Philly neighborhoods fall into six segregated groups of Democrats

We used eight years of primary election data to categorize Philly's voting precincts. Here are the six groups we found.
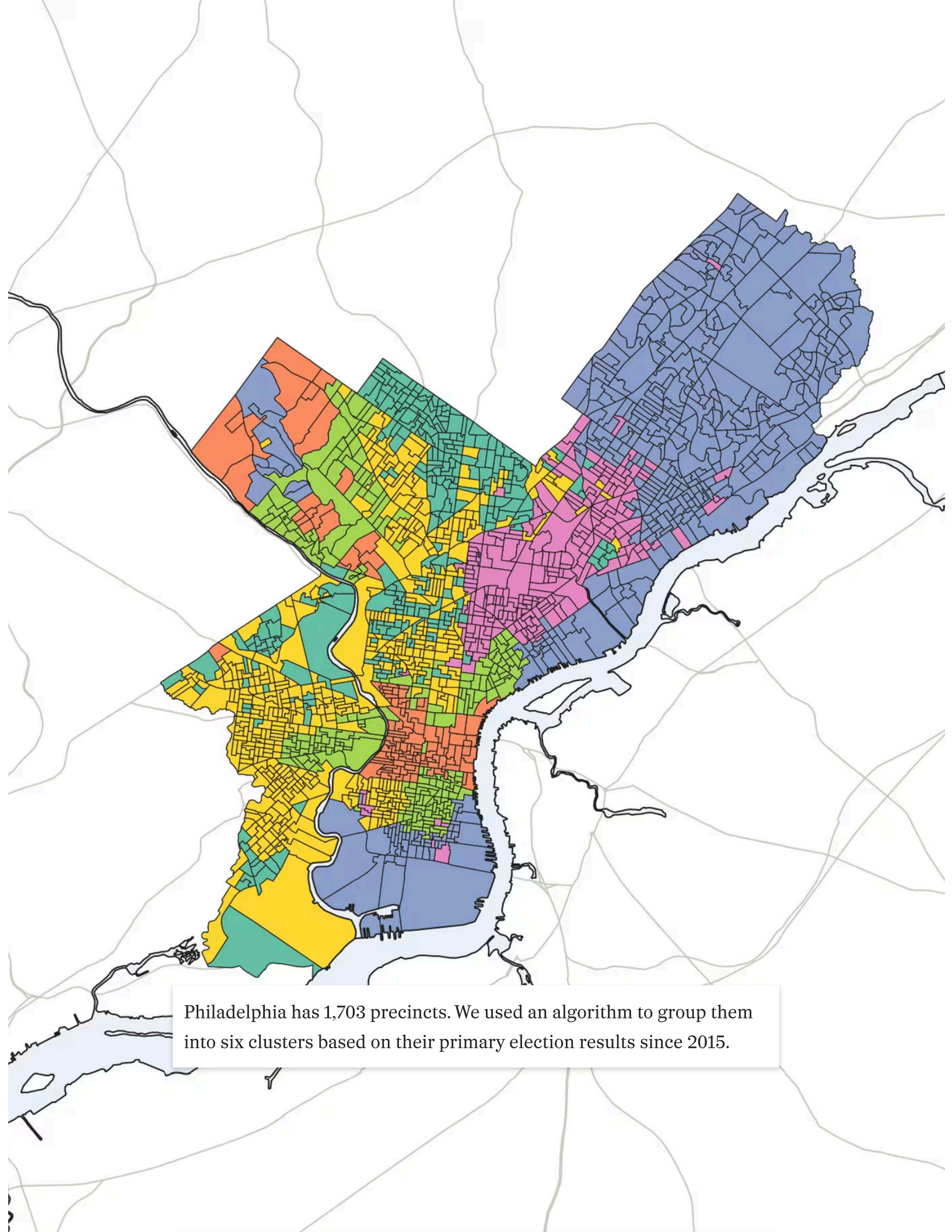
By Aseem Shukla and Julia Terruso
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Philadelphia Democrats vote overwhelmingly along racial, economic, and geographic lines.

