Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State: Revisited

Re-examining American politics' most famous paradox in an era of shifting demographic and growing polarization

Overview

- Introduction
- Project impetus
- Methodology
- Datasets
- Preliminary findings
- Conclusions and next steps

Introduction: History of **red**, **blue** states

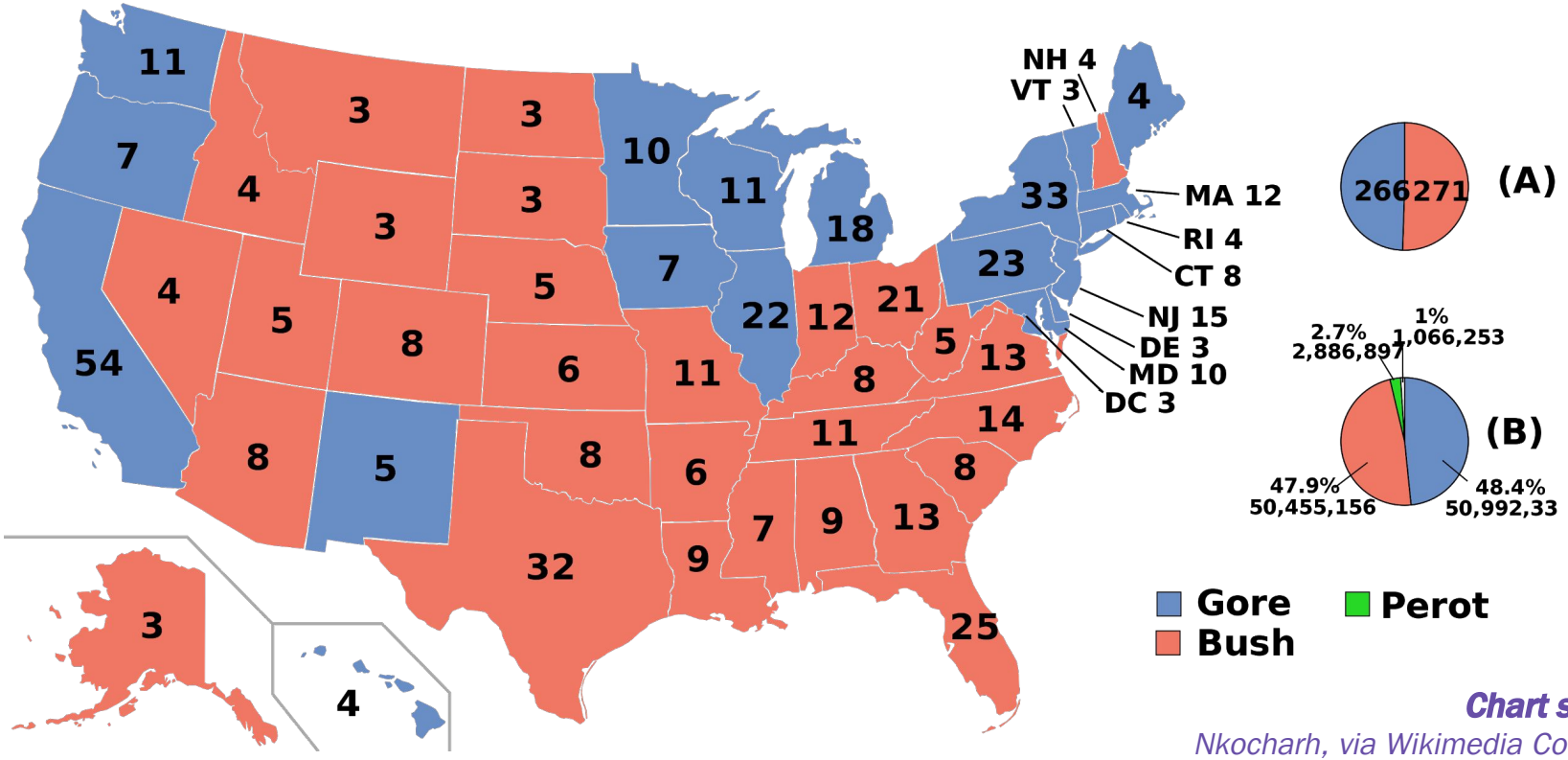


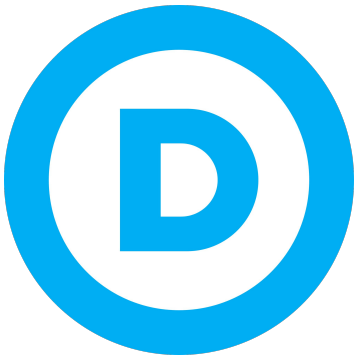
Chart source:

Nkocharh, via Wikimedia Commons

How did those colors get picked?

Until recent years, no official party colors in America.

