

The 2016 Election Aiken County Exit Poll: Analysis of Election Results

A public research report co-sponsored by the
Department of History, Political Science and Philosophy
And
Social Sciences and Business Research Lab
University of South Carolina Aiken

February 10, 2017

This report marks a continuation of exit polling of Aiken County by USCA since the 1980's. Student interviewers this year were: Genelle Bacote, Adam Barton, Eric Carrier, Josie Cox, Chris Evans, Sierra Gilmore, Jeff Grice, Robert Hill, Kyle Kirk, Phil McHood, Brock McLeod, Xavier Myers, Timothy Ray, Courtney Strauss, Kara Summerlin, Joyce Tshitenge and Steve Wilson.

Special thanks this year to Bob Botsch whose experience and guidance in this exit poll helped immeasurably. Also, thanks to Erin McCullough for data entry. Finally, thanks to Christie Hightower for supervising interviewers at the precincts around Aiken County on Election Day. Special thanks to all of the voters that made the survey possible by filling out questionnaires.

Any questions or comments can be directed to Matthew Thornburg at matthewth@usca.edu. This and previous reports are available at: <http://polisci.usca.edu/SSBRLab/>.

VOTER TURNOUT

According to the official results, 75,549 individuals cast valid votes in the 2016 general election in Aiken County. This is an increase over the 70,832 valid ballots cast in 2012. Voter turnout in 2016, as measured as percentage of the citizen voting age population (CVAP) in Aiken County was 60.7%, a slight increase over 2012's 58.9%. However, this small overall increase masks changes in the composition of the Aiken electorate from 2012 to 2016. In Aiken County, white voters and women both increased their turnout rate from 2012 to 2016. Men and African-Americans saw their turnout rates decrease.

Table 1: Aiken County Turnout in 2012 and 2016

	2012 Turnout	2016 Turnout	Change
Overall	58.85%	60.72%	+1.87%
African-American	58.96%	54.25%	-4.71%
White	60.00%	63.42%	+3.42%
Women	59.41%	64.16%	+4.75%
Men	58.25%	56.39%	-1.86%

Note: Percentages are based on number of individuals in each group voting in Aiken County in the appropriate election divided by the Census Bureau estimate of CVAP for the group for that year.

While CVAP breakdowns are not available regarding age, there is reason to believe that fewer younger voters participated in the 2016 election compared to 2012. Using Aiken County voter records, the average age among voters in 2016 was 52.8 years. In 2012, the average age of representative exit poll respondents was 50.9. This seems to follow trends nationwide that saw lower turnout in 2016 among young people and racial minorities. In Aiken County, this appears to be a return to the typical breakdowns in racial and age composition of the electorate prior to the arrival of Barack Obama. Nationwide, the "Obama elections" of 2008 and 2012 saw African-American turnout rates (as a proportion of voting-eligible population) overtake white turnout rates for the first time in history as the prospect of voting to elect and re-elect the first black president in US electrified the African-American community. The "star power" of Obama at the top of the Democratic ticket had important effects on the voters who turned out in 2008 and 2012. It appears that the 2016 election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump was not able to duplicate this effect among African-Americans although it is notable that turnout in Aiken County overall as a proportion of citizens of voting age was greater than 2012.

Another way to examine the question of how voters changed in Aiken County from 2012 to 2016 is to look at the characteristics of voters that stayed home on Election Day in 2016 but voted in 2012. While the Aiken County voter file does not list the elections in which each voter participated, it does list the last general election in which a voter cast a ballot. The voter file provides the age, gender and race of voters to give us a sense of their characteristics.

Table 2: Characteristics of 2016 Nonvoters

	Voted 2016	Voted 2012 but not 2016	Voted 2012 or later but not 2016
Average Age	52.8 years	47.3 years	50.1 years
African-American	21.7%	34.4%	28.7%
White	76.4%	63.4%	69.2%
Women	55.6%	54.5%	53.2%
Men	44.3%	45.4%	46.8%
Live in Aiken or North Augusta	35.2%	34.9%	37.2%

Note: Individuals in the last column (“Voted 2012 or later but not 2016”) voted in either the 2012 election, the 2014 midterm or one of the other elections between the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections but did not participate in the 2016 general election.

