

*The Suburbanization of the
Democratic Party, 1992–2018*

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Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association,
Washington, DC, August 29, 2019.

Abstract

Over the past three decades, the Democratic Party has become mostly suburban in both the residence of party supporters in the mass public and the composition of its congressional caucus. This transformation reflects migration patterns among American citizens, partisan shifts among some suburban voters, and a serious relative decline over time in the party's rural strength. The trend of suburbanization has made the party's elected officials more ideologically unified, especially on cultural issues, but it also works to preclude the partywide adoption of an ambitious left-wing economic agenda.

Suburbanization has occurred alongside a growth in the racial heterogeneity of the Democratic mass membership and elite leadership alike, encouraged by the demographic diversification of American suburbs. Democratic suburban growth has been especially concentrated in the nation's largest metropolitan areas, reflecting the combined presence of both relatively liberal whites (across education levels) and substantial minority populations, but suburbs elsewhere remain decidedly, even increasingly, Republican in their collective partisan alignment. Rather than stimulating a broad national pro-Democratic backlash across suburban communities in general, as is sometimes suggested by political observers, the election of Donald Trump has instead further magnified this existing divergence—leaving American suburbia, like the nation itself, closely and deeply divided between the two major parties.

Introduction

Political analysts, including academics, are fond of describing the current era of American politics as primarily distinguished by deep and stable partisan loyalties. Within the mass public, strong preferences for one party or the other are reinforced by perceptions that the parties increasingly stand for different ideological agendas and

speak for distinct social groups.¹ Rising popular acrimony toward the opposing party and its members in recent years has discouraged the ticket-splitting and party-switching that were once regular practices in the United States.² At the aggregate level, the elevated collective partisan stability of the electorate since the 1990s has produced an unusually durable set of regional partisan alignments: the “red” and “blue” states of the American electoral map.³

Yet the coalitions of the parties have demonstrated evolution as well as constancy over the past three decades. Despite the lack of a dramatic realignment of the party system, each of the past four presidents has measurably bolstered the appeal of his party among certain segments of the public while simultaneously repelling members of other voting blocs toward the opposition. Internal migration and generational replacement have continued to cause fluctuations in the geographic reach of both parties even without the large-scale partisan conversion of individual citizens. The magnifying quality of winner-take-all electoral rules allows even modest shifts in party strength among specific voting populations to produce significant changes in the composition of representative institutions.⁴ Because the two major parties have reached a historically exceptional degree of parity in both presidential and congressional voting, which party takes power after a national election can easily hinge on the precise

¹ Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

² Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven W. Webster, “Negative Partisanship: Why Americans Dislike Parties But Behave Like Rabid Partisans,” *Political Psychology* 39 (February 2018), pp. 119–135; Shanto Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J. Westwood, “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Partisanship in the United States,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (May 2019), pp. 129–146.

³ David A. Hopkins, *Red Fighting Blue: How Geography and Electoral Rules Polarize American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁴ *Ibid.*

distribution of votes across geographic boundaries—as demonstrated by the events of 2000 and 2016.

This paper focuses on one critical development of the contemporary period: for the first time in American history, the Democratic Party now draws most of its popular support from the suburbs. The suburbanization of the party, itself the product of several intersecting trends in the political and social behavior of the mass public, has yielded important yet complex consequences for the Democrats' ideological, demographic, and geographic composition. It has made the party more liberal in some respects while also limiting its potential leftward shift; it has symbolically represented party leaders' strategic courting of whites even as it has often reflected, in reality, the changing residential choices or opportunities of racial minorities. Suburbanization has helped to resolve some former dimensions of internal conflict within the Democratic Party, but it threatens to expose new fault lines as well.

Any significant evolution in the social or spatial constituency of a party also holds potentially critical implications for the nature of interparty competition. Each of the national Democratic presidential and congressional victories since 1992 has been widely interpreted as representing party leaders' successful harnessing of suburban electoral strength. As analysts digest Democrats' successes in the 2018 midterm election and anticipate a highly competitive challenge to a politically vulnerable Republican president in 2020, perceptions of increasing Democratic dominance of the suburban vote are edging toward conventional wisdom in the political media.

Yet the true picture is much more ambiguous. Democratic candidates are indeed performing better in some suburban areas over time, but other suburbs remain solidly, or increasingly, aligned with the Republicans. While white-collar professionals who have become increasingly alienated from the Republican Party during the Trump years

are sometimes treated as representing prototypical suburban voters, the white college-educated sector of the electorate is, in reality, neither numerically dominant on suburban voting rolls nor politically uniform across geographic boundaries. The increasing heterogeneity of the suburbs has helped Democrats make sufficient inroads to defend their position as a competitive national party in an age when most votes are cast in suburban precincts, but has also prevented Democratic leaders from establishing a consistent electoral advantage over the Republican opposition. American suburbia as a whole thus remains as internally divided over partisan politics as the nation of which it is a steadily growing part.

This paper proceeds in three sections. The first section illustrates the suburbanization of the Democratic Party since the early 1990s in both presidential and congressional contests. The second section considers the implications of this trend for the party's internal coalition and ideological dynamics. The final section takes a wider view, examining the effects of Democratic suburbanization on competition between the parties and the results of recent—and future—general elections.

The Democrats Become a Suburban Party

American suburbs have historically been associated with Republican politics. The national boom in housing and highway construction that began after World War II and continued over succeeding decades built or expanded suburban neighborhoods that disproportionately attracted the prosperous white voters who traditionally constituted much of the loyal Republican base. It did not take long for students of American politics to notice the difference in voting patterns between these growing suburban communities and the central cities they surrounded. "By 1954," noted Robert C. Wood, "the Democratic vote in the New York City suburbs averaged only 35 percent;

the suburban Democratic vote around Chicago was barely 40 percent. On the fringes of Philadelphia, St. Louis, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Buffalo, Milwaukee, and Cincinnati, Democrats never represented more than 47 percent of the total suburban vote, and more frequently their proportion ranged between 35 and 40 percent.”⁵

To the extent that this trend simply represented the residential shuffling of partisans across municipal boundaries, it would not leave much of a residue on the internal composition or external competitiveness of the national parties. But some observers viewed a citizen’s decision to leave the city for the suburb as frequently accompanied, or soon succeeded, by a decision to leave the Democrats for the Republicans.⁶ If suburbanization indeed predicted or produced partisan conversion, the collective relative growth of the suburbs at the expense of cities threatened the survival of the Democratic Party’s post-New Deal popular majority.

Just as the Republican ascendance of the 1920s occurred amid rhetorical invocations of small-town ideals by candidates like Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge, Republican electoral victories in the post-war decades were habitually interpreted as collective endorsements of the suburban way of life—and as expressions of aversion toward the cities whose liberal ambiance and social problems could be associated with the opposition Democrats. “The Democratic Party will never win another national election until it solves the problem of the suburbs,” boasted incoming Senate majority leader Robert Taft of Ohio after Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected president in 1952, accompanied by newfound Republican control of both houses of

⁵ Robert C. Wood, *Suburbia: Its People and Their Politics* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), pp. 139–140.

⁶ Louis B. Harris, *Is There a Republican Majority?* (New York: Harper, 1954); Samuel Lubell, *Revolt of the Moderates* (New York: Harper, 1956). See Fred I. Greenstein and Raymond E. Wolfinger, “The Suburbs and Shifting Party Loyalties,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 22 (Winter 1958–1959), pp. 473–482.

Congress.⁷ After Richard Nixon's election in 1968, Nixon aide Kevin P. Phillips argued in *The Emerging Republican Majority* that the suburbs were creating enough new Republican voters to serve as the foundation of an entire era of national partisan dominance for the GOP: "suburbia and Great Society social programs [are] essentially incompatible. . . . This is the new young America on the move, and from southern California to Richmond, Virginia to Long Island's Suffolk County, the movement is conservative."⁸ When George H. W. Bush followed Ronald Reagan's two terms in office by winning the presidency in his own right in 1988, some political analysts concluded that the suburban strength of the Republican Party was unshakable enough to provide it with an electoral "lock" on the White House.⁹

Bill Clinton's victories in 1992 and 1996 disposed of that particular theory. But the electoral math had indeed changed since the days of the New Deal and Great Society. Democratic candidates could no longer survive losing populous suburban counties by double-digit margins even if they carried the big-city vote by lopsided proportions. With this reality in mind, 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.¹⁰

⁷ Quoted in Wood, p. 139.

