

# Whatever Happened to the Arizona Republican Party?

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## **Abstract**

The Republican party dominated Arizona politics after Barry Goldwater's first Senate victory in 1952 until 2016. Arizona was thus a harbinger of a half century of Republican dominance in the American West reflecting the rise of the fast-growing "Sunbelt" in American politics. After Goldwater's retirement his successor, US Senator John McCain, prolonged the state's significant role in national Republican politics. This paper discusses the underpinnings of the Republicans' rise to dominance in Arizona, and the erosion of that dominance over the past decade due to: 1) demographic change at the state level; 2) the emergence of populist national Republican leadership that accords less well with Arizona's "Sunbelt" conservative tradition; and 3) the takeover of the Arizona Republican party by populist "tea party" and "MAGA" Republican forces driven by strong hostility toward immigration.

## Introduction

Rapid economic and population growth in the decades following 1945 transformed the politics of the states of the American South and Southwest, often referred to as the “Sunbelt”. Arizona is a case in point. As a sparsely populated state dominated by ranching, farming and mining, Arizona (together with neighbor New Mexico, the last states in the continental US to be admitted to the Union) had little influence nationally prior to World War II. Arizona’s politics in its first decades as a state oscillated from Republican domination in 1920s presidential contests, to Democratic domination following the New Deal. The state’s phenomenal economic and population growth in the postwar decades, however, was reflected politically by the rise of the Republican party, and particularly the GOP’s post-New Deal conservative wing characterized by an ideology of limited government, low taxes, unrestricted development and strident anticommunism at home and abroad. Arizona Republican Senator and 1964 presidential candidate Barry Goldwater was largely the catalyst for this transformation and from 1952 (when Goldwater was first elected to the Senate) until Bill Clinton’s narrow win in a three-way race in 1996, Arizona was among the most Republican states in presidential elections while the state’s economic and population growth continued apace.

The Republican party’s increasing espousal of cultural conservatism and evangelical Christianity from the 1980s onward, however, comported less well with continued change in the demographics of Arizona. The state’s surging urban center – the city of Phoenix and its suburbs in Maricopa County – became more demographically, culturally, and politically diverse by 2000, a diversity reflected in the state’s fast-growing, and largely Democrat-supporting Hispanic population. While Republicans still tended to dominate Arizona politics at all levels, the formula

for success changed to a more moderate (at least in tone) “corporate” conservatism as epitomized by long-serving (1987-2017) Republican US Senator and 2008 presidential candidate, John McCain. Arizona Democrats also became increasingly adept at winning gubernatorial elections in the state with moderate, pragmatic candidates, and increased their number of US house and state legislative seats.

While Arizona remained a red state during the Bush 43-McCain-Romney era, Arizona elections swung heavily against the Republicans at all levels after Donald Trump took over the party in 2016. Trump’s more populist, nationalistic version of Republican doctrine did not comport as well with Arizona’s corporate conservative culture. Trump carried the state by less than four points over Hilary Clinton in 2016, lost it very narrowly to Joe Biden in 2020, and carried it by over five points in 2024 (largely due to increased support from male Hispanic voters). During the Trump Era, the Arizona Republican state party has reflected the views of MAGA Republican supporters of Trump who openly rejected the more pragmatic Republicanism of the John McCain era. This has not been a successful electoral formula beneath the presidential level however, as the GOP has not won a gubernatorial or US Senate election in Arizona since 2018, and the Republican majorities in the Arizona state legislature have narrowed dramatically.

This paper examines the factors behind the Republicans rise to dominance in Arizona politics after 1948, and the reasons for its unraveling post-2000 and the state’s transition from Red to Purple. In the 1950s and 1960s, the rise of the Arizona Republicans was driven by the economic needs of the state as perceived by Arizona’s economic and political elites, ongoing change in the Arizona electorate due to massive population growth (which created a much

more Republican voter base), and change in the nature of the national Republican party. The Goldwater-Reagan Republican party was a perfect fit for mid-late 20th century Arizona, and the state played a significant role in the rise of Sunbelt conservative Republicanism. Since Reagan, the national party has been decreasingly aligned with the economic and cultural direction of Arizona. In the 2020s, perhaps the state is best characterized politically as a microcosm of the keenly contested, highly polarized nature of national American politics (Goldberg 2024, Packer 2024).

### **From Territory to State (1912-1948)**

Arizona joined the Union in 1912 as one of the smallest states with a total population of just over 200,000 in the 1910 US Census and a single US House seat. Population grew steadily over the next few decades reaching half a million by 1940 (when the state added a second House district) and 750,000 by 1950 (see Figure 1, Appendix). In its early decades, though, Arizona's economy reflected that of other small population Mountain states being heavily dependent on resource and extractive industries principally agriculture, ranching and mining (Meinig 1971, Sheridan 1995). In the arid Southwest, access to water for irrigation and consumption by a growing urban population was critically important for Arizona, and remains so (Reisner 1996, Worster 1992). The colonial economy and the importance of major water projects (such as the Roosevelt Dam near Phoenix, and the Parker and Hoover dams on the Colorado river) which could only be undertaken with federal funding gave the state's politics a somewhat radical and progressive CAST (Bridges 2015). Early Arizona politics was not particularly partisan, but it did

show a strong tilt toward progressives of both parties, reflected in support for Woodrow Wilson in the 1910s and higher than average support for FDR's New Deal in the 1930s (see Figure 2, Appendix). In the 1920s the Arizona electorate preferred moderately conservative Republicans over moderately conservative Democrats but in state elections the dominant political figure of the period was the somewhat mercurial George W. P. Hunt who served as Governor for a total of 14 years between statehood in 1912 and his death in 1934 (Johnson 2002, Sheridan 1995). Hunt was a populist/progressive Democrat with strong support from organized Labor and he well reflected the political predilections of the young state. Another key political figure from the earliest days of statehood in Arizona was another Democrat, Carl Hayden who served as Arizona's sole member of the US House of Representatives from 1912-27, and as US Senator (1927-1969). A less flamboyant character than Governor Hunt and a consummate congressional insider and coalition-builder, Hayden dedicated his political career to enabling federal public works projects to support Arizona's economic and demographic growth – particularly federal water and irrigation projects (August 1999). He perfectly fitted the strong pro-New Deal political direction of the state after 1932.

Following the passing of FDR, Arizona like its neighboring mountain and southwestern states remained in the Democratic column for Harry Truman over Republican Thomas E. Dewey in the 1948 presidential election. From almost 70% of the vote in the New Deal elections of 1932 and 1936, however the Democratic winning total in Arizona had diminished to 54% for Truman (see Figure 2, Appendix). Part of this erosion reflected the gradual Republican electoral recovery nationally after 1936, but there were also some demographic trends in motion specific to Arizona that helped revive the Republican party in the state. Arizona's dry, warm climate had

gradually attracted more and visitors from the northern states, many of whom originally visited the state for health reasons and stayed (Meinig 1971, Sheridan 1995). Being wealthier individuals, they tended to be more Republican inclined. Population growth in Phoenix gave rise to a new Arizona business class that favored the GOP (VanderMeer 2010). The advent of the Cold War and the increased salience of civil rights were also slowly unraveling the Democratic New Deal coalition.

Truman still carried every Arizona county in 1948 but his margins in the largest population centers – Phoenix’s Maricopa County (51-46) and Tucson’s Pima County (50-48) were narrower than in the rest of the state, while he dominated the slower growing ranching and mining dominated rural counties (see Figure 3, Appendix). While there was still a Democratic majority in Arizona in 1948, the stage was being set for the Republican realignment of the state by Dwight Eisenhower and Barry Goldwater in 1952.

### **Barry Goldwater and the Rise of Republican Arizona (1952-1964)**

The political rise of Barry Goldwater and the Arizona Republican party was driven by the above-mentioned changes in Arizona’s economy and demography that accelerated dramatically in the 1950s. The development of air conditioning played a critical part here, allowing Arizonans to live and work comfortably year-round. This made the state even more attractive to retirees, but also to defense industries, financial services, electronics, and other emerging industries (Meinig 1971 and 2004, Sheridan 1995, Nugent 2018). The state’s banks particularly the Phoenix-based Valley Bank led by Walter Bimson also played a critical role in nurturing rapid economic and

population growth (Sheridan 1995). Arizona thus almost became a paradigm case of what would later be referred to as the Sunbelt – the southern tier of the continental US characterized by a warm climate, rapid economic growth, and rapid in-migration by more economically and politically conservative types: military, defense industries, white-collar professionals, and retirees (Phillips 1970, Wiley and Gottlieb 1982). Between 1950 and 1960, Arizona grew from just under 750,000 residents to just over 1.3 million – an astonishing 74% increase in just ten years (see Figure 1, Appendix). With only two congressional districts after the 1940 census, Arizona added a district in both 1950 and 1960.

But Arizona's dramatic postwar population growth was not evenly distributed across the state. Indeed, since World War II it has been increasingly concentrated in Phoenix and its surrounding communities – including Scottsdale, Mesa, Tempe, Chandler, Gilbert, and Glendale in the so-called "Valley of the Sun" and all contained within Maricopa County (VanderMeer 2010). Figure 4 (Appendix) shows that Maricopa's dramatic growth has almost exactly paralleled that of Arizona as a whole. Figure 5 (Appendix) further shows that across the decades Maricopa County has comprised a larger and larger share of the state's overall population. From just over a third of Arizona's population (35%) in 1940, Maricopa County rose to over 40% of the population in 1950 and over 50% by 1960. The factors that were increasingly drawing Americans to Arizona, were the same factors that propelled the growth of Greater Phoenix: military installations, defense industries, financial services, real estate and retirees (VanderMeer 2010). Those factors and Maricopa County's increasingly demographic, economic, and political domination of the state also led to the rise of Barry Goldwater and the Arizona Republican party in the 1950s.



