The Road to A Political Realignment in American Politics

Education: The New Fault Line in U.S. Elections

Demographics and economics have long driven voting patterns in American politics. What is different now is that educational attainment has increasingly played a dominant role in voting. This has led to a political realignment, with the base shifting for both political parties.
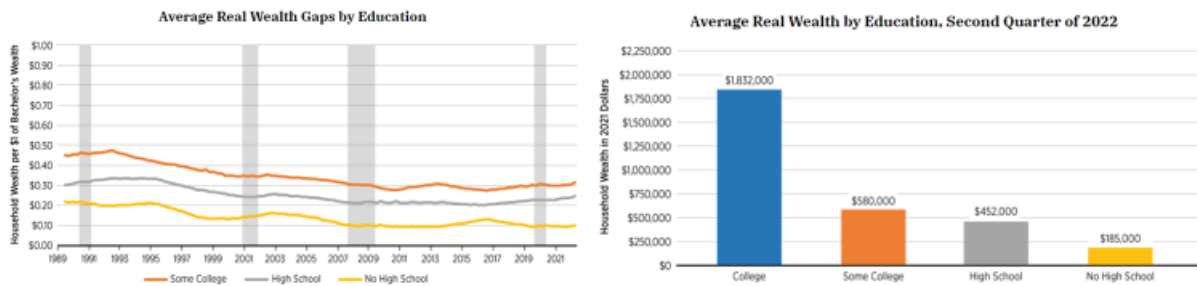
In a sharp contrast to a previous era, college educated voters are now more likely to identify as Democrats, and those without college degrees - particularly white voters, but increasingly all Americans – support Republicans.

Voting at all levels of federal and state elections demonstrates this overwhelming trend of the "diploma divide." Whereas in the past the axiom that "all politics is local" rang true, these days the more accurate truism is that "all politics is national."

There are economic and cultural components in this sorting by education. The confluence of rising globalization, technological advancements, and the offshoring of many working-class jobs led to a sorting of economic fortunes. There is now a widening gap in the average wealth between households led by college graduates compared to the rest of the population, whose levels are near all-time lows.

According to an analysis by the Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis, since 1989, families headed by college graduates have increased their wealth by more than 83%. For households headed by someone without a college degree, there was relatively little or no increase in wealth.

Culturally, a person's educational attainment increasingly correlates with their views on a wide range of issues, including abortion, attitudes about LGBTQ+ rights, and the relationship between government and organized religion. It also extends to cultural consumption (movies, TV, books), social media choices, and voters' sources of information that shape their understanding of facts.

As a result of these economic and cultural trends, politics now has a class-based architecture where cultural affinity now surpasses voters' narrow economic self-interests.

This educational sorting has made the vast majority of states no longer politically competitive. It is the battleground states in the middle - where education levels are neither disproportionately high nor low - that will decide the 2024 presidential election.

Unlike the rest of the country, the education profiles in these areas generally trend toward the national average, which is the reason that they remain battleground states. Without the built-in advantage of an electorate that favors either political party based on education, this will force candidates to appeal to swing voters in these states in order to win the White House in 2024.

THE ROAD TO POLITICAL REALIGNMENT

Phase #1: Voters' Education Levels Gain Prominence at the Ballot Box

The first signs of the divisions in today's politics surfaced in 1992. Pat Buchanan's America First primary challenge against George H.W. Bush for the Republican nomination for President laid the groundwork for Ross Perot's third-party run in the general election. Perot received 19% of the vote, with almost 20 million people supporting his candidacy. These Buchanan/Perot voters, along with newer voters who share their sense of alienation, are now a core part of today's Republican Party.

Coinciding with these developments was the launch of Rush Limbaugh's radio show less than two months before the 1992 general election. By the end of the next decade, Limbaugh's "four corners of deceit" – government, academia, science, and the media – which he argued "corrupts and exists by virtue of deceit" increasingly had become a cornerstone idea for the GOP.

With the emergence of these trends, the foundation for today's political realignment began forming in 1992. Despite receiving only 37.5% of the vote, George H.W. Bush carried 13 states that tended to have high concentrations of non-college voters – Alabama, Alaska, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. These states are now part of the Republican political base.

