AN EXAMINATION OF THE POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF GROCERY STORES' MARKETING STRATEGIES IN CONGRUENCE WITH THE POLITICAL BELIEFS OF STAKEHOLDERS

by

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An Examination of the Political Influence of Grocery Stores' Marketing Strategies in Congruence with the Political Beliefs of Stakeholders

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To understand the relationship between partisanship and branding, this thesis takes on an exploratory research project to gauge the impact of political attitudes on marketing strategy within the context of the grocery retail industry. The main purpose of a grocery store is to sell food to general population, which often causes the industry's interactions with political stakeholders to be overlooked. This thesis examines the correlations between surrounding political beliefs and values with the grocery store's marketing strategies, specifically looking at the locations that grocery retailers choose to place their stores at.

This thesis employs a mixed methodology to observe the locational patterns of the grocery retail industry. Using a geographic information system (GIS) software, the individual grocery store locations for Portland, OR, Austin, TX, Columbus, OH, and Oklahoma City, OK were collected. These locations were then superimposed on a map showing the partisanship of the city's corresponding county and precincts to visualize the patterns within each city. For a quantitative analysis, a chi-square test was conducted using a Python script to observe the statistical significance for each city.

These methods were able to show that grocery stores in Portland, Austin, and Columbus were predominately placed within Democratic areas at a much higher rate than the actual

political makeup of the city, whereas the stores in Oklahoma City had a wider distribution in locations and reflected the partisanship of the city. These findings can suggest grocery stores are more likely to skew towards Democratic areas as investment in order to create more meaningful self-brand connections with the corresponding market. The results and speculations of this thesis do not fully answer the relationship of political attitudes and locational marketing strategies but explore various correlations that contributes to a deeper understanding of political consumerism and invoke deeper developments regarding political signaling within marketing strategies. Future studies can potentially include external factors such as socioeconomic status and population density.

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Introduction

Food is an inherent part of our existence. It functions as nutrients for our body, cultural signifiers, and a device that connects communities together. Food is integral for us to function, so subsequently being able to access food is integral for our whole society to function. In the United States, there are over 115,526 food stores across the nation (U.S.D.A., 2025) and as of July 2025, the total revenue of grocery stores in the United States reached 76 billion dollars (F.R.E.D., 2025). These stores, however, are not created equally. The types of grocery stores situated around the U.S. reflect the patterns of income, population density, and historical investment that reside in certain neighborhoods. These variables can also allude to the specific political inclinations that a neighborhood or city has. Examining how grocery retail marketing evolves over time offers a lens into understanding how businesses align their messages with the sentiment and policies of its audience and the governing administration.

This thesis will examine the application of the political sentiments of various grocery stores in context to the political sentiments of its main consumer base. This paper will first examine the contextual background of the relationship between U.S. politics and businesses, focusing on the type of marketing campaigns that these companies have pushed out during different time periods in history. This research aims to observe how the marketing efforts of brands reflect the current political landscape and appeal towards the demographic of the current party by looking at their physical location, campaigns, and corporate statements. A spatial data analysis will be performed to understand the positioning of the store within a political landscape through its decision to place its retail locations. This thesis aims to capture the true scale of political influence within marketing and identify key patterns in these companies' marketing

campaigns for consumer interest, stock price gauging, and understanding the market for future insights.

Research Questions

The objective of this research paper is to observe the extent of the relationship between brand marketing and political affiliation. This thesis aims to understand the reasons to which grocery retail chains utilize location and geospatiality to optimize their reach to customers, and specifically what customers that they are trying to reach. To guide my research and my data analysis, my research questions are as follows:

- To what extent does the political climate shape the alignment between grocery stores' marketing strategies regarding location choices?
- How does the consumer's perception of a store influence how politically aligned their marketing becomes?

These questions concentrate on the symbiotic relationship between grocery stores and consumers and seeks to understand how political sentiment interacts within the relationship.

Literature Review

The following literature review has been composed to develop an understanding of the conceptual ideas of brand and marketing strategies regarding political alignment and activism, and the importance of brand-consumer relationships and its effect on the brand strategies that companies choose to implement.

What is a grocery store?

Compared to the cyclical nature of other retail industries where purchasing trends come and go, the grocery retail industry of today has stayed relatively consistent to what it looked like decades ago. The industry comprises a diverse range of food retail establishments, including supermarkets, convenience stores, wholesale clubs and superettes. According to the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund (2011), grocery retail businesses can be classified into several principal categories:

- Traditional supermarkets, also known as conventional supermarkets, which are self-service retail stores that offer various food and nonfood products and multiple service departments. They tend to be larger in size, ranging around 20,000 square feet (SF) to 65,000 SF+.
- Limited assortment supermarkets, often described as discount or price-impact supermarkets, are self-service retail stores that provide a smaller selection of food and nonfood and limited service departments. These establishments carry a smaller selection of stock-keeping units (SKUs)[1] and emphasize price competitiveness compared to conventional supermarkets.

