

The Decline of the Republican West: 1988- 2020

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One of the most distinctive features of American elections between 1952 and 1988 is the solidarity of the western states behind the Republican presidential nominee. If we define the western region as the Pacific, Mountain, and Great Plains states we see an almost solidly Republican West in every presidential election except the LBJ landslide in 1964 (Appendix, Figure 1). The exceptions are few. Hawaii, while technically a western state has leaned Democratic since entering the union in 1959 and voted for the Republican presidential candidate only in the landslide years of 1972 and 1984, although the Democratic victories in 1960, 1976 and 1980 were exceedingly narrow. New Mexico and Nevada voted narrowly Democratic for president in 1960, and Washington voted narrowly Democratic in 1968. Washington and Oregon defected in 1988 as the Republican presidential era in the West was drawing to a close, and were harbingers of a new electoral era as neither has voted Republican in a presidential election since. Interestingly, even when losing close elections during this period - 1960, 1968 and 1976 – Republicans overwhelming carried the electoral votes of the West (Appendix, Figure 1). The “Solid West” constituted a formidable base of support for the GOP in presidential elections, and entailed that Democrats had to pull off the difficult task of carrying most of the electoral college votes of the larger Northeast and Great Lakes states while at least dividing the South with the GOP at a time when the New Deal political era was beginning to unravel and civil rights had come to prominence in the national political debate. Only the fallout from the Kennedy assassination, a maladroit Republican nominee, and a Texan Democratic incumbent in 1964 broke the trend.

The Republican domination of the West also heralded the region’s rise to political power and influence nationally. Every Republican presidential ticket from 1952-1984 included a westerner and the era produced two western presidents – the Californians Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan – and one losing presidential nominee Barry Goldwater of Arizona. During the 1952-1988 period the western region also grew hugely in terms of population and economic and political power. As we shall see much of this growth worked to the benefit of the Republican party in presidential elections. Interestingly the

Democrats remained much more competitive in congressional and state elections during the period perhaps reflecting the persistence of the New Deal at this level of government, and a bifurcated national political alignment (Shafer 1991). Westerners could still vote for Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan as president while also supporting enduring Democratic New Dealers in congressional elections such as Senators Henry Jackson (WA) and Carl Hayden (AZ) and Representative Wayne Aspinall (CO) who used their positions of authority on Capitol Hill to guarantee continued federal largesse for their states.

After 1988 the Republican presidential coalition in the West increasingly dissipated due to a variety of factors that we will explore later in the paper. The switch of vote-rich California to the Democrats after 1988 has ensured that the western electoral vote is now overwhelmingly Democratic (Appendix, Figure 2). While losing to Jimmy Carter nationally in 1976, Republican Gerald Ford carried 16 of the 17 western states with 116 (97%) of the region's 121 electoral votes. In 2020 the Democrats won 110 or 76% of the West's total of 145 electoral votes. Apart from reliably Republican Alaska, no Pacific state has supported a Republican presidential nominee since 1988. In the mountain region, increasingly metropolitan Colorado, Nevada, and Arizona have moved from Republican to competitive (arguably reliably Democratic in the case of Colorado). Hispanic majority New Mexico has only once voted Republican (2004) for President in recent decades. The less metropolitan northern Mountain and Great Plains states together with Mormon Utah have arguably become more reliably Republican in their presidential voting since 1988, and that presidential dominance has increasingly been reflected at the congressional and state level too. The reasons for the unraveling of the solidly Republican Presidential West, and its implications for American politics nationally will be explored in more depth later in this paper. First, we will look at how Republican presidential dominance in the region came to be.

The Populist, Progressive and New Deal West: 1900-1948

The West's engagement with national politics in the early part of the 20th century was characteristic of a largely rural region, economically dependent on eastern capital and the federal government, yet remote from the nation's centers of power (White 1991, Robbins 1994). Civil war party loyalties and the fact that the West had largely supported the Union or had been settled from largely from Union states meant that the region leaned Republican most of the time. Yet the near colonial status of the West meant that the region was highly vulnerable to agrarian populist and progressive revolts against the national political-economic status quo (Sanders 1999, Nye 1959). The People's Party's presidential candidate James Weaver carried 4 western states (Kansas, Colorado, Nevada, and Idaho) in 1892, and the entire region except North Dakota and the Pacific Coast states of Oregon and California supported Democratic-Populist fusion candidate William Jennings Bryan in 1896. Economic stress and widespread animosity against eastern elites meant that various strands of political radicalism - populism, free silver, progressivism, even socialism - found a particularly strong resonance in the West pre-New Deal (Sanders 1999). Indeed, the national political parties tended to be organizationally weak in the region as the recent settlement of the West mitigated against the strong party/community ties that characterized the strong party organizations of the eastern states, and also because the major divisions over "reform" in the country did not fall clearly along party lines in most elections (Kleppner 1983). The association of western party machines with the influence of the railroads and other elements of eastern capital helped fuel radical progressive electoral reforms in most western states that intentionally undermined party ties and party influences leading to a politics dominated by radical social movements and charismatic political officeholders of both parties (Kleppner 1983, Bridges 2015). In presidential politics national party candidates who represented "reform" of the politico-economic structure of the Gilded Age - Democrats William Jennings Bryan (1896) and Woodrow Wilson (1912, 1916) and Republican Theodore Roosevelt (1904, 1912) - tended to prevail in the region. With two conservative establishment

politicians leading the national party ticket (1920, 1924, 1928) however, the West reverted to the post-civil war electoral alignment and overwhelmingly supported the Republican.

This pattern changed dramatically with onset of the Great Depression and the New Deal. FDR won the entire region in his landslide victories in 1932 and 1936 cementing the votes of Democrats and Progressive Republicans and Independents (Feinman 1981). In 1940 Wendell Willkie was able to win the Great Plains states and Colorado for the Republicans and Thomas Dewey in 1944 won the same group of states plus Wyoming for the GOP. While the Plains states remained with Dewey in 1948, the West was key to Democratic President Harry Truman's shock victory as he swept the rest of the region except Oregon. The expansion of government characterized by the New Deal resonated powerfully with western voters due to the severity of the depression and the West's need for economic development. The FDR administration (1933-45) encouraged a huge expansion of infrastructure in the West paid for by the federal government: the Great Dams (Hoover, Grand Coulee, Bonneville, Fort Peck) built by the Bureau of Reclamation, the Farm Relief programs, the CCC projects in National Parks and Monuments and recreational areas, and finally the dramatic development of war related industries in the region (particularly in California and the Pacific Northwest), all of which spurred western economic and population growth (White 1991, Robbins 1994). Ironically by encouraging such growth and by making the region heavily economically dependent on defense industries, the New Deal Democrats partly contributed to their own political decline in western presidential politics in the post-New Deal Era.