By 2000, seven other states, most with similarly high levels of non-college educated voters, had been added to the GOP base: Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, Tennessee, and West Virginia.

On the Democratic side, 15 states that Bill Clinton carried in 1992, all of which are in the top half of the list of states with significant concentrations of college educated voters, are now part of the Democratic Party base: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington, as well as the District of Columbia. Democrats added three additional states in 2008: Colorado, New Mexico, and Virginia.

Phase #2: Education Emerges as the New Fault line in American politics in the 2016 Presidential Election
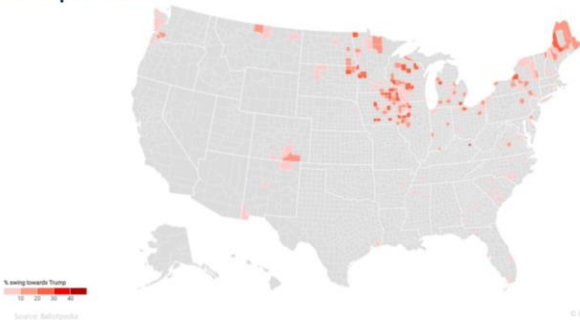
Trump's 2016 victory served as the tipping point for the current political realignment in American politics.

According to the 2016 PEW validated voter post-election survey, Trump's 36-point margin of victory with non-college white voters was double Romney's 18-point advantage in 2012.

Not surprisingly, the foundation for Trump's victory in 2016 was the geographic areas with a high percentage of non-college voters that had been hit hardest by globalization and the rise of China.

There were 206 counties that voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 that switched over to Trump in 2016. These voters were particularly critical in the key swing states – Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin – that had not voted for a Republican for President since 1988.

There Were 206 Counties that Flipped From Obama-Obama to Trump in 2016

Trump also carried Iowa and Ohio by wide margins, the first Republican presidential candidate to carry these states since 2004.

While Trump was racking up these huge margins with non-college white voters, Clinton's 17-point advantage with white college graduates in the PEW post-election survey marked the first time since 1956 that a Democratic presidential candidate carried these voters.
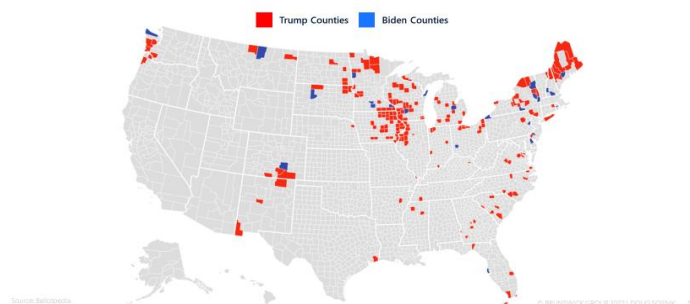
Phase #3: The Trump Presidency's Impact on the Education Divide in American Politics

After his 2016 victory, Trump put a primary focus on non-college voters who had elected him President – the people who had been hardest hit by globalization. Throughout his presidency, Trump relied on blatant appeals that spoke to the worst fears of these voters.

As a byproduct of Trump's approach, educated voters were turned off and began to abandon Trump and the Republican Party. In the 2018 midterm elections, these voters enabled Democrats to regain control of the House leading to a pick-up of 40 seats, the majority of which were in areas with higher educated voters.

This trend continued in the 2020 presidential election. Joe Biden defeated Trump by assembling a different coalition than the one that elected and re-elected Obama President. Of the 206 counties that Obama carried in 2008 and 2012 that were won by Trump in 2016, Biden was only able to win back 25 of these areas that had a high percentage of non-college voters.

