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## **Polar(ized) Opposites: A Nation Divided by Politics, Geography, and Demographics**

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No sentient American could be surprised to read that our political landscape is deeply polarized. But less understood, bordering on shocking, is just how wide—and wide-ranging—the *physical* divide has become. Far beyond the ideological differences between our two major parties and their followers, we are increasingly separated by geography and demographics.

True, our recent national elections have tended to be relatively tight and are much closer now than in prior centuries (though in recent days the 2020 Presidential race seems to be heading for a blowout). But as a country, we're much more divided by where we live. Voters today are increasingly likely to be surrounded primarily by like-minded electorates—not just in the virtual worlds of social media, but in the physical world of actual neighborhoods and communities.

The vast majority of counties now are either solidly red or blue, with a rare few staking a middle “purple” ground. This is especially true for Republicans, who account for the overwhelming share of the most partisan counties. The two major parties are also divided by demographics, with Democrats tending to reside in larger, more affluent, more diverse counties compared to the much smaller, less affluent, whiter Republican counties. And all of these tendencies have been intensifying in recent decades.

No wonder our representatives in Washington find so little common ground: their voters come from different worlds—or at least much different places with sharply diverging demographic profiles.

### **Close Elections. But a Divided Nation.**

Recent presidential elections have been quite close by historical standards. The average margin of victory in the popular vote over the last eight elections since Reagan's second election has been just 4.7 percentage points (“pps”), compared to 13.2 pps in the preceding 48 elections since Washington (excluded because he ran unopposed in both elections). In fact, the *greatest* margin in recent years (8.5 pps) is a third less than the *mean* margin (13.2 pps) in the prior 184 years (*Fig. 1*).

<b>Margins of Victory in Popular Vote in Presidential Elections Since 1800</b>			
	<b>1800 - 1984</b>	<b>1988 - 2016</b>	<b>All Years</b>
Number	48	8	56
Max	64.7%	8.5%	64.7%
Min*	-10.4%	-2.1%	-10.4%
Average (Absolute Value)	13.2%	4.7%	12.0%

\* Negative margins occur when the winning candidate won Electoral College but lost popular vote.  
Source: Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Elections via Wikipedia; compiled by Nelson Economics

Figure 1

But the closeness of recent elections belies the degree of geographic polarization in the nation. This polarity occurs in two distinct ways: the share of counties won by each party and the margin of victory within each county. In the last presidential election, the two major-party candidates split the popular vote nearly evenly, with a margin of just 2.2 pps—in favor of the losing candidate, Democratic Hillary Clinton—yet the Republican Donald Trump captured a majority of votes in 84% of counties, as illustrated in this map (Fig. 2):

**2016 Presidential Vote by County—Blue (Clinton) vs. Red (Trump)**

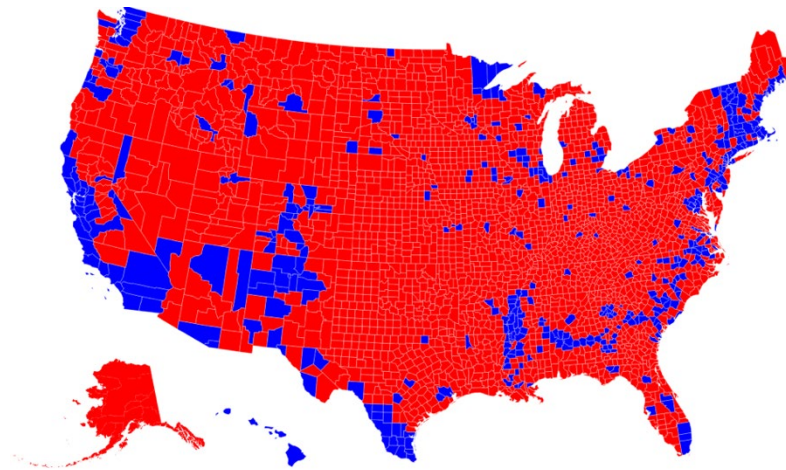


Figure 2

Moreover, the vast majority of counties voted decisively for one candidate or the other, with little middle ground. The margin of votes was as tight as the 2.2-pp national spread in just 82—or less than 3%—of the nation’s 3,141 counties. Almost 90% of counties were decided by a margin of at least 10 pps and more than a third of counties were decided by a margin of at least 50 pps! Indeed, the average margin in all counties was an astonishing 31 pps.

