Much media attention before and after the 2020 presidential election in the United States has been on the racial identity of Vice President-elect Senator Kamala Harris. The media emphasised her several firsts that are the result of where her parents were born. From Jamaica where her father was born, to India where her mother was born, the narrative of her South Asian/Black identity has been scrutinised, analysed, and evaluated. In addition, the perceived and real possibility of some dominant Republican states losing power to the Democrats was front and centre in newspaper articles, opinions pieces, blogs, and essays.

Political analysts addressed the international and domestic migration pieces of this puzzle to a certain extent, but the historical and contemporary dynamics of migration to and within the United States needs further analyses if we are to understand the Biden-Harris victory.

William F. Frey, in Diversity Explosion: How Racial Demographics are Remaking America (2015), uses census and other data to illustrate that both forms of migration are transforming the country in economic and political ways. Historical migration out of the South, especially for African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century to Northern, Midwestern, and Western states and cities, is too important to downplay. Furthermore, intra-migration of African Americans has to be unpacked if we are to understand clear Democratic victories in certain states and the shift towards
turning some red states into blue states—at least a paler shade of blue for some. In other words, African Americans are migrating out of Chicago in droves, but not all of them are making a beeline to Atlanta. Intra-regional migration has seen the numbers of African Americans increase in Milwaukee and other cities in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan that were so important to rebuilding the blue wall in the Midwest. The other excellent example of intra-regional migration is African Americans migrating from California to Nevada and Arizona.

Finally, the manifestation of African American reverse migration out of these same states and regions showed up in voter turnout and voter preferences in particular states in the South and Southwest. We must also take into consideration that states that experience an influx of African Americans, such as Georgia, Texas, North Carolina, and Florida, also experience an influx of Latino populations that come from various regions in Central and South America and the Caribbean. Moreover, there are Latinos (read Mexican-descended non-immigrants) who have lived in what was northern Mexico and now makes up the Southwest for centuries. They also participate in intra-regional migration from California to Nevada, Arizona, and Colorado. In sum, domestic migration, whether it is intra-regional, inter-regional, or reverse, is a factor that is evident in recent presidential, congressional, and gubernatorial races in several states that have turned from red to blue or that could be on the cusp of transferring power from Republicans to Democrats. When this domestic migration coincides with international migration, which is what brought Vice President-elect Kamala Harris’ parents to the United States in the first place, the result is a change in demographics and a more diverse electorate and candidate pool that ushered in different voter preferences and choices.

African American migration out of California to Southern states is important to note. African Americans are moving from Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego to Southern and Mid-Atlantic States such as Georgia, Louisiana, Virginia, Florida, Maryland, and the Washington, DC area.

The significance of the African American vote cannot be underestimated in the 2020 presidential election. Without African Americans participating in large numbers in South Carolina’s democratic primary and then voting for Senator Joseph Biden, current President-elect Biden’s campaign may not have gotten the head winds needed to secure the nomination for president. Moreover, Congressman James E. Clyburn, the House Majority Whip, endorsed Biden. The endorsement gave African Americans the green light to support Biden in the primary. Biden garnered 61% of their vote. This is why South and African Americans are very important to the Democratic Party, although Biden did not win South Carolina.

This is where domestic migration needs to be unpacked as it relates to African Americans. There is some scholarship on African American migration following the Civil War, such as Nell Irvin Painter’s *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (1976). Other scholarship examines the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North and Midwest into cities such as New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Saint Louis, and Philadelphia. Isabelle Wilkerson’s *Warmth of Other Suns and Castes: The Origins of Our Discontent* (2010) is one such example, along with William F. Frey’s *The New Great Migration: Black Americans’ Return to the South, 1965-2000* (2004) and Sabrina Pendergrass’ “Routing Black Migration to the Urban US South: Social Class and Sources of Social Capital in the Destinations Selection Process” (2013). We know that African Americans transformed these cities culturally, economically, and politically.

From 1910 to 1970, as many as six million African Americans left the cotton fields, sharecropping, domestic work, and terrorism (in the form of lynching of Black people carried out by the Ku Klux
Klan and other white groups) for the North, Midwest, Southwest, and West. They did not heed the call of Booker T. Washington to cast down their buckets where they were. We also know that the first residents of these cities identified and voted for the Republican Party because they viewed it as the party of Abraham Lincoln. Over time, party identification shifted to the Democratic Party and African Americans were important in the election of Democratic presidents while at the same time gaining political power as mayors in most of these cities beginning in the 1960s and 1970s.