We examined the results of the last eight primary elections across every precinct in Philadelphia to better understand the coalitions candidates need to build — and the challenges they face in attracting voters across different communities.

And while each election is different, we found voting preferences consistently map to demographic patterns, revealing how those divides shape outcomes — like who wins the May 16 mayoral primary, and likely becomes mayor, in a deep-blue city.

"It's stunning that … our city remains this segregated," Democratic political consultant Mustafa Rashed said after reviewing the data. "If you know this is the racial makeup of the city – if you're running a campaign – it's literally your roadmap for where you need to go and the kind of messages that work there."

Philadelphia has 1,703 precincts. We used an algorithm to group them into six clusters based on their primary election results since 2015.

Most visibly, these clusters map to the city's racial and ethnic mix, with predominantly **Black**, **white**, **Hispanic or Latino**, and **Asian** precincts clearly identifiable.

But race isn't the whole story. The city's predominantly Black precincts, for example, divide into two clusters. One is anchored in the Northwest and in parts of West Philly. These are the city's most **pro-establishment Black voters**, who consistently support party-backed candidates.
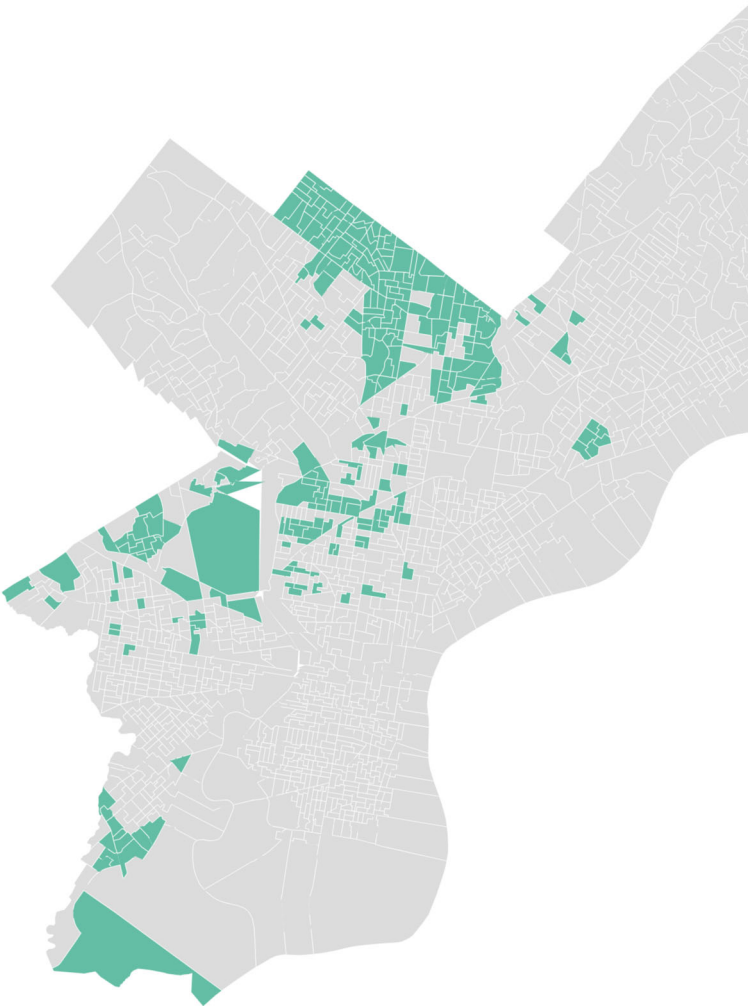
The other predominantly Black cluster is concentrated in parts of the city's north, west, and southwest. These **less politically affiliated Black voters** shift between progressive and establishment candidates.

A cluster of **poor voters and predominantly Latino voters** is anchored by Kensington, and a geographically extensive group of mostly **white, working-class moderate voters** covers neighborhoods on the city's periphery.

