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Understanding the Partisan Divide: How Demographics and Policy Views Shape Party Coalitions

Oscar Pocasangre & Lee Drutman

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Acknowledgments

About the Author(s)

Oscar Pocasangre is a senior data analyst for the Political Reform program at New America.

Lee Drutman is a senior fellow in the Political Reform program.

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newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/understanding-the-partisan-divide-how-demographics-and-policy-views-shape-party-coalitions/

3

Contents

newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/understanding-the-partisan-divide-how-demographics-and-policy-views-shape-party-coalitions/

4

Understanding the Partisan Divide: How Demographics and Policy Views Shape Party Coalitions

Introduction

Decades of polarization and partisan sorting, along with a growing urban-rural divide, have created different partisan strongholds for Democrat and Republican parties across the United States. The distinctions between the congressional districts represented by Republicans and those represented by Democrats lead to different strategies in how each party maintains support among their core constituencies while simultaneously trying to make inroads in those few competitive districts that ultimately decide which party controls the House.

In this report, we use a combination of Census and survey data to show how congressional districts represented by Republicans differ from those represented by Democrats in terms of demographic characteristics, levels of ethnic diversity, and the policy views of voters in those districts. We also show how these partisan districts differ from competitive districts, which although few in number, play an outsized role in the country's winner-take-all elections. Exploring the differences in demographics and policy preferences across Democratic, Republican, and competitive districts provides insights that help explain current dynamics within parties. It also sheds light on the policies that parties emphasize in their efforts to build broader coalitions that capture voters in competitive districts. While our analysis reveals important differences between Democratic and Republican districts, it also shows that these differences are not clear-cut and that districts fall along a continuum of demographic characteristics and policy views. The two-party system hides this diversity while exaggerating differences, precluding the emergence of new coalitions where different types of districts overlap.

As expected, we find that Republican districts are predominantly white and, for the most part, less affluent than the national average. In contrast, Democratic districts are less white than the average but tend to be more affluent than average. Republican districts are also some of the least diverse in terms of their ethnic composition while Democratic districts tend to be more diverse than the national average.
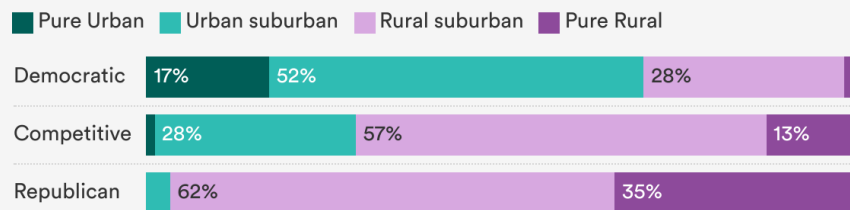
Competitive districts are in the middle. They are more affluent than Republican districts but less so than Democratic districts. Competitive districts tend to be whiter than the average and whiter than Democratic districts, but not as white as Republican districts. When it comes to ethnic diversity, competitive districts are roughly split, with about half of competitive districts below the national average of the diversity index we estimate and the other half above. Having a relatively

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5

homogenous group of constituents in its stronghold districts and facing competitive districts with a higher share of its population that is white, the Republican party might have an easier time appealing to voters across these districts with identity-based or cultural issues. The Democratic party is forced to pitch a bigger tent to accommodate the diversity of ethnic groups within its districts, which may create challenges in making inroads in competitive districts.

On policy views, however, residents in Democratic districts exhibit greater agreement than their counterparts in competitive or Republican districts. Democratic districts are internally quite homogeneous in their policy views of both social and economic issues, but across districts they exhibit a diverse set of viewpoints. On the other hand, Republican districts have higher levels of ideological heterogeneity internally, particularly when it comes to views of economic issues, but exhibit little diversity across districts.

Table 1 | Competitive Districts Are Concentrated in Rural Suburban Areas

Breakdown of competitive, Democratic, and Republican districts under the 2020 congressional maps by urban, rural, and suburban categories.

Legend: Pure Urban, Urban suburban, Rural suburban, Pure Rural

District	Pure Urban	Urban suburban	Rural suburban	Pure Rural
Democratic	17%	52%	28%	
Competitive		28%	57%	13%
Republican		62%	35%	

Source: CityLab and Cook Political Report

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In competitive districts, we observe some of the highest levels of heterogeneity in the policy views of citizens, which reflects the mix of partisans that coexist within competitive districts. This mix likely stems from the predominantly suburban location of competitive districts, which given the **political geography of the country** makes it more likely that they have a more balanced share of partisans than the Republican countryside or the Democratic metropolis.