The Goldwater family has been in the state since territorial days and were originally based in the Yavapai County seat of Prescott where Barry Goldwater's grandfather, Michael, founded a dry goods store that eventually grew into Arizona's major department store chain (Goldberg 1995). Barry Goldwater was very much a product of Phoenix, however, where he ran the Goldwater stores with his brother. As a rising member of the city's business elite Goldwater got his start in politics associated with the urban reform movement in Phoenix. This business-based group sought to reform the city's charter to eliminate corruption and make conditions move favorable for business, and got the young Goldwater elected to the Phoenix City Council (Goldberg 1995, Perlstein 2001, Bridges 1999). Goldwater's politics were clearly Republican and in 1952 he was persuaded to run for the US Senate against the Democratic Arizona Senator and US Senate Majority Leader, Ernest McFarland: a moderate New Deal Democrat and legendary figure in Arizona politics. On paper Goldwater's chances appeared minimal, but two factors gave the young department store magnate some grounds for hope. The growth in the Arizona electorate and particularly in Goldwater's home region of greater Phoenix meant that McFarland was running in a substantially larger and different electorate than in 1946 due to migration into Arizona by Republican-inclined constituencies: military, corporate types and seniors. The second factor was that Goldwater was running on the same Republican ticket as the phenomenally popular World War II hero, General Dwight Eisenhower. Goldwater was also an attractive candidate: a young, handsome, outdoorsy, Air Force veteran, already known in the state for his photography and a famous raft trip down the Grand Canyon (Goldberg 1995). He was also an outspoken free-market conservative aligned with the individualistic pro-business,

values of the fast-growing Sunbelt and a strong anti-communist running at the height of the McCarthy Era (Perlstein 2001).

The 1952 election was an unqualified triumph for Goldwater, Eisenhower and the Arizona Republicans. Ike carried the state 58-42% over Democratic nominee Adlai Stevenson, a dramatic 14% increase over 1948 and slightly higher than his national popular vote share (+3%). In an upset, Goldwater narrowly defeated McFarland 51-49%. In the presidential race Eisenhower easily carried Maricopa County with over 60% and lost only the southeastern Arizona mining counties (See Figure 6, Appendix). Goldwater lost most of the ranching and mining counties in his much closer race, but again a comfortable margin in his home-base of Maricopa County was key to his narrow victory in the Senate race (See Figure 6). In addition to the triumphs of Goldwater and Eisenhower, Republican Governor, John Howard Pyle (narrowly elected in 1950 as the state's first Republican governor since the New Deal) won reelection with over 60% of the vote, and Republican John Rhodes was elected to Congress from Arizona's first district dominated by Maricopa County, a seat Rhodes would hold for the next 28 years.<sup>1</sup>

The rise of Goldwater and the Republicans in Arizona during the 1950s and 1960s was a harbinger of the rise of western conservatism to a position of dominance in the Republican party as demonstrated by the presidential nominations of Californian Richard Nixon in 1960 and 1968 and 1972, Goldwater himself in 1964, and another Californian Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984 (Perlstein 2001). Except for 1964, these candidates completely dominated the western and southwestern states in the general election. The forces behind the rise of conservative

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<sup>1</sup> In another indication of Arizona's rising influence in the national Republican party, Rhodes would later serve as Republican Leader in the US House from 1973 to 1981.

Republicanism in Arizona, California, Texas and the West as a whole were broadly similar. The demographics of the postwar population boom - retirees, white collar workers, workers in the energy and defense industries – favored conservatism (Phillips 1970). The businesses behind the fast-growing western economy sought to throw off the shackles of eastern financial centers and government interventionism in pursuit of unhindered development and growth (Sale 1975, Wiley and Gottlieb 1982, White 1992). The region was developing new financial centers in Los Angeles, Phoenix, Dallas and Houston to challenge the dominance of Wall Street and eastern capital. The strong presence of military bases and defense industries in the southwest gave anticommunism and a hawkish stance against the Soviet Union during the Cold War powerful electoral appeal.

Barry Goldwater's strongly held free market, antigovernment beliefs, combined with militant opposition to the USSR contributed to his electoral success in Arizona, and made him an increasingly prominent national voice for this emerging sunbelt conservative Republicanism (Goldberg 1995, Perlstein 2001). In the generally disastrous Republican year of 1958, Goldwater easily defeated McFarland for a second time by a comfortable 12-point margin. His ability to articulate conservative beliefs and his electoral strength in Arizona earned Goldwater a devoted following in the nascent national conservative movement that had formed around William F. Buckley's *National Review* and associated organizations (Perlstein 2000, Rae 1989). His slim volume *The Conscience of a Conservative* (ghostwritten by Buckley's brother-in-law, L. Brent Bozell) became the bible of the new American right of the 1950s. After winning reelection in a dismal Republican year, Goldwater immediately became a potential contender for the Republican presidential nomination in 1960. The Arizonan ultimately stood aside out of loyalty

to Vice-President Richard Nixon, but after Nixon's narrow defeat in the fall of 1960, the pressure from the Conservative movement for Goldwater to run in 1964 became overwhelming.

Goldwater's capture of the 1964 GOP nomination marked the triumph of Sunbelt conservatism over the GOP's traditional Wall Street establishment (Rae 1989, Brennan 1995). His presidential campaign also revealed Goldwater's limitations as a national candidate (Goldberg 1995, Perlstein 2001). His strongly articulated anti-government beliefs were too strong for a country that still fondly remembered the New Deal and valued the New Deal legacy of federal programs to help the economically disadvantaged. His bellicosity toward the USSR easily led to public concerns over possible nuclear conflict. His opposition to the 1964 Civil Rights Act ran against the grain of increasing national support for civil rights in the early 1960s. Running in the wake of the Kennedy assassination in 1963 also made the 1964 presidential campaign difficult for any Republican. In the general election against President Lyndon Johnson, Goldwater was overwhelmingly defeated and won only five Deep South States and Arizona (and that by only 1%).

Regardless, Goldwater remained a hero to conservatives and to voters in his home state. After Carl Hayden retired from the Senate in 1968 Goldwater ran and easily won election to the Senate once again serving until his retirement in 1986. From 1968 until the end of the Reagan-Bush era in 1992 Arizona remained one of the Republican party's strongest bastions in presidential elections (see Figure 2, Appendix).

### **Sunbelt Republican Bastion: Goldwater, Kyl and McCain (1968-2012)**

As can be seen from Figure 1 (Appendix), Arizona has maintained its phenomenal population growth since the 1960s, and now has over seven million residents with well over four million of those (or more than 60%) in Maricopa County (Figure 5, Appendix) still the principal driver of the state's population growth and economy. Figure 2 (Appendix) shows that from 1972 through 1988 Republican presidential candidates secured comfortable election victories in Arizona with winning percentages in the high 50s or low-mid 60s per cent. In critical Maricopa County (see Figure 7, Appendix), Republican margins were invariably slightly higher. In 1992 the independent candidacy of Texan billionaire businessman H. Ross Perot, whose fiscal conservative themes and populist style resonated strongly with elements of the Arizona Republican presidential coalition, secured 19% of the vote in the state, keeping Republican incumbent president George H. W. Bush to 43% and a mere six-point margin over Democrat Bill Clinton. In 1996, Perot still took 8% of the Arizona vote and, but the principal beneficiary of his decline was Clinton, who became the first Democratic presidential candidate to carry Arizona since Truman in 1948.

Arizona returned to the Republican column in the elections of the 2000s although the Republican winning percentages - 51% for George W. Bush in 2000, 55% for Bush in 2004, 53% for favorite son John McCain in 2008 and 54% for Mitt Romney in 2012 – were significantly lower than the 60% plus Republican presidential percentages of the 1964-1988 period. Beneath the presidential level, Arizona was not so overwhelmingly Republican post-1964. The state regularly elected Democratic liberal icons Stuart and Morris Udall uninterruptedly from a Tucson-based district from 1955 to 1991. Arizona also had several Democratic governors: Sam Goddard (1965-67), Raul Castro (1975-77), Bruce Babbitt (1978-1987), Rose Mofford (1988-

1991), and Janet Napolitano (2003-2009) and other Democrats were regularly elected to statewide office. Conservative Democrat Dennis DeConcini represented Arizona in the US Senate from 1977-1995. The Republicans held secure but not overwhelming majorities in the state legislature.

Arizona Republicans were not monolithic either during their period of dominance. Barry Goldwater mellowed ideologically in his final years in the Senate, as the national Republican party became more identified with religious or cultural conservatism rather than the focus on individual freedom that characterized Goldwater conservatism (Goldberg 1995). Hard-right conservative Evan Mecham was a regular candidate for the Republican nomination for Senate in the 1960s and 1970s, finally winning the Republican nomination and the Arizona governorship in 1987. Mecham was impeached and removed from office a year later by a Republican-majority legislature (Johnson 2002, Biggers 2012). Another Republican governor, Fife Symington, was impeached a year after winning reelection to the governorship in 1996 (Johnson 2002). The dominant figure among Arizona Republicans post-Goldwater was US Representative (1981-1986) and US Senator (1987-2018) John McCain. A Vietnam war hero, McCain moved to Arizona to embark on a political career after his second marriage to an Arizonan. Ideologically McCain was probably more conservative than Goldwater overall – particularly on cultural issues – but he cloaked his conservatism in a maverick, reformist political style that conformed well with the political culture of Arizona and also had national appeal as demonstrated in his campaigns for the Republican nomination in 2000 and (successfully) in 2008 (Salter 2020). For much of his time in the Senate, McCain's Republican colleague was John Kyl (1995-2011) a more low-key, orthodox Republican conservative of the Reagan-Bush stamp.

In the 2012 presidential election, Republican presidential nominee, Mitt Romney won Arizona by 54 to 45% over Democratic incumbent Barack Obama. Romney's victory was in line with the reduced Republican margins of the 2000s but still a comfortable win. A glance at figures 7 and 10 (Appendix) shows the usual Republican formula for winning the state was still working with Romney winning 55% of the vote in Maricopa and sweeping the rural and mining countries by large margins. Obama, like most 21st century Democratic candidates carried the increasingly Hispanic and Democratic Pima County based on the city of Tucson, the heavily Hispanic border County of Santa Cruz, the resort county of Coconino (around Flagstaff), and the (Navajo) reservation Apache County in the northwest of the state. After his failed presidential run, John McCain, was easily reelected to the Senate in 2010, and John Kyl was succeeded by another Republican Jeff Flake in the 2012 Senate election. Republican Jan Brewer won reelection as governor in 2010 with 54% of the vote and was succeeded by another Republican, Doug Ducey, who won in 2014 with 53%. All standard Arizona, conservative Republicans of the McCain-Goldwater stamp.

