President Obama carried 29 states including the District of Columbia in his 2008 victory over Republican candidate John McCain. Obama garnered 365 electoral votes with 53 percent of the popular vote that year. He carried all but two of the same states in 2012, with Indiana and North Carolina switching to the Republican column.

This past November, Donald Trump pulled off his unexpected victory by adding Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin to the group of 24 states Mitt Romney won in 2012. Trump won with 304 electoral votes from 30 states. The last time Wisconsin voted Republican in a presidential election was in 1984. Pennsylvania and Michigan last voted Republican in 1988.

The figure below depicts the states won by the Democratic candidates (blue) in both the elections of 2008 and 2016, the Republican candidates (red) in both years, and the
states that switched between 2008 and 2016 (purple).¹

Pollsters tell us that Trump’s views on trade, immigration, and his general populism resonated with enough voters in the swing states to nudge them to the Republican column. What is interesting about the three set of states is how they now differ economically and how they each fared over the past eight years.

Figure 1 shows that about 44% of the US population live in states that voted for the Democratic candidate in both 2008 and 2016. Just 31% live in the solidly Republican voting states and 25% live in the states that switched to the Republican column by 2016.²

The figure also shows that the states won by the Democrat in both years have the highest per capita income at $54,105. The states won by the Republican have the lowest per capita income at $42,717 and the states that switched have slightly higher per capita income at $44,452.

That per capita income is higher in states that voted for the Democratic candidate in both years runs counter to the impression many have about the two parties. Further, in terms of per capita income, the states that switched are more similar to the states that voted for the Republican candidate in both 2008 and 2016.

Figure 2 continues the comparison of the three sets of states by looking at how population, per capita income, and total income changed from 2008 to 2015.

The states won by the Republican candidates had a 5.2% increase in population, while the states that switched collectively experienced just a 4.1% increase.

The change in real per capita income tells a slightly different story. The states won by the Democrat candidates in both years experienced the highest real per capita income growth at 7.9% between 2008 and 2015. The states won by the Republican candidates had a 6.6% increase in real per capita income. The states that switched saw real per capita income increase by 5.8%.

The final comparison of total real personal income combines the population growth and the per capita income growth. Here we see that the states won by the Republican candidates had the highest growth in total real personal income, the states won by the Democrat candidates had the second highest growth, and the states that switched had the lowest growth in total real personal income.

These outcomes suggest that the states that had the poorest economic outcomes were those that switched to the Republican candidate between 2008 and 2016. But the narrative is a bit more nuanced at the individual state level than is seen by these broad groupings.

Another way to quantify voting outcomes is to calculate the percentage point change in the share of the presidential votes won by the Republican or Democrat candidates in each state. These changes in shares between 2008 and 2016 can then be compared to changes in respective states’ population, per capita income or total state income.

The change in the Republican candidates’ shares of the vote between 2008 and 2016 is graphed in relation to the percentage change in the states’ populations between 2008 and 2015 in Figure 3.

Each circle in the graph represents a state and is proportional to the state’s voting age population in 2016. Thirty-two states fall in the positive half of the figure as they became more Republican in their voting, while the other 19 states and the District of Columbia, in the negative portion, became less Republican.

Among the solidly Republican voting states, North Dakota’s per-
cent voting Republican rose 9.7 percentage points to 63%. Trump won West Virginia with 68.6% which represented a 12.9 percentage point increase over John McCain’s 2008 vote share of 55.7%. West Virginia had the highest percentage voting Republican in 2016.

Texas is notable among the solidly Republican states in that its Republican share of the vote dropped 3.3 percentage points from 55.5% to 52.2%. At the extreme in terms of reduced shares among the states that voted Republican in the two elections is Utah with its 17.1 percentage point drop to 45.5%. The drop is attributable to the strong write-in candidacy of native son Evan McMullin who collected 21.5% of the votes. Trump still won the state, given that Hillary Clinton received 27.5% of the total votes cast.

Illinois is notable among the solidly Democrat states that became more Republican with its share increasing 2 percentage points from 37% to 39%. The largest state in the union, California, became even less Republican with its share falling 5.5 percentage points to 31.6% in 2016.

There are several other important relationships to note in this figure. We see that the states that switched to the Republican column are generally clustered in the upper left portion of the figure reflecting their relatively low population growth. North Carolina and Florida are exceptions among these states with population growth of 7.8% and 9.4% respectively.

We also see that lower population growth is associated with an increase in the percent of a state’s voters choosing the Republican candidate. The percentage change in population explains 37% of the variation in the percentage point change in the share of the votes cast for the Republican candidate.

From the previous figure we also saw that the states in which the Republican candidates won in 2008 and 2016 had the highest population growth. Of the 10 fastest growing states in this group, 6 became less Republican in their voting. Some of this is a result of differential migration to the growing states and in the case of Utah, it is driven by McMullin’s write-in candidacy.

So what should we conclude from the negative relationship between population growth and the change in the Republican vote share? The states that had the lowest population growth over the past eight years had the greatest Republican gains. If the percent change in total state income had been plotted on the horizontal axis, the negative relationship would still hold, but with less precision. Together these results indicate that voters in the states that did not fare as well voted for change.

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1Election results from The American Presidency Project, John Woolley and Gerhard Peters.
The US map was created with mapchart.net.
2Economic data from Bureau of Economic Analysis, SA1, Personal Income Summary: Personal Income, Population, Per Capita Personal Income.
The Private Enterprise Research Center was founded in 1977 as a research organization at Texas A&M University. The mission of the Center is to raise economic understanding and to increase awareness of the importance of individual freedom to the strength and vitality of our economy. The Center supports academic research and produces newsletters and studies that address important public policy issues.

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