WORKING PAPER

The myth of the moderate suburb: Exploring the spatiality of racial realignment in presidential voting patterns in Ohio, 1932-2016.

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Abstract:

Geographical studies of broader political change in the last 50 years tend to emphasize conventionally economic explanations and the rise of neoliberalism. This study complicates this paradigm by emphasizing the role of racial reaction in driving political change. It does this through a synthesis of geographical, historical, and sociological literature on racial threat, and careful examination of presidential voting pattern change in Ohio since 1932. Rather than seeing the 1970s as a pivot of purely economic crisis, I explore the role of a broader period of racial realignment stretching from the late 1940s to the late 1960s. Contra popular and some scholarly narratives, the biggest shifts in the state have not occurred in very white rural areas, but rather in the ostensibly moderate suburbs surrounding the state’s largest black populations. My intervention is to suggest that racial reaction is a more plausible explanation of these patterns than economic crisis in the 1970s.
Introduction

Like much of the country, mainstream political pundits were stunned by the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. For months, pollsters had confidently predicted that Hillary Clinton would perform poorly in white rural America, but that she would more than make up for it in the “moderate” suburbs. For every voter that was attracted to Trump’s toxic racial rhetoric, the Democratic Party would pick up several suburban white-moderate refugees from the Republican Party to counter-balance it. Senate Minority Leader, Chuck Schumer, confidently predicted that, “for every blue-collar Democrat we lose in western Pennsylvania, we will pick up two moderate Republicans in the suburbs in Philadelphia, and you can repeat that in Ohio and Illinois and Wisconsin” (quoted in Geraghty, 2016). Schumer’s political estimation was similar to Democratic and Republican strategists—that the suburbs were a moderating “center” between the progressivity of the multi-ethnic central city and the social intolerance of white rurality. Republicans appealing to the putative intolerance of the latter would alienate the ostensibly moderate suburb as much as Democratic candidates openly appealing to the multi-ethnic central city according to this framing. Candidate Trump’s toxic racial rhetoric on the campaign trail would thus prove to be a liability—in particular his refusal to repudiate David Duke’s support, his suggestion that a Mexican-American judge was too Mexican to fairly adjudicate the civil suit against his Trump University, and his open promise to enact a ban on Muslim immigrants (Chan, 2016; Klein, 2018).¹

In the three years since the election, the notion of the moderate suburb has continued to have an effect on political thinking despite the fact that suburbs in the Midwest voted overwhelmingly with Trump and not discernably less enthusiastic about him than rural areas of the same states. Rather than focus on why the suburbs of Cincinnati and Columbus Ohio
enthusiastically supported, and continue to support Trump, every major national newspaper and news magazine has done pieces on how the “economic anxiety” of the white working class in rural America led them to consider Trump. Some mainstream political scientists have added apparent rigor to this impression by emphasizing the new sense of loss and economic distress in such places. Pundits refer to working and poor white supporters of Trump as “the new minority”—whose worlds have been turned upside down by globalization and the growing non-white demography of the country. Politics professor Eric Kaufmann interprets the attraction to openly hostile racial rhetoric as the twin result of “unprecedented white demographic decline”, and the “anti-white ideology of the cultural left” (Chotiner, 2019).

There are important differences between and among the pundit class, and the views (again between and within) of political scholars on this matter, but it is surely just as true that there is a common tendency in such explanations. First, the emphasis is on recent change. Within this narrative, the white working class recently turned its back on the Democratic Party, and have only recently experienced economic anxiety and demographic decline. The element of recency would provide a tidy explanation for Trump if it was empirically true. But the white working class has been trending Republican since the Civil Rights Movement (CRM), the country has been gradually becoming less white since the 1970s, and the economic struggles of 2016 are not discernably worse or more acute than those of the 1970s, early 1980s, early 1990s, or certainly the 2008 recession. The second curious dimension of these explanations is the tacit and sometimes explicit belief that we can easily separate white rural America from white suburban America, and the simple refusal, in some corners, to characterize the voting intent of suburbanites as “racially resentful”. In fact, as will be argued later, the white subsurbs
surrounding cities with large black populations in Ohio voted very similar to white rural areas (and in fact were responsible for more of the post-Civil Rights Movement shift than rural areas).

This paper is an attempt, within the critical whiteness studies paradigm, to more seriously consider the role of racial resentment as a motivator for electoral behavior and political change more generally (see also, Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Carter, 1995; Carter, 1996; Lee, 2002; Olson, 2004; Lipsitz, 2006; Olson, 2008; King, 2017). I focus on Ohio presidential voting patterns at the county level from 1932 to 2016. Several empirical findings emerge from this analysis. First, in line with recent analyses using American National Election Study data (Enders & Scott, 2019; Tesler, 2013; Tuch & Hughes, 2011)—which find a growing, gradual correlation between white racial resentment and voting Republican since the 1960s—I do indeed find that Trump was able to improve upon recent Republican performances in very white, rural areas of the state. But the corollary—that these appeals to whiteness (and his generalized vulgarity) would alienate those in the suburbs—was not true, at least not in Ohio. Not only is Trump very popular in the white suburbs surrounding the state’s major cities—those spaces (unlike white rural areas) are growing and becoming more prominent in the state’s electoral geography. Second and related, the “economic anxiety” of white rural areas is neither a recent phenomenon nor particularly-acute compared to past waves of economic distress. The 1970s, for example, saw sharper drops in the relative position of white rural areas. The bulk of Trump’s electoral support (and the Republican Party for the last 50 years) in Ohio actually comes from relatively-prosperous white suburbs. Whatever one’s explanation of the latter pattern, it is difficult to conclude that “economic anxiety” was motivating either their tolerance of Trump’s rhetoric. The more straightforward conclusion seems to be that they were not just tolerating it—they apparently were motivated by it as it confirmed their worldviews. To be sure, other geographers
have emphasized the conservative voting tendencies of the suburbs but they tend to resort to contextual or economic reasons to explain these tendencies. Owning a home, being near other conservative suburbanites, and enjoying low taxes are predominant explanations in this literature (Walks, 2004; Walks, 2006). Here I seek to emphasize the dimension of racial reaction as a cause of suburban conservatism and thus to challenge the notion that is a surprise that such environments voted for Trump, or that their motives were primarily driven by an underlying economic crisis.