As pointed out by **scholars of political geography and polarization**, the diversity of policy preferences in competitive districts makes it tricky for parties to identify the policy views of voters who could be persuaded—as we show in a **previous report on undecided voters**—leading parties to mobilize their core voters in competitive districts instead. For the Republican party, the combination of ideologically diverse competitive districts and the assortment of views on economic issues in its stronghold districts can make it challenging to present a

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6

platform on economic issues that appeals to all its voters. This makes identity and cultural issues more appealing in campaigns, especially given the ethnic homogeneity of Republican districts and encourages Republicans to mobilize core constituents instead of focusing too much on policy issues. In fact, in 2020, the party **didn't even offer a formal policy platform**.

While the Republican coalition is kept together by exploiting questions of identity ("Who are we?" and "Where are we headed?"), the Democratic coalition is held together by questions of distribution ("Who gets what, and how much?"). Politicians in Democratic districts are better able to identify the policies their constituents want, but there is a wider range of policy views across Democratic districts. In a more permissive electoral system, the diverse collection of views would result in different parties—one for the likes of President Joe Biden and another for the likes of Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.)—but the two-party system and the intense opposition to Republican positions keeps the Democratic coalition together.

The Democratic and Republican parties find their strongholds in districts that, on average, are very different. Democrats get most of their votes from ethnically diverse districts but with constituents that, for the most part, are in agreement over policy issues. Republicans get their votes from predominantly white districts but with constituents that disagree more on policy matters, particularly on economic issues. But, increasingly, neither party can win a majority in Congress without winning competitive districts and have to find ways to win over voters in these districts, with the comfort that the combination of winner-take-all and intense negative partisanship and polarization will prevent mass defections from their stronghold districts.

The gravitational pull of a small number of competitive districts in the American electoral system—**much like that of undecided voters**—reflects the **calcification of national politics**. But beneath this calcification, our report shows that there is fertile ground for new coalitions to emerge given the diversity in demographics and policy views exhibited by districts. More permissive electoral rules, like proportional representation, would allow these coalitions to crack through our calcified system and provide better representation to voters in districts that do not fit comfortably in the existing party tents or whose views are completely unrepresented because they live in partisan strongholds.

About the Data

The classification of districts into Democratic, Republican, or competitive comes from the ratings of the **Cook Political Report** for the 2020 and 2022 midterm elections. Competitive districts are those classified as toss ups for each cycle while the partisan districts are those rated as solid, likely, or lean Democratic or Republican.

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7

Demographic data comes from the 2020 census and from the 5-year estimates of the American Community Survey (ACS) for 2020. Between 2020 and 2022, congressional districts were redistricted, so we approximate the new congressional maps for the 2022 midterms using the **block equivalency files** provided by each state to the Census Bureau. These files allow us to match each census block to its new congressional district.

The data on policy views comes from the **Democracy Fund and UCLA Nationscape** survey, aggregated to the district level. The survey carried out 77 waves from July 2019 through January 2021 and reached almost 500,000 respondents. We use the same dataset for our **report on undecided voters**, for which we created indices for various social and economic issues. On the social dimension, the issues are abortion, gun control, immigration, views on structural discrimination, and traditional and Christian values and positions. On the economic side, the issues are environmental protections and investments, debt free college, government role in healthcare, government role in the economy, and taxation.

Demographics

What distinguishes Democratic, Republican, and competitive districts from each other? In this section, we provide a description of demographic characteristics of these districts, for both 2020 and for 2022, after the redistricting process. Polarization and partisan sorting has created a **mega-identity** composed of reinforcing racial, ethnic, and other social identities. Because of this, the basic demographic breakdown of congressional districts can be informative for understanding the different effects these districts have on Democrats and Republicans.

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8

Table 2 | Demographic Profile of Congressional Districts

Median values of demographic characteristics nationally and across different types of districts in 2020 and after redistricting in 2022.

|	National Median	Democratic Districts		Competitive Districts		Republican Districts	
		2020	2022	2020	2022	2020	2022
White (Not Hispanic)	63%	48%	45%	68%	64%	73%	71%
Black	7%	9%	10%	8%	6%	5%	6%
Hispanic	12%	18%	18%	10%	16%	8%	9%
BA Degree or Higher	31%	36%	37%	32%	34%	27%	28%
Average Household Income	$85K	$95K	$100K	$86K	$92K	$77K	$80K

