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PSC 4600

Examining Appalachian Realignment

Abstract

The Appalachian region is a unique case within American politics, yet it has not been given much attention by political scientists. In the 1990s and 2000s, the area underwent a political realignment, shifting from a Democratic stronghold to a Republican one. I plan to examine proposed theories of realignment in the context of Appalachia to determine the root cause of this shift. I expect to find a relationship between the adoption of environmentalism as a Democratic principle and the change in Appalachian voting behavior because of the prominence of the coal industry in the region. I will use statistical analysis to determine if there was a significant shift in Democratic environmental values and determine the relationship between Appalachia, coal production, and the Democratic vote share from 1976 to 2020. My research found that the divide between Democratic and Republican environmentalism did increase significantly after 2000, with the majority of the change occurring on the Democratic side. Further, I found that a moderate correlation does exist between Appalachian counties' Democratic vote share and the county's history of coal production aligning with the timing of the shift in environmental values.

Appalachia & "King Coal"

Despite relatively little research addressing the Appalachian realignment, a major shift occurred over the last forty years in this region. Appalachia was formerly a Democratic stronghold, yet today it is one of the most Republican areas of the country. In 1980, when Ronald Reagan won by a landslide against Jimmy Carter, West Virginia (the only fully Appalachian state) was one of only five states won by Carter. But in 2020, West Virginia was Trump's second strongest state. The cause of this shift, previously undefined, can be partially understood by examining the culture around coal within the region.

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), a federal agency devoted to economic growth in Appalachia, defines the region's borders as covering 423 counties from southern New York to northern Mississippi, following the Appalachian Mountain range. When defining Appalachia as a distinct cultural region, though, the northern and southern-most portions of the ARC's definition are typically not included. Since this study has a cultural component, I will be following that pattern and examine the counties within the ARC's central and north-central regions, which include portions of Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, Ohio, and all of West Virginia. This area has a distinct culture due to its isolation from the rest of the country until relatively recently, so it is important to differentiate it from other areas that are included in the ARC definition, which is based mainly on economics rather than culture. References to "Appalachia" in this study are to the cultural region, not the larger ARC defined region.

It is important to establish the deep roots of the coal industry as an economic powerhouse in the Appalachian region to understand why it could have an impact on the political leanings of its citizens. Coal mining has long been the dominant industry of the region, with many residents having ties to the industry going back generations. The history of Appalachian coal mining can accurately be portrayed as a history of exploitation and economic restraint, with companies

requiring long hours in dangerous conditions for low wages. The use of company towns further degraded the ability of residents to accumulate wealth. Nevertheless, despite the many negative aspects of the coal industry, it is still held in very high regard by many Appalachians. The culture of the region is one that prides itself on heritage and legacy, and the coal industry has played on this tendency by defining coal mining as part of this legacy (Bodenhamer, 2016:1143). Connection to the land has always been an important value held by Appalachians, and mining is deeply interconnected with that. Appalachians see the environment as something that is supposed to provide for people, and through coal, it has. This is fundamentally in opposition to environmentalist ideologies that encourage the protection and preservation of natural resources (Nesbitt & Weiner, 2001). A quote from an interview done by Nesbitt and Weiner sums this up perfectly:

Outsiders, tourists for example, see the land only as a playground. Their life is not connected to the land the same way ours is. They come to Pendleton County to play in nature, and then they leave. Most of them are of the environmentalist type. Their only relationship to nature is through playing in it and reading Sierra Club information (interview in North Fork, West Virginia, September, 1995).

In addition to the assertion that coal is part of the “Appalachian way of life”, coal also plays an economic role. Though the region remains impoverished, coal companies have been the source of paychecks for many families for generations, which explains why they would be defenders of the industry. Many Appalachians view coal as the cornerstone of their economy, which explains why they are so quick to defend it. Both of these ideas play into the post-materialism thesis presented by Inglehart. Appalachians are reliant on the land and the use of natural resources. For those whose livelihood does not depend on the extraction of natural resources, it is much easier to advocate for their disuse.

It is important to note the correlation between the coal industry and today’s high poverty rate, though. Although Appalachian coal was the dominant energy source in the U.S. during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, powering the nation’s growth into a global superpower, the region did not see the economic benefits of this because of an exploitative industry. To make matters worse, the rapid downturn of production within Appalachian coal mines has exacerbated this issue (Zipper and Skousen 2021).

