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I N S T I T U T E

## Changes in New Hampshire's Republican Party Evolving Footprint in Presidential Politics, 1960-2008

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New Hampshire voters are about to observe the quadrennial traditions of their first-in-the-nation presidential primary. Someone, however, will be missing from this civic celebration. The Yankee Republican, that rural stalwart of New England conservative values, has slowly but surely disappeared from the scene. Once upon a time, the rural counties of New Hampshire were among the most Republican in the country. Nowadays, visiting out-of-state reporters are more likely to find Republican primary voters in the densely populated towns of the Granite State's southern tier. In the past, old-time New Hampshire Republicans frequently complained about the negative effects of Massachusetts voters moving north. Now, one might argue that Interstate 93 has only bolstered the state's Grand Old Party (GOP).

### Slow-motion Realignment

From the 1960s through the 1980s, when figures such as Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan were GOP nominees, New Hampshire was a reliably Republican state. Throughout these decades the Granite State typically voted several percentage points more Republican than the nation as a whole. New Hampshire's Republican tilt disappeared, however, in the 1992 presidential election. In that year, George H. W. Bush, who had carried the state easily in 1988, only won 38 percent of the vote. Ross Perot, a businessman who ran as an independent promising to solve the nation's budget deficit, earned the support of nearly one-quarter of Granite State voters. And Democrat Bill Clinton carried New Hampshire's four electoral votes, an accomplishment he would repeat four years later. No Republican candidate for president has won 50 percent of the vote in New Hampshire since 1988. New Hampshire has moved from reliably Republican to Democratic-tilting bellwether.

Underneath this slow realignment in the Granite State is a series of dramatic changes in New Hampshire's political geography at the county level. This brief outlines these significant shifts by examining the "political footprint" of

### Key Findings

- Looking at presidential elections from 1960-2008, New Hampshire voters have become less Republican overall.
- Republican presidential candidates no longer have the advantage they once did in New Hampshire's "Yankee" rural counties.
- Historically Republican counties Grafton and Merrimack have both tilted Democratic consistently in recent decades.
- Hillsborough and Rockingham counties' percentage of Republican presidential primary voters across the state has grown from 44 percent in 1976 to 55 percent.

the state's Republican Party. It describes the counties the Republican Party has dominated in New Hampshire over the past four decades, and how those counties have changed over time. (For the purposes of this study, a political party dominates a county when its presidential candidate outperforms his statewide vote share of the two-party vote by at least 5 percentage points.)

The Granite State's counties are grouped as follows:

- Core counties—Hillsborough and Rockingham counties, both of which border Massachusetts, typically generate one-half of all votes cast in New Hampshire.
- Bordering the core—Merrimack and Strafford counties, which border Hillsborough and Rockingham to their north, account for one of five votes cast in New Hampshire.
- Periphery—These rural counties include the Vermont border counties of Cheshire, Sullivan, and Grafton; and the northern counties of Belknap, Carroll, and Coös. The periphery's relative voting power has shrunk over the decades as the core counties have become more densely populated.

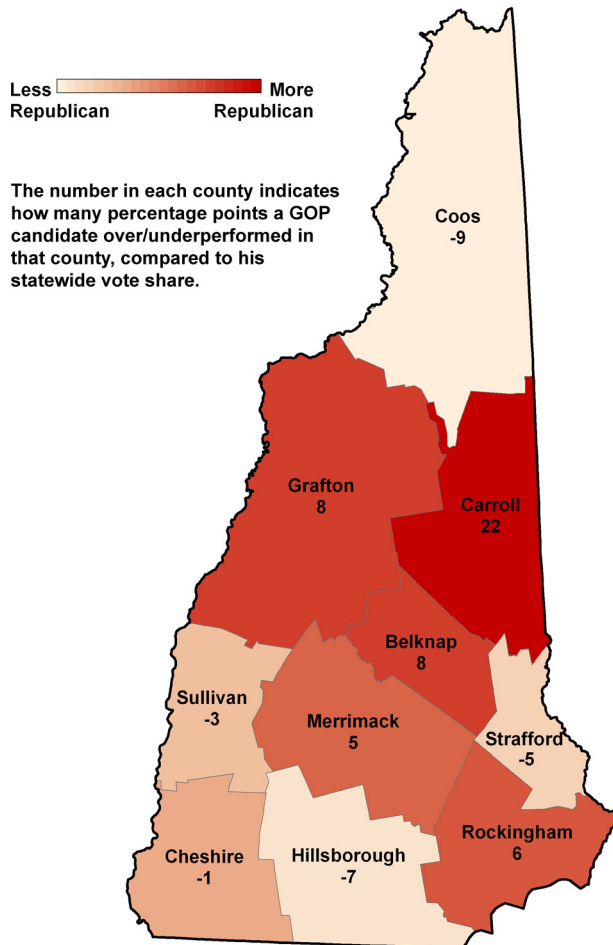
See Figures 1 to 6 for the voting results in presidential elections by county from 1960 to 2008.