But there were also signs that political alignments in Arizona were changing between the parties and within them. One factor was the dramatic growth in the state's Hispanic population. The state and Maricopa county's Hispanic population doubled from 15% to over 30% by 2012 (see Figures 8 and 9, Appendix). As these voters were overwhelmingly Democratic the growth in Hispanic votes helped Democrats narrow the overall Republican margins in the state (Nugent 2018, Damore et al 2021). It also gave the Democratic party in the state a more Hispanic and progressive cast, with more progressive Democrats such as Ed Pastor, Raul Grijalva, and later Ruben Gallego getting elected in the state's two Hispanic-majority congressional districts

(Damore et al 2021). In the Republican party, the McCain-Goldwater establishment in the state was increasingly under challenge from far-right tea party activists (Zoellner 2011, Biggers 2012). The growing Hispanic population, Arizona's status as a border state, and the rising salience of immigration as a national issue in the 2010s also began to increasingly polarize Arizona politics between the parties, and within the Republican party as the tea-party Republicans chided the party establishment for insufficient militancy on the issue (Zoellner, 2011, Biggers 2012). Party polarization over immigration intensified after the passage of state legislation - Arizona SB 1070 – written and sponsored by tea party Republican State Senator Russell Pearce (Biggers 2012, Zoellner 2023) and signed by GOP Governor Jan Brewer. The law required immigrants older than 18 to always carry a certificate of registration with them, and to provide proof of immigration status when stopped by law enforcement.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, Republican icon John McCain had to suffer the indignity of a serious primary challenge from far-right former US Representative, J. D. Hayworth, who secured a third of the GOP primary vote (Biggers 2012). US Representative Jeff Flake's margin of victory in the 2012 US Senate race over Hispanic Democrat, and former surgeon general, Richard Carmona, was a precarious 3%.

The increasing salience of the immigration issue, and the division is caused in the Republican party, thus gave Democrats some hope that they could finally make the state consistently competitive in presidential elections, starting in 2016.

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<sup>2</sup> Only the latter provision was upheld by the U. S. Supreme Court in the 2012 case, *Arizona v. United States*.



## **Trump v. McCain and the rise of the new Arizona Democrats**

Donald Trump's presidential candidacy in 2016 specifically highlighted the issue of illegal immigration from Mexico, and his other major campaign themes constituted a repudiation of the free-market, hawkish in foreign policy, corporate conservatism that had characterized the national and Arizona Republican parties since the time of Goldwater (Rae 2018). Trump's populist approach appealed to working and lower middle-class, less well-educated, rural and exurban voters, many of them hitherto Democratic. The traditional upscale, corporate Republicans in such famously Republican Arizona enclaves as the Phoenix suburb of Scottsdale were far less comfortable with Trump's campaign themes and populist and pugilistic political style. Indeed, Trump went out of his way in 2016 to differentiate himself politically and stylistically from Arizona's leading Republican politician and representative of the GOP's *ancien regime*, Senator John McCain (Salter 2020).

Trump comfortably won Arizona's March 22, 2016, Republican presidential primary, but he secured only 46% of the vote with the remaining 54% divided between the more mainstream Republican candidates, in a pattern typical of the 2016 GOP primary campaign (Rae 2018). Texas Senator Ted Cruz finished second with 28% but carried only two small rural counties. Trump carried the state's most populous counties but broke 50% only in fast-growing, increasingly exurban Pinal County wedged between the state's major metropolitan centers of Phoenix and Tucson. His victory owed much to the immigration issue and dedicated support from staunch Arizona anti-immigration advocates such as Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio. In the state's US Senate primary election that was held later in the year on August 30, 2016, Senator John McCain faced off against a tea-party challenger, former state Senator Kelli Ward who again

focused strongly on the immigration issue. McCain spent heavily to fend off Ward and won with 52% of the vote to Ward's 39%, thanks largely to the votes of the state's major metropolitan centers (Nugent 2018, Damore et al 2021).

The discomfort with Trump's presidential candidacy among many upscale, highly-educated, wealthy suburban Republicans (and among traditionally-Republican Mormon voters who constitute a significant voting bloc in sections of the state – including Maricopa County) combined with the demographic trends underway favoring the Democrats, meant that Arizona was seriously competitive in the general election for the first time since the Clinton Era (Nugent 2018, Damore et al 2021). In fact, Clinton held a late election rally in Tempe less than a week before the election, believing it might tilt the state in her favor (Liriano 2016). A relatively strong showing by the Libertarian presidential nominee, former New Mexico governor Gary Johnson, also enhanced Democratic prospects by providing a more palatable alternative to Clinton for "Never Trump" Arizona Republicans. In the end Trump carried Arizona by 48.7% to 45.1% for Clinton and 4.1% for Johnson. His margin was much reduced from that of other Republican nominees since 2000 (average 8.6%), but Clinton with 45.1% was only marginally above the Arizona average for Democratic presidential nominees over the same period (44.6%). As can be seen from Figures 2 and 7 (Appendix), Trump's margin in Maricopa County was similar to his statewide margin and proved critical to carrying the state. He ran strongly in most of the rural and mining counties and the high population growth counties of Pinal and Yavapai. Clinton easily carried the more heavily Hispanic border counties of Pima (Tucson) and Santa Cruz, and almost, Yuma County. In the U.S. Senate general election race John McCain easily defeated Democrat Ann Kirkpatrick by 54% to 41% although this was the closest margin of his senate

career. Interestingly no Republican candidate for US Senate has carried Maricopa County or the state of Arizona since.

The conflicted relationship between Trump and segments of the Arizona Republican party continued into his administration. The passing of John McCain in August 2018 did nothing to dissipate the animosity between Trump and the McCain family and many of McCain's most devoted supporters in Arizona (Salter 2020). Arizona's other Republican Senator Jeff Flake, a devout Mormon, found himself increasingly at odds with the Trump administration, and facing a possible primary challenge from the right, decided not to run for reelection (Coppins 2021, Packer 2024). As it happened, Representative Martha McSally, a conservative but more mainstream Arizona Republican easily defeated Ward in the Republican primary, with Joe Arpaio's candidacy dividing the Trump Republican vote. McSally lost the general election, however, to moderate Democrat Kyrsten Sinema, who became Arizona's first Democratic US senator since the 1990s. Sinema's exceeded her statewide margin of 2.35% with a four-point win in Maricopa County which slipped into the Democratic column in a US Senate election for the first time since 1976. Republicans easily held onto the governor's office however, with incumbent Doug Ducey winning a second term with a 15% margin.

The bitter division between the MAGA and McCain wings of the Arizona Republican party continued into the 2020 election cycle. By now the controversial Kelli Ward has been elected chair of the state Republican party only accentuating the bitterness of the split. In the 2020 presidential election, the Democrats felt that they had a real opportunity to win Arizona, given the relatively narrow margin in 2016, Sinema's Senate victory, the continued growth in Hispanic voters, and the ongoing Republican civil war in the state. Democrats increasingly

envisaged Arizona as the next California, where demographic change and Republican “extremism” would lead to an ongoing electoral realignment in their favor (Damore et al 2021). The outcome in 2020 fit that narrative as Joe Biden became the first Democrat to carry the state in 30 years, and unlike Bill Clinton in 1996, Biden did not require a strong third-party candidate to help him win. The Arizona outcome was perilously close, Biden eventually winning with 49.4% to Trump’s 49.1% after days of counting. Only one Arizona county switched from Democrat to Republican from 2016, but it was vote-rich Maricopa where Biden won 50.1 to 48% in a dramatic swing from 2016. In fact, from Figure 13 we can see that while most Arizona counties swung Democratic, the old mining countries of Greenlee and Graham and the border countries of Santa Cruz and Yuma, both with large Hispanic populations actually swung Republican. Most Arizona counties also voted more Republican than the state as whole, except for Maricopa and the two Democratic bastions of Pima (Tucson) and Coconino (Flagstaff). More disappointment for Republicans followed in the US Senate special election to fill John McCain’s seat. After her defeat by Sinema in 2018, Martha McSally was appointed in early 2019 by GOP Governor Doug Ducey to occupy the McCain seat until a special election could be held in 2020. In the 2020 special election to fill the remainder of McCain’s term she faced a formidable Democratic challenger in Mark Kelly, a former astronaut and US Navy Captain, and husband of former US Representative Gabrielle Giffords. Giffords’ congressional career had been ended in a deadly shooting at a constituent event in Tucson on January 8, 2011, when six people were killed, and Giffords left with serious brain injuries (Zoellner 2011). Kelly and Giffords had received national attention as compelling campaigners for gun control, and the Navy veteran had no problem in outraising and outspending McSally in the fall campaign. Given the

antirepublican swing in Arizona in 2020, it was no great surprise when Kelly won a narrow 51-49% victory, giving Arizona two Democratic US senators for the first time in almost 70 years (since Goldwater defeated McFarland in 1952).

The Democratic advance continued in Arizona in the 2022 midterm elections. Trump's challenging of the 2020 election result, specifically in Arizona, continued to keep polarization and controversy swirling in the Arizona Republican party (Packer 2024). In 2022, the GOP nominated three MAGA candidates for the major statewide offices, all of whom espoused the "stolen election" mantra. The GOP nomination for the governorship was won by former Phoenix area television news anchor Kari Lake, who narrowly defeated the establishment Republican candidate former Arizona University Regent Karrin Taylor Robson 48-43% after a bitter campaign. The nomination for Secretary of State (effectively the Lieutenant Governor in Arizona) was won by state Representative Mark Finchem, well known for his extreme right-wing views. For Attorney General, the Republican nominee was Abraham (Abe) Hamadeh, a former county prosecutor and military intelligence officer. With Trump and the 2020 stolen election controversy still swirling around the Arizona GOP each of the statewide MAGA candidates lost, though only by 280 votes in the case of Hamadeh (who was later elected to the US House from a heavily Republican Phoenix area congressional district in 2024). Finchem lost by over four points to Hispanic Democrat Adrian Fontes (but subsequently returned to the Arizona legislature as a state senator from Yavapai County in 2024). The 2022 gubernatorial election was also close, with Democrat Secretary of State Katie Hobbs prevailing over Kari Lake by less than one percent of the vote (0.67%) or just over 17,000 votes statewide. Hobbs' 37,000 vote margin

in Maricopa County was critical to her success, again demonstrating the problems created for the Arizona GOP by the erosion of their prior bastion in state elections.

