new voters starting to vote, the same voters changed which party they cast their votes for. An additional dimension to consider is Louisiana's history of restrictive voter ID laws, as voter ID laws have traditionally been used to suppress the votes of Black citizens. In the past, Louisiana parishes used poll taxes, property and literacy requirements, and an understanding clause to drop the registration of Black voters. Enforcement of these laws was left to the discretion of local officials, which resulted in unequal application of the law. Therefore, though Assumption parish has a large Black population, the voting rate of that population is meager due to voter suppression. However, the large Black population could have influenced a perception of the racial threat hypothesis. This is supported by the presidential election of 2008, where Barack Obama was the first Black presidential candidate. Though Assumption Parish voted 5% Democratic in 2004, they saw a 16%

Republican shift in 2008, running contrary to the sizeable Democratic shift seen through most of the United States and possibly indicating a perceived status threat in which residents saw Obama's presidency as an irrevocable shift in status quo. In conclusion, the Republican shift in Assumption parish, despite its large minority population, could be attributed to two factors: a perceived group status threat and the irregularly low turnout of minority voters.

Though an initial assumption of demographics was that aging populations would benefit Republican candidates, this is not exclusively true. Though White Americans traditionally have become more conservative with age, this trend does not match when applied to other ethnic groups. Proof of this is seen in Jefferson County, Mississippi. Jefferson county is 85% Black and has seen a 7% increase in residents older than 55 years. However, the county has simultaneously continuously shifted Democratic over the last 20 years and had a 72% Democratic margin in 2020, one of the highest in the country. Instead, the trend with age can be revised to the creation of a "stickiness" to political identity, that as voters, in general, become older, their beliefs are more set into stone.

5. Conclusion

This paper applied a qualitative analysis to a case study set of 19 counties to evaluate how race and age change over the last 20 years could explain shifts in presidential election margins. Initial demographic hypotheses that diversification would increase Democratic votes and aging populations would increase Republican votes were applied to these counties. Demographic and electoral shift was tracked through yearly race and age data from the U.S. Census Bureau and presidential election data from MIT's election data lab. Though the electoral shift for many counties was consistent with the demographic hypotheses, limitations were present in both. There was often a "backlash" in racial diversification, where counties would see significant Republican shifts even with a growing minority population, as White residents would vote Republican against the diversification. This was particularly true in counties with inactive or non-citizen residents because there wouldn't be many votes for Democratic candidates. This pattern indicates a fascinating social trend, as diversification has usually been seen as good for Democrats, but this backlash factor may reverse its effects in certain circumstances. A greying population being more Republican mainly was only accurate for dominantly White populations. Greying minority populations did not see the same electoral shifts as greying White populations.

The results of this study raise interesting questions about how demographic changes may indicate future electoral shifts. While there is some benefit to Democratic candidates from the increasing minority populations, the backlash of White residents seen in certain counties creates uncertainty around increasing diversification being good for Democrats, particularly given the growing group identities and polarization of today's political atmosphere. Future research should consider what circumstances and factors play into this backlash effect. The application of demographics to understanding the electorate shift continues to be an essential topic to understand, particularly as the United States continues to diversify, and it will be salient to campaigns and voter outreach efforts in future elections.

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