Source: 2020 Census & ACS 5 Year Estimates

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Figure 1 shows the distribution of districts based on the shares of their white population and their average household income. Districts in the upper quadrants are, on average, richer than average and those in the right-side quadrants have shares of white residents higher than the district average. As seen in the figure, most Republican districts clustered in the lower right quadrant in 2020: 71 percent of Republican districts were whiter than the national average and had lower than average household incomes. For the most part, the Republican districts that had shares of white residents below the average were districts with high shares of Hispanic residents, like those in states like California, Florida, and Texas. Democratic districts were scattered all over the other quadrants, with 57 percent of Democratic districts in high income groups. Of these higher income districts, 58 percent were below the national average of white residents and 42 percent above. Meanwhile, 31 percent of the all Democratic districts were both poorer and less white than the national average and only 12 percent were poorer but whiter than the national average.

Figure 1 | Income and Racial Disparities Across Congressional Districts

Scatterplot of the average household incomes and the share of the population in congressional districts that is white. Dotted lines represent the averages.
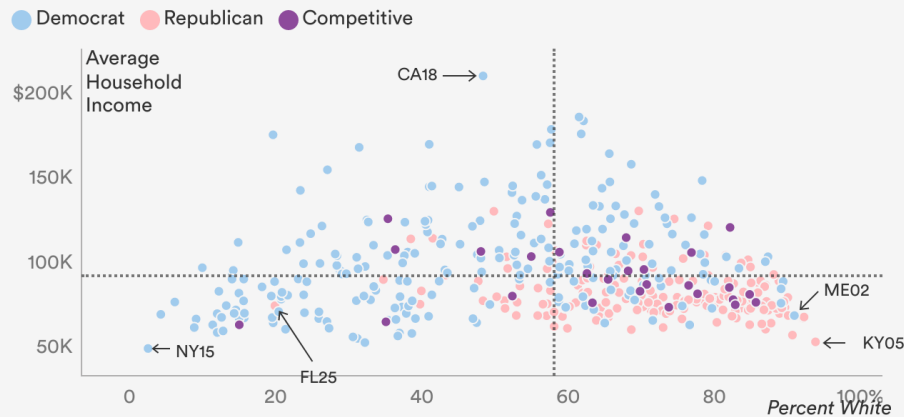
Source: 2020 Census & ACS 5 Year Estimates

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Competitive districts were whiter than the average congressional district. In this characteristic, they overlap with reliably Republican districts. But unlike Republican districts, there were roughly equal numbers of competitive districts above the average household income level as there were below. Such conditions create opportunities for Republicans to exploit identity and cultural issues instead of economic issues. Politicians always seek issues that cut across multiple groups in society to create a broad coalition that can be mobilized to the polls. For Republicans, then, it is better to build a coalition around issues of identity and race because they appeal to lower- and higher-income white voters in both competitive and Republican districts instead of campaigning on economic issues which would pit lower-income Republicans who **support progressive economic policies** against higher-income Republicans who do not.

Following the redistricting process, which was done with new census data from 2020, little changed in terms of the income and ethnic composition of districts. For the 2022 midterms, we observe a similar distribution of Republican and Democratic districts across household income levels and shares of white residents. Again, most competitive districts had shares of white voters higher than the national district average. And like in 2020, there were equal numbers of competitive districts below and above the average income across the districts.

Table 3 shows how many districts were won by each party by their demographic and income breakdowns. The table reiterates that little changed after the redistricting process and that Republican districts are clustered in the poorer and

white category while Democratic districts are more spread out across all the other categories.

Figure 2 | In 2022, After Redistricting, There Were Still More Competitive Districts That Were Whiter Than the Average Congressional District

In 2022, more competitive districts had higher shares of white people than the district average, but there was an equal number of competitive districts with incomes above and below the district average income.
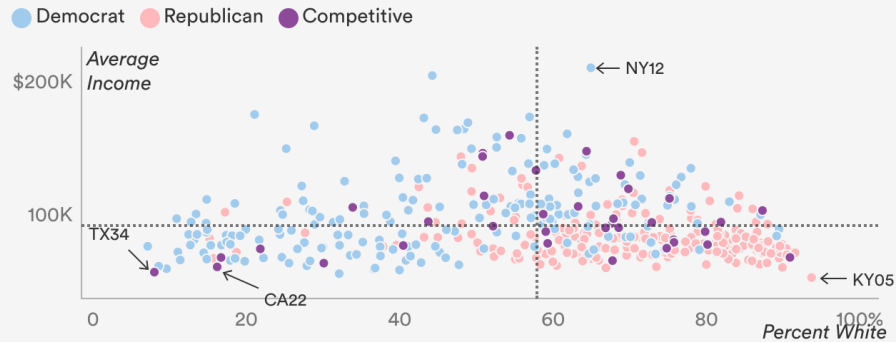
2020 Census & ACS 5 Year Estimates

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Table 3 | Number of Districts Won By Democrats and Republicans By Income Level and Share of White Residents

Comparisons are relative to the average share of white residents and average household income at the district level.