- Superettes, also known as corner stores, are smaller stores that sell primarily packaged and perishable food items and few service departments, with a smaller selection of SKUs.
- Supercenters are large-scale retail establishments that integrate a full-service grocery store with discount department services in one location. These stores are significantly bigger than traditional supermarkets, with their size averaging over 170,000 SF.
- Natural and gourmet stores are specialized grocery stores that focus on organic, health-oriented and/or gourmet prepared foods, with a smaller selection of general merchandise in order to emphasize product quality.
- Convenience stores are small retail outlets that are designed for quick accessibility to a limited selection of food and non-food merchandise.

This thesis will primarily look at traditional grocery stores and will also include limited assortment supermarkets and supercenters in the data collection and will not discuss convenience stores or superettes.

The number of food retailers in the United States have increased substantially throughout the last 25 years. Within the retail food industry, national and regional chains have consistently dominated the market, accounting for approximately 75% of average sales and employment throughout the 25 years (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2021). Grocery stores generate the majority of industry revenue, with traditional grocery formats (not including convenience and specialty stores) accounting for 92.1% of the $717 billion in retail food and nonfood products sold in 2019 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2025). Around 65% of those sales were attributed to the twenty largest food retailers, many of which have maintained their market positions for several decades now. Leading firms in the U.S. grocery industry include Walmart, Costco,

Kroger Co., Sam's Club, and Albertsons (Progressive Grocer, 2025). The continued success of these corporations reflects not only their scale and operational efficiency, but also their strategic use of targeted marketing practices designed to align with consumer preferences. Within an extremely competitive industry such as the grocery retail sector, understanding the role that factors and marketing strategies must sway consumer choice have become increasingly important to knowing how these firms maintain and increase market share.

External Consumer Behavior Factors

The specific situational circumstances and predispositions of a consumer can be influential to where and how they decide to shop. Recchia et al. (2023) observe the differences in food shopping practices within various food cultures and households by finding that households with higher incomes were less likely to prioritize efficiency and discounts, but more likely to enjoy social interaction and experience pleasure while grocery shopping. Meanwhile, households with lower incomes were more likely to seek promotions and less likely to enjoy social interactions during shopping and also had more concerns around improving the availability of cheaper food compared to higher income households. The socioeconomic status of customers influences their shopping decisions by impacting their priorities on what is most important. In terms of store format, higher-income households were found to shop more at organic stores and markets, while lower-income households were more likely to shop at supermarkets and discounters (Recchia et al., 2023). Higher-income households have the money and leisure time to focus on the shopping experience of the grocery store when making their decision on what store to go to, while convenience and cheaper options is the main priority for lower-income households who have more constraints on where and when they can purchase food.

The household condition of a customer can also influence their shopping behavior by constraining the number of trips they take grocery shopping. Lower-demand families with less disposable time were observed to have consistent shopping behavior, while high-demand families with more disposable time were found to make more frequent short trips (Namin and Dehdashti, 2019). A customer's current status can impact their shopping behavior through influencing the type of grocery store they go to and the frequency of when they make trips to that specific store. This thesis aims to examine whether these external factors are shown to have a greater impact on influencing a customer's decision to shop at a specific grocery store compared to self-congruity with a brand and customer's political views.

Brand-Consumer Relationship Dynamics

Customer retention and satisfaction have always been a top priority for businesses. As industries are becoming increasingly competitive with new technology and international businesses, companies are not only looking to diversify their product portfolio to gain attention from potential customers but developing their brand image to fit their stakeholders' values as well. Political affiliation of stakeholders can influence a brand's decisions to act in a certain way, including their decisions to publicly support or not support societal issues.

Several studies have shown that humans have an instinctual need to attach themselves to groups to provide themselves with a sense of security and belonging and help them define their own self-identity. According to social identity theory, individuals base their sense of self from their group membership(s), defining their identity off their affiliation to these social categories (Haupt et al., 2023). A consumer's affiliation to a brand can also serve as a signifier being in an ingroup. Consumer-brand identification (CBI) is the theoretical notion that consumers look for brands and products to identify and express their sense of self upon (Haupt et al., 2023). As

brands begin to link themselves with certain causes and political positions, they can target a certain psychographic segment, allowing consumers to form deep emotional bonds with brands and products, unrelated to the actual perceptions about the product itself (Matos, 2017). Self-brand connection (SBC) is the personal connection that a customer has with a brand based on the perceived identification of the brand's value and the extent in which the brand reflects the self (Matos, 2017). The connection that consumers form with brands through alignment of certain movements and principles can establish a "cognitive link" between the two parties, creating consumer-brand alignment as a consumer's attraction and support to a cause transfers to a brand that they also associate with the issue as well (Flight and Cooker, 2021). Consumers that are attached to the brand are more willing to justify the actions of a brand to preserve their own self-concept, but perceived misconduct from the brand could pose a threat to their identity and lead to a devaluation of the company (Haupt et. al, 2023).

