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Population Density of Congressional Districts in the Mountain West

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POPULATION DENSITY OF CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICTS IN THE MOUNTAIN WEST

Demography Fact Sheet No. 15 | October 2020

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PURPOSE:

This fact sheet reports the population density of congressional districts in the Mountain West states, and the party representation in the House of Representatives for both the 2016 and 2018 general elections. This fact sheet utilizes a model from *Bloomberg CityLab*,¹ the Congressional Density Index (CDI), originally published November 20, 2018.

ABOUT THE DATA:

The original data source measures the population density of all Census tracts within each congressional district and classifies each tract into one of four density categories: “very low,” “low,” “medium,” and “high”.² Researchers then group each district into one of six clusters (“pure rural,” “rural-suburban mix,” “sparse suburban,” “dense suburban,” “urban-suburban mix,” and “pure urban”) based on the density of its constituent Census tracts.³

In the Mountain West, there are 3 “pure rural” districts, 5 “rural-suburban mix” districts, 3 “sparse suburban” districts, 10 “dense suburban” districts, and 6 “urban-suburban mix” districts. There are no “pure urban” districts in the Mountain West. This fact sheet overlays information regarding the results of the 2016 and 2018 general elections on the density data provided by *CityLab*.

KEY FINDINGS:

1. A majority of congressional districts in the Mountain West contains suburban areas, with only 3 out of 27 districts lacking any suburban area.
2. The 2018 “blue wave” in the Mountain West saw 3 previously Republican districts in the “dense suburban” cluster flip to the Democratic Party (AZ-2, CO-6, UT-4). One “rural-suburban mix” district also flipped from Republican to Democratic (NM-2).
3. From 2016 to 2018, no party change occurred in “pure rural,” “sparse suburban,” and “urban-suburban mix” districts in the Mountain West.
4. In the 2018 election, the House of Representatives delegations from Arizona and Colorado changed from being majority-Republican to majority-Democratic.

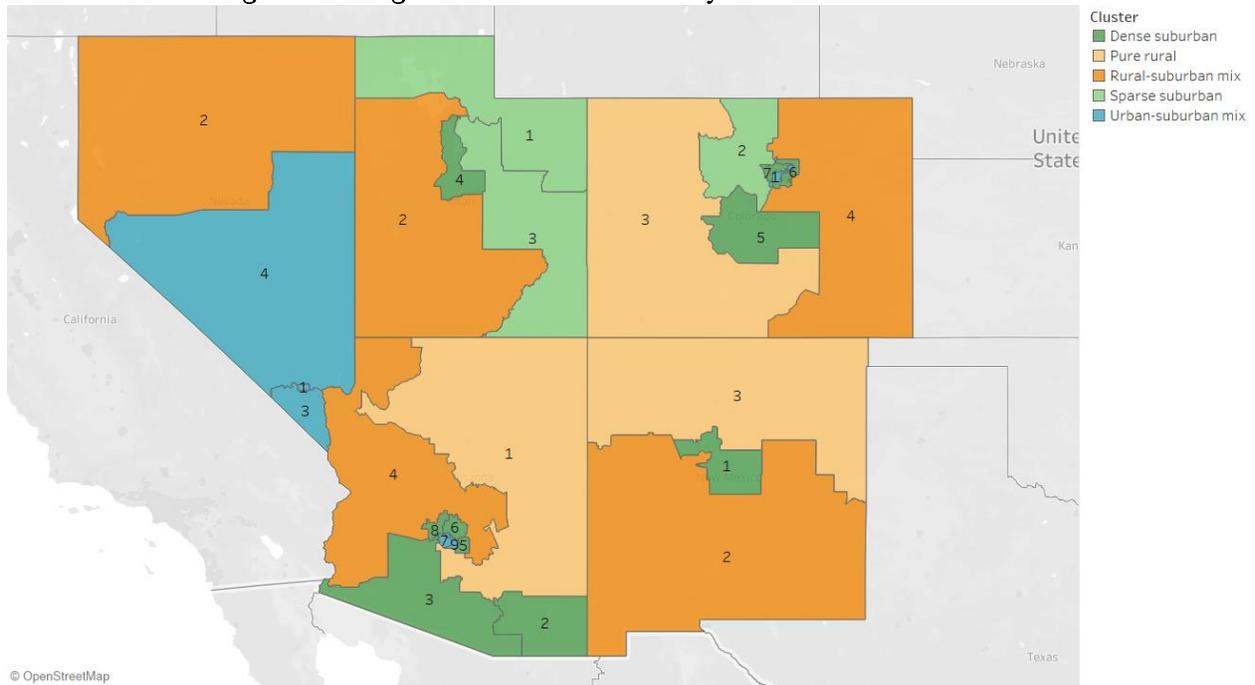
¹ David Montgomery, “CityLab’s Congressional Density Index,” *Bloomberg CityLab*, November 20, 2018 (www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-11-20/citylab-s-congressional-density-index).