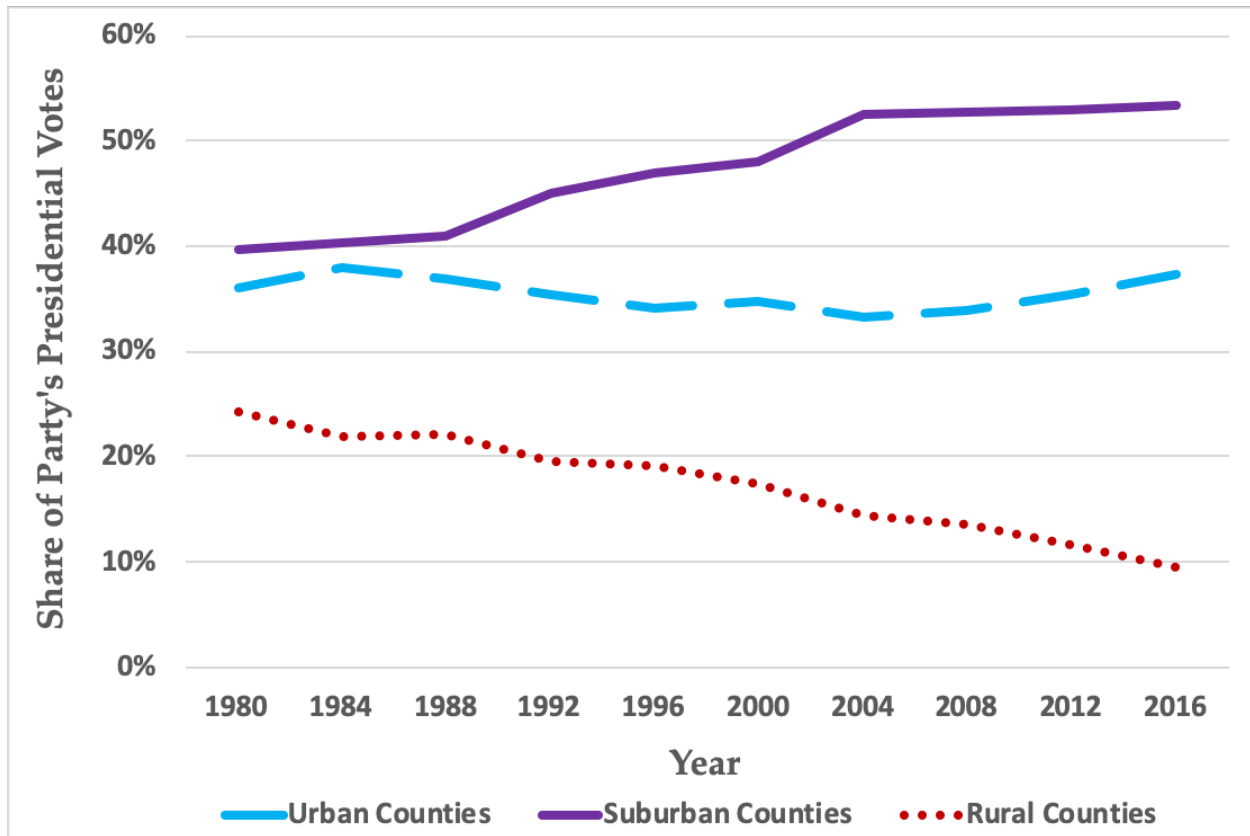
⁸ Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, updated edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015 [originally published 1969]), pp. 194, 200.

⁹ See William Schneider, "An Insider's View of the Election," *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1988; and Schneider, "The Suburban Century Begins," *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1992.

¹⁰ Gwen Ifill, "In the Suburbs, Clinton Pursues Disaffected Democrats," *New York Times*, March 13, 1992, p. A17; Ronald Brownstein, "Clinton Efforts May Redefine Party's Appeal," *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1992.

FIGURE 1

The Suburbanization of the Democratic Presidential Vote, 1980–2016



Source: Electoral data compiled by author from U.S. Election Atlas, <https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/>. County classifications by author based on metropolitan statistical area definitions by the U.S. White House Office of Management and Budget, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/metro-micro/about/omb-bulletins.html> and <https://www.census.gov/geographies/reference-files/time-series/demo/metro-micro/historical-delineation-files.html>.

In retrospect, the election of 1992 indeed marked the beginning of the Democratic Party's contemporary phase of suburbanization. Figure 1 displays the national share of Democratic presidential votes drawn from urban, suburban, and rural counties over the ten elections between 1980 and 2016. These three categories are based on official metropolitan statistical area (MSA) definitions published by the White House Office of Management and Budget. Metropolitan counties in which a majority of the population

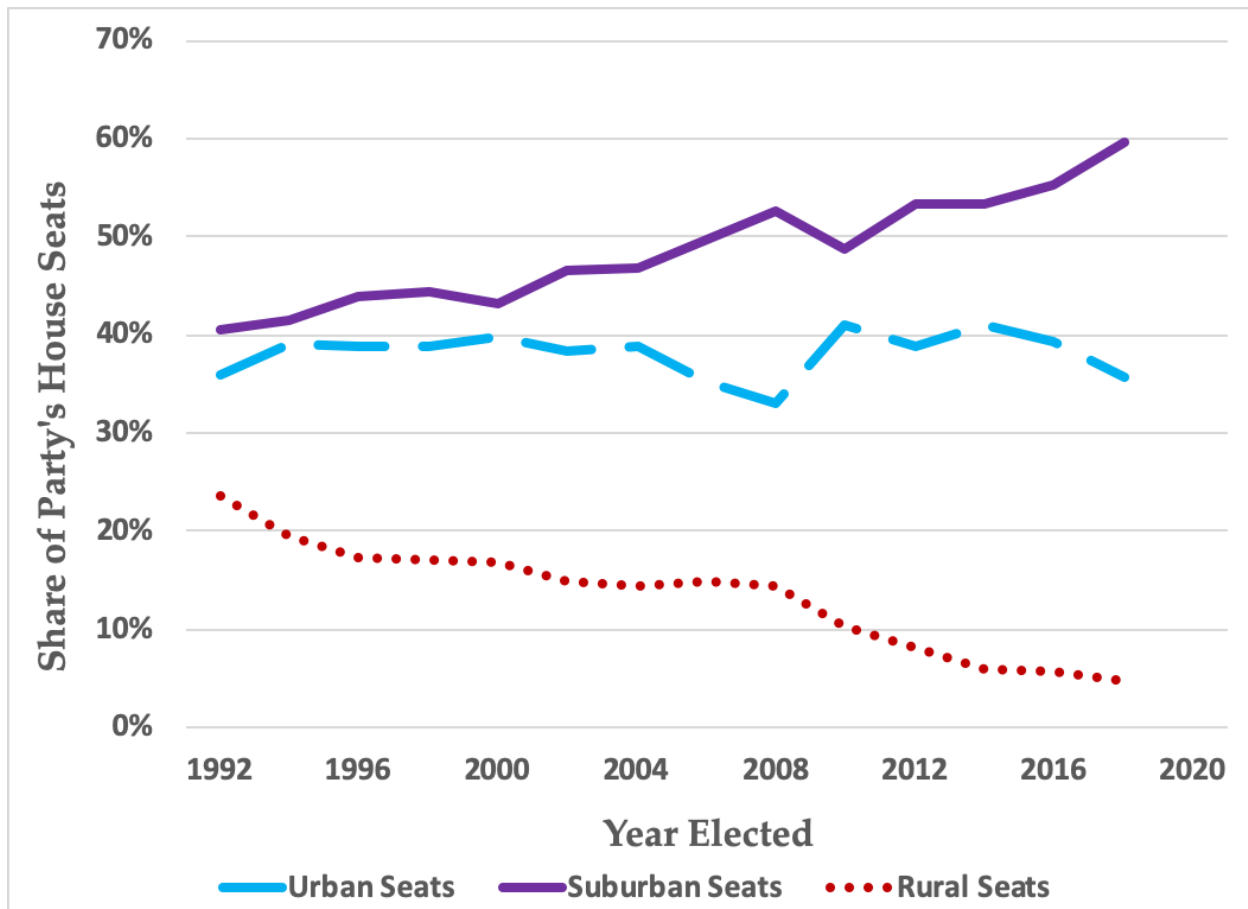
resides within one or more designated central cities (as measured by the previous national census) are classified as urban; all other metropolitan counties are classified as suburban, and non-metropolitan counties are classified as rural.¹¹

As Figure 1 demonstrates, the proportion of Democratic presidential votes cast by residents of suburban counties rose from 40 percent to 53 percent over the past four decades, crossing the 50 percent threshold in the election of 2004. This development represented the product of three coinciding trends. First, the suburbs continued to grow in relative population over this period (56 percent of the total two-party vote for president was cast in suburban counties in 2016, compared to 42 percent in 1980). Second, Democratic presidential candidates began to attract a greater share of the suburban vote after the decisive national losses of the 1980s. Third, rural counties continued to experience a steady decline in relative national population that was joined after 1996 by a strong concurrent shift by rural voters in favor of Republican candidates. As a result, 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.

¹¹ Across all analyses in this paper; the 1983 MSA definitions are applied to elections between 1980 and 1990; the 1993 definitions are applied to elections between 1992 and 2000; the MSA definitions are applied to elections between 2002 and 2010; and the 2013 definitions are applied to elections between 2012 and 2018. “Central cities” are cities included in the official MSA titles and those designated as principal cities by the OMB (2003 definitions employed for the 1980–2010 period; 2013 definitions employed for the 2012–2018 period). Historical designations of MSAs and principal cities are available from the U.S. Bureau of the Census website at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/metro-micro/about/omb-bulletins.html> and <https://www.census.gov/geographies/reference-files/time-series/demo/metro-micro/historical-delineation-files.html>. The state of Alaska, which is not subdivided into counties, is treated as a single county in all analyses presented here.

