Political Demographics of North Carolina’s Urban/Rural Divide

North Carolina’s expansive rural areas skew strongly Republican, while its scattered urban areas lean even further in favor of Democratic principles and candidates. Far from being a static standoff, this urban/rural divide, buffered by vast suburbs, is evolving over time in ways that hold important implications for incumbents, candidates, map-drawers, and activists. Here we analyze the political demographics of the state’s shifting urbanity at the ZIP Code level, with an eye toward 2022 and beyond.

I. Defining Urban, Suburban, and Rural NC

There are no shortage of measures to choose from to define urban and non-urban populations, among which the most familiar is the U.S. Census Bureau’s, which classifies as ‘urban’ all incorporated areas exceeding an arbitrary population threshold (without taking into account population density), and defines as ‘rural’ all remaining (non-urban) areas. It’s a less than ideal metric for political analysis as it does not define a ‘suburban’ space – a key political classification today – which leads to oddities like that of classifying 99% of Mecklenburg County’s residents as ‘urban.’

For our own purposes, EQV Analytics employs a proprietary index of urbanity, the ZIP Urbanity Index (ZUI), fine-tuned to resolve our state’s urban, suburban, and rural populations. Its units of spatial resolution are ZIP Code Tabulation Areas (which we shall refer to interchangeably as ‘ZIP Codes’ and ‘ZCTAs’). In the ZUI, NC voters’ 808 ZCTAs are classified as ‘urban,’ ‘suburban,’ or ‘rural’ based on their population densities, and rural ZIP Codes are further subdivided between those whose registered voters are majority white or majority people of color (Figure 1).

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1 ZIP Codes themselves are not defined as geographic areas that can be mapped. ZIP Code Tabulation Areas (ZCTAs) are defined by the Census Bureau to closely reflect the mappable area occupied by postal customers sharing a common ZIP Code. Some largely unoccupied areas, such as state and national parks, have no ZCTAs and so are represented as ‘holes’ in ZCTA-based maps like that of Fig. 1. Other ZCTAs (notably post offices’ PO boxes, and large individual USPS customers earning their own unique ZIP Codes) are single points rather than areas and are not included among US Census ZCTAs with population data.
FIGURE 1: EQV Analytics’ ZIP Urbanity Index (ZUI). Each of the state’s 808 non-point ZIP Code Tabulation Areas (ZCTAs; outlined in grey) is categorized either rural, suburban, or urban based on its 2019 population density. Rural ZCTAs are further subdivided, according to white voters’ majority or minority status among each area’s registered voters, into majority-white and majority-POC ZIP Codes. The latter are hashmarked in this map. Holes in the map represent areas lacking ZCTAs because they are largely unpopulated. See Table 1 for major point ZIP Codes (single-institution ZIP Codes) with substantial residential populations, not included on this map. An enlarged version of this map is included as Appendix A. Data: American Community Survey 2019 5-year population survey.

Eight North Carolina ZIP Codes are home to substantial numbers of residents but are not included in the Census Bureau’s enumerated ZCTAs (and are thus not rated here with respect to their urbanity) because they are points assigned to single organizations rather than meaningful map areas, and thus do not have calculable population densities (Table 1). Nonetheless, all but two of these point ZIP Codes are either embedded within or adjacent to ZIP Code Tabulation Areas rated ‘urban’ by the ZUI. The two exceptions are 28608 (Appalachian State Univ.) and 28542 (Camp Lejeune), both of which are embedded within suburban ZCTAs. Except where explicitly stated otherwise, all 8 of these point ZIP Codes are considered ‘urban’ for all of the summary statistics discussed throughout this report. Their age 18+ resident populations listed in Table 1 are derived from the institutions’ own information regarding their residential capacities. Their voter data are sourced (as are all others’ in this report) from voter records’ bearing those residential ZIP Codes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ZIP</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>18+ Population (est.)</th>
<th>Mean Voter Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27411</td>
<td>NCA&amp;T Univ.</td>
<td>2,981</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27412</td>
<td>UNC Greensboro</td>
<td>5,300</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27708</td>
<td>Duke Univ.</td>
<td>6,649</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28035</td>
<td>Davidson College</td>
<td>1,884</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28223</td>
<td>UNC Charlotte</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28274</td>
<td>Queens University</td>
<td>1,766</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28542</td>
<td>Camp Lejeune</td>
<td>9,832</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28608</td>
<td>Appalachian State Univ.</td>
<td>5,606</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1: Major ‘point’ ZIP Codes included in this report. Point ZIP Codes are those assigned by the USPS to individual institutions or to PO boxes. Because they are single points and not areas, the Census Bureau excludes them from its ZIP Code Tabulation Areas (ZCTAs). This table lists the major NC point ZIP Codes included in our analyses. Estimated populations are sourced from each organization’s own public information regarding its residential capacity. Mean voter ages are calculated from State Board of Elections voter records that designate these ZIP Codes in their residential addresses. For comparison purposes, note that the statewide average voter age in North Carolina is 48.7 years.

