

**THE UNIVERSITY EFFECT:  
THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF OU  
ON NORMAN, OKLAHOMA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper probes the effect of the University of Oklahoma on the politics of Norman, Oklahoma. Election results from between 2010-2024 are examined to contrast outcomes in Norman versus county and state outcomes. Elections analyzed include President and Vice President, Governor, United States Senator, United States Representative (District 4), State Senator (Districts 15, 16, 24) and State Representative (Districts 20, 44, 45, 46) as well as straight party voting. The City of Norman votes more Democratically in nearly 90% of elections than the statewide average and is more than 10% more likely to vote for Democratic candidates than the rest of the state. It is theorized that the Democratic preferences stem from the voting patterns of OU faculty, staff, and students, as well as the liberalizing effect of OU on city residents.

## I. INTRODUCTION

A hot topic that has been brought to light by the media in recent years has been the developing education gap between the Democratic and Republican Parties in the United States. This gap has seemed to appear in the last decade and in the 2022 election, 51% of Democratic Voters held a bachelor's degree or higher, in contrast to 37% of Republican voters (Goldberg 2023, Pew Research 2023). Near the same time as this educational shift, a different shift was emerging in the State of Oklahoma. Oklahoma began its shift into the Republican powerhouse that it is today in the early to mid 2000's (Gaddie and Buchanan, 1998; Hart, 2023). Despite this shift, an outlier suburban city has seemed to resist the trend of the rest of the State, Norman. Norman does not have many of the typical markers for a Democratically dominant city yet in several recent elections a majority of its precincts light up blue on election day maps. This paper seeks to prove that the reason for this in-state partisan shift is the presence of The University of Oklahoma within Norman's city limits.

The literature review examines Oklahoma's political history as well as several current factors such as age, out of state move ins and the social capital that they create that may influence voting trends on individual and group levels utilizing census data and enrollment data collected from The University of Oklahoma. The methods section explains how historical context was used to select the time frame of 2010 to 2024 and which offices were chosen to analyze. The analysis formats the findings in a side-by-side comparison of Norman election results with county and statewide election results, complete with graphs of each election. Finally, the conclusion provides additional context into reasons why The City of Norman votes more Democratically in nearly 90% of elections than the statewide average and has voted for the Democratic candidate by over 10% more than the rest of the state.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The State of Oklahoma has historically been a political oddity. While seemingly politically aligned with the traditional South in many ways, the shift in support from the Democratic to the Republican Party in Oklahoma seems to have its unique reasons. Despite only voting Democratically in one Presidential election since 1960, Lyndon Johnson 1964, The Democratic party remained competitive and, in many ways, dominant in the state winning elections for State and National elected offices from statehood until 2010, when all offices were won by The Republican candidate for the first time and Republican dominance began to take shape (Gaddie and Buchanan, 1998; Hardt, 2021; Alberty, Dowdle, and Hartney, 2014). Since this shift in dominance, Oklahoma has gained attention locally and nationally for its extremely conservative political views. It has begun to be known as the state with zero blue counties in Presidential elections. Despite this stereotype most of Oklahoma proudly adheres to, if you begin to look into the election results, especially in Oklahoma's largest three counties: Oklahoma, Tulsa, and Cleveland which combined have over 1,800,000 more than a third of Oklahoma's population of 4.1 million, the races are closer than you might be led to believe.

Oklahoma's largest two counties, Oklahoma and Tulsa, which also contain the state's largest two cities, Oklahoma City and Tulsa, follow the national trend of large cities urban areas typically favoring the Democratic Party, so while not ultimately winning in these counties in national races, the Democratic candidate tends to perform the best in these counties which aligns due to both cities having a population larger than 400,000 and being considered major cities (Caplan, 2021; Florida, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2023). Oklahoma's third largest county, Cleveland with a population of 304,611 is half as large as the next closest county and its largest city Norman's population is barely a fourth of the Oklahoma's two largest and most liberal cities at 130,046 yet in re-

cent elections Cleveland County has voted just as liberal if not more than Oklahoma and Tulsa Counties, with the city of Norman having even higher numbers of Democratic votes than the county alone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025).

#### COLLEGE TOWNS AND THE POLITICAL SHIFT LEFT:

This project's goal is to pinpoint exactly how the city of Norman votes in elections compared to Statewide preferences, as well as to isolate some of the possible reasons why the citizens of Norman may or may not vote so drastically different from their other Oklahomans. I hypothesize that Norman votes more democratically in elections due to the influence and presence of the University of Oklahoma.