Finally, two clusters of mostly white voters concentrate in Center City and the Northwest. One consists of **wealthy white liberals** who support establishment candidates. The other consists of mostly **younger white progressives** who support candidates further to the left.

Pro-establishment Black voters

This group of precincts is the home base of the vaunted "Northwest Coalition," a political powerhouse that regularly brings voters in these predominantly African American neighborhoods out to the polls.

Voters here are older, tend to have high levels of political engagement, and the political system is very well-organized, so endorsements and party support appear to shape electoral preference.

That plays out in local as well as national races. In 2016, for example, this cluster supported Hillary Clinton over Bernie Sanders by the highest margin in the city.

This grouping includes the home precincts of declared mayoral candidates Cherelle Parker, Derek Green, and James DeLeon.
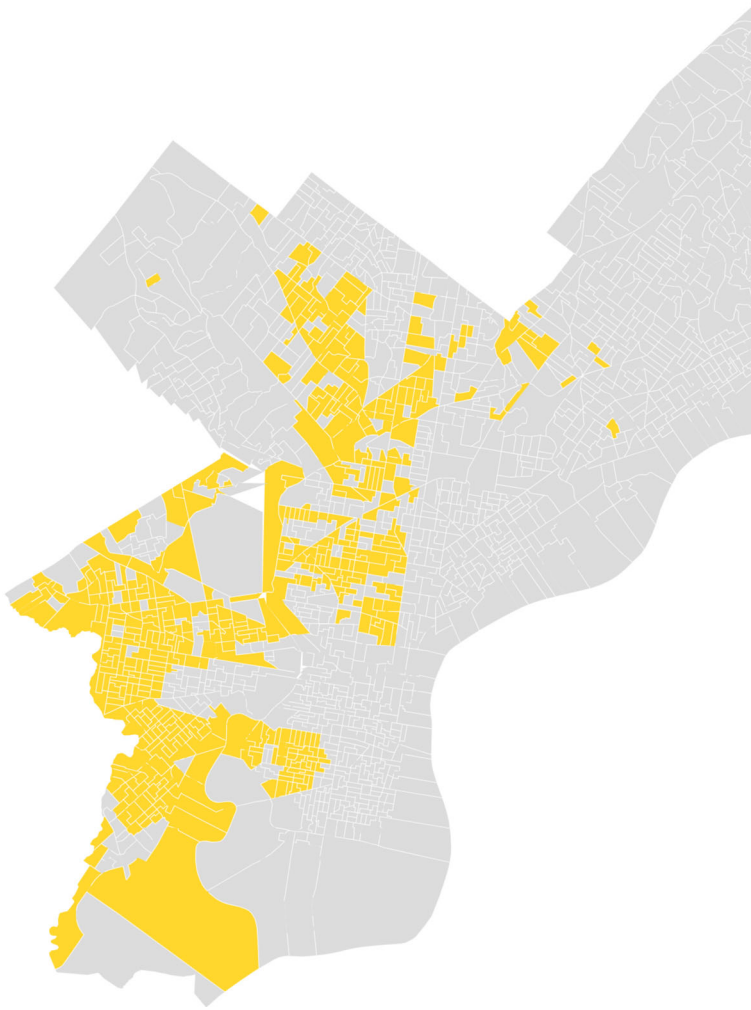
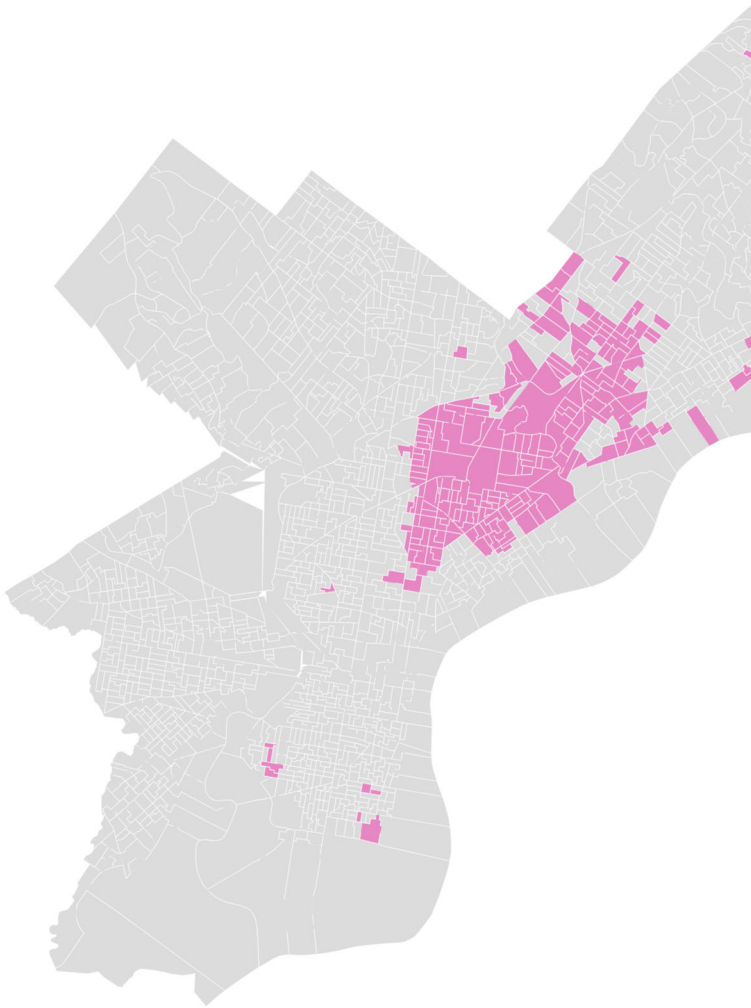## Less politically affiliated Black voters