² David Montgomery, “Citylab-data/citylab-congress/methodology.md,” *GitHub*, November 13, 2018 (<https://github.com/theatlantic/citylab-data/blob/master/citylab-congress/methodology.md>).

³ The authors utilized a “fuzzy c-means clustering” machine learning algorithm to form the six clusters, which leads to some datapoints being in several clusters. In cases like this, the authors classified the district into the cluster it was most similar to.

Figure 1 displays the clusters of all congressional districts in the Mountain West. All districts with urban areas are centered around the cities of Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Denver.

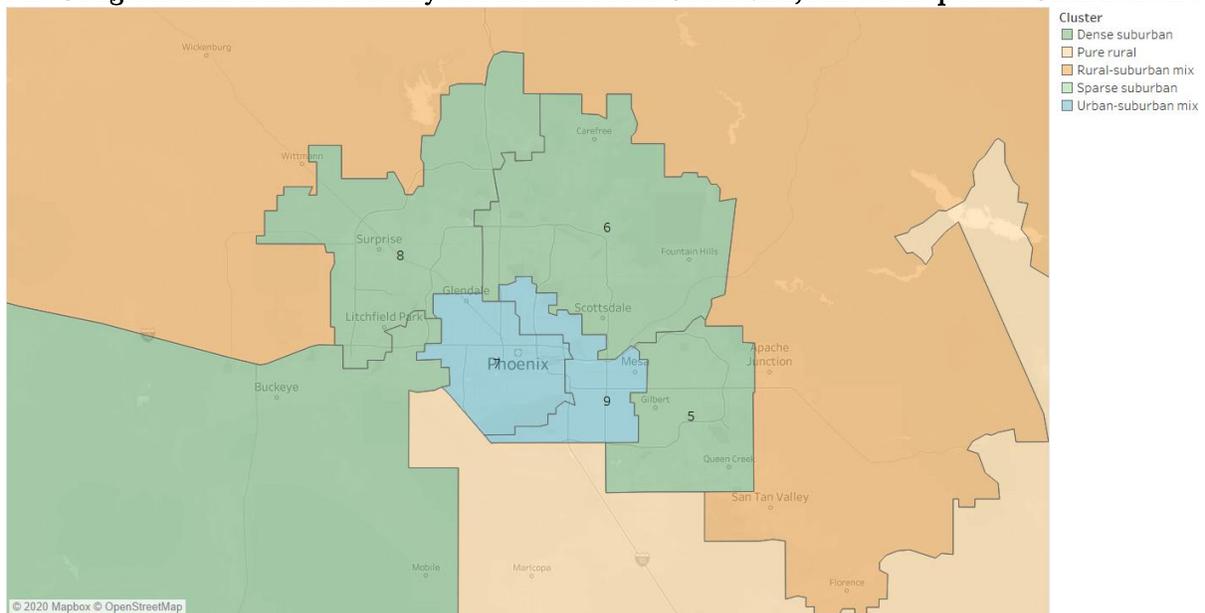
Figure 1: Congressional District Density in Mountain West States



*Adapted from data originally reported in *Bloomberg CityLab*, 2018

Figure 2 depicts the clusters of the congressional districts in the Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Two urban-suburban districts are clustered in the center of the metropolitan area, surrounded by a ring of dense suburban districts, which are surrounded by a rural district and a rural-suburban district.