An explanation for Norman's political preference that differs from the majority of the state could lie not just in its population, which is relatively small compared to the States two largest cities but in Norman being the home to Oklahoma's largest university, The University of Oklahoma which is said to be "The Heart of the Town." A trend is emerging in college towns across the United States, where political shifts have been pronounced. According to Politico, "two-thirds of college counties have grown more Democratic since 2000" (Mahtesian & Alexander, 2023, np). Universities, along with their faculty and young students who have also tended to vote more liberal, play a significant role in shaping these towns into desirable locations for highly educated Democratic voters, many of whom are relocating from more conservative areas seeking a high quality of life and the presence of like-minded individuals (Mahtesian & Alexander, 2023; Mariani and Hewitt, 2008).

#### FACULTY AND STUDENT INFLUENCE ON VOTING PATTERNS:

Since the beginnings of organized higher education, faculty of these universities have tended to be liberal and progressive thinkers whose ideologies that more so align with the modern-day Dem-

ocratic party (Magness and Waugh, 2022; Gross and Fosse, 2012). The University of Oklahoma alone employs 2,186 researchers and faculty members as of 2024 and research suggests professors today are on average as much as four times as likely to identify as a liberal than the average American, with professors teaching disciplines that require extensive research and independent thinking such as the hard sciences or liberal arts having even higher levels of liberalism than professors of business subjects that tend to vote more conservative (Mariani and Hewitt, 2008).

Obviously, these professors and researchers are not the only people influencing the vote in Norman; perhaps the most important piece to this puzzle is the students. Over 22,000 students are enrolled at The University of Oklahoma's main campus in Norman and account for 20.5% of the city's population. Each one of these students is bringing with them their own thoughts, ideas, and opinions that others would never otherwise hear or think about without being a part of the community at the University of Oklahoma. As a group, Gen Z and Millennials vote more liberally than past generations already and this social capital created by higher education is one of the leading theories along with how higher education teaches students to think critically, have more complex vocabulary, and have a higher net income is why a majority of all voters with a Bachelor's degree or higher resonate with the democratic party and that this gap in preference has grown by 20.5% since 2008 (Goldberg, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2023; Apfeld et al, 2023).

While Norman certainly has a strong student population, a major issue facing Oklahoma elections is young student voters deciding not to vote. The age group with the least amount of voter turnout is consistently ages 18-24, which some scholars cite as lack of competition between races leading many students to feel like their vote doesn't matter not just for younger voters but everyone in the state, as Oklahoma has the lowest voter turnout in the country (Hardt, 2024; Ross, 2023; Murphy, 2024). Despite this dip in young voter turnout, students in college as well as graduates vote

in much higher numbers than voters who never attended college. This has been observed to be due to engagement in on-campus activities, education on voting, and a sense of community that instills a civic duty to vote and a unionizing effect. It is also noted that schools with large residential populations have higher turnouts among students than commuter schools (Shearer, 2023; Ahearn, Brand, Zhou, 2023). In which OU has 32% of students living on campus. That is more than 9,200 additional people who are able to register and possible vote in Norman elections (The U.S News, 2023).

#### THE MOVE-IN VOTE

The final bridging aspect in explaining the potential political impacts of the University of Oklahoma is the atmosphere it creates in the city of Norman that not only makes the area desirable for students but also other adults with advanced degrees. Norman has grown from a city of 110,925 to an estimated 130,046 in 2024, a 17.24% growth rate increase in fourteen years (U.S. Census Bureau). The University is bringing hundreds of millions of dollars to the area that wouldn't otherwise be there, creating a city with a high quality of living and many opportunities. The research-minded community presents an academia-fueled town that is eye-catching to highly educated individuals and their families. In fact, on average, according to the Census Bureau, 46.2% of people living in Norman have a bachelor's degree or higher, a stark 18.4% increase from the state average. This, along with Norman's newfound identity as a "less conservative city" is drawing in other democratic voters and move-ins from more rural and conservative areas who wish to join a community that more closely aligns with their political beliefs (Mahtesian & Alexander, 2023; Smith, 2023; Mariani and Hewitt, 2008).

All these factors combined seem to lead to a conclusion of possible reasons why Norman could possibly be one of the most Democratic cities in The State of Oklahoma, yet further examination is needed to reveal just how Democratic the city actually may vote

and what liberal ideas the city may or may not support. This examination intends to fill in that blank and perform a deep dive on Norman's elections on a citywide basis instead of the county-wide election data available.

### III. METHODS

For this project I analyzed data from General Elections from the years 2010-2024. I chose this time frame to begin my research due to 2010 being the year that all statewide offices were won by the Republican candidate, and thus the start of true Republican partisan dominance in Oklahoma (Hardt, 2023). This date became an ideal starting point to begin to analyze if a political shift had occurred in Norman as well.

