

The Democrats’ Countrypolitan Problem in North Carolina: Progressive Challenge and Opportunity

By Pope McCorkle, III
with Rachel Salzberg, MPP

Summary

For the last few decades North Carolina has represented a political puzzle to national commentators, especially those with a progressive bent. Progressive perplexity has mounted after Joe Biden’s failure to carry North Carolina in 2020. It added a 10th loss to the string of Democratic presidential defeats in the state interrupted only by Barack Obama’s 2008 victory.

Instead of NC, Georgia turned out to be the other southern state joining Virginia in the 2020 Democratic winner’s circle. Much to the chagrin of NC Democrats, the national media hailed the Peach not the Tar Heel State as crucial to Biden’s victory.¹

Inquiring progressive minds can’t help but ask: Why has North Carolina remained stuck on the cusp of turning into a solidly blue state? Or in more formal political science parlance: Why hasn’t a durable Democratic majority emerged in North Carolina? Or to borrow a famous phrase from the annals of progressive complaint: What’s the matter with North Carolina?²

Some analysts see the presence of an ideologically driven “urban-rural divide” as explaining North Carolina politics today. It is true that Biden in 2020 won and gained mainly strong majorities in 10 of the state’s 11 counties with cities above 85,000 in population. And Trump won strong majorities in most of the state’s 50 nonmetropolitan (rural and small-town) counties.

Yet the analysis here identifies the state’s “Countrypolitan” counties as the principal political problem for North Carolina Democrats in the 2020 election.³ North Carolina’s Countrypolitan counties are the 28 outlying⁴ counties across the state in the same “metropolitan statistical areas” (MSAs) as the 10 bigger-city counties which so strongly supported Biden. According to the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB), these 28 outlying counties belong in such metropolitan areas due to their significant economic (job commuting) ties with neighboring big-city counties. At the same time, these counties retain significant rural and/or small-town legacies. The label “Countrypolitan” is designed to capture their hybrid status.⁵

*Since less than 75,000 votes separated Biden from Trump in NC, votes from across the state were crucial. And Trump’s performance uptick in NC’s non-metropolitan counties certainly contributed to his victory. **But the state’s 28 Countrypolitan MSA counties represented Trump’s strongest base of percentage support (63%) and Biden’s lowest percentage (36%).⁶ These Countrypolitan MSA counties also provided Trump with his largest number of votes (934,667)***

in the state. Trump's Countrypolitan total significantly exceeded his total number of votes in all of NC's 50 nonmetropolitan counties (616,299).

In terms of median income and percentage of college graduates, NC's Countrypolitan counties mainly fall in a middling status between big-city counties and nonmetropolitan counties. But the White population shares in NC's 28 Countrypolitan counties constitute the largest in the state. Contrary to stereotypical assumptions, NC's 50 non-metropolitan counties have comparatively more racial diversity.⁷

Our analysis in this document comes in three sections.

Section 1 below provides a reworking of the rural-urban divide narrative for NC.⁸ The chart in this section identifies 5 county categories developed from OMB's metropolitan/nonmetropolitan framework. The chart highlights the crucial political role that NC's 28 Countrypolitan counties played in Trump's 2020 (as well as 2016) win in NC.

As Section 2 demonstrates, the Countrypolitan problem for NC Democrats was especially clear in the state's biggest MSA of Charlotte.⁹ Trump gained large double-digit red margins in the 5 of the 7 Countrypolitan counties around Charlotte. As a result, Biden only won NC's biggest MSA by less than 4 points (and Clinton lost the MSA in 2016).¹⁰

The contrast with the biggest metros in Virginia and Georgia is striking. Strong majorities for Biden throughout most of the outlying Northern Virginia counties (in the Washington DC MSA) and those immediately around Atlanta contributed significantly to his victories in those states.

Section 3 explores whether NC's Countrypolitan counties are lost causes for Democrats in the absence of more significant demographic change. Most of these NC counties are not close to matching the racial diversity, college graduation percentages, or higher median incomes found in Northern Virginia or the counties immediately outlying Atlanta. NC's Countrypolitan problem could thus continue to dampen progressive hopes for turning the state blue.

But since Biden only lost NC by 1.3%, his campaign would have turned the state blue by simply losing somewhat less in Countrypolitan counties. Democrats would then roll up bigger overall margins throughout metropolitan NC.

One strategy for NC Democrats to "lose less"¹¹ in Countrypolitan counties involves the targeting of potentially swing voters who are more affluent, more college-educated, and predominately White. The precincts closest to Charlotte/Mecklenburg in western Union County, for example, are home to many such voters.

But another and more progressive opportunity may exist for NC Democrats. They could focus on expanding existing but overlooked blue pockets of local Democratic support in certain town centers – especially county seats – within otherwise solid red Countrypolitan counties.

Examples of such blue outposts include the racially county seats of Monroe in Union County, Gaston in Gastonia County (both in Charlotte's MSA), and Reidsville in Rockingham County (Greensboro MSA). Hendersonville in Henderson County (Asheville MSA) is another kind of blue county seat with a percentage of college graduates above the state average. All four towns have mayors who are registered Democrats.

This strategy of focusing on local blue-ish Democratic outposts could be extended beyond NC's Countryopolitan counties to other red-Republican counties across the state. Burlington for example is the biggest town (but not the county seat) in the smaller MSA county of Alamance, and it has a mayor who is a registered Democrat. So does Morganton in Burke County, New Bern in Craven, and Goldsboro in Wayne. Moreover, some towns in red non-metropolitan counties – such as Sanford in Lee County and Beaufort in Carteret County – have mayors who are registered Democrats.

So, while NC's bigger-city counties have come close to establishing a progressive electoral majority in the state, more attention to blue-ish outposts in Countryopolitan as well as other red counties could strengthen Democrats' chances in presidential and other statewide elections.

Table of Contents

Summary	1-3
1 Analysis of North Carolina 2020 presidential election results in five county categories	5-8
2 Comparing the “big-metro” vote in North Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia	9-12
3 Without more demographic changes, are North Carolina’s above-average White countryopolitan counties lost causes for Democrats?	13-16
Endnotes	17-33
Appendix	

Section 1: Analysis of North Carolina 2020 presidential election results in five county categories

The Big Takeaway

NC's 28 Countryopolitan counties constituted Trump's strongest base of support (63%), his biggest vote total (934,667), and Biden's smallest vote percentage (36%).

Other Notes

- Despite losing badly in Biden's 10 bigger-city counties (63-35%), Trump gained his second biggest vote total from these counties (875,158) due to their sizable statewide vote share (44.8%).
- Trump received more votes in Biden's 10 bigger-city counties (874,158) than in all 50 nonmetropolitan counties (616,299).

Chart 1: NC 2020 Results

County Type	Trump	Biden	Share of Statewide Vote
A. Biden's 10 Bigger-City Metropolitan/MSA Counties	35% 875,158 (36%)	63% 1,560,218 (59%)	44.8% (45%)
B. 28 Outlying "Countryopolitan" Counties in Bigger-City (+85,000 pop.) MSAs	63% 934,667 (63%)	36% 527,336 (33%)	26.8% (25.8%)
C. 12 Smaller-City MSA Counties	61% 332,651 (60%)	38% 208,597 (37%)	9.9% (10%)
D. 25 Micropolitan/Small-Town Counties	60% 429,813 (58%)	39% 274,492 (38%)	12.9% (13.4%)
E. 25 Most Rural Counties	62% 186,486 (59%)	38% 113,649 (39%)	5.5% (5.8%)
100 Counties Total	49.93% 2,758,773	48.59% 2,684,292	100%

Notes: 2016 percentages in parentheses. See Appendix A for county results in each category.

10 Summary Points

1. Biden's 10 bigger-city counties were Wake (Raleigh), Mecklenburg (Charlotte), Guilford (Greensboro and High Point), Forsyth (Winston-Salem), Durham, Orange (Chapel Hill-Carrboro), Cumberland (Fayetteville), New Hanover (Wilmington), Pitt (Greenville), and Buncombe (Asheville).¹² Biden won these 10 bigger-city counties by a decisive 63-35% margin.¹³

Yet because these 10 big-city counties contain such a sizeable share of the statewide vote (44.8%), Trump still received his second-largest number of votes (875,158) from them – more than he received in the state's 50 nonmetropolitan counties (616,299).

2. NC's 28 Countryopolitan counties provided Trump with his strongest percentage base of support (63%) as well as largest vote total (934,667). Moreover, Biden received his lowest percentage (36%) in these Countryopolitan counties. These are the outlying counties in NC's bigger-city MSAs. With significant economic (job commuting) ties to big-city counties, these counties have developed varying levels of "metropolitan" and even "mini-urban" elements or influences. At the same time, these counties retain significant "rural" and/or "small-town" legacies.

NC's 28 outlying Countryopolitan counties are Cabarrus, Union, Gaston, Iredell, Rowan, and Lincoln, and Anson (Charlotte MSA), Johnston and Franklin (Raleigh MSA), Randolph and Rockingham (Greensboro MSA), Davidson, Davie, Stokes, and Yadkin (Winston-Salem MSA), Chatham, Person, and Granville (Durham-Chapel Hill MSA), Henderson, Haywood, and Madison (Asheville MSA), Hoke and Harnett (Fayetteville MSA), Pender (Wilmington MSA), Brunswick (Myrtle Beach MSA), Gates, Currituck, and Camden (Virginia-Beach MSA).¹⁴

3. Trump received significantly more votes in these 28 Countryopolitan MSA counties (934,667) than he did in NC's 50 nonmetropolitan counties (616,299). And while statewide voter turnout increased by 16.5% from 2016, only the Countryopolitan counties experienced an increase in its percentage share from 2016 (26.8% versus 25.8%).

4. Trump won 25 of the state's 28 Countryopolitan counties. 23 of his victories were in double digits; 20 victories exceeded 20 points.

Trump's smallest victory (53%-46%) was in Granville County; the county's 57.8% White population is below the 62.6% state average.¹⁵

Trump also won Cabarrus County by nearly 10 points (54%-44%). On Cabarrus, see Section 3 of this document.

5. The state's 28 Countyropolitan counties are NC's most White counties.¹⁶ The White population reaches above 70% in 17 Countyropolitan counties – and above 75% in 12 of them.

Only two Countyropolitan counties – Hoke in the Fayetteville MSA and Anson in Charlotte's MSA – have White percentages below 50%. Hoke and Anson represented two of Biden's three wins in the Countyropolitan county category.

Biden's only other win was Chatham County in the Durham-Chapel Hill MSA. Chatham has a White population percentage (72.1%) above the state average (62.6%). At the same time, however, Chatham is one of two Countyropolitan counties where the percentages of college graduates (42.4%) and average median income level (\$67,031) are above state averages of 31.3% and \$54,602. (Union County in Charlotte's MSA is the other.)

6. 13 of NC's 25 most rural counties are in the eastern coastal plain; 10 are in the western mountains. Biden won 4 eastern counties (Hertford, Warren, Bertie, Washington) and Trump received less than 60% in 7 others (6 in the east). All 11 of these counties have majority or otherwise significant Black/Minority populations.¹⁷

While experiencing his biggest percentage uptick in these most-rural counties (from 59% in 2016 to 62% in 2020), Trump received only 186,486 total votes and gained only a total lead of 72,837 votes over Biden in these counties Trump therefore gained a margin increase of only 16,798 votes from 2016. And the already small statewide vote share of these most rural counties slightly *decreased* in 2020 (from 5.8% in 2016 to 5.5%).

In contrast, the Countyropolitan counties provided Trump with 934,667 total votes and a margin of 407,31 total votes. That represented an increase for Trump of 33,989 votes from 2016. And the statewide vote share of the Countyropolitan counties slightly *increased* in 2020 (from 25.8% to 26.8%).

7. Trump experienced a similar uptick in the state's 25 small-town/micropolitan counties.¹⁸ But Biden was still more competitive in these micropolitan counties than in the Countyropolitan counties. He won 6 micropolitan counties (Halifax, Northampton, Pasquotank, Vance, Watauga, and Wilson), and Trump received less than 60% in 9 others. Of these 15 counties, 11 have majority or otherwise significant Black/Minority populations. The other 3 counties have strong higher education connections: Biden won (53-45%) in the "university-county" of Watauga (Appalachian State), received 45% in Jackson (Western Carolina University), and received 41% in Transylvania County (with the college-town of Brevard).¹⁹

8. Standard commentary emphasizing the urban-rural divide misses Biden's more competitive performance in nonmetropolitan NC because it ignores or glosses over the racial diversity among those 50 counties.²⁰

9. The problem was NOT that Biden's "urban" support from these 10 bigger-city counties was too weak²¹ or that Trump's "rural" support was too strong.²² Biden's support in NC's 10 bigger-city counties (63%) was stronger on a percentage basis than Trump's support in the state's 50 nonmetropolitan counties (61%). And Biden's number of votes in the 10 bigger-city counties (1,560,218) far outpaced Trump's votes in the state's 50 nonmetropolitan counties (616,299).

Some analysts may want to increase Trump's "rural/small town" amount by adding his vote total in NC's 12 MSA counties with smaller (less than 85,000 pop.) city centers.²³ Trump gained 61% (or 332,651 votes) of the total in these 12 MSA counties.²⁴ However, even after such a hypothetical expansion, Trump's total rural/small-town vote would only reach 948,950 and Biden's big-city county total (1,560,218) would still be larger. Moreover, Trump's total metropolitan vote from Biden's 10 big-city counties and the 28 Countryopolitan MSA counties (1,809,825) would still nearly double such a hypothetically expanded rural/small-town vote.²⁵

10. The problem was that Trump routed Biden in NC's 28 Countryopolitan counties (63-36%). Biden won the rest of NC by a 53.4%-45.1% margin (2,156,956 to 1,824,108).