This group is demographically similar to the first group — but not identical. Voters here are slightly younger and have slightly lower incomes.

But the main difference from the first group is in political organization and preferences. Voters here are less uniformly supportive of establishment candidates and have supported candidates from various wings of the Democratic party.

Voters in this cluster preferred state Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta in last year's Senate primary and District Attorney Larry Krasner in his 2021 reelection bid at the highest rates of all the clusters.

State Rep. Amen Brown, a candidate for mayor, lives in this cluster.

Poor voters and Latino voters

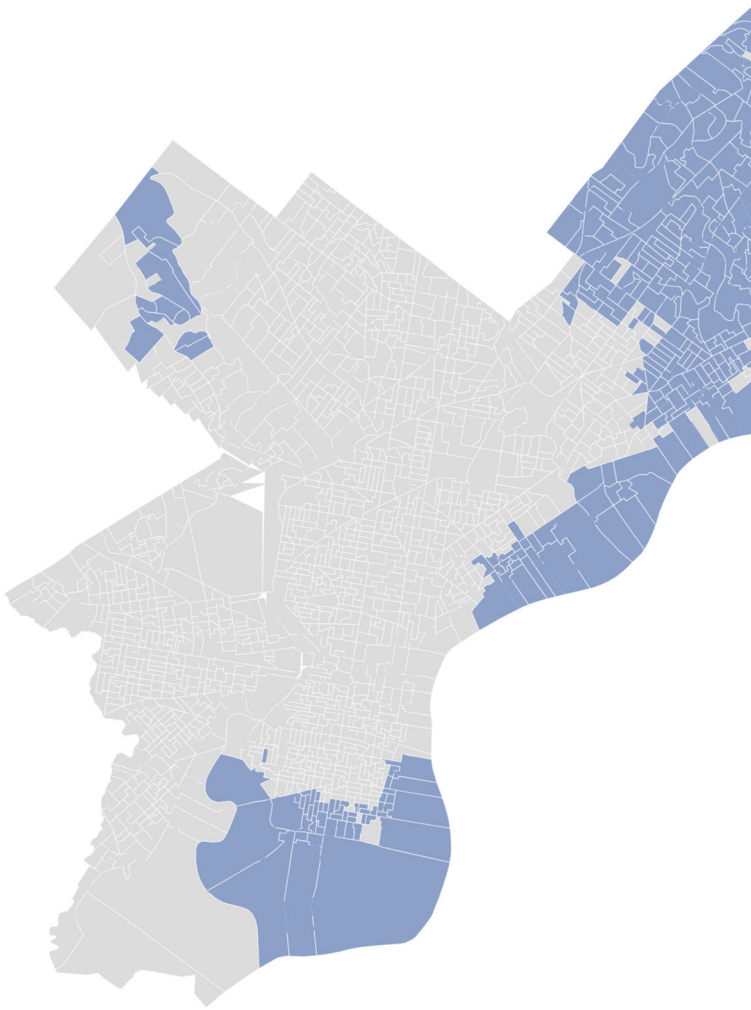| Demographics	
Hispanic	**White**
45.6%	16.6%
Speaks language other than English	**Has a bachelor's degree**
48.9%	12.6%
2015 mayoral primary	
Williams	**Oliver**
20.9%	3.1%
2016 presidential primary	
Sanders	**Clinton**
30.2%	69.4%
2021 district attorney primary	
Vega	**Krasner**
47.4%	52.5%