This article is organized as follows. First, this paper situates an emphasis on racism against the backdrop of political geographical thought that has neglected to sufficiently invest in it as a crucial axis of change. Second, I explain the methodology for the paper, with particular emphasis on the reasons why Ohio is a revealing case, and how the state can be divided into different typological zones (e.g. suburbs, rural, large cities, etc.). Third, I present the findings of county-level voting and demographic change since 1932 to illustrate the importance of embedded racial resentment and its spatial imprint. Finally, I conclude with some comments about the implications of foregrounding racism as a causal force in political geographic change.

Explaining Conservatism

Few geographers study the “Conservative Movement” per se. Most focus on the rise of neoliberalism and then loosely associate the two. According to this logic, economic crisis in the 1970s was the seedbed for current political alignments (Hackworth, 2007; Harvey, 2005). Harvey’s (2005) *Brief History of Neoliberalism* and his seminal “from managerialism to entrepreneurialism” article (1989), where he spells out this narrative, have been cited a staggering number of times—24,497 and 5,839 citations respectively according to Google
Scholar (as of this writing). There is no other comparably-influential take in geography on broad political change that emphasizes non-structural elements. To Harvey and others, electoral politics and non-economic causes of change are secondary to crises of accumulation in the broader global economy for provoking change.

Within this framework, the 1930s and 1970s are crucial historical pivots. The Great Depression threatened global profit margins and provoked anti-capitalist social movements that could, if successful, challenge the very nature of private property and labor relations. Capitalist institutions and the state, particularly in the Global North, aligned to resolve the crisis. Ideationally, the logic of Keynesian-managerialism took hold at a variety of different scales. Keynesianism involved more direct investment by the state in the economy to smooth out business cycles and boost effective demand. This not only lowered unemployment (and thus the potential for anti-capitalist social movements), but also provided stability for the corporate community. Managerialism involved a more robust effort (than before the 1930s or after the 1970s) for the state to act as an arbiter for disputes between capitalists, and between capitalists and workers (e.g. the Taft Hartley Law that established the National Labor Relations Board).

Materially, this alignment included large investments in the building, military, and automobile industries from the 1930s through the 1970s. The material and the ideational eventually fused—political challenges to the Keynesian order had to contend not only with organized labor, but with a substantial segment of the business community which supported the status quo, so even most “conservatives” tacitly supported it. As recently as 1971, Richard Nixon famously lamented even he was now a Keynesian (Harvey, 2005; Pearlstein, 2008).

The Keynesian-managerial consensus began to erode, according to this line of thought, in the 1970s, because several of the structural ingredients supporting it began to disappear. The first
and most important within this line of thought, is that post-World War II growth rates were challenged for the first time in the American economy. As both a cause and consequence of these events, Bretton Woods (the post-war monetary consensus to use the U.S. dollar for trade), and unquestioned American dominance in the automobile industry collapsed (Harvey, 1989). The combination of inflation and high unemployment (stagflation) challenged the ideational credibility of the Keynesian order—within this framework those two forces could not logically coexist (Blyth, 2002). Materially, growth rates and American trade power plummeted—factories closed across the United States. “From these several epicenters,” writes Harvey (2005, p. 1), “revolutionary impulses spread and reverberated to remake the world around us in a totally different image.” According to the structuralist line of thought, this provided the opening for neoliberal ideologues and politicians to advance a different line of thought—one built on deregulation, market fundamentalism, and emphasis on personal responsibility (Hackworth, 2007; Harvey, 2005). Within this narrative, economic crisis is the base—everything else, including racism, is superstructure. Though Harvey is the earliest and most prominent geographer to develop this worldview, it should be noted that he is far from alone. This account of American politics has been supported and developed by political scientists (Blyth, 2002), historians (Stein, 2011), sociologists (Block & Sommers, 2014; Wacquant, 2007), and popular authors (Klein, 2007). To be sure, there are differences of emphasis but they are united in their insistence that the 1970s was the pivotal turning point, and that conventionally-economic sources of crises provoked it.

There are certainly compelling aspects to this line of inquiry—my goal here is not to reject, but to complement it—but on its own, the 1970s-economic-crisis-narrative leaves several unanswered questions. First, Robin (2018) among others has cautioned against seeing neoliberal
ideas as the driving force or ulterior motive for the wider conservative movement. He places neoliberalism within a varied group of conservative ideas, institutions and social movements (see also Diamond, 1995). Neoliberals long been aligned with conservative politics—the underlying affect of returning society and economy to an earlier imagined order fits very neatly with other fragments of the conservative movement. Placing other fragments of the conservative movement, moreover, behind an over-riding neoliberal puppet-master is also historically suspect. Several important shards of the conservative movement only began to invoke the language of neoliberalism (e.g. “freedom” “individual rights”) after their initial motives proved to be socially toxic. Forces opposing the desegregation of housing and schools, for example, in the 1950s and 1960s found that open hostility to black people and the Civil Rights Movement were becoming politically toxic, so they began to adopt the superficially anodyne (and apparently neoliberal) language of “local control” “individual rights” and “freedom” (Delmont, 2016; Kruse, 2005). There are thus at least some elements of the conservative movement where neoliberalism is not the lead or underlying goal, but rather a language adopted post hoc to justify or mask uglier impulses.