Post-Materialism and its Effects

In 1973, Ronald Inglehart proposed his theory of post-materialism in his book *The Silent Revolution*. In it, he discusses the increasing emphasis on “post-material” values, or values beyond immediate threats against physical security, by most Western publics (Inglehart:1973). As wealth has increased, economic insecurity and physical threats are much less common and thus do not need to be placed as highly on the hierarchy of issues people are concerned with. Because of this, people are able to prioritize issues concerned with quality of life and lifestyle at a higher level than before. The environment is an example of an issue that is defined as post-material. For most of us, the protection (or lack thereof) of the environment is not an issue that would affect us in our day-to-day lives, but if all our immediate needs and concerns are being met, we can use our efforts to advocate for less immediate concerns like protecting the environment.

In central Appalachia, poverty levels are much higher than in the rest of the United States. The average poverty rate for the counties in this study is 19.6% compared to the national average of 13.4% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015-2019 American Community Survey). Because of this, it is safe to say that post-materialism is much less popular in Appalachia, where, for many, immediate threats like hunger and job security are more pressing. Environmentalism would be a particularly unpopular policy because of Appalachian coal culture. As a historically large employer, many are not going to support policies that would have a negative effect on the industry because that would create a threat to their livelihood.

Understanding Realignment

To begin examining the question of why the Appalachian realignment occurred, it is important to first develop an understanding of realignments more generally. Charles Bullock defined realignment as “a dramatic change in the partisan expressions of constituencies and communities” (Bullock 2006). Instances of realignment are rare and thus it is difficult to come to a full understanding about their nature due to the small sample size. Despite this, scholars have created theories as to why realignment occurs. Following the original works that introduced realignment to the areas of study, there have been two distinct schools of thought: people-centered and party-centered realignment. While there is nuance within each category, most scholars in the field can fit into one of these categories. The people-centered scholars believe that as the electorate changes their views, they will switch parties. Party-centered scholars theorize that as parties shift their views, the people will follow.

The first scholar to address realignment was V. O. Key, and his writings created the foundation for future studies. He describes “critical elections” as those in which the electorate is engaging with the election and the results show a departure from earlier voting patterns (Key 1955:4). Key examined vote choice in small towns in new England and determined that a realignment occurred within the 1890s. In a later work, Key expands on another form of realignment, called secular realignment. This occurs over a period of years or decades as members of a group slowly shift toward a different political party (Key 1959: 199). Secular realignment would more accurately describe the Appalachian realignment.

Research following Key’s work focused mainly on determining causes of realignments, which is the focus for this paper. A possible answer to this question was suggested by Kristi Anderson (1970), who theorized that the addition of new voter groups to the electorate would be responsible for a realignment. An example of this would be women joining the electorate after the Nineteenth amendment. While she did not specifically discuss region in her work, this theory could easily be applied to different groups moving in and out of different areas and changing the pool of voters. Anderson believes that as new groups are added, they might swing elections in another direction. Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale also took a people-centered approach to this question. They suggest that realignments begin with the electorate rejecting the policies of the dominant party and slowly identifying with another party. This change starts from the ground up and does not require the parties themselves to change their views. Both of these arguments center on the idea that new groups or ideas among the people will change the outcomes of elections. The most important factor in this school of thought is that parties do not change, the people shift their support around parties that have stayed relatively the same. This identifies people as the cause of realignment, not parties.

Conversely, some scholars put the blame for realignments on parties and their identity. Another influential scholar on realignments, Sundquist, indicated that realignments occur when a new issue or set of issues splits the population in a different manner than the previous party system did. In this case, the old party system would dissolve, and parties would realign themselves based on a new set of issues (Sundquist 1983). Similarly, Walter Burnham theorized that social changes were integral to realignments. He said that once a third party or protest movement gains traction, a realignment will be eminent. He uses the Free Soil Party of 1848 and the Socialist Party of 1912 as examples of this phenomenon. As people begin identifying with a third party or a movement that exists outside the established party system, the parties will shift to absorb these new ideas (Burnham 1970). Abramowitz and Saunders made a similar argument, suggesting that as parties redefine themselves based on changing views, the makeup of the party will change. They point to the increased ideological polarization between the Democratic and Republican parties in the Reagan and post-Reagan years as an example of parties shifting their own views and thus causing a change in who supports their party (Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998).