To begin, I gathered election data from the Cleveland County Election Board as well as the Oklahoma State Election Board and began to isolate precincts located within Norman city limits. To do this I compiled a list of all precincts that were eligible to vote in Norman city elections noting which precincts were located closest in proximity to The University of Oklahoma. From there I created a spreadsheet to calculate the total number of votes for each candidate from each precinct and added all the precinct data to create a sum that would represent the total number of votes cast in Norman as well as percentages for each candidate. It is noted that for the 2010 General Election I did not include the Cleveland County absentee votes because they were counted separately, and it is impossible to isolate Norman voters. I then compared the data to that of the same races on the countywide or district wide and statewide level to reveal the difference in level of support for each political party.

The offices that I chose to analyze are as follows: President and Vice President, Governor, United States Senator, United States Representative (District 4), State Senator (Districts 15, 16, 24) and State Representative (Districts 20, 44, 45, 46) as well as straight

party voting. I felt that these offices provided a good variety of races and candidates to be able to have a good understanding of voting trends. As well as that these elections can be compared on multiple levels. For the State Senator and Representative races, I compared the data to the statewide average vote for all contested State Senate and State Representative races respectively that occurred in the same election. My final step in data collection was to create a timeline and order all my collected data chronologically comparing all elections for the same office against their Norman, statewide and Cleveland County totals while also comparing results from previous elections.

Lastly, I gathered the yearly enrollment numbers, Faculty numbers, the number of students from out of state each semester of the University of Oklahoma and created a similar timeline to compare against by completed election results. All reports used for data on OU were provided on The University of Oklahoma's official website.

#### **IV. ANALYSIS**

Of the fifty-four total contested elections analyzed, the data points in the hypothesized direction with Norman having higher Democratic voting percentages than the state and Cleveland County totals in 46 of 54 elections, 85.18% of elections. See Charts below for specific election data. Of the eight elections that had lower than state average voting percentages six of the elections were located in districts that contained six or less precincts located in Norman, with the included precincts located on the outskirts of city limits (State Districts 27, 20 and State Senate District 24). In elections that were uncontested a Democrat held the office 9 out of 20 times (45%). In total from the years 2010 through 2024 Norman has voted for the Democratic candidate 46.47% in elections, a 10.48% increase from Oklahoma's statewide average of 36.99% during the same period.

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For the same time, I found no statistically significant difference in voter turnout between precincts located in Norman and the Statewide average but there is a 1.49 - 3.0% increase in turnout in Non-Presidential General Elections since 2012.

The data collected from The University of Oklahoma revealed that there was a 16.5% growth rate in enrollment from 26,490 in 2010 to 30,873 in 2024. and an even larger 56.7% growth rate coming from states outside of Oklahoma growing from 33.38 to 44.75% in the same period. Proving that while they may not be physically voting in Norman elections their effects may still be felt on the political climate of the city.