Second, even if we assume that electoral politics follow structural change, it still begs the question of how the purveyors of neoliberalism have been so successful at provoking people who do not stand to materially benefit from this line of reasoning. Polanyi (1944) was among the first to argue that a populace exposed to an unregulated marketplace will eventually push toward a system that “embeds” the economy within social norms—in simple terms a political movement would develop to protect regular citizens and workers against the brutality of the market and its promoters. How then, did the series of events in the 1970s provoke so many in the white working class to vote Republican after years of leaning toward the Keynesian managerialist system and its
primary vessel in the U.S., the Democratic Party? And why was it so unsuccessful at getting non-white working class people to vote the same way? It is clear what corporations have to gain, materially, by donating massive sums of money to neoliberal politicians. It is much less clear why the white working class would consider conservative economic policies to be in their interests. Something other than (or in addition to) economic crisis would have to be present for such forms of precarity to convert into voting for a deepening of conservative economic policies.

Third, the events of the 1970s were indeed pivotal, but they say nothing on the surface about other crises in the social realm. Some scholars have noted the importance of race and racism after the Civil Rights Movement (Edsall & Edsall, 1992; Hohle, 2012; Hohle, 2015; Kruse, 2005). Though studies of anti-black racism in geography have existed for decades (among many others see: Darden, 1990; Gilmore, 2006; Pulido, 2006) they have not, until recently, enjoyed the same prominence as structural accounts derived from (white) Marxism (see also Robinson, 2000). In reflecting, for example, on her own decision to become a geographer, Hawthorne writes (Hawthorne & Heitz, 2018, p. 149), that “I was ... alarmed by the fact that, in a discipline whose history is so closely tied to the violent histories of colonialism and racism, race remained a relatively insignificant category in contemporary geography, a ‘super structural’ embellishment atop the ‘material’, clanking gears of capitalism”. A “purely” materialist account of political change (which has until recently been a virtual hegemon in geography) leaves these and other questions unanswered about the current political moment.

My intervention is based on a wider set of literatures that seek to problematize the structuralist account of political change on several levels. First, there was no purely social (i.e. universal, or even widely felt by all) response to market exposure in the 1930s in the United States. There was one for white people—who had most of the jobs that were protected by labor
regulations, most of the housing that was subsidized by the federal government, and much of the social insurance that flowed from the New Deal consensus. Black people were explicitly excluded as much as they could be.³ This was not an incidental or accidental omission—it was the condition on which the support of the southern Democratic Party rested (Rothstein, 2017). Without this faction of the Democratic Party, the Keynesian-managerialist paradigm would not have taken the form it did. Without the support of the “solid South,” Roosevelt faced a much more mixed electorate elsewhere in the country and would likely never have had the power to push through the labor, housing, and other market-embedding forms in the 1930s and 1940s. To the extent that there was some reform to the exclusion of non-white people during the Civil Rights Movement, it also arguably demolished the New Deal consensus as much as any element of stagflation or Bretton Woods in the 1970s (Edsall & Edsall, 1992; Hohle, 2015). The Civil Rights reforms provoked an angry political backlash that Republicans were eventually able to capture starting in the late 1960s. Many white people saw, and continue to see, the granting of rights to non-white people as an erosion, ipso facto, of their own privileges.

Second, and related, the structuralist account of change, tends not to have a very robust consideration of the role of racial resentment in driving electoral patterns, or more problematically feeds into current narratives about “economic anxiety” being the driving force behind such ugly motivations. The structuralist account assumes that white racial resentment is subordinate to economic position, and that the former can be dissolved by improving the latter. Detailed evidence since the 1960s suggests this ordering is dubious. Researchers have used the American National Election Survey data to gauge associations between a variety of attitudinal factors and vote decisions. They have found a consistent, durable, and growing correlation between white racial resentment and voting Republican since the inception of the survey, even
after controlling for a number of potentially mitigating circumstances including class and education (Enders & Scott, 2019; Tuch & Hughes, 2011). Conversely, the same researchers have shown a growing correlation between being non-white (or white with low racial resentment scores) and voting Democratic.

Most social science and historical work that emphasizes these forces focuses on the role they played in the American South, and for understandable reasons. From the Civil War through the 1950s, the states of the former confederacy were dominated by the Democratic Party. The southern Democratic Party led the charge to replace Reconstruction with Jim Crow, elected officials who either looked away or participated in extra-judicial violence toward black people, and made sure that black people were not allowed to vote, or be schooled with white children. When southern states elected Roosevelt by margins often exceeding 70 percentage points, southern Democrats insisted on influence in the newly-formed administration. Among other outcomes, they used this influence to insist that the Administration limit social benefits to black people (Rothstein, 2017). The systemic, willful racism of Social Security benefits, housing financing programs, and labor regulations likely would not have taken the form they did without the influence of the southern Democratic Party. This faction was at least as committed (arguably more) to white supremacy as they were to the abstractions of Keynesian-managerial governance. When national Democrats softened, then eventually caved on upholding Jim Crow and its cousins in the North starting in the mid-1940s, support in the South for the Party eroded (in the 1950s), then collapsed (in the 1960s) (Riguer, 2015). As Olson (2008, p. 712) wrote, “In the eyes of many whites, the Democratic Party became the party of and for black people”.

The overwhelming bulk of literature that highlights these themes focuses on the South but there are compelling reasons to consider their impact in the North. First, one of the primary
differences between the South and North (particularly in the Midwest), was the size and concentration of the black population, not the presence or absence of white animus. Prior to the 1940s, most black people still lived in the South where they were disenfranchised and thus could be effectively ignored by both major parties without electoral consequence. In the North, black people lived almost exclusively in forcibly-segregated neighborhoods in a small number of larger cities—Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, etc. (Massey & Denton, 1993). The rest of the Midwest was (and remains) almost entirely white. In the few cities where African Americans were located, they faced extra-judicial violence. White mobs murdered dozens of black people in 1919 riots in Chicago and Detroit, for example, while white police forces looked on or participated in the anti-black violence (Balto, 2019). When larger numbers of black people moved north during the Great Migration, they faced violence for daring to move into white spaces as recently as the 1960s, again with police forces unwilling at best, hostile at worst to stopping it (Anderson, 2016; Hirsch, 1983). Violent, resentful whites in (and near) cities were sympathetic with the segregative measures of the New Deal programs and also increasingly hostile to the Democratic Party when it finally embraced civil rights. White people in rural areas of the Midwest tended to be less compelled by the politics of exploiting this animus but not because of an underlying tolerance—it was more plausibly because there was no “racial threat” posed by black people in such spaces. Black Great Migrants did not move in large numbers to such spaces either because jobs were not abundant, or because openly racist groups prohibited them from doing so.4