FIGURE 2

The Suburbanization of the Democratic Party in the U.S. House of Representatives,
1992–2018



Note: Independent members of Congress are classified as members of the party caucus to which they belong.

Source: Electoral data compiled by author from the Office of the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, state election websites, and other sources. Seat classifications by author based on metropolitan statistical area definitions by the U.S. White House Office of Management and Budget, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/metro-micro/about/omb-bulletins.html> and <https://www.census.gov/geographies/reference-files/time-series/demo/metro-micro/historical-delineation-files.html>. Congressional district data from the Missouri Census Data Center, <http://mcdc.missouri.edu/applications/geocorr2014.html>.

Congressional elections exhibited a similar pattern. Figure 2 employs a corresponding categorization of seats in the House of Representatives: districts where a

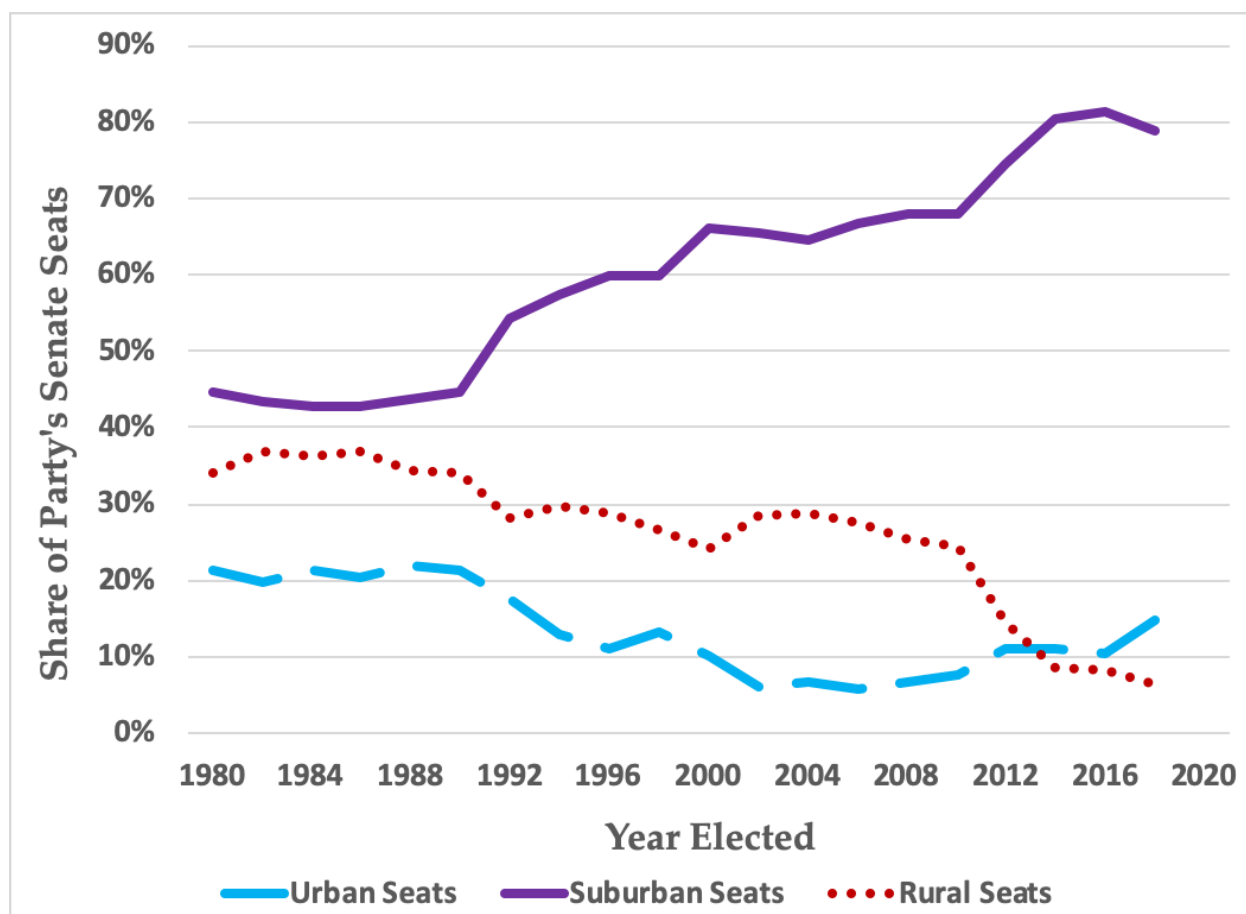
majority or plurality of inhabitants resides within one or more central cities are classified as urban; districts where a majority or plurality resides within an MSA but outside its central cities are classified as suburban, and districts with a non-metropolitan majority or plurality are classified as rural (data are available from 1992 to the present). The proportion of House Democrats representing suburban districts rose from 41 percent after the 1992 election to 60 percent after 2018, while the share of Democratic-held seats located in urban areas remained fairly stable over time (varying between 33 percent and 41 percent of all party seats) and the share of rural districts declined from 24 percent to 5 percent of all Democratic seats.

The structure of the U.S. Senate is very different from that of the House: elections conducted solely at the state level systematically underrepresent urban areas (which seldom constitute a majority or plurality of statewide populations) while the equal apportionment of states regardless of population systematically overrepresents less populous states that are more likely to contain significant proportions of rural residents. But changes over time in the composition of the Senate Democratic Party follow a parallel pattern to those illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, as revealed in Figure 3. While less than half of Senate Democrats represented plurality- or majority-suburban states before 1992, suburban population growth and the pro-Republican turn of rural America combined to produce a sharp increase in the proportion of Democratic Senate seats from suburban states after 1992, with a concurrent decline occurring in the relative numbers of rural Democrats. By the 2019-2020 Congress, 79 percent of Democratic senators represented suburban states, while only 6 percent, or 3 senators, represented mostly rural states.¹²

¹² These three senators were Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders of Vermont—a politically atypical rural state—and Jon Tester of Montana.

FIGURE 3

The Suburbanization of the Democratic Party in the U.S. Senate, 1980–2018



Note: Independent members of Congress are classified as members of the party caucus to which they belong.

Source: See Figure 2.

The Democratic Party has undergone a steady trend of collective suburbanization over the past three decades. But while the conventional wisdom of the 1980s described a party that needed to reduce its traditional urban base to a proportionately smaller and less influential internal constituency by expanding its tent into the burgeoning boroughs of suburbia, the relative growth of Democrats' suburban support in both presidential and congressional elections from 1992 to the present

occurred instead at the expense of the party's fading strength in rural America. Thus the Democrats are a more suburban, but not a less urban, party today than they were thirty years ago—a development with noteworthy implications for their ideological and demographic character.

How Suburbanization Has—and Hasn't—Changed the Democratic Party

The aggregate migration from city to suburb that occurred over the second half of the 20th century was frequently interpreted as reflecting both ideological and racial motivations. Large cities served as both symbolic centers of modern liberal culture and actual centers of modern liberal governance; citizens who departed dense urban neighborhoods for the green lawns and picket fences of suburban America seemed to be expressing a conscious preference for a traditional lifestyle more congruent with conservative Republican appeals to small government, family values, and private enterprise than with liberal Democrats' friendliness to regulation, redistribution, and progressive social change. But the rise of the suburbs also represented an apparent response to the growth of urban racial minority populations driven by the Great Migration of African-Americans from the rural South and the liberalized immigration laws of the 1960s: a nationwide "white flight" to more ethnically homogeneous communities.

As the 1970s and 1980s wore on, these perceptions convinced many would-be strategists both inside and outside the party that the most electorally effective Democratic response to the suburban boom was to become less liberal in general while specifically distancing party leaders from the political demands of minority groups. A series of formal and informal Democratic blocs and organizations, from "Atari Democrats" and "New Democrats" to the Democratic Leadership Council and (after

1994) the Blue Dog Coalition, maneuvered to push the national party toward the ideological center—or, at least, to protect Democratic officeholders representing suburban (and rural) constituencies from politically damaging associations with urban liberalism. These efforts reached fruition with Bill Clinton’s successful 1992 and 1996 presidential candidacies, which rejected the liberal label, touted moderate issue positions on taxes, crime, and welfare, and adopted a “triangulation” strategy that visibly separated Clinton from the left wing of his own party as well as from the Republicans. In pursuit of this approach, Clinton picked a public fight with Jesse Jackson in the midst of the 1992 general election campaign that lived on for years in the lore of the Washington pundit class as an oft-cited example of ingenious and effective political calculation.¹³

The Democratic Party did collectively respond to the proliferating suburban vote (and the Ronald Reagan- and Newt Gingrich-led popular Republican victories of the 1980s and 1990s) by lowering its policy ambitions in the economic domain, with most of the party’s top leaders ultimately reconciling themselves to lower tax rates and a less central role for federal bureaucracies in the provision of public services. But it is more difficult to make the case that three decades of suburbanization led the national party to a more moderate ideological position in general. On many social and cultural issues, including those that were once widely cited as fueling the Republican dominance of suburbia, both Democratic leaders and followers have moved leftward since the mid-1990s; examples include civil rights, criminal justice and drug policy, abortion, gay rights, immigration, and gun control. Moreover, it is equally apparent that

¹³ This was what became known as Clinton’s “Sister Souljah moment.” For a useful recent summary, see Steve Kornacki, *The Red and the Blue: The 1990s and the Birth of Political Tribalism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), pp. 174–185.

suburbanization has not made the Democrats a more heavily white party. Indeed, the growing racial diversity of the Democratic elite leadership and mass membership alike has become one of the party's most distinctive attributes in the Obama era and its aftermath. How can the suburbanizing trend be reconciled with these other developments?

