

The Density Divide: Urbanization, Polarization, and Populist Backlash

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Executive Summary

- ▶ Urbanization sorts populations on attributes—ethnicity, personality, and education—that make individuals more or less responsive to the incentives to move toward cities.
- ▶ Self-selected migration has segregated the national population and concentrated economic production into megacities, driving a polarizing wedge between dense diverse populations and sparse white populations—the “density divide.”
- ▶ The filtering/sorting dynamic of urbanization has produced a lower-density, mainly white population that is increasingly uniform in socially conservative personality, aversion to diversity, relative disinclination to migrate and seek higher education, and Republican Party loyalty.
- ▶ Related urban-rural economic divergence has put many lower-density areas in dire straits, activating a zero-sum, ethnocentric mindset receptive to scapegoating populist rhetoric about the threat of “un-American” immigrants, minorities, and liberal elites who dwell in relatively prosperous multicultural cities.
- ▶ The low-density bias of our electoral system enabled Trump to win with majority support in areas that produce just 1/3 of GDP and contain less than 1/2 the population.

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About the Author

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Introduction

The great, gradual migration of the human population from the countryside to the city has transformed the human world, but we've barely begun to reckon with its political implications. "What will be remembered about the twenty-first century, more than anything else," writes Doug Saunders in his book *Arrival City*, "is the great, and final, shift of human populations out of rural, agricultural life and into cities."¹

Suppose that this great shift has, over generations, sorted us on the traits—ethnicity, education level, personal temperament—that draw us toward cities or keep us away? What would the cultural and spatial segregation produced by ongoing, selective urbanization mean for the cohesion of our society and the health of the American republic?

Declining public faith in democracy and the rising global tide of populist nationalism have kindled a widespread and mounting sense of dread that the liberal order is unraveling. Here in the United States, there is a roiling debate about the forces that allowed a dangerously corrupt and compromised populist demagogue to capture the Republican Party and then the White House. What explains the presidency of Donald Trump? Economic anxiety? A loss of faith in elites? Aggravation over "political correctness"? Backlash to immigration, demographic change, and evolving national identity?

Summary of the Argument

In this paper, I explore a neglected hypothesis for the crisis facing liberal democracy, one centered on the economic, political, and cultural implications of *urbanization*—the most momentously transformative trend in the organization of human social life over the past two centuries. Urbanization, I argue, has sorted and segregated national populations and concentrated economic production in megacities, driving us further apart—culturally, economically, and politically—along the lines of ethnicity, education, and population density. I call this rift "the density divide." Understanding the forces behind the growth of this fissure is critical to understanding the rise of populism around the world, and to answering the "Why Trump?" question here in the United States, where the maladaptation of our political institutions

¹ Doug Saunders, *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History Is Reshaping Our World* (Windmill, 2011).

to the polarizing pressures of the density divide has bred intensifying mutual contempt and has brought us to the brink of a destabilizing crisis of democratic legitimacy.

The basic story is that urbanization is a mechanism that sorts the population on attributes that make individuals more or less responsive to the incentives to urbanize. Ethnicity, education, and personality stand out in importance in this regard. The upshot of this process of selection is that, over time, the nonurbanized population has grown more homogeneously white and conservative as the population at large has filtered toward big cities.

Meanwhile, changes in the technical structure of the economy have increased the productivity and wage bonuses to higher education and the geographic concentration of talent. This has amplified incentives to get more schooling and move to thriving big cities, concentrating human capital and economic opportunity and output in dense metro areas.² Smaller towns, rural areas, and cities with an outdated mix of industries have been left with economic stagnation or decline.³

The increase in returns to human capital and density has amplified the polarizing nature of selective urbanization. It has intensified the self-selection of temperamentally liberal individuals into higher education and big cities while leaving behind a lower-density population that is relatively uniform in white ethnicity, conservative disposition, and lower economic productivity. That spatial sorting, by itself, should be expected to widen the values gap between city and country people. But we should expect urban-rural economic divergence to intensify this polarizing effect. Economic growth reliably generates liberalizing cultural change, shifting people toward more progressive, “self-expression” social values, whatever their native ideological temperaments.⁴ Conversely, stagnant or declining material prospects tend to generate a rising sense of anxiety and threat, leading people to adopt a zero-sum, “us or them” frame of mind.⁵ The concentration of economic growth in relatively big cities accordingly concentrates the liberalizing “treatment effect” of rising living standards on the already

² Enrico Moretti, *The New Geography of Jobs* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

³ Mark Muro and Jacob Whiton, “Geographic Gaps Are Widening While U.S. Economic Growth Increases,” Brookings Institution, January 23, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/01/22/uneven-growth/>; Moretti, *The New Geography of Jobs*.

⁴ Christian Welzel, *Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁵ Benjamin M. Friedman, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* (Knopf, 2005).

relatively liberal urban population, while rural stagnation is widening the already significant gap in cultural and moral values produced by the increasing spatial separation of urbanizers and rooted holdouts.

Diversity does not breed distrust, but spatial segregation does.⁶ Moreover, spatial segregation along ideological/values lines is itself radicalizing. A lack of exposure to intellectual diversity pushes people's views to extremes.⁷ The urban population is much more diverse in terms of both its ethnocultural and temperamental composition, which helps explain why the more homogenous nonurban population has shifted toward the right extreme faster.⁸

Taken together with polarizing media fragmentation and immigration-led demographic change, this is a formula for populist, ethno-nationalist reaction in lower-density populations. Because urbanization is a worldwide phenomenon, we should not be surprised to see a similar story playing out across the globe. Indeed, support for Brexit in the U.K., and for ethnonationalist, populist parties in France and Germany (*Front National* and *Alternative für Deutschland*, respectively), was notably higher among less diverse, less-educated, lower-density populations.⁹

The exact political consequences of polarizing spatial sorting depend in part on the structure of a country's democratic institutions. In the American system, which practically guarantees a two-party equilibrium and overrepresents low-density populations, polarization along the density divide can be a recipe for disaster. America's major parties have now split relatively cleanly along density and ethnicity lines. This division, combined with the density penalties in the American electoral system, explains how it was possible for a white-identity populist to get into the White House with a third of the economy and less than half of the vote.

⁶ Ryan Muldoon, "Diversity Isn't What Divides Us. Division Is What Divides Us," Knight Commission on Trust, Media, and Democracy (Knight Foundation, July 5, 2018).

⁷ Cass R. Sunstein, "The Law of Group Polarization," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2002): 175–95.

⁸ Matt Grossmann and David A. Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁹ Joe Cortright, "Cities and Brexit," City Observatory, June 27, 2016, <http://cityobservatory.org/cities-and-brexit/>; Gregor Aisch et al., "How France Voted," *The New York Times*, May 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/05/07/world/europe/france-election-results-maps.html>; Franz, Christian, Marcel Fratzscher, and Alexander S Kritikos. "German Right-Wing Party AfD Finds More Support in Rural Areas with Aging Populations," February 2017, https://www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw_01.c.578785.de/dwr-18-07-1.pdf.

I. The Political Economy of the Density Divide

Imagine a tabletop evenly scattered with a mix of iron, nickel, steel, and aluminum ball bearings. Now, suppose we were to place an electromagnet at the center of the table. If we begin at a low level of power, the magnet will draw the nearest and most magnetic metals toward it. As we progressively turn up the attractive magnetic force, more and more of the iron, nickel, and steel will migrate toward the center of the table and create a growing, densely packed, multi-metallic cluster around the magnet. Aluminum, however, is nonmagnetic. The aluminum bearings may get jostled by other migrating metals, and possibly even nudged a fair distance toward the increasingly magnetic cluster, carried along by the general drift of migration. But they will otherwise mostly stay put, spread out relatively evenly over the surface of the table.

It's a simple analogy, but it helps us envision the process by which urbanization—operating over a vast space for centuries—has split the American electorate along the lines of population density. The depopulation of the countryside reflects the fact that cities are magnets for people seeking opportunity, and their gradually increasing attractive force has slowly separated our population into two factions: a diverse, densely concentrated, “magnetic” faction and a homogenous, sparsely distributed, “nonmagnetic” faction.

The logic of America's electoral institutions—our first-past-the-post, winner-take-all electoral system—has always sorted the bulk of American voters into one of two major parties.¹⁰ What's new is that the sorting dynamic of urbanization now accounts for partisan sorting, too. Democrats have become the party of the multicultural city, Republicans the party of the monocultural exurbs and country—the party of relatively urbanization-resistant white people.¹¹

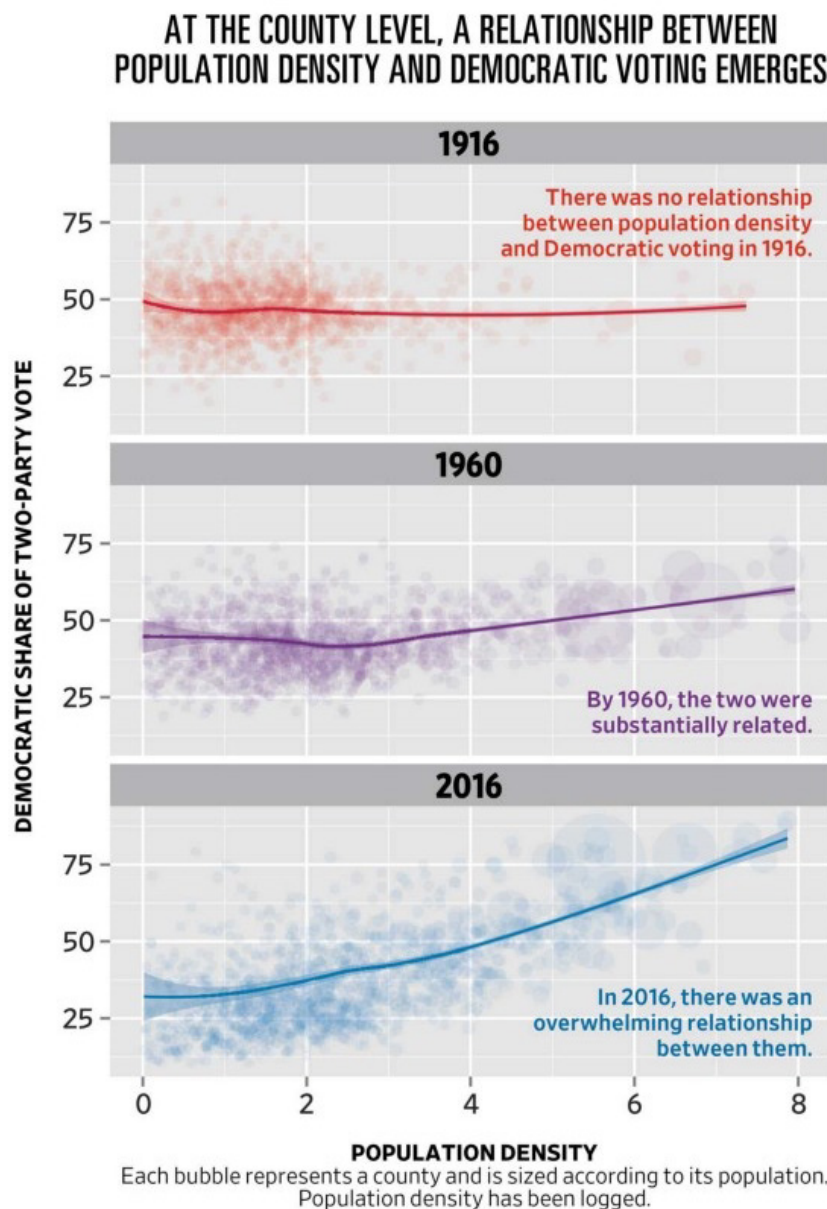
¹⁰ How first-past-the-post, winner-take-all election rules tend to result in a stable two-party equilibrium is explained by “Duverger's Law,” named after the French sociologist Maurice Duverger. See William H. Riker, “The Two-Party System and Duverger's Law: An Essay on the History of Political Science,” *The American Political Science Review* 76, no. 4 (1982): 753–66.

¹¹ Jonathan Rodden, “The Urban-Rural Divide,” *Stanford Magazine*, May 2018, <https://stanfordmag.org/contents/the-urban-rural-divide>; Jonathan Rodden, “‘Red’ America Is an Illusion. Postindustrial Towns Go for Democrats,” *The Washington Post*, February 14, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/14/red-america-is-an-illusion-postindustrial-towns-go-for-democrats-heres-the-data/>; Will Wilkinson, “Why Do We Value Country Folk More Than City People?,” *The New York Times*, June 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/27/opinion/republicans-democrats-trump-urban-rural.html>.

This pattern didn't suddenly crop up. It has been long in the making, but the density divide has only recently sharpened to the point at which it could become a dominant factor electoral politics.

Population Density and Party Vote-Share

Figure 1: Country population density and Democratic vote-share in 1916, 1960, and 2016¹²



¹² Source: Jonathan Rodden, "The Urban-Rural Divide," Stanford Magazine, May 2018, <https://stanfordmag.org/contents/the-urban-rural-divide>

In the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump prevailed in 80 percent of America's counties (2584 of 3056), but they contain just 45 percent of the country's population. Hillary Clinton dominated Trump in dense metro regions of over a million people, where 56 percent of the population lives—which is how she managed to rack up a 2.9 million popular vote advantage while winning just 472 (one in five) counties. This is a significant shift toward regional polarization since 2000, when Al Gore's 659 counties netted him a narrower popular vote victory.¹³ Low-density counties are relatively ethnically homogenous. They contain more than half—56 percent—of the white population, but just 20 percent of the nation's foreign-born population. Similarly, fewer than one in five Asians and one in three Hispanics live in Trump counties.¹⁴ Immigrants and minorities congregate in big cities, attracted by the opportunities, services, and sense of community, inclusion, and safety-in-numbers they supply.

Figure 2: Number and share of GDP for Democratic- and Republican-majority counties in the 2000 and 2016 presidential elections¹⁵

Year	Candidate	# of Counties Won	Aggregate Share of GDP
2000	Al Gore	659	54%
	George W. Bush	2397	46%
2016	Hillary Clinton	472	64%
	Donald Trump	2584	36%

¹³ Mark Muro and Sifan Liu, "Another Clinton-Trump Divide: High-Output America vs Low-Output America," Brookings Institution, November 29, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2016/11/29/another-clinton-trump-divide-high-output-america-vs-low-output-america/>.

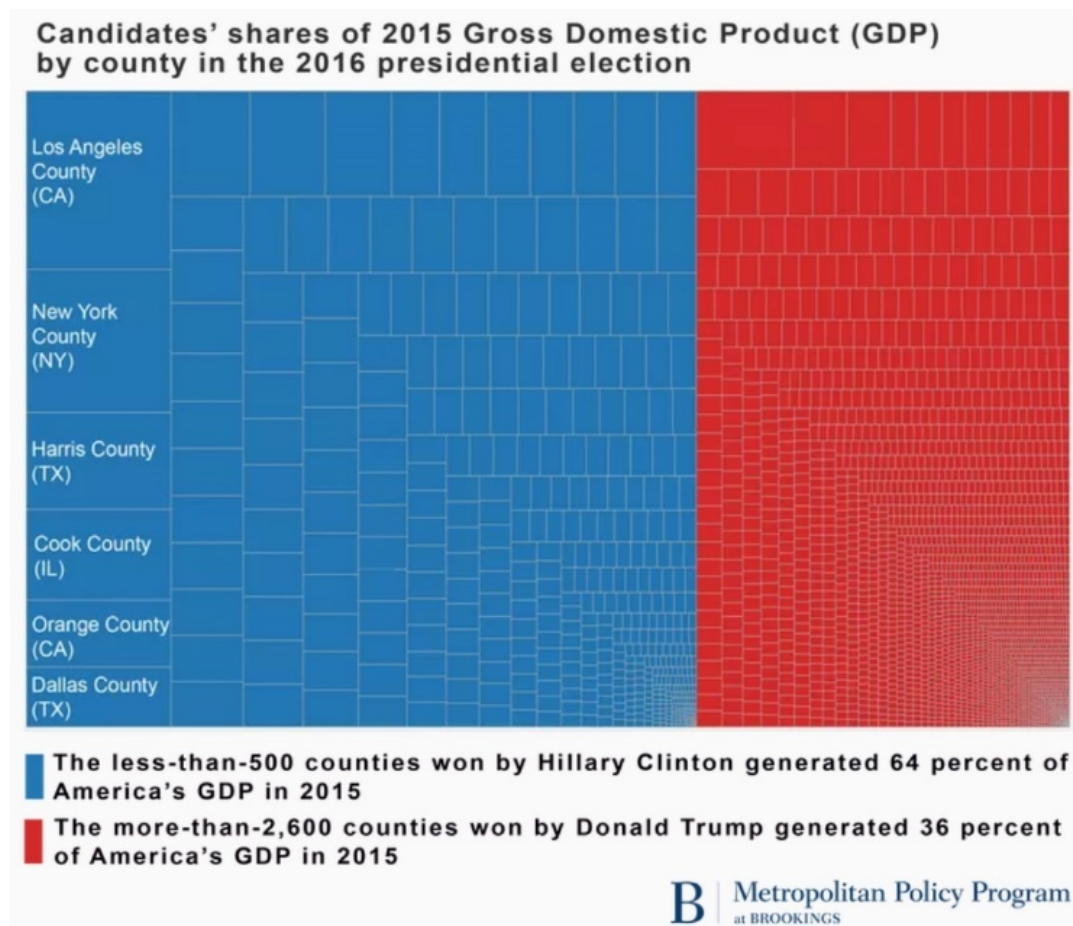
¹⁴ William H. Frey, "A Substantial Majority of Americans Live Outside Trump Counties, Census Shows," Brookings Institution, March 23, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2017/03/23/a-substantial-majority-of-americans-live-outside-trump-counties-census-shows/>.

¹⁵ Source: Analysis of Moody's Analytics estimates by Mark Muro and Sifan Lui, "Another Clinton-Trump Divide: High-Output America vs Low-Output America," Brookings Institution, November 29, 2016.

Economic Output and Party Vote Share

The economic dimension of the divide is equally stark. The 472 Clinton counties also accounted for 64 percent of GDP—nearly twice the combined economic output of the 2,548 counties that favored Trump. This represents a dramatic shift since 2000, when the 659 counties that went for Gore produced 54 percent of GDP, compared to 46 percent generated by the 2,397 Bush counties. Economic productivity has become increasingly correlated with both education and population density.

Figure 3: Counties won by Clinton and Trump in 2016 by size of economic output¹⁶

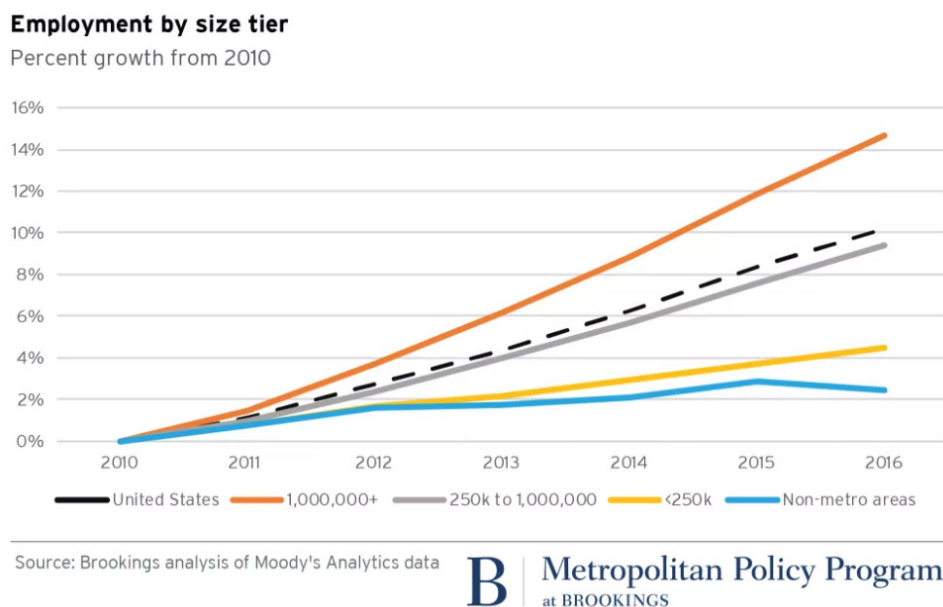


The transition to the information economy has widened the productivity gap between *workers* with more and less education and between *places* with more

¹⁶ Source: Analysis of Moody's Analytics estimates by Mark Muro and Sifan Lui, "Another Clinton-Trump Divide: High-Output America vs Low-Output America," Brookings Institution, November 29, 2016.

or less dense agglomerations of those workers. As smaller, less-educated cities and towns languish, their best-schooled daughters and sons decamp to the metropolis, further widening the big city/small town productivity and employment gap.¹⁷

Figure 4: Employment growth by city population size, 2010–2016¹⁸



There has been, in the words of Mark Muro and Jacob Whiton of the Brookings Institution, “a truly eye-popping divergence of big-, medium-, small-sized communities’ growth progress—one that’s getting worse.” They report:

[T]he 53 very largest metro areas (those with populations over one million residents) have accounted for fully 93.3 percent of the nation’s population growth since the crisis, but an incredible 96.4 percent of it since 2014 (though they account for just 56 percent of the overall population). Even more significantly, the biggest metros generated fully two-thirds of output growth on the economic front and 73 percent of employment gains between 2010 and 2016.¹⁹

¹⁷ Moretti, *The New Geography of Jobs*.

¹⁸ Source: Mark Muro and Jacob Whiton, “Geographic Gaps Are Widening While U.S. Economic Growth Increases,” Brookings Institution, Jan. 23, 2018.

¹⁹ Mark Muro and Jacob Whiton, “Geographic Gaps Are Widening While U.S. Economic Growth Increases,” Brookings Institution, Jan. 23, 2018, <https://brook.gs/2YTeXwz>

This concentration of growth and opportunity, they note, has recently intensified. Since 2014, million-plus metros produced a whopping 72 percent of American output growth and 74 percent of the country's employment gains.

Over generations, the escalating incentive to seek education and move to the city has filtered those most responsive to these inducements, and least wary of urban diversity, out of lower-density America. This has left the places they've fled poorer and less educated, and has left the people who remain in them almost uniformly white, averse to dynamic, multicultural cities, alarmed by the prospect of a majority-minority America, and receptive to pandering, demagogic explanations of their relative decline.

There Are No Republican Cities

This sorting process has progressed to the point that there is now *no such thing as a Republican city*. "As you go from the center of cities out through the suburbs and into rural areas, you traverse in a linear fashion from Democratic to Republican places," Stanford political scientist Jonathan Rodden has observed.²⁰ The electorate is typically equal parts Democrat and Republican at about 900 people per square mile, according to Mark Muro of Brookings.²¹ The exact number varies a bit from place to place; higher in more Republican and lower in more Democratic states. Overall, majorities tend to flip from blue to red roughly where commuter suburbs give way to "exurban" sprawl. That's where the political boundary of the density divide is drawn.