The voting map looks much different when adjusted for the margin of the vote in each county (Fig. 3):

## 2016 Presidential Vote by County Showing Margin of Vote—Blue (Clinton) vs. Red (Trump)

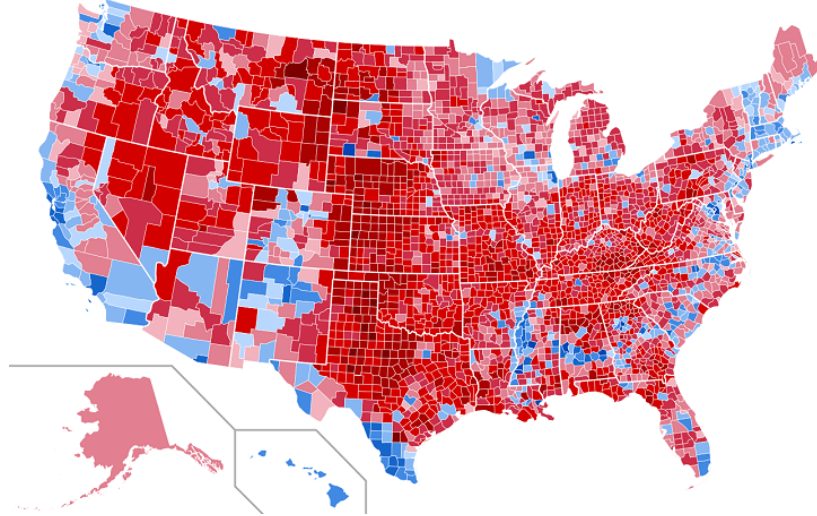
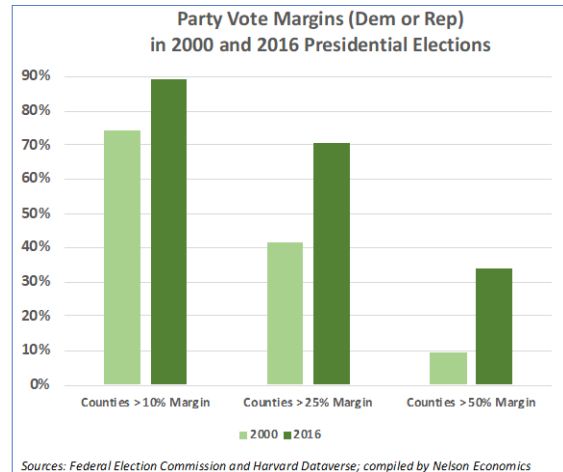
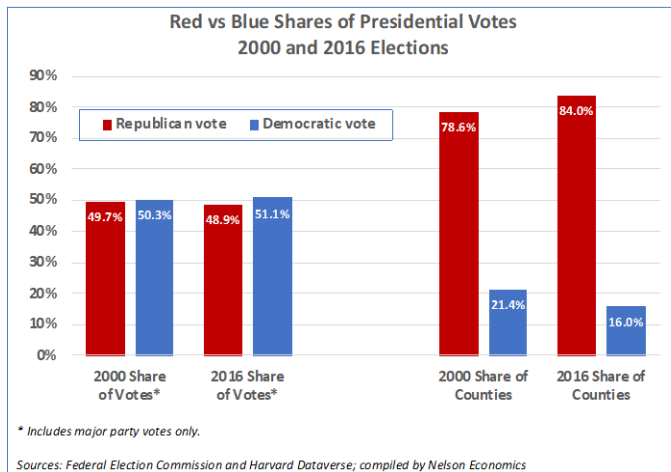


Figure 3  
Source: [Brilliant Maps](#)

### Retreating to our Bubbles

But 2016 was no aberration. The 2000 presidential election was an even closer race, with the popular vote decided by a margin just 0.5 pp. Still, the winning Republican candidate, George W. Bush, who also actually lost the popular vote, nonetheless captured the majority of votes in more than three-quarters of all counties (*Fig. 4, left*). And virtually three-quarters of counties were decided by at least 10 points (*Fig. 5, right*).