One answer is provided by Figures 1 through 3, which demonstrate that 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. Democratic politicians elected from rural constituencies—especially but not solely in the South—have historically been less liberal as a group than suburban Democrats (who in turn have been less collectively liberal than urban Democrats). To the extent that the Democratic Party has been trading rural for suburban support over the years, the exchange has actually served to render the party somewhat more liberal—and more internally unified—over time, merely by eroding the size of its rightmost ideological bloc.

This change is especially apparent on cultural issues that most visibly separated metropolitan from rural America, but that no longer represent major internal fault lines dividing Democratic officeholders or candidates. Gun control, for example, was once viewed as a subject that would produce uncomfortable divisions among Democrats in Congress while alienating elements of the rural electorate that might otherwise be attracted to Democratic campaign messages; as a result, party leaders saw little reason to emphasize the issue after suffering substantial perceived rural backlash from enacting a 10-year federal assault weapons ban in 1994 (even as an overall majority of Americans continued to report favoring more restrictive gun policies). By 2019, however, the Bipartisan Background Checks Act was part of the new Democratic House

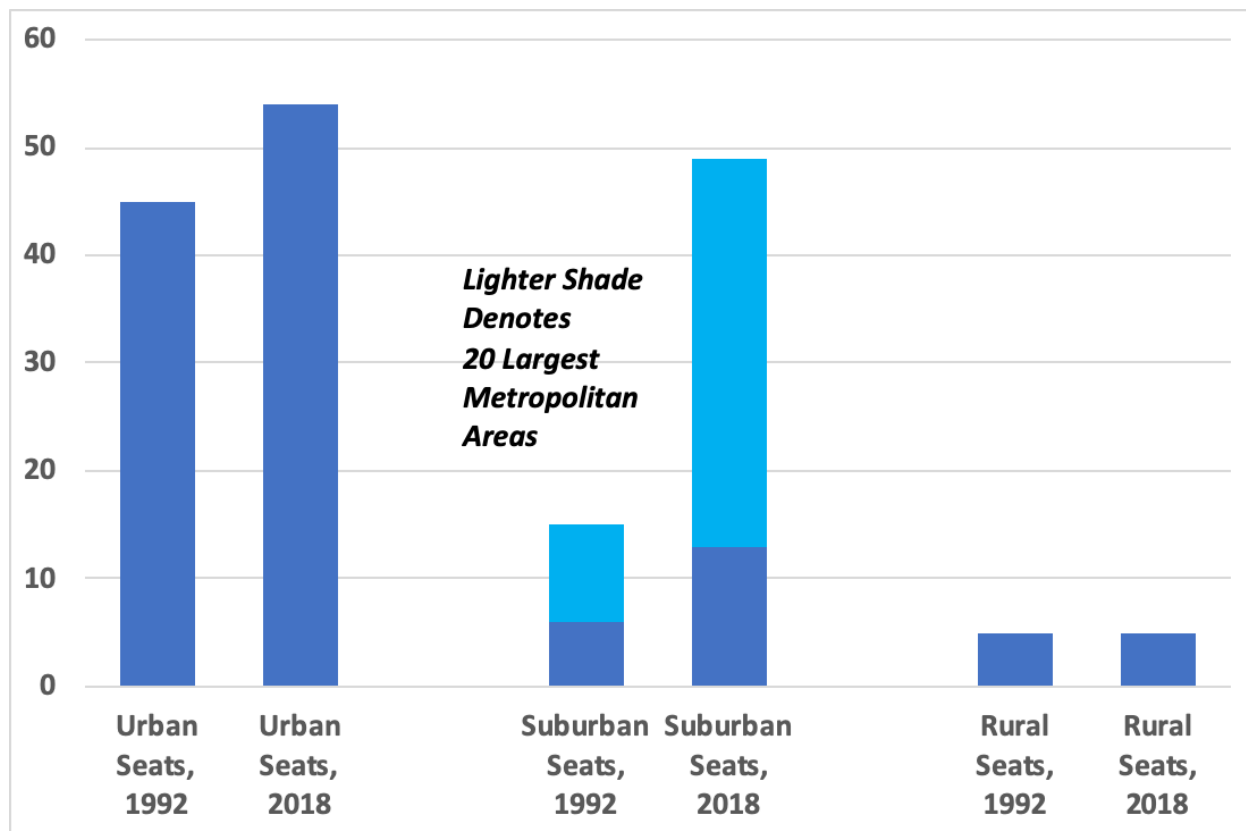
majority's initial legislative package, passing the House of Representatives with opposition from only two Democrats, both representing rural districts.¹⁴ But rural Democrats often broke with the rest of the party on economic legislation as well as cultural matters, representing much of the internal Democratic opposition to the major health care reform initiatives proposed by Bill Clinton in 1994 and Barack Obama in 2009.

Bolstering the share of suburban seats won by congressional Democrats after the 1980s did not turn out to require the election of candidates who were as moderate as the rural representatives whom they were effectively replacing in the party caucus. In fact, suburban Democrats in the House collectively moved to the ideological left between 1992 and 2018, as measured by the first-dimension DW-NOMINATE scores commonly used as indicators of congressional ideology. House Democrats representing suburban seats produced a mean DW-NOMINATE score of -0.320 in the 1993–1994 Congress (with more negative scores representing greater relative liberalism), compared to a mean score of -0.240 for rural Democrats and -0.410 for urban Democrats. By the 2017–2018 Congress, suburban House Democrats' mean score had shifted to -0.379 .

The engine powering this leftward movement was an important change in the population of the suburbs themselves. Suburban areas are, like American society as a whole, increasingly non-white in their racial composition. Because most minority voters retain strong Democratic electoral preferences regardless of their place of residence, the racial diversification of the suburbs has supplied the Democratic Party with new geographic territories of loyal support outside its traditional urban bastions.

¹⁴ Roll call on H.R. 8, February 27, 2019, <http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2019/roll099.xml>. The two Democratic opponents were Jared Golden of Maine and Collin Peterson of Minnesota.

FIGURE 4
Majority-Minority Seats in the U.S. House of Representatives by Urbanism,
1992 and 2018 Elections



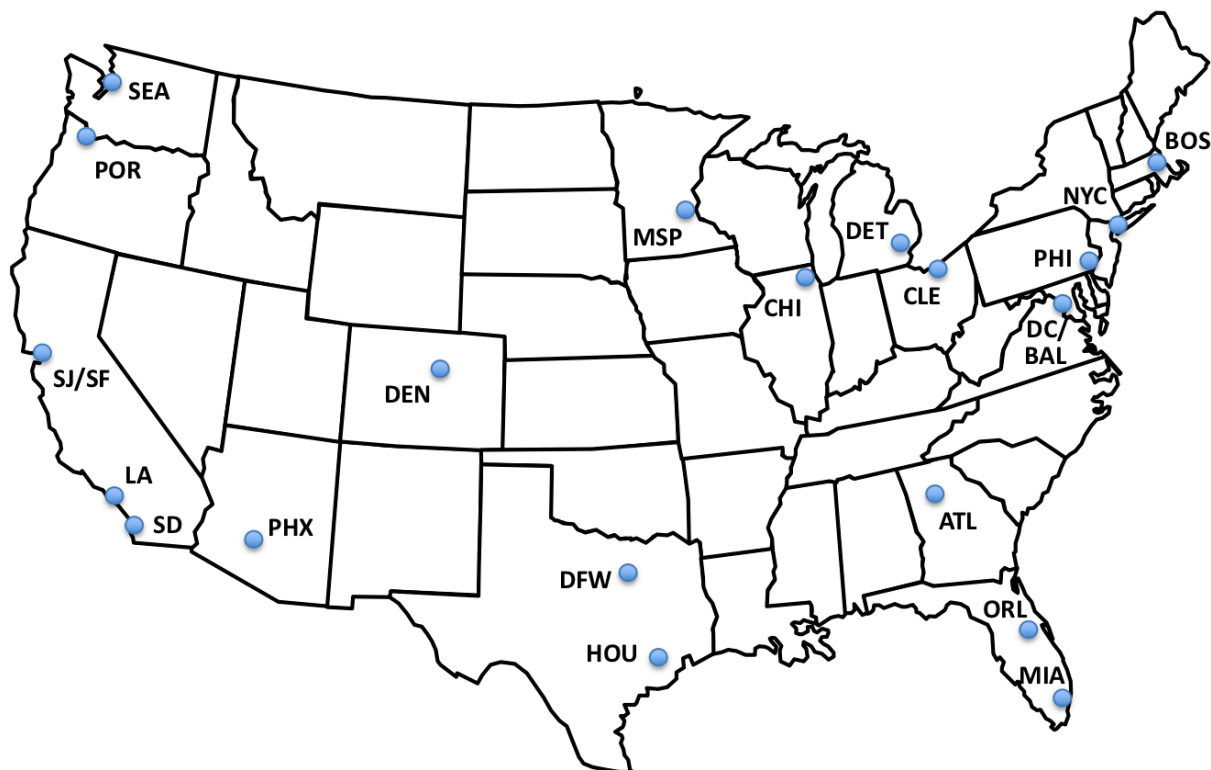
Source: Compiled by author from U.S. Census data.

