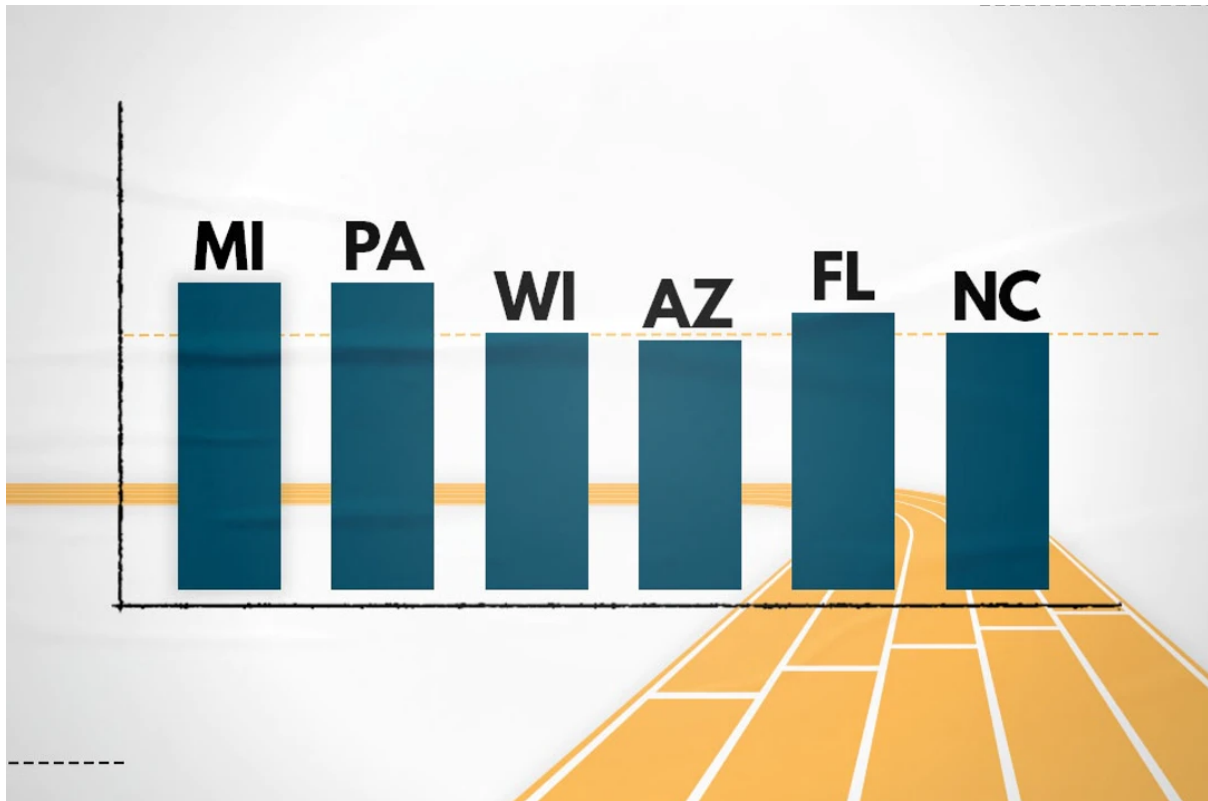


Democrats Are on Track to Win Decisive Battleground Suburbs They Lost in 2016

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Democrats' path to victory in 2020 requires strong majorities in cities and minimizing losses in rural stretches, but it hinges on performance in the suburbs. In 2016, Hillary Clinton lost the six key battleground states (Arizona, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) by a combined 455,204 votes; she lost the suburban counties in those states by 560,412.

Battleground suburbs like Macomb County, Michigan, and Seminole County, Florida, are ground zero for Democrats' efforts to beat Donald Trump. These communities are complex; they are racially diverse, blue- and white-collar, and they make up half of the electorate. And after disappointing in 2016, the suburbs powered Democrats' blue wave election in the midterms. So it is crucial for Democrats to know where they stand in the suburbs if they are to repeat this performance, and by doing so, win the presidency, hold the House, and potentially flip the Senate. To better understand the dynamics in these decisive places, Third Way used data from the analytics firm Catalist to estimate how many people are likely to vote and for

data from the analytics firm Catalist to estimate how many people are likely to vote and for which party in suburban counties (and urban and rural ones, too) this year.

