

# How the Great Migration Shaped the American Political Landscape

A Statistical Analysis of the Relationship Between the Domestic Migration of African Americans and the Rise of the Democratic Party in the North

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HIST 1378H

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April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017

One of the most defining events of the twentieth century in the United States was the mass migration of African Americans out of the southern states to the northern regions of the country. Historians estimate between 6 and 8 million African Americans made the trip from the Jim Crow states, driven by racial discrimination and the hope for a better life, to the more liberal parts of the country in the northwest and along the Pacific coast.<sup>1 2</sup>

The major demographic shift of black communities settling into northern cities was accompanied by a transformation of America's political landscape, as the Democratic party redefined themselves as the party of minority rights. The link between these two events – the migration of African Americans to northern states and the subsequent popularity that the Democratic party enjoyed in these states – is a complicated and nuanced relationship that remains relevant to the modern political discourse. The purpose of this research paper is to examine the relationship between the changes in African American populations in the states at the receiving end of the Great Migration and the reshaping of the political parties to what they are today. Specifically, this research paper aims to explore the degree to which these two defining events in the twentieth century are related. Relevant U.S. census data and election records are analyzed to understand whether there exists a meaningful relationship between the migration of African Americans and the emergent identity of the Democratic party. Using standard statistical methods, this paper intends to show that the migration of several million African Americans between the 1920s and the 1970s correlates strongly with the rise in popularity of Democratic Party in northern and Pacific states.

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<sup>1</sup> The Website Services & Coordination Staff, US Census Bureau. "The Great Migration, 1910 to 1970." U.S. Census Bureau. March 01, 1994. Accessed April 20, 2017. <https://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/020/>;

<sup>2</sup> James N. Gregory, "The Great Migration: Number of Migrants," University of Washington Faculty, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://faculty.washington.edu/gregoryj/greatmigration/numbers.htm>.

Public records from the U.S. Census Bureau provide sufficient data to examine a possible correlation between the growth of a black community and the shift in political party preference of a state. As a simple example, consider the following comparison. Figure 1 below shows the population percentage of African Americans in three states from 1910 to 1970.<sup>3</sup> For the same three states, the results of the popular vote in presidential elections are shown for the period from 1920 to 1970 with trendlines in Figure 2.<sup>4</sup> A quick comparison of the two sets of data confirm that there is at least some identifiable correlation between the percentage of a state's black population and the tendency for the state to vote Democrat in presidential elections.

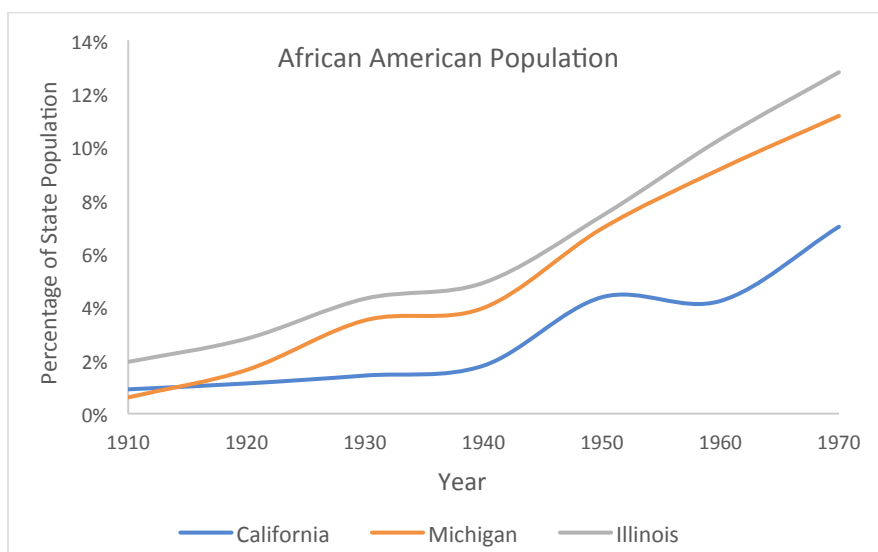


Figure 1. African American compositions of state populations per decade for California, Michigan, and Illinois.