The results here seem to support our conclusions—we find that those who did not vote were more likely to be members of the Obama coalition—particularly racial minorities and younger voters.

PARTISANSHIP

The realignment of white southerners that began over 50 years ago, has largely concluded in South Carolina. The Republicans are firmly in a position of power throughout most of the state and Aiken County is no exception. This election saw the share of voters identifying or leaning Republican increase and the share of Democratic identifiers/leaners decrease compared to 2012. However, rather than evidence of a movement by voters towards the Republicans from the Democrats, it is more likely that this is a return to the status quo established prior to the arrival of Barack Obama on the ballot. In other words, rather than the same voters changing their predisposition from 2012 to 2016, it simply appears that different voters showed up. In particular, fewer Democrats showed up in this election, compared to more Republicans.

Among respondents rating themselves on the Democratic-Republican scale, 29.4% of respondents identified or leaned towards the Democrats. This is a slight decrease from the 2012 exit poll, where 32% of respondents claimed to lean or identify as Democrats. The change is within the margin of error, however. Additionally, 16.4% of voters called themselves independents in 2016, down from 17.5% of voters in 2012. The largest increase was towards the Republican Party; the share of voters identifying or leaning Republican went from 50.1% of voters in 2012 to 54.3% in 2016. Also of note, a much larger percentage of voters in 2016 claimed their partisanship was “Other”. In the poll, 6.3% of voters claimed this identification, more than double the percentage in 2012.

Does the decrease in the Democratic share of the electorate and the corresponding growth in the Republican share indicate that Aiken County voters are switching partisanship from Democratic to Republican identification? Or did more Democrats choose to stay home this election and more Republicans come out to vote?

Partisanship in Aiken County, like much of the South, is heavily influenced by race; most African-Americans lean or identify as Democratic while most whites tend towards the Republican Party. One way to determine whether voters are changing their partisanship without asking the same voters in multiple elections is to examine the partisan breakdown

Table 3: White Partisanship, 2012 to 2016

	2012	2016
Democratic	16.1%	15.9%
Independent	19.0%	18.0%
Republican	64.9%	66.0%

Table 4: African-American Partisanship, 2012 to 2016

	2012	2016
Democratic	83.5%	82.6%
Independent	13.5%	9.0%
Republican	2.9%	8.4%

Among white voters, there was little overall change in partisanship from 2012 to 2016. No category changed by more than one percentage point between the two elections. Among African-Americans, the percentage identifying or leaning Democratic changed by less than a percentage point. There was a slight increase in African-American Republicans but this accounted for less than one percentage point in the overall increase among Republicans in the electorate countywide in 2016.

Because the overall racial composition of Aiken County did not significantly change from 2012 to 2016, these percentages seem to indicate that among the citizens, the overall partisan balance of the county did not change. Overall, it is safe to say that the increase among Republicans in the 2016 electorate is due to fewer Democrats showing up at the ballot box and—more importantly—more Republicans turning out to cast a vote. The electorate in 2016 looks quite similar to the electorate in 2004 when George W. Bush won a decisive victory in Aiken County. This was also the last presidential election before Barack Obama ran for office. The 2008 and 2012 elections in which Obama has appeared on the ballot may represent something of an “Obama bump” in our county that did not last into 2016.

PRESIDENTIAL VOTE

According to official results, Donald Trump received 61.5% of the ballots cast in Aiken County for President to Hillary Clinton’s 34.01%. This marks a slight decrease in the vote share for both major party candidates from 2012, where the shares were 62.6% and 36.0%, respectively. This is due to a larger share of voters casting ballots for third-party candidates this election, which presumably reflects some of the well-documented dissatisfaction among voters with both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

Part of what made Trump’s victory a surprise on Election Night was the fact he significantly outperformed polling and surveys—including exit polls. Analysis of the results for South Carolina found that Trump’s actual vote share was 6.6 percentage points higher than what would be predicted by exit poll results in the state.

The results for the Aiken County exit poll were not immune to this phenomenon. When weighted by age, gender and ethnicity, our exit poll showed 57.3% for Trump and 35.7% for Clinton. This was slightly outside of the margin of error. Reasons for this error are still being debated among survey researchers and include “shy Trump voters” or non-response bias. The fact that the reported vote for third-party candidates in our poll was significantly higher than their actual support in the county (7.04% in the poll versus 4.50% in the official results) may indicate that some Trump voters reported they voted third-party. The conclusions in this section of the report are made with awareness of this limitation.

