Coalitional Change or Pocketbook Election? Evidence from Nevada in 2024

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Introduction

After being voted out of office in 2020, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump won in 2024 by improving his vote share in every single state. For the first time since 1892 the American public returned a previously defeated incumbent to the presidency. Why did the electorate so decisively shift vote preference towards a candidate it had rejected as an incumbent four years prior?

In the days after November 5th two explanations of Americans' change of mind quickly emerged in press accounts of the election: first, that the return of Trump was an outcome of partisan realignment, in which the underlying coalitions of the two major parties have undergone a lasting transformation; or second, that was it instead a classic referendum election, in which voters punished the incumbent Democratic administration for perceived mismanagement of the economy.

The realignment explanation hinges on 2024 functioning as a "critical election." In realignment theory a critical election is expected to periodically occur every thirty years or so

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and is identified as an election that reshapes which groups vote for which party in a durable way that can last for decades—until the next critical election. Key groups shift their partisan allegiances because new issues sharply rise to drive fresh cleavages, replacing the old issues that defined the differences between the parties' coalitions in prior elections (Burnham 1970, Key 1955). In these critical elections voter turnout spikes, and the policy platforms of the parties shift to address the shifting issue salience. Later refinements to the concept of realignment emphasized that such changes may occur less through sudden "critical" elections than through more gradual "secular" realignments in which voter coalitions evolve incrementally over multiple election cycles (Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1990; Nardulli 1995).

Numerous articles heralding such a realignment have appeared since the 2024 election, e.g., an NBC News headline in the days afterwards, "Trump just realigned the entire political map" (Smith 2024). These descriptions largely focused on the movement of Latinos and African American men towards the Republican Party: "[the election's] outcome certainly has the potential to become a realigning election … what was new was the level of support Donald Trump drew from Latino working-class men" (Meyerson 2024); and on the Wall Street Journal opinion page "the Democrats' defeat in 2024 reflected long-term shifts in the electorate … the declining significance of race and ethnicity for voters' choices, the rising significance of education levels" (Galston 2024).

But realignment theory in general and of critical elections in particular has drawn several criticisms within political science. First, contrary to realignment theory's expectation partisan change is generally incremental and uneven, not a sudden wave (Beck 1979, Ladd 1970). Second, the theorized periodicity of realignments in a 30-to-36-year cycle lacks empirical

evidence (Nardulli 1995). A third area of criticism is that the view of high-turnout, issue-driven elections as the engine of change in American party politics largely ignores generational replacement and other compositional changes to the electorate (Sundquist 1983). In short, "critical elections" appears to be more of a rhetorical device than an empirical reality, since even most elections that bring a change in power show continuity rather than sharp breaks in voter behavior (Mayhew 2004). Moreover, the degree to which the 2024 election outcome was issue driven, that issue was the state of the economy, perhaps the most salient metric of performance for the incumbent party and a topic that has been the subject of volumes of political science research.

Thus, we instead expect that the result of the 2024 presidential election is better explained as a referendum on the economy. It is a well-established pattern in American elections that the incumbent party's presidential vote share is correlated with the performance of the national economy (Key 1966). As far back as the turn of the 20th Century when public data on national economic performance was scant, incumbent party vote share correlated with aggregate economic indicators, i.e., GDP growth, inflation, and unemployment (Kramer 1971). In these assessments, voters tend to respond to national economic conditions over their own personal finances (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979).

There are limitations on this relationship, as partisan identities bias individuals' assessments of the health of the economy and voters can inaccurately attribute blame and credit to the parties (Achen and Bartels 2016, Bartels 2002). Voters can even punish incumbents for events far beyond their control, such as natural disasters (Healy and Malhotra 2010). But despite citizens' rather fuzzy political knowledge, they will hold the incumbent party in the

White House responsible for overall economic performance over the previous term (Fiorina 1978, Lewis-Back and Stegmaier 2000).

It was no secret during the 2024 campaign that retrospective evaluations of the Biden administration were not in the Democrats' favor. "Harris and her team, recognizing the threat of widespread disillusionment with President Joe Biden, tried to transform the Democratic campaign from a *retrospective* referendum on the performance of the administration in which she served into a *prospective* choice about … Trump" (Brownstein 2024). And in the days after the election, commentary from multiple academics cited the impact of the American electorate's dissatisfaction with inflation and wage stagnation (Rauch 2024, Sides 2024).

Which of these explanations of the 2024 presidential election result have greater merit—realignment or retrospective economic voting—has important implications for the dynamics of future electoral competition. If Trump's victory was the result of an enduring swing by Latino and working-class voters towards the Republicans and a smaller shift of better-educated voters towards the Democrats, then such a realignment would mean that the party coalitions have shifted in ways that will carry forward to future elections. Conversely, if 2024 was a rebuke of President Joe Biden's handling of the economy, then the Republicans current control of the White House and both chambers of Congress may be ephemeral depending upon the party's handling of the economy and its overall performance.