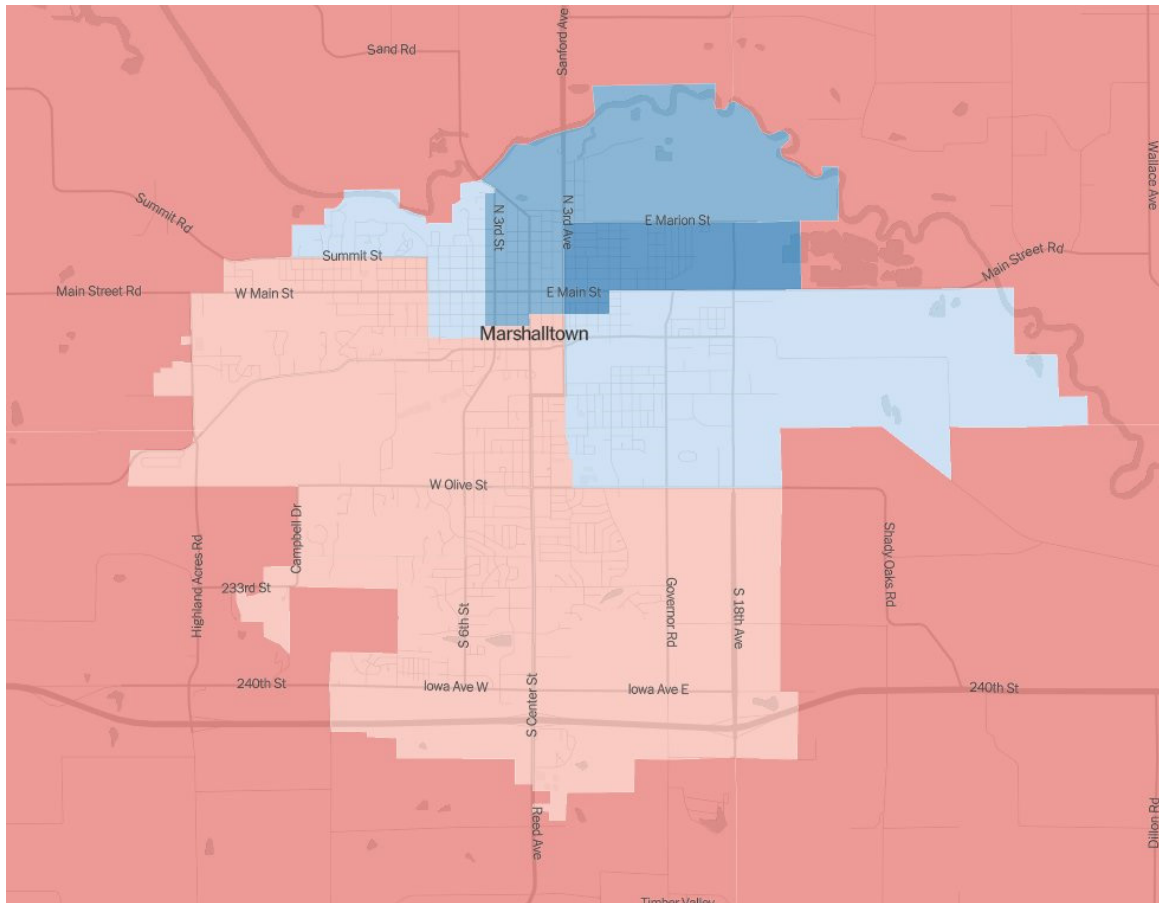
Higher population density predicts higher Democratic vote share even in small cities in deep red counties in deep red states. Rodden has shown heavy concentrations of Democratic voters in the relatively dense historic cores of most small and mid-sized cities, such as Scranton, Pennsylvania, and Terre Haute, Indiana, which wash out with distance from city hall. "There is a fascinating fractal-like relationship between population density—which is the upshot of early industrial activity—and Democratic voting," Rodden

²⁰ Quoted in Ian Chipman, "Political Polarization's Geographic Roots Run Deep," Stanford Graduate School of Business, May 2, 2017, <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/political-polarizations-geographic-roots-run-deep>.

²¹ Personal communication.

writes. “As one zooms in to lower and lower levels of geographic aggregation, the relationship only reappears in finer detail.”²²

Figure 5: Clinton and Trump vote share by precinct in Marshalltown, Iowa²³



This pattern holds even in Marshalltown, Iowa, my childhood hometown of 27,000 people. A dynamic map from the *New York Times* allows users to zoom into any region of the United States and see 2016 election results at the precinct level. Blue precincts signify a Clinton majority; red precincts signify a Trump majority; and darker colors signify a larger majority share of the vote. Hillary Clinton won majorities in the densest parts of Marshalltown, and earned a whopping 72 percent of the vote in the oldest, densest precinct—enough to eke out a majority in the seat of this rural Trump county in a rural

²² Jonathan Rodden, “This Map Will Change How You Think about American Voters—Especially Small-Town, Heartland White Voters,” *The Washington Post*, October 31, 2016, <https://wapo.st/2YIQ5T0>.

²³ Source: Matthew Bloch et al., “An Extremely Detailed Map of the 2016 Presidential Election,” *The New York Times*, July 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/upshot/election-2016-voting-precinct-maps.html>

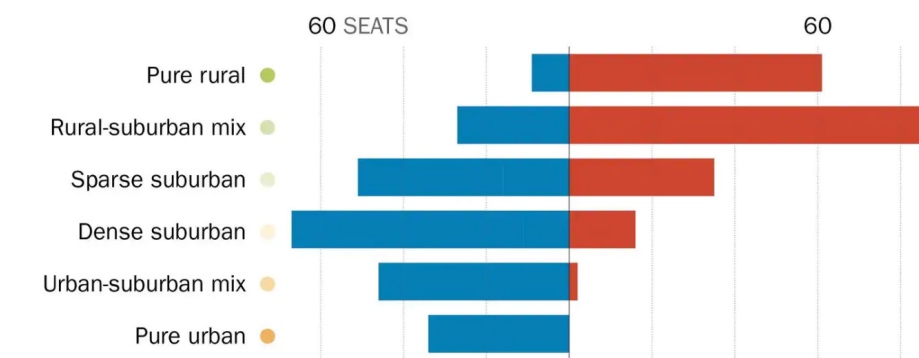
state the president took by a wide margin.²⁴ The point is that there are no “red states” or “blue states.” There aren’t even red or blue *counties*. What we see is compact blue urban density and sprawling red sparseness—even in small cities in rural states.

The density divide sharpened further in the 2018 midterm elections, which saw Democrats take the majority of the seats in the House of Representatives by capturing even more of the relatively high-density suburbs, leaving the GOP with an even lower-density constituency. CityLab’s Congressional Density Index breaks down each congressional district’s mix of neighborhoods along a continuum of population density running from “pure urban” to “urban-suburban mix” to “dense suburban” to “sparse suburban” to “rural-suburban mix” to “pure rural,” which includes the countryside, small towns, and some suburb-like areas.²⁵ In the 116th Congress, Republicans hold just 6 percent of “pure urban” districts, in which only 14 percent of the electorate voted for Trump, but they hold 82 percent of “rural-suburban mix districts” (56 percent Trump voters) and 84 percent of “pure rural districts” (63 percent Trump voters).

Figure 6: House seats in urban, rural, and mixed congressional districts after the 2018 midterms²⁶

Distribution of 2018 results by type of district

Analysis by The Post. Urban-rural data from CityLab. Results as of Nov. 12, 2018.



(Philip Bump/The Washington Post)

²⁴ Matthew Bloch et al., “An Extremely Detailed Map of the 2016 Presidential Election,” *The New York Times*, July 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/upshot/election-2016-voting-precinct-maps.html>.

²⁵ David Montgomery, “Suburban Voters Gave Democrats Their House Majority,” CityLab, November 7, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2YVUsdu>.

²⁶ Source: Philip Bump, “The Shifts that Handed Democrats the House,” *The Washington Post*, November 12, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/11/12/shifts-that-handed-democrats-house>.

The division of Republican and Democratic areas in terms of economic productivity also remained stark in the 2018 midterm elections. House districts won by Democrats accounted for 60.9 percent of 2016 GDP, while Republican districts accounted for just 37.6 percent. This disparity reflects a gap in education and output-per-worker. Slightly more than 35 percent of the population in Democratic districts had a college or graduate degree, compared to 28 percent in Republican districts, which corresponds to a nearly \$25,000 annual advantage in GDP per worker in Democrat-held House districts.²⁷ However, Republicans gained ground in the Senate, heightening the mismatch between regional economic output, fiscal contribution, and political representation. As Muro and Whiton write:

With new GOP gains in the chamber, 21 mostly rural, low-output [states]—ranging from Arkansas to Wyoming—now host two Republican senators and are poised to serve as an even more reactionary veto on the projects and priorities of the high-output America. These 21 states will easily be able to outvote the 19 states with two Democratic senators, even though the Republican 21-state caucus represents just 30.3 percent of the nation’s output.²⁸

II. Urbanization Drives the Density Divide

The manifestation of the density divide in American politics is mediated by the idiosyncratic electoral structure of our patched and frayed 18th century constitution. But that’s a local frame around a much larger global process. The exodus of the human population from the countryside to the city is a glacial force of transformation that has remade societies in every part of the globe. Because the United States is the world’s first modern liberal democracy—and has been its largest, most innovative economy for more than a century—the economic and political effects of urbanization may have gone further, and may be more clearly visible, here than elsewhere. But the effects are nevertheless visible everywhere.

The pace of urbanization picked up speed around the world with the mechanization of farming at the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Declining

²⁷ Mark Muro and Jacob Whiton, “America’s Two Economies Remain Far Apart,” Brookings Institution, November 16, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/11/16/americas-two-economies-remain-far-apart/>.

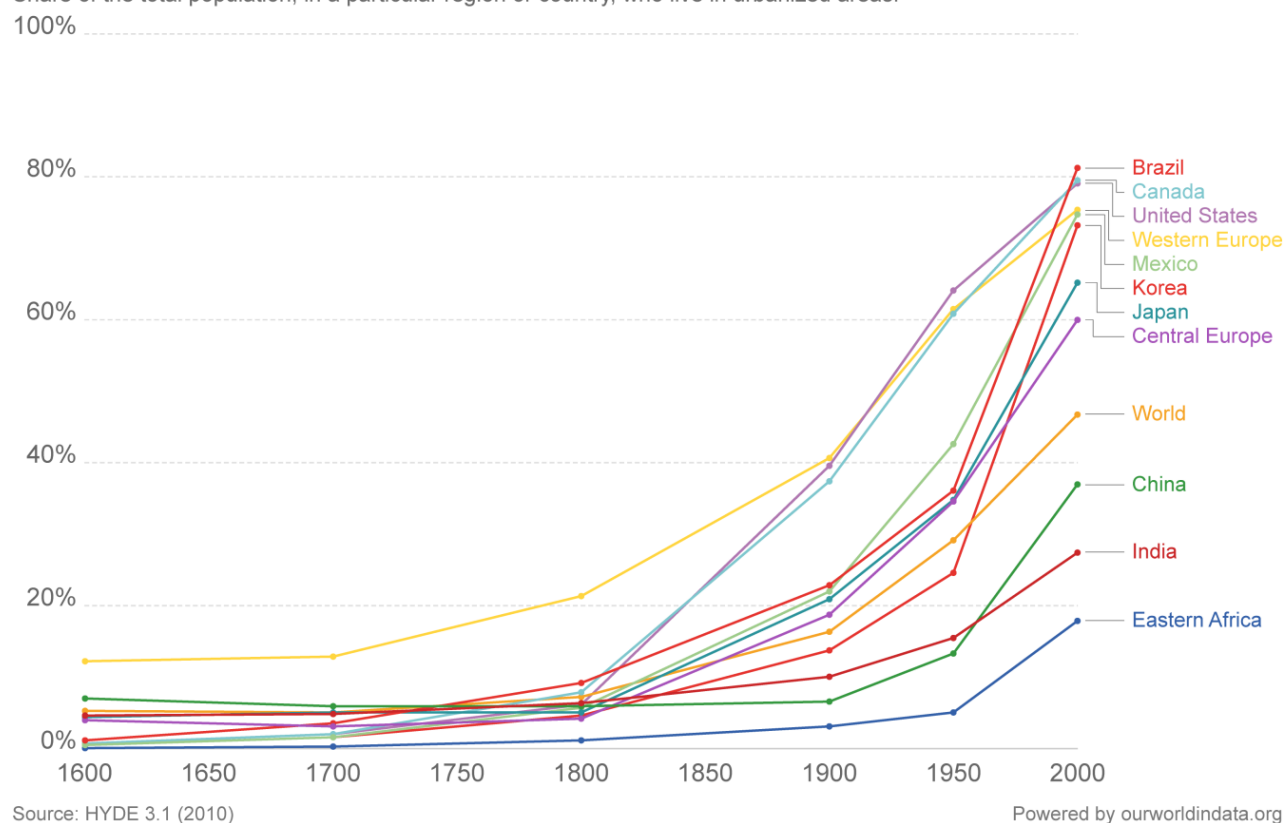
²⁸ Ibid.

demand for agricultural labor and the rise of factory work rapidly drew millions of workers from the farm to the city. Between 1800 and now (in industrialized countries for which we have data), the share of the workforce involved in agriculture decreased 80 percent or more.²⁹ The urban share of the population increased with the decline of agricultural employment. In 1800, around 11 percent of the population in these relatively developed countries lived in urban areas.³⁰ By 1914, that figure increased to 36 percent; by 2017, it had exceeded 80 percent.³¹

Figure 7: Urbanized share of selected world populations, 1600–2000³²

Share of the population living in urbanized areas

Share of the total population, in a particular region or country, who live in urbanized areas.



²⁹ Max Roser, "Employment in Agriculture," *Our World in Data* (2018), <https://ourworldindata.org/employment-in-agriculture>.

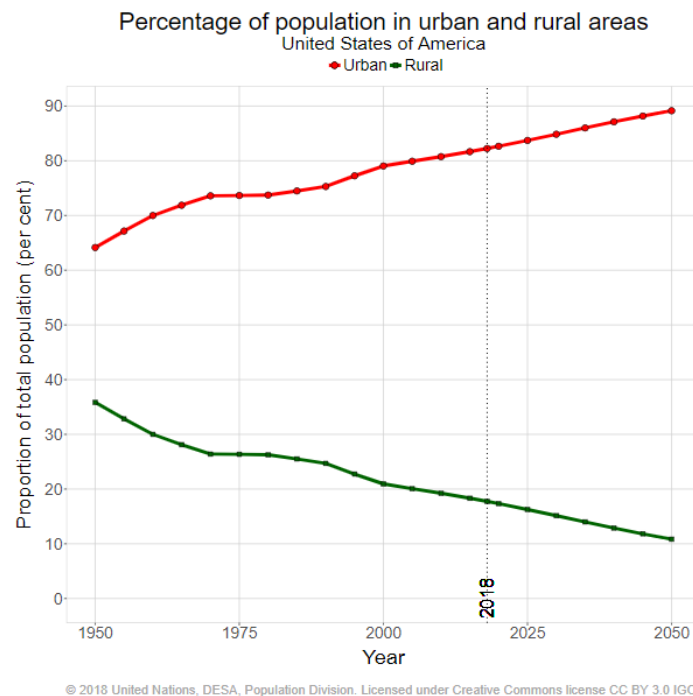
³⁰ Paul Bairoch and Gary Goertz, "Factors of Urbanisation in the Nineteenth Century Developed Countries: A Descriptive and Econometric Analysis," *Urban Studies* 23, no. 4 (August 1, 1986): 285–305.

³¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Urbanization Prospects, The 2014 Revision: Highlights* (2014), <https://bit.ly/2GMpqLk>.

³² Source: Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, "Urbanization," *Our World in Data*, September 2018, <https://ourworldindata.org/urbanization>.

The experience of the United States tracks these global trends. From 1850 to 2012, agricultural workers fell from 69 to 1.5 percent of the American labor force, with corresponding growth in the urbanized portion of the population.³³ When the first Census was conducted in 1790, the largest city in the United States, New York City, contained 33,000 people—barely bigger than Marshalltown, Iowa today. No American city exceeded 100,000 people until 1810.³⁴ By 1950, the number of MSAs (Metropolitan Statistical Areas) containing at least 100,000 people had grown to 150, and these accounted for 62 percent of the country’s population. By 2017, the number of metro areas with more than 100,000 people had increased to 352, and they contained 85 percent of the total population. A city of 100,000 is no longer considered especially “big.”³⁵

Figure 8: Urban and rural U.S. population as a percentage of total population: 1950 to 2050³⁶



³³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Percent of Employment in Agriculture in the United States,” FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, January 1, 1970, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/USAPEMANA>.

³⁴ Richard L. Forstall, *Population of States and Counties of the United States: 1790 to 1990: From the Twenty-One Decennial Censuses* (U.S. Census Bureau, 1996), <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/34927951.html>.

³⁵ “1950 Census of Population Preliminary Counts: Population of Standard Metropolitan Areas” (U.S. Census Bureau, November 5, 1950), <https://bit.ly/2YVvCXO>.

³⁶ Source: United Nations, World Urbanization Prospects, “Country Profiles: United States of America,” <https://population.un.org/wup/country-profiles/>

New York City was first to hit seven-figure population levels, in the 1870s. By 1950, there were 14 MSAs with over a million people, which collectively made up 37 percent of the total population. In 2017, there were 53 MSAs containing more than a million souls, and they collectively made up 56 percent of the American population. Currently, 82 percent of the population lives in an area the Census Bureau designates as urban.

When urbanization reaches these levels, it tends not to maintain such a torrid pace. Still, it's not about to stop. The United Nations population division projects that nearly 90 percent of the U.S. population will be urbanized by 2050—about a half decade after the population is projected to become “majority minority.”³⁷ The multicultural megacity is America's future.

Discussions of the so-called “urban-rural divide” can get tangled up in definitions of “urban” and “rural” and other geographic units. The official Census Bureau definition of “urban” can be counterintuitive. Small towns, cities, and settlements with populations over 2,500 but less than 50,000 count as “urban clusters” in Census terminology. Cities over 50,000 are classified as “urbanized areas.” Consequently, moving to one of these “urban” places from a farm, ranch, remote resort area, or tiny village counts as “urbanization.”

In common parlance, however, a town of a few thousand people surrounded by soybean fields is “rural,” not “urban,” and a small city of 50,000 isn't “big.” However, as we've noted, the “density divide” shows up even in relatively small towns in rural areas. Because the Census definition of “urban” picks up even small pockets of relatively high population density — because even a fair portion of Marshalltown, Iowa, is on the denser side of the density divide—it remains useful for our purposes.

Similarly, when speaking of “big cities,” matters are complicated by wild variety in the ways large urban areas are carved up into official jurisdictions. The City of Los Angeles, for example, covers a vast expanse of territory. Some of its most remote exurban reaches seem like they ought not to count as “Los Angeles,” exactly. And archetypical parts of central “Los Angeles,” like Beverly Hills, are carved out, politically independent municipalities. So when I

³⁷ Country Profiles: United States of America," *World Urbanization Prospects 2018*, (United Nations, 2018), <https://population.un.org/wup/country-profiles/>; Sandra L. Colby and Jennifer M. Ortman, “Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060,” *Current Population Reports* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), <https://bit.ly/1G8av78>.

speak of “big cities,” I’m normally speaking of continuous “metropolitan statistical areas” or “metros” with populations greater than 500,000, and especially the largest 53 metros areas—those with populations above one million—which now account for over 90 percent of population growth, and which tend to encompass multiple jurisdictions, including independent suburban municipalities.

According to the Census, moving 15 miles from State Center, Iowa, (pop. 1500) to Marshalltown (pop. 27,000) counts as “urbanizing,” which may have made a lot of sense when our population was mainly rural, but that’s not normally what we have in mind in a contemporary context. However, a move from State Center or Marshalltown to the Des Moines metro (pop. 682,000) is urbanizing in the sense I will mostly have in mind. Because this can be a little confusing, rather than speaking of “urban” and “rural,” I’ll often simply speak in terms of more and less population density, and speak of urbanization, and resistance to it, in terms of moving toward greater density, or not.

Any way you slice it, it is impossible to overstate the significance of urbanization for human social, economic, and political life. Urbanization is literally dislocation, and on a massive scale. We shouldn’t expect it to go down easy.

III. Urbanization and Spatial Sorting

Everyone alive is a descendant of people from somewhere else, of people who walked a long way. People move (or are moved as captives and slaves) for all sorts of reasons: famine, war, ethnic cleansing, religious persecution, enslavement, curiosity, prospects for material improvement, or because the weather seems nice. But rarely does an entire group of people leave a place all at once. People also stay, and they have their reasons, too. When some leave and others stay, the population sorts along the lines of their reasons, slightly changing the characters of the communities at both the origin and destination.

For example, the first English settlers of Massachusetts and Rhode Island were radical religious dissenters. Their flight left England more religiously homogenous, while their combination of nonconformist zeal and hardy intrepidity came to define the cultural character of the places they colonized and continues to shape American culture hundreds of years later. Likewise, we

might expect selection into uncertain westward migration to have altered the character and composition of populations at both the origins and destinations of westward treks—and evidence does suggest that contemporary regional differences in moral values and individual temperament continue to reflect this history.³⁸

If you have pulled up stakes and moved, it was probably to go to school or to take a new job. Generalizing from this common experience leads us to think of migration primarily in economic terms. But that can lead us to miss the extent to which identity, or group membership, drives migration or constrains individuals' sense of eligible destinations.

Group identity and economic opportunity are not always easy to separate, as the post-emancipation Great Migration of African-Americans to northern cities illustrates. Or take a more personal example: Both my parents (one of them Canadian) migrated for mainly religious reasons to Independence, Missouri, where they met, were married, and had three children. My family then migrated from Missouri to Iowa when I was a young child in part for my father's professional advancement, but also (I would later learn) to avoid the forced racial integration of the public schools in Jackson County, Missouri.

Who we are, both genetically and culturally, is often the result of prior, identity-related, self-selected migration. There's a story like this in your history, whether it involves your parents, grandparents, or ancestors further up your family tree. Whatever the reasons that drive it, migration slightly changes the population and character of the culture at both the origin and destination. Any individual move is, as they say, a drop in the bucket. But our reasons are rarely random or idiosyncratic—others tend to share them. Over time, steady regularities in the motives of those who leave and those who stay can result in relatively cleanly spatially sorted, or segregated, populations.

In addition to shaping individuals and local cultures, self-selected separation and clustering also has profound consequences for democratic political systems in which party loyalties are sensitive to the same kinds of group identities—ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, professional—that tend to figure heavily in decisions to stay put or opt in to new communities.

³⁸ Samuel Bazzi, Martin Fiszbein, and Mesay Gebresilas, "Frontier Culture: The Roots and Persistence of 'Rugged Individualism' in the United States" (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, November 2017); Anne Sofie Beck Knudsen, "Those Who Stayed: Individualism, Self-Selection and Cultural Change During the Age of Mass Migration," (January 24, 2019), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3321790>.

The Logic of Spatial Sorting

Many of us understand this dynamic intuitively, if hazily. It was only when economists in the middle of the last century started to think rigorously about the aggregate effects of individuals acting on their residential preferences that the dynamics of spatial sorting, and its implications for politics and policy, began to come into focus. Reviewing some of this literature's greatest hits will help us understand the dynamics that account for the density divide.