Regional Realignment

Many studies of realignment focus on national realignments rather than regional ones. However, some scholars have changed the scale of their research and looked at specific regions, but this pool of research is much smaller. Bullock, Hoffman, and Gaddie (2006) emphasized the importance of region in conversations surrounding realignment. Different areas of the country follow different patterns when it comes to changing party loyalty. Their findings show that realignments occurred in four of the six regions of the country during the time period they defined. Appalachia was not one of the defined regions tested in their research, and Appalachian states were found in both the Border South and South categories. Because of this, this data was not applicable to my research, but the overall thesis is. They found that realignments, both critical and secular, have occurred in different regions and realignment is not limited to the national scale, which means that Appalachia can be analyzed through such a lens.

Other regional realignments have occurred within the last several decades, most notably the shift of southern voters from the Democratic to Republican party in the mid-to-late twentieth century. That realignment has seen a great deal of scholarly analysis. The counties I will be assessing have in many cases been considered part of the South, but when it comes to assessing realignments, it is important to distinguish between the South and Appalachia because of the discrepancy in when they occurred. The South's realignment began in the 1960s and was clearly visible by the 1980s, but Appalachia continued to vote for Democrats until 2000 with few exceptions. This is only noticeable when looking at a county-by-county scale because Democratic-voting Appalachian counties were often simply outvoted by Republicans in the rest of their state. If one were to only look at the state level, it would appear that the entirety of the state supported Republicans, when in reality there is a large Democratic bloc in the Appalachian portions of the state.

Possible Theories

The theories outlined above provide scholarly attempts to explain the causes of realignments. Each of these can be applied to the case of Appalachia. The dependent variable in each case would be decreasing Democratic vote shares in Appalachia.

Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale present the theory that the party policies do not change, but rather the views of the people change. This hypothesis would be that the people of Appalachia changed their own views and began identifying with the Republican party more. This theory, which basically proposes that there was no change in the parties' views and it was simply a change in decision making, could be considered the null hypothesis.

Anderson suggests that new voting groups being introduced to the electorate would cause a change in party affiliation. Her theory refers to extensions of suffrage, but seeing as no such changes have been made within this time frame, a logical extension of this would be to examine new voting groups moving into the region. This hypothesis would say that new citizens moved into Appalachia, which caused the region to vote differently. The flaw in this hypothesis is the fact that the Appalachian population has a very small growth rate and in many areas the population is actually decreasing. From 2010 to 2019, the growth rate for the entire region was 1.8%, compared to the national average of 6.1% (U.S. Census Bureau, Vintage 2019 Population Estimates). Census data also shows that the breakdown of the population in terms of racial demographics is also not changing in any significant way. Because the population remains basically the same, it is not possible that this is the cause of realignment.

Burnham suggested that social change resulted in the adoption a social movement into one of the existing party structures. The hypothesis associated with this theory in the context of Appalachia would say that a movement among Appalachians developed, encouraging pro-coal policies, and this was adopted by the Republican party. However, simply showing a rise in Republicanism and a rise in pro-coal activism would not be enough to confirm this hypothesis, as the two could both be caused by anti-coal Democratic sentiments. This hypothesis is not accurate because it suggests pro-coal groups became large and influential enough for the Republican party to absorb their beliefs, which may be true, but it leaves out an important factor in this equation. Pro-coal activist groups, such as the influential "Friends of Coal", were formed as a countermeasure to increasing environmentalist rhetoric on the left. This hypothesis assumes that these groups were formed independently, so a test of this hypothesis would not be reliable because it does not include the cause of the formation of these groups. Further, as this group was formed in 2002, the realignment was already underway and this is likely a symptom, not the cause.