The idea that there would a reverse migration of thousands of African Americans out of these cities to return to the South was not in the calculations of the Southern Strategy that the Republicans so successfully used to turn Democratic strongholds red. One observation from the election is that the millions of African Americans who participated in reverse migration may have the ability to wrestle political power from the Republicans to the Democrats.

**The impact of reverse migration**

Before there is a discussion of African American participation in the 2020 presidential election in the South in particular, the economic and cultural dynamics of their migration need to be addressed in general, and in particular, those states that experienced the influx of new African American arrivals beginning in the late 1990s.

For example, African Americans from New York, Chicago, and other Northeastern and Midwestern cities began moving to Georgian cities that include Atlanta, Savannah, Columbus, Athens, and Macon for several reasons. Western cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco also experienced an out-migration of African Americans. One of the factors that makes Atlanta attractive to African Americans and others is its increasingly diverse population and economic opportunities. The multinational giant, the Coco-Cola Company, along with DHL, Delta Airlines, Home Depot, and reputable colleges and universities that include Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) such as Spelman and Morehouse that attract students, faculty, and staff from across the world, along with Emory University and top notch medical facilities serve as pull factors. More importantly, Atlanta is a space for those who choose to migrate where African Americans can achieve economic and personal success. Atlanta serves as a magnate for African Americans working in the entertainment industry such as Tyler Perry who opened Tyler Perry Studios in 2019. This follows the huge success of musicians who set up studios in Atlanta earlier, such as Kenneth Edmonds (Babyface) and Antonio Reid (L.A). Jermain Dupri and even Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis got their start in Atlanta by working with the Atlanta-based SOS band. Edmonds and Reid used their skills as producers and songwriters to make some of the best-known recordings in the last several decades by Whitney Houston, Toni Braxton, Usher, Janet Jackson, TLC, Bobby Brown, Johnny Gill, and Boys II Men.

Florida is another state that has experienced an influx of African Americans as part of the reverse migration trend. The mass exodus out of the Rust Belt does not just comprise whites who want to escape the harsh winters of the Midwest and Northeast after retirement nor whites who lost jobs due to loss of manufacturing jobs in states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania. African Americans were also tired of the snow and sleet of these regions. They too had lost jobs in the same states.
Again, what is missing from the Rust Belt to the Sun Belt narrative is the participation of African Americans and what this means for presidential races in their new states. Whites are not the only ones moving to the Sunshine State to soak up the sun year round. African Americans are moving to Fort Lauderdale, Tampa, Orlando, Jacksonville, and smaller towns and cities. Other states include North Carolina, Virginia, and South Carolina.

For African American retirees, the reasons vary, but they include other factors besides a warmer climate, such as a cheaper cost of living, lower taxes in some states, the desire to return to their ancestral homes to be near family and childhood friends and to enjoy leisure activities. There are also pull factors for younger African Americans, especially those who are college-educated. The growing economy in these states (before COVID-19) provided employment in various sectors, such as banking in Charlotte, the tech industry in Atlanta, and the hotel and hospitality industry in Charleston, Miami, and Virginia Beach.

However, it is important to note that there were push factors that served as a catalyst for migration. Many African Americans from Chicago to Philadelphia to Bridgeport to the Bronx were frustrated with areas where they lived that were unsafe on many levels. Parents feared for the safety of their children; they also wanted to obtain a high quality education; employment opportunities that led to economic and social mobility dwindled, and finally the economic recession of 2008 laid bare the extent of predatory lending to African American households that often led to foreclosures. Many lost their jobs, homes, savings, and any hope of rebuilding their lives. They were more than willing to return to the states that their parents and grandparents had left in search of a better life.

Finally, in some ways life and opportunities in their new homes were better for African Americans. However, there were instances when it was not. They still could not fully escape structural and systemic racism, especially by the police when walking, driving, and shopping while Black could result in death.

African American migration out of California to Southern states is important to note. African Americans are moving from Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego to Southern and Mid-Atlantic States such as Georgia, Louisiana, Virginia, Florida, Maryland, and the Washington, DC area. The high cost of housing and a dismal reputation for traffic jams, long commutes, and lack of public transport have pushed many residents to smaller cities. The Southwestern states of Texas, Nevada, and Arizona have also experienced an influx of African American migrants in Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Austin, Las Vegas, and Phoenix.

Intra-migration, as mentioned above, is important to examine for African Americans in the West and Midwest. African Americans have migrated from California to Nevada, Arizona, and Texas. They have also migrated from cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis to other smaller towns and cities. The protests and demonstrations after the killing of George Floyd and the shooting of Jacob Blake Jr. illustrate the presence of African Americans in smaller cities throughout the country. Unfortunately, the world knows that Kenosha, Wisconsin has an African American population.