Interestingly State Treasurer Kimberly Yee, a more traditional Arizona Republican, was reelected 56-44%: the largest margin for any elected statewide office in Arizona that year and carried every Arizona county except the Democratic bastions of Pima, Santa Cruz, Coconino and Apache. Veteran Republican Tom Horne, a former state Attorney General and Superintendent for Public Instruction, returned to that office with a narrow nine thousand vote statewide margin over the Democratic incumbent. Finally, 2022 also saw another US Senate election with Mark Kelly seeking to win a full Senate term after winning the 2020 election to fill out John McCain's term. Tech executive Blake Masters, a protégé of conservative Silicon Valley tech billionaire Peter Thiel, while not as clearly a MAGA candidate as Lake, Hamadeh and Finchem, nevertheless echoed their political outsider status and easily won the Republican primary over more established Republican candidates (including Attorney General Mark Brnovich). Masters was easily dispatched by the formidable Mark Kelly campaign fundraising and electoral machine, however, as the incumbent defeated him by almost 5% of the vote. Unlike the other Republican statewide losers, Masters did not contest the election results.

At this point it is also interesting to note that the erosion in the Republican margin in Arizona has also been reflected in elections to the Arizona state legislature (see Figure 12). The comfortable Republican margins of the early 2000s have been replaced by an increasingly narrow balance of power between the parties since 2014. After the 2022 election, the Republican margin in each chamber had sunk to a bare majority of two votes: 16-14 in the state senate and 31-29 in the state house. Due to political polarization between the parties and most

districts being drawn to favor one or other party, the narrow margin had no moderating effect on legislative politics, however (Packer 2024).

Arizona elections from 2016 onward can be characterized by an increasing Democratic advance based on growth in Hispanic support, and the continued erosion of Republican supports in the upscale suburbs of Maricopa County in reaction to Donald Trump and the MAGA takeover of the Arizona GOP (Nugent 2018, Damore et al 2021). This continued to be manifest in the refusal of the losing Republican statewide candidates in 2022 to accept their defeat, except for Blake Masters. With Trump once again the clear frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024, the 2022 elections provided further confirmation that Arizona and the Sunbelt in general were slipping from the Republicans' grasp. In fact, the 2024 elections would provide a mixed electoral picture that continued to encourage Democratic hopes to "Californiaize" the state in their favor, while at the same time indicating a possible Republican path back to electoral supremacy in the Grand Canyon State.

### **Split Outcomes: The Enigma of 2024**

At the outset of the 2024 presidential election campaign Arizona appeared headed for as close an outcome as in 2020, with perhaps a slight Democratic advantage due to recent electoral trends in the state, and strong Democratic performance in pivotal Maricopa County. Opinion polling generally showed an advantage for Republican Donald Trump, however, which remained after Vice-President Kamala Harris replaced Biden as the Democratic candidate in July 2024 (Thomas and Salama 2024). In the end Trump carried Arizona 52.2% to 46.7% for a 5.5% margin:

much improved over his narrow loss in 2020 and his 3% win in 2016, but still below the Republican presidential margins of the early 2000s. As usual the key to Trump's 2024 victory was Maricopa County which he switched from a 50-48% Democratic margin in 2020 to 51-48 Republican (see Figure 7 and Figure 14, Appendix, and Murray and Falayi, 2024). In Arizona's next four most populous counties, Trump gained slightly in the Democratic bastion of Pima County, while padding his margins in the high growth counties of Pinal (+2.7%) and Yavapai (+2.8%), and largely rural Mohave (+2.5%). Trump also made surprisingly strong gains in the two border counties with large Hispanic populations surging by 7.5% in Yuma County and 8.6% in Santa Cruz County. These latter results provide the clue to Trump's surge in Arizona: his spectacular gains among Hispanic voters - and particularly Hispanic men - over 2016 and 2020 (Montanaro et al 2024, Murray and Falayi 2024). Hitherto the immigration issue in Arizona had largely cut in favor of the Democrats in Arizona, but the perception that the Biden's administration's border policies had failed combined with the high inflation of the Biden years to provide Republicans with a somewhat unanticipated path to victory in the Grand Canyon state (Fisher 2024).

The Trump surge among Hispanic voters was not replicated in Arizona's other signature statewide race in 2024. Kyrsten Sinema's moderate voting record in the Senate alienated her from the Democratic activist base back in Arizona, and when it became apparent that she was unlikely to win the 2024 Democratic Senate primary against Representative Rueben Gallego, a more progressive Phoenix Democrat, Sinema switched her party affiliation in the Senate to Independent (while still caucusing with the Democrats) and declined to run for reelection (Hansen 2024a). Gallego then ran as the Democratic Senate nominee against the failed 2022



Republican gubernatorial nominee, Kari Lake. If Lake had hoped that Trump's appeal in Arizona would pull his MAGA protégé into the Senate, she was to be bitterly disappointed. Despite his progressive reputation, Gallego won 50-48% to become Arizona's first Hispanic US senator. Lake underperformed Trump in Arizona by 175,000 votes. As in her run for governor she lost Maricopa County, this time by almost five points. Polling revealed that Gallego ran far more strongly than Kamela Harris among Hispanics, and particularly Hispanic men (Kapur and Thorpe 2024, Hansen 2024b). On the same ballot Arizona voters also belied their conservative reputation by passing a state constitutional amendment establishing a right to abortion up to the point of fetal viability with over 60% of the statewide vote.

The 2024 election stopped the rot as far as the Republicans were concerned at the presidential level in Arizona and indicated that with the right campaign themes and candidate the Republicans could make up for their losses among upscale, highly educated, suburban voters by winning over working class Hispanics – particularly Hispanic men. Their fourth successive defeat in US Senate elections in Arizona, however, indicated their continuing struggle to prevail with candidates who lacked Donald Trump's specific appeal. Despite Donald Trump's decisive presidential victory, the strength of Democrats further down the ballot means that Arizona remains very much in its new-found purple, swing-state status as opposed to the Republican monolith of the Goldwater-Reagan-Bush era. The easy nomination and general election failure of Kari Lake demonstrated a continuing disconnect between the Republican base of MAGA voters and the Arizona general electorate (Hansen 2024b). Trump's ability to win a significant share of the Hispanic vote did indicate a way forward for the Arizona GOP, however.

## Summary

Following the election of Barry Goldwater and Dwight Eisenhower in 1952, Arizona became the forerunner of a particular style of Sunbelt conservative politics that came to dominate the Republican party and the nation as a whole. Sunbelt conservative Republicanism was based on a politics of growth – both demographic and economic – untrammelled by state or federal government interference, combined with a fierce anticommunism and hawkish posture abroad, and resistance to the liberal “counterculture” of the 1960s and 1970s. It was sustained by waves of migration into the state, the strong presence of the US military installations and defense industries, and a booming economy – particularly in Phoenix and its adjacent suburbs in Maricopa County.

As a result after Goldwater and Eisenhower’s 1952 victories, the Republican party came to dominate Arizona politics based on its dominance in Maricopa. The GOP carried Arizona without interruption between 1952 and 1996 and only lost that year because of Ross Perot. The Republicans also generally won US Senate and governors races in the state during this period and enjoyed comfortable margins in the state legislature. Arizona conservatives such as Goldwater, John Rhodes and John McCain rose to prominent positions of leadership in the national Republican party.

After the Reagan era (1980-1992) however, the Republican position in Arizona eroded from one of complete supremacy to a habitual advantage for several reasons. The steady growth in the state’s Hispanic population undoubtedly helped the Democratic party recover ground. Ross Perot’s candidacies in the 1990s split the Republican vote and even allowed Bill

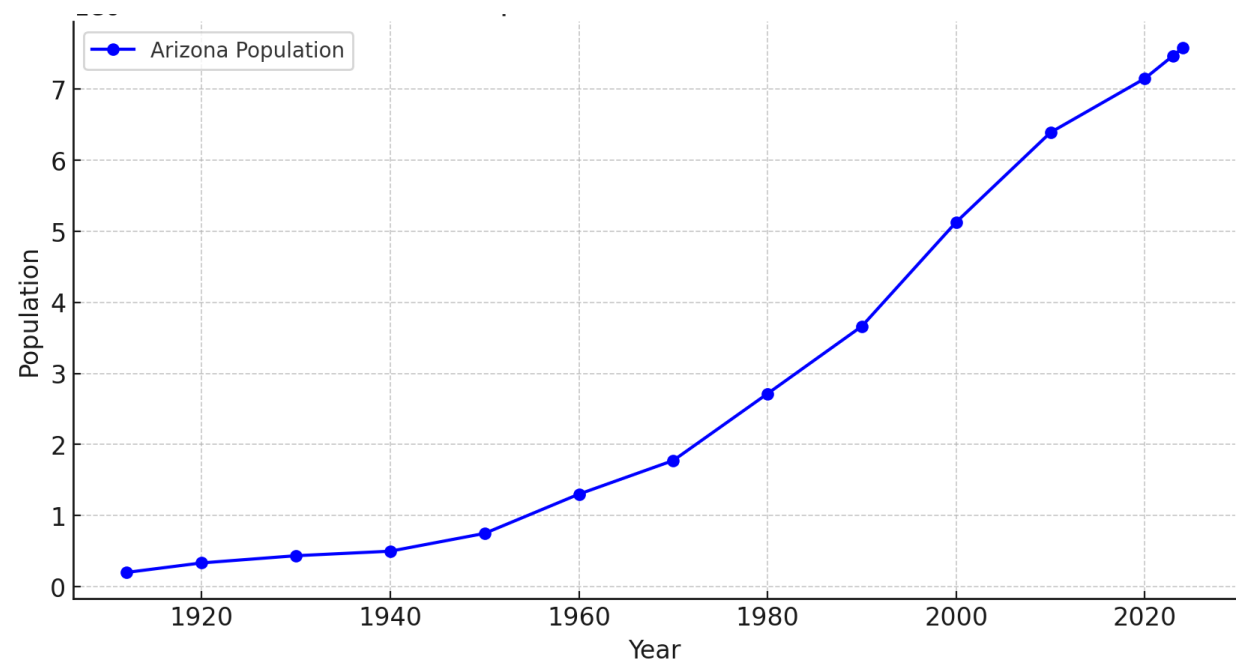
Clinton to carry the state in 1996. The end of the Cold War and the Soviet Union in the early 1990s neutralized the anticommunism issue. The Republican Arizona coalition still held together sufficiently, however, to win comfortable if not overwhelming victories in presidential elections and most state races in the 2000s. It took the advent of Donald Trump and Trump-aligned candidates in 2016 and after to move Arizona clearly from Red to Purple status at almost all electoral levels. Trump's populist appeal focused very much on immigration and trade issues and "endless wars," as opposed to the traditional Republican Sunbelt mainstays of free markets, individualism, and hawkish defense policy as epitomized by Arizona's leading Republican of the post-Goldwater era Senator John McCain. As the result Trump won only narrowly in the 2016 presidential election and lost even more narrowly in 2020, a slew of MAGA statewide Republicans lost in statewide races including the governorship in 2022, the GOP endured four consecutive defeats in US Senate elections between 2018 and 2024, and the Republican margins in the state legislature almost evaporated. The fundamental reason for the GOP slide in Arizona was the educated, wealthy, upper-middle classes' desertion of the party in the hitherto solidly Republican Maricopa suburbs, plus Democratic mobilization of Hispanic voters, and Mormon voters' increasingly alienation from the Trump GOP (Packer 2004).