A puzzle immediately emerges in that the share of the 2016 electorate identifying or leaning Republican was over four percentage points higher than in 2012 however Trump actually received a *smaller* share of the vote in Aiken County compared to Mitt Romney in 2012. This is explained by the lower loyalty of Republicans in Aiken County to their candidate in 2016 compared to 2012. In the 2012 election, over 98% of Republicans in Aiken County voted for Mitt Romney; less than one percent voted for Barack Obama. In 2016, 91.7% of Republicans voted for Trump—still a strong show of loyalty but significantly lower than four years ago. Clinton received the vote of 93.3% Democrats. Clinton received the plurality of support from independents. However, this was countered by a strong majority (59%) of those claiming “Other” party identification backing Trump.

Table 5: 2016 Presidential Vote By Partisanship

	Clinton	Trump	Other Candidates
Democratic	93.3%	3.3%	3.5%
Republican	4.2%	91.7%	4.0%
Independent	44.3%	40.1%	15.6%
Other	16.4%	59.0%	24.6%

Note: Percentages represent percentage of row voting for candidate.

THE EFFECT OF “MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN”

Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign was built around a clear message in its slogan “Make America Great Again”. The implication of the slogan is deeply reactionary—it implies America is (1) no longer great and (2) in the past was greater than it is now. Trump therefore repeatedly emphasized that America had been led astray over the preceding decades by the liberal and neoliberal policies of the modern Democratic Party. Clinton contrasted herself with Trump on more than one occasion, saying that America has always been great or still was. She thus implicitly aligned herself with the status quo. This presented a stark choice to voters. Did the messages of the opposing campaigns resonate with voters?

A question was added to the exit poll evaluating this. The question asked “Compared to 50 years ago, how would you describe life in America for people like you today?” Respondents were given the options of “worse”, “better” or “about the same”. A plurality of respondents (48.4%) said that life for people like them has gotten worse over the last 50 years. A smaller 35.4% of respondents said it has gotten better and 16.0% said it has stayed about the same.

Comparing responses to this question to presidential vote choice reveals a stark divide among Clinton and Trump supporters. Voters who said life has gotten better for people like them overwhelmingly favored Clinton (she won 57.8% of their vote). In contrast, of those who said life has gotten worse over the last 50 years for people like them, 79.1% favored Donald Trump. How a respondent answered the question of change over the last 50 years predicts their presidential vote with 65% accuracy. This is higher than almost any other factor we measured besides ethnicity and partisanship. It appears that the messages of the candidates resonated with voters and the fact that more voters said life has gotten worse over the last 50 years played a strong role in Trump’s victory in Aiken County and nationwide.

Table 6: Life Change Question on Presidential Vote

	Clinton	Trump	Other
Gotten Better	57.8%	34.67%	7.5%
Gotten Worse	16.2%	79.1%	4.8%
About the Same	42.8%	44.9%	12.3%

Note: Percentages represent percentage of row voting for candidate.

Because opinion on the above question might be expected to be correlated with other factors that predicted the presidential vote, such as age, race and gender, I examined the effect of response to this question statistically controlling for age, race, gender and party identification. I was thus able to compute the average effect of opinion on this question on an individual’s presidential vote, holding other factors the same. The table below shows the probabilities of the sample voting for each candidate depending on their answer to the question.

Table 7: Life Change Question on Presidential Vote, Controlling for Other Variables

	Clinton	Trump	Other
Gotten Better	0.427	0.495	0.078
Gotten Worse	0.298	0.654	0.049
About the Same	0.351	0.499	0.150

Note: Probabilities are based on a multinomial logit model of presidential vote, and are calculated by modeling changes in responses of the sample to the life question while keeping the other covariates as observed. For example, holding all other demographic controls consistent, 42.7% of the sample would have voted for Clinton if all members had believed life had gotten better for them. Similarly, 65.4% of the sample would have voted for Trump if they all believed life had gotten worse for them.