2020			
		Less White	**Whiter**
	Richer	72(D) - 19(R)	54(D) - 31(R)
	Poorer	69(D) - 24(R)	27(D) - 139(R)
2022			
		Less White	**Whiter**
	Richer	63(D) - 19(R)	51(D) - 38(R)
	Poorer	74(D) - 28(R)	25(D) - 137(R)

Source: 2020 Census and ACS 5 Year Estimates

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Another important demographic characteristic is how diverse congressional districts are internally in terms of their ethnic composition. To explore diversity

within districts, we calculate the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index for each congressional district using the shares of the population that identify as white, Black, Hispanic, Asian, or other. This index is a widely used measure of diversity where zero ("0") indicates that there is only one ethnic group present while 10 indicates that each ethnic group has equal shares of the population within each district.

The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index shows that most Republican districts are among the least ethnically diverse while Democratic districts are the most ethnically diverse. In 2022, of all the Republican districts, 61 percent of them were below the national average of the diversity index, with high shares of white residents resulting in low levels of diversity. In contrast, 83 percent of Democratic districts were above the national average of the diversity index in 2022, which underscores the diverse coalition across ethnic groups that the Democratic party has to keep together. Competitive districts were in the middle: Of the 36 competitive districts in 2022, 19 were below the national average of the diversity index while 17 were above the average.

Most of the diversity in the Republican party comes from larger Hispanic populations in Texas and Florida. Of the 83 Republican districts that had scored a diversity index higher than the national average, 29 percent of these districts were in Texas, followed by 12 percent in Florida. Florida also has the most Republican districts with the least diversity: 8 percent of Republican districts with diversity indices below the national average were located in that state, another 8 percent is located in Ohio. For Democrats, a quarter of the districts that were above the national average in the diversity index were located in California, followed by nine percent in New York. Of the Democratic districts with below average diversity indices, 15 percent were in Massachusetts followed by 12 percent in Michigan.

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12

Figure 3 | Republican Districts Are the Least Ethnically Diverse

The plot shows the 2022 Republican margin of victory and the Herfindahl-Hirschman Diversity Index on the vertical axis. Higher values on the index indicate more diversity.
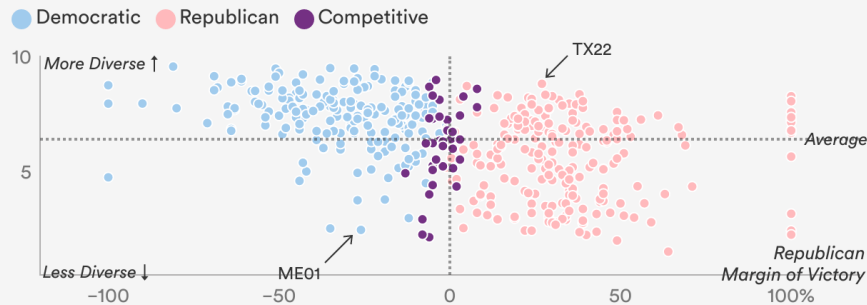
The Herfindahl-Hirschman Diversity Index considers the shares of the population that are White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Other based on the 2020 census. A value of 10 means that each group represents equal shares of the population while a value of zero means that there is only one ethnic group.

Source: 2020 US Census Data & MIT Election Lab

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Policy Views

It is no surprise that, on average, Democrats are progressive on social and economic issues and Republicans are conservative on these issues. In this section, we illustrate the spread—both internally within districts and externally across districts—of these policy views and the location of competitive districts in the policy space. We use these observations to understand the incentives and constraints that parties face and the resulting electoral strategies they take.

Figure 4 shows a scatterplot of the aggregate indices of economic and social issues, all of which are coded so that the more negative values reflect more progressive views and the more positive values reflect more conservative views. We see that Republican districts cluster in the upper right corner, conservative on both social and economic issues, with very few districts below the national average on either dimension.