A third group is anchored by North Philadelphia's Kensington and Fairhill neighborhoods and the surrounding area. Nearly half of the city's Latino population lives here, alongside a sizable Black population. This cluster includes some of the city's poorest neighborhoods and consistently has the lowest rates of voter turnout.

This cluster voted 47% for Carlos Vega in the 2021 district attorney race, the second-highest support for Vega of any cluster.

It is home to declared mayoral candidate Maria Quiñones Sánchez.

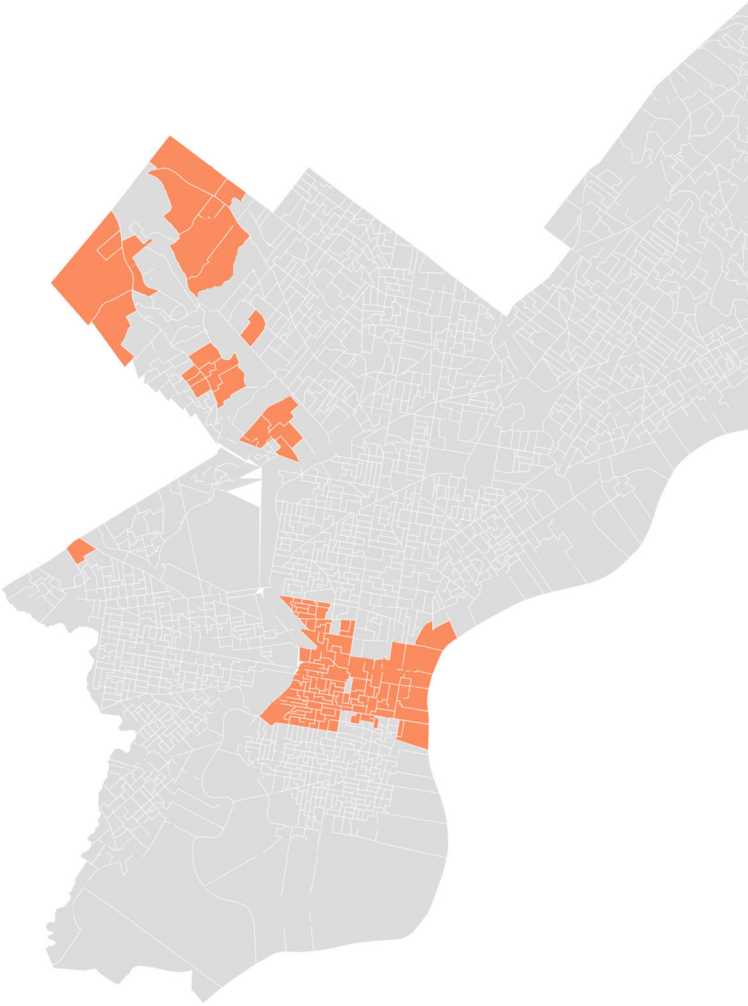## Working-class white moderate voters

The largest group geographically comprises suburban-style neighborhoods of the Northeast and South Philadelphia with a section of Roxborough and surrounding neighborhoods in the Northwest. These are historically working-class, white neighborhoods where Democrats tend to support more moderate candidates and Republican candidates often win in general elections.