Our view is that Trump's 2024 victory is best understood as the Democrats paying a price at the ballot box for a sharp upturn in inflation and flattening wage growth. We also expect that another idiosyncratic feature of the 2024 campaign—Democrats switching to a new candidate

in July—amplified organizational challenges that impacted mobilization efforts and left the party poorly equipped to adjust to continuing changes to the electorate.

Bellwether Nevada

To analyze the 2024 result we look to Nevada as our case study. Historically, the state has functioned as a bellwether in presidential politics, supporting the winner in every election since 1912 with only two exceptions. Moreover, Nevada elections are competitive: five of the last seven presidential contests there have been decided by less than four percentage points. At the same time, Nevada's electorate is unusually fluid due to a growing and transient population, and with nonpartisan voter registration now matching that of both Democrats and Republicans. Furthermore, Nevada reflects the overall nation's demographic present and future. It is racially and ethnically diverse, with significant numbers of Latino voters. It is a rapidly urbanizing state, driven mostly by population growth in Las Vegas's Clark County. Indeed, by one estimate Las Vegas's demographic contours reflect what the country will look like in 2060 (Kolko 2017).

We bookend our analysis with the 2012 and 2024 presidential elections. This period allows us to assess how Nevada's presidential electorate has changed over time, the factors that have driven these changes, and how these changes have affected outcomes. To empirically unpack these dynamics, we utilize data from three levels of analysis: state and federal legislatives districts, the individual voter, and the state. These data presentations are anchored by three considerations salient to our thesis: the impact of macroeconomic conditions on presidential election outcomes, political mobilization, and the changing contours of Nevada's electorate.

Economics and Elections in the Silver State

The 2012 and 2024 elections both featured incumbent Democratic administrations seeking a second term in a weak economy. While the effects of both economic downturns lingered in Nevada even as the rest of the nation was recovering, there are important differences in how each played out in the state. Economic conditions in 2012 were poor across the board. Nevada's November 2012 unemployment rate was 10.9 percent compared to 5.8 percent in November 2024 (Federal Reserve Economic Data 2025). In 2012, Nevada's housing market hit rock bottom, and the state was plagued by record defaults and bankruptcies. In contrast significant in-migration during the pandemic, largely from neighboring California, and the purchase of thousands of houses by institutional investors depleted the affordable housing stock in the Las Vegas and Reno metros causing prices to surge to record highs as inventory contracted. In 2012 inflation was largely held in check, but in 2024, escalating prices were the most salient economic condition wearing on voters.[1]

Yet, in 2012 President Barack Obama easily defeated Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. In 2024, after rejecting Trump in the prior two elections, Nevadans awarded the state's six electoral voters to the Republican column. Trump's statewide margin of 3.1 percentage points bested Clinton and Biden's 2016 and 2020 margins by better than half a percentage point. Why the 2024 election was a referendum on the incumbent party's handling of the economy and 2012 was not can be explained in part by the state's history and how the campaigns' secondary issues shaped the broader political environment in Nevada.

[1] From 2021 to 2024, Nevada's cumulative inflation rate was 21.8 percent, 1.2 percentage points higher than the national average (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee 2024).

Nevada has supported the winning presidential candidate in every election since 1912 except for 1976 and 2016. Across these 29 elections, Nevada's electoral votes have gone to Democrats in 15 elections and to Republicans in 14 elections. At times, the state has been dominated by one party or the other. The Democrats carried Nevada in five consecutive elections from 1932 to 1948 and prior to 2024 had won the previous four. The Republicans won six consecutive elections from 1968 to 1988 and won six of the first seven presidential elections in the state's history.

Prior to the 1990s most of the outcomes were quite lopsided and featured large inter-election swings. For instance, in 1964, Democrat Lyndon Johnson won Nevada by over 17 percentage points, but four years later the state swung 25 percentage points towards the GOP. Starting in 1992—just as the state's population was starting to explode, diversify, and urbanize—margins in presidential elections have decreased. Except for Obama's wins in 2008 and 2012, since 1992 no election has been won by a more than four percentage points.

While scholars may quibble about what economic variables matter and their direction of evaluation (e.g., prospective or retrospective), a vast body of research supports the notion that voters reward and punish the incumbent party for economic conditions. Nevada's over dependency first on mining and now on tourism leaves the state particularly vulnerable to macroeconomic downturns. At the onset of the pandemic, statewide unemployment surged to 33 percent and years later Nevada's unemployment rate remains one of the highest in the country. Early in its history the state reported decade-over-decade population decreases in

concert with downturns in the price of silver.[2] The degree that any presidential election turns on the economy, we should expect this to be the case in Nevada.