Most representatives of these areas are thus free to adopt liberal policy positions without worrying that they might be endangering their re-election prospects.

The share of suburban constituencies with large populations of non-white voters increased dramatically after the 1990s. Figure 4 displays the number of majority-minority House seats (that is, districts in which racial minority groups constitute a majority of the population) in cities, suburbs, and rural areas in the 1992 and 2018 congressional elections. In 1992, most majority-minority seats were urban (45 in all, compared to 15 suburban seats and 5 rural seats). But by 2018, the non-white suburban

FIGURE 5

The 20 Largest Metropolitan Areas in the United States, 2010–2019



Source: Compiled by author from 2010 U.S. Census data on the basis of 2013 Metropolitan Statistical Area and Combined Statistical Area definitions (see Figure 1).

population had grown to represent a majority in 49 House districts, nearly as many as the 54 urban majority-minority seats.¹⁵

As Figure 4 indicates, most of the growth in suburban majority-minority seats was concentrated in the 20 most populous metropolitan areas (as of the 2010 census), home to a disproportionate share of the nation’s African-American, Latino, and Asian-American inhabitants. (These 20 largest metro areas are identified in Figure 5.) The

¹⁵ The U.S. Bureau of the Census measures Hispanic/Latino status separately from race. In this paper, “white” refers to non-Hispanic/Latino whites only.

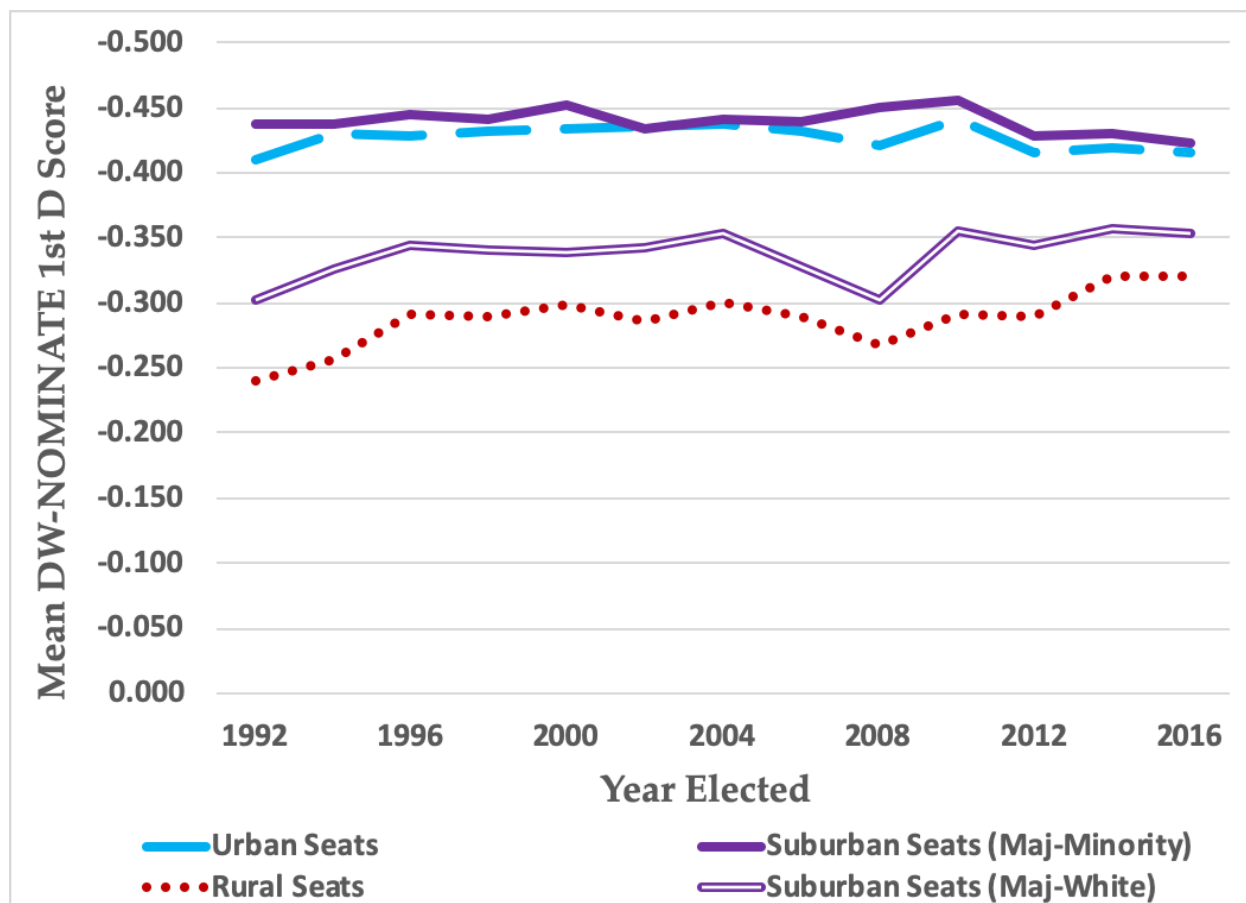
largest single concentration of suburban majority-minority seats in the current Congress is located in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area, but metropolitan New York, San Jose/San Francisco, Miami, Atlanta, San Diego, Washington/Baltimore, and Orlando all now contain at least two apiece.

The ideological profiles of congressional Democrats elected from this expanding bloc of suburban majority-minority seats have resembled those of urban Democrats much more than their fellow suburban Democrats who represent majority-white districts. Figure 6 summarizes the mean first-dimension DW-NOMINATE scores of House Democrats from urban, suburban, and rural seats over the 1992–2018 period (years indicate the date of election, so 2016 figures apply to the 2017–2018 Congress), separating majority-minority from majority-white suburban districts. As Figure 6 demonstrates, suburban Democrats with mostly non-white constituencies have amassed voting records on Capitol Hill that have closely comported with those of their Democratic colleagues from urban seats. Suburban Democrats representing majority-white districts, however, have remained consistently more moderate in comparison, producing ideological scores that resemble those of the dwindling bloc of rural Democrats more than those of their suburban colleagues from majority-minority seats.

The leftward aggregate ideological trend among suburban congressional Democrats as a whole therefore reflects the growing share of suburban seats that contain large minority populations and often elect liberal representatives. As Figure 6 indicates, the ideological positioning of suburban Democrats representing majority-white districts has remained virtually constant since the mid-1990s, except for a slight collective moderation in the 2007–2008 and 2009–2010 sessions of Congress (which contained a temporary influx of highly vulnerable Democrats elected from normally Republican-leaning districts). Besides the proliferation of suburban majority-minority

FIGURE 6

Mean Ideological Scores of House Democrats by District Type, 1992–2018



Note: Independent members of Congress are classified as members of the party caucus to which they belong. Figures include one score per district per Congress only (mid-session special election winners and party switchers omitted).

Source: Compiled by author from U.S. Census data and first-dimension DW-NOMINATE scores. NOMINATE data courtesy of Jeffrey B. Lewis, Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal, Adam Boche, Aaron Rudkin, and Luke Sonnet, available at <http://www.voteview.com>.

seats, a dramatic attrition of rural Democrats—whose numbers declined from 61 to 11 members between the 1992 and 2016 elections—has also contributed via subtraction to the overall leftward drift of the congressional party visible in the NOMINATE data; the mean score for the House Democratic caucus as a whole moved from -0.333 to -0.390 over the period covered by Figure 6.