The Dominant Republican Presidential Coalition: 1952-88

National Republican party themes of anticommunism, a strong defense, free enterprise, and limited government well-fitted the fast-growing and dynamic status of the West during the Cold War Era (Wiley and Gottlieb 1982). A number of regional factors contributed to Republican dominance: dramatic

economic and population growth; the increasing economic and political independence of the West; and the critical role played by the military and defense-related industries in the western economy (Nugent 1999). The expanding defense workforce and retirees also contributed disproportionately to the escalating migration to the Sunbelt after World War II. These migrants gravitated toward suburban locales in southern California and Arizona: a social context that dramatically favored the GOP over the Democrats. The gradual unraveling of the New Deal philosophy of government and the electoral coalition that sustained it in the postwar decades also contributed to the Republican rise (Phillips 1970). The eastern orientation of the New Deal Democratic party based on urban political organizations did not accord with the anti-partisan political culture that still predominated in the West, and this progressive, reformist political culture reasserted itself after the Depression and World War II had passed (Kleppner 1989). As environmentalism became a growing factor in western politics, the old progressive/New Deal philosophy of the federal government providing large infrastructure projects to create employment and enhance economic development also came under scrutiny. Extractive industries such as mining and logging whose (often unionized) workers traditionally supported Democrats also came under increasing scrutiny as the rise of the environmental movement in the 1960s placed ecological preservation and conservation of the West's natural resources more prominently on the national political agenda (Martin 1989). Republican presidential nominees during the 1952-1988 period were able to embrace these trends in a moderately conservative fashion (with one major exception –Arizona Senator Barry M. Goldwater in 1964) that enabled their campaigns to take advantage of the division and disarray among the national Democrats.

Migration to the West and population growth transformed the region after World War II. The concentration of defense related firms such as Lockheed, Northrup, Boeing and the development of major military installations in the region was a major magnet for population growth in western urban centers such as southern California, Puget Sound, and the Front Range of Colorado (White 1991,

Robbins 1994, Nugent 1999). The introduction of air-conditioning made the desert areas of the Southwest habitable year-round and attractive to retiring seniors and others fleeing the winters of the northern US (Wiley and Gottlieb 1982). Migration and the West's desire for rapid economic growth reinforced each other, generating electoral demands to remove federal restraints on growth and economic freedom in the region. Growth also helped the West overcome its economically dependent status as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Phoenix, and Denver became financial powerhouses able to challenge the supremacy of Wall Street (White 1991). In the political realm the growth coalition also provided an electoral and financial base for conservative Republican candidates in presidential politics (Goldberg 1995, Dallek 2000).

Suburbia was the base of Republican domination in the post-World War II West. Republican victories in 9 out of 10 presidential elections in fast-growing and electoral vote-rich California between 1952 and 1988 were grounded on winning huge margins in southern California's suburban counties and splitting populous Los Angeles County and the San Francisco Bay area evenly with the Democrats (Appendix Figure 3). Since its admission to the Union in 1912, Arizona had been a generally Democratic state due to a stronger confederate heritage, the influence of populism among the state's farmers and mineworkers, and state's relatively large Hispanic and Native American populations (Sheridan 1995). Population growth after World War II, however, was concentrated in Phoenix and its surrounding suburbs in Maricopa County, which became the electoral base of the rapidly rising Arizona Republican party that succeeded in electing Barry Goldwater to the US Senate in 1952. Goldwater's strong free market beliefs coupled with anti-communism represented the ideology of the new Republican party in the West seeking to throw off the perceived shackles of the federal government on a fast-growing region (Goldberg 1995).

Republican strength in presidential elections after 1952 also benefited from the tensions within the post-New Deal Democratic party on a wide range of issues: tensions that eventually erupted into

intraparty warfare during the turbulent decade of the 1960s. Urban discontent in the aftermath of the civil rights revolution (as evidenced by bitter 1965 Watts riot in Los Angeles) opened a gulf in electoral support between growing minority populations – African Americans moving increasingly to the urban West after World War II and Hispanics migrating from Mexico in larger numbers after the end of the Bracero Guest Worker program in 1964 – and white working-and middle-class Democrats in the West’s metropolitan areas. The Vietnam war and the rise of the antiwar movement (which was particularly active on California’s college campuses) in the mid-1960s opened another chasm in the party’s electoral coalition between working-class Democrats and more educated liberals and college students. Democratic solidarity around major federal government infrastructure projects in the West also eroded with the rise of the environmental movement largely in reaction to the Bureau of Reclamation’s proposed dam projects in Echo Park (Dinosaur National Monument), Glen Canyon and the Grand Canyon itself (Martin 1989, Reisner 1986). Veteran New Dealers who saw these projects as critical to the growth of the region and had shepherded them through Congress – such as Colorado Congressman Wayne Aspinall - found themselves increasingly marginalized in their own party (Schulte 2002), and consequently their support base among farmers and ranchers and the region’s mining and logging industries gravitated instead toward the Republican party – at least in presidential elections. These ideological fractures within the Democratic party were exposed in Democratic presidential nominating contests from 1968 onward and damaged the party electorally in the West.

Yet while the Republican party in the West became increasingly associated with the free-market conservatism and anti-government attitudes of the Sunbelt conservatives Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan, the Republican presidential West of 1952-88 was based largely on the party’s general unity behind their candidates (by contrast with the divided Democrats) and the relative moderation of those candidates’ campaigns and in office. The one time that the party nominated an ideological Sunbelt conservative who refused to trim his sails for the general election – in 1964 – led to electoral disaster in

the West with Barry Goldwater carrying only his home state of Arizona. Anti-government rhetoric accorded with the West's populist and individualistic traditions and the region's desire to shake off the economic and political dominion of the East, but Republican presidential candidates knew not to push the anti-government agenda to the extent that their core electoral constituency might feel threatened. Social Security and Medicare, for example, were as popular in the West as in the rest of the country and unlike many ideological conservatives western voters in general would not endorse dismantling these programs.

Republican presidential candidates articulated the moderately pro-civil rights sentiments of their largely suburban constituents despite outbreaks of middle-class angst over urban unrest in the 1960s. Barry Goldwater's opposition to the 1964 Civil Rights Act and apparent embrace of states' rights in the 1964 campaign did not help his cause in his home region (Goldberg 1992). Republican presidential candidates did not emphasize hostility toward immigration despite the increase in mass migration from Mexico after the mid-1960s. On environmental issues they also held to a generally centrist path, embracing the GOP's conservationist heritage, and avoiding overt hostility to the environmentalism of the 1960s and 70s – much of whose leadership issued from the San-Francisco based, upper status and generally Republican Sierra Club (Martin 1989) - either on the campaign trail or in office (consider the impact of major environmental legislation enacted during the Nixon administration). As a presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan did somewhat embrace the agenda of the early 1980s "Sagebrush Rebellion" that sought to restore many of the West's federal landholdings to the states, but after he fired his first Interior Secretary Coloradan James Watt (one of the main architects of the Sagebrush Rebellion) in 1983, his administration reverted more to the Republican norm. George H. W. Bush in 1988 campaigned as the "environmental president".