Democratic districts span across the lower left quadrant, progressive on both policy domains, but have quite a few districts that fall above the average on either the social or economic dimension. In particular, of the 229 Democratic districts in 2020, 14 percent were more conservative than the national average on social issues and 19 percent were more conservative than the national average on economic issues.

As for competitive districts, very few competitive districts in 2020 were found on the progressive quadrants of social and economic issues. Instead, of the 27

competitive districts in 2020, 70 percent were more conservative than the national average on economic issues and 59 percent were more conservative than the national average on social issues.

Figure 4 | In 2020, Competitive Districts Were Conservative on Both Economic and Social Issues

Economic and social policy indices aggregated to the district level. Competitive districts were more conservative on both dimensions than the district average.
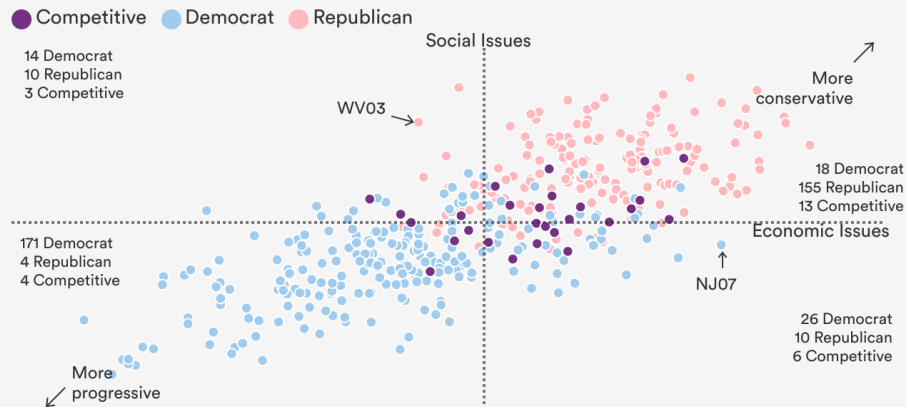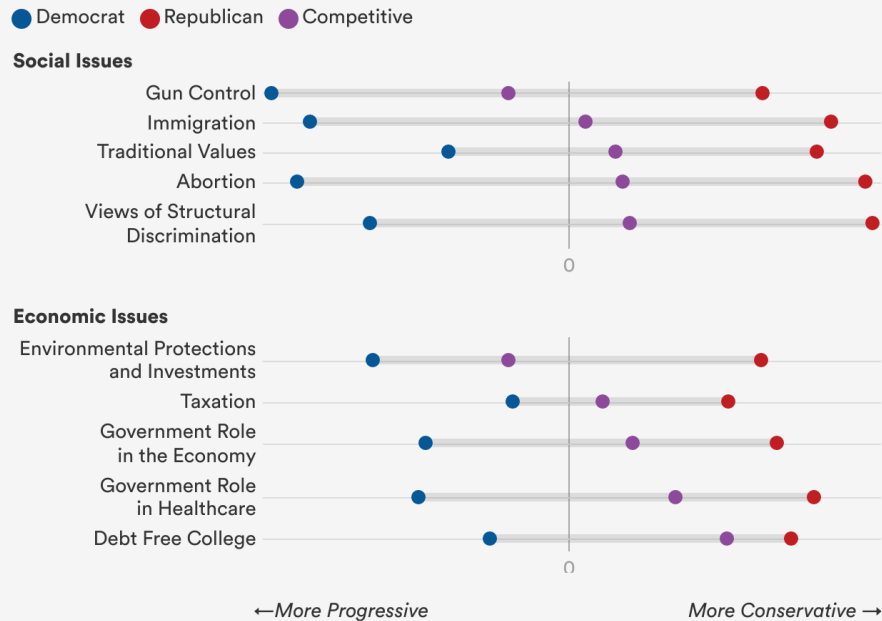
Source: Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape

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The aggregate indices obscure some variation on views towards particular issues in competitive districts that can help better characterize competitive districts in terms of their policy preferences. On the social dimension, competitive districts lean towards the progressive side when it comes to gun control, but they lean towards the conservative side on all the other social issues. Their views on structural discrimination—an index that captures responses to questions of whether Black people just need to try harder to get ahead and whether discrimination keeps them back—are the most conservative, followed by views towards abortion.

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14

Figure 5 | Competitive Districts Lean Conservative on Most Issues—Except Gun Control and Environmental Protections

Policy views aggregated to the district level for 2020 and centered around the average. With the exception of gun control and environmental protections, competitive districts are more conservative than the average.

