Democrats are increasingly Whiter, Richer, more Educated Elites
PSCI 107 Final Paper – Dylan Radley

The 2016 Election produced a fundamental shift in how we view the American political landscape, upsetting expectations and calling into question who Democrats are as a party, how to move forward, and what they represent. With election data from 2016, 2018, and 2020, I show what kinds of voters the Democratic party is appealing to. Since the 2016 election, Democrats have been elected by a coalition of whiter, wealthier, and more educated Americans. This plays out from the suburbs of Atlanta to Akron, Ohio, and has implications for a party that imagines a return to its working-class roots or a broad coalition of people of color.

What does it mean to be whiter, wealthier, and more educated? The US Census Bureau's *American Community Survey* (ACS) compiles their results into reports organized by year and geographic level, including data on race, educational attainment, and economic health. Combining 2014-2018 ACS data at the house-district level with house district-level election returns from 2016-2020[1] shows how people voted and their demographic conditions. Let's start with two districts that shifted heavily towards the Democratic and Republican parties respectively: the Georgia 6th (GA06) and Ohio 13th (OH13) congressional districts.

GA06 has gotten attention since Jon Ossof's 2017 special election, where he narrowly lost. Then, Lucy McBath (D) won in 2018 and held her seat more comfortably in 2020. OH13 has been held by Democrats since 1977, but the once comfortable seat has been drifting away since 2016, edging into competitive territory. Measured by the percent of residents with a bachelor's degree or higher, GA06 is very highly educated while OH013 is a bit below the median. GA006's average, median, and income per capita are all double or almost double OH13's. GA06 is more diverse, with large groups

	Median House District	Georgia 6th	Ohio 13th
% Bachelor's Degree or higher	29.76	61.09	22.78
Median Household Income (thousands)	58.96	90.88	45.09
Average Household Income (thousands)	80.25	127.26	60.04
Income per Capita (thousands)	31.02	49.34	26.03
% White	65.86	59.66	80.63
% Black	6.86	12.96	11.28
% American Indian & Alaska Native	0.24	0.25	0.20
% Asian	3.06	11.55	1.86
% Hawaiian	0.05	0.02	0.01
% Other Race	0.18	0.52	0.09
% Two or More Races	2.16	2.20	2.66
% Hispanic	12.05	12.84	3.27

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[1] From the National Election Pool

of white, black, Asian, and Hispanic residents, while OH13 is more overwhelmingly white, with a minority of black voters. Among the many differences between the districts, education, race, and median income stand out. But how have those factors played out on a national scale?

In 2016, each 1% increase in the white population of a district was correlated with a 0.52%-point decrease in democratic vote share. Conversely, each additional 1% of the population with a bachelor's degree or higher was correlated with a 0.32%-point increase in democratic vote share. However, both relationships changed from 2016 to 2020, as the figure below shows.