Another party-centered analysis by Abramowitz and Saunders theorized that parties redefine themselves based on changing beliefs, thus changing their pool of supporters. In the context of the Appalachian realignment, a hypothesis would be that the Democratic party redefined itself as an environmentalist platform, rejecting coal as an energy source, which led the people of Appalachia to shift their party support. This approach can be better understood by examining Inglehart's ideas of post-materialism, which, while not necessarily about realignment, can help further understanding about why Appalachian citizens would decide to shift their support to Republican candidates. As a region becomes more economically stable and as people grow their wealth, they begin to value more post-material concerns. For the people of Appalachia, a region with extreme poverty and little economic security, post-materialism is not

as attractive because they have more material concerns to deal with. Environmental issues are considered post-material, especially in Appalachia where environmental regulation is often in conflict with the coal industry. People are not going to vote against the industry that is providing their livelihood, so as the Democratic party adopted protecting the environment as part of its platform, they isolated Appalachian coal-mining families.

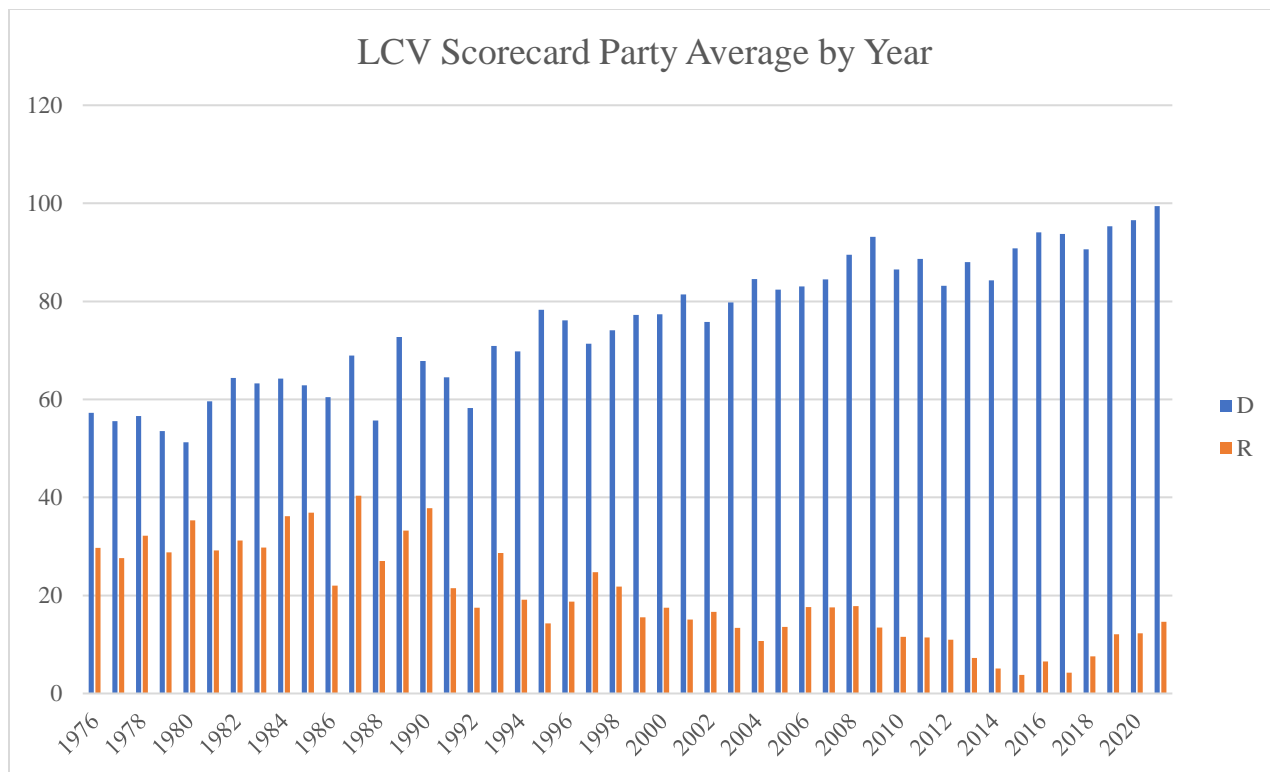
Sundquist suggested that when a new set of issues splits the population in a new way, a realignment will occur. The hypothesis associated with this theory is that the two parties completely redefined their platforms, leading the entire nation to be split among the parties in a different manner than before. This hypothesis also addresses the issue of post-materialism as proposed by Inglehart which was correlated with Abramowitz and Saunders' hypothesis. These two hypotheses work together because the redefinition of the Democratic party as more environmentally focused could have split the entire population in a new way between material and post-material concerns, but would affect the Appalachian region differently than it would more economically secure areas. This would explain why the change was seen in Appalachia and not in the rest of the U.S. at this time. This new issue did not concern other groups as much because it did not threaten to affect their way of life, but this was the case in Appalachia, so the results were seen there.