<sup>3</sup> "IPUMS-USA." IPUMS USA: Published Census Volumes. Accessed April 20, 2017.  
<https://usa.ipums.org/usa/voliii/tPublished.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> "Presidential Elections." The American Presidency Project. Accessed April 20, 2017.  
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/elections.php>.

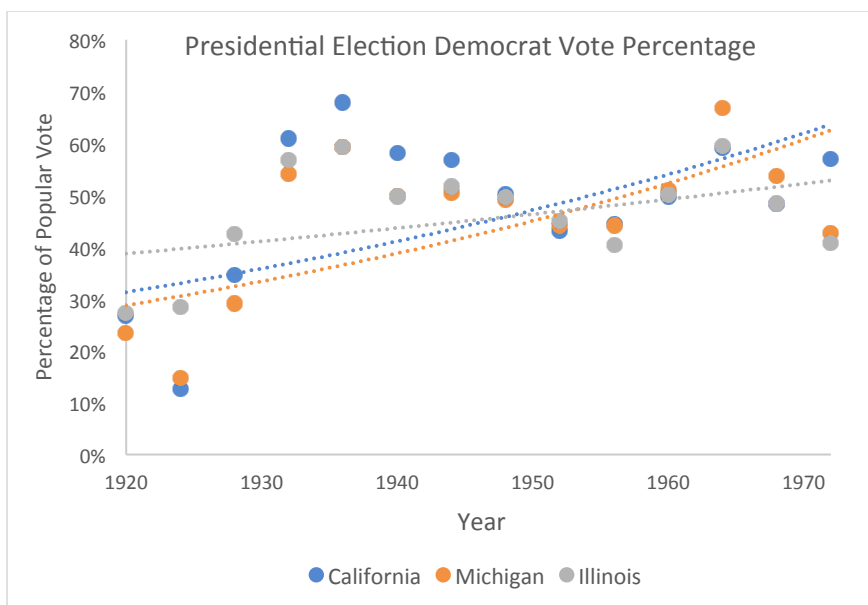


Figure 2. Percentages of presidential election votes going to the Democratic Party in California, Michigan, and Illinois per decade.

A connection between black population and support for the Democratic Party is unsurprising given the effort expended by the historically pro-slavery political group's presidential candidates starting with Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" in 1933, which corresponds to a clear increase in support visible in Figure 2. However, the question of to what degree the migration of six million African Americans affected the Democratic Party's popularity in northern and Pacific states is significantly more difficult to answer. Estimating the effect of a growing black demographic in a state on that state's political leaning cannot be accomplished by simply examining a state's voting history in isolation. Too many variables affect the outcome of U.S. presidential elections to allow for a meaningful interpretation of a single statistical variable's role in influencing party affiliation. As such, it cannot be concluded that any correlation between the racial demographic of a state and the state's voting record alone is statistically significant.

However, it is possible to estimate the effect of a demographic variable on a state's political affiliation by controlling for unrelated variables by comparing the state's voting record to the voting record of the United States itself. In other words, comparing how much support a state gives to a political candidate relative to that of the country overall for a given presidential election gives a better picture of how that state is affected by factors that do not affect other states in the union. For example, Figure 3 shows the percentage of Pennsylvania's votes during presidential elections that went to the Republican candidate.<sup>5</sup>