Even when we control for the effect of important factors predicting vote choice like race, age, gender and party identification (statistically, “controlling for” variables means to statistically remove their effect—essentially examining the effect of something else as if everyone had the same race, age, gender and party identification) we find that how an individual views the change in life for people like them over the last 50 years still has a powerful effect on who they voted for for president in 2016. Going from believing that life for people like you has gotten better over the past 50 years to believing it has gotten worse increases an individual’s probability of voting for Donald Trump by over 15 percentage points and decreases probability of voting for Clinton by 13 percentage points.

CHANGING VIEWS ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGE AND THE CONFEDERATE FLAG

The interval between the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections witnessed two important political events with effects in South Carolina. In 2015, in the case *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the US Supreme Court overturned bans on same-sex marriage, declaring them to violate the Constitution. Thus same-sex couples in South Carolina and elsewhere were granted the right to marry. Also in 2015, in response to a racially motivated mass shooting in Charleston, the Confederate Flag was removed from the State Capitol grounds in Columbia. Aiken County residents were asked about both issues in the 2012 exit poll and were surveyed again in 2016 on these issues. In both cases, public opinion continues to be divided but has begun to shift.

Regarding same-sex marriage, in 2016 the plurality response remained opposition with 39.4% of respondents opposing same-sex marriage. However, this is significantly lower than in 2012, when 49.1% of voters opposed same-sex marriage. In the 2016 election, 34.9% of voters favor same-sex marriage an increase over the 25.4% in favor in 2012.

Table 8: Views on Same-Sex Marriage by Party Identification

	Oppose	Favor	No Opinion
Democrats	19.8%	55.4%	24.8%
Republican	57.0%	17.7%	25.3%
Independent	17.9%	57.3%	24.8%
Other	29.8%	34.6%	31.2%

Note: Percentages represent percentage of row with each position.

Among Democrats and independents, there has been a decisive shift in favor of same-sex marriage. A majority of both groups favor same-sex marriage and less than 20% oppose. A majority of Republicans remain opposed to same-sex marriage but more members of this group support or express no opinion compared to four years previously.

Table 9: Views on Same-Sex Marriage by Party Identification: Changes from 2012

	Oppose	Favor	No Opinion
Democrats	-3.9%	+16.2%	-9.3%
Independent	-16.8%	+13.2%	+5.3%
Republican	-13.2%	+7.7%	+7.3%

Note: Column percentages do not sum to zero because in 2012 there was a “Do Not Know” option that was eliminated on the 2016 survey.

Additionally, opinion on the Confederate flag issue continues to divide Aiken County. Former State Representative Chris Corley, whose district included parts of Aiken County, was one of the most prominent politicians in the state voicing opposition to removing the flag. Has the salience and resolution of this question changed public opinion in Aiken County?

A slight plurality of Aiken County voters in 2016, 42.7% favored keeping the Confederate Battle Flag at the SC State House. On the other hand, 36.6% of voters supported the removal of the flag at the State House and 14.3% expressed mixed feelings. Among partisans,

the vast majority of Democrats supported removal while a solid majority of Republicans favored keeping the flag and independents were evenly divided.

Table 10: Views on the Confederate Flag by Party Identification

	Remove	Kept There	Mixed Feelings / No Opinion
Democrats	78.8%	7.3%	12.5%
Republican	16.1%	63.5%	20.4%
Independent	37.4%	33.1%	28.4%
Other	22.2%	47.8%	24.8%

Note: Percentages represent percentage of row with each position.

Comparing views on the Confederate flag among the parties in 2012, before it became a salient issue reveals different trends among the parties. Among Democrats and independents, there was a decisive shift in the direction of removing the Confederate flag. Among Democrats, the percentage believing the flag should be removed increased by 17.5 percentage points, which seemed to be the result of fewer Democrats expressing mixed feelings or no opinion. Among independents, the 10.6 percentage point increase in those believing the flag should be removed was accompanied by fewer independents believing the flag should be kept there. Among Republicans, opinion seemed to polarize, with fewer individuals in 2016 reporting mixed feelings or no opinion compared to 2012 accompanying small increases in the number of Republicans believing the flag both be removed and kept there.

Consistent with the rapid increase in prominence of the Confederate flag issue in South Carolina state politics between 2012 and 2016, opinion among Democrats and Republicans seemed to polarize, with a large decrease among both partisan groups in the proportion reporting mixed feelings or no opinion.