Occupational Self-Selection

Labor economists rely heavily on models of “self-selection” to explain why people choose to gain certain skills, enter certain occupations, seek certain kinds of jobs, and move to certain labor markets. The initial model of occupational selection, offered in 1951 by A.D. Roy, says, in effect, that everyone has some level of skill in every occupation, but we choose the one in which we can expect the highest income at our level of skill, not the occupation in which we are *most* skilled. You may be a better baker than builder, but if there are too many bakers and not enough builders, or there is more unmet demand for houses than for dinner rolls, you can make more as a builder of middling productivity than as a super-efficient baker. You'll therefore tend to select into the building profession.³⁹ This basic economic logic has immediate consequences for mobility, as the Harvard economist George Borjas drew out in his seminal paper, “Self-Selection and the Earnings of Immigrants,” which has inspired an immense body of related work.⁴⁰ Borjas noted that demand for skills, and output at a given degree of skill, is geographically variable. We'll therefore tend to gravitate toward places where our comparative advantage will be most remunerative. Those most likely to seek a new labor market are those with the most to gain from moving.

Tiebout Sorting and Foot-Voting

In another watershed paper, “A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures,” the economist Charles Tiebout conceived of mobile individuals as consumers of local government who shop for jurisdictions with a level of tax-financed

³⁹ A.D. Roy, “Some Thoughts on the Distribution of Earnings,” *Oxford Economic Papers*, New Series 3, no. 2 (June 1951): 135–46.

⁴⁰ George J. Borjas, “Self-Selection and the Earnings of Immigrants,” *American Economic Review* 77, no. 4 (September 1987): 531–553. Borjas specifically argued that the United States was likely to get “low quality,” less-skilled immigrants from nearby countries, but that claim hasn't stood up to subsequent research. See Daniel Chiquiar and Gordon H. Hanson, “International Migration, Self-Selection, and the Distribution of Wages: Evidence from Mexico and the United States,” *Journal of Political Economy* 113, no. 2 (April 2005): 239–81.

public goods that match their preferences.⁴¹ Those who prefer to pay more in taxes for more services, and those who prefer to pay less for fewer, will tend to vote with their feet by moving to jurisdictions with policy bundles they like better than the alternatives. This “foot voting” eventually sorts people into jurisdictions and produces populations that are relatively uniform in their preferred levels of public spending. When ballot-box votes reflect prior “Tiebout sorting,” as it is called, more of a jurisdiction’s electorate is likely to get a policy bundle close to what it wants.

Tiebout’s simplified model, like most economic models, relies on a number of unrealistic idealizing assumptions, but it has been shown to help explain real-world patterns in residential settlement and differences in policy between nearby jurisdictions. It has also been used as an argument for federalism, or greater decentralized local control, most notably by the George Mason University legal theorist Ilya Somin.⁴² This line of thought draws on Tiebout-inspired work on the characteristics of “optimal” political jurisdictions. According to Alberto Alesina, a Harvard political economist, optimal jurisdictions are large enough to benefit from economies of scale, yet homogenous enough in terms of policy preference to produce relatively stable consensus around the provision of public goods.⁴³ Devolving power to jurisdictions whose populations have been sorted by Tiebout-style foot voting can plausibly reduce political conflict and policy instability at higher-level jurisdictions, and contribute to policy that is overall more “efficient,” in the sense that more people get what they want.

Beyond “efficient” policy, relatively homogenous enclaves can produce a sense of belonging and mutual understanding that builds social trust, enhances productive cooperation, and contributes to a sense of well-being.⁴⁴ Yet foot voting can also segregate populations along ethnic and religious lines, which undermines social trust and cooperation, and generates social and political conflict.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Charles Tiebout, “A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures,” *The Journal of Political Economy* 64, no. 5 (1956): 416–24.

⁴² Ilya Somin, “Foot Voting, Political Ignorance, and Constitutional Design,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 28, no. 1 (2011): 202–27.

⁴³ Alberto Alesina and Enrico Spolaore, *The Size of Nations* (MIT Press, 2005).

⁴⁴ C. Ashley Fulmer et al., “On ‘Feeling Right’ in Cultural Contexts: How Person–Culture Match Affects Self–Esteem and Subjective Well–Being,” *Psychological Science* 21, no. 11 (November 1, 2010): 1563–69; James Coleman, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988): 95–120.

⁴⁵ Ryan Enos, *The Space Between Us: Social Geography and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Homophily, Ethnocentrism, and Schelling Sorting

As the Nobel Prize-winning game theorist Thomas Schelling showed, even very weak differences in preferences can lead to stark spatial sorting.⁴⁶ If we assume that people prefer to be around those who are more rather than less like them in some respect—a very safe assumption, it turns out—groups can very rapidly separate themselves spatially. Most of us have been to a party or family gathering in which a mixed group ends up dividing into a cluster of men and a cluster of women. Social scientists call a preference for similarity “homophily,” and nearly everyone is a homophile.⁴⁷ We like people like us. We tend to choose friends who are like us in terms of ethnicity, education, socioeconomic status, religion, or political orientation. But people differ in the strength of their taste for homophily. This is worth briefly expanding upon before moving on to Schelling’s sorting model (which abstracts away from these differences) to help bring its implications for the partisan density divide into sharper focus.

The political scientists Donald Kinder, of the University of Michigan, and Cindy Kam, of Vanderbilt, have devised a measure of “in-group favoritism,” or “ethnocentrism,” which reflects the size of the gap between the positivity of an individual’s sentiments toward his or her ethnic in-group and out-groups.⁴⁸ The higher your opinion and the warmer your feelings toward your own ethnic group relative to other groups, the more “ethnocentric” you are, in Kinder and Kam’s technical sense. As we’ll see, differences among whites in their levels of ethnocentrism, construed as in-group favoritism, help to account for the correlated geographic and partisan sorting that characterizes the density divide. It’s critical to note, however, that homophily need not imply any *negative* evaluation of those who are unlike us. If you’re short, and you have short friends, that doesn’t necessarily mean you *don’t* like tall people; it might just mean that you prefer the company of short people like you. Ethnocentrism, a species of homophily, is no different. Ethnic in-group favoritism is *consistent* with out-group hostility, but it does not logically imply *any*.

⁴⁶ Thomas Schelling, “Sorting and Mixing: Race and Sex,” in *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (New York City: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 137–66.

⁴⁷ Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M. Cook, “Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 415–44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2678628>. The term “homophily” is due to Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, “Friendship as a social process: a substantive and methodological analysis,” in *Freedom and Control in Modern Society*, M. Berger and T. Abel, eds. (New York: Van Nostrand, 1954).

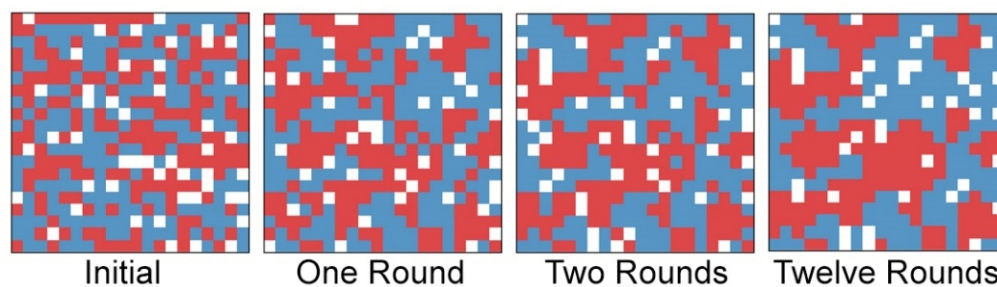
⁴⁸ Donald R. Kinder and Cindy D. Kam, *Us Against Them: Ethnocentric Foundations of American Opinion* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Schelling's ingeniously simple model of residential sorting begins with an assumption of uniform weak homophily: other things equal, each individual prefers to live in a house in which about one-third of her neighbors on the nearest plots are of the same type. This is, as Schelling says, a "moderate" demand. It amounts to being happy as a minority in your neighborhood as long as other members of your in-group are near.

Schelling shows how weak homophily can sort people into strong segregation with a simple 8 x 8 matrix, the cells of which have been mostly, but not entirely, filled with randomly placed dimes and pennies. (You can think of dimes and pennies as blacks and whites, Sunni or Shia, or whatever you like.) Some of the dimes and some of the pennies will be satisfied with their initial "neighborhood." Others, however, will fall short of satisfying the weak homophily conditions, leading them to move to an empty spot that better fits their preference. Every move leaves a new empty spot, which may affect the satisfaction of the adjacent coins, leading to more moves, and so on. This goes on until every coin has settled on a satisfactory spot. The final pattern will vary, depending on initial positions and the number of cells left empty, but the result is generally a fairly clean separation of pennies and dimes.

Here is an example of the Schelling model on a 20 X 20 grid showing how a population of "blues" and "reds" sorts after one, two, and twelve rounds of moves, given Schelling's weak homophily assumption.

Figure 9: Schelling sorting simulation after One, Two, and Twelve rounds⁴⁹



If you were to observe the emergent pattern of segregation without knowing how it came to pass, you might guess that the dimes and pennies (or reds and blues) are more averse to difference than the model actually stipulates. You might assume that they wanted to minimize contact with each other, or

⁴⁹ Source: Adapted from David Lowry-Duda, "Segregation, Gerrymandering, and Schelling's Model," Mixedmath (blog), February 3, 2018; <http://davidlowryduda.com/segregation-gerrymandering-and-schellings-model/>

perhaps that they were all averse to being in the local minority. But you would be wrong. By stipulation, every agent in the model merely wants to settle at a location where at least 1/3 of their neighbors are like themselves. Yet that can lead to a situation in which every individual's neighbors are mostly or entirely of the same type. That's what's so unsettling about Schelling's simple model: it shows that moderate in-group favoritism, with zero outgroup hostility, can produce a starkly segregated pattern of residential settlement. Our "micromotives," as Schelling has put it, can lead to "macro behavior" that no one intended or even imagined.

The literature on migrant self-selection, based on Roy's occupational selection model, has clear implications for long-distance geographic sorting. It tells us that changes in occupational demand and the location of jobs will tend to move people around, and that those who stand to gain the most from moving are most likely to move. However, the implications of Schelling and Tiebout's simple models, which focus on local residential sorting, are perhaps less clear. Schelling's model involves a fixed group of individuals, all with the *same* preference to live next to people like them, moving around a neighborhood. Tiebout's model helps explain why individual *differences* in policy preferences can lead nearby jurisdictions to settle on sharply contrasting packages of public services. However, the basic logic of the Schelling and Tiebout models nevertheless applies to longer migrations, growing populations with varying preferences, and residential patterns at larger geographic scales. If short moves over a relatively short period of time lead to dramatic spatial sorting, many millions of long moves over a very long period of time will, too.

Before moving on, it bears emphasizing that sorting clearly isn't the only process at work. My focus on the importance of sorting effects to polarization shouldn't be taken to imply that the places in which we live, and the people we encounter there, don't exert an important influence on our political attitudes. As the Harvard political scientists Ryan Enos and Jacob Brown have observed:

[A]n individual who lives in a denser area, with a variety of amenities, may grow more accustomed to that level of government services, and their political ideology will adjust accordingly. This theory mirrors the sorting argument offered by Tiebout, with the causal arrow reversed. Another mechanism consists of the effect of daily interaction with neighbors. By

virtue of living in close proximity and sharing social networks, neighbors are more likely to align politically the longer they have lived side by side. These contextual or neighborhood effects have been shown to impact political and social preferences.⁵⁰

Selection Effects Don't Explain Everything

It's likely that all of these things are at work simultaneously. Separating “selection effects” from “treatment effects,” untangling the web of reciprocal causal influence, and establishing the relative explanatory importance of all the variables at work is a forbidding analytical task, and we've only just begun to make serious headway on it. My claim is emphatically not that *only* sorting and self-selection matter. Rather, my claim is that the extent to which urbanization sorts populations has yet to be fully appreciated, and that many of its implications for political polarization have been overlooked or under-emphasized. My aim, as a theoretically inclined, cross-discipline synthesizer, is to connect enough unconnected dots to lend credibility to these claims and persuade specialists in empirical methods that it would be worth their time to drill down into the relevant data, formulate crisp, testable hypotheses, and see how well the picture I present here holds up.

According to one theory of partisan polarization, Americans have been sorting themselves according to party affiliation. Republicans would rather live next to Republicans; Democrats would rather live next to Democrats, which has led to partisan polarization along the density divide. This is, more or less, the story of Bill Bishop's fascinating book, *The Big Sort*.⁵¹ And there's some evidence for this.⁵² However, as we shall see, geographic sorting on party loyalty is largely incidental to the deeper story of the way in which the magnet of urbanization progressively filters individuals with “magnetic” traits out of the rural population, leaving behind an increasingly homogenous, urbanization-resistant population. In the following, I will lay out the case for the magnetic polarity of three kinds of traits: ethnicity, personality, and level of education.

⁵⁰ Jacob Brown and Ryan Enos, “Partisan Segregation,” accessed March 14, 2019, <https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/renos/files/brownenos.pdf>.

⁵¹ Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).

⁵² Matt Motyl, “Liberals and Conservatives Are (Geographically) Dividing,” in *Social Psychology of Political Polarization*, Claremont Symposium on Applied Social Psychology Series (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 7–37.

IV. Sorting on Ethnicity

America's rural counties are 79 percent white. Suburban counties are 68 percent white. Urban counties are 44 percent white.⁵³ Which is to say, as population density goes up, so does nonwhite population share. Overall, the nonwhite share of the American population has been growing faster than the white share. The Census Bureau projects that the United States will be a "majority minority" country sometime in the mid-2040s. It's not that surprising, then, that the nonwhite population share is growing in rural as well as suburban and urban counties. But it is growing slowest in rural counties and fastest in urban counties.⁵⁴

Why Minority Populations Prefer Urban Density

The concentration of America's nonwhite population in large urban areas is a consequence, first, of the two great waves of internal migration of freed African-American slaves and their descendants from the rural South to cities in the industrial North, and later, to cities in the West.⁵⁵ Today, 75 percent of African-Americans live in cities or suburbs. 15 percent live in smaller cities and towns, while just 10 percent live in rural areas, mainly in the South.⁵⁶ Rising housing costs in urban cores have shifted the black population (and other less wealthy city dwellers) away from dense city centers toward the suburbs. Still, the small-town and rural black population continues to shrink.

Second, the era of mass international migration to the United States, which came on the heels of urban industrialization, established large immigrant populations in a handful of thriving "gateway cities," which made those places especially attractive destinations for subsequent migrants from the same countries of origin. The economic pull of urbanization, and the increasing difficulty of circular migration, also drew large numbers of Mexican and Central American agricultural, construction, and service workers to settle in the booming cities of the Southwest. The second wave of mass international migration, which began after the Immigration and Nationality

⁵³ Kim Parker et al., "What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities," *Social & Demographic Trends* (Pew Research Center, May 22, 2018), <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2018/05/22/what-unites-and-divides-urban-suburban-and-rural-communities/>.

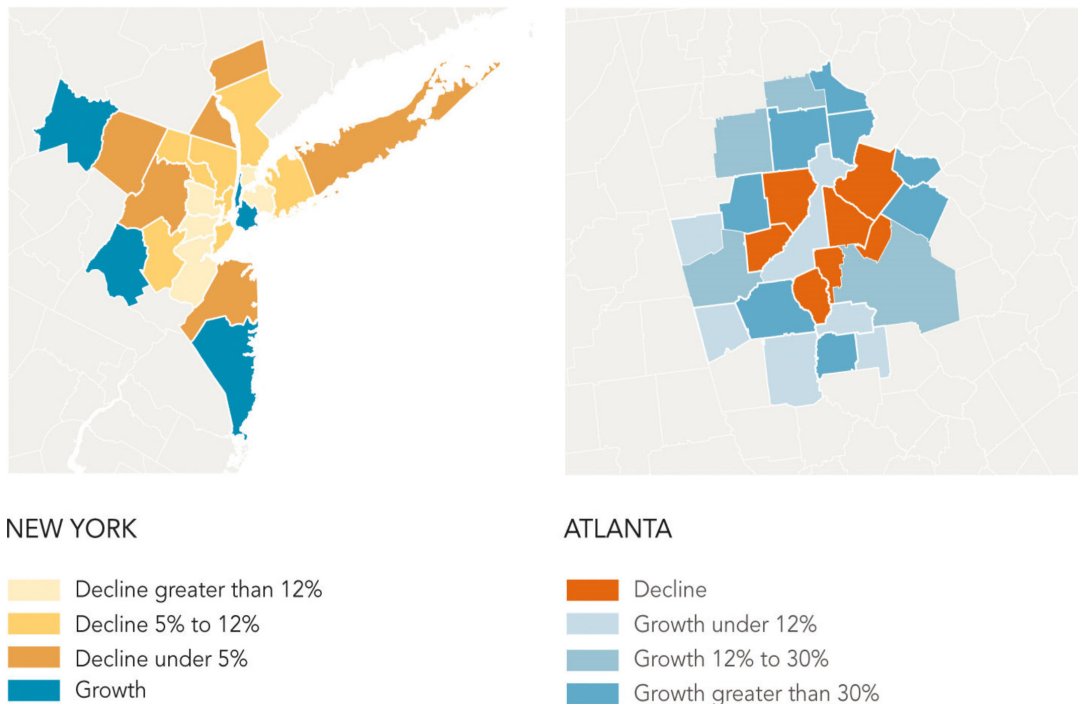
⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ See generally, Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (Vintage, 2010).

⁵⁶ Alana Semuels, "No, Most Black People Don't Live in Poverty—or Inner Cities," *The Atlantic*, October 12, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/10/trump-african-american-inner-city/503744/>.

Act of 1965, established West Coast and Sunbelt cities as new gateway destinations for Asian, Latin American, and African migrants.

Figure 10: White Urban and Suburban County Growth New York and Atlanta Metros:
2000–2010⁵⁷



Source: 2000 and 2010 U.S. censuses.

In 2014, 57 metro areas with “distinctive patterns of historical immigrant settlement” contained about 80 percent of America’s immigrants.⁵⁸ Because less than 20 percent of today’s immigrants to the United States are of European descent, this largely accounts for the rapid and disproportionate increase of the nonwhite population of these cities.⁵⁹ This population has also become more ethnoculturally varied. In recent years, immigrants from Asia, mostly from India and China, have outnumbered newcomers from Latin America. These newer immigrant groups live overwhelmingly in a relatively

⁵⁷ Source: William H. Frey, *Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics Are Remaking America*, Map 7–2

⁵⁸ Audrey Singer, “Migration and the Metropolis,” Brookings Institution, April 2, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/migration-and-the-metropolis/>; “Metropolitan Immigrant Gateways Revisited, 2014,” Brookings Institution, November 30, 2001, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/metropolitan-immigrant-gateways-revisited-2014/>.

⁵⁹ Pew Research Center Hispanic Trends, “Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S.,” September 28, 2015, <https://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/09/28/modern-immigration-wave-brings-59-million-to-u-s-driving-population-growth-and-change-through-2065/>.

small handful of major metro areas, increasingly in suburban enclaves. For example, Sugar Land, Texas, a booming suburb of Houston, is nearly 40 percent Asian, with Indian and Chinese communities large enough to support significant Schelling-sorted subcommunities from different regions of those countries.⁶⁰

In fact, more than half of America's nonwhite population now resides in suburbs. Urbanization has largely become suburbanization. Since 2010, suburbs have grown faster than urban cores. Suburban gains have come from a combination of local moves out of majority-minority urban cores, international migration, and domestic in-migration—including a large movement of black Americans from declining Rustbelt cities to high-growth Southern cities. Between 2000 and 2014, total domestic in-migration fell 5.4 percent in urban counties, but rose 6.4 percent in suburban counties.⁶¹

All of which is to say that America's nonwhite population has thoroughly selected into large metropolitan areas. The reasons are easy to understand. People of all backgrounds prefer to live near people who are like them—who speak the same way, eat the same foods, enjoy the same music, share religious convictions and expectations about family life, and so on. Ethnic and religious enclaves offer informal networks of social insurance and finance. Cities are relatively tolerant of difference. Historically, socially and politically persecuted minority groups have been especially keen to find safety in numbers. Large urban minority communities are more likely to be represented in democratic bodies at the city, state, and/or federal levels, affording them better protection of their rights and interests. And, of course, economic opportunity is increasingly concentrated in cities, which is the key factor driving urbanizing migration generally.

As important as economic opportunity is, it clearly isn't everything. Identity and culture matter. Immigrants tend to “choose cities that resemble their home countries in terms of winter temperature, safety, coastal proximity, and education level” and are willing to pay a premium to do so.⁶² Moreover, recent decades have seen a partial reversal of the Great Migration, as waves of

⁶⁰ Corrie MacLaggan, “What Ethnic Diversity Looks Like: Fort Bend,” *New York Times*, November 23, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/us/what-ethnic-diversity-looks-like-fort-bend.html>.

⁶¹ William H. Frey, “Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics Are Remaking America,” (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014).

⁶² David Albouy, HeePyung Cho, and Mariya Shappo, “Immigration and the Pursuit of Amenities,” September 10, 2018, 41, <http://davidalbouy.net/ImmigrantQOL.pdf>.

African-Americans have relocated from the industrial cities of the Northeast, Great Lakes, and West Coast—which are either struggling or expensive—to the suburbs of booming “New South” cities such as Raleigh, Atlanta, and Jacksonville.⁶³ Family ties and cultural affinities to the South surely play an important role. (This pattern of internal migration is of particular political importance, as it represents a significant redistribution of Democrats from solidly Democratic states to states with shrinking Republican majorities.)

That America’s nonwhite population is overwhelmingly urbanized does not mean there are no notable nonwhite rural populations. Much of the Native American population is concentrated in and around rural reservations. There remain many heavily black areas in the rural South. Established Hispanic communities in the rural Southwest are not rare, and many Hispanic immigrants have dispersed widely to enclaves in smaller towns across the country, often to satisfy unmet local demand for agriculture, food-processing, and construction workers. However, few of these places are economically thriving, and they collectively contain a small portion of the overall rural population. If members of minority groups wish to live with people who are like them in a place where they can find a job, the odds of success are much higher in or around big cities.

There are very few attractive options for nonwhites who would like to live in a rural community populated mainly by those of the same ethnocultural background. If an immigrant from China, for example, wishes to live among Chinese, she is likely to end up near some Indians, Mexicans, African-Americans, and whites. For immigrants, finding one’s own subgroup means moving toward diversity across the board. The same is not true, however, for America’s white majority. Only white Americans have the option of satisfying their taste for homophily by steering clear of urban diversity.