Specific to the 2012 and 2024 elections, having inherited the economic mess of his Republican predecessor voters may have held Obama less responsible for the state of the economy. While the same could be said for Biden given that the COIVD-19 recession began under Trump, coming on the heels of lockdowns, school closures, and mask mandates, Biden's policies were viewed as doing little to alleviate the concerns of voters' pocketbook. In 2024, Republicans also benefited from backlash to the Democrats identity-based politics. The secondary issue in 2012—immigration—played in favor of the Democrats. A point we explore below.

The Reid Machine and the Latino Vote

The 2012 election captures the Reid Machine, the sobriquet for the political operation developed and nurtured by former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, at the height of its power. Created during the 2008 election to supercharge Obama's double-digit victory, two years later the machine got Reid over the line in what would be the last of his five senate election victories (Damore 2011). In 2016 Nevada remained blue and the state elected the first Latina to serve in the U.S. Senate, Democrat Catherine Cortez Masto—Reid's handpicked successor. Two years later the Democrats won the governorship for the first time since 1994 and flipped its

[2] Efforts to diversify the state's economy and reduce its dependency on mining have focused in part on legalizing activities that when they were adopted were shunned by other states such as prize fighting (legalized in 1897), gambling (legalized in 1931), six-week residency requirement for divorce (also legalized in 1931), prostitution in the state's rural counties (legalized in 1971), and legalization of cannabis (medical use was legalized in 2000 and recreational use was legalized in 2016).

other U.S. Senate seat. In 2020 Nevada's six electoral votes again went to the Democrats as Joe Biden carried the state by the same margin as Clinton in 2016.

Starting in the 2000s the party and allied organized labor groups began outreach into the Latino community. Historically, Latino political participation in Nevada lagged that of other ethnic and racial groups, but the combination of the growing saliency of immigration in the state, the Democrats embracement of pro-immigration policies (i.e., DREAM Act, DACA, and comprehensive immigration reform), and the GOP's tact to the right on the issue, provided Nevada Democrats with the opportunity to make inroads with the fastest growing bloc of age-eligible voters in the state. Polling of Latino voters in 2012 found that immigration reform was ranked as the second most important problem behind the economy (Damore 2015). In 2016 it was the most salient issue priority of these voters (Damore 2020). Mobilizing Latino voters around immigration paid huge electoral dividends—effectively moving Nevada from Republican to Democratic leaning over the course of a handful of elections.

After Reid's passing in 2021, infighting between the progressive and establishment wings of the party weakened what once was the most formidable state party organization in the country. With access to fewer resources and less unity, the party's voter registration advantage evaporated. In 2012, there were more than 90,000 more active registered Democrats than Republicans, in 2024 the difference was less than 6,000.

By 2024, more than a decade removed from the Democrats' 2013 failure to deliver comprehensive immigration reform, increased Republican outreach, and another economic downturn that hit Latino families disproportionately hard, support for Democratic candidates was far from a given. Immigration was again part of the campaign dialogue, but it was much less

of a priority compared to economic issues such as the cost of housing and healthcare, jobs, and inflation. The confluence of these factors resulted in support for Harris among Latino voters in 2024 that was 15 percentage points lower compared to for Obama in 2012—a shift that in and of itself was not determinative but demonstrates how interelectron shifts at the margins respond to the national mood.

To evaluate changing patterns of support among racial and ethnic groups in presidential elections in Nevada, Table 1 presents the correlations between the Democratic presidential vote share and the racial and ethnic composition within Nevada's 42 state assembly districts for the 2012 through 2024 presidential elections. We use state assembly districts because it is the lowest unit of analysis for which reliable racial and ethnic data can be accessed. Specifically, we use the race and ethnicity data prepared by the Legislative Counsel Bureau for the decennial redistricting completed by the Nevada Legislature in 2011 and 2021. Because our time series cuts across two censuses, for the 2012, 2016, and 2020 presidential elections we use 2010 census data and for the 2024 presidential election we use data from the 2020 census.

Inspection of Table 1 suggests over time differences in support for Democratic presidential candidates depending up on the racial and ethnic composition of an assembly district. Except for the correlations between the Democratic presidential vote and the Asian population share, all other correlations are statistically significant. Like Nevada's other racial and the ethnic groups, Asians are heavily concentrated in the Las Vegas metro, but unlike Blacks and Latinos, Asians are less geographically concentrated within the metro.

The strongest relationships in all four elections are between the Democratic vote and the share of an assembly district's population that is white. The negative sign means that as the

Table 1: Correlations Between Democratic Presidential Vote and Racial and Ethnic Composition of Nevada's Assembly Districts, 2012-2024

	Obama Vote (2012)	Clinton Vote (2016)	Biden Vote (2020)	Harris Vote (2024)
Share Asian	.12	.18	.19	.10
Share Black	.73*	.73*	.69*	.70*
Share Latino	.84*	.81*	.77*	.71*
Share White	-.90*	-.90*	-.85*	-.83*
Number of observations	42	42	42	42

** p< .05*

Note: Race and ethnicity data for 2012, 2016, and 2020 from the 2020 census and race and ethnicity data for 2024 from 2020 census.