Trump's more comfortable victory in 2024 indicated a viable alternative Republican winning coalition in Arizona with a much greater component of working-class Hispanic voters compensating for Republican losses at the upper end of the income scale. Yet this coalition appeared only at the presidential level in 2024, and it remains unclear if any other Republican but Trump with his unique populist style could consolidate it. The immigration issue also contributed greatly to Trump's gains in 2024, and it is unclear if this issue can sustain its

electoral power should migration numbers into Arizona and the US as whole drop drastically in the coming years. What is clear is that Arizona is no longer a state that can be automatically assigned to the Republican column at any electoral level.

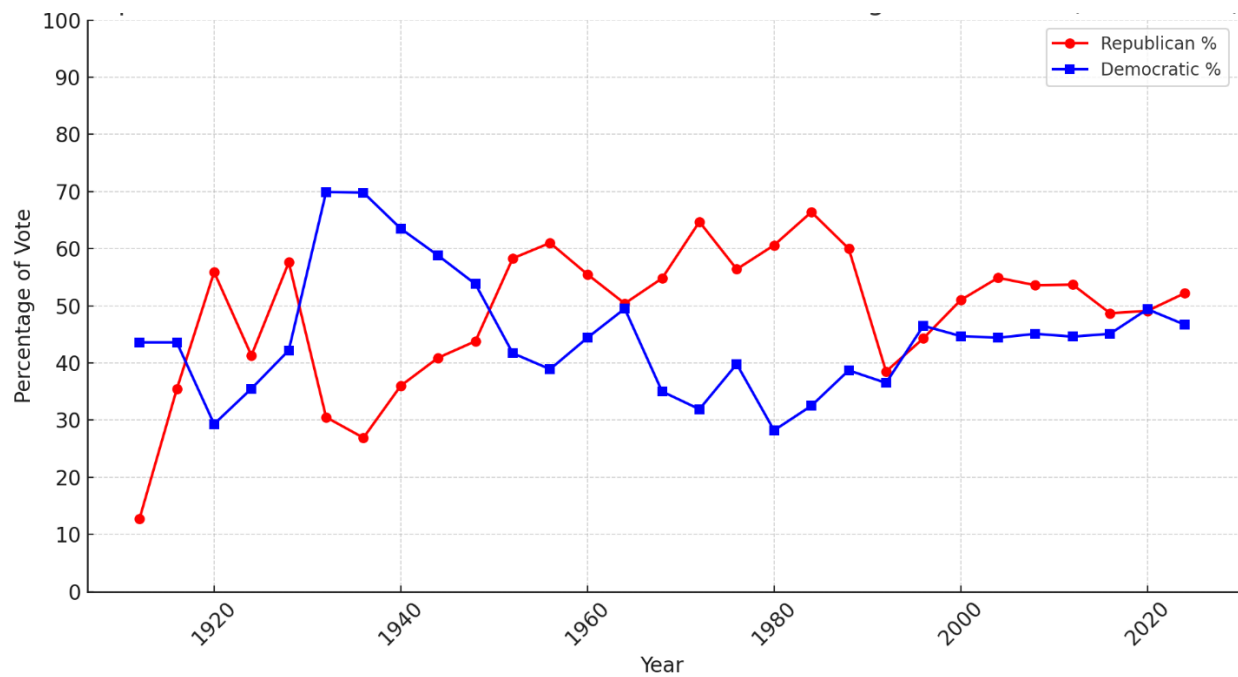
## Appendix

Figure 1: Arizona Population Growth, 1912 to 2024



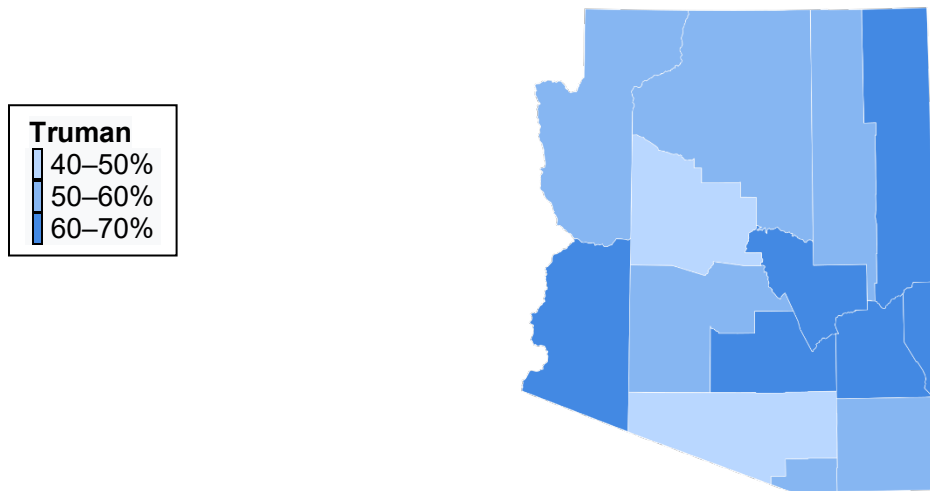
Source: Graph by Chat GPT. Data from U.S. Census Bureau, Arizona Office of Economic Opportunity, MacroTrends

**Figure 2: Republican and Democratic presidential election percentages in Arizona 1912-2024**



Source: Graph by Chat GPT. Data: *Wikipedia*: United States presidential elections in Arizona  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States\\_presidential\\_elections\\_in\\_Arizona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_elections_in_Arizona))

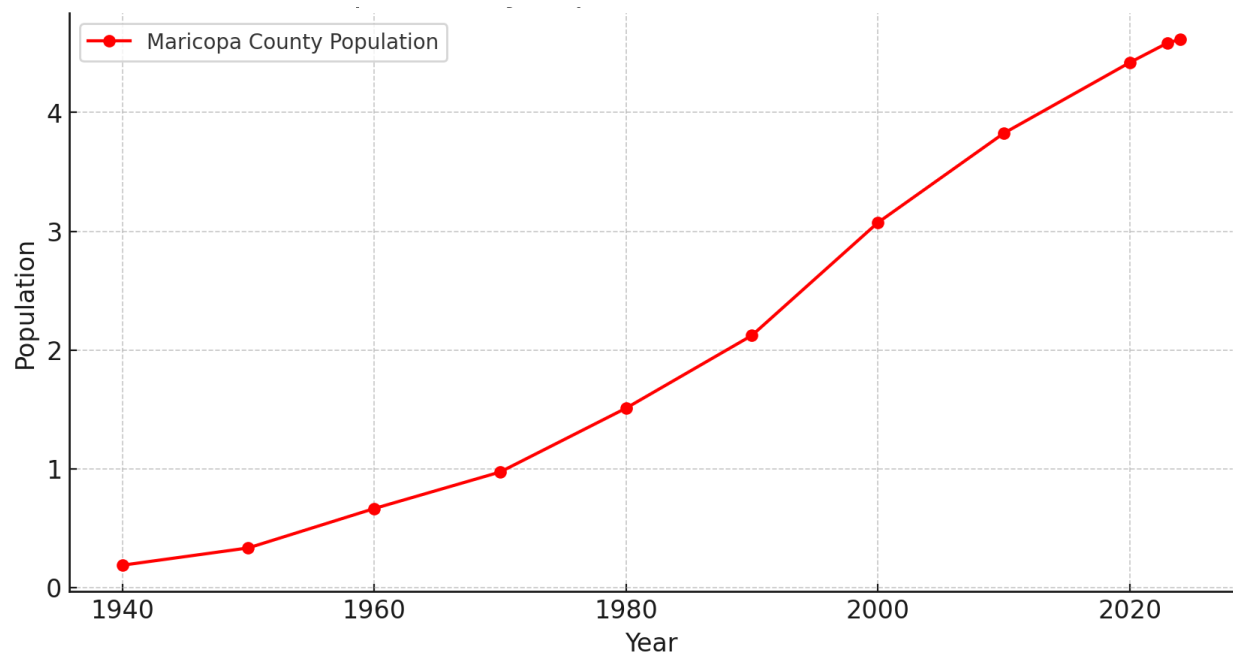
**Figure 3: 1948 Presidential Election in Arizona by County**



Source: *Wikipedia: The 1948 United States presidential election in Arizona*  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1948\\_United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election\\_in\\_Arizona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1948_United_States_presidential_election_in_Arizona))