Figures 4 and 5

And the degree of polarity has been increasing over time: every election sees more and more counties decided by high, very high, and ridiculously lopsided margin. **The vast majority of these highly partisan counties vote Republican.** In the last presidential election, seven times as many counties voted at least +10% red as +10% blue. The gap is even larger for the most partisan districts: 18 times as many counties voted at least

+50% red as +50% blue. In other words, Republicans account for more than 95% of the counties with a partisan vote margin of at least 50% (*Fig. 6*).

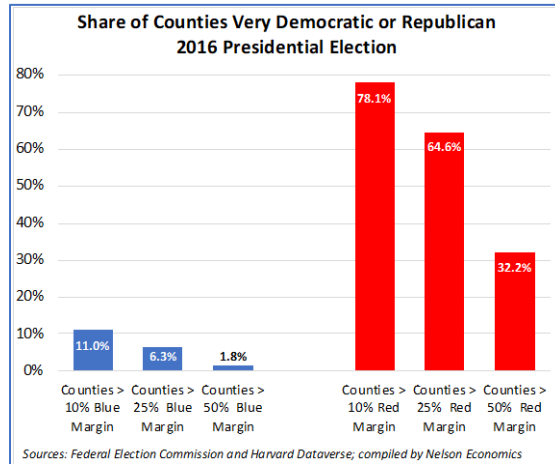


Figure 6

A histogram of vote margins provides a more complete view of just how slanted the partisan distribution is. As shown, the degree of partisanship is heavily skewed to the red side of the ledger, with a median vote margin in all counties of +37.5% Republican (*Fig. 7*).

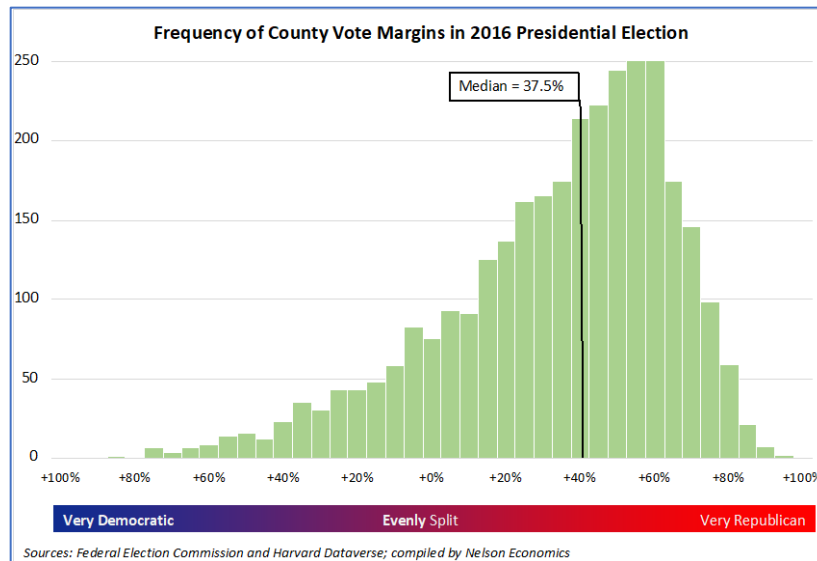


Figure 7

## A Red and Blue Demographic Split

Although our recent national elections have tended to be relatively tight, the vast majority of our counties lean red. How have Democrats been able to remain competitive nationally when Republicans are winning such a large share of counties so decisively? The answer is that Democrats tend to live in much larger counties than Republicans. The average blue county in 2016 had almost 350,000 people compared to just 56,000 in red counties (*Fig. 1*). And the more partisan the county vote, the bigger the divide in county size: deep-red counties are even smaller while the bluest counties are even larger.