Until 1980, Republican presidential candidates did not embrace religious or social conservatism, which generally had less appeal in the more secular West (apart from Mormon areas) than the rest of

the US. They did emphasize a strong defense and resisting the Soviet Union in foreign policy which in a region where the military and defense-related industries had a strong presence was generally an electoral asset, particularly with the Democrats divided on foreign policy after Vietnam.

The nominations of Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan further demonstrated that the West was a growing force within the national Republican coalition (Rae 1989). Republican presidential nominating politics up through the New Deal was generally determined by winning the support of blocs of national convention delegates in the population heavy northeastern and Great Lakes states. These delegates were usually selected and directed by party officeholders or state bosses at GOP national conventions. Northeastern-based corporations and Wall Street also exercised considerable influence over the Republican presidential nominating process through direct candidate funding and their business and financial connections (Rae 1989). The nominations of Wendell Willkie (1940), Thomas Dewey (1944 and 1948) and Dwight Eisenhower (1952) were case studies of how the “eastern establishment” controlled the GOP presidential nominating process during the New Deal era usually at the expense of conservative Republican favorite Senator Robert Taft of Ohio.

The growth in population and economic influence of California was indicated, however, by the vice-presidential nominations of Governor Earl Warren in 1948 and Senator Richard Nixon in 1952. During the period of Republican presidential dominance in the West (1952-88) power within the national Republican party shifted dramatically toward the South and West or the “Sunbelt”. The emergence of a viable Republican party in the South post-1945 when allied with the rising Republican West created a coalition behind candidates from those regions against the generally pro-New Deal party elites of the Northeast. These Sunbelt candidates were also generally defined and defined themselves as more “conservative” although as argued in the previous paragraph, there were clear limits on the substance of that conservatism. The Sunbelt GOP coalition had its first major triumph with the

nomination of Barry Goldwater in 1964, which confirmed that the power of the traditional “eastern establishment” over the party had finally been broken (Rae 1989, Brennan 1995).

The Goldwater debacle in the general election also confirmed the limits of emphasizing conservatism, however. Goldwater’s successor as the leader of the Conservative movement in the Republican party – Ronald Reagan – would not make the same mistake. The former Hollywood actor had eagerly embraced the Arizonan in the 1964 nominating and general election campaigns, including the broadcast “A Time for Choosing” aired on October 27, 1964, that launched Reagan as a major figure in the Republican party in California and nationally (Dallek 1966). In his successful 1966 campaign for California governor, and once in office, Reagan tempered his conservatism sufficiently to appear unthreatening to the moderate suburban California voters who had supported him in the wake of the 1965 Watts riot and the widespread campus unrest in the state in the mid-1960s (Dallek 1966, Cannon 2003). Reagan’s political genius was to continue to appear as a stalwart conservative to Republicans nationally while governing according to the formula for Republican presidential success in California and the West as a whole in the mid-20th century: a strong anti-Soviet stance, a predisposition toward smaller government, and a moderate approach to most other salient issues in the region and nationally (Cannon 2003). As long as the Democrats remained bitterly divided over civil rights, Vietnam, the environment and the excesses of the “counterculture”, the GOP would benefit in presidential elections where these issues tended to be most salient.

The Erosion of the Solid Republican West: 1992-2020

The first major sign of erosion in the solidly Republican West occurred in 1988 when the Pacific Northwest states of Oregon and Washington voted for Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis, while the rest of the region voted solidly Republican with the usual exception of Hawaii. The

key to the Democratic victory was erosion of Republican support in the suburbs of the major metropolitan centers of Portland and Seattle (Nugent 2018). Neither state has voted Republican in a presidential election since. The 1992 election witnessed a strong Independent presidential candidacy from Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot that split the Republican presidential vote and helped Democrat Bill Clinton to win California, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, and Colorado. Perot ran again in 1996, and while Montana and Colorado returned to the Republican fold, Arizona was lost for the first time since 1948. The strength of Perot and the greater stability of the Democratic vote was a clear sign that all was not well with the Republican presidential party in the West.

With Perot no longer a factor, George W. Bush in 2000 was able to win back Arizona and Nevada and came very close to winning Oregon (thanks to Ralph Nader peeling off 5% of the likely vote for Democrat Al Gore) and New Mexico. Gore easily won California and Washington, however, and the general pattern of hitherto Republican suburbs moving toward the Democrats continued in the region's metropolitan areas. In the less urbanized western states growing Republican strength in the rural areas compensated for this, but the overall trend was highly ominous for the GOP. In 2004 the same pattern prevailed. The Pacific Coast states remained Democratic with gradually increasing margins based in the metropolitan areas. Bush won the remainder including a very narrow win in New Mexico.

Despite an all-western 2008 Republican presidential ticket headed by Arizona Senator John McCain with Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate, Democratic nominee Barack Obama carried Colorado and Nevada easily and the party's margins in the Pacific Coast states except for Palin's Alaska (which remained Republican throughout the post-1992 period) continued to increase. Increasingly metropolitan Colorado and Nevada have remained in the Democratic column since (although their winning margins in Nevada tightened considerably after 2012). The same alignment of western states continued in 2012 and 2016. The more metropolitan western states continued to trend Democratic with even Arizona coming into play in 2016 as Republican presidential

nominee Donald Trump won by only a 3.5% margin in the home state of Barry Goldwater and John McCain (who won his 6th and final Senate term by a 13% margin on the same ballot).

Trump's narrow wins in the rustbelt states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania coupled with an almost solid South, showed a path to a Republican victory nationally without recovering its strength in the West. Trump was not able to repeat the trick in 2020, and Democrat nominee Joe Biden's very narrow win in Arizona contributed to a Republican defeat nationally. The hitherto Republican bastion of Maricopa County, the beating heart of mid-20th century Sunbelt conservatism, also went narrowly Democratic in 2020. Even Mormon Utah showed some erosion with Trump winning by a somewhat smaller margin than those typical of recent Republican presidential candidates (Coppins 2021). The countertrend of the rural/small-town West becoming ever more Republican guaranteed hefty margins for Trump in the less urbanized Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, Alaska, and the Great Plains states. But after the 2020 election the Republican presidential states in the West were reduced to a core of less urbanized states with economies heavily dependent on agriculture or resource extraction, and/or a significant Mormon population: Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Utah, Wyoming, the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas.