Sources: Nevada Secretary of State and the Nevada Legislative Counsel Bureau.

share of a district's white population increases, the share voting Democratic decreases. The relationship does weaken over time. In 2020 Joe Biden increased support relative to Hillary Clinton in Nevada's overwhelmingly white rural counties. Harris lost ground in these counties, and as we discuss below the smaller correlation for the 2024 presidential election did not result from more Democratic support among whites but is an artifact of population change and how it was addressed in the 2021 redistricting process.

The strongest positive relationship across all four elections is between the population share of an assembly district that is Black and the Democratic vote share—a relationship that varies little over time. By comparison, the correlation between a district's Latino population shares and the Democratic presidential vote share decreases from a high of .84 in 2012 to a low of .71 in 2024.

While these data are consistent with the notion of declining Democratic margins with Latino voters over time, the analysis is limited by its reliance on district level data instead of

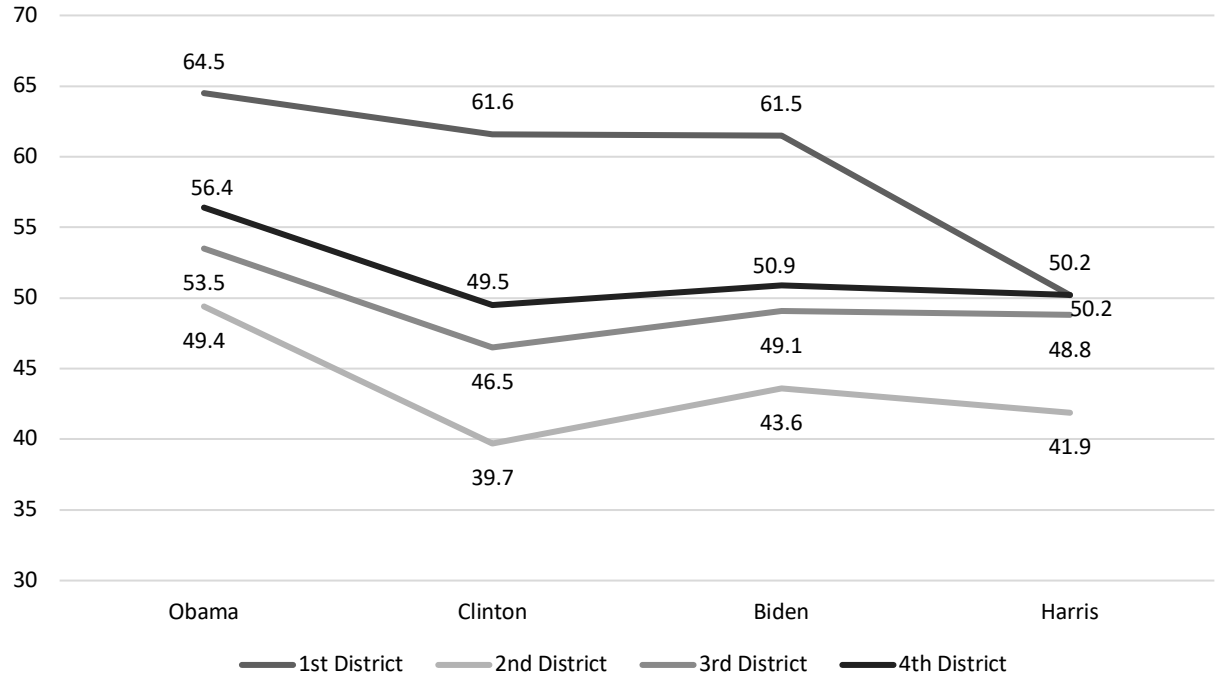
individual level data. Moreover, the reliability of these data may decay over time. Between 2010 and 2020 Nevada's population increased by 15 percent. The Latino population share increased by 24 percent, accounting for over 40 percent of total population gain. Although starting from a smaller base, the Asian population grew at an even faster clip, increasing by 40 percent and accounting for nearly 20 percent of population gain.

The Everchanging Electorate and Liberalizing Ballot Access

As one of the fastest-growing states in the country with high levels of transiency, Nevada's voting pool is constantly changing. Consider that between 2012 and 2024, the electorate increased by nearly 50 percent. Our analysis of the state voter file found that just 36 percent of 2024 voters participated in the 2012 election and a remarkable 31 percent of 2024 voters had not previously voted in a presidential election in Nevada.

By digging a bit deeper into the 2011 and 2021 redistricting processes we can glean how population growth was addressed by map drawers. The 2011 maps were drawn by special masters appointed by a district court judge after the Republican governor vetoed two sets of maps that had been passed on party lines by Democrats who controlled both chambers of the statehouse. The result was maps that both parties won majorities during the decade. In 2021, with the Democrats holding unitary control of state government, the party implemented a partisan gerrymander. Given the declining share of Nevadans who are white (between 2010 and 2020 the share of Nevadans who were classified as non-Hispanic white decreased from 54.2 percent to 45.4 percent), the 2021 redistricting resulted in every state assembly district becoming more racially and ethnically diverse and increasing in size by roughly 10,000 residents.