**Changing demographics**

Trump and Republican strategists seemed to be oblivious of inter, intra, and reverse migration for African Americans. Moreover, the thought – not the fact – that the majority of African Americans are living in suburbs, regardless of the region more so than ever, was not on their radar. Trump’s nod to white women in his plea for them to like him and that he saved their neighbourhoods was a clear illustration that demographics had changed and he was unaware. While he begged them to
like him and vote for him, African Americans were getting out the vote in those same
neighbourhoods from Atlanta to Miami, Phoenix, Houston and Austin. The college-educated and
retired African Americans who have migrated live in these same suburbs.

Furthermore, this population has the time, resources, and skills to participate in election campaigns,
to donate to candidates, and to canvas door to door. The tech entrepreneurs can use their expertise
to work with younger people to use social media to energise African American voters. Brentin Mock
reports in “Black Cities Ain’t Going Nowhere” (2019) that suburban areas outside of Atlanta and
Miami are manifestations of Black cities within the cityhood movement. As indicated by the title of
his article, Black cities are not decreasing in number, but rather, they are increasing: from 460 in

At the same time that inter, intra, and reverse migration has changed demographics in key states
that determined the electoral vote count in 2020. International migration played a role too. This
discussion examines people who are citizens through naturalisation. Therefore, the refugees and
legal immigrants in states such as Texas, Florida, North Carolina, Georgia, Minnesota, Wisconsin,
Pennsylvania, Virginia, Texas, Nevada, and Arizona are discussed. Those states have significant
immigrant populations who are eligible to vote and many did. The largest number of immigrants are
from Mexico, the Philippines, India, China, Vietnam, Cuba, South Korea, the Dominican Republic,
Jamaica, and El Salvador. It is interesting to note that of the 23 million eligible immigrant voters,
they live in only five states: California, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, and New York. Trump won
Florida and Texas while Biden won the other three Democrat strongholds.

However, Texas and Florida may be moving from blood red to cranberry red and on its way to
becoming blue. In particular, Texas has a large immigrant population from Mexico, Vietnam, and
India. For Florida, the emphasis is on Cuban-Americans and their support for the Republicans due
to the narrative that they support presidential candidates who are anti-communist. What is left out
of this narrative within the context of the Latino vote in Florida is that other immigrants who are
classified as Latino live there too, including Puerto Ricans, Colombians, Dominicans, El Salvadorans,
and others from Central America. Furthermore, these classifications are nebulous. Where do
African-descended migrants from Cuba, Colombia, Brazil, and the Dominican Republic factor in?
Asian Americans cannot be lumped into one category either because some Chinese and Japanese
communities have lived in the United States for longer than the Vietnamese, Cambodians, Indians,
and Laotians.

African immigrants and refugees have a shorter history in the United States due to exclusionary
immigration laws. However, laws passed that no longer relied on geographical quotas opened the
door for more African and Black immigrants to enter the country. In addition, the refugee ceiling for
Africa slowly began to increase. At this point, Black- and African- descended immigrants played a
role in the 2020 presidential election. There numbers are still not large, but they are active and are
certain to become more active. Congresswoman Ilhan Omar serves as an important example. The
Somali-American community in the district that elected her, along with historic African American
community, are too important to ignore. It is also important to point out that refugees hold
permanent resident status following their approval for resettlement to the United States. Following
the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, refugees must apply to adjust their status to lawful
permanent resident after one year of being admitted into the United States. After five years of lawful
permanent residence, refugees can apply for citizenship through naturalisation. Therefore, the
thousands of Somalis, Liberians, Ethiopians, Burundians, Sierra Leoneans, Rwandans, and Eritreans
are citizens and eligible to vote.

Other first, second, and third generation African and Black immigrants participate in elections as
well. Census data and scholarship illustrate the level of education and their success in various
economic sectors. Many of these migrants who represent several generations at this point live in key states, cities, and suburbs that were important to the Biden-Harris ticket. There is a confluence of their migration to the same regions and states where reverse migration has occurred. In other words, the historic African American Diaspora and the contemporary African Diaspora are finding themselves in the same spaces in Georgia, Texas, Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida. Both groups are represented by a young and college-educated demographic. This demographic lives and works in college towns such as Austin, Atlanta, Raleigh, Athens, Hampton, and Richmond. At the same time, this demographic joins educated and professional retirees from the military, educational, corporate, health, government, and business sectors who vote.