How did this happen?

Regional Realignment 1992-2020

The end of the Cold War and the associated depletion of defense related industries and their GOP leaning workforce certainly contributed to the erosion of Republican presidential support in the western states after 1988. In areas with the largest defense-related workforces such as southern California and the Puget Sound region of Washington state, the impact was particularly telling. And as Republicans lost support in these areas it tilted these two states against the Republican party (Nugent 2018). More

generally the Republican party had benefited in presidential elections from being perceived by voters as more credible in foreign and national security policy due to continuing Democratic divisions rooted in the Vietnam Era. With national security policy no longer such a large part of the political equation after the break-up of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, the Democrats profited in presidential elections.

The relative decline of the defense sector was part of a general change in the complexion of the western economy. The 1990s also witnessed the rise of the technology sector as a growing economic and political influence, particularly in California and Washington (Miller 2020). Despite its entrepreneurial spirit the tech sector was far less disposed toward the Republican party than American business in general. Its characteristic cultural liberalism was at odds with the increasing influence of religious conservatism in the GOP. Tech's reliance on recruiting the best and the brightest from overseas also did not accord with the Republican party's increasingly hostile attitude toward immigration. As the tech and entertainment industries began to fill the gap left by the decline in the defense sector, the Republican party's core business constituency in the West became decreasingly comfortable with allegiance to the party (Miller 2020).

Demographic change in the region also began to work against the GOP. The most dramatic growth was in the Hispanic proportion of the western electorate – particularly in southern California, Arizona, and metropolitan Colorado (Nugent 2018). Once registered in the electorate these voters tended to identify heavily with the Democratic party (Miller 2020). Generally lower in income and education levels and more likely to be in public sector and /or unionized jobs, western Hispanics had a natural affinity for the Democrats. This was reinforced by the Republican party's increasingly strong embrace of measures to combat illegal immigration and hostility toward affirmative action measures to benefit minorities. In California these stances brought some short-term political gain for Republican Governor Pete Wilson in the 1990s, but probably worked to the detriment of the party long term (Miller 2020).

Another growing population in the West – Asian Americans – also began to turn against the GOP. This is a diverse and complex population including Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and Filipino Americans with different patterns of party support. Hostility to Communism (due to enforced exile from their homelands), general cultural conservatism, and ownership of or employment in small businesses meant that during the Nixon-Reagan era, Republicans were highly competitive among these voters. The end of the Cold war, and the GOP's increasingly anti-immigration and conservative Christian orientation coupled with the increasingly Asian American workforce in the culturally liberal tech sector, led to a gradual and consistent turn toward Democratic candidates in presidential elections from 1992 onward (Miller 2020)

Aside from these groups, the evolving policy profile of the Republican party post-1992 increasingly alienated the growing number of highly educated, suburban voters in the West's metropolitan areas. In the era of Republican presidential dominance, these voters had been the reliable bulwark of the party, but on a number of issue areas the Republican party adopted stances that appeared increasingly hostile to their political worldview. As mentioned earlier the American environmental movement was largely western (and western Republican) in origin, and Republican presidential candidates in the 1952-1988 period generally strove to appear supportive of environmental concerns. After the presidency of George H. W. Bush, however, the national Republican party increasingly appeared to identify solely with the extractive industries, ranchers, farmers and oil and coal interests that were most hostile to conservation and environmental issues. Rising public concerns over climate change and global warming which seemed to have a particularly adverse effect on the region – primarily through a growing number of large deadly wildfires and increased water scarcity – moved environmental issues to the forefront of political debate in a manner that did not advantage the GOP among the increasingly environmentally conscious, highly educated, suburban voters in the metropolitan West.

The increasingly conservative Christian tone of the national Republican party also did not sit well with college educated, suburban voters in an increasingly secular region (with the exception of heavily Mormon Utah). In the great “culture war” debates of the post 1992 era over abortion, LGBT rights, and same sex marriage, the Republican party took an ever more conservative stance both in the region and nationally (Layman 2001). At the same time, highly-educated, suburban voters in the West – drawing on the region’s traditional libertarian and secular traditions – were at odds with Republican stances on all these issues. The suburbs of California, Oregon, Washington, Colorado and even more culturally conservative Arizona, were becoming increasingly estranged from Republican presidential candidates.

The story of the Republican presidential electorate in the West post-1992 is not entirely one of erosion. The party’s conservative stances on cultural issues, immigration and the environment have significantly increased its support in the rural and small-town West, and in areas heavily dependent upon agriculture and traditional extractive industries. Many of these areas, ironically, had been bastions of support for Democrats for much of the twentieth century, as they benefited from the federal subsidies and large public works programs of the New Deal (White 1991). But as the Democratic party in the West became less like the party of Wayne Aspinall, Scoop Jackson, and Carl Hayden areas with economies dependent on the West’s traditional economic mainstays gravitated increasingly toward the GOP. The Mormon West – particularly significant in the presidential politics of Utah and Idaho and to a lesser extent, Arizona, and Nevada, also stayed generally loyal to the GOP regardless of distinctions based on economics or education level. The rural/small city West despite having benefited disproportionately from federal government largesse (such as dams bringing affordable electric power) during the 20th century became increasingly hostile toward the federal agencies that had had so much impact on the region – particularly the Bureau of Land Management that managed the region’s extensive public lands, and to a lesser extent the National Park Service and the Forest Service. This conflict between the old and new Wests was crystallized in recent stand-offs led by the rural ranching,

Mormon Bundy family of Bunkerville, Nevada, and federal law enforcement (Pogue 2018, Ketcham 2019, Quammen 2020).

Gains in the rural West, however, came nowhere close to compensating for Republican losses in the metropolitan West (Appendix, Figures 3, 4, 5, 6). As mentioned above the Republican presidential West now consists of a core of relatively small population Rocky Mountain, Great Plains and LDS-influenced states, whose total electoral college vote (37 in 2024) is dwarfed by now heavily Democratic California (54). The southwestern states of Arizona and Nevada remain competitive, but it is hard to envisage Republican presidential candidates in the 2020s seriously contesting California, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, and New Mexico. All of which makes it harder for a Republican to win presidential elections nationally.