**Figure 1**

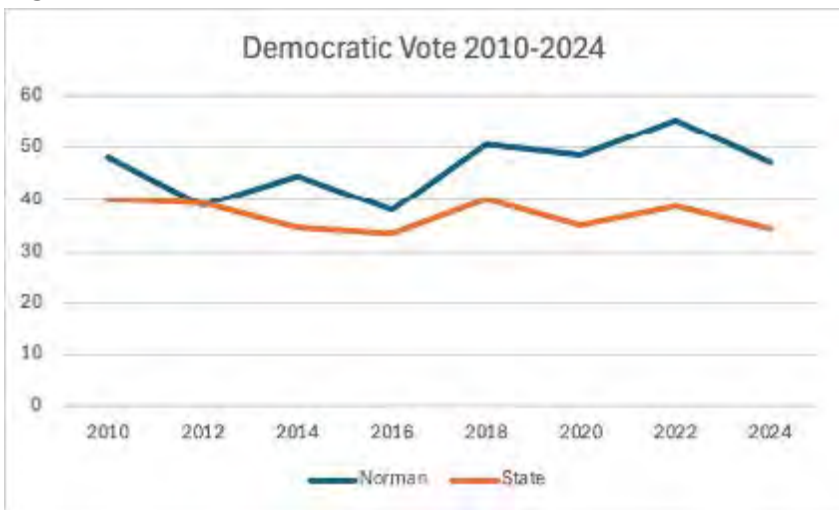


Figure 2

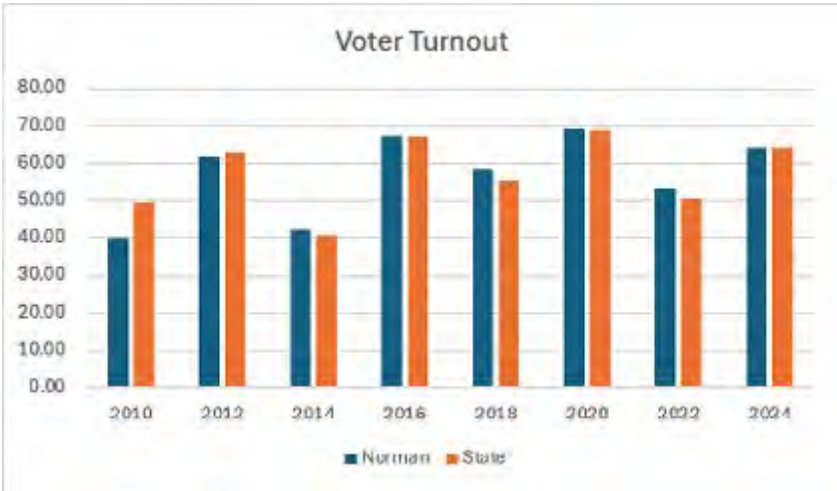
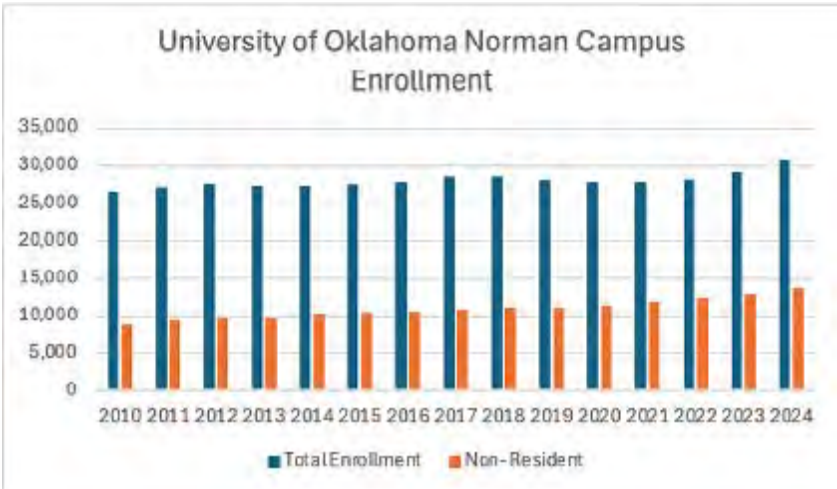
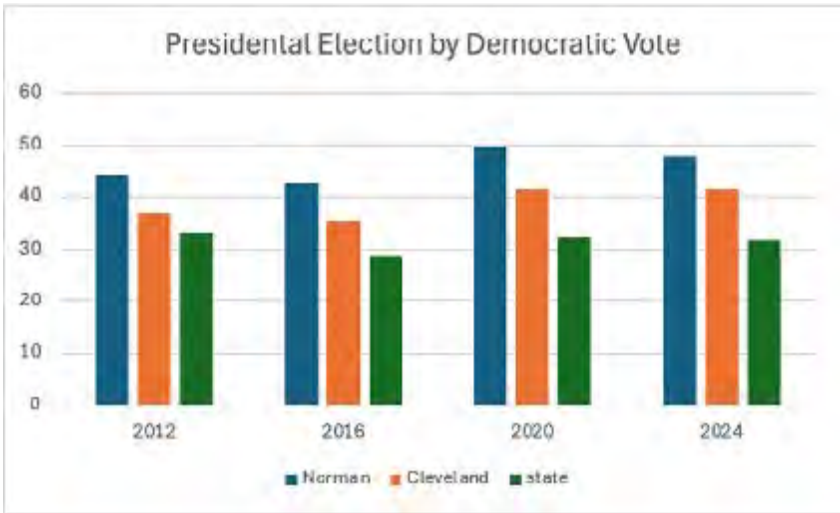