## 1960 to 1980

During the 1960s, Republicans dominated northern New Hampshire, with the exception of Coös County, home of working-class bastions such as the city of Berlin. In Carroll County, for example, Republican presidential candidates performed 22 percentage points better than they did statewide, according to a rolling average taken from 1960 through 1968. Traveling from east to west across the state, GOP presidential candidates performed 8 percentage points better than statewide in both Belknap and Grafton counties during the same period.

Further south, Merrimack County was a source of Republican strength in the 1960s, voting 5 percentage points more strongly Republican than statewide. Toward the Seacoast, Strafford County (then as now) was a source of Democratic strength, voting 5 percentage points less Republican than statewide.

**FIGURE 1. REPUBLICAN STRENGTH BY COUNTY, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, 1960-1968**

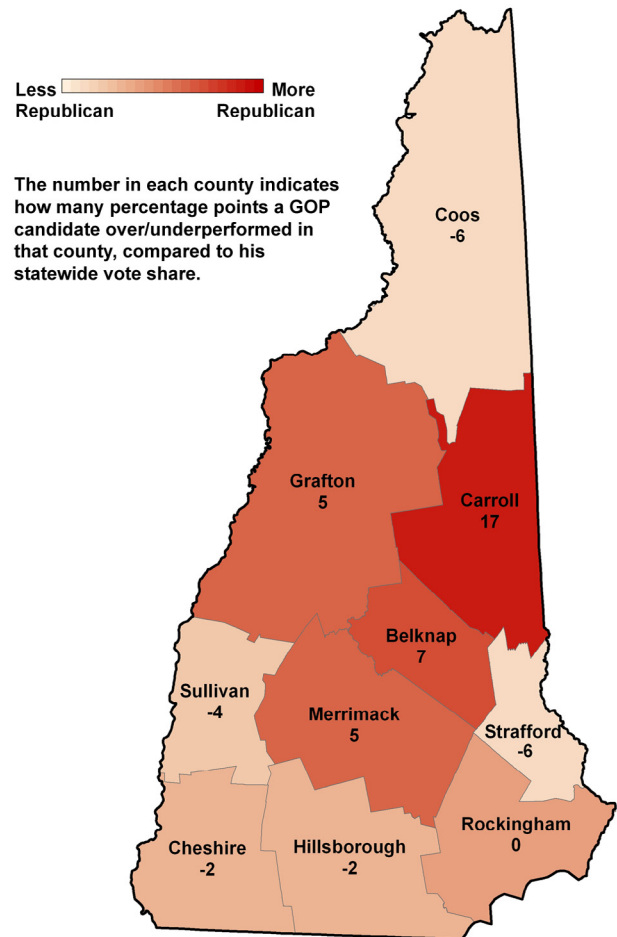


Note: All map data is derived from the voting records of the NH secretary of state.

The core counties of the Granite State, Hillsborough, and Rockingham, tilted in opposite directions throughout the 1960s. Hillsborough County, featuring the state's two largest cities, Manchester and Nashua, was a key Democratic stronghold throughout the 1960s. Republican presidential candidates did far worse here than they did statewide, carrying 7 percentage points fewer votes than statewide on average. Rockingham County, in contrast, boosted Republican presidential candidates considerably. GOP candidates performed 6 percentage points better in Rockingham than statewide.

All told, the Republican Party enjoyed dominance in five counties all across the Granite State, from Rockingham in the southeast to Grafton in the northwest. This pattern, however, was about to undergo change—in part because of the significant growth in New Hampshire's population, and in part because of changes in the national Republican Party itself.