Our metric defines 13 urban cores across North Carolina (excluding the point ZIP Codes discussed above), comprising the most densely populated portions of Asheville, Gastonia,
Cornelius, Charlotte, Winston-Salem, High Point, Greensboro, Chapel Hill, Durham, Raleigh, Fayetteville, Wilmington, and Jacksonville. Other less densely populated cities like Monroe, Burlington, Goldsboro, Greenville, Wilson, and Rocky Mount are defined as ‘suburban’ (which, as the term is used by us here, does not imply adjacency to an urban area), a category that also spans a broad crescent stretching from Charlotte through the Triad and across the Triangle. The rest of the state (solid yellow or grey-hatched yellow in Fig. 1) is defined as ‘rural’.

The ZUI is intentionally more parsimonious with ‘urban’ designations than is the US Census Bureau, whose one-size-fits-all population density standards for urbanity do not take into account individual states’ idiosyncrasies (such as the substantial difference in urban population densities between otherwise largely similar states like North Carolina and Virginia\(^3\)). Indeed, the Census Bureau and the U.S. Management & Budget Office have recently proposed tighter definitions of metropolitan and urban areas that will see several NC communities lose their ‘urban’ status following the 2020 census\(^4,5\).

II. The Demographics of NC Urbanity

**Voter Populations:** At about 3.4 million voters, suburbanites represent North Carolina’s largest voting segment according to our index, comprising just under half of the state’s electorate (Fig. 2, left panel). Rural North Carolinians earn second place at 2.2 million voters, and urban voters bring up the rear at 1.5 million voters. We further subdivide rural NC into majority-white and majority-POC zip codes (the latter comprising the state’s northeastern ‘Black Belt’ or Carolina Delta, plus scattered agricultural ZIP Codes across Eastern NC and Robeson County’s significant concentrations of black and Native American voters). Rural majority-white ZIP Codes are home to ten times as many registered voters as are rural majority-POC ones.

**Partisanship:** Among the state’s suburban residents, Democrats very slightly outnumber Republicans, by 1.1-to-1 (Fig. 2, right panel), and dominate in both urban areas (2.1-to-1) and rural majority-POC ZIP Codes (3.8-to-1). Only in rural majority-white ZIP Codes do Republicans predominate (1.3 Republicans per Democrat, or 0.7 Democrats per Republican). This analysis excludes the point ZIP Codes listed in Table 1, where Democrats outnumber Republicans by 3.4-to-1 or, if we exclude the only organization listed in Table 1 that is not a college (Camp Lejeune), by an overwhelming 4.1-to-1.

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\(^5\) Federal Register, 2021. Urban areas for the 2020 census-proposed criteria. federalregister.gov/documents/2021/02/19/2021-03412/urban-areas-for-the-2020-census-proposed-criteria
FIGURE 2: Populations and partisanship of NC voters, by urbanity. Left panel: registered voter numbers in each North Carolina ZUI classification (see Fig. 1). Right panel: partisan balance of each classification, expressed as its ratio of Democrats-per-Republican. Data: NC State Board of Elections’ voter registration file, current as of 2021-01-23.

Unaffiliated Voters: Voters’ probability of declining to affiliate with a political party is positively correlated with their urbanity (Fig. 3), with a solid majority of urban point ZIP Code residents (mostly college students) choosing unaffiliated status, while more than a third of other urban residents, and still fewer rural voters, do so. Statewide, 33.3% of registered voters are Unaffiliated at the time of writing.