- In Europe, red often used for left-leaning parties, blue for right-leaning.
- U.S. news outlets used own schemes, often echoing European one.
- **2000:** Just by chance, most outlets went red for GOP, blue for Dems.
  - Divisive, drawn-out, contested election cemented scheme in the public conscience.
- **2004:** Media outlets kept it. Each party used its color in its logos.



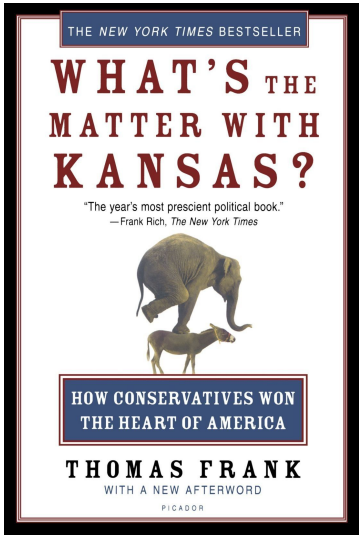
Enter the red-blue paradox

A clash of popular perceptions with data.

- **Perception:** Democrats as "rich, latte-sipping liberals," Republicans as "poor, NASCAR-loving conservatives."
- **Data:** Exit polls showed richer voters leaned GOP.

2005: Gelman, et al. address that clash:

- Affirmed exit polls' findings that rich voters leaned **GOP**.
- But then, the researchers also noticed an oddity…



Rich states were trending **Democratic**, poor states **Republican**.

The paradox's causes and implications

What did it all mean?

- May explain "limousine Democrats" and "NASCAR Republicans."
- Income's effect on vote choice more nuanced than previously thought.

So, can we reconcile/resolve the paradox?

- Gelman, et al.: Income-vote link weaker in rich states, stronger in poor states, even after accounting for demographics.
- Persisted even after adjusting for factors like black % of population.

Impetus: Where my study comes in

It's no longer 2004, and the political landscape has shifted.

- Red-blue map mostly steady in 2008, 2012, but not 2016.
  - Key Rust Belt "blue wall" states in flipped to Republicans.
  - Some states in Sun Belt showed signs of trending to Democrats.
- Emerging picture: Parties increasingly polarized along racial, urban-rural, educational, generational lines.
- **What about income? Conflicting signals.**

Goal: Build upon Gelman, et al.'s work by including 2008–2016 in order to assess red-blue paradox's present-day status.

Methods: Step-by-step overview

1. **Replicate, expand state-level income-vote models**
    - How did a state's average annual income affect the share of votes it gave to the GOP candidate in every election since 1952?
2. **Do same for individual-level income-vote models**
    - How did individuals' annual income affect their likelihood of voting for the GOP candidate in every election since 1952
3. **Multilevel models on state, individual data**
    - Attempts to tie previous two together. Most challenging part.

Part 1: State-level model data

A few key datasets were needed:

1. States' average personal income: 1952–2016
   - Obtained from U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.
   - Values were adjusted for inflation (standard CPI), relative to 1996.
2. State-level presidential election returns: 1952-2016
   - Same as above, but 2008–2016 data obtained from U.S. Election Atlas.

Attempted to replicate these models, extend through 2016:

1. State's GOP candidate % vs. income via linear regression for each year.
2. Slope of each year's regression line vs. year via linear regression.

Part 1: State-level modeling

Exact replica of Figure 1 from *Gelman, et al.* shown at right:

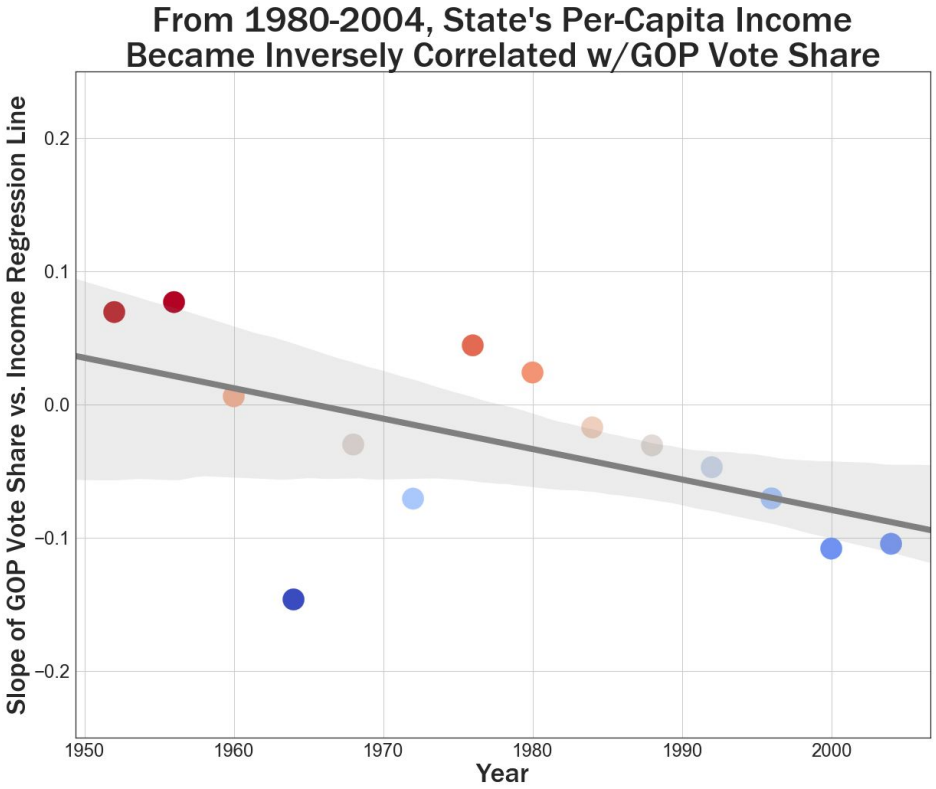
- Dot color → Rich states' party lean.
- Dot shade → Strength of that lean.