Section 2: Comparing the “Big-Metro” vote in North Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia

The Big Takeaways

- By far the weakest “big-metro” link for Biden in the three states was Charlotte’s MSA due to the strength of Trump’s support in 6 of its 7 outlying Countyropolitan counties.
- Biden gained significant winning margins throughout Northern Virginia. And he did the same throughout most of the immediate outlying counties in the Atlanta area. But in NC, Biden ran into a red wall of outlying Countyropolitan counties in the Charlotte and Raleigh MSAs.

Chart 2: Presidential election comparison, 2016 and 2020

	Margin		Difference	Change in Vote Share	2016 Share	2020 Share
	2016	2020				
New Sun Belt East						
Georgia (16)	5.2 R	0.3 D	+5.5 D			
Atlanta	8.1 D	15.5 D	+7.4 D	+0.3	58.4	59.1
North Carolina (15)	3.7 R	1.3 R	+2.4 D			
Charlotte	1.5 R	3.6 D	+5.1 D	+0.08	20.1	20.9
Raleigh	12.0 D	17.3 D	+5.3 D	+0.05	13.6	14.1
Virginia (13)	5.3 D	10.1 D	+4.8 D			
Northern Virginia	25.8 D	31.6 D	+5.8 D	+0.5	35.1	35.6
Richmond	9.0 D	14.2 D	+5.2 D	+0.1	16.3	16.4
Virginia Beach	9.1 D	15.2 D	+6.1 D	-0.3	19.1	18.8

Notes: R=Republican; D=Democratic. Excerpted from [Damore, et al., “In 2020, The Largest Metro Areas Made the Difference for Democrats,” *Brookings* \(2/4/21\).](#)

10 Summary Points

1. The Charlotte MSA is by far the biggest in the state (pop. 2.226 million in NC²⁶). Biden’s 3.6% win there stands out as Biden’s weakest “big metro” (MSAs with populations over one million) victory among the three states of North Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia.²⁷

2. Biden’s Charlotte MSA problem was **NOT** due to a weakness in his Charlotte city/Mecklenburg County vote. Biden won Mecklenburg by a 67-32% margin. That vote produced the largest numerical county lead for Biden in the state (198,896 votes).

3. But Trump overwhelmingly won 6 of 7 outlying Countyropolitan counties outside Mecklenburg: Cabarrus (53.9-44.5%), Union (61-37%), Gaston (63-35%), Iredell (65-33%),

Rowan (67-31%), and Lincoln (72-26%). Biden's only win came in the small White minority county of Anson by a 52-48% margin of 468 votes. (In 2016 Clinton won Anson by a 56-43% margin of 1,353 votes.)²⁸ Biden's small overall victory in the Charlotte MSA reflected an improvement in Democratic performance – Trump actually won the Charlotte MSA by 1.5% in 2016.

4. The state's other big MSA is the Raleigh MSA (pop. 1.39 million). Biden rolled out of Raleigh/Wake County with a 62-36% margin and a lead of 167,139 votes. The Countryopolitan diminishment of Biden's lead was not as severe because the Raleigh MSA has only two smaller outlying counties. But Trump gained impressive victories in both Johnston (61-37%) as well as Franklin (56-43%). Biden ended up winning the Raleigh MSA by a 57.7%-40.4% margin and 135,021 votes.

5. The Brookings data above show that Biden's 31.6-point victory in Northern Virginia far outpaced his 17.3-point win in the Raleigh MSA and his anemic 3.6-point win in the Charlotte MSA.

Biden's 17.3-point win in the Raleigh MSA may appear to compare favorably with his 15.5-point win in the Atlanta MSA.²⁹ But that pairing is not a proportionate, apples-to-apples comparison in geographic or population terms. The massive 29-county Atlanta MSA represented 59.1% of the Georgia statewide vote. The Raleigh MSA constituted only 14.1% of the North Carolina vote. Combined with the Charlotte MSA's 20.9% of NC's statewide vote, these two big NC metros represent 35% of the statewide vote.

6. The more politically equivalent match with North Carolina's two big metros is the sub-region around Atlanta's Fulton County containing 10 immediately outlying counties which belong to the Atlanta Metropolitan Regional (AMR) planning organization. In that comparative frame (using the Brookings data for Northern Virginia), Biden's big-metro performance in the three states was as follows:

- ***A 31.6-point victory in the 35.6% share of the statewide vote from Northern Virginia;***³⁰
- ***A 27.6-point victory (63.1-35.6%) in the 48% share of the Georgia vote from Atlanta/Fulton plus the 10 immediately outlying counties in the AMR sub-metro region;***
- ***Only a 9-point victory (53.7-44.6%) in the 35% share of the North Carolina statewide vote from the Charlotte and Raleigh MSAs.***

Some analysts see it as "a statistical fluke" in the federal OMB framework that the Durham-Chapel Hill area and the Raleigh area form separate MSAs rather than being part of a combined "Triangle MSA."³¹ Creating such a Triangle MSA³² would obviously enhance Biden's big-metro margin in NC. The smaller Durham-Chapel Hill MSA (pop. 644,367) indeed provided the strongest percentage margin for Biden among big-city MSAs (70.3-28.2%). It even gave him a bigger total vote margin (144,447) than Wake (134,921).

But even after adding in the Durham-Chapel Hill MSA, Biden's NC big-metro victory margin would still be less than half of his margin in Northern Virginia and just barely over half his margin in the immediate Atlanta metro sub-region. Biden's comparative performance would be as follows:

- **A 31.6-point victory in the 35.6% share of the statewide vote from Northern Virginia;**
- **A 27.6-point victory (63.1-35.6%) in the 48% share of the Georgia vote from Atlanta/Fulton plus the 10 immediately outlying counties in the AMR sub-metro region;**
- **A 14.3%-point victory (56.3%-42%) in the 41.9% share of the North Carolina statewide vote from the Charlotte, Raleigh, and Durham-Chapel Hill MSAs. 7.**

The big comparative difference was Biden's strength in Northern Virginia and the outlying AMR counties in Georgia versus his losses in 6 of Charlotte/Mecklenburg's 7 and both of Raleigh/Wake's outlying Countryropolitan counties.³³

Biden won 7 of the 10 outlying AMR counties in the Georgia MSA -- and 4 of them by 60% or more. He won 11 of Northern Virginia's 18 jurisdictions in the Washington DC MSA -- including all 6 of the biggest jurisdictions (the counties of Fairfax, Prince William, Loudon, Arlington, Stafford, and the city of Alexandria). All but one of Biden's 11 victories ranged from a minimum of 24 to a maximum of 64 percentage points.

8. Thus while NC's outlying Countryropolitan counties in the Charlotte-Raleigh MSAs were key to Trump's win in the state, the outlying MSA Counties in Northern Virginia and the Atlanta/AMR region were key to Biden's victories in those states:

- Without Northern Virginia, Trump wins the rest of the state -- 1,430,550 (49.9%) to 1,383,570 (48.3%).³⁴
- Without the 10 outlying Atlanta/AMR counties, Trump easily wins Georgia -- 1,746,439 (55.9%) to 1,340,621 (42.9%).
- But without the 9 outlying "Countryropolitan" counties in the Charlotte-Raleigh MSAs, Biden wins North Carolina by over 100,000 votes -- 2,409,245 (50.5%) versus 2,294,898 (48.1%).

9. On race and education, as data from the Brookings *Big Metro* team and Pew Research show, Northern Virginia and the outlying Atlanta/AMR counties in Georgia present striking demographic contrasts with the Countryropolitan counties of the Charlotte-Raleigh MSAs.³⁵

Except for the small near-Black majority (44.8%) county of Anson won by Biden, all Countryropolitan counties in the Charlotte and Raleigh MSAs have White populations above the state average of 60.5%. Black residents represent less than a quarter of both these NC "big metro" populations. The Black population in Charlotte's MSA is 22.2% -- which is just above the state average (20.5%). The Black population in the Raleigh MSA is a few points lower at 18.3%. NC's two big metros contain only around a third (38%) of the state's total non-White population.

Georgia's statewide Black population is 32.6% – over 10 points higher than in North Carolina (22.2%). According to Pew Research, the same 10-point difference exists in the Black share of the eligible voting populations (Georgia 32% versus NC 22%).³⁶ Moreover, in contrast to NC's non-White percentage of 37.4%, Georgia's percentage is 48%.

Almost two-thirds of GA's non-White population (63%) is concentrated in the Atlanta MSA. Pew Research estimates that 60% of Georgia's eligible Black voting population live in the Atlanta MSA. In contrast, only 34% of NC's eligible Black voting population live in the Charlotte and Raleigh MSAs.³⁷

Among Biden's 7 outlying Atlanta/AMR counties, 6 have non-White majority populations and the non-White percentage in the seventh (Cobb) is 48.9%. In the whole 29-county Atlanta MSA, Black residents represent 33.5% of the population and Whites constitute a 47% minority.

Virginia exhibits even more multi-racial diversity. Compared to NC, Virginia's statewide Black percentage (19%) is lower but its non-White percentage (38.7%) is higher. Similarly, Northern Virginia's Black percentage is even lower (12.1%) but its non-White percentage is higher (46%). Only 1 of Biden's 12 Northern Virginia jurisdictions have a non-White population below 40% (Arlington County 38.6%).

But the larger contrast with Northern Virginia involves the percentage of college graduates. All but one of the 9 County Metropolitan counties in the Charlotte-Raleigh MSAs have percentages of college graduates *below* NC's statewide average (31.3%). All 12 pro-Biden jurisdictions in Northern Virginia have percentages of college graduates *above* the statewide average (38.8%).

While NC and Georgia have the same statewide college-graduate average of 31.3%, the 3 biggest outlying Atlanta/AMR counties (DeKalb, Cobb, Gwinnet) plus one other (Douglas) have college-graduate percentages *above* the statewide Georgia average and were deep-blue Biden counties.

The contrast on median income levels is not as striking. Most of the 9 outlying pro-Trump counties in the Charlotte-Raleigh MSAs have median incomes *above* or near the statewide average (\$54,602). Only 3 counties fall below \$50,000 (Gaston \$49,384, Rowan \$48,667, and Anson \$40,213). All but one of the 7 pro-Biden outlying Atlanta/AMR counties have median incomes above the Georgia average (\$58,700). All the 12 pro-Biden Northern Virginia counties have median incomes above the state average (\$74,222).

10. Based on the mixed NC demographic data, the Brookings team of authors in the recent *Blue Metros, Red States* volume characterized the Charlotte-Raleigh MSAs as two of the most "***semi-countrified*** urban complexes in the nation."³⁸

Section 3: Without more demographic change, are NC's above-average White Countrypolitan counties lost causes for Democrats?

1. The need to "lose less" in NC's Countrypolitan counties? The Bitzer analysis (NC political scientist Michael Bitzer, Catawba College)

- "[Prof.] Bitzer says the threshold to watch in Union County is roughly 60 percent: If Republicans win more than that percentage of the vote, it's going to be a good election for them up and down the ballot. But if Democrats can eat into that margin, it bodes well for the party...."
– Quoted in [Graham](#), "Trump's Fate Rests on Countrypolitan Counties," *Atlantic* (10/26/20)
- "In the [Charlotte MSA's] surrounding suburban counties [like Union] ... what's the Republican margin of victory? Is it 20 points? Is it 15 points?" Bitzer said. "If it gets below 20, there's something ... dynamic going on."
– Quoted in [Woolverton](#), "Trump Needs North Carolina in 2020 Election, But the Swing State Is a Toss-Up," *Fayetteville Observer/USA Today* (10/12/20)

2. Does the 2020 Vote in Cabarrus County Signal a Better Countrypolitan Future for NC Democrats?

- In 2020, Trump won Cabarrus by a 53.9-44.5% margin.
- Trump won Cabarrus by double that margin in 2016 (58-38%).³⁹

3. Or does the example suggest that other Trump Countrypolitan counties in the Charlotte MSA and across the state first need to become more racially diverse, more "urban," and more college-educated?⁴⁰

- *Cabarrus is comparatively less White.* Its White population (59.2%) is now below the statewide average (60.5%). In Charlotte's MSA, the White majorities throughout the other five Trump Countrypolitan counties exceed 67%. The only other Trump Countrypolitan counties with White percentages below 70% were Johnston (63%) and Franklin (62%) in the Raleigh MSA, Person (64%) and Granville (55%) in Durham-Chapel Hill MSA, Harnett (58%) in the Fayetteville MSA, and Gates (64%) in the Virginia Beach MSA.
- *Cabarrus has been experiencing significant population growth.* It had the third highest growth rate (26.8%) among Countrypolitan counties from 2010-2019. Over half (15) of NC's 28 Countrypolitan counties registered growth rates *below* the state average (9.5%) during this period. While the relationship between population growth and

Countrypolitan voting patterns is a loose one, most higher growth NC Countrypolitan counties registered support levels of less than 70% for Trump.⁴¹

- *Cabarrus is more “urban.”* Its county seat of Concord has 105,240 people. Concord is even slightly bigger than the Democratic strongholds of Greenville (87,521) and Asheville (94,589).⁴² Concord is the home of NASCAR’s Charlotte Motor Speedway and high-profile NASCAR racing teams. It is also becoming a significant auto research center.^{43,44}

Also nearby in Cabarrus, Kannapolis now has a population of 53,114. It is the home of the North Carolina Research Campus (NCRC) on the grounds of the abandoned Pillowtex textile plant. Attempting to emulate the collaborative spirit of the Research Triangle Park, NCRC promotes research involving the corporate sector and NC higher educational institutions in the health sciences.⁴⁵