**FIGURE 2. REPUBLICAN STRENGTH BY COUNTY, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, 1968-1976**

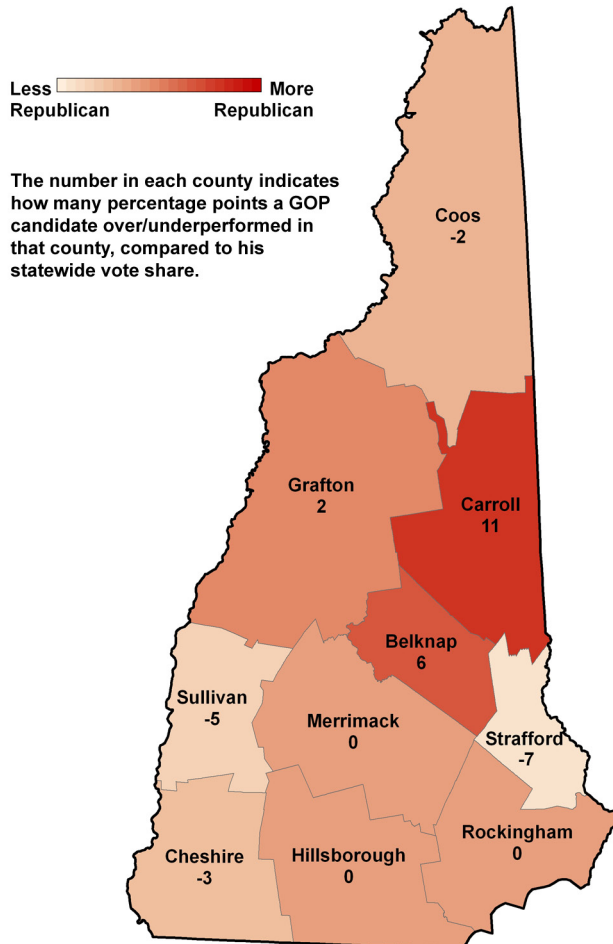


Note: All map data is derived from the voting records of the NH secretary of state.

## The 1970s and 1980s

In the 1970s and 1980s, New Hampshire was in the middle of a burst in growth that lasted half a century after World War II. This growth, of course, had an impact on the New Hampshire vote, both in the aggregate and at the county level. Overall, 30 percent more voters cast ballots in the 1980 presidential election, when Ronald Reagan carried the state for the first time, than in 1960. This growth, however, varied widely from county to county, with Rockingham County leading the way. The number of ballots cast in Rockingham grew by 76 percent from 1960 to 1980, a rate 250 percent greater than statewide. Second was Carroll County to its north, with 58 percent growth. Other counties outside the core, however, lagged significantly. By 1980, voters in the core counties of Hillsborough and Rockingham were casting 51 percent of all ballots in New Hampshire, up from 46 percent in 1960.

**FIGURE 3. REPUBLICAN STRENGTH BY COUNTY, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, 1976-1984**

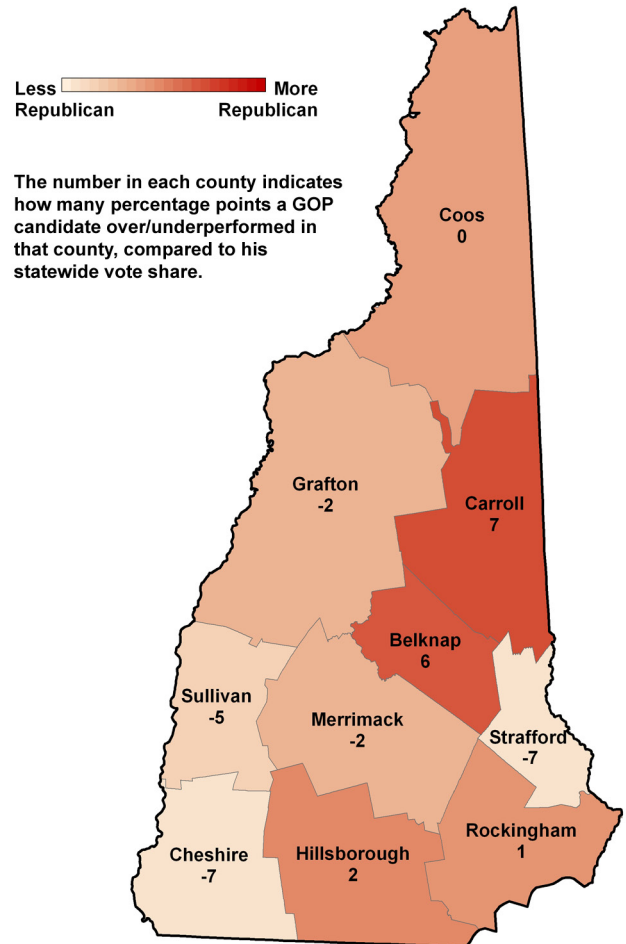


Note: All map data is derived from the voting records of the NH secretary of state.

