

Blue Dogs to New Dogs: The Transformation of Congressional Economic Moderates in the Democratic Party

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Abstract

A persistent dynamic in recent congressional politics is that the moderate wing of the Democratic Party has frustrated Democratic economic policy ambitions on issues ranging from the provision of health care to the regulation of the financial sector. These Democratic moderates are reticent to support bills that seek to expand the role of government in the economy. While the pressure from these Democratic moderates is ever present, the moderates of today are different from the moderates of the past. Whereas previous Democratic moderates were concentrated in less affluent rural areas, many new moderates hail from more affluent suburban areas. This paper attempts to demonstrate this transformation using congressional scorecard data from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; and show that the transformation is connected to the broader education realignment in American politics: as Democrats shed support from less educated constituencies and gained traction among more educated constituencies, this produced a shift in the districts and states that produced moderates in the Democratic caucus. Additionally, unlike the economic moderates of the past who were often also moderates on social issues, the new Democratic economic moderates from highly educated districts and states are typically liberal on social issues. This suggests that while the Democratic Party may be more cohesive on social issues, there will continue to be divisions in the party on economic issues in the years to come.

Introduction

In the spring of 2018, a rare event occurred on Capitol Hill: an important piece of legislation passed with significant bipartisan support. That piece of legislation was a partial rollback of banking reforms created in the landmark Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010. This new bill did not repeal Dodd-Frank in its entirety but weakened some of the regulations placed on banks the banking community believed were too onerous. It allowed banks with assets up to \$250 billion to avoid heightened regulatory scrutiny. This bill was spearheaded by Republicans who controlled both chambers of Congress and the White House at the time, but it attracted significant number of Democratic votes in the House of Representatives and Senate: 33 House Democrats and 17 Senate Democrats voted for the bill.¹ These Democrats voted for the bill despite many of them representing safe seats² and fellow members of their party arguing they were voting to make another financial crisis more likely. Liberal congresswoman Pramila Jayapal (WA-07) went as far to call the bill a “sledgehammer” to Dodd-Frank.³

This was not the first time that a significant number of Democrats voted against increased regulations on the banking industry. When the final version of Dodd-Frank passed the House in 2010, 19 Democrats voted against it.⁴ ⁵ But there are key differences in the kinds of Democrats who voted against Dodd-Frank in 2010 and the Democrats who voted for the Dodd-Frank repeal in 2018. The earlier group was predominantly made up of conservative Democrats from the South

¹ Economic Growth, Regulatory Relief, and Consumer Protection Act, S. 2155, 115th Congress (2018).

² Democrat Hillary Clinton won these districts and states by an average of more than nine points in 2016.

³ Fang, Lee. 2018. “How Two House Democrats Defended Helping the GOP Weaken Dodd-Frank Financial Regulations.” *The Intercept*, May 26. <https://theintercept.com/2018/05/26/dodd-frank-repeal-senate-democrats/>.

⁴ Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, H.R. 4173, 111th Congress (2010).

⁵ One Democrat in the Senate, Russ Feingold (WI), voted against the bill, but he publicly stated he opposed it for not being “tough enough” on Wall Street. See: Appelbaum, Binyamin, and David M. Herszenhorn. 2010. “Financial Overhaul Signals Shift on Deregulation.” *The New York Times*, July 15. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/16/business/16regulate.html>.

who represented rural and less affluent districts. Their districts were also less educated: the average percentage of their constituents who had a Bachelor's degree or higher was 20.4 percent which was close to eight points lower than the national average at the time and thirteen of those nineteen districts are now held by Republicans in Congress today.

The Democrats who voted for the Dodd-Frank repeal were less uniform. Many were from rural and less educated districts and states like the 2010 group, but many hailed from districts and states which had only recently begun electing Democrats. Among the 50 Democrats who voted for the repeal, nearly half represented districts or states which Democrats did not control in 2003; and the rate of college education in these mostly affluent urban and suburban districts and states was six points higher than the national average.

These shifts from 2010 to 2018 reveal a broader shift in the Democratic Party in recent decades among the party's economic moderate wing. Whereas in the past, many moderate and conservative Democrats were concentrated in less educated districts and states, these Democrats now more commonly represent highly educated districts and states. This is reflective of the broader education realignment in American politics which led to the Democratic coalition becoming more educated and the Republican coalition becoming less educated (Abramowitz 2018; Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2018; Kitschelt and Rehm 2019; Hopkins 2020). But unlike how this realignment affected the party's position taking on social issues in which the realignment ousted socially moderate Democrats (Kersting 2021), on economic policy, it helped to maintain a significant number of economic moderates in Congress. I argue this is partially explained by public opinion research that finds greater educational attainment leads to more liberal social issue positions, but more conservative economic positions. The education realignment led to fewer Democratic economic moderates from rural, less educated districts and states, and more from the affluent,

highly educated areas Democrats increasingly won in recent years. Additionally, while this new class of Democrats are moderates on economic issues, they are not moderates on social issues, which contrasts with the earlier group, who were moderates across both economic and social issues. This leads to the current state of the Democratic Party in Congress, in which Democrats are overwhelmingly in agreement on liberal social issue positions but have more internal disagreement on economic issues: there are more outliers on economic issues than social issues within the party.

This paper seeks to explain the recent dynamics in congressional Democrats' positions on economic issues and determine whether the education realignment is a factor in the party's position taking. The paper proceeds as follows: I first review the Democratic party's historical stances on economic policy. Next, I review the public opinion research on the relationship between educational attainment and economic policy preferences. Then, I outline a theory for how the education realignment would affect Democratic elites' positions on economic issues. I use data on congressional behavior on economic policy from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's annual legislative scorecard to test this theory. I find the education realignment led to the replacement of many Democratic economic policy outliers in Congress with new economic outliers who differ from their predecessors in the kinds of constituencies they represent. These outliers are more economically conservative than the average Democrat in Congress. I conclude by discussing what these findings suggest for the future of economic policy in American congressional party politics.

Democratic Position Taking on Economic Policy

For much of the histories of the Democratic and Republican parties in America, the former was more associated with greater government regulation of the economy and the latter was more associated with more support for the free market; and this was especially true after the Democratic

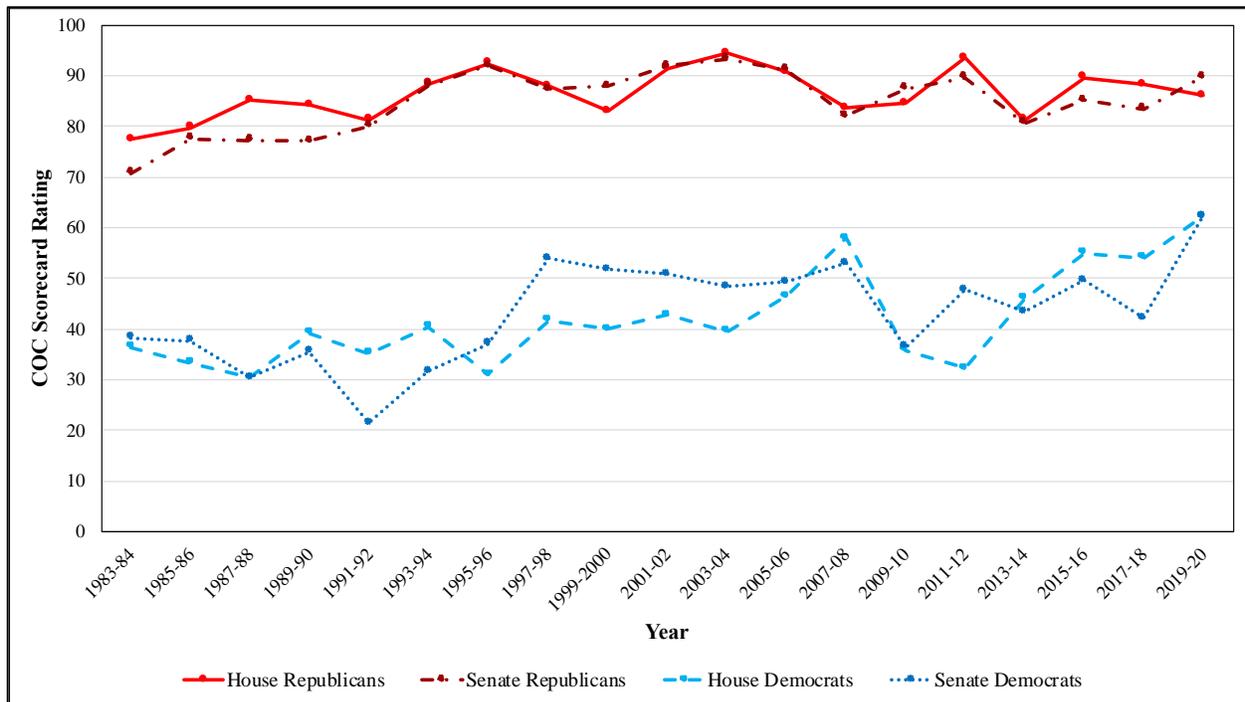
Party dramatically expanded the influence of the federal government in the economy with the New Deal programs of the 1930s (Gerring 1998). Throughout the mid-twentieth century, Democrats, when in power, expanded the size and scope of the federal government and its reach into economic affairs; and while Republicans were always resistant to Democratic economic policy, their resistance took on a new form with the rise of supply side economics and deregulation championed most prominently by the Reagan administration. This increased polarization on economic issues between the two parties.