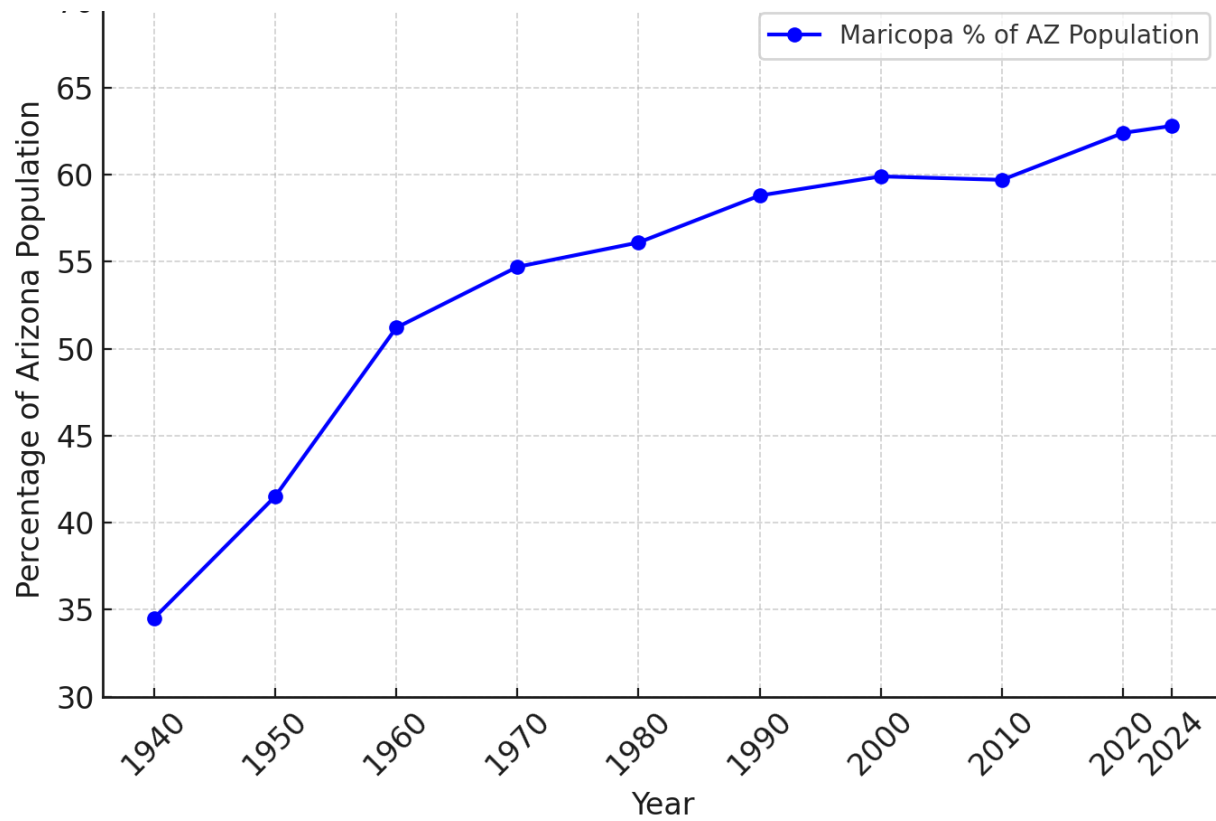


**Figure 4: Population Growth in Maricopa County, AZ: 1940-2024**



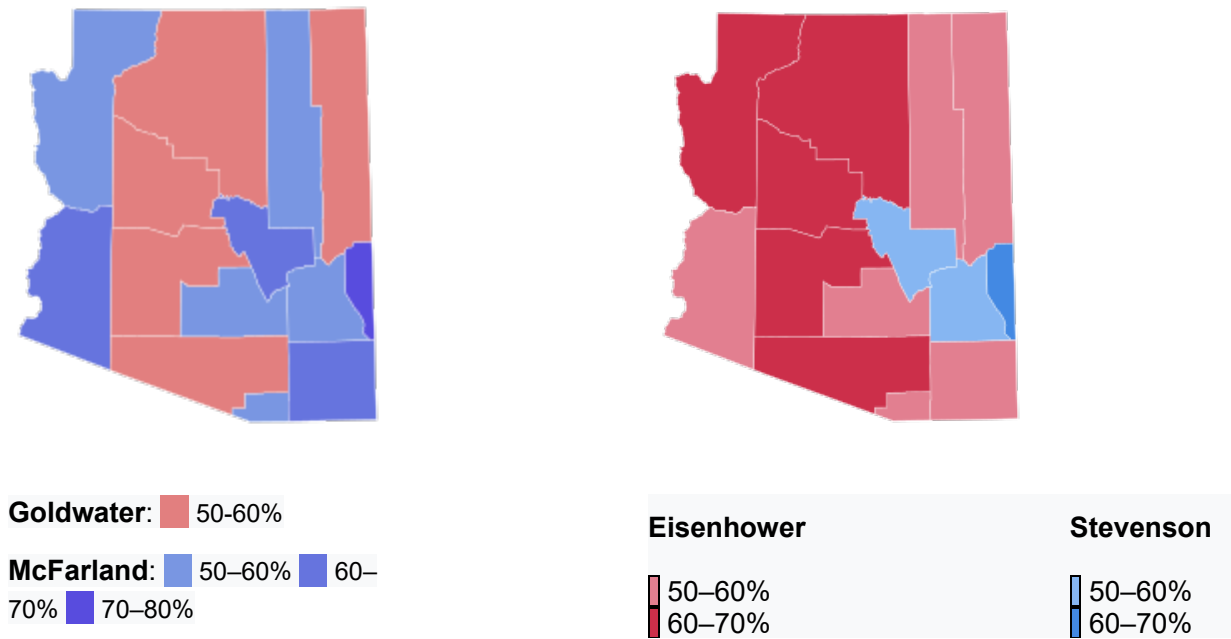
Source: Graph by Chat GBT. Data from *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maricopa\\_County,\\_Arizona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maricopa_County,_Arizona)

**Figure 5: Maricopa County's Share of Arizona's population: 1940-2024**



Source: Graph by Chat GBT. Data from *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maricopa\\_County\\_Arizona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maricopa_County_Arizona)

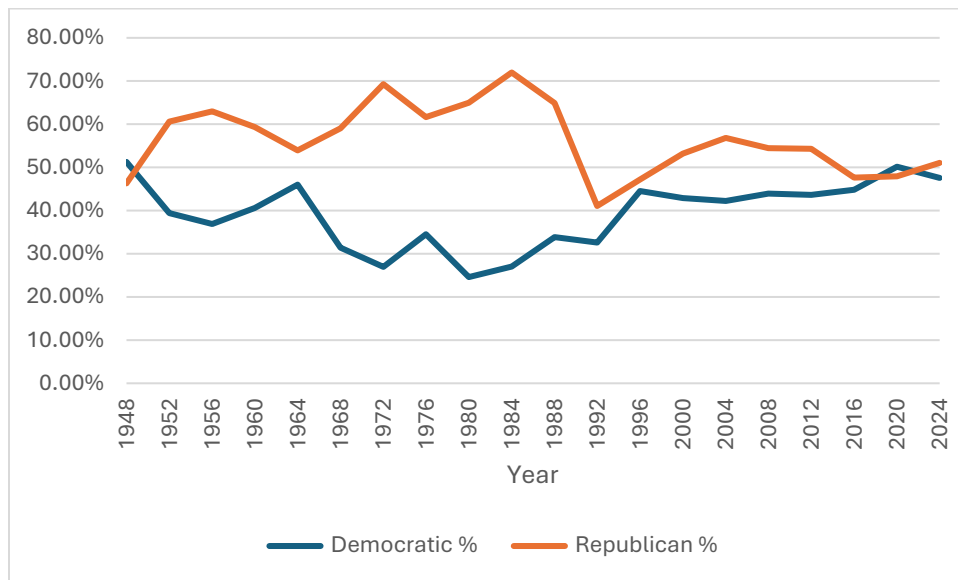
**Figure 6: 1952 Presidential and Senatorial Election Results in Arizona by County**



Source:

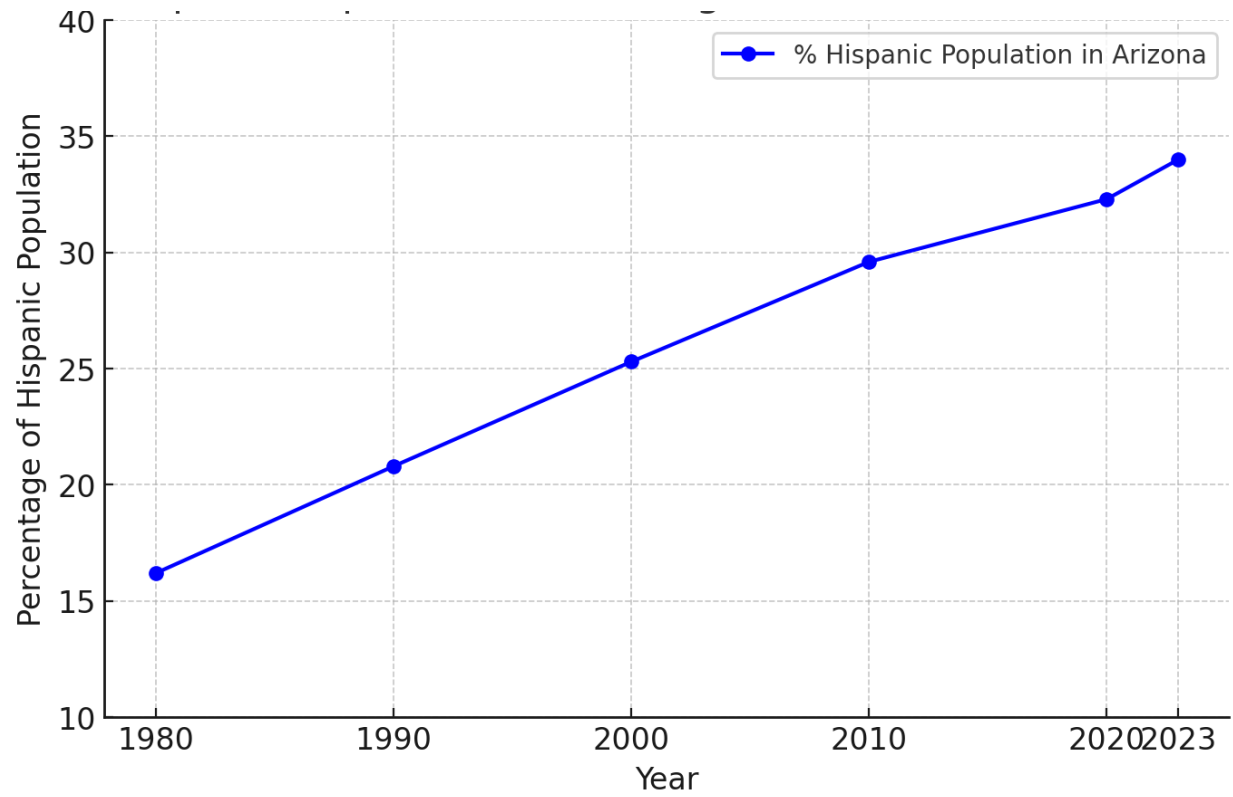
Source: Wikipedia: *The 1952 United States Senate Election in Arizona* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1952\\_United\\_States\\_Senate\\_election\\_in\\_Arizona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1952_United_States_Senate_election_in_Arizona)) and *The 1952 United States Presidential Election in Arizona* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1952\\_United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election\\_in\\_Arizona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1952_United_States_presidential_election_in_Arizona))