These estimates show that Democrats are in encouraging position in the battleground–state suburbs, but they have work to do to lock up these states. Specifically:

- Democrats are in position to win majorities in the **Michigan** and **Pennsylvania** suburbs, which would set them up to win both states.
- Democrats should get close or just reach a majority in the **Florida**, **North Carolina**, and **Wisconsin** suburbs, which would put them in a dead heat with Republicans in these states.
- And Democrats are on target to win a majority in **Arizona**’s suburbs, but preliminary estimates still show Republicans with a slim advantage statewide. But additional analysis is needed for Arizona.

The battleground suburbs are where 2020 will be won or lost. And this analysis finds that Democrats are in position to do well there this year, including in some unlikely suburban counties. What follows is a deep dive into Democrats’ support in the suburbs, and what it means for the party’s chances of winning in 2020.

How We Classified Suburban Counties and Estimated Democratic Performance

Understanding Democrats’ estimated performance for this November in urban and rural counties is important, and this data is referenced here, but our focus is on the suburbs that are home to half of all voters. (A future analysis will address Biden’s potential rebound in rural counties.) Counties are classified as urban, suburban, and rural based on a scheme from the National Center for Health Statistics.

Third Way’s estimates for Democrats’ support were generated using two of Catalist’s models. The **2020 Vote Propensity model** estimates individuals’ likelihood of voting this November, while the **Vote Choice Index** estimates how probable it is that they will vote for a Democrat.

This analysis includes three suburban data points for battleground states:

- **First**, we estimate Democrats’ support across suburban counties.
- **Second**, by also analyzing urban and rural counties, we estimate Democrats’ statewide support.
- And **third**, we estimate the share of the suburban vote Democrats need to reach 50% statewide.

All of these data points are two-way numbers (just Democrat versus Republican, not accounting for third parties).

Data on estimated Democratic support comes from individual-level predictive models aggregated to county-level estimates. It is not specific to any one race, and it does not capture external forces that can affect outcomes. It is also distinct from polling data; rather than capturing a snapshot in time, it lays out a baseline for Democratic performance. In sum, this data should inform expectations for the November election rather than be interpreted as an exact prediction for it. See the methodology section for additional details.

Blue Wall States

Michigan

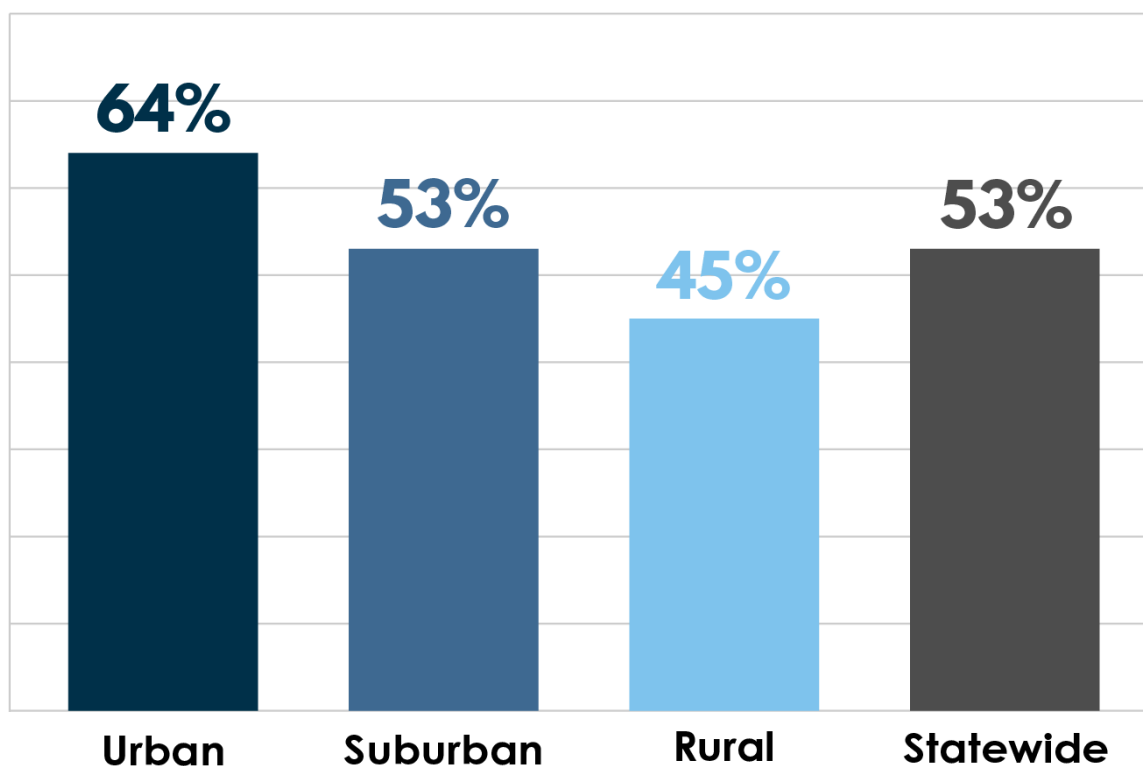
Democratic support in suburban counties (estimate)	Democratic support statewide (estimate)	Democratic suburban counties support to win statewide (estimate)
53%	53%	47%