FIGURE 3: Unaffiliated voter frequency, by urbanity. See Table 1 for definition of point ZIP Codes. Data: NC State Board of Elections’ voter registration file, current as of 2021-01-23.

In North Carolina, unaffiliated voters are free to vote in the primary of the party of their choice, as more than a quarter of them did in 2020 alone. Their ballot choices afford us a view into the partisan balance of this increasingly important group of voters.

Urban and suburban unaffiliated voters’ engagement in GOP primaries peaked in 2014, then plummeted throughout the Trump years (Fig. 4). Hints of the same trend, albeit slower and smaller, may even be seen among rural unaffiliated voters.
FIGURE 4: Trends in party choice among unaffiliated voters participating in primary elections, 2010-2020, by urbanity. Left, middle, and right panels: urban, suburban, and rural unaffiliated voters, respectively. The point ZIP Codes listed in Table 1 are not included in this analysis. Data: NC State Board of Elections voter history file 2021-01-09 and voter registration file 2021-01-23

Age: Urbanity groups also differ strikingly by age composition (Fig. 5). Urban NC voters skew young; their largest age group is 25 to 34 years of age. In contrast, rural voters’ dominant age group is 65+ years of age. The age distributions of voters from majority-white and majority-POC rural areas do not differ significantly (not shown), peaking at 65+ years of age.

FIGURE 5: Age distributions of NC voters, by urbanity. The point Zip Codes listed in Table 1 are not included in this analysis. Data: NC State Board of Elections’ voter registration file, current as of 2021-01-23.

Race: African Americans comprise a slim majority of rural majority-POC areas (50%; Fig. 6, right panel), but these ZIP Codes are home to just 7% of the state’s black voter population (left panel), leaving rural blacks a numerically weak political community in North Carolina. In contrast, white voters comprise a dominant 82% of the electorate in majority-white rural areas, which are home to 33% of all of the state’s white voters, rendering rural whites a significant political force at both the state and local levels.

Among black and white voters, pluralities of each call suburban areas home, while rural areas comprise white voters’ second largest home areas (35% of whites, versus just 18% for urban areas), while black voters are equally likely to reside in either urban or rural areas (27% each). Native Americans are unique in living primarily in rural areas (64%).
Whites comprise a majority of urban voters (61%), but urban areas are home to only 18% of the state’s white voter population (versus 27% of blacks and 34% of all other races excluding Native Americans).

**FIGURE 6: Racial demographics of NC voters, by urbanity. Left panel: Urbanity distributions of black, Indian, white, and all other races. Right panel: racial compositions of rural, suburban, and urban areas. The point ZIP Codes listed in Table 1 are not included in this analysis. Data: NC State Board of Elections’ voter registration file, current as of 2021-01-23.**

**Electorate’s Growth Rate:** According to American Community Survey annual population estimates for 2014 through 2019, the state’s age 18+ rural population’s very low annual growth rate (averaging 0.3% across all rural ZIP Codes; Table 2) is the combined effect of negative growth in most of the majority-POC ZIPs (averaging ~0.5% per year) plus a low positive growth rate in majority-white rural ZIPs (averaging 0.4%). By contrast, the state’s suburban and urban ZIPs are growing their age 18+ populations at healthy rates of 2.1% and 2.3% per year, respectively – more than twice the state’s overall 1% population growth rate in 2019 (a rate placing it among the nation’s top ten fastest-growing states).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Fraction of ZIPs</th>
<th>Avg. Annual Growth Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Growing</td>
<td>Stable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural (all)</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural (POC)</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural (White)</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2: Age 18+ population growth rate statistics for rural, suburban, and urban North Carolina ZIP Codes, 2014 through 2019.** This analysis does not include the point ZIP Codes listed in Table 1. Rural ZIP Codes are separately analyzed for majority-POC, majority-white, and all rural Codes. Data: 2014 through 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

**II. Voting Performance and Urbanity**

**Voting Propensity:** At first glance, degree of urbanity appears to have no influence on voter propensity, with voters from rural, suburban and urban areas each participating in an average of 68% of the general elections for which they were registered between 2010 and 2020 (not shown).