The development of self-incongruity with a brand and its customers can lead to negative outcomes regarding its brand equity and position within the market. When consumers perceive a mismatch between the store's identity and the consumer's own values, this causes a disconnect between the brand and the consumer and decreases the likelihood of the consumer maintaining a relationship with the brand long-term. Torres et al. (2023) introduces the concept of Customer-Brand Disidentification (CBD) as a negative pathway from brand-consumer incongruity, where the customer develops a cognitive dissociation from the brand based on misaligned values and their evaluation of their own identity relative the brand's. The development of CBD does not just hamper the relationship between brand and customer but also has negative economic impacts as it decreases a customer's willingness to buy from the store and reduces store patronage. Over time, CBD can lead to customers feeling negative emotions after experiencing negative

interactions with the brand and developing brand hate, with the customer going beyond to form an avoidance or commit retaliatory behaviors towards the brand (Torres et al., 2023). In order to maintain positive relations with the customer and create compatibility between the brand and consumer, companies must align themselves into positions that correspond with the beliefs of their existing and/or desired audience. Implementing political ideology into their identity and marketing is a direct strategy for brands to quickly develop SBC with their customers but also has its own constraints. When brands continue to establish themselves into political issues, the brand's identity and their political position become inseparable. As consumers integrate their self-concept into the brand, a misalignment between the brand's political position and individual political affiliation can be seen as a norm violation of brand trust and relationship and weaken SBC. In order to walk this fine line, brands must be strategic in the types of political issues that they engage with and how they execute their engagement.

Brand Activism and Corporate Responsibility

Brand activism is the act of promotion, reactance, or reformation of a social topic or issue by utilizing brand connection and resources (Pimentel et al., 2023). Brand activism is conducted because of increased pressure on corporations to be more responsible for their actions and take public stances on current events. The role of the corporation has evolved from being a figureless entity to emerging as a leader for social change, with many companies beginning to embed brand activism strategies to market themselves to certain target audiences. Consumers have been shown to favor brands that reflect their own values and lifestyles, using the alignment of the brand upon their own sociopolitical views to evaluate their purchase decisions (Bhagwat et al., 2020). As conscious consumerism, purchasing practices that serve to create a positive social and environmental impact, becomes more common amongst modern consumers, the relationship

between brands and consumers have developed in which there are expectations for brands to meet the consumer's demands on all fronts.

Brand activism can take on many forms depending on the type of brand the company has positioned itself to have and the industry expectation already in place. With the role of the corporate entity evolving into corporate citizens, firms are expected to promote social welfare through their actions. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate political activity (CPA) are currently two major corporate activities conducted to signal brand activism amongst consumers (Bhagwat et. al, 2020). Corporate political activity includes activities such as lobbying, media campaigns, and other activities that influence stakeholder evaluations of the firm itself. Through CPA, firms can gain political capital and prestige among their competitors and stakeholders (Shirodkar et al., 2022). CPA as a strategy is not too favorably looked upon as excessive CPA has been generally linked to corporate political corruption (Kamasak, 2019). Corporate social responsibility is the concept that a company has a responsibility to create a positive impact on society through their actions (Stobierski, 2021). Companies that identify themselves as socially responsible implement philanthropic and charitable works into their business chain or through outside donations and support. CSR acts as a business strategy and marketing tool to build its reputation to major stakeholders including potential customers that have values aligned with the firm.

Compared to effortful actions that are required from CSR and CPA, an easier method of brand activism is corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA). Corporate sociopolitical activism is a company's decision to publicly demonstrate support (or opposition) to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue (Bhagwat et. al, 2020). CSA involves public statements and corporate actions such as committing to hire members of marginalized communities and cutting ties with

controversial business partners. Prior research has shown that when CSA is aligned with the values of key stakeholders such as customers and employees, CSA can have a positive impact on investor reactions. In the occurrence where CSA is not aligned with key stakeholders, investors generally react negatively and punish companies from deviating from their customers' values. Political alignment with consumers is incredibly important for a company to financially succeed, so being able to distinguish the political values of their audience and market to them effectively is invaluable.

Political Affiliation and Consumer Attitudes

Several studies have shown people who identify with certain political beliefs tend to think, behave, and have different values compared with those with opposite views. Examining deeper, conservatives and liberals exhibit different behavior patterns in daily activities like grocery shopping, charity choices, complaints and disputes, and lifestyle choices (Schoenmueller et. al, 2023). Liberalism as an ideology aims to create a shared central governing system to provide equality to the welfare of citizens, while conservatism values individual rights and freedoms with little government intervention (Flight and Cooker, 2021). Conservatives tend to possess traits surrounding structure, order, stability and conformity, while liberals show a stronger relationship with traits involving openness, flexibility, and tolerance for uncertainty (Adaval and Wyer, 2022). When this identity turns into deliberate and conscious decisions to why a consumer chooses to purchase or not to purchase an item due to political, ethical, or environmental justifications rather than economic reasonings, these actions are considered to be political consumerism (Starke and Kelm, 2025).

Political consumerism is a form of political participation where consumers utilize the market and their purchasing power to reject or encourage specific products to achieve certain

political or moral goals (Stolle et al., 2005). Political consumerism can take on various different forms, with the most common methods for consumers being boycotts, the intentional withdrawal of support to a specific product or producer through refusal of purchase, and buycotts, the intentional support to a specific product or producer through purchasing (Pruysers, 2025). Boycotting has been a very common political practice used to challenge policies and practices of corporations regarding pressing issues such as environmental sustainability, labor rights, and other ethical violations committed by corporations. Buycotting, also referred to as ethical consumerism, seeks to support movements that advocate for the well-being of specific social, political, or environmental causes. On the corporate end, marketing strategies such as labelling products as organic and fair-trade and utilizing environmentally friendly production methods and packaging can facilitate political consumerism by enabling consumers to align their purchasing decisions with ethical and social values. (Pruysers, 2025). Political consumerism enables individuals to exercise their political power by directly influencing institutions through market participation, compelling them to act in the best interests of consumers.