● Democrat ● Republican ● Competitive

Social Issues

Gun Control
Immigration
Traditional Values
Abortion
Views of Structural Discrimination

0

Economic Issues

Environmental Protections and Investments
Taxation
Government Role in the Economy
Government Role in Healthcare
Debt Free College

0

←More Progressive   More Conservative →

Source: Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape

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On the economic dimension, competitive districts are most progressive on issues of environmental protections and investments in technology to protect the environment. In contrast, they are most conservative on the issue of debt free college, which may help explain why that issue has become so polarizing in recent years. Following the issue of debt free college, competitive districts are most conservative on their views of the government's role in healthcare.

While competitive districts fall in the ideological middle between solid Democratic and solid Republican districts, they are not necessarily home to high shares of moderate voters. Instead, as researchers who have looked under the hood of the **moderate electorate have found**, these competitive districts are quite ideologically diverse—and often have a **mix of extreme positions**. We show this graphically by plotting the Republican margin of victory against the standard deviation of an aggregate ideology index that includes both social and economic issues, and then separately for each social and economic index. A high standard deviation indicates greater ideological heterogeneity while a low standard deviation indicates more uniform policy views.

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15

Figure 6 | Decisive Districts Are Some of the Most Ideologically Diverse Districts

The scatterplot shows the Republican margin of victory and the standard deviation of district level ideology for the 2020 congressional map. High standard deviations are an indication of ideological diversity within the districts.
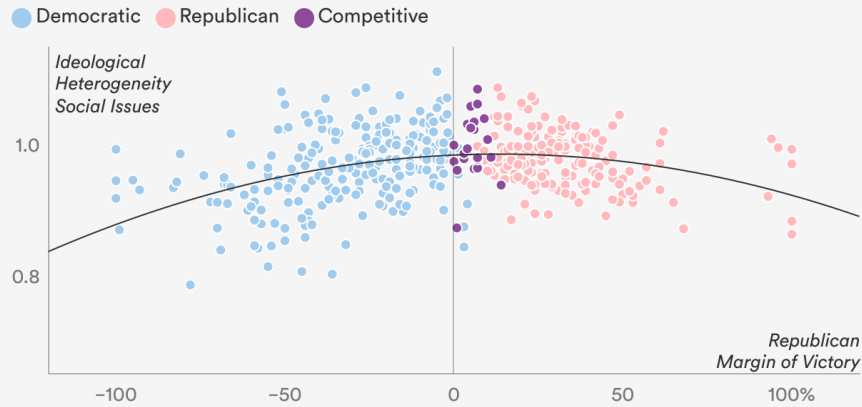
Source: Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape
New York TImes Election Results

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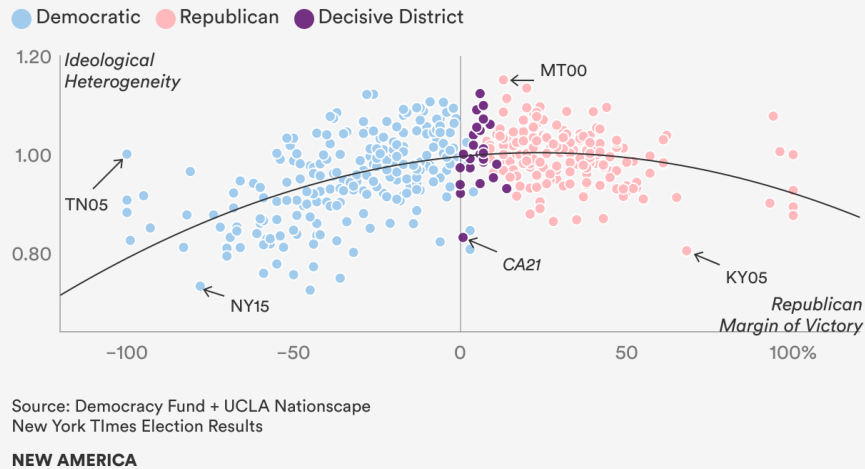
The plots indicate that competitive races tend to occur in districts with higher levels of ideological heterogeneity. Competitive districts have some of the highest variances meaning that there is a wider spread of views within these districts. Republican districts appear to be quite ideologically diverse internally as well, while Democratic districts exhibit more internal agreement over policies, especially so where they win by larger margins.

Looking at the standard deviation for the social and economic indices separately reveals that most of the internal disagreement within districts among Republican districts comes from views of economic issues (see Figures 7 and 8). Competitive districts still exhibit some of the highest variances, meaning that there is a wider spread of views towards social issues. Democratic and Republican districts are more uniform in their views towards social issues than competitive districts.