Breaking down participation rate by the number of elections for which each voter was registered during the past decade (Fig. 7, left panel) does little to change this conclusion, although rural voters who have been registered for fewer elections do have very slightly lower propensities than their suburban and urban neighbors. Only when we break this down still further, to look at majority-white and majority-POC rural areas separately, do we find any substantial rural

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distinction, with rural whites considerably more likely to vote than are rural people of color (Fig. 7, right panel). This has only a slight effect on rural propensity overall, however, because majority-POC rural areas are home to less than a tenth of all rural voters. In the most extreme case – rural majority-POC voters registered for only the past two elections (i.e., mostly young voters) – average propensity is 30% lower than in rural majority-white areas.

**FIGURE 7:** Voter propensity, by urbanity. *Left panel:* average voter propensity (fraction of registered elections voted, from 2010 to 2020) for rural, suburban, and urban current voters, calculated separately for voters who were registered for from 1 to 6 general elections during the decade. *Right panel:* average voter propensity for residents of majority-white and majority-POC rural areas for the ten years from 2010 to 2020. The point ZIP Codes listed in Table 1 are not included in this analysis. Data: NC State Board of Elections voter history, voter registration, and snapshot files, current as of January 2021.

**Voter Turnout:** North Carolina Republicans routinely exceed Democrats’ turnout performance, in midterm and presidential elections alike (Fig. 8). This behavior has a strong urbanity effect, as seen in 2020’s turnout, in which Republicans’ advantage (margin in percentage points between Republican and Democratic turnout) in rural ZIP Codes was twice that of urban ZIP codes (Fig. 9). Republican Donald Trump beat Democrat Joe Biden that year by a statewide margin of just over 1 percentage point.


**FIGURE 9:** Urbanity effect on 2020 presidential election turnout. Data: NC State Board of Elections voter history and voter registration files, current as of January 2021.

**Partisan Shifts:** Over the past ten years (2010 to 2020), the majority of NC counties have either maintained a stable partisan preference or have grown even more hyper-partisan in favor of their historically preferred party. But 17 of the state’s 100 counties have bucked this trend,
demonstrating progressive reversals in party preference over the decade just past, either from Republican toward Democratic preference (Fig. 10, left panel) or vice versa (right panel).

**FIGURE 10**: Counties undergoing long-term reversals in party preference. Party preference for each general election is expressed as the Republican margin (in percentage points) for the top-of-ballot statewide race each year (presidential in 2012, 2016 and 2020; US Senate in 2010 and 2014; and NC Supreme Court Justice in 2018). A least squares line is fitted to each county’s data points. **Left panel**: counties shifting from Republican toward Democratic preference (Alamance, Cabarrus, Guilford, Henderson, Johnston, New Hanover, Pitt, Union, and Watauga). **Right panel**: counties shifting from Democratic toward Republican preference (Anson, Bladen, Gates, Granville, Martin, Richmond, Robeson, and Scotland). Data: NC State Board of Elections election results, 2010 through 2020.

Urbanity helps us make sense of these shifting loyalties. Among the counties shifting from Democratic toward Republican preference (right panel in Fig. 10), none contain urban centers or significant areas classified ‘suburban’ in our model. Six of these eight rural counties contain areas classified as ‘majority-POC’ (the exceptions are Gates and Granville counties) which, as we have seen in Table 2, are mostly declining in population. Conversely, most of the 9 counties shifting from Republican toward Democratic preference (left panel in Fig. 10) are largely urban/suburban: 2 contain urban areas (Guilford and New Hanover), while another 5 contain extensive (> 50% of the county’s area) suburban tracts. The two exceptions to these counties’ urban/suburban character are Johnston, with a growing suburban area adjacent to Raleigh that has yet to exceed 50% of the county’s total area, and Watauga, a rural county home to the large and strongly Democratic-leaning Appalachian State University.

On balance, Democrats are winning the race for votes between these two classes of preference-reversing counties. The Democratic-to-Republican counties of Fig. 8 are home to just over 217,000 registered voters, while the Republican-to-Democratic counties are home to just under 1.4 million.