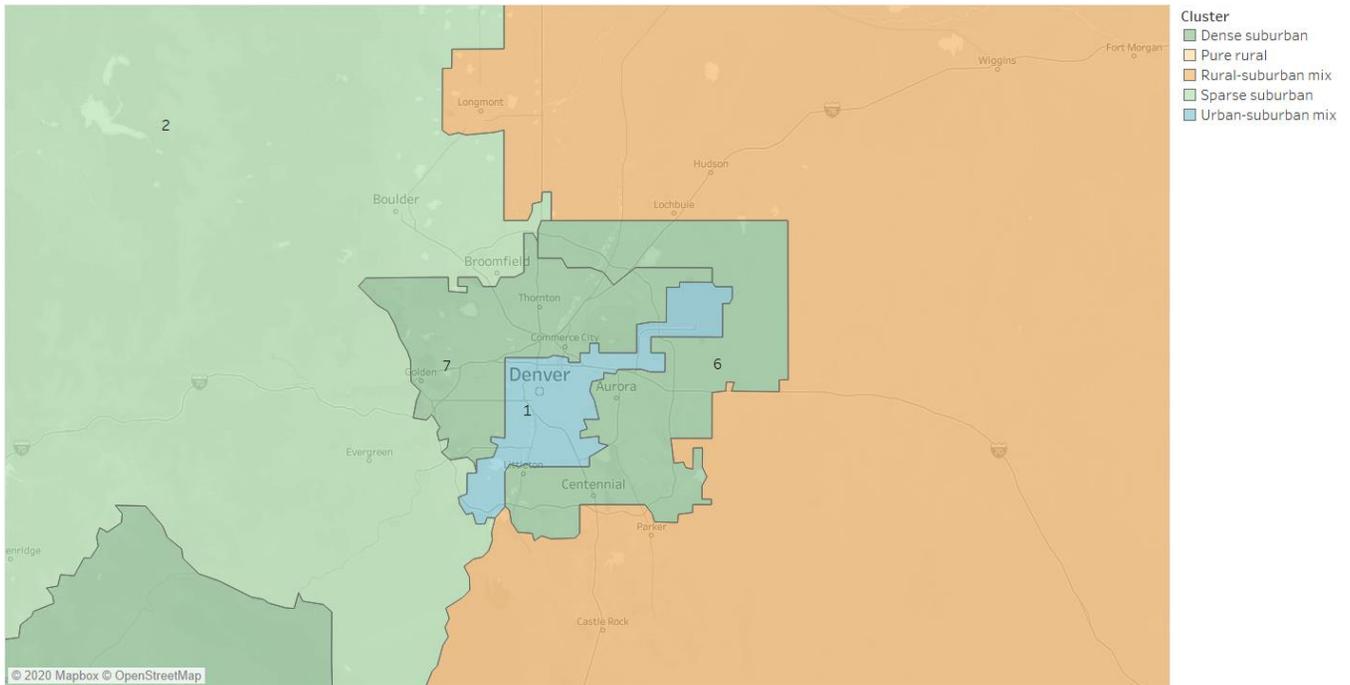
Figure 2: Congressional District Density of Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ Metropolitan Statistical Area



*Adapted from data originally reported in *Bloomberg CityLab*, 2018

Figure 3 depicts the clusters of the congressional districts in the Denver-Aurora-Lakewood, CO MSA. Similar to the Phoenix metro, the core of the Denver metropolitan area forms an urban-suburban district, surrounded by dense suburban areas. Also like the Phoenix metro, the Denver metropolitan area is bounded by a rural-suburban area to one side but differs due to a sparse suburban district to the west.