Everything that has happened to the Republican party in the West since 1992 has only been reinforced by its embrace of Donald Trump and the ascendancy of populism in the GOP since 2016. The Trumpian GOP has somewhat less emphasized religious and cultural conservatism but remains strongly opposed to abortion. Under Trump the Republicans nationally have become even more hostile toward immigration and the goals of the environmental movement. The Trump administration's adoption of protectionist trade policies targeted chiefly at China has only served to further alienate the Pacific Coast states with their large tech sectors and very Pacific-oriented economies from the Republican party. With Trump at the head of the Republican presidential ticket in 2016 and 2020, Democratic margins in California, Oregon, Washington, and Colorado continued to expand based in continued swings against the GOP in the major metro areas of those states Appendix, Figures 3, 4, 5). In both elections the Republicans' electoral bastion in California during the era of presidential dominance – Orange County – was carried by the Democratic presidential candidate. Trump's demeanor and lifestyle were also highly antithetical to traditionally Republican-voting Mormons explaining a somewhat narrower winning margin in Utah and perhaps making the difference in his narrow 2020 losses in Nevada and Arizona

(Coppins 2021). In most of the non-metropolitan West however, Republican margins of victory continued to grow under Trump (Appendix, Figures 3, 4, 5, 6). The Trump era might have changed electoral college voting patterns elsewhere in the US but in the West, the regional tendencies in place since the 1990s were consolidated.

Summary

The Republican party enjoyed a period of regional dominance in presidential elections in the western states from 1952-88. This solid bloc of states and electoral votes from a rapidly growing region was the base of the Republican presidential coalition in the mid-20th century and certainly more reliably Republican than the South and Midwest during this period. The GOP dominance reflected a rising region seeking to advance its increasing economic and political strength nationally in the post-New Deal era. Republican policy themes of smaller government – particularly at the federal level – and staunch opposition to the Soviet Union during the Cold War resonated with the aspirations of the rapidly growing suburbs of the western metropolitan areas and the strong presence of the military-industrial complex in the region's economy and workforce post- World War II. The federal issue and policy agenda of the mid-20th century – civil rights, the Vietnam War, the environment – bitterly divided the New Deal Democrat party and advantaged the Republicans who successfully convinced a majority of voters in the western states that they had a more moderate and pragmatic approach to these issues. This advantage was bolstered by urban discontent and an adverse public reaction to the college-based antiwar movement in the mid to late 1960s. Californians Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan were also the dominant political figures in the Republican party during this period with either of them being on the national party ticket in seven of the ten presidential elections from 1952-88. In short, the Republican party was the West's ticket to national political power and influence.

Republican presidential supremacy in the West ended after 1988 due to a combination of factors. The end of the Cold War changed the issue mix of American politics making national security less important and depleting the West's defense-related workforce that had been an important bastion of Republican support (particularly in southern California and Washington's Puget Sound). Simultaneously with the downsizing of the defense sector, the role of the more Democratically inclined technological, entertainment, financial, health and education sectors has increased as traditional mainstays of the western economy such as agriculture, mining and logging have diminished in economic significance. The net effect of migration increased the demographic and electoral power of constituencies – primarily Hispanics and Asian Americans – that were more disposed to favor the Democrats. Finally, the national Republican party's embrace of religious-based, cultural conservatism and hostility toward environmental causes alienated many of the suburban, college-educated, upper middle-class voters in the West's rapidly growing metropolitan areas who had been the base of Republican support in the Eisenhower to George H. W. Bush Era. The new Republican stances on culture and the environment increased the party's support in the rural and small-town West and areas dependent on agriculture and the region's traditional extractive industries to unprecedented levels, but this has not compensated for the presidential party's losses in the metropolitan West. These losses mean that the Democrats currently have a clear electoral college advantage in the West due to their current iron grip on California's 54 electoral votes and the combined 39 electoral votes of Oregon, Washington, Colorado, New Mexico, and Hawaii. The Republicans continue to dominate the smaller Great Plains and northern Mountain states (total 2024 electoral vote of 37), where the minority and college-educated, suburban demographics are weaker, and traditional western industries and Mormonism remain strong. Arizona and Nevada (a combined 17 2024 electoral votes) remain competitive as the minority and college-educated demographics are not so predominant as in other metropolitan western states.

This paper has focused on the presidential level but there is clear evidence from congressional and state elections that the presidential realignment is becoming entrenched at the lower federal and state electoral levels, with Democrats dominating the more metropolitan and Republicans the more rural western states. What is clear is that the new electoral alignments in the West cut through state lines. More sparsely populated Washington, Oregon, and California east of the Cascades and Coastal ranges are as Republican as Idaho, Utah, and Montana (Appendix, Figures 3, 4, 5, 6). The college towns and resort areas of Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, and even Utah, are as Democratic as metropolitan California or Colorado. These different subregions and regional subcultures have often aligned differently in national politics since the civil war and the Republican supremacy in the region over an almost forty-year period after 1952 is something of an aberration. The greater political homogeneity of the region in presidential politics during this period, however, did parallel and contribute to the West's rise to national political power.

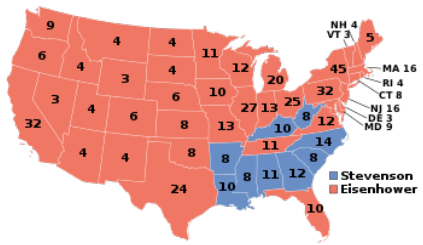
Can the Republicans come back in the metropolitan West? This would probably require a greater appeal to minority voters and some moderation of the party's current stances on cultural conservatism, immigration, the environment, and trade. To achieve the latter while retaining the party's grip on the more sparsely populated Intermountain West and Great Plains would require some very deft politics indeed on behalf of Republican presidential candidates. In the 2020-2022 election cycle there were some signs of increasing Republican support among minority voters at presidential and congressional levels with the election of Republican minority US House candidates in southern California, California's Central Valley, Oregon, and Arizona. If this is maintained and the Democrats go too far in a culturally liberal or environmental direction to alienate their new college-educated, suburban constituency, the western economy goes into a severe downturn under a Democratic White House, or party cleavages on national security issues start to matter again in the region, there might be a chance for the Republicans to at least become more electorally competitive in the metropolitan West which would only strengthen

their presidential election prospects nationally. It appears highly unlikely, however, that the alignment of circumstances that led to the solid Republican presidential West of 1952-88 will recur anytime soon.