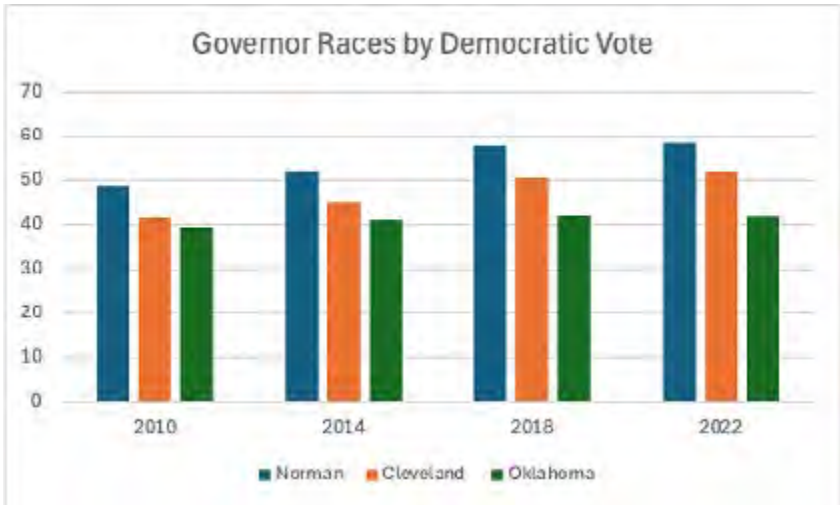
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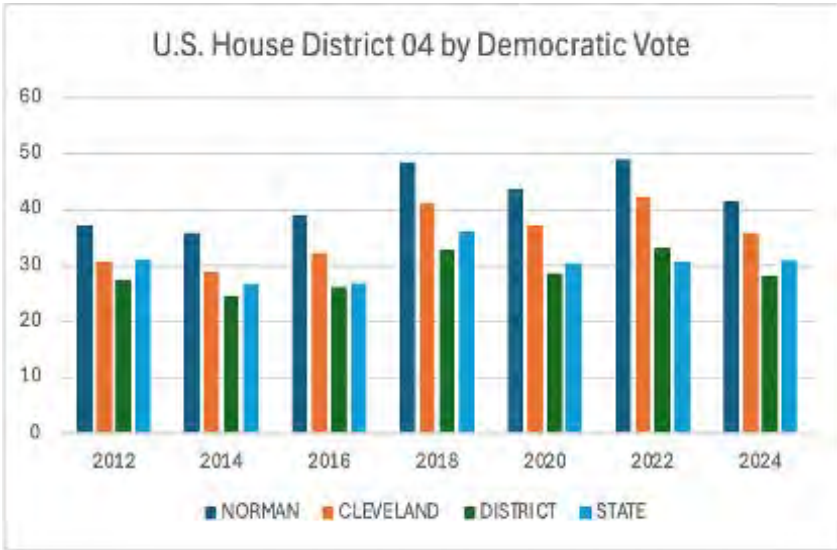
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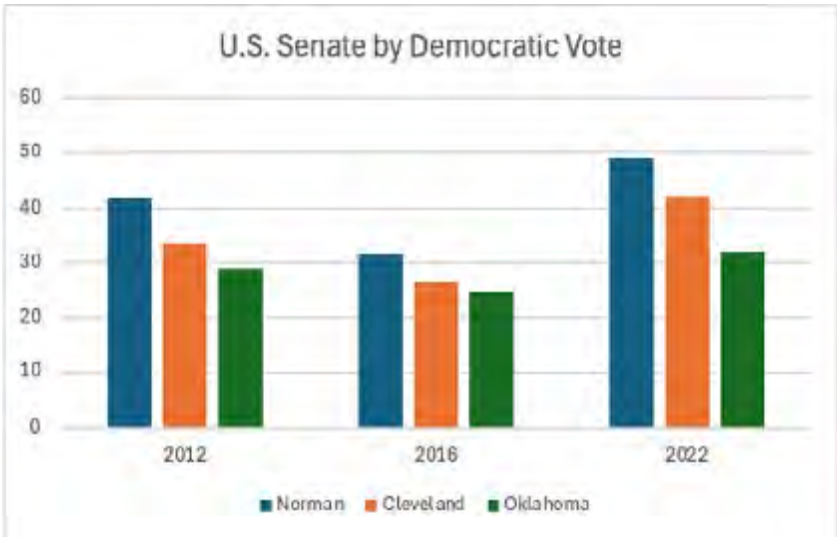
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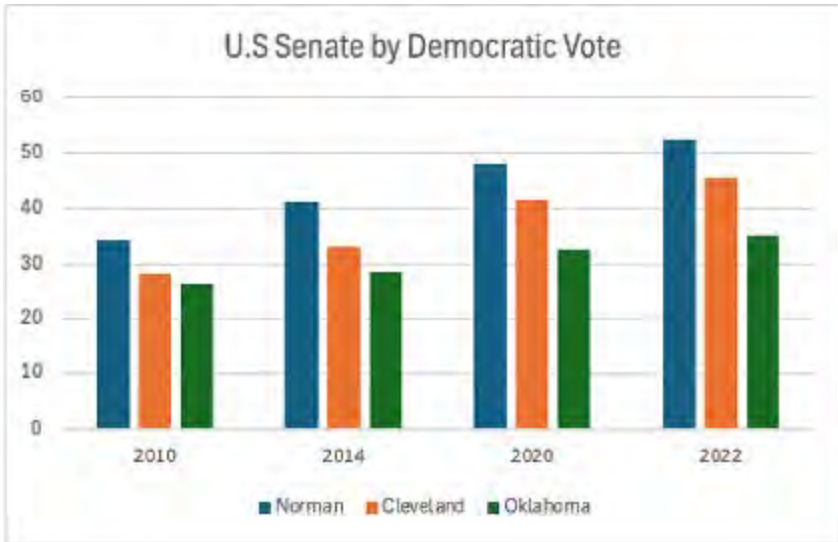