But in response to a series of electoral losses that were blamed on the excessive liberalism of Democratic presidential candidates like George McGovern and Walter Mondale, the Democratic Party began to shift some of their issue positions on economic policy. This shift is associated with the rise of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), which was founded in 1985 by moderate and conservative Democrats to promote a new brand of Democrats (Hale 1995). These New Democrats, most notably President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, argued for a less liberal Democratic Party. Once in office, President Clinton began by embracing more government involvement in the economy on issues like health care, but after Republicans took back both houses of Congress in the 1994 midterm elections, he worked with them to roll back the size and scope of the federal government. Some notable laws Clinton signed into law during this time were the 1996 Telecommunications Act,⁶ which deregulated the media industry, and the 1999 Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act,⁷ which deregulated the financial industry. Both acts repealed prior statutes put into place by Democrats during the New Deal and many Democrats in Congress voted for both bills alongside Clinton's support.

⁶ Telecommunications Act of 1996, S. 652, 104th Congress (1996).

⁷ Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act, S. 900, 106th Congress (1999).

Figure 1. Average Chamber of Commerce Congressional Scorecard Rating by Party and Chamber, 1983-2020



These shifts in economic policy among Democrats in the 1990s are observed in Figure 1, which shows the average scores received by each party in Congress on the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s annual legislative scorecard. This scorecard documents congressional roll-call votes on business and economic policy. Democrats move closer to Republicans on this scorecard as the 1990s progress and this trend continues for much of the 2000s and 2010s. In fact, Democrats in the 116th Congress (2019-2020) scored higher on the Chamber of Commerce’s (COC) scorecard than they have in decades. While Democrats attempted to expand government regulation of the economy in recent years when they controlled Congress and the presidency, often these regulations were watered down, such as the removal of the public option from the 2010 Affordable Care Act.⁸

One explanation for the shift among Democrats documented in Figure 1 is that American politics generally shifted to the right on economic policy. In recent decades, economic policy is

⁸ Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, H.R. 3590, 111th Congress (2010).

skewed towards the interests of business groups and the wealthy (Bartels 2008; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Gilens 2012; Witko et al. 2021). Smith (2007) argued this is the result of Republicans changing how they framed their own conservative economic policies: they went from highlighting the need for a small government to balance the federal budget to arguing a smaller government promotes jobs and economic growth. Smith argued this message became popular amongst the American public, and thus, economic discourse now occurs on Republican terms rather than Democratic terms. This may have had the effect of pulling Democrats to the right on economic policy to appeal to voters.

But there is also a separate argument that Democrats are independently becoming less economically liberal than they were in previous decades (Miller and Schofield 2008; Geismer 2015; Frank 2016; Fraser 2017). Fraser (2017) characterized the Democratic Party as reflective of “progressive neoliberalism,” an ideology that values both equality and rights for historically marginalized groups, as well as the ethos of free markets and the financial powerhouses in the U.S. economy. I find support for this characterization as the Democratic Party became more liberal on social issues than on economic issues in recent decades. Both Miller and Schofield (2008) and Geismer (2015) attributed the party’s shift on economic issues to changes in the party’s coalition. The former argued this is a result of the Democrats’ attempt to woo pro-business and socially liberal voters who were disaffected in the Republican Party over the party’s embrace of social conservatism. Geismer (2015) developed a similar argument and focuses on how the core of the Democratic Party shifted from working-class voters who were connected to the party through labor unions to affluent, white-collar suburbanites that emerged in the postindustrial economy. I place my argument alongside these explanations about the Democratic Party: the education realignment resulted in college-educated voters who commonly held socially liberal yet economically

conservative views becoming a more important constituency within the Democratic coalition. This restrained the Democratic Party from shifting further to the left on economic issues and in some instances can explain economically conservative positions taken by the party.

Not all agree with the assertion that Democrats are less economically liberal than they used to be. Malpas and Hilton (2021) argued while Democrats did retreat somewhat from their history of economic liberalism in the 1990s with the rise of the New Democrats under Clinton, economic liberalism rebounded in the 2000s and 2010s. But their findings rested on an analysis of Democratic party platforms; and while I do not dispute their findings regarding the policies that are included in the national platform, I argue we must look at Democrats' behavior when in elected office to fully understand their positioning on economic issues. This paper does so by examining congressional behavior on roll-call votes. This is important, because while a party can propose a given policy in their platform, the realities of governing mean that the party may not be able to deliver on that policy if elements of their party balk at the policy. I argue this is what often occurs in the Democratic Party today on economic policy: Democratic leadership proposes a policy, but economic moderates and conservatives within the party's congressional caucus push back against the policy, either reforming it more to their liking or killing it altogether. This is evident in the recent internal debates in the Democratic Party over the 2021 Build Back Better Act.⁹ And I find that increasingly, Democratic economic moderates and conservatives come from highly educated districts and states that have been incorporated into the Democratic coalition because of the education realignment.

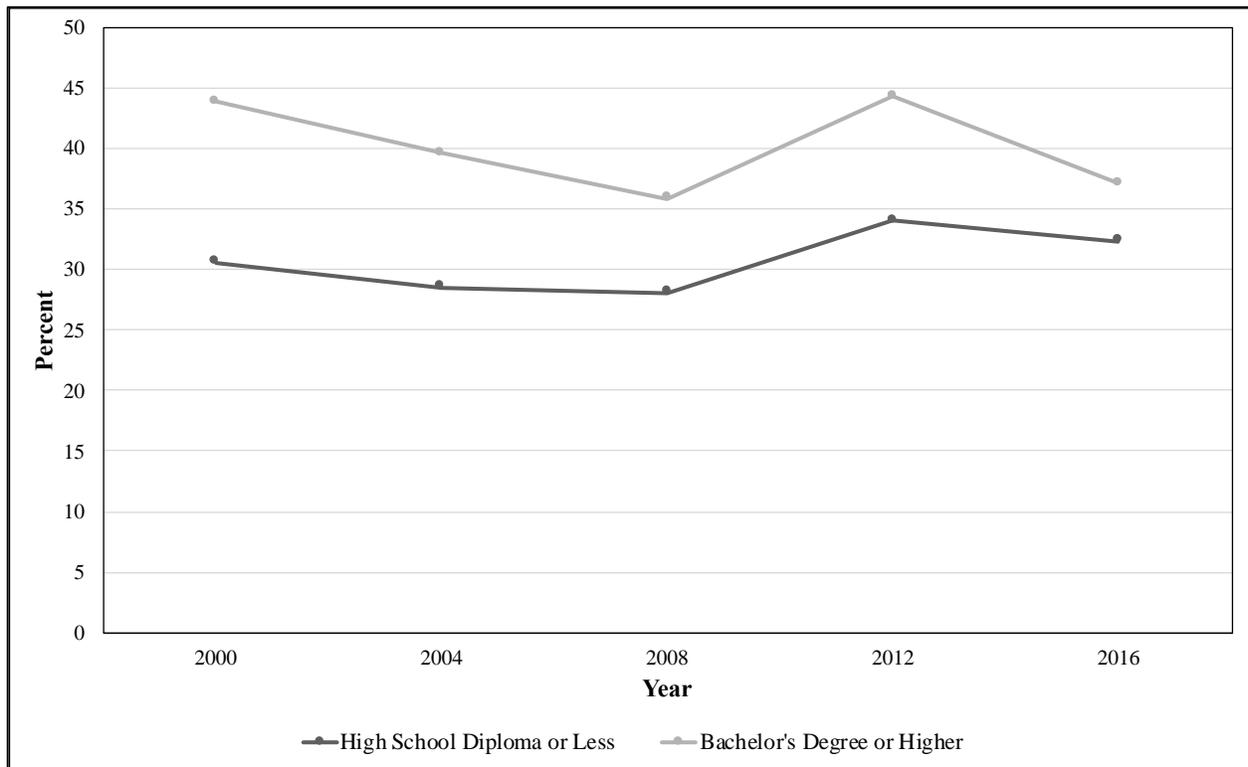
⁹ Ollstein, Alice Miranda, Heather Caygle, and Sarah Ferris. 2021. "Centrists Throw Wrench in House Democrats' Drug Pricing Plans." *Politico*, September 14. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/09/14/centrists-house-democrats-drug-pricing-511798>; Prokop, Andrew. 2021. "The State of the Shrinking Build Back Better Act." *Vox*, December 13. <https://www.vox.com/2021/12/13/22799436/build-back-better-senate-manchin-parliamentarian>.

Public Opinion on Economic Policy by Education

Whereas greater educational attainment often corresponds to more liberal ideological positions on social issues, public opinion research often finds it is associated with more conservative economic positions (Jackman and Muha 1984; Phelan et al. 1995; Mendelberg, McCabe, and Thal 2017; Nye et al. 2020; Bullock 2021). Evidence of this relationship is seen in Figures 2 and 3. These figures report data from the American National Elections Survey (ANES) over time on support for the free-market economy and labor unions, respectively. I observe over time, college-educated Americans are more supportive of the idea that the free-market handles the economy better than the government does compared to Americans without a college degree. At the same time, college-educated Americans feel less favorably towards labor unions than Americans without a college degree. It should be noted though that the gap between college-educated and non-college-educated Americans on these measures narrowed in recent years. This could be explained by both groups converting their positions in response to the education realignment, in which the former is becoming more Democratic, and the latter is becoming more Republican. But I emphasize a gap remains.