Figure 1: Democratic Presidential Vote Share by U.S. House District, 2012-2024



Sources: The Daily Kos and The Downballot

The effects of these changes to Nevada's population and the reshuffling of voters for partisan reasons can be most easily seen at the level of the U.S. House district. Figure 1 summarizes the Democratic presidential vote share in each of the state's four U.S. House districts for the 2012 through 2024 presidential elections. Under the Democrats' 2021 gerrymander, Democratic voters were shifted from the very safe and highly diverse first district to the swingy third district and to the competitive fourth district in hopes of shoring up those districts for Democratic incumbents. The second district, apportioned to the state after the 1980 census and which comprises the Reno metro area and most of the rural counties, has never been won by a Democrat. In 2024, the Democrats failed to qualify a candidate to run against the incumbent Republican. As the figure indicates support for Harris in the three Democratically held districts—the first presidential election to take place under the 2021 maps—converged in

2024 with all three incumbent House Democrats winning even as the state swung towards Trump by five points relative to 2020.

Although Harris failed to carry the state, this illustrates that from the perspective of the down ballot candidates, the presidential nominee delivered just enough for their campaigns. Congressional Democrats' push to remove Biden from the ballot in the summer was driven less by the idea that the presidential contest could be salvaged than by the hope that a new candidate could rescue down ballot candidates' chances (Allen and Parnes 2025, Tapper and Thompson 2025). Combined with the 2021 gerrymander, these results in Nevada support that rationale.

These data also are indicative of the shallowness of Trump's Nevada victory. As is summarized in Table 2, Trump ran well ahead of the Republican candidates for the other federal races. Specifically, the table reports the number of voters who rolled off after casting their vote for the president and the vote differences between Harris and Trump and the Democratic and Republican candidates respectively competing for the U.S. Senate and the three Democratically controlled U.S. House districts.

As the table makes clear for each of the four contests, there were roughly 20,000 fewer votes cast compared to the presidential election, and it appears that most of those who rolled off, supported minor party candidates, or split their tickets were Trump voters. While Democratic support held and in the 3rd and 4th districts increased, Republican support did not. This is most obvious in the U.S. Senate race where incumbent Jacky Rosen received 4,000 fewer votes that Harris while her challenger, Sam Brown, underperformed Trump by over 74,000 votes. Certainly, some of these differences are a function of the advantages of incumbency, but

Table 2: Vote Difference Between the Presidential Election and Other Federal Elections, 2024

	Roll-off	Democratic Vote Difference Relative to Presidential Election	Republican Vote Difference Relative to Presidential Election
U.S. Senate	20,112	-4,092	-74,159
1st District	18,183	-567	-24,802
3rd District	19,262	3,307	-6,913
4th District	17,443	2,493	-24,372

Notes: Due to voting for minor party candidates and the "none of these candidates" option in the U.S. Senate election, Roll-off does not equal the total of the vote difference columns. The 2nd District is omitted because the Democrats did not have a qualifying candidate.
Sources: Nevada Secretary of State and The Downballot.

if 2024 ushered a reshaping of the parties' electoral coalitions, one might expect stronger down ticket effects.

In addition to the influx of so many new voters, Nevada has liberalized its voting laws. Voters can cast their ballots in-person on Election Day or during the two weeks prior. The state also offers a vote by mail option and same day voter registration. Nevadans can register at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) when they apply for their drivers' licenses and manage their registrations online. With these changes and to some degree because of them, voter registration now divides more-or-less evenly between Democrats, Republicans, and nonpartisans.

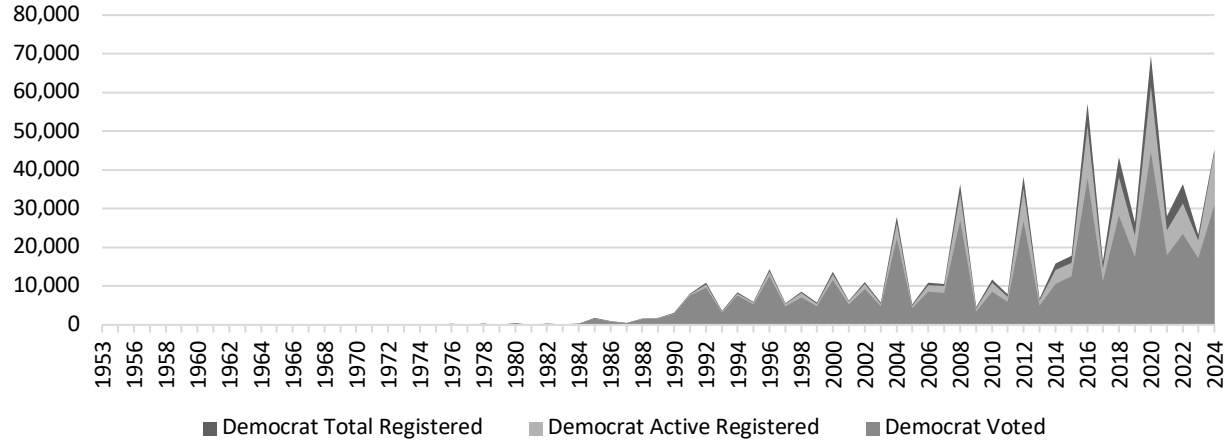
Continued population growth and few barriers to the ballot create both challenges and opportunities for partisan mobilization. With little voting history or attachment to the state, it is not surprising that national winds have historically blown strongly in Nevada's presidential voting. Still, because Nevada's electoral participation is typically below the national average targeted outreach to expand the electorate can shift the margins among voting blocs.