The types of individuals who participate in political consumerism tend to differ in both socioeconomic status and political affiliation. Individuals with higher education and income tend to engage in boycotting more often than less educated and lower income earners, who instead tend to practice buycotting (Baek, 2010). A similar split occurs within political affiliation with Democrats/liberals being more likely to boycott a product, while Republicans/conservatives are more likely to buycott. Democrats are shown to punish companies that contradict their personal values, while Republicans are less likely to be affected by a liberal stance (Haupt et al., 2023). For a singular event of value misalignment, brand attitudes from conservatives won't be impaired drastically in comparison to liberals, with evidence showing that conservatives are

more focused on utilitarian beliefs while liberals focus on the abstract image of the brand (Haupt et al., 2023).

This divergence in consumer psychology suggests that brands operating in politically diverse markets must be strategic in how they communicate their values, as liberal consumers may respond more sensitively to ideological conflict, whereas conservative consumers may prioritize functional performance over political alignment. The distinction between socioeconomic status and political identity with political consumerism demonstrates that participation is not the same across the board, but is affected by access, resources, and ideology. Looking within the context of grocery stores where the product differentiation between each store isn't as pronounced as other industries, this distinction raises questions about what happens when purchasing choices become even more constrained and how consumers navigate ethical decision-making under limited options.

Grocery Stores and Marketing Strategies

In order to capture maximized consumer engagement and patronage, grocery stores employ various marketing strategies to create and strengthen brand-consumer relationships. These marketing strategies work to create some sort of persona for the grocery store and develop a connection between the store and the customer through identity alignment. The type of marketing strategies that these stores carry out can be broken down into three categories: (1) identity creation, (2) environment curation, and (3) relationship building. These strategies work in tandem with one another to transform the one-time transactions that a consumer may have at a grocery store to a long-term relationship with the company. Each strategy serves its own role to develop a certain image perception of the store and market it as desirable to the consumer's current needs and wants.

Identity Creation Strategies

Identity creation strategies focus on the specific alignment decisions that the store chooses to conduct to develop a certain image for the store in the consumer's mind. These strategies form the conceptual image of the store in the customer's mind, attracting those whose identity aligns with theirs. The overall store price image can be a strong determinant for store patronage and be utilized in attracting certain kinds of customers (Desai and Talukdar, 2003). Rather than remembering the exact price for an item, customers create generalized price perceptions over time and that can factor into their decision-making. A store's overall store price image is shaped by their frequency of discounted items, the magnitude of price reductions for specific items, and the noticeability of the product categories they discounted. Having a lower overall store price image requires having more customers in order to break-even in profits and vice versa, companies must decide what their priorities are and who their target demographic is when conducting their price-gauging strategies. The pricing strategies at a high-end, natural grocery store will be much different than a discount supermarket due to the difference in priorities of these stores and the idealized price perceptions of their target customers.

Environment Curation Strategies

Customers evaluate their level of satisfaction based on their points of reference from other stores and their opinion on the ideal shopping experience (Filipe et al., 2017). When choosing where to shop, consumers first decide the specific store format that they want to go to and then choose a store within that format (González-Benito et al., 2005). Certain store formats are designed to align with different shopping habits and lifestyles, with some shoppers looking to shop at typical grocery stores more frequently for less items, while others look to take infrequent trips and stock up at low-cost supermarkets instead (Pechey and Monsivias, 2015). The format

and atmosphere the store provides is a reflection on its brand identity and can contribute to a customer's (Grzeskowiak et al., 2015). Environment curation strategies work in conjunction with identity creation with creating a specific image of the store but is constrained to the decisions involving the physical location of the store. Grocery store characteristics like store atmosphere, perceived reasonable pricing, and shopping convenience have been found to increase consumer well-being and impact life satisfaction. The experience of shopping is able to shape a customer's identity by allowing them to express themselves and their preferences. A high level of self-congruity between the store image and the customer's identity can transform consumers into their desired form and represent their identity (Grzeskowiak et al., 2015). Environment curation can shape the customer's perception of the value of the store and create an emotional connection between the retail space and the customer's own identity.

Relationship Building Strategies

Relationship building strategies focus on developing the brand-consumer relationship and retaining customer attention through loyalty and trust-building mechanisms. These approaches work on creating and maintaining long-term customer relationships beyond simple transactional exchanges. Loyalty programs have become an increasingly common technique employed by companies to enhance customer loyalty (Filipe et al., 2017), with these programs emphasizing on rewarding the customer as they continue to purchase from their company. These programs allow the consumers to develop a stronger relationship with the company through exclusive benefits and rewards, creating a deeper link between brand and consumer as it defines the customer more as an individual. Attracting new customers can be more difficult and expensive than retaining existing customers, so instead these programs minimize costs by utilizing pre-existing customer relationships to encourage spending by incentivizing customers to increase the money and time

that they spend at that specific grocery store (Lakshman and Faiz, 2021). For example, Safeway has their own loyalty programs that include personalized deals and a point system that matches the number of points earned to dollars spent at the store. As customers continue to stay in these loyalty programs, their price sensitivity can reduce, increasing their willingness to pay for whatever the brand offers (Lakshman and Faiz, 2021). These programs not only drive short-term sales but also cultivate long-term brand attachment and distinguish the company's position within the market.