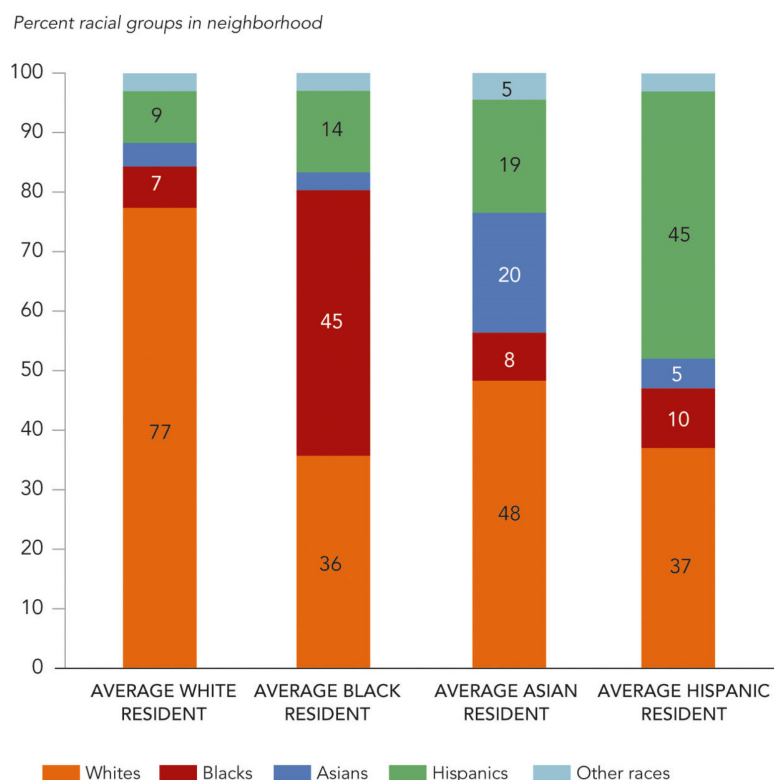
For example, in Los Angeles, one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the country, the typical white resident lives in a neighborhood that is 77 percent white, 7 percent black, and 9 percent Hispanic.⁶⁴ Outside of large metros, the neighborhoods of typical white Americans are far more homogenously white. Indeed, small-town whites *usually* have no non-white neighbors. In contrast, blacks and Hispanics typically live in mixed neighborhoods. In Los Angeles, a

⁶³ Greg Toppo and Paul Overberg, “After Nearly 100 Years, Great Migration Begins Reversal,” *USA Today*, Feb. 2, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/02/02/census-great-migration-reversal/21818127/>.

⁶⁴ Frey, *Diversity Explosion*, Ch. 9.

typical black and typical Hispanic resident resides in a neighborhood that is 45 percent same-ethnicity, and more than 1/3 white. For Americans of color, rubbing shoulders with members of other ethnic groups is far more likely to be a fact of daily life than it is for whites Americans, whether or not they live in a big city.

Figure 11: Neighborhood Racial Makeup of the Average White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian Los Angeles Resident⁶⁵



The Density Bonus Is a Tax on Diversity-Averse Whites

This pattern takes on greater significance in light of the fact (which I will discuss at length below) that economic output and opportunity is increasingly concentrated in multicultural cities. This means that the cost (in terms of forgone earnings) of exercising the option to stay in a homogenously white area away from a big city labor market has gone up—especially for younger people with college educations.

⁶⁵ Source: William H. Frey, *Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics Are Remaking America*, Figure 9-4.

The ongoing urbanization of employment and economic output therefore effectively functions as a tax on the satisfaction of white ethnocentric residential preferences. As the cost of maintaining distance from thriving labor markets rises—that is, as the “tax” on white homophily/ethnocentrism goes up—some residents of relatively small, white communities who are on the fence about urbanization will finally hop off the fence and migrate toward more diverse, urban labor markets. Some of their neighbors, who are slightly less inclined to urbanize, will climb onto the fence, and so on. As the opportunity cost of staying in lower-density areas increases, and those who are unwilling to bear this cost progressively filter toward urban diversity, we should expect the average value placed on ethnocultural homogeneity to rise among those still willing to bear the rising cost of the white homophily tax.

However, this doesn’t mean we should expect the marginal white urbanizer, who is no longer willing to forego so much to live in a homogenous place, to throw caution to the wind, settle in a downtown loft, and start biking to work. It’s now relatively late in the day in the process of urbanization, and the later it gets, the stronger we should expect the marginal white urbanizer’s preference for homophily to be.

In any case, as Schelling teaches us, even weak homophily can translate into strong ethnic segregation. Moreover, if in-group favoritism is correlated with policy preferences (and we’ll see that it is), we should expect to observe some Tiebout sorting, or foot-voting, into jurisdictions with policy packages that better accord with these preferences. Therefore, if the average level of in-group favoritism among late-in-the-day white urbanizers is higher than earlier-in-the-day white urbanizers, we should expect them to prefer (a) relatively economically vital metro areas that are smaller, whiter, and zoned less densely or (b) mixed rural-exurban sprawl in the commuter zone of expanding big cities.

The New Suburban White Flight

According to the demographer William H. Frey, this is in fact what we see. We’re also seeing significant self-selection of already-urbanized suburban white residents away from rapidly diversifying suburbs. Frey writes:

[T]here is a new form of white flight that is ... extra-local and in many cases interregional. Yet its deconcentrated nature is similar to that of its earlier counterpart—that is, it involves

movement to newer, smaller, and suburban-oriented metropolitan areas and, within those areas, to outer suburbs and exurbs.”⁶⁶

The dense centers of many prosperous cities have gained a significant number of highly-paid white residents, but rapidly rising housing costs in these areas have bounced many white newcomers with a taste for urban amenities into increasingly multicultural inner suburbs that, therefore, increasingly resemble urban cores both demographically and culturally.

To be sure, there remain many wealthy, predominately white suburban enclaves in and around big thriving big cities. However, they tend to be too expensive either for relocating white suburb-dwellers or late-in-the day white urbanizers drawn in by the opportunities of urban labor markets. So that leaves the outer suburbs and exurbs as the dominant option for those seeking lower-diversity white communities.

Taken together, these patterns of selective migration go a long way toward explaining the correlation between lower population density and higher white population share. However, to more fully understand how racial sorting into higher- and lower-density locations generates political polarization, it's helpful to dig into the literature on individual personality differences and their behavioral implications.

We'll find that the same deep-seated personal attributes that predict a lower propensity to migrate, lower-density residential location, and stronger aversion to diversity *also* predict more conservative views on social issues and, among whites, Republican Party affiliation. This, in combination with basic findings in political science on the sensitivity of party affiliation to social-group identity, will help explain partisan polarization on race. We'll also find that the personality trait that most strongly predicts rootedness, ethnocentrism, *and* Republican Party identification among whites—low “Openness to Experience”—*also* predicts a weaker interest in higher education and a lower level of educational attainment. This, in turn, will help us explain the increasing “diploma divide,” and account for the relative economic stagnation (or decline) of whiter, lower-density, Republican-heavy areas. Putting it all together will then help us make sense of the alarming

⁶⁶ William H. Frey, *Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics Are Remaking America* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2014), 10, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/35812>.

political effectiveness of demagogic, right-populist attacks on the multicultural city, which combine the economic and ethnocultural anxieties of the homogenous, lower-density white population into a specious yet potentially unifying narrative of national decline.

V. Sorting on Personality

In the context of the transformative trend of mass urbanization, the relationship between whiteness, lower-density residence, and Republican Party affiliation suggests that at least half of the story of the partisan density divide is the story of the set of white Americans most immune, or most resistant, to the magnetic pull of the city. As we've seen, the basic fact of political polarization on the density divide is that Republican vote share goes up as population density goes down, with majorities flipping from Democratic to Republican somewhere in the outer suburbs. During the same period that partisans became increasingly well-sorted on population density, they also became increasingly well-sorted on ideology. There were once a fair number of ideologically liberal Republicans and ideologically conservative Democrats, but now they're rare birds.⁶⁷

Taken together, these two trends suggest a connection between ideology and preferences over more and less densely peopled places to live. However, the direction of cause and effect isn't obvious. Do less dense places make you more conservative, or does a conservative temperament make you prefer less dense places? There's surely a bit of both at play. We're generally conformist, prone to social influence, and like to fit in with the people around us.⁶⁸

However, it's deeply significant that the personalities of liberal- and conservative-minded people differ along certain key dimensions. If the personality characteristics that predict a broadly conservative temperament also leave white Americans with those traits less inclined to pull up stakes, seek higher education, and move to cities, we should expect urbanization to have spatially sorted the white population on those traits, and we should expect this sorting to have become more complete over time as the economic costs of foregoing education and urbanization have risen.

⁶⁷ Steven W. Webster and Alan I. Abramowitz, "The Ideological Foundations of Affective Polarization in the U.S. Electorate," *American Politics Research* 45, no. 4 (July 2017): 621–47.

⁶⁸ For an excellent, general discussion of contextual social influence in the context of spatial sorting see: Ryan Enos, *The Space Between Us: Social Geography and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

The Politics of “Open” vs. “Closed” Personality Types

There is a vast literature on the psychological correlates of general political orientation. It’s too varied to review both briefly and comprehensively. It’s fair to say, however, that research in “political psychology” has converged on the idea that the difference between broadly liberal and conservative ideological and political orientations is related to a family of deep-seated psychological attributes usefully summarized by the difference between “open” and “closed” personality types.

In their book, *Open Versus Closed: Personality, Identity, and the Politics of Redistribution*, the political scientists Christopher Johnston, Howard Lavine, and Christopher Federico observe:

[A] great deal of research suggests that variables indicative of a general open-closed personality dimension are important antecedents of political preferences. This result obtains with respect to a diverse array of psychological dispositions, including authoritarianism, loss aversion, the need for closure, conservation values, moral concerns about in-group loyalty, obedience, and purity, and the openness and conscientiousness dimensions of the Big Five.⁶⁹

I will pay special attention here to the “Big Five,” a well-validated, general-purpose model of personality that breaks individual temperament into five independent dimensions: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (or emotional stability).⁷⁰ My relatively exclusive focus on research using the Big Five model of personality shouldn’t be taken to imply that other personality-based theories of left-right political orientation—such as Jonathan Haidt’s “moral foundations” theory, or John Jost’s “system justification” theory—are less enlightening.⁷¹ In many ways, they are *more* enlightening. However, the depth and breadth of work on the elements of the Big Five model in other areas central to my

⁶⁹ Christopher D. Johnston et al., *Open Versus Closed: Personality, Identity, and the Politics of Redistribution* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁷⁰ Daniel Nettle, *Personality: What Makes You the Way You Are*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) offers an accessible general introduction to the Big Five model of personality.

⁷¹ J.T. Jost and Joanneke van der Toorn, “System Justification Theory,” in P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, and E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology*, (Sage Publications, 2012): pp. 313–343; Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon, 2012).

argument (such as migration, residential preferences, and education), and its robust track record of predictive utility and replicability, make it most reliable and useful for my purposes.

The Big Five Personality Model and Ideological Disposition

The Big Five model has proven useful in predicting patterns of individual behavior in a wide array of domains, and two aspects of personality in particular—Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience—are strongly predictive of liberal or conservative attitudes on *social* (but not economic) issues.⁷² If you're low in “Conscientiousness” and high in “Openness,” you probably identify as liberal; if you're high in Conscientiousness and low in Openness, you probably identify as conservative. The other dimensions of personality are either unrelated to political attitudes, or ambiguously related.

A high level of Openness to Experience is strongly positively associated with liberal attitudes on social issues and negatively associated with conservative attitudes. Openness can be tricky to characterize, but it involves an active imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, attentiveness to inner experience, a taste for variety, and intellectual curiosity. People high in openness seek novelty, like to travel, are interested in other cultures, try new foods, are motivated to learn, and are relatively comfortable with ethnic and cultural difference. Those low in openness are wary of change and more likely to hew to tradition, remain close to home, and feel unsettled by cultural difference.

“Conscientiousness” is less strongly predictive of political attitudes but remains positively associated with social conservatism and negatively associated with social liberalism. Conscientiousness is pretty much what it sounds like. High Conscientiousness individuals are organized, orderly, and punctual. They keep to-do lists, meet deadlines, have neat desks and houses, and generally have their acts together. Those with a low-level of conscientiousness are messy, tend to be late, and have a hard time getting things done on time.

These traits are relatively stable over the lifespan and have a significant genetic basis.⁷³ Estimates of heritability (the degree of variation in a trait

⁷² Jeffery J. Mondak, *Personality and the Foundations of Political Behavior* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Johnston et al., *Open Versus Closed*.

⁷³ Johanna Rantanen et al., “Long-Term Stability in the Big Five Personality Traits in Adulthood,” *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 48, no. 6 (December 2007): 511–18; K. L. Jang et al., “Heritability of the Big Five Personality Dimensions and Their Facets: A Twin Study,” *Journal of Personality* 64, no. 3 (September 1996): 577–91.

explained by variation in genes) for Big Five personality traits range from 40 to 60 percent.⁷⁴ (Height is 60–80 percent heritable and estimates for IQ range from 57 to 73 percent.) Significantly, Openness, which is weakly correlated with IQ, is the most heritable of the Big Five traits.

Figure 12: The Big Five Personality Traits⁷⁵

Trait	Definition of Trait
Openness to Experience	The tendency to be open to new aesthetic, cultural or intellectual experiences.
Conscientiousness	The tendency to be organized, responsible, and hardworking.
Extraversion	An orientation of one's interests and energies toward the outer world of people and things rather than the inner world of subjective experience; characterized by positive affect and sociability.
Agreeableness	The tendency to act in a cooperative, unselfish manner.
Neuroticism (Emotional Stability)	Neuroticism is a chronic level of emotional instability and proneness to psychological distress. Emotional stability is predictability and consistency in emotional reactions without rapid mood changes.

Each Big Five trait sits on a low-to-high continuum. The typical person, by definition, has a medium level of “Openness,” “Conscientiousness,” or “Agreeableness;” most of us fall on the fat part of the bell curve for most traits, and there are roughly equal numbers of us who score “high” and “low” on a given trait. These traits are normally distributed across the population

⁷⁴ Jang et al., “Heritability.”

⁷⁵ Source: American Psychological Society Dictionary, 2007

and don't notably vary by race or sex. This means, for example, that black Americans are just as likely to be low in Openness, and to be temperamentally socially conservative, as white Americans.

Ethnicity and the Limits of Political Psychology

Because we already know that nonwhite ethnicity is a dominant factor in both partisan and geographic sorting, we should expect differences in traits like Openness to tell us more about political differences among white Americans, whom we find in nearly equal numbers on both sides of the density divide, than among nonwhite Americans, who are overwhelmingly clustered on the dense, Democratic side. Personality psychology therefore doesn't have much to tell us about why nonwhites tend to be Democrats. That the Democratic Party is more much more diverse than the GOP in terms of its ethnic constituencies means that it is also more diverse in terms of its range of politically relevant personality types, which helps account for the fact that partisan polarization has been asymmetrical, with the right drifting further right than the left has drifted left.⁷⁶ Accordingly, my use of findings in political psychology is mainly meant to help account for differences in the political attitudes, partisan affiliations, and residential choices of white Americans.

Personality Does Not Predict Left/Right Attitudes on Economic Issues

It's also important to note that the association between ideological inclination and "open" vs. "closed" personality types is much clearer on social issues (such as abortion, same-sex marriage, affirmative action, and immigration) than on economic issues (such as trade, redistribution, and the minimum wage). Johnston, Lavine, and Federico write:

[R]esearch on the dispositional antecedents of political preferences reveals a glaring asymmetry: individual differences indicative of the open-closed dimension predict political identifications and attitudes in the cultural domain, but they have inconsistent and typically weak predictive power in the economic domain.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Matt Grossmann and David A. Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁷⁷ Johnston et al., *Open Versus Closed*.

Economic policy preferences, they find, are highly mediated by an individual's party identification and level of political knowledge and engagement. The cross-partisan appeal of Medicare and Social Security, and the malleability of partisan positions on attitudes toward protectionist trade policy, illustrate the weakness of the association between personality and issues of economic regulation and redistribution.

Personality Can't Explain Cultural Change or the Range of Public Opinion

Even if we restrict ourselves to social issues, knowing that certain personality traits incline us to conservative or liberal opinions doesn't tell us what the content of those opinions will be at any given point in history. For example, fifty years ago, nearly everyone opposed interracial marriage, then it became a distinctly conservative position, and it now lingers at or beyond the outer fringe of admissible public opinion. Which is to say, the culturally available range of opinions changes over time. Personality psychology can tell us that individuals with certain traits will tend to favor "liberal" or "conservative" opinions on social issues, but it can't tell us what the salient issues of the moment will be, what the range of positions on those issues are, or why the salience of issues changes and the range of positions shifts. For that, we need history, accounts of cultural and political change, and theories of party organization and voter behavior. Still, with all these caveats in place, personality psychology can tell us a lot worth knowing.

Personality, Migration, and Residential Preferences

If we combine (a) the fact that low Openness (and, to a lesser extent, high Conscientiousness) predict Republican Party affiliation with (b) the fact that the partisan density divide exists, then we can safely infer that (c) white Americans *are* geographically sorted on these personality traits. This conclusion is well-supported by work in the young field of "geographical psychology," which shows that personality types are not randomly distributed across the country.

The Geographic Distribution of Personality Traits

American states differ in the typical personality profile of their residents.⁷⁸ Peter Rentfrow, a pioneer in geographical psychology at Cambridge

⁷⁸ Peter J. Rentfrow et al., "A Theory of the Emergence, Persistence, and Expression of Geographic Variation in Psychological Characteristics," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 5 (September 2008): 339–69.

University, has found that “Openness tends to be highest in the New England, Middle Atlantic, and Pacific Regions, and comparatively lower in the Great Plains, Midwest, and Southeastern states.”⁷⁹ These differences in statewide personality roughly correspond to the pattern of red and blue states we see on electoral maps. In studies of the 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential elections, Rentfrow and his co-authors found that “the percentage of votes cast for Democratic candidates was positively related to mean levels of Openness and negatively related to statewide Conscientiousness, a finding consistent with individual-level research. In contrast, the percentage of votes cast for Republican candidates was negatively related to Openness and positively related to Conscientiousness.”⁸⁰ Conscientiousness fell below the threshold of statistical significance after controlling for statewide differences in education, female population share, and black population share, but “Openness remained a significant predictor of voting patterns.”

Figure 13: Average state-level Openness by quintile⁸¹

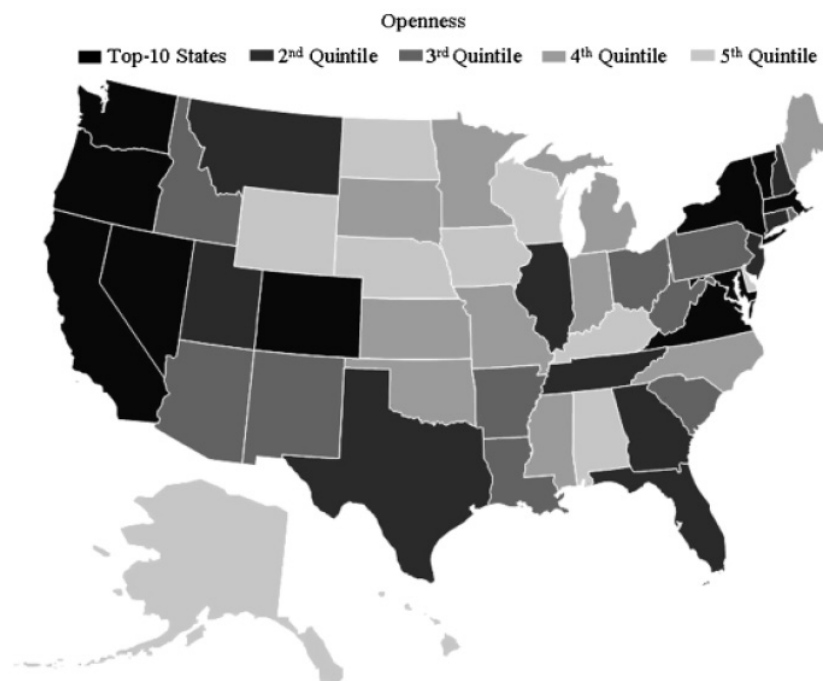


Fig. 6. Map of state-level Openness.

⁷⁹ Peter J. Rentfrow, “Statewide Differences in Personality: Toward a Psychological Geography of the United States,” *American Psychologist* 65, no. 6 (September 2010): 548–58.

⁸⁰ Peter J. Rentfrow et al., “Statewide Differences in Personality Predict Voting Patterns in 1996–2004 U.S. Presidential Elections,” in *Social and Psychological Bases of Ideology and System Justification*, eds. John T. Jost et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁸¹ Source: Peter Rentfrow, et al. “A Theory of the Emergence, Persistence, and Expression of Geographic Variation in Psychological Characteristics.”

By itself, this doesn't tell us that statewide differences in Openness are a consequence of selective migration. But it is suggestive in light of the partisan density divide. Whether a state leans Democratic or Republican is now largely a matter of the relative size of the state's voting-age population on either side of the line marking the level of population density at which party allegiance is evenly split. (1000 people per square mile is currently a decent rule of thumb.) Other things equal, states with larger Republican majorities are less thoroughly urbanized—which is to say, a larger proportion of their populations have stayed away from density.

Personality and the Tendency to Migrate

Because the trend of urbanization means that most migration flows toward rather than away from greater density, we ought to expect that lower Openness individuals are less likely to migrate. This is precisely what Markus Jokela, a psychologist and epidemiologist at the University of Helsinki, has found in several studies of the relationship between individual-level Big Five traits and migration.⁸² “[E]xtraversion and Openness to Experience,” Jokela finds, “predicted increased migration propensity,” suggesting that “outgoing and open-minded individuals who prefer novel stimuli are most likely to change their residential locations.”⁸³

However, Jokela notes, Extraversion only predicts inclination to move *within* states, not between them (and a later study found no relation), while higher Openness predicts both intra- and inter-state migration. Moves within a state (from one town to another, or from the city to the suburbs, for example) are much more common than moves across state lines. High Openness individuals are considerably more likely than low Openness individuals to make an in-state move, and nearly twice as likely to move to a new state. Which is to say, people whose temperaments dispose them to conservative social views are also less likely to move. This sort of difference in propensity to migrate between individuals with liberal-skewing and conservative-skewing temperaments is exactly what we'd expect to find if the density divide is a result of liberal self-selection out of lower density areas.

⁸² Markus Jokela, “Personality Predicts Migration Within and Between U.S. States,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 43, no. 1 (February 2009): 79–83. Markus Jokela, Marko Elovainio, Mika Kivimäki, and Lúsa Keltikangas-Järvinen. “Temperament and Migration Patterns in Finland.” *Psychological Science* 19, no. 9 (September 2008).

⁸³ Jokela, et al., “Temperament and Migration Patterns in Finland.”