**Figure 7: Presidential Election Percentages in Maricopa County, AZ**



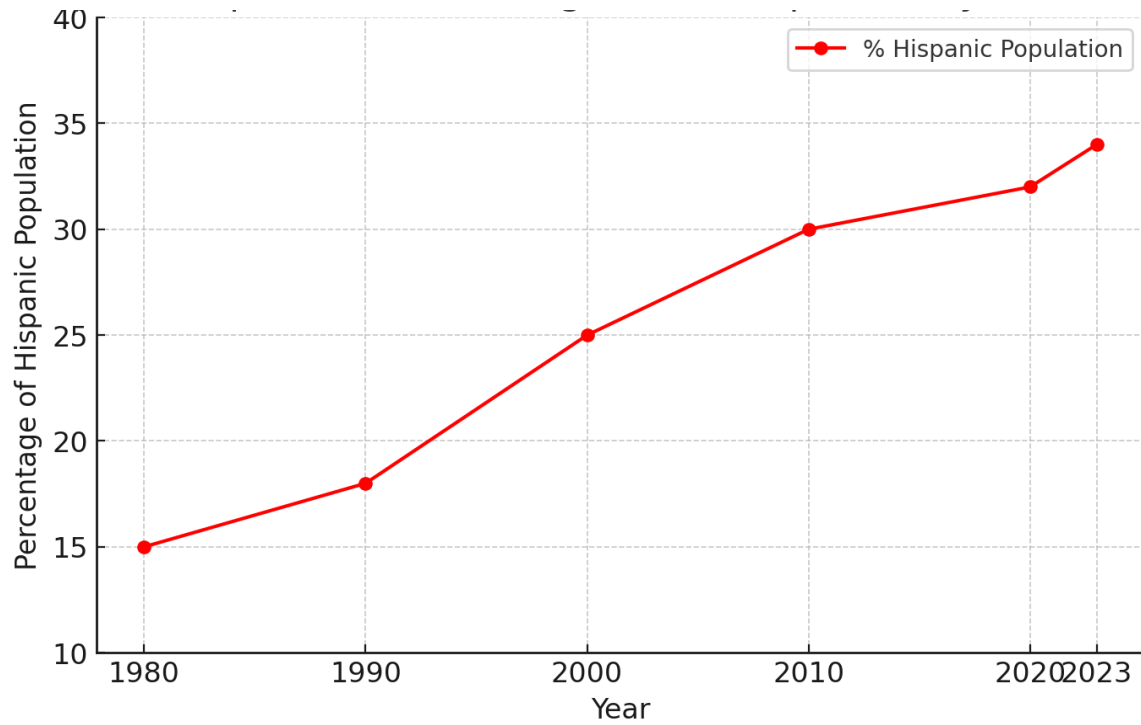
Source: *Wikipedia: Maricopa County, Arizona* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maricopa\\_County,\\_Arizona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maricopa_County,_Arizona))

**Figure 8: Hispanic Population Growth in Arizona**



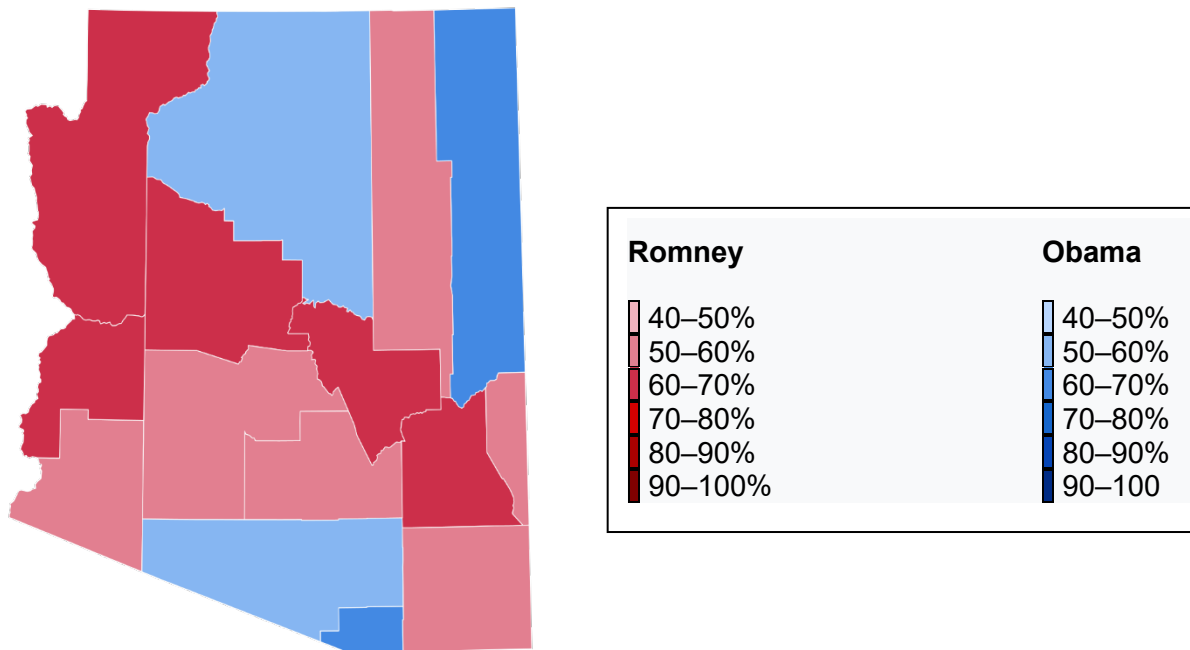
Source: Graph by Chat GBT. Data from **U.S. Census Bureau**: *Decennial Census reports* (1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, 2020), and **American Community Survey (ACS)** – Annual estimates for recent years, including 2023 projections.

**Figure 9: Hispanic Population Growth in Maricopa County**



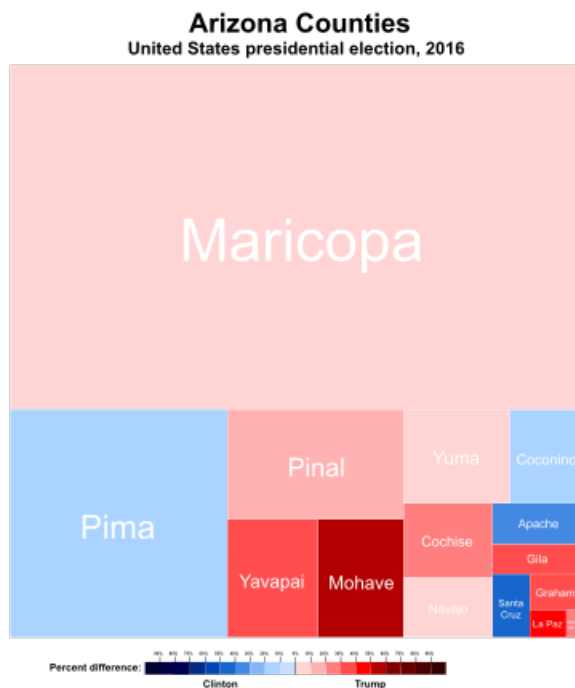
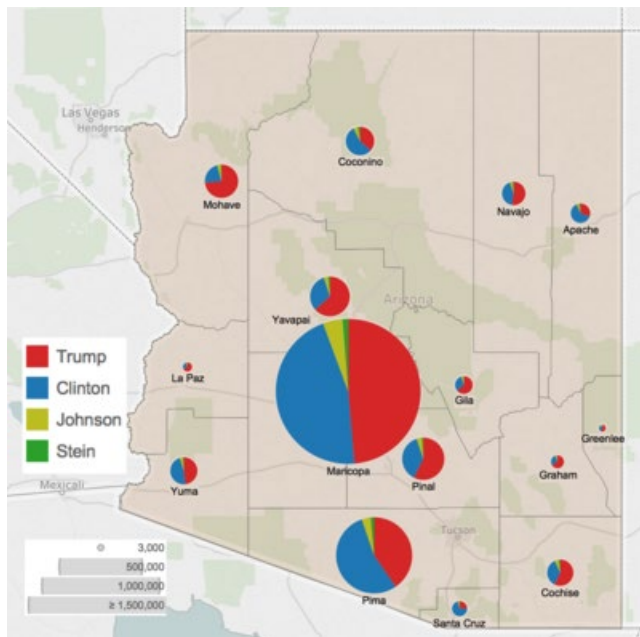
Source: Graph by Chat GBT. Data from **U.S. Census Bureau**: *Decennial Census reports* (1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, 2020), and **American Community Survey (ACS)** – Annual estimates for recent years, including 2023 projections.