Neighboring Gaston County is NC’s only other Countrypolitan county for Trump with a town above 50,000. County seat Gastonia has 80,411 people.⁴⁶

- *Cabarrus is more college-educated.* Its percentage (32.3%) is above the statewide average (31.3%). Neighboring Union is the only other pro-Trump Countrypolitan County with a college-graduate percentage (35.4%) above the statewide percentage. Henderson in the Asheville MSA was the only other Countrypolitan county for Trump in the state with a college-graduate percentage (31.8%) above 30%.⁴⁷

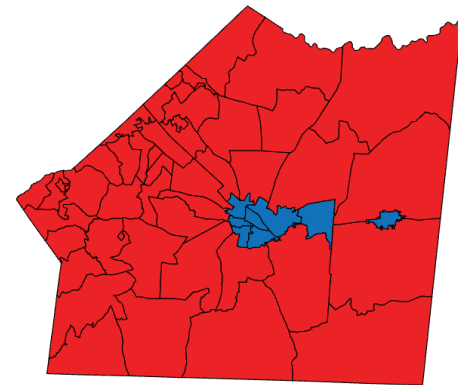
4. Union County as a test case for more immediate Democratic strategies to “lose less” in Countrypolitan counties: The option of targeting mainly White and affluent “swing” voters

- Union County might be the most likely Countrypolitan domino to fall in line with neighboring Cabarrus and become a place where Democrats “lose less.”⁴⁸ In addition to being the pro-Trump Countrypolitan with the highest percentage of college graduates, its median income level (\$80,033) is also by far the highest among Countrypolitan counties and ranks in the top ten statewide.
- After Cabarrus, Union also exhibited the smallest Trump Countrypolitan majority in the Charlotte MSA. Trump barely broke the 60% threshold (61%) in Union and Biden registered 37% – which represented a 2 point drop for Trump and a 5 point uptick for Biden from Clinton’s percentage in 2016.
- Such analysts as *Washington Post* columnist [E.J. Dionne](#) have identified “the precincts closest to Charlotte in Republican-heavy Union County” as prime sources of “suburban cross-over voters” for Democrats.⁴⁹ In some of those western Union County [precincts](#), Trump fell below the 60% support level against Biden.
- But the progressive-minded political [historians Lily Geismer and Matthew Lassiter](#) have warned Democrats about relying on persuasion strategies which “cater to white swing voters in affluent suburbs.” A political strategy dedicated to “turning affluent suburbs

blue,” in their view, is not capable of building ... a stable long-term majority nor a policy blueprint worthy of the progressive mantle.”⁵⁰ For more background, see the profile of Union in [Graham, “Trump’s Fate Rests on Countryopolitan Counties,” *Atlantic* \(10/26/20\).](#)

6. Another strategic option: Strengthening and expanding existing blue-Democratic pockets of support in Union and other red-Republican Countryopolitan counties

- Recognizing the county patterns of the 2020 votes is important. Yet, as political scientists John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck have put it, “Counties do not vote. People do.”⁵¹ Due to their hybrid mixes, even strong red-Republican Countryopolitan counties may have “metropolitan/urban” as well as “country/rural” outposts that vote more Democratic. Beyond the commonly-recognized phenomenon of “college towns,”⁵² such places as county seats – with their status as local government centers – may constitute mini-or semi-urban/metropolitan outposts.⁵³
- Take, for example, the town of Monroe in the middle of Union County. Monroe is Union’s county seat and second-biggest town (35,540). It is the ancestral home of Jesse Helms. But today, as [Graham](#) pointed out, Monroe’s seven-person [city council](#) includes four registered Democrats (including the mayor and two Black members) plus three unaffiliated members (one of whom is also Black), and no registered Republicans. Monroe has a 57% non-White majority – with 25.8% Black and 29.6% Latinx.⁵⁴ Its percentage of college graduates is 16.9% and its average median income is \$51,574.
- In 2020, 6 of 15 [precincts](#) in Monroe (the 15 precincts in the 2019 Monroe Mayor’s election) constituted an island of blue for Biden (along with one precinct in the nearby college town of Wingate and one in the small town of Marshville) in an otherwise red Union County.
- Clinton won the same Union precincts. But the vote increase for Biden over Clinton’s 2016 total in these 6 Monroe precincts was only 1.8%. In contrast, Biden’s vote total increased nearly 10 times more (17.7%) in Mecklenburg. (Trump’s 2020 total vote increase in the 6 Monroe precincts was 18.7% in the 6 Monroe precincts and 15.2% in Mecklenburg.)⁵⁵
- Is there low-hanging fruit still to be picked in terms of Democratic-oriented voters in and around Monroe? Have these voters not been targeted enough in the past because they live in such a red-Republican county? Could a place like Monroe serve as a long-term foundation for expansion of the Democratic base in a key Countryopolitan county?
- Other Trump-red Countryopolitan counties also have comparatively blue-ish county seats. For example, Gastonia (Gaston County),⁵⁶ Hendersonville (Henderson County),⁵⁷ and Reidsville (Rockingham County) have mayors who are registered Democrats.⁵⁸



Union County 2020 Results

7. Could existing blue-Democratic pockets be strengthened and expanded in red-Republican counties across the state?

- Comparatively blue-ish outposts can be found in other red NC counties beyond the Countryopolitan ones. For example, the smaller MSA cities of Burlington (Alamance, but not a county seat),⁵⁹ Morganton (Burke), New Bern (Craven), and Goldsboro (Wayne) have mayors who are registered Democrats. So do such micropolitan county seats as Albemarle (Stanly), Beaufort (Carteret) and Sanford (Lee).⁶⁰
- And elsewhere throughout NC, the Democratic vote in other strong Republican counties is often concentrated in county seat or bigger town areas.
- Focusing more on deepening and expanding such blue pockets would heed the recent warning from North Carolina's [Reverend William Barber](#): "Democrats have too easily accepted that their political fortunes depend on increasing turnout in reliably blue districts"⁶¹
- Similarly, Georgia's [Stacey Abrams](#) has emphasized the strategic importance of competing "across the state ... from the rural towns to the big cities."⁶²
- In sum, NC's Democratic big-city counties are coming close to fulfilling political scientist V.O. Key's prediction back in 1949 that "the growth of cities contains the seeds of [progressive] political change for the South."⁶³ But they may need more assistance from other parts of the state for a durable and progressive Democratic majority to develop in North Carolina.

ENDNOTES

Unless otherwise indicated, we rely in this paper on the following sources. For NC election data, see North Carolina State Board of Elections (NCSBE), [Election Results Dashboard](#). For the partisan voting registration of local NC officials, see NCSBE, [Voter Search](#) And [Voter Registration Records/NC](#). For NC general population and racial demographic information, see United States Census Bureau, [Race and Ethnicity in the United States: 2010 Census and 2020 Census/"North Carolina."](#) For other NC demographic information, see [American Community Survey, 2014-2019; also available at U.S. Bureau Census Quick Facts/"North Carolina."](#)

¹ The media celebration of Georgia as the new Southern Democratic state was especially frustrating for NC Democrats because the Biden-Trump difference between the two states was so small. Trump won NC with 49.83% of the vote and lost Georgia with 49.2% of the vote – a difference of less than 7/10th of a percentage point. As Western North Carolina University political scientist [Christopher Cooper](#) put it in his insightful post-election analysis:

“Of all the states colored red on the map, Donald Trump’s margin of victory was the smallest in North Carolina. Conversely, of all the states colored blue on the map, Joe Biden’s two-party share was the smallest in Georgia. Said differently, in 2020, Georgia was the reddest blue state in the country and North Carolina was the bluest red state in the country.”

Moreover, at the level of state offices, NC is a purple state while Georgia remains uniformly red. Republicans have majority control of both state legislative chambers in Georgia as well as NC. But in 2020, incumbent NC Democrats won re-election for Governor, Attorney General, Secretary of State, and State Auditor. Stacy Abrams’ 2018 candidacy for Governor came close to breaking the Republicans’ total lock on Georgia statewide offices. And momentum gained from 2020 might make 2022 the break-through year for Georgia Democrats at the state level regardless of what voting changes that Georgia Republicans engineer. See [Waldron](#), “Georgia is How American Democracy Falls Apart,” *HuffPost* (9/19/21); [Corasaniti and Epstein](#), “What Georgia’s Voting Law Really Does,” *New York Times* (4/2/21).

NC currently exhibits something of a return to what political scientists had called the “dual partisanship” or “split-level realignment” that started to develop as Republicans won races first at the federal level in the post-war era. See Hadley, “Dual Partisan Identification in the South,” *Journal of Politics* (1985): 254-68; Rae, *Southern Democrats* (1994) 51-52, 155 (split-level realignment); Glaser, *Race, Campaign Politics, and the Realignment in the South* (1996), 178-181; Aistrup, *Southern Strategy Revisited: Republican Top-Down Advancement in the South* (1996) 14. In the wake of Biden’s presidential victory there and the surprising Democratic victories in the two 2020 US Senate run-offs, Georgia reflects a new upside-down or reverse split-level alignment.

² White, “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” [Topeka Emporia] *Gazette* (August 15, 1896); Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004).

³ Our analysis here focuses only on the presidential vote in NC. But our review of all 2020 NC statewide races (including the six appellate judicial ones narrowly swept by Republican candidates) indicate that the Trump-Biden race set the basic voting parameters for all these races. The essential NC political story in 2020 could be summarized as partisan/ideological “polarization all the way down.”

As analyst J. Miles Coleman of the University of Virginia’s Center for Politics has pointed out, the evidence suggests that even the losing Senate candidacy of Democrat Cal Cunningham – who became embroiled in a late-breaking sex scandal after leading in late summer polling – fits this polarized pattern. As Coleman put it, “a Cunningham win would have really stood out as a pro-Democratic outlier compared to the other statewide results, given that Trump carried the state, no Republican incumbent statewide officeholders lost, and some Democratic statewide incumbents has very close calls *without* the kinds of problems that Cunningham had.” Incumbent Democratic

Governor Cooper won by a considerably smaller margin (4.5%) against an opponent who was short on campaign money and had been polling badly. Moreover, incumbent Democratic auditor Beth Wood won by only 2 points against a Republican opponent who did not mount a serious campaign and was facing unresolved criminal charges from 2012. See [Coleman](#), “Did Scandal Cost North Carolina Democrats a Senate Seat,” *Sabato’s Crystal Ball* (4/8/21). On Gov. Cooper’s raising almost four times the amount of his Republican opponent and the GOP’s success in other state-level races, See [Robertson](#), “Cooper Raised \$41 Million; Outspent GOP Candidates Still Won,” *Associated Press* (1/14/21).

Analysts have also emphasized NC’s comparative political “inelasticity” or lack of variation in county voting patterns across election cycles. See [Jan](#), “Elasticity in Swing States,” *Sabato’s Crystal Ball* (10/28/20); [Silver](#), “Swing Voters and Elastic States,” *FiveThirtyEight* (5/21/12); [Hood](#), “Few Voters Split Their Tickets,” *Carolina Journal* (10/29/18).

Part of the story behind the better performance of NC Democrats at the state level in 2018 (when they broke the GOP super-majorities in both legislative chambers) may be that it was a “blue moon” election with no statewide federal candidates were on the ballot. No federal level race at the top of the statewide ticket thus could establish as rigidly the polarized parameters for state races.

⁴ We have chosen to use “outlying” as a more neutral term to describe the geographical location of Countryopolitan counties in NC’s bigger-city MSAs. Other analysts have used the term “fringe” – which we see as too urban-centric and implying that such counties have little to no political centrality.

NC’s outlying MSA counties conform to the definition of “exurban” counties established by a team of Brookings authors led by [Alan Berube](#) in their 2006 paper entitled “Finding Exurbia America’s Fast-Growing Communities at the Metropolitan Fringe.” The Brookings team focused on high-growth locales in the largest MSAs. Yet the Brookings team acknowledged that a generic definition of “exurbs” should also include “slow/low growth” communities on “the urban fringe” of all metropolitan/MSA areas where a significant percentage of workers commute to jobs in more urbanized communities (pgs. 1-2, 6-7). We have chosen not to use “exurb” because the term is subject to such varying and culturally bound uses that do not provide very helpful guides to NC’s 28 Countryopolitan counties.

Auguste Comte Sectorsky – who went on to become associate publisher at Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy* magazine – coined the term in his semi-satiric 1955 book *The Exurbanites*. Sectorsky used the term as shorthand for “extra-urbanites.” His prime examples were members of the professional class who commuted mainly by public rail transportation into Manhattan from affluent towns in Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. On Sectorsky, see Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (2008) 199-213. See also Fraterrigo, “The Answer to Suburbia: *Playboy’s* Urban Lifestyle,” *Journal of Urban History* (July 2008) 747-774.

The cultural context of Sectorsky’s original exurbanites was thus quite different from those of today’s less affluent car drivers who commute today from and back to NC’s outlying Countryopolitan counties. At its most ideological extreme, the difference is between Yankee commuters on trains reading the *New York Times* versus Southern car drivers listening to Rush Limbaugh.

Taking the term in a different direction, recent political commentators such as David Brooks have portrayed “exurbia” as the land of “new places” and frontier-like “towns that have barely been built.” See [Brooks](#), “Take A Ride to Exurbia,” *New York Times* (11/9/04). But as historians Andrew Needham and Allen Dietrich-Ward have pointed out, this kind of analysis can display the bias of treating “suburban” and exurban” places as “of little importance until they are suddenly transformed into ... members of the metropolis by the arrival of the first subdivision.” See Needham and Dietrich-Ward, “Beyond Metropolis: Metropolitan Growth and Regional Transformation in Postwar America,” *Journal of Urban History* (2009) 943-69, 947.