Through identity creation, environment curation, and relationship-building strategies, grocery retailers are able to construct meaningful connections with their target consumers. The internal and external structures of their store shape purchasing behavior and create brand attachment.

Location as a Marketing Strategy

Building upon the identity and environment of the retailer and the pre-existing relationship between brand and consumer, the location of a grocery store is another marketing strategy optimized to bring their target audience in. The location of a grocery store can indicate to consumers what values the store has and what ways they can or cannot fit into your lifestyle. The location of a grocery store holds strategic significance for maintaining and increasing market share and their competitive advantage as features like convenience and accessibility will impact the attractiveness of the store to customers (Demirel, 2026).

Competition between retailers can be broken up into two categories: (1) Intratype competition, where competition occurs between the same type of store. (2) Intertype competition, where competition occurs between different types of stores (Hansen, 2004). We can see the effects of these different competitions through the location decisions of grocery retailers.

The location strategy of a supercenter like Walmart is going to differ significantly from a specialty grocery store like Whole Foods due to the differences in its main customer base. Supercenters are more likely to be located on the outskirts of towns and cities and more embedded within suburbia (Halebsky, 2004). In order to serve customers with the largest variety of goods possible, supercenters trade off convenience of location for lower prices and a larger inventory stock. As multi-purpose trips are the dominant type of outings for grocery shoppers, supercenters can be located further away than traditional supermarkets due to the vast selection of goods that are possible to purchase in these stores (Leszczyc et al., 2004). Outside of supercenters, some retailers have placed their buildings near or even inside of shopping malls to allow shoppers to make multi-purpose trips much easier. On the other hand, smaller specialty grocery stores tend to be in more urban areas with more affluent and well-educated populations, residing in areas that are less saturated with more traditional supermarkets (Reed et al., 2023). As the primary customer audience for these specialty stores already skew towards higher-income individuals, the careful selection of location in urban areas aligns with the grocery store's core identity. Reed et al. (2023) finds that specialty grocery stores tend to locate closer to wholesale stores than traditional supermarkets, indicating a choice in their marketing strategy to focus on their competitive separation from supercenters than supermarkets. These location patterns suggest that grocery retailers do not just place themselves anywhere but strategically situate their stores in order to reflect the characteristics of their target income.

As opening and running a supermarket requires significant investment, choosing the right location is critical for the long-term success of the store. With this in mind, there is an incentive for grocery retail chains to place their stores in high-demand areas to increase market access and minimize distribution and logistics costs (Demirel, 2026). The choice of grocery retailers to

place themselves in these high-demand areas does have implications for the distribution of food supplies in less populated areas, causing a phenomenon called “food deserts”. Food deserts can be defined as geographic areas in which there is insufficient access to affordable and healthy food options due an absence of grocery stores within convenient traveling distance (Bitler and Haider., 2010). Food deserts commonly occur in lower-income and minority neighborhoods, many of which have been historically disenfranchised by systemic disparities, such as residential segregation and redlining and poverty deprivation (Walker et al., 2009). While food deserts are an important topic in discussions of food access and retail geography, this thesis will not examine food deserts directly. This study will focus on the relationships between retail location decisions and marketing strategies within urban areas in order to allow for a larger sample of stores and a wider range of variation across key variables, such as socioeconomic status and election voting results. To examine the relationship between location and customer demographics, this study employs spatial data analysis to evaluate the geographic placement of grocery stores in relation to neighborhood-level political affiliation and socioeconomic indicators, allowing for a more precise assessment of how retail location strategy intersects with political and economic landscapes. Through this methodology, this thesis will test the following hypothesis:

> **H1**: Grocery stores located in politically extreme areas (highly liberal or highly conservative counties) will show greater political alignment in distribution than those in politically competitive areas.

Methods

To understand the relationship between the marketing campaigns of grocery stores and its broader connection to the surrounding political environment, this study will conduct a mixed methods approach by utilizing various data science and analysis techniques.

To determine political affiliation within grocery stores, a spatial data analysis will be performed to visualize the relationship between the physical location of the grocery store and the voting patterns within its environment. QGIS will be used to map the locations of grocery stores across various cities and will be overlaid upon a map of their respective counties. By looking at the political affiliation of each county and observing the location frequencies of specific grocery stores, the specific choices that these companies have made in relation to the political environment. This method will provide insight into whether grocery stores strategically locate their outlets in certain regions based on political demographics, and how these location decisions may align with or influence consumer engagement.