Turning anger and grief to votes

The last part of this essay will examine the five states that the Biden-Harris ticket flipped from red to blue and examine the role an influx of domestic and international migrants played. Georgia serves as a good starting point because its growth in population that is eligible to vote from both domestic and international migration is too important to ignore. Georgia had 2.4 million African Americans residents who were eligible to vote. The number represents 32% of this total electorate. The population growth resides in both urban and suburban areas. People who voted for the Biden-Harris ticket live in counties such as Cobb, Henry, Douglas, Gwinnet, Clayton, and Fayette that are not predominantly as white as they were during previous elections. These counties have larger numbers of African Americans now, but Asian Americans and Latinos now live there. These communities, along with African and African descended immigrants have similar concerns around issues such as healthcare, the effects of COVID-19 on people of color, police brutality against African Americans and other people of color including undocumented and documented immigrants.

Georgia delivered its electoral votes to the Republican presidential candidate faithfully after the 1992 election, but in 2020, things fell apart. The New York Times reported on November 14th that, “Mr. Biden’s late surge in Georgia, thanks to his dominance in Atlanta, Savannah and the increasingly Democratic-friendly suburbs around both, transformed what had seemed to be a safe Trump state in early tabulations last week into one of the closest contexts in the nation.” This underscores the importance of the cities pointed out earlier that have African American voters as the result of several factors including reverse migration, retirees, HBCUs, and immigrants from Africa, Asia, Central America, and the Caribbean. The same New York Times article pointed out the importance of Atlanta in that “Mr. Biden was powered by high turnout among Black voters in Atlanta.”

The Biden-Harris ticket probably would not have garnered these much-needed electoral votes without the organisational skills of Stacy Abrams. Ms. Abrams gained national attention when she ran and later lost the governor’s race in 2018 under the suspicion of voter suppression carried out by her opponent, Brian Kemp, who at the time was Secretary of State. It is clear to all who were not familiar with presidential elections in the United States that the secretaries of state are responsible for overseeing elections to ensure that voter fraud and suppression do not occur. Many in Georgia and around the country viewed Ms. Abrams as the rightful winner because they believed the secretary of state’s office participated in voter suppression by purging voters’ names from the voting rolls. Ms. Abrams turned this loss into a win for Democrats in the presidential election by galvanizing 800,000 new registered voters. We all know that voting is important, but if one does not register, one cannot vote. The 14,000 votes that Biden received to beat Trump may have come from this number.

Georgia was the only state in the South that flipped from red to blue where the Midwest had two: Wisconsin and Michigan. Wisconsin has 0.3 million eligible African American voters or 6% of the state’s electorate. Wisconsin is among the Midwestern states that has experienced intra-migration
as the result of African Americans moving from cities such as Chicago to Milwaukee and other smaller cities. However, during this presidential election, this is not what put the state in national and international headlines. The police shooting in August 2020 of 29-year old Jacob Blake Jr., an African American man who did not live in Milwaukee, made the small city of Kenosha infamous. Mr. Blake survived the shooting, but his name is on the long list of African American men who have either been killed or severely injured by the police.

Hundreds of people from the state and Midwest descended on Kenosha after learning that police officers shot Mr. Blake seven times in the back, leaving him paralysed. Trump’s response to this shooting did not motivate African Americans and other people of colour, along with whites in urban and suburban areas, to vote for him. When people from all backgrounds protested against the shooting, Trump made it clear that he supported whatever aggressive actions were taken by the police. The last straw may have been the killing of two white men in Kenosha by a white teenager during a Black Lives Matter protest in response to the Blake shooting. Another person was seriously injured. The image of a seventeen-year old teenager brandishing a semi-automatic rifle, shooting three men, and then running toward the police with the gun slung across his torso was too much. To add insult to injury, the police assisted the teenager; the police did not apprehend him on the spot; the police did not push him to the ground, put him in a chokehold, put him in handcuffs or use a Taser to attempt to arrest him. His arrest was the following day from his home in Illinois! It was apparent to African Americans that Trump’s call for law and order did not apply to everyone equally. When Congresswoman Gwen Moore, whose district includes Milwaukee, stated, “We have to turn our anger and grief and frustration into our votes,” African Americans listened.

Wisconsin’s location next door to Minnesota heightened people’s willingness to march and protest following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. In addition, Wisconsin is part of the intra-migration of African Americans from Chicago and other cities in Illinois and other states in the Midwest. Some of these migrants live in Milwaukee; however, others have moved to smaller cities such as Madison and Racine.