Why does greater educational attainment correspond with more conservative economic positions? Public opinion research offers several answers to this question. Jackman and Muha (1984) argued a college education affects economic attitudes less by changing students' ideologies and more by cementing existing ideologies. They argued many students who enter higher education already skew conservative on economic policy as they come from privileged backgrounds and were benefited by existing, conservative economic policies. But where education has an impact is that it gives students more robust cognitive skills that allow them to have more developed ideologies which they can articulate. Thus, for Jackman and Muha, a college education

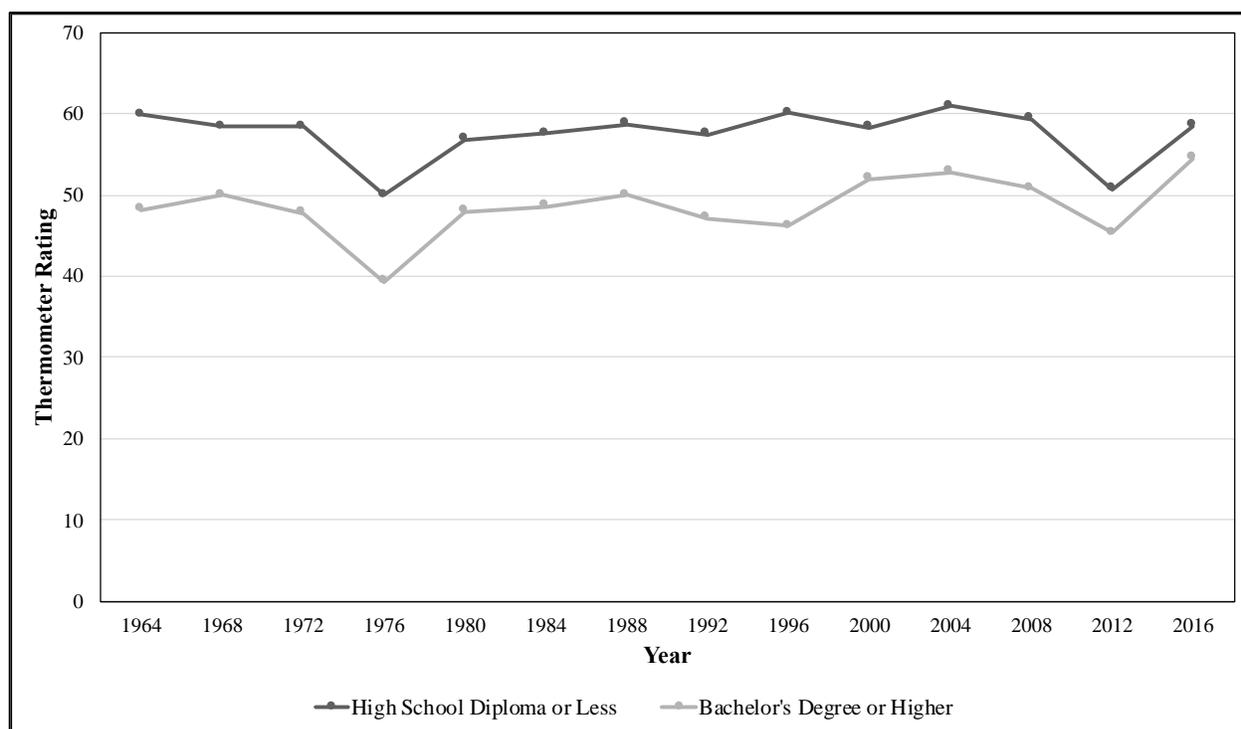
Figure 2. Americans who Believe the Free Market is Better than Government at Handling the Economy by Education, 2000-2016 (ANES)



is a system of ideological refinement – it allows individuals to refine their beliefs they held when they entered college. A potential issue with this theory is that increasingly, college students come from both affluent and non-affluent backgrounds, so how would this theory explain conservative economic attitudes among non-affluent students?

An alternative mechanism is one proposed by both Phelan et al. (1995) and Mendelberg, McCabe, and Thal (2017). They both argued college-educated individuals' economic conservatism is produced through socialization while on college campuses, though they both offered different theories of how this socialization occurs. Phelan et al. (1995) argued higher education socializes students to the “official culture” in American society, which they argued includes values of tolerance and equal opportunity that can explain college graduates' predisposition towards liberalism on many social issues. But this official culture does not include a value of equal

Figure 3. Labor Union Feeling Thermometer by Education, 1964-2016 (ANES)



outcomes, which restrains support for more liberal economic policies that aim to promote economic equality. Thus, a college education can produce somewhat conflicting attitudes surrounding underprivileged groups. For example, Phelan et al. found college graduates are more tolerant of the homeless but are less willing to support policies to economically aid the homeless.

Mendelberg, McCabe, and Thal (2017) argued instead college campuses socialize students into a culture of affluence. They argued many individuals who attend college come from affluent families, and they arrive to college with a latent predisposition to economic conservatism which reproduces the affluence they are accustomed to. Once on a college campus, these students are surrounded by fellow students from affluent backgrounds which reinforces their predisposition towards economic conservatism. Additionally, norms which both legitimize the preservation of affluence and the seeking of financial gain are instilled into students. This results in college graduates who are more economically conservative in their ideology, and these effects are stronger

the more affluent the student body of a college or university is. I argue both socialization mechanisms are valid explanations for why we continually find college education to be associated with greater economic conservatism.

A final explanation for why college graduates are more economically conservative is that their higher educational attainment insulates them from the pitfalls of the free market. Nye et al. (2020) argued a college education produces human capital among students and graduates who believe that they have skills that will allow them to succeed in many different economic situations. Thus, they have less of a desire than their less educated counterparts to have the government step in to regulate the market economy as it would not benefit them significantly. But this argument which relies on economic interest is challenged by recent work which found ideas which promote economic conservatism gained in college are just as important in explaining individual attitudes as this economic interest mechanism (Gelepithis and Gianni 2020).¹⁰ Additionally, Hainmueller and Hiscox (2006) found specifically on the issue of trade policy, the elevated support for free trade agreements among college graduates is explained more by a shared value for market liberalization than economic interest.

Ultimately, I associate myself with the socialization explanation for college graduates' greater economic conservatism, though for the purposes of this paper, it is more consequential that the relationship between higher education and economic conservatism exists. This is because the education realignment is introducing more college graduates into the Democratic Party and more non-college graduates into the Republican Party. If the former group of voters is significantly more economically conservative than the latter, this is likely to affect the economic policy positions of both parties in the long term. This may help explain why Democrats became more economically

¹⁰ This study only looked at college graduates in European countries, so there is a question of whether these findings can be generalized to the American context.

conservative as a party in recent years as they absorb more economically conservative college-educated voters.

The Education Realignment's Effect on Democrats' Economic Policy Position Taking

Whenever a group enters or exits a political party's coalition, there is opportunity for change in the kinds of positions that party advocates for (Wolbrecht 2000; Karol 2009; Baylor 2017). This is because it can change the decision calculus for party elites as to which positions or policies will be most popular with their supporters; and if we assume parties are preoccupied with winning elections, they need to adopt positions that maximize their electoral support (Downs 1957) and satisfy the pressure groups within their coalition (Bawn et al. 2012).

If this theoretical vision of party position taking is mapped onto the education realignment and the Democratic Party, we may expect to see some sort of elite response to the changes in the Democratic coalition. The education realignment is resulting in more and more college-educated whites leaving the Republican Party and aligning themselves with the Democratic Party. The opposite is the case for whites without a college degree. As public opinion literature often finds a college education is associated with more conservative economic positions, the nature of the education realignment means that the Democratic coalition is shedding voters who tend to support more government regulation of the economy and absorbing voters who tend to reject more government regulation of the economy. This should have the long-term effect of creating a more economically conservative Democratic coalition.

It may also be deduced that because educational attainment is not distributed evenly across the country and that certain areas have a greater concentration of college graduates, areas with the greatest average educational attainment should be more economically conservative and should be

more likely to be represented by economically conservative elected officials. This assumes elected officials will adopt positions to maximize their electoral support. In the context of the Democratic Party, we may posit that in Congress, Democrats who are more economically conservative should be more likely to come from highly educated districts and states. This leads to my first hypothesis:

H1: Economic conservatism among Democratic members of Congress will increase as the level of educational attainment among their constituents increases.

Specifically, I will test whether greater constituent educational attainment leads a Democratic member of Congress to be an outlier within their party on economic policy. In this study, an economic outlier is defined as a Democrat who takes more conservative positions on economic policy compared to the rest of their party.

Beyond this relationship between constituent educational attainment and elite behavior on economic policy, I also theorize about how the education realignment will affect the level of economic conservatism in the Democratic caucus in Congress. The education realignment results in Democrats losing ground in areas which are less educated and gaining ground in areas which are more educated (Abramowitz 2018; Kitschelt and Rehm 2019; Hopkins 2020). In the context of Congress, this results in Democrats losing seats with lower levels of educational attainment and gaining seats with higher levels of education attainment. If these trends are combined with the relationship between constituent educational attainment and whether a member of Congress is an outlier within their party on economic policy described above, we can hypothesize the following:

H2: The education realignment will result in the increase of conservative economic outliers in the Democratic caucus in Congress.

This hypothesis stems from the assumption that Democrats losing less educated districts and states and flipping highly educated districts and states to their side means Democrats should shed members who tended to be more economically liberal and gain members who will tend to be more

economically conservative. If this hypothesis is correct, it could explain the recent shift towards economic conservatism among Democrats in Congress observed in Figure 1. Moreover, it may help explain the internal party conflicts over economic policy Democrats experience in recent years. The logic behind this statement is if there are more economic conservatives in the Democratic coalition, they will be able to exert greater influence over the kinds of bills that Democrats spearhead when they are in power in Congress. Democrats will have to resolve the differences between this conservative wing and the progressive wing of the Democratic caucus.