The spatial data analysis method used to measure political affiliation of various businesses was originally conducted by Time magazine journalists Wilson, Johnson, and Rebala. Their method involved looking at all retail locations of each individual company and matching the placement of its longitude and latitude to the corresponding Congressional district (Wilson et al., 2014). This project will follow a similar methodology to their report but will be localized to observe the political affiliation of grocery stores within Oregon county lines as Oregon only has a limited set of six congressional districts. The results of this project will be compared to the findings from the Time journalists to see how grocery stores have positioned themselves nationally versus regionally. By contextualizing marketing strategies within the broader political

landscape, the project can provide deeper insight into the interplay between corporate decision-making and political strategy.

Spatial Data Analysis Tools and Data Sourcing

To start the spatial data analysis, the first step was to find the data that would be used to explore the claim that the location of the grocery stores affects its marketing practices. The data for the grocery store locations was found through OpenStreetMap, which is a free, open source geospatial database that allows for individuals to contribute to the services through adding buildings, roads, and any other locational information to the map.

To narrow down the scope of the thesis project, specific cities were chosen to conduct this analysis. The first area of interest that was selected for this research exploration was the city of Portland, Oregon in the United States. Portland was chosen as the first city to be analyzed for two main reasons: (1) this is an area in which I have personal ties with, and (2) Portland is a deeply Democratic city that could provide interesting insights to the effect of politics on the urban city infrastructure. The city houses a residential population of around 630,000 citizens and a land area of 145 miles^2, with Portland being the largest city in Oregon and the 29th largest city in the United States. With such a large population density, Portland acts as a hub for contemporary city life through its focus on urban development and diverse transportation options, making it an excellent location choice for grocery stores to situate their stores at. To compare with Portland's deeply Democratic demographic, cities that had a similar population size with differing political demographics were also used to thoroughly test my hypothesis. The cities that were also researched were Austin, Texas; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Columbus, Ohio.

Procedure

The spatial data analysis was mainly constructed through the software QGIS, an open-source geographic information system software, and was used to map both the grocery stores and the precinct-level data of a given location. The steps of the procedure were conducted as follows:

1. *Data Collection:* Through the data filtering tool Overpass turbo, a query was used to gather the locational points of the grocery stores within the Multnomah County lines, resulting in 72 data points being collected from the data. These data points include supermarkets, wholesale stores, limited assortment grocery stores, and natural or specialty grocery stores, but does not include superettes or convenience stores in the dataset.

   To show the geographic makeup of the given city, precinct and county division line maps were found from the cities' respective county's government website to be used as a base layer with showing the geographic boundaries of the city. Historical voting data was collected from the counties' government website as well, containing the 2024 U.S. election voting results for each precinct within the county. Socioeconomic data for Multnomah County was provided by the U.S. Census Bureau, including data about the average household income from the last 12 months within each precinct. These data sets were used to analyze the relationship between grocery store density and certain factors behind customer shopping choice.

2. *Data Cleaning***:** In order for smoother processing through the QGIS software, the data sets were cleaned to show only the variables: Precinct, Total Votes, Votes for Democrat Candidate, Votes for Republican Candidate, Winning Candidate, % of Democrat Votes, and % of Republican Votes. These variables were used to show how the political makeup

of the city affected grocery store location, and to what degree political demographics had an impact.

3. *Map Preparation:* After creating a new map draft on the QGIS software, the OpenStreetMap layer, accessed through the XYZ tiles package, was chosen as the base reference layer and contained a comprehensive rendering of the local infrastructure for urban and rural areas. This layer allowed for the statistical analysis of the spatial distribution of grocery stores to be conducted at a citywide level. The presidential election voting data was added as a layer beneath the grocery store data. To see the voting results of each precinct, the original CSV file containing the voting results for each precinct had to be joined with the base layer showing the geography of the city. Then, the layer's symbology was edited to be categorized by voting choice, showing the distribution of votes for the Democrat and Republican presidential candidate, with a Democrat-leaning precinct colored as blue while a Republican-leaning precinct would be colored as red. The grocery store data for the given city was then added as a layer.
4. After conducting this procedure, the number of grocery stores within Democratic and Republican areas were recorded.

This result of this method aims to create comprehensible visualizations and assessments on the correlation between the political sentiments of the consumers and the actual geospatial strategy for grocery store chains.

Results

Upon completion of the data collection and preprocessing, the results reveal a discernible pattern in the distribution of the presidential election votes between the Republican and Democrat candidates throughout these cities seen in Table 1. Central urban precincts tend to exhibit a majority of Democrats, whereas precincts on the periphery of the county are more likely to vote for the Republican candidates. The distribution of these grocery stores seems to align in the same center of the city, usually bunched up together in one area, as seen in Figure 1-3. An exception of this pattern is in Columbus, OH in Figure 4, where grocery stores are more spread out across the county boundaries.

