Examining the Roots of Political Discontent:

The "Left Behind" Theory in the Context of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

A Dissertation

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1 Introduction

Anti-establishment politicians and positions have been part of Western democracies for decades. However, electoral support for them used to be, generally speaking, marginal and their influence in the political arena remained mostly irrelevant. This changed dramatically in the mid-2010s, when growing numbers of voters in Western democracies started to support anti-establishment politics. Among the most prominent examples were the success of the Brexit referendum for the United Kingdom to leave the EU and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2016; these were followed by the almost-victory of Marine Le Pen in the 2017 French presidential election and the entrance of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party into the German Bundestag after the German federal election later that year. While these politicians and parties have faced setbacks since then — Trump is no longer president, Le Pen's third bid for the French presidency in 2022 was unsuccessful, and the AfD lost seats in the 2021 election — they are far from returning to being irrelevant. As the electoral and public support for anti-establishment politicians and positions continues, so will their influence in their countries' respective political landscapes in the coming years.

Journalists and scholars have provided myriad explanations for this significant growth in support for anti-establishment politics and continue to do so, for it constitutes a tectonic shift for these democracies. To be clear: the tectonic shift is not the expression of dissatisfaction. That is a core element of a liberal democracy and happens regularly in regard to specific parties, politicians, or policies. It also is not that parts of the electorate are fundamentally dissatisfied with their country's established economic, governmental, normative, and/or political system. In a liberal democracy, these voters are part of the legitimate political spectrum, as long as they abide by certain rules. No, the tectonic shift is the growth in the number of these types of voters because it poses a new and serious challenge

to these countries' established systems. So, the question was and is: What is the source of this recent and continuous outpouring of anti-establishment voting in Western democracies?

One popular answer to these questions, among journalists and scholars alike, is that increasing numbers of voters have become fundamentally dissatisfied with established politics because they were factually and/or felt "left behind": Left behind by an economy which made it increasingly difficult for them to find employment with their skillset, left behind in areas with already poor or deteriorating infrastructure, and left behind by changing societal norms they did not agree with. Numerous journalistic accounts of "left behind" people and places have provided vividly illustrated support for this theory. And while scholarly accounts that rely on this theory tend to shy away from using the term "left behind," they still analyze the economic, infrastructural, and/or cultural components of the term. The "left behind" theory seems intuitive: We all know of these "left behind" places and people and, if we were to put ourselves in their position, we would probably be dissatisfied with "the system", too. This theory also provides an explanation for an aspect of the rise in support for anti-establishment politics that can be observed in several countries and what has been called "Geographies of Discontent" (Dijkstra, Poelman, and Rodríguez-Pose 2018): specific geographical areas within countries, where, in comparison to others, anti-establishment voting has been particularly prominent in recent years. However, despite its intuitive plausibility and that it provides an explanation for geographically differentiated voter behavior, the "left behind" theory has two problems that have so far not been addressed adequately: one, a lack of theoretical rigor and two, a lack of systematic empirical testing. Because this theory has been so popular and widely used as an explanation for the surge in support for anti-establishment politics, it is important to address its problems. I will do this over the course of this thesis by first, developing a testable version of the "left behind" theory; second, I will empirically test to what extent it can explain election results; and third, I will investigate the aspects of election results it cannot explain.

I will perform these tasks using the 2016 U.S. presidential election as my "study object" or case because it has a number of characteristics which provide fertile ground for my undertaking. To start, it was probably the political event in the mid-2010s with the largest ripple effects across the Western world. Thus, journalists and scholars alike gave it a great deal of attention, meaning there is a large amount of literature available for my research. Second, the U.S. government has, to my knowledge, the best publicly and easily available databases with information that is relevant for my tasks. And third, the US is the single largest country in terms of size and population out of all Western democracies that saw a surge in support for anti-establishment politics. This gives me a large number of data points to empirically test the explanatory power of the "left behind" theory, as well as investigate the aspects of the election results it cannot explain. The questions that will guide my research are thus:

1) Which components constitute the "left behind" theory in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election?

2) To what extent can the "left behind" theory explain the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election?

3) Which other factors beyond the "left behind" theory can help explain the result of the 2016 U.S. presidential election?

I will address the first question in Chapter 2, followed by an empirical analysis of the second question in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4 I will engage with the third question and in the final chapter I will summarize my findings and provide a speculative outlook on the political developments in the US in the coming years.

1.1 Beyond Traditional Models: Reckwitz's Paradigm Theory

Although for many it came as a surprise, the tectonic shift in Western liberal democracies was (or still is) the culmination of a longer trajectory of political developments. At the moment, Western democracies are, according to the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, in a phase of transition between two political paradigms (2021, 133). On the following pages, I will provide a detailed description of this theory, how he uses it to understand and explain political developments in Western democracies, and show its utility for this thesis.

Reckwitz developed his theory because he considers the traditional approach to interpreting post-1945 political developments in Western liberal democracies — as a constant fight between political left versus right — to be insufficient for explaining the recent increase in support for anti-establishment (or populist) politics. He argues today's populist politics encompass aspects from both the traditional right and the traditional left, just like the political parties and establishment they challenge.

Instead of using the traditional right-left schema to understand structural change in Western postwar politics, Reckwitz argues that we should "recognize that a sequence of abstract political paradigms has been at work 'beneath' this left-right distinction" (2021, 132). Deriving his definition of political paradigms from Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific paradigms, Reckwitz describes them as "complexes for problem-solving, and particularly as discourses and government techniques for dealing with social problems" (2021, 134). When political paradigms have proven so successful that they control the discourse of which problems should be solved with which solutions, Reckwitz continues, they become hegemonic. Another important aspect of political paradigms is that they

> [I]nvolve decisions about value, antagonisms over value, and utopian visions of desirable values. Every individual version of a political paradigm therefore possesses an enormous amount of potential for people to identify with it. […] a political paradigm is essentially more heterogeneous. Every political paradigm exists in various versions – left-leaning and right-leaning varieties, for instance – which can be "opposed" to one another, even though they share certain common perceptions of problems and common ideas about how to solve them. (Reckwitz 2021, 135)

Thus, Reckwitz argues, a paradigm shift is much more significant than just a change in government: It is a change in the way of problematizing the world. While political paradigms solve problems, they also create new ones which they can eventually no longer solve, Reckwitz continues, thus making a political paradigm obsolete. He calls this phenomenon the "political paradox" and provides examples: "as an answer to the social question, the expansion of the welfare state [after World War II] has created the problem of a 'culture of dependency'; as an answer to government overregulation [in the 1970s], neoliberalism has resulted in the neglect of infrastructure and in drastic social inequalities" (Reckwitz 2021, 136).

While the decision over which problems need a political solution is in theory completely open, Reckwitz argues that "in the development of political paradigms since 1945, at least three complexes of problems have been present: socio-economic problems, socio-cultural problems, and democratic-functional problems." (2021, 137) The following table provides a detailed overview of how Reckwitz defines these complexes:

Socio-economic problems	Socio-cultural problems	Democratic-functional problems
- economic crises (which go beyond mere boom-and-bust fluctuations) - long-term economic stagnation - financial crises - high rates of long-term unemployment - glaring social inequality - high levels of government debt - low levels of innovation	- social experiences of alienation - forms of cultural disintegration - crises of legitimacy and motivation	- affect the legitimacy and functionality of the political system itself - raise questions about the validity of participating in the liberal-democratic system and about the efficiency of the political order

While these problem complexes receive attention in "regular" crisis situations, Reckwitz argues, for a "dominant political paradigm [to] find itself in a state of crisis, this crisis usually pertains more or less to all three areas simultaneously. Conversely, it can also be said that if a new political paradigm wants to persuade people, win votes, and influence government policy, it has to offer a solution and a reconfiguration on all three levels" (2021, 137).

Attempting to systematize post-1945 political paradigms, Reckwitz writes that their key point of difference is how they shape social order "and thus also in the way that they deal with the question of stabilizing or destabilizing social boundaries" (2021, 137). Based on this observation, he differentiates between paradigms of regulation and paradigms of dynamization. In the former, according to Reckwitz, "problems are interpreted as problems that have resulted from a lack of social order and social regulation," whereas in the latter

problems are interpreted as problems "that have arisen from an excess of collective regulation and a lack of dynamism" (2021, 138). When we take this dichotomy of regulation and dynamization as the underlying structure, Reckwitz argues, the distinction between political left and right becomes relevant again: Each side focuses on different aspects of a given paradigm which, in turn, has specific social consequences. The following table by Reckwitz (2021, 138) summarizes his argument:

Table 2: The left-right distinction and political paradigms according to Reckwitz (2021, 138)

	The paradigm of regulation	**The paradigm of dynamization**
Left	Statist social democracy	Progressive liberalism
Right	Conservatism	Economic liberalism

According to Reckwitz, the social-corporatist paradigm, which was hegemonic in Western democracies until the beginning of the 1970s, was characterized by the will to create a strong social order after the chaos of the 1930s and 1940s: socio-economically through Keynesian economic policies and the creation of an extensive redistributive welfare state; socio-culturally through the creation of a sense of community via the empowering of social corporations such as political parties, unions, churches and community organizations; and democratic-functionally through strengthening elements of "representative democracy with a mass base in strong people's parties" (2021, 142). This paradigm, however, faced increasing — and in part self-inflicted — socio-economic, socio-cultural, and democratic-functional problems in the 1970s that it could no longer adequately resolve, Reckwitz argues. Among them were stagflation, high government debt, the transition to post-industrialization and increased globalization and the ensuing crisis of the Fordist model of production, the shift from social corporations to "individual self-actualization" (Reckwitz 2021, 143), and the emergence of the "new social movements," which "articulated new and previously neglected

political themes 'from below,' and thus demanded a greater share of political participation" (Reckwitz 2021, 144).

The social-corporatist paradigm of regulation was thus, according to Reckwitz, consequentially replaced by a new hegemonic paradigm of dynamization in the 1980s: apertistic liberalism. This paradigm, comprising its two wings of neoliberalism and progressive liberalism, was characterized by "its general tendency to deregulate, dynamize, and open up previously rigid social structures" (2021, 145). It did so socio-economically through increasing competitiveness and deregulation in existing spheres and expanding competitive market structures into new sectors of society and beyond the nation-state, and socio-culturally by expanding (or at least aiming to expand) societal diversity and subjective rights, especially for minorities and other disadvantaged groups. In terms of democratic praxis, Reckwitz observes that the "democracy of apertistic liberalism […] uncoupled itself from the national "demos": Supranational organizations gained increasing influence over national policy decisions, and "sub-political actors" in the form of "political-economic hybrid organizations" and a "judicial system, which, by making fundamental legal rulings, became an instrument for establishing the law instead of applying it" (2021, 148). Since the early 2010s, however, apertistic liberalism has been in a fundamental crisis of over-dynamization, Reckwitz argues (2021, 150). As was the case when the social-corporatist paradigm was in crisis, Reckwitz attests apertistic liberalism has a threefold set of problems as well. This time, however, they result from too little regulation: almost-collapsing financial markets, growing economic inequality, deteriorating public infrastructure, and "the polarization between high-skilled and low-skilled jobs" (Reckwitz 2021, 151); "the dissolution of reciprocal connections within a "thoroughly liberalized" society," and a spreading perception of societal "norms and duties as nothing more than limitations on […] opportunities for individual growth," which has transformed individuals into entitled, egotistical subjects who are starting to threaten the same institutions that have guaranteed their freedoms in the first place (Reckwitz 2021, 152).

The ensuing crisis of democratic practice, Reckwitz argues, is characterized by decreasing voter participation as an expression of "losing faith in the institutions of liberal democracy"; an "accelerated, combative, and highly emotional" way of deliberation enabled by the spread of digital media, which traditional liberal forms of discussion cannot keep up with; and a mismatch between the variety of social milieus and how they are represented in today's parliaments (2021, 153–54).

Reckwitz consequentially interprets the growing support for and success of (right-wing) anti-establishment politics in Western democracies since the early 2010s as "a symptom of the crisis of this [apertistic] liberalism and an important collective force during a conflict-laden transitional phase" between two political paradigms (2021, 154). For Reckwitz, (right-wing) anti-establishment political movements have recently become so successful because, in contrast to liberal approaches to the crisis of apertistic liberalism, they address all three aspects (socio-economic, socio-cultural, and democratic-functional) of the crisis: They tries to (re-)introduce strong socio-economic and socio-cultural regulations, as well as "promoting [a] form of democracy that equates politics with the will of the people" (2021, 157) as an answer to the democratic-functional crisis.

Theorizing the surge of support for anti-establishment politics as the "product of the crisis" (Reckwitz 2021, 157) of the current paradigm is productive for two reasons. First, it situates the current situation in a broader historical context of socio-economic and socio-cultural developments, thus helping shed light on the roots of the current situation as a useful first step for addressing it. And second, while it does not mean that growing support for anti-establishment politics is unproblematic, theorizing it as a symptom of a transitional phase between two paradigms to an extent "normalizes" conflict-heavy phases like the current one, defining them as times of renewal of liberal democracy — which is a much more productive mode than assuming the beginning of its end. To use Reckwitz's own words: "In light of the

nature of social change, any overriding political paradigm necessarily has just a limited amount of time in which it can act in a way that is sensitive to the problems at hand. At a certain point, it will be taken down by a socio-structural transformation that causes new problems and requires new solutions." (2021, 149) For the purposes of this thesis specifically, this approach also allows me to define the "left behind" theory as one potential explanation for the political repercussions of socio-economic change that recently took place in the U.S., thus placing it in a broader context. To connect this thesis' endeavor with Reckwitz's theory, I will approach the latter the same way I will approach the former: by testing it.

While Reckwitz's theory sounds convincing, he speaks of Western democracies in general without using in-depth examples, and he also does not provide "hard" detailed evidence for his arguments. Yes, he draws long lines and makes a coherent argument, but in an essayistic form rather than a detailed exploration of case studies. I will therefore trace political developments in the U.S. and evaluate to what extent they corroborate his theory in order to tease out to which extent Reckwitz's ideas can help inform our understanding of the 2016 presidential election. The U.S., according to Reckwitz, works on a slightly different trajectory than other Western democracies because, in his view, the social-corporatist paradigm already started becoming hegemonic in the 1930s under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. This will thus be my starting point.

1.1.2 Methodological Considerations in Applying Reckwitz's Theory

Before I dive into "fact-checking" Reckwitz's theory, it is necessary to address one more important issue: What it means for the scientific quality of this thesis that I use Reckwitz's theory as the framework with which I analyze the 2016 presidential election. Reckwitz's theory can be classified as a cyclical one. Theories for the existence of recurring cycles that structure and can predict political developments are not new: In fact, a research field that analyzes U.S. society in general and politics in particular through the lens of cyclical theory has existed in the U.S. since the 1950s. Reckwitz himself does not seem to be aware of this, as he makes no reference to it and does not reflect on what type of theory he creates. Cyclical theories, however, have received substantial criticism regarding their scientific quality and value, which is why I consider it important to address this issue at this point.

Though more than 30 years old, the overview and quality assessment of cyclical theories by Resnick and Thomas (1990) still provides a comprehensive approach to the topic. According to them, cyclical theories are attractive because they seem "to make prediction much simpler than other types of theories [since] all we need to do is specify where we are in the cycle and then read our prediction from the table" (1990, 1). However, cyclical theories are subject to a range of criticisms, which Resnick and Thomas list as follows: They are a) deterministic; b) too broad in scope; and c1) cycles are spurious, meaning the data to corroborate them is either intentionally or unintentionally shaped or selected to fit a preconceived theory or c2) that the "pattern discovered is itself the result of random factors." (1990, 2–4) Resnick and Thomas, who are supportive of cyclical theories, refute these criticisms by arguing that a) the nature of all generalizations in social science is that a phenomenon will happen "when the relevant circumstances occur" and that time is one of these circumstances in cyclical theories; that b) this is an understanding of cyclical theories only as macro theories, which attempt to be comprehensive but whose "theoretical grasp often exceeds their empirical reach," and that does not mean that micro-cyclical theories should be

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discarded outright; that c1) this is a potential danger for every theory which can be avoided by a "hard look at the facts […] to determine that the cycle exists in the eye of the theorist, not in the data themselves"; and that c2) it is relatively easy to show that these patterns have no predictive power (1990, 2–4). As a response, they create a model for a "well-formed model cyclical theory" for U.S. politics which has three components: one, it applies to a specific political practice, for example elections or political reform; two, the practice has at least two different possible phases; and three, the phases are associated with a specific time period (1990, 5). They argue most theories do not fully meet these criteria and thus lose predictive power — but that they still remain useful as they can help make connections between several phenomena which vary at the same time and are often the basis of a phase in a cycle (1990, 6).

The last theoretical issue Resnick and Thomas address is the explanation of the cycle itself, meaning the reasons for the cycle. The challenge they see is that "if we are to have faith in the validity of cycles and set aside the nagging suspicion that their existence is simply an instance of a clever observer imposing a pattern on the past or else the result of essentially random variation" (1990, 7), cyclical theories need to be grounded in other, well-established theories. This means that, in addition to "empirical theory in political science," political cycles should be explained "by reference to other well-grounded generalizations about politics" (Resnick and Thomas 1990, 7). This sounds quite vague on its face, but essentially means that explanations of political cycles should also be grounded in well-established theories from areas like economics, sociology, or psychology. Drawing on this explanation, it is then useful to evaluate how well Reckwitz's theory meets these criteria for a "well-formed model cyclical theory."

Applying Resnick and Thomas's categorization, Reckwitz's theory can be grouped into the category of value cycle theory. These theories "involve long-term movements in

public opinion [that] are self-generating in that events and conditions in one phase of the cycle create the circumstances that lead to the next phase" (Resnick and Thomas 1990, 8). And values are essential to Reckwitz's definition of political paradigms, as "they involve decisions about value, antagonisms over value, and utopian visions of desirable values" (Reckwitz 2021, 135). On the surface, the political practice he appears to be interested in are post-1945 elections in Western liberal democracies, and specifically those since around 2010; however, the main political practice he focuses on are political paradigms. Again, a political paradigm according to Reckwitz is both a way of discursively defining social problems that need solving and a way of solving these problems through government action that follows specific overarching ideas. In this theory, paradigms can go through three phases: ascendency, dominance (or hegemony) and decline. Reckwitz does not make any pronouncements about how long each of these phases lasts, nor does he make predictions for when the next phase will begin; he only speculates on the characteristics of the next hegemonic paradigm. Reckwitz attributes the alternation between these phases to socio-economic, socio-cultural, as well as democratic-functional changes (or problems) which can be externally created but can also be created by the hegemonic paradigm itself.

Whether the alternation between phases of ascendency, dominance, and decline of political paradigms will continue remains open in Reckwitz's theory. This is logical, because Reckwitz is mainly interested in finding an explanation for the recent support for anti-establishment politics in Western liberal democracies, not in explaining recurring political developments in this group of countries. In that sense, I would argue that Reckwitz's theory is not fully a cyclical theory but shows a few characteristics of the type, which is why I still deemed it necessary to address potential methodological concerns.

1.2 Building Social Cohesion (1933-1968)

In 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, American voters elected Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had campaigned on a platform of far-reaching government intervention to combat the country's crises, as president. Not only did he win by a landslide, but Democrats also managed to win majorities in the House and the Senate after decades of Republican dominance.

1.2.1 Embedded Liberalism: America's Social Corporatism

In stark contrast to the previously dominant approach of laissez-faire government, the Roosevelt administration immediately showed its strong will to foster social order and stability through government intervention. This came in the form of banking reforms and regulations as well as the creation of government-financed public works and relief programs, which were among the most prominent pieces of legislation of the First New Deal (1933/34). The Second New Deal (1935/36) brought the nationwide introduction of key social welfare programs like old age assistance, old age insurance, and unemployment insurance; it also strengthened labor unions through the Wagner Act, which, among other benefits, gave them the right to collective bargaining and created the National Labor Relations Board, the stated purpose of which was to "create a balance between unions and business" (Blyth 2002, 85) As a consequence, union membership rose to nearly 9 million by 1940 (Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum 2023). Labor unions actively started supporting the state and campaigned heavily for Roosevelt's reelection in 1936 (Blyth 2002, 69). While union support in the reelection campaign was a welcome side effect of the Wagner Act for Roosevelt's campaign, the provision of "workers with a set of protective institutions designed to increase purchasing power [which], it was hoped, would reduce unemployment, stabilize expectations, and thus resolve the crisis." (Blyth 2002, 69). The strengthening of unions by

the state as representative bodies corroborates Reckwitz's theory in that it "enforced the structural outline of representative democracy"; however, the reasoning behind it was not "skepticism toward the will of the people" (2021, 142).

This paradigm of regulation was far from uncontested in the 1930s: Most prominently challenged from the political left by populist Huey Long and his "Share Our Wealth" plan, and the political right, where the "American Liberty League," a group mostly comprised of wealthy business elites shaped the opposition (Phillips-Fein 2010). The landslide victory of the New Deal coalition in the 1936 elections, however, showed the massive popular support for the paradigm and by the beginning of World War II, the challenges had decreased significantly; during the war, government policy remained mostly unchallenged. Conflicts resumed, however, briefly after the war's end: a series of strikes and growing inflation put pressure on the government's strategy, and the call for less government spending and interference became louder again as voters elected a more conservative Congress in 1946. Through targeted efforts, business successfully supported passing legislation to restrict the power of labor, the most significant laws being the Administrative Procedures Act of 1946 and the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947.

The battle over the role of the state vis-á-vis the economy, went on, however, as business "still faced the problem of constructing an alternative set of economic ideas [to state interventionism] that would avoid the pitfalls of laissez-faire" (Blyth 2002, 90). It managed to do so by developing a concept which, at its core, suggested an automated generation of surpluses in good times, and deficits in hard times. Through establishing this more passive role of government, the concept found middle ground between hardline proponents of balanced budgets and advocates of government intervention in the economy. This "order provided business with expectational stability such that investment and profits would be predictable, but at the same time accepted the new political realities of collective bargaining

and an expanded state" (Blyth 2002, 92). The concept seemed to prove itself as the

"automated stabilizers" contributed to halting the recession of 1948/49 (Blyth 2002, 93).

Additionally, mass growth and mass consumption (Fordism) became cornerstones of

economic policy and societal norms (Cohen 2004). Consequently,

> By 1950, for the first time in thirty years, [labor,] business and the state had built a stable coalition around a shared set of economic ideas and supporting institutions that would last a further twenty years. This set of ideas centered on a passive fiscal policy with stable tax rates facilitating positive-sum outcomes for both business and labor. By providing growth through the maintenance of the institutions that supported these distributions, the state would minimize distributional conflicts while regulating the activities of both business and labor. Business received a steady return on investment, expanding domestic and international markets, and relative labor peace. Labor gained legitimacy, recognition, institutional security, and an increasing real wage. (Blyth 2002, 94).

This "Embedded Liberalism" was the American, lighter version of the Social Corporatism

that was the dominant paradigm in Western Europe at the time; it had become so popular

across the political spectrum that "it seemed that the United States [had] entered a period […]

when the big questions were no longer up for grabs" (Blyth 2002, 95).

1.2.2 Mass Organizations and Individual Security

Socio-culturally, the 1930s reflected the high degree of uncertainty the Great

Depression had brought economically. Don Martindale's description of American society's

malaises at his time includes his view on the cause:

The Great Depression burned into the brains of millions the realization that personal security depended on stable positions in the emerging large-scale organizations of government, business, labor, welfare, and the like. World War II, in organizing millions of Americans into gigantic military operations, in mobilizing the entire economy for war, in uprooting local labor enclaves and transporting them to war industrial centers, only continued the lessons of the Depression: the individual's security and prosperity were henceforth dependent on his place in the mass organizations. (Martindale 1968, 85)

While his view on these developments is a very negative one, there is some truth to it. During these two decades, the state and the institutions it expanded created a framework which provided a large degree of economic security in times of severe national crises. The Fordist model of mass production for mass consumption, as well as the large-scale organizations Martindale mentions, heavily pushed standardization of production, organization of labor, and consequently behavior. Criticisms such as Henry Miller's *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* of 1945, however, were virtually irrelevant at the time. Wartime production and patriotism acted like steroids for this process and after World War II standardization and homogenization turned into conformism. Anti-communism as government doctrine was present from the presidencies of Truman through Nixon and was quasi-enforced between 1947 and 1956 under McCarthyism. For the individual, the culturally propagated characteristics to aspire to were "assuming self-control, establishing goals for the self, and striving to become a socially cooperative and "mature" individual" (Thomson 1992, 501). The call to be a socially cooperative individual bore fruit: Engagement and membership numbers in organizations such as unions, women's clubs, the parent-teacher association (PTA), the Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, and the Church all peaked in the 1950s or 60s (Putnam 1995). This evidence corroborates Reckwitz's argument:

"The individual had a reciprocal relationship with society. He or she received support and protection from it but was also expected to do something for society in return. In a sense, the individual was thought to be 'indebted' to society. Within the framework of this paradigm, there was also (besides the state) a diverse set of corporations that were responsible for imbedding individuals into society at large" (Reckwitz 2021, 142).

In his inaugural address in 1961, President John F. Kennedy perfectly summarized this relationship: "Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country."

1.2.3 Political Machines, Unions, and the Democratic Party

In democratic-functional terms, Reckwitz argues the "social-corporatist paradigm […] enforced the structural outline of representative democracy with a mass base in strong people's parties and organizations" (2021, 142)This argument needs to be dissected in more detail in order to see to what extent it applies to the U.S. Reckwitz, as a German, has the concept of the *Volkspartei* — or, directly translated, "people's party" — in mind here. However, the concept of the *Volkspartei* is specific to Germany: The U.S. equivalent would be a "big tent" or "catch-all" party, defined by its appeal to a broad political spectrum of members and voters. In that sense, the Democratic Party certainly fulfilled this characteristic between 1933 and 1968: The New Deal coalition of voters that started under Roosevelt consisted of southern Whites, racial and religious minorities, liberal intellectuals, labor unions, and political machines (Rieder 1990). Political machines, which had existed for a long time in the U.S., were local political organizations which in some cases virtually controlled all political and economic life in a specific geography (often large cities). Strictly hierarchically organized, they exerted power over their members through patronage systems, meaning the provision of incentives like money or jobs in return for their votes. Machines and unions played a specifically vital role for the Democratic Party because they provided most of the organizational power to mobilize voters (Mayhew 1986). This role led them to become important players within the party structure as well, especially in the selection of delegates for state and national conventions — which was far from transparent and representative (Center 1974). In the 1950s and 60s, machines and unions were joined by a third organizational

player: liberal amateur activists.

Republicans, by contrast, had neither a similarly diverse and powerful voter coalition nor equivalent organizational capabilities. Though most "corporations and newspapers" (Mayhew 1986, 324) leaned Republican and, together with the conservative amateur activists who joined Republicans in the 50s and 60s, provided mobilizational power, they were outmatched by the fact that political machines and unions skewed almost entirely in favor of Democrats (Mayhew 1986, 325). This asymmetry showed in election results during this period: Between 1933 and 1968, Republicans won the presidency only in 1952 and 1956 and controlled the House and Senate only from 1947 to 1949 and from 1955 to 1957. To return to Reckwitz: There was only one mass-based people's party in the U.S. during this paradigm, the Democratic Party, and it dominated the political landscape. Given the organizational structure and its power, as well as the masses that comprised the New Deal Coalition, Reckwitz's characterization fits for the Democratic Party.

Finally established, the paradigm of regulation received widespread approval: It had become hegemonic, in part because of its productiveness but also due to the lack of divisive issues and the specific characteristics of the electorate. The "White Picket Fence Dream" — a house in the suburbs, stable employment, surplus income, and the availability of consumer goods like a refrigerator, TV, or a car — became reality for many, as the (White) middle class expanded massively after the war (von Emster 2020). Both trust in the government (Pew Research Ceenter 2023) and electoral participation were high (The American Presidency Project 2021). The latter was, however, not the result of a high degree of politicization. To the contrary: the (White) electorate in the 1950s was "only mildly involved in politics; […] thought about politics in relatively simple and narrow terms; [and] was allied with one or the other of the major parties by ties that were more a matter of habit than of rational selection" (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976a, 14). Voters were mostly influenced by New Deal issues and even though they "were no longer as important, they had not been replaced by any

new issues that were of deep concern to the electorate" (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976b, 45). The presidential elections mirrored this degree of stability and continuity: "The 1948 election was essentially a New Deal election, with FDR's vice-president as the incumbent running against FDR's opponent of 1944" (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976a, 40). Dwight Eisenhower's bids for the presidency in 1952 and 1956 were successful not because he provided a clear-cut Republican alternative for dealing with the country's issues: His political positions, in fact, overlapped so much with those of the hegemonic paradigm that Democrats had tried to draft him as their candidate. The Republican label was thus no reason for the New Deal Coalition not to support him; in combination with his widespread popular appeal as a war hero, this helped propel him to landslide victories in both elections (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976a, 41). In the 1960 election, again, neither Democrat John F. Kennedy nor Republican Richard Nixon appealed to the political fringes but to a broad coalition of support in the political center, both within their respective parties and with the broader electorate (Rorabaugh 2014). This strategy mobilized large parts of the electorate, leading to a record turnout of 62.8% and an extremely close victory for Kennedy. Paradigm-adhering positions continued to be popular with the electorate, as Lyndon B. Johnson's landslide victory over the far-right Republican Barry Goldwater demonstrated in the election of 1964. However, the first cracks in the paradigm's hegemony started to show that year as Goldwater won several states in the "Solid South," which had been a Democratic bastion since Reconstruction. Democrats there were deeply divided over President Johnson's support for the Civil Rights Movement, an opening Republicans would exploit in future elections.

1.3 Challenges to the Regulatory Paradigm (1968-1980)

Starting in the late 1960s, the regulatory paradigm that had been dominant until then in the U.S. entered a period in which it increasingly faced problems it could no longer adequately address, had in part caused, and had in part exacerbated. One of the most relevant

paradigm-destabilizing forces at the time, if not *the* most relevant, was the Vietnam War. The U.S. government, starting with the Johnson administration, was convinced that winning the war was paramount for containing the spread of Communism.

1.3.1 Navigating Economic Uncertainty

The focus of economic output was thus to produce enough goods for the war effort, which led to increased employment but also to increasing inflation. The government was, however, both, institutionally hampered and politically unwilling to fight inflationary pressures. Influence over the Federal Reserve's monetary policy had been restricted by the Treasury-Fed Accord of 1951, thus putting the possibility of raising the discount rate out of political reach; what's more, President Johnson and Congress were not willing to increase taxes because the former was worried it might hamper the expansion of the welfare state under his Great Society programs and the latter feared electoral consequences (Blyth 2002, 130). And while demand was growing steadily, supply through private-sector investment did not follow at the same pace due to "uncertainty over expected future returns" because of inflation (Blyth 2002, 131). The federal government thus stepped in and increased its share of GDP, which, combined with its lack of the ability to create revenue, led to a steep increase in the deficit (Blyth 2002, 132). Additionally, in 1969, stagflation — the congruence of high inflation, slow economic growth, and growing or high unemployment — hit the U.S. for the first time and existing solutions to this problem were ineffective (Blyth 2002, 134–35). In an attempt to regain control over the volatile economy and the consistently rising level of uncertainty, Nixon in 1971 introduced far-reaching regulations as part of what was later termed the "Nixon Shock." Among them were, most importantly, a temporary wage and price freeze, followed by the introduction of a "price commission and a pay board" as well as "mandated pay increases no larger than 5 percent, tending toward an average target rate of 3

percent, combined with a limitation on profit margins." (Blyth 2002, 136). The measures were successful, lowering inflation in the short run; when the agreements on prices and wages were made voluntary in 1973, however, inflation soared again, leading to another mandated freeze of wages and prices. This time, however, it was unsuccessful (Blyth 2002, 137). It was in this already messy environment that the oil crisis of 1973 emerged. This supply shock added even more inflationary pressure, which the state tried to counter: First by decreasing spending, then by increasing it again, to no avail. The state seemed uncertain what to do in this crisis, as it not only had "lost control of its diagnosis" (Blyth 2002, 138) but was unable to solve it with the existing toolkit.

Additionally, the crisis of the Fordist model of production that unfolded in the late 1960s created further doubt that the regulatory paradigm was still the best approach. The two were intrinsically linked: Mass production needed stable mass consumption, which could only be achieved by broadening the consumer base; that was done by expanding redistribution and employing anti-cyclical economic policies (Schoenberger 1988, 247). Fordist production as a system, however, had internal as well as external problems, which led to a "slowdown in productivity growth and the slowdown in the decline of real social wage costs" (Schoenberger 1988, 247). Internally, the ever-accelerating production process hit technical as well as human limits. Externally, postwar US Fordist production relied heavily on international markets, since not all production surpluses could be absorbed quickly enough by domestic consumption and were thus transformed into investments channeled abroad. As long as the U.S. had a quasi-monopolistic position in the world as the most advanced Fordist regime, it was not a problem that Fordist production techniques and the correspondent regulatory regimes of redistribution diffused into other, mostly Western European countries after World War II. However, when they diffused into low-wage countries, most notably in East Asia — which relied on non-domestic consumption (exports) to absorb their output and did not implement Fordist production in the context "of the productivity-sharing wage bargain with

labor" (Schoenberger 1988, 251) — the U.S. system faced increasing pressure. In the stable framework of oligopolistic competition and mass standardized production, companies that produced in a Fordist manner were increasingly unable to keep up with international competition that produced goods cheaper and more flexibly.

1.3.2 Breaking the Mold of Social Conformity

Socio-culturally, the most important developments in this period were the increasing influence of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, in particular the protests against it. The former was the most prominent example of what Reckwitz described as the emergence of new social movements, which "articulated new and previously neglected political themes 'from below,' and thus demanded a greater share of political participation" (2021, 144). Other notable examples of this category were the women's movement and the environmental protection movement. All three found their political home in the Democratic Party and transformed it and the New Deal Coalition significantly.

The Civil Rights Movement and the support it received from the leadership of the Democrats, starting with Truman in 1948, was the most transformative (or disruptive) to the New Deal Coalition because it highlighted its greatest weakness: the race question. As described above, New Deal Democrats relied on a coalition of voters which included Blacks, other ethnic minorities such as Italians and Jews, and low and middle-class southern Whites. Keeping these groups in the coalition worked because they were all in favor of New Deal economic policies and the race question was, for a long time, kept behind closed doors. However, when the Civil Rights Movement started to grow stronger — at times militantly, highlighting the fact that New Deal liberalism was insufficient to combat racial inequalities and demanding change — the Democratic leadership decided it could no longer ignore the race question. Political initiatives included "affirmative action, community control of schools,

welfare rights, racial quotas, model cities programs, busing, reparations, political mobilization of the black masses, black pride" (Rieder 1990, 254). The Civil Rights Act, which President Johnson signed into law in 1965, was the single most prominent piece of civil rights legislation. However, "each of these remedies surpassed the existing level of moral legitimacy and political acceptability" (Rieder 1990, 254) among the non-Black, middle and lower middle-class groups of the New Deal Coalition, since they felt these improvements for Black people took place at their expense.

While the power of social corporations and with it the stability provided through social networks, strong traditions and morals worked for many people, people increasingly began to revolt against the downsides of this level of conformism and traditional societal norms and roles in the early 1960s. Women, who had worked in World War II but were pushed backed to a more domestic role after the war, started demanding equal pay for equal work; the birth control pill was official approved in 1960 and gave women more personal freedom and choice; and in 1966, activists founded the National Organization for Women to aid in the fight against gender discrimination . Many conservative New Dealers viewed this changing role of women with growing skepticism, seeing it as a decay of morals and traditions.

In addition to the resurfacing race question, a new generation of young, university-educated voters started questioning existing institutions, rules, and decisions. The New Deal-era issues that had been important to their parents were less relevant for the generation that was born after World War II. When they came of voting age, the Vietnam War was, among others, a powerful new issue. Here, the generation's penchant for questioning existing institutions, ways of life, traditions, and values was most visible in antiwar protests and campus riots. This development was especially disruptive for the Democratic Party, as antiwar protestors flocked to it and the movement found prominent supporters such as Hubert Humphrey and Robert F. Kennedy. This further contributed to the split of the New Deal

Coalition: The Vietnam War served as a catalyst for new disputes between socially traditional, lower, and middle-class voters, and the New Left.

Like the economic disruptions of this period, the new social movements and their growing influence did not singlehandedly break up the New Deal Coalition in the 1960s and lead voters to switch to Republicans. Instead, they functioned as catalysts for a development which in hindsight seems almost inevitable, given the centrifugal powers and inconsistencies that existed within it. As Rieder put it, "The upheavals of race, war, and morality did not simply create conservative temptations; rather, they exploded the Democratic container that had kept them within the party" (Rieder 1990, 253).

1.3.3 Democratic Praxis in Flux

The new social movements demanded more representation in the political process, and the Democratic Party was the place for them to materialize these demands — not only because the party seemed to best represent the fight for a fair and just society, but also simply because it was the party that had been, with few exceptions, in control of the country at all levels since 1933. To the Democratic Party, "the mobilization of blacks, programmatic liberals, antiwar protesters, and women brought volatile new forces into the party that disturbed the existing balance of power." (Rieder 1990, 259). Fights between the old and new left became ever more frequent and hostile, culminating in the riots at the 1968 Democratic convention. The tumultuous convention led Democratic leaders to change party rules and as part of the process, the new left side of the party managed to "rewrite the party rules, adding quotas that ensured the future participation of women, blacks, and the young" (Rieder 1990, 259). The consequence was a profound change in the balance of power, as the traditional New Dealers,— "White ethnics, Democratic mayors, organized labor, and party leaders in the industrial Northeast" (Rieder 1990, 259) — which used to be the organizational base of the

Democratic Party, had to give up a significant part of their influence starting as early as the 1972 convention.

In addition to this transformation of the Democratic Party that came from within, two other external developments changed the democratic praxis of both parties. First, the replacement of caucuses with primaries in the selection process of candidates, which shifted the core influence in selecting a party's candidate from party members and long-term affiliates to the wider electorate. And second, the introduction of Political Action Committees (PACs) in 1971, which revolutionized party finance and soon heavily favored Republicans (Blyth 2002, 155).