The spatial conditions of antiblack animus were thus very present but more concentrated in and around certain cities in the North, compared to the South where black people existed across the rural-to-urban spectrum. The concentrated white hostility toward black people
intensified considerably (albeit in mutated form) in and around large cities like Cincinnati and Detroit in the 1950s and 1960s. While (white) mob violence became less prevalent, angry collective responses to the growing demographic and political influence of black people did not. White people resented the election of black mayors, the increasing ability of black people to live anywhere they could afford, and particularly the uprisings of the late 1960s. But there was arguably no force more politically impactful in the North than school busing court orders (Delmont, 2016). As Orfield (1978, p. 1) wrote, “busing was the last important issue to emerge from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the only one to directly affect the laws of large numbers of Whites outside the South.” Busing was and remains a divisive topic along sharp racial lines. Many black people viewed it as a necessary reparative device that would ameliorate segregation, while many white people viewed it as a heavy-handed assault on their ability to control the racial make-up of their local school (Olson, 2002; Delmont, 2016). Following the Brown v. Board of Education decision (1954), lower court judges finally began (a decade later) to issue orders for school districts throughout the North to achieve racial balance. Busing children to adjust the balance emerged as one desegregative method. Prior to 1974, the direction of federal courts suggested that some of these orders would apply not just to single school boards (e.g. Cleveland School District only), but also to all nearby school boards even if they were in a different municipality. School districts like Detroit had, by the 1970s, begun already planning to bus children across school district lines as the level of separation was often greater across districts than within them. But the Milliken v. Bradley (1974) Supreme Court decision ended this practice. In Milliken, the Court overturned a lower court order to desegregate regionally, making it effectively impossible to bus across district lines (Delmont, 2016). The primary collective response of white people was to move to a different municipality and/or a surrounding county
where such orders were not valid. This response too was uneven—it motivated white residential choice in the very places that black people were most numerous (e.g. Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dayton), but not as much in the nearly all-white industrial regions of southeastern Ohio.

Democrats held many different positions on busing. Conservative northern Democrats like Joe Biden and the entire southern delegation actively contested busing as a method. Others, hoping to capture the increasingly large black population in the North, were either silent or supportive of school integration which further fueled the political animosity of fleeing whites. But because of the concentration of black populations and political power, it was not just as Olson (2008) suggests that white people saw the Democratic Party as associated with black people. In the Midwest, white suburbanites increasingly associated the Democratic Party with the black city. Thus in 1968 when southern Democrats ran George Wallace—an open segregationist committed to preserving Jim Crow—it was not only impactful in the South (where he won five states in the presidential election). Wallace was also effective in the white suburbs and exurbs surrounding black cities Ohio (Figure 1) and the rest of the Rust Belt (Hackworth, 2019, Figure 2.5).

Both major parties scrambled to devise ways of capturing or re-capturing these voters but the Republicans eventually won this battle. The lynchpin of their strategy was “dog whistling”—messaging on racially-divisive issues like crime, busing, welfare, and taxes (Haney-Lopez, 2014; Waldman, 2014). Because open appeals to racially resentful whites might hurt Republicans amongst “moderates”, strategists devised coded ways of gesturing to perceived racial unfairness. “The trick,” wrote Carter (1996, p. 30), “lay in sympathizing with and appealing to the fears of angry whites without appearing to become an extremist and driving away moderates”.

Conventional wisdom amongst Republican and Democratic strategists alike has been that there is a political geography to “appealing to the fears of angry whites” while not driving away
**Figure 1:** Vote percentages for George Wallace in the 1968 Presidential Election (Source: Dave Leip Presidential Vote Custom Database).
“moderates”. As Senator Schumer’s apocryphal prediction in 2016 suggested, “angry whites” are seen to dominate in rural America. Their putative intolerance stems from being poorly-educated, and thus falling victim to myths about non-white danger and pathology. Suburban white areas are, by contrast, viewed through this prism as spaces of relative tolerance. That tolerance is seen as a by-product of higher education, economic stability, and more diverse contacts (mostly through the workplace). Group threat theory (GTT) holds these assumptions to be dubious and the historical-empirical record is strong for suggesting that they are (Blumer, 1958; Bobo, 1983; Bobo et. al, 1997; Brown, 2013; Eitle & Taylor, 2008). GTT holds, briefly, that the degree of threat perceived (and willingness to act upon it) is proportional to the demographic or political threat posed by the “outgroup” (Pottie-Sherman & Wilkes, 2017). It would therefore be expected that white reaction to blackness is concentrated in the very places that black people were and remain located. In the South, where the black population is widespread the geography of white reactive threat is similarly widespread. But in the North, where black populations are more concentrated so too is the geography of white reactive threat. As will be described later, in Ohio rural white counties were relatively evenly split between the two major parties during the New Deal period—they were not Democratic Party strongholds. The dog whistling of the post-Civil Rights Movement Republican Party, if it had an effect at all, simply moved those space to become more Republican. The most acute and consequential shifts from Democratic leaning to Republican leaning occurred in the white “moderate” suburban and exurban counties of the state.