This hypothesis is in line with findings on how the education realignment affected Democratic position taking on social issues. In contrast to the greater economic conservatism associated with greater educational attainment, the relationship is reversed when it comes to social issues: more education is associated with more liberal positions on social issues. Thus, while the education realignment should produce more economic conservatives in the Democratic Party and greater intraparty conflict over this issue area, we should expect it to produce more socially liberal Democrats in Congress and greater intraparty agreement on social issues. Kersting (2021) found the latter to be the case for Democratic position taking on LGBTQ+ rights. It can be expected economically conservative Democrats in Congress who won their seats through the education realignment should also be socially liberal. This would be in accordance with the growing number of highly educated Democrats in the electorate who are economic conservatives and social liberals.

Data and Methods

The primary source of data for this paper is the annual U.S. Chamber of Commerce's congressional scorecard.¹¹ The Chamber of Commerce (COC) is a prominent pro-business interest

¹¹ U.S. Chamber of Commerce. "How They Voted: The U.S. Chamber's Annual Scorecard." <https://www.uschamber.com/how-they-voted-the-us-chambers-annual-scorecard>.

group which advocates for government policies which promote the interests of businesses and business owners. Traditionally, this meant lobbying for economically conservative policies that reduce government regulation of businesses and the economy. For example, the COC opposed House Democrats passing the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act in 2019, which would have protected and expanded the ability for labor unions to form in workplaces.¹² But this does not mean the COC reflexively takes the Republican position on all congressional bills: in 2021, it supported the passage of the bipartisan infrastructure bill, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which most congressional Republicans voted against.¹³

In this paper, I use scorecard data from the 98th to the 116th Congresses (1983-2020). Each year, the COC decides which roll call votes in the House of Representatives and Senate are important enough to business interests to be termed “key votes.” The COC then sends a letter to members of Congress notifying them this vote will be scored and included in the annual COC scorecard.¹⁴ At the end of each congressional session, the COC compiles these key votes into a comprehensive scorecard assigns a score of 0 to 100 for each member of Congress.¹⁵ The higher the score a member of Congress receives, the more pro-business a member’s voting behavior is according to the COC. Rather than scores for individual years, I compute a score for an entire congress over a two-year period.¹⁶

¹² Protecting the Right to Organize Act of 2019, H.R. 2474, 116th Congress (2019).

¹³ Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, H.R. 3864, 117th Congress (2021).

¹⁴ If the member is absent for a key vote, it does not get calculated into their final score.

¹⁵ Beginning in the 116th Congress (2019-2020), the COC modified their scorecard to include two new measures: a Leadership score and a Bipartisanship score. The Leadership score measures a member’s behavior on bills which do not come to a floor vote – the COC outlines specific bills which they either encourage members to cosponsor or to refrain from cosponsoring. The Bipartisanship score measures how many bills a member cosponsors which are introduced by a member of the opposing party. Both new measures count for 10% of the final scorecard and the remaining 80% is based on the traditional legislative score based on roll-call votes. To ensure that the COC scores are comparable over time, I exclude these new measures for the 116th Congress and only include the legislative scores in the data.

¹⁶ For some years, the COC includes a score for the overall congressional session. In years in which they do not, I simply average the member’s scores over the two-year period.

While some of the analysis in this paper is a longitudinal one looking at changes among Democrats in both chambers over time, the primary analysis compares members to their co-partisans at a single point in time. I use an outlier detection scheme which determines a member as an outlier in their party or not based on median absolute deviation (MAD). The MAD for a set of data is calculated by determining the median of the absolute deviations from the dataset's median. I selected to use MAD to determine congressional outliers over standard deviation from the mean following statistical research which argued the former is a more robust technique for detecting outliers than the latter (Olewuezi 2011; Leys et al. 2013). Unlike the mean, which is very sensitive to outliers, the median is less affected by outliers. This makes MAD a more appropriate choice for this study than standard deviation.

Democrats who fall more the one deviation above their party's median scorecard rating are classified as outliers.¹⁷ The MAD is determined for the entire period studied here (1983-2020).¹⁸ In this paper, I track the number of COC outliers in each party over time, but instead of tracing the future of outliers in earlier years, I focus on the COC outliers who currently serve in Congress. This is in line with my theoretical expectations that unlike with social issues where I would expect outliers to disappear in the Democratic Party as the education realignment flips educated districts to the Democratic Party and less educated districts to the Republican Party, I expect the education realignment to increase the number of outliers on economic issues among Democrats. Thus, I am concerned with where current economic outliers come from: in particular, I am interested in the level of educational attainment of their constituents and whether they represent seats which are recent pickups for their party.

¹⁷ Obviously, we could also label Democrats who fall below their party's median, but as this chapter is concerned with explaining Democrats becoming more economically conservative, it is more consequential to look at Democrats who are more conservative on economic policy.

¹⁸ The MAD for Democrats was 14.

Interest group scorecards are subject to criticism as a data source (Charnock 2018). Interest groups, like the COC, are political organizations and politics will play into which bills and votes are included in their scorecards. At the same time, Anderson (2012) argued interest group scorecards can be an important tool in measuring congressional behavior on a specific policy domain – in this case, economic regulation. Additionally, the COC scorecard is a useful metric of determining which members of Congress the nation’s largest pro-business interest group deems as friendly to business interests; and the members who turn up as outliers on the COC scorecard are members who one would expect to turn up from their coverage in the media.¹⁹ This suggests face validity.

There is also a question of whether the COC scorecard can be used to compare members of Congress at different points in time. In other words, there is potential that a rating of 0 in 1990 may not mean the same thing as a rating of 0 in 2020. Obviously, the kinds of economic issues that are subject to debate and votes on the House and Senate floor change over time and thus, the COC scorecard reflects those changes. For example, there is a difference between the regulations on the health care industry created in the 2010 Affordable Care Act and the proposed regulations in the recently debated Medicare for All Act that would create a national health care system.²⁰ But both bills still target the same concept of whether the government should be more involved in health care, and both are included in the COC scorecard. Thus, I argue while the kinds of bills and policies included in the COC scorecard change over time, it is continually measuring whether a member takes more pro-business or anti-business positions in Congress. But as a robustness check, I test for the validity of the scorecards as a measurement of the same concept over time using Cronbach’s alpha. The result was 0.9. This suggests it is likely the COC scorecard is measuring

¹⁹ A list of outliers who serve in the current 117th Congress (2021-2022) can be found in the appendix.

²⁰ Medicare for All Act of 2019, H.R. 1384, 116th Congress (2019).

the same concept for each congressional session included here. Additionally, as a significant portion of my analysis here compares members to one another at the same point in time, concerns about longitudinal validity should be less important.

To test how congressional behavior on economic policy and whether members are outliers within their parties on this issue are connected to the education realignment, I use data from the United States Census Bureau and the American Community Survey on the educational attainment for states and congressional districts in recent decades.²¹ The specific measure I employ is the percentage of constituents 25 years or older who have a Bachelor's degree or higher. I also restrict this data point to only non-Hispanic white constituents for some of the analysis. Control variables used in some of the statistical models of congressional behavior include the Democratic vote share for a state or district in the last presidential election;²² pro-business campaign contributions;²³ the chamber of Congress the member belongs to; and whether that chamber was controlled by Democrats at the time.

Trends among Democratic Congressional Economic Outliers

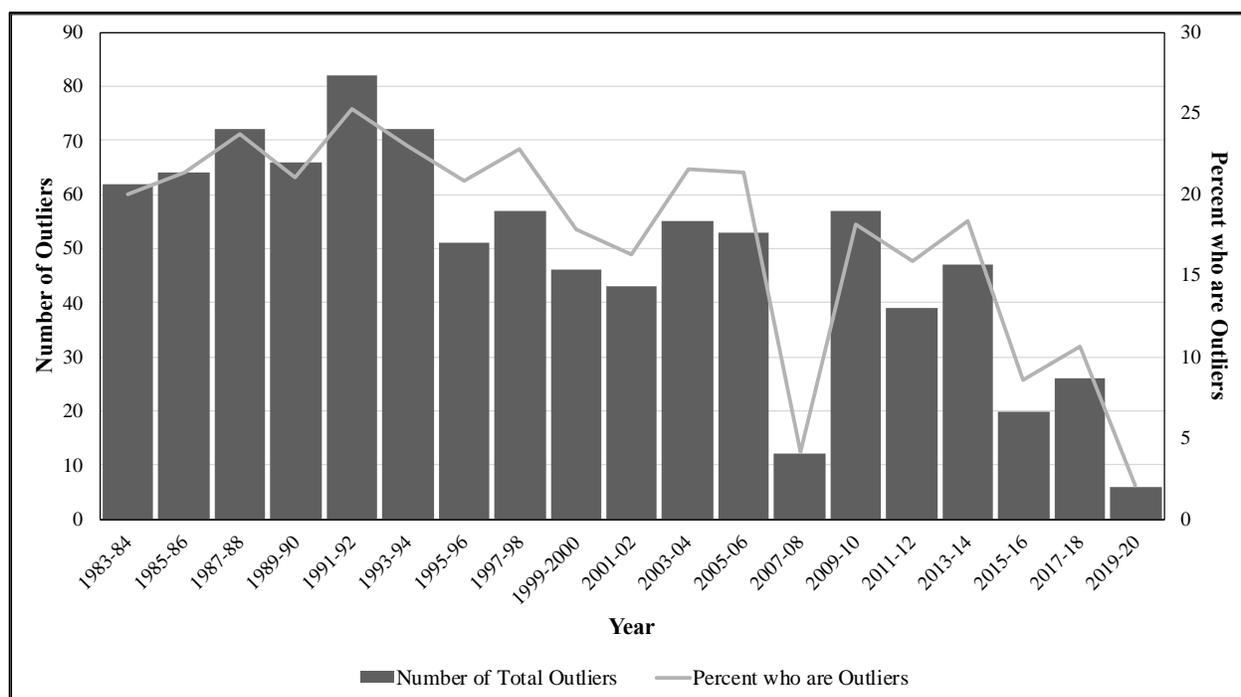
In Figure 1, I observed Republicans largely remained high and constant in their average scorecard ratings from the Chamber of Commerce, while Democrats gradually received higher ratings as the years transpired. To explain the changes among Democrats, looking at the outliers in the party on the COC scorecard can be useful. The most pro-business Democrats would affect the party's overall behavior on economic policy: if there are more or less of these kinds of

²¹ Availability of this data at the congressional district level varies over time. From 2003 onwards, I have complete data at the state and congressional district level for educational attainment. I was also able to access older census data for 1983 and 1993. Years in between 1983 and 1993 as well as 1993 and 2003, I do not have reliable data for.