**Voter Registration**: Roughly 1.3 million North Carolinians age 18+ were not registered to vote as of July 2020, for a statewide registration rate of about 84%\(^7\). The average fraction of eligible

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\(^7\) [https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/technical-documentation/research/evaluation-estimates.html](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/technical-documentation/research/evaluation-estimates.html)
individuals\textsuperscript{8} who are registered to vote per zip code varies little by urbanity: 84\% to 85\% among urban, suburban, and rural zip codes alike (not shown). But the distributions around that mean differ substantially with degree of urbanity (Fig. 11). Rural voters are most likely to live in low-registration zip codes. Indeed, more than a quarter of rural persons (27\%) live in zip codes where only 71\% to 80\% of qualified individuals are registered to vote – about twice the frequency of suburban and urban persons. In contrast, suburban individuals are twice as likely as rural persons to live in zip codes with the highest level of voter registration (91\% to 100\% of qualified individuals).

\textbf{FIGURE 11: Population distribution of voter registration rate per zip code, by urbanity.} The point ZIP Codes listed in Table 1 are not included in this analysis. Data: NC State Board of Elections voter registration file as of 2021-01-23; 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

A relatively small fraction of ZIP Codes are home to the majority of unregistered voting-age North Carolinians: slightly more than 50\% of them live in about 10\% (86) of the state’s ZIP Codes (Fig. 12). Twenty-four of those top ZIP Codes are rural (comprising about 124K unregistered eligible individuals), 38 are suburban (229K individuals), and 24 are urban (162K individuals). Registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by an average of 2-to-1 across these 86 top ZIP Codes, and outnumbert Republicans in 56 of them individually\textsuperscript{9}. Among these Democratic 56, a plurality (23) are urban, 20 are suburban, 13 are rural, and 49 have positive average growth rates (Fig. 13). Eleven are home to universities or colleges of more than 1,000 students: 27401 (NCA&T), 27403 (UNC Greensboro), 27705 (Duke Univ.) 27909 (Elizabeth City State Univ.), 27858 (East Carolina Univ.), 27106 (Wake Forest Univ.), 27707 (North Carolina Central Univ.), 27607 (Meredith College), 28262 (UNC Charlotte), 28403 (UNC Wilmington), 28607 (Appalachian State Univ.).

\textsuperscript{8} This analysis considers only age, not citizenship or felon status, when enumerating individuals who are eligible to register to vote.

\textsuperscript{9} Blue ZIP Codes in Fig. 10: 27105, 27106, 27107, 27127, 27217, 27260, 27320, 27344, 27403, 27407, 27514, 27530, 27534, 27546, 27549, 27560, 27577, 27603, 27640, 27606, 27607, 27610, 27616, 27704, 27705, 27707, 27834, 27858, 27893, 27909, 28052, 28054, 28205, 28210, 28212, 28213, 28215, 28217, 28227, 28262, 28273, 28303, 28304, 28311, 28314, 28327, 28352, 28358, 28360, 28364, 28376, 28390, 28403, 28580, 28607

FIGURE 13: Average annual population growth rates of the Democratic ZIP Code Tabulation Areas in Fig. 12. Averages are for the years 2014 through 2019. The seven ZIP Codes with negative annual growth rates are 27530, 27909, 28304, 28328, 28352, 28358, and 28360, in Wayne, Pasquotank, Cumberland, Sampson, Scotland, and Robeson Counties. Data: 2014 - 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

Party Affiliation Trends Among First-Time Registrants: Trends in the party affiliations of first-time registrants are useful forward-looking indicators because about 90% of party-affiliated NC voters retain their first party affiliation for at least 10 years.

The sharp rise in 1st-time voter registrants choosing no party affiliation (so-called unaffiliated voters, or UNAs) that marked the first half of the 2010s has since leveled off to a near-constant 40-45% of new voters, irrespective of urbanity (Fig. 14) – good news for Democrats, who appear to have suffered the majority of past losses to the unaffiliated camp, judging by the striking mirror symmetry of most of the Democratic and unaffiliated curves in Fig. 14.
Perhaps the single most striking urbanity effect in Fig. 14 (aside from the expected urban-Dem/rural-GOP divide) is Republicans’ stunning success at registering new rural (and, to a lesser extent, suburban) voters in presidential election years, and in 2020 particularly (top left graph in Fig 14). Democrats have no similar successes to point to, even in their urban strongholds.