It's not surprising, then, that rural Americans are significantly less likely than denizens of the suburbs and cities to say that they would move if given the chance. According to a 2018 Pew Research survey, 25 percent of rural residents would move if they could, compared to 34 and 37 percent of suburban and urban residents.⁸⁴

In a subsequent study, Jokela found that the desire to move, and the expectation that one will move, are positively associated with low Emotional Stability (or high "Neuroticism"), low Agreeableness, and high Openness to Experience. Low Agreeableness did not predict *realized* moves, but high Neuroticism and Openness did. High Conscientiousness was not found to predict the *desire* to migrate, but individuals high in the trait were less likely to expect to move or to actually move than were those low in Conscientiousness.⁸⁵

In sum, the two Big Five traits most reliably associated with socially conservative attitudes, low Openness and high Conscientiousness, *both* independently predict a relative disinclination to migrate. This strongly suggests that individuals with the most conservative personality profile will be especially likely to stay put. Conversely, it suggests that we're likely to find a higher concentration of individuals high in Openness in big cities, especially immigrant gateway cities. And, at the state level, we should see a higher average level of Openness in states containing these cities, as well as those first settled through arduous, long-distance, voluntary migration, such as the original colonial states of New England and the mid-Atlantic, and the Western states at the ends of the Santa Fe, California, or Oregon trails. The work of Peter Rentfrow and his co-authors largely bears this out, as you can see in Figure 13, depicting the quintiles of state-level Openness.

Sorting on Openness Helps Explain the Partisan Density Divide

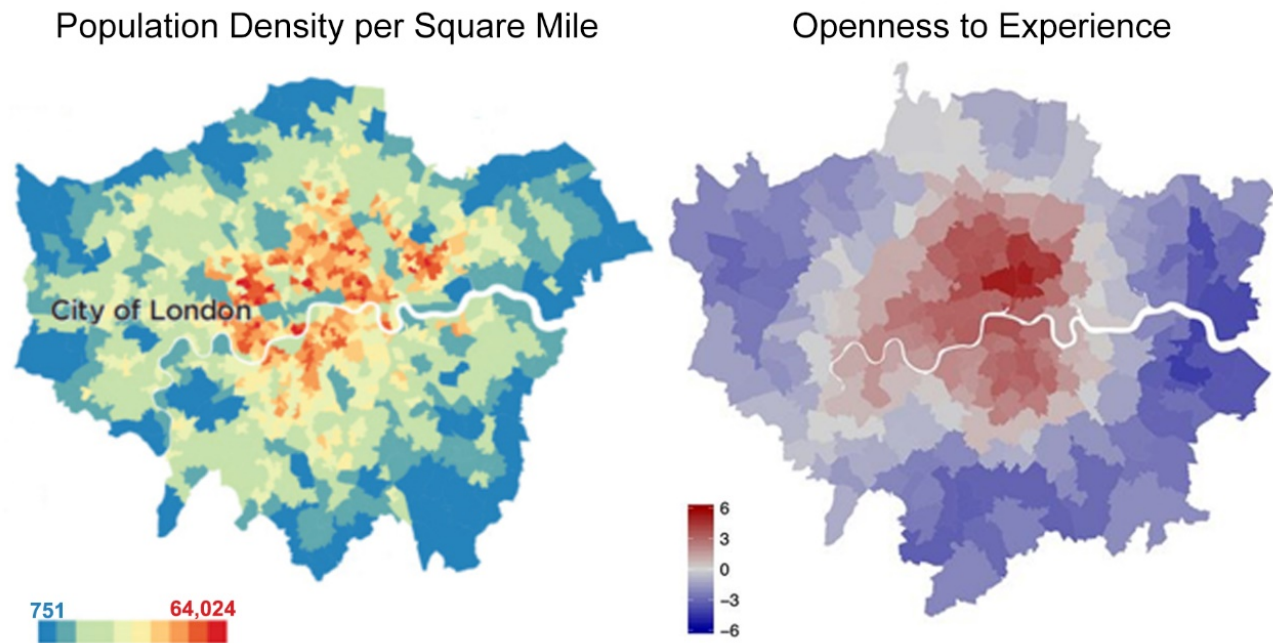
We should also expect to see populations higher in Openness gravitate toward higher population densities at the local level. To date, there have been no studies looking at the spatial distribution of personality types within American metro areas. However, a study by Rentfrow, Jokela, and others has examined the relationship of personality to patterns of residential choice in London. They find those high in Openness are disproportionately clustered in

⁸⁴ Parker et al., "What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities."

⁸⁵ Markus Jokela, "Personality Predicts Migration Within and Between U.S. States."

diverse and densely populated neighborhoods near the urban core, but are relatively scarce in less dense, more homogenous suburbs.⁸⁶ The connection between Openness and density is especially vivid when you see it on a map.⁸⁷

Figure 14: Population Density and Average Neighborhood Openness to Experience in London⁸⁸



The map of the distribution of Openness in London bears an unmistakable resemblance to maps of partisan vote share in American cities. There's little reason to worry that the relationship between Openness and temperamental social conservatism/liberalism is different in Britain and the United States. Indeed, it's clearer across the pond, where smaller parties at the extremes of the left-right spectrum highlight the association of ideology and party identification with personality. The Green Party attracts supporters at the extremes of low Conscientiousness and high Openness (and Neuroticism). The typical Conservative Party supporter has the classic high Conscientiousness

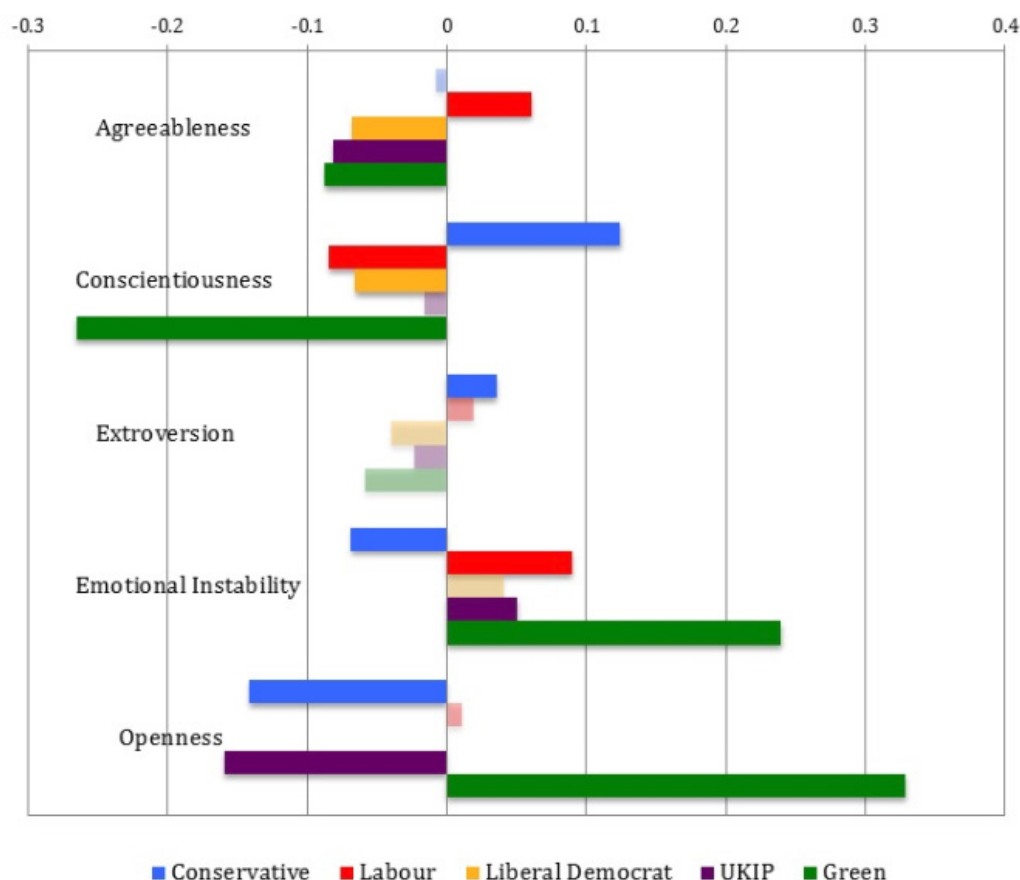
⁸⁶ Markus Jokela et al., "Geographically Varying Associations between Personality and Life Satisfaction in the London Metropolitan Area," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 3 (January 20, 2015): 725–30.

⁸⁷ Harry Garretsen et al., "Brexit and the Relevance of Regional Personality Traits: More Psychological Openness Could Have Swung the Regional Vote," *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 11, no. 1 (March 10, 2018): 165–75.

⁸⁸ Source: Density map adapted from by Andreas Viglakis, <https://www.spur.org/publications/urbanist-article/2014-08-23/density-within-or-growth-outward>; Openness map adapted from Markus Jokela et al., "Geographically Varying Associations between Personality and Life Satisfaction in the London Metropolitan Area."

and low Openness personality combo—though the typical ethnonationalist UKIP supporter outbids the typical Tory on low Openness.⁸⁹

Figure 15: Personality Traits and Party Choice in 2015 U.K. Election⁹⁰

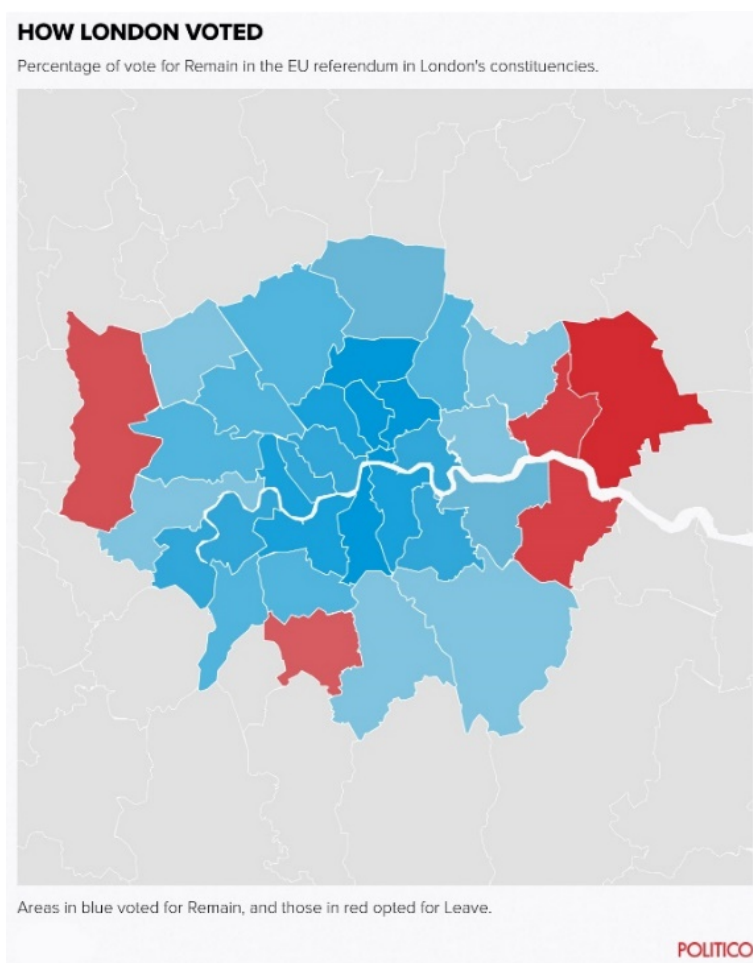


It therefore ought to come as no surprise that London's Brexit vote share for Remain is so clearly correlated with both Openness and density, while the Leave vote share clearly rises as both density and Openness decline.⁹¹

⁸⁹ James Dennison, "Populist Personalities? The Big Five Personality Traits and Party Choice in the 2015 UK General Election," British Politics and Policy at LSE (blog), August 24, 2015. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/populist-personalities-the-big-five-personality-traits-and-party-choice-in-the-2015-uk-general-election/>.

⁹⁰ James Dennison, "Populist Personalities? The Big Five Personality Traits and Party Choice in the 2015 UK General Election."

⁹¹ Aranau Busquets Guardia, "How Brexit Vote Broke Down," Politico EU, June 24, 2016. <https://www.politico.eu/article/graphics-how-the-uk-voted-eu-referendum-brexit-demographics-age-education-party-london-final-results/>.

Figure 16: London Remain/Leave Brexit Vote Share⁹²

We're Sorting on Residential Preferences, Not Partisanship

Dispositional liberals and conservatives evidently want different things from the places they call home. According to Pew, an overwhelming majority of self-identified liberals say they prefer high-density city living; condos or smaller houses; walkable, diverse neighborhoods near public transportation; and proximity to museums and theaters. Self-described conservatives say they like less-crowded rural or suburban communities with larger single-family homes, abundant parking, ample places of worship, and not so many people of color.⁹³

⁹² Aranau Busquets Guardia, "How Brexit Vote Broke Down."

⁹³ "Political Polarization in the American Public" (2014, June 12). Pew Research Center, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

People also want to fit in, to feel at home. Even those who like to let their freak flag fly prefer not to hoist their colors alone. High Openness people seem to inherently enjoy urban amenities. But once a critical mass of like-minded personalities has established a beachhead in an area, the fact of their congregation becomes a further desirable amenity. As the community collectively modifies its environs to better suit its shared tastes—painting murals, launching food trucks, opening Waldorf schools—a psychocultural form of Tiebout/Schelling sorting ramps up, attracting the foot votes of simpatico location shoppers, while driving out incumbent residents with the motive and means to flee a mounting sense of cultural mismatch. “There goes the neighborhood,” is a racist trope, but it’s not *only* about race.

A parallel process of self-reinforcing, niche customization also unfolds in suburbs and exurbs, as those who prefer suburban and exurban amenities go about tacking day cares onto churches, opening Chick-fil-A franchises, staffing up Costcos, and turning pastures into soccer fields. Because the personal dispositions that underlie preferences for residential amenities *also* underlie social attitudes and partisan preference, these sorting dynamics tend toward partisan clustering and segregation. As a consequence, it really does *look like* people self-select into communities on the basis of their partisan sympathies. And there’s likely *some* reality behind this appearance.

As Matt Motyl and co-authors have found, “Ideological fit affects migration tendencies, and ... the relationship is driven by people’s desire to satisfy their belonging needs.”⁹⁴ However, the larger body of evidence suggests partisan homophily plays at best a tiebreaking role in residential decisions. The desire to satisfy our need to belong by living near people who share our political bent tends to get swamped by other considerations, such as housing costs, commute times, proximity to “good” schools, and ethnic in-group favoritism.⁹⁵ In a study of the relative importance of “inadvertent” and “intentional” partisan residential sorting, James Gimpel and Iris Hui, political scientists at the University of Maryland and Stanford, write that “it is unlikely that a large proportion of people quite consciously move in order to live alongside copartisans, though some might. A considerably larger share

⁹⁴ Matt Motyl et al., “How Ideological Migration Geographically Segregates Groups,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 51 (March 2014): 1–14, James Gimpel and Iris Hui, “Seeking Politically Compatible Neighbors? The Role of Neighborhood Partisan Composition in Residential Sorting,” *Political Geography* 48 (Sept. 2015): 130–42..

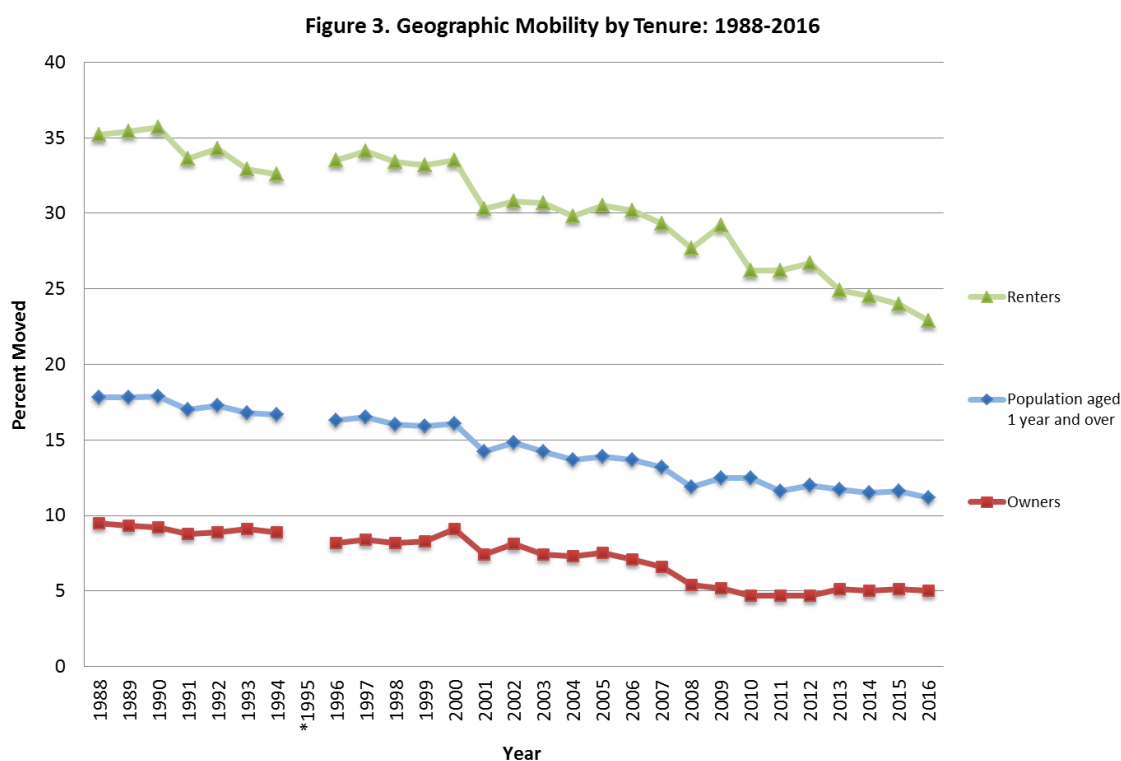
⁹⁵ Gregory J. Martin and Steven W. Webster, “Does Residential Sorting Explain Geographic Polarization?,” *Political Science Research and Methods*, October 22, 2018, 1–17.

evaluates potential destinations on the basis of features that just happen to be related to their partisan identity and to that of their prospective neighbors.”⁹⁶

Declining Mobility and the Psychology of Leavers and Stayers

It bears emphasizing that the psychology of eager leavers, reluctant urbanizers, and intransigent stayers is not so simple as liking experimental theater more or less than churches and big backyards. People don’t move that often, and Americans have been moving less and less.⁹⁷

Figure 17: American Geographic Mobility 1988–2016⁹⁸



* One-year migration data by tenure are not available for 1995.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1988-2016.

Staying put is the default for everybody—and increasingly so. This suggests that geographic sorting on personality is driven in the first instance by the

⁹⁶ James G. Gimpel and Iris Hui, “Inadvertent and Intentional Partisan Residential Sorting,” *The Annals of Regional Science* 58, no. 3 (May 1, 2017): 441–68.

⁹⁷ David Ihrke, “United States Mover Rate at a New Record Low,” Random Samplings (blog), U.S. Census Bureau (January 23, 2017). <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/01/mover-rate.html>.

⁹⁸ Source: U.S. Census Bureau

traits that make individuals more likely to overcome the inertia of established residence, and only secondarily by traits that make individuals *even more* averse to relocation. We can statistically isolate the effects of personality traits and the disposition to leave or stay, but they never work in isolation.

For example, high Conscientiousness, though it inclines toward conservatism, does not appear to be inherently anchoring. It bears no relationship one way or another to *wanting* to pick up and leave. It tends to hold people in place simply because most people intend to stay in place most of the time, and conscientious individuals are more likely to devise a clear plan and carry it out. Conscientiousness inclines individuals to the bourgeois conservatism of self-discipline, hard work, punctuality, reliable adherence to established norms, and predictable relationships between effort and reward. It's the personality trait most strongly associated with academic and professional achievement.⁹⁹ It's the temper behind the competent, steady-as-she-goes conservatism of Dwight Eisenhower and Mitt Romney, not the race-baiting, culture-war conservatism of Strom Thurmond and Donald Trump.

Conscientiousness is largely instrumental and amplifying, a workhorse that latches onto aims offered up by the ambient culture and other dimensions of personality. A person high in both Openness to Experience and Conscientiousness is likely to be less temperamentally liberal than a person high in Openness and low in Conscientiousness—less freewheeling, antinomian, and suspicious of authority. However, if gratifying the tastes of high Openness is on her agenda, the high-Conscientiousness liberal is more rather than less likely to use the preferred pronoun, plow through the challenging new novel, show up at the protest with a sign, book the trip to Nepal, and follow through on a desire to move.

But the practical valence of Conscientiousness is decidedly different when hitched to low Openness to Experience, which inclines individuals to the conservatism of stability, familiarity, inherited wisdom, satisfaction in the done thing, tribal loyalty, and wariness of change. The conservatism of low Openness predicts rootedness; the procedural conservatism of Conscientiousness tends to sink the roots deep. However, when the most thoroughly conservative personality type *does* feel drawn toward the city, her

⁹⁹ Daniel A. Briley et al., "Achievement-Relevant Personality: Relations with the Big Five and Validation of an Efficient Instrument," *Learning and Individual Differences* 32, no. 1 (May 17, 2014): 26–39; Meera Komarraju et al., "Role of the Big Five Personality Traits in Predicting College Students' Academic Motivation and Achievement," *Learning and Individual Differences* 19, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 47–52.

high Conscientiousness will raise the odds she'll actually go. And when she does go, or if she grew up there, she will be determined and exacting about separating herself from the things she doesn't like about cities.

Diversity is one of those things.

Ethnocentrism and Conservative Personality

Scores of studies have repeatedly demonstrated an association of low Openness with strong ethnic in-group favoritism and antipathy to ethnocultural diversity.¹⁰⁰ Openness is closely related to Kinder and Kam's "ethnocentrism" measure, which they construct from a battery of questions in the General Social Survey and the American National Election Studies that ask respondents about their beliefs and sentiments about various ethnic groups.¹⁰¹ Some individuals answer these questions in ways that exhibit no in-group favoritism while others exhibit intense in-group favoritism. On average, Americans are *mildly* ethnocentric, displaying just a bit of bias toward their in-groups. Again, people who are more positive about their in-group are not generally likely to be especially negative about other groups. However, very cool feelings (along with negative stereotypical beliefs) about specific outgroups are clear evidence of out-group hostility.

According to a recent study by psychologists at Australian National University, "[high] openness to experience was found to negatively predict ethnic prejudice, but as hypothesised, ethnocentrism fully mediated this relationship." They take this to suggest that "low openness to experience predisposes people to ethnocentric attitudes, which in turn predispose them to increased prejudice against ethnic outgroups."¹⁰²

Relatedly, low Openness and high Conscientiousness have both been found to relate to "racial resentment," an analytical construct devised specifically to measure the moralized attitudes of white Americans about their black compatriots after the civil rights movement, which had made the frank

¹⁰⁰ Chris G. Sibley and John Duckitt, "Personality and Prejudice: A Meta-Analysis and Theoretical Review," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 12, no. 3 (August 2008): 248–79.

¹⁰¹ Donald R. Kinder and Cindy D. Kam, *Us Against Them*.

¹⁰² Elizabeth Huxley et al., "The Role of Ethnocentrism in the Relationship between Openness to Experience and Ethnic Prejudice," in *Ethnic and Cultural Identity: Perceptions, Discrimination and Social Challenges*, ed. Adrienne D. Warner (New York: Nova Science Publishers Inc., 2015), 85–101.

expression of overtly racist attitudes less socially acceptable.¹⁰³ This relatively subdued and polite form of racism is most commonly seen in the interpretation of black poverty as a consequence of a “laziness” or failure of initiative and self-responsibility. The key to “racial resentment” is a drive to reinterpret out-group behavior related to a history of structural disadvantage in terms of the violation of broadly shared in-group norms.