Mayhew (1986) attests this period saw an overall decline in the power of party organizations, both for Democrats and Republicans; in the case of the former, the contrast to the late 1970s is stronger than in that of the latter, given that the Democratic Party used to have an incredibly strong organizational structure. While the failure of patronage systems due to a redistributive welfare state and infighting among amateur organizations also contributed to this waning influence, Mayhew argues the biggest changing force in this development has been the increasing power of money-intensive candidate organizations, which were made possible through the rule changes about candidate selection and finance described above. He even goes as far as to describe the Democratic Party in the 1980 presidential election as merely "an arena for competing candidate organizations" (1986, 330). If we think about national conventions of both parties today, which seem more like a coronation event than a conflict-laden convention, Mayhew's description seems fitting. The system of superdelegates, which is still influential in the presidential nomination process, seems like a remnant from the days when political machines and organized labor had the power to control entire nomination processes.

The electoral erosion of the "Democratic container" began in the Deep South, where wide-scale voter defection first appeared significantly in the 1964 presidential election: That year, Republican candidate Barry Goldwater and independent populist candidate George Wallace made significant gains in the Democratic bastion of the "Solid South." The trend continued in 1968 and by 1972, when Wallace no longer ran, the South had turned red. In the North, the breaking of the New Deal Coalition was less overt and clear-cut than in the South; still, "by the late 1960s, the issues of race, Vietnam, and life-style had changed the political climate of the entire nation" (Rieder 1990, 258). Although the margin in the popular vote in 1968 was only 0.7%, Republicans won the presidency for the first time in decades based on a clear differentiation between them and the Democrats. Ironically, they did so by doing what Democrats had done for decades: focusing on the middle. Nixon successfully appealed to the working and middle class by addressing them as the hard-working yet forgotten backbone of American society which had become silent and did not voice its concerns in the face of louder voices (i.e., the new left): The "Silent Majority," as Nixon called it, was born. Two additional factors were crucial for Nixon's success: the bitter divisions between the old and new left on the Democratic side, which drove many conservative Democrats away from the party, and George Wallace's decision to run again as an independent appealing to many New Dealers, especially in the South but also in parts of the North with his mix of social conservatism and New Deal economic policies.

As described above, Nixon's economic policies were a continuation of the regulatory paradigm, as was his appeal to the "Silent Majority." The erosion of the New Deal Coalition, however, continued as the intraparty rivalry within the Democrats continued. It culminated in the nomination of George McGovern as Democrats' 1972 presidential candidate, "who came to personify all the forces that were anathema to the interests and ideals of the middle-income classes. His pledge to get down on his hands and knees to obtain peace from North Vietnam violated popular taboos on humiliating appeasement. He supported busing, amnesty for draft

evaders, and abortion rights, all the while repudiating the death penalty" (Rieder 1990, 262). Nixon won in a landslide: McGovern won only the state of Massachusetts.

Jimmy Carter's win in the 1976 election may have seemed, at the time, like Democrats could return to their old strength. However, his victory was more a result of Nixon's resignation over the Watergate scandal in 1974 and the damage it had done to Republicans than a strong statement of support for him as a candidate and the Democratic platform. The fact that Carter won the popular vote by a margin of 2.1% is emblematic of this constellation. Middle America's loyalty to the Democrats had been eroded, but that didn't t mean voters were now loyal to the Republicans; the regulatory paradigm was under attack, but it had not yet been replaced with a new one. The political right successfully exploited the opening to bring about paradigmatic change but "to arrive where it eventually did in 1980, it first had to suffer electoral loss and reap electoral gain. It also needed luck, the complicity of Democrats, the accident of history, organizational resources, and, more than anything else, the vagaries of the economy." (Rieder 1990, 266)

1.4 Apertistic Liberalism: A New Way Forward (1980-2008)

As a consequence of the manifold crises that riddled the United States between the mid-1960s and late 1970s, the regulatory paradigm of embedded liberalism lost its hegemony and was replaced by a new one: apertistic liberalism. This new paradigm became hegemonic, according to Reckwitz, because it combined aspects of a new liberalism from both the political right (neoliberalism) and the political left (progressive or social liberalism). Both strands gained popularity in response to the problems embedded liberalism was no longer able to resolve and, in fact, seemed to an increasing number of people to be responsible for actually creating those problems.

1.4.1 The Economic Turnaround: Neoliberalism in the United States

As Leendertz (2022) describes in her historiography of the social sciences in the U.S., the previously hegemonic idea of the interventionist state, that could solve any societal problem if only it employed enough resources, lost its persuasive power by the end of the 1970s. Using the example of post-World War II urban policy, Leendertz illustrates how first the doubts over the federal government's ability to handle complex problems started growing during the Johnson administration. The growing societal complexity and increasing number of simultaneous crises led, Leendertz continues, to an erosion of the belief in the interventionist state among the very intellectuals that used to be its adherents.

And while the star of the regulatory paradigm was sinking, that of dynamization rose. The moment for new market-radical ideas that had been in the making on the political right since the end of World War II and were first tested by the Republican Party at a national scale with Barry Goldwater as their 1964 presidential candidate, had come — and Ronald Reagan seized it in 1980. His electoral victory that year showed very clearly that the time of direct government interventionism as the organizing principle of policymaking was over. In his

inaugural address, he made it very clear how he saw the role of government: "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." (Reagan 1981b) In the socio-economic sphere, neoliberalism was now the guiding principle. This, according to Leendertz (2022, 25–26), encompassed three main aspects: First, the conviction, based on the view of humans as rational, profit-maximizing, and self-responsible individuals, that free markets and competition were superior ways of societal organization and policymaking; second, a belief in deregulation, privatization, tax reductions, and the commodification of formerly non-marketized goods and services; and third, a power shift away from governmental institutions, which were purposefully weakened, toward businesses, which either successfully evaded regulation or managed to influence it in their favor.

Under President Reagan, the advent of neoliberalism as the new guiding principal of economic policy in particular and policymaking in general soon became visible. Eight days after his inauguration he signed an executive order lifting the last price controls on petroleum (Reagan 1981a); in August of 1981 he signed the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 which included, among other provisions, a reduction of the individual tax rate by 23% over three years, a reduction of the highest marginal tax rate from 70% to 50%, a reduction of the capital gains tax from 28% to 20%, as well as expanded depreciation options for companies (Economic Recovery Tax Act 1981). Even though Republicans only had a majority in the Senate, Reagan managed to gather 48 Democratic votes in the House approving the bill in a 238-195 vote, which can be seen as another indicator that the paradigmatic tides had changed. The federal budget for 1982 was also majorly revised, down from the $739 President Carter's administration had envisaged to $695 billion, seeing cuts in the food stamps program, the budgets of regulatory bodies, federal grants to states and municipalities, and social housing projects (Leendertz 2022, 270–71).

While tax reform and cuts to federal spending were the most impactful immediate changes under Reagan in his first term, his administration did not stop there. Even though organized labor was not as powerful as it used to be in the 1940s (see above), it had considerable political clout by the late 1970s. With Reagan, however, organized labor had found a powerful adversary and already in 1981, he would set the new tone. As a result of stalled negotiations with the Federal Aviation Administration, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization began a strike in August 1981. Because they were federal employees, they were not allowed to strike — which, in turn, led Reagan to threaten the termination of their employment if they did not return to their jobs within 48 hours. When the strikers refused to comply, he followed through on his threat: The administration fired more than 11,000 of the 13,000 air traffic controllers. As a consequence of this unexpected and highly impactful decision, many private employers were encouraged by the president's actions and broke strikes in their industries, which in turn drastically reduced the mobilizing power of organized labor (McCartin 2021). Additionally, Reagan made key appointments to the National Labor Relations Board (NLBR), which contributed to the labor-hostile climate. Similar to the Supreme Court, the president nominates the members of the five-person board and each member serves five years. By 1983, Reagan's appointees had gained the majority of seats and the new chairman, Donald Dotson, not only had a "staunchly anti-union stance, […] hired as board solicitor an official from the National Right to Work Committee — an anti-union lobby group [but] Under a line of Dotson Board rulings, employers obtained greater latitude to interrogate union supporters, make misleading campaign statements, speculate about the adverse effects of unionization and discharge union supporters." (Farber and Western 2002, 392–93).

Regarding deregulation, Reagan was not the first p to push for it. In fact, Republican Presidents Nixon and Ford had started first attempts at deregulating key industries to reduce prices through increased competitiveness but their efforts ultimately met with too much

resistance from Congress (Crain 2007). Their Democratic successor Jimmy Carter was much more successful and continued what they had started. During his presidency, he deregulated the commercial airline sector, the trucking industry, rail rates, and long-distance phone service (Dudley 2023). This was another indicator that the regulatory paradigm was no longer in its heyday. Reagan continued on this path even more eagerly, an approach illustrated by what his administration managed to change in two key areas.

In the financial sector, the Garn-St. Germain Depository Institutions Act of 1982 and the Alternative Mortgage Transaction Parity Act of 1982 lifted restrictions (the latter became part of the former during the legislative process). The acts included provisions that allowed savings and loans associations to "engage in commercial loans up to 10 percent of assets and offer a new account to compete directly with money market mutual funds, [allowing them] to act more like a bank and less like a specialized mortgage lending institution" (Sherman 2009, 7) and "lifted restrictions [on banks] against classes of mortgage loans with exotic features, such as adjustable-rate and interest-only mortgages (Sherman 2009, 12). Both acts were passed with an overwhelming bipartisan majority in Congress. Another shift towards deregulation was only partly Reagan's responsibility: the dismantling of the Glass-Steagall-Act of 1933. Passed during the Great Depression, this law strictly separated commercial and investment banking. Efforts to loosen the act's provisions started in the 1960s but the pivotal change came in 1986, when the Federal Reserve reinterpreted the act and allowed banks to "derive up to 5 percent of gross revenues in investment banking business" (Sherman 2009, 9). Until 1996, this percentage was increased to 25% under Reagan-appointed Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan, who held this post from 1987 to 2006 (Sherman 2009, 9).

Under Reagan, the bipartisan support for environmental protection came to a quick halt. Seen as yet another example of "government overreach by federal bureaucracies" (Fredrickson et al. 2018, 96), Reagan targeted the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), already starting as president-elect. Brought to life with the support of President Nixon in

1970, the EPA soon became one of the most powerful federal agencies and was supported by majorities among Democrats and Republicans alike. Since business interests found more than one pair of open ears in the Reagan administration, their efforts against environmental regulation quickly bore fruit. One key to this was personnel: Not only did Reagan appoint Anne Gorsuch, a "corporate lawyer and two- term Colorado legislator who had opposed the Clean Air Act, water quality rules, and hazardous waste protections" but many other "EPA appointments were also based more on ideology and loyalty than government experience, with many coming from the industries that they were tasked with regulating (Fredrickson et al. 2018, 96). Gorsuch reduced EPA staff by 21% between 1981 and 1983 and disrupted the agency's organization, leading to a significant reduction in rule enforcement efforts (Fredrickson et al. 2018, 96). Other efforts were the reduction of the EPA's budget and the creation of a Science Advisory Board, filled with "industry-aligned scientists" (Fredrickson et al. 2018, 97). Some of the administration's measures were eventually mitigated or not enacted at all after significant public outcry, media attention, and congressional investigations: For example, Gorsuch was fired from her role, the agency's budget was partially restored and the phaseout of leaded gasoline continued (Fredrickson et al. 2018, 96). However, the damage was done in that sense that environmental protection had become a partisan issue (Fredrickson et al. 2018, 97).

One of the most far-reaching early changes under Reagan was how he enacted his conviction that small government was the best program for economic expansion. Attempting to revolutionize the interplay between federal, state, and local governments, his administration's approach was to drastically reduce the influence of the federal government on state and local governments, which had been expanding since the 1940s. Although even his own party rejected some of his far-reaching legislative ideas, Reagan managed to not only significantly reduce federal grants to state and local governments but also eliminated many categorical grants and created block grants instead. The former had been a tool of the federal

government to implement national rules and standards, while the latter allowed more spending discretion and reduced the influence of the federal government (Leendertz 2022, 272–75).

These examples show how the Reagan administration tried to achieve its goal of reduced government influence: through ideologically loyal appointments and budget reductions. The budget reductions, in combination with the efforts to balance the federal budget (see below), were a particularly creative way of reducing the reach of federal agencies, especially those that were considered to be the most inhibiting to corporate interests. Between FY 1980 and FY 1985, the Federal Trade Commission lost 26% of its respective budget; the Interstate Commerce Commission lost 54%, the Consumer Product Safety Commission lost 33%, the EPA lost 4%, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration lost 10% (Litan 1985, 23). Ironically, the total spending on regulatory agencies accounted for less than 1% of the federal budget in 1985 (Litan 1985, 23), making the argument of having to save in these areas to reduce the federal deficit, as commonly promulgated by the Reagan administration, somewhat dubious.

In the first half of the 1980s, neoliberalism, though already set in the tracks to paradigmatic dominance, was not quite there yet. It still faced some setbacks: For example, even though Reagan's advisers saw the most potential for cuts in the 1982 budget in the areas of Social Security and Medicaid, they quickly had to rescind these plans due to the programs' overall popularity, even among Republican voters (Leendertz 2022, 270). Also, the passing of the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982 can be seen as a small setback. Passed by Congress over concerns over the quickly growing federal deficit, which was a result of the early 1980s recession and the decreased revenue due to the provisions of the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982 turned back the wheel on some provisions of the 1981 Act. Another example of a setback was the Deficit Reduction Act of 1984, which, as the name already suggests, was also passed as a

consequence of the increasing national debt, and reintroduced some of the previously reduced

taxes (Deficit Reduction Act 1984). These were, however, only small setbacks. The national

economic recovery started in 1983 and lasted until the mid-1990s, which contributed to

Reagan's landslide victory by an 18.2% margin and him winning 49 out of 50 states in the

1984 presidential election. Republicans also defended their majority in the Senate and won 16

additional seats in the House (although they still did not win a majority of seats there).

Economic liberalization continued in Reagan's second term, most prominently in the

signing of the Tax Reform Act of 1986. Among other provisions, it reduced the top tax rate

for individuals from 50% to 28%, expanded the standard deduction, personal exemptions, and

earned income credit, reduced the corporate tax rate from 50% to 35%, and closed a number

of tax loopholes (Tax Reform Act 1986). It was not only passed by a broad bipartisan

majority (292-136 in the House; 74-23 in the Senate), but even sponsored by leading

congressional Democrats (Winfrey 2013). As written above, the Reagan administration had

severe problems balancing the federal budget due to decreased tax revenue, coupled with

expanding defense spending. In fact, during Reagan's presidency, the federal debt grew from

about $738 billion to slightly less than $2.1 trillion (U.S. Department of the Treasury - Fiscal

Service 2023). In an effort to get control over the growing debt, Congress passed the Gramm-

Rudman-Hollings Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985. At its core,

the act states that Congress must eliminate the federal deficit "either through conventional

means or, failing to reach agreement, through automatic spending cuts" (West 1988, 96), gave

specific annual deficit-reduction targets until FY 1991, "and failure to reach these targets, as

determined by the Congressional Budget Office and Office of Management and Budget,

would require across-the-board reductions in government programs." (West 1988, 96) After it

was eventually ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1986, Congress passed a

second version of the law, the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Reaffirmation

Act of 1987 (also known as Gramm-Rudman-Hollings II). This is especially noteworthy, as it

shows a further dissipation of the new political paradigm across the political spectrum: In the 1986 midterm elections, Democrats had gained control of both the Senate and the House again for the first time since 1980.

Under Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush, neoliberalism appeared to be the continuing guideline for economic policy and the organization of government. One of the most emblematic phrases for this continuation was Bush's famous slogan " Read my lips: No new taxes," which he uttered as part of his speech to accept the nomination at the 1988 Republican National Convention. Once in office, however, Bush soon faced reality: An ever-growing federal deficit, caused by an economic recession after the 1980s boom, combined with Democrats' control of both chambers of Congress, led him to break his promise in the shape of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990. The law, among other provisions, increased the individual top tax rate from 28 to 31% and the alternative minimum tax rate from 21 to 24%, and increased taxes on certain itemized goods like autos, boats, airplanes, cigarettes, and alcohol (Tax Policy Center 2022a). The act also included the Budget Enforcement Act (BEA) of 1990, which was a successor to Gramm-Rudman-Hollings I and II. Passed as a new approach to solve ongoing problems with the reduction of federal budget deficits, the BEA also used budget controls but differed from Gramm-Rudmann-Hollings I and II in a range of aspects. First, it no longer "sought to use budget controls to force future deficit reduction legislation, [but] sought to use budget controls to preserve the deficit reduction achieved in the accompanying reconciliation legislation"; second, "the statutory controls included in BEA sought to limit any new legislation that would increase the deficit"; and third, the replacement of deficit targets by "the implementation of pay-as-you-go (PAYGO) procedures to control new direct spending and revenue legislation and discretionary spending limits to control the level of discretionary spending [which] were enforced separately so that savings scored under one category could not be used to offset another" (Lynch 2011a, 8). The BEA would set the tone for the coming decade, during which

President Bill Clinton signed the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993 and the Budget Enforcement Act of 1997, which both further expanded budget enforcement procedures (Lynch 2011a, 10–12).

Efforts regarding further deregulation continued under Bush in some areas, whereas in others he supported additional regulation. As a result, he ultimately had a mixed track record in this policy area — which is, however understandable, if we look at the pieces of legislation he did sign that introduced new regulation. Most prominent was the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, which gave Americans with disabilities protections against discrimination similar to those in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and also "guaranteed the disabled adequate access to places of business and public venues, expanded access to transportation, and provided for equivalent access to telecommunications."(Knott 2023) Fearing the increased costs for business and being skeptical towards the expansion of civil rights to begin with, conservative Republicans had lobbied against the passage of the bill. The Bush administration and the ADA supporters, however, managed to convince a bipartisan majority to pass the bill by framing it as a "cost-saving measure at a time of fiscal stringency" (Berkowitz 1994, 112) because it claimed to reduce the dependency on federal programs of people with disabilities.

The other prominent piece of new regulatory policy was the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990, which Bush had proposed himself. The proposal's goal was to address the issues of acid rain, urban pollution, and toxic air emissions and "called for establishing a national permits program to make the law more workable, and an improved enforcement program to help ensure better compliance with the Act."(United States Environmental Protection Agency 2023) Despite industry resistance (The Pew Environment Group 2010), the amendments passed with broad bipartisan majorities, likely due to three factors: One, environmental issues being on the agenda of both political parties since the 1970s and climate

change in particular becoming an important political issue in the 1980s (Schmalensee and Stavins 2019, 30); two, having a powerful advocate for environmental protection in the White House; and three, the encouragement of "market-based principles and other innovative approaches, like performance-based standards and emission banking and trading" (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2023) in combating these issues, which is in the vein of neoliberal organization of government policy-making and implementation (see above).

When Democrat Bill Clinton was elected president in 1992, after 12 years of Reagan and Bush Sr., it first appeared as though he would return to New Deal policies. During his campaign, Clinton promised to cut taxes for the middle class, increase taxes for the wealthy "to use government spending to invest in education and infrastructure" (Meerepol 1998, 226). And once elected, Clinton soon presented his program to improve the nation's poor economic performance, the main reason that Bush Sr. remained a one-term president. His program included a $30 billion economic stimulus package based on investments in infrastructure as well as in education and workforce training; the reduction of inequality through the expansion of the earned-income tax credit, an increase of the top marginal income tax rate from 31% to 36%, the creation of more high-skilled jobs; and a deficit reduction plan (Meerepol 1998, 228–30). His proposal for investments and tax increases were, however, all blocked in Congress and the only part of Clinton's economic program that remained was deficit reduction, which materialized in the shape of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993. Congress Republicans unanimously opposed it, and their Democratic colleagues only hesitantly supported it. As Meeropol writes, that showed that the mantra of no new taxes and deficit reduction to combat inflation "had succeeded in shackling even a reform-minded Democratic president supposedly working with a like-minded Democratic majority in Congress." (1998, 236)

Clinton was, however, by no means simply a classic New Deal Democrat unfortunately blocked by Congress. In fact, Clinton stood for the new policy mix moderate Democrats had started to develop in the 1980s, both out of disagreement with the New Left over issue priorities and out of frustration over the continuously bad electoral performance of new left candidates in presidential elections since McGovern's defeat in 1972 (Surender 2004, 14). This group, known as the Democratic Leadership Council (later changed to New Democrats), developed a platform that became known as the "Third Way," which was based on "issues such as economic growth and opportunity, not entitlement, though controlled investment and education. New Deal liberalism was placed within the context of globalization and an economically individualist electorate wanting smaller government" (Surender 2004, 14). Main domestic policy tenets of this platform were thus the adherence to balanced budgets, the reform of welfare toward more individual responsibility, and the overall creation of equality of opportunity. If this sounds similar to what the Republican Party had promoted since Reagan, that's because it was. As Leendertz (2022, 387) poignantly puts it: "Overall, there was a clear closeness between the neoliberal, value-conservative discourse of responsibility and freedom and the more left-wing discourse of communitarianism and empowerment, which promised individual freedom, autonomy, and self-realization through liberation from patronizing social norms" (translation my own). Also, in a direct continuation of Reagan's approach to government reform, as one of the first actions in office, Clinton tasked Vice President Al Gore with leading the task force of the "National Performance Review." This project was aimed at identifying ways of making the federal bureaucracy cheaper and more efficient, guided by Clinton's idea to "to change the culture of our national bureaucracy away from complacency and entitlement toward initiative and empowerment" (Leendertz 2022, 389). To cut costs, the task force recommended firing more than 250,000 federal employees as well as streamlining administrative processes and structures based on private sector principles (Leendertz 2022, 389).

Besides the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993 and the National

Performance Review, a range of policies Clinton supported during his two terms show that

neoliberalism had become the hegemonic paradigm not just among Republicans, but also in

the Democratic Party. In 1993, he signed the North American Free Trade Agreement, which

his two predecessors had started negotiating; in 1996, he signed the Personal Responsibility

and Work Opportunity Act, delivering on his 1991 campaign promise to "end welfare as we

know it" by eliminating a 61-year-old federal entitlement born in Roosevelt's New Deal,

replacing it with time limits, work requirements, and block grants under the control of the

states" (Carcasson 2006, 655); and in 1997, preceded by two government shutdowns and

bitter fights with the Republican majorities that had been in place in both chambers of

Congress since the 1994 midterm elections, he signed laws to achieve a balanced budget by

2002.

In the area of regulation, Clinton continued on the path his predecessor had started by

introducing little new regulation but further deregulating other crucial areas. The Family and

Medical Leave Act of 1993, which had been vetoed twice by Bush Sr., was one of those

major pieces of new regulation, allowing employees to take a total of three months of unpaid

leave per year to care for a family member or in cases of serious health conditions. The other

was the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, the most important

provision of which protects health insurance coverage for workers and their families if they

lose or change their jobs. Clinton's signing of two key deregulatory bills, the Financial

Services Modernization Act of 1999, also known as the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act, and the

Commodity Futures Modernization Act of 2000, were "the crowning achievement of decades

and millions of dollars worth of lobbying efforts on behalf of the finance industry" (Sherman

2009, 10). The former "repealed all restrictions against the combination of banking, securities

and insurance operations for financial institutions" (Sherman 2009, 10) and the latter

"exempted derivatives from regulation and made a special exemption for energy derivative trading" (Sherman 2009, 11)

Under George W. Bush, the Republican elected in 2000, neoliberal economic policies continued. The two most prominent pieces of legislation that continued this trend were the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001 and the Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003, later dubbed the Bush tax cuts. The former reduced top tax rate from 39.6% to 35% and those for a number of other brackets, as well as capital gains taxes, and eliminated the estate tax (Tax Policy Center 2022b), and the latter sped up a range of the former's provisions. Different than tax bills during the Reagan, Bush Sr., and Clinton administrations, the Bush Jr. tax bills did not include any increases in taxes or new ones. Republicans had the majority in both chambers of Congress; this shows that by this point, the last influential voices in favor of tax increases to balance the federal budget, as they had still existed during the time of Bush Sr., had been marginalized in the Republican Party. This development had seen its first peak in 1994, when Newt Gingrich, who would become Speaker of the House in 1995, authored the "Contract with America," a legislative agenda for the time after the 1994 midterm elections. Since all Republican candidates signed the agenda, which, among other provisions, included tax cuts, it helped unify the party. Since many Republicans saw Bush Sr.'s defeat in 1992 as a consequence of him reneging on his promise not to increase taxes, this issue had become a cornerstone of the party's platform. Further enforcement of this position among Republican lawmakers has been taking place since 1986 in the shape of the "Taxpayer Protection Pledge," a document offered to new lawmakers by the interest group Americans for Tax Reform promising to not pass any new taxes (Beschel Jr. 2024; Good 2012)

During the two Bush Jr. terms, "government spending rose by 4% of GDP, the budget deficit doubled, and the national debt surged to $11 trillion" (Wilson 2009, 149). The Bush

tax cuts are estimated to have added $1.5 trillion dollars to the national debt (Kessler 2011), despite assurances that they would pay for themselves through increased economic output (Bruni 2001). Other major contributors to this surge were the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan Bush started as a consequence of the 9/11 terror attacks, and the recessions in 2001 and from 2007 to 2009. The former "only" significantly reduced the tax revenue; the latter did that too, but also endangered the U.S. economy as whole, leading to a massive government stimulus package and bailout program.

In the area of regulation, the Bush Jr. administration continued for the most part on the path of its predecessors. Not only did Bush not ratify the Kyoto accords on global warming, he also mainly continued the deregulatory agenda through appointment of free market adherents for positions in regulatory agencies (Wilson 2009, 155–56). The main notable exception was the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, which, as a consequence of the Enron accounting scandal, "imposed much more stringent, possibly overly stringent, accounting procedures on American corporations and their overseas subsidiaries" (Wilson 2009, 156).

Contrary to Reagan's approach to reduce the federal government's influence on states, the Bush Jr. administration strengthened it again. This divergence from the "traditional" Republican course was based on two aspects. First, the influence of neoconservatives in the administration was significant and they "are not necessarily opposed to big government, provided that the exercise of federal power is necessary to achieve their aims" (Vile 2009, 62). And two, Bush Jr. was the first Republican president since Eisenhower to govern with Republican majorities in both chambers of Congress, an opportunity he used to prioritize his policy goals over concern for states' rights and even "reversed the policies of his Republican predecessors" (Vile 2009, 63). Notable examples were the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which mandated that states adopt certain curriculum and testing standards; the Patriot Act of 2001, which mandated that states adhere to federal standards regarding emergency programs;

and the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003, which mainly expanded Medicare coverage for prescription drugs for the elderly and additionally centralized the provision of medication for previously covered participants (Vile 2009, 64–66).[1]

This overview over the economic, regulatory, and public management policies pushed forward during the tenure of four Republican and one Democratic president between 1981 and 2009 shows quite clearly how all-encompassing and hegemonic the neoliberal arm of apertistic liberalism became in the U.S. during this period.

1.4.2 Progressive Liberalism and Cultural Empowerment

Reckwitz argues that in Western democracies in general, progressive liberalism, alongside neoliberalism, was the other defining strand of apertistic liberalism. He argues it was defined by its goal "of opening up identities and empowering individuals and cultural groups" and seeing the state only in the instrumental function of "securing the subjective rights of individuals and particular, as well as local, collectives" (2021, 146). For the U.S. in particular, he argues that for the Democratic Party, "following the civil rights movement, the political concerns of groups that had been disadvantaged on account of their 'identity' were avidly pushed to the forefront of the party's program. Its politics are now guided by the image of a society that is neither egalitarian nor homogeneous, but is instead (and ought to be) diverse and multicultural" (2021, 147). The precursor to Reckwitz's argument was Nancy Fraser's assessment that there were two in fact two types of "politics of recognition": a progressive one, promulgated by the Democrats that focused on "ideals of "diversity,"

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[1] The expansion of Medicare coverage of prescription drugs was also one of the main contributors to the ballooning federal debt, as it incurred cost just short of $400 billion over 10 years according to the Congressional Budget Office Director's 2004 estimation (Congressional Budget Office 2004). This expansion of welfare coverage seems contradictory to neoliberal thinking but can be explained by the fact that the act also included provisions to create Health Savings Accounts, which were a way to marketize Medicare.

women's "empowerment," and LGBTQ rights, post-racialism, multiculturalism, and environmentalism"; and a reactionary one, promulgated by Republicans and based on a "vision of a just status order [that was] ethnonational, anti-immigrant, and pro-Christian, if not overtly racist, patriarchal, and homophobic" (Fraser 2017). One could say the Republican politics of recognition was more exclusionary, while the Democratic one was more inclusive — which is likely why the latter was politically more successful, according to both Reckwitz and Fraser. It is worth examining the extent to which political history corroborates these arguments.

During the Reagan and Bush Sr. presidencies, Republicans built and maintained an electoral coalition that heavily depended on the so-called Reagan Democrats. These northern Whites that used to vote solidly Democratic voted for Reagan and Bush Sr. based on a mix of frustration over Carter's performance, favorable views of Reagan as a person, and disagreement with the Democratic Party's policies on race and redistribution (Borquez 2005). The Republican Party, in its efforts to win southern Whites from the Democrats (the so-called Southern Strategy) since the 1960s, had steadily and increasingly openly positioned itself as the party that was against affirmative action and welfare programs that were designed to help Black people. A first peak of these positions was the 1988 election, in which Bush Sr. built his campaign around the case of Willie Horton, a Black man who had raped a White woman while he on furlough from prison. Presenting himself as tough on crime, in contrast to his Democrat competitor Michael Dukakis, Bush Sr. and the Republicans "converted crime into a code word for race" (Piliawsky 1989, 32). This proved to be fertile ground, especially among working-class Whites who increasingly felt unfairly treated at the expense of Blacks (Piliawsky 1989, 31).

Given this context and having been frustrated by three consecutive defeats in presidential elections, the Democratic Party significantly changed its stance in preparation for

the 1992 election. The main problem that made Democrats easy targets for the Republicans in the 1980, 1984, and 1988 elections was that they appeared to be "at the mercy of the party's most vocal special interests," a result of the post-1968 party reform, which led to party delegates more likely being "issue-oriented activists, members of minority groups, and/or frustrated members of defeated party factions [that] are supposedly are [sic!] more unyielding in their demands for highly specific, ideologically extreme and controversial platform planks" (Borrelli 2001, 431). In 1980, controversial issues such as full employment and Medicaid funding for abortions found their way into the party platform against resistance by Carter and his supporters. In 1984, the "platform ballooned from an initial 20,000-word draft to 45,000 words" (Borrelli 2001, 431) due to contributions from numerous groups; in 1988, the platform was both too vague, a consequence of the 1984 platform's length, and again contained controversial issues such as a "national health program [and] increasing taxes on the wealthy" (Borrelli 2001, 431). During the drafting process for the 1992 platform, however, the moderate Democratic Leadership Council and its affiliated New Democrats, which had become the strongest wing of the party by that point, managed to shape the process in such a way that it kept extreme positions at bay, thus securing key constituencies of the Democratic voter coalition (Borrelli 2001, 455–56).

In terms of actual policy, Reagan's and Bush Sr.'s track records were mixed: They had to balance their own relatively moderate convictions (Haines 2018), a growing socially conservative wing in the Republican Party, and keeping social conservatives on board. On the one hand, both vetoed civil rights legislation because they viewed these laws — in the case of the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987, which required organizations that received federal funding to comply with civil rights laws — as an overreach of the federal government. In the case of the Civil Rights Act of 1990, which would have eased discrimination-based litigation, they viewed the proposals as destructive to the "national employment system" (Rhor 2018) that would have enacted strict quotas, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1990. On the other hand,

Reagan appointed the first female director of the EPA as well as the first female justice of the Supreme Court, and established the 50 States Project for Women, which intended to "identify and correct State laws which discriminate against women." (Peters and Woolley 2023) Bush Sr., meanwhile, signed the Americans with Disabilities Act, which "brought civil rights protections for people with disabilities to a level of parity with civil rights protections already enjoyed by racial minorities and by women." (Berkowitz 1994, 1)

Clinton's track record on the expansion of individual rights and their protection was also mixed, but for a different reason, as Kim (2002)argues. On the one hand, the Democratic Party still had a very influential progressive liberal wing: Even though it was not as influential in the creation of the 1992 platform, the bloc was still integral to mobilizing substantial parts of the Democratic coalition. On the other hand, Clinton wanted to win back those White middle-class voters that had given their votes to Reagan and Bush Sr., which meant he had to find a way to reconcile these two voting blocs. Clinton did so with a calculated balance between concrete policy and symbolic action, not only on issues of race, as Kim (2002) pointed out, but also regarding other minority groups that were integral to the Democratic coalition.

In the area of LGBTIQ rights, Clinton was the first presidential candidate to actively "seek and receive support from an organized gay political community, which was itself new to Presidential politics" (Socarides 2013). Once in office, he actively sought to fulfill his campaign promise that service in the military would be made possible for everyone. The resulting "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" directive was, however, a compromise Clinton agreed to after having faced considerable resistance against his proposal (Socarides 2013). And despite signing of the Defense of Marriage Act[2] in 1996 to avoid potential blowback in his reelection bid (Socarides 2013), during his second term, Clinton supported a "new federal hate-crimes

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[2] The act banned federal recognition of same-sex marriage.

statute that included sexual orientation" [and] " legislation banning employment

discrimination against gays", and " signed an executive order banning sexual-orientation

discrimination in the federal civilian workforce."(Socarides 2013)

In the area of women's and reproductive rights, Clinton also deployed his mix of

symbolic and substantial actions. For example, he appointed a number of liberal feminists and

allies in high-ranking government positions, such as the first female secretary of state

Madeleine Albright, Janet Reno for attorney general, Hazel O'Leary as secretary of energy,

and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg for the Supreme Court (Riley 2023). In the early days of his

first term, Clinton, who was a supporter of reproductive freedom, "reversed a wide variety of

Reagan-Bush administration domestic policies that had been aimed at restricting reproductive

choice, and he nullified the Mexico City policy"[3] (Garner 2016, 127). In 1994, he signed the

Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act, which made it a federal crime to use or threaten

the use of force otherwise obstruct individuals from seeking or providing reproductive health

services. And in 1996, he vetoed a bill that would have made it illegal to have certain types of

late-term abortions, namely the partial birth abortion (University of Virginia - Miller Center

2023). As early as his 1992 campaign, Clinton had expressed his support for abortions, even

though only six years before he had still stated his opposition (Flanagan 2019). He had

realized, however, that his party was looking for a candidate who supported abortion rights;

by saying he wanted abortions to be "safe, legal, and rare," he had "located language that

made it possible to be completely for legal abortion and against legal abortion" (Flanagan

2019) — thus bringing White conservatives, many of whom were not completely against

abortion, back into the fold while keeping progressives in his camp.

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[3] The Mexico City policy "has required foreign NGOs to certify that they will not "perform or actively promote abortion as a method of family planning" using funds from any source (including non-U.S. funds) as a condition of receiving U.S. global family planning assistance" , see The Kaiser Family Foundation (2021)

On the highly critical issue of race, Clinton acted in a similar vein. During his 1992 presidential campaign, he in fact distanced himself from Blacks by taking more conservative positions on crime, welfare, and affirmative action than previous Democratic presidential candidates, all part of his effort to win over White voters (Kim 2002, 61–64). Once in office, Clinton tried to mend the rifts his campaign had caused with Blacks, though mostly through symbolic gestures, such as appointing Blacks to high-level government positions or apologizing for the Tuskegee experiments, "an example of egregious discrimination that was safely in the past" (Kim 2002, 71). On the policymaking front, Clinton continued to side with White demands when he thought it would cost him their support if he did not. During his first term, he proposed a crime bill and passed it with the help of Republican votes, as well as signed a welfare reform bill against Black opposition in Congress (Kim 2002, 66). Even his central piece in racial politics, "One America in the 21st Century: The President's Initiative on Race," announced in 1997, was mostly symbolic and primarily a calculated move to keep Black public support and "to promote diversity as a means to enhance America's economic strength and moral standing in the eyes of the world" (Kim 2002, 74), than him caring about Blacks. The initiative itself was the creation, which Clinton did via Executive Order, of an advisory board tasked with counseling the president on matters of race relations, which it mostly did by issuing reports and fostering dialogue among citizens. It did not, however, bring about actual change, mostly because the reports "played to white sensibilities by downplaying discrimination, deemphasizing white responsibility for black disadvantage, and denying the need for major government programs" and because Clinton saw the government role as "only to facilitate dialogue" but not to actively "improve things" (Kim 2002, 76).

In summary, Reckwitz is correct when he says that the support of subjective rights and recognition of individual diversity became an integral part of the Democratic Party's profile during apertistic liberalism. However, his claim that "progressive liberalism has endorsed a program for systematically actualizing and expanding such rights and for 'empowering'

individuals" (2021, 147) may have been true in theory but was hardly put into practice. In fact, one could argue that neither Republicans nor Democrats had the expansion of individual rights to create a more just societal order at the heart of their political agenda during apertistic liberalism. When thinking of Republicans, this comes as no surprise given that an increasing number of its legislators and supporters saw the creation of societal equality for women and minorities through federal policy as an infringement on private business interests and an attack on White (heterosexual and male) societal hegemony. Nancy Fraser's criticism thus seems at first glance surprisingly harsh when she writes that the moderate Democrats who have been dominant in the party since the late 1980s reduced "equality to meritocracy" because they "did not aim to abolish social hierarchy but to 'diversify' it, 'empowering' 'talented' women, people of color, and sexual minorities to rise to the top," thus seducing "major currents of progressive social movements into the new hegemonic bloc" (Fraser 2017). When we look at Clinton's track record, however, this criticism seems warranted: He did not promote any significant, targeted structural change toward more societal equality. Instead, the combination of a rhetoric of empowerment and opportunity and mostly symbolic actions (a politics of recognition) to keep non-White and other minority support, while enacting concrete policy to regain popularity with Whites, must have been disappointing for those seeking a more just social status order — and likely even was taken as a betrayal by those who were proud of the Democratic Party's history as the civil rights party.

The fact that between 1980 and 2008, no president was elected that did not promote a message of less government regulation and involvement (except for times of significant crises such as the 9/11 attacks or the Great Recession, when strong government responses met broad public support), corroborates Reckwitz's argument that apertistic liberalism was the hegemonic paradigm during that time. Of course, this does not mean there was no resistance against it or that its hegemony was absolute. Factors specific to certain elections also played a role, but as the examples listed above show, there was a clear pattern during that period.