The example of NC’s Countryopolitan counties fits far better with an older and now too neglected tradition of analysis which emphasized, in historian Russell Nye’s words, the “interpenetration of rural and urban traits and

values” in “rurbanized” areas. Nye, “Changes in Twentieth-Century Rural Society,” *American Studies* (Spring 1969) 25-40, 29. See Galpin, *Rural Life* (1914) 64; Sorokin and Zimmerman, *Principles of Rural-Urban Sociology* (1929) 611; Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory* (1949) 435.

The eminent Southern and UNC-trained historian C. Vann Woodward specifically invoked the term “rurbanization” to describe change throughout the region in the post-World War II period. Woodward used the terms to emphasize that many southern people and communities were moving away from the rural but “skipping” the conventional city “phase of urbanization entirely.” (6-7) On the one hand, they were joining the metropolitan way of life. But Woodward expressed doubt about what he called the “Bulldozer Revolution” developing new political cultures rather than absorbing the historical legacies of racial and populist grievance historically embedded in such places. See “The Search for Southern Identity” (1958) in Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (1960, 1993) 6.

So for example “White flight” constitutes a significant part of but does not entirely explain metropolitan growth around the bigger cities of such southern states as North Carolina. In *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (2006), political historian Matthew Lassiter charted the role of White flight in the development of metropolitan Charlotte. Yet Lassiter also pointed out that *after* the Supreme Court’s affirmation of its busing remedy for school desegregation Charlotte exhibited “a lower percentage of ‘White flight’ than most other large cities in the nation.” Lassiter, *Suburban Strategies: The Volatile Center in Postwar American Politics*, in Jacobs et al, eds, *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* (2003) 327-49, 340.

As historians Needham and Dietrich-Ward have put it, “no one really knows what percentage of suburban growth” has been due to “rural in-migration versus [urban] out-migration” across the nation (960). Research on the magnitudes of migration into Countryopolitan-type counties from cities versus rural and small-town areas (in-state as well as from out-of-state) could be essential to understanding better the exact cultural mixes in them.

⁵ In music circles, the term “Countryopolitan” has developed as a synonym for the movement in “the Nashville Sound” away from country music’s “hillbilly” origins to more of a pop crossover style. See Monroe, *Southern Music, American Music* (1979, 2003) 131. In his survey of Southern urban history, UNC-Charlotte historian David Goldfield described “Countryopolitan” as referring to “urban versions” of county music. Goldfield, *Cottonfields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (1982) 221. But historians have also emphasized the hybrid city-fied elements of country music dating back to the emergence of Grand Old Opry radio broadcasting from Nashville in the 1920s. See, e.g., Monroe, “The Rural South Moves to the City: Country Music Since World War II,” in Hurt, ed., *The Rural South Since World War II* (1998) 95-121; Kyriakoudes, *The Social Origins of the Urban South: Race, Gender, and Migration in Nashville and Middle Tennessee, 1890-1930* (2003) 8, 17-18.

See also Watson, *William Faulkner and the Faces of Modernity* (2019) 43 (portraying “early county-music performers” as “rustic Countryropolitans ... whose expressive efforts introduced new forms, sensations, intensities, and commodities into urban and national as well as rural American life.”). Watson argues that such the pre-eminent White Southern literary figure William Faulkner also grasped the hybrid nature of the supposedly traditional rural South. Watson’s comment about county music came in his Chapter 1 entitled “Rus in Urbe: Faulkner’s Rural Modernisms,” 41-74. “Rus in Urbe” is a Latin phrase whose literal meaning can be translated as “the county in the city.” See [Merriam Webster Dictionary Online here](#). Watson pointed out that *Rus in Urbe* was the title he initially chose for his 1957 novel *The Town* (44). See also Mancini, “‘Messin with the Furniture Man’: Early Country Music, Regional Culture, and the Search for an Anthropological Modernism,” *American Literary History* (July 2004) 208-37.

For use of “Countryopolitan” as a political label, see the memoir of former Wake County GOP state legislator Rick Eddins entitled *Call Me Countryopolitan* (2008). And in our view, for an insightful portrayal of an NC Countryopolitan type, see the profile of Rockingham County native Dean Price in Packer, *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America* (2013). On Price, see also Christensen, “The Country’s Unwinding as Told Through NC Man,” *Raleigh News and Observer* (1/21/14). For an analysis agreeing that North Carolina is more demographically

“Countryopolitan” than Virginia, see [Jones](#),” “North Carolina Is More Likely To Become Georgia than Virginia,” *PoliticsNC* (1/27/21).

Scholarship outside the US has focused more on analyzing such hybrid or in-between places. A common scholarly label for such hybrid places is “peri-urban.” See Ravetz, Fertner, and Nielsen, “The Dynamics of Peri-Urbanization,” Chapter 2 in Nilsson et al, eds., *Peri-Urban Futures: Scenarios and Models for Land Use Change in Europe* (2013) 13-44. For a recent application of the peri-urban concept to the Countryopolitan county of Cabarrus in Charlotte’s MSA, see Koch, et al, “Modeling Landowner Interactions and Development Patterns at the Urban Fringe,” *Landscape and Urban Planning* (2019) 101-13 (the interdisciplinary team of authors included three N.C. State scholars). For more on Cabarrus, see the text on pgs. 13-14 and endnotes 39-47.

Scholarship in other disciplines has also focused more on the hybridity of places between the city and the country. See, e.g., the essays in Hornburg, ed., *Vincent Van Gogh: Timeless Country – Modern City* (2009). See especially Sund, “Country Man/City Man: Dichotomy and Hybridity in Van Gogh’s Figure Paintings,” 73-88.

⁶ We often refer in this paper to the pioneering work on NC politics from Catawba College political scientist Michael Bitzer and his [Old North State Politics](#) blog. Our Countryopolitan county category is similar to Prof. Bitzer’s NC category of “surrounding suburban counties” in the same MSAs as what Prof. Bitzer calls “urban counties.” In August 2019, Prof. [Bitzer](#) anticipated our emphasis when noting that “surrounding suburban counties to urban counties are among the most reliable Republican voting areas in the state, more so than rural counties.”

And for many years, now retired UNC-CH journalism professor Ferrel Guillory has been a mentor and source of political wisdom for McCorkle. On our Countryopolitan theme, see [Guillory](#), “Red State? Blue State? An Education State,” *EdNC* (10/30/20); see also his quote in [Wallace](#), “North Carolina’s Changing Electorate Creates New Battleground Areas, Complicating Urban Blue, Rural Red Divide,” *Fox News* (11/10/21) (“Some rural areas, particularly those rural areas with ... majority White population, have become increasingly Republican. But what the urban-rural divide construct analysis misses is what happens in Union County, which is just outside Charlotte, and Johnston County, just outside of Raleigh. These are formerly small-town communities but are now major suburban communities of fast growth.”)

Our analyses have also been informed by the individual NC county political profiles from Darren Janz and John Wynne on Thomas Mills’ [PoliticsNC website](#).

⁷ On the comparative racial diversity of nonmetropolitan NC, see the analysis in the text at pg. 7 and endnote 20. See also [Bitzer](#), “A Deeper Exploration of North Carolina’s Urban/Suburban/Rural Voters,” *Old North State Politics* (8/6/18) (In NC “urban ‘central cities’ have the greatest racial diversity ... while surrounding suburban co [what we call Countryopolitan] counties have the least diverse voter pool.”)

⁸ For a historical tracing of the national narrative about a rural-urban divide as the source of modern partisan political conflict, see Eagles, “Urban-Rural Conflict in the 1920s: A Historiographical Assessment,” *The Historian* (Nov. 1986) 26-48. For North Carolina and the urban-rural divide generally, see [Hood](#), “Urban-Rural Gap Is Nothing New,” *Carolina Journal* (1/18/17) (quoting a passage from the 1931 book entitled *The Country Church in North Carolina* by Duke University rural sociologist Jesse Marvin Ormond stating that “rural institutions are not keeping up with the march of social progress” and “the result is that a social chasm between the ruralite and urbanite is evident.”) and [Hood](#), “It’s Not About Urban Versus Rural,” *Carolina Journal* (12/3/18). See also Lassiter and Kruse, “The Bulldozer Revolution: Suburbs and Southern History Since World War II,” *Journal of Southern History* (August 2009) 691-706, 692) (while “an urban-suburban dichotomy took hold in community studies of the postwar North and Midwest, ... the geographic divisions and political conflicts within the modern South” have been primarily narrated through the “categories” of “rural versus urban (or sometimes metropolitan.”)

⁹ In this paper, we focus on NC’s red Countryopolitan counties in the state’s biggest metros of Charlotte and Raleigh in contrast to the biggest metros in Georgia and Virginia. Obviously the Countryopolitan notion could have some

applicability to bigger metros in other Southern states, especially the Nashville area in Tennessee. Nashville's MSA fits with NC's red Countryopolitan pattern: the consolidated Nashville-Davidson urban county area is a Democratic bastion surrounded by 12 outlying red-Republican counties in the MSA whose overall vote numbers swamp it. See, e.g., [Ross](#), "A Big, Blue Dot in a Deep Red State, Ready for Biden (10/31/20); [Smith](#), "Nashville Lies at the Heart of a Divided Country," *Guardian* (3/18/17); "[Tennessee Presidential Election Results](#)," *New York Times* (3/26/21). The phenomenon of outlying counties wiping out Democratic city leads also exists in a substantial number of metropolitan areas across the rest of the country, especially below the mega-level of the MSAs centered around New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago. See [Florida](#), "How Metro Areas Voted in the 2020 Election," *Bloomberg City Lab* (12/4/20) and [Florida](#), "Mapping How America's Metros Voted in the 2016 Election," *Bloomberg City Lab* (12/1/16).

¹⁰ In pointing out that NC Democrats have a comparative Countryopolitan problem especially in their largest MSAs of Charlotte and Raleigh, we are not at all suggesting that the 2020 results establish Democrats in Georgia as now having a durable electoral majority. See [Bacon](#), "Democrats Hope Georgia Will Become the Next Virginia, But It Could End Up Being the Next North Carolina," *FiveThirtyEight* (1/5/21) (quoting the comparative insights of NC political scientists Susan Roberts of Davidson and Whitney Ross Manzo of Meredith College). Given the closeness of the Biden-Trump margins in both states (see endnote 1) and the strength of the Biden margin in the Atlanta MSA, it is fair to say that the continuing challenge for Georgia Democrats is their comparative weakness in the rest of the state.

And we are not suggesting that Democratic candidates in NC are always fated to lose or do worse than Democratic candidates in Georgia. Not only did the incumbent Governor Roy Cooper and three other incumbent statewide Democratic officials win in 2020. But on Election Day incumbent Georgia GOP Senator David Perdue in fact came closer to a majority (49.73%) than did victorious incumbent NC GOP Senator Thom Tillis (48.09%). But Georgia's distinctive 50% requirement dictated a January runoff with Democrat Jon Ossof. Moreover, the presence of multiple Republican candidates in the Georgia's distinctive nonpartisan primary system scrambled GOP chances of avoiding a runoff. That Senate seat was only in play because popular GOP incumbent Senator Johnny Isakson retired early due to health reasons.

Virginia comes far closer to qualifying as a state now with a durable Democratic majority. In stark contrast to all other Southern states, Democrats in Virginia have full control of state government – the Governor's mansion, both legislative chambers, both US Senate seats, and congressional delegation majority (7-4) and Biden gained a 10-point victory there. Virginia however might still be "southern enough" for Democrats to experience slippage in future elections. But the pattern in recent elections through 2020 has established a clear "metropolitan" path for Democratic victories there not present in NC due to the continuing red-Republican bent of its Countryopolitan counties.

¹¹ For use of the phrase "lose less," see the comments of *RuralOrganizing.org* executive director Matt Hildreth in [Brownstein](#), "The GOP is Voting Against Its Base," *Atlantic* (4/9/21).

¹² Biden's 10 bigger-city counties include 12 of NC's bigger cities. These bigger cities are as follows: (i) NC's 9 cities above 100,000 in population, (ii) 2 of its 3 cities between 90,000-100,000 (Greenville and Asheville) plus (iii) the adjoining city-towns of Chapel Hill (64,051) and Carrboro (21,190). Only one county in the Trump column has a locale whose population exceeds 85,000. This is Cabarrus; its county seat of Concord has a population of 105,240. For more on Concord and Cabarrus, see text on pgs. 13-14 and endnotes 39-47. Two Biden bigger-city counties have two cities above 100,000 in population – Wake (Raleigh as well as Cary) and Guilford (Greensboro as well as High Point).

¹³ Biden's only less than double-digit victory in the 10 bigger-city counties was his 50-48% New Hanover win. In 2016 Clinton also won all these bigger-city counties except for New Hanover (where Trump won 49-46%). For an analysis of the mixed 2020 partisan results in New Hanover, see [Lennon](#), "Collaboration with Trump Campaign Was a Cornerstone of Local Republicans' Strategy," *Port City Daily* (12/2/20).

Clinton's overall margin in these 10 bigger-city counties was 59-36%. In 2020 over 300,000 more voters within the 10 bigger-city counties turned out (2,477,672) compared to 2016 (2,133,557). And Biden received almost 300,000 more votes in those 10 counties (1,560,218) than Clinton (1,262,043). But the statewide vote share in these 10 bigger-city counties (44.8%) was virtually unchanged from 2016 (45%). See Chart 1 on p. 5.

Biden (and Clinton) clearly ran up even higher margins inside the cities. Vote totals inside NC cities are not readily available from the State Board. Some precincts moreover mix votes from inside and outside city limits. But visual review of the [State Board's precinct data](#) shows strong concentrations of "blue" Biden support within all 12 big cities.