Source: Estimates derived from Catalist national database of voters and voting-age persons.



Democrats’ estimated support across suburban counties in Michigan this year is 53%, and these counties are expected to make up half of the statewide vote. In combination with estimated support in the rest of the state, 53% in suburban counties would give Democrats a matching 53% of the two-way vote statewide.

Michigan Estimated Democratic Support by County Area and Statewide



Source: Estimates derived from Catalist national database of voters and voting-age persons.



The largest suburban bloc in the state, around 25% of the statewide vote, is immediately outside of Detroit's Wayne County. In white-collar Oakland County, which typically votes blue, Democratic support is estimated to modestly improve from 54% for Clinton in 2016 to 56% this year. But in blue-collar Macomb County, which can go either way in elections, support is estimated to improve significantly from 44% to 51%. These gains would be consistent with Democrat Gretchen Whitmer's performance in the 2018 governor's race when she won 56% across Macomb and Oakland counties.

Holding urban and rural support constant, Democrats need at least 47% in the Michigan suburbs to stay above 50% statewide. Democrats' estimated suburban support of 53% is above this benchmark right now.

Pennsylvania

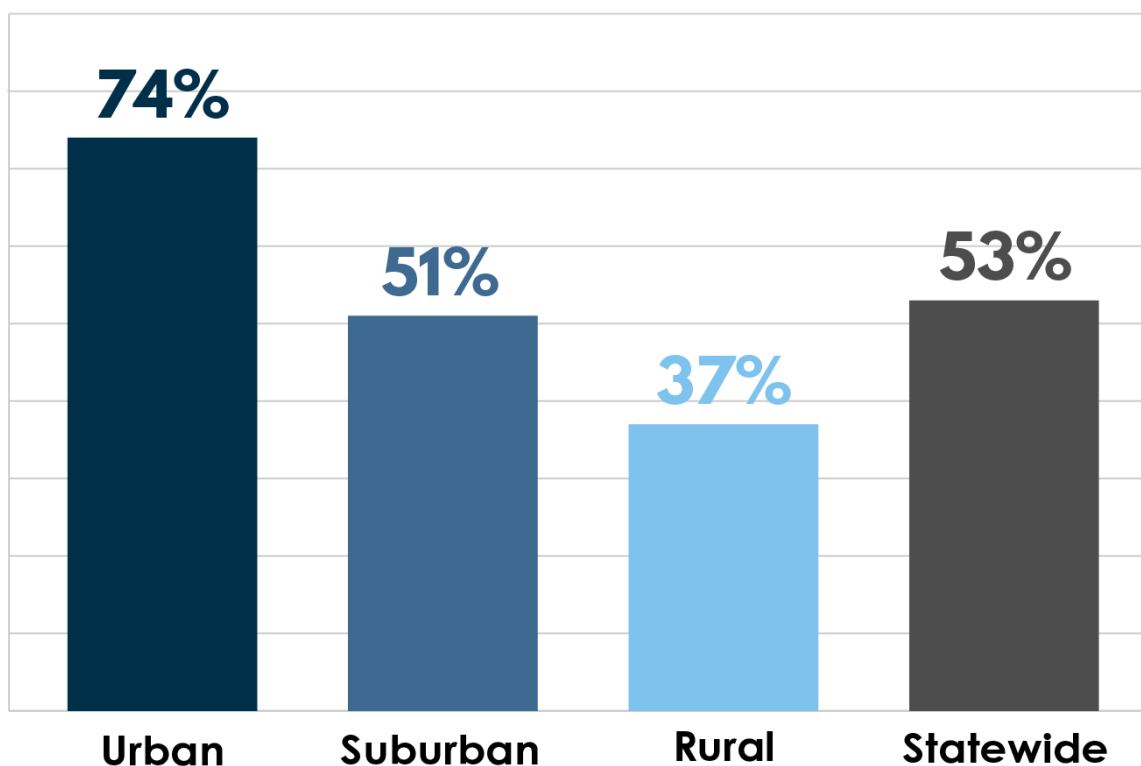
Democratic support in suburban counties (estimate)	Democratic support statewide (estimate)	Democratic suburban counties support to win statewide (estimate)
51%	53%	45%