Throughout this period, the Republican Party remained dominant in presidential elections. The GOP candidates carried the Granite State five consecutive times, from Richard Nixon in 1972 to George H. W. Bush in 1988. At the county level, however, the “footprint” of Republican dominance shifted and shrunk during these two decades. For example:

- Rockingham County, where the GOP dominated in the 1960s, became a “bellwether” county, voting for Republican candidates at the same rate as statewide.
- Merrimack County, another area of GOP dominance in the 1960s, also became a bellwether.
- In northern New Hampshire, Belknap, Carroll, and Grafton counties still tilted Republican in the 1980s, but at a lesser degree than in the 1960s.

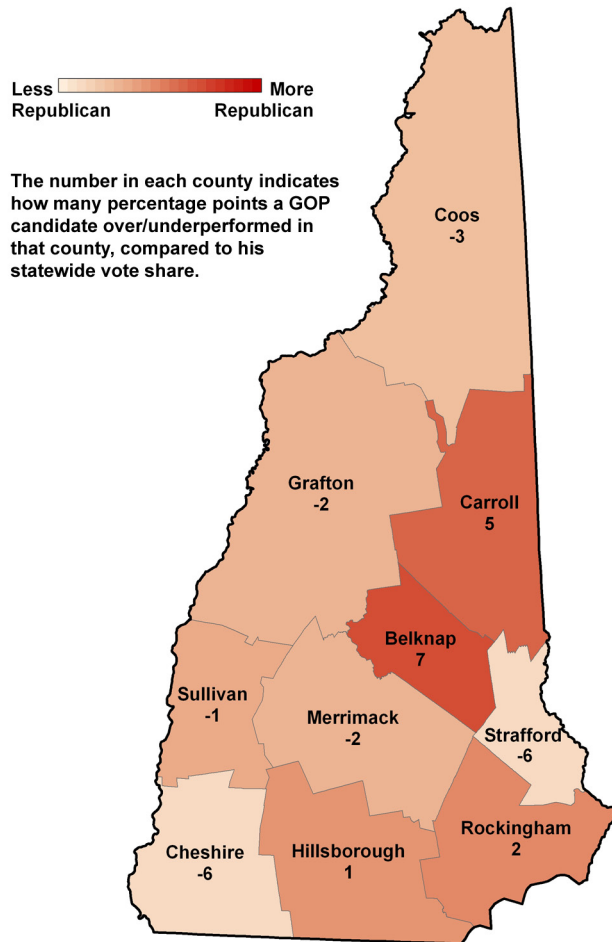
**FIGURE 4. REPUBLICAN STRENGTH BY COUNTY, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, 1984-1992**



Note: All map data is derived from the voting records of the NH secretary of state.

In all, by 1980, the Republican Party only dominated two counties in New Hampshire, both in the north: Belknap (6 percentage points higher) and Carroll (9 percentage points higher, down from 22 higher in the 1960s). In-migration may well have played a part in this shift. Another factor was the changing national identity of the Republican Party. As Nixon advisor Kevin Phillips wrote in *The Emerging Republican Majority*,<sup>1</sup> the GOP began to shift its policy positions in the 1960s, becoming more conservative on issues such as crime, welfare, civil rights, and the size and scale of government more generally. Nationally, the Republican Party's electoral base began to shift, drawing more votes from southerners and from socially conservative Democrats in the Northeast. In doing so, the GOP began to repel moderates, many of whom were found in Yankee country.<sup>2</sup>

**FIGURE 5. REPUBLICAN STRENGTH BY COUNTY, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, 1992-2000**



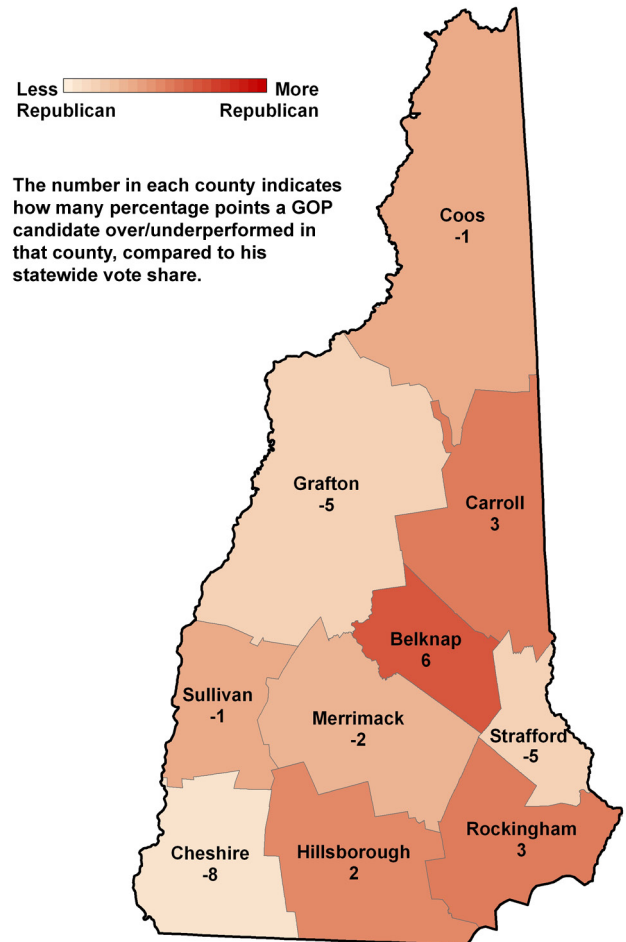
Note: All map data is derived from the voting records of the NH secretary of state.