The pioneering work of Prof. Bitzer confirms Biden's vote strength inside the state's bigger cities. Bitzer's estimate is that Biden ran up an overall margin of 70-30% (of the two-party vote) against Trump among a dataset including the biggest "central cities" in each of NC's 15 total MSAs. He calculates that Clinton's margin was 68-32%.

Biden (and Clinton) almost assuredly ran up bigger overall numerical margins inside our 12 big Democratic cities. The Bitzer dataset does not include the Biden strongholds of Cary and High Point because they are second, not the "central," cities in their counties. The Bitzer calculations also include MSAs with central cities containing more than 50,000 people but less than our bigger-city standard of 85,000 in population – such as the Trump stronghold of Hickory in the so-called western-piedmont "Unifour" MSA.

Prof. Bitzer has also estimated that Trump won an overall 54-46% majority of the two-party vote in all the 15 MSA county areas outside city limits. This margin represented an improvement for Trump from 2016 when these outside-the-central-cities areas split 50%-50% for Trump and Clinton. It is safe to say that both Biden's and Clinton's comparative performances were better throughout our 10 Biden bigger-city counties (and 10 MSAs) than throughout Prof. Bitzer's larger collection of all 15 MSA counties.

Yet because the NC Elections Board reports voting data only for counties and does not separate out data for cities or towns, we cannot exactly identify the vote performance within our 10 Democratic bigger cities or throughout county areas outside these bigger cities. We also note that Prof. Bitzer's percentages reflect the two-party vote. We are using the official percentages from the NC Elections Board for the total vote (including minor parties and write-ins) for counties and statewide in 2016 and 2020.

For Prof. Bitzer's NC vote data on 2016 and 2020, see [Bitzer](#), "What Precinct Polarization Might Tell Us About NC's Politics Before Redistricting Kicks Off," *Old North State Politics* (8/6/21)

On turnout patterns in 2020, see also [Bitzer](#), "A First Look at 2020's Election Turnout: GOP and Suburban Voters Dominated," *Old North State Politics* (1/7/21) 4 ("Central-city voters had the lowest turnout rate at 70 percent, while suburban voters – both inside the urban counties and surrounding counties – had the highest, at 77 percent."). See also [Mills](#), "If Democratic Turnout Kept Pace with Republicans, The State Would Have A Bluer Hue," *PoliticsNC* (2/3/21) and the post-election analysis from the Raleigh-based Democratic consulting firm led by Dr William Busa entitled "[Political Demographics of NC's Urban-Rural Divide](#)" (5/2/21).

On turnout among NC Black voters in particular, see [Harry](#), "N.C.'s Black Voter Turnout Was Up in 2020. What Was Behind It?" *WFAE* (1/27/21) Harry cited data from the NC Elections Board estimating that turnout among registered Black voters rose from 64% in 2016 to 68% in 2020 (1,038,375 total Black voters) and represented 18.7% of the statewide vote. Using data from the GA Board, Tom Bonier of the Democratic-oriented Target Smart consulting firm estimated that the Black vote constituted 28.92% of the statewide vote there (negligibly down from the 29% share in 2016). Bonier, "How Georgia Turned Blue," *Medium* (11/17/20) This 10-percentage point difference in vote share is hardly surprising given the 10-percentage point larger size of GA's total Black population and eligible voting population. But in a more surprising post-election analysis for the Flip NC political organization, the Catalist political data firm estimated that voter turnout among the smaller share of registered Black voters in

NC was 65% while turnout among the significantly bigger pool of Black voters in GA was 57% (Summary of the Catalist study in McCorkle's possession).

¹⁴ For more information on our definition of Countryropolitan counties, see endnote 5.

Critics might particularly question the inclusion of a county like Anson in the Countryropolitan category. Anson indeed has a rather anomalous history among outlying counties in Charlotte's MSA. During the 2012 election cycle, the level of commuting from Anson met OMB's standards to qualify it as part of the MSA. But by the 2016 election cycle, Anson had dropped below OMB's commuting standards. Then by the 2020 election cycle, Anson's commuting had again qualified it for MSA status. Anson does not have a "micropolitan" small-town center. It has thus been cycling in and out of OMB's "remainder" county category – or what we are calling the "most rural" counties. Based on 2010 Census data, Anson has a 78.5% rural population density.

But Anson's removal would not change the status of the Countryropolitan category as Trump's biggest source of total votes and his largest base of percentage support. Anson accounted for only 11,194 total votes. And since Trump lost Anson – by less than 500 votes – the Countryropolitan category would become a slightly more pro-Trump base. And if counted in the "most-rural" category, Anson as a White minority county (44.3%) for Biden would incrementally improve his performance in that category. It thus would further undermine the stereotypical rural-urban divide view of NC's most rural counties as the heaviest White and strongest sources of support for Trump.

It appears that the Brookings team in *Blue Metros, Red States* used the pre-2020 MSA categories for NC and did not include Anson in the Charlotte MSA. See *Blue Metros*, 65 (Table 2-3 showing Charlotte's MSA with only 7 counties). But as discussed above, the removal of Anson from the Countryropolitan category would not be significant due to its small vote. It for example would not change the Brookings' team's calculation that Biden won Charlotte's MSA by only 3.6 points and Clinton lost it by 1.5 points.

But for Anson's possible status as a southern or national bellwether in the 2022 midterm elections, see endnote 55.

In 2020 the other three counties moving into the outlying Countryropolitan MSA category were Granville in the Durham-Chapel Hill MSA, Harnett in the Fayetteville MSA, and Camden in the Virginia Beach MSA. All three moved up from the nonmetropolitan "micropolitan" county category.

Removing the new MSA counties of Granville and Harnett from the Countryropolitan category would have the same incremental effect as removing Anson. Since Granville was Trump's closest Countryropolitan win (53-46%) and his win in Harnett (60-38%) was below his overall Countryropolitan average (63-36%), the Countryropolitan category would become even more strongly pro-Trump without those two counties. And contrary to the standard rural-urban divide view, the nonmetropolitan /micropolitan category would become slightly less pro-Trump.

Camden is a small county in Northeastern NC previously connected with Pasquotank County in the Elizabeth City micropolitan area. It is heavily White (80.5%), and Trump's 72-26% winning margin was above the Countryropolitan average (63-37%). But due to its small number of votes for Trump and Biden (4,312-1,537), removing it from the Countryropolitan category would not significantly reduce Trump's performance levels or even offset the opposite effect of removing Granville and Harnett.

Below is a chart showing the 2020 NC presidential election results that reflects our county categories as of 2016 before the OMB change moving these four counties (Anson, Granville, Harnett, and Camden) into the Countryropolitan category. The Countryropolitan county category remains Trump's strong percentage base of support. The only change of significance is that the largest number of *Trump votes comes from the 10 bigger-city counties*; this category outpoints the Countryropolitan county by less than 3,000 votes. This version of county categories circa 2016 also thus fails to provide support for the standard rural-urban divide narrative.

NC 2020 Presidential Results According to OMB's 2016 County Designations

County Type	Trump	Biden	Statewide Share
Biden's 10 Bigger-City Metropolitan Counties	35% 875,158	63% 1,560,218	44.8%
24 Metro Fringe/Exurban "Countryopolitan" Counties	63% 873,208	35% 483,352	24.9%
12 Smaller-City Metro Counties	61% 332,651	38% 208,597	9.9%
28 "Micropolitan" Small-Town Counties	60% 482,832	39% 310,665	14.5%
26 Most Rural Counties	61% 194,924	38% 121,460	5.8%
100 Counties Total	50% 2,758,773	49% 2,684,292	100%

¹⁵ For a 2020 political profile of Granville, see [Jacobs](#), "Caught in the Middle: A Battleground County in Battleground NC Shows a Tight Race for President," *WFAE* (9/29/20). Jacobs noted the recent history of Granville as a swing county: "In 2008 and 2012 ... voters there [Granville] went for Barack Obama by healthy margins. But the county flipped in 2016, going for Trump by two percentage points."

¹⁶ See [Bitzer](#), "A Deeper Exploration of North Carolina's Urban/Suburban/Rural Voters," *Old North State Politics* (8/6/18) (In NC "'urban 'central cities' have the greatest racial diversity ... while surrounding suburban counties [what we call Countryopolitan] have the least diverse voter pool.")

¹⁷ This most-rural category amounted to somewhat stronger Trump territory in 2020. Trump's performance incrementally rose or stayed the same in all 25 counties. Biden won the same four counties as Clinton in 2016 (Hertford, Warren, Bertie, and Washington). But Biden's performance ticked downward in all 4 counties. At the same time, Biden's losing percentages ticked upward from Clinton in 8 counties, downward in 10 counties, and matched Clinton in 3 counties.

We see these counties as fitting the comparative label "most rural" in multiple ways. All 25 are NC's "remainder" counties which fail to qualify as micropolitan small-town counties in the OMB framework because they lack economic, job-commuting town centers with populations of 10,000 or more. Not surprisingly, given this economic isolation, 16 of these most rural counties fall into the NC Commerce Department "tier" of counties in the most economic distress (Tier 1). Only 2 counties (Polk and Macon) rise into the non-distressed tier (Tier 3). See the November 2020 publication from the NC Dept. of Commerce, "[County Distress Rankings \(Tiers\)](#)." None has a median income level of \$50,00 (versus NC's statewide median of \$54,602). All but one (Polk) have poverty rates above NC's 13.6% state average. Only two counties (again Polk and Macon) have percentages of college graduates above 20% (versus the state average of 31.3%).

In addition, these 25 counties have disproportionately low or “rural” population densities according to US Census Bureau data. The Bureau rates 8 of these counties as having a 100% rural density. All but 3 have a rural density rating of 75% or more, and those three (Hertford and Washington) have ratings above 65%.

But commentators should be wary of relying too simply on the Census Bureau’s “rural” and “urban” designations as political categories. The Census’ rural and urban designations represent proxies for degree of population density alone; they do not include or refer to any other social or economic measure.

In fact, the Bureau has no definition of “rural” – it is a catch-all for areas that do not meet the Census designation of “urban.” The Bureau’s either-or binary framework does make room for a “suburban” or any other in-between designation. As a result, areas that might otherwise be considered “suburban” can rather arbitrarily fall into either the urban or rural category.

In some clear ways, the Bureau’s “urban” definition moreover can be significantly over-inclusive for purposes of political analysis. For example, any locale with a minimum of 50,000 people and continuous density of 1,000 people per square mile (with some exceptions allowing even lower square-mile standards) is an “urban” area. Moreover, locations with no more than 2,500 people can qualify as “urban” clusters if they meet the density standard of 1,000 people per continuous square mile. As a result, such small NC towns as Warsaw (pop. 3,119) in Duplin County and Wallace (3,891) in Duplin and Pender qualify as “urban” along with Charlotte and Raleigh.

Nevertheless, some political commentators interpret the Census Bureau data as establishing that NC has the biggest “rural” population after Texas among the nation’s ten most populous states. For purposes of a rough general comparison between states, such population density data can be helpful to consider. The Bureau methodology (using 2010 Census data) designates 66% of NC’s population as living in locations with “urban” population densities and the other 34% living in locations with “rural” or “non-urban” densities. In contrast, the Bureau rates the urban-rural density of Georgia as well as Virginia as 75%-25%.

Still all such urban-rural density designations are highly problematic for political analysis. For if 66% of North Carolinians are treated as “urban” and only 34% as “rural” for political purposes, how do any Democratic statewide candidates lose with such an “urban” super-majority in their favor? And how can Republican candidates ever win in Georgia and Virginia if they face 75% urban super-majorities?

In the OMB’s metropolitan-nonmetropolitan framework (as of 2019), NC is more comparable to Virginia and particularly Georgia. NC’s splits 79% metropolitan and 21% nonmetropolitan. Georgia’s split is 81.9%-18.1% and Virginia’s split is 87.7%-13%. NC’s comparatively larger nonmetropolitan population is due the larger number of its people living in micropolitan/small town counties rather than in its most rural counties. *But NC has a comparatively smaller percentage of its population living in such isolated rural counties without a significant job-commuting center.* Only 5.7% (594,365) of NC’s total population (10,480,437) live in NC’s 25 most-rural counties (state total 100). In Georgia, this most-rural percentage is 7.4% (782,370 out of total 10,617,423 population. In Virginia, it is 9.4% (800,437) out of total 8,535,519 population. OMB places 54 out of 159 total Georgia counties and 44 of Virginia’s 133 total jurisdictions in this isolated remainder group which we are characterizing as “most rural” category.

Of course, the problem is even more severe if political analysis wrongly equates all of OMB’s “metropolitan” counties with areas containing strong progressive, Democratic-oriented majorities. How could any Republican candidates ever come close to being competitive if Virginia and Georgia as well as NC have over 80% of their populations living in strongly “blue” metropolitan areas?

Our Countryopolitan analysis avoids this kind of political unreality by demonstrating that metropolitan NC is divided, contested territory, with strongly red-Republican areas outside its 10 bigger-city blue counties. And as the Brookings *Blue Metros* team points out, metropolitan areas beyond the blue “big metros” of Northern Virginia and the Atlanta MSA are also contested, divided territory in those two states.

The issue of public opinion is another reason for political analysis to avoid relying too much on the high level of the Census Bureau’s “urban” or OMB’s “metropolitan” designations. We do not know of any data on how people in metropolitan or nonmetropolitan counties specifically identify the places in which they live. But according to the [A.P. VoteCast](#) surveying conducted by the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center for the 2020 election, only 53% of NC’s voters chose to respond that they lived in either an “urban” (15%) or “suburban” (38%) area. A substantial 48% minority chose either “small town” (21%) or “rural” (28%). (VoteCast rounded up the total here to 101%.) In our view, such voter/public-opinion data reinforce our Countryopolitan analysis for NC and its recognition of continuing rural and small-town legacies in counties which now formally qualify as “metropolitan.” In the AP VoteCast survey work, somewhat more voters in [Virginia](#) and [Georgia](#) chose “urban” and “suburban” while fewer chose “small town” and “rural.”

