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THE NEW DIVIDE IN POLITICS: EDUCATION

Midterm results highlight a pattern of voters with college degrees swinging away from the GOP

By Aaron Zitner and Anthony DeBarros
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South Carolina hasn't sent a newly elected Democrat to Congress for 25 years. But on Tuesday, voters in the Charleston area broke form and chose a Democrat over a Republican endorsed by President Trump.

That result might seem like an outlier, given South Carolina's strong Republican tradition. But it is more evidence of a powerful new factor in politics: the nation's growing educational divide.

Democratic pickups in House races in Oklahoma and Georgia might also have seemed unexpected, given that Republicans hold the major, statewide offices in both states. But as in South Carolina, the outcomes fit a pattern of voters with bachelor's and advanced degrees swinging away from the GOP. White voters with lower educational attainment, meanwhile, have shifted toward the GOP.

Of the 34 House districts that Democrats picked up from Republicans as of Friday's tallies, 29 are in the top half among all House districts for educational attainment, meaning more than 30 percent of adults there have bachelor's or more advanced degrees.

Democrats now represent 27 of the 30 House districts with the largest concentration of college-educated Americans. Before Tuesday, they held 20 of those districts.

Blue Streak

Voters increasingly back Democrats in the 30 House districts with the highest shares of people with bachelor's and advanced degrees.

When Bill Clinton entered the White House a quarter-century ago, the parties evenly divided the top 30 districts. Republicans since then have gained in working-class and rural areas, and among white voters without bachelor's degrees.

The result is an America divided in a new way. "The new cultural divide is education," says Bill McInturff, a Republican pollster.

Education helps explain some of Tuesday's results that might seem like outliers in solid-Republican states.

In South Carolina, voters last sent a Democrat to Congress from the Charleston, SC, area in 1979. In Georgia, a Democrat raised \$30 million last year to compete in an Atlanta-area district—and lost. On Tuesday, the party carried both seats.

Both those districts—South Carolina’s 1st and Georgia’s 6th—are in the top half among all House districts for educational attainment. Both also have some of the largest shares of college-educated adults in their states.

Flipped

In South Carolina and Georgia, House districts flipped from the GOP to Democratic control have high educational attainment.

Similarly, Democrats on Tuesday won a House seat in usually-Republican Oklahoma, in a district that’s in the top half of all House districts ranked by educational attainment.

And in Utah, where Republican Mitt Romney cruised to victory for a Senate seat, Democrats were leading as of Sunday in a House district that is also in the top half.

At the same time, education helps explain why some political outliers on the House map no longer have that status.

One example is a northern Minnesota district that has backed Democrats in every House election except one since 1946. The district, with a history rooted in mining and shipping, has a large share of the working-class, white voters who on a national level have moved toward the GOP.

Minnesota’s 8th Congressional District had largely withstood the trend—until Tuesday, when voters elected a Republican.

The educational divide is a new feature of politics and is a force among the white electorate rather than among minority groups, polling data shows.

As the Journal discussed in a recent story, its possible causes include the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and changing cultural outlooks. Americans without bachelor’s degrees recovered more slowly from the economic downturn than did those with degrees. At the same time, attitudes toward immigration, guns, health care and other issues diverged among whites with and without bachelor’s degrees. White women who have degrees and white men without degrees diverged most sharply.

The trend is especially strong at the outer edges of the educational spectrum. “Republicans are now the party of those with a high-school diploma or less,” Mr. McInturff said, “with Democrats having a totally dominating advantage among those with a postgraduate degree.”