The second point is both a cause and effect of this realignment geography. That is, the messaging of Republican dog whistlers was and remains particularly suited (in the North) to the white refugee from the black city. Take Nixon advisor Lee Atwater’s famous, execrable
description of their messaging strategies. “You start in 1954 by saying ‘nigger, nigger, nigger’”, Atwater admitted,

By 1968 you can’t say ‘nigger’—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states’ rights and all that stuff. You’re getting so abstract now, you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things and a by-product of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. I’m not saying that. But I’m saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, what we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me—because obviously sitting around saying, ‘We want to cut taxes and we want to cut thus’, is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than ‘nigger, nigger’. So any way you look at it, race is coming on the back burner (quoted in Perlstein, 2012)

This positioning is obviously designed to provoke reaction amongst those with an experience of busing, but this was not a universal experience in the North. It is concentrated in and around a number of key cities. Meigs County in southern Ohio did not have a busing order, and even if it did, it would not have resulted in “integration” because nearly everyone in the county is white. But as of 1976, the cities of Akron, Dayton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, and Youngstown had all been ordered by the courts to desegregate (and all had appealed these orders) (Wooten, 1976; see also Jonas, 1998).6 Resentment amongst middle class whites in the North was intense even if it (mostly) avoided the toxic language and messaging of Jim Crow (Delmont, 2016)

Southern Strategy messaging resonates precisely where it confirms extant worldviews or biases. In the white suburbs surrounding black cities in the Midwest this messaging responds to and animates the threat that white suburbanites regard the principal city of their region to be.
Whites in such spaces have both a psychic and material interaction with black spaces and people in that principal city. Given that jobs are still concentrated in central counties, many suburbanites continue to commute to those cities daily where they are subject to various taxes and regulations. It just as true, moreover, that the principal city is a symbol to them. Even if they did not themselves flee the city after busing, a 1960s uprising, or the election of a black mayor, they are likely closely related to someone who did—possibly their own parents. This fuels a before/after imaginary that is easy to idealize (the before) and exploit. “Make America Great Again” has a particular meaning to white suburbanites who feel that the major city in their region—home to their ancestors or current family members—was stolen from them.

**Data and Approach**

This study is organized around several assumptions. First, rather than relying upon the notion that 1970s economic crises generated the shift rightward, I explore the geographical impact of racial realignment from the late 1940s to the late 1960s. Specifically, I use the presidential elections from 1932 to 1944 to operationalize the New Deal period, the presidential elections from 1948 to 1968 as the period of racial realignment, and the elections from 1972 to 2016 as the post-Civil Rights Movement (see Table 1). The period of racial realignment was characterized by a national Democratic Party softening, then capitulating, then facilitating the Civil Rights Movement. Key events in this period include Truman’s order to desegregate the Army in 1948, a spate of court decisions that undermined housing and school segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement. Busing court decisions which were still being delivered as late as the 1970s were particularly integral at moving otherwise evenly-divided (or Democratic leaning) spaces to becoming very Republican spaces. Though national Democrats were certainly not
**Table 1: Racial realignment in the United States, key moments, 1932-2016.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Years¹</th>
<th>Major Themes and Key Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Deal Keynesian Managerial Period</td>
<td>1932-1944</td>
<td>The Roosevelt Presidencies: Characterized by a major expansion of the federal social state. Key programs include the Works Progress Administration, Social Security, and homeownership subsidies. Key regulatory influences include labor laws, anti-trust regulations, and banking regulations. Southern Democrats insisted that measures be included to limit access for African Americans, and for the federal government to avoid civil rights regulations and enforcement. Support from white racially resentful voters (especially in the South) is strained as the national Democratic Party begins to embrace a civil rights agenda. Key presidential events: Truman orders partial desegregation of the Army (1948); Kennedy (1960) runs on a pro-civil rights platform in 1960; Wallace (1968) runs as a segregationist and wins 5 southern states; Key judicial events: Shelley v. Kraemer (1948); Brown v. Board of Education (1954); numerous busing rulings; Key legislative events: Civil Rights Act (1964), Voting Rights Act (1965), Fair Housing Act (1968); Key social events: anti-black violence directed at families moving out of the formal ghetto; uprisings in major cities from 1965 to 1968; assassination of civil rights leaders: J.F. Kennedy (1963), Malcolm X (1965), MLK (1968), R. Kennedy (1968).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Civil Rights Movement Period</td>
<td>1972-2016</td>
<td>Characterized by an almost complete reversal of voting patterns in the American South. National Republicans devise messaging techniques to capture the white racially resentful voter while also retaining the white suburban “moderate” which has historically been their base. Rather than open racial animus Republicans (and some Democrats) gesture to themes like busing, “law and order” (e.g. Willie Horton ads in 1988), “welfare queens” (e.g. Reagan comments in 1976) to “dog whistle” about race.</td>
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**NOTES**

¹ Refers to the presidential election years used to operationalize this period in this study. The actual transitions between periods was more fluid.
fierce advocates for busing, Republicans from Nixon onward were palpably hostile to it. Nixon, Ford, and Reagan not only frequently mentioned the topic; they actively dismantled the federal government’s ability to enforce desegregation orders coming from courts or the Department of Health Education and Welfare (Delmont, 2016). In both subtle and overt ways, Republicans established themselves as hostile to the juridical residue of the Civil Rights Movement.

To assess the geography and magnitude of the shift away from Democrats and toward Republicans, this study is built on an analysis of presidential election results in Ohio from 1932 to 2016. This county-level data was purchased from the Dave Leip presidential voting database—which is simply a digital recording of presidential votes going back to the origin of the country—and assembled into a dataset that could be subdivided temporally to gauge the impact of racial realignment, and geographically to explore the role of different levels of urbanization. The state’s counties were divided into different categories and their election results compared over time. These categories are summarized in Table 2. First, I began with the contemporary metropolitan statistical area (MSA) boundaries in the state. The U.S. Census designates and continually revises the definition for MSAs. Metropolitan statistical areas are groupings of counties whose total population exceeds 50,000 that are centered on one (sometimes several) major “principal city”. There are 14 MSAs that either originate or spill into the state of Ohio as of 2018 (see Figure 2). In 11 of these cases the core county is within the state boundary so it was counted as “category 1: urban core county”. Second, all other counties from the official metropolitan statistical area were counted as “official suburbs”. These counties have the strongest connection to the principal city in the MSA. Third, there are 21 other counties in the state that were not officially part of an MSA but which share a boundary with the core county of an MSA. Though the connection was not strong enough for it to be counted as an “official
**Figure 2:** Spatial typology of Ohio counties.
Table 2: Typology of Ohio Counties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Urban Core Counties</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Home count of the principal city (first one listed) of a recognized metropolitan statistical area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Suburb 1: Official Suburb</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Other counties in the officially designated Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Suburb 2: Adjacent</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Counties that are not officially part of the MSA, but which share a boundary with the core county of an MSA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rural 1: Micropolitan Centers</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Core counties for a recognized micropolitan area in the state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rural 2: All other counties</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Counties that are neither part of, nor adjacent to recognized metropolitan statistical areas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES

1 MSA definitions were derived from the 2018 release available on the United States Census website (www.census.gov). Note also that three principal cities are located in West Virginia (Weirton, Wheeling, Huntington)

2 If it is both adjacent to an MSA core county, and a core county for micropolitan area, it was counted as “adjacent” (idea being that metro city is more impactful than micropolitan area).
county” by the U.S. Census, these counties do nonetheless share considerable proximity, labor market overlap, and often similar media. They are designated “adjacent”. The fourth category of counties are “micropolitan areas”. These counties contain fewer than 50,000 people and are often centered on a medium or large town. These will be referred to as “rural 1” counties. Finally, all counties that are neither part of nor adjacent to the core county of a metropolitan or micropolitan area were counted as “rural 2”.

Presidential election data at the county level in Ohio has both opportunities and limitations. Presidential elections have much higher turnout rates than local or state elections, so they are more a representative proxy for political attitudes than other elections. It is also true that Ohio has been and continues to be the focus of copious election advertising each cycle because it is a swing state. So its residents are particularly exposed to the viewpoints, rhetoric, and statements of major candidates. That said, there are some limits to the approached used here, namely the spatial unit of analysis. Counties, particularly in Midwestern states like Ohio, are large spatial units that often contain “urban”, “suburban”, and “rural” communities. A county like Cuyahoga, for example, contains Cleveland, some incorporated suburbs, and some farmland. Counties are large units of analysis—in an ideal research world, we could evaluate voting changes at the precinct level and associate those findings with census data that align with those boundaries. In more recent years, such analysis is possible, but more historical work becomes impossible for because the boundaries of smaller social units such as precincts and legislative districts change over time, and the availability of vote data at such a small scale is elusive for longer historical spans. Moreover, the U.S. Census uses a geography of tract and block boundaries, that both changes over time, and is difficult to align with electoral data particularly for more distant elections.
Thus the reader should understand the findings through these limitations. First, the actual influence and size of “suburban” votes and communities is likely understated. The biggest counties in the state—Franklin, Cuyahoga, Hamilton—are classified as “large urban core” but contain dozens of incorporated suburbs within their boundaries that are as white and Republican-voting as the incorporated suburbs just beyond the county line. Put simply, the influence of “suburban” votes and racial reaction to the central city is even higher than the findings would suggest. Similarly, parts of the suburban counties surrounding major cities remain very rural, and certainly were during the New Deal period. Again, this would simply understate potential “suburban” findings. That is, if suburbs are indeed a fulcrum of moderation, there should be evidence that such places are becoming more racially moderate in the post-civil rights period, and particularly troubled by figures like Trump. As will be described below, not only is this not happening—the lurch toward the Republican Party is actually most acute in these spaces.

Political Change in Ohio, 1932-2016

One of the starkest differences between Ohio counties is the concentration of the black population in the state. Over 85% of the state’s black population resides in one of the urban core counties. This ratio has not changed significantly since 1930 (when it was 79.6%), but the overall size of the African American population has. In 1930, the state was only 4.7% black—even the major urban counties of the state were only 6.5% black (compared to the national number of 9.7%) (Table 3). But as the second wave of the Great Migration took hold in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, the state’s ethnoracial landscape changed considerably. The state’s black population increased by over 50% during the 1940s and 1950s, but almost entirely in the major cities of the state. By 1960, the state’s black population reached 12.0% in urban core counties (combined),
Table 3: Black population percentages in different Ohio counties, 1930-2016 (Source: U.S. Census)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core County</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official Suburb</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjacent</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural 1</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural 2</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
exceeding the national level (10.5%) for the first time in history. Today, the black population of urban core counties has grown to 21.6%, which is almost double the state (12.4%) and national (12.6%) percentages. It should be noted though that even in those counties (big city counties for example), black people are still a demographic minority (23.0% of big city county population, for example), so while the potential for voting power rests in a few select cities, so does the potential for white backlash. Cleveland is, for example, 50.4% black, but the remainder of Cuyahoga County is 73.3% white. Even in areas of putative black power, African Americans remain the minority often within the same county. This likely has the effect of understating the levels of white reaction to such cities described below as there are substantial segments, often majorities, of “black” counties that are also voting against the symbolism of the region’s main city. The rest of the state (including officials suburbs) has long been, and remains, very white.

The second important demographic feature to note is the uneven geography of population growth and decline (Table 4). In 1930, core counties constituted 57.2%, and official suburbs 18.3% of the of the state’s population respectively. By 2016, core counties had fallen to below 50% for the first time, while official suburbs now constitute 29.7% of the state’s population. Much of this shift has occurred since 1970 and it has largely been a process of movement from the core counties to the official suburbs. Nine of the eleven core counties in Ohio experienced absolute losses in population. Some counties, like Cuyahoga (Cleveland) and Hamilton (Cincinnati) have experienced staggering losses since 1970: 462,590 and 118,053 respectively. By contrast, the suburban counties have gained considerable population since 1970. Twenty-four of the 27 official suburban counties have gained population. Six have grown by over 100%, one by over 300% (Delaware County, outside of Columbus). The remaining counties have had a more mixed experience. Most rural counties have gained population since 1970 but because the
Table 4: Percentage of Ohio population in different spatial categories, 1930-2016 (source: U.S. Census).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core County</td>
<td>57.2%</td>
<td>56.8%</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
<td>49.8%</td>
<td>49.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official Suburb</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjacent</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural 1</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural 2</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
official suburbs of the state are growing so rapidly their relative share has remained identical. Today, rural 1 counties constitute 8.6% of the state’s population, just as they did in 1970. Rural 2 counties constitute 2.2% of the state’s population, a slight increase of their 1970 share (2.0%).