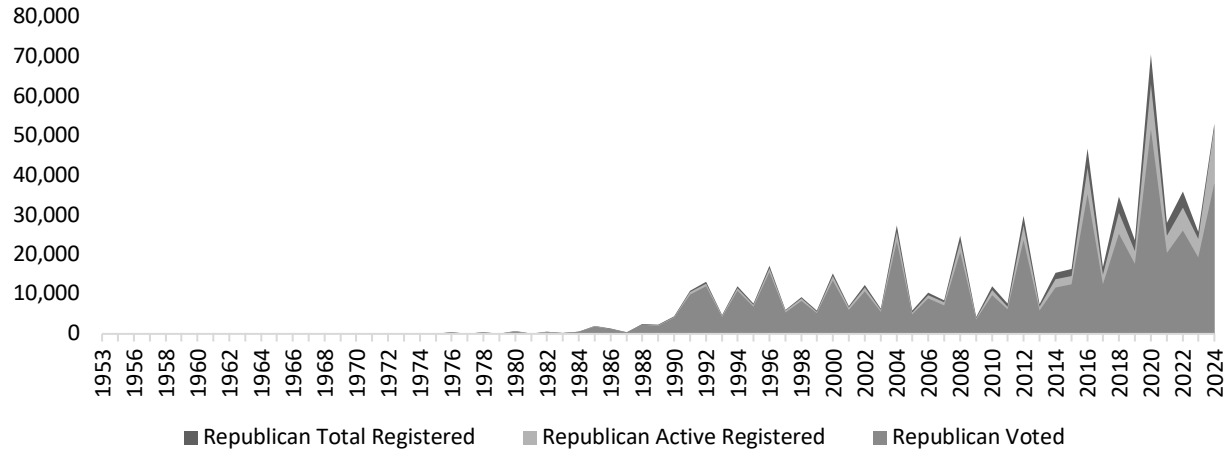
During the heyday of the Reid Machine, the Democrats had the much stronger turnout operation. With these efforts waning, the Republicans expanded on their 2020 Nevada investments. The work of Americans for Prosperity, America PAC, and Trump campaign recruited precinct captains was the GOP's long-awaited effort to match the Democrats in Nevada. The 2024 election also was the first that the party encouraged its voters to use early in-person and mail voting. The number of Republicans who voted by mail or early eclipsed the number of Democrats using those options—the only time this occurred in the four presidential elections considered here.

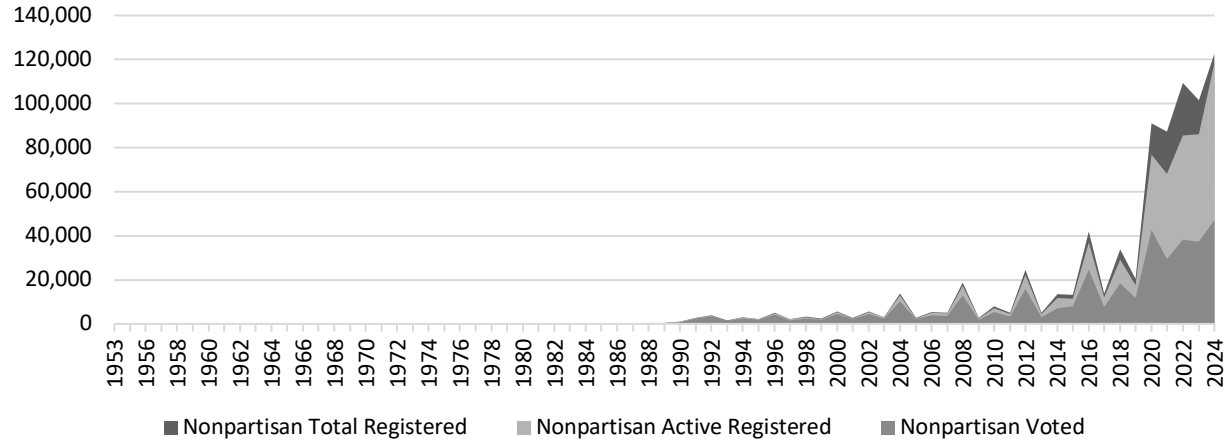
The two figures that follow best capture the convergence of these dynamics. Figure 2 uses the state voter file to model the registration and turnout of the 2024 election for Democrats, Republicans, and nonpartisans. The x-axis reports the year a voter registered, their status (active versus inactive), and if they voted in 2024. A voter is considered inactive if the registration card mailed to the address on file by the county registrar of voters is returned. Voters who are inactive can vote after updating their registrations.