1.4.3 Democracy without the Demos

When it comes to the mode of democratic praxis during apertistic liberalism, Reckwitz argues that "domestic policy was driven more and more by the increasingly close relations between politics and economics, on the one hand, and between politics and law on the other. Political-economic hybrid organizations — in the form of public–private partnerships, for instance — gained relevance, as did the political influence of the judicial system, which, by making fundamental legal rulings, became an instrument for establishing the law instead of applying it," thus disconnecting democracy from the people (2021, 148–49). It is helpful to examine to what extent this claim holds true for the U.S.

As for the relationship between politics and economics (or rather, business interests), the case is relatively clear. The 1971 Campaign Finance Reform Act, which ironically sought to limit contributions to election campaigns by allowing the creation of Political Action Committees (PACs) for "solicitation of contributions to a separate segregated fund to be utilized for political purposes" — and by neither limiting the number of PACs nor the number of entities who were allowed to contribute to them — "effectively handed business a license to print political money" (Blyth 2002, 155). In the first few years after the act, Democrats and Republicans received similar contributions from business through PACs; by the late 1970s, however, corporate PACs predominantly funded pro-business (i.e. Republican) candidates and incumbents (Blyth 2002, 155). Since the 1980s, privatization of government service, mostly through outsourcing and contracting, increased (Auger 1999; Fairman 2001). Based on a data sample that spanned from 1981 to 2002, Gilens & Page (2014)showed the disproportionately high influence of business interests on policymaking.

Regarding the relationship between politics and law, what Reckwitz refers to has been termed the "juridification of politics," which describes the phenomenon of increasing reliance "on legal process and legal arguments, using legal language, substituting or replacing ordinary

politics with judicial decisions and legal formality" (Silverstein 2012, 5). While this has been a global trend in recent decades (Hirschl 2011, 254), the U.S., compared with other Western democracies, has a long-standing tendency of dealing with problems in general — and politics in particular — in a legalistic manner (Kagan 2001). Shapiro hypothesizes that the reason behind this phenomenon is in part based on the centrality of the Constitution in U.S. politics, the creation of which he sees as a consequence of an "assertion of the legal and constitutional rights of Englishmen against an overbearing Parliament" (1994, 101). Trägårdh & Delli Carpini argue that the foundational idea of "preserving democracy by limiting its excesses" is the key reason that U.S. judges enjoy a high level of independence and are "bestowed with law-making capacities, as they engage in constitutional adjudication" (2004, 53); and Kagan's notion that "free from traditions of deference to kings and priests and guilds, Americans have long been inclined to challenge authority" (2001, 36), adds another potential root explanation for this phenomenon.

The effect of "juridification" on what Robert Kagan describes as "the most politically and socially responsive court system in the world" (2001, 16) can be interpreted in different ways. A neutral point of view simply could see it "a sort of logical and pragmatic extension of American pluralist, interest-group, single-issue politics from legislatures and executives on to courts (Shapiro 1994, 109–10). A positive one could see it as allowing "relatively powerless people, not least minorities, when they want to assert their individual or group rights, and in doing so produce changes in the behaviour of powerful institutions that also have collective benefits" (Trägårdh and Delli Carpini 2004, 60). And a negative one could see it as enabling "ideologues or opportunists to use the law as a tool for extortion," thus creating "high levels of legal unpredictability" and being "an extremely inefficient and hence often unfair way of meeting the public's demand for justice and protection" (Kagan 2001, 16). In other words, there is a broad range in the ways the U.S. legal system can be used.

Regardless of the pros and cons of the nature of the legal system, there appears to be agreement among scholars that the "juridification of US politics" is an existing phenomenon. As Kagan documents, the "federal court appellate cases involving constitutional issues increased sevenfold" between 1960 and 1980, and "between 1970 and the late 1980s, federal indictments of public officials swelled from less than 100 per year to almost 1,000 per year." (2001, 36–37) And while there already was a general inclination in the U.S. toward "taking matters to court," the starting point for the "juridification of politics" was the 1960s. Landmark decisions such as *Brown vs. Board of Education* or *Baker vs. Carr*, both cases in which the Supreme Court for the first time showed its willingness "to say not only what government could and could not do , but what it must do as well," (Silverstein 2012, 6) signaled that "policy goals that once had been achievable only through the legislative and political process, it was thought, might now be advanced in large part — and perhaps even exclusively — through judicial decisions and judicial orders" (Silverstein 2012, 7). This coincided with the 1960s, a time when "public trust in government was tested, eroded, and finally shattered," […] the political system seemed to fail and […] the formality, apparent transparency, predictability, and moral superiority of legal alternatives became increasingly attractive" (Silverstein 2012, 7). As a result, increasing numbers of public interest groups started to form — which, through litigation, tried to realize their demands for "major transformations in established social and economic patterns and a major expansion of the role of the federal government" (Kagan 2001, 38). While the Democratically controlled Congresses of the 1960s and 1970s were open to these demands and passed a broad range of legislation to meet them, they faced a fragmented political system and enforcement was difficult. Thus, Congress relied heavily on empowering mostly public interest organizations to litigate as the main enforcement mechanism, leading to a surge in cases (Kagan 2001, 46–50; Shapiro 1994, 108). Not only Democrats enabled the juridification of U.S. politics, however: Republicans did as well by pushing "for legislative provisions that restricted administrative

discretion and subjected it to legal challenge" and creating "regulatory schemes that called for private litigation, rather than public expenditure, to accomplish collective goals" (Kagan 2001, 50–51) For Kagan, "the fundamental reason behind [juridificiation of U.S. politics] lies in the collision between demands for more active government and some enduring features of the American political system: political structures that fragment governmental power, a political culture that mistrusts "big government," and a legal culture that promotes and validates adversarial legalism." (2001, 58)

The situation is quite paradoxical: While it seems that the juridification of U.S. politics is "a symptom of a political culture in which 'the people' have lost faith in the government and the ordinary political process" (Trägårdh and Delli Carpini 2004, 61) it has, as Reckwitz argues, decreased the electorate's influence in the policymaking process by diminishing the legislature's role. This would in turn explain why judicial appointments have become a partisan issue in recent years: They function as quasi-elections. Besides shifting away power from Congress, this development has additional problematic consequences as "the content of law becomes unstable" (Ferejohn 2002, 44)and also that the Supreme Court's legitimacy increasingly depends on whether or not people agree with policy that it has decided on (Strother and Gadarian 2022).

Not quite falling under the category of juridification but related to it has been the development of self-imposed limits to congressional discretion over the federal budget. As I described above, since the in 1980s, Congress has passed several bills that included requirements to offset new government spending by saving or cutting it from existing spending automatically, or caps on discretionary spending which, if not met, triggered across-the-board budgetary cuts (also known as budget sequestration). While these rules were meant to curb federal deficits, the ever-growing federal debt is evidence they did not achieve that goal. However, they have been criticized for contributing to conflicts between Congress and

the president as well as limiting Congress' (and by extension the electorate's) discretion over the budget (Lynch 2011b, 5).

1.5 The Dilemma of Deregulation (2008-)

Reckwitz argues that since around 2010, the paradigm of apertistic liberalism has been in a severe crisis because in the areas of socio-economics and socio-culture, the continued deregulation of social life has created new problems and exacerbated existing ones. This, he argues, has in turn led to a crisis of democratic praxis, which has been met by increasing voter frustration — one expression of which is the surge in support for anti-establishment politics (2021, 149). Again, it is worth exploring the extent to which this argument applies to the U.S.

1.5.1 The Great Recession: Catalyst for the Crisis

The biggest single crisis that can be interpreted as the starting point for the challenge of apertistic liberalism in the U.S. was the Great Recession from 2007 to 2009, a combination of a financial crisis and a recession. Immediate consequences of the Great Recession were job loss numbers worse than during the Great Depression in the 1930s (Greenstone and Looney 2011), a doubling of the unemployment rate from 5% to 10%, a 4.3% drop in the US GDP (Weinberg 2013), a rise in the poverty rate from 12.5% in 2007 to more than 15% in 2010, and a quarter of U.S. households losing at least 75% of their net worth and more than half of households losing at least 25% of their net worth (Duignan 2019). The Great Recession also further exacerbated economic inequality. Starting during the first Reagan administration, income and wealth became increasingly unequally distributed (Horowitz Menasce, Igielnik, and Kochhar 2020b); this trend continued during the Clinton years (I. Morgan 2004, 1038) and continued to do so under the Bush Jr. presidency (Wilson 2009, 157). The following

paragraph summarizes the drastic growth in wealth inequality: "From 2007 to 2016, the median net worth of the richest 20% increased 13%, to $1.2 million. For the top 5%, it increased by 4%, to $4.8 million. In contrast, the net worth of families in lower tiers of wealth decreased by at least 20% from 2007 to 2016. The greatest loss — 39% — was experienced by the families in the second quintile of wealth, whose wealth fell from $32,100 in 2007 to $19,500 in 2016 (Horowitz Menasce, Igielnik, and Kochhar 2020b).

The political response to the Great Recession can be interpreted as surprising, given the fact that for the nearly three decades prior to it, government intervention in the economy was considered to be harmful. Not only did the Bush Jr. administration bail out a number of banks and other financial institutions in 2008 with $750 billion (Wilson 2009, 161), newly elected President Obama signed an $800 billion economic stimulus package in February 2009. That same year, first commentators argued that "the dominance of the Washington consensus public policy discourse of faith in markets, deregulation and a minimal role for government is over." (Wilson 2009, 163) While the reasons for the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression were numerous, it was rather astonishing (and another sign that the paradigm's hegemony was being challenged) that one of the key reasons was considered to be the lack of adequate regulation and oversight of the financial sector (Angelides et al. 2011, XVIII). As one of the Great Recession's consequences, Congress in 2010 passed the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, which, among other provisions, introduced stricter regulation for investment banking, and created two new government agencies: the Financial Stability Oversight Council and the Office of Financial Research.

In other words, in the background of the Great Recession, something even more fundamental happened as a consequence of neoliberal politics, according to Reckwitz: "the replacement of the old leveled middle-class society with an (economically, culturally, and geographically) polarized social structure" consisting of a new, mostly academically educated

middle class that lives in "thriving metropolitan regions [and] adheres to the ideal of social

progress via globalization, singularization, and post-industrialization," and "the precarious

class and parts of the old middle class" that are characterized by "regression-oriented

perceptions of society," low-skilled employment and that tend to live in "left behind" rural

areas (2021, 151). Reckwitz attributes this degree of socio-structural polarization to neoliberal

ideas being "unable or unwilling" to regulate complex and dynamic processes (2021, 151).

Reckwitz's assessment applies well to U.S. society. As I mentioned above, income

inequality has risen sharply in the U.S. in recent decades. If we look at who is affected by this

development, there is a clear stratification according to educational attainment. In 1971, 69%

of adults that had only a high school diploma were part of the middle-income tier and 17%

were in the lower-income tier; by 2021, only 52% of that group were in the middle-income

tier, while 39% were in the lower-income tier (Kochhar and Sechopoulos 2022). The main

reason for this income decline for those with only a high school degree appears to be what is

called the "college wage premium," which describes the degree to which college graduates'

income differs from that of non-college graduates (James 2012, 1). While historically,

earnings of college graduates have always been significantly higher than those of high school

graduates, the college wage premium and the high school wage premium were the most

similar in 1950, meaning that the aggregate income difference between these two groups was

the smallest it ever was (Goldin and Katz 2007). Since the 1980s, however, the college wage

premium has significantly outpaced the high school wage premium (Goldin and Katz 2007;

James 2012). At the same time, the number of college graduates increased significantly from

4.6% of the total population in 1940 to 33.4% in 2016 (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). The gap

between college graduates and high school degree-holders also shows in their aggregate

mortality, which, while this figure declined overall, it declined less and even started rising

after 2010 for those without a bachelor's degree (Case and Deaton 2021, 12). In terms of

geographic distribution, a 2019 report found that "of the bottom 10 percent of counties in

terms of attainment, 84 percent can be classified as mostly or completely rural. By contrast, in the top 10 percent of counties in terms of attainment, just 16 percent are rural" (Campbell 2019, 6) and only 8% of all bachelor's degrees holders lived in rural counties (Campbell 2019, 2). And while the overall number of college graduates has increased nationwide and also in rural areas, the gap between rural and non-rural areas in terms of college-educated population has increased from 11% to 15% since 2000 (U.S. Department of Agriculture - Economic Research Service 2023a). Regarding perceptions of society, a 2016 survey showed a very clear correlation between educational attainment and societal perceptions. For example, 78% of respondents with a postgraduate degree were of the opinion that the U.S. has the ability to solve its problems, whereas only 56% of respondents with a high school degree or less had the same opinion (Pew Research Center 2016b). In the same poll, 51% of postgraduate degree-holders said that compared with 50 years ago, life for people like them in America today was better, 29% said it was worse; of those with a high school degree or less, 56% said it was worse, compared to 30% that said it was better. Also in that poll, 56% of respondents with a postgraduate degree and a relative majority of 43% of respondents with a college degree stated that free trade agreements definitely or at least probably helped their family's financial situation; 57% of respondents with a high school degree or less stated that free trade agreements definitely or at least probably hurt their financial situation (Pew Research Center 2016c). In summary, the data appears to corroborate Reckwitz's assessment of an increasingly polarized social structure.

1.5.2 Sorting and Polarization

There was no single event similar to the Great Recession in the socio-cultural realm that signified a challenge to apertistic liberalism's hegemony in the U.S. However, the question of whether the country was fragmenting into too many subcultures became an issue

when the conflicts in the political arena started becoming fiercer and more polarized over Obama's election in 2008 and the creation of the Tea Party in 2009; societal fragmentation was hypothesized to be one of the causes.[4] Empirical evidence for this hypothesis is, however, tricky. As Marx (Marx 1994) noted early in the debate, one fundamental problem is how to assess fragmentation, as it can occur across a whole range of factors. Reckwitz argues that the empowerment of group identities to the point of self-isolation based on markers such ethnicity or religion, as well as the increased sense of entitlement of individuals, have become so pronounced that they have eroded the commonalities required for a society (and democracy) to function (2021, 152). I will thus focus on these two measures of fragmentation. In a broad review of the scientific literature covering the period between 1970 and 2005, Fischer and Mattson found that there is clear evidence for growing gaps among the general population along lines of income and educational attainment (Fischer and Mattson 2009), a trend that started in the 1980s (see above). Arguments for a growing fragmentation based on race/ethnicity, however, are not corroborated by empirical evidence. Their review shows that, if measured by consumption patterns, there has been a divergent fragmentation of lifestyles compared to the period prior to the 1970s . However, the evidence for lifestyle fragmentation measured by social traits and attitudes is rather weak. Fischer and Mattson also consider the fragmentation based on clusters of similarity and expect an increase in clusters of people who have the resources to connect closer with people they consider having a similar lifestyle (Fischer and Mattson 2009). Bishop and Cushing (2008) found on a national scale and Lütjen (2016), in his study of how two Wisconsin counties showed that sorting according to similar lifestyles has, in fact, been happening and contributes to political polarization. Fischer and Mattson also consider the role of an increasingly diverse media landscape influenced by the growing importance of the Internet and are not particularly worried that this will increase

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[4] It was also an issue earlier, as Schlesinger Jr. (1992) exemplifies.

fragmentation but actually see its benefits (Fischer and Mattson 2009). In 2009, however, social media did not have the same societal impact that it would have only a few years later. The concept of filter bubbles and their negative consequences for social cohesion were, at best, known to some visionaries.

Fischer and Mattson concur with the assessment that, between 1970 and 2005, Democrats and Republicans had become more ideologically coherent, thus making political agreement in a system with many veto players increasingly difficult. But their literature review shows that in 2009, the polarization of political elites was reflected by the general population in how they aligned closer with either of the parties (Fischer and Mattson 2009). While in the beginning, this increasing coherence of party ideology was mostly driven by political elites, DellaPosta (2020) argues that polarization of values and beliefs of the general population has followed suit in recent years.

1.5.3 Trump's Succes: A Challenge to Apertistic Liberalism

In summary, the evidence supports the argument that U.S. society has been increasingly fragmenting since the 1970s and that this fragmentation negatively impacts the country's democratic system. However, fragmentation appeared to happen not along those categories that Reckwitz argued but rather along socio-economic differences and differing lifestyles. Meanwhile, political elites became more ideologically stringent, which in turn, led to increasing partisan sorting and political polarization. Reckwitz consequently sees two reasons for the recent growth in support for political actors such as Donald Trump, that I distinguish as demand and supply. On the demand side is the need for a new paradigm, caused by the crisis of apertistic liberalism, which no longer seems capable of solving problems but instead creates them. One of these such problems is the growing number of people who feel "that they have been 'cheated' [or left behind] by social developments" (2021, 156). On the

supply side are political actors, who seemingly present answers to all three crises of apertistic liberalism: "the socio-cultural crisis of progressive liberalism should be countered by strengthening national identities and opposing cosmopolitanism and immigration; and the democratic-functional crisis of 'post-democracy' should be countered by promoting an illiberal form of democracy that equates politics with the will of the people" (Reckwitz 2021, 156–57). According to Reckwitz, the fact that neither of the paradigm-adhering political actors have addressed the democratic-functional crisis and have, if at all, addressed only one crisis each (the socio-economic crisis on the left, the socio-cultural crisis on the right), has also contributed to the existing situation (2021, 156–57).

When we look at Donald Trump's success in 2016 through this lens, he ticks many boxes. Rhetorically and programmatically, he was the embodiment of the antithesis to apertistic liberalism. Even though he ran as Republican, his positions on a majority of issues —granted that they were not always consistent — did not reflect those of the long-time party orthodoxy: He stood for a protectionist trade policy; spoke in favor of increasing taxes for the rich; opposed cuts to Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid; spoke in favor of stricter immigration laws; proposed a more isolationist foreign policy; and supported universal healthcare and a federal mandate for the negotiation of drug prices (Becker 2016). The fact that voters had trouble clearly identifying him as a Republican (Eady and Loewen 2021) further corroborates the argument that he was programmatically challenging the existing paradigm. His continuous attacks on institutions of liberal democracy such as the media (Diamond 2016) and Congress (Vitali 2016), as well as his anti-pluralist way of seeing himself as the only legitimate representative of the "real" people facing a corrupt Washington elite (Müller 2017), were also clear signs of him breaking with the existing liberal democratic paradigm.

This addresses the supply side argument of Reckwitz's explanation. However, the demand side argument remains to be investigated. Specifically, the "left behind" hypothesis, which, as has become clear, is one aspect of Reckwitz's larger explanation. As I have written above, this hypothesis was quite a popular explanation for the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. However, to my knowledge, it has neither been rigorously defined nor empirically tested. Thus, in the following chapter, I will engage in more detail with the existing discourse around the "left behind" hypothesis to distill a definition of it that is operationalizable and thus empirically testable.

2 Refining the "Left Behind" Theory

In the previous chapter, using Reckwitz's theory, I argued it is helpful to explain Donald Trump's success in 2016 within a broader context of shifting political paradigms because it demonstrates that the rise of support for anti-establishment politics is not a historical singularity. Chapter 1 was thus more of a macro-level argument for a long historical trajectory that set the stage for Donald Trump's success. However, the argument for a historical trajectory by itself is not enough to explain the result of the 2016 election, because it does not consider in sufficient detail the developments specific to this election cycle. As I explained at the end of Chapter 1, Reckwitz distinguishes between the supply and demand aspects he sees as factors in the support for Donald Trump in 2016. In this chapter, I will address a specific explanation on the demand side: the "left behind" theory.

As I wrote in Chapter 1, the "left behind" theory has been a popular explanation, primarily in journalistic accounts, for Donald Trump's appeal since it became clear that he had a realistic chance of becoming the Republican candidate for the 2016 election. But as Steiner, Schimpf and Wuttke (2023, 111) summarize quite poignantly: "Due to its inherent vagueness, there is neither a broadly shared definition of feeling left behind nor a commonly accepted theoretical framework associated with the term." And Pike et al. (2023) are even more specific:

> [D]espite the increased attention, [the term] 'left behind places' and its spatial imaginary have lacked clearly specified definitions and meanings in the hands of different actors. To what is being referred and for what purposes are pliable. Their geographies are multiple, and their temporality is variable. Causation, diagnosis, and political, institutional, and policy responses discussed are often narrow and particular to their study focus. (Pike et al. 2023, 5)

The goal of this chapter is thus to arrive at a definition of the "left behind" theory that captures both its breadth and depth, while being specific enough to operationalize it for

empirical testing. I will do this by looking at both the journalistic and academic discourse that has evolved around this theory in the U.S. since late 2015 and attempt to distill the main aspects.

2.1 Emergence of a Concept: Tracing the Term "Left Behind"

To investigate how U.S. media discourse defined the "left behind" theory, I searched for relevant coverage using Google's web search. The combination of search terms I used were 1) "left behind" and "Trump" and 2) "left behind voters" and "Trump." For my investigation, I chose the time period between June 16, 2015, the day when Donald Trump announced his candidacy, and December 31, 2016, shortly after his election. I took into consideration free (not behind a paywall) newspaper articles, magazine articles, and transcripts of radio shows from U.S. sources, that either explicitly used the term "left behind" in the context of explaining voter support for Donald Trump or did so more indirectly by using terminology that revolved around concepts of deprivation and loss.

The first journalistic articles that used the term "left behind" appeared in late 2015. To my knowledge, the first article of this kind that appeared was one on the *Washington Post*'s website from December 12, 2015, titled, "The real reasons Donald Trump's so popular — for people totally confused by it"(Guo 2015). There, the author, argued Trump's popularity was based on his "personality and his politics," specifying that he was "hugely popular among people without college degrees, who have been left behind by economic progress in recent years" because they "blame immigrants for their own poor prospects,"(Guo 2015) and Trump campaigned with a strong anti-immigrant message. Guo connects "left behind" to economic well-being, specifying it as stagnant or declining wages between 2002 and 2013.

The definition of "left behind" as suffering from worsening economic conditions, specifically stagnating wages, continued to appear in news coverage in 2016. An NBC piece from March that focused on Macomb County, Michigan prior to the state's primary specifically made that connection (Chinni 2016). An NPR piece from April also picked up this narrative when it explained the support for Donald Trump as an expression of rage against a "rigged system": "Washington is gridlocked, the economy isn't growing fast enough and what growth there is hasn't been shared equally. Too many people feel left behind"(Liasson 2016).

In May, when it had become clear Trump would be the Republican Party's nominee, renowned *New Yorker* writer George Packer published a piece continuing with the narrative of being "left behind" economically. However, he added the notion of being "left behind" by "the culture," which he described as a feeling of "indifference or disdain of the winners on the prosperous coasts and in the innovative cities." (Packer 2016) This is one of the first accounts that mentions a divide between rural/inland and urban/coastal parts of the U.S. That connection also appeared again after the election in news coverage, including in an NPR interview with a reporter who had spent some time Pennsylvania and Ohio: "They're disconnected economically in the sense that these towns and cities have fallen so far behind the sort of coastal, prosperous bubbles of Washington, New York, San Francisco - these kind of places that have moved so far beyond these places in the last few years." (NPR 2016)

At that point in the primary cycle, associating the concept of being "left behind" with economic deprivation was well-established in the discourse; numerous journalists who talked to Trump supporters where they lived tried to corroborate this association in their stories. This passage from a PBS article exemplifies those trends: "Rockingham County, nestled in a rural swath of foothills on the Virginia border, was a small but thriving textile hub until the recession laid waste to its mills and factories. Its residents are mostly white and working-

class. And now, many of them feel left behind by an economy propelled by automation and higher-tech factory jobs."(Jeffries 2016) Here, being economically "left behind" receives a bit more detail, namely a decline in manufacturing jobs that used to provide economic prosperity in the community. The loss of jobs in mining, specifically coal mining, and the decay of the steel industry was also a common aspect of characterizing being economically "left behind," as evidenced by this Center for Public Integrity dispatch from Ohio:

> "In the Rust Belt of Ohio and Pennsylvania, steel was the dominant industry. But as steel companies outsourced their labor to mills in China, voters also grew frustrated with the job loss. "When the steel industry collapsed in the 1970s … this region was literally not prepared for the shutdown of the steel mills," said Bertram de Souza, a political columnist for the Vindicator newspaper in Youngstown. Forty years after its steel mills closed, Youngstown's poverty rate is just over 40 percent. Before the coal mine went idle in July because of a lack of sales, workers went underground to mine coal at Enterprise Mining Co. in Redfox, Kentucky. "The opportunities aren't here," said Frankie Susany, 50, who grew up in the Youngstown area and now works there as a small-business owner. "What used to be a thriving city in Youngstown is brown fields, abandoned mills, abandoned buildings, abandoned factories."" (Mills, Miller, and Bunny 2016)

Defining being "left behind" economically was not, however, synonymous with being poor. In a feature article from NBC News, focusing on the ascendance of Trump in the Republican Party, the author explained the economic status of Trump voters as follows:

> "Trump supporters aren't poor, they're workers whose wages haven't risen adequately; they own small businesses that are struggling instead of thriving; they have lost a job or have seen friends lose jobs too many times. They have witnessed decades of economic stress and their political leaders' insufficient response."(Caldwell 2016)

Another aspect that was associated with being "left behind" was a decline and aging of the population. One CNN article on the city of Welch, West Virginia provided a key example of these dynamics in a specific community:

""It's depressing to watch the population disappear, the business disappear and the activity to stop," he said. "Back in the 50s, 60s, 70s, it'd be hard to walk up the sidewalk because there was so many people. Now you walk up the sidewalk and there's nobody." McDowell County's population is just 19,835 down from 100,000 in the 1950s. That decline is expected to continue. West Virginia University economists estimate that McDowell will continue to lose residents at a rate of 1% each year." (Summers 2016)

Another common trope around the "left behind" voters was their characterization by journalists as white, rural, and part of the middle to lower income classes. The last aspect in particular, however, varied greatly and included terms like "working class," "underclass," and "blue-collar Americans." The aforementioned CNN dispatch, for example, had this headline: "The 'forgotten tribe' in West Virginia; why America's white working class feels left behind." (Summers 2016)

Similarly, a *Politico* article from October 2016 on Trump's voter base picked up this trope:

"   If you've read anything about this unprecedented 2016 campaign, you know this: Donald Trump's solid core of support comes from white working-class America. As the blue-collar voter has become central to the political conversation, a clear picture of who we're talking about has emerged: He's likely male and disillusioned with the economy and loss of industry. He's a coal miner that's been laid off in Hazard, Kentucky, and is scraping by off his wife's income; a machinists' union member in a Pennsylvania steel town who says "a guy like Donald Trump, he's pushing for change." Through the campaign, we've seen endless portraits of Trump support in the heart of Appalachian coal country, and a recent spate of books documents white working-class alienation and the history of the white underclass in America. Trump's iron grip on the support of blue-collar white Americans has been one of the most striking threads of his unprecedented campaign." (Sonenshein 2016)

And in an NPR post-election article, the author reiterated this characterization of the Trump voter:

"During the campaign, Donald Trump characterized himself as a champion of working-class voters who felt left behind and disconnected from more prosperous parts of the country. And Trump's historic upset victory last week was fueled by working-class voters in the Rust Belt and elsewhere who believed in this promise." (Arnold 2016)

Returning to the notion of being culturally "left behind" (see above), the media discourse

revolved around these voters' feeling of "not fitting in" with American society, especially

with changing values. The NPR post-election analysis mentioned above, summarized this

characterization as follows:

> "What we found was a distinct movement of Americans alarmed by economic trends,
> unsure of their place in a more diverse nation and convinced that the major parties no
> longer have their interests in mind." (Sarlin 2016)

A more detailed description of this feeling of being culturally "left behind" could be found in

a long piece from the *New Yorker,* in which the author recounts his experience of visiting

multiple of Trump's campaign rallies:

> "The Trump supporters I spoke with […] loved their country, seemed genuinely
> panicked at its perceived demise, felt urgently that we were, right now, in the process
> of losing something precious. They were, generally, in favor of order and had a
> propensity toward the broadly normative, a certain squareness. They leaned toward
> skepticism (they'd believe it when they saw it, "it" being anything feelings-based,
> gauzy, liberal, or European; i.e., "socialist"). Some (far from all) had been touched by
> financial hardship—a layoff was common in many stories—and (paradoxically, given
> their feelings about socialism) felt that, while in that vulnerable state, they'd been let
> down by their government. They were anti-regulation, pro small business, pro Second
> Amendment, suspicious of people on welfare, sensitive (in a "Don't tread on me"
> way) about any infringement whatsoever on their freedom. Alert to charges of racism,
> they would pre-counter these by pointing out that they had friends of all colors. They
> were adamantly for law enforcement and veterans' rights, in a manner that
> presupposed that the rest of us were adamantly against these things." (Saunders 2016)

And finally, another reappearing trope in the definition of "left behind" voters was their

disconnect from "the establishment," a feeling expressed as frustration, resentment, and

betrayal. In the same *New Yorker* feature article about the multiple Trump rallies, the author

writes:

> "They've been left behind in other ways, too, or feel that they have. To them, this is
> attributable to a country that has moved away from them, has been taken away from
> them—by Obama, the Clintons, the "lamestream" media, the "élites," the business-as-
> usual politicians." (Saunders 2016)

The CNN article about West Virginia I cited above also reflects this sentiment, quoting voters:

> "'We're conditioned that there's really nothing you can do about it. The only thing outrage and protesting and stuff does is cause bad feelings,' he said. 'People are just resigned to have what they have. The ones that want to leave, the ones that can leave and want to leave leave. Everybody else just stays here.'" (Summers 2016)

In the NPR interview with a reporter who had spent some time in Pennsylvania and Ohio, this topic appears when the interviewer argues: "They feel completely disconnected from the sort of mass mainstream media. And then they feel completely disconnected from Washington." (NPR 2016)

2.2 Towards a Comprehensive Definition: Integrating Academic Insights

The international academic literature revolving around the "left behind" theory, in comparison to journalistic accounts, is, understandably, more nuanced. One prominent recent example of this is the review by Pike et al. (2023). While they focus on the term "left behind places" instead of the "left behind theory," the former is closely enough related to the latter to use the findings of this review for this section. Defining "left behind places" as "the leitmotif of geographical inequalities since the 2008 crisis," Pike et al. (2023) argue that:

> As a term and spatial imaginary 'left behind places' includes numerous, typically related, characteristics: relative economic decline and lower productivity, employment and wages; lower levels of educational attainment and skills; higher levels of disadvantage and poverty; population shrinkage, outmigration, and ageing; poor health and wellbeing; limited social and economic assets, infra- structure, and underinvestment; lower public and private goods and services provision; and political neglect, disengagement and discontent. (Pike et al. 2023, 4)

They group these characteristics along specific dimensions, providing an overview of the many facets that have been associated with the term "left behind places", that I list in the table below.

Table 3: Potential dimensions of 'left behind' places according to Pike et al. (2023, 6)

Dimension	Examples
Economic	Falling real wages

Limited and/or poor-quality opportunities for training and/or employment

Limited wealth |
| Social | Lack of social and/or spatial mobility

Limited bridging social capital (but high levels of bonding social capital)

High levels of attachment and belonging to place

Low levels of civic participation |
| Environmental | Degraded physical environments

Poor air quality |
| Political | Neglect by mainstream political parties and politicians

Disengagement from representative democracy

Populist, nativist and/or nationalist beliefs and views |

Table 3: Potential dimensions of 'left behind' places according to Pike et al. (2023, 6)

Institutional and governance	Absent or weak local leadership
	Limited decentralized powers, resources, and/or capacity
	Lack of political voice
Cultural	Inferior, subordinate, common, proletarian, or plebeian worldviews
	Disconnection from and/or rejection of dominant attitudes/values
	Backward-looking, behind the zeitgeist outlooks
Infrastructural	Lack of public investment
	Limited and/or uneven access to public services
	Unequal provision of infrastructure systems and services

To my knowledge, this is the most comprehensive overview of aspects that have been associated with the term "left behind." While the dimensions are a helpful orientation, it is worth noting that the list is the result of a review of the academic literature that focused on "left behind places" in the Global North more broadly, not on the U.S. specifically.

In the academic discourse that focused on the "left behind" theory specific to the U.S. context, its dimensions and examples were rarely defined directly. Instead, authors had the tendency to define it through setting specific factors they considered to contribute to Donald

Trump's success in the context of the "left behind" theory — a definition by association, so to say.

Similar to the journalistic accounts I described above, one of if not the most prominent dimensions associated with being "left behind" in the academic discourse was the socio-economic one, divided into various facets. Ferguson et al. (2018), for example, associate it with growing economic distress among certain parts of the electorate since 2007-08, which they broadly characterized as "job losses; stagnant or declining wages; departures by young people; and the hollowing out of whole communities," and more specifically as job loss in specific industry sectors (oil and gas, manufacturing, agriculture, and coal mining) (Ferguson et al. 2018, 34–37). The association of being "left behind" with economic distress or anxiety appears again and again in the literature, where it is defined as job loss or unemployment (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018), a decline in manufacturing jobs due to off-shoring and automation (Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021; Ulrich-Schad and Duncan 2018), a decline in mining jobs (Kojola 2019), a lack of social and geographical mobility (Thompson 2019), a low level of formal education (Case and Deaton 2020, 150; Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre, and Utych 2023, 37), income inequality between regions within the US (Bayerlein 2022; Case and Deaton 2020, 139), and also a suffering from housing problems (Zonta, Edelman, and McArthur 2016).

Another dimension prevalent in the academic literature that focused on the term "left behind" in the U.S. context was that of public services in general and infrastructure specifically. The association here was that "left behind" voters tended to live in "left behind" places, meaning areas with public services and specifically infrastructure that have deteriorated over time or were otherwise inadequate compared to more advanced parts of the country. For example, Broz, Frieden and Weymouth (2021, 474)(2021, 474) describe "left behind" communities as witnessing a decline in school quality and other public amenities as a

result of economic decline and argue that because of this decline "people in struggling communities are more likely to reject the status quo and embrace populism than are people in more prosperous communities."

Wuthnow's (2019) account of "left behind" places and its people based on almost a decade full of interviews with exactly those people, among other factors, lists poor infrastructure, specifically no or only poor access to the internet, no or poor public transportation, and limited or no access to healthcare. Lichter and Schafft (2016) and Lichter and Ziliak (2017) also refer to unequal access to healthcare as a characteristic of left behind places. And in his investigation of spatial inequality and its relationship to support for Trump, Bayerlein (2022) argues that the provision of public goods — such as good medical infrastructure, school density, good traffic infrastructure, and broadband internet availability — reduced the support for Trump in otherwise "left behind" places.

Another prominent dimension in the academic discourse around the "left behind" theory was described as demography. One term that appeared over and over again in association with "left behind" was "rural." Examples are Goetz, Davlasheridze, Han and Fleming-Muñoz (2019), Goetz, Partridge and Stephens (Goetz, Partridge, and Stephens 2018), Rodríguez-Pose, Lee and Lipp (2021), Ulrich-Schad and Duncan (Ulrich-Schad and Duncan 2018), Wuthnow (2019), to name a few. However, many of these articles do not clearly define what they understand as "rural," which is why I have opted for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's definition: "rural areas comprise open country and settlements with fewer than 2,000 housing units and 5,000 residents." (U.S. Department of Agriculture - Economic Research Service 2023b) This means that rurality is defined along terms of population density, which I assume is what most academic literature has in mind when they use the term "rural," and therefore I interpret it as population density as well and include it in the "demography" domain.

Another characteristic that appeared in the literature that I also include in this category is that of life expectancy. Bor (2017), Ferguson et al. (2018), and Wang et al. (2013)Wang, for example, make this association with "left behind" places, arguing life expectancy is lower there compared with other parts of the country. Closely related but not quite the same are analyses that associate "left behind" places with increased mortality rates, specifically due to so called "deaths of despair," meaning deaths due to alcohol and/or drug abuse and suicides (Case and Deaton 2020; Monnat 2016).

The last characteristic that featured prominently in the demography dimension was age: Specifically, the association of "left behind" places having a disproportionately high number of senior citizens. Ulrich-Schad and Duncan (2018), for example, characterize poor rural places as having witnessed a shrinkage in the population of 25- to 34-year-olds, among other factors. Or Wuthnow points out that the "that the median age of adults (eighteen years and over) in rural counties is six years older than in urban counties" (Wuthnow 2019, 28). As Ziliak points out as well, "the share of prime-age workers is about 10 percentage points lower in rural areas, while the share of older persons in rural places is about 10 percentage points higher" (Ziliak 2019, 109).

What definition, then, can be gathered from all of these characteristics that have been associated with the "left behind" theory in the journalistic and the academic literature? One very concise one that I have encountered in the literature — interestingly from 2023, despite the term having been used for such a long time already — is from Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre, and Utych. (2023):

> "The left behind in industrialized countries are those with no university degree (and perhaps no high school diploma) who work in low- or semi-skilled manual professions, especially manufacturing. They tend to be older members of the dominant ethnoracial group in their societies and live in much more homogenous communities outside major urban centers, in industrial cities, suburbs, or small company towns in rural areas." (Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre, and Utych 2023, 37)

While this already covers many of the aspects I have described above, I would add that for the U.S. context that these voters have witnessed some form or another of loss in recent years, mostly in witnessing deteriorating personal economic well-being and a deterioration of the communities in which they live, specifically in the form of public services and infrastructure.

2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I tried to distill a definition of the "left behind" theory from the journalistic and academic discourse around the 2016 U.S. presidential election that strikes a balance between comprehensiveness and specificity. The approach I took in this chapter, which does not just focus on one single domain but on multiple, while defining what they are composed of, will allow me to investigate the research question at hand. In addition, I am making my definition of the "left behind" theory explicit. I acknowledge that with this approach there may still be areas that contribute to being "left behind" that I leave out, about which I lack detail, either conceptually or due to the fact that I will not have variables that measure what would need to be measured. I explore this in Chapter 4 by looking at specific counties for which my operationalization of the "left behind" theory did not accurately predict the share of votes for Trump. However, I hope that in my approach I balance the tradeoff between being too vague — in which case I could not do any empirical analysis — and being overly precise due to the availability of the variables and the literature that addresses these topics. In the following chapter, I will use my operationalization of the "left behind" theory to analyze to what extent it explains the variance in the share of votes for Trump.