Of 206 Counties that flipped from Obama to Trump in 2016, Biden carried only 25

To offset that trend, Biden carried college educated voters by 15 points, which was key to his victory. He performed particularly well in the largely urban and suburban areas with high levels of educated voters. In the new economy, which values educated workers, over 70% of the GDP growth in the country came from these areas that Biden carried despite the fact that Trump won 84% of the counties in the United States.
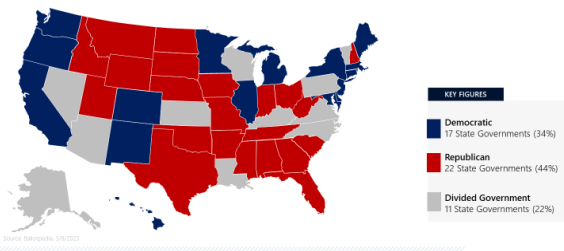
Biden's support with educated voters was also reflected in the House results. He carried more than four-fifths of House districts where the share of white college educated exceeded the national average. These trends continued in the 2022 midterm elections, with Democrats carrying white college voters by three points while Republicans won white non-college voters by 34 points, which was a 10-point improvement from 2018.

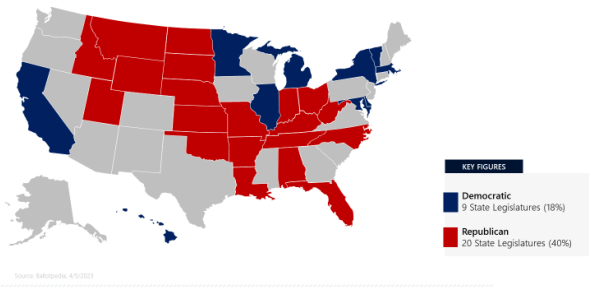**THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF THESE TRENDS IN VOTING**

This realignment based on education levels has resulted in tribal politics, with one-party control in the vast majority of states in the country. There are now 39 states (22R/17D) where one party has unified control of the governorship, as well as the state legislature. There are now veto proof majorities in 29 states.
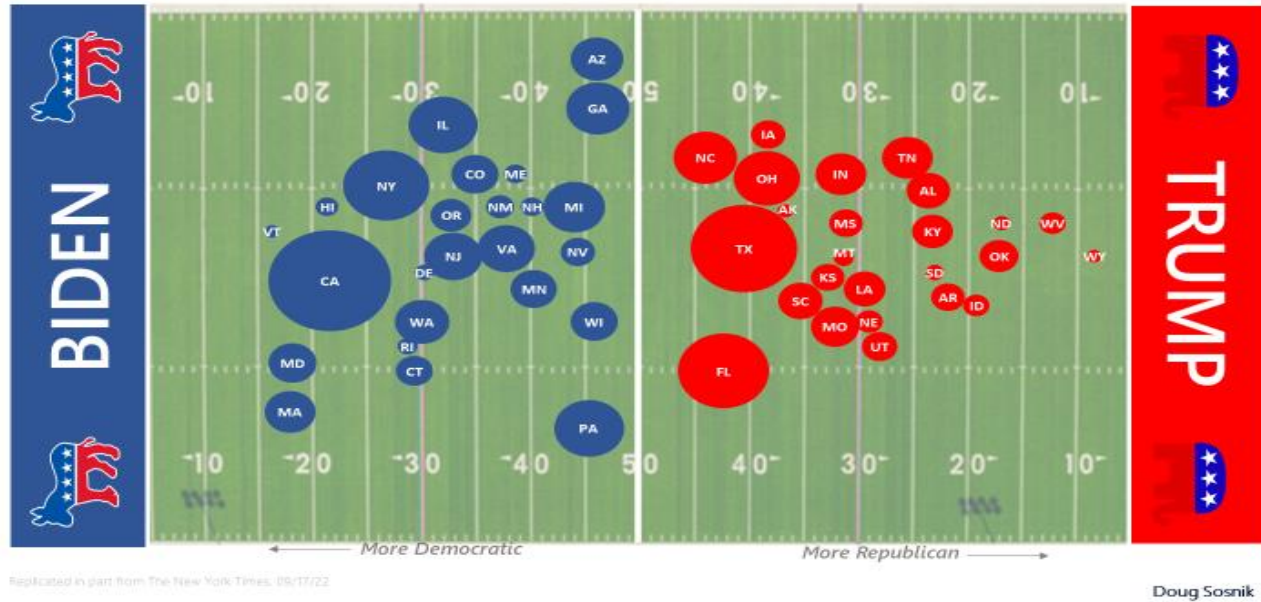

These trends are reflected in presidential and U.S. Senate elections. In the last two presidential elections 45 out of 50 states voted for the same party, and fewer than 20% of Senate and House seats are now considered competitive.