²² Data drawn from Daily Kos elections: <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2012/11/19/1163009/-Daily-Kos-Elections-presidential-results-by-congressional-district-for-the-2012-2008-elections>.

²³ I used the logarithm of the dollar amount received by each member from the financial industry. Data drawn from Center for Responsive Politics: <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/summary.php?ind=F>.

Figure 4. Democratic Congressional Outliers on Chamber of Commerce Scorecard, 1983-2020



members, this could explain the changes in position taking among Democrats. Figure 4 shows the number of total Democratic outliers on the COC scorecard from 1983-2020; as well as the share of the entire Democratic congressional caucus who are outlier in the same period. I observe a decrease in the number of total outliers from the beginning of this period to the end. Democratic economic outliers make up a smaller proportion of the Democratic congressional caucus in the 2000s and 2010s than they did in the 1980s and 1990s, even when the 2007-2008 and 2019-2020 congressional sessions, which appear to be outliers, are excluded.²⁴ This appears to not support my second hypothesis that the education realignment should increase the number of economic outliers in the Democratic Party over time. The education realignment would predict the addition of more Democrats from highly educated districts and states which should keep the party internally

²⁴ Both outliers occurred during periods of divided government when Democrats controlled at least one chamber of Congress and there was a Republican president. It may be that divided government leads Democrats to stick together as a party more than they would under other circumstances.

Table 1. Time-Series Logistic Regression for Democratic COC Rating Outlier Status, 2003-2020

	M1	M2
	b/(se)	b/(se)
% Constituents with Bachelor's Degree or Higher	-0.067*** (0.017)	
% White Constituents with Bachelor's Degree or Higher		-0.059*** (0.018)
Democratic Presidential Vote Share in Last Election	-0.154*** (0.016)	-0.144*** (0.017)
Business Campaign Contributions	0.03 (0.135)	0.01 (0.131)
Senate	-1.855*** (0.391)	-1.970*** (0.398)
Democratic Control of Chamber	-1.868*** (0.257)	-1.890*** (0.264)
COC Outlier _{t-1}	0.367 (0.317)	0.363 (0.335)
Constant	8.714*** (1.247)	8.330*** (1.252)
Log Likelihood	-541.211	-544.206
N	2157	2157

*Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; District and Year Random Effects included*

heterogenous on the issue of economic regulation; and that these kinds of Democrats should be the most likely to be outliers in their parties on this issue area.

If the hypothesis that the education realignment will produce more Democratic outliers on economic policy is incorrect, it may be the first hypothesis which states that Democrats who represent more educated constituencies will be more likely to be economically conservative and be outliers within the party is also incorrect. Table 1 tests this hypothesis and looks at the relationship between constituent educational attainment and whether a member of Congress is an outlier in their party on economic policy from 2003-2020. The logistic regression models report more unexpected results. I find lower constituent educational attainment significantly increases the likelihood of being an outlier. But this is hard to explain: if the most pro-business Democrats are likelier to represent less educated constituencies, why have Democrats become more pro-

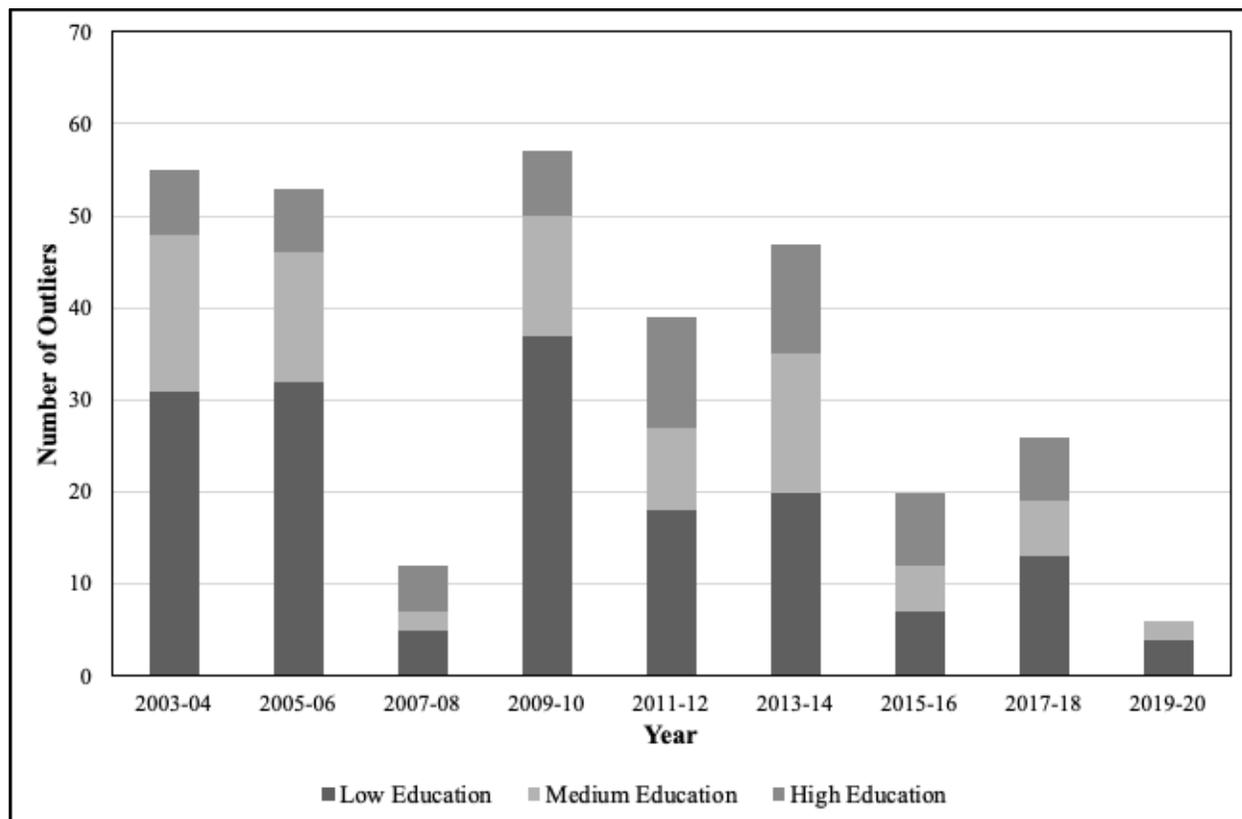
business at a time when they continue to represent fewer of these kinds of constituencies? A larger factor in explaining why a Democrat is an outlier in the model is the vote share the Democratic candidate received in the most recent presidential election. This suggests electoral competitiveness may be more consequential to Democratic behavior on economic issues, but both less educated and highly educated constituencies are competitive for Democrats in recent years so this again presents a puzzling result.

If we take a closer look at the constituent educational attainment of COC outliers and how that changed over time among Democrats, the results are closer to what the education realignment would predict. Figure 5 reports the number of Democratic outliers in Congress since 2003 by the level of educational attainment of the outliers' constituents.²⁵ I observe the share of COC outliers who represent less educated constituencies decreased and the share who represent highly educated constituencies increased over the past two decades. From 2003-2010, the share of outliers from highly educated districts and states was 15% and from 2011-2020, that share grew to 28%. This reflects the transformation of the Democratic coalition in recent years: it became more educated.

Figure 5 also suggests COC outliers are not particularly concentrated among any level of constituent educational attainment, which contradicts what I expected considering public opinion research on the relationship between educational attainment and attitudes on economic policy and with what was found on the relationship between constituent attitudes and legislative behavior in other social issue areas (Kersting 2021). It may be the relationship between constituent attitudes and legislative behavior is weaker when it comes to economic issues than on social issues, which could reflect the greater saliency of social issues in American politics in recent decades (Dalton 2018). This aligns with why the education realignment is purported to have occurred in the first

²⁵ The level of educational attainment (low, medium, or high) is based on a comparison to all districts and states for a given period.

Figure 5. Number of Democratic COC Outliers by Level of Constituent Educational Attainment, 2003-2020



place: that the saliency of social issues created dissonance between voters and their parties based on educational attainment. This may also be reflective of Hacker and Pierson's (2020) argument that the Republican Party can ignore constituent opinion on economic policy as it distracts its voters with social issues – perhaps the same is true of the Democratic Party as well.