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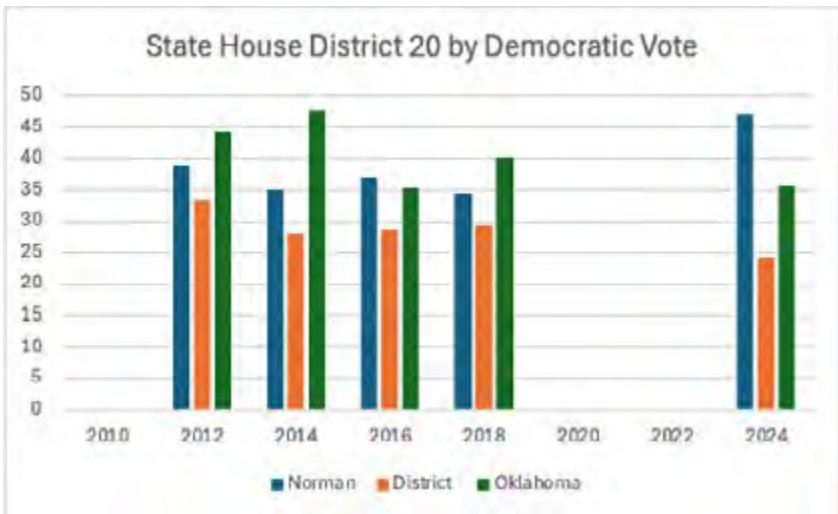
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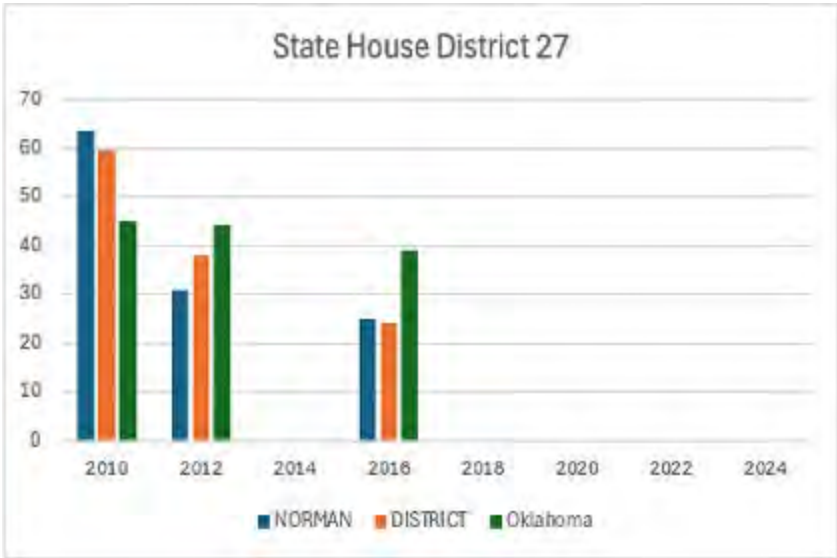
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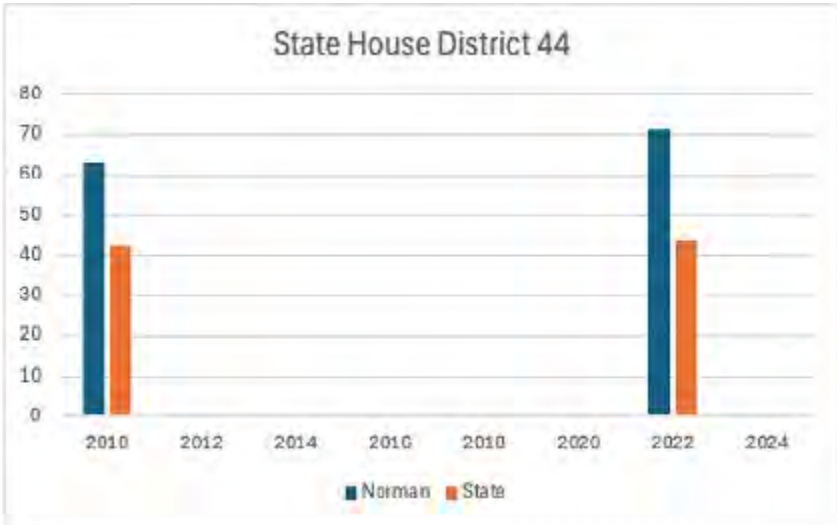
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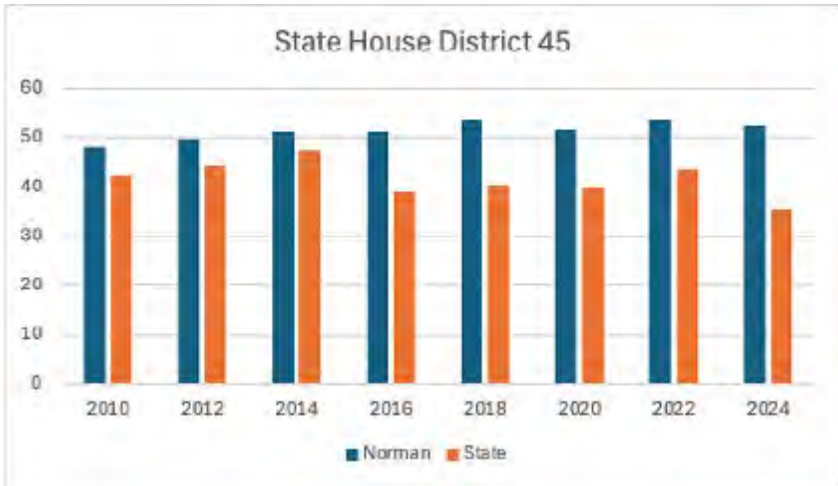
**Figure 10**