Given the structure of the election process for President and the Senate, there are significant political ramifications to Electoral College voting in presidential elections and U.S. Senate elections, which result in two Senators per state regardless of population.

Republicans have greatly benefited from these rules, which give disproportionate power to rural states which skew toward non-college voters.

Conversely, the Democratic vote is inefficiently distributed in a handful of states with large metropolitan areas, which dilutes their political impact. Despite winning the popular vote in seven out of the last eight presidential elections, Democrats were shut out of the White House for 12 years during that time. The results of the 2020 presidential election reflect how inefficiently the Democratic vote is distributed, with Biden racking up huge margins in a handful of states. In fact, Biden's seven million vote margin of victory in California and New York was greater than his national vote advantage over Trump.

In the current Congress, despite the fact that Democrats have only a two-seat majority, there are 41 million more Americans living in the states that they represent.

The 2024 Presidential Electoral College Map

In the 2020 presidential election, Biden received 306 electoral votes compared to Trump's 232. Following reapportionment, the new electoral map is a net six points more favorable for Republicans compared to 2020. Under the new map, Biden's victory over Trump would have been reduced to 303 electoral votes, with Trump receiving 235. If the next presidential race is highly competitive, **Democrats will likely enter the General Election with 222 electoral votes, compared to 219 for Republicans.**

That leaves only eight states, with 97 electoral votes – Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin – up for grabs. These battleground states all share five common attributes.

First, the outcomes of elections in these states have generally been very close.

Second, and not surprisingly, given the closeness of these elections, these areas comprise almost half of the states with divided state governments (Arizona, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin).

Third, the education levels in these states are at or near the national average - Pennsylvania (23rd), Georgia (24th), North Carolina (25th), Wisconsin (26th), Arizona (30th), and Michigan (32nd) - not disproportionately highly educated nor toward the bottom. (See Appendix)

Fourth, the winning party carried political independents in the last four election cycles and this vote is particularly important in these evenly divided battleground states. The 2022 exit polls showed that over 30 percent of voters were independents, the highest percentage since 1980. In Arizona, according to exit polls 40 percent of voters in 2022 considered themselves political independents.

Lastly, these independent voters tend to live disproportionately in suburbs, which are now the most diverse socioeconomic areas in our country. Voting in the suburbs in these states determined the outcome of the last two presidential elections and will likely play the same pivotal role in 2024.

Election results in the 8 battleground states (2016-2022)

STATE	2016 PRESIDENTIAL	2018 SENATE	2018 GOV	2020 PRESIDENTIAL	2022 SENATE	2022 GOV	STATE PARTY CONTROL	EDUCATION RANK
Arizona	3.5%	2.4%	14.2%	.3%	4.9%	.37%	Divided	#30
Georgia	5.1%	NA	1.4%	.23%	.9%	7.5%	Republican	#24
Michigan	.22%	6.5%	9.5%	2.8%	NA	10.6%	Democrat	#32
Nevada	2.4%	5%	4%	2.4%	.9%	1.5%	Divided	#45
New Hampshire	.37%	NA	7.1%	7.35%	9.2%	15.5%	Republican	#8
North Carolina	3.6%	NA		1.3%	3.2%	NA	Divided	#25
Pennsylvania	.7%	13.1%	17.1%	1.1%	4.8%	14.8%	Divided	#23
Wisconsin	.7%	10.9%	1.1%	.5%	1%	3.4%	Divided	#26

* Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey (bachelor's degree or higher)

DOUG SOSNIK

2024 CONGRESSIONAL RACES

U.S. Senate

Voting for the U.S. Senate has increasingly followed the national trends in presidential elections. There are currently only five states with split partisan delegations – Maine, Montana, Ohio, West Virginia, and Wisconsin - the fewest since direct elections for the Senate began in 1914. This is in sharp contrast to elections as recently as 2009, when almost half of the Senators (23) were from a different party than the presidential candidate who had carried their state in the previous election.