¹⁸ A “what-if” scenario underlines the relatively insignificant nature of the 2020 margin upticks for Trump in the 25 most-rural counties and 25 micropolitan counties. This “what-if” scenario hypothesizes that the margin upticks for Trump in NC’s 50 nonmetropolitan counties did not occur and the Trump-Biden percentages were the same as the Trump-Clinton 2016 nonmetropolitan margins. In that scenario, Trump would have won NC’s 25 most-rural counties by the smaller margin of 59%-39% (not 62%-38%) and its 25 micropolitan counties by 58%-38% (not 60%-39%). But based on that hypothetical “2016” percentages scenario for NC’s 50 nonmetropolitan counties in the 2020 vote, Biden would have reduced Trump’s margin by only 13,874 votes, and he would have still lost NC by 60,587 votes.

Another way of underlining the prime significance of the Countryopolitan counties is to point out the size of Trump’s “over-performance” there compared to the nonmetropolitan counties. As shown below, Trump received 33.9% of his votes from the Countryopolitan counties. That is 7% more than the Countryopolitan share of the statewide vote (26.8%). His 7% Countryopolitan overperformance is the highest among our county classifications by a wide margin.

	Share of Total Vote	Share of Trump Vote	Trump "Overperformance"
10 MSA Bigger-City Biden Counties	44.8%	31.7%	-13.1%
28 MSA Countryopolitan Counties	26.8%	33.9%	7.0%
12 Smaller-City MSA Counties	9.9%	12.1%	2.1%
25 Most Rural Counties	5.5%	6.8%	1.3%
25 Micropolitan Counties	12.9%	15.6%	2.7%

¹⁹ Compared to its 25 most rural counties, NC’s 25 micropolitan counties have a more mixed demographic profile. The micropolitan category contains 3 counties with median income levels higher than the state average (\$54,602) – the golf- and retirement-oriented Moore (\$59,963) plus the coastal, tourist-oriented Dare (\$59,381) and Carteret (\$57,194). Four counties have percentages of college graduates above the state average (31.3%) – Watauga (42.2%) Moore (37.4%), Dare (34.7%), and Transylvania (32.6%). Two others are close to the state average – Jackson (30.4%; home of Western Carolina University) and Carteret (29.1%). The Census Bureau ranks 8 micropolitan counties as having “urban” population densities above 50%. But NC Commerce ranks as many as 13 of 25 micropolitan counties economically distressed enough to be in Tier 1 (versus 13 of 16 in the 25 most rural counties).

Some commentary on the 2020 election in NC has emphasized the relatively big expansion of Trump’s vote in Robeson – which is the biggest (pop. 130,625) and poorest (median income of \$34,976) micropolitan county. Robeson also has a low White population percentage (24.7%) and the highest Native American population (42.3%) in the state. Trump’s surprising 51-47% win there over Clinton in 2016 provided him a margin of 1,246 votes. But Trump’s 59-40% win there over Biden yielded a margin of 8,786 votes. This increase of 7,540 votes represented Trump’s biggest margin increase in any NC county. See, e.g., [Kruse](#), “How Trump Won One of America’s Most Diverse Counties – By A Lot,” *Politico* (12/10/20).

Robeson certainly constitutes a cautionary tale regarding assumptions about non-White majorities ensuring Democratic victories. (See also endnote 40.) A rising cultural conservatism among Robeson's Lumbee Native Americans probably played a significant role in dashing such assumptions. But so did the immediate economic interests of the Lumbees in gaining official federal status as an independent tribe and thus access to such eventual tribe opportunities as casino ownership. At a late October 2020 rally in the county seat of Lumberton, the former casino-owner president completed the Republican turn on the issue and proclaimed his support for the Lumbee tribal status. See, e.g., [Flores](#), "Lumbees Show Appreciation After President Trump Supports Lumbee Recognition Act," *WPDE/ABC News 15* (10/24/20).

Scotland County also flipped from a 53-45% Clinton victory in 2016 to a 51-49% Trump win in 2020. That represented a net swing of 1,350 votes to Trump.

Biden however made clear advances over Clinton's performances in three micropolitan counties. His 53-45% win in Watauga netted him a margin gain of 2,230 votes from Clinton's squeaker 47-46% victory. He also narrowed Trump's winning margins in two other micropolitan counties with higher educational institutions – Jackson (from 53-41% to 53-45%) and Transylvania (from 59-37% to 57-41%). This trio of micropolitan counties together created a margin swing of 3,392 votes to Biden.

In the other 20 micropolitan counties, Trump's performance improved by 1-3 percentage points. At the same time, Biden ticked up above or matched Clinton's performance in these Trump micropolitan counties while ticking downward in the five counties that he and Clinton won.

These different political swings resulted in only a two point increase for Trump (from 58% to 60%) and 1 point increase for Biden from Clinton's performance in 2016 (39% versus 38%) in the Micropolitan category.

²⁰ North Carolina does not conform well to the generic kind of urban-rural divide model recently sketched by analyst Will Wilkinson which depicts the "urbanization" process as yielding "a nonurbanized population ... homogeneously White." [Wilkinson](#), "The Density Divide: Urbanization, Polarization, and Populist Backlash," *Niskanen Center Research Paper* (June 2019) 5; see also [Wilkinson](#), "The Density Divide and the Southernification of Rural America," *Substack* (8/30/21).

According to the Brookings authors in *Blue Metros* (p. 12), NC has "a substantial [racial] diversity in rural areas." Similarly, as political scientist Jonathan Rodden has emphasized in *Why Cities Lose* (2019) 173, NC is one of those southern states where "rural African-Americans [are] relatively efficiently distributed." See also [Bitzer](#), "Some Preliminary Findings from the NC Ninth: What Can We Learn?," *Old North State Politics* (9/12/19) ("[O]ne North Carolina exception to the national trend of rural politics is the strong presence of voters of color" in such congressional districts as the 9th Congressional District, which extends eastward from Charlotte); [Barkin](#), "Point Taken: A Different Twist on the Urban-Rural Divide," *Business North Carolina* (March 2021). Barkin's criticisms regarding the idea of a single White rural NC highlights the PhD analysis of N.C. Justice Center policy analyst Dr. William Munn. See [Munn](#), "Running Away From Home: Social and Economic Explanations of Net Migration in North Carolina Black Belt Counties (NC A&T 2016). See generally [Alijore](#), "The Role of Communities of Color in the 2020 Election," *Center for American Progress* (12/22/20); [Love and Loh](#), "The Rural-Urban Divide Furthers Myths about Race and Poverty ...," *Brookings* (12/8/20); and Tieken, "There's a Big Part of Rural America That Everyone's Ignoring," *Washington Post* (3/24/17).

²¹ See also endnotes 12-13. In recognition of their usual solid majorities or even super-majorities for Democratic candidates down to the local level, conservative commentator John Hood has acknowledged that the days of "robust partisan politics" in North Carolina's "most populous cities" are "over, for the most part." [Hood](#), "Political Future May Surprise Us," *Carolina Journal* (10/9/20).

Most of Biden's 12 big cities have nonpartisan local elections. See [UNC School of Government, Forms of Government and Methods of Election in North Carolina Cities](#) (showing that only Charlotte and Winston-Salem

have partisan elections). Yet all but two (High Point and Greenville) of these cities have mayors who affiliate with the Democratic party. Many of their city councils moreover are becoming training grounds for a new generation of left progressives. See, e.g., [Killian](#), “Is Greensboro Becoming One of the South’s Most Progressive Cities?” *Greensboro News & Record* (3/16/16); [Pitkin](#), “Young Progressive Wave Rolls Over Charlotte City Council,” *Creative Loafing* (11/8/17); [Yeoman](#), “What Happens After the Progressive Revolution Comes to a City Like Durham?” *Nation* (3/12/18); [Vigdor](#), “North Carolina City [Asheville] Approves Reparations for Black Residents,” *New York Times* (7/16/20). Moreover in 2018, voters throughout the seven most populous of Biden’s big-city counties elected Black sheriffs (Wake, Mecklenburg, Guilford, Forsyth, Cumberland, Durham, and Buncombe). See Shaffer, “With Focus on Immigration, Voters in North Carolina’s Most Populous Seven Counties Elected Black Sheriffs,” *Raleigh N&O* (7/13/18) and Yeoman, “New Sheriffs in Town as African Americans Win Top Law Enforcement Posts in N.C.,” *Washington Post* (1/4/19) (noting that Pitt County elected North Carolina’s first Black female sheriff, Paula Dance). Both Shaffer and Yeoman took special note that Quentin E. Miller was elected Buncombe’s first Black sheriff while the county’s population is over 90% White.

²² The use of quotes reflects our skepticism about the wisdom of efforts to apply absolute dividing lines regarding what counties should be considered “urban” and “rural.” See also endnote 19.

The analysis pursued by reporter Andrew Carter in the *Raleigh News and Observer’s* front-page postmortem on the NC 2020 presidential race might appear to constitute such an opposing strict urban-versus-rural approach. According to Carter’s apparent working definition, “urban” NC includes the state’s “largest cities and counties” but all other counties in the state are “rural” -- and they combined to put Trump over the top against Biden. As our analysis shows, all of NC’s 90 other counties beyond its 10 big-city counties basically need to be considered “rural” in order to claim, as Carter did, that “the considerable advantage for Democrats in more urban areas disappeared completely in rural North Carolina, so much that Biden, like Clinton before him, failed to carry the state.”

Yet Carter’s analysis also expressed ambivalence about the “rural” label for such outlying MSA counties as Johnston in the Raleigh MSA and Union plus others in the Charlotte MSA. He even cited UNC political scientist Sarah Treul’s comment that such outlying metropolitan counties are different than “the *true rural* communities and counties across North Carolina.” See Carter, “North Carolina’s Urban-Rural Divide Widens in 2020 Election,” *News & Observer* (11/7/20).

For an outstanding exploration regarding the Countrypolitan character of Johnston, see the student essay by Johnston native Katherine Tamer, “The Convergence of Urban-Rural Divide in Johnston County, North Carolina” (final paper in McCorkle’s 2017 “North Carolina Politics and Policy” Master’s Seminar at Duke’s Sanford School of Public Policy; paper in the authors’ possession).

In our view, characterizing such counties as Countrypolitan is far analytically superior to stretching out the “rural” label to include them. The term “Country-politan” captures the depth of rural and small-town legacies even in such outlying NC metropolitan counties next door to big-city counties. At the same time, it does not confuse them with what Prof. Treul called the “true rural” counties in the rest of NC. Our distinguishing emphasis on NC’s 25 Countrypolitan counties moreover underlines the key point that Trump’s strongest base of support was in metropolitan NC rather than the more rural and small-town counties of nonmetropolitan NC.

Finally, our analysis underscores that “regional” political characterizations of, for example, “Eastern” versus “Western” NC have become woefully antiquated and misleading. The analysis from *Washington Post* reporters David Weigel and Lauren Tierney entitled “The Six Political States of North Carolina” (8/23/20) might initially appear to follow such an old-fashioned regional approach. Yet the top factor that Weigel and Tierney emphasized in analyzing the partisan blue-red divisions within each of NC’s “six states” was whether each region had a higher or lower “share of people living in cities [than the] the state average.”

²³ The demographic profiles of these 12 smaller-city MSA counties do not fit any uniform pattern. OMB rates all of them as metropolitan based on their economic/commuting patterns. And the Census Bureau rates most of them (9

of 12) as having urban-majority population densities. But all 12 counties have median income levels and college graduate percentages below statewide averages. From 2010-2019, only two – Alamance (12.1%) and Onslow (11.3%) – had population growth rates above the state average (10%). Only one other county had a growth rate above 2% (Catawba 3.1%), and 6 of these counties experienced negative growth.

Alamance is the single county in the Burlington MSA. It is the second biggest (169,509) as well as fastest growing county in this 12-county MSA category. While not yet economically connected with them at OMB's requisite commuting levels, Alamance is sandwiched between the bigger-city Durham-Chapel Hill and Greensboro MSAs.

Military installations are in three other of these small-city MSA counties with over 100,000 people. Two – Onslow and Wayne – constitute single-county MSAs. Onslow County in the Jacksonville MSA has the Camp Lejeune Marine Base. It also has the highest population of all 12 counties (204,576). The Seymour Johnson Air Force Base is in Wayne (123,131), and Wayne is the single county in the Goldsboro MSA. The Cherry Point Marine Base is in the multiple-county New Bern MSA. While the Census Bureau rates Craven (102,139) as having a 72.3% urban population density, the two small outlying counties with commuter connections to it – Pamlico and Jones – are both ranked as having 100% rural population density.

The biggest MSA in this category is the western piedmont Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton MSA – which is informally known as the “Unifour” MSA. Its three main counties – Catawba, Burke, and Caldwell – have majority-urban population densities. Catawba is the one county in the MSA with over 100,000 in population (159,551). The much smaller Alexander County (37,497) has only a 27.2% urban density. This Unifour MSA might be considered the most “metropolitan” in this category since its four counties form the 8th most populous MSA (369,711) – ahead of the MSAs containing the bigger cities of Wilmington and Greenville.

At the same time, all four Unifour counties have heavy White majority populations. Catawba has the lowest of the four at 74.9%. Trump ran up super-majorities above 66% in all four counties.

At the other political pole is the Rocky Mount MSA in eastern NC. Its two counties have White-minority populations – Nash (48.9%) and Edgecombe (36%). Biden narrowly won Nash (50-49%) but easily carried smaller Edgecombe (63-36%). The Census Bureau rates the Biden-blue counties of Nash (52.4%) and Edgecombe (54.7%) as having urban-density majorities. Yet their urban-density majorities are at lower levels than the main three and very Republican-red counties in the Unifour MSA.