The only hypotheses that are possible here are Abramowitz and Saunders' and Sundquist's. Using these two, I have crafted my own hypothesis as follows:

H1: Environmentalism as an issue was adopted by the Democratic party, which isolated Appalachians and drove them to withdraw their support for the party.

Measuring Environmentalism

The first step in corroborating this hypothesis is to determine if there was a distinguishable change in Democratic environmentalist sentiment at the time of the proposed change. To measure the environmental tendencies of the party, I will be using the annual National Environmental scorecard produced by the League of Conservation Voters. This scorecard calculates a score between 0 and 100 for each member of congress based on their voting record for that year. Using these averages for the years 1976 to 2021, I performed several t-tests to determine if there is a difference in means. I performed one test between Democrats and Republicans before 2000, and one between the same groups after 2000. The results showed that, while there was a difference between the two groups before, it became much more significant after 2000. Further, I performed a t-test on each party before and after 2000 to see if they both changed. For both groups, I saw significant differences in the stances of party members before versus party members after. However, the distinction among Democrats was greater, suggesting that the change was driven by the Democratic party rather than Republicans.



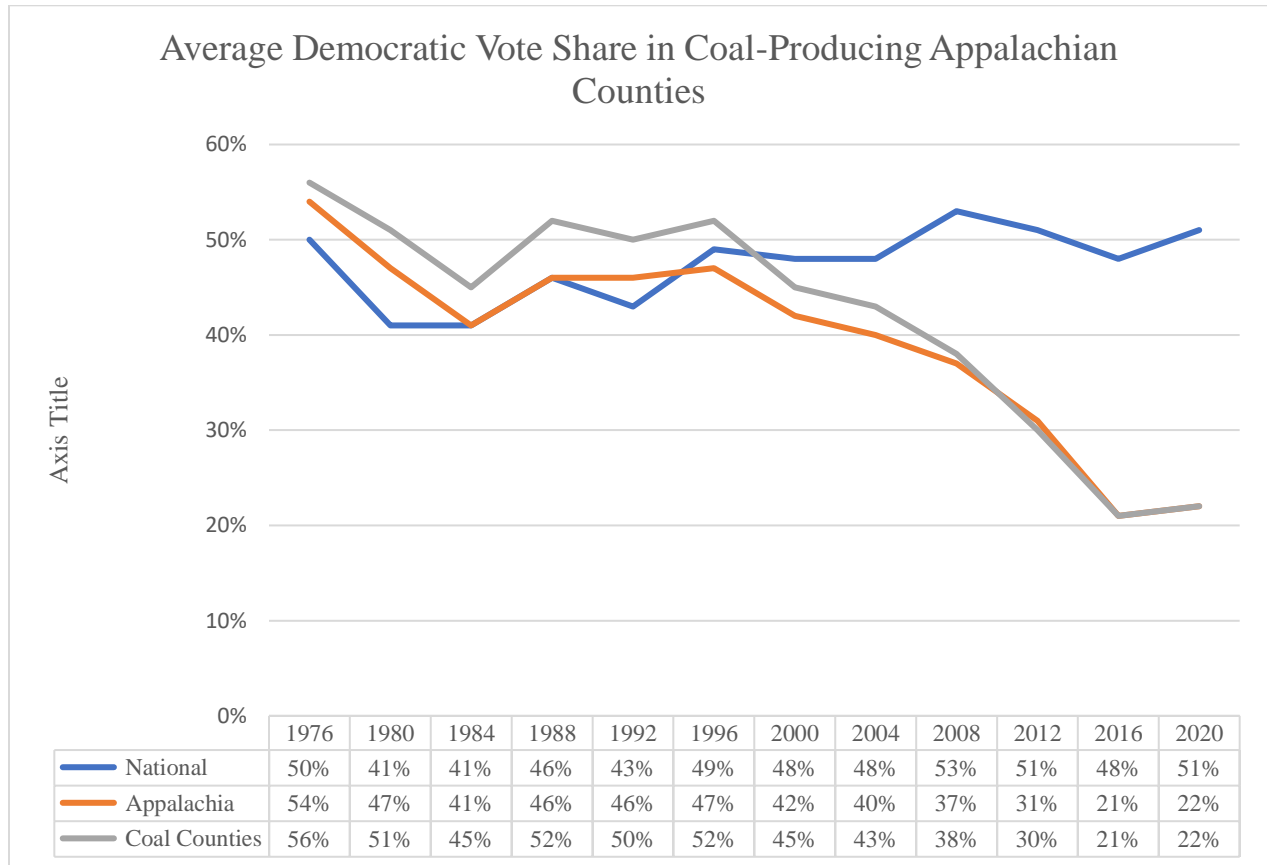
The table above shows the average score of each party throughout the years in question. The mean score for Democrats before 2000 was 64.2, while the mean score for Republicans was 26.9. After 2000, the mean score for Democrats was an 87.5 and the mean score for Republicans was 11.7. There has clearly always been a greater tendency for Democrats to support environmental legislation, as even the highest Republican yearly average does not approach the lowest Democratic one. Nevertheless, the scores within each party were much more varied in the years preceding 2000. As time moved onward, the scores for each party became more and more homogenous, with the Democratic average approaching 100 by 2021. It is clear that the parties realigned themselves on the issue of environmentalism, defining it as a Democratic issue.