There are 34 Senate seats on the ballot, with Democrats defending 23 states (which includes three independents) and 11 held by Republicans. There are currently two Democratic open seats - California and Michigan.

Of the Democratic-held seats, eight are considered competitive, three (Brown-OH, Manchin-WV, and Tester-MT) of which Trump carried by eight points or more in 2020. All but two of these eight competitive states are in the bottom half of education levels in the country.

The Republican chances of regaining the Senate will be determined in part by the outcome of their primaries next year. Unqualified, right-wing nominees cost the GOP control of the Senate in 2022 and the early indications are that they may face the same problems next year. There are six Republican primaries to watch - Arizona, Montana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

None of the 11 seats held by Republicans are considered competitive, and all but two states (Nebraska and Utah) are at the bottom half of education levels in our country.

34 seats on the ballot in the Senate

23 Democratic/Independent and 11 Republican

8 Democratic/Independent seats are considered competitive with not a single Republican -held state at risk

Competitive Races				
State / Senator	Cook Political Report Rating(1/24/23)	Educational Attainment Ranking (highest to lowest)	2020 Presidential Candidate	2020 Presidential Margin
AZ – Sinema*	Toss -up	30	Biden	.3%
MI – Open	Lean Dem	32	Biden	2.78%
MT – Tester	Lean Dem	19	Trump	16.37%
NV – Rosen	Lean Dem	45	Biden	2.39%
OH – Brown	Toss -up	37	Trump	8.03%
PA – Casey	Lean Dem	23	Biden	1.5%
WV – Manchin	Toss -up	50	Trump	38.97%
WI – Baldwin	Lean Dem	26	Biden	.63%

* Independents

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2021 American Community Survey (bachelor's degree or higher)

Non-Competitive Races		
State / Senator	2020 Presidential Candidate	2020 Presidential Margin
CA – Open	Biden	29.2%
CT – Murphy	Biden	20.03%
DE – Carper	Biden	16.37%
FL – Scott	Trump	3.3%
HI – Hirono	Biden	29.4%
IN - Open	Trump	17.06
MD – Cardin	Biden	33.21%
MA – Warren	Biden	33.6%
MS – Wicker	Trump	16.5%
MO – Hawley	Trump	15.4%
ME – King*	Biden	9.07%
MN – Klobuchar	Biden	7.12%
NE – Fischer	Trump	19.1%
NE – Ricketts		
NM – Heinrich	Biden	10.8%
NJ – Menendez	Biden	15.9%
NY – Gillibrand	Biden	23.1%
ND – Cramer	Trump	33.6%
RI – Whitehouse	Biden	20.78%
TN – Blackburn	Trump	23.2%
TX – Cruz	Trump	5.6%
UT – Romney	Trump	20.5%
VT – Sanders*	Biden	35.3%
VA – Kaine	Biden	10.2%
WA – Cantwell	Biden	19.4%
WY – Barrasso	Trump	43.7%

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U.S. House

The education voting trends dominating national and statewide elections are also playing out in House races.

A recent analysis by Ron Brownstein of census data compiled by the Atlantic Magazine and the Equity Research Institute at the University of Southern California (USC) shows the dominant role education levels play in determining the election results for the U.S. House.

Nearly 75% of House Democrats represent districts where the share of white adults with a college degree (36%) exceeds the national average, while more than three quarters of Republican House seats are in districts below the national education average.

The correlation of education levels to income extends to the House as well, with over 60% of Democrats holding districts where the medium income exceeds the national average of $65,000. In more than two-thirds of districts held by Republicans, the medium income is below the national average.

The USC/Atlantic analysis also reveals how these voting trends are increasingly transcending race. Democrats now hold only a seven-seat advantage in districts that have low levels of white college graduates and high levels of diversity, compared to a 28-seat advantage in 2009.

This has led to national voting trends increasingly determining local races, as well as resulting in fewer competitive House races. The recently released Cook Political Report *Partisan Voting Index* (PVI) analyzed election results for House districts in the last two presidential election cycles compared to the national average.