Nash and Edgecombe were the only small-city MSA counties won by Biden. But Trump's majorities failed to reach 60% in 4 additional counties – Alamance, Wayne, Craven, and Jones. All 4 counties have White population majorities of less than 66%. (So does the 64-34% Trump county of Onslow – which is 65.7% White).

²⁴ For a similar point about the composition of Trump's vote at the national level, see Van Dam, “Trump Wasn't Just a Rural Phenomenon. Most of His Supporters Come from Cities and Suburbs,” *Washington Post* (11/18/20)

²⁵ In January of 2021 OMB proposed a tightening of its metropolitan standards so that all MSA counties must have or be economically connected to “core” areas containing at least 100,000 in population. In July, after a largely critical round of public comment, OMB withdrew the proposal. See [Macagone](#), “OMB Backs Off Change...,” *Roll Call* (7/13/21). For a critical review, see [Pipa and Gesimar](#), “The New ‘Rural’? The Implications of OMB's Proposal to Redefine Nonmetro America,” *Brookings* (3/18/21). See also [Marema](#), “What Would Redefining Metro Counties Mean for Rural America? It's Complicated,” *Daily Yonder* (3/5/21).

The proposed OMB standard would have technically applied to “core” contiguous areas including but extending beyond formal city or town limits. The NC counties in the Jacksonville, Burlington, and Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton MSAs would have remained in the metropolitan category. The counties in the Goldsboro, New Bern, and Rocky Mount MSAs would have dropped down into the nonmetropolitan/micropolitan category. See [Tippett](#), “Proposed Standards Impact Who Is Urban In NC,” *Carolina Demography* (3/10/21). Gov. Cooper's administration filed an

objection to the OMB proposal. See [Tippett and Coates](#), “NC Urges Delayed Action on Proposed Metro Standards (3/17/21).

²⁶ The total population of the Charlotte MSA is 2.64 million. It contains 3 counties in South Carolina – York, Lancaster, and Chester – with a total population of 411,235. All references in the text of this paper are to the NC population in the Charlotte MSA.

²⁷ The status of metropolitan Charlotte probably represents the biggest source of confusion about NC politics. In August 2016, for example, the *Raleigh News & Observer* ran an AP story on the front page which emphasized Trump’s NC troubles due to Clinton’s strong support in “the Charlotte area.” See [Beaumont](#), “N.C.’s Changing Voter Base Hurts Trump in a State He Needs,” *N&O* (8/21/16) Yet, as the Brookings chart in the text shows, *Trump ended up winning the Charlotte metropolitan area by 1.5%*. And in 2020, national publications issued numerous stories about how suburban voters around Charlotte were rather uniformly opposed to Trump. See, e.g., [Schneider](#), “Booming Suburbs Boost Biden in North Carolina,” *Politico* (10/21/20) (“... growing metro areas like Charlotte have tilted against the GOP”); [Glucsek](#), “Trump Is Selling White Grievance. The Suburbs Aren’t Buying It.” *New York Times* (7/10/20). Biden did perform better than Clinton but still won the Charlotte metropolitan area by only 3.6% – versus his double-digit victory over Trump in Wake County and his even larger drubbings of Trump in Northern Virginia and the immediately outlying AMR counties in the Atlanta MSA.

The confusion is somewhat understandable because Mecklenburg County registered such large vote numbers and percentages for Clinton as well as Biden. On the Democratic transformation of Charlotte and the rest of Mecklenburg County, see [Lacour](#), “Outmanned Old Party: The GOP in Charlotte, Past and Present,” *Charlotte Magazine* (7/1/20) and [Harrison](#), “... Biden Won Almost Every Charlotte Precinct, Sweeping Former GOP Strongholds,” *WFAE* (1/25/21).

A big source of the confusion may well be that the word “suburban” today appears to be winning the dubious prize for being the most overworked term in American political analysis. Especially since the 2018 midterm elections, liberal-minded commentators have been claiming that “the suburbs” are turning Democratic blue. See, e.g., [Canipe](#), “Suburban Districts Moved Toward Democrats in 2018,” *Axios* (11/9/18); [Montgomery](#), “Suburban Voters Gave Democrats Their Victory,” *Bloomberg City Lab* (11/7/18). More conservative-minded commentators deny the staying power of any such shift. See, e.g., [Kotkin](#), “The Next Election Will Be Decided by the Suburbs,” *Los Angeles Daily News* (12/15/19).

The reality however is that politically different kinds of suburbs can be found in too many different places. As the work of Prof. Bitzer (see especially endnote 13) has emphasized, the vote in “suburbs” *inside* such NC big cities has been trending solidly blue Democratic, the “suburbs” *outside* such cities and in the same county is trending bluer but still constitute contested territories, while the “suburbs” in outlying NC metropolitan counties has remained the Republican base in NC. Due to this political diversity, our analysis here has chosen to avoid “suburban” as a key term of NC analysis.

²⁸ The 7 outlying counties in the Charlotte MSA constituted 40.5% of the statewide Countryopolitan vote (600,921 out of a 1,482,635 total). Yet the red-Trump nature of outlying Countryopolitan counties in other MSAs also significantly countered Biden’s big-city county margins in NC metropolitan areas beyond Charlotte. For example:

- Biden won the Greensboro MSA by only 50.5%-48.2% and 9,207 votes after gaining a 60.8%-37.7% margin and a vote lead of 65,792 in Guilford.
- He lost the Winston-Salem MSA by 42.0%- 56.6% or 52,596 votes after gaining a 56.2-42.2% margin and a vote lead of 27,969 in Forsyth. The Winston-Salem MSA contributed the second largest Countryopolitan vote in 2020 (10.75%/159,449 out of the 1,482,635 total).
- He lost the Wilmington MSA by 46.9%-51.4% and 7,426 votes after gaining a 50.2-48.0% margin and a vote lead of 2,807 in New Hanover.

-
- He won the Asheville MSA by 50.7%-47.7% and only 8,514 votes after gaining a 59.7%-38.6% margin and a vote lead of 34,103 in Buncombe.

But this phenomenon of smaller metropolitan areas going red-Republican overall is not unique to NC. As the Brookings authors pointed out in *Blue Metros, Red States*, the phenomenon of “outer suburban” areas “offset[ting] ... Democratic voting power” in counties below the “big metro” level occurs throughout Virginia and Georgia as well. See pages 103, 105, 138. The big comparative difference with NC is that the outlying counties in the leading *big metros* of Northern Virginia as well as the immediately outlying Atlanta/AMR counties have not been exhibiting this overall red-Republican pattern. We thus concentrate on this crucial comparative difference among the “big metros” in these three states.

²⁹ Throughout the text, we refer for convenience’s sake to the Atlanta MSA, the Northern Virginia MSA, and the Charlotte MSA. But all three of these MSAs have secondary job-commuting centers which appear in the OMB’s formal titles. The formal titles are the Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Alpharetta MSA, Washington-Arlington-Alexandria MSAs, and the Charlotte-Concord-Gastonia MSA. The Raleigh MSA is the only one of the four MSAs without any secondary job-commuting center.

³⁰ As the Brookings team of authors explained in *Blue Metros* (p. 127), Virginia has “independent cities” plus counties with no incorporated cities. Northern Virginia’s only incorporated/independent city with a population above 100,000 is Alexandria (159,428). The MSA also contains counties above that population mark – Fairfax (1,147,532), Prince William (470,335), Loudon (413,538), Arlington (236,842), Stafford (152,882), Spotsylvania (136,215). Spotsylvania was the only above-100,000 jurisdiction won by Trump (52.5%-45.7%). For individual county results, see Virginia Department of Elections, “[2020 Presidential General Election](#).” See also text accompanying endnotes 32 and 33.

The Brookings team in *Blue Metros* calculated that Northern Virginia had 17 total jurisdictions. In 2020 OMB added one more jurisdiction – Madison County -- to increase the total to 18. The *Blue Metros* volume was probably written in substantial part before this change. And it appears that the Brookings team’s post-election analysis in “[The Largest Metro Area Made the Difference for Democrats](#)” stayed with the prior designation of 17 Northern Virginia jurisdictions. That may explain our slightly different numbers. We find that the 18 Northern Virginia jurisdictions represented 35.7% of the statewide 2020 vote and provided Biden with a 31.2% lead (64.6%-33.3%). Madison County is the second smallest jurisdiction in the region with only a population of only 13,312. Trump won Madison in 2020 by a 5,300-2,698 margin.

³¹ See [McShane](#), “Innovation and the Endless Frontier,” *Substack* (5/19/21).

³² OMB also recognizes looser and larger statistical areas beyond the metropolitan level. OMB characterizes them as “Combined Statistical Areas.” This hypothetical “Triangle MSA” would conform to the Raleigh-Durham-Cary Combined Statistical Area. This combined area has a population of 2.08 million – which makes it very comparable in size to the NC population in Charlotte’s MSA (2.2 million).

³³ For more background on Northern Virginia and its political influence, see Chapter 3 “Mid-Atlantic: Pennsylvania and Virginia” in the Brookings team’s *Blue Metros, Red States* volume at 81-127 (section on Virginia starts at p.99) For background on Georgia, see Chapter 4 “South Atlantic: Georgia and North Carolina” at 129-169 (section on Georgia ends at p. 146) For especially on the demographic and political changes in the Atlanta area, see also [Badger](#), “How Atlanta’s Politics Overtook the Suburbs, Too,” *New York Times* (12/9/20); [Thompson](#), “Georgia on My Mind,” *New York Review Daily* (11/19/20); [Pooley](#), “Segregation’s New Geography: The Atlanta Metro Region, Race, and the Declining Prospects for Upward Mobility,” *Southern Spaces* (4/15/15). For individual county results, see Georgia Secretary of State, “[November 3, 2020 Presidential Recount](#).”

For an outstanding ethnographic profile of an outlying Atlanta/AMR county – Rockdale – before its emergence as a new Democratic stronghold, see Garner, “‘Perfectly Positioned’: The Blurring of Urban, Suburban, and Rural Boundaries in a Southern Community,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (July 2017) 46-63. In our view, the blurring of urban, suburban, and rural mentalities highlighted by Garner reflects a

quintessentially Countryropolitan characteristic. See also [Hallerman](#), “How Changes in Henry, Rockdale Helped Biden Capture Georgia,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (12/30/20); and the statement of Democratic analyst David Shor in Stanton, “How 2020 Killed Off Democrats’ Demographic Hopes,” *Politico* (11/12/20) (“The real story behind Georgia ... is just these enormous swings in the Atlanta suburbs, which make up most of the state. There are a bunch of precincts where Obama got 30 percent of the vote, where now Trump got 30 percent of the vote – absolutely wild swings in these highly educated suburbs.”)

³⁴ See also [“Without Northern Virginia, Trump Would Have Won the State,”](#) *Inside NOVA* (11/12/20) (analysis showing that Trump would have won the state by a 50.2%-47.9% margin if a more narrowly defined “Northern Virginia” composed of 9 pro-Biden jurisdictions – Arlington, Fairfax, Loudon, Prince William, Alexandria (City), Fairfax, Fairfax City, Falls Church (City), Manassas City, and Manassas Church City – is excluded from the statewide total.)

³⁵ For the general demographic (but not voting) data pertaining to whole MSAs and statewide in NC, Georgia, and Virginia in Paragraph Number 9 on Page 13 of the text, see *Blue Metros, Red States*, 17, 41, 49. For more on the demography of the Countryropolitan counties in the Charlotte MSA, see the profiles in [“Our Region”](#) compiled by the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute.

³⁶On the different Black shares of the voting population in GA versus NC, see Buchanan, “Key Facts about Black Eligible Voters in 2020 Battleground States,” *Pew Research Center* (10/21/20). For an emphasis on Georgia’s comparative strength in terms of Black voters, see the 2020 strategy analysis published by Stacey Abrams and her Fair Fight organization entitled [“The Abrams Playbook: The Strategy and Path to Victory in 2020”](#) (“Black voters, the most reliably Democratic voting bloc, comprise a significantly higher proportion of Georgia’s eligible electorate than that of any other competitive state. Georgia has, by far, the largest base of voters a 2020 campaign can turn out [p.7]”).

³⁷ Buchanan, Key Facts about Black Eligible Voters...,” *supra*.

³⁸ *Blue Metros*, 148.

³⁹ In 2018 and 2020, Democratic candidate Aimy Steele lost relatively close 53-47% contests in the races for the Cabarrus-area state House district (House #82). Steele is a Black woman from Concord who was a Spanish teacher and a school principal. She is now the executive director of the recently launched New North Carolina Project. Its goal is to use Stacey Abrams’ efforts in Georgia as a model for further expansion of the North Carolina electorate. See Murphy, “New Group Aims to Flip NC, Through 1 Million People of Color Who Didn’t Vote in 2020,” *Raleigh News & Observer* (10/8/21)

⁴⁰ In October 2020, a team of demographic and political analysts sponsored by the Center for American Progress released a report estimating the political impact of projected demographic changes in each of the 50 states. The CAP team projected NC’s current non-White percentage of 32% rising to 38% by the time of the 2036 election cycle. The CAP team moreover suggested that this movement upward of NC’s non-White vote could lead to the establishment of a durable NC Democratic electoral majority by 2028 – and perhaps by 2024 if the progressive pattern among Millennial generation voters continues. See [Griffin, Frey, and Teixeira](#), “America’s Electoral Future: The Coming Generational Transformation,” *Center for American Progress* (10/19/20).