Source: Estimates derived from Catalist national database of voters and voting-age persons.



Democrats' estimated support is 51% across Pennsylvania's suburban counties this year, and these counties are expected to make up 59% of the statewide vote. In addition to estimated support elsewhere in the state, 51% in suburban counties would give Democrats 53% of the statewide two-way vote.

Pennsylvania Estimated Democratic Support by County Area and Statewide



Source: Estimates derived from Catalist national database of voters and voting-age persons.



The state's suburban hub is the collar counties around Philadelphia, where more than one-in-five voters live. But Democrats' support is expected to hold steady there from 2016 to 2020 at 57%. Instead, the largest estimated difference in support from 2016 to 2020 is in smaller suburban counties in western Pennsylvania, such as Beaver County, where Democrats' support is expected to improve from 40% to 49%. Trump beat Clinton by 20 points in Beaver County, but Democrat Tom Wolf previewed Democrats' renewed strength there when he won the county with 54% in 2018. Similar improvements are estimated for northeastern Pennsylvania, where Trump overperformed in 2016.

These estimates show that Democrats need at least 45% in the Pennsylvania suburbs to stay above 50% statewide. Democrats' estimated support this year exceeds this benchmark, but given the size of the state's suburban vote, small changes in support can swing the final margin.

Wisconsin

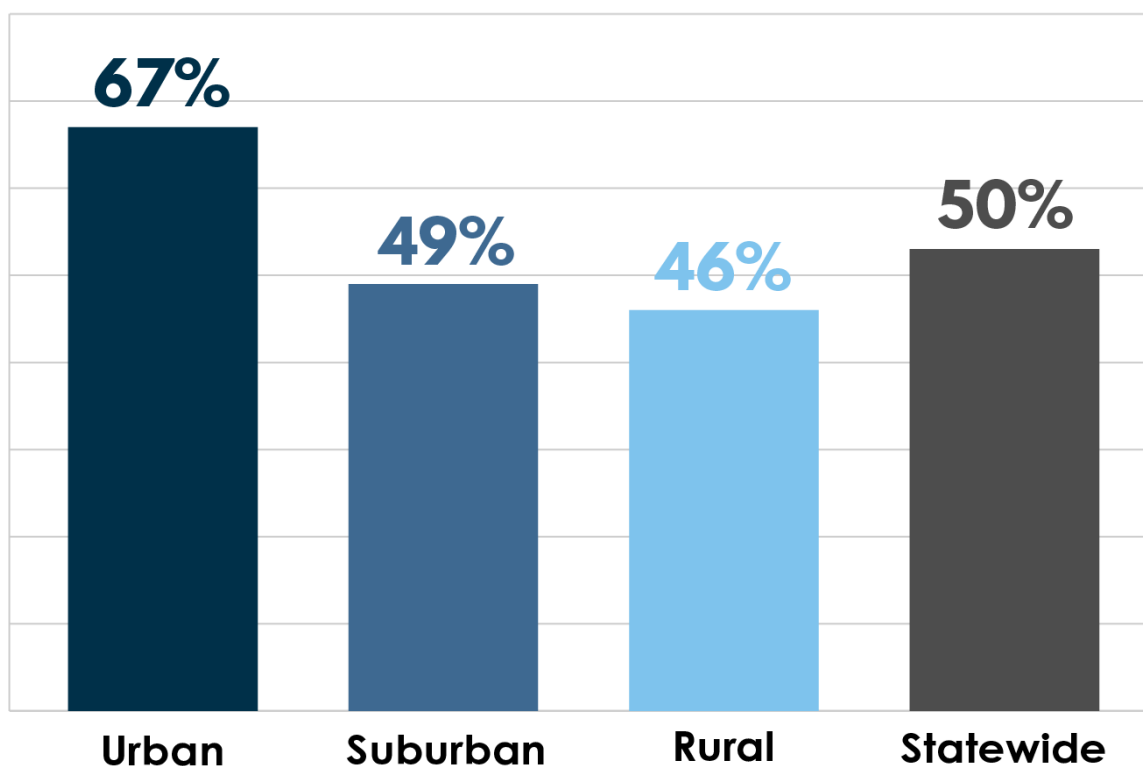
Democratic support in suburban counties (estimate)	Democratic support statewide (estimate)	Democratic suburban counties support to win statewide (estimate)
49%	50%	49%