But on economic issues, there seems to be less agreement on policy views in both competitive and Republican districts (see Figure 8). In fact, the peak of the trend line in the plot shifts towards the right and peaks within the Republican area. Meanwhile Democratic districts tend to have lower standard deviations, indicating more agreement on this dimension. The larger variance in the economic policy index in Republican districts is reflective of internal disagreements on economic issues within the Republican party.

Figure 7 | On Social Issues, Competitive Districts Are Some of the Most Ideologically Diverse

Most competitive elections occurred in districts with high levels of internal ideological diversity on social issues.
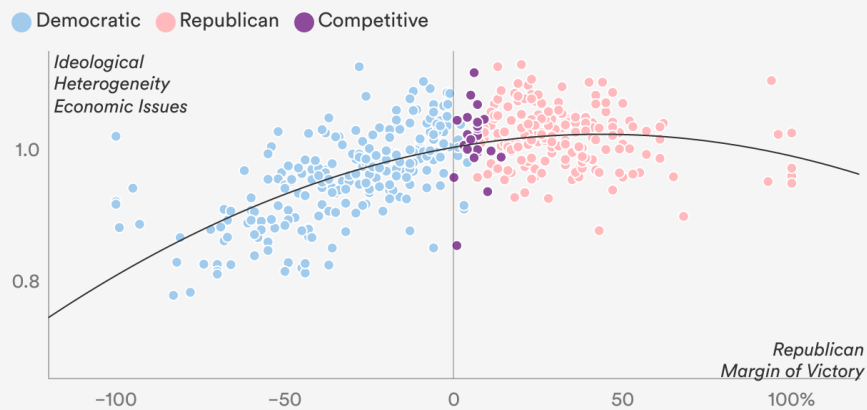
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Figure 8 | On Economic Issues, Republican and Competitive Districts are the Most Diverse

Republican and competitive districts have higher levels of internal ideological diversity compared to Democratic districts.
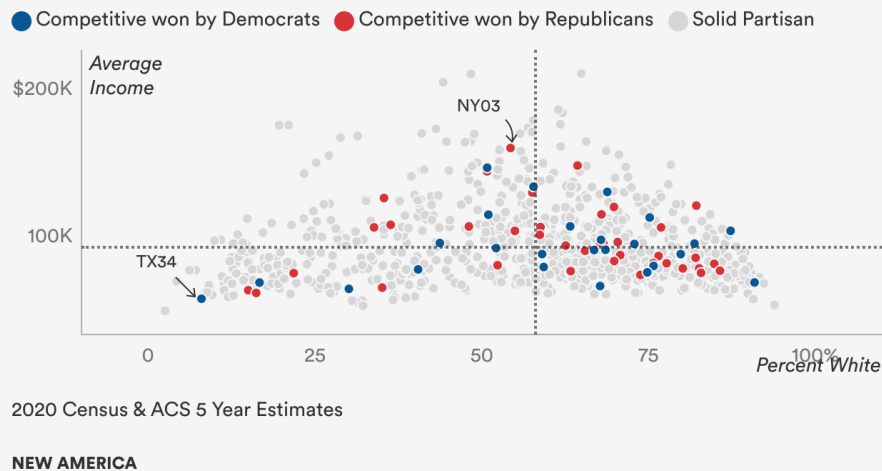
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For competitive districts, the higher variances in both social and economic dimensions make it more challenging for campaigns to identify the median voter's preferences in these districts. As McCarty and co-authors argue, high ideological diversity in districts creates incentives for campaigns to focus on their

core voters—for whom they know **what issues are effective for mobilizing**—instead of trying to find the appropriate center position on both social and economic domains. Similarly, the assortment of views towards economic issues in Republican districts makes it hard to find a median economic policy that appeals to the majority of voters in these districts, likely pushing politicians to emphasize social and cultural divisions between parties instead of focusing too much on economic policies.

Given the demographics and suburban geography of competitive districts, Republicans might have an edge in competitive districts. Indeed, across the 2020 and 2022 elections, Republicans won a majority of the competitive districts. Most of these were districts that had shares of white voters higher than the average and districts where the aggregate social and economic indices were more conservative than the national district average.

Figure 9 | Competitive Districts Won By Each Party In 2020 and 2022

Competitive districts won by each party in 2020 and 2022 by their share of white voters and average income. Over the two elections, Republicans won 60 percent of competitive districts.