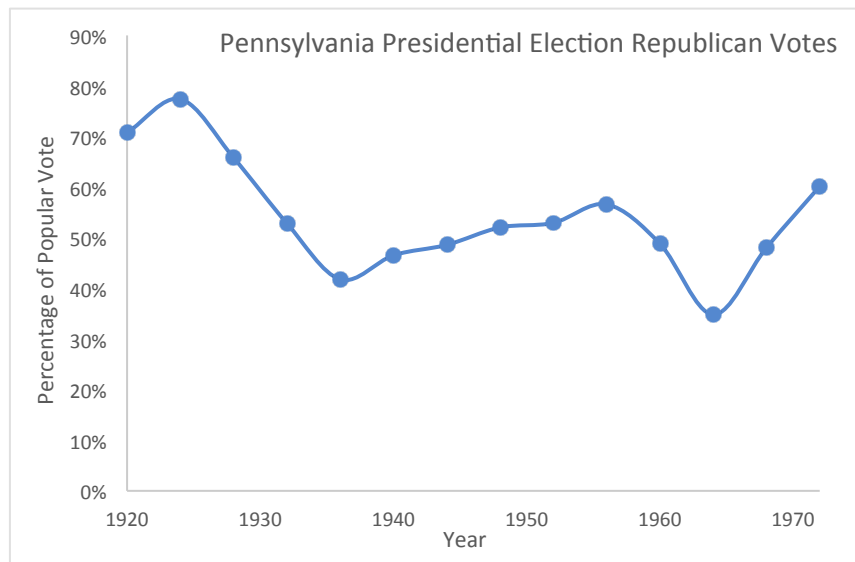
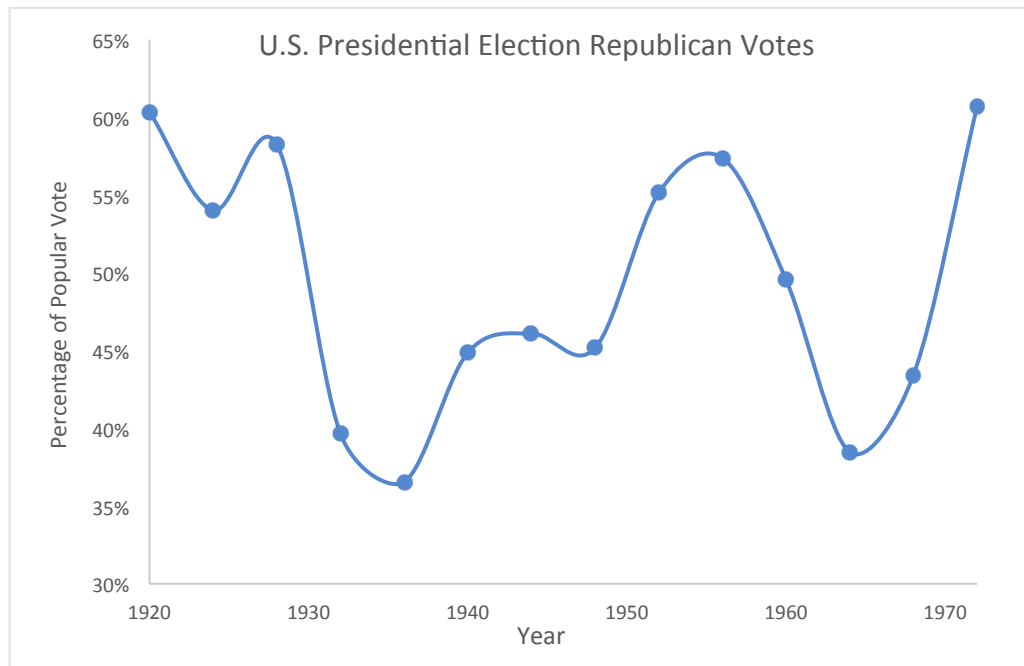


Figure 3. Percentage of Pennsylvania presidential election votes for Republican candidates.

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<sup>5</sup> "Presidential Elections," The American Presidency Project, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/elections.php>.

This data alone appears to suggest a slight trend away from support for Republican presidential candidates in the Pennsylvanian political sphere over several decades. However, variables such as the popularity of a political candidate nationwide, which could apply equally to every state as well, must first be ruled out to conclude that some aspect of Pennsylvania's demographic itself is responsible for this trend. Compare Figure 3 to Figure 4, showing the



percentage of majority votes nationwide that went to Republican candidates over the same time span.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 4. Percentage of U.S. presidential election votes for Republican candidates.

Considering Figure 4, it is entirely possible that the political affiliation of Pennsylvania shown in Figure 3 is the product of nationwide factors and not the a demographic variable unique to Pennsylvania. To differentiate between trends that occur on the state level and the national level, it is necessary to identify a variable other than the percentage of votes a state gives to a

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

particular party. If it were the case that the increase in African American populations in northern states played a role in political affiliations of those states, then it follows that there must be a measurable difference between the election results on the state and national level, which are common to those states where a large number of black men and women travelled during the Great Migration and is proportional to the number of those individuals. This suggests the following approach.