Source: Estimates derived from Catalist national database of voters and voting-age persons.



Democrats' estimated support across suburban counties in Wisconsin this year is 49%, and these counties are expected to make up 36% of the statewide vote. Forty-nine percent in suburban counties would put Democrats on course for a slim two-way majority of just over 50%.

Wisconsin Estimated Democratic Support by County Area and Statewide



Source: Estimates derived from Catalist national database of voters and voting-age persons.



Wisconsin's suburban counties fall into three categories: Dane County, which is very Democratic, the Republican stronghold of Waukesha County, and a dozen counties with a combined vote smaller than Dane and Waukesha put together. In that last category, Democrats are expected to make incremental gains in greater Milwaukee, like Kenosha County, where support is estimated to go from 50% for Clinton to 52% this year. In a signal for Democrats' potential gains this year, Kenosha County supported every statewide Democrat in 2018.¹ Similar shifts are estimated for small suburban counties near the Minnesota border.

Democrats need an estimated 49% or better in the Wisconsin suburbs to stay above 50% statewide. This means that Democrats have no room for error here.

Sunbelt States

Arizona

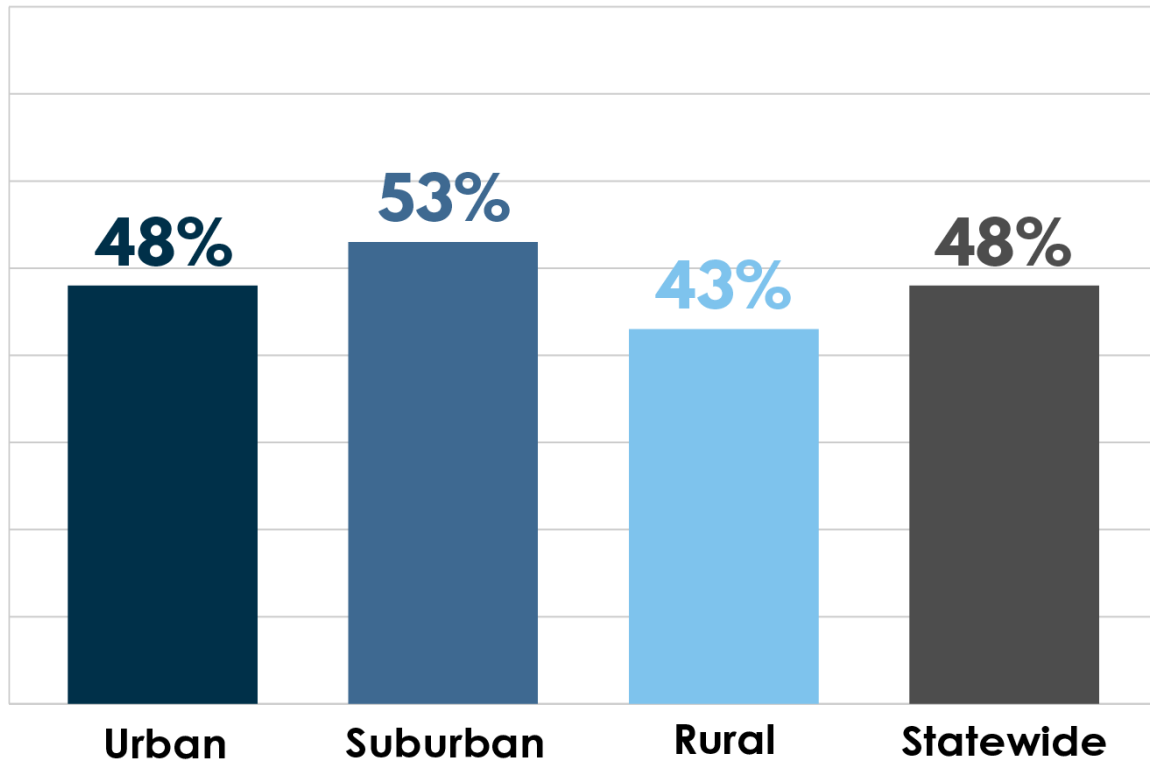
Democratic support in suburban counties (estimate)	Democratic support statewide (estimate)	Democratic suburban counties support to win statewide (estimate)
53%	48%	60%