Compared to the famous internal conflicts that characterized previous decades of American history, today's Democratic Party appears unusually unified. Yet consequential divisions remain, reflecting the distinct constituencies and electoral incentives of officials representing a diverse set of communities. Highly ambitious economic policies, such as the Green New Deal environmental/employment initiative and Medicare For All single-payer health care plans, have recently received the public endorsement of multiple leading figures on the party's left edge but have not inspired similar enthusiasm from most Democrats elected in majority-white suburban districts. Some suburban Democratic officeholders have even expressed concern that the extensive media attention directed to these proposals, as well as to four prominent liberal House members first elected in 2018 from large urban centers (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Rashida Tlaib of Detroit, Ilhan Omar of Minneapolis, and Ayanna Pressley of Boston, collectively dubbed "The Squad"), will endanger their own re-election prospects by promoting a strategically unhelpful image of the party as a whole among moderate suburban voters.¹⁶

Patterns of caucus membership in the current (2019–2020) Congress demonstrate the persistent relationship between member ideology and electoral constituency. Among House Democrats representing urban districts and suburban majority-minority districts, membership in the liberal Congressional Progressive Caucus is more common

¹⁶ Simone Pathe, "Democratic Female Freshmen Signal Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Doesn't Represent Them," *Roll Call*, May 10, 2019, <https://www.rollcall.com/news/freshman-women-say-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-doesnt-represent>; Laura Barron-Lopez, "Centrists Fear Socialist Tag Will Cost Democrats the House in 2020," *Politico*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/03/15/house-democrats-moderates-2020-aoc-1220643>; Catie Edmondson and Emily Cochrane, "In Conservative Districts, Democrats Have to Answer for Party's Left Wing," *New York Times*, February 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/24/us/politics/house-democrats-moderates-liberals.html>.

TABLE 1
Ideological Caucus Membership among Democrats by District Urbanism,
2019–2020 Congress

| | <i>Congressional Progressive Caucus</i> | <i>New Democrat Coalition and/or Blue Dog Coalition</i> | <i>Both</i> | <i>Neither</i> |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Urban | 38 | 27 | 5 | 14 |
| Suburban (Maj-minority) | 14 | 13 | 6 | 11 |
| Suburban (Maj-white) | 23 | 45 | 6 | 22 |
| Rural | 3 | 5 | 0 | 3 |

Note: 21 of the 26 members of the Blue Dog Coalition are also members of the New Democrat Coalition. Membership figures are current as of August 15, 2019.

Source: Congressional Progressive Caucus, <https://cpc-grijalva.house.gov/caucus-members/>; New Democrat Coalition, <https://newdemocratcoalition.house.gov/members/>; Blue Dog Coalition, <https://bluedogcaucus-costa.house.gov/members/>.

than membership in the New Democrat Coalition or Blue Dog Coalition, the relatively centrist alternatives (see Table 1). But Democrats from majority-white suburban districts were more likely to join the New Democrats or Blue Dogs than the Progressive Caucus by a margin of roughly two-to-one.

Rather than producing an increasingly white party, suburbanization has occurred in concert with a doubling of the non-white share of the House Democratic caucus: from 21 percent of all Democratic members after the 1992 election to 42 percent after 2018. The proliferation of majority-minority districts in the suburbs since the 1990s helped to fuel this trend, since minority candidates are especially likely to be elected from such seats. But non-white Democratic nominees also found increasing success in majority-white districts during the post-Obama era; a record 17 minority Democratic House members were elected from mostly-white suburban constituencies in

2018 (another 5 minority Democrats represent majority-white urban districts). In the current 2019–2020 Congress, non-white Democrats from suburban districts now outnumber non-white Democrats from urban seats by a margin of 49 to 46.¹⁷

The reality of Democratic suburbanization has not entirely fulfilled 1980s-vintage expectations. In fact, the majority-suburban Democratic Party is in some ways more liberal, and in every respect much more racially diverse, than it was 30 years ago. But the party still needs to capture large numbers of white-dominated districts in order to compete for national power; House Democrats held 68 majority-white suburban seats after the 2016 election, and 96—or 41 percent of the entire party caucus—after the gains of the 2018 midterms restored them to majority status. The Democrats elected from these seats generally fall comfortably within the left-of-center party mainstream on prominent social and cultural matters, and an increasing number are themselves members of racial minority groups. However, they mostly continue to resist identification with the Congressional Progressive Caucus and left-wing economic policies, limiting the capacity of the party to unify around the “revolutionary” legislative agenda endorsed by prominent figures on the left like Ocasio-Cortez, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren.

There is, of course, a familiar strategic calculation to politicians’ ideological positioning decisions. Democratic candidates, in particular, are likely to perceive an inevitable tradeoff between philosophical purity and swing-seat electability.¹⁸ The next section turns directly to the implications of suburbanization for the Democrats’ fortunes in general elections—both in the recent past and the immediate future.

¹⁷ There are also 4 non-white Democrats who represent rural seats.

¹⁸ Matt Grossmann and David A. Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), esp. chapters 3 and 5.

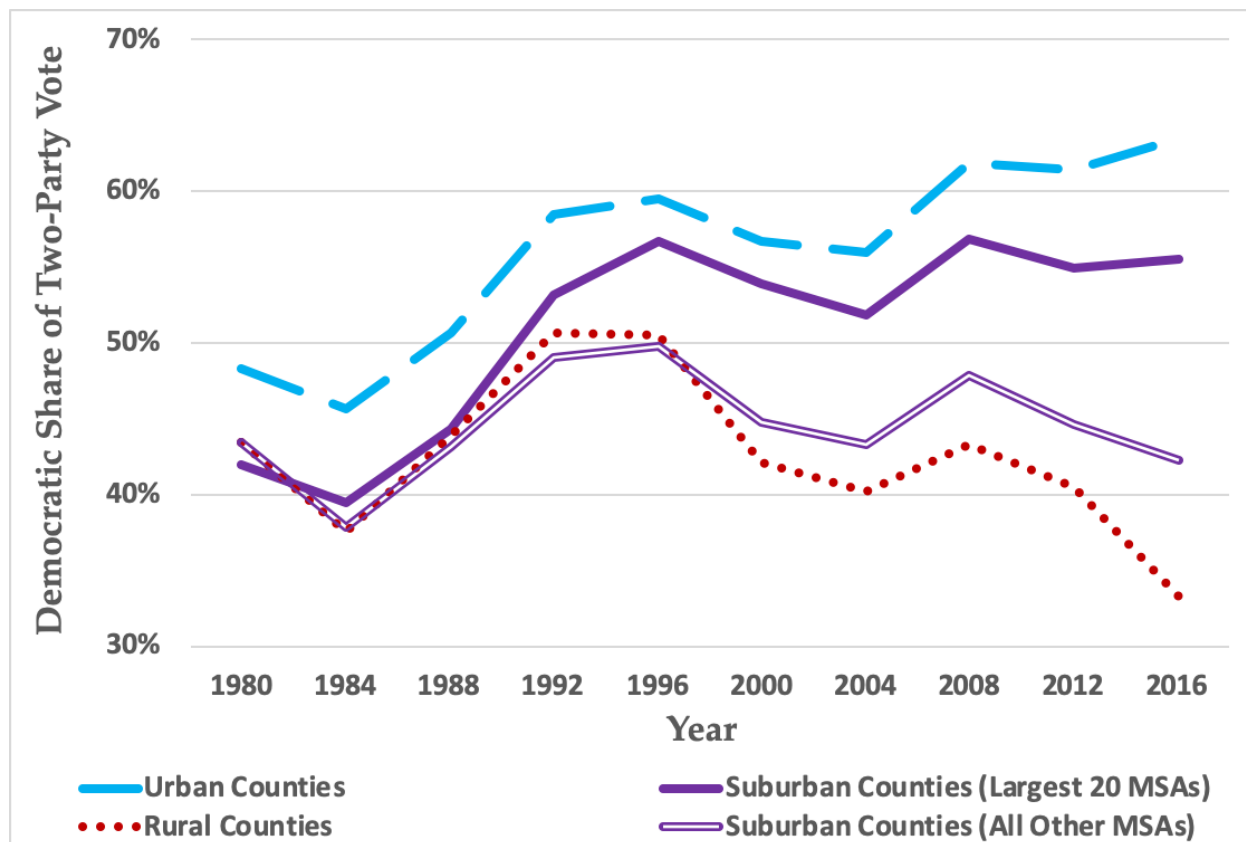
The Electoral Consequences of Suburbanization

No single place in the United States is more identified with the history of the modern conservative movement than the suburbs of Orange County, California. Orange County was the political home of Richard Nixon, a major supplier of popular support for organizations like the John Birch Society and the candidacies of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan, and a center of anti-government activism such as the Proposition 13 tax revolt of 1978. But the partisan climate in Orange County began to change in the 1990s, first signaled by the 1996 defeat of arch-conservative nine-term congressman Bob Dornan by Latina challenger Loretta Sanchez. Orange County was carried by the Democratic presidential candidate in 2016 for the first time since the election of 1936; Democrats swept all seven U.S. House seats located wholly or partially in the county in the 2018 congressional midterms; and in August 2019 the Orange County registrar of voters announced that the number of registered Democratic voters had surpassed the number of registered Republicans—a development that received considerable media attention in the state.¹⁹

Similar stories of partisan change can be told about many other well-known suburban counties that once regularly elected Republicans but are now increasingly, or even solidly, aligned with the Democrats, such as Westchester County, New York; Montgomery County, Pennsylvania; and Fairfax County, Virginia. But in many other suburban areas, especially those that surround mid-size or smaller cities, Republican

¹⁹ Seema Mehta and Melanie Mason, “Orange County, Longtime GOP Stronghold, Now Has More Registered Democrats Than Republicans,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2019-08-07/orange-county-turns-blue-with-more-registered-democrats-than-republicans>; Brooke Staggs, “Orange County Turns Blue,” *Orange County Register*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.ocregister.com/2019/08/06/democrats-about-to-outnumber-republicans-in-orange-county/>.