	Republican	Democrat	Total
Portland, OR	6	100	106
Austin, TX	30	257	287
Oklahoma City, OK	1706	270	1976
Columbus, OH	27	522	549

Table 1: Count of Republican and Democrat Precincts in Each City

	Republican	Democrat	Democrat %	Total
Portland, OR	0	45	100%	45
Austin, TX	0	112	100%	112
Oklahoma City, OK	14	28	66%	42
Columbus, OH	2	83	98%	85

Table 2: Grocery Store Count within Categorized Precincts

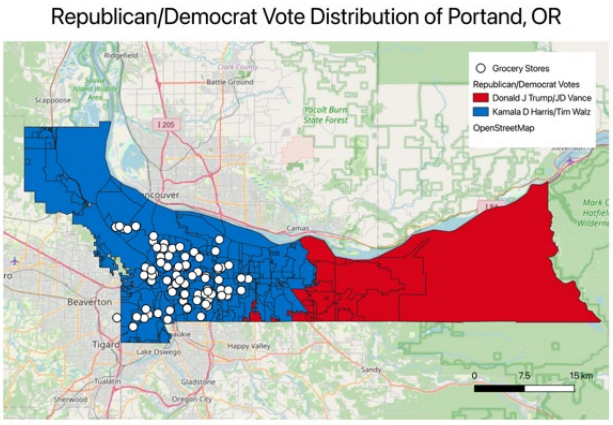

Figure 1: Grocery Stores in Republican/Democrat Vote Distribution in Portland, OR

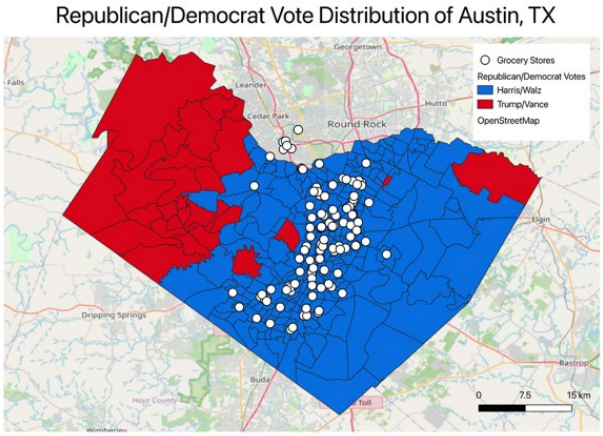

Figure 2: Grocery Stores in Republican/Democrat Vote Distribution in Austin, TX

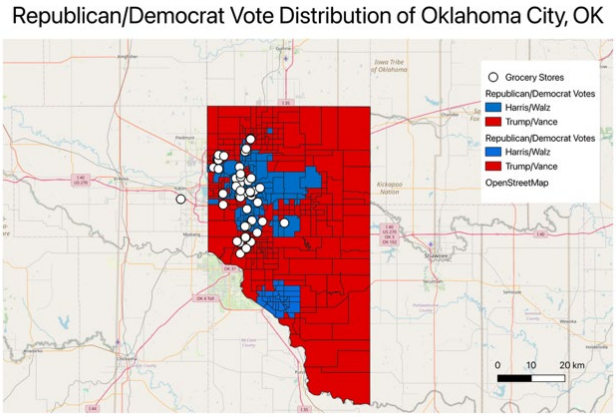

Figure 3: Grocery Stores in Republican/Democrat Vote Distribution in Oklahoma City, OK

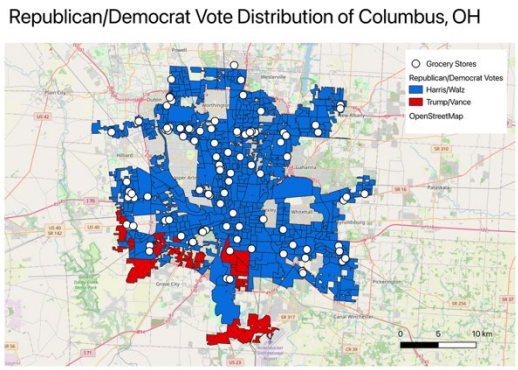

Figure 4: Grocery Stores in Republican/Democrat Vote Distribution in Columbus, OH

Across all four cities, there seems to be a correlation between the location of the grocery stores with Democrat-leaning precincts as seen in Table 2. Figures 1-4 visualize this pattern with the majority of the grocery stores centralizing in the middle of the major Blue area on the graphs. The percentage of grocery stores that are Democrat are the majority for each major city. At a first glance, we could assume that all grocery stores carry Democratic values as they are in Democratic areas. This logic, however, falls short when you consider the other possible factors, which could have a larger influence in the placement of these grocery stores compared to political ideology. The observed patterns in the data more so reflect the broader dynamics of urban cities, where grocery stores are more likely to be congregated together as a result of the higher population density within the center of the cities and higher demand for these businesses.

In order to better understand the actual political demographic of the cities, another analysis was conducted to examine the extremity of the political beliefs of the county. Instead of binary categories where the precinct could only be labeled as Democrat or Republican, the categories were split between Republican, Moderate, and Democrat with the representative colors being red, purple, and blue respectively. The assignments were based on the share of total votes for the Democratic candidate: a percentage of higher than 60% indicated a strong Democrat-leaning precinct, between 40% to 60% represented a more moderate split between

both parties, and a percentage of less than 40% indicated a strong Republican-lean. The new counts of these categories can be seen in Table 3.