**Figure 11**



**Figure 12**



**Figure 13**

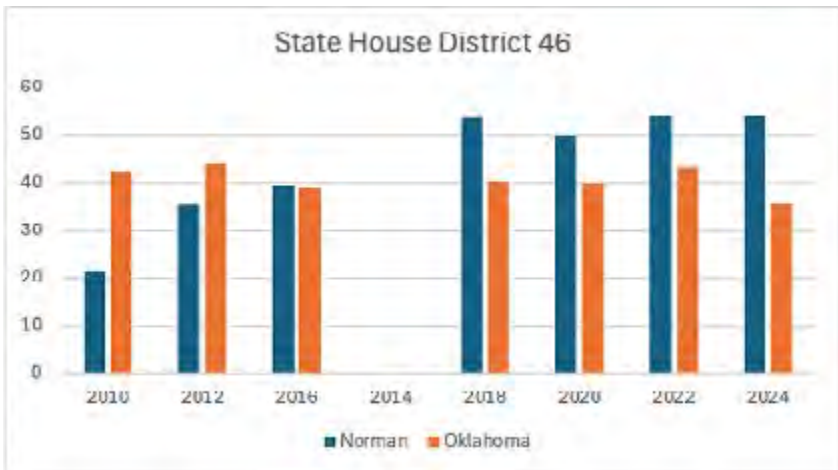


Figure 14

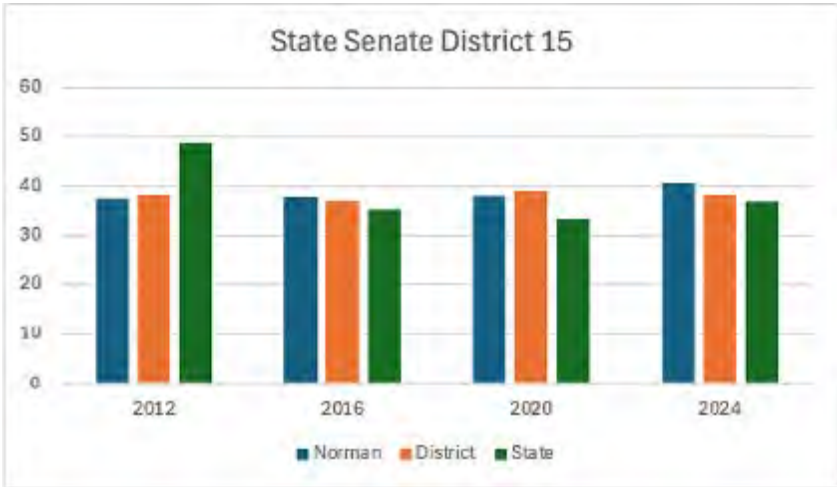
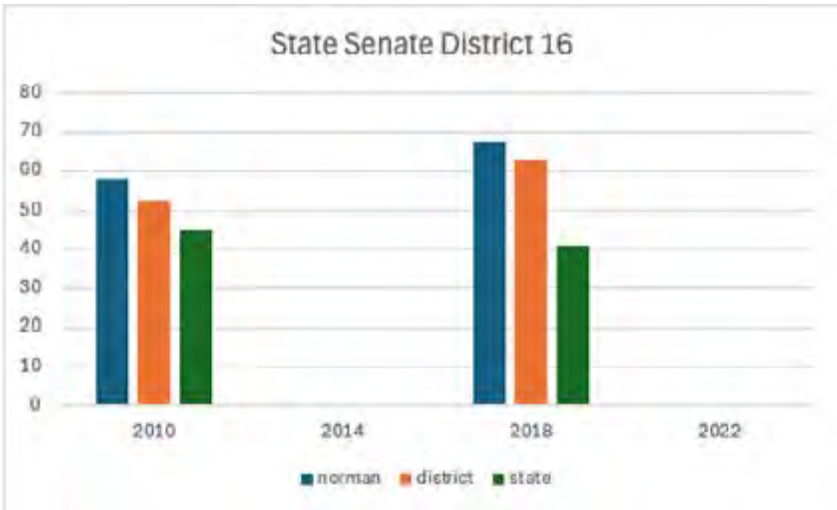
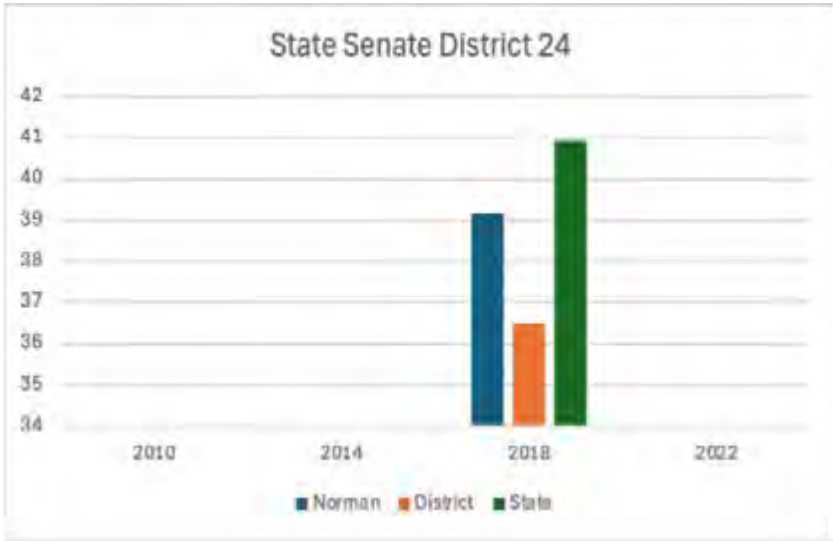