The treatment of former San Francisco ‘49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick by conservative politicians and the right-wing media illustrates how this works. A black NFL player respectfully kneeling during the national anthem in protest of deadly, racially-biased police practices was recast as an ungrateful, disloyal, un-American attention hog expressing contempt for binding symbols of national identity, denying the value of law and order, and even (somehow) attacking “our troops.” This moral inversion has the rhetorical and cognitive effect of minimizing the salience of oppressive racial hierarchy and relieving its beneficiaries of culpability, all while justifying undeniable patterns of inequality by shifting responsibility to the racial out-group.

Christopher Federico and Rafael Aguilera explain the connection of racial resentment to the personality traits of dispositional conservatism this way:

Those low in openness are sensitive to violations of conventional values like self-reliance and are especially likely to show bias against out-groups thought to violate said values ... Individuals high in conscientiousness are sensitive to failures to attend to duty, delay gratification, and work hard—moral shortcomings highlighted by the RR [racial resentment] belief system. Thus, those high in conscientiousness are also likely to gravitate toward the intergroup judgmentalism implied by RR.¹⁰⁴

In short, temperamental conservatives have stronger preferences for ethnic sameness, and are more inclined to harbor antipathy to ethnic out-groups.

The Double Bind of Increasing Urban Diversity and Economic Concentration

As we’ve noted, the American population has become significantly more diverse since the late 1960s, and this increase in diversity is almost entirely

¹⁰³ Christopher M. Federico and Rafael Aguilera, “The Distinct Pattern of Relationships Between the Big Five and Racial Resentment Among White Americans,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 10, no. 2 (January 16, 2018).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

concentrated in large cities and their suburbs. Because those least inclined to move in the first place are also most inclined to ethnocentrism, we should expect increasing urban diversity to create additional resistance to urbanization among those most attached to smaller, whiter communities. We should also expect rising urban and suburban diversity to amplify the impulse of late-in-the-day white urbanizers to self-segregate into lower-density suburbs and exurbs.

To see why this should be so, recall that the filtering logic of self-selection on Openness suggests that lower-density origin populations should become more homogenously low-Openness/high-ethnocentrism over time, and that the average level of in-group favoritism/homophily in that population should rise with the economic incentives to migrate toward density. This is an important point worth re-emphasizing and drawing out.

As the wage bonus from education and urbanization has gone up and up (i.e., as the implicit tax on low-density rootedness continuously rises), it ought to have become more and more compelling—strong enough to become *finally* magnetically attractive—to individuals closer to the low-Openness/high-ethnocentrism end of the bell curve. Over decades and many millions of moves, the trend of lower and lower Openness individuals finally filtering out toward bigger cities should progressively reduce the average level of openness, and increase the average level of ethnocentrism, in lower density origin populations. It can be useful way to think of stronger in-group favoritism as willingness to pay more to avoid out-group contact. As we’ve noted, the rising size of the high-density wage premium amounts to an increasing implicit tax on low-density whites. However, as this population becomes lower-Openness over time, and thus less and less motivated to move in the first place, its average willingness to pay the tax should go up.

At the same time, for lower-Openness whites *already* averse to migration, increasing urban diversity makes migration to a city an even less appealing prospect; choosing to move to a multicultural city amounts to imposing a “diversity tax” on yourself. The higher an individual’s level of ethnocentrism, the more likely it will be that the size of the diversity tax wipes out the entire urbanization wage bonus. Indeed, rapidly rising housing costs have *already* wiped out much, if not all, of the education and density wage bonuses in the most expensive metros, which is why the richest, most productive cities have

net negative rates of domestic in-migration.¹⁰⁵ It's possible that these factors explain some portion of the steady slide in geographic mobility. We may plausibly suspect that selective urbanization has, over generations, progressively filtered out the lower-density population of white Americans at all inclined to seek their fortunes in and around the city, leaving behind a population that has become, on average, decreasingly disposed to migrate and increasingly averse to diversity.

Sorting on Ethnocentrism Sets the Stage for Populism

At this point, it won't come as a shock to hear that ethnocentrism and racial resentment both strongly predict negative attitudes toward immigration. Kinder and Kam find that, among whites and blacks, a high level of ethnocentrism strongly predicts support for reducing the rate of immigration, and it does so more strongly than other variables, such as a high level of "moral traditionalism" or a low level of "egalitarianism." The interesting wrinkle here is that for Hispanics and Asians—groups that identify as or with immigrants—ethnocentric in-group bias predicts *support* for immigration. Overall, however, ethnocentrism is a principal factor driving opposition to immigration. "Indeed," Kinder and Kam write, "... ethnocentrism emerges as the single most important determinant of American opposition to immigration—across time and setting and for various aspects of immigration policy."¹⁰⁶

Low-Openness/High Ethnocentrism and Out-Group Antipathy

Logically, ethnocentrism-driven opposition to immigration *could* occur without hostility to out-groups. As a matter of fact, out-group scorn is a big part of it. Kinder and Kam write:

Both in-group loyalty and out-group hostility make significant contributions to opinion on each and every aspect of immigration policy. Between the two, denigration of out-groups is consistently more important. But the main story is that both

¹⁰⁵ David Schleicher, "Stuck! The Law and Economics of Residential Stagnation," *Yale Law Journal* 127, no. 1 (October 2017): 78–154; Will Wilkinson, "The Republican Tax Act Could Turn Texas Blue," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/01/opinion/sunday/republican-taxes-texas-blue.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Donald R. Kinder and Cindy D. Kam, *Us Against Them*.

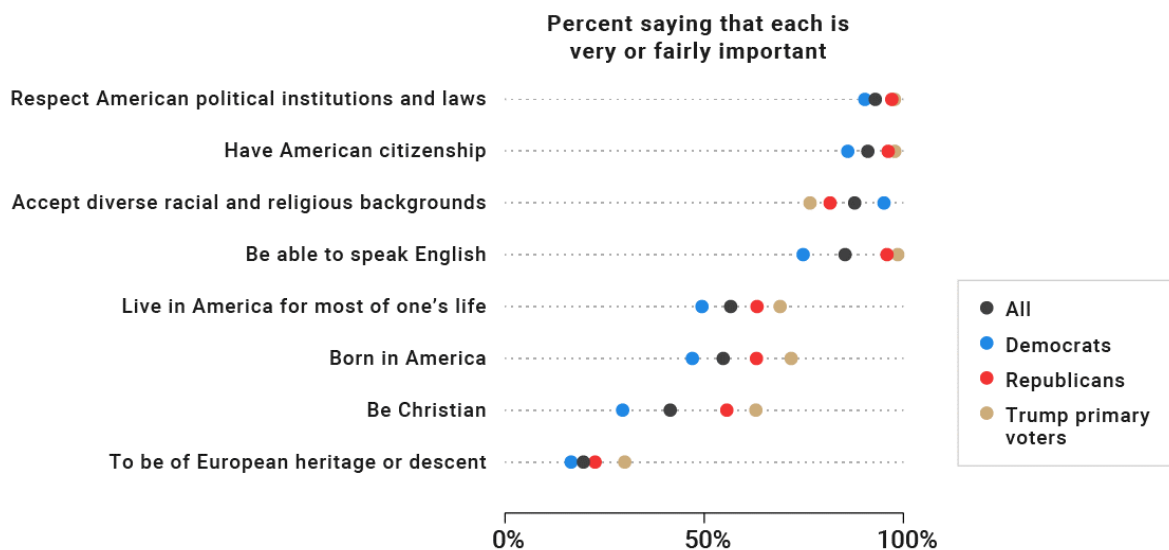
attachment to in-groups and disdain for out-groups figure importantly in opinion on immigration.¹⁰⁷

The racial resentment measure, intended to capture a dog-whistling form of white racism toward blacks, also turns out to strongly predicts views on immigration, which it *wasn't* intended to do. This suggests that “racial resentment” reflects a more general set of attitudes toward ethnic out-groups.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, there is reason to believe that the measure has come to capture something closer to the presence or absence of “racial sympathy”—a belief in the existence and unfairness of structural ethnic disadvantage and sense of compassion toward those who suffer from it. Accordingly, many scholars who use the “racial resentment” measure see it as a tool for gauging general “racial sympathy” and “racial conservatism.”

Strong ethnocentric attitudes are clearly visible among today’s Republican voters, and especially among Trump’s most ardent supporters, who are heavily rural.

Figure 18: Traits Important to American Identity:
Democrats, Republicans, and Trump Primary Voters¹⁰⁹

Importance of Criteria for Being American



¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

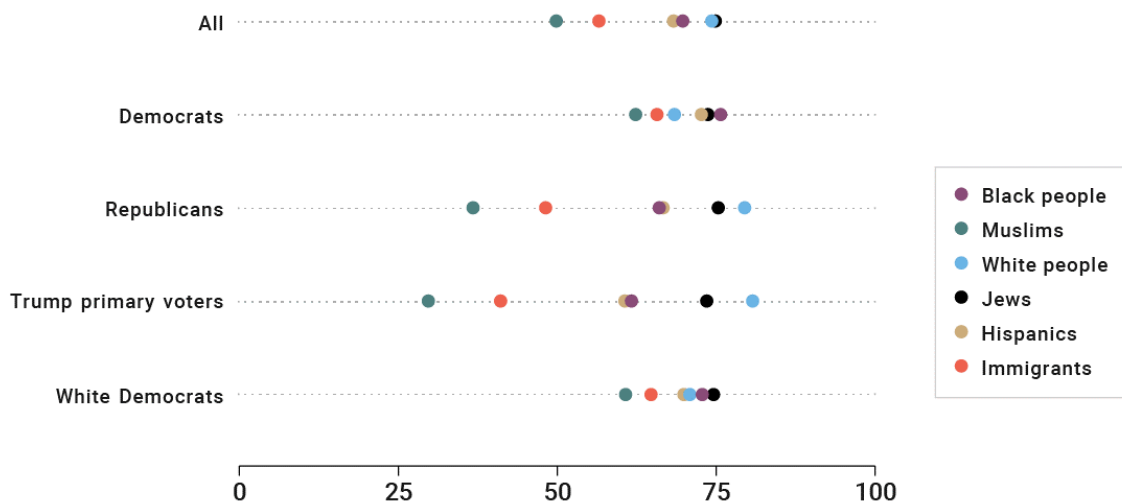
¹⁰⁸ Riley K. Carney and Ryan D. Enos, “Conservatism and Fairness in Contemporary Politics: Unpacking the Psychological Underpinnings of Modern Racism,” n.d., 42, <https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/rkcarney/files/carneyenos.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ Source: John Sides, “Race, Religion, and Immigration in 2016,” Democracy Fund Voter Study Group

Most Republicans say you need to be a Christian nonimmigrant to count as a full-fledged member of the national in-group. And these views were *especially* prevalent among Trump primary supporters. Figure 19, drawn from the same study illustrates patterns in *feelings* about various groups measured on a 0-to-100, cool-to-warm “feeling thermometer” scale.

Figure 19: Warmth of feelings toward social groups by party and party sub-group¹¹⁰

Feelings About Social Groups



Ethnocentrism and “Economic Anxiety” Explanations of Populism

A standard explanation among pundits and political scientists is that the draw of populist immigration hawkery is largely a knock-on effect of “economic anxiety.” Drawing on a large historical dataset of attitudes about immigration and economic conditions at the state and zip-code level, however, Steven V. Miller, a Clemson political scientist, finds that “racial resentment is reliably the largest and most precise predictor of attitudes toward immigration,” while indicators of “economic anxiety” have at best a weak effect in predicting anti-immigration politics.¹¹¹ Miller devises a model rigged to favor an economic explanation of anti-immigration attitudes, yet “a standard deviation increase in racial resentment is still a greater magnitude effect than all ‘economic anxiety’ proxies combined.”

¹¹⁰ Source: John Sides, “Race, Religion, and Immigration in 2016,” Democracy Fund Voter Study Group.

¹¹¹ Steven V. Miller, “Economic Anxiety or Racial Resentment? An Evaluation of Attitudes Toward Immigration in the U.S. From 1992 to 2016,” August 12, 2018, <https://github.com/svmiller/earr>.

In other words, poor economic conditions and related worries do predict an uptick in anti-immigration opinion, but the size of this effect is quite small compared to Openness-related attitudes about race. Moreover, as other scholars have noted, the causality seems to go in the other direction.

Michael Tesler, a political scientist at UC Irvine, has noted the truly striking fact that before Obama was elected president, racial resentment/sympathy measures didn't predict dissatisfaction with the economy, but after he was elected they did.¹¹² And, as Federico and Aguilera show, Obama having taken office increased measured racial resentment *most* in individuals high in Conscientiousness and low in Openness to Experience—that is, among temperamental social conservatives.¹¹³

All this strongly suggests that the resolute inertial resistance to novelty and change that is characteristic of low-Openness, high-Conscientiousness white Americans has been amplified by the ethnocentric tendencies of the same personality traits, which has, in turn, bred hostility to increasingly multicultural cities. The ethnic in-group sentiments common among urbanization-resistant temperamental conservatives create the possibility that opportunistic politicians will seek to activate them to gain and keep power through racial demagoguery, fomenting divisive mutual hostility and social distrust. Donald Trump clearly capitalized on this possibility.

The ethnocentric tendencies of lower density, temperamentally conservative, white Republican voters are clearly quite strong in their own right. Economic woes aren't necessary to set them off. Nevertheless, there is abundant reason to suspect that “economic anxiety,” produced in large measure by the sorting dynamic of urbanization, has contributed mightily to polarization, and has dried the tinder that Donald Trump lit.

VI. Sorting on Education and the Great Divergence

The idea that attraction to Trump's ethnonationalist populism was driven primarily by “racial resentment” rather than “economic anxiety” has congealed into a consensus piece of wisdom among data-driven wonks. And there's a good reason for that: it's true—as far as it goes.

¹¹² Michael Tesler, *Most Racial or Post-Racial: Race and Politics in the Obama Era* (University of Chicago Press, 2016); John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck, *Identity Crisis*.

¹¹³ Federico and Aguilera, “The Distinct Pattern of Relationships Between the Big Five and Racial Resentment Among White Americans.”

However, ethnocentrism is a disposition, like kindness or aggressiveness; it's not always an active motivating force. A settled disposition can supply powerful motivation—or lay largely dormant and untapped. You might be unusually aggressive by disposition, but if you're rarely threatened or challenged, it may rarely show. Dispositions are *activated* by changes in our circumstances—or, more precisely, by the interpretations we impose on changes in the practical contexts in which we're embedded. Indeed, the powerful role that ethnocentrism plays in political opinion and behavior is so clear *because* of its latency and contextual variability.

The fact that Obama's election to the presidency increased measured racial resentment most among white Americans with the personality traits most strongly correlated with racial resentment, and that it was only at this juncture that racial resentment began to predict economic dissatisfaction among conservative white voters, tells us something important. It tells us, for one thing, that an African-American in the Oval Office increased the political salience of racial identity, triggering latent ethnocentric attitudes among conservative white Americans, which then drove them to adopt a darker view of their material prospects than they likely would have done had under John McCain, a white Republican.¹¹⁴ A black Democrat moving his family into the White House may not have been a sterling basis upon which to conclude that the economy was worse than conservatives had thought, but sometimes we stumble onto the correct conclusion for bad reasons.

There's every reason to think economic conditions across broad swaths of low-density America have long been objectively poor, then abject (the Great Recession was not mild), and then recovered very little in rural regions by 2015, leaving the ethnocentrism of temperamental conservative whites ripe for further activation. Indeed, "economic anxiety" and nonurban white unease about the browning of America appear to be intrinsically related facets of the population-sorting effects of selective urbanization, not rival explanations.

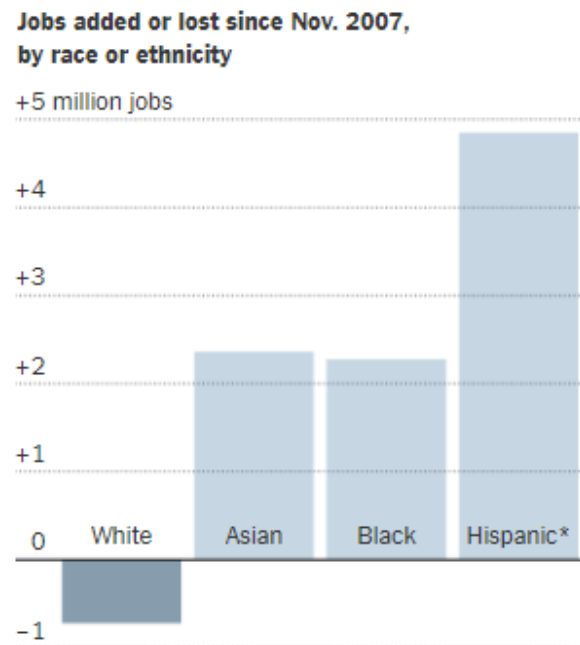
Regional Economic Divergence and "Deaths of Despair"

Writing in the *New York Times*, Eduardo Porter observed that "whites ages 25 to 54 lost some 6.5 million jobs more than they gained" between the onset of

¹¹⁴ John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck, "Hunting Where the Ducks Are: Activating Support for Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican Primary," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 28, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 135–56; Federico and Aguilera, "The Distinct Pattern of Relationships Between the Big Five and Racial Resentment Among White Americans."

the recession and the recovery up to 2016. “Hispanics in their prime, by contrast, gained some three million jobs net, Asians 1.5 million and blacks one million.”¹¹⁵ The difference is largely due to the fact that the nonurban areas, where the jobs *aren’t*, are mainly populated by whites.

Figure 21: Net employment gains by ethnicity since 2007¹¹⁶



However, as critics of the “economic anxiety” diagnosis of Trump’s rise have been quick to point out, Hillary Clinton won handily among voters facing objectively greater economic hardship than those who went for Trump—the average Trump voter was just a typical Romney-voting Republican. The worst-off classes of voters are disproportionately urban people of color, who vote heavily for Democrats. White Americans, for their part, have long enjoyed lower rates of poverty and unemployment than have nonwhites, are more likely to be relatively wealthy, and wealthy voters are more likely to favor Republicans than Democrats.

¹¹⁵ Eduardo Porter, “Where Were Trump’s Votes? Where the Jobs Weren’t,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 2018, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/business/economy/jobs-economy-voters.html>.

¹¹⁶ Source: *The New York Times* using Economic Cycle Research Institute Data <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/business/economy/jobs-economy-voters.html>

Yet it remains that Trump's victory was largely due to his success in attracting enough party-switchers and less active voters to clinch a few razor's edge races in Midwestern and Great Lakes states. And many of these critical areas were not in blooming economic health. As Ben Casselman insightfully noted at *FiveThirtyEight*, "Factoring in the strong opposition to Trump among most racial and ethnic minorities, Trump significantly outperformed Romney in counties where residents had lower credit scores and in counties where more men have stopped working."¹¹⁷ And, he continues, "the list goes on":

More subprime loans? More Trump support. More residents receiving disability payments? More Trump support. Lower earnings among full-time workers? More Trump support. "Trump Country" ... isn't the part of America where people are in the worst financial shape; it's the part of America where their economic prospects are on the steepest decline.¹¹⁸

Recall that the number of counties Hillary Clinton won in 2016 was considerably smaller than the number Al Gore won in 2000, yet Clinton's smaller county-level yield nevertheless accounted for a larger share of America's GDP than Gore's did two decades ago, *and* garnered her a larger popular vote victory. This astounding pattern reflects the combined effect of increasing partisan polarization on population density and ongoing concentration of economic production in populous metro regions.

Regional Economic Divergence and Geographic Self-Selection on Education

For many decades before the 1980s, living standards in poorer areas had been steadily converging with those in wealthier areas. But catch-up growth stalled toward the beginning of the Reagan administration when growth in employment and economic output shifted away from manufacturing (and further still from agriculture) toward services and "knowledge work" based on new information and communications technologies. Since then, gaps in regional productivity, living standards, and the ability of local economies to bounce back from economic contraction and job loss have been widening year

¹¹⁷ Ben Casselman, "Stop Saying Trump's Win Had Nothing To Do With Economics," *FiveThirtyEight* (blog), January 9, 2017, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/stop-saying-trumps-win-had-nothing-to-do-with-economics/>.

¹¹⁸ Casselman.

after year. The Berkeley labor economist Enrico Moretti calls this “the Great Divergence,” and there’s no end to the divergence in sight.¹¹⁹

The core of the problem, Moretti emphasizes, is that “good jobs” were previously widely geographically distributed, but gradually became concentrated in the best-educated cities through a positive feedback loop between “human capital” and the hotspots of the new economy’s rising sectors. The flipside of the equation is that the flight of educated workers from regional economies reliant on flagging industries has led to relative stagnation or self-reinforcing spirals of decline in those places.

The basic economic story driving the Great Divergence is now well-understood. Transformative innovation in computing and other technologies turned out to be “skill-biased,” as the economists say, meaning that they increased productivity more for better-educated workers. For example, a worker who can write code that marginally improves the speed and accuracy of hundreds of assembly-line robots that produce millions of units can raise widget output more in a few months, for far less money, than adding hundreds of new factory workers. Firms that efficiently coordinate this kind of knowledge work have therefore come to be more valuable than most firms solely devoted to physical widget-making.

The skill bias of new technology has bid up demand for workers with college degrees, raising the college-wage premium. However, the rising diploma bonus has not induced more young Americans to go to college at a rate sufficient to keep pace with labor-market demand. The shortfall in workers with technology-complementary skills has therefore deepened, further raising the labor-market return to higher education and leading to a rapidly widening income gap between more- and less-educated workers.¹²⁰

Productivity growth in the “information economy” has come to depend less on the manufacture of physical wares and more on the creation of economically valuable ideas, which is encouraged by packing large numbers of highly educated and experienced knowledge workers close together.¹²¹ Far from spelling the “death of distance,” the information economy has instead increased the payoff to economic “agglomeration,” supplying yet another

¹¹⁹ Moretti, *The New Geography of Jobs*.

¹²⁰ Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, *The Race Between Education and Technology* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹²¹ Paul M Romer, “Endogenous Technological Change,” *Journal of Political Economy*, n.d., 32; Paul M Romer, “Economic Growth,” Econlib, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/EconomicGrowth.html>.

boost to the productivity and wages of the highly educated in cities with densely populated clusters of specialized knowledge workers.¹²² As these clusters grow, their efficiencies rise, making the cities fortunate enough to have them progressively more “magnetic” to educated workers.

Cities and towns with the “wrong” mix of industries are thereby slowly drained of the high-skilled workers on which growth increasingly depends. The spatial sorting on education that drives the Great Divergence has been a major blow not only to big, heavy-industry Rustbelt manufacturing hubs, but also to many of the small- and medium-sized towns that anchor America’s rural economies. Consequently, wage growth has been low or non-existent for the (mainly white) middle- and lower-income families outside big urban centers.