The difference between the percentage of votes given to either party on the state and national level can be examined to identify trends that are unique to the state. Comparing the performance for Republican candidates in Pennsylvania to their national stage gives a better picture of the Pennsylvania's political leaning. Figure 5 shows the difference between the percentage of Pennsylvania votes versus overall U.S. votes for Republican presidential candidates.<sup>7</sup>

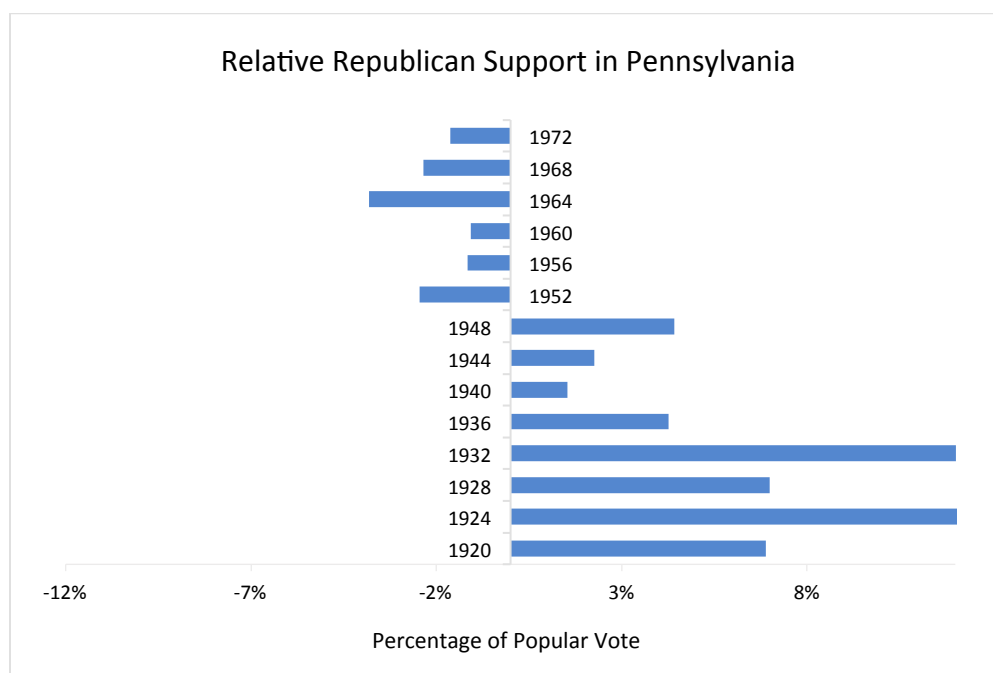


Figure 5. Relative support for Republican candidates in U.S. presidential elections for the state of Pennsylvania.

Figure 5 gives a clear picture of how Pennsylvania's support of the Republican party changes over time. Constituents in Pennsylvania voted between 7 and 12 points higher than the national average in presidential elections from 1920 to 1932. However, by 1972, Pennsylvania shows clear affinity for the Democratic party over other states. This implies that the trend suggested previously by Figure 3 is independent of any national trend and is due to some variable unique to the state. This approach can now be applied to the states in which the African

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



American community grew fastest during the Great Migration to determine if there is a meaningful correlation between black migration and northern support for the Democratic party.

Using data obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau for the state level African American population and voting records, the following variables were compared to the percentage of black individuals living in the state: percentage of Republican voters, percentage of Democrat voters, difference between percentage of Republican voters at the state and national levels, difference between the percentage of Democrat voters at the state and national levels, and the year-to-year change in each of these variables; third party candidates were taken into account as well to determine if independent voters played any meaningful role. A “correlation coefficient” in each case was calculated using the standard statistical method to understand how closely the voting behavior of a state’s constituency is related to the local population of African Americans. The closer this number is to one, the stronger the implication that there is a correlation between the black population and political affinity of a state. In four out of six destination states examined using this methodology, statistically significant correlations were found to exist between the African American population (AAP) and the percentage difference between the state and the nation’s support for the Democratic presidential candidate (% DSvUS). The cities found to have a meaningful correlation between black citizenry and support for Democratic candidates are, in increasing order of correlation – California, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. These results are tabulated in Table 1.