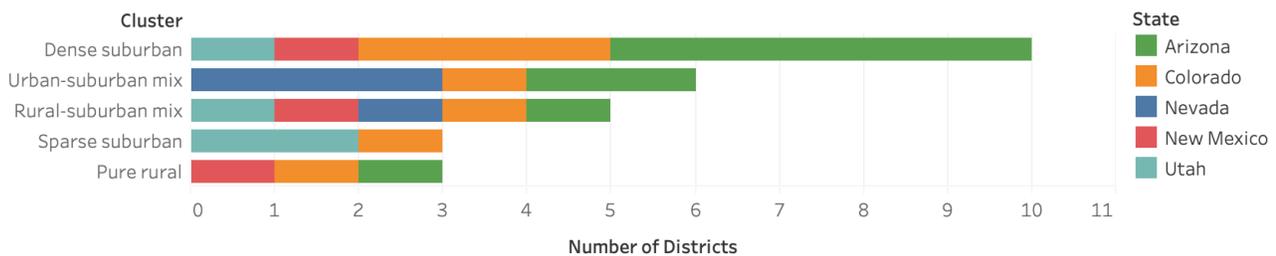
Figure 3: Congressional District Density of Denver-Aurora-Lakewood, CO Metropolitan Statistical Area



Adapted from data originally reported in *Bloomberg CityLab*, 2018

Figure 4 shows the breakdown of population density by state. The majority of dense suburban districts in the Mountain West are found in Arizona; these districts constitute a majority of the state’s congressional representation. A majority of Nevada’s congressional districts are classified as urban-suburban mix. Half of Utah’s representation is from sparse suburban districts, and New Mexico’s representation is evenly divided across the dense suburban, rural-suburban, and pure rural clusters.

Figure 4: Mountain West States, Congressional District Density by State

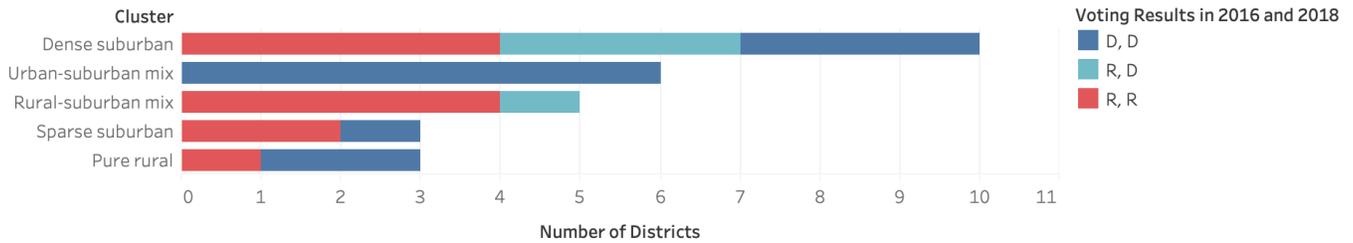


Adapted from data originally reported in *Bloomberg CityLab*, 2018

Figure 5 displays Mountain West election results for the 2016 and 2018 elections, where red districts voted Republican in both elections, dark blue districts voted Democratic in both elections, and light blue districts voted Republican in 2016 and Democratic in 2018. There were no districts that voted Democratic in 2016 and voted Republican in 2018.

All flipped districts (from Republican to Democratic) contained some suburban areas, and one also contained rural areas. No districts that contained urban areas flipped, and no purely rural districts flipped. Figure 5 further shows the breakdown of Mountain West districts by cluster. There are 13 wholly suburban districts (dense suburban and sparse suburban), compared to 11 districts that contain some suburban areas, and 3 that contain no suburban areas.