The distributions for the early years of the three series are similar. Regardless of affiliation, those who are older and have lived in the state for decades vote at very high levels as suggested by the minimal gap between the registered and voted lines. Note that the figure begins in 1953 at a time when Nevada was the least populated state in the continental United States. In the 1952 election Dwight Eisenhower flipped the state back to the Republicans by winning 50,000 of the 82,000 voters cast. In 2024 Trump did the same with an electorate that had grown 18-fold and that included some of those same voters. Because of the difference in

Figure 2: Voter Registration by Year and Voter Participation, 2024







Note: 1,541 observations where the year of registration was inconsistent with year of birth are omitted.
Source: Nevada Secretary of State

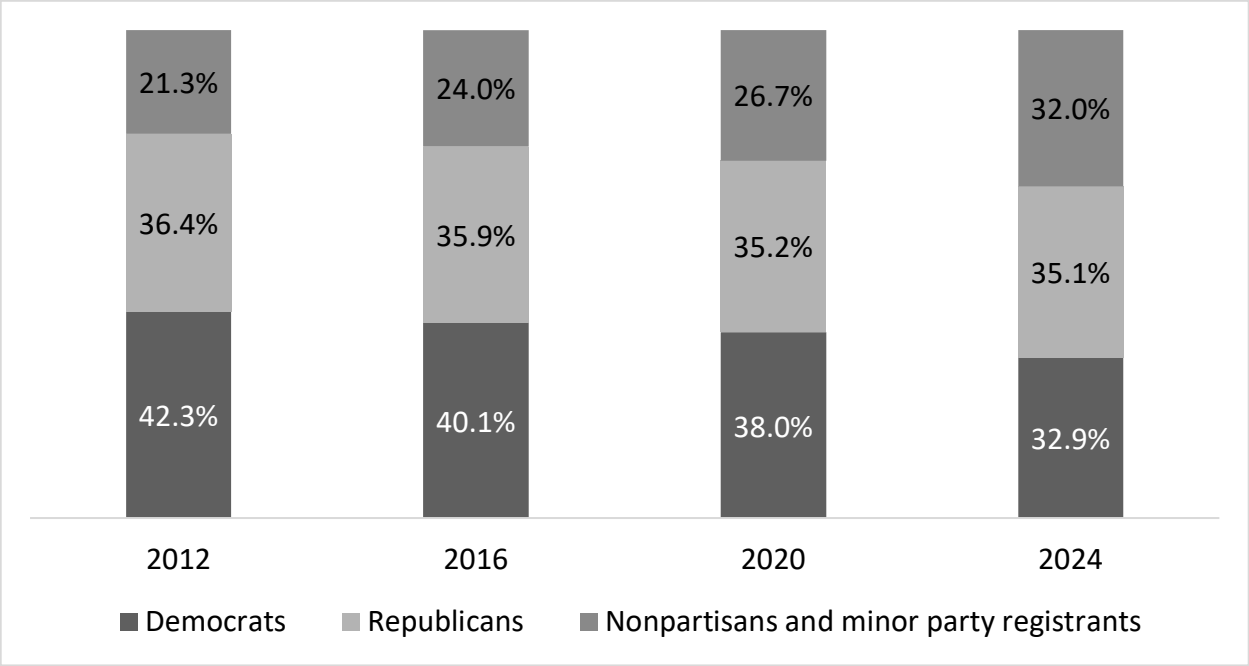
scale over time these data are all but invisible, but they do attest to the longevity of some voters' history even in a state where the population is in constant flux.

For all three distributions there are clear peaks in presidential election years. Starting in 2008, the Reid Machine's strategy of registering more voters and then working to get them to the polls moved Nevada to the Democrats is evident. Comparing the distributions for the two parties explains why Nevada Democrats had to expand the electorate—the gap between Republican registration and turnout is slim reflecting the higher turnout among the party's voters. The figure also captures the Democrats' 2024 drop-off in registering new voters and turning them out. Data from the state voter file indicates that in 2024 Democrats added 45,000 registrants, 60 percent of whom voted. In contrast, 72 percent of the 53,000 Republicans who registered in 2024 voted. For nonpartisans who registered in 2024, turnout was 38 percent.