African Americans, in particular, did not just march and protest; they registered to vote and then voted for Biden. They did not repeat the mistake of 2016 when they stayed home and did not vote for Senator Hillary Clinton who, perhaps mistakenly, did not campaign in the state. Moreover, Biden and Harris did not make Clinton’s mistake; they both campaigned in Wisconsin and for that thousands of African Americans, particularly younger ones, voted for the ticket. Wisconsin is just one example of an increase in voter registration and voting by young African Americans in the presidential election. In many ways, it was obvious that Trump was launching a dirty war against them by using the rhetoric of law and order; insisting that federal law enforcement protects cities; and giving a nod to a white supremacist group, Proud Boys, that he was on their side during one of the presidential debates no less.

The second Midwestern state to deliver blue electoral votes to Biden was Michigan, especially among younger voters. Michigan, like Wisconsin, was able to give Trump a victory in 2016 because many African Americans voters stayed home. Michigan may not have had its Stacy Adams, but it had African American pastors and others who mobilised people to register to vote. African Americans constituted 13% of the one million eligible voters in Michigan. Detroit’s own Stevie
Wonder played a part by attending a campaign rally in Detroit that paid off with Biden receiving 94% of votes cast in Detroit while Trump received 5%. This came as no surprise as Detroit’s population is 79% African American. However, African Americans in Detroit could not have done it alone. Other African Americans in Oakland, Genesee, and Wayne County (39% of its population is African American) were also important. Michigan’s Lt. Governor, Michael Gilchrist understood this and underscores the argument that Trump fundamentally did not understand changing demographics when he attempted to characterise the suburbs as being places for whites only. He played right into the hands of Trump and the Republicans when he stated, “This year I really kind of made it my mission to make sure that we were engaging communities both in Detroit but also in...Flint, Saginaw, Benton Harbor. But also, importantly, the fact that Black people don’t just live in cities.”

There is no disputing the importance of the African American vote in Michigan, from Detroit to Flint to Benton Harbor. However, Michigan has Latino, Asian, and Arab and Muslim populations. Segments of the Arab and Muslim population have been in the state from the late nineteenth century. African Americans were not the only group who moved there to work in the automobile plants. People who identified as Arab migrated to work in the new auto plants. It is important to point out that this population is not all Arab or Muslim and many do not come from or are descended from the Middle East.

The Black Muslim and Arab American vote

Finally, there are Black Muslims to consider. Let us not forget that the members of the historic African Diaspora founded the Nation of Islam in Detroit in 1930. The Pew Research Center reported in 2017 that Black Muslims represent one-fifth of all Muslims in the United States. Put another way, two percent of African Americans identify as Muslim. Black Muslims are a part of the historic and contemporary Diaspora in the United States.

The contemporary African Diaspora Black Muslims can be from Senegal, Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia, or Ethiopia. Dearborn has the distinct reputation of being the capital of Arab America. These communities have much in common with African Americans in terms of housing, employment, racial justice, police killings, and COVID-19. African Americans have shown solidarity with immigrants and refugees. This was evident in their push for reforms in immigration laws during the 1960s at a time when they had recently gained basic civil and voting rights.

Trump’s (or rather his son-in-law, Jared Kushner’s) handling of issues in the Middle East did not convince some Muslims to vote for him. Many Americans, and not just this community, did not think Kushner had the political skills or expertise to enable him to formulate any foreign policy, let alone to broker a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. What he managed to do was totally unacceptable to the Palestinians as it was clear that Israel was not going to have to give any concessions while the Palestinians were expected to take whatever offer was on the table. This, along with other issues and concerns, may have been the final nail in the coffin that sealed Trump’s electoral fate in Michigan.

Going back to the above counties of Wayne, Macomb, Oakland, they not only have sizeable African American populations, but there are also Latinos, Asian, Arab, and Muslim Americans who reside there. Again, Trump was ignorant concerning the racial and ethnic diversity found in American suburbs. Wayne County is not only home to Detroit, but Dearborn where a sizeable Arab American population lives. Trump failed to gain the votes from eligible voters in this county, but Biden did and he won 70% of this voting bloc.

Arab Americans, similar to all groups, do not vote one hundred percent for either party. Domestic
and international issues influence their vote. Their vote is influenced by domestic and international issues. The voting patterns of communities that have resided in the state for decades are different from those of more recent refugees from Syria and Iraq. One issue that may have unified the various communities is immigration and Trump’s efforts to ban travel to and from Arab and Muslim-majority countries. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, one of four Congresswomen Trump bullied, played a significant role in getting Arab, Muslim, and African American communities to vote.