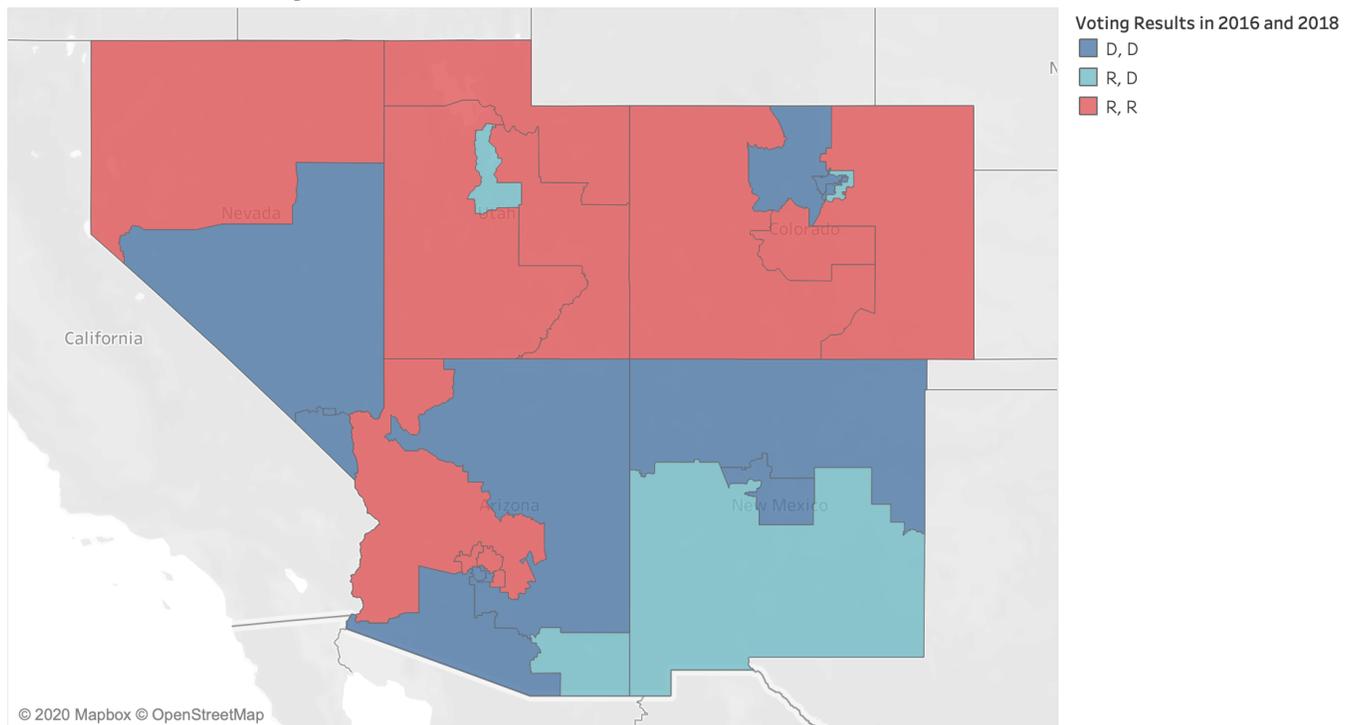
Figure 5: Mountain West Congressional Districts, Voting Results by Congressional Density Cluster



Adapted from data originally reported in *Bloomberg CityLab*, 2018

Figure 6 depicts the 2016 and 2018 election results on a map, with districts that voted Democratic both times in dark blue, districts that voted Republican both times in red, and the 4 districts that flipped from Republican to Democratic in 2018 shown in light blue. These flipped districts are not concentrated in any one state or region, rather indicating that the 2018 district flips were concentrated in suburban areas across the Mountain West.

Figure 6: Mountain West States, Election Results, 2016 and 2018



Adapted from data originally reported in *Bloomberg CityLab*, 2018