Nevertheless, I argue the finding that a growing share of Democratic economic outliers come from highly educated constituencies is important. It suggests a transformation of the Democratic Party which the education realignment brought about. It may be that the education realignment did not increase the disagreement on economic policy among Democrats in Congress, but it may have changed the kinds of members who were disagreeing with the party's orthodoxy on economic policy.

The Transformation of Democratic Economic Outliers in Congress

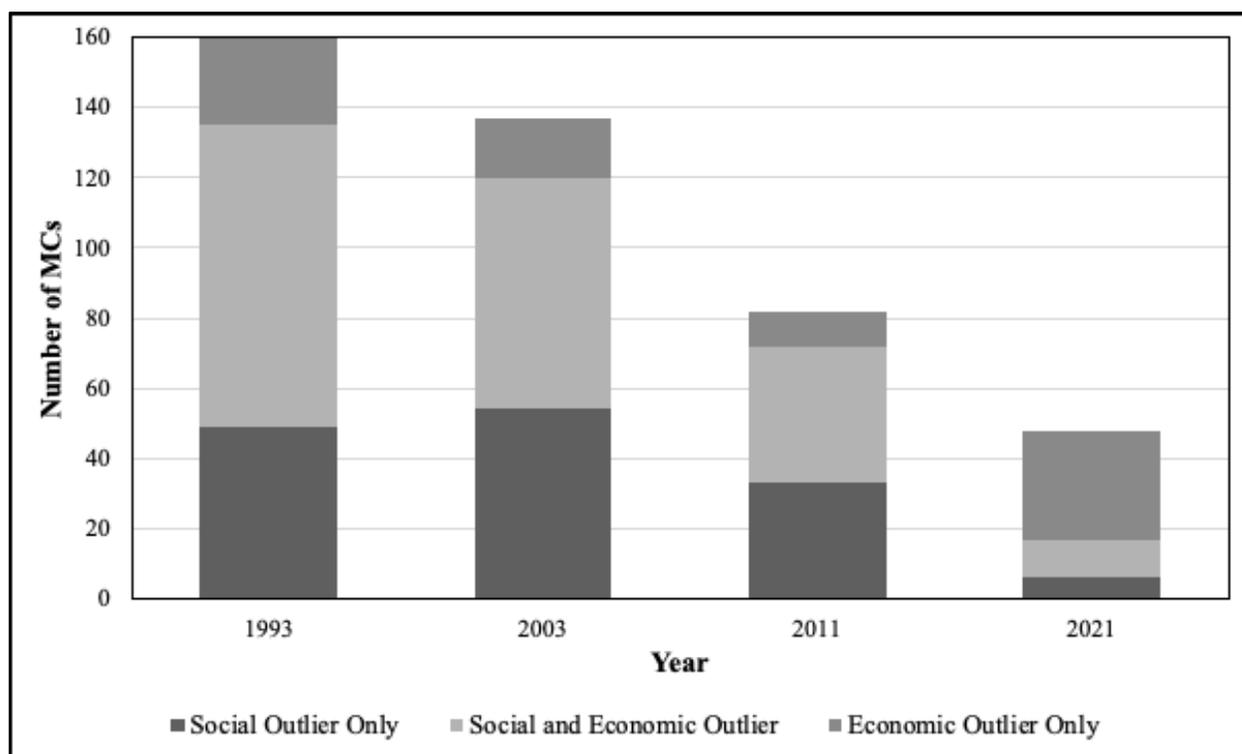
While their numbers have dwindled, there remains a significant number of outliers on economic issues in the Democratic Party in Congress. Who these outliers are and what kinds of districts and states they represent changed; and I argue this is an effect of the education realignment. The following section looks at how these outliers changed in recent years in both parties. I relate economic policy outliers to social policy (LGBTQ+ rights and environmental protection) outliers and show how being an economic outlier is increasingly less linked to being an outlier on social issues; and how this relates to the education realignment.

To do this, I aggregated outliers on three different scorecards on three different issue areas: (1) economic policy using the COC scorecard; (2) environmental policy using the League of Conservation Voters' (LCV) scorecard;²⁶ and (3) LGBTQ+ rights policy using the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) scorecard.²⁷ The methodology for computing outliers for these two social policy areas is identical to that described above for computing outliers on the COC scorecard. I sorted those outliers into three categories: (1) "social outlier only," meaning the member is an outlier on either the LCV or HRC scorecard, but not the COC scorecard; (2) "economic outlier only," meaning the member is an outlier only on the COC scorecard; and (3) "social and economic outlier," meaning the member is an outlier on the COC scorecard and at least one of the social policy scorecards. I then broke down this data into four roughly equal timeframes, using four years as snapshots: 1993, 2003, 2011, and 2021. If a member was serving in 1993, and they were an outlier on any of the three scorecards after 1983, they are included in the data for 1993. This is repeated for the following three timeframes. Aggregating the data in this way accounts for periodic

²⁶ League of Conservation Voters. 2021. "National Environmental Scorecard." <https://scorecard.lcv.org/scorecard/archive>.

²⁷ Human Rights Campaign. 2021. "Congressional Scorecard." <https://www.hrc.org/resources/congressional-scorecard>.

Figure 6. Types of Democratic Outliers in Congress, 1993-2021



drop-offs and surges in the number of outliers in a congressional session, as observed in earlier figures.

Figure 6 shows the size of the previously described three groups of outliers over time in the Democratic Party's congressional caucus. We can observe a steep decline in the total number of Democratic outliers from 1993-2021. Most of that decline is in the categories of social-only outliers and social and economic outliers; but the number of Democrats who are only outliers on economic policy increased over this period. In 1993, 16% of Democratic outliers were only outliers on the COC scorecard. In 2021, that percentage jumped to 65%. Currently, most Democrats who stray from the party's mainstream only do so on economic policy. This is marked change from decades past; and this is what the education realignment would predict: as Democrats come to represent highly educated districts and states with socially liberal but economically conservative voters, the party should largely agree on social policy, but have more divisions on economic policy.

Figure 7. Average Constituent Educational Attainment of Democratic Outliers, 1993-2021

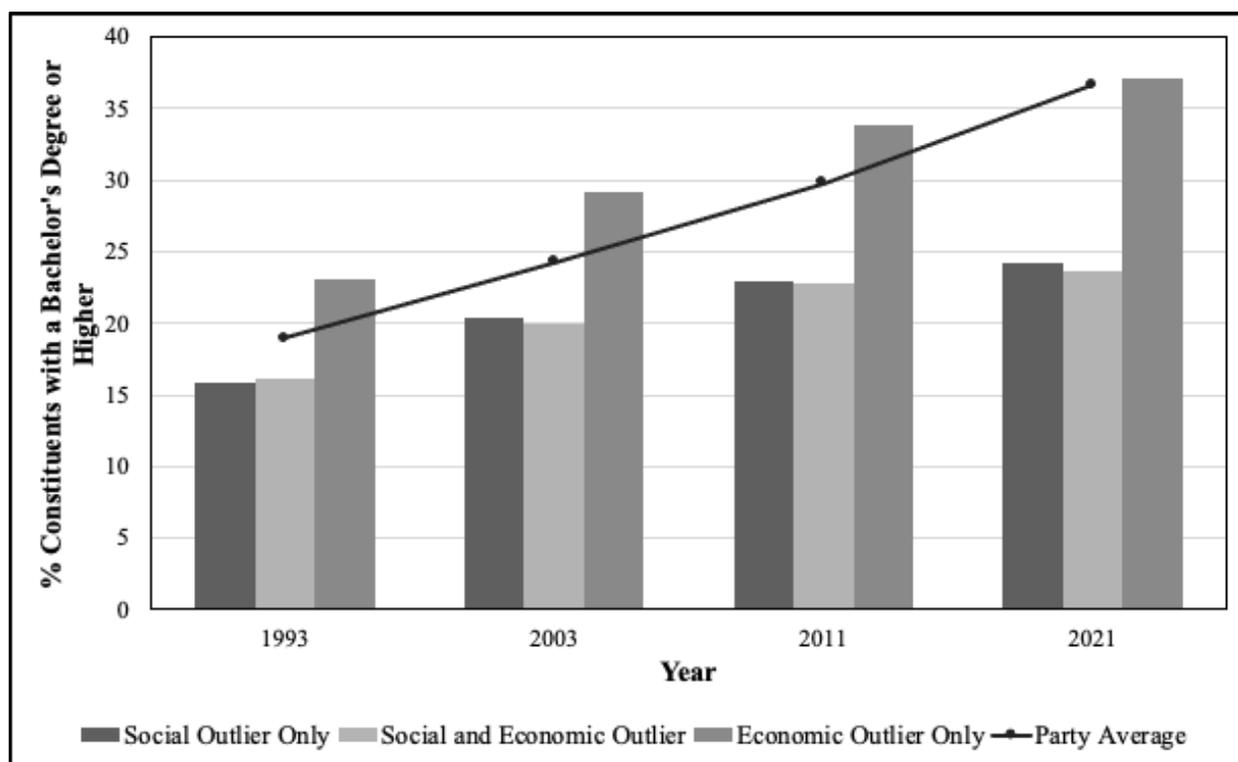
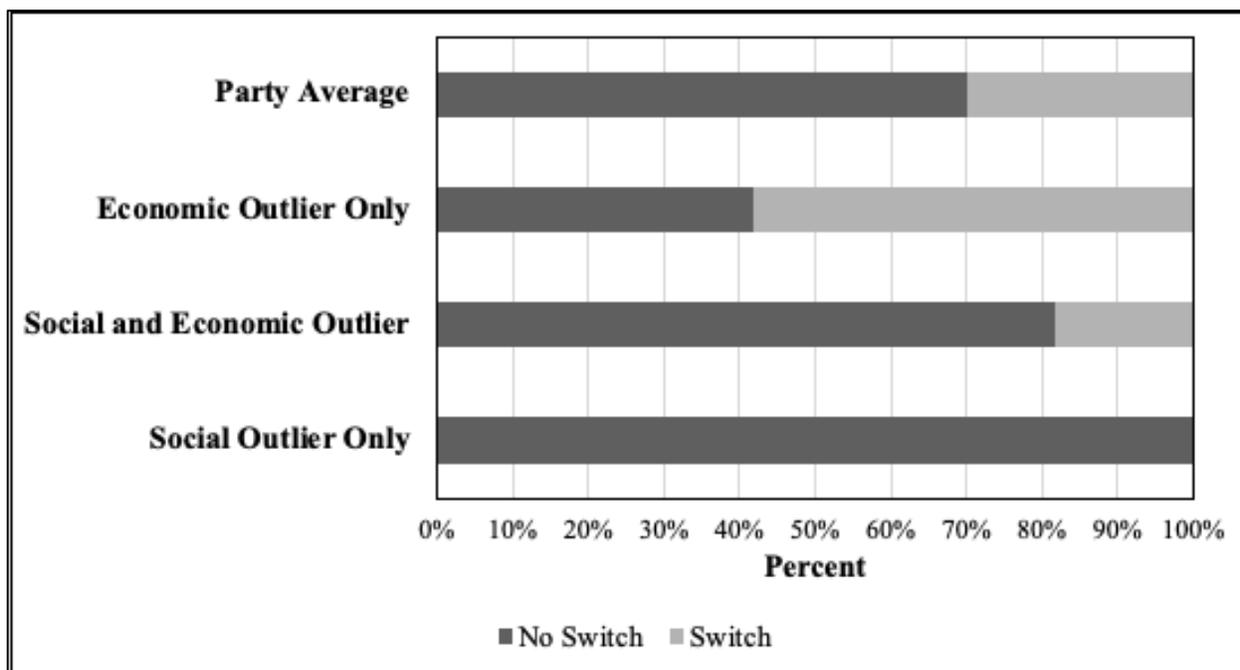