FIGURE 7
The Partisan Divergence of Suburban Counties in Top 20 and Other
Metropolitan Areas in Presidential Elections, 1980–2016



Source: Compiled by author (see Figure 1 and Figure 5).

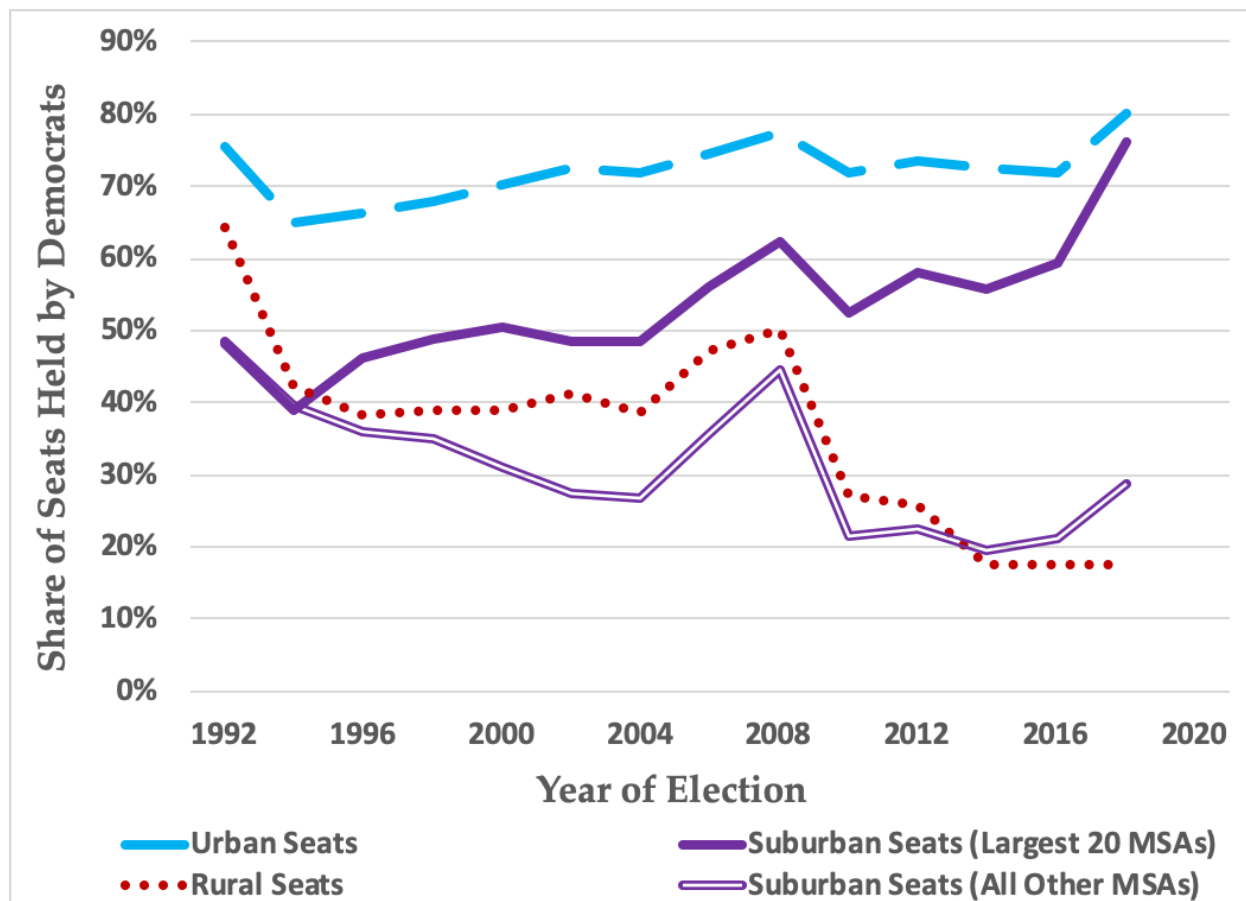
candidates can still count on substantial popular support: suburban Milwaukee; suburban Cincinnati; suburban Birmingham, Spokane, and Bakersfield. The Democratic Party has indeed gained suburban support compared to its well-chronicled struggles of the 1970s and 1980s, but this trend has been concentrated in a subset of metropolitan areas while remaining largely absent from others. Rather than providing Democrats with a reliable national majority, the evolving electoral alignments of suburban voters have produced an overall pattern of geographic divergence—a growing gap between red and blue territory that reflects the political polarization of the nation itself.

Figure 7 demonstrates the increasingly distinct partisan preferences of suburban residents of the 20 largest metropolitan areas, as denoted in Figure 5, and voters in the rest of the nation's suburbs. (These two groups are of roughly equal size; 29 percent of the national two-party presidential vote in 2016 was cast in Top 20 metro suburban counties, and 27 percent in other suburban counties.) In every presidential election since 1992, the Democratic candidate has carried the suburban vote inside the Top 20 metro areas while the Republican candidate has prevailed across the remainder of the nation's suburbs. The partisan gap between these two suburban electorates has increased over time: from 4 percentage points in 1992 to 13 points in 2016. As Figure 7 reveals, the partisan vote distributions inside Top 20 metro and smaller metro suburban counties are closer to those of urban and rural counties, respectively, than they are to each other.

An even more dramatic pattern of divergence is evident in House elections. After the 1994 election, congressional Democrats held nearly identical shares of suburban districts in Top 20 metro areas (39 percent) and other metro areas (40 percent). By the 2016 election, Democrats had captured 59 percent of Top 20 suburban seats but retained just 21 percent of other suburban seats. The 2018 midterms brought Democrats a further windfall of House seats in large metro areas—a net gain of 6 in greater Philadelphia; 4 in greater Los Angeles; 3 in greater New York; 2 each in greater Chicago, Detroit, Miami, and Minneapolis/St. Paul; and 1 each in greater Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, Houston, San Diego, Seattle, and Washington/Baltimore.²⁰ But Republicans still emerged from the 2018 “blue wave” holding 71 percent of all suburban seats outside the Top 20 metro areas (as well as 82 percent of the nation's rural districts). Figure 8

²⁰ Democratic gains in metro Philadelphia were amplified by a court-ordered redrawing of Pennsylvania's congressional districts prior to the election, which dismantled a map enacted by a Republican-controlled state government in 2012. The party already held 100 percent of House seats in metro Boston and San Jose/San Francisco prior to 2018.

FIGURE 8
The Partisan Divergence of Suburban House Seats in Top 20 and Other
Metropolitan Areas, 1992–2018



Source: Compiled by author (see Figure 2 and Figure 5).

illustrates this widening partisan rift in House elections separating urban and Top 20 metro suburban America from smaller-metro suburbs and rural areas.

What makes the Top 20 metro suburbs so politically different from the rest of the nation's suburban areas? One factor is racial composition—as Figure 4 suggested, much of the demographic diversification of American suburbia since the 1990s has been concentrated within the 20 largest metropolitan areas. Table 2 reveals that 36 percent of

TABLE 2

Demographic Composition of Counties by Urbanism, Race, and Education, 2017

| | <i>White Non-College</i> | <i>White College Grad</i> | <i>Non-White</i> |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| Urban | 30 % | 23 % | 48 % |
| Suburban (Top 20 metro areas) | 38 | 25 | 36 |
| Suburban (All other metro areas) | 53 | 23 | 24 |
| Rural | 65 | 17 | 18 |

Note: Age 25 and over only. "College grad" refers to residents who have completed a bachelor's degree or higher. Figures may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Compiled by author from U.S. Bureau of the Census 5-Year American Community Survey county-level data, 2017, available at <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/advanced>.