These population changes stem from, and amplify, voting tendencies in the state. Table 5 is a summary of vote percentages for each election in each county type between 1932 and 2016. Core counties have the longest track record of voting in ways that are different than the rest of the state, but that is particularly the case in the past eight election cycles. Also clear from this table is the fact that support for the Democratic Party has long been quite concentrated in the state. Rural and adjacent areas of the state were sympathetic to the “self-help” messaging of the Republican Party and in several of the elections between 1932 and 1944 actually voted against the Roosevelt Presidency (even while he was winning by landslide margins elsewhere in the country). Since 1972, there has been a notable pattern of core counties voting very differently than the rest of the state again. Official suburbs, by contrast, have converged politically with rural areas of the state.

Missing from these figures is however a sense of the magnitude of shift and the size of the counties in question. Figure 3 is a scatterplot of vote percentages for Democratic presidential candidates (see Table 6 for aggregated category totals). The horizontal axis represents Democratic Presidential vote percentages in the 1932-1944 period. The vertical axis represents vote Democratic Presidential vote percentages in the 1972-2016 period. The figures are based on aggregated vote totals to reflect broader tendencies—i.e. all Democratic votes in a county in 1932-44 divided by all votes in that county in 1932-44. Clearly, the entire state has shifted away from the Democratic Party since the Civil Rights Movement nearly everywhere. Only 7 of 88 counties became more Democratic, and in only two of those cases did they actually do so enough
Figure 3: Presidential vote percentages in Ohio Counties, 1932-1944 versus 1972-2016 (NOTE: Suburb counties include “official suburbs” and “adjacent”) (Source: Dave Leip Presidential Vote Custom Database).
Table 5: Difference between presidential election results in Ohio suburbs and other regions of the state (shaded cells are significantly different from Official Suburb scores).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Spatial Type</th>
<th>Core County</th>
<th>Official Suburb</th>
<th>Adjacent Area</th>
<th>Rural 1</th>
<th>Rural 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D%</td>
<td>R%</td>
<td>D%</td>
<td>R%</td>
<td>D%</td>
<td>R%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
<td>42.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>54.9%</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
<td>53.2%</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>52.1%</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>50.5%</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
<td>53.0%</td>
<td>45.8%</td>
<td>53.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
<td>55.5%</td>
<td>39.3%</td>
<td>60.7%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>68.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
<td>52.7%</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>59.8%</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>63.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>62.4%</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
<td>59.8%</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
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<td>1968</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
<td>58.9%</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>66.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
<td>53.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
<td>50.6%</td>
<td>36.9%</td>
<td>56.2%</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
<td>57.7%</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>65.5%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>68.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>53.6%</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td>62.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>42.0%</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>49.4%</td>
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<td>42.2%</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>46.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>56.2%</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
<td>58.1%</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
<td>54.7%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>54.0%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
<td>55.9%</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>62.6%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>70.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES

1. Calculated mean for all counties within a category (not weighted to population size).
2. A Mann-Whitney Test was performed with each set of counties to determine levels of difference. If a cell is shaded, that score is significantly different (p<.05) than the same category and year for official suburbs.
Table 6: Shifts in Ohio presidential voting, by spatial category, 1932-1944 versus 1972-2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>% Point Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core County</td>
<td>-5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official Suburb</td>
<td>-10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjacent</td>
<td>-12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural 1</td>
<td>-6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural 2</td>
<td>-7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entire State</td>
<td>-7.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to be above 50%. The rest of the state shifted decisively toward the Republican Party, but the geography and degree of this shift varied. In the 1932-1944 period, all urban core counties voted for Democrats at rates over 50%. By the latter period, only four counties remained 50% or more Democratic in their votes. Official suburbs shifted more dramatically. In the 1932-1944 period, about half of the official suburban counties voted Democrat, and half leaned Republican—and virtually all of these counties were competitive no matter what direction they leaned. During the 1972-2016 period, only four of the 27 official suburb counties still leaned Democratic, and the average shift away from Democratic votes was 10.6 points. The biggest shifts were in suburban counties surrounding cities that were experiencing great increases in their black population, and much less in counties surrounding more white cities. Many growing counties outside of Cincinnati, Dayton, and Columbus shifted from being Democratic to Republican leaning. In Butler, Clermont, and Brown counties in the Cincinnati metro region each shifted over 18 percentage points away from Democrats. Similarly Pickaway, Fairfield and Licking Counties outside of Columbus all shifted over 14 percentage points away from the Democratic Party in the post-Civil Rights period. Incidentally, these are all counties in which George Wallace over-performed. More rural areas of the state also shifted away from the Democratic Party but at smaller rates, and fewer of those counties were Democratic leaning to begin with. There, the Republican Party built upon its New Deal resistance strongholds in rural Ohio but the impacts were less significant because the relative population share of such spaces is largely stagnant. In short, the contemporary suburban areas of the state were more similar politically to the main city in their region in the 1930s, when that city was almost all white. But after the Great Migration and Civil Rights Movement, the state’s main suburban counties vote more similar to the state’s rural areas—overwhelmingly Republican. The “suburbs” voted more like their main city when
they were not even really suburbs (they were just rural areas surrounding major cities in the 1930s). Now that they are more formally linked economically with a principal city, they vote in palpably different ways.