3 Testing the "Left Behind" Theory

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the concept of the "left behind voter" or the left behind region," though widely used, is not well-defined in a manner useful for explaining the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, neither in the academic nor the journalistic discourse. However, since a clear definition of a theory is a prerequisite to empirically test it, I defined the "left behind" theory according to what I consider to be its constituting categories: socio-economy, infrastructure, and demography.

In this chapter, the goal was to empirically test the explanatory power of the "left behind" theory. To do this I first defined key variable sets to operationalize the categories that constitute the "left behind" theory I established in Chapter 2. Second, I used a regression-based modeling approach using these "left behind" variables to see how well this combination of variables predicted the proportion of votes for Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election on the county level. Finally, I compared these predictions to the actual county-level election results to show the explanatory power of my chosen operationalization of the "left behind" theory.

Over the course of this chapter, I first describe the general characteristics of my data, followed by a detailed description of the variables I used for my regression models. I then show the results of my calculations and end the chapter with a discussion of my findings.

3.1 General characteristics of my data

In the following section, I describe general characteristics of all data sets I use for my analysis, followed by detailed descriptions of each variable as well as the origin of the data sets behind them.

3.1.1 Spatial unit

Arguably, the ideal data sets for analyzing factors that predict voting outcomes are surveys in which representative sample populations answer a battery of questions. These types of surveys typically include questions on socio-economic status, values and political views, quality of life, etc. Using these types of data sets would, however, only allow me to test the "left behind" theory at the national or perhaps the state level. That is because, to my knowledge, these types of surveys draw predominantly on national samples, sometimes on state samples, but almost never on sub-state samples. As I show, however, in Chapter 4, a sub-state level testing of the "left behind" theory reveals a much more geographically granular and differentiated result than an analysis at the state level could. The most relevant sub-state level spatial units are counties and U.S. Census tracts. While both of these options provide much more detailed insight into regional differences than state-level data could, data sets at the census tract level — which is smaller than the county level — are extremely limited. As a result, choosing only such data sets would have significantly limited my selection of variables. Using counties instead of states also significantly increased my sample size from 50 to over 3,000. I thus deemed using county-level data to be the most suitable spatial unit for my analysis.

The spatial unit of analysis in this paper was thus the county and its equivalents (i.e., Alaska boroughs and census areas, Louisiana parishes, and Virginia independent cities). According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the most recent census conducted prior to the 2016

presidential election, the continental U.S. (including the District of Columbia) had 3,143 counties and equivalents, two more than in the 2000 census[5]. Every county has a unique five-digit Federal Information Processing Standard (FIPS) code by which it can be identified. Due to changes such as the incorporation of an independent city into a county or the merging of two counties into one, the number of counties changes over time; however, it does so infrequently and only by a small amount. If such a change in geography occurred in the time range of my analysis, I considered only the county for which the FIPS code remained the same. Some county borders changed substantially during the time range of my analysis; therefore, I excluded them entirely from my analysis.

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[5] https://www.census.gov/geographies/reference-files/time-series/geo/tallies.html

Table 4: Overview of counties and equivalents intentionally excluded from my sample

FIPS	State	County Name
2105	AK	Hoonah-Angoon Census Area
2195	AK	Petersburg Census Area
2198	AK	Prince of Wales-Hyder Census Area
2201	AK	Prince of Wales-Outer Ketchikan Census Area
2230	AK	Skagway Municipality
2232	AK	Skagway-Hoonah-Angoon Census Area
2275	AK	Wrangell City and Borough
2280	AK	Wrangell-Petersburg Census Area
51019	VA	Bedford County
51199	VA	York County
51515	VA	Bedford City
51700	VA	Newport News

For the Alaskan population considered in my analysis, the exclusion of these counties amounted to a reduction from 739,828 people (Alaska population as of July 1, 2016) to 725,928. The exclusion of the Virginia counties amounted to a reduction from 8,410,106 people (Virginia population as of July 1, 2016) to 8,151,904. Furthermore, I treated the Kusilvak Census Area (Alaska, FIPS 2158) as a single county under this name, even though it changed its name and FIPS in 2015 (formerly Wade Hampton Census Area, FIPS 2270.)

Analogously, I included Oglala Lakota County (North Dakota, FIPS 46102) (formerly known as Shannon County, FIPS 46113).

Since most data sets were largely complete for all counties, and to avoid overcomplicating the analysis with data imputation procedures, in the small number of cases when a data point for a variable was missing for a county, I excluded the entire county from the analysis.

3.1.2 Time frame

As described in the previous chapter, the term "left behind" includes a temporal component. I considered this component by including selected variables twice in my analysis but at different points in time. The time frame I specified for my analysis is Jan. 1, 2006, to Oct. 31, 2016. The end point of the range is the last complete month before the 2016 presidential election. However, if a data set only has yearly intervals, I considered Dec. 31, 2015, as the end point of my time range to not distort results by including the months of 2016 which were after the presidential election. The starting point is the first day of two five-year time periods between the beginning of 2006 and the end of 2015. This is derived from the methodology of the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), a yearly, nationwide survey with a sample size of about 3.5 million addresses, which collects "social, economic, housing, and demographic data" (U.S. Census Bureau 2020, 1). Data are collected throughout the year and pooled at the end of each year to produce one-year estimates. These estimates are, however, only available for geographic areas with 65,000 people or more. To address this issue, the ACS "combines 5 consecutive years of ACS data to produce multiyear estimates for geographic areas with fewer than 65,000 residents. These 5-year estimates represent data collected over a period of 60 months" (U.S. Census Bureau 2020, 1). This means that even though one-year estimates provide more current data, I deemed the five-year

estimates to be more suitable for my analysis because they exist for almost all counties. Additionally, five-year estimates have smaller confidence intervals than one-year estimates, making them statistically more reliable (U.S. Census Bureau 2020, 13). The five-year estimates are released in the year that follows the last year of the 60-month data collection period, e.g. a five-year estimate from 2016 is based on data collected from January 2011 through December 2015. In order for me to illustrate potential changes in variables based on ACS five-year estimates and to avoid overlapping data collection periods in the estimates, I compared 2016 five-year estimates (2011-2015 period) with 2011 estimates (2006-2010 period). This is how I derived the starting point of Jan. 1, 2006.

3.1.3 Categorical and continuous variables

While the majority of variables considered in my analysis was continuous, some were categorical because an equivalent data set of sufficient quality that contained a continuous variable was not available. Due to limited availability of data sets, I showed these variables only at one point in time. Also, data collection for some of these sets happened well before the 2016 presidential election. These are, admittedly, limiting factors which could call into question the relevance of the chosen data sets. However, since these data sets show categorizations of counties based on economic and infrastructure characteristics, factors that do not tend to change very rapidly, I worked under the assumption that the counties keep this categorization over extended periods of time.

3.2 Key variables

In the following section, I describe in detail the variables I used for my statistical analysis, starting with the dependent variable and then the independent variables, separated by categories (socio-economy, infrastructure, demography). I chose these variables because in the categories of socio-economy and infrastructure they allowed me to operationalize issues that were important to voters in 2016 (Winston 2017) and that were part of the "left behind" discourse; in the category of demography, they were also part of this discourse and are common measures of rurality (Goetz et al. 2019), potential for economic well-being (Cylus and Al Tayara 2021), or an indicator of living standards (OECD 2023). All data sources for my variables were publicly available and were almost exclusively provided by agencies of the U.S. government. I sourced all data over the course of 2022.

3.2.1 Election results

My dependent variable was the percentage of votes received by the Republican candidate for the U.S. presidential election of 2016, Donald Trump. It is reported as a value between 0 and 100. I sourced the data for this variable from the GitHub repository that was last updated on Dec. 20, 2016.[6] The data were scraped from the news website Townhall.com. I chose this data source for several reasons: First of all, it was publicly available, allowing for reproducibility of my approach. David Leip's election atlas website, which is considered to be the best source for county-level election data, provides the data only behind a paywall. The other publicly available county-level data set I was aware of existed on Harvard University's Dataverse website.[7] This data set was, in fact, more accurate than the one I used, because

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[6] See https://github.com/tonmcg/US_County_Level_Election_Results_08-20/blob/585cb48ccc17fef3640db33eef952cf613c67e95/2016_US_County_Level_Presidential_Results.csv
[7] See https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/MLLQDH&version=2.0

instead of compiling estimated data, like the GitHub file did, it compiled the election results certified by the individual Secretaries of State. However, the estimated results and the certified ones never differed more than 1%. The reason I decided not to use the Harvard Dataverse file was that that would have excluded county analyses for the states of Kansas and Missouri because these two states only certified statewide election results; the GitHub file contained county-level results for these two states.

In the GitHub data set, the Alaska borough and census area election results (which are the state's equivalent to counties) were all reported with the same value, resulting from the fact that sub-state level results did not exist for this spatial unit; in fact, Alaska reported its certified results on election districts, whose borders, however, are not equivalent with those of its boroughs and census areas. Instead of excluding the state entirely from my analysis, I decided to take the same value for each of those units.

3.2.2 Socio-economic variables

In this section, I describe the first group of independent variables I included in my analyses, the socio-economic ones. These variables include information about educational attainment unemployment rates, relevance of certain types of employment for the county, comparison of the median household income with the national household income, and housing costs.

Percentage of people with high school degree or less

This continuous point-in-time variable shows ACS 2015 five-year estimate of percentage of people that have a high school degree or less. The data set stems from the ACS (Table ID: 1501), the calculation is my own.

Unemployment rate in 2015

This continuous point-in-time variable shows the annual average unemployment rate, defined as the "number of unemployed people as a percentage of the labor force (the labor force is the sum of the employed and unemployed)"[8], for 2015. The data set stems from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.[9]

Unemployment rate in 2006

This variable has the same characteristics as *Unemployment rate in 2015.* Only the time period is different.

Employment in farming as share of total employment in 2015

This is a continuous point-in-time variable. It reflects the percentage of full-time and part-time employment in farming as a share of the total employment in 2015. The calculation is my own and is based on data sets from by the Bureau of Economic Analysis on total employment and farm employment[10]. The BEA defines farm employment as "the number of

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[8] See https://www.bls.gov/cps/definitions.htm#ur
[9] See https://www.bls.gov/lau/tables.htm#cntyaa
[10] See https://apps.bea.gov/itable/iTable.cfm?ReqID=70&step=1

workers engaged in the direct production of agricultural commodities, either livestock or crops; whether as a sole proprietor, partner, or hired laborer."[11]

Employment in farming as share of total employment in 2006

This variable has the same characteristics as *Employment in farming as share of total employment in 2015*. Only the time period is different.

Mining dependency[12]

This is a categorical variable that distinguishes only between mining-dependent counties (1) and all other counties (0) at one specific point in time. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 2015 Atlas of rural and small-town America, from which this variable and the corresponding data set stem, a county "is defined as mining dependent if either earnings accounted for an annual average of 13 percent or more of total county earnings or 8 percent or more of total jobs during 2010-12."[13] The data set consists of multiyear averages, considering data from the years 2010-12. The data set does not provide information about when a county was classified from non-mining dependent to mining dependent or vice versa.

Manufacturing dependency

This is a categorical variable that distinguishes only between manufacturing-dependent (1) counties and all other counties (0) at one specific point in time. The USDA's

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[11] https://apps.bea.gov/regional/definitions/

[12] The BEA also provides data sets on employment in manufacturing, mining, and oil and gas related industries per county. However, in each of these data sets, large numbers of data points were missing, rendering them unusable for my analysis. This is why I replaced these data sets in my analysis with the categorical ones 'Mining Dependency' and 'Manufacturing Dependency'.

[13] https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/atlas-of-rural-and-small-town-america/documentation/#mine2015

2015 Atlas of rural and small-town America, from which this variable and the corresponding

data set stem, states: "a county is defined as manufacturing dependent if either manufacturing

earnings accounted for an annual average of 23 percent or more of total county earnings or 16

percent or more of total jobs during 2010-12."[14] The data set consists of multiyear averages,

considering data from the years 2010-12. The data set does not show when a county was

classified from non-manufacturing dependent to manufacturing dependent or vice versa.

Deviation between county median household income and national median household income
2011-2015

     This continuous, point-in-time variable reflects a five-year estimate for the period

from 2011-2015. It shows the percentage of deviation between a county's median household

income and the national median household income, which is then inflation-adjusted to 2015

Dollars. In the period from 2011-2015, the estimated median household income in the U.S.

was $53,889.[15] A negative percentage thus indicates that the county's median income was

lower than the national median, while a positive percentage indicates it was higher. The data

set stems from the ACS (Table ID: S1901); the calculation is my own.

Deviation between county median household income and national median household income
2006-2010

     This continuous, point-in-time variable shows a five-year estimate for the period

between 2006-2010 inflation-adjusted to 2015 U.S. dollars.[16] For the 2006-2010 period, the

estimated median household income in the US was $51,914. A negative percentage indicates

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[14] See https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/atlas-of-rural-and-small-town-america/documentation/#mfg2015
[15] See
https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2015.S1901?q=S1901:%20Income%20in%20the%20Past%2012%20Mo
nths%20(in%202022%20Inflation-Adjusted%20Dollars)
[16] Values in the 2006-2010 estimate were multiplied by the factor 1.08710584 to adjust 2010 Dollars to 2015
Dollars. See section on 'Income' at
https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance/comparing-acs-data/2015/5-year-comparison.html

that the county's median income was lower than the national median, a positive percentage indicates the opposite. The data set stems from the ACS (Table ID: S1901); the calculation is my own.

Median gross rent as a percentage of household income, 2011-2015

This continuous, point-in-time variable reflects the median of the distribution of percentages of income a household has spent on rent in the past 12 months. This means that half of the data points fall above, and the other half fall below the median percentage. The variable is based on an ACS data set (Table ID: B25071) that provides data for renter-occupied housing units paying cash rent for the 2011-2015 period.

Median gross rent as a percentage of household income, 2006-2010

This variable has the same characteristics as *Median gross rent as a percentage of household income, 2011-2015*. Only the time period is different.

Median selected monthly owner costs as a percentage of household income, 2011-2015

This continuous, single point-in-time variable represents the median of a distribution of data for percentage of income a household had spent on selected monthly owner costs in the past 12 months. These monthly owner costs are defined as "the sum of payments for mortgages, deeds of trust, contracts to purchase, or similar debts on the property (including payments for the first mortgage, second mortgages, home equity loans, and other junior mortgages); real estate taxes; fire, hazard, and flood insurance on the property; utilities (electricity, gas, and water and sewer); and fuels (oil, coal, kerosene, wood, etc.). It also includes, where appropriate, the monthly condominium fee for condominiums […] and mobile home costs […] (personal property taxes, site rent, registration fees, and license fees" (U.S. Census Bureau 2015, 34) The ACS data set (Table ID: 25092) that serves as the basis

for this variable includes data for owner-occupied housing units with a mortgage for the 2016 five-year estimate.

Median selected monthly owner costs as a percentage of household income, 2006-2010

This variable has the same characteristics as *Median selected monthly owner costs as a percentage of household income, 2011-2015.* Only the time period is different.

3.2.3 Infrastructural variables

In this section, I describe the second group of independent variables I included in my analyses, the infrastructural ones. These variables include information about access to long-distance transportation, commute times, spending on education, access to broadband internet, and access to health care.

Percentage of population without access to long-distance transportation, 2012

This continuous, point-in-time variable shows the percentage of a county's population classified as having no access to long-distance transportation in 2012. The year 2012 is given by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS), from which the data set for this variable stem[17], and was not chosen by me. In this data set, the BTS classifies *having access to long-distance transportation for a county's rural population* as living "within 75 miles of a large airport, that is, airports with at least 0.25 percent of total U.S. passenger boardings in a year, or 25 miles of any other airport with scheduled commercial service, intercity bus stop, or intercity rail facility."[18] My variable is the inversion of this classification, meaning that it classifies the parts of a county's population that live

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[17] See https://data.bts.gov/Research-and-Statistics/Access-to-Intercity-Transportation-in-Rural-Areas/29cj-8s4a
[18] See https://data.bts.gov/stories/s/gr9y-9gjq

further away from these transportation access points as having no access to long-distance transportation. Additionally, my variable not only considers a county's rural population[19], but the county's entire population. The reason is simple: If I did not take this approach, many counties would be excluded from the data set simply since they do not have a rural population, even if they lack access to these modes of transport. This implies a further assumption that the non-rural residents of any county always have access to long-distance transportation.

To compute values for this variable, I first calculate the absolute number of rural residents with access to long-distance transportation. This is possible because the BTS data set provides both the total number of rural residents per county and the percentage of rural residents with access to long-distance transportation per county. This, in turn, allows me to calculate the number of rural residents without access to long-distance transportation through simple subtraction. Taking this number and setting it in relation to the county's entire population, I can calculate the percentage of a county's population without access to long-distance transportation. The county population counts for 2012 in the BTS data set are based on estimates from the 2010 Census.

Percentage of population without access to long-distance transportation, 2006

This variable has the same characteristics as *Percentage of population without access to long-distance transportation, 2012.* Only the time period is different.

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[19] For the data set's definition of rural see https://data.bts.gov/stories/s/dbb4-pr2c

Mean travel time to work, 2011-2015

This continuous, point-in-time variable shows the average time, in minutes, that it took workers aged 16 and above who did not work from home to commute to work according to the ACS 2015 five-year estimate. "The travel time includes time spent waiting for public transportation, picking up passengers and carpools, and time spent in other activities related to getting to work." (U.S. Census Bureau 2015, 94). The ACS data set (Table ID: DP03) for this variable groups together workers who drove (alone or in a carpool), walked, biked, or took public transportation (excluding taxis) to work. This means it does not differentiate between these modes of commuting and it does not allow for differentiation between areas where people are more likely to take public transit or walk (urban areas) and areas where people are more likely to drive (rural areas). Despite these issues, however, I use this variable as a representation of people who commute by car because that was by far the most common mode of transportation to work during my period of observation (Tomer 2017).

Mean travel time to work, 2006-2010

This variable has the same characteristics as *Mean travel time to work, 2011-2015*. Only the time period is different.

Per pupil current spending total

This continuous, point-in-time variable shows how much money was spent per pupil in public elementary and secondary education for the period between July 1, 2015, and Sept. 30, 2016, adjusted for region.[20] The values are presented in non-inflation-adjusted 2016

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[20] "With the exception of school systems in Alabama, the District of Columbia, Nebraska, Texas, and Washington, the 2016 fiscal year for school systems in all states began on July 1, 2015 and ended on June 30, 2016. The fiscal year for school systems in Alabama and the District of Columbia ran from October 1, 2015, through September 30, 2016. The fiscal year for school systems in Nebraska, Texas, and Washington ran from

dollars. Per-student spending includes "instruction of prekindergarten through grade 12 children, as well as support activities, such as guidance counseling, administration, transportation, plant operation and maintenance, and food services." (U.S. Census Bureau 2019, 2) The data set stems from the U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Survey of School System Finances.[21] Since the data was gathered for school districts and not for counties, I added all data points that had the same county FIPS code to aggregate county level data. To make county spending comparable across the entire U.S., I adjusted each value for county level spending by multiplying it by the corresponding value from the Comparable Wage Index for Teachers (CWIFT).[22]

Access to broadband internet, 2016

This continuous, point-in-time variable shows the percentage of the population in a county that did not have access fixed to broadband internet as of December 2016[23]. Here, I rely on data from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which defines fixed broadband internet in its 2018 Broadband Deployment Report as "terrestrial connection with at least 25 Megabits per second (Mbps) for downloading and 3 Mbps for uploading" (Federal Communications Commission 2018, 8). While the FCC includes fixed and mobile access to broadband internet in its report and rightfully states "that any analysis that did not include both services would be incomplete and flawed" (Federal Communications Commission, 2018: 7), I opted to exclude mobile access from my analysis. The reason is that for the variable

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September 1, 2015, through August 31, 2016. Survey data are not adjusted to conform school systems to a uniform fiscal year." (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019: 2)

[21] See https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2016/econ/school-finances/secondary-education-finance.html

[22] For information on the CWIFT, see https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Economic/TeacherWage

[23] The FCC's Broadband Deployment Reports always issue data as of December of a respective year. Since the FCC did not issue a report with data as of December 2015, I rely on data as of December of 2016, although this includes two months after the 2016 presidential election. However, broadband deployment is a lengthy process and it is safe to assume that a county's population will oftentimes know more than two months in advance when they will get access to broadband internet.

"Change in access to broadband internet" (see below), I use data from the 2015 FCC

Broadband Deployment Report, the earliest report that provides data on county-level access to

broadband internet. The 2015 report covers the year 2013; however, for that year, the FCC did

not have enough reliable data on mobile broadband coverage, which is why that category is

excluded from their report and thus also from my analysis. The data sets also do not provide

data on access to satellite internet in a comparable fashion, which is why I further exclude this

aspect.

Access to broadband internet, 2013

This variable has the same characteristics as *Access to broadband internet, 2016.* Only

the time period is different.

Health Professional Shortage Area

This categorical, point-in-time variable shows whether a county has been designated

as a Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) at any point in time between the beginning of

2006 and the 2016 presidential election and has maintained that status throughout that period

without interruption. The data set stems from the Health Resources and Services

Administration (HRSA), an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.[24]

It defines HPSAs as "geographic areas, populations, or facilities […] that have a shortage of

primary, dental or mental health care providers."[25] HPSA categories include geography,

population, and facility. A geographic HPSA can be a county, a county subdivision, or a

census tract, which is smaller than a county. A population HPSA indicates a lack of providers

for specific groups of people, such as low-income, homeless, or migrant farm worker

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[24] See https://data.hrsa.gov/data/download?data=SHORT#SHORT

[25] See https://bhw.hrsa.gov/workforce-shortage-areas/shortage-designation#hpsas

populations. A facility HPSA is an HPSA that includes hospitals (public or non-profit private), correctional facilities, mental hospitals, Rural Health Clinics, Federal Indian Health Service and tribally run hospitals, Community Health Centers/Tribal Clinics, and Federally Qualified Health Centers, which "serve a population or geographic area with a shortage of providers."[26]

The HRSA receives applications to designate HPSA status from State Primary Care Officers and once it designates the status, it calculates a score for that HPSA. The scoring system is based on a range of criteria, including population-to-provider ratios, percentage of the population below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level, and travel time to the nearest source of care outside the HPSA designation area.[27]

In several cases, two or more HPSA categories (geographic, population, facility) overlap in a county. For example, when an entire county is designated as an HPSA, it has a migrant farm worker HPSA and a Community Health Center HPSA. If a county has at least one sub-county unit designated as an HPSA, one HPSA population, or facility, I designated the county as an HPSA (coded as a "1" in the data set). All other counties receive a '0' to indicate that they are not an HPSA. In my analyses, no weight was given to higher numbers of HPSAs within each county.

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[26] ibid.

[27] For a complete list of criteria, see https://bhw.hrsa.gov/workforce-shortage-areas/shortage-designation/scoring

Medically Underserved Area/Population

This categorical, point-in-time, variable shows whether a county has been designated by the HRSA as a Medically Underserved Area (MUA) or as containing a Medically Underserved Population (MUP) at any point in time between the beginning of 2006 and the 2016 presidential election and has maintained that status throughout that period without interruption. Like for the HPSA variable, the data set for this variable also stems from the HRSA.[28] For the sake of my analysis, I will combine MUA and MUP into MUA/P, analogous to my treatment of the different HPSA categories. While very similar to the HPSA designations, MUA/Ps are slightly different in that they "identify geographic areas and populations with a lack of access to primary care services" only.[29] Geographic areas can be a "whole county; a group of neighboring counties; a group of urban census tracts; or a group of county or civil divisions."[30] MUPs are characterized by insufficient access to health services for population subsets, such as "people experiencing homelessness; people who are low-income, people who are eligible for Medicaid; Native Americans; [or] Migrant farm workers."[31] The main difference between MUA/Ps and HPSAs is the process of designation and scoring. Unlike HPSAs, MUA/Ps do not go through a yes/no evaluation before receiving a score. Their designation is based on a score of 62.0 or below on the Index of Medical Underservice for the respective area or population. The score is based on the variables of "Provider per 1,000 population ratio [28.7 points max]; Percent of population at 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) [25.1 points max]; Percent of population age 65 and over [20.2 points max]; [and the] Infant Mortality Rate [26 points max]."[32]

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[28] See https://data.hrsa.gov/data/download?data=SHORT#SHORT
[29] See https://bhw.hrsa.gov/workforce-shortage-areas/shortage-designation#mups
[30] ibid.
[31] ibid.
[32] See https://bhw.hrsa.gov/workforce-shortage-areas/shortage-designation/scoring

In several cases, a county contains one or multiple MUA/Ps. For the purposes of my analysis, however, I only differentiate between MUA/P and non-MUA/P counties and do not weigh each county based on its number of MUA/Ps. I also consider an entire county an MUA/P, even if it only has one sub-county unit designated as an MUA or only one MUP. In those cases, I give the county a '1', to mark it as an MUA/P. All other counties receive a '0' to indicate that they are not an MUA/P.

3.2.4 Demographic variables

In this section, I describe the third group of independent variables I included in my analyses, the demographic ones. These variables include information about population density, the share of senior citizens in the population, and the life expectancy compared to the national mean.

Population density, 2016

This continuous, point-in-time variable shows the number of people per square mile as of July 1, 2016. The data set for the population estimate stems from the U.S. Census Bureau[33] as well as each county's geographical area.[34] For the calculation (the number of people per county divided by the number of square miles per county), I consider the square miles based on 2007 data because these numbers were readily accessible. The Census Bureau did not record any substantial changes in county borders except for a limited number of cases, which I exclude from the analysis for other reasons (see above).

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[33]See https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/datasets/2010-2019/counties/totals/co-est2019-alldata.csv

[34] See https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/tables/2000-2007/2007-population-estimates-maps/county-map-data.csv

Population density, 2006

This variable has the same characteristics as *Population density, 2016*. Only the year is different.

Population age 65 and over, 2011-2015

This continuous, point-in-time variable shows the percentage of a county's population aged 65 and over. Voter group analyses usually include the group "65 and over" and I follow this pattern in the definition of my variable. The data set stems from the ACS (Table ID: S0101) and reflects the 2016 five-year estimate.

Population age 65 and over, 2006-2010

This variable has the same characteristics as *Population age 65 and over, 2011-2015*. Only the time period is different.

Deviation from national mean life expectancy at birth

This continuous, point-in-time variable shows by how many years the mean life expectancy at birth deviated from the national mean in 2015. A negative value indicates that the county's mean life expectancy at birth was lower than the national mean value, while a positive value indicates a higher-than-average life expectancy. The data set for the calculation of this value stems from the Centers for Disease Control's National Center for Health Statistics and are the result of the "U.S. Small-area Life Expectancy Estimates Project (USALEEP)," between the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), the National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems (NAPHSIS), and the Robert

Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)."[35] Analogous to the ACS estimates, the 2015 values in this data set are based on estimates for the 2011-2015 period. Since the USALEEP only provides data for states and census tracts, the latter being smaller units than counties, I merged all census tracts with the same FIPS code and calculated their average to obtain average estimates for each county. The national mean life expectancy at birth in 2013, the mid-point of the five-year estimate, was 78.7 years (Arias et al. 2018, 1).

Percentage of White Population, 2011-2015

This continuous, point-in-time variable shows the percentage of a county's population that identifies as White. According to the ACS documentation, the classification as "White" is based on the following definition:

> "A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as "White" or report entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Arab, Moroccan, or Caucasian." (U.S. Census Bureau 2015, 109)

The data set stems from the ACS (Table ID: B02001) and reflects the 2016 five-year estimate.

Percentage of White Population, 2006-2010

This variable has the same characteristics as *Percentage of White Population, 2011-2015*. Only the time period is different.

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[35] See https://data.cdc.gov/d/5h56-n989. Contrary to the description on the website, the data set does include data for Maine and Wisconsin and thus covers the entire US.

3.2.5 Variable abbreviations

Voting result variables	
Variable description	**Variable abbreviation**
Absolute number of votes cast for the Democratic Party in the 2016 presidential election	votes_dem
Absolute number of votes cast for the Republican Party in the 2016 presidential election	votes_gop
Absolute number of votes cast in the 2016 presidential election	total_votes
Percentage of votes cast for the Democratic Party in the 2016 presidential election	per_dem
Percentage of votes cast for the Republican Party in the 2016 presidential election	per_gop
Difference in the absolute number of votes cast for the Democratic and Republican parties in the 2016 presidential election	diff
Difference in the percentage of votes cast for the Democratic and Republican parties in the 2016 presidential election	per_point_diff

Socio-economic variables	
Variable description	**Variable abbreviation**
Percentage of people with High School degree or less	PercPopHS
Unemployment rate in 2015	Unemp15
Unemployment rate in 2006	Unemp06
Percentage of employment in farming enterprises as share of total employment in 2015	FarmShare15
Percentage of employment in farming enterprises as share of total employment in 2006	FarmShare06
Mining dependency in 2015	MinDep
Manufacturing dependency in 2015	ManDep
Percentage of deviation between county median household income and national median household income based on 2016 five-year estimates	IncomeDev15
Percentage of deviation between county median household income and national median household income based on 2011 five-year estimates	IncomeDev10
Median gross rent as percentage of household income in the past 12 months based on 2016 five-year estimates	RentPercInc15
Median gross rent as percentage of household income in the past 12 months based on 2011 five-year estimates	RentPerceInc10
Median selected monthly owner costs as percentage of household income in the past 12 months for housing units with a mortgage based on 2016 five-year estimates	MortPercInc15
Median selected monthly owner costs as percentage of household income in the past 12 months for housing units with a mortgage based on 2011 five-year estimates	MortPercInc10

Infrastructure variables	
Variable description	**Variable abbreviation**
Percentage of population outside 25 miles of a non-hub or small airport, 75 miles of a medium or large airport, or 25 miles of intercity bus stop or intercity rail station as of 2012	AccTrans12
Percentage of population outside of 25 miles of non-hub or small airport, 75 miles of a medium or large airport, or 25 miles of intercity bus stop or intercity rail station as of 2006	AccTrans06
Mean number minutes for daily commute, based on 2016 five-year estimates	Commute15
Mean number of minutes for daily commute, based on 2011 five-year estimates	Commute10
Regionally adjusted per pupil current spending total, elementary through secondary education, 2015-2016 financial year	PPCSTOT
Percentage of population without access to fixed broadband internet as of December 2016	BroadCov16
Percentage of population without access to fixed broadband internet as of December 2013	BroadCov13
Designation as a Health Professional Shortage Area between 2006 and 2016	HPSA
Designation as a Medically Underserved Area/Population between 2006 and 2016	MUA.P

Demographic Variables	
Variable description	**Variable abbreviation**
Population density as in people per square mile as of 2016	PopDens16
Population density as in people per square mile as of 2006	PopDens06
Percentage of population age 65 and over, based on 2016 five-year estimates	PercPop6515
Percentage of population age 65 and over, based on 2011 five-year estimates	PercPop6510
Percentage of deviation from national mean life expectancy at birth, based on 2016 five-year estimates	DevMeanLifeExp15
Percentage of White Population, based on 2016 five-year estimates	PercWhite15
Percentage of White Population, based on 2010 five-year estimates	PercWhite10

3.3 Statistical analysis

Using the independent variables I listed above, in a first step, I created two statistical models to predict the election result for each county. These models use information from the independent variables to predict the election result up to an unexplainable random error (assumed to follow a specific distribution in each model). As a result, I received coefficients for each independent variable and the degree to which the independent variables can explain the variation in each model.

First, I created a multiple linear regression model. Such linear models are straightforward and typically used to model the relationship between multiple independent variables (X) and one dependent variable (Y). Two underlying assumptions of this model are that each X is linear with respect to the average of Y and that the error is mean zero with a normal distribution of the residuals around this mean. This implies that any Y values between negative infinity to positive infinity are possible. My dependent variable, however, was reported as percentages between 0 and 100. For the linear regression models, I therefore treated these percentages as metric values between 0 and 1, thus facilitating comparison with prior work.

An approach that is less commonly encountered in the literature but actually more suited to the scale of my dependent variable, which is a proportion, is the beta regression. While in many ways similar to the multiple linear regression model, the beta regression has some distinct differences. First, this model assumes the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable is linear. And second, it assumes the dependent variable follows a beta distribution around this average, which means values outside of the range 0 to 1, including the values of 0 and 1, are not possible. In other words: The beta regression model is particularly useful when the dependent variable is a proportion, which is why I also report

results from this model. For a detailed description of the beta regression, see Cribari-Neto & Zeileis (2010).

Using these two models to probe the relationship between the "left behind" variables and the election outcome is also beneficial because, if they yield similar results, this can indicate the robustness of the results.

3.4 Results

3.4.1 Descriptive statistics

In the following table, I provide an overview of all independent variables considered in my analyses with corresponding descriptive summary statistics. "SD" stands for Standard Deviation and "Range" means the range between the smallest and the largest value of this variable in the data set.

Table 6: Descriptive overview of variables

N=3134 (Number of counties considered)	
PercPopHS	
Mean (SD)	49.347 (10.648)
Range	9.800 - 79.500
Unemp15	
N-Miss	1
Mean (SD)	5.521 (2.014)
Range	1.800 - 24.600
Unemp06	
N-Miss	8
Mean (SD)	4.982 (1.768)
Range	1.600 - 20.700
FarmShare15	
N-Miss	52
Mean (SD)	7.635 (7.569)
Range	0.000 - 57.879
FarmShare06	
N-Miss	52
Mean (SD)	7.667 (7.671)
Range	0.000 - 58.548

MinDep	
N-Miss	202
0 (not mining dependent)	2733 (93.2%)
1 (mining dependent)	199 (6.8%)
ManDep	
N-Miss	202
0 (not manufacturing dependent)	2451 (83.6%)
1 (manufacturing dependent)	481 (16.4%)
IncomeDev15	
N-Miss	1
Mean (SD)	-13.145 (22.711)
Range	-64.128 - 129.122
IncomeDev10	
N-Miss	2
Mean (SD)	-14.766 (22.195)
Range	-62.725 - 122.626
RentPercInc15	
Mean (SD)	28.499 (4.650)
Range	-10.000 - 50.000
RentPercInc10	
N-Miss	3
Mean (SD)	27.962 (4.915)
Range	-10.000 - 50.000
MortPercInc15	
N-Miss	4
Mean (SD)	21.756 (2.919)
Range	11.400 - 40.000
MortPercInc10	
N-Miss	4
Mean (SD)	22.847 (3.209)
Range	10.000 - 48.800

AccTrans12	
N-Miss	4
Mean (SD)	21.546 (34.335)
Range	0.000 - 100.000
AccTrans06	
N-Miss	4
Mean (SD)	22.852 (34.458)
Range	0.000 - 100.000
Commute15	
Mean (SD)	23.169 (5.512)
Range	4.900 - 44.000
Commute10	
N-Miss	2
Mean (SD)	22.754 (5.488)
Range	4.300 - 44.200
PPCSTOT	
N-Miss	29
Mean (SD)	13954.641 (4867.034)
Range	5822.564 - 98540.681
BroadCov16	
N-Miss	2
Mean (SD)	27.901 (28.078)
Range	0.000 - 100.000
BroadCov13	
N-Miss	3
Mean (SD)	50.794 (36.655)
Range	0.000 - 100.000
HPSA	
0 (not classified as HPSA)	2411 (76.9%)
1 (classified as HPSA)	723 (23.1%)

MUA.P	
0 (not classified as MUA.P)	2750 (87.7%)
1 (classified as MUA.P)	384 (12.3%)
PopDens16	
Mean (SD)	269.877 (1797.945)
Range	0.037 - 71785.828
PopDens06	
N-Miss	3
Mean (SD)	249.889 (1726.088)
Range	0.040 - 70784.478
PercPop6515	
Mean (SD)	17.132 (4.427)
Range	3.300 - 50.900
PercPop6510	
N-Miss	2
Mean (SD)	15.532 (4.224)
Range	0.000 - 40.700
DevMeanLifeExp15	
N-Miss	34
Mean (SD)	-0.969 (2.583)
Range	-9.650 - 10.800
PercPopWhite10	
N-Miss	2
Mean (SD)	83.876 (16.647)
Range	9.420 - 100.000
PercPopWhite15	
Mean (SD)	83.562 (16.621)
Range	4.701 - 100.000

votes_dem	
N-Miss	3
Mean (SD)	20600.951 (72047.009)
Range	4.000 - 1893770.000
votes_gop	
N-Miss	3
Mean (SD)	20437.895 (41413.208)
Range	57.000 - 620285.000
total_votes	
N-Miss	3
Mean (SD)	43256.317 (114402.339)
Range	64.000 - 2652072.000
per_dem	
N-Miss	3
Mean (SD)	0.317 (0.153)
Range	0.031 - 0.928
per_gop	
N-Miss	3
Mean (SD)	0.636 (0.156)
Range	0.041 - 0.953
diff	
N-Miss	3
Mean (SD)	11827.888 (42659.247)
Range	2.000 - 1273485.000
per_point_diff	
N-Miss	3
Mean (SD)	0.391 (0.208)
Range	0.000 - 0.916
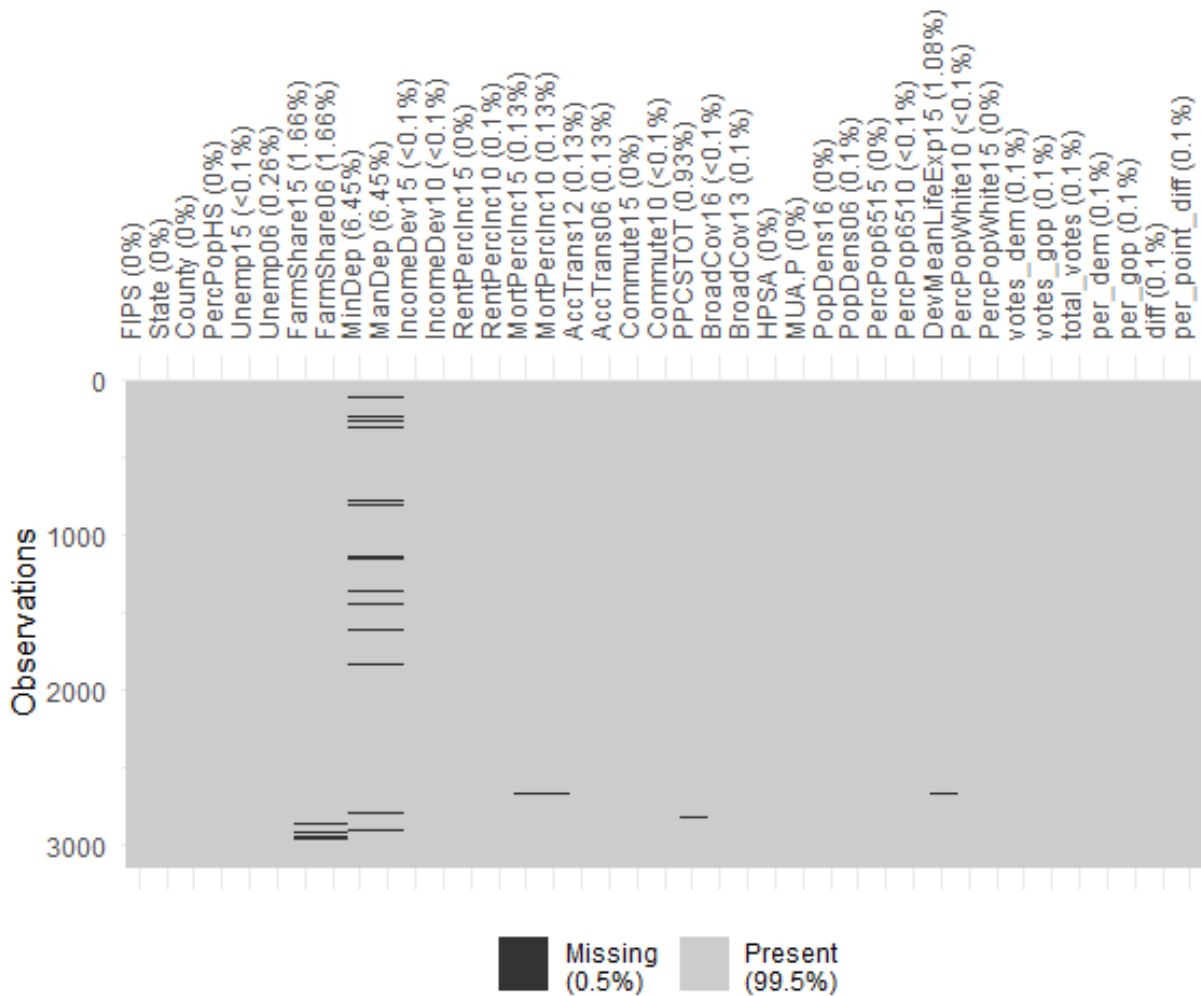
As shown in the plot above, I excluded only a small number of counties from my analysis due to missing data points in one or more data sets. The Y-axis labeled "Observations" indicates all the counties included in my analysis; these do not, however, correspond to the FIPS codes. The X-axis shows the FIPS code plus every single independent variable and the percentage of counties that did not have data points in this set. The black bars in the figures indicate those counties that were excluded from my analyses. What we can see is that county data was missing mostly in the data sets for Mining Dependency and Manufacturing dependency. The thicker black bar in the bottom left corner stands for a number of Virginia counties that were excluded from my analysis.