Source: Estimates derived from Catalist national database of voters and voting-age persons.



Democrats' estimated support is 53% across Arizona's suburban counties this year, but these counties are expected to make up just 21% of the statewide vote. Arizona is a unique case; nearly two-thirds of voters live in Maricopa County, a sprawling urban county with intra-county suburbs. Nevertheless, 53% in suburban counties would put Democrats short of a two-way majority at 48%.

Arizona Estimated Democratic Support by County Area and Statewide



Source: Estimates derived from Catalist national database of voters and voting-age persons.



Arizona has just two truly suburban counties. In Republican-leaning Pinal County, Democrats' support is estimated to go from 40% for Clinton to almost 43% this year. In Pima County, home to Tucson, Democrats' support is expected to nearly match 2016 at around 57%. In the 2018 Senate race, Kyrsten Sinema's performance hinted at Democrats' potential gains in Pinal County when she took 44% on her way to victory statewide.²

Because suburban counties make up a small share of the vote, Democrats need 60% there to reach 50% statewide when holding support elsewhere constant. But it is important to remember that intra-county suburbs in Maricopa County are not captured with a county-level study. Analyzing voters *within* Maricopa would be necessary for understanding the full impact of Arizona's suburban vote.

Florida

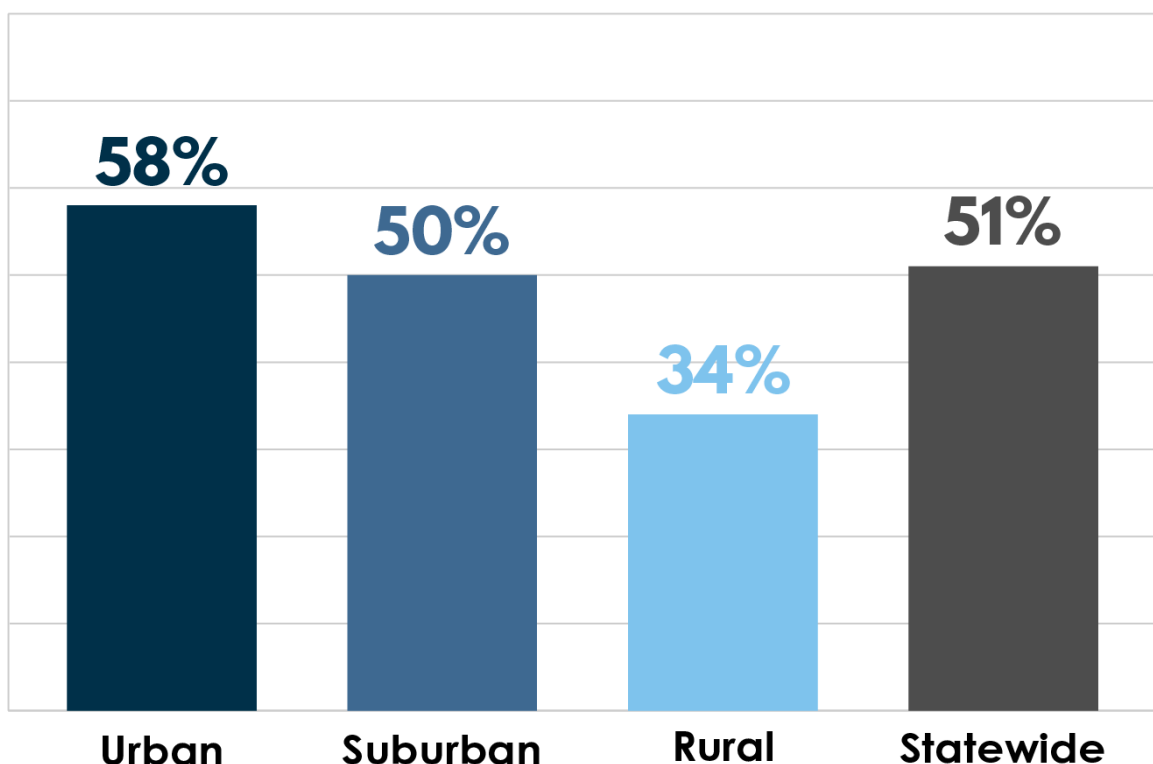
Democratic support in suburban counties (estimate)	Democratic support statewide (estimate)	Democratic suburban counties support to win statewide (estimate)
50%	51%	49%