Figure 7 shows these Democrats who are only outliers on economic policy do tend to come from more educated constituencies than the other groups of outliers. This figure compares the average constituent educational attainment of the three categories of outliers and the average for all Democratic members of Congress over time. I observe the average percentage of constituents who have a college education is about the same for Democratic social-only outliers and social and economic outliers over time, but the average educational attainment for economic-only outliers is much higher. In 2021, this gap was close to fifteen percent. The educational attainment of these outliers is also very similar to the entire Democratic caucus in Congress, which suggests these members are more numerous than the other kinds of outliers. Again, this is what is to be expected given the contours of the education realignment: the most economically conservative Democrats should increasingly come from highly educated districts and states.

Figure 8. Party Switching among Democratic Outlier Districts and States, 2003-2021



These highly educated districts and states that elect economically conservative Democrats are also relatively new to the Democratic caucus according to Figure 8. Here, the rate of party switching for the entire Democratic caucus and the three kinds of outliers is represented. The figure looks at party switching for seats Democrats hold in the House and Senate in the current 117th Congress (2021-2022). It reports how many of these seats Democrats also held in the 108th Congress (2003-2004). The percent of seats represented by economic outliers in 2021 that Democrats did not hold in 2003 is almost twice as high as the percent of party switching for the Democratic Party as a whole. Additionally, the rate of party switching from 2003-2021 is very low for social-only and social and economic outliers, which suggests the few remaining Democrats in these categories are mostly holdovers from years past. I argue the very high rate of party switching for economic-only outliers is reflective of Democrats increasingly winning districts and states with higher constituent educational attainment.

Overall, these results suggest both that economic policy is becoming the major point of division in the Democratic Party in contrast to social policy; and that whereas economic outliers used to often also be outliers on social policy, they increasingly are only outliers on the former. Essentially, the Democratic Party went from having many members in Congress who were conservative on social and economic policy to now having very few members who are social conservatives but quite a few who are economic conservatives. The former kind of member often hailed from less educated constituencies, while the latter now often comes from affluent, highly educated districts and states. I attribute this to the education realignment.

This transformation can also be observed by looking at changes in caucus membership among congressional Democrats. Two of the most prominent caucuses within the Democratic Party in Congress in recent decades are the Blue Dogs and the New Democrats. The Blue Dog coalition was founded in the wake of the 1994 midterm elections that gave Republicans control of both houses of Congress for the first time in forty years. The Blue Dogs believed the Democratic Party lost because it moved too far to the left; and they wanted to steer the party back to the center.²⁸ Many of the caucus' members were conservative southern Democrats who were conservative on both social and economic policy. The New Democrat Coalition was founded in 1997 to provide a congressional base of support for Democratic President Bill Clinton's "third way" politics that included more pro-business, economically conservative policies. In that sense they shared common ground with the Blue Dogs, but unlike the Blue Dogs, the New Democrats were mostly social liberals and represented suburban seats with highly educated constituents.²⁹

²⁸ Blue Dog Coalition. 2022. "History." <https://bluedogcaucus-murphy.house.gov/about/history>.

²⁹ Jones, Sebastian, and Marcus Stern. 2010. "The New Democrats: The Coalition Pharma and Wall Street Love." *ProPublica*, October 25. <https://www.propublica.org/article/new-democrat-coalition?token=fcBTkfgKzxflyDsBW05KKPyQNISYgH4d>.

Figure 9. Number of Blue Dogs and New Democrats in House Democratic Caucus, 2003-2021

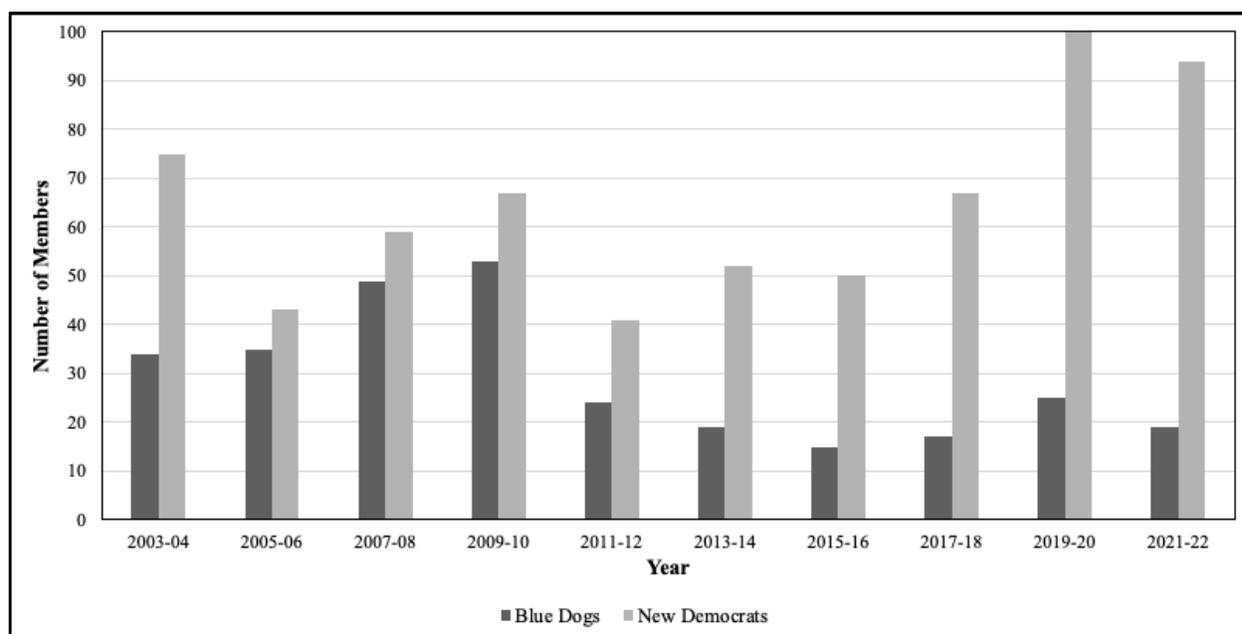
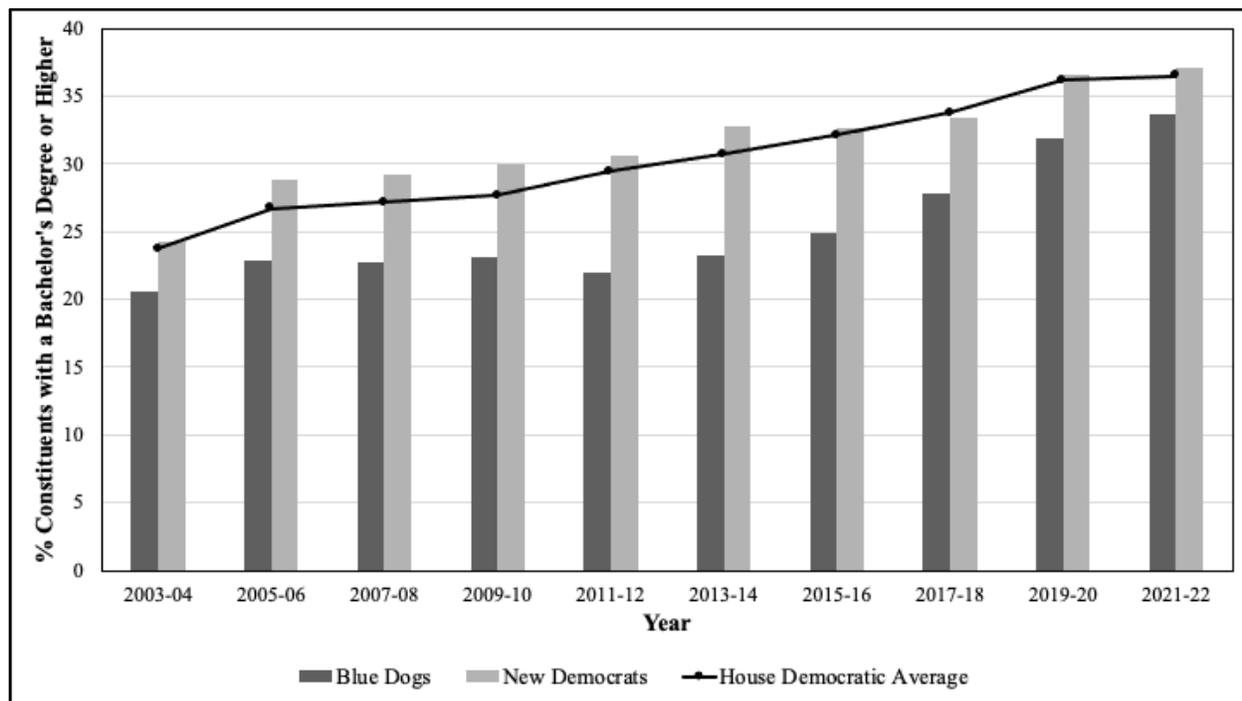