## 1980 to 2000

New Hampshire continued its growth path through the 1980s and 1990s; in the 2000 presidential election 48 percent more votes were cast than in 1980. Once again, growth was concentrated in the eastern half of the state, with Rockingham and Carroll counties leading the way.

As mentioned above, the 1990s also marked New Hampshire's shift from a reliably Republican state to a Democratic-tilting bellwether. New Hampshire was the only state in the Union to flip from Republican to Democrat in the 2004 presidential election; Barack Obama easily carried the state in 2008 over John McCain.

**FIGURE 6. REPUBLICAN STRENGTH BY COUNTY, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, 2000-2008**



Note: All map data is derived from the voting records of the NH secretary of state.

At the county level, the political differences between New Hampshire's core and periphery deepened:

- The core counties of Hillsborough and Rockingham remained politically stable during this period, tilting slightly Republican in presidential elections.
- The “core border” county of Merrimack, which in the 1960s was solidly Republican, now had a small Democratic tilt.
- Further north, Belknap and Carroll remained Republican counties.
- Historically Republican Grafton County tilted Democratic during this period, joining Vermont-bordering counties Cheshire and Sullivan as a key Democratic stronghold.

In the 2004 presidential election, Bush significantly outperformed his statewide share of the vote in just one county, Belknap (7 more percentage points). He significantly underperformed in three counties: Cheshire (less 9 percentage points), Grafton (less 6 percentage points), and Strafford (less 5 percentage points). Bush actually carried both Hillsborough and Rockingham, but by margins slim enough to be overwhelmed by his electoral losses in New Hampshire's periphery.

## What This Means for the 2012 Primary

All of these changes have impacted not just general elections in New Hampshire, but the Republican presidential primary as well. Compare, for example, the 1976 Republican presidential primary with the most recent in 2008:

- Core counties—In 1976, voters in Hillsborough and Rockingham counties combined to cast 44 percent of all ballots in the Republican primary. By 2008, their portion of the primary vote had increased to 55 percent. Three of ten votes were cast in Hillsborough alone, one of four in Rockingham.
- Core border—Merrimack and Strafford counties have held steady in terms of voting power in the Republican primary, casting roughly one of five votes.
- Periphery—Thirty years ago, a Republican running for president could find a fair number of votes in the rural counties of the Granite State. One-third of all GOP ballots cast in the 1976 primary came from places such as Belknap (6 percent of all ballots) and Carroll (5 percent), as well as counties bordering Vermont such as Grafton (8 percent) and Cheshire (7 percent). Even Coös County accounted for 4 percent of all GOP primary votes.

By 2008, Coös County's “voting power” in the primary had shrunk by half, from 4 percent of ballots cast to just 2 percent. And the influence of the rural periphery as a whole has waned significantly. These six counties now account for just one of every four votes cast in the presidential primary.

To conclude: on the one hand, national political reporters will have an increasingly difficult time landing an interview with the laconic old-timer sporting the red plaid jacket. On the other, a chief complaint about the New Hampshire primary—that its voters are too rural, hence too unrepresentative of the general electorate—is dissipating. The fate of Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, and the other competitors will largely be decided by voters who live within the environs of the Greater Boston metropolitan area.<sup>3</sup> As such, they might be a harbinger of how Republicans in other suburbs around the country may choose when it is their turn to cast votes.

For a slideshow displaying the strength of the Republican vote relative to the state of New Hampshire, see this link: [www.flickr.com/photos/65907538@N04/show/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/65907538@N04/show/).

### ENDNOTES

1. Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969).
2. Mark D. Brewer and Jeffrey M. Stonecash, *Dynamics of American Political Parties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
3. Thanks to my colleague, Ken Johnson, who is a senior demographer at the Carsey Institute and a professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire, for that insight.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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