Population Density, Economic Vitality, and Education

Today, “the typical household income in the richest 20 percent of counties is more than twice that in the poorest 20 percent, and the gap has increased noticeably since 1980,” write Ryan Nunn, Jana Parsons, and Jay Shambaugh of the Hamilton Project. The result is that Americans in economically weaker areas are far more likely to live in poverty, suffer health problems, die early, and lack a job. “In the lowest performing fifth of counties,” the Hamilton authors write, “33 percent of prime-age adults are not employed—nearly double the rate of the best performing places.”¹²³

Nunn, Parsons, and Shambaugh have devised a county-level “Vitality Index” combining weighted measures of poverty, life expectancy, housing vacancy, unemployment, and the employment-to-population ratio from 1980 to 2016. The fifth of the American population living in counties with the highest share of rural population suffer the lowest levels of vitality—and by a long shot.¹²⁴ Considered in terms of population density, the average economic health of counties between 20–50 people per square mile is particularly dismal. Of the

¹²² Edward L. Glaeser, ed., *Agglomeration Economics*, National Bureau of Economic Research Conference Report (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010); Edward Glaeser, *Triumph of the City* (Penguin Books, 2012); Paul R. Krugman, *Development, Geography, and Economic Theory*, The Ohlin Lectures 6 (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995).

¹²³ Ryan Nunn, Jana Parsons, and Jay Shambaugh, “The Geography of Prosperity” (The Hamilton Project, September 2018).

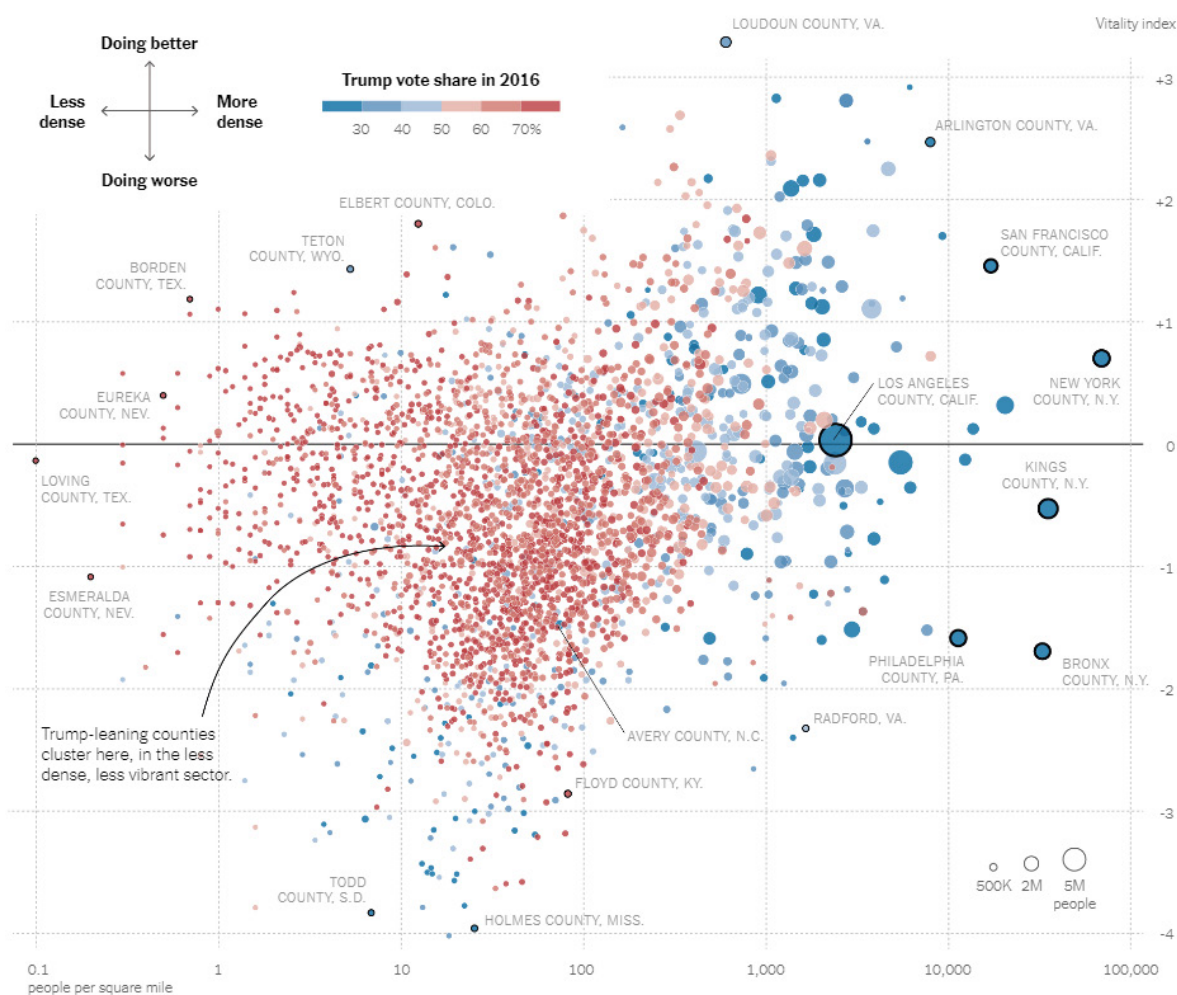
¹²⁴ If you were to order America’s counties on a list from highest to lowest rural population share and run down the list until the combined population of the counties amounts to a fifth of the national population, that’s the “most rural” quintile.

counties below -2 on the Hamilton vitality index, about 2/3 are mainly rural, and nearly all of them are majority-Republican.¹²⁵

Figure 22: County-level Economic Vitality, Population Density, and 2016 Trump Vote Share¹²⁶

Red, Rural and Struggling

There are almost seven times as many lagging rural counties where Donald Trump won more than half of the votes in 2016 than similar counties that voted for Hillary Clinton.



Note: Lagging counties are those with a negative vitality index, which measures economic and social well-being. Rural counties are those with a population density below 100 people per square mile. The horizontal axis is scaled so percentage changes are comparable. - Sources: Hamilton Project (vitality index), M.I.T. Election Lab (vote shares), Census Bureau (population density) - By Sahil Chinoy/The New York Times

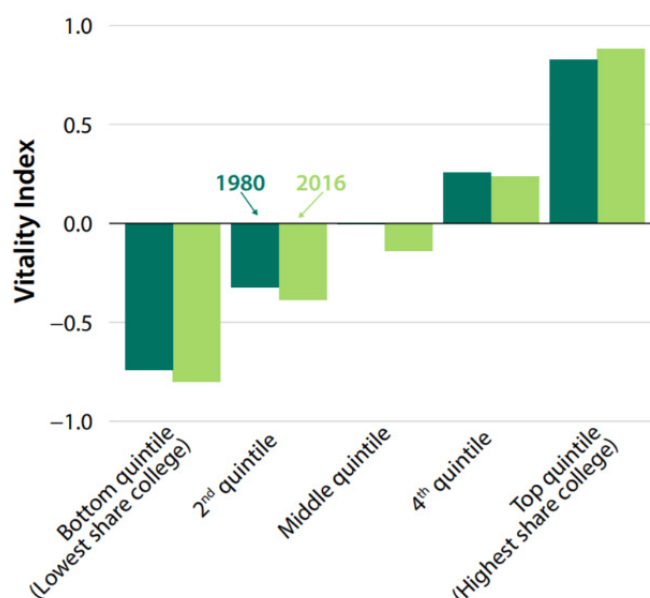
¹²⁵ Will Wilkinson, "Has Trump Handed Democrats an Opening in Red America?," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/23/opinion/trump-rural-america.html>.

¹²⁶ Source: Chart by Sahil Chinoy in Will Wilkinson, "Has Trump Handed Democrats an Opening in Red America?," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/23/opinion/trump-rural-america.html>.

Significantly, no variable is more strongly correlated with county-level economic vitality than average educational attainment. As Moretti observes, “the sorting of highly educated Americans into some communities and less educated Americans into others tends to magnify and exacerbate all other socioeconomic differences,” including widening regional inequalities in health and mortality.

Figure 22: Vitality Index by quintile of college attainment, 1980 and 2016¹²⁷

FIGURE 11B.
Vitality Index by Quintile of College Attainment,
1980 and 2016



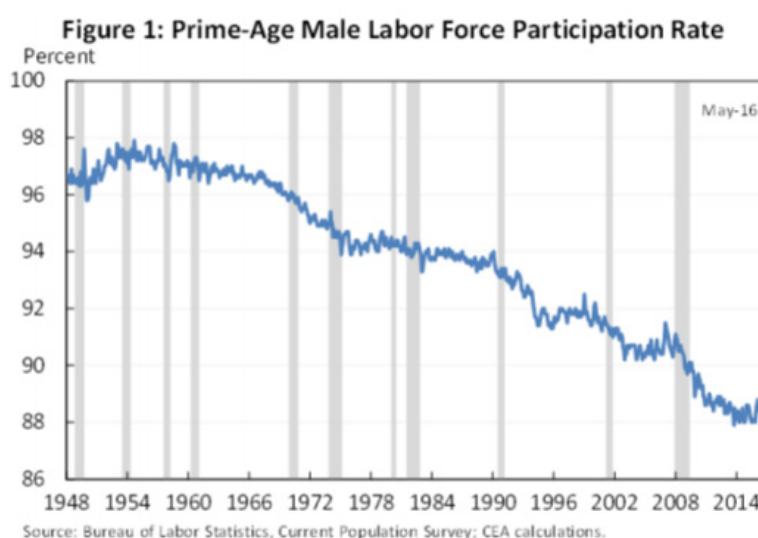
The Great Divergence means stagnant or declining wage income in many of the most stoutly Republican areas of the country. But income is only part of the story of declining regional economic vitality and household material security. There’s also wealth, which Americans tend to store in their houses. However, home equity suffers mightily in smaller towns and cities that are depopulating as wealthier, better-educated residents flee to flourishing bigger cities in pursuit of the “good jobs.” By 2016, much of the country still had not recovered from the housing crisis, and the pattern of the Great Divergence suggests much of it will never recover.

¹²⁷ Source: Nunn, Parson, Shambaugh, “The Geography of Prosperity.”

This drop in housing wealth seems to have boosted Trump’s electoral fortunes. As Michela Zonta, Sarah Edelman, and Colin McArthur of the Center for American Progress have observed, counties that shifted from Obama in 2012 to Trump in 2016 had unusually high rates of negative home equity, which casts more than a financial pall over struggling families.¹²⁸ “This erosion of housing wealth,” they write, “means that a homeowner cannot draw on home equity to start a small business, send a child to college, handle a family emergency, or move to a more advantageous location. For homeowners, this can result not only in economic harm but also in a feeling that their way of life is slipping away.”

For those of us without rich parents, income, homeownership and other forms of wealth accumulation depend primarily on steady, gainful employment. But working-age men, in particular, have been dropping out of the workforce at an alarming rate. According to the White House Council of Economic Advisers, the labor-force participation rate for prime-age men decreased from 98 percent in 1954 to 88 percent in 2016—the second largest decrease among any of the OECD countries.¹²⁹

Figure 24: U.S. prime-age male labor force participation rate, 1948–2014¹³⁰



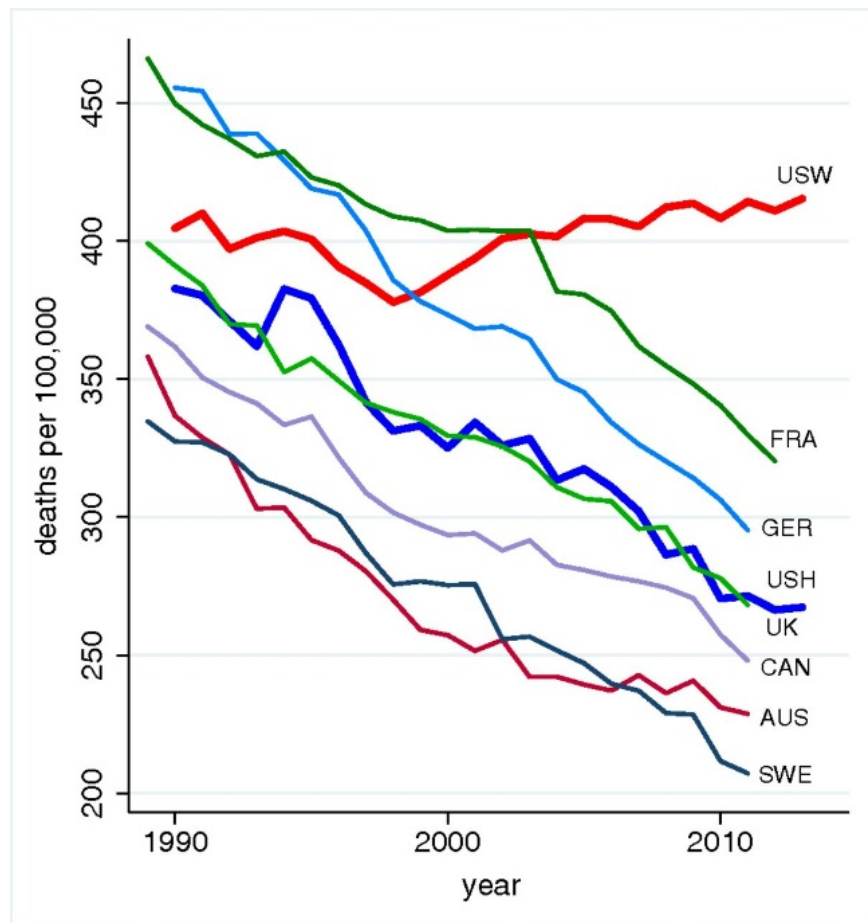
¹²⁸ Michela Zonta, Sarah Edelman, and Colin McArthur, “The Role of Midwestern Housing Instability in the 2016 Election,” Center for American Progress, November 29, 2016, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/news/2016/11/29/293816/the-role-of-midwestern-housing-instability-in-the-2016-election/>.

¹²⁹ White House Council of Economic Advisors, “The Long-Term Decline of Prime-Age Male Labor Force Participation,” June 2016, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/page/files/20160620_primeage_male_lfp_cea.pdf.

¹³⁰ Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Whatever the ultimate explanation of this drop, joblessness often entails a demoralizing loss of status and social esteem, and a mood of disquiet can pervade communities thick with enervated ex-workers, touching even the securely and prosperously employed. The unsettling loss of a sense of purpose and dignity that so often accompanies permanent joblessness surely plays a central role in Anne Case and Angus Deaton's shocking recent finding of "a marked increase in the all-cause mortality of middle-aged white non-Hispanic men and women in the United States between 1999 and 2013."¹³¹

Figure 25: Mortality rates in six countries and U.S whites (USW) and Hispanics (USH): Individuals aged 45–54 years¹³²



¹³¹ Anne Case and Angus Deaton, "Rising Morbidity and Mortality in Midlife among White Non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 49 (December 8, 2015): 15078, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1518393112>.

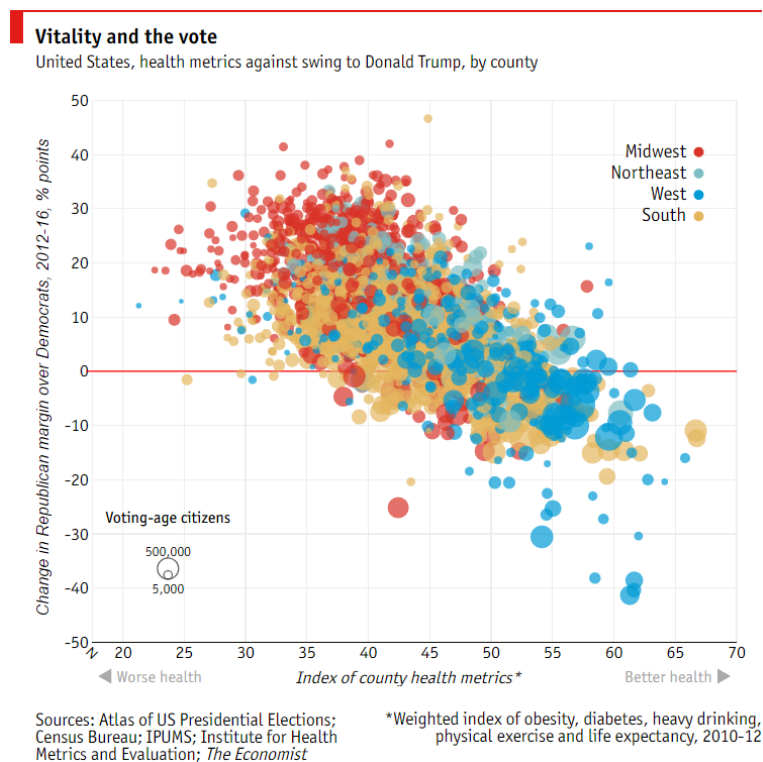
¹³² Source: Anne Case and Angus Deaton, "Rising Morbidity and Mortality in Midlife among White Non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century."

This rise in “deaths of despair,” as Case and Deaton call them,

... reversed decades of progress in mortality and was unique to the United States; no other rich country saw a similar turnaround. ... This increase for whites was largely accounted for by increasing death rates from drug and alcohol poisonings, suicide, and chronic liver diseases and cirrhosis. Although all education groups saw increases in mortality from suicide and poisonings, and an overall increase in external cause mortality, those with less education saw the most marked increases.

The higher the death rate from overdose and suicide in Rust Belt areas, the more Trump tended to outperform Romney. *The Economist* found that the most significant factor predicting Trump’s gains over Romney was an area’s percentage of whites without college education. The second most significant was an index of public health metrics.¹³³

Figure 26: Change in GOP vote share from 2012–16 against an index of public health¹³⁴

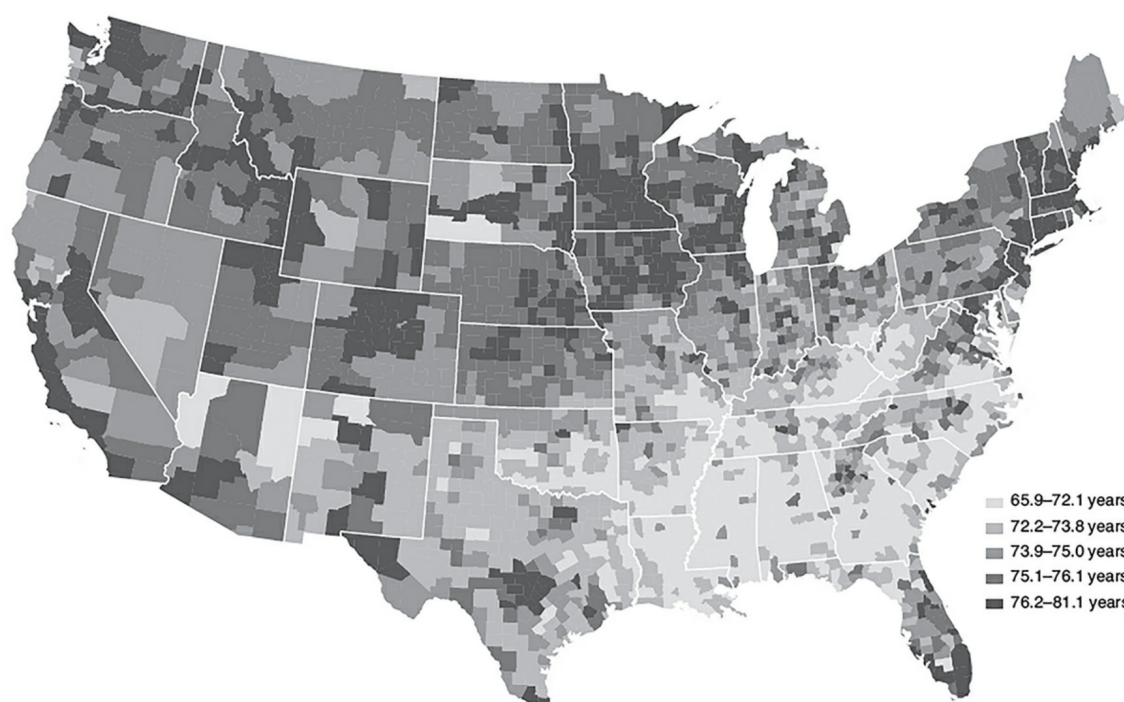


¹³³ “Illness as Indicator,” *The Economist*, November 19, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2016/11/19/illness-as-indicator>

¹³⁴ Source: *The Economist*, “Illness as an indicator.”

These factors aren't unrelated. In addition to making more money, better-educated Americans are more likely to eat well, exercise, and refrain from smoking. Consequently, as Moretti notes, "the growing gap in education and income between the brain hubs and the rest of the country is a probable driver of the divergence in life expectancy."¹³⁵

Figure 27: U.S. Male Life-Expectancy by County¹³⁶



But geographic sorting on education has an additional effect on health beyond the mere correlation with education. The evidence suggests, Moretti writes, that "poorly educated individuals who live in a community where everyone else has low levels of education are likely to adopt less healthy lifestyles than poorly educated individuals in a community where there is a mix of educational and income levels."¹³⁷ Norms around food, exercise, and obesity can be socially contagious, and it appears that this may have political consequences.¹³⁸ Controlling for local share of non-college whites in the

¹³⁵ Moretti, *The New Geography of Jobs*.

¹³⁶ Source: Enrico Moretti, *The New Geography of Jobs*, Map 4.

¹³⁷ Moretti.

¹³⁸ Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler, "Social Contagion Theory: Examining Dynamic Social Networks and Human Behavior," *Statistics in Medicine* 32, no. 4 (February 20, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1002/sim.5408>.

population, “the better physical shape a county’s residents are in, the worse Mr Trump did relative to Mr Romney,” *The Economist* reports. “[T]he specific subset of Mr Trump’s voters that won him the election—those in counties where he outperformed Mr Romney by large margins—live in communities that are literally dying.”¹³⁹

Of course, these counties aren’t representative of the larger Republican base. However, the sorting on education responsible for the Great Divergence largely accounts for the relative material insecurity of white Americans who dwell in lower-density areas of the country. Because this geographic sorting on educational attainment is, like sorting on ethnicity, correlated with partisan sorting, it helps us understand the nature of the density divide.

Sorting on Education and the “Diploma Divide”

In the 2018 midterm elections, 53 percent of college-educated white voters cast votes for Democrats compared with 37 percent of those without a degree.¹⁴⁰ The strongly Democratic tilt of college-educated whites, and the overwhelming Republican tilt of non-college whites, are very recent developments, which are due in large measure to the clarity of the signal that Obama’s blackness, and elite conservative reaction to it, sent to voters about party positioning on race and civil rights.

The slow drift of Southern whites out of the Democratic Party after the passage of the Civil Rights Act is a well-known story.¹⁴¹ However, less-educated whites in the rest of the country stuck with the Democratic Party far longer. Many working-class whites, particularly in the manufacturing regions of the Northeast and Midwest, were either labor union members, or members of families with a history of union and Democratic Party loyalty. Party attachment is fairly “sticky” over generations, so Democratic affiliation tended to linger among non-southern working-class whites, even as union membership declined and intergenerational union loyalty faded. Because college-educated whites had long favored Republican, the split partisan loyalties of working-class whites meant that there was no clear “diploma divide.” Obama’s presidency changed that.