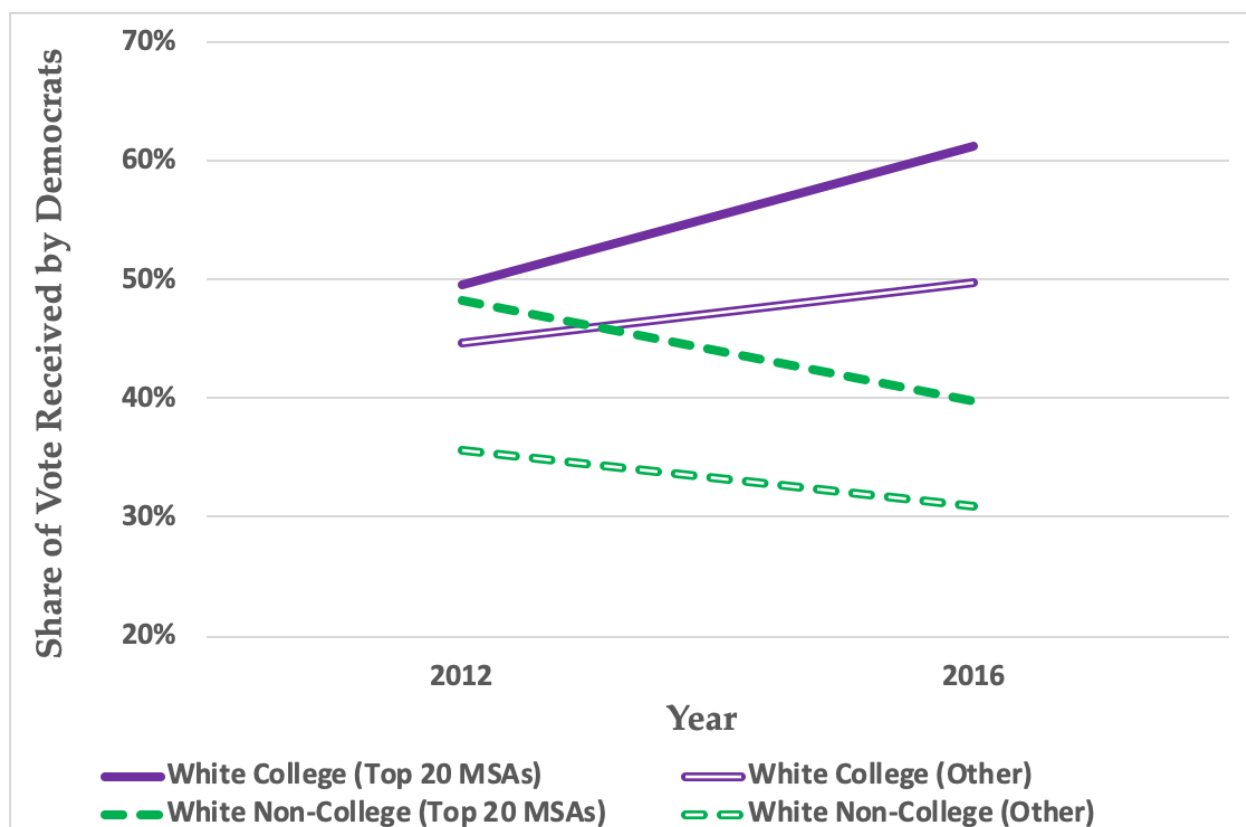
the adult (age 25 and over) resident population of suburban counties in the Top 20 metro areas is non-white, compared to just 24 percent in other suburban counties.

Whites with college degrees have become more likely to vote Democratic in the era of Donald Trump, while non-college whites have correspondingly become less supportive of the party. Especially after the Democratic gains of 2018, some journalists and pundits have suggested that the Republican Party is suffering a "collapse" in its suburban support—or, at least, its suburban support within the nation's largest metropolitan areas—reflecting the wholesale disaffection of college-educated voters from the Trump-led GOP.²¹ But as Table 2 reveals, whites with college degrees are collectively outnumbered by non-college whites in both Top 20 metro and smaller metro suburbs alike, and are not a significantly greater share of the total population in the former than they are in the latter. The lack of a disproportionate presence of college-

²¹ Both Jonathan Martin of the *New York Times* and Amy Walter of the *Cook Political Report* have recently referred to a suburban "collapse" of the Republican Party; see <https://twitter.com/jmartNYT/status/1058034813029007362> and <https://twitter.com/amyewalter/status/1158378078248296448>.

FIGURE 9

White Presidential Vote by Education Level and Residence, 2012–2016



Source: Calculated by author from the American National Election Studies Time Series Cumulative Data File, available at <https://electionstudies.org/data-center/>.

educated whites in large metropolitan areas rules it out as a potential cause of the large and growing partisan gap between the two types of suburbs.

Figure 9 displays the two-party presidential vote share received by Barack Obama in 2012 and Hillary Clinton in 2016 among college-educated and non-college whites within and outside the nation's largest 20 metropolitan areas, according to data from the American National Election Studies. These findings demonstrate that whites who were inhabitants of Top 20 metro areas were more likely in both elections to vote Democratic than whites of comparable educational attainment residing elsewhere in the

nation. The pro-Democratic shift among college-educated whites between 2012 and 2016 was also especially large within Top 20 metro areas; these voters preferred Clinton by a 61 percent to 39 percent margin while white college grads in the rest of the U.S. divided their votes evenly between Clinton and Trump. But non-college whites, too, were more likely in both elections to be Democratic supporters if they lived within a Top 20 metro area.

Claims of a contemporary suburban surge (for Democrats) or collapse (for Republicans) are hyperbolic, if not utterly inaccurate, when applied to the nation as a whole. Trump carried the national suburban popular vote in 2016 (by 51 percent to 49 percent, excluding minor candidates) and even the midterm “blue wave” of 2018 only resulted in a narrow 140–127 advantage for House Democrats within all majority- or plurality-suburban districts after the party lost these districts two years before by a margin of 159 to 107.²² Outside the Top 20 metros, Trump’s performance in the suburbs was in fact unusually strong. He received 58 percent of the two-party vote there in 2016, which represented the best showing for a Republican presidential nominee since Ronald Reagan’s landslide re-election in 1984 (see Figure 7).

But the partisan climate has become much friendlier to Democratic candidates over time in many of the best-known and closely-watched suburban counties located within the nation’s most prominent population centers, attracting disproportionate attention from national media figures and other members of the political class. This trend reflects the combination of increased racial diversity and a more liberal white electorate (regardless of education level) than exists in suburban areas elsewhere. It has disproportionately contributed to the suburbanization of the party while transforming

²² The new congressional district map in Pennsylvania resulted in the net creation of one additional suburban district between 2016 and 2018.

former swing states like New Jersey and Illinois into safe blue territory—and pushing former Republican-leaning states like Virginia and Florida into perennial battleground status.

Additional Democratic gains in the future among large-metro suburbanites could potentially produce further changes in the national electoral map. It is hardly a coincidence that three of the four normally-Republican states where Hillary Clinton's share of the two-party vote in 2016 exceeded Barack Obama's 2012 performance are home to populous, racially heterogeneous metropolitan areas: Arizona (Phoenix), Georgia (Atlanta), and Texas (Houston and Dallas); all three states may be on the cusp of partisan competitiveness in presidential elections.²³ But the increasing suburban vote margins received by the party in large-metro America over the past three decades have been largely balanced out at the national level by comparable losses elsewhere. Just as Democrats appear to be gaining in the largest Sun Belt population centers, for example, they must contend with clear signals of eroding popularity in smaller suburbs (and rural areas) in midwestern states like Ohio, Wisconsin, and Iowa: a trend that resulted in the party's unexpected defeat in 2016. These countervailing developments have left Democrats locked in perennially close and bitter electoral competition with a Republican Party that has been able to defend, and even expand, its own suburban base surrounding the mid-size and small cities of the nation's midsection—still the electoral backbone of red-state America.

²³ The fourth red state where Clinton outpolled Obama is Utah, whose largely Mormon electorate was particularly friendly to Mitt Romney in 2012 and (compared to other Republican voting blocs) unfriendly to Trump in 2016.

Conclusion

Justified recognition of the unusual depth of partisan loyalty and cross-partisan acrimony in contemporary American politics should not preclude examination of the important ways in which both major parties continue to evolve over time. Recent changes within the Democratic Party have arguably received less scholarly attention than the more dramatic developments in Republican politics over the past several decades, from the Gingrich Revolution to the Tea Party movement to the rise of Donald Trump. But the Democrats are not quite the same party that they were thirty years ago either, and many major areas of change—ideological, demographic, electoral—are related in various ways to the process of adopting a mostly suburban constituency, as the findings presented here have demonstrated.

At the same time, the suburbanization of the Democratic Party should not be equated, or confused, with the Democratization of the suburbs. Republican strength has indeed declined in some suburban communities, but others remain reliable or growing bastions of party support. Whether suburban voters will collectively tip consistently toward a single partisan side in the near future depends on whether the electoral trends favoring Democrats—continued racial diversification, rising educational attainment, generational replacement—outweigh the trends favoring Republicans, such as the party's rising popularity among whites without a college degree. With suburban residents casting an ever-growing majority of the nation's ballots, a party that managed to capture the enduring affection of suburbia as a whole would be able to break the current pattern of parity and gridlock in favor of an extended period of unified rule over the federal government. But for now, it seems more likely that the suburbs will continue to fuel the closely-matched partisan warfare that has come to characterize American politics in the 21st century.