It is important to note that there was little actual anti-coal legislation passed by Congress during this time. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) did produce some regulations regarding fossil fuel combustion waste, but overall the decline of coal has been due more to economic factors, such as a decrease in the cost of natural gas. Further, coal has not been specifically called out by most politicians on the left. It is important to understand that in this case, it is not actual anti-coal rhetoric that caused the switch but more the assumption by pro-coal individuals that increased environmentalism would be harmful to coal. Because of that, tracking actual anti-coal acts by the government would not be beneficial, and tracking general environmental rhetoric will better address the actual phenomenon.

Appalachian Voting Patterns

The next step in evaluating the hypothesis that increasing Democratic environmentalism led to Appalachian realignment is to examine the voting patterns of the region in context of the aforementioned split. Counties in Appalachia voted for Democrats at the same or higher

percentages as the national Democratic vote share through the 1996 Presidential election. Beginning with the 2000 election, the percentage of Appalachians voting for Democrats plummets. If filtering by only Appalachian counties with a history of coal production, the numbers are even more significant. Aside from Reagan's reelection in 1984, Democrats averaged over 50% of the vote share in coal-producing Appalachian counties until 2000.



I performed a regression on the Democratic vote share data for Appalachian and border counties, creating a dummy variable for coal production (0 or 1) and Appalachian status (0 not Appalachian, 1 for counties that share a congressional district with Appalachian counties, and 2 for Appalachia). The R statistic for this model is .632 and the R squared statistic is .399, which shows a moderate correlation. The existence of a correlation here suggests that environmentalism in the Democratic party contributed to Appalachians, specifically those in counties with a history of coal production, choosing to vote for the Republican party in increasing numbers. This correlation could be better understood after further tests, and it does not fully account for the shift, but the results of my tests do provide evidence for the idea that coal was a contributing factor.

Conclusion

The data collected and the statistical analyses performed partially corroborate the hypothesis that increasing environmentalism in the Democratic party led to a decrease in Democratic vote shares in Appalachian coal producing counties. A distinction must be made

between the areas heavily influenced by the coal industry, such as Eastern Kentucky, Southwest Virginia, and West Virginia, from other Appalachian areas such as East Tennessee or Western North Carolina whose voting patterns differ significantly from the coal producing regions. The results of my analysis of the League of Conservation Voters environmental scorecard showed a significant difference in Democratic environmentalism before the 2000 election and after. These results were true of both parties, but showed a larger difference between parties in the years after 2000. This confirms the hypothesis that a change occurred at this time, and though Democrats do consistently have higher scores than Republicans, parties were less homogenous in terms of environmental support before the 2000 election. Voters in regions dominated by the coal industry likely considered increased environmentalism as an attack on their way of life, thereby contributing to their decision to vote for the Republican party instead. The results of my analysis show that coal production did have a correlation with Democratic vote share but did not entirely explain the sharp decrease in Democratic votes. Further testing should be done to determine other influential factors.

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