**Winning Pennsylvania**

President-elect Biden won his home state of Pennsylvania. However, it was a struggle to the end, but his victory allowed him to reach the 270 electoral votes needed to become President-elect and to put the state in the blue column. Biden needed to win urban and suburban areas and he did this in Philadelphia and Allegheny Counties that are home to the cities of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

African Americans and others in Philadelphia responded to the police killing, again captured on video, of Walter Wallace Jr. in October 2020, with marches, protests, and looting. Trump’s response was to send in the National Guard. Again, this was his signal that he was the candidate to enforce law and order. When he begged white women to like him because he saved their neighbourhoods, his message was that he would deal with these “thugs.” African Americans interpreted it for what it was. They were stereotyped as criminals who needed to be rounded up and locked up. African Americans make up 10% or one million of the state’s eligible voters and enough of them voted for Biden.

As the Lt. Governor of Michigan rightly pointed out for his state, African Americans do not all live in cities. The same applies to Pennsylvania where African Americans in rural areas voted for the Biden-Harris ticket. African Americans in suburban areas followed suit. One county is Chester where the African American population voted overwhelming for Biden. African American churches, sororities, fraternities, and civil rights groups all joined forces to push Biden into the lead. Smaller cities such as Harrisburg, the state capital, also voted for Biden. African Americans voted in other parts of the state such as Wilkes-Barre, Erie, Allentown, Reading, Scranton (Biden’s hometown), and York. Pennsylvania is a state that witnessed large numbers of African Americans who migrated during the Great Migration. Their descendants are the ones who canvassed door-to-door, participated in phone banks, organised voter registration, and voted for Biden.

Pennsylvania has the not so flattering reputation of having Philadelphia and Pittsburgh as progressive centres and the rest is Mississippi. As stated above, African Americans live throughout the state in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The state also has an increasing number of Latinos and Asian Americans as a result of immigration. According to the Pew Research Center, the number of Asian eligible voters in the country was 4.6 million in 2000. This number increased to 11.1 million in 2020. Again, Asian Americans are very diverse and people from the Pacific Islands are often put into this category. Nevertheless, the issues that concern them include the economy, education, healthcare, COVID-19, and immigration. Pennsylvania has 511,002 people who are classified as Asian American and Pacific Islanders. Of this number, 251,377 are eligible to vote. The largest numbers are people from Indian (155,887), China (136,206) followed by Vietnam (49,306), South Korea (47,480), and the Philippines (42,544). The same counties that have sizeable African American populations are where Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders reside: Philadelphia, Montgomery, and Allegheny Counties.

Within this classification, numerous factors produce cleavages such as immigration status, religion, and countries of origin. Putting all of this aside, Asian American and Pacific Islanders made up 4% of Pennsylvania’s eligible voters and many voted for Biden. Again, some members of this population were born in Muslim-majority countries or their parents and grandparents migrated from those
countries.

Trump, again, put his foot in his mouth by constantly blaming the COVID-19 pandemic on China, going so far as to call it the “China Virus,” and threatening to engage in a trade war with the country. These actions, accompanied by anti-Asian racism, served to energise members of the community to provide voter education, register eligible voters, and ensure they voted. Despite Asian Americans being labeled the model minority, they face the same challenges that all minority and marginalized communities face such as poor health care, lack of health insurance, significant rates of poverty, poor housing, unemployment, and overall obstacles to achieve social and economic success.

Latino voters in Pennsylvania also contributed to Biden’s 270 electoral votes. This segment of the population is diverse within the context of its members having origins in many countries. In addition, it does not pack a punch, like African Americans, in terms of its numbers in Pennsylvania, but every vote for Biden was important. It has a larger number than Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in terms of eligible voters with more than 500,000. Of this number, the majority identify as Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Mexican. Similar to communities discussed above in all states, Latinos organised grassroots efforts to register voters. The treatment and language used by Trump following Hurricane Maria served to favour Biden over Trump because it was viewed as a gesture of blatant disrespect. This, coupled with the same issues discussed above for other communities, gave Biden the support of the Latino community.