¹³⁹ “Illness as Indicator.”

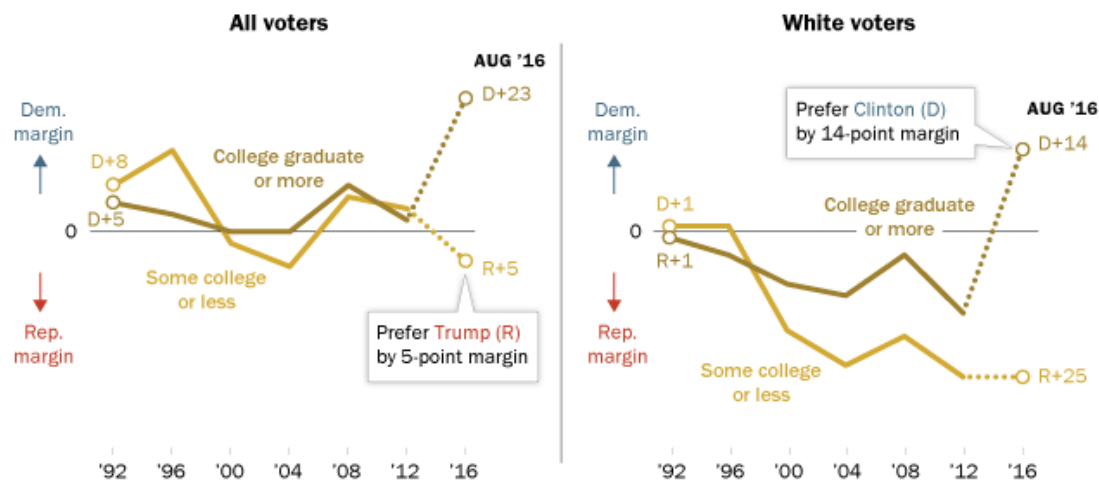
¹⁴⁰ Adam Harris, “The Education Gap That Explains American Politics,” accessed March 29, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/11/education-gap-explains-american-politics/575113/>.

¹⁴¹ Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (Yale University Press, 2018).

Figure 28: Educational attainment and party preference in presidential elections:
1992–2016¹⁴²

A widening educational divide in presidential preferences

Presidential candidate preference, by educational attainment



Note: Based on registered voters.

Source: Survey conducted Aug. 9-16, 2016. 1992-2012 data from national exit polls.

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Ethnocentric reaction to a black Democrat in the White House largely explains why, by the time of the 2016 election, the parties has become more neatly sorted on race *and* education. As John Sides, Michael Tesler and Lynn Vavreck report in their book, *Identity Crisis: the 2016 Election and the Battle for Meaning in America*:

[D]uring the Obama era, whites were leaving the Democratic Party. In Pew Research Center surveys from 2007, whites were just as likely to call themselves Democrats as they were to call themselves Republicans. But by 2010, whites were 12 points more likely to be Republicans than Democrats (51% versus 39%)... White flight from the Democratic Party occurred almost entirely among whites without a college degree.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Source: Pew Research Center, "A widening educational divide in presidential preferences."

¹⁴³ Sides, et al., *Identity Crisis*.

“Obama’s presidency simplifies the politics of race,” Tesler has noted. “If you were a low-educated white, you were much more likely to know about the partisan differences on race [after Obama] than you were before.”¹⁴⁴

However, as Tesler has pointed out, “the negative effects of education on white support for Trump *vanishes* after accounting for attitudes about both African Americans and immigrants.”¹⁴⁵ In light of the size the diploma divide, this is just another way of saying, as Tesler puts it, that “College-educated whites and whites who live in highly educated areas of the country have long been much more racially tolerant than other white Americans.”

This straightforwardly suggests that whites who don’t attend and complete college are typically more ethnocentric and lower in Openness than whites who do. But why? In short, because the same traits that predict higher geographic mobility and lower ethnocentrism also predict self-selection into higher education.

Higher Education Selects on Openness

We’ve already examined some of the reasons why this makes sense. First, going to college typically involves moving away from family and childhood friends, but lower Openness individuals are least likely to *want* to migrate. Second, college campuses are relatively diverse, which more ethnocentric individuals find less attractive. Additionally, colleges and universities, and the communities around them, are among the most culturally liberal places in the country, which can make them an uncomfortable ideological fit for dispositional conservatives with a strong general inclination toward homophily.

But that’s not all. Higher Openness is moderately correlated with higher IQ, which predicts academic achievement and success in college. Moreover, a large part of Openness to Experience *just is* intellectual curiosity and the motivation to learn. The psychologists Michael O’Connell and Hammad Sheikh find that “people who succeed in entering institutions of higher education are typically likely to be in the top range of openness...”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Michael Tesler, “The Education Gap among Whites This Year Wasn’t about Education. It Was about Race,” Washington Post, November 16, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/11/16/the-education-gap-among-whites-this-year-wasnt-about-education-it-was-about-race/>.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Michael O’Connell and Hammad Sheikh, “‘Big Five’ Personality Dimensions and Social Attainment: Evidence from beyond the Campus,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 50, no. 6 (April 1, 2011): 828–33.

Controlling for IQ, higher Openness does not predict good grades as strongly as Conscientiousness.¹⁴⁷ But high Openness *does* appear to predict self-selection into higher education and a higher level of educational attainment.¹⁴⁸ “[W]hile being conscientious and well-organized may be helpful within institutions of higher education, for general educational attainment, traits that lay the foundations within which knowledge and skills can be acquired (i.e. openness and emotional stability), may be more important,” write O’Connell and Sheikh.¹⁴⁹

In addition to supplying motivation to learn, Openness to Experience contributes to the tendency to imaginatively envision and desire a kind life different from the one we grew up in. This may be particularly important in driving college completion for less-privileged individuals whose parents did not go to college. Shelly Lundberg, a labor economist at UC Santa Barbara, finds that “Conscientiousness, which has been linked in past research to school success, has no significant impact on the education of disadvantaged men, while openness to experience is an important correlate of college graduation only for less-advantaged men and women.”¹⁵⁰

Last, the concentration of economic opportunity in the largest cities has made it increasingly difficult to fully capitalize on the college wage bonus in homogenously white smaller towns and cities. Because the prospect of moving to a multicultural city to cash in on the income premium to higher education is likely to be least attractive to those who are least inclined to move toward dense diversity, the expected payoff to a college degree is likely to be less compelling to those individuals.

Again, this isn’t *only* a sorting story. Higher education appears to increase Openness to Experience and temper ethnocentric impulses. However, because those with weaker ethnocentric impulses are *already* more likely to seek and complete college degrees, selection in and out of higher education may have an additional polarizing effect on racial attitudes, leaving better-educated

¹⁴⁷ Arthur E. Poropat, “A Meta-Analysis of the Five-Factor Model of Personality and Academic Performance,” *Psychological Bulletin* 135, no. 2 (2009): 322–38.

¹⁴⁸ Shelly Lundberg, “The College Type: Personality and Educational Inequality,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 31, no. 3 (2013): 421–41.

¹⁴⁹ O’Connell and Sheikh, “‘Big Five’ Personality Dimensions and Social Attainment,” *Ibid.*; Sophie von Stumm, Benedikt Hell, and Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, “The Hungry Mind: Intellectual Curiosity Is the Third Pillar of Academic Performance,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6, no. 6 (November 2011): 574–88.

¹⁵⁰ Lundberg, “The College Type,” *Ibid.*

whites even more racially tolerant, and less averse to urbanization, than they'd be if they hadn't gone to college.

Pulling the Strands Together

This is a complicated story with a lot of moving pieces. Let's zoom out to the bigger picture and look at how all these elements fit together. The Great Divergence is largely the result of the increasing magnetic pull of dense, diverse cities on better-educated individuals, and the positive and negative economic feedback loops this creates. But better-educated individuals are more likely to be higher in Openness to Experience and therefore less inclined to in-group favoritism and out-group hostility. As less dense, more uniformly white places have become comparatively less educated—both because of the movement of people with college degrees toward large cities *and* the relative disinclination of lower-Openness individuals to seek and complete those degrees—they have also become relatively poorer *and* more ethnocentric on average. Over the same period, the presidency of a black Democrat accelerated the sorting of these less-urbanized, materially struggling, lower-education, higher-ethnocentrism whites out of the Democratic Party and into the Republican Party, while shifting more-urbanized, higher-income, higher-education, lower-ethnocentrism whites out the GOP and into the Democratic Party.

This complex web of connections between Openness, level of education, tendency to migrate, tolerance of diversity, wages, regional economic performance, and party identification shows why working-class white “racial anxiety” and “economic anxiety” aren't really *rival* hypotheses about the appeal of Trump's ethnonationalist populism. They're deeply intertwined aspects of the *same story* about the information economy's intensification of urbanization's long-term spatial sorting of the population on ethnicity, personality, and education.

In the light of this story, it should not be surprising that the descent of most of the country's non-urban territory into the economic doldrums dried the ethnocentric kindling of its overwhelmingly white, less-educated, temperamentally conservative exurban and rural population. Nor is it really surprising (though it is very depressing) that the mere fact of Obama's blackness (emphasized at every turn by “birthers” like Trump) would throw a match into this tinderbox and drive less-educated, more ethnocentric whites

into the GOP, supplying the perfect conditions for a race-baiting demagogue to fan the flame into a populist inferno.

Uneven Growth Amplifies Polarization on the Density Divide

Consider three of the most robust findings in psychology and behavioral economics: (1) *the endowment effect*: we place extra value on things we have simply because we have them; (2) *loss aversion*: we are more pained by losses than buoyed by gains; and (3) *hedonic adaptation*: we quickly adjust to gains in material comfort and revert to our baseline level of subjective affect.

In his book, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*, the Harvard economist Benjamin Friedman draws on the relationship between business cycles and periods of social progress and retrenchment to offer a compelling argument that these psychological phenomena combine to create a powerful one-way ratchet effect.¹⁵¹ In the context of longstanding expectations of rising prosperity, a decrease in the rate of growth can seem like a painful loss, eliciting a propensity to jealously guard our holdings and advantages. We can become disposed to close the gates and bolt them, even if the economy, and each individual share, continues to grow. It follows, then, that actual economic stagnation or contraction will be even worse, and raise our competitive, zero-sum instincts from a simmer to a boil.

Zero-sum games—or tricks of the mind that lead us to believe we’re caught in one—bring out the worst in human beings. Friedman persuasively argues that the principal moral consequence of economic growth is that it transforms society into a “cooperative venture for mutual advantage,” to use John Rawls’s phrase, fostering social trust and inclusive tolerance born of a widespread sense that winners needn’t imply losers. This generous frame of mind, Friedman argues, subdues resistance to progressive social change in a way that tends to predict the success of political efforts to codify these changes in law.

Along similar lines, an enormous body of work drawing on the World Values Survey, inspired by Ronald Inglehart’s “post-modernization theory,” shows that increasing economic abundance reliably shifts whole cultures away from solidaristic “survival values”—which are adapted to conditions of relative scarcity, uncertainty, and danger—toward liberal-individualist “self-

¹⁵¹ Friedman, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*.

expression values,” which are oriented toward individual meaning-making through the realization of personal potential and identity, engagement with voluntary communities of affinity, and democratic political participation.

According to in Christian Welzel, a German political scientist, the upshot of this literature is that “fading existential pressures open people’s minds, making them prioritize freedom over security, autonomy over authority, diversity over uniformity, and creativity over discipline. By the same token, persistent existential pressures keep people’s minds closed...” Rising prosperity, which eases the anxieties of the scramble for material subsistence, is thus “the source of tolerance and solidarity beyond one’s in-group.”¹⁵²

When growth is broadly shared, it can nudge whole cultures in the direction of the individualism and egalitarianism of self-expression values. However, even a rising tide that lifts all boats can act as a moderately polarizing force if temperamental liberals are already more inclined than temperamental conservatives to move with the currents that pacify rivalrous, “us or them” antagonisms of the survival-value mindset. It follows, then, that a rising economic tide that disproportionately elevates the most liberal among us, while leaving tens of millions of conservatives treading water and gasping for air, could be *dramatically* polarizing.

The Great Divergence isn’t *only* economic, then. If “the existentially stressed state of mind is the source of discrimination and hostility against out-groups,” as Welzel maintains, and a mere slowdown in the rate of economic growth can *feel* like loss, as Friedman argues, then we ought to expect that *absolute* stagnation or decline that is spread widely across the lower-density population (a population *already* more strongly disposed to discrimination and hostility to out-groups) will activate and inflame these dispositions—*especially* when cities are booming in comparison, and becoming at once more brown *and* more liberal.

The sunny theory that economic growth is *broadly* liberalizing therefore breaks down in national populations well-sorted on race, personality, and education. Under the conditions of the density divide, which include the widening regional inequalities of the Great Divergence, the liberalizing material benefits of economic growth go primarily to our most vital big cities. But these places are home to the lion’s share of higher-Openness Americans,

¹⁵² Welzel, *Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation*.

who are *already* predisposed to liberal social attitudes. The progressive, positive-sum *zeitgeist* of rising self-expression values blows against the open door of the prospering multicultural metropolis, heightening its already inclusive, tolerant, cosmopolitan ethos.

At the same time, relative economic stagnation, or absolute material decline, encourages a zero-sum mindset of loss-minimization and defensive distributive conflict across the widely scattered population of relatively migration-resistant, lower-Openness, less-educated white Americans. Yet these temperamental conservatives are *already* comparatively wary of diversity and liberalizing cultural change. This polarization is exacerbated further by the fact that segregated, ideologically uniform groups tend to become more extreme over time, as Cass Sunstein and others have shown.¹⁵³

By concentrating diversity, human capital, innovation, and national economic output in enormous cities, the sorting logic of long-term urbanization has slowly converted the culturally liberalizing power of economic growth into a morally and politically polarizing wedge, driving town and country further apart and feeding the mutual contempt and vitriolic division of negative, affective partisanship.

The Political Opportunity of Low-Density Homogeneity

Crucially, the increasing temperamental homogeneity of America's economically struggling, lower-density white population has helped to unify it around a shared sense of identity and interests, making it easy to organize politically. It's telling, in this regard, that white-identity populism finally turned out to be a winner in the GOP primary and presidential election after decades of overall *improvement* in American race relations. Barack Obama's presidency both exemplified this progress and sparked a realigning ethnocentric reaction to it. The fact that our country has in many ways become *less* racist over the past half-century has, somewhat counterintuitively, helped to polarize our politics on race.

Polarization along the density divide has made it easier to consolidate and mobilize the relatively uniform block of white, non-urban voters by recasting the very real, economically and culturally polarized pattern of the Great Divergence into a scapegoating populist narrative that treats the multicultural

¹⁵³ Sunstein, "The Law of Group Polarization"; Muldoon, "Diversity Isn't What Divides Us. Division Is What Divides Us."

city as a metastasizing cancer that has sapped low-density “real America” of its economic vitality, demographic centrality, and cultural power. This story is so viscerally compelling because it combines a kernel of truth (dense diversity is drinking sparse uniformity’s milkshake) with a gross distortion of reality that taps directly into the zero-sum mindset and ethnocentric dispositions primed by the lower-density population’s sense of declining status and material security.

Donald Trump, for once a successful entrepreneur, spotted this low-hanging fruit and snatched it.

VII. Accounting for Populist Backlash

There’s no shortage of attempts to account for the alarming, and seemingly sudden, efflorescence of populist backlash around the world. In particular, the global surge in disruptive populist discontent has often been blamed on the shortcomings of “neoliberal globalism” by those on both the socialist left and nationalist right. To be sure, the dislocations of globalization, especially when combined with a shoddy social safety net, may drive some populist backlash.¹⁵⁴ But this is at best an incomplete diagnosis. The ethno-nationalist star has been on the rise even in those countries with the lowest levels of inequality and highest levels of social spending.¹⁵⁵

More generally, the liberal-democratic capitalist welfare state—whether in its Western and Northern European “social democratic” form or in its “neoliberal” Anglophone incarnation—is the most successful type of political and economic organization in human history, by almost any measure. No alternative to this broad formula has come close to supplying ordinary people with as much freedom, material abundance, longevity, or opportunity to realize their potential or life plans. But discontent and sectarian division run rampant, nevertheless.

In this paper, I’ve offered an outline of an alternative theory of populist backlash focused on the population-sorting dynamics of long-term urbanization, and I’ve tried to connect enough of the dots to show that it’s worth taking seriously. I certainly haven’t established that it’s correct, but I

¹⁵⁴ Dani Rodrik, “Populism and the Economics of Globalization,” *Journal of International Business Policy* 1, no. 1–2 (June 2018); Samuel Hammond, “The Free-Market Welfare State: Preserving Dynamism in a Volatile World,” Niskanen Center (May 2018).

¹⁵⁵ E.g., nationalist parties have made considerable gains recent elections in Sweden, Netherlands, and Germany— countries with some of the lowest levels of income inequality and highest levels of social insurance spending in the world.

hope that I've done enough to show that something like it can help us better explain why ethnonationalist political movements are on the march, even in the some of the most successful, and most liberal, societies the world has ever known.

In the United States, as we've seen, the non-white population has overwhelmingly selected into large metro areas. Nonwhite ethnicity has become strongly "magnetized" to urban density and is now strongly correlated with Democratic Party identification. In contrast, America's white population is distributed across both the density divide and the partisan spectrum. But it is by no means randomly distributed; the high- and low-density white populations are not the same. White Americans have become relatively cleanly sorted into higher- and lower-density locations on personality traits—most notably Openness to Experience—that are correlated with propensity to migrate, residential preferences, tolerance for diversity, higher education, and party identification. Like nonwhite ethnicity, high Openness is magnetized to urban density, and strongly associated with Democratic Party loyalty.

Additionally, the increasing self-selection of Americans with college, graduate, and professional degrees into a relatively small number of metro areas is a principal cause of flagging economic performance in smaller Rustbelt cities and the lower-density locales where the least magnetized Americans—lower-Openness white Republicans—tend to live. The concentration of national economic output in big, multicultural, heavily Democratic cities has broken down the relationship between rising prosperity and generally liberalizing cultural attitudes, turning economic growth into a divisive force that intensifies the moral and political polarization of a population relatively cleanly sorted on ethnicity, personality, and education.

Some may detect a determinism verging on fatalism in my account of populist backlash. However, it was far from inevitable that Trump would succeed in intensifying the polarized mood of the density divide and riding the wave of discontent into the White House. The final enabling condition that brought Trump to power—the relationship between the distribution of the American population and the structure of our electoral institutions—is tenuous, and unlikely to hold.

The Final Piece of the Puzzle: Population–Constitution Mismatch

America’s federal system has a strong small-state bias. Every state, no matter its population, gets two senators and a minimum of three Electoral College votes and at least one member of the House. Under the conditions of the density divide, the constitutionally baked-in overrepresentation of sparsely populated states lends Republicans an enormous structural advantage, and as America’s population continues to concentrate in highly urbanized states, this bias grows worse. The United States Constitution was crafted in the 1780s to balance power between free and slave regions in a thoroughly agricultural economy. In an urbanized polity in which a handful of dense, multicultural metros contain most of the people and produce most of America’s wealth and tax receipts, our federal scheme of representation, which effectively gives extra votes to topsoil in low-population states, defies both moral and prudential common sense.

There is a great deal of wisdom embedded in America’s constitutional scheme. However, in the context of the density divide, this system allowed Donald Trump and the party of the monocultural country—the party of urbanization’s most tenacious holdouts—to seize total control of the American state with a minority of votes and a third of the economy. That’s a recipe for disaster.

Across the 31 states in which voters register by party, there are 12 million fewer Republicans than Democrats, and Republicans outnumber them in only 12 of those states. Looking at the American voting-age public more broadly, a Pew Research Center study estimates that 50 percent of registered voters identify or lean Democratic, while 42 percent self-identity or tilt Republican. This gap suggests a Democratic advantage on the order of 18 million registered voters—enough to populate five states the size of Iowa. Nevertheless, the Republican Party managed to take the White House and majorities in both chambers of Congress with a shrinking minority of the voting-age public. This is possible because, atop its formidable structural advantage, the GOP has erected an imposing fortification—a great anti-majoritarian firewall built from aggressively gerrymandered legislative districts, voter-ID laws, voter-roll purges, felon disenfranchisement, opportunistic Census apportionment rules, packed state supreme courts, last-minute ballot rewrites, and more—which combine to keep Democrats from

reliably cashing in on their superior numbers. Many of the Republicans' recent additions to their bulwark against the multicultural urban majority came after the claw back of critical elements of the Voting Rights Act in the Supreme Court's 2013 *Shelby v. Holder* decision. Trump's addition of two new zealously conservative Supreme Court justices threatens to line the firewall with razor-wire. But that's what it will take to take for the GOP to continue to win national majority with its current base of lower-density white voters.

Against the Party of Pastoral Supremacy

Republicans don't need this firewall to win; they need it to win *as the party of pastoral supremacy* in a city-powered republic James Madison could never have foreseen. But *this* Republican Party, defined by seething hostility to the urban multicultural majority, is teetering on the brink of irrelevance. Continued urbanizing migration, both domestic and international, is likely to push it over, sooner or later, which helps explain the vehemence of the GOP's current opposition to basic norms of fair democratic representation.

We should dearly wish for the demise of the current dispensation to come sooner rather than later. When it comes at last, and the GOP can no longer clinch national elections as the minority party of pastoral supremacy, it will be forced, as a matter of political survival, to tamp down rather than inflame ethnocentric impulses, broaden its coalition, and begin hunting for non-white and higher-education votes inside the outer suburbs. This should set in motion a healing process of depolarization and moderating partisan realignment. New legislation establishing robust voting rights and structural electoral reform would kickstart this process and help shift American democracy into a healthier political equilibrium in which effective governance in the public interest is once again possible. If there's anything we can do to neutralize the toxicity of the density divide, it's this.

Conclusion: Taking Urbanization Seriously

The larger lesson of the partisan density divide is that urbanization is a transformative cultural and political force, and we need to take it far more seriously. "The last time humans made such a dramatic migration in Europe and the New World between the late eighteenth and the early twentieth centuries," Douglas Saunders reminds us, "the direct effect was a complete reinvention of human thought, governance, technology, and welfare. Mass

urbanization produced the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and, with them, the enormous social and political changes of the previous two centuries.”¹⁵⁶

Since these upheavals, urbanization has continued to change the human world, slowly and inexorably, beneath our feet. Indeed, we have been changing it by voting *with* our feet—or not—for life in the city. We’ve erred in the past by failing to grasp urbanization’s logic, leaving ourselves without the intellectual and institutional tools needed to analyze and ameliorate the tumult and disorder it would produce. We’re better situated today, but the social and political disturbances of urbanization have crept up on us again, and our continued failure to comprehend the implications of the process that is reshaping our world has again left us ill-equipped either to foresee or avert another epoch of revolutionary turmoil.

“If we make a similar mistake today,” Saunders warns, “and dismiss the great migration as a negligible effect, as a background noise or a fate of others that we can avoid in our own countries, we are in danger of suffering far larger explosions and ruptures.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Saunders, *Arrival City*.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*