Table 12: Views on the Confederate Flag by Party Identification: Changes from 2012

	Remove	Kept There	Mixed Feelings / No Opinion
Democrats	+17.5%	-3.1%	-15.7%
Republican	+3.5%	+3.8%	-7.3%
Independent	+10.6%	-9.4%	-2.3%

INDEPENDENTS: FEET IN BOTH CAMPS

Independents in Aiken County comprised 16.4% of voters in the 2016 election. This does not include individuals who identified as independents but reported leaning towards the Democrats or Republicans but instead only individuals who do not lean towards a party. As previously mentioned, a slight plurality of these independents in Aiken County reported voting for Hillary Clinton. Given the Democratic Party's weakness in Aiken County, it is clear that any path to electoral success for the party in the county will include the support of independents. Likewise, the Republican Party's position as the dominant political party in Aiken County

depends on continuing to do respectably among this critical group. Thus, the opinions of Democrats, Republicans and independents were assessed on a variety of salient political issues. On some issues, Aiken County independents showed similarity to Democrats in the county while others find them sharing attitudes similar to Republicans.

As mentioned, on the issue of same-sex marriage, independents are solidly aligned with the Democrats. In fact, a slightly larger proportion of independents support same-sex marriage in 2016 compared to Democrats (although the difference is within the margin of error). Independents appear split on the issue of the Confederate flag. A very small plurality supported the removal of the Confederate flag, and opinion among independents on this issue has significantly shifted in this direction over the last four years.

Economic Issues

The 2016 exit poll asked voters about a number of economic issues. The election presented a stark divide between the protectionist policies of Trump and the free trade policies of Clinton. In particular, Trump’s criticism of free trade is interesting because recent decades have seen both political parties strongly support free trade. Thus, Trump’s advocacy of protectionist policies represents something of a turn for the GOP. Where do voters, especially Republicans, stand on this issue?

The exit poll asked voters whether they believed free trade agreements have been a good or bad thing for this country. Although a significant minority of voters did not express an opinion on the issue (32%), a clear plurality (42%) stated that they believed free trade agreements have been a bad thing for the country while only a quarter of Aiken voters surveyed believed that they were a good thing.

Table 13: Views on Free Trade Agreements by Party Identification

	Good Thing	Bad Thing	I Have Not Had Time to Think about This
Democrats	39.6%	19.4%	41.0%
Independent	33.8%	44.0%	22.2%
Republican	17.3%	53.2%	29.5%
Other	12.3%	56.6%	31.1%

Note: Percentages represent percentage of row with each position.

Breaking responses down by party reveals interesting variation among the voters. While a plurality of Democrats actually expressed no opinion on free trade agreements, those who did voice an opinion viewed them a good thing rather than a bad thing by over a 2:1 margin. In contrast, a solid majority of Republicans in Aiken County viewed free trade agreements as a bad thing. This seems to indicate that Republican voters (at least in Aiken County) fully support Donald Trump’s stance on free trade. Among independents, a solid plurality (44%) also view free trade agreements as a bad thing—indicating that independents and Republicans are closely aligned on this issue.

Another important issue to consider is tax policy. Republicans in the 2016 election campaigned on tax reform and it is a matter of Republican ideological orthodoxy that taxes on wealthier Americans are not only unfair but hurt the country due to the theories of “supply side economics”. Voters in Aiken County were asked their opinion on the tax rate for individuals making greater than \$400,000 a year (the approximate cutoff for membership in the so-called “1 percent”).

A sizable plurality of Aiken County voters (44%) believed that taxes on those making greater than \$400,000 a year should be increased. Among Aiken County voters, this was over three times the number of individuals who believed these taxes should be cut (14%). Surprisingly, breaking tax views down by party reveals a majority or plurality of every partisan group—even Republicans—believing taxes should be increased on those making greater than \$400,000 a year.

Table 14: Views on Taxes on the Wealthy by Party Identification

	Increased	Stay the Same	Cut	DK/Not Sure
Democrats	65.1%	9.7%	6.8%	18.4%
Independent	47.9%	19.9%	9.3%	22.9%
Republican	31.3%	26.7%	21.4%	20.6%
Other	37.3%	27.9%	13.7%	21.1%

Note: Percentages represent percentage of row with each position.