**Conclusion**

There has been a notable materialist bent to theories of political change in geography. The economic crises of the 1970s eroded the conditions of Keynesian managerialism, opening the door to neoliberal governance. Economic turmoil caused the shift toward conservatism after the 1970s. Outside of the materialist paradigm, other scholars have foregrounded the role of racial animus and broader social conflict. This work provides several amendments and challenges to a strict materialist frame. First, racial resentment has a key component of all ostensibly economic shifts in the United States. The Keynesian New Deal period, specifically excluded black people as a condition for passage. The post-Keynesian period is built on a number of pillars—not least, racial resentment. Providing some material benefits to non-white people during the Civil Rights Movement provoked an angry backlash amongst racially-resentful whites who are willing even to undermine their own privileges to assure that nonwhites do not get them. Racism is a potent template from which to work, and Republicans have exploited it masterfully since the 1960s.

Second, while he is framed by many media pundits as an outlier and the acceptance of his toxic racial rhetoric new, Trump is in fact not new in several respects. Racial resentment has driven white voters away from the Democratic Party since the late 1940s when Truman desegregated the Army. That disaffection only increased during and after the Civil Rights Movement. President Obama’s mere presence appears to have sparked it again. Trump is clearly
less veiled with his racial rhetoric, and for decades Republican strategists have assumed that a figure like him would undermine support in the white moderate suburbs because it would link the Republican Party to a politically ugly set of white supremacists. National Democrats were so convinced of this that they assumed Trump would collapse in the suburbs, but this has not happened. The ostensibly-moderate suburbs did not vote in discernably different ways from other post-1972 elections, which is to say they voted overwhelmingly for the Republican candidate for president. The political tendencies of the state’s suburbs and exurbs is more like that of distant rural areas than the principal city of their own metropolitan region. More than simply “holding their nose” and voting for Trump, suburbanites did so enthusiastically, and he remains popular there as of this writing. The suburbs are the base of the Conservative Movement in the state. Rural areas of the state are very white and vote also have voted for Republicans enthusiastically since the Civil Rights Movement (and they were enthusiastic supporters of Trump). But they are also shrinking in relative importance, and were never particularly Democratic-leaning places to begin with. The biggest shift in support for Republicans, post-CRM, has been in the suburbs surrounding the most African-American cities in the state.

Attracting suburban middle class white votes in the main line suburbs of Philadelphia is not the same as attracting suburban middle class white people of Licking County outside of Columbus. In fact, publicly repudiating racism (as Hillary Clinton did in her campaign) provoked a suburban backlash akin to that seen in rural white America—perhaps because these counties are partially rural white America. Trump did not turn off the “moderates” by bull horning—he animated them. He gave confirmation to their biases—one of those being that the city into which they commute, and from which their parents fled a generation ago is filled with “threats” to their interests. Among other findings, perhaps we should more seriously critique the
definition of “moderate”. There are few voters who sit in the middle of every issue spectrum. Voters are motivated by a variety of ideas and self-interest. The heart of Republican power is precisely in the parts of Ohio that grew rapidly in response to black municipal empowerment and uprisings in the 1960s. The biggest shifts have been in the counties that voted for George Wallace by the highest margins outside of the American South. The Trump coalition is not just the white “economically anxious” farmer in Southeastern Ohio. It is also the white accountant in Pickerington Ohio (in Fairfield County) who commutes to Columbus every day, is suspicious of the city’s black mayor, its “high taxes”, and associates all of that with the Democratic Party. Rather than viewing Midwestern suburbs as a fulcrum between the increasingly non-white cities and the very white rural areas of the state, perhaps we should be more willing to view them as outgrowths of the latter (politically) even if they are outgrowths of the former economically. Perhaps too it is time to retire both “moderate” and “suburb” as uncomplicated political categories.
References:


NOTES

1 It was not just Trump’s comments on race that were supposed to turn away white suburban moderates. His generalized vulgarity, punctuated by the release of the “Access Hollywood tape” a few weeks before the election was certain, in the eyes of many pundits and strategists to turn away white moderate suburban Republicans.

2 It should be noted that there are other, less influential, takes (e.g. Wilson, 2006; Hohle, 2015) which do more seriously take into account how racism influenced this turn, and very influential books (e.g. Edsall and Edsall, 1992) outside of geography that have been written from this perspective.

3 New Deal programs restricted access for African Americans. This was an explicit condition on which southern Democratic Party support rested. Among other examples, Social Security initially refused to cover those who were involved in domestic, seasonal or agricultural labor (i.e. those occupations that were dominated by black people). Most homeownership from the New Deal subsidies never reached black people because of a refusal to adequately insure mortgages in black neighborhoods, which resulted in contract mortgages being the only source of financing for most African Americans (Satter, 2009), and Federal Housing Administration regulations that insisted on segregation (Rothstein, 2017). See Lieberman (1998) for a more in depth discussion of the racism of New Deal programs.

4 Alexander (2017) for example writes about the town of Lancaster Ohio (which is about 25 miles southeast of Columbus). The long-time Sherriff during the 1950s and 1960s had ties to the KKK and would harass nonwhite families who tried to settle there. Those who did remain in Lancaster faced such indignities as having a “black only” public pool day, after which the pool was drained so that white children could swim in it the following day. Clearly there was racial animus in smaller and rural white locales, but the nonwhite population remained so small (probably because of this animus) so there was not the same scale of collective response (i.e. white mobs a la Chicago in 1919) or policy shifts (e.g. busing orders).

5 President Carter was the most outspoken Democratic president on the issue of busing. His position seemed to vacillate between being against it and being vague about it (see Mohr, 1976).

6 There was a desegregation order for the city of Lima, Ohio that concluded in 1981 with a “school choice” plan that did not include busing (Hasson, 1981).

7 As of 2019, the Federal Government was still using definitions set forth in the 2010 document (OMB, 2010).

8 For a county to be included, at least 25% of the workforce from an outlying county must work in the central county of an MSA to be given this designation (OMB, 2010).