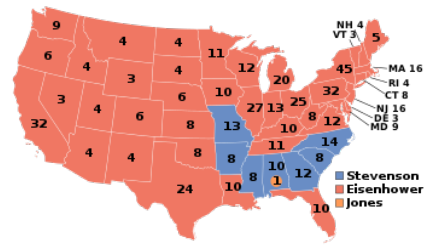
Appendix

FIGURE 1: Presidential Election Maps, 1952-1988

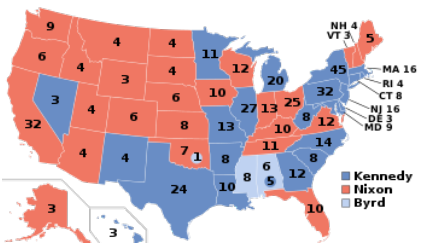
1952



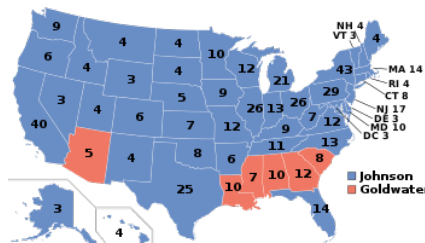
1956



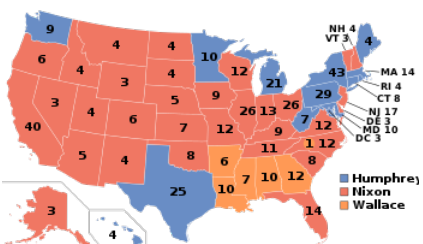
1960



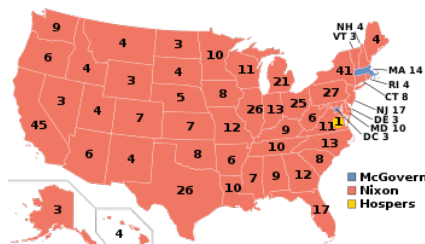
1964



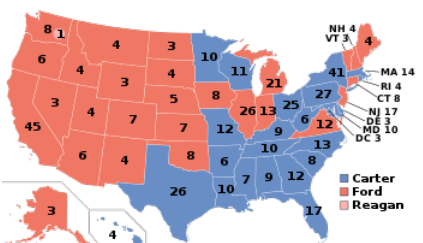
1968



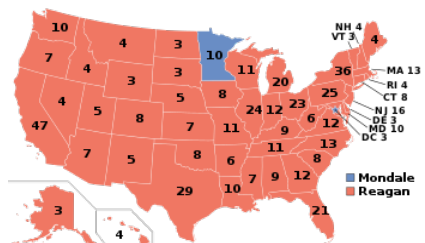
1972



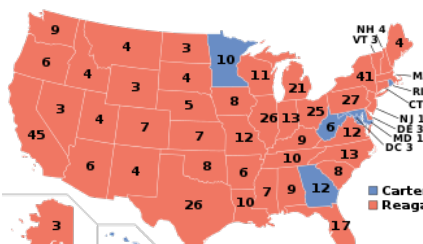
1976



1980



1984



1988

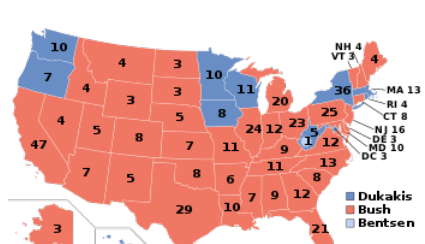
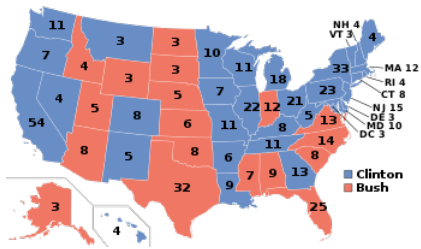
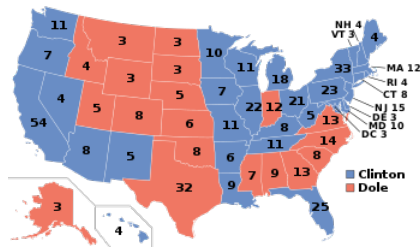