Figure 2 plots the correlation between the individual variables. A red dot signifies a negative correlation between two variables, a blue dot signifies a positive one. The darker the shade of the respective color, the stronger the correlation. The diagonal line of dots from the top left to the bottom right indicates the strongest possible correlation value (1). As we can see, some variables correlate quite strongly with each other, which may distort the predictive power of my models. Thus, following Zainodin & Yap (2013), I exclude variables with absolute correlation coefficient values greater than 0.95. These are "FarmShare06", "PercPopWhite10" and "PopDens06."

Figure 2: Correlations between variables
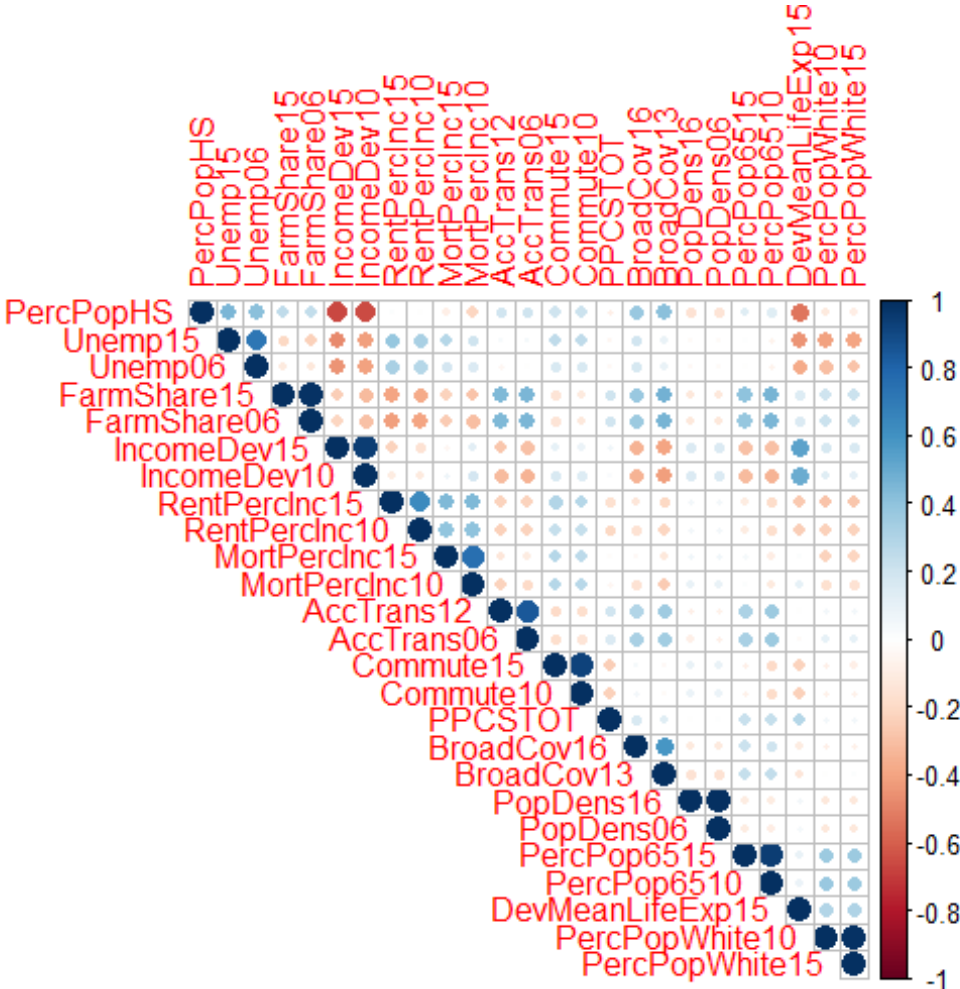
3.4.2 Analytical statistics

Tables 7 and 8 show the analytical results of my statistical models. For each variable, the models generated an effect estimate, meaning by how much the proportion of votes for Donald Trump changed if the variable was increased by one unit (holding all other variables constant). Also included in the regression model output for each variable is the standard error, a measure of the average degree of uncertainty. I also report the p-value for each variable from the models, obtained from the corresponding test statistic. The p-value is the probability of observing a linear relationship between that independent variable and the dependent variable equal to or more extreme than the estimated coefficient value, assuming the null hypothesis is true (that the independent variable has zero effect on the dependent variable). Therefore, low p-values provide strong evidence against the null hypothesis and indicate high statistical significance, meaning the observed effect estimate is unlikely to be explained by random chance alone.

Table 7: Predictors of the election result (linear regression model)

Variable	Effect estimate	Standard error	p-value
PercPopHS	0.0034177	0.0002791	0.0000000
Unemp15	-0.0020246	0.0014851	0.1728994
Unemp06	-0.0121194	0.0014688	0.0000000
FarmShare15	0.0022024	0.0003506	0.0000000
MinDep1	0.0204892	0.0072415	0.0046965
ManDep1	0.0011954	0.0047934	0.8030889
IncomeDev15	-0.0001566	0.0002897	0.5888286
IncomeDev10	0.0005841	0.0002834	0.0393803
RentPercInc15	-0.0015479	0.0005526	0.0051266
RentPercInc10	-0.0022555	0.0004848	0.0000034
MortPercInc15	-0.0019603	0.0009859	0.0468633
MortPercInc10	-0.0068614	0.0008950	0.0000000
AccTrans12	0.0003372	0.0000924	0.0002666
AccTrans06	0.0001745	0.0000923	0.0587580
Commute15	0.0023276	0.0008451	0.0059230
Commute10	-0.0009883	0.0008349	0.2365987
PPCSTOT	-0.0000019	0.0000004	0.0000046
BroadCov16	0.0001912	0.0000782	0.0145434
BroadCov13	0.0001906	0.0000639	0.0028688
HPSA1	0.0009007	0.0040328	0.8232811
MUA.P1	-0.0065620	0.0051809	0.2054098
PopDens16	-0.0000265	0.0000028	0.0000000
PercPop6515	0.0029535	0.0014759	0.0454711
PercPop6510	-0.0007528	0.0015802	0.6338203
DevMeanLifeExp15	-0.0119757	0.0009501	0.0000000
PercPopWhite15	0.0039759	0.0001323	0.0000000

Variable	Effect estimate	Standard error	p-value
PercPopHS	0.0142748	0.0012456	0.0000000
Unemp15	-0.0083030	0.0066293	0.2104011
Unemp06	-0.0530375	0.0064876	0.0000000
FarmShare15	0.0124703	0.0016288	0.0000000
MinDep1	0.1267457	0.0340884	0.0002007
ManDep1	0.0022843	0.0214038	0.9150076
IncomeDev15	-0.0004737	0.0013172	0.7191404
IncomeDev10	0.0027034	0.0012915	0.0363301
RentPercInc15	-0.0066406	0.0025120	0.0082042
RentPercInc10	-0.0101179	0.0022386	0.0000062
MortPercInc15	-0.0078753	0.0044582	0.0773141
MortPercInc10	-0.0301533	0.0040319	0.0000000
AccTrans12	0.0018262	0.0004250	0.0000174
AccTrans06	0.0007624	0.0004228	0.0713490
Commute15	0.0110962	0.0038654	0.0040966
Commute10	-0.0049826	0.0038222	0.1923700
PPCSTOT	-0.0000082	0.0000018	0.0000050
BroadCov16	0.0008210	0.0003595	0.0223812
BroadCov13	0.0007697	0.0002866	0.0072298
HPSA1	0.0065488	0.0178273	0.7133598
MUA.P1	-0.0280744	0.0229794	0.2218144
PopDens16	-0.0001313	0.0000149	0.0000000
PercPop6515	0.0133423	0.0067914	0.0494620
PercPop6510	-0.0044734	0.0073017	0.5401046
DevMeanLifeExp15	-0.0560835	0.0043144	0.0000000
PercPopWhite15	0.0173762	0.0005885	0.0000000

3.4.1 Robustness

The robustness of the findings between the two modeling approaches is strong. The multiple R-squared and adjusted R-squared values from the linear regression (0.655 and 0.652) are very similar to the pseudo R-squared value from the beta regression (0.646). These values indicate the proportion of the variation in the dependent variable that can be explained by the independent variables. Furthermore, as evidenced in the results presented in Table 6, the significance levels of all variables are identical between the models, with the exception of MinDep1 and MortPercInc15, which shows a small deviation between the models.

Variable	Linear regression	Beta regression
PercPopHS	***	***
Unemp15	NS	NS
Unemp06	***	***
FarmShare15	***	***
MinDep1	**	***
ManDep1	NS	NS
IncomeDev15	NS	NS
IncomeDev10	*	*
RentPercInc15	**	**
RentPercInc10	***	***
MortPercInc15	*	.
MortPercInc10	***	***
AccTrans12	***	***
AccTrans06	.	.
Commute15	**	**
Commute10	NS	NS
PPCSTOT	***	***
BroadCov16	*	*
BroadCov13	**	**
HPSA1	NS	NS
MUA.P1	NS	NS
PopDens16	***	***
PercPop6515	*	*
PercPop6510	NS	NS
DevMeanLifeExp15	***	***
PercPopWhite15	***	***

Significance codes: *** = $p \leq 0.001$, ** = $0.001 < p \leq 0.01$, * = $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$, = $0.05 < p \leq 0.1$ Not significant (NS) = $0.1 < p \leq 1$

Additionally, the direction of the effect estimate obtained for all statistically significant variables is identical in both models, as can be seen in Table 10.

Table 10: Side-by-side comparison of statistically significant variables' effect directions between linear regression and beta regression models

Variable	Estimate linear regression	Estimate beta regression
PercPopHS	0.0034177	0.0142748
Unemp06	-0.0121194	-0.0530375
FarmShare15	0.0022024	0.0124703
MinDep1	0.0204892	0.1267457
IncomeDev10	0.0005841	0.0027034
RentPercInc15	-0.0015479	-0.0066406
RentPercInc10	-0.0022555	-0.0101179
MortPercInc15	-0.0019603	-0.0078753
MortPercInc10	-0.0068614	-0.0301533
AccTrans12	0.0003372	0.0018262
AccTrans06	0.0001745	0.0007624
Commute15	0.0023276	0.0110962
PPCSTOT	-0.0000019	-0.0000082
BroadCov16	0.0001912	0.0008210
BroadCov13	0.0001906	0.0007697
PopDens16	-0.0000265	-0.0001313
PercPop6515	0.0029535	0.0133423
DevMeanLifeExp15	-0.0119757	-0.0560835
PercPopWhite15	0.0039759	0.0173762

3.4.3 Predicted proportion of votes vs. actual proportion of votes

In a final step, I plotted the actual proportion of votes for Trump compared with the expected proportion of votes for Trump based on my predictive models. The X-axis in each model shows the percentage of votes Trump should have received according to the prediction model used, whereas the Y-axis shows the percentage of votes he actually received in that county. Figure 3 shows this plot with the predicted proportion of votes from my linear regression model on the X-axis, while Figure 4 does so with the predicted proportion of votes taken from the beta regression model. Each dot represents one of the counties included in my analysis. The red diagonal line in each figure illustrates perfect prediction, meaning when the predicted proportion of votes perfectly matches the actual one. While in both figures a considerable number of dots (counties) lie far away from this line, the large majority of them are relatively close to it, especially when we look at the top right quadrant of each figure.
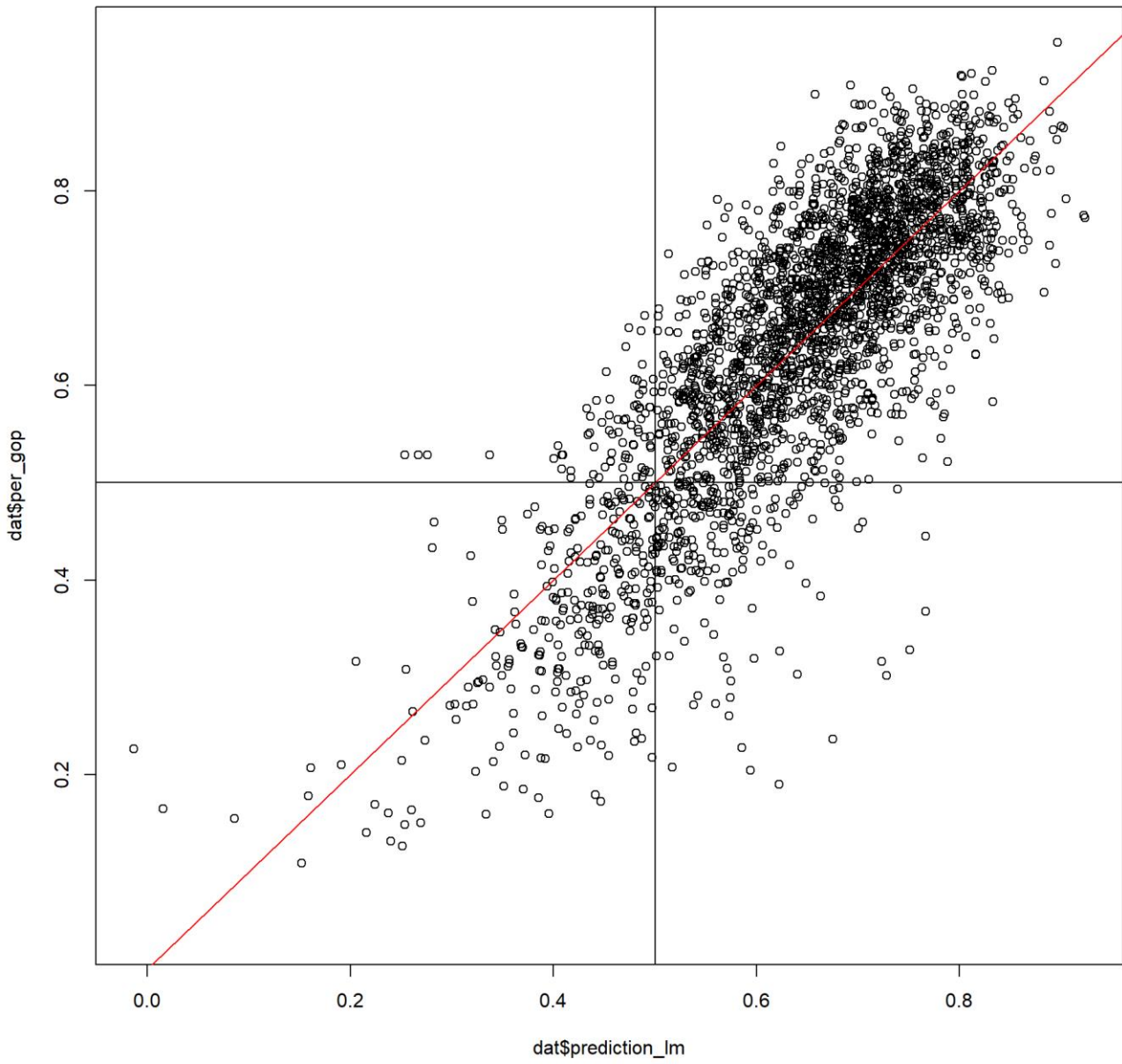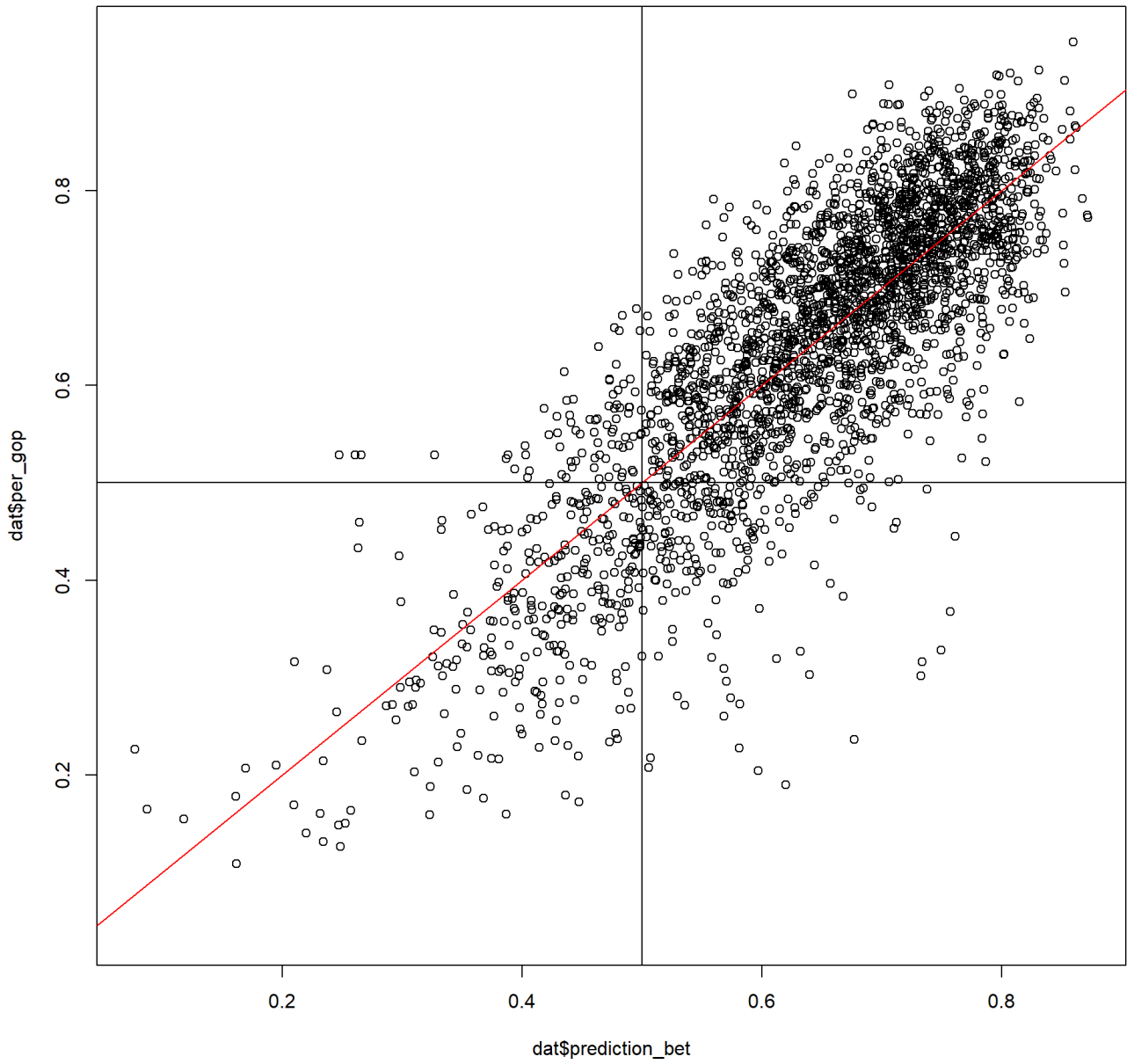
Figure 4: Comparison between the predicted results from the beta regression model and the actual results

3.5 Interpretation of results

Socio-economic variables

The results from the regression models indicated that voters in counties with a higher percentage of high school degrees or less as their highest level of education, as well as counties that were dependent on mining, and those that had a high percentage of employment in agriculture, had an increased likelihood of voting for Trump. This is in accordance with the "left behind" theory. Interestingly, in the multivariable models, having a higher unemployment rate on the county level in 2006 was associated with a lower proportion of votes for Trump. I also made this observation in counties where the percentage of household income spent on a mortgage or on rent had been higher in the 2006-2010 and 2011-2015 periods, with the estimated effect size being slightly larger for the 2006-2010 period. Both observations seem to stand in contrast to the "left behind" theory's argument that Trump's supporters had a recent experience of economic hardship. One explanation for this observation could be that voters in these counties had a longer history of economic hardship, meaning that it started prior to the economic crisis of 2008, and tended to favor Trump less because they may have been worried that he was more likely to cut economic support programs and welfare.

Supporting the argument that Trump's supporters were in fact not poor, is the fact that a deviation of the county's median household income from the national median for the 2006-2010 period was positively associated with the share of votes for Trump, meaning that the more the mean county income was higher than the national mean, the likelier the county was to have higher share of votes for Trump. The fact that for this variable, the 2011-2015 period was statistically insignificant, can be interpreted as income deviation was not as much of an issue for voters in the run-up to the 2016 election.

Infrastructural variables

Having a higher share of the population lacking access to long-distance transport, both in 2006 and 2012, having a longer commute to and from work in the 2011-2015 period and having a higher proportion of the population without access to broadband internet in both, 2016 and 2013 were factors associated with a higher proportion of Trump votes. This speaks in support of the argument that voters who lived in more remote and rural areas had a higher tendency to support Trump. Spending per student at the county level was negatively associated with voting for Trump, meaning the more was spent per student at the county level, the less likely it was that its voters would vote for Trump. This aligns with the observation of the positive association between the percentage of people with a high school degree or less and the likelihood of support for Trump. Being designated as an HPSA or MUA/P county was not statistically significant.

Demographic variables

Counties with a greater proportion of their population aged 65 and older in 2011-2015 were more likely to have a higher share of votes for Trump. However, the percentage of the population aged 65 and older in 2006-2010 was not statistically significant in my models. A further variable that was not statistically significant was the population density in 2006; in 2016, , it was negatively associated with votes for Trump, meaning that when population density increased, the probability of a county to vote for Trump decreased. This is in line with the overall pattern that urban areas tend to vote Democratic and rural areas Republican (Hartig et al. 2023) and also with the "left behind" theory. Counties with a higher positive deviation in the mean life expectancy were also less likely to cast votes for Trump, meaning the lower the mean life expectancy in a county, the likelier it was to vote for Trump — which also fits with the "left behind" theory in that in places with worse living conditions, people

were likelier to vote for Trump. And finally, also fitting with the "left behind" theory, the percentage of Whites per county in the 2011-2015 was positively associated with voting for Trump. In fact, together with the percentage of people with a high school degree or less and a county's mining dependency, it was one of the top three predictors across both of my models.

3.6 Limitations

One important limitation to my approach is that it did not allow me to make any inferences about how specific groups or individuals voted. I only used aggregate-level data, not individual-level data. To avoid committing an ecological fallacy, i.e., erroneously assuming "that relationships that hold at one level of aggregation also hold at another level of aggregation" (Firebaugh 2001, 4023), I was careful to only make group-level inferences such as "counties with characteristic X had a higher/lower likelihood to vote for Trump." This also did does not allow me to make any inferences about whether voters considered themselves "left behind," and if they did, whether or not this had an effect on their voting behavior. To make such an inference, I would need to rely on ethnographic or survey data.

Another important limitation to address is the theoretical blurriness of the "left behind" label. To reiterate, the "left behind" theory states that the more a place was "left behind," the higher the likelihood of Trump winning a larger proportion of votes there. Statistically speaking, the theory appears to imply a linear relationship between the independent variable (being "left behind") and the dependent variable (proportion of votes for Trump). When operationalizing this theory as a variable, the challenge is to determine which scale is most suitable. One could conceptualize "left behind-ness" in ordinal, discrete categories (not at all left behind, somewhat left behind, strongly left behind, etc.) or on a continuous scale, for example using a score ranging from 0 (not at all "left behind") to 100

(strongly "left behind"). Regardless of the choice of variable scale, however, the challenge remains as to how we should determine suitable values for each county according to how "left behind" they are based on a specific set of variables. This is, however, impossible since it is not possible, just by looking at the variable values for a county, to distinguish which aspect of being "left behind" is the most relevant for it. Is the county "left behind" because of insufficient internet access, low income, and low population density, or because of low per-student funding, a decrease in manufacturing jobs, or a high proportion of elderly people?

Therefore, I elected to give all variables the same weight and first ran regression models to see how well this combination of variables predicted the proportion of votes for Trump. In my comparison of the predicted results with the actual results for each county, I relied on an assumed linear relationship because both variables are continuous (proportions).

4 Exploring the Unexplained Variation

My quantitative testing of the "left behind" hypothesis in Chapter Three suggests a strong association between being "left behind" and the election outcome, since my models explain about 65% of the variation in the election results. Two problems arise from this analysis, however: First, the quantitative analysis only shows a correlation. Whether or not a causal mechanism is present can only be discerned by qualitative, in-depth case research. Hochschild (2016) and Cramer (2016) have provided excellent examples of this type of research, and their accounts suggest that such a causal mechanism is, in fact, present. Second, and more relevant for this dissertation, is the remaining level of unexplained variation between the predicted and the actual result. The following two maps illustrate this problem. The first map shows the percentage of votes Donald Trump received per county in 2016. The second map shows the divergence between the predicted election result according to my beta regression model and the actual result at the county level. The darker shade of blue a county appears on the map, the less it voted for Trump than my model predicted; the darker the shade of red a county appears, by contrast, the more it voted for Trump than my model predicted. Counties that appear in gray were excluded from the model because they were missing data for one or more variables. As the map illustrates, my beta regression model predicted a considerable number of counties with a high divergence from the actual election result; in other words, about 35% of the variation between the predicted results and the actual results cannot be explained with my operationalization of the "left behind" hypothesis.

Map 1: Percentage of votes for Donald Trump in 2016 per county
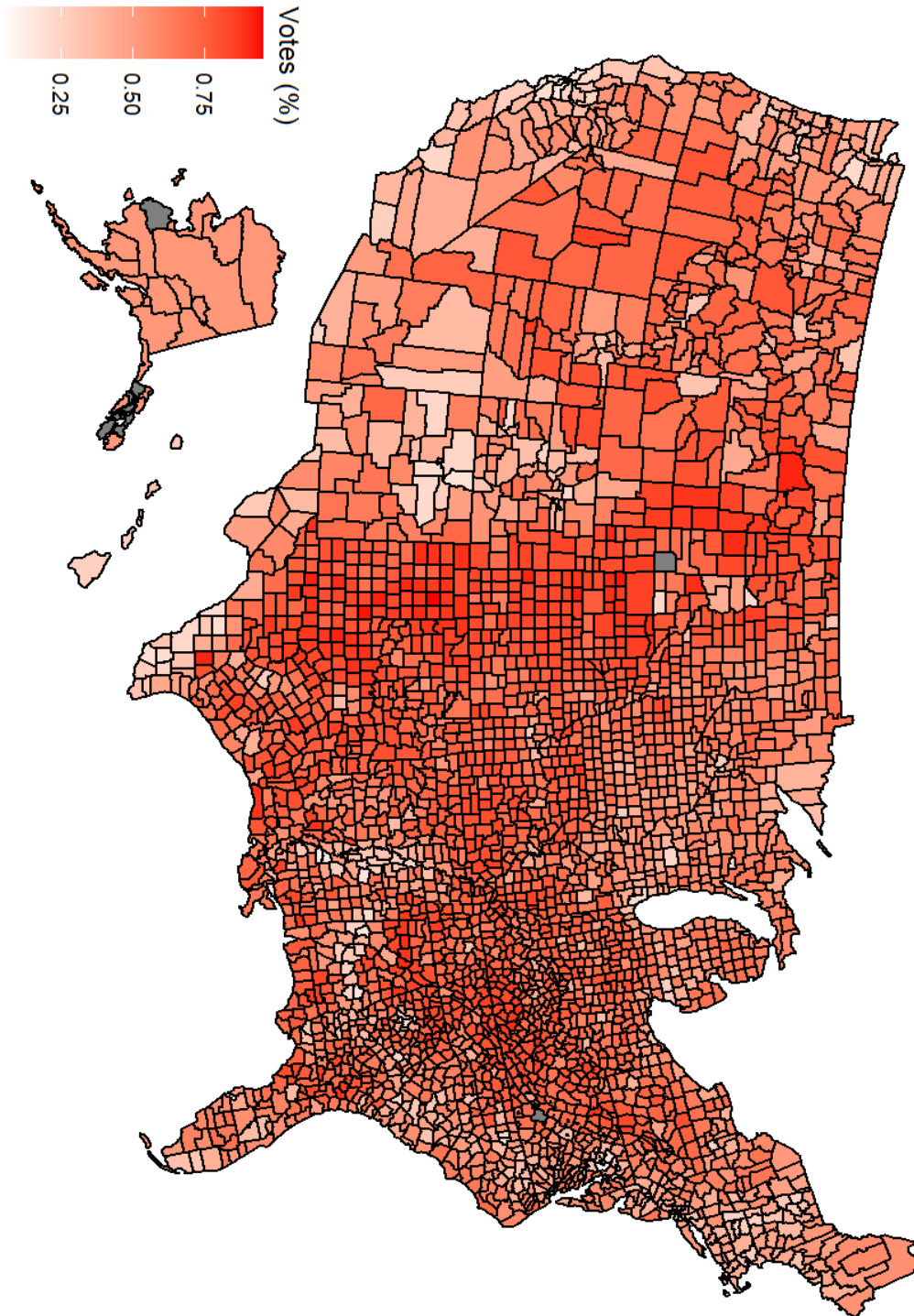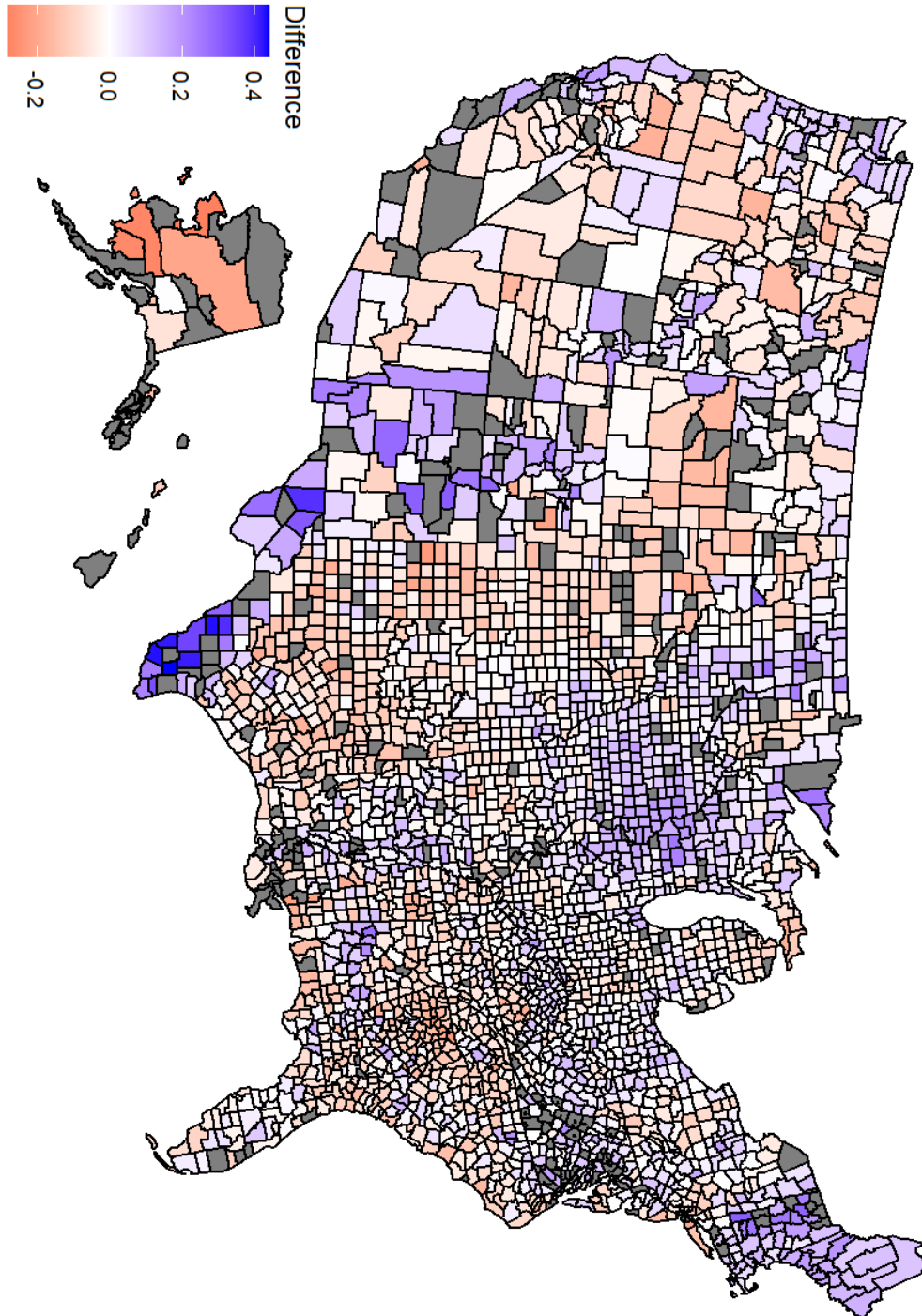
This is a limitation, for which I see three possible explanations: One, the set of variables by which I measured being "left behind" is missing important components; two, other factors that have nothing to do with being "left behind" are relevant; or three, a combination of both those explanations.

The omission of important variables in an analysis is always a possibility and can never be ruled out completely. As a result, I would show an unscientific degree of confidence if I said that this was not the case in my analysis. What I can say, however, is that any omission of potential variables that could be part of a "left behind" vector was either unintentional or based on a lack of available and usable data. This chapter is thus concerned with the second explanation referenced above: That other factors besides being "left behind" explain the remaining variation in my statistical analysis. There are multiple, sometimes overlapping suggestions for other factors that might explain the variation. Mutz (Mutz 2018), for example, argues that perceived status threat among white Americans — in other words, fear of losing societal dominance — is a better explanation for Trump's success than economic hardship, which is one aspect of my definition of being "left behind." The most popular alternative to the "left behind" theory is the theory of a cultural backlash. It posits, in short, that Trump's success can best be explained as a voter backlash against the increasing dominance of socially liberal norms and values in American society. These include, for example, gender and racial equality, acceptance of homosexuality and gay marriage, and access to abortion. Norris and Inglehart (2019) have demonstrated the explanatory relevance of this theory and in combination with the "left behind" theory, both can likely explain most of the 2016 election result.

Testing whether these alternative theories can significantly reduce the remaining residuals of my analysis presents challenges, however, primarily due to the granularity of the data they are built on. Data on status threat and cultural norms and values is based on detailed

surveys of individuals. Conducting this type of survey is extremely costly; this is why, to my knowledge, they only exist in the shape of large-scale surveys with nationally, or sometimes regionally, representative population samples. By contrast, I would need county-level surveys on status threat and cultural norms and values in order to incorporate these theories into my models.

Ultimately, I created a vector of "left behind" variables (independent variables) upon which I created two models to predict the election result for each county, then compared these models to the actual election result (dependent variable) in each county. The two models use information from the independent variables to predict the election results up to an unexplainable random error (assumed to follow a specific distribution of the data in each model). This unexplained random error term determines the presence of the residuals (the difference between actual election results and predicted ones). In other words, the residuals represent aspects of the election result that my models can't explain. Other plausible theories (including status threat, cultural backlash) may explain the discrepancy between the reality and the prediction based on the left behind status. However, it is not possible for me to test them in the context of this dissertation.

4.1 Unlocking Insights through Theory-Building Process Tracing

Given the challenges and limitations with addressing this existing problem and acknowledging that there are likely additional explanations beyond those listed above, this chapter will focus instead on taking a deep dive into the potential other variables that may contribute to the voting patterns I examine in this research. I will do this through a qualitative investigative analysis of a selected number of counties, using parts of a method called theory-

building process tracing, to identify other potential predictors than those I used for my models.