Figure 9 shows the number of members in each caucus from 2003-2021.³⁰ I observe for most of the 2000s, the size of both the Blue Dog and New Democrat coalitions were relatively similar, though the latter was always larger. In the 2010s, the size of these coalitions became increasingly different: there were fewer and fewer Blue Dogs and more and more New Democrats. This is particularly seen after the 2010 midterm elections in which many conservative southern Democrats lost their seats. Many of these seats were rural and had few college-educated constituents. The decline of the Blue Dogs only continued throughout subsequent electoral cycles.³¹ Meanwhile, the New Democrats surged, particularly after the 2018 midterm elections which returned control of the House of Representatives to Democrats for the first time in almost a decade. Many of the seats which Democrats flipped in 2018 were highly educated, suburban

³⁰ There is crossover between these caucus' memberships: Democrats can both belong to the Blue Dog and the New Democrat coalitions.

³¹ Blake, Aaron. 2012. "Why the Blue Dogs' decline was inevitable." *Washington Post*, April 25. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/why-the-blue-dogs-decline-was-inevitable/2012/04/25/gIQAhOw8gT_blog.html.

Figure 10. Average Constituent Educational Attainment of Blue Dogs and New Democrats, 2003-2021



districts. This was part of the broader education realignment, just as the loss of the seats Blue Dogs represented was.

Evidence of New Democrats typically coming from more educated constituencies than the Blue Dogs is found in Figure 10: the percent of constituents who held at least a Bachelor's degree is higher for New Democrats in every congress since 2003. It can also be observed that the constituent educational attainment of New Democrats more closely matches that of all Democrats in Congress. This suggests New Democrats are more reflective of the entire Democratic congressional caucus than the Blue Dogs are. The decline of the Blue Dogs and rise of the New Democrats reflects the transformation of economic outliers in the Democratic Party. There are fewer Democrats who are both economic and social conservatives and more Democrats who are only outliers on economic policy. The former kind of Democrat often came from less educated areas and the latter now commonly hails from highly educated areas. As the education realignment

progresses, I expect these trends in the Democratic Party to continue. Democrats will increasingly lose districts and states which are less educated, and which commonly elected socially and economically conservative Democrats; and Democrats will increasingly win districts and states which are more educated, and which now often elect socially liberal and economically moderate to conservative Democrats. The continued presence of economically moderate and conservative Democrats pulls the Democratic Party more towards business interests as evidenced in Figure 1; and is likely to constrain the ability of the party to enact significant liberal economic policies in the years to come.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to examine the effect the education realignment had on the Democratic Party's positions on economic policy in recent years. Because prior research on the relationship between educational attainment and economic attitudes found individuals with higher levels of education tend to skew more economically conservative, I expected a large influx of such voters into the Democratic coalition may influence the party's stances on economic policy. I expected Democrats to become more conservative; and that these changes would be led by newly elected Democrats in highly educated constituencies.

What this paper found was mixed evidence for the education realignment affecting the party on economic policy as expected. Relying on data from the Chamber of Commerce, in the aggregate, Democrats moved to become more conservative. But the relationship between the educational attainment of a member's constituents and that member's behavior on economic policy was surprising: there was a significant effect for Democrats, though it was the opposite of what the education realignment would predict. A closer look at the most economically conservative

Democrats found they hail from both highly and lowly educated districts and states, which may lend support to the argument that all kinds of Democrats are responding to a rightward shift in American politics on economic policy (Smith 2007; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Gilens 2012; Witko et al. 2021). More work should be done on why this expected link between more educated constituents and greater economic conservatism among elected officials is not as anticipated.

But where the education realignment does appear to have had the expected effect is in the kinds of economic outliers in the Democratic caucus that are more numerous in Congress today. Because the education realignment led to the loss of many less educated districts and states for Democrats, this means many of the economic outliers who remain hail from highly educated constituencies. Additionally, this new breed of economic outliers tends to only be outliers in this policy area and are not outliers in their parties on social policy. This differs from the kinds of economic outliers who were removed as the education realignment transpired. So, it may be the education realignment did not increase disagreement on economic policy within the Democratic Party, but it helped to maintain the level of disagreement which already existed.

While Malpas and Hilton (2021) argued Democrats did not abandon their legacy of economic liberalism, I observed in the Democratic caucus in Congress, there is still division on economic policy within the party, but the sources of that division changed. This is because the moderate and conservative Democrats of the past, who typically hailed from less educated, rural districts and states and who strayed from the party mainstream on both economic and social policy, are largely gone due to the machinations of the education realignment. Those same machinations made the typical Democratic moderate a member who represents a highly educated, affluent constituency, and who is quite liberal on social policy but less so on economic policy. These kinds of members are reflective of the progressive neoliberalism trend in the Democratic Party described

by Fraser (2017) engineered by the influx of suburban liberals into the Democratic coalition described by Geismer (2015). This transformation of Democratic economic moderates and conservatives is seen in the fall of the Blue Dog Democrats and ongoing rise of the New Democrats in the Democratic congressional caucus.

This is not to say that there are no Blue Dogs or typical conservative Democrats left: much of the obstruction of the Democratic agenda in the 117th Congress is attributed to Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia, a state with the lowest educational attainment in the country. But he is joined in that obstruction by Democrats who won districts and states as part of the education realignment. For example, when Senate Democrats held a vote on increasing the national minimum wage to \$15 in 2021 as part of the third COVID relief bill, eight Democrats voted against the wage increase.³² While Manchin was one of the eight, six of the remaining seven represent states with educational attainments at or above the national average. Additionally, four of those senators flipped Republican held seats in the last twelve years: Jeanne Shaheen and Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire, Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, and Angus King of Maine, an Independent who caucuses with the Democrats. Unlike Manchin, these senators do not often stray from their party on social policy. These Democrats, from more highly educated constituencies newly added to the Democratic caucus, are likely to be the future of economic conservatism in the Democratic Party as the education realignment progresses, whereas Democrats like Joe Manchin are being left in the past.

³² Everett, Burgess. 2021. "8 Democrats defect on \$15 minimum wage hike." *Politico*, March 5. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/05/democrats-15-minimum-wage-hike-473875>.

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Appendix

*Democratic Outliers in 117th Congress (2021-22)**

Social Outlier Only	Social and Economic Outlier	Economic Outlier Only
Emanuel Cleaver (MO-05) Vicente Gonzalez (TX-15) Al Lawson (FL-05) Bobby Rush (IL-01) Tim Ryan (OH-13) Bennie Thompson (MS-02)	Sanford Bishop (GA-02) Tony Cardenas (CA-29) Jim Costa (CA-16) Henry Cuellar (TX-28) Steven Horsford (NV-04) Ann Kirkpatrick (AZ-02) Joe Manchin (WV) Kurt Schrader (OR-05) Terri Sewell (AL-07) Kyrsten Sinema (AZ) Filemon Vela (TX-34)	Michael Bennet (CO) Ami Bera (CA-07) Julia Brownley (CA-26) Cheri Bustos (IL-17) Gerry Connolly (VA-11) Jim Cooper (TN-05) Lou Correa (CA-46) Bill Foster (IL-11) John Gottheimer (NJ-05) Al Green (TX-09) Jim Himes (CT-04) Tim Kaine (VA) Derek Kilmer (WA-06) Ron Kind (WI-03) Ann McLane Kuster (NH-02) Conor Lamb (PA-17) Sean Patrick Maloney (NY-18) Stephanie Murphy (FL-07) Tom O'Halleran (AZ-01) Ed Perlmutter (CO-07) Gary Peters (MI) Mike Quigley (IL-05) Kathleen Rice (NY-04) Jacky Rosen (NV) Raul Ruiz (CA-36) Dutch Ruppersberger (MD-02) Adam Schiff (CA-28) Brad Schneider (IL-10) David Scott (GA-13) Jeanne Shaheen (NH) Mark Warner (VA)

**Bolded names represent senators.*