	Illinois		Michigan		Pennsylvania		California	
Year	AAP	% DSvUS	AAP	% DSvUS	AAP	% DSvUS	AAP	% DSvUS
1920	2.81%	-8.61%	1.64%	-11.84%	3.26%	-6.94%	1.13%	-9.82%
1924	3.41%	-5.46%	2.38%	-15.70%	3.75%	-9.74%	1.25%	-20.59%
1928	4.01%	1.50%	2.38%	-11.86%	3.75%	-6.90%	1.37%	-6.59%
1932	4.43%	-2.20%	3.59%	-5.07%	4.53%	-12.11%	1.50%	0.98%
1936	4.67%	-3.11%	3.78%	-4.48%	4.64%	-3.93%	1.65%	6.15%
1940	4.91%	-5.27%	3.96%	-5.30%	4.75%	-1.60%	1.80%	2.61%
1944	5.91%	-1.86%	5.15%	-3.19%	5.28%	-2.25%	2.83%	3.09%
1948	6.91%	-0.43%	6.35%	-2.09%	5.82%	-2.74%	3.85%	-2.09%
1952	7.99%	0.57%	7.39%	-0.40%	6.37%	2.48%	4.34%	-1.64%
1956	9.14%	-1.67%	8.28%	2.19%	6.95%	1.35%	4.28%	2.36%
1960	10.29%	0.26%	9.17%	1.13%	7.53%	1.34%	4.22%	-0.17%
1964	11.29%	-1.58%	9.97%	5.65%	7.97%	3.87%	5.34%	-1.94%
1968	12.30%	1.44%	10.76%	10.82%	8.40%	5.92%	6.45%	2.14%
1972	13.30%	2.98%	11.56%	4.29%	8.84%	1.60%	7.57%	17.48%

Table 1. African American percentage of state populations and support for Democratic presidential candidates by election year. Support for a Democratic candidate is measured as the difference between the percent of the state's vote versus the nation's vote for the candidate.

The correlation coefficients for the states are 0.6998 for Illinois, 0.9310 for Michigan, 0.8584 for Pennsylvania, and 0.5921 for California. As a number over 0.50 suggests the correlation of two variables is statistically significant, it can be concluded that as the Great Migration progressed, there developed a meaningful correlation between the percentage of African Americans in destination states and the tendency for the state to support the Democratic party.

There are two other interesting conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis. Firstly, states' black populations tended to correlate strongly with support for Democratic presidential candidates, but did not equally correlate with the lack of support for Republican candidates one might expect. This suggests that the votes for Democrats were siphoned from support for third

party candidates, which indeed is supported by the available Census data.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, the increase in Democratic votes in states where the evidence suggests African Americans affected political affiliation cannot be explained solely on the basis that the newly arrived black individuals tended to vote Democrat. The increase in support for the Democrats over the period between 1920 and 1970 thus implies that citizens of other ethnicities must have also switched political affiliation from Republican to Democrat at higher rates in the states to where African Americans moved from the south.

In conclusion, data from the U.S. Census Bureau and other government archives suggest that the migration of African Americans from southern states to the north directly correlated to the rise in popularity of the Democratic party in destination states. Regardless of the nature of the causal relationship between the two phenomena, the transformation of the Democratic party was inexorably linked to the actions of those domestic immigrants. Therefore, it is well supported that the Great Migration defined the American twentieth century not only in the journey of self-actuated men, women, and children driven by a longing for a better life free from prejudice, but also by permanently upsetting the balance between the Republican and Democratic parties and shaping the political landscape of the United States which persists today.

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<sup>8</sup> "Historical Election Results by State," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed April 21, 2017, [https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/votes/votes\\_by\\_state.html](https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/votes/votes_by_state.html).

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