The figure also nicely illustrates the effects of the liberalization of the state's voting laws. After the implementation of automatic voter registration in 2018, the gap between registered and voted increased as did the number of inactive voters. This speaks to the state's rapid growth and transience. The bottom panel also shows the rapid increase in nonpartisans—the default category for automatic registrants. Certainly, more nonpartisans are voting but the gap between registrants and voters has increased with the implementation of automatic registration suggesting that many who come to the state, register at the DMV when they exchange their driver's licenses, and then never vote. Nonpartisans also compose the largest share of inactive voters, a group that has increased sharply since 2016.

Thus, given the lack of over time stability in the composition of the state's voting pool, it is difficult to suggest that the "Nevada electorate" realigned in 2024. If recent patterns persist

Figure 3: Partisan Composition of the Nevada Electorate, 2012-2024



Source: Nevada Secretary of State

into the next presidential election cycle, the 2028 edition of the Nevada electorate is likely to be composed of twenty or more percent of voters who had not previously voted in the state.

Figure 3 shows how the partisan composition of the Nevada electorate has changed over the last four presidential elections. Since 2012, the Democratic share of the vote has eroded by nearly ten percentage points. Most of this vote share has been replaced by nonpartisans. The Republicans have lost ground too but just by over a percentage point. Also note that whereas the GOP held their vote share compared to 2020, the Democratic share decreased by five points in a state that was decided by just over three points.

Conclusion

Donald Trump's 2024 presidential victory triggered renewed public discourse on two venerable models of U.S. electoral politics: partisan realignment and retrospective economic

voting. While some commentators heralded the election as a “realigning” moment where Republicans made coalition-altering gains among Latino and working-class voters that will persist for decades, political science literature is more skeptical of realignment theory’s cyclical and abrupt model of partisan transformation. Empirical evidence instead supports a more gradual and uneven evolution of party coalitions, and the evidence from Nevada in 2024 is consistent with this more gradual pattern.

The 2024 outcome is better understood as a retrospective referendum on economic performance. Long a national bellwether, Nevada mirrored the nation and shifted Republican in 2024 after more than a decade and a half of Democratic success in the state. The combination of rising costs, stagnant wages, and the lack of affordable housing left many Nevadans overworked, underpaid, and priced out. Consistent with decades of research linking incumbent support to economic indicators, high inflation and stagnant wages damaged Democrats’ standing—regardless of whether the nominal incumbent was on the top of the ticket.

In addition, the organizational decay in the once-formidable Reid Machine eroded Democratic turnout advantages. The Democrats’ earlier dominance among Latino voters, built on mobilization around immigration issues, weakened as economic concerns displaced identity politics and as party unity fractured after Senator Reid’s passing. The Democratic national campaign organization had completely reorganized only three months earlier with the switch from Biden to Harris, and this left the campaign more reliant than usual on a state party organization than was in decline.

Simultaneously, the Republican ground game expanded dramatically. Investments by Trump's campaign and allied groups built more robust early-voting and mail-ballot operation than Republicans had fielded in years, surpassing Democrats' turnout efforts for the first time. By 2024, voter registration in Nevada was evenly split among Democrats, Republicans, and nonpartisans, reflecting demographic churn and liberalized voting laws.

The combination of the Democrat's weakened electoral machinery and the investments in ground operations by the Republicans highlights the importance of canvassing and one-on-one voter engagement. In a state where many voters have little voting history and where residency can be short-lived, campaigns that are able to negotiate this terrain and nudge the less engaged and informed Nevadans to the polls typically prevail.

At the same time, 2024 election gave warning signals to both parties. An ominous sign going forward for Republicans is that Trump's success failed to transfer to other candidates in the party. There were no presidential coattails in Nevada as just enough ballot roll-off and split ticket voting allowed all Democratic House and Senate incumbents to win reelection. For Democrats, the challenge in Nevada is an electorate poorly constructed to offset Republican gains under Trump. Unlike in other swing states where Democrats have been able to make inroads with higher educated voters, Nevada's low share of college graduates limits the party's ability to expand the electorate in its favor. Instead, it is the GOP that has capitalized on the growing inter-party educational divide by making gains with working class voters of all races and ethnicities.

The growth of nonpartisan voters, now one-third of registrants in Nevada, has created a volatile and unpredictable electoral environment that challenges both major parties. These voters are more transient, their partisan leanings are imperfectly known to campaigns, and they require more effort to turn out, if they do at all, making traditional mobilization strategies less effective. Compounded with the decline of the Reid Machine, this has largely eliminated Democrats' turnout advantage. For Republicans, while the expanding pool offers opportunities to reach new voters, the lack of consistent partisan attachment among many in the Nevada electorate limits Republicans' chances of consolidating recent gains, particularly if these voters are responding to short-term evaluations of the incumbent party's performance.

Overall, Trump's Nevada win appears to be less a durable partisan realignment than a short-term economic backlash amplified by weakened Democratic organization and a newly competitive Republican mobilization infrastructure. The result was that history repeats in Nevada, as the state once again splits between the president and senate races and sends a signal that it will continue to be a presidential bellwether.

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