FIGURE 2: Presidential Election Maps, 1992-2020

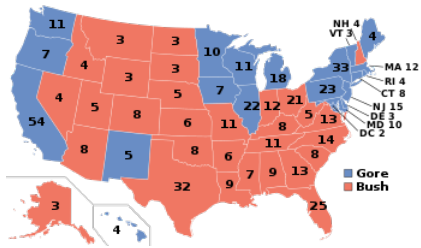
1992



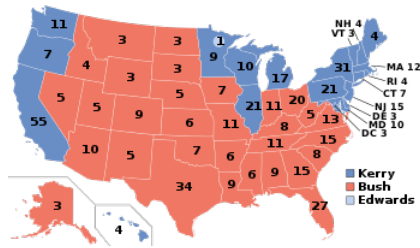
1996



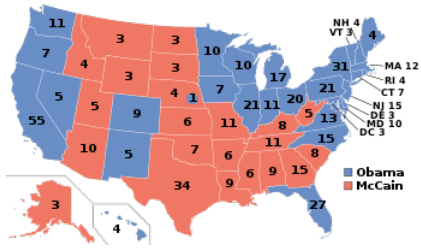
2000



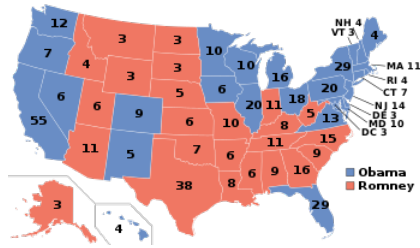
2004



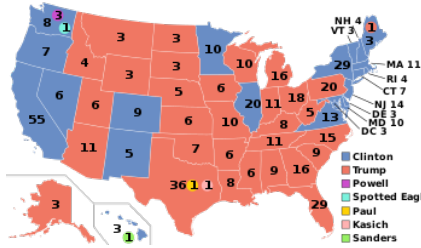
2008



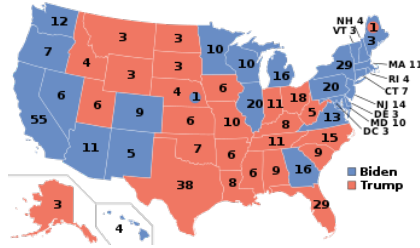
2012



2016

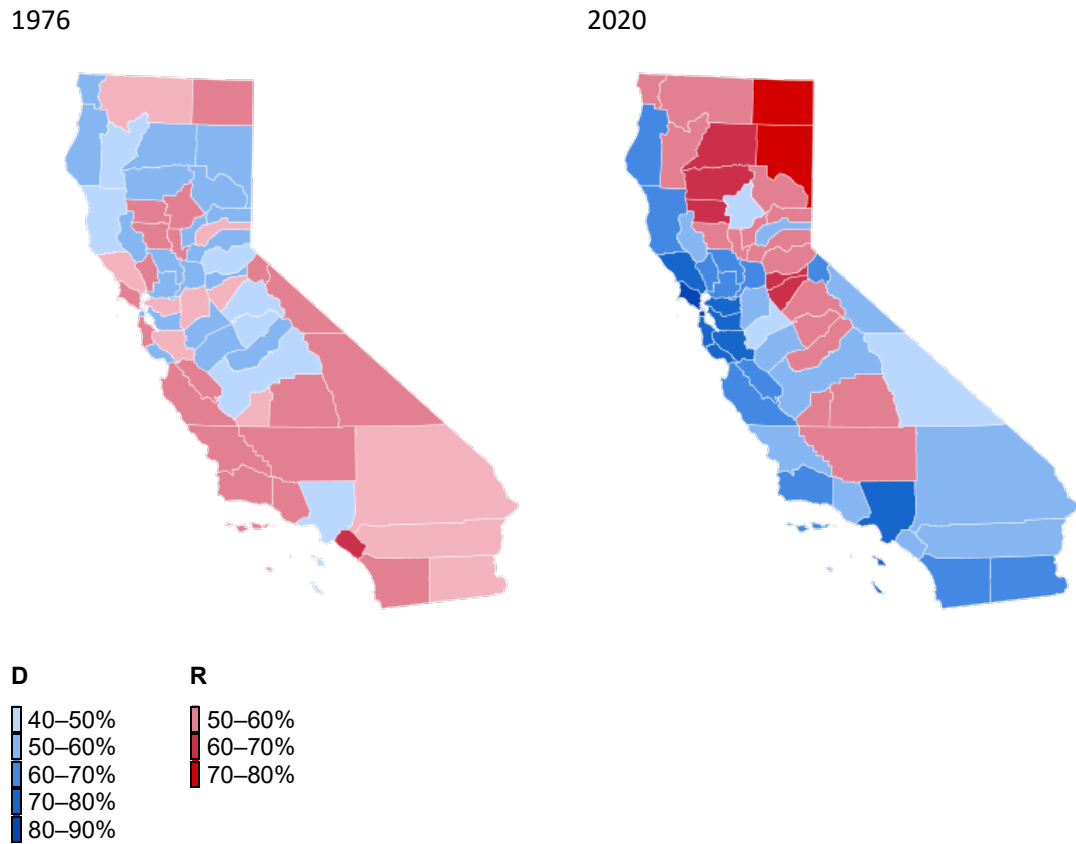


2020



Source: Wikipedia

FIGURE 3: Change in the Presidential Vote 1976 and 2020 (by County): California



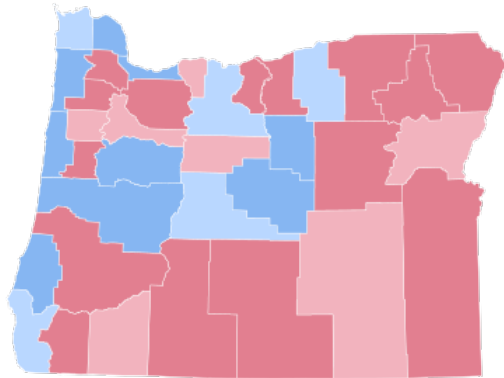
Source: Maps from *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_United_States_presidential_election_in_California and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1976_United_States_presidential_election_in_California.

In 1976, Republican Gerald Ford while losing nationally carried California 49.4 to 47.6%. The Republican victory was based on large margins in the southern California suburban counties, losing by only 2% in populous LA County, and carrying several suburban counties in the San Francisco Bay area: the typical Republican victory pattern in the 1952-1988 period. Democrat Joe Biden carried California in 2020 by a landslide 63.5% to 34.3% over incumbent president Donald Trump. Suburban California is now totally Democratic including the former Republican bastion of Orange County, and LA County and the Bay area suburban counties have become unwinnable for the GOP. The only Republican gains since 1976 are in relatively low population rural/small town or heavily agricultural Central Valley counties reflecting the pattern of the West as a whole.

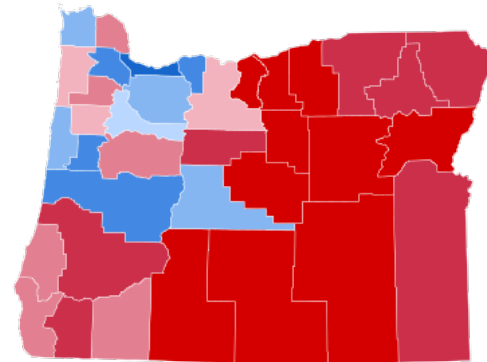
FIGURE 4: Change in the Presidential Vote 1976 and 2020 (by County): Pacific NW States

Oregon

1976

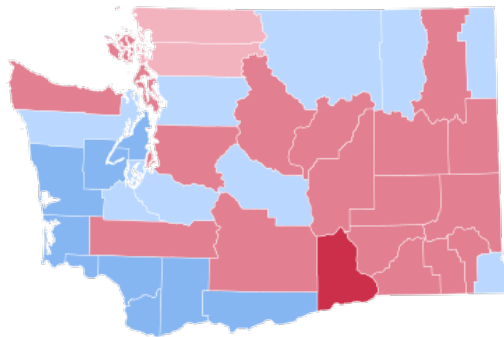


2020

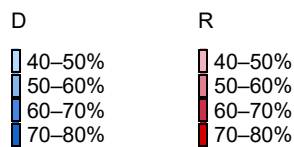
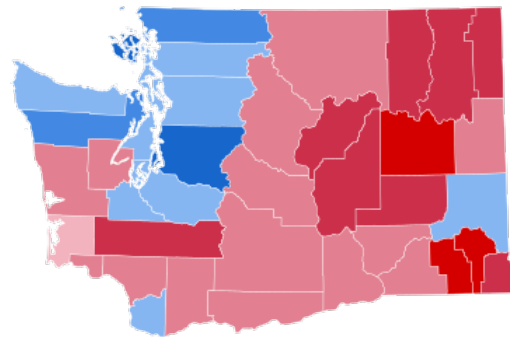


Washington

1976



2020



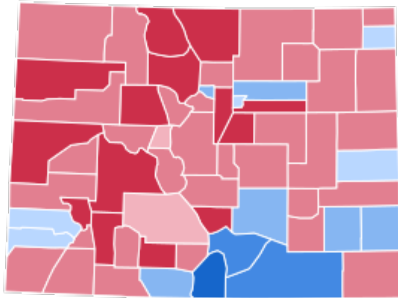
Sources: Maps from *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_United_States_presidential_election_in_Oregon, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_United_States_presidential_election_in_Washington_\(state\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_United_States_presidential_election_in_Washington_(state)), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1976_United_States_presidential_election_in_Oregon, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1976_United_States_presidential_election_in_Washington_\(state\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1976_United_States_presidential_election_in_Washington_(state)).