**Figure 10: 2012 Presidential Election in Arizona by County**



Source: *2012 US Presidential Election in Arizona* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012\\_United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election\\_in\\_Arizona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_United_States_presidential_election_in_Arizona))

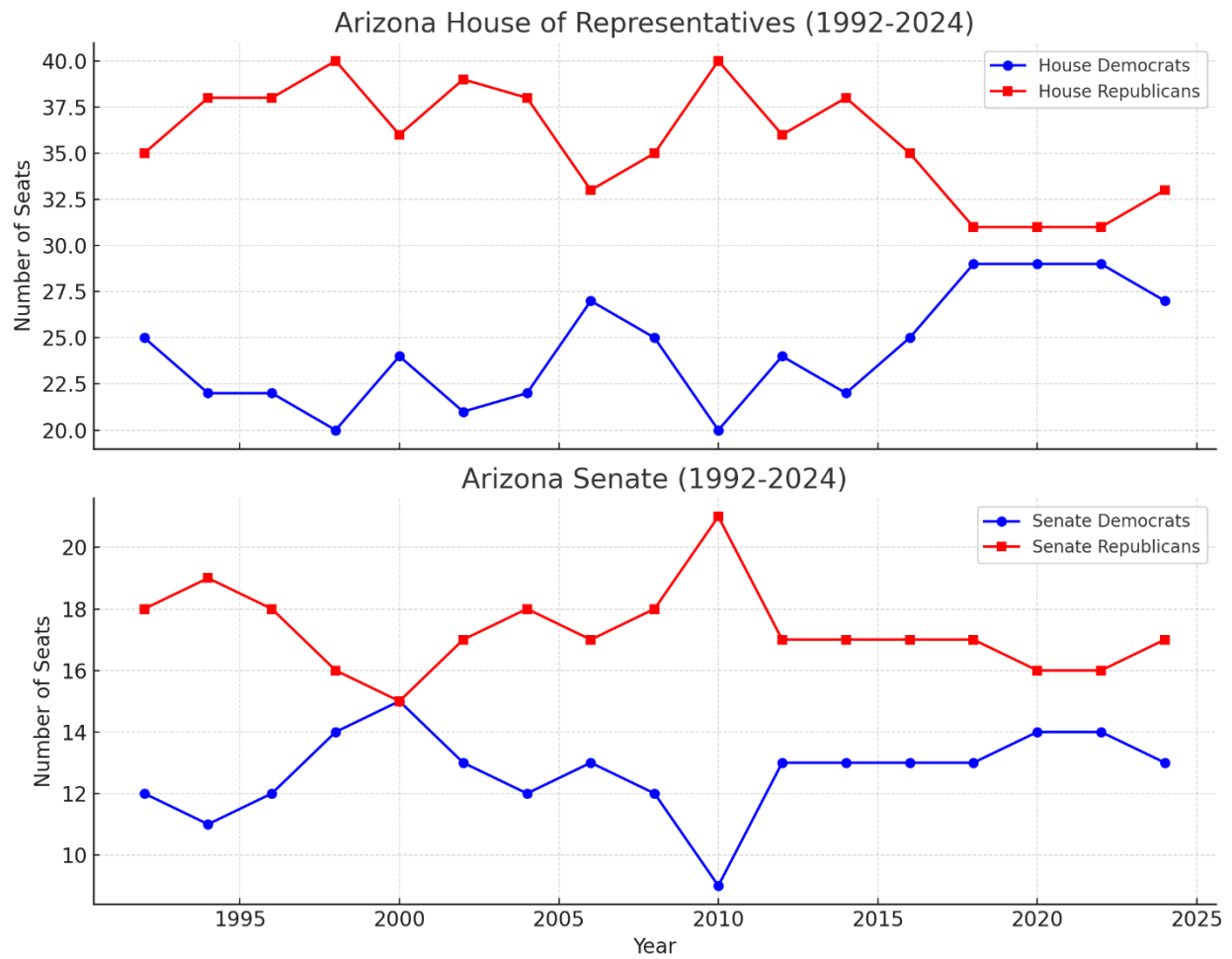
**Figure 11: 2016 Presidential Election in Arizona by County**



Source: Charts from 2016 *United States Presidential Election in Arizona*  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016\\_United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election\\_in\\_Arizona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_United_States_presidential_election_in_Arizona))

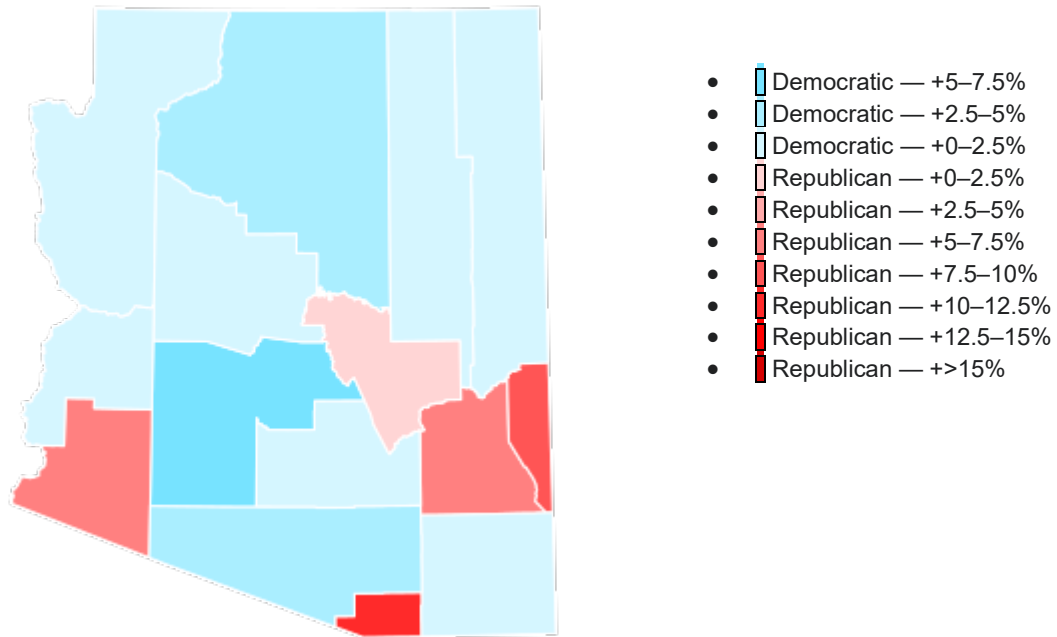


**Figure 12: Party Margins in the Arizona Legislature, 1992-2024**

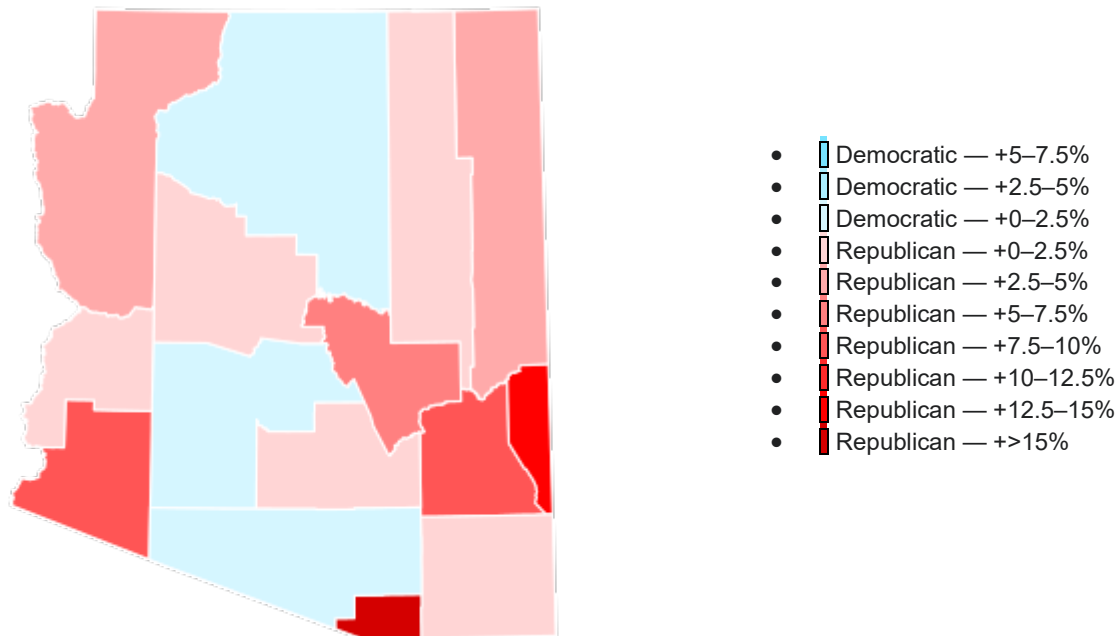


Source: Graph by Chat GPT ( <https://chatgpt.com/c/67e9c208-1cc4-8013-aac3-760cd14dd369>) from data in *Ballotpedia: Arizona State Legislature* ([https://ballotpedia.org/Arizona\\_State\\_Legislature?](https://ballotpedia.org/Arizona_State_Legislature?))

**Figure 13: 2016 to 2020 Swing in the Presidential Vote (by County)**

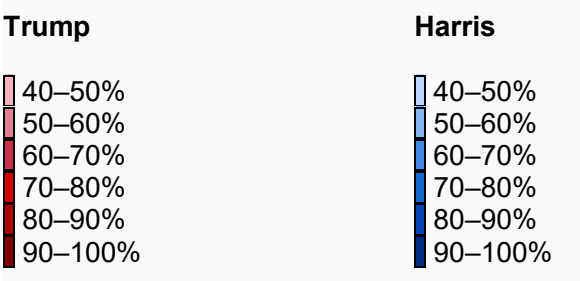
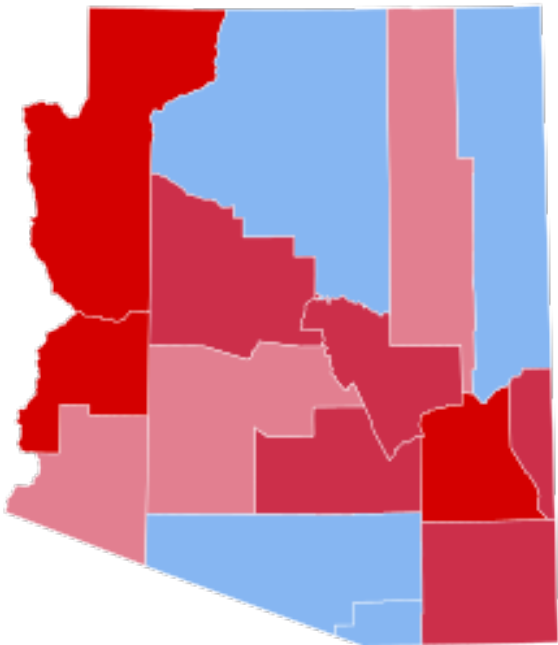


**Trend Relative to the State by County**



Source: Wikipedia: 2020 United State Presidential Election in Arizona  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020\\_United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election\\_in\\_Arizona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_United_States_presidential_election_in_Arizona)

Figure 14: 2024 Presidential Election Result in Arizona by County



Source: *Wikipedia: 2024 United States Presidential Election in Arizona*  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024\\_United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election\\_in\\_Arizona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_United_States_presidential_election_in_Arizona))

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