According to Beach and Pedersen (2013), theory-building process tracing aims to hypothesize about generalizable causal mechanisms for when we know the outcome but are in the dark about the cause. They define mechanisms as theories about how and for what reason one event triggers another; that apply to more than one case; and that consist of several parts (entities) composed of actors executing an activity. Beach and Pedersen name five steps for theory-building process tracing:

1. Creation of an empirical narrative (collection of observable evidence)

2. Identification of empirical evidence, based on existing theorizations and intuition, that supports the existence of potential plausible systematic parts of a mechanism

3. Formulation of a causal mechanism consisting of several entities

4. Assessing the evidence's weight (is it sufficient and/or necessary?)

5. Assertion of degree of confidence and testability of causal mechanisms

However, when we hypothesize causal mechanisms in cases taken from quantitative large-n design, we run into two problems. First process-tracing makes deterministic arguments, while large-n methods make probabilistic ones. In order the connect these different types of arguments, the theories behind them need to be compatible. This means the probabilistic theory needs to either be transformed into a deterministic one (from "When X increases, we should expect that Y will tend to increase" to "X is a necessary condition for Y" (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 157)), or vice versa. This is, however, theoretically not possible in the context of this dissertation and this topic more generally: No single predictor will ever be a sufficient or necessary condition to vote a specific way. And second, process-tracing makes "inferences about the presence of a causal mechanism between X and Y," while frequentist analyses "will

investigate the causal effects of X on the incidence of Y" (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 158). These are different types of relationships between X and Y.

Given these limitations, I will use only those parts of theory-building process tracing that are helpful for this exploratory chapter. These parts relate to the selection of cases to investigate and their empirical description in order to discern potential patterns of predictors for the election result. That, in turn, can then be tested in the future using large-n methods.

4.1.2 Case Selection

The process begins with the selection of counties. To do so, I first divide the scatterplots into four quadrants.

Figure 5: Comparison between the predicted results in the linear regression model and the actual results
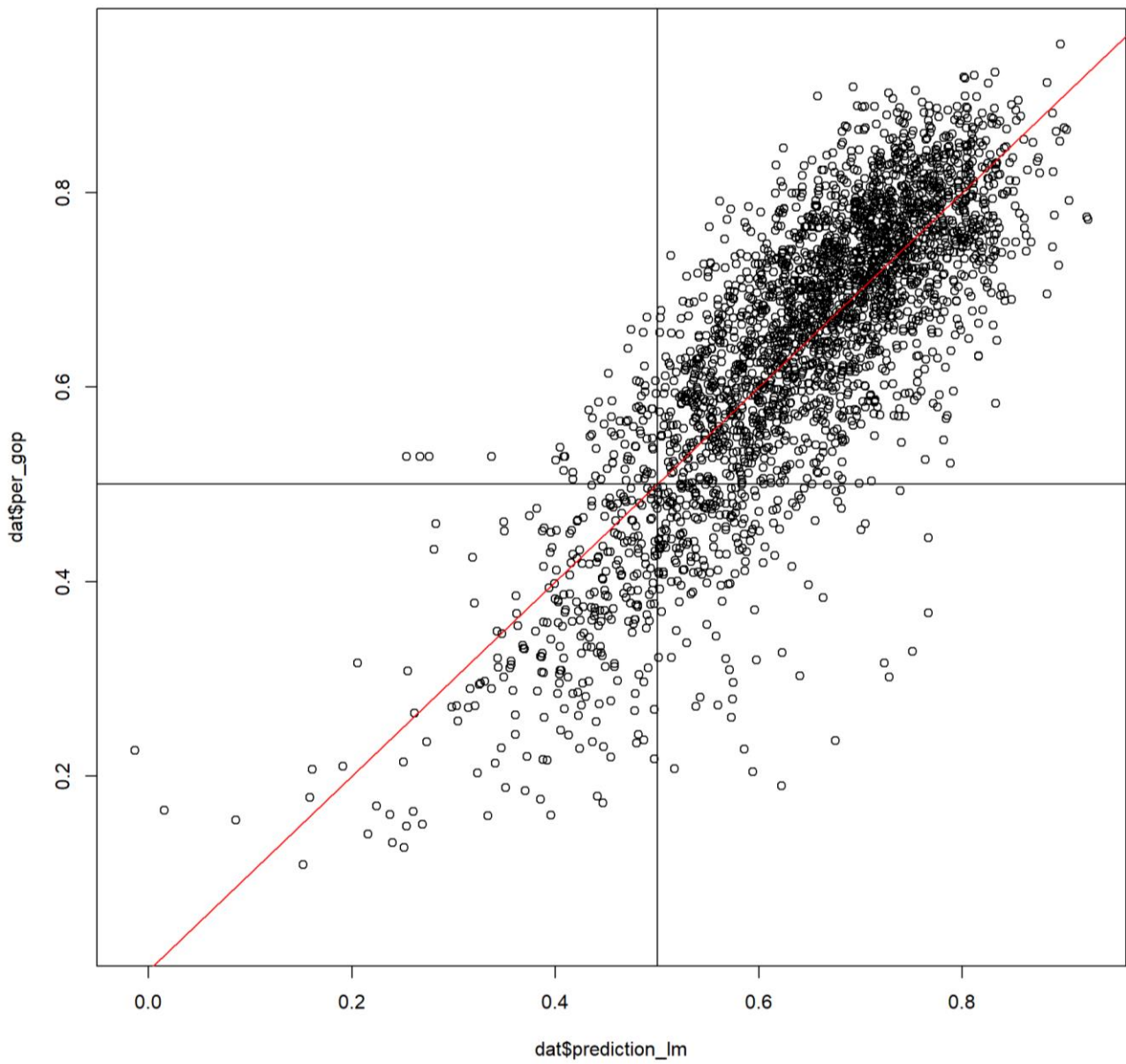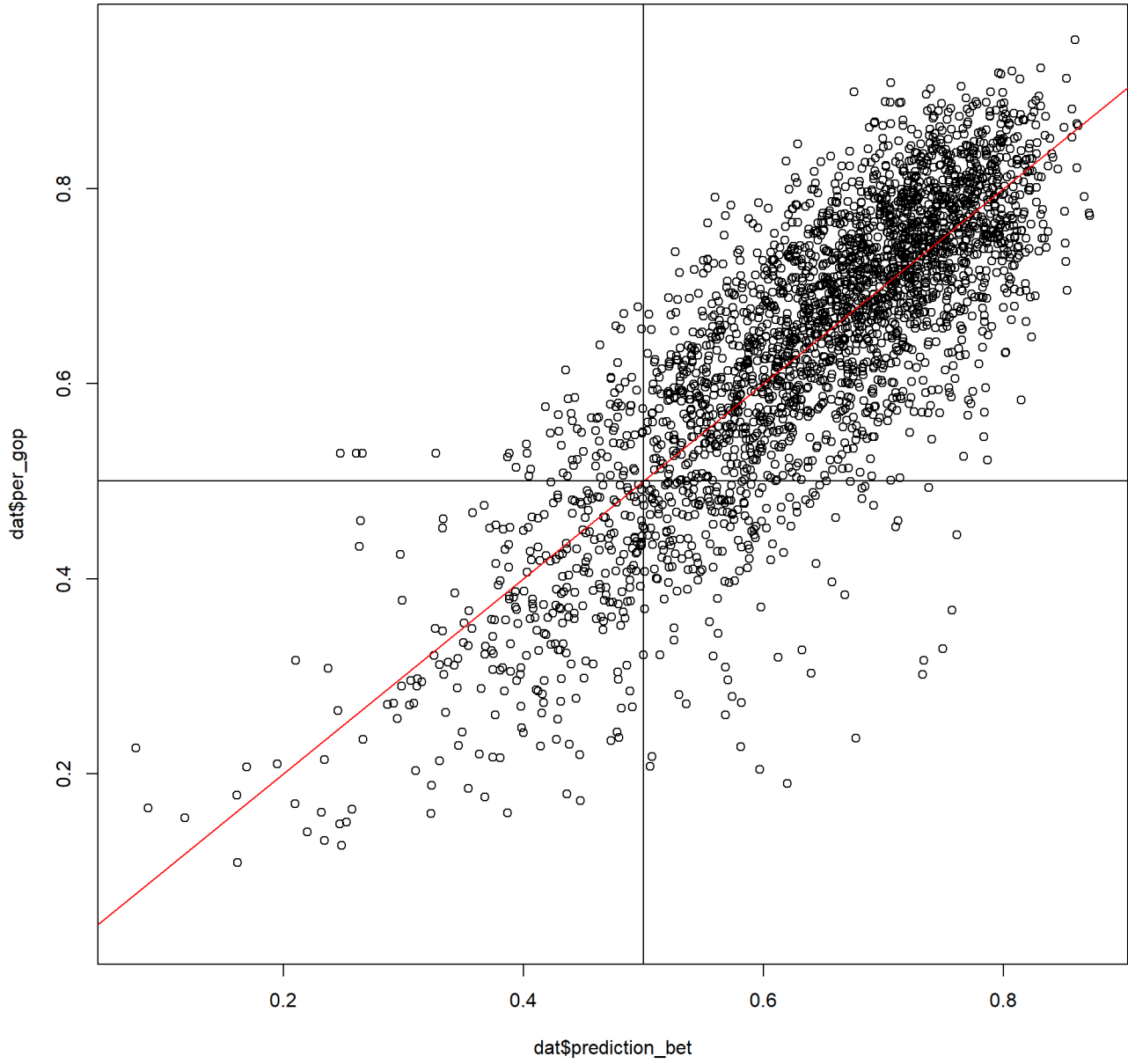
Figure 6: Comparison between the predicted results from the beta regression model and the actual results

This division follows the logic of conceptualizing the expected result and the actual result in terms of a fuzzy set, in contrast to conceptualizing them as variables. Beach and Pederson describe this process in their research:

> "Fuzzy-set logic describes concepts as either being a member of a set or not (differences in kind) but opens up the possibility that cases can either be more in than out, or vice versa (differences in degree) (Ragin 2008). The key difference between fuzzy sets and variables is that there is a qualitative threshold that marks membership of cases in the set, demarcating them from cases that are outside of the set." (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 148)

This distinction between inside and outside cases, in turn, enables me to figure out which cases are relevant for my task. If I did not divide the plots into these specific quadrants, I would still be able to select counties based on their residuals, but not to discern whether these cases are deviant cases; that second step is crucial for theory-building process-tracing. Deviant cases are those that defy expectations and the expectation in this case is that of the "left behind" hypothesis: The more a county is "left behind," the higher the vote share for Trump will be. The quadrants allow me to decide at which point a case should be considered deviant.

Drawing the horizontal line for the quadrants at the 0.5 intercept of the Y-axis is straightforward: It demarcates that in all counties above the line, an absolute majority of more than 50% of actual votes went for Trump, counties I categorize as definitely pro-Trump. This, of course, excludes counties which were pro-Trump but in which he only won by a relative majority. Making this fine-grained distinction, however, is impossible when I want to separate the plot only into quadrants. Distinguishing between above and below 50% of the votes also ensures that I only take counties in which Trump definitely won. If I put the demarcation at above or below 40%, for example, the quadrant could theoretically include counties in which Trump received 40% of the vote but another candidate received even more.

Drawing the vertical line at the 0.5 intercept of the X-axis is also straightforward: It demarcates that in all counties right of the line, my models predicted an absolute majority of more than 50% of votes for Trump. Analogous to the position of the horizontal line, setting the vertical line at the 0.5 intercept ensures that only counties for which my models predicted a definite victory for Trump are in this quadrant. As I wrote above, the predicted result is not an independent variable but the closest possible approximation to it, as it represents what the election result would look like if my "left behind" variables were the only explanatory variables. Keeping this in mind, I will treat the predicted result like an independent variable for the process of selecting the counties for my exploratory analysis. Based on these quadrants, the deviant counties are those in the top left and the bottom right quadrants: The former are those that voted more strongly for Trump than my models predicted, while the latter are those that voted less strongly for Trump than my models predicted.

To choose the counties out of these two quadrants, I ranked them by the difference between the predicted and the real share of votes for Trump, putting those with the largest difference at the top of the ranking. Within the fuzzy-set logic, this means I chose counties based on the degree that they are deviant. Since the linear and the beta regression models are very similar (yet not 100% congruent) in their prediction for each county, I compared the county rankings for both regression models to see, whether they yielded the same results. And while they did not create the exact same order of counties, they were very similar to each other, as the following tables illustrate, in which I compare the ten counties from each ranking that had the largest difference between predicted and real share of votes. The first table shows the counties where the share of votes for Trump was higher than predicted[36], the second shows the counties where the of votes for Trump was lower than predicted.

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[36] Four Alaska Census Arears actually led both rankings but because Alaska reported the same percentage of real votes only by state and not by census area, I excluded them from the ranking.

Table 11: Comparison between linear and beta regression model county rankings of difference between predicted and real share of vote in percents; counties that "overvoted"

County	Difference linear regression	County	Difference beta regression
Jackson County, SD	-18.5%	Custer County, CO	-18.8%
Custer County, CO	-18.2%	Lee County, MS	-18.3%
Shasta County, CA	-16.9%	Jackson County, SD	-18.2%
Harrisson County, MS	-16.8%	Mackinac County, MI	-17.9%
Mackinac County, MI	-16.2%	Harrisson County, MS	-17.6%
Lincoln Parish, LA	-15.8%	Shasta County, CA	-17.5%
Yuba County, CA	-14.2%	Lincoln Parish, LA	-15.8%
Greene County, GA	-13.4%	Onslow County, NC	-15.8%
Baker County, GA	-13.4%	Yuba County, CA	-14.8%

Table 12: Comparison between linear and beta regression model county rankings of difference between predicted and real share of votes in percent; counties that "undervoted"

County	Difference linear regression	County	Difference beta regression
Brooks County, TX	43.9%	Brooks County, TX	44.1%
Starr County, TX	43.2%	Dimmit County, TX	43.1%
Dimmit County, TX	42.6%	Starr County, TX	43.0%
Zapata County, TX	42.3%	Zapata County, TX	42.1%
Duval County, TX	40.7%	Duval County, TX	41.7%
Culberson County, TX	39.9%	Zavala County, TX	39.3%
Zavala County, TX	39.0%	Culberson County, TX	39.0%
Webb County, TX	35.8%	Webb County, TX	35.3%
Willacy County, TX	33.7%	Willacy County, TX	33.7%

Given that there is no exact overlap neither of the rankings but a close enough proximity between them, I chose, three counties out of each table that both, appeared in the top ten of both rankings and for which enough information was publicly available in order to provide descriptions that are meaningful in the context of this dissertation. I provide a map for each county showing its location in the state, as well as an overview of its values from my statistical analysis in the previous chapter.

4.2 Counties that 'overvoted'

4.2.1 Shasta County, California

Map 3: Location of Shasta County in California
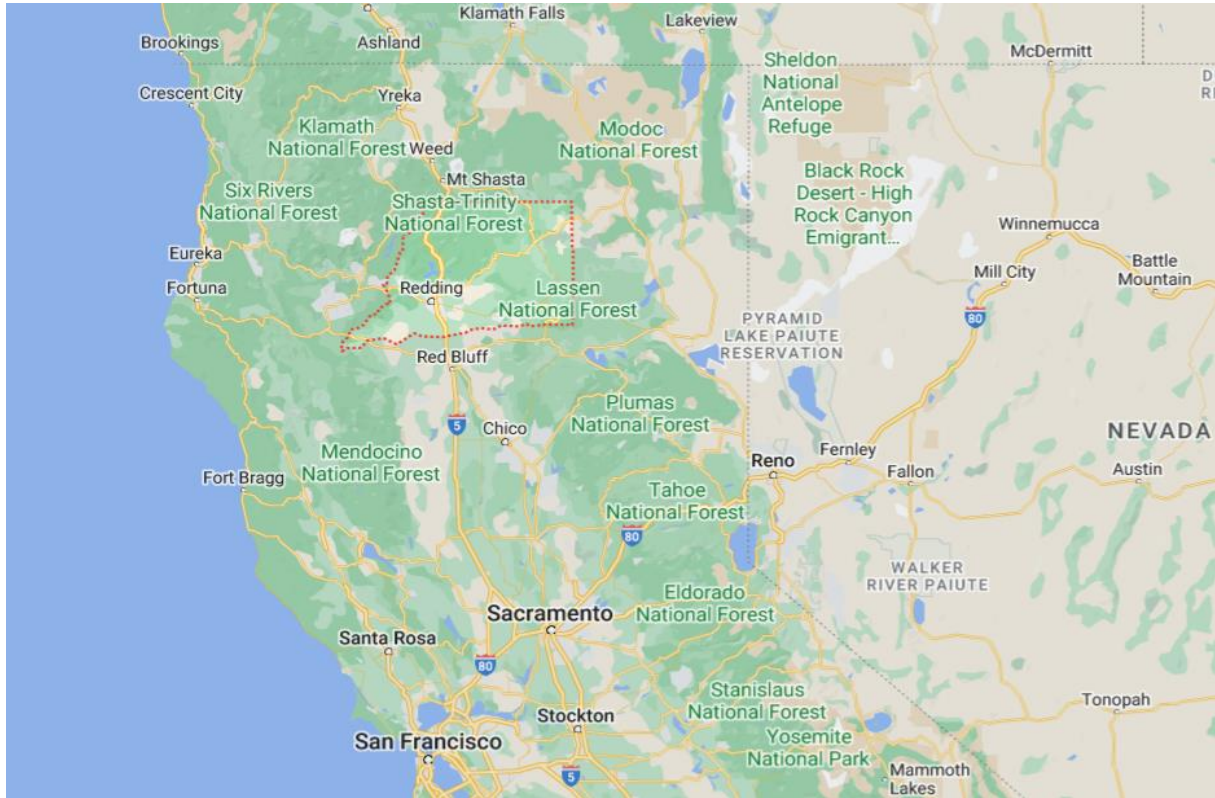
Size: 3,847 sq mi (9,960 km²)
Population (2010 Census): 177,223

Table 13: Values for Shasta County, CA

PercPopHS	36.5%	MortPercInc10	30.2%	PercPop6515	18.7%
Unemp06	6.6%	AccTrans12	4.3%	DevMeanLifeExp15	-1.9 years
FarmShare15	2.0%	AccTrans06	4.6%	PercPopWhite15	88.4%
MinDep	No	Commute15	20.0 min.	per_gop	65.6%
IncomeDev10	-17.2%	PPCSTOT	14,223$	prediction_lm	48.6%
RentPercInc15	35.3%	BroadCov16	25.2%	prediction_bet	48.1%
RentPercInc10	34.9%	BroadCov13	26.8%	per_dem	28.2%
MortPercInc15	26.1%	PopDens16	47.3 / sq mi		

Located in the Northeastern corner of California, Shasta County belongs to the rural part of the state. For the 2016 election, my models predicted around 48% of the county's votes to go to Trump, meaning it would be a contested county. The population density in 2016 was relatively low and around 75% of the county's population had access to broadband internet in 2013 and 2016. The share of the county's population aged 65 or older for 2011-2015 was slightly higher than the national average of 14.9%[37], but the mean life expectancy and the county's median household income were significantly lower. Household income spent on rent was slightly higher than the national average of 32.9% of income spent on housing (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017, 3), while income spent on a mortgage was significantly below average. Unemployment in 2006 was two percent higher than the national average of 4.6%[38], but the percentage of people with a high school degree or less was, compared to the Texas counties I described above, much lower. Similarly, however, the percentage of Whites as part of the county population was very high, as well. Given this relatively equal balance between factors that increased and factors that decreased the county's likelihood to vote for Trump, it does not come as a surprise that my models predicted an almost even split between votes for Trump and Clinton. In reality, however, Shasta County voted heavily Republican in 2016. A full 65.6% of the votes went for Trump, compared with only 28.2% for Clinton. These numbers seem surprising, given the fact that since the 1992 presidential election, the majority of Californians have consistently voted Democratic. What was different in Shasta County?

Shasta County appears to have a history of social conservatism, as evidenced by its voting history in presidential elections. Formerly reliably Democratic (between 1932 and

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[37] See https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2017/cb17-ff08.html
[38] See https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/srgune_03022007.pdf

1976, Eisenhower in 1952 was the only Republican to win the county), Shasta County flipped completely in 1980 and has consistently voted for Republican presidential candidates since.

What most likely explains Shasta County (and, similarly, Lassen County) residents' voting behavior is their history, which includes a secessionist movement and a history of economic decline. The county is located in the center of a long-running secessionist movement that had — and for a considerable part of the local population still has — the goal of leaving California and creating a new state. Initially propagated in the 1850s, the suggested state would comprise Northern Californian and Southern Oregonian counties, Shasta being one of them. The idea behind this new state was that the rural parts of Northern California and Southern Oregon had more in common with each other than with their respective states' more populous areas because of their similar economies, demographics, and belief systems (Lalande 2017). The region's post-World War II economic boom (see below), in combination with low taxes, brought many new residents; for or some of them, the secessionist "identity became their badge as self-professed rebels, concerned largely with personal-property rights in their own little patch of Heaven" (Lalande 2017, 33). Even though the secessionist movement has not been successful to this day, it has survived for 160 years because throughout its history, the "desire for increased self-determination" (Lalande 2017, 36) was the driving element. In recent years, this sentiment gained traction again because of two things: Encouragement by national actors like the Tea Party movement (Lalande 2017), and the ever more apparent consequences of the decline of the logging industry.

During the post-World War II housing boom, Northern California, including Shasta County, was highly successful economically because of the expanding logging industry, which, ironically enough, happened mostly in federal forests (Lalande 2017). However, like most manual industries in the U.S., and especially those based on resource extraction, logging declined in Shasta County starting in the 1980s. Reasons for this decline include stronger

environmental regulations that were introduced by the federal government as well as the state government under then-Governor Reagan, and increased international competition (Scheide 2017). Over the same period, Bethel Church in Redding, the county's largest city, grew substantially in membership and influence. The non-denominational evangelical congregation, has a controversial history (M. W. Jones 2016) and Bill Johnson, one of the megachurch's senior pastors in 2016, publicly endorsed Donald Trump (Lodge 2016).

This combination of deeply rooted secessionism, long-term loyalty to the Republican party, economic decline, and increased influence of evangelical Christianity in Shasta County created the perfect electoral storm for Trump. In fact, it almost seems surprising that he did not get more votes there in 2016. His election as president, however, appears to have emboldened existing radicals in Shasta County, as reports mount over increased aggression toward local politicians and non-conservative inhabitants of the county (Anguiano 2022, 2023).

4.2.2 Jackson County, South Dakota
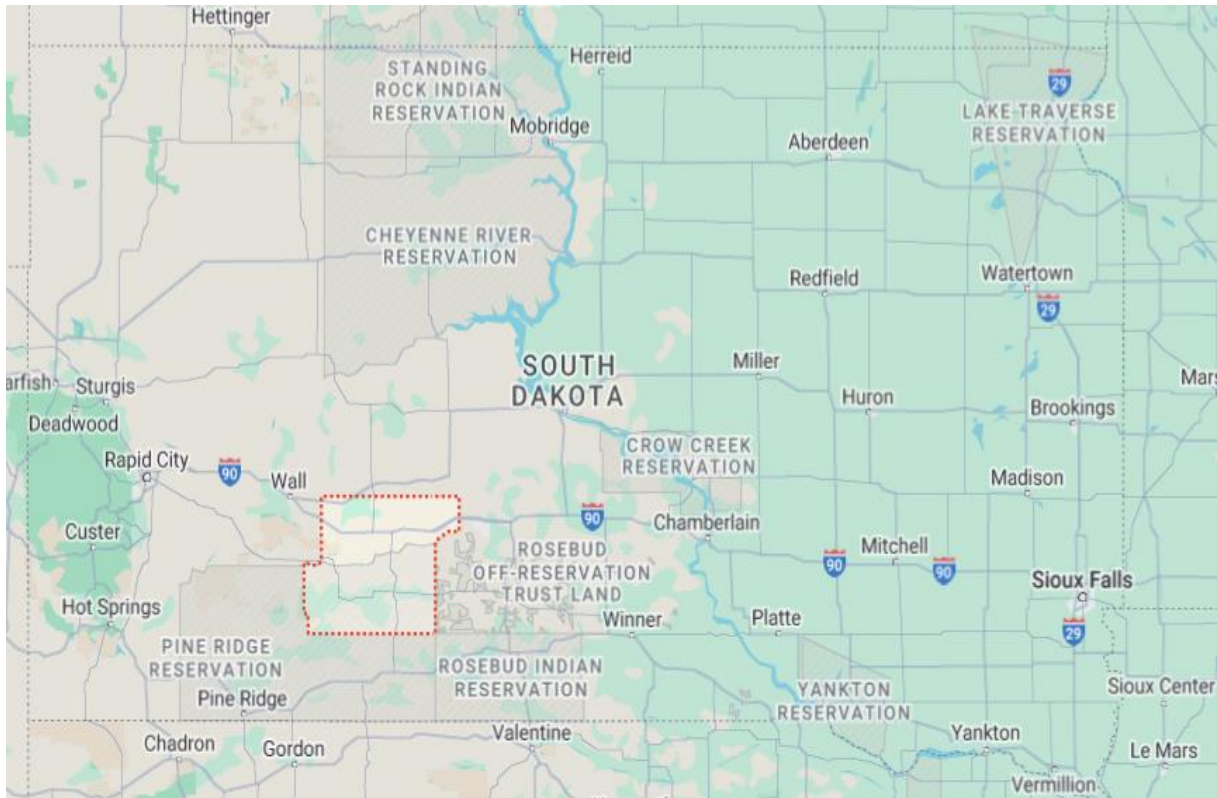
Size: 1,871 sq mi (4,850 km²)
Population (2010 Census): 3,031

Table 14:Values for Jackson County, SD

PercPopHS	43.9%	MortPercInc10	22.4%	PercPop6515	14.4%
Unemp06	5.4%	AccTrans12	0.0%	DevMeanLifeExp15	1.5 years
FarmShare15	20.4%	AccTrans06	0.0%	PercPopWhite15	50.6%
MinDep	No	Commute15	17.3 min.	per_gop	65.9%
IncomeDev10	-16.3%	PPCSTOT	16,130$	prediction_lm	47.4%
RentPercInc15	17.8%	BroadCov16	26.5%	prediction_bet	47.7%
RentPercInc10	24.4%	BroadCov13	26.2%	per_dem	29.5%
MortPercInc15	17.8%	PopDens16	1.8 / sq mi		

Located in the Southeast of South Dakota, Jackson County was within the top three in both my rankings as a county in which the share of votes for Trump was higher than my models predicted. They predicted Jackson County to be a contested county in 2016, with about 47% of votes going to Trump. However, the actual share of votes he received was almost 66%. Predicting Jackson County to be contested is probably due to two sets variables equaling each other out. On the one hand are the values that are associated with an increased share of votes for Trump: the high percentage of people having a high school degree or less (43.9%), the high percentage of people working in farming (20.4%), and the extremely low population density (1.8 people per square mile). And on the other hand are those factors that are associated with a decreased share of votes for Trump: a relatively low share of household income spent on housing (either on rent or on a mortgage), both in the 2006-2010 and 2011-2015[39], excellent access to long-distance transportation, a relatively short mean commute time of 17.3 minutes, a mean life expectancy that is 1.5 years higher than the national mean, and a comparatively low share of the county population being White (50.6%). This begs the question: What was different in Jackson County?

One aspect that could shed some light on the great divergence between the predicted and the actual share of votes for Trump in the county is that fact that it has a large Native American population. In 2015, 48.5% of the county population identified as part of that group[40] and as can be seen on the map above, large parts of Jackson County are part of the Pine Ridge Reservation. This would explain the county's household incomes were significantly lower than the national median, as Native Americans are the most affected by poverty of all race groups, according to the U.S. Census.[41] The fact the share of household income spent on housing was also relatively low, means that housing in the county was

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[39] The national average in 2015 was 32.9% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017, 3)
[40] See https://datausa.io/profile/geo/jackson-county-sd#diversity
[41] See https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2015/cb15-ff22.html

comparatively cheap, also in absolute terms. Native Americans in general tend to vote Democratic (Min and Savage 2014), which would be in line with the predicted lower share of votes for Trump in the county. In fact, if all Native Americans of voting age in Jackson County had voted Democratic and all Whites of voting age Republican, the predicted share or votes for Trump would have been quite accurate. However, this still does not help us understand the great divergence between predicted and actual result and the low share of votes for Clinton in Jackson County.

One possible explanation for this paradox could be low turnout among Native Americans. In fact, voter turnout in Jackson County was only 59.4%, compared to 69.6% in the entire state (South Dakota Secretary of State 2016, 13). The reason for this low turnout is most likely that many Native Americans did not vote because of a very contentious issue that had been prevalent in South Dakota since 2014: the Dakota Access Pipeline. The pipeline was designed (and completed in 2017) to transport crude oil from North Dakota to Illinois, traversing, among other areas, Native American lands in South Dakota. Especially Native Americans protested against it and also expressed their frustration by abstaining from voting:

> "We're all like, fuck the government, fuck voting, and fuck the people running." […]
> "Trump really doesn't like Indians," he said. "If [Clinton] gets in, it's just all the same."(Wong 2016)

And also those whose reservations were not directly affected, like the Pine Ridge Reservation, seemed to show their solidarity by not voting: the South Dakota Counties with the lowest voter turnout in 2016 (Buffalo, Corson, Dewey, Jackson, Oglala Lakota, Ziebach) (South Dakota Secretary of State 2016, 3) are all part of Native American reservations.

In addition to low voter turnout among the Native American population in Jackson County, it has a strong historical loyalty to the Republican Party. Jackson County has consistently voted for the Republican presidential candidate since 1940 (with the exception of

1964), the strongest Republican results being in 1952 (Eisenhower's first candidacy) and 1984 (Reagan's second candidacy).[42] In summary, these two factors likely explain the large divergence between the predicted and the actual result in Jackson County.

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[42] See David Leip's Election Atlas: https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/

4.2.3 Custer County, Colorado

Map 5: Location of Custer County in Colorado
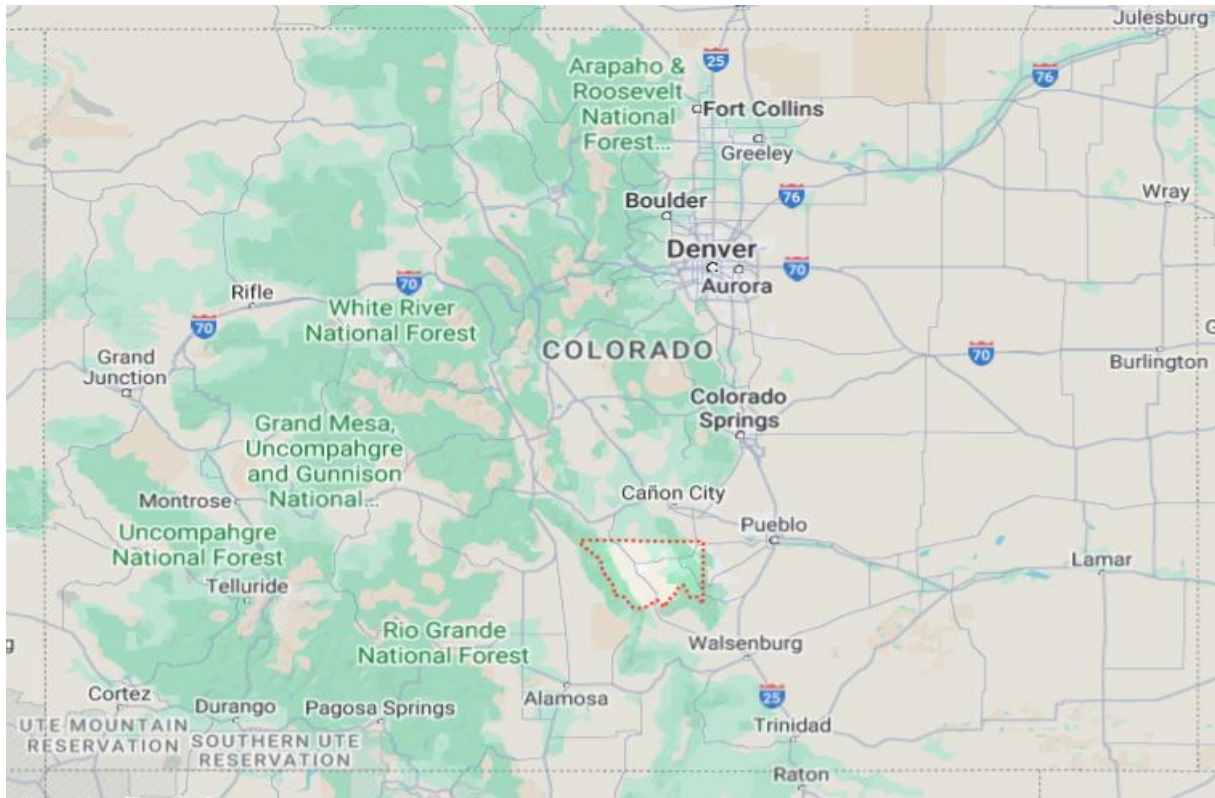
Size: 740 sq mi (1,917 km²)
Population (2010 Census): 4,278

Table 15: Values for Custer County, CO

PercPopHS	25.2%	MortPercInc10	32.5%	PercPop6515	28.2%
Unemp06	4.2%	AccTrans12	0.0%	DevMeanLifeExp15	4 years
FarmShare15	8.9%	AccTrans06	100%	PercPopWhite15	94.0%
MinDep	No	Commute15	29.7 min.	per_gop	67.2%
IncomeDev10	-35.0%	PPCSTOT	13,737$	prediction_lm	49.0%
RentPercInc15	33.8%	BroadCov16	1.5%	prediction_bet	48.4%
RentPercInc10	37.4%	BroadCov13	98.9%	per_dem	26.0%
MortPercInc15	31.8%	PopDens16	6.2 / sq mi		

Located about 75 miles Southeast of Colorado Springs and with a population density of 6.2 people per square mile in 2016, and the two largest towns being Westcliffe and Silver Cliff, having a combined population of about 1,000 inhabitants as of the 2010 Census, Custer County is a perfect example of a rural county. Also, about three quarters of the county's land are used for agriculture, mostly for raising cattle (Colorado Encyclopedia 2023). Interestingly, the share of the county's population that worked in farming and agriculture in the 2011-2015 period was only at 8.9%. Most people worked in construction (22.5%), followed by public administration (12.1%).[43] However, for men that lived in Custer County, working in agriculture in 2016 yielded the second-highest median earning at $44,000; only in transportation the median income was higher ($45,000).[44] Thus, despite a relatively low number of people working in this industry, it could well be that it still is very important for the county's identity. When we look at the development of mean earnings for men by industry beyond 2020, we see a dramatic change: starting in 2017, median earnings in agriculture stayed the same as in 2016, but more than doubled in transportation. By 2020, agriculture had become the county's industry with the lowest median earnings for men ($31,300), both because in other industries earnings had risen and because they had shrunk in agriculture.[45] While it is possible that people work outside Custer County, it seems likely that most of them actually work within the county limits, as the average commute for the 2011-2015 period was just under 30 minutes and the next largest town that would provide employment opportunities, Pueblo, is a one-hour drive Eastward from Westcliffe and Silver Cliff.

Another unusual characteristic of Custer County was the proportion of the population aged 65 and older. For the 2011-2015 period it was at 28.2%, making almost double the national average. In fact, in a 2016 nationwide ranking of counties by median age of its

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[43] See https://datausa.io/profile/geo/custer-county-co#employment_by_industries
[44] See https://datausa.io/profile/geo/custer-county-co#median_earnings
[45] See https://datausa.io/profile/geo/custer-county-co#median_earnings

residents, Custer County was in 11th place. (Kiersz 2016) And the trend has continued since then: a 2022 overview showed the county having the second oldest population in the entire county (Stebbins 2022). Most of these residents, however, do not seem to be year-round residents, as a 2023 article by the Wet Mountain Tribune, a local newspaper, insinuated: according to it, as of "July 2021, there are 4,310 housing units in Custer County. Yet the estimates are that only 2,124 of those units are year- round households."(Hedberg 2023) Paired with the high average population age of the county, it seems like that the county is somewhat of a place of retirement for elderly Whites. This would explain the seemingly contradictory combination of relatively low median income, high life expectancy, and high level of people aged 65 and older.

My models predicted Custer County to be a contested county in 2016, probably due to the unusual combination of low median income, high life expectancy, good accessibility of broadband Internet and long-distance transportation on the one hand, and low population density, a very high percentage of the county population being aged 65 and older and high level of farming employment, compared to other counties. The county's heavy Republican leaning is probably affected by two strands: the first one consisting of having always been a very rural place with an overwhelmingly non-Hispanic White population, agriculture still playing an important role for the county's people's identity, and a strong historical loyalty to the Republican Party. Custer County has consistently voted for the Republican presidential candidate since 1940 (with the exception of 1964), the strongest Republican results being in 1952 (Eisenhower's first candidacy) and 1984 (Reagan's second candidacy).[46] And the second strand being the historically more recent influx of retirees, which has increased the county's median aged significantly.