Figure 15



**Figure 16**



## V. CONCLUSION

After analyzing the factors that were examined throughout this paper, the leading theory that communities with above average highly educated populations tend to vote more Democratic holds true for Norman, Oklahoma (Pew Research Center 2023, Goldberg, 2023). While when compared Nationally, a 46.47% vote does not appear to be very liberal at all, but when compared to the state that Norman lies within only gathers less than 36% it suddenly seems impressive to have that much a difference in preference. Even compared to Cleveland County and the cities that lie directly beside Norman such as Moore, the Democratic candidates perform better inside Norman’s city limits in nearly every race. While the demographics are roughly the same compared to statewide data in every other area, the one statistical category that Norman has the leg up on is education level and the presence of The University of Oklahoma.

An explanation that knits these two independent statistics together is the bridging social capital created by attending a college or university. Bridging social capital is defined by The Institute for Social Capital as “Connections that link people across a cleavage that typically divides society (such as race, or class, or religion). It is associations that ‘bridge’ *between* communities, groups, or organizations.” (Claridge 2018, np). It is widely known that attending college allows for unique opportunities for the students attending, for many students it is the first time they may meet and talk to people from different states that are starkly different from themselves. This along with the education they are receiving that involves learning things such as critical thinking, communication skills, and civic consciousness through required courses.

I believe that it is this social capital that accounts for Norman’s divergence from the rest of the state. This can be backed by the increasing number of non-resident students at OU. The non-resident population grew by 56.7% since 2010 that directly offsets Oklahoma’s Republican shift, possibly leading to Norman’s political stability. While most of these students are most likely not voting directly in Norman’s elections, their influence is still widely felt within the university and community. Each student, or even Professor is bringing their own unique life story and political beliefs creating bridging social capital with other students or members of the Norman community, that local Oklahomans would not otherwise have thereby helped to resist going with the statewide partisan trends due to interacting with multiple perspectives.

In closing, Norman’s political identity showcases how a city’s scholarly environment can shape not just traditional higher education learnings but also other political ideological leanings. The presence of the University of Oklahoma and above average education levels in Norman and the bridging social capital that comes along with them appear to be major factors in explaining why Nor-

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man stands apart from the rest of the state politically. As Oklahoma continues to shift further to the right, Norman has remained relatively stable in its Democratic support, possibly largely due to the influence of the university community. Looking ahead, the continued growth of non-resident student populations, the expanding reach of higher education and Norman's population continued growth may further solidify this divide. If similar patterns are observed in other major college towns across the state, it may indicate a larger trend in which universities act as stabilizing forces for political diversity and civic engagement. Understanding this relationship further could be useful for candidates playing to run for office and could be key to predicting future political outcomes in Oklahoma.

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