Pre-1980: No clear pattern.

- Wide confidence interval (95%).
- 1964: **LBJ's** 23-point rout of **Goldwater**

Post-1980: Clear trend.

- Rich states became more likely to support Democratic candidate.
- The reverse for poor states.

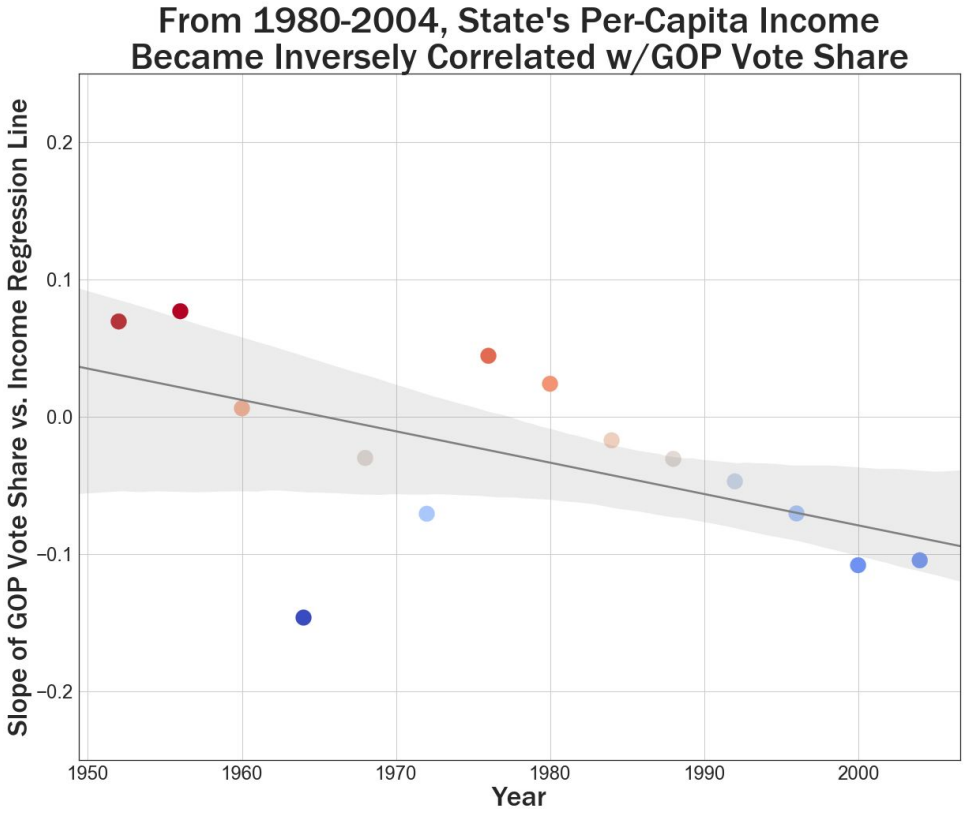


Part 1: State-level modeling

Adding 2008–2016 will be tough:

Gelman et al. adjusted state income data for black share of population.

- Unclear how to replicate their adjustments.
- Interim plan is to use own adjustment method.
- Adjusting for states' Latino share of population may merit exploring, given recent political/demographic trends.



Part 2: Individual-level model data

1. Individually paired income and vote data: 1952–2016
   - Gelman, et al.'s replication package had data for every year through 2004.
   - Data for later years obtained from same source: Bureau of Economic Analysis.
2. State-level presidential election returns: 1952-2016
   - Gelman, et al.'s replication package had data for every year through 2004.
   - Data for later years obtained from same source: Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Modeling approaches to be determined.

Conclusions and next steps

Preliminary conclusions:

- Attempts to replicate *Gelman, et al.*'s state- and individual-level income-vote models, graphs largely successful.
- 2008–2016 seems to show paradox's effect waning, but more data adjustments needed to boost confidence in finding.

Next steps:

- Continue to refine individual-level models, complete multilevel models.
- Perform adjustments to state-level models income data to account for race/ethnicity population differences across the states.