This group voted for Mayor Jim Kenney's first term by the largest margin of any cluster. That support plummeted to the lowest in the city when Kenney ran for reelection in 2019 on a more progressive platform.

No mayoral candidates live here.
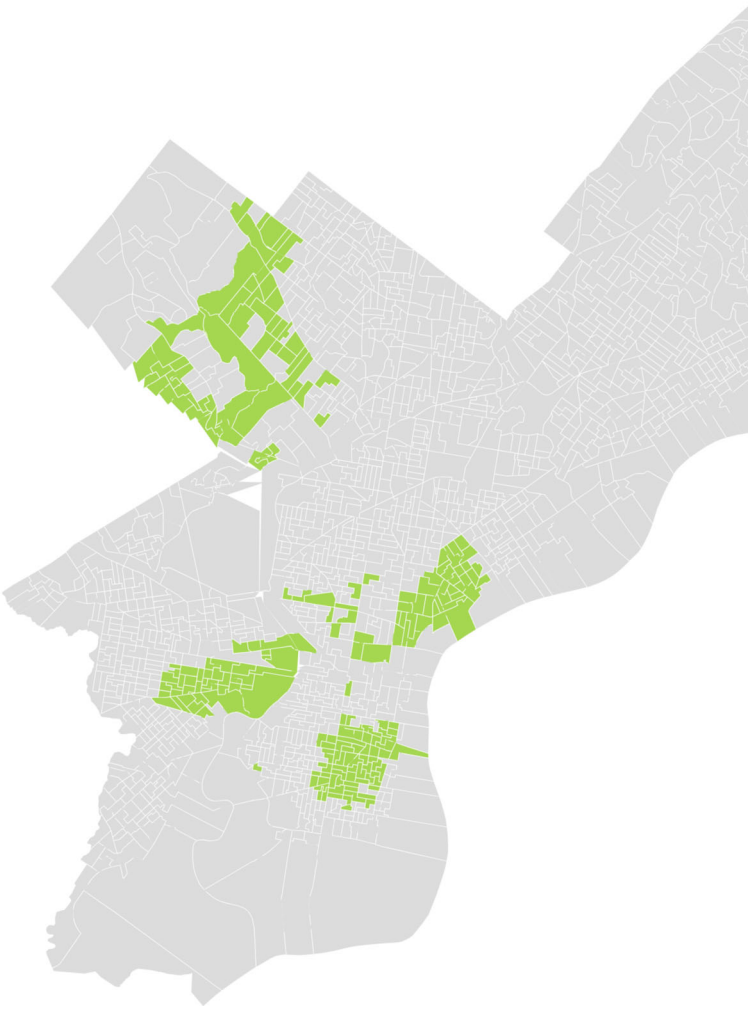
Wealthy, white liberal voters

A second predominantly white cluster is based in Center City and affluent neighborhoods of Northwest Philadelphia, and these voters generally prefer establishment liberal candidates. This group is the best-educated and has the highest incomes of all the groupings.

These voters supported Kenney's reelection bid more than any other cluster. The group also backed Josh Shapiro in the 2016 attorney general race by the highest margin.

Declared mayoral candidates Allan Domb, Rebecca Rhynhart, Helen Gym, and Jeff Brown all live here.