In the Cook PVI index, a district is only considered a swing seat if in the results in the last two presidential elections the House margin of victory was +/- five points off the national average. In 1999,164 seats fell within that margin to qualify as a swing seat; today, only 45 seats meet the criteria in the current House of Representatives.

In fact, there are now only two House districts (Alaska and Maine-02) where the incumbent member of Congress outperformed the national average by more than six points.

Not surprisingly, this has led to a significant drop in split voting for President and the House. There are currently only 23 seats (18 Republican and 5 Democratic) held by a different party than the presidential candidate who carried the district in 2020. This is a sharp drop from 2009 when 83 members of the House were of a different party than the presidential candidate who carried their district in the previous election.

The Cook Political Report currently rates only 42 districts (10%) as competitive (23 Democratic and 19 Republican).

Almost half of these districts are concentrated in just four states. There are a total of twelve competitive races in California and New York, with Republicans defending 10 of these seats. In the most recent Cook Political Report half of the 10 Republican seats that are considered toss up or lean toward Democrats come from New York.

There is a strong possibility that the Republican-controlled legislatures and state supreme court majorities in North Carolina and Ohio will pass new gerrymandered districts, which would overturn the court ordered plans from 2022. This would put four Democratically held seats in North Carolina and three in Ohio at risk in 2024. Half of the districts considered toss-ups in the current Cook Political Report are in these two states.

As Americans have increasingly self-selected where they live based on tribal politics, driven by education and economic status, the suburbs have become the last battleground in American politics. They determined control of the House in the 2018, 2020, and 2022 elections. They will again determine control in 2024, with 39 of the 42 competitive races in the suburbs. There are only three rural districts that are considered competitive (2 Democratic and 1 Republican), with not a single urban district considered at risk for Democrats.

Over half the country now lives in the suburbs. Lenny Bronner of the Washington Post did an analysis of all 435 congressional districts based on an index that David Montgomery created for CityLab measuring how urban or rural a congressional district was based on population density. The model, which divided up states into six categories ranging from pure urban to pure surburban, underscored the education voter trends – demonstrating that the denser the population, the more likely it is that they have a higher percentage of educated voters. This density and higher education levels make them more likely to vote for Democrats. The less dense and less educated rural areas trend Republican.

Democrats are defending 23 of the 42 competitive House seats

Incumbent (District)	District Type	Educational Attainment Ranking (highest to lowest)	2022 Margin	Party Change	2020 Presidential Margin
Peltola (AK – 01)	Rural suburban	235	9.8%	R > D	T + 10.1%
Open (CA – 47)	Urban suburban	161	3.4%		B + 11.1%
Caraveo (CO – 8)	Dense suburban	NA	.7%		B + 4.6%
Hayes (CT – 05)	Sparce suburban	121	.7%		B + 4.5%
Sorensen (IL – 17)	Sparce suburban	403	3.6%		B + 7.8%
Mrvan (IN – 01)	Sparce suburban	340	5.6%		B + 8.4%
Golden (ME – 02)	Rural	295	6.2%		T + 6.1%
OPEN (MI – 07)	Rural suburban	321	5.4%		B + .5%
Davis (NC – 01)	Rural	71	5%		B + 7.3%
Manning (NC – 06)	Rural suburban	303	8.9%		B + 24.4%
Nickel (NC – 13)	Rural suburban	229	3.2%	R > D	B + 1.7%
Jackson (NC – 14)	Sparce suburban	NA	15.4%		B + 16.4%
Lee (NV – 03)	Urban suburban	145	4%		B + 6.6%
Vasquez (NM – 02)	Rural suburban	391	.6%	R > D	B + 5.9%
Ryan (NY – 18)	Rural suburban	115	1%		B + 8.4%
Landsman (OH – 1)	Dense suburban	158	5%	R > D	B + 8.5%
Kaptur (OH – 9)	Sparce suburban	319	13%		T + 2.9%
Sykes (OH – 13)	Sparce suburban	334	5%	R > D	B + 2.8%
Salinas (OR – 06)	Dense suburban	NA	2.5%		B + 13.2%
Wild (PA – 07)	Sparce suburban	206	2%		B + .6%
Cartwright (PA – 08)	Rural suburban	313	2.4%		T + 2.9%
Deluzio (PA – 17)	Sparce suburban	59	6.8%		B + 5.8%
Gluesenkamp Perez (WA – 03)	Sparce suburban	305	.8%	R > D	T + 4.2%

TAKEAWAYS

- 5 Democratic incumbents are in districts carried by Trump. Due to a possible redrawing of the lines, 7 Democratic seats are at risk in North Carolina and Ohio.
- At-risk Democratic seats rank in the bottom 50% (241) on average for educational attainment levels.