Source: Estimates derived from Catalist national database of voters and voting-age persons.



Democrats' estimated support across suburban counties in Florida this year is 50%, and these counties are expected to make up 58% of the statewide vote. Democrats' 50% in suburban counties would set them up for an estimated 51% of the statewide two-way vote.

Florida Estimated Democratic Support by County Area and Statewide



Source: Estimates derived from Catalist national database of voters and voting-age persons.



Democrats' largest estimated suburban gains are in the I-4 Corridor that runs from Tampa to Daytona Beach. Across suburban Polk, Osceola, Seminole, and Volusia counties, which make up around 10% of the statewide vote, support is estimated to go from 48% in 2016 to 51% this year. By contrast, Democrats are not estimated to improve upon their already strong support in the largest suburban counties of Broward and Palm Beach north of Miami. In 2018, neither Andrew Gillum (running for governor) or Bill Nelson (running for Senate) hit a majority in the I-4 Corridor. Democrats this year will have to look to Obama in 2008 as an example of how to win a majority in this crucial stretch of the state in a competitive election.³

Democrats need an estimated 49% in Florida's suburban counties to stay above 50% statewide. Democrats' estimated suburban support of 50% is just above this threshold, but it leaves no real margin for error.

North Carolina

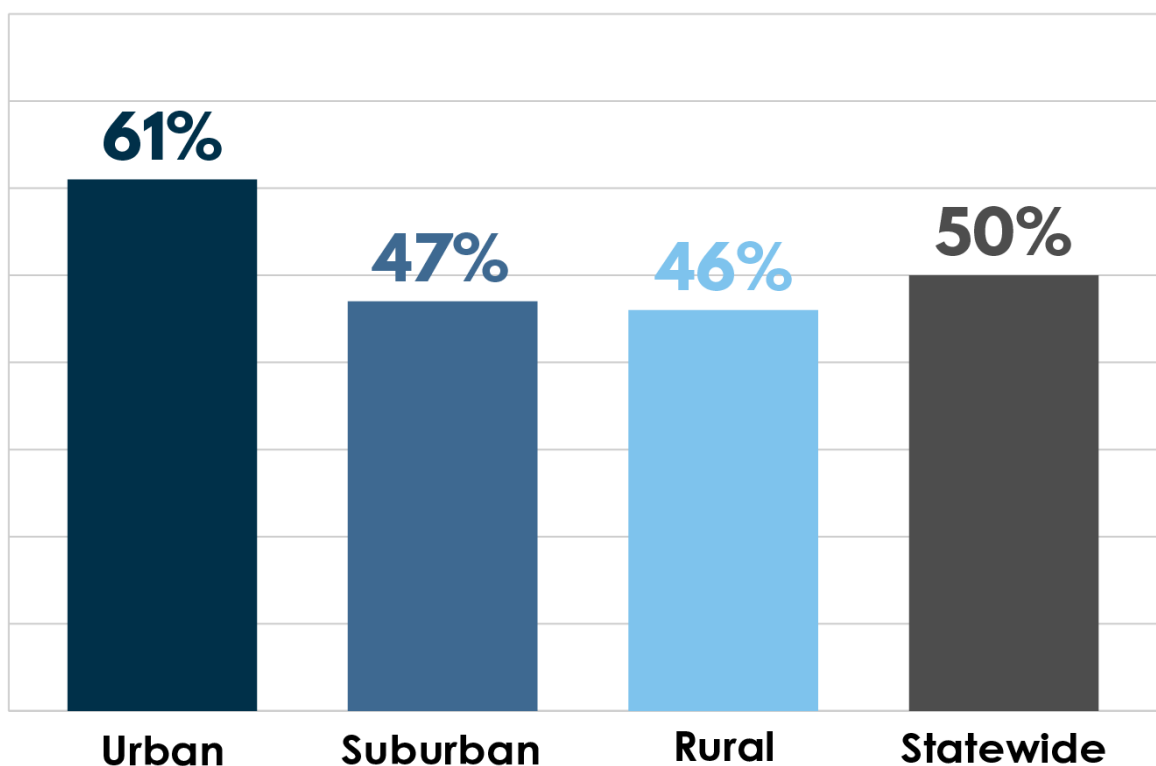
Democratic support in suburban counties (estimate)	Democratic support statewide (estimate)	Democratic suburban counties support to win statewide (estimate)
47%	50%	47%