We believe that much of Republicans’ 2020 rural/suburban voter registration success was pandemic-related, as Republican campaigns largely ignored social distancing to conduct conventional canvassing and rallies (important sources of new voter registrations), while Democrats mostly eschewed face-to-face ‘retail’ campaigning. The impact on voter registration appears significant. While a typical presidential election year like 2016 would see both Democrats and Republicans registering 47% of their entire cycle’s worth of new voters, in 2020 Democrats registered only 38% of the cycle’s new Democrats, compared to Republicans’ 43%. That deficit amounted to about 40,000 would-be Democrats who went unregistered in 2020.

We consider the third column in Fig. 14 (Non-Election Years) to best reflect trends in new voters’ intrinsic partisanship (i.e., largely free of the differential effects of parties’ lesser or greater effectiveness at realizing the registration of their sympathizers). Those intrinsic trends include:

- A now-stable absence of share growth (or even a very slight decline in share) for 1st-time unaffiliated registrations, across all urbanity classes.
• A bottoming out of rural Democratic share decline, plus a continuing half-point per year Republican rural share gain (largely at the expense of unaffiliated registrations), growing Republicans’ rural margin over Democrats by about 1,000 voters per year

• A half-point per year Democratic share growth, and a similar Republican share loss, in the suburbs, opening a gap (and Democratic advantage) currently growing by about 6,000 new voters per year

• A half-point per year Democratic share growth in urban ZIP Codes, and 2-point per year Republican share loss, growing the margin between the two parties, in Democrats’ favor, by about 3,000 new voters per year

We suggest that, combined, these trends point to an intrinsic partisan shift among new voter registrants (distinct from the parties’ ability to actually register them) handing Democrats a net advantage of about 8,000 new voters per year.

III. Causes & Consequences

Voter Turnout

Ironically, North Carolina is a blue state by any criterion except for the one that matters most: election wins.

Democrats, the state’s most popular party affiliation, outnumber Republicans (only the third most popular affiliation, behind unaffiliated voters) by 15% - a 325,000 voter margin. Unaffiliated voters have been edging toward a net Democratic lean for several election cycles now, and appear to have crossed that threshold in 2020 (at least in the state’s cities and suburbs; see Fig. 4).

There was a time when Democrats’ numerical superiority among registered voters meant little, due to North Carolina’s huge pool of ‘legacy Democrats’ – conservatives voting Republican but registered Democratic for no better reason than that their fathers and grandfathers were Democrats, back when Democrats were the party of white supremacy. Thankfully, today the NC Democratic party’s ranks are largely cleared of Southern white supremacists, and today’s NC Democrats largely vote Democratic.

Why, then, are statewide Democratic wins so rare in numerically ‘blue’ North Carolina? The proximate reason is because Democratic turnout always lags Republican turnout (Fig. 8), by a 5 point margin on average. Numerous factors no doubt combine to drive this persistent turnout failure; here we focus on just one: the state’s nearly unique rurality.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, North Carolina has the nation’s second largest rural population, close on the heels of Texas. Indeed, so unusually rural is North Carolina’s population that its urban population share in 2010 (66% of total population by Census Bureau reckoning) was closer to the world’s urban population share (52%) than it was to America’s urban population share (81%). In a very real sense, North Carolina is an unusually rural state.

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12 Carolina Demography, 2016. Urbanization trends. ndemography.org/2015/01/05/urbanization-trends/
The state’s rurality has important consequences for how campaigns conduct their voter turnout efforts. Door-to-door canvassing is well-documented to be more effective at driving voter turnout than are mail, email, or telephone solicitations, but intensive canvassing is a difficult and costly proposition in low population density rural environments. Democratic voters’ numerical inferiority across rural North Carolina (Fig. 2) probably leaves Democratic campaigns, in particular, disinclined to invest in rural canvassing. Further, Republicans alone have the benefit of the widely available propaganda talk radio that reaches deep into rural communities, driving grievance politics which can in turn drive turnout.

Whatever the causes of Democrats’ failure to match GOP turnout in 2020 (Fig. 9), we estimate that the consequence for statewide Democrats was a shortfall of 58,000 rural ballots, 66,000 suburban ballots, and 24,000 urban ballots – more than enough to deliver Trump’s win in the state.