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[46] See David Leip's Election Atlas: https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/

4.3 Counties that 'undervoted'

4.3.1 Zapata County, Texas

Map 6: Location of Zapata County in Texas
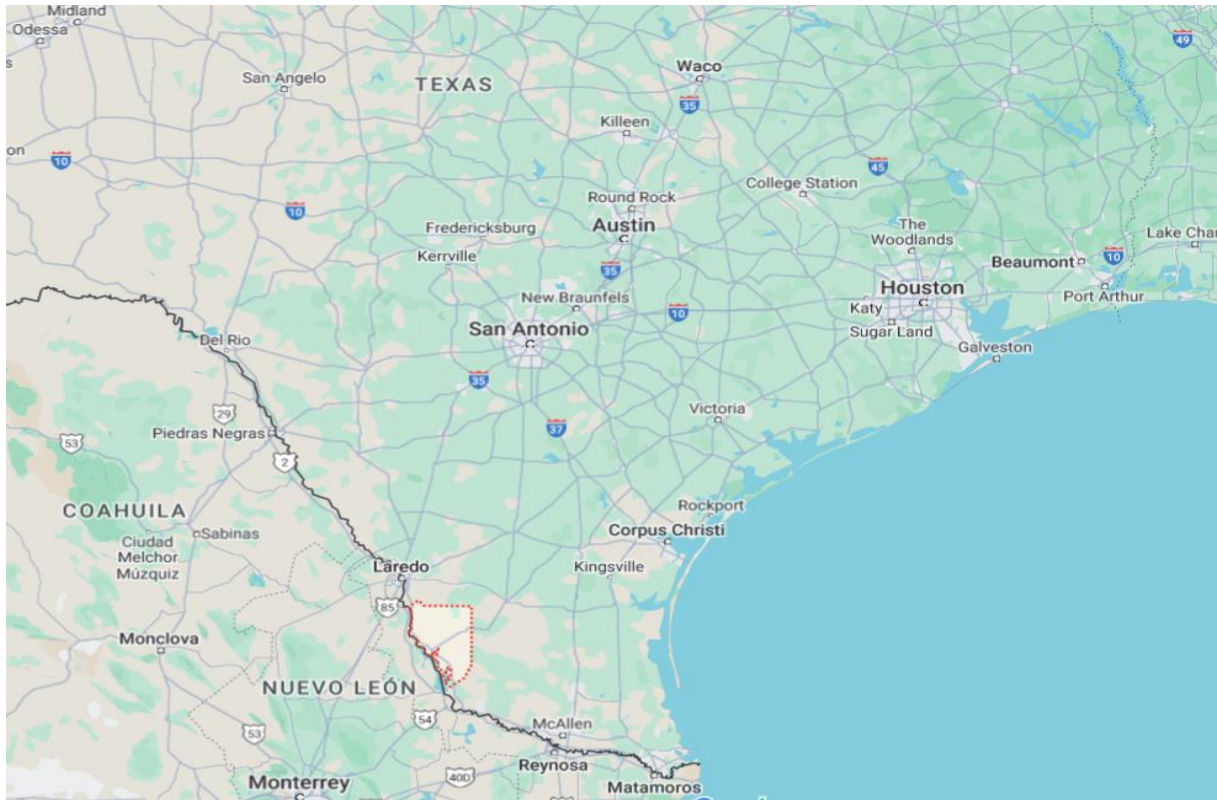
Size: 1,058 sq mi (2,740 km²)
Population (2010 Census): 14,018

Table 16: Values for Zapata County, TX

PercPopHS	72.8%	MortPercInc10	18.19%	PercPop6515	11.4%
Unemp06	6.2%	AccTrans12	0.0%	DevMeanLifeExp15	-1.3 years
FarmShare15	8.5%	AccTrans06	66.4%	PercPopWhite15	86.4%
MinDep	Yes	Commute15	19.8 min.	per_gop	32.8%
IncomeDev10	-40.3%	PPCSTOT	11,400$	prediction_lm	75.1%
RentPercInc15	32.0%	BroadCov16	18.9%	prediction_bet	74.9%
RentPercInc10	36.5%	BroadCov13	100%	per_dem	65.6%
MortPercInc15	24.2%	PopDens16	14.5 / sq mi		

Located about a three-and-a-half-hour drive South of San Antonio and right at the U.S.-Mexican border, Zapata County is part of the Hispanic South of Texas. Looking at my model's individual predictors, it seemed like Trump would win Zapata County very comfortably: the very high percentage of the population with a high school degree or less, the county's mining dependency, the low population density, and the high percentage of Whites as part of the county population would have made it reasonable to guess that my models would predict an overwhelming victory for Trump. And they did, predicting about 75% of the votes to go to him. The actual result, however, was a victory for Clinton by a margin of more than 30%. How was this possible?

Traditionally Zapata County has been a Democratic Stronghold in the otherwise heavily Republican state of Texas. Democratic presidential candidates have won Zapata County consistently since 1924; in many elections.[47] This is probably due to the fact that historically, the county's population was predominantly Hispanic (Garza and Long 2021) and Hispanics favoring the Democratic party is well documented (Uhlander and Garcia 2005). How does this fit together, however, with the fact that 86.6% of Zapata County's population identified as White in the 2011-2015 period? The answer: they identified as both Hispanic and White. In fact, in 2015 90.8% of the Zapata County population identified as Hispanic White. This is an important new category that my data did not capture. Based on my data, it seemed like Zapata County was actually predominantly non-Hispanic White in the run-up to the 2016 election.

This is an important development that seems to have taken place between the 2000 and 2010 census surveys, as a 2014 article by Pew Research describes:

[47] See David Leip's Election Atlas: https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/

> "The largest number of those who changed their race/ethnicity category were 2.5 million Americans who said they were Hispanic and "some other race" in 2000, but a decade later, told the census they were Hispanic and white, preliminary data showed. Another 1.3 million people made the switch in the other direction. Other large groups of category-changers were more than a million Americans who switched from non-Hispanic white to Hispanic white, or the other way around." (Cohn 2014)

And already in 2014, Eric Liu wrote about the consequences of this development, speculating that the Democratic hold over Hispanics may erode in favor of the Republicans "if large numbers of Hispanics were to start thinking of themselves as white" (Liu 2014). He brushed this speculation off as premature, but history would prove him right: in 2020, Trump won the majority of votes in Zapata County. [48]

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[48] See David Leip's Election Atlas: https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/

4.3.2 Duval County, Texas

Map 7: Location of Duval County in Texas
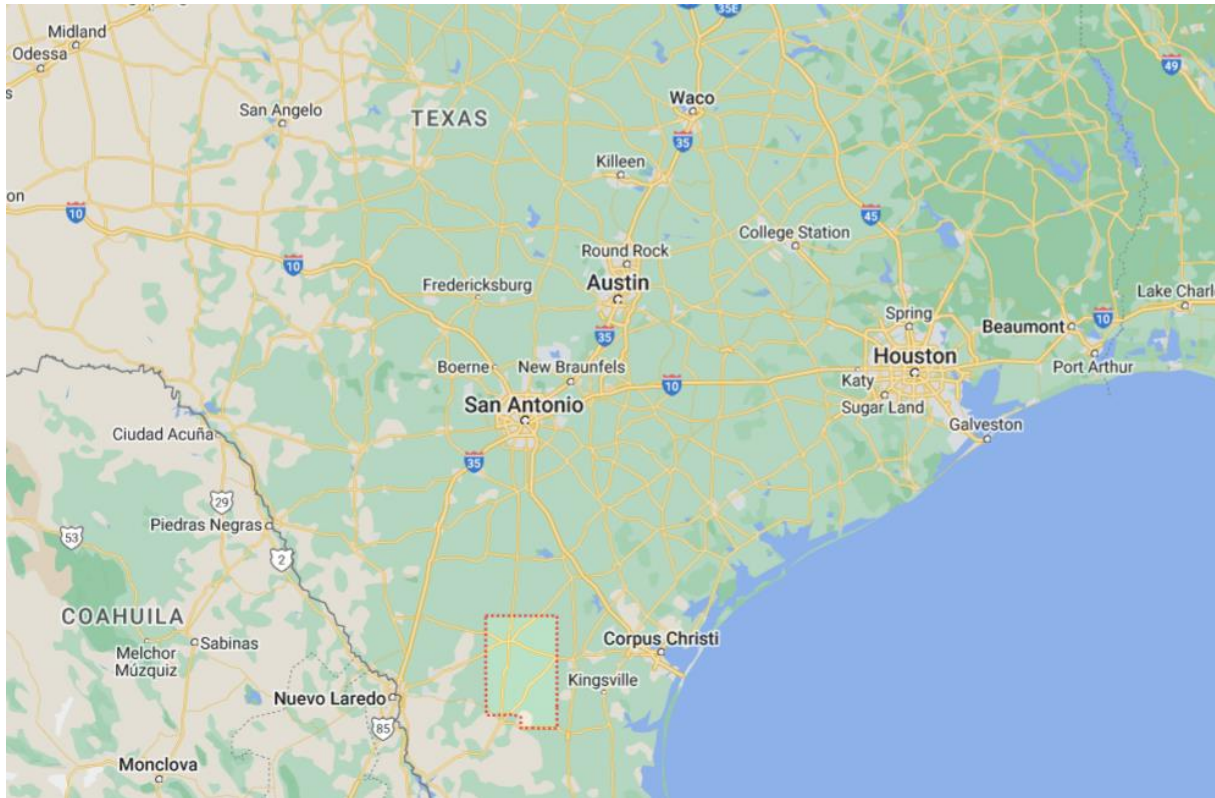
Size: 1,796 sq mi (4,650 km²)
Population (2010 Census): 11,782

Table 17: Values for Duval County, TX

PercPopHS	64.9%	MortPercInc10	22.9%	PercPop6515	17.4%
Unemp06	5.5%	AccTrans12	7.6%	DevMeanLifeExp15	3 years
FarmShare15	23.9%	AccTrans06	7.7%	PercPopWhite15	85.7%
MinDep	Yes	Commute15	26.9 min.	per_gop	31.6%
IncomeDev10	-41.3%	PPCSTOT	16,831$	prediction_lm	72.3%
RentPercInc15	23.7%	BroadCov16	32.5%	prediction_bet	73.3%
RentPercInc10	19.7%	BroadCov13	100%	per_dem	66.9%
MortPercInc15	19.8%	PopDens16	6.4 / sq mi		

Located about an equal distance from both the Gulf of Mexico and the U.S.-Mexican border, Duval County is located at the center of the Hispanic south of Texas. Looking at my model's individual predictors, it seemed like Trump would win Duval County very comfortably: the very high percentage of the population with a high school degree or less, the county's mining dependency, the low population density, the relatively low share of household income spent on housing, the high share of employment in farming, and the high percentage of Whites as part of the county population would have made it reasonable to guess Duval County witnessed a landslide Republican victory. And my models predicted about 73% of the votes to go to Trump The actual result, however, was a Democratic victory by a margin of more than 30%, like in Zapata County

Traditionally and similar to other counties in the South of Texas, Duval County has been a Democratic bastion in the otherwise heavily Republican state of Texas. Democratic presidential candidates have won Duval County since 1908, more than a century ago; in many elections, the Democrat has won with more than 90% of the county's overall votes.[49] This is probably due to two interconnected reasons. First, similar to Zapata County, Duval County's population was historically comprised of a predominantly Hispanic population that "[was] held in thrall by a small but wealthy and influential White minority" (Donnel Kohout 2020). Before the turn of the 20th century, this minority was more or less evenly distributed across Republicans and Democrats and Duval County was characterized by political stalemate, while Mexican-Americans were almost completely excluded from any elected offices (Anders 1981, 121). This changed dramatically in the early 20th century when Archie Parr, a former ranch hand, exploited the situation: In Benavides, the county's second-largest and predominantly Mexican-American populated town, Parr — who had become a ranch owner in the meantime — advocated for the needs of his Mexican laborers and the county's working-class Mexican

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[49] See David Leip's Election Atlas: https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/

electorate. He organized them so successfully that with their votes, he quickly rose to the head of the county Democratic Party. Step by step, Parr created a well-oiled political machine built on patronage, corruption, and violence that ensured a strong political base for his endeavors. By the end of World War I, Parr not only had absolute control over the county party but also over the county itself: From public administration to business to the judicial system to law enforcement, nothing happened without his control (Anders 1981). His son George Parr (1901-1975) continued and expanded the power and influence of the Duval County machine well beyond the county's borders. The Parr machine also played an influential role in Lyndon B. Johnson's political career, in that they provided fraudulent votes that helped him win the Democratic primary prior to the 1948 U.S. Senate election in Texas (Anders 2021). The Parr machine's control over Duval County and its influence in Texas politics ended in 1975 with George Parr's suicide after he had been sentenced to ten years in prison (New York Times 1975). Even though the Parrs' political machine is long gone, its legacy of organizing the Mexican-American vote in Duval County for the Democrats appears to have outlasted the Parr family.

And second, this population started to increasingly identify as Hispanic White[50], which, similar to Zapata County, led to my models predicting a large share of votes for Trump because my data had them classified as was a non-Hispanic Whites. The loyalty to the Democratic Party appears to have been carried over into this new self-identification. However, it seems to be slowly eroding as new generations of voters with no immediate recollection of the Parr machine and a Hispanic White-only identity enter the electorate: In 2020, Joe Biden won Duval County by a margin of only 2.6%.[51]

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[50] See https://datausa.io/profile/geo/duval-county-tx#demographics
[51] See David Leip's Election Atlas: https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/

4.3.3 Dimmit County, Texas

Map 8: Location of Dimmit County in Texas
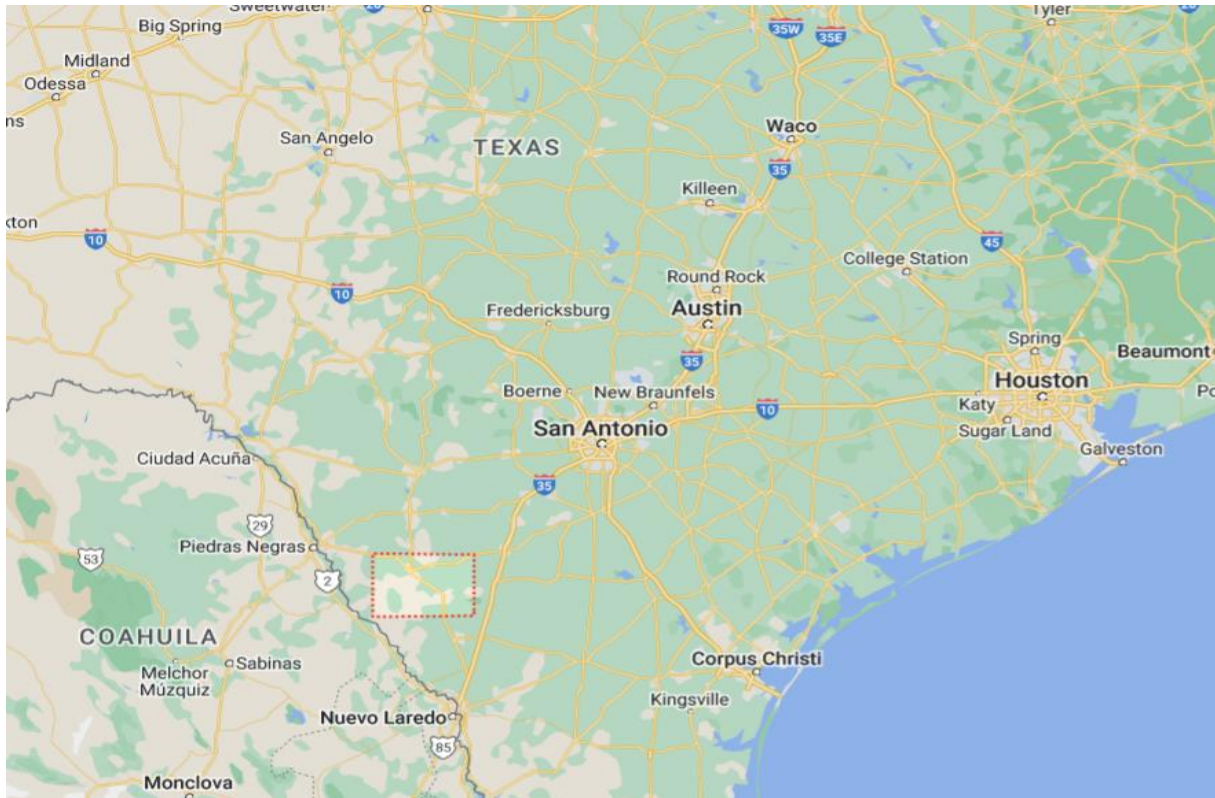
Size: 1,335 sq mi (3,460 km²)
Population (2010 Census): 9,996

Table 18: Values for Dimmit County, TX

PercPopHS	61.6%	MortPercInc10	20.9%	PercPop6515	14.1%
Unemp06	7.7%	AccTrans12	69.9%	DevMeanLifeExp15	-0.3 years
FarmShare15	6.34%	AccTrans06	47.6%	PercPopWhite15	95.3%
MinDep	Yes	Commute15	15.8 min.	per_gop	30.2%
IncomeDev10	-50.1%	PPCSTOT	13,524$	prediction_lm	72.8%
RentPercInc15	22.5%	BroadCov16	19.2%	prediction_bet	73.3%
RentPercInc10	26.7%	BroadCov13	99.9%	per_dem	67.3%
MortPercInc15	18.9%	PopDens16	8 / sq mi		

For Dimmit County, my models predicted a similar percentage of votes for Trump as in Duval County (about 73%) and interestingly, the actual results for Trump and Clinton were very similar as well (30.2% to 67.4% in Dimmit vs 31.6% to 66.9% in Duval). This begs the question: What characteristics do Dimmit County and Duval County have in common that may help explain this similarity in the divergence between the predicted and the actual election result? And which possible differences exist between the two counties?

Dimmit County shares several important characteristics with Duval County: It is also located in the predominantly Hispanic South of Texas (though closer to the Mexican border and further away from the Gulf of Mexico), the median income in 2006-2011 was also significantly lower than the national median income, access to broadband Internet was equally poor in 2013, the share of income spent on housing was equally low, as was the population density, and Dimmit County was also economically dependent on mining. Marked differences were the lower mean life expectancy, the lower share of people with access to long-distance transportation, and the much lower share of people working in farming. However, they still do not explain the large divergence between the predicted and the actual result.

Unlike Duval County, Dimmit County does not have a decades-long history of a powerful political machine organizing votes for the Democratic Party. The share of Hispanic in the county population in 2015 was, however, larger than in Duval County (81.6%[52] in comparison to 75.7%[53]). This may explain the fact that Dimmit County has a history of voting mostly Democratic (1972 was the last election in which a Republican candidate won the county)[54], but not as overwhelmingly Democratic as Duval County. In fact, since 1972, the

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[52] See https://datausa.io/profile/geo/dimmit-county-tx#demographics
[53] See https://datausa.io/profile/geo/duval-county-tx#demographics
[54] See David Leip's Election Atlas: https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/

Democratic candidate has always received between 65% and 75% of the votes in Dimmit County.[55]

However, like in Duval County, the long tradition of voting Democratic in Dimmit County seems to be eroding — a development that seems to be emblematic for the Hispanic vote in the entire United States. Compared with the 2016 election, Trump made significant gains among Latinos across the entire country in 2020 (Igielnik, Keeter, and Hartig 2021). This does not mean that Hispanics as a whole vote more Republican: In fact, both Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020 won this voter group. However, Hispanics are not, the demographic silver bullet some Democrats had hoped (Carville 2011) would ensure they could control government for the next 40 years. They are far from being a monolithic group, and their views and priorities differ significantly.

In Texas, for example, 24% of all voters in 2016 were Hispanics, the third largest share after New Mexico (40%) and California (31%). Thirty-four percent of Texas Hispanics voted for Trump, which was the highest percentage out of those three states (Sonneland and Fleischner 2016). What is specifically interesting about the Hispanic population in South Texas is how they identify themselves, namely as *Tejanos*. These are Texans of Mexican descent, meaning their ancestry goes back to the time when the majority of what would become the U.S. state of Texas was still part of Mexico (Benavides Jr. 2017). *Tejanos* do not consider themselves the same as newer Hispanic groups but as distinctly American and, probably most importantly, as White (Herrera 2020). In Dimmit County, the majority of the population identified as White (Hispanic)[56]. The White Hispanic voter group in South Texas tends to be conservative on social issues like abortion and same-sex marriage, in favor of protections for gun ownership, pro-oil and gas extraction, and relatively strict on immigration

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[55] See David Leip's Election Atlas
[56] See https://datausa.io/profile/geo/dimmit-county-tx#demographics

— all positions closer aligned with Republicans than with Democrats in national elections (Gest 2022).

What we see in South Texas, exemplified by the three counties I investigated in more detail, are the final remnants of former Democratic bastions that were built on long-term party loyalty. While Democrats still win there, the region's Hispanic voters appear to hold views and political priorities that are increasingly divergent from those of the Democratic Party; this gives Republicans an opening with them, in particular on social issues, and they have started to exploit that opening (Herrera 2021; Svitek and Choi 2022).

4.4 Discussion of Findings

In this chapter I looked at six counties in which the result of my statistical models predicted for the 2016 presidential election diverged significantly in either direction from the actual election result. The goals of this exploratory chapter were twofold and closely connected to each other: One, to find out what was special about these counties that could have contributed to this divergence; and two, to understand what implications these findings could have for future research.

At this point, I would like to insert a brief reminder that the main goal of this thesis was not to create the best predictive model for the outcome of the 2016 election. The main goal was to empirically test the thesis that experiences of being "left behind" were the most plausible explanation for the election outcome. This means the purpose of this chapter was not to find additional variables that would improve the predictive power of my statistical models; but to investigate why in some cases their predictions were so far away from the actual results, the potential additional factors are nonetheless interesting and could be helpful for other avenues of research. With regard to model improvement, however, the findings of this chapter have done a service to the extent that they have shed light on variables that could be weighed differently. This could improve the predictive power of my models, as in my approach I have treated all variables equally. The effect size and directionality for each variable I showed in chapter three is under the condition that all other variables are held constant. On the following pages I will show in concrete terms what I mean by these abstract observational and summarizing thoughts.

Hispanic Whites

The percentage of Whites as part of a county's population is one of the most relevant variables, according to my models. However, the Texas counties I investigated in this chapter made one thing very clear: the classification "White" does no longer capture the increased complexity of that label and can lead to results that are far from reality. In fact, the classification "Hispanic Whites" better captures the reality of millions of Americans and, as I wrote above, taking this into account in future research on voter behavior is vital to understand party support in this segment of society.

Party loyalty

Based on this chapter's sample, a county's voting history, especially if it has been proven difficult to shake, could potentially have predictive power for how that county votes in future election. : Those with a long-standing history of loyalty to one party that has proven difficult to shake, those that changed their loyalty at some point and have stayed with the new party since, and those that appear to have a relatively volatile allegiance to either party. In their seminal 1976 work "The Changing American Voter," in which they provided their perspective on the changing voting behavior among the American electorate after World War II, Nie, Verba, and Petrocik made the following statement that provides a useful perspective for understanding the three types of counties:

> "[P]artisan commitments, when they are formed, appear to be affected by the issues of the day. But once a commitment is fixed, it tends to be long lasting even if the older issues fade and potent issues arise. Furthermore, in the absence of potent new issues, the partisan commitments based on earlier potent issues can be transferred to new members of the electorate even if the earlier issues no longer apply. But when one has the combination of the weakening of the older issues, the rise of potent new issues, and a new generation of voters, the stability of party commitments is shattered." (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976b, 46)

If we apply this to explain decades-long party loyalty in a county and assume that new potent issues did not completely bypass them, it means that older issues have continued to be more important to a majority of people across generations in this county than new potent issues. This raises the question, then, of what these old issues could be. In the cases of the Texas counties and Jackson County, South Dakota, for example, the lasting inequality of Hispanics and Native Americans could be such an issue. In Shasta County, California , and Custer County, Colorado, however, this potential issue is less straightforward, especially because the Republican Party since 1945 not only changed which issues it politicizes but also shifted its stance itself, particularly on questions of race. One guess is that continuous trans-generational support for the Republican Party is a result of the party's successful rebranding from the party that once was in favor of little to no state intervention to one that would advocate for Whites who, because of Democratic social engineering toward a more egalitarian society, run the risk of losing their status of societal dominance (Tanenhaus 2013). The fact that Republicans have made gains among Whites, especially in the South since the 1970s and among non-college educated Whites nationally since the early 2000s (Pew Research Center 2016a), lends support to this theory. This, however, shows us that party loyalty is most likely only a proxy variable for political issues that move voters.

Voter turnout

As the case of Jackson County, South Dakota showed, voter turnout appears to play an important role in predicting voting outcomes. While the county's population was comprised only of about 50% Whites, which is probably why my models predicted a much lower share of votes for Trump, the non-White population's voter turnout was most likely very low, which in turn increases the effect of the ballots Whites cast.

Weight of specific variables

One aspect that I have not paid attention to thus far in my discussion of the results of this chapter is the fact that in my statistical models I treated all variables equally, meaning that I did not give them specific weights or ranks. As I explained above, this was due to the fact that based on environmental data, it was not possible to differentiate which variables had a higher or lower effect on the likelihood of voting for Clinton or Trump. This would have required individualized survey data, which, however, would not have allowed me to make observations based on geography. In other words: I chose one approach while being aware of the questions it cannot answer. Nonetheless, as the observations in this chapter show, some variables appear to "outrank" others with regard to how they affect the likelihood of voting one or the other way. These appear to be the percentage of people aged 65 and older and the percentage of (non-Hispanic) Whites, an observation that is in line with my findings from chapter three, where these variables are among those with the largest effect size. For future research that wants to better predict voting percentages based my operationalization of the "left behind" hypothesis, it thus may make sense to weigh specific variables.

4.4.1 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to take a closer look at the counties for which my election result predictions were significantly off; I analyzed what was special about these places in order to see how and whether those factors may have contributed to the divergence between the predicted and the actual election result. Exploratory in nature, the goal of this chapter was not to find factors that improve the predictive power of my statistical models, but rather to find factors in addition to those that are part of "left behind" theory that could help explain the election outcome and see whether the factors that I chose for my models should be

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reconfigured. In that sense, this chapter functioned as a controlling mechanism for my conceptualization of the "left behind" theory.

Again, what I found out about these counties falls — like the findings from my statistical analysis — under the danger of ecological fallacy, as I deduct individual voter behavior from environmental data. Nonetheless, the analysis in this chapter shed significant light on what other factors besides the "left behind" theory contributed to the 2016 election outcome.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

When I started working on the initial concept of this dissertation in 2017, Donald Trump had already been in office for a few months. The disbelief and shock of election night in November 2016 had by then been replaced by a worried skepticism and a desire to develop a deeper understanding for the reasons behind his victory. As I write these lines in 2024, the events that motivated me to write this dissertation feel incredibly far away because so much has happened since 2016: Not only has the world witnessed a global pandemic and a new war in Europe, but Trump transformed the country and American politics during the four years of his presidency. This included the regular turnover among his high-level government officials, the construction of a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border, the investigations around Russian interference in the 2016 election, the trade war with China and the alienation of key diplomatic allies, and two impeachment trials, among others. The most dangerous one, however, took place at the end of his term on Jan. 6, 2021, when a violent mob — riled up by Trump's inflammatory rhetoric — stormed the U.S. Capitol in order to prevent Congress from certifying Joe Biden's 2020 election victory. Not only did several people die, but the images of the marauding masses, of members of Congress running and hiding, scared for their lives, spread around the country and the world. The events of Jan. 6 shattered the longstanding image of the United States that has served as a role model for so many other countries: A stable democracy characterized by reliable institutions, the rule of law, and the peaceful transition of power. While Trump and the people around him washed away many certainties during his time in office, the Jan. 6 insurrection was the "pinnacle" of these developments that characterized his presidency.

Explaining Trump's appeal was already of immense interest back in 2016; as the 2024 presidential election is nearing, and his popularity is unbroken, the topic continues to be of great interest and importance. In that sense, although I began working on the concept for this

thesis seven years ago and it investigates events that happened even longer ago, its relevance has not diminished. It is often said that history repeats itself, and in this case, this statement appears to ring true: If we compare the concerns that brought the downfall of the regulatory paradigm in the late 1960s and 1970s with the grievances that propelled Trump into office, the similarities are striking. In that sense, Reckwitz's argument — that Trump's success is nothing out of the ordinary and part of the process of paradigm change — appears convincing. Reckwitz's explanation provides a useful lens to help us better understand and contextualize the election of Trump. By considering alternating political paradigms as the "infrastructure" below the left-right antagonism at the surface, longer trajectories of political developments become visible. Theorizing Trump as the result of such a trajectory puts him in perspective, allowing us to see him not as a historical singularity. This theoretical lens also helps us contextualize and understand why Trump's politics were, and still are, so appealing to large parts of the American electorate. He not only stands for a radical departure from the paradigm of deregulation, but in contrast to the Democrats and classical Republicans — who have thus far only developed solutions for either the socio-economic or the socio-cultural problems, but never for the democratically functional problems — he presents solutions for all three problem areas, which according to Reckwitz are fundamental.

In this dissertation, I situated the hypothesis that the "left behind" voters were the decisive demographic for Trump's success in the 2016 U.S. presidential election within this larger framework. As my analysis showed, based on my operationalization of this hypothesis and with the data sets I chose, the hypothesis can explain about 65% of the election results, meaning that it has considerable explanatory power. Nonetheless, a considerable proportion of the election results remains unexplained if this hypothesis is the only approach. Therefore, I also provided an in-depth descriptive account of a selected number of counties in which my conceptualization of the "left behind" hypothesis explained only a small part of the election results. These "outlier" counties, where my statistical models predicted either a higher or a

lower percentage of votes for Trump than he actually received, provide valuable insights into possible explanations for the election results besides the "left behind" hypothesis and should be investigated further to gain more insights into voter decision making. However, as I stated before: The goal of this thesis was not to find the best model to predict the election results, but to test the explanatory power of one specific hypothesis.

As became clear over the course of this thesis, the "left behind" hypothesis, while a popular explanation for the result of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, is a rather blunt analytical tool. It is excellent for a first focus on a subset of factors that contributed to Trump's victory, but it is not much more beyond that. As I explained in Chapter 3, in order to test the assumed linear relationship between being "left behind" and number of votes for Trump, being "left behind" needs to be operationalized in a scalable manner. Regardless of the choice of variable scale, however, the challenge remains as to how we determine suitable values for each county according to how "left behind" they are based on a specific set of variables. Just looking at the variable values for a county, however, it is impossible to distinguish which aspect of being "left behind" is the most relevant for it. It is also impossible to determine suitable values for each county according to how "left behind" they are based on only a specific set of variables. This is why, to my knowledge, researchers have thus far not operationalized the "left behind" hypothesis and empirically tested it. This is one of the main achievements of this dissertation: an operationalization of the "left behind" hypothesis, followed by empirically testing these operators. The result shows that the correlation between the predicted share of votes for Trump based on these operators alone and the actual share of votes he received is, with about 65%, relatively high, which supports the "left behind" hypothesis. At the same time, this does not tell us anything about what explains the other 35% of the votes for Trump. It seems likely that socio-cultural issues could be the other large group of explanatory factors, as national surveys have indicated. But at the county level, surveys that provide testable data do not exist, a problem future research should address. What I find even

more important, my testing of the "left behind" hypothesis' explanatory power does not tell us anything about whether or not being "left behind" was at least part of the rationale behind voting for Trump. In order to find this out, researchers need to either go out and experience these voters' lives and talk to them to ascertain what leads to their voting behavior, or we need to do more fine-grained surveys in which we ask for a specific connection between feeling left behind and voting decisions.

5.1 Reckwitz's Vision for a New Hegemonic Paradigm

The 2020 election made it seem like Trump and his challenge to the apertistic paradigm had been defeated: Voter turnout surged significantly in comparison to 2016, Joe Biden won the popular vote by a margin of 4.5%, and Democrats took control of both chambers of Congress again. However, although he did not win the 2020 election and the attempted coup was unsuccessful, Trump and his supporters are far from gone; the contestation of apertistic liberalism in the U.S. continues. After the 2022 midterm elections, in which a considerable (yet smaller than anticipated) number of his supporters were voted into office across the country, he announced that he would run again for president in 2024 and, as of this writing, seems very likely to become the Republican nominee.

If we continue the line of thinking in political paradigms, the questions remain: How long will the current transition phase last and which paradigm will be the new hegemonic one? If we take the past as a basis for predicting the future, we could speculate that the current transition phase will probably end within the next decade, because the last transition phase (between the paradigms of social corporatism and apertistic liberalism) lasted about 10 to 20 years, depending on the country. Equally, if not more interesting, however is the second question.

While any answer is of course speculative, Reckwitz provides a prediction: He is skeptical that (right-wing) populism will be the new hegemonic paradigm, for two reasons. First, because it does not serve a "long-term integrative function in society" but instead thinks in societal antagonisms ("us" versus "them"), which is essential for its appeal. And second, instead of accepting "the foundations of the respective social structures at hand in order to reconfigure them subsequently," (right-wing) populism outright rejects them and instead tries to create a society based on a glorified version of the past. These social structures, which Reckwitz considers *faits accomplis*, are:

> "the globalization of the economy, in which national economies now depend on global production chains, financial streams, and the migration of workers; the post-industrialization of the economy, in which the former centrality of industry has been replaced by the duality of high-skilled knowledge work and simple services; and, finally, the cultural heterogeneity of society, which has resulted from the pluralization of milieus, the differentiation of classes, and the effects of global migration processes." (Reckwitz 2021, 157–58)

Instead of (right-wing) populism becoming the new hegemonic paradigm, Reckwitz predicts an alternative: regulatory liberalism. He assumes three aspects will be characteristic for this new paradigm: the creation of more social order than under apertistic liberalism (but less than under social corporatism), a revitalization of "generality, both socially and culturally," and the continuation of the "liberal foundation" — meaning the preservation of "the institutional framework of liberal democracy and its pluralism," and embedding the "dynamic nature of identities, markets, and globalization," which arose under apertistic liberalism "within newly established parameters" (Reckwitz 2021, 159). Reckwitz thus predicts a paradigm development that continues the positive aspects of apertistic liberalism and significantly changes the negative ones.

For him, the accomplishments and insights of apertistic liberalism that will continue under regulatory liberalism are mostly on the side of progressive liberalism and include the systematic promotion of "the rights of people who have been disadvantaged and discriminated

against legally, socially, and culturally" and the encouragement of "people to respect the ethnic and religious differences between individuals and groups." On the side of neoliberalism, he only mentions the acceptance of the fact that "we no longer exist in national economies but, rather, in a global economy — in a global form of capitalism in which individual countries and regions have to compete for capital and labor" (Reckwitz 2021, 160). Reckwitz, however, points to more of neoliberalism's benefits by referring to Colin Crouch's book *Can Neoliberalism Be Saved from Itself ?* There, Crouch, who is otherwise known to be a harsh critic of neoliberalism, lists a few: the increased scrutiny of public spending, the realization that democratic government has limits as to how detailed its ability to steer the economy can and should be, and the facilitation of trade and of links between people (Crouch 2017, 24–31). Crouch's list may well be criticized for being too simplistic, but all of his points contain some truth and should be looked at in the context of the time when the social-corporatist paradigm was hegemonic.

For Reckwitz, apertistic liberalism has run its course because "of its naïve belief that legal rights and market forces would necessarily bring about social progress" without producing negative consequences; he argues a new paradigm will have to recognize the need "to implement social, cultural, and (to some extent) government-run systems" to buffer these negative consequences (Reckwitz 2021, 161). In the form of challenges that in his view need to be overcome by the new paradigm, Reckwitz lists these negative consequences. Socio-economically, he sees the "meritocracy problem," by which he means that the differences in societal status between the high- and low-skilled classes of the post-industrial knowledge economy are not only much larger than they were in the social-corporatist era, but are coupled with a detrimental "status hierarchy" as "it is now implied that they [the losers of post-industrialization] are responsible for their own falling status because they failed to achieve upward mobility through the educational system" (Reckwitz 2021, 163). Another challenge in

his opinion is the "urban-rural divide," again driven by the post-industrial society. Reckwitz observes two vicious, self-reinforcing cycles that need to be broken:

> "Already successful metropolitan regions attract more and more capital and residents (partially from abroad) and, in the absence of regulation, this leads to overheating effects in the form of shortages of space, inadequate transportation systems, and rising housing costs. Rural areas, in contrast, are suffering from an exodus of qualified young people, which only causes such areas to seem more unattractive, thereby inciting even more people to leave and enticing even fewer people to move there." (Reckwitz 2021, 164–65).

The last socio-economic challenge in Reckwitz's list is the adequate "provision of public infrastructure." Marketization and neglect of "elementary resources to the population — transportation, healthcare, energy, affordable housing, education, public security," he argues, not only weakened their provision for increasing groups of society, but also exacerbated inequalities as affluent citizens, in contrast to poorer ones, were able to privately compensate for a weak public infrastructure (Reckwitz 2021, 165)

Socio-culturally, Reckwitz sees the main challenge for the new paradigm as the ability "to establish, convey, and implement basic cultural values and universally shared cultural practices" (Reckwitz 2021, 166) in an increasingly heterogeneous society. Reckwitz sees the immense difficulties of this challenge when he acknowledges that a future paradigm "will have to navigate within two fields of tension: between collective acceptance and heterogeneity, on the one hand, and between universalism and national cultures on the other." He argues the mere creation of laws is not sufficient for this task; it requires "specific everyday cultural practices – practices of cooperation, civil conflict, exchange, solidarity, friendly indifference, ritual, play, etc. — in order to become socially effective. (Reckwitz 2021, 167). A sub-challenge Reckwitz sees is the creation of a "culture of reciprocity": With its view of the citizen as either a "utility-maximizing individual who participates in markets" or "an individual who claims his or her subjective rights vis-à-vis others," apertistic liberalism, Reckwitz argues, eliminated "any room for society as a space of reciprocity — that

is, as a space for mutual social benefits, with laws and obligations that seek a balance between one's own individual interests and those of others" (Reckwitz 2021, 168). Reckwitz is aware that creating a culture of reciprocity is also a difficult task because it puts more emphasis on the question of what obligations individuals have vis-à-vis society. And the answers cannot be given by laws exclusively because the problem relates to the "the general conception of what constitutes the body politic" (Reckwitz 2021, 168)

In terms of the concrete manifestation of regulatory liberalism, Reckwitz predicts two versions: a progressive one that will "emphasize the importance of social infrastructure for all and will be more strongly oriented toward cultural universalism," and a conservative one that will be "more nationally oriented and will be more tolerant of social inequality" (Reckwitz 2021, 168). However, in order for either version to find broad societal support, they will also need to contain elements of the other. In this requirement for balance, Reckwitz sees the chance for a "historical compromise," writing that "there is a chance that regulatory liberalism might attract support not only from the enlightened and self-critical portion of this new middle class but also from portions of the old middle class and the precarious class, some members of which presently endorse populism" (Reckwitz 2021, 169).

5.2 The Potential of Regulatory Liberalism in the U.S.

Regarding the timeline, the U.S. could potentially see the end of the transition phase and the beginning of a new paradigm as early as 2024. Gerstle (2018, 264), for example, argues in a similar vein when he writes, "The next ten years (2018–28) will be decisive in revealing whether that [neoliberal] order can be repaired, or whether it will fall." What are the chances that the new paradigm in the U.S. will be regulatory liberalism and if so, what will the progressive and the conservative version look like? In the following sections, I will try to give an answer to these questions by checking Reckwitz's abstract arguments against the U.S. case. I will first look at the changing societal structures and challenges he lists and see if his description applies to the U.S., followed by an analysis of how Republicans and Democrats each reply to them.