Voter mobilisation

The last sections of the essay will examine the Western region by examining the presidential vote in Arizona. Biden won Arizona that was a deep shade of red (perhaps ruby red). This is a big shift from the party of ultra-conservative Senator Barry Goldwater to the “maverick” late Senator John McCain. Trump’s treatment of the late senator, both in life and in death, was mean-spirited and hateful. Trump took every opportunity to besmirch McCain’s military career during the Vietnam War and his political record in the Senate. Senator McCain’s widow did not let Trump’s attacks go unnoticed. When a long-time Republican such as Ms. Cindy McCain publicly denounced Trump and endorsed Biden, the writing was on the wall that the state had the possibility to flip from red to blue. People of colour may not have supported or voted for Senator McCain, but many must have believed that Trump’s attacks against him represented an all-time low and he was clearly in the basket of deplorables. The last Democrat to win the presidential vote in Arizona was President Clinton in 1996. Trump’s attacks against a late senator, who Republicans and Democrats respected, may have played a role.

There were other factors at play, including the state’s changing demographics due to inter, intra, and international migration. However, the state’s indigenous population needs to be examined as the media, politicians and other Americans even in states where their numbers are significant often ignore them. The Navajo in Arizona are one such group. Its members overwhelmingly voted for Biden under daunting circumstances. First, COVID-19 hit their communities in a devastating manner. The health outcomes for the Navajo were problematic before the pandemic struck. The pandemic made it difficult to provide voter education and registration information to them. The cases of COVID-19 were disproportionate to their numbers in the state and the death toll struck a community already under siege. Trump’s anti-immigrant position did not appeal to many indigenous communities because of his plan to build a wall to keep out migrants from Mexico. In order to build the wall, sacred burial grounds of the Hopi, White Mountain Apache, and Pascua were destroyed. Moreover, indigenous populations throughout the country and in Arizona understand marginalisation, racism, and discrimination. Similar to African Americans, not all Native Americans in Arizona live in urban areas. They too joined African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos in
Phoenix and the important Maricopa County.

As stated earlier, intra-migration of African Americans and Latinos from California to Arizona has changed the demographics in the state. These two groups also played a role in delivering Arizona’s eleven electoral votes to Biden, although the African American population is much smaller than the Latino one. Arizona had 0.2 million eligible African American voters or 5% of the state’s eligible voters. Again, Maricopa County, where many African Americans reside voted for the Biden-Harris ticket. Many of these African Americans are college-educated middle and upper middle class professionals. The percentage of African American eligible voters who have a Bachelor’s degree and higher is 23% while 41% have some college education.

African Americans find retirement attractive in Arizona due to the lower cost of housing from what they left in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento, and San Diego. California declined to serve as a pull for African American migration, but rather, African Americans migrated to Arizona with their college degrees and skills prepared to take advantage of economic and professional opportunities. African American migration out of California in significant numbers began in the late 1980s long before the economic crisis of 2008.

Latinos also voted for Biden. This category includes more immigrants from Central America and Mexico and non-immigrant Mexican descended citizens who have lived in California for generations and later moved to Arizona. In other words, there are people of Mexican descent or non-immigrants whose ancestors lived in what was then Northern Mexico (later became the Southwest) before the Mexican-American War. Arizona’s Latino population that is eligible to vote is 23% or 1.2 million citizens.

International migration within the context of African and African-descended populations may not have been very significant for the 2020 presidential election, but if the numbers of eligible voters continue to increases from this migration, they could play a bigger role in future elections. African refugees and immigrants reside in all of the above states. An estimated 2.4 million Africans migrated to the country during the last two decades. As stated above, all refugees can apply for citizenship after five years of permanent legal residence. The U.S. refugee resettlement programme began to accept refugees in the 1980s mainly from Ethiopia and Somalia. The children and grandchildren of these refugees are first and second generation American citizens. More recently, refugees have been accepted for resettlement from Liberia, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, and Sierra Leone. Immigrants from Africa have mainly migrated from Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Cameroon, Senegal, South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya. African descended immigrants have migrated primarily from Jamaica, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Guyana, Cuba, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Because African and African-descended people, regardless of their origins and how long they have lived in the country, were classified as Black, the Black eligible voters discussed above include people from refugee and immigrant backgrounds as well as the historical African Diaspora. This has increased the overall percentage of Black eligible voters. For the states that flipped from red to blue, Arizona’s was 5%; Pennsylvania 10%; Georgia 32%; Wisconsin 6%; and Michigan 13%.