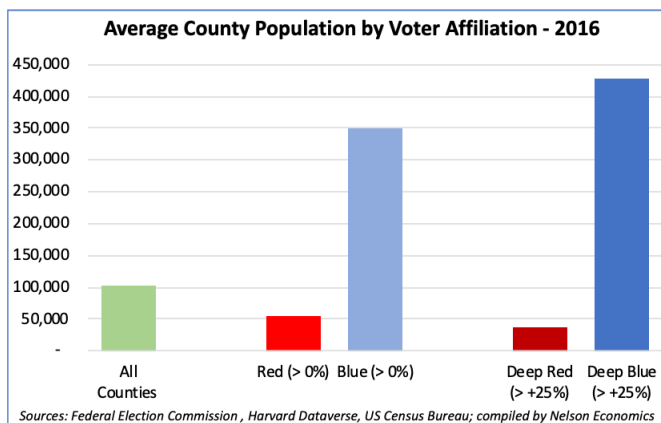


Figure 8

This trend, too, is intensifying with redder counties shrinking over time, while bluer counties are growing, meaning the size differential between red and blue counties is expanding (Fig. 2).

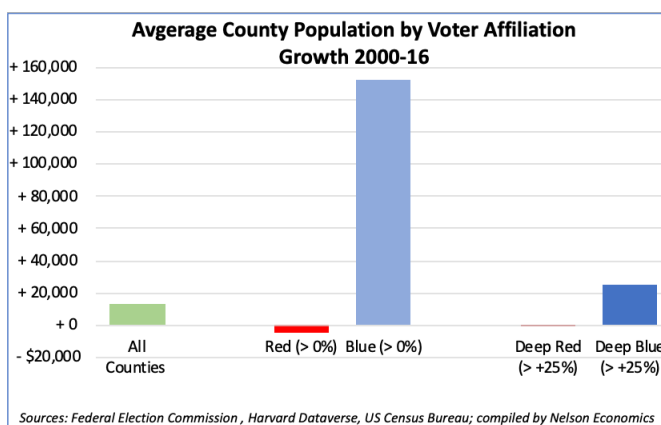


Figure 9

The red-blue schism is also evident in their respective income profiles. Per capita incomes in the last election were 28% higher in blue counties than in red, and 45% greater in deep-blue counties than in deep-red counties (Fig. 3). Moreover, the county income exceeds the national income in almost one in three blue counties compared to just one in ten red counties.

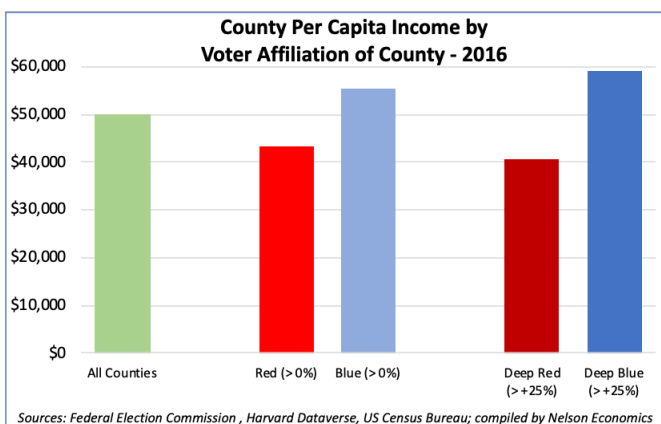


Figure 10

And as with population size, the income differential between red and blue counties is rising. Incomes in red counties grew less between 2000 and 2016 than the national average, while incomes in blue counties grew more, magnifying their income gap (Fig. 4).

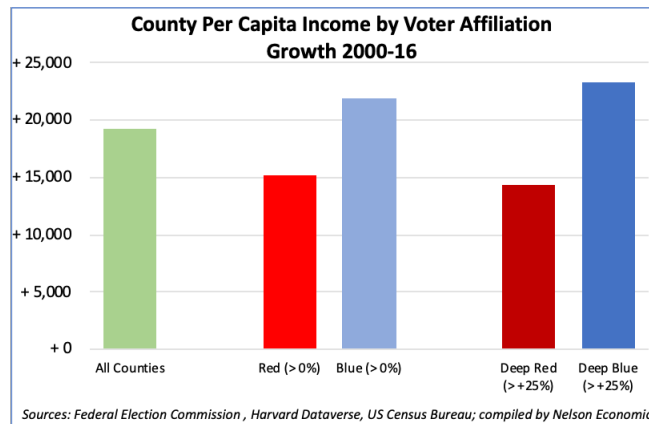


Figure 11

Finally, we can observe a large and growing ethnic split between red and blue counties. While about 60% of the U.S. population in 2016 was non-Hispanic white, that share rises to over 75% in red counties but falls to less than half in blue counties. And the split widens further when comparing deep red to deep blue counties (Fig. 5).