KEY FIGURES

- Urban districts (0)
- Urban suburban districts (2)
- Dense suburban districts (3)
- Sparce suburban districts (9)
- Rural suburban districts (7)
- Rural districts (2)

NOTES

- Competitive districts based on Cook Political Report (4/18/23)
- District type determined by a Washington Post analysis of Congressional districts by Lenny Bronner based on an index created by David Montgomery
- Educational attainment rankings drawn from 2021 American Community Survey by the United States Census Bureau

Republicans are defending 19 of the 42 competitive House seats

Incumbent (District)	District Type	Educational Attainment Ranking (highest to lowest)	2022 Margin	Party Change	2020 Presidential Margin
Schweikert (AZ – 01)	Dense suburban	324	.8%		B +1.5%
Ciscomani (AZ – 06)	Sparce suburban	51	1.4%		B + .1%
Duarte (CA – 13)	Sparce suburban	37	.4%		B + 10.9%
Valadao (CA – 22)	Dense suburban	306	3%		B + 12.9%
Garcia (CA – 27)	Dense suburban	67	6.4%		B + 12.4%
Calvert (CA – 41)	Sparce suburban	422	4.6%		T + 1.1%
Steel (CA – 45)	Urban suburban	19	4.8%		B + 6.2%
Boebert (CO – 03)	Rural suburban	193	.2%		T + 8.3%
Nunn (IA – 03)	Sparce suburban	168	.6%	D > R	T + .3%
James (MI – 10)	Dense suburban	345	.5%	D > R	T + 1%
Bacon (NE – 02)	Dense suburban	99	2.6%		B + 6.3%
Kean (NJ – 07)	Rural suburban	20	2.8%	D > R	B + 3.9%
Santos (NY – 03)	Urban suburban	13	8.2%	D > R	B + 8.2%
D'Esposito (NY – 04)	Urban suburban	56	3.7%	D > R	B + 14.5%
Lawler (NY – 17)	Sparce suburban	40	.8%	D > R	B + 10.1%
Molinaro (NY – 19)	Rural	186	2.2%	D > R	B + 4.6%
Williams (NY – 22)	Rural suburban	309	1%		B + 7.5%
Chavez-DeRemer (OR – 05)	Sparce suburban	209	2%	D > R	B + 8.9%
Kiggans (VA – 02)	Sparce suburban	133	3.4%	D > R	B + 1.9%

TAKEAWAYS

- 18 Republican incumbents are in districts carried by Biden. The Republicans are defending 10 seats in California and New York.
- At-risk Republican seats rank in the top 35% (157) on average for educational attainment levels.

KEY FIGURES

- Urban districts (0)
- Urban suburban districts (3)
- Dense suburban districts (5)
- Sparce suburban districts (7)
- Rural suburban districts (3)
- Rural districts (1)

NOTES

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THE ROAD AHEAD

Heading into the 2024 elections the country remains deeply and narrowly divided. The divisions are so deep that in 10 out of the last 12 elections control changed in the House, Senate, and/or the White House. The level of rancor continues to increase, and the recent shift of the Supreme Court to the right has further magnified these divisions.

The "diploma divide" has increasingly led to a sorting of Americans into the Democratic and Republican Parties by educational attainment. This trend has reshaped the political landscape with only a handful of states and congressional districts determining power in our country during the current period of political turmoil and instability which began at the beginning of this century.

Never before has such a limited number of states had such an outsized impact on the results of elections. As both political tribes continue to dig in, it is likely that these current trends will continue to intensify during the 2024 elections and through the rest of this decade.

Educational Attainment by State
Bachelor degree or higher

*Six out of the eight swing states have educational levels at or near
the national average*