Such analysts as Jed Kolko have suggested that more blue-oriented young and non-White voters appear to be moving into the outlying “lower-density suburbs of large metros” which currently “lean red” and they may “bring their politics with them.” See [Kolko](#), “Red Counties + Blue Folks = Purple? Reading the New Census Data,” *Bloomberg* (3/22/18). Such migration in NC could turn such booming Countryropolitan counties as Union and Johnston as well as Cabarrus into more purple places in relatively short order. See also McWhirter and Overberg, “New Life and Work Choices Revitalize Exurbs, Bringing New Strains,” *Wall Street Journal* (8/29/21) (focusing among other places on the Charlotte metropolitan area)

But the demographic inevitability of such a progressive scenario is subject to question. Especially due to increased voting for Trump among Latinx voters in such states as Florida and Texas, some analysts are emphasizing that such voters will never be as solidly in the Democratic column as Black voters have been. See [Levins](#), “Latino Vote Turnout Spikes, Shifts Election in Some Unexpected Ways,” [Charlotte] *WCNC* (11/4/20) (“There’s nothing inevitable about Democrats winning this group of voters,” [NC State political scientist Steven] Greene added. ‘And we saw that this time.’ Exit polls showed Democrats didn’t secure the Latino voters they were hoping for in states like Florida, Texas, Nevada, and parts of North Carolina.”)

Some post-election analysis has also specifically indicated that Republicans in NC made incremental “gains among Black supporters, particularly in non-urban areas.” [Marshall and Tran](#), “2020 Post-Election Analysis, *Third Way* (May 2021). See also endnote 19 on the big shift to Trump among Lumbee Native Americans in Robeson County.

Other analysts question how the Census Bureau calculates its “White” category and its claims that the US is heading toward being a “majority-minority” nation. See, e.g., [Alba](#), *The Great Demographic Illusion: Majority, Minority, and the Expanding American Mainstream* (2020). [Alba](#), “The Myth of a Majority-Minority America,” *Atlantic* (June 2021). For a review of this growing debate, see [Rosenfeld](#), “Majority-Minority Myths,” *Dissent* (Spring 2021). See also [Teixeira](#), “Demography is Not Destiny,” *Persuasion* (7/16/21); [Serwer](#), “Demography is not Destiny,” *Atlantic* (8/20/21); [Stanton](#), “How 2020 Killed Off Democrats’ Demographic Hopes,” *Politico* (11/12/20); [Pearce](#), “Can Democrats Do the 2022 Math?” *New Day for NC* (5/17/21).

Western Carolina political scientist Christopher Cooper has furthermore warned that the long realignment of Whites away from the Democratic Party has been slower in NC than in many other Southern states – and thus may continue over subsequent election cycles. See Cooper quoted in [Adams](#), “Electoral Patchwork: Both Parties Look for Success in a South That is Less Monolithic,” *Daily Yonder* (10/12/20) (“The realignment never finished here [NC]”)

Finally, the idea that demographic change guarantees a “blue” NC must contend with the fact that a significant amount of change has already occurred over the last half century and has not yielded that result. In his classic exploration entitled *Inside U.S.A. (1947)*, for example, journalist John Gunther noted the strikingly native-born nature of the state’s population. Gunther declared that that some people even referred to NC as “the most American of all the states” because “not less than 99.6 per cent of its people (by North Carolina figures anyway) are native born.” (p. 718). Yet today over 40% of NC’s population was born outside the state. See [Stanford](#), “Non-Native NC Residents, 2012-2016,” *Carolina Demography* (3/15/18).

Regardless of the demographic question, the best strategy for NC Democrats may well be to exhibit a hungry “underdog” mentality about the prospects for victory rather than seeing themselves as destined to triumph. See [McCorkle](#), “‘The Dread Handwriting is on the Wall:’ Confronting the New Republican South,” *Southern Cultures* (1998) 28-42.

⁴¹ The other pro-Trump NC Countrypolitan counties with growth rates above the state average were Brunswick (32.9%/62% Trump-37% Biden), Johnston (24%/61-37%), Pender (20%/64-34%), Union (19.7%/61-37%), Currituck (17.9%/72-26%), Franklin (15.1%/56-43%), Iredell (14%/65-33%), Lincoln (10.4%/72-26%), and Henderson (10%/59-40%) Five Countrypolitan counties experienced no or negative growth – Anson (-9.2%) Gates (-5.1%) Stokes (-3.8%) Rockingham (-2.8%), Person (0%), Yadkin (-1.9%). Biden won Anson while Trump won Gates with less than 60% (56-43%). See also text at p.14.

⁴² As already noted (see endnote 29), Concord (and Gastonia) represent a large enough secondary job-commuting centers for the OBM to formally identify this metropolitan area as the “Charlotte-Concord-Gastonia” MSA.

⁴³ See [Muccigrosso](#), “Production of Army Vehicles Powered by NASCAR Team Underway in Concord Now,” *Charlotte Observer* (5/4/21); [Smoot](#), “General Motors Announces Racing Tech Facility in Concord,” *Charlotte Observer* (1/24/20).

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Andrejev, "Today's Coke 600 is Important for the Future of NASCAR, Motorsports in North Carolina" (5/30/21)

⁴⁵ See [Cuthrell](#), "Kannapolis Presses On With Hefty UNC Aid," *Business North Carolina* (Jan. 2020). Kannapolis' percentage of college graduates (21.8%) still falls below the statewide average of 31.3%. And its median income average of \$53,365 is slightly below the \$54,602 statewide average. Its White percentage of 60.1% is slightly below the 62.6% statewide average. For a view of Kannapolis's continuing conservative legacy, see [Martin](#), "Growing Up in a Trump Town," *Deadspin* (11/11/16). See also [Boraks](#), "Kannapolis Sells Off More Blocks as Downtown Vision Takes Shape," *WFAE* (11/25/20). A smaller portion of Kannapolis is in Rowan County.

⁴⁶ For more on Gastonia, see the text accompanying endnote 56.

⁴⁷ For more on Henderson County, see the text accompanying endnote 57.

⁴⁸ In quintessential Countrypolitan fashion, Union's official "[2019 Community Profile](#)" portrays the county as containing "a unique blend of rural and metropolitan lifestyles." (p.2) See also endnote 33 on Garner, "'Perfectly Positioned': The Blurring of Urban, Suburban, and Rural Boundaries in a Southern Community," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (July 2017). All five of the [county commissioners](#) in Union are middle-age to older White male Republicans. But for an analysis demonstrating that the Union commissioners have not been dedicated to an old-school fiscal conservatism, see [Schwartz](#), et al, "Economic Growth and Public Debt; The Case of Union County, North Carolina," *Research in Business and Economics Journal* (Sept. 2013).

⁴⁹ Dionne, "In North Carolina, A Portrait of a Deeply Torn Nation," *Washington Post/Salt Lake City-Tribune* (9/11/19)

⁵⁰ Lassiter and Geismer, "Turning Affluent Suburbs Is Not Worth the Cost," *New York Times* (6/9/18); see also [Geismer and Lassiter](#), "Stop Worrying about Upper-Class Suburbanites," *Jacobin* (1/2/21).

⁵¹ *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America* (2018) 172.

⁵² Najmabadi and Knott, "Yes, You're Right, Colleges are Liberal Bubbles: Here's the Data," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (11/14/16)

⁵³ Too much current political commentary ignores the existence of such blue mini-urban outposts in Countrypolitan and other red counties because it seems to assume that the urbanization process is somehow confined to the biggest cities. Yet more than five decades ago the famed historical sociologist Charles Tilly emphasized the fallacy of truncating urbanization in such a fashion. Urbanization instead needs to be understood as a comprehensive process encompassing even the "increased involvement of the members of rural communities in sets of activities, norms, and social relationships that reach beyond the limits of their own localities." Tilly, *The Vendee* (1964) 11-12; see also Sewell, "Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology," in McDonald, ed., *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (1996) 252.

Another way to frame this sociological fallacy limiting or truncating urbanization is found in the phrase "timeless country – modern city." Scholar Cornelia Hornburg used the phrase to describe the artistic license that Van Gogh used in some of his works. Hornburg noted that Van Gogh could portray "the countryside as an environment where traditions and values remained the same throughout the centuries, even though he knew perfectly well that it was changing all the time." See Hornburg, "Imaging City and Country," in Hornburg, ed., *Vincent Van Gogh: Timeless Country – Modern City* (2009) 19-36, 19.

On the possible political significance of county seats, see generally Dacey, "A County-Seat Model for the Areal Pattern of an Urban System," *The Geographical Review* (Oct. 1966) 527-42. See generally Rodden, "Red America is an Illusion: Postindustrial Towns Go for Democrats," *Washington Post* (2/14/17) ("Simplistic county-level maps ...

colored red” can miss the reality that even “towns” in “largely rural counties” can have “a solidly Democratic core.”) But no iron law dictates that all Countryopolitan or other red counties must possess blue-town outposts.

⁵⁴ On the growth of the Latinx population in the Charlotte area and Monroe in particular, see [McShane](#), “Charlotte Region’s Hispanic Population Grows At a Rapid Pace,” *UNC Charlotte Urban Institute* (7/7/21) (“As early as 1991, the *Charlotte Observer* noted a growing population of Hispanic workers living in and around Monroe.”)

⁵⁵ In this same vein, NBC News Political Director Chuck Todd has also taken note of Anson County in the Charlotte MSA as a “bellwether” turnout challenge for NC Democrats. From our perspective, the important comparative point is all the 6 Trump Countryopolitan counties in the Charlotte MSA experienced significant double-digit increases in 2020 turnout similar to the statewide average of 16.5%. Rowan registered a 14% increase and Gaston’s increase was 19.8%. The other 4 Trump Countryopolitan counties registered increases above 20%. Yet Anson with its almost Black majority population experienced only a 6.2% increase and a significant shrinkage in the Democratic margin from 2016. See p. 10 of the text. As Todd recently put it about Anson’s bellwether turnout status, “If Democrats figure out how to get [stronger] African-American ... turnout [in a place like Anson], that is going to tell you about ... the [2022] Senate race not just in NC but the statewide races in South Carolina and the statewide races in Georgia.” Todd referred to Anson as a “rural” county, and as we have explained its status has fluctuated between the most rural and Countryopolitan status. See endnote 14 . But as we also point out, blue-ish Democratic outposts exist in nonmetropolitan as well MSA Countryopolitan counties. See p. 16 of text. And Anson may be an example of a whole county that NC Democrats need to target due to its comparative low turnout performance. On Todd’s comments, see [Thompson](#), “Anson County Could Be National Bellwether for Midterm Elections,” *WCNC/Charlotte* (10/23/21).

⁵⁶ On Gastonia as “a blue speck in a red county with a majority Democratic city council for the first time in recent history,” see [Karni](#), “Why Trump Can’t Take Red Counties in North Carolina For Granted,” *New York Times* (10/25/20). As Karni pointed out, Trump’s decision to hold a late October rally in Gastonia made him the first presidential candidate since George W.H. Bush in 1992 to visit Gaston County. In contrast, a Biden supporter in Gastonia reported that she could not even get a Biden-Harris campaign sign until she purchased one on Amazon and made it one of the “rare sightings” of support for the Democratic ticket in Gastonia.

⁵⁷ For a 2016 presidential election analysis pointing out Clinton’s relative strength in Hendersonville and other central towns in NC western counties, see [Taylor](#), “Breaking Down the Mountains: Precinct-Level Analysis of WNC’s Vote,” *Carolina Public Press* (11/14/16).

⁵⁸ Roxboro in the Trump Countryopolitan county of Granville (Durham-Chapel Hill MSA) can also probably be added to the list. Mayor Marilyn Newell is registered as an independent. But as of the local elections this fall, the five-person city council has four members who are registered Democrats and people of color constitute a majority on the Roxboro city council for the first time. See, “[Lavigne](#), “People of Color Grab First-Ever Majority on Roxboro Council,” *WRAL. Com* (10/6/21).

⁵⁹ On Burlington as a Democratic base, see [Yeoman](#), “A New Democratic Playbook,” *The Assembly* (4/21/21) (story on the successful 2020 campaign in state House District 63 of Ricky Hurtado, the lone Latinx member of the NC General Assembly).

⁶⁰ For a story about the Clinton campaign belatedly rushing VP running mate Tim Kaine to Sanford in late October 2016, see [Bouie](#), “Black Voters Aren’t Turning Out in North Carolina ...,” *Slate* (11/1/16). According to the UNC Institute of Government’s [Forms of Government and Methods of Elections](#), the mayor’s race in Sanford is a partisan election.

⁶¹ Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove, “Who Holds the Key to a New America,” *New York Times* (6/4/18); see also [Peck](#), “Learning the Right Lessons: How the Dems Lost North Carolina,” *Medium.com* (2/3/17) (criticizing the too exclusively “urban focus” of the Clinton campaign in NC); Spikes, “Georgia’s Rural Black Voters Were Ignored and

Suppressed. Now They Might Flip the Senate,” *USA Today* (1/4/21); [Paschal](#), “How Rural Black Organizers Helped Democrats Win the Senate,” *Facing South* (1/12/21)

⁶² “The Stacey Abrams Playbook...,” 12. See also [Abrams and Groh-Wargo](#), “How to Turn Your Red State Blue,” *New York Times* (2/11/21) (emphasizing the strategic need for a “multiracial, multiethnic, multigenerational, and truly statewide coalition”).

⁶³ Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949) 673-74. Such a blue-outpost strategy would obviously need to complement the continuing effort to turn out more Democratic voters in the state’s bigger-city counties and other Democratic strongholds. For a recent collection of political history essays questioning the significance of the red/conservative versus blue/progressive dichotomy, see Cebul et al, eds., *Shaped by the State: Toward A New Political History of the Twentieth Century* (2018).