Source: Estimates derived from Catalist national database of voters and voting-age persons.



Democrats' estimated support is 47% across North Carolina's suburban counties this year, and these counties are expected to make up half of the statewide vote. This 47% would give Democrats an estimated two-way majority of 50%.

North Carolina Estimated Democratic Support by County Area and Statewide



Source: Estimates derived from Catalist national database of voters and voting-age persons.



The largest expected difference in Democratic support from 2016 to 2020 is in the Republican-leaning counties surrounding Charlotte's Mecklenburg County that make up 10% of the statewide vote. Despite their partisan lean, estimates show Democrats' combined support across Union, Cabarrus, Gaston, and Iredell counties improving from 35% to 39%. North Carolina did not have any top-of-the-ticket statewide races in 2018. But Democrat Dan McCready very nearly won the House race in suburban NC-09, despite Trump winning the district by 10 points in 2016 and Republicans engaging in documented election fraud in 2018. ⁴

These estimates show that Democrats need 47% in the North Carolina suburbs to stay above 50% statewide. Democrats' estimated suburban support of 47% just reaches this threshold.

Conclusion

Clinton's entire losing margin across the battleground states in 2016 can be explained by her deficit in suburban counties. And these same counties will decide the outcome in 2020. This analysis shows that Democrats' support in these counties ranges from competitive to strong right now. A theme across the battlegrounds is that Democrats' potential gains are concentrated in smaller, red-to-purple suburban counties rather than bigger ones that are already reliably blue. But Democrats will have to deliver big numbers across the suburbs to win. Beating Trump this year won't be easy, Democrats have to hit their marks across the map, but it begins *and ends* with winning America's suburbs.

Methodology

Counties are classified as urban, suburban, and rural based on a scheme from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). Counties that are described as "large fringe metro" (code 2) or "central medium metro" (code 3) in the NCHS scheme are defined as suburban here.⁵ Election results for 2016 come from Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections.⁶

Estimates for Democrats' performance in suburban counties, as well as urban and rural ones, were generated by Third Way using two of Catalist's models. The first, the 2020 Vote Propensity model, estimates the likelihood that an individual will vote this year. The vote propensity model does not account for new registrants ahead of the election and the turnout impact of COVID-19. The second model, the Vote Choice Index, estimates the probability that an individual would vote for a Democrat. The former is used to approximate how many people are likely to vote this November while the latter identifies how many of them are likely to vote for a Democrat. These estimates are not specific to any one race but are for how Democrats can perform generically across race levels. It is important to note, data comes from individual-level predictive models aggregated to county-level estimates. In short, this data should be considered estimates; while models are rigorously tested, not all those identified here as likely voters will vote, and not all likely voters have been identified here. The same goes for those likely to support a Democrat.

Democrats' support numbers (2016 actual support and 2020 estimates) are reported as two-way numbers. Democrats' two-way numbers are calculating by summing Democratic and Republican votes and then dividing by Democratic votes. This excludes any third-party votes, and instead gives Democrats' share of the vote if they were just running against a Republican.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of Catalist, LLC ("Catalist"). Although Third Way references its use of Catalist data, any interpretation, analysis, assumptions, conclusions and/or statements, or

the like, surrounding or pertaining to the use or citing of this data belong solely and exclusively to Third Way.

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ENDNOTES

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