In 1976 Republican Gerald Ford won both Washington (50–46%) and more narrowly Oregon (by just 0.2%) while losing nationally to Democrat Jimmy Carter. Ford’s margins of victory came from solid margins in the suburban counties around the major metropolitan centers of Portland and Seattle and the rural counties east of the Cascade mountains. He ran decently even in Multnomah County (Portland) with 46% and actually carried Washington’s King County (Greater Seattle) by almost 5 points. In 2020 Democrat Joe Biden won Oregon by 16 points and Washington by 20 points. In each state Republican strength grew significantly in the counties east of the Cascades but this was overwhelmed by huge Democratic margins in the western urban and suburban counties. Biden won 75% of the vote in King County, and 80% in Multnomah county. A fairly even partisan balance with a slight Republican lean was replaced by Democratic overall dominance and polarization between metropolitan and rural areas in both states.

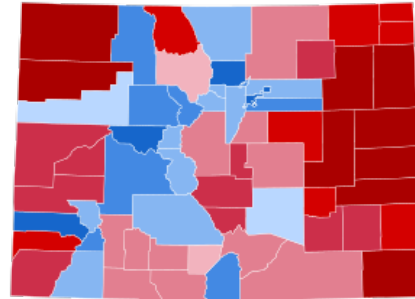
FIGURE 5: Change in the Presidential Vote 1976 and 2020 (by County): Colorado and Arizona

Colorado

1976

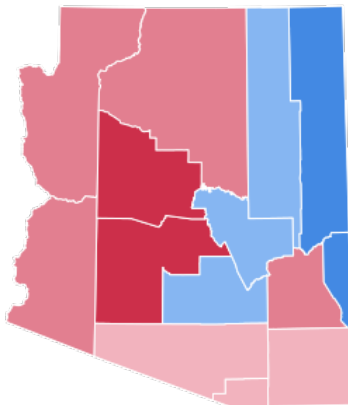


2020

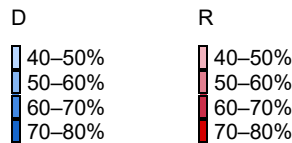
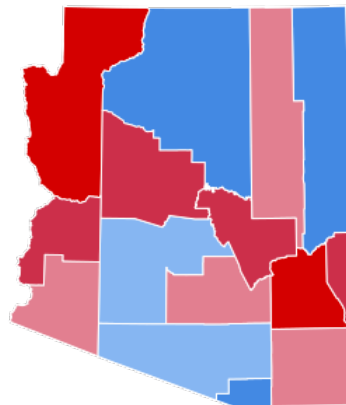


Arizona

1976



2020



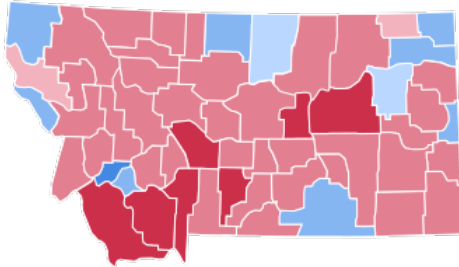
Sources: Maps from *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1976_United_States_presidential_election_in_Colorado, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1976_United_States_presidential_election_in_Arizona, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_United_States_presidential_election_in_Colorado, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_United_States_presidential_election_in_Arizona

In 1976 Republican Gerald Ford carried Colorado by 11 points and Arizona by 16 points. In Arizona Ford carried Phoenix's Maricopa County (over 50% of Arizona voters) 62-35, and narrowly carried Pima County (Tucson) the second most populous country 49-45. In Colorado, the pattern was similar. Ford lost Denver by only 3 points and carried all the suburban counties around it by comfortable margins. Democrat Jimmy Carter won Denver, steel making Pueblo and scattered mining, agricultural and heavily Hispanic counties. In 2020 Joe Biden carried Colorado by 13 points and narrowly carried Arizona by less than half a point. Biden secured over 80% in Denver County, while also winning the Denver suburbs and Colorado's resort areas. The Republicans won El Paso County (Colorado Springs) by 10 points and gained in the less populated rural counties. In Arizona Biden's narrow victory was based on winning giant Maricopa County (now over 60% of Arizona voters) by 2 points and Pima by 19 points. Republican gains in the rural and mining counties and increasingly ex-urban Pinal County were insufficient in 2022. Will Arizona go the way of Colorado?

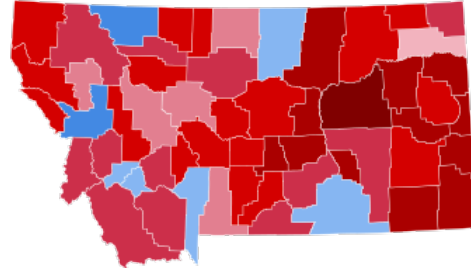
FIGURE 6: Change in the Presidential Vote 1976 and 2020 (by County): Montana and Idaho

Montana

1976

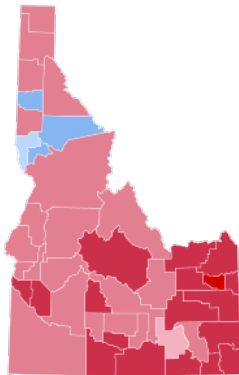


2020

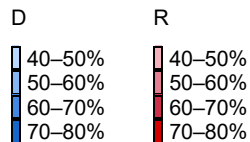
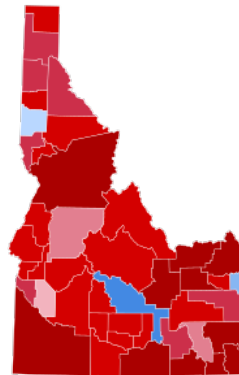


Idaho

1976



2020



Sources: Maps from *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1976_United_States_presidential_election_in_Montana,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_United_States_presidential_election_in_Montana,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_United_States_presidential_election_in_Idaho.

In 1976 Gerald Ford comfortably won Montana (53-45%) and Idaho (60-37%). In Montana Democrat Carter carried most of the reservation counties and the traditional Democratic mining bastions of Silver Bow (Butte) and Deer Lodge. Ford carried the counties with the state's other population centers. In Idaho Ford was very strong in the Mormon southeast and carried the major urban county Ada (Boise) by a 2:1 margin. Democrat Carter won only in the heavily Native American reservation counties. By 2020, GOP margins increased with Donald Trump winning Montana by 16 points and Idaho by 31 points. Trump secured huge margins in the Montana's rural agrarian and logging counties, and comfortably carried in the urban centers of Yellowstone (Billings) and Cascade (Great Falls). Democrat Joe Biden carried several reservation counties, and added the fast-growing urban, college/resort counties of Missoula and Bozeman (Gallatin). In Idaho Trump again ran up large margins in the Mormon counties and the more rural counties. He carried fast-growing Ada County but only by a four-point margin. Two high-income resort counties Teton and Blaine switched to the Democrats. Montana and Idaho reflected the changing voting patterns of the other western states but the higher proportions of Mormons (in Idaho), rural voters and lower proportion of urban voters and college graduates kept both states strongly in the Republican column.

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