Close to a majority of independents believe that taxes on the wealthy should be increased. It is apparent that this issue is an area of agreement between independent voters and Democrats.

Social Issues

In addition, voters were asked a number of questions about social issues, including abortion, the treatment of undocumented immigrants (debatably also an economic issue) and the aforementioned question about how life for people like them has changed over the past 50 years. On the first two issues, independents and Democrats are aligned but on the last issue, independents closely match Republicans.

Nationally, opinion on abortion has been stable for decades. While politically the issue is often portrayed as a dichotomy between pro-choice and pro-life camps, Americans’ opinions on the issue tends to be more nuanced. Relatively few Americans favor a complete ban on abortion, but a majority nationally does not favor complete freedom either. Instead, the majority of Americans favor abortion being legal in some circumstances but not others. Aiken County in 2016 was no exception. Only a minority of voters in Aiken County believe abortion should be completely legal in all circumstances (37%). However, an even smaller group of Aiken voters believe abortion should be banned completely (18%). Similar to national trends, the largest expressed opinion (40%) was that abortion should be legal in some situations but not others. 28% of Aiken County voters believed abortion should be legal in cases of rape, incest or major health issues to the fetus. An additional 12% said that abortion should be permitted but only when the mother’s life was in danger.

Table 15: Views on Abortion by Party Identification

	Always Permitted	Some Circumstances	Never Permitted	DK/Not Sure
Democrats	67.1%	17.1%	10.9%	5.0%
Independent	47.8%	36.9%	7.1%	8.2%
Republicans	17.2%	54.4%	24.9%	3.5%
Other	50.5%	27.1%	15.4%	7.1%

Note: Percentages represent percentage of row with each position.

As might be expected, opinion on abortion differs among individuals according to party identification. Interestingly, the majority or plurality response for Democrats, independents and those identifying as “Other” is that abortion should always be permitted. This indicates alignment between Democrats and independents in Aiken County. Even among Republicans, however, a majority in the county still believe abortion should be legal in some situations.

One of the areas that Donald Trump strongly emphasized during his presidential campaign is a tough stance on undocumented or illegal immigration. While most Democrats favor some path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, Republican opinion on this topic is more complex. Some prominent Republicans have called for a path to citizenship. Others have taken a hard line stance, advocating deportation. The Republican position is complicated by the fact that many businesses in the United States—a traditionally Republican-leaning constituency—rely on undocumented immigrant labor. However, Republican working class voters tend to see undocumented immigrants as competition for jobs.

Aiken voters were asked whether they believed that undocumented immigrants who met certain requirements should be allowed to stay in the United States legally. This question is partially plagued by the complications of the undocumented immigrant issue. It did *not* specify that undocumented immigrants allowed to stay in the United States would receive American citizenship; neither did it specify what those requirements to stay were. Instead, this question should be regarded as a test of support for deportation of all undocumented immigrants.

Aiken voters in 2016 were closely divided on this question. A plurality (49%) believed that undocumented immigrants who meet certain requirements should be allowed to stay legally in America. However, 41% of voters believed that these individuals should not be allowed to stay in the United States legally (approximately 10% of voters did not express an opinion on the issue).

Table 16: Views on Undocumented Immigrants by Party Identification

	Allowed to Stay	Not Allowed to Stay	Mixed Feelings / No Opinion
Democrats	73.0%	14.8%	13.2%
Independent	60.1%	29.8%	10.1%
Republicans	33.1%	59.5%	7.1%
Other	47.3%	38.6%	11.1%

Note: Percentages represent percentage of row with each position.

Given the salience of this issue in the 2016 election, it is not surprising that responses to the question were polarized between the parties. A solid majority of both Democrats and independents favored allowing undocumented immigrants to stay legally, while a solid majority of Republicans believed they should be allowed to stay legally.

As mentioned, the question of how voters felt life in America had changed for people like them over the last 50 years provided important insight into how individuals voted in the 2016 presidential race. One might expect responses to this question to be similarly polarized by partisanship. Groups making up important components of the Democratic coalition in South Carolina (most especially African-Americans) have witnessed great gains in the South over the last 50 years. While it is an unfortunately frequent logical fallacy to view opportunity and stature in society as a zero-sum game, the fact of the matter is that the gains realized by many groups in America over the last 50 years have come at the expense of the traditionally privileged position in society of members of the Republican coalition—especially white males—in favor of a more level playing field. Thus, it is logical to think that Democrats will view their situation as improving while Republicans will see erosion.