	Republican	Moderate	Democrat	Total
Portland, OR	1	28	77	106
Austin, TX	10	36	241	287
Oklahoma City, OK	1510	330	136	1976
Columbus, OH	5	111	433	549

Table 3: Count of Republican, Moderate, and Democrat Precincts in Each City

Through this procedure, the findings followed a similar pattern to the original analysis where many of the grocery stores resided in Democratic areas but revealed considerably more variation in the location of the stores. Several precincts classified as Republican under the binary model shifted to Moderate under this framework, as did several precincts situated further from the city center.

	Republican	Moderate	Democrat	Total
Portland, OR	0	2	84	97%
Austin, TX	0	0	112	100%
Oklahoma City, OK	7	22	13	31%
Columbus, OH	0	19	66	78%

Table 4: Grocery Store Count within Categorized Precincts

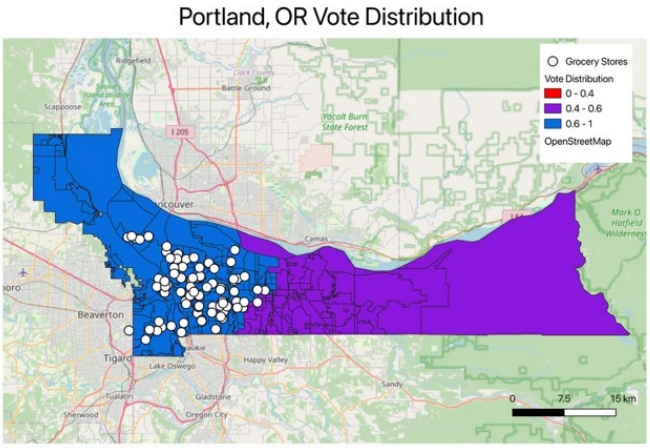

Figure 5: Grocery Stores in Republican/Moderate/Democrat Vote Distribution in Portland, OR

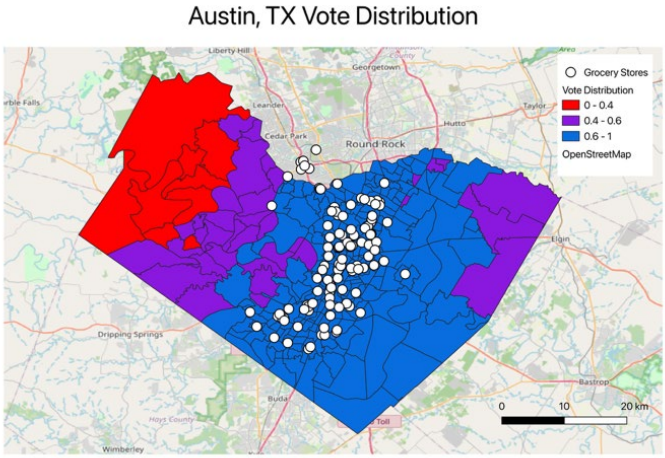

Figure 6: Grocery Stores in Republican/Moderate/Democrat Vote Distribution in Austin, TX

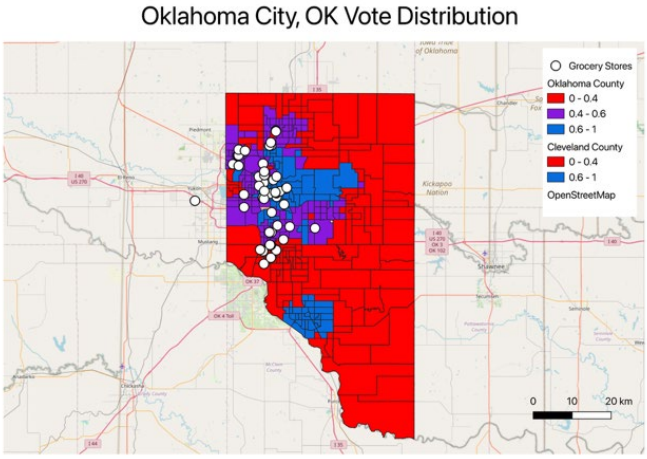

Figure 7: Grocery Stores in Republican/Moderate/Democrat Vote Distribution in Oklahoma City, OK

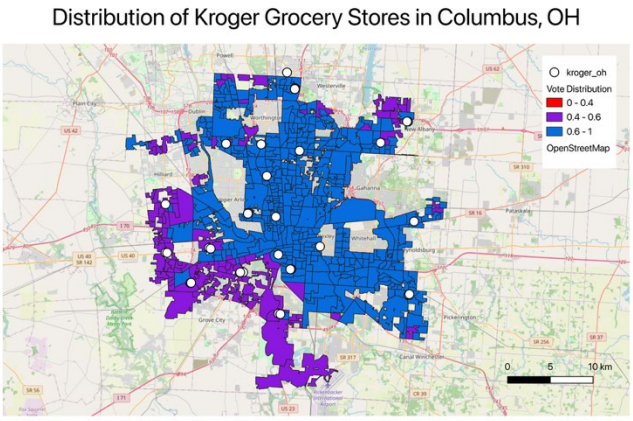

Figure 8: Grocery Stores in Republican/Moderate/Democrat Vote Distribution in Columbus, OH

Overall, the distribution of grocery store locations across precincts showcases a consistent pattern of