● Competitive won by Democrats ● Competitive won by Republicans ○ Solid Partisan

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Conclusion

American politics today is often described as **"calcified,"** a reference to two sides being pitted rigidly against one another. It's a useful description— coined by John Sides, Chris Tausanovitch, and Lynn Vavreck—to characterize how voters have been shuffled into two distinctly, and firmly, different parties. Calcification has created different types of congressional districts for Democrats and Republicans to represent. As we show in the report, Democrats garner most of their support from urban districts that are more affluent and more ethnically

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18

diverse, while Republicans mostly do so from districts that are rural, less affluent, and predominantly white. Democratic districts are mostly progressive on both social and economic policy issues, while Republicans are mostly conservative.

The winner-take-all electoral system magnifies this distinction, creating binary choices for voters and forcing parties to differentiate themselves from each other as much as possible. But our analysis indicates that the differences between Democratic and Republican districts are not as clear-cut. There are affluent Republican districts and there are poor Democratic districts, there are Republican districts that have progressive views on social and economic policy issues and Democratic districts that lean conservative on these issues. Congressional districts—and the voters within them—exist in a continuum of demographic characteristics and hold a variety of policy views. This suggests that there could be many and more diverse political coalitions if the electoral system were more permissive and proportional.

Democratic and Republican districts do differ on average on various demographic variables and they tend to gravitate towards opposite ends of the policy spectrum. But it is the winner-take-all, two-party system that exaggerates these differences and turns them into a binary, preventing the discovery of common ground and the emergence of new parties that could better represent voters in districts that are far from the median ideological points of each party. As we see in Figure 10, which shows the median values for each party on the social and economic indices, each party will be able to maximize its seats by choosing policies closest to where the majority of districts fall, but that leaves many districts inadequately represented.

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19

Figure 10 | Medians by Party of the Economic and Social Policy Indices for 2020 Districts

Scatterplot of the social and economic indices aggregated to the district level. Dashed lines show the median for each index by party.
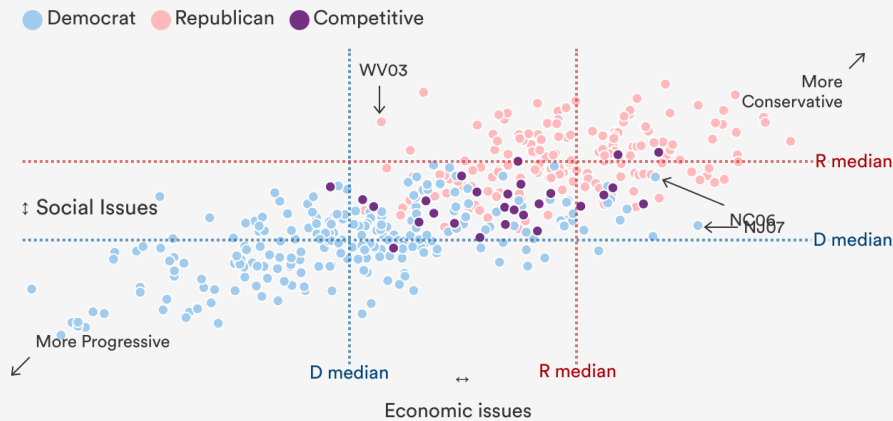
Source: Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape

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The lack of political options reduces all of the country's ethnic and ideological diversity to a choice of us versus them. Recent elections have shown that voters in partisan strongholds continue voting for their parties—indeed very **few incumbents lost elections** in the 2022 midterms—and that any shifts in the balance of power comes from swaying swing districts towards one side or the other.

To do so, the Republican party has taken the strategy of emphasizing identity issues—crime, immigration, gender—that stoke fear among their predominantly white stronghold districts and that have a better chance of appealing to the majorities of white voters in competitive districts and to their core voters in those districts. The focus on identity and cultural issues leaves less room for compromising and fewer opportunities to develop cohesive programmatic policy platforms. Democrats, for their part, have to build broad coalitions that include various ethnic groups and an assortment of better defined policy positions, which makes it difficult for them to exploit identity and cultural issues—other than by highlighting threats from Republicans—but easier for them to negotiate over policy concessions.

Under these conditions, the hyper-polarization that characterizes American politics becomes increasingly difficult to resolve. The different ways in which Democrats and Republicans carve out and sustain their respective coalitions leaves little room for agreement, particularly when identity and cultural issues replace economic issues as the focal conflict of politics. Multi-party democracy

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20

would help mitigate polarization by relegating extreme views to fringe parties as it empowers new coalitions to emerge around other issues.

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21

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22