Table 17: Change in Life for People Like Me over Last 50 Years by Party Identification

	Better	Worse	About the Same
Democrats	54.4%	23.9%	21.7%
Independent	39.2%	45.3%	15.5%
Republicans	24.7%	60.1%	14.8%
Other	32.2%	63.4%	4.4%

Note: Percentages represent percentage of row with each position.

As expected, a majority of Democrats believed that life has gotten better for people like them while a majority of Republicans say it has gotten worse. A plurality of independents also agree that life in America has gotten worse for people like them over the last 50 years. This seems to indicate that Republicans see the erosion of traditional positions of privilege by members of their coalition as a decline in life for them.

CONCLUSION

The 2016 election in Aiken County in some sense marked a return to the norm after the Obama years. African-American turnout and turnout of young people fell in the county. While we do not have exact statistics to compare the electorate in 2016 to the electorate in previous presidential elections, there is reason to believe that this is some sense a return to things in past presidential elections and that the Obama years were an anomaly. Turnout overall in the county, driven by a greater turnout among white voters and women, increased to its second highest rate in modern history (2016 still failed to surpass the election of 2008).

Democrats in Aiken County and South Carolina should be mindful of state law regarding inactivity of voters. Under state law, if a voter does not vote for two general elections in a row, they are mailed a postcard asking them to confirm their wish to remain active. If the voters do not respond, they are removed from the active voter list. According to the voter file of Aiken

County, over 6,000 individuals reported last voting in 2012, meaning that they will soon be receiving postcards from Aiken County. Under state law, even if a voter is moved to inactive they can still cast a valid vote in the next two general elections. However, if they do not vote in the next two elections (i.e. they miss four general elections in a row), their name is removed from the voter rolls.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns of Barack Obama on participation in the African-American community. Even in states such as South Carolina that were not considered to be competitive, Obama's presence on the ballot drove registration and turnout among African-Americans. For Democrats, a limited window exists to consolidate these gains before these voters are removed from the voter rolls.

This is reflected in the aggregate partisanship of the county in the 2016 election as the percentage of Democrats in the electorate slipped and the percentage of Republicans surged. Republicans were less loyal to Donald Trump in 2016 than they had been to Mitt Romney in 2012, so in spite of their great numbers, Donald Trump won a slightly lower vote share in the county (as did Clinton). Still, strong support from Republicans and support from those reporting "Other" party identification was enough for Trump to decisively win Aiken.

While Trump was criticized by many pundits and political observers for running what appeared at first glance to be a chaotic and ill-conceived campaign compared to Clinton, the results from the exit poll make clear that he nonetheless had a far stronger message than Clinton did. "Make American Great Again" resonated deeply with many voters who feel the country has left them behind and that life in America has gotten worse for them over the last decades. Of those voters in Aiken County who felt that life for people like them has gotten worse over the past 50 years, almost 80 percent voted for Donald Trump. Opinion on this question, outside traditional indicators of partisanship like party identification and race, was the single best predictor in the exit poll of vote for president.

Important changes are always happening in politics, the consequences of which play out slowly over time. In 2015, same-sex marriage was legalized and the Confederate flag was removed from the State Capitol grounds. Opinion on both of these issues changed from 2012 to 2016. On same-sex marriage, individuals of all partisan persuasions reported greater support for same-sex marriage, with decisive majorities of Democrats and independents now voicing support. On the issue of the Confederate flag, Democrats and independents supported its removal, while views on the topic polarized among Republicans.

Finally, the exit poll showed that political independents—a critical group in Aiken County for both parties—are split on issues, aligning with Republicans on some issues and Democrats on others. Independents in Aiken County are similar to Democrats on issues of: same-sex marriage, taxes on the wealthy, abortion and allowing undocumented immigrants to stay in the US. On the other hand, independents align with Republicans on issues of free trade and how life has changed over the past 50 years for people like them. Depending on the positions of candidates in subsequent elections, both parties could have a decent shot of playing to this important group.

Notes:

The margin of error for the overall survey was 3.6%. Margin of error for subgroups (such as Democrats or members of racial groups) is higher.