Voter Registration

The majority of North Carolina’s roughly 1.3 million unregistered adults may never be high propensity voters, but hidden among their ranks are those who could be, if targeted by appropriate voter outreach and education efforts. Where to field voter registration drives is a timeless question faced by activists concerned with investing their limited resources most efficiently (i.e., registering the most individuals who are likely to share their partisan lean, at the lowest necessary investment in time, money, and personnel). Our ZIP Code-based analysis (Fig. 12) contributes useful guidance in answering this question, by identifying a small subset of ZIP Codes (86) that are home to slightly more than half of eligible unregistered citizens, and a subset of those (56) likely to yield the largest proportions of Democratic-friendly new registrants. Subtracting from that latter list the 11 college-containing ZIP Codes that are already perennial targets of registration drives leaves a hit list of what we would suggest are the state’s 45 highest-value targets for Democratic voter registration drives, comprising a good mix of urban, suburban and rural areas.

Partisan Shifts

One significant consequence of NC’s rapid population growth is the expansion of suburbs, rendering once-rural GOP turf increasingly suburban and friendly to Democrats. The result is visible among the nine increasingly suburban counties steadily shifting from red to blue over the past decade (Fig. 10, left panel). In Alamance County, for example, that shift made possible history’s first election of a Democratic Latino, Ricky Hurtado, to the state House, in a district that as recently as 2016 went uncontested by Democrats. Court-ordered redistricting in 2019 improved Hurtado’s odds by leaving the district marginally less Republican, but it was the county’s steady suburbanization that made that more Democrat-friendly map unavoidable.

Gerrymandering GOP pols this year will need to deal with the likelihood that most, if not all, of the red-to-blue counties in Fig. 10 will be in the Democratic column by 2030. Democrats, in turn,

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need to facilitate that evolution by continuing to run great candidates like Hurtado in these once-impossible districts.

Engaging Black Voters

The North Carolina Democratic Party is the party of people of color, who comprise the majority of its registered voters (52%). African Americans predominate at 49%, compared to whites’ 44% share of the party. Thus, when black voters turn out in large numbers, Democrats win, as they did in 2008 when a black presidential candidate inspired historically strong black turnout (73%, versus white voters’ 71%), handing Barack Obama a surprise victory.

But North Carolina has never since seen that same level of African American engagement. In 2020 black turnout increased to 68% from 64% in 2016, yet was outpaced by the uptick in white turnout (to 79%, from 72% in 2016), leaving African Americans even more outnumbered at the polls than they had been at any other point in recent history, and securing broad ballot victories for Republicans.

Depending on their ZIP Code urbanities, in 2020 black Democrats posted turnout figures lagging those of white Democrats by 5 to 13 percentage points (Fig. 15, left panel). Statewide, they trailed white Dems by an 8 point margin (not shown).

FIGURE 15: 2020 African American Democratic turnout deficit versus white Democrats, and the resulting African American ballot shortfall, by urbanity. Left panel: margin (in percentage points) by which black Democratic turnout trailed white Democratic turnout. By way of example, urban white Democratic turnout (81.4%) minus urban black Democratic turnout (68.5%) equals 12.9 percentage points. Right panel: number of Democratic ballots not voted as a result of the black voter turnout deficits shown in the left panel. The point ZIP Codes listed in Table 1 are not included in this analysis. Data: NC State Board of Elections voter registration file as of 2020-11-21 and voter history file current as of January 2021.

By far the largest African American turnout deficit (12.9 points lower than that of white Democrats) is found in urban ZIP Codes. While the root causes are multifactorial (including issues like income disparity, gerrymandering, and polling place location), we believe that one contributing factor may be the relative ease of registering new voters in the high-density urban environment, combined with inadequate follow up to convert those new low-propensity voters to actual voters.

Despite suburban black voters’ substantially better turnout than that of urban blacks, urban and suburban ballot shortfalls are roughly equal (about 40,000 each; right panel in Fig. 15) due to the much larger suburban black voter population. Ballot shortfalls are lowest in rural majority-POC ZIP Codes, due to their very low populations. Resource-limited voter engagement projects employing face-to-face contact may benefit from even higher-resolution geographic analyses to identify the counties, communities, neighborhoods or precincts where high ballot shortfalls present the most ‘target-rich’ environments for voter engagement efforts.
APPENDIX A: Enlarged Version of Figure 1