Younger white progressive voters

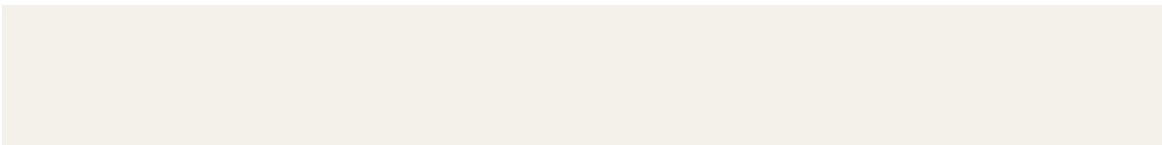Areas immediately surrounding Center City and mixed in with affluent parts of the Northwest form a cluster of largely white, well-educated, and, in some cases, gentrifying neighborhoods that tend to support more progressive candidates.

This is the youngest of all the groups and the one that most favored Bernie Sanders in the 2016 presidential primary and Krasner in his 2017 run.

No mayoral candidates live here.

How we created the clusters

We used an algorithm that grouped precincts based on how similarly they voted in Democratic primaries from 2015 through 2022. The clusters revealed voting preferences that overlap with race and class.

Precincts, known in Philadelphia as divisions, are the most detailed level of election result possible, and individual votes are secret. That means the algorithm doesn't account for every individual voter.

"There are variations in how all the people in [each] division vote, how different people vote in a single election, and how the same people vote from … election to election," Temple University political science professor Michael Hagen said. "So we're averaging across a whole bunch of times and people."

And because we divided the city into just six clusters, lots of demographic groups are subsumed: They represent a smaller slice of the Democratic electorate or vote too similarly to existing clusters to form their own.

But the core finding — that race and class are the strongest predictors of voting patterns even in Democratic primaries — says a lot about the city's historical problems of segregation.

What the six clusters could mean in the mayoral race

Historical voting patterns help explain how candidates might structure their campaigns.

"In a contest like the mayoral primary, in which winning a third of the vote might get you the nomination, you don't need to piece together half of the Democratic electorate … you might just need to mobilize and appeal to one or two of these groups," said Hagen.

But not all the clusters carry the same influence.

For example, the cluster of less politically affiliated Black voters is the largest by far, home to nearly 30% of all the city's active Democrats. But because turnout is lower, it contributed an average of just 26% of the votes across recent primaries.

The cluster that includes a large Latino population comprises 11.5% of the city's active Democrats, but historically only about 6% of the votes cast.

White clusters, by contrast, have much higher turnout.

The challenge is stitching together a coalition across multiple clusters.

In a crowded field, candidates with finite resources will likely zero in on clusters that align with their messaging, Rashed said. The clusters being so geographically segregated could make campaigning easier, he said — but while politically savvy, that strategy also perpetuates divides already present in the map. Ⓘ

Demographics

Past Election Results and Turnout

About the analysis

The Inquirer's analysis uses precinct-level election results from the Philadelphia city commissioners, demographic data from the Census Bureau, and voter rolls from the Pennsylvania Department of State.

Democratic primary results from 2015 to 2022 were compiled for every precinct, often called a "division" in Philadelphia. Because division boundaries change over time, past election results were recalculated to match present boundaries based on the population overlap between past and current divisions. Some primaries were left out of the analysis, such as those with only one candidate.

Precincts were categorized using a k-means clustering algorithm. We tested various numbers of clusters; six clusters captured the variation across the city while also yielding groups that were easy to

understand.

The racial and ethnic makeup of each division comes from the 2020 Census. The analysis grouped residents into mutually exclusive racial and ethnic categories, which is an oversimplification that doesn't always match how people identify. Anyone who is listed as **Hispanic or Latino** is counted in that group, regardless of race; all other categories group non-Hispanic residents by race. **White**, **Black**, and **Asian American and Pacific Islander** categories represent non-Hispanic adult residents who reported being of only those single races. **All Other** persons are those from other racial and ethnic groups or of multiple races.

Most other demographic data came from the 2017 to 2021 American Community Survey data from the Census Bureau. The Jan. 30 voter roll was used to calculate the number and age of Democrats in each precinct.

For more information and access to the underlying data, see here.

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