Predicting Democratic Vote Share in House Districts
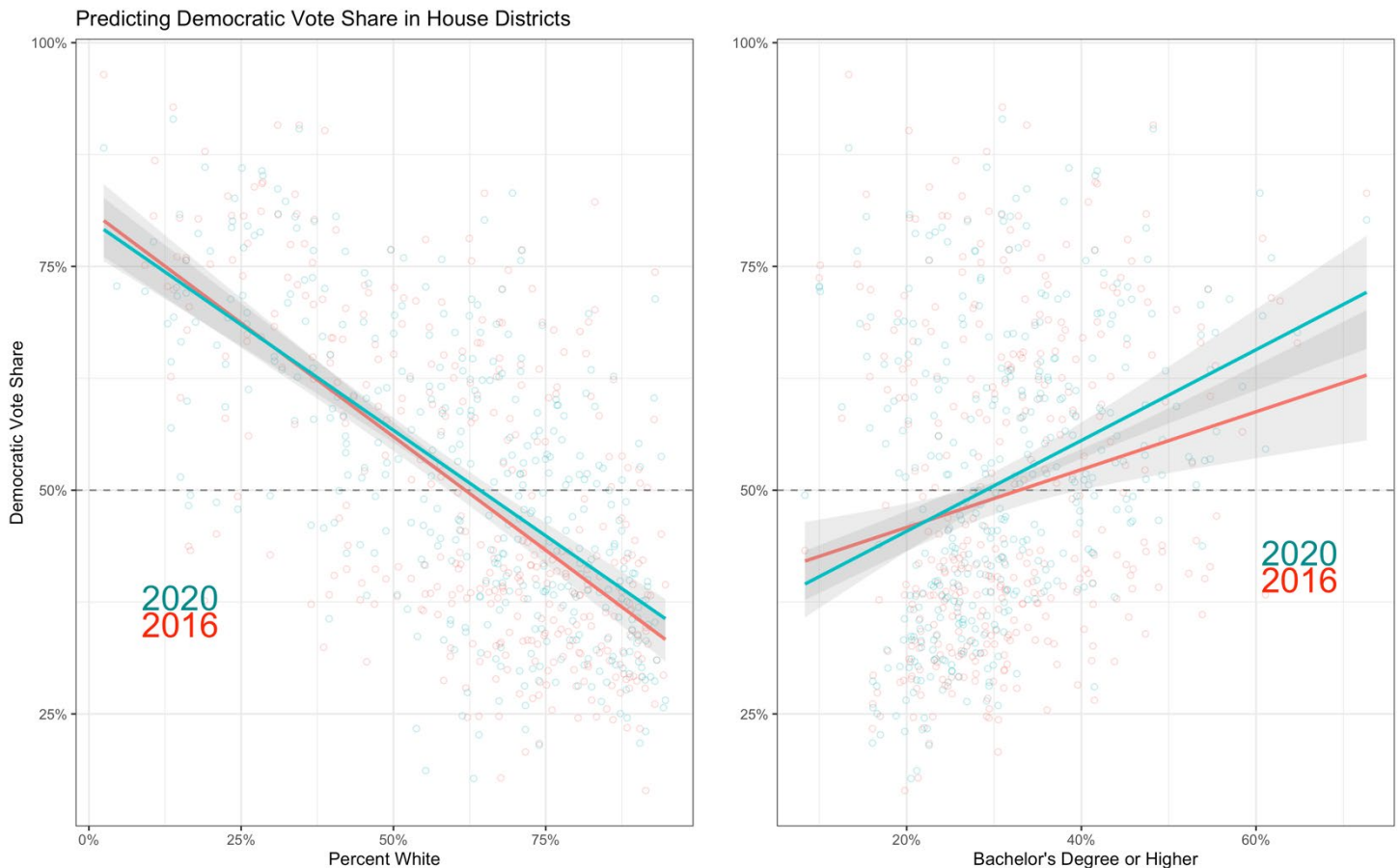
The relationship between white voters and the Republican party weakened, now correlating with only a 0.47%-point decrease in democratic vote share. Meanwhile, the correlation strengthened from 0.32% to 0.49% points for each 1% with a bachelor's degree or higher. Many other variables also had significant shifts, and out of these changes the broad picture starts to emerge. Overall, signs a house district was doing well, such as higher median income and income per capita, saw higher correlations with democratic vote share. Signs a district was not, such as higher unemployment or a larger proportion of constituents on public assistance, saw

weaker correlations with democratic vote share. Furthermore, the correlation with higher education and democratic votes increased considerably, while the correlations with less academic achievement shifted towards Republicans. Racial groups also shifted, with many minority communities having a weaker correlation with democratic votes. All of the variables considered, and their changes from 2016 to 2020, are summarized below.

Variable	Correlation w/Democratic Vote Share 2016	Correlation w/Democratic Vote Share 2020	% Change 2016-2020
% Less Than HS Diploma	0.954	0.648	-32.10
% Only HS Diploma	-1.020	-1.295	-26.96
% Some College	-1.391	-1.479	-6.26
% Bachelor's Degree or higher	0.319	0.490	53.79
Unemployment Rate	3.767	3.196	-15.15
Median Household Income (thousands)	0.106	0.168	58.72
Average Household Income (thousands)	0.126	0.172	36.68
% on Public Assistance	4.779	4.157	-13.00
Income per Capita (thousands)	0.293	0.406	38.85
Adult Poverty Rate	0.671	0.438	-34.73
Senior Poverty Rate	2.126	1.751	-17.61
% Uninsured	0.334	0.137	-59.12
% on Public Insurance	0.412	0.199	-51.80
% on Private Insurance	-0.589	-0.416	29.31
% not Hispanic	-0.365	-0.305	16.66
% White	-0.516	-0.471	8.80
% Black	0.513	0.483	-5.89
% American Indian & Alaska Native	-0.779	-0.970	-24.44
% Asian	1.090	0.972	-10.80
% Hawaiian	3.768	2.683	-28.79
% Two or More Races	1.439	1.278	-11.16
% Hispanic	0.365	0.305	-16.66

For Example, on average, for every additional percent unemployment, Democrats received on average 3.2 additional percentage points of the vote in 2020. This relationship was about 15% weaker than in 2016, when it was 3.76.

The broad trends created by education and measures of income are clear, but can we see their effects in election outcomes? Thirteen house seats had particularly high partisan shifts towards democrats, of over 12% points. All but two had above median levels of education, and 6/13 were among the 40 most educated districts[2]. Most also had high median incomes, and 5/13 were among the 40 highest median income districts. By contrast, districts with heavy republican shifts were concentrated around the median levels of education and income or tended to fall below it, which you can see below.

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[2] As measured by percent of the population with a bachelor's degree or higher.