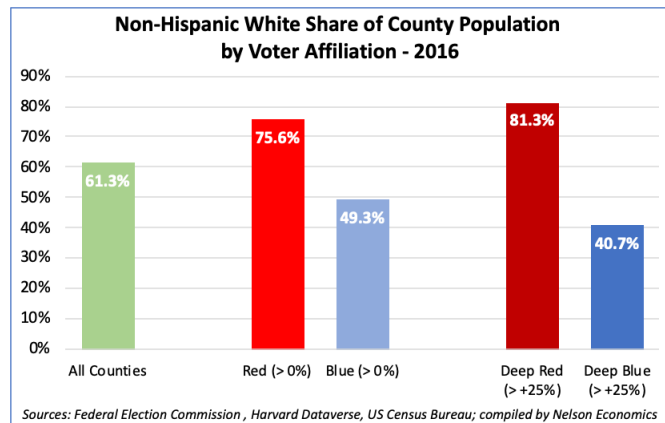


Figure 12

And this split has been widening over time. While the non-Hispanic white share of the U.S. population dropped by eight percentage points between 2000 and 2016, the decline was negligible in red counties but much more significant in blue counties (Fig. 6).

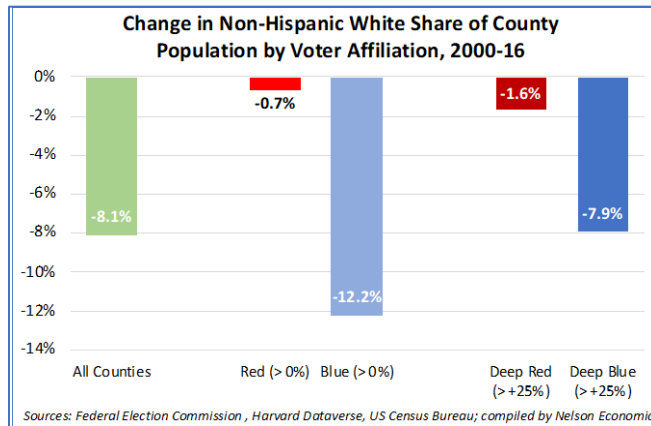


Figure 13

### More Polarized = Less Dialogue

Putting it all together, the U.S. electorate is increasingly polarized by geography and demographics. The margin of victory in the typical county averages an incredible 31 percentage points. Republican voters especially are increasingly residing in very partisan counties. The average vote margin in red counties in the last presidential election was more than 40 pps, almost twice that in the typical blue county. And Republicans account for more than 90% of counties decided by margins of at least 25 pps (Fig. 7).

	Red	Blue	All Counties
Mean Vote Margin	+41.8%	+23.2%	+31.4%
Median Vote Margin	+43.6%	+18.8%	+37.5%
Mean Population	55,567	349,220	102,782
Median Population	22,765	90,004	25,710
Per Capita Income	\$43,263	\$55,262	\$49,890
Share of Votes	48.9%	51.1%	100.0%
Share of Counties	84.0%	16.0%	100.0%
Share of Highly Partisan Counties (+25%)	91%	9%	100.0%

Sources: Federal Election Commission, Harvard Dataverse, US Census Bureau; compiled by Nelson Economics

Figure 14

But the gulf between red and blue goes well beyond just political affiliation: Red counties are less affluent and much smaller than blue counties on average, suggesting that both lifestyle choices and economic opportunities are contributing to the growing divide. And this gulf is widening over time as more red districts lose population and experience slower income growth.

A fundamental question for our nation: How will we ever start to bridge our ideological divides when we increasingly isolate ourselves among like-minded voters?