Florida is worth mentioning although it did not flip but because the percentage is the highest of the top states with Black immigrant populations. The state has 14% of its eligible voters who are Black immigrants from either Africa or the Caribbean. The old notion that the Black vote is totally comprised of the historic African Diaspora needs to be deconstructed to take into account African and African descended immigrants who come from diverse and vast backgrounds. For example, depending on their country of origin, some are Christian while others are Muslims, and others are from South Asian origins whose relatives migrated to the Caribbean and East Africa from India.
Black immigrants from the Caribbean have English or Spanish as their first language whereas immigrants from Africa have many first languages such as Arabic, Yoruba, Ewe, Zulu, and Luo. In addition, many are fluent in the European language of their former colonisers, such as French, Portuguese, and English. Furthermore, there is a need to examine the Latino population within the context of nebulous racial categories. There is the non-white Latino and white Latino classification. For example, are African-descended immigrants from the Dominican Republic and Cuba, Latino or Black? Are immigrants from Brazil who are African-descended Black or Latino? Are they both? What do these categories mean for understanding the Black vote? Are North Africans Black immigrants? To help answer these questions, the census can now capture some of these nuances by simply asking citizens to identify their national origins.

The 2020 presidential election signaled that the African and African-descended population, if not already, will have a role to play in future elections and may serve to swing battleground states such as Florida from red to blue. We know that in Philadelphia, which has a sizeable African and African-descended immigrant population, there was a concerted effort to engage in grassroots organising and mobilising. The Coalition of African and Caribbean Communities and the African Cultural Alliance of North America worked hard to make sure citizens originally from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ethiopia, and Nigeria registered to vote and then voted. Social media and good old-fashioned door-to-door canvassing mobilised eligible voters to cast their votes and many did for Biden. Biden’s win in Pennsylvania is what gave him the 270 electoral votes. The media, and rightfully so, focused on the Black vote and Philadelphia. What was missing was the importance of the Black immigrant vote, particularly in Philadelphia. Black immigrants paid attention to the police killing of Walter Wallace Jr. Some members of this community may have participated in the protests following the killing. They too interact with the police and whether they or their parents are from Jamaica, Nigeria, or Ethiopia, they are viewed and treated as Black. When the Black vote is compressed into a single bloc, these important factors are not explored.

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Similar to the historic African Diaspora and other immigrant and minority groups discussed above, these communities share similar issues that motivated them to vote and sometimes against Trump – issues surrounding immigration, employment, education, healthcare and COVID-19. At the same time, depending on how long they have lived in the country, their religious beliefs and age, some hold conservative views and supported Trump over Biden.

However, there is one thing that most Black people regardless of citizenship, immigration status, age, gender, and region of residence, rallied around: Trump’s grotesque characterisation of some African countries as “shitholes”. This was an assault against all members of these communities who have roots in Africa regardless of how long they have lived in the country and under what conditions they ended up in the country.

Trump’s anti-Muslim ban, overall anti-immigrant stance, attacks on Congresswomen Tlabib and Omar, and general disinterest in Africa persuaded some of these voters to support Biden. Finally, Latinos are not the only immigrant group that is concerned about immigration issues. Although a sizeable percentage of African and African-descended immigrant populations are in the country legally, thousands are undocumented. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement conducts surveillance on them, rounds them up in sweeps, detains, and then deports them. There are
numbers of Africans seeking asylum who are also stuck at the US-Mexican border. They too are separated from their families including children from their parents.

Over the next several months and years, scholars and the media will study and analyse the presidential election of 2020. International and domestic migration is crucial for a thorough understanding of the outcomes for Biden in the swing states that handed him a victory. Arizona was the only state with a large Latino population that flipped from red to blue. Texas and Florida remained red despite having sizeable eligible voters who are Latino immigrants and non-immigrant Mexican descended—Texans of Mexican descent are not recent immigrants. Latinos’ contribution to the immigrant vote in Texas is 52% while their percentage of eligible voters is 30%. Both immigrant and non-immigrants make up 40% of the state’s population. Texas did not turn blue for the 2020 presidential election, but it has a good chance in the next election as its Latino, African American, and Black immigrant populations increase, along with Asian Americans.

The other part of the 2020 presidential election that cannot be ignored is the extent of voter mobilisation within all of the states discussed among all of the communities. In addition, the gender dynamics of this mobilisation needs to be analyzed. African American women received media attention, spurred on by the work of Stacy Abrams in Georgia and women in other states. We have become familiar with their activism. However, Latina women in Texas, Florida, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Arizona need to be visible. Native American women in Arizona also need to be acknowledge for their work. African and Caribbean immigrant women in Pennsylvania and Muslim and Arab women in Michigan were very important to voter mobilisation.

What is evident from the election is that all of the people in all of the states have difference histories and experiences in the United States. No group is monolithic. There were similar issues in common for all groups during this election period that occurred during a pandemic: access to healthcare, unemployment, and economic issues. Despite all the differences and variations among and within all of these groups, there was enough commonality and coalition-building to turn some states from red to blue.

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