Higher Education and Partisan Shift / Median Household Income and Partisan Shift
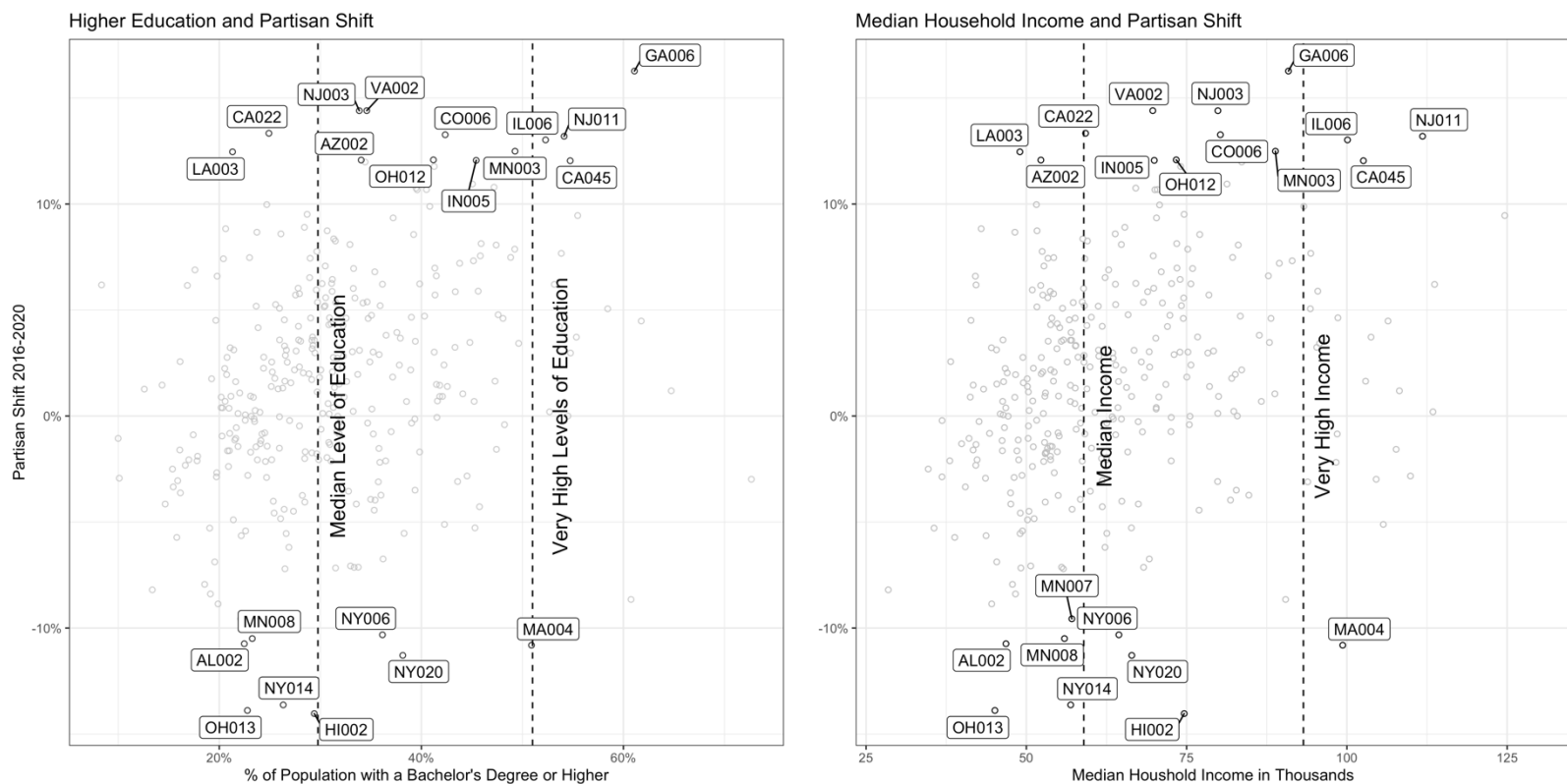
"Very High Income/Education" is placed two standard deviations greater than the median. Districts with partisan shifts more than 2 standard deviations from the median are highlighted. In normally distributed data, approximately 2.5% of data points lie outside this bound, representing extreme data points.

We've seen the broad trends, and how they played out among districts that shifted the most. Let's return to GA06 and OH13 to illustrate two parts of the story. Highly educated, wealthier voters in the Atlanta suburbs that define GA06 may have pushed the district towards the Democratic party. Meanwhile, poorer, less educated districts like OH13 have been slipping away. Some, like Clare Malone writing for 538, have investigated how race plays into this dynamic: making a distinction between working-class white voters in the Midwest and highly educated, suburban whites. As OH13 shows, the former may be shifting towards Republicans, while Democrats gain among the latter group in places like GA06. What does this all mean for Democrats?

The shift towards a more highly educated and wealthy base paints a concerning picture for the party, especially as they campaign on looking out for less-advantaged Americans. It becomes even more troubling if they also lose their appeal with some voters of color. A coalition of economically disadvantaged voters of all races and voters of color in general would be nearly unstoppable. However, even candidates like Joe Biden seem to be appealing to wealthy white liberals, often in suburban areas, while doing little to reverse the trends that I have identified. The next question is how Democrats stop losing ground with voters they are trying the hardest to court, and the attempt to answer it will define the future of the party and our politics.