5.2.1 Assessing U.S. Societal Trends …

On the larger societal trends, I tend to agree with Reckwitz that they also apply to the U.S. However, the picture is complex: Working with the definition of globalization "as the integration of the markets for goods, labor and financial capital" (Bordo 2017, 2), we can check the overall trend of the U.S. economy's degree of international integration. Compared to the 1990s, we can see that the U.S. economy has been "disengaging" from the global economy over the last 20 years as developments in trade, immigration, and capital movement have diverged from other highly internationalized economies (Djankov et al. 2021). However, on closer inspection, we can see that these trends hardly warrant a conversation about the reversal of internationalization. In fact, trade as a percentage of GDP has decreased since 2010 but is currently at levels of 2008 again; immigration kept growing, only slower; and foreign direct investment has increased (Damgaard and Sánchez-Muñoz 2022). Thus, to speak of a general trend of deglobalization of the U.S. economy, as some have done since the

election of Donald Trump (Zakaria 2020), simply lacks evidence if we look at even slightly longer timeframes. I therefore tend to agree with the assertion that globalization of the U.S. economy has not been reversing; if anything, it has only been slowing down (Bordo 2017).

While the definitions of post-industrialized societies differ in broadness, the two most important aspects of the term are that a society has transitioned from accruing most of its GDP through the production of physical goods to the provision of services, and that theoretical knowledge has higher value than practical knowledge. For the U.S., especially, this description appears to be especially fitting. Since 1959, employment in the service-providing sector has shown a steady upward trend, whereas it has been stagnant in the goods-producing sector (Barnes, Bauer, and Edelberg 2022). Also, since 1998, the share of services value added in overall GDP has shown a steady upward trend (The World Bank 2023b); in the same period, the share of manufacturing value added in the overall GDP has shown a steady downward trend (The World Bank 2023a). The fact that the number of both students with a high school diploma or more and students with a college degree or more has steadily increased as well since 1960 further underlines the characterization of the U.S. as a post-industrial society (Korhonen 2023). Despite these trends, the U.S. government has in recent years made efforts to increase the role of domestic manufacturing for the economy. This is in part for geostrategic reasons, but also because manufacturing jobs have the reputation of having a high multiplier effect — meaning that every job created in manufacturing creates additional jobs in other sectors of the economy (Osman and Kemeny 2022). However, the number of manufacturing jobs is not likely to increase significantly in coming years due to the ongoing effects of globalization and automation, which increases output while decreasing the need for labor (Jacobson 2022). Given these trends, it seems highly unlikely that the U.S. will steer away from its current course of post-industrialization, let alone reverse it.

Assuming racial and ethnic diversity translate into cultural heterogeneity, we can certainly say that it applies to the U.S. Since the country's inception, racial and ethnic diversity has been one of the U.S.' main characteristics, especially in comparison to the European nation-states that formed in the 19th century. Due to centuries of struggle for recognition, acceptance and equality by non-white groups, diverse heritages among the American citizenry have now reached a point where they are no longer just labels but a valued characteristic of society (Horowitz Menasce 2019). And while immigration has decreased in recent years, U.S. society will become even more diverse than it already is, mostly at the expense of the White population, which is projected to shrink (Frey 2020). Traditionally, U.S. society has placed a great deal of value on individualism — with ebbs and flows, of course, but on average to a higher degree than other Western societies. The combination of highly valuing diversity and individualism, as has been the case since the 1980s, has led to a high degree of differentiation of U.S. society (Fischer and Mattson 2009; Hedayatifar et al. 2019; Marx 1994). Thus, it is safe to assume that this development will not reverse.

5.2.2 … and Challenges

Let us take a look at the challenges Reckwitz describes. First, the meritocracy problem: As early as the 1990s, rising inequality in wages and benefits, both between the goods-producing and service sectors but also within the service sector of the U.S. economy, became visible (Bluestone 1990; Nelson 1994). Back then, research had already identified the main trends for this development: the increasing returns on education in both sectors, the decreasing degree of unionization, globalization, and post-industrialization of the U.S. economy. The relative low level of pay in unskilled service has contributed to a decreasing social status for people working in this sector, especially for men without college degrees (Autor et al. 2017). This is a stark contrast to the mid-20th century, when blue-collar work made men good marriage material since their secure and good income could provide a good standard of living for their families. As a consequence of this decline in status, men in particular have been leaving the job market at increasing rates (Wu 2022). On top of this, the decrease in social status is attributed to the individual. In a 2016 survey, 72% percent of Americans believed individuals should have a lot of responsibility to ensure their success in the economy. The public school system came in second place with 60%, state and federal governments came in second to last and last, with 40% and 35% respectively (Pew Research Center 2016e). Interestingly, though, when it comes to reducing inequality, a majority of the general population in 2020 believed the federal government should do more to fight it, in particular by ensuring that the labor force has the necessary skills for the job market (Horowitz Menasce, Igielnik, and Kochhar 2020a).

Regarding the second challenge, the growing divide between urban and rural areas, this is very clearly an issue in the U.S. While it is more nuanced than the simple "urban/better vs rural/worse" dichotomy, in general, urban counties have been advancing economically much more than rural ones. In recent years, urban counties have significantly outperformed rural ones with regard to, for example, job growth, salary growth, and the number of college

graduates (Florida and King 2019). Poverty is also more common in rural than in urban areas (Thiede et al. 2017) and the share of the U.S. population living in rural counties has also decreased since 2000, while in the same period the urban population has grown (Parker et al. 2018).

Looking at the state of U.S. public infrastructure, there is a significant need for improvement. According to a 2023 overview from the Council on Foreign Relations that compiled data from multiple sources like the American Society of Civil Engineers, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the American Road and Transportation Builders Association, most of the country's major infrastructure systems "are reaching the end of their lifespan and are dangerously overstretched." In detail: U.S. infrastructure had a total investment gap of $2.6 trillion in the current decade, Amtrak currently has a repair backlog of $45 billion, one in three bridges needs to be repaired or replaced, and drinking and wastewater systems need $744 billion in additional funding in the coming decade (McBride, Berman, and Siripurapu 2023). Regarding healthcare, the picture is equally dramatic: Polling conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation in late 2023 revealed that "about half of U.S. adults say it is difficult to afford health care costs, and one in four say they or a family member in their household had problems paying for health care in the past 12 months." The survey also found that a quarter of adults say that in the past 12 months, they "have skipped or postponed getting health care they needed because of the cost," and even "about four in ten insured adults worry about affording their monthly health insurance premium, and 48% worry about affording their deductible before health insurance kicks in."(Lopes et al. 2024) The affordable housing situation in the U.S. is also critical. According to a Pew Research report from October 2022, 49% of Americans said that the availability of affordable housing was a problem in their community, 46% of Americans spent 30% or more of their income on rent, and the average U.S. rent has risen 18% since 2017 (Schaeffer 2022).

It is difficult to translate Reckwitz's challenge to establish, convey, and implement basic cultural values and universally shared cultural practices in general and to create a culture of reciprocity into the U.S. context: It appears to be a sentiment for which it is hard to find evidence. However, if we pick up on Reckwitz's reference to the philosophical debate between liberals and communitarians, we can find a connection toward the more concrete case of U.S. society. To briefly summarize, modern communitarians believe humans are essentially communal beings rather than individuals and that communities "shape, and ought to shape, our moral and political judgments and we have a strong obligation to support and nourish the particular communities that provide meaning for our lives, without which we'd be disoriented, deeply lonely, and incapable of informed moral and political judgment" (Bell 2022). Modern communitarianism began as a critical response to the liberal philosophy of John Rawls, in which they saw a "devaluation of community" (Bell 2022). Developing from philosophically abstract to politically concrete concerns, modern communitarians since the 1990s have been "worried by a perception that traditional liberal institutions and practices have contributed to, or at least do not seem up to the task of dealing with, such modern phenomena as alienation from the political process, unbridled greed, loneliness, urban crime, and high divorce rates" (Bell 2022) As a response, communitarians call for "emphasizing social responsibility and promoting policies meant to stem the erosion of communal life" (Bell 2022). Reckwitz's description of a trajectory that "began as the welcome emancipatory empowerment of responsible citizens [and] is ultimately threatening to turn into the egoism of individuals against institutions" (Reckwitz 2021, 152) is clearly a critique from a communitarian perspective. Spelling out Reckwitz's trajectory in more detail, we can trace the following stages: individualization, fragmentation, polarization, and finally, disintegration.

So, to what extent does this trajectory apply to American society? The empirical evidence appears to corroborate each of the stages: Putnam's 2004 study *Bowling Alone* shows the decline in social capital and tendencies towards individualization since the 1960s.

Twenge et al. (2008) show a significant increase in narcissistic personality traits among college students between 1979 and 2006. Bishop and Cushing (2008), Dunkelman (2014), and Lütjen (2016) illustrate very well how the individualization of lifestyles first leads to societal fragmentation, and then, through the process of geographical sorting of voters along party lines, contributes to the degree of polarization currently present in U.S. politics. Polarization, however, does not need to be detrimental to society and democracy per se. As Lütjen (Lütjen 2021, 11) points out, polarization is at times the price for emancipatory progress and can have positive effects in that it politicizes broader parts of the population and increases their degree of participation in the democratic system. Polarization does, however, damage democracy when the other side is no longer seen as an opponent but as an existential threat. In such an environment, into which the U.S. has been sliding for the past 30 years, essential values of a liberal democracy, such as "cooperation, civil conflict, exchange, solidarity, friendly indifference" (Reckwitz 2021, 167) are in danger because political disagreement becomes a matter of life and death (Lütjen 2021, 11). If the stakes are that high, adhering to democratic rules becomes less important; in fact, in order to protect themselves from extinction by "the political enemy," citizens even go as far as attacking democratic institutions. The attack on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021 was the culmination of what Reckwitz had predicted.[57]

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[57] The German original of his essay was published in 2019.

5.3 Republican and Democratic Responses

To summarize, we can say that Reckwitz's diagnosis of the structural changes and challenges Western democracies are facing apply very much to the United States. In the following section, I will take a speculative outlook on the paths Republicans and Democrats may take in the coming years.

5.3.1 Navigating Trump's Influence: Challenges and Opportunities for Republicans

The similarities between the populism of George Wallace in the 1960s and that of Donald Trump since 2015 are quite striking. Wallace and his supporters were also not willing to accept changing social realities such as racial integration, the changing role of women, or a world in which the U.S. is willing to end a war without winning it. Resistance against societal changes was fierce, and support for Wallace was high in the 1960s when societal tensions peaked. However, after the climax in 1968, resistance against societal change among Wallace voters faded over time. They acknowledged new realities, their expressions of dissatisfaction became more toned down, and they found a new home in the Republican Party, which welcomed them happily (Rieder 1990, 253).

Does this mean that history will repeat itself, with Donald Trump and his supporters facing a similar fate? For a start, in contrast to George Wallace, Trump did not run as an independent candidate. This was a risk, albeit well-calculated. Instead of joining at a later point with his own label, Trump first adopted the Republican label, then co-opted it and ultimately transformed the Republican Party to his liking. By adopting the Republican label, Trump managed to do two things: One, he secured voters who have a loyal party history and vote for any candidate as long as they are Republican; and two, he made sure that voters would not defect from him out of fear they would waste their vote on a third-party candidate.

The only risk in this strategy was that voters would perceive Trump as "part of the system" if he ran as a Republican. That perception, however, was the one thing he worked against from day one — and he did so successfully. The Republican establishment despised him, and his supporters loved him for what he perfectly personified to them: a political outsider, voting for whom is not a wasted vote, and who is not a Democrat (Pew Research Center 2016d). When Trump's nomination as the 2016 Republican presidential candidate started to become a realistic scenario, the party establishment, initially fearful (Oliphant 2016), slowly turned and not only seemed to accept but embrace its fate.[58]

The more important factor for the course of the Republicans is the intra-party conflict over which approach to take for the 2024 election, which has a lot to do with Trump's influence over the Republicans. During his presidency, Republicans were extremely loyal to their president. The numerous occasions in which he broke democratic norms and maneuvered at the edge of legality seemed to have little influence on the party's or voter's loyalty to him, which led some commentators to wonder whether Republicans were suffering from Stockholm Syndrome (Boot 2017). As early as the 2018 midterm elections, intra-party opposition to Trump was already virtually impossible, as loyalty to him had become the most important currency of political power (Davis 2018). His hold on the party continued beyond his term: Not only did GOP members of Congress prevent Trump from being convicted for incitement of insurrection after the Jan. 6 insurgency, but the few who voted for his impeachment suffered severe blows to their political careers as a consequence of their disloyalty to Trump (Leibovich 2021; Sprunt 2021). Loyalty to him among his voters also did not seem to be affected by these events (Yokley 2021).

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[58] It should be noted that a considerable number of high-profile Republicans did continue to speak out against Trump. The fact that they did not have a sufficient effect on voters can be counted as another indicator that establishment politics and the people who personified it were no longer popular enough among the Republican electorate.

However, Trump's control of the party and Republican voters was never absolute. Among Republican voters, loyalty to Trump has been decreasing since 2021, while loyalty to the party has remained stable (Folmar 2022). Republican electoral performance in the 2022 midterm elections is emblematic of this development: Sweeping victories for the Republicans, including many Trump-backed candidates, seemed certain given that historically, the party of the incumbent president has suffered significant losses in the midterm elections. However, the "Red Wave," as some Republicans dubbed the anticipated victory, did not materialize. Democrats kept control of the Senate and the Republican majority in the House turned out to be only ten seats. Parts of the Republican Party attributed this weaker-than-expected performance in part to Trump's endorsement for candidates based on whether or not they supported his claim that his defeat in the 2020 election was illegitimate instead of their appeal to a majority of voters (D. Morgan 2022). They were right: The success record of Trump-backed candidates was very mixed (Bowman, Marquez, and Kamisar 2022; Politico 2023). This in turn weakened Trump because it showed that an endorsement by him was no longer a guarantee for victory — and could in fact damage a candidacy, because the number of people who voted Republican based on their belief that the 2020 election results were illegitimate seemed to be smaller than Trump thought (Bernd and Sherman 2022).

The reduction of Trump's influence over the party in the context of the 2022 midterm elections does not, however, mean the Republican Party as a whole has become less extreme. Instead, it signifies that factions within the party were struggling for control. These factions were those "who have tried to distance themselves from Trump's political style without really rejecting any of his views," those that back parts of Trump's agenda but are "aiming to distance themselves from it," and finally those "who seem to be trying to out-Trump Trump" (Azari 2022). In early 2023, the first and the last group appeared to be the most influential ones. A prime example of those trying to 'out-Trump' Trump is Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida. DeSantis not only won the 2022 reelection as governor in a landslide, at the end of

2022 he was also more popular than Trump among Republican voters nationwide (Matza 2022). The second group, those who agree with parts of Trump's agenda but are trying to distance themselves from him, is currently virtually powerless.

After the 2022 midterms, Trump's road to the 2024 Republican presidential nomination seemed to have become rockier, as relevant Republicans voiced concerns over his candidacy (Bolton 2022) and polls among Republican voters showed a majority in favor of someone else than Trump being the Republican candidate (MaristPoll 2022) — a striking reversal from October 2021, when a clear majority had favored him (Rakich and Wilkes 2021). Trump seemed to notice that support for him among Republicans is not as unanimous as it used to be and tried to stabilize a coalition behind him: when 20 far-right members of the newly elected House had refused three times to elect Republican and Trump loyalist Kevin McCarthy as the new speaker in early 2023, Trump urged them to change their mind, calling for unity to follow through on the electoral victory Republicans had fought for together (Hooper 2023). The dissenters eventually voted for McCarthy; whether it was Trump who decisively influenced them is open to interpretation, as it took another twelve attempts and McCarthy agreeing to a "rules package" (Tran and Woodall 2023) before a majority was reached.

Which path will the Republican party take? Azari (2022) thinks a split is within the realm of possible scenarios, as "disagreeing over the basic tenets of democracy might prove too much of an intra-party fissure for Republicans to overcome to form a coalition." However, it could just as well go the complete opposite direction. As Lütjen (2021) analyzes, considerable parts of the Republican base are willing to ignore basic democratic rules and attack democratic institutions because they see themselves in an existential fight against the Democrats. The Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol can be seen as the dramatic culmination of this sentiment — which did not start under Trump but found in him a powerful and willing

enabler. While the yearlong attack on democratic institutions did not find a "successful" ending under Trump, the feeling some Republicans have of being in an existential fight is unlikely to disappear soon, as the general societal trends of heterogenization and globalization described above will most likely continue. Republicans do not seem to want to accept these trends just yet: In fact, it appears they are continuing further on their path, as powerful parts of the Republican Party are doubling down on efforts to undermine U.S. democracy and have been developing plans on how to quickly give almost absolute power over the executive to the president in case a Republican wins in 2024 (Hirsh 2023). Whether this will be the most successful strategy for the 2024 election remains to be seen, but as of late 2023, Trump had overcome the seeming dip in support, has been leading the polls for the Republican nomination by a large margin (Pew Research Center 2023a) and as of early 2024, it seems very likely that he will be the Republican nominee.

Whether it's the extreme or moderate Republicans who dominate the party in the coming years, there seems to be a consensus among both groups in favor of more regulation. Socio-economically, support for extreme neoliberalism and globalization has decreased. Already under Trump, the U.S. introduced massive tariffs and renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement. Also, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Republicans supported — and Trump signed — several economic stimulus packages totaling to more than $3 billion, making them the largest in U.S. history. In 2009, all House and but three Senate Republicans had refused to support then-President Obama's stimulus package in response to the financial crisis. Interestingly, even back then, doubts over the hardcore small-government and no-debt positions had been growing within the Republican Party (Reuters 2009). While they were clearly abolished under Trump, the other core Republican position of lowering taxes remained, as evidenced by the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017. Astonishingly, the tax cuts were very unpopular among the general population (Enten 2017), a development that could be explained by the fact that most of the cuts benefited rich individuals and

corporations, a policy with which a growing part of the population no longer agrees (Williams 2021). Under President Biden, Republican lawmakers have oscillated between positions. On the one hand, they seem to have returned to the position of limiting government spending: The most prominent examples for this stance were House and Senate Republicans' unanimous rejections of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 and the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, two large-scale economic stimulus packages. Some House and Senate Republicans did, however, loosen that stance again when they voted for Biden's CHIPS and Science Act of 2022, which provides about $280 billion for funding research and manufacturing of semiconductors in the U.S. This seemingly inconsistent voting behavior starts making sense when we consider a number of factors. The first one is the inner divisions among Republican voters on socio-economic issues. It may be true that 57% of all Republicans opposed the American Rescue Plan Act, but if we divide them by income groups, that opposition was less solid. Among upper-income Republican households, who made up 21% of the Republican electorate in 2021, 21% favored the package; among middle-income Republican households, who in 2021 represented 50% of Republican voters, 37% supported it . Of lower-income Republicans, however, who account for 25% of Republican voters, 63% supported the stimulus package. A relative majority of 43% of the low-income group also stated that the bill spent too much (Pew Research Center 2021c). So when some Republican lawmakers supported the CHIPS and Science Act, they could be sure that at least some of their voters favored increased government spending, especially because one of the act's provisions is to create research hubs in rural and deindustrialized areas, where mostly low-income households are present. Likely of more importance for their voting behavior was, however, the fact that the bill was written with the intention to increase U.S. competitiveness vis-à-vis China in the strategically important field of semiconductors. In other words, the CHIPS and Science Act is not only a matter of increasing manufacturing capabilities in the U.S., but also of national security. Additionally, public opinion —especially among Republicans — is in favor of a

tough economic stance on China (Silver, Huang, and Clancy 2022). The CHIPS and Science Act heavily restricts semiconductor companies, and they only receive subsidies if they do not manufacture in China, a provision Republicans a decade ago would have fought tooth and nail. The support of the bill has thus led some commentators to speculate that "conservative interest in rebuilding America's industrial base may finally be overtaking the free-market fundamentalism that once dominated the centre-right" (Cass 2022).

In regard to socio-cultural issues, the Republican party for now appears to be continuing its appeal to voters who consider themselves social conservatives. This voter group, while consisting of various factions, has a common core: "a desire to maintain the institutions (e.g., the church, "traditional" nuclear families) and hierarchies that they believe form the basis of a well-ordered society." (Kohler 2023) This desire includes the recent efforts to stop teaching of Critical Race Theory in schools, anti-trans and extremely strict anti-abortion laws, and efforts against affirmative action programs.

Social conservatives first became relevant for the Republican Party as a voter group in the 1960s and have been a core part of the party's voter base since the 1980s (G. Miller and Schofield 2008). Trump appealed heavily to this group starting with his 2016 bid for the presidency, promising to appoint conservative Supreme Court judges that would hand down conservative rulings on key issues like abortion (Coaston 2020). And this promise paid off: According to the 2016 National Election Pool Exit Survey, 46% of his voter coalition was composed of White evangelical Christians, a key sub-group of social conservatives (Husser 2020). During Trump's presidency, social conservative leaders initially expressed a high degree of satisfaction with his decisions, especially regarding appointments for key political positions; interestingly, they did so while being aware this cooperation was primarily

transactional and not based on a common set of beliefs (Alberta 2017).[59] However, toward the

end of Trump's presidency, many social conservatives expressed disappointment over judicial

rulings they deemed not conservative enough, as well as a lack of conservative policies

enacted under Trump (Coaston 2020). Some commentators even believe Trump is already

moving to abandon the social conservatives again; they call for social conservatives to

withdraw their support for Trump because he blamed losses in the 2022 midterm elections on

some Republican candidates' too-radical stances on abortion (meaning those who favor a

complete ban with no exceptions) (F. J. Miller 2023). That justification on Trump's part is

indicative of the tightrope he walks politically: On the one hand, he needs the social

conservatives as an important part of the Republican coalition and given their increasing

disappointment, their turnout may decrease. On the other hand, he cannot embrace their

positions 100% because that may alienate other, less extreme voter groups he also needs to

win on the national level. According to a 2021 Gallup typology, the social conservatives

(which Gallup calls Faith and Flag Conservatives), make up 23% of the Republican coalition;

together with the Populist Right, which also accounts for 23% of the voter coalition, they

share the position of most important Republican voter group (Pew Research Center 2021a).

However, while the number of people who describe themselves as socially conservative has

risen since 2021 among Republican voters from 60% to 74% and among independents from

24% to 29%, especially White social conservatives have been voting for Republicans, and

they are a shrinking demographic (Pew Research Center 2019). With regard to its approach to

implementing socio-cultural changes, the Republican Party is at a crossroads, which Espinoza

summarized as such:

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[59] This, by the way, stands in stark contrast to many socially conservative voters, especially White evangelicals, who believe that Trump underwent either a transformation alike to that from Saul to Paul or see in him similarities to the biblical king David, who was anything but a devout believer, that eventually found his faith. For an excellent in-depth description of the American Christian Right's mythology around Trump, see Brockschmidt (2021)

"Will the post-Trump era be a time to refocus and move the GOP and Republican conservatism back towards a more inclusive approach like George W. Bush tried with compassionate conservatism – one that could appeal to Hispanics to a larger degree? Or, will the GOP double down and attempt to forge onward with an increasingly hostile and white minority driven approach that can work for them given the current framework of American democracy? The former is the more difficult option, but may offer a long-term gain. The latter is the easier option in the short-term, but would dial up an already enraged country." (Espinoza 2021, 574)

My guess is that for 2024, the Republican Party will choose the latter approach to then shift over to the former, given the demographic realities. And a successful, all-encompassing paradigm for them may be one that is "a form of social conservatism that co-opts just enough of [liberal] economic rhetoric to expand its political reach." (Kohler 2023)

5.3.2 Democratic Strategies for the Future: Lessons from Biden's Presidency

For Reckwitz, "a new political paradigm's ability to solve problems is also revealed in the way that it deals with the previous paradigm." He sees "two general possibilities here: either a radical break from the old paradigm, or a constructive form of integration" (Reckwitz 2021, 159). As the Republicans under Trump have so far veered more toward the first possibility, the Democrats seem to have chosen the latter. To start, large parts of the current Democratic Party and its voters are more in line with the general tendencies in the American economy and society (the globalization and post-industrialization of the economy, and the increasing cultural heterogeneity of society); as a result, they are less resistant to them overall than Republicans under Trump are. And when we look at the challenges created by both branches of apertistic liberalism (neoliberalism and progressive liberalism), Democrats appear to be trying to deal with them constructively.

Socio-economically, the Biden administration has given the federal government a more active role than the Clinton and Obama administrations. While the first major

intervention — the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, a $1.9 trillion economic relief and stimulus package — was primarily a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was part of Biden's bigger-picture Build Back Better plan, a multi-trillion-dollar legislative proposal for investments in, among other things, infrastructure and job creation, provisions for clean energy and climate change, as well as investments in the health care system. Even though Congress ultimately did not pass all of this agenda as initially envisioned, the fact that the Biden administration had the intention to massively use government spending to overcome the country's challenges shows that the view of limited government outside times of crisis, as it was popular under Clinton, is no longer dominant within the Democratic Party. Commentators even considered the initial spending proposal so significant that it was comparable with the policies of the New Deal era in the 1930s and those of the Great Society in the 1960s (Iacurci 2021).

Socio-culturally, the Biden administration's agenda is a bit more complex. His approach, mostly keeping a low profile on contentious issues such as police reform and immigration may have enraged the progressive wing of the Democratic Party because they perceived him as too conservative on these issues. However, commentators see this approach less as an expression of his conservatism but as emblematic of his view:

> "that the best way to respond to the culture-war onslaught from Republicans is to engage with it as little as possible [and that] that voters don't want to be subjected to fights about such polarizing cultural issues and would prefer that elected officials focus more on daily economic concerns such as inflation, jobs, and health care." (Brownstein 2023)

Polls corroborate this approach: In 2020, 79% of voters named the economy as their most important issue and 68% named health care; racial and ethnic inequality and immigration were in 8th and 9th position, both with 52% of voters saying the issue is very important (Pew Research Center 2020). By 2023 this had not changed much, as strengthening the economy

and reducing health care costs remained the top two issues for voters; immigration and addressing issues around race were middle- and bottom-tier priorities, respectively (Pew Research Center 2023b). While this agenda-setting through avoidance may so far have been a viable strategy, it runs the risk of alienating the progressive Democratic voters that are vital for the party. Biden has so far made two major exceptions: he has taken a strong pro-abortion stance, as well as vehemently spoken out against book bans in schools. Taking stances on these two issues should not, however, be interpreted solely as an expression of Biden's progressivism: An overwhelming majority of voters across the political spectrum are against Republicans' strict abortion bans (Gallup 2023) and book bans (Backus and Salvanto 2022). To summarize: on socio-cultural issues, the Democrats under Biden are not actively taking an approach toward more regulation, but rather follow a two-pronged strategy: to avoid issues that are potentially hurting them because the progressive wing of the party's views on them are, in the eyes of many voters, too extreme; and to double down on issues on which the majority of the party and the majority of voters have similar views. While this may not be a strong sign of leadership in this policy area — and is rather a mix of dodging and bandwagoning — it may be the best way to prevent further voter loss. As the number of self-ascribed liberals among Democrats has risen significantly, mostly pushed by Whites (Saad 2023), the party has lost ground with Hispanics and Blacks (J. M. Jones and Saad 2024), groups that have traditionally voted solidly Democratic. The latter two groups are more likely to describe themselves as moderate or conservative Democrats (Saad, Jones, and Brenan 2019) and their dwindling support is rooted in the perception that Democrats are moving too far to the left (Galston 2023). Whether they mean "left" in regard to economic or cultural issues (or both) is not 100% clear, and is one of the shortcomings of surveys based on self-ascribed ideology (Galston 2023). However, the fact that there is more agreement among liberal, moderate and conservative Democrats on issues such as corporate taxation, labor unions and gun legislation than there is on abortion, same-sex marriage and the legalization of

marijuana (Saad, Jones, and Brenan 2019) strongly suggests that the critique of the party leaning too much to the left is based on cultural issues.

Expert opinions on whether the Democratic Party has substantially shifted to the left vary significantly. Horst, for example, strongly argues that since the first term of Barack Obama's presidency, the party has shifted significantly to the left. His main arguments are the almost-nomination of Bernie Sanders in 2016 and the ensuing leftward shift of what became mainstream demands in the Democratic Party discourse (among others, Medicare for All, a Green New Deal, and a $15 minimum wage), as well in increasingly left-leaning voting behavior of Democratic members of Congress and the expansion in both size and influence of the "Congressional Progressive Caucus," (it was the largest congressional caucus at the beginning of 2023 with 103 members) (Horst 2023, 148–57). Seemingly corroborating this argument is the fact that between 1994 and 2020, the percentage of Democrats that describe themselves as liberal has increased from 25 to 51% (Saad 2021).

Others, however, argue the Democrats have stayed more or less the same. Mayer, for example, contends that the party has not moved a millimeter to the left. For her, left means "to limit the power of corporations, billionaires and politicians who are obedient to them. In other words, those who fight against the capitalist logic of valorization and domination, for the interests of the working classes and the exploited, as well as for the integrity of nature, are on the left." (Neues Deutschland 2023) However, Mayer (2022a, 17) also contends that not everyone on the American political left shares this view. For her, a handful of key developments — the fact that the initial Build Back Better plan was significantly altered under the pressures of conservative Democratic senators Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema, the general direction to focus on market-mechanisms instead of redistribution to bring about environmental and social change, and the failure of significant police reforms (Mayer 2022b)

— support her description of the Democratic party as neoliberal, financial market-orientated and hostile to socialism.

Also hotly debated is the question of whether a more moderate or more progressive approach to socio-economic and socio-cultural issues will be more successful. On the one hand, some argue the Democratic Party's moderates should stop blaming too-progressive demands, such as defunding the police in order to reduce police violence, for electoral losses. Instead, they should embrace more progressive ideas: "[T]he Democratic Party has achieved electoral success because of, while remaining internally hostile to, the left — and left-wing activists — for much of its history since the New Deal," (Brenes and Koncewicz 2020) as the recent successful mobilization and political integration efforts of progressives like Reps. Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez show. The fact is, the Democratic Party needs these voter groups: They constitute more than a third (35%) of their voter coalition (Pew Research Center 2021b). At the same time, Democrats also heavily rely on moderate voters as part of their coalition; commentators warn that the left "managed to associate the Democratic Party with a series of views on crime, immigration, policing, free speech and of course race and gender that are quite far from those of the median voter." (Teixeira 2021) Exit polls on perceived party extremism in the context of the 2022 midterm elections seem to corroborate this argument, as Democrats were perceived as similarly extreme to Republicans and were "seen as further from where voters place themselves ideologically." (Astrow and Erickson 2022) A 2023 paper by the Niskanen Center argues in a similar vein: Just as geography plays an important role in the American political system due to "federalism and single-member districts," working-class and rural voters play a significant role. These voter groups, however, have defected to Republicans over the last decades, both because of the Democrats' focus on urban areas, as well as its perceived leftward shift on cultural issues. In this sphere, the authors continue, these two voter groups tend to have more moderate or conservative views; however, on economic ones, such as Medicare for All or trade policies,

they align to a large degree with the Democratic Party's positions (Saldin and Kal Munis 2023).

Returning to Reckwitz's prediction that the progressive version of regulatory liberalism will "emphasize the importance of social infrastructure for all and will be more strongly oriented toward cultural universalism," it appears the Biden administration is definitely doing the former. Rodrik even considers the Build Back Better agenda as showcasing signs of a new economic paradigm [sic!] he calls "productivism." In his definition, productivism

> [P]rioritizes the dissemination of productive economic opportunities throughout all regions of the economy and segments of the labor force. It differs from what immediately preceded it ("neoliberalism") in that it gives governments (and civil society) a significant role in achieving that goal. It puts less faith in markets and is suspicious of large corporations. It emphasizes production and investment over finance, and revitalizing local communities over globalization. It also departs from the Keynesian welfare state – the paradigm that "neoliberalism" replaced -- in that it focuses less on redistribution, social transfers, and macroeconomic management and more on creating economic opportunity by working on the supply side of the economy to create good, productive jobs for everyone. (Rodrik 2023, 1)

In his view, the Biden administration's "wholesale embrace of industrial policies to facilitate the green transition, rebuild domestic supply chains, and stimulate good jobs, the finger-pointing at corporate profits as a partial culprit behind inflation, and the refusal (so far) to revoke Trump's tariffs against China" are examples of this paradigmatic change (Rodrik 2023, 8).

Regarding "cultural universalism," the other branch of regulatory liberalism, the Democratic Party under Biden — in stark contrast to the Republicans under Trump — shows no signs of transforming the country into a Christian-White autocracy but wants to protect and nurture its heterogeneity. At the same time, Biden heavily focused on the need for national unity in his inaugural address (Campos et al. 2021), which, in combination with the avoidance

of contentious cultural issues (see above), can be interpreted as meeting Reckwitz's requirement of a successful new paradigm to navigate "between collective acceptance and heterogeneity, on the one hand, and between universalism and national cultures on the other" (Reckwitz 2021, 167).

5.4 The Dawn of a New Political Order

The current Democratic Party appears to be moving more in the direction of what Reckwitz dubbed as "regulatory liberalism." However, this is no guarantee of electoral success for them in the coming years, nor does it mean the U.S. could not transform into a White ethnonationalist autocracy if the current Republican Party regains control of the White House in 2024. However, in the long run, it seems likely to me that a new paradigm similar to regulatory liberalism will take hold in the U.S. Agreement between Democrats and Republicans on the socio-economic branch of it is already growing, as I have written above, and among voters, too: A 2020 Pew Research survey revealed that not just a majority of Democrats but also low-income Republicans favor a more active role for the federal government in certain areas such as adequate medical care, health insurance, and standard of living — thus distancing themselves from their middle- and high-income party brethren (Horowitz Menasce, Igielnik, and Kochhar 2020a). And agreement between parties may also increase on the socio-cultural branch, as a majority of voters does not seem to favor extreme positions in these matters. Regardless of what the coming years bring, one thing seems certain: The political order that dominated the U.S. since the 1980s is history. And the rise of anti-establishment parties and politicians like Trump are proof that these debates are being renegotiated, meaning the topics discussed in this dissertation will be relevant for years to come.

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Abstract/Kurzfassung

The growing popularity of anti-establishment parties and politicians among voters in Western democracies since the mid-2010s has led to a number of explanations. One widely accepted approach, both in journalistic and academic circles, is the theory that the "left behind" voters are primarily responsible for this development. Despite the popularity of this theory, it has two central problems: firstly, a clear definition of what "left behind" means and secondly, a lack of empirical testing.

This dissertation addresses these problems using the 2016 U.S. presidential election as an example. Based on an examination of media and academic discourse, an empirically testable definition of the theory is distilled, operationalized, and then empirically tested at the county level through two regression models. The results of the analysis show that the chosen operationalization of the theory can explain approximately two-thirds of the variance in the vote share for Donald Trump. In order to understand the proportion of unexplained variance, counties in which Trump's share of the vote as predicted by the statistical models deviates significantly from the actual vote are then examined in descriptive analysis in exploratory form. It becomes clear that the reasons for the strong deviations lie less in the selection of the chosen variables, but probably in their lack of weighting, as well as in other factors such as voter turnout and historical loyalty to a party.

The dissertation places this empirical research in a broader context by viewing Trump's election as a symptom of a transitional phase between two political paradigms. Both by adopting this perspective and through the empirical aspects of the work, this dissertation contributes to a better understanding of the origins of Trump's electoral success and opens up new ways to address them.

Der seit Mitte der 2010er-Jahre wachsende Zuspruch bei Wähler*innen für Anti-Establishment Parteien und Politiker*innen in westlichen Demokratien hat zu einer Reihe von Erklärungsansätzen geführt. Ein sowohl journalistischen als auch in wissenschaftlichen Kreisen weit verbreiteter Ansatz ist die Theorie, dass vor allem die „abgehängten" Wähler*innen für diese Entwicklung verantwortlich sind. Trotz der Popularität dieser Theorie, weist sie zwei zentrale Probleme auf: erstens eine klare Definition davon, was „abgehängt" bedeutet und zweitens einen Mangel an empirischer Prüfung.

Die vorliegende Dissertation adressiert diese Probleme am Beispiel der US-Präsidentschaftswahl von 2016. Basierend auf einer Untersuchung des medialen und akademischen Diskurses, wird eine empirisch überprüfbare Definition der Theorie destilliert, operationalisiert und anschließend durch zwei Regressionsmodelle empirisch auf der County-Ebene getestet. Die Ergebnisse der Analyse zeigen, dass die gewählte Operationalisierung der Theorie annähernd zwei Drittel der Varianz des Stimmenanteils für Donald Trump erklären kann. Um den Anteil der nicht erklärten Varianz zu verstehen, werden anschließend in exploratorischer Form Counties, in denen der durch die statistischen Modelle vorhergesagte Stimmenanteil Trumps stark vom tatsächlichen abweicht, in deskriptiver Analyse untersucht. Dabei wird deutlich, dass die Gründe für die starken Abweichungen weniger in der Auswahl der gewählten Variablen liegen, sondern wahrscheinlich an deren fehlender Gewichtung, sowie an weiteren Faktoren wie Wahlbeteiligung und historisch gewachsene Loyalität zu einer Partei.

Diese empirischen Untersuchungen setzt die Dissertation in einen größeren Kontext, indem sie die Wahl Trumps als Symptom einer Übergangsphase zwischen zwei politischen Paradigmen betrachtet. Sowohl durch die Einnahme dieser Perspektive als auch durch die empirischen Aspekte der Arbeit, trägt diese Dissertation zu einem besseren Verständnis der Ursprünge von Trumps Wahlerfolg bei und eröffnet neue Wege, um diese adressieren.

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Declaration of authorship

Last Name: Rohmann
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I hereby declare that I have completed the submitted dissertation independently and without the use of sources and aids other than those indicated. I have marked as such all statements that are taken literally or in content from other writings. This dissertation has not yet been presented to any other examination authority in the same or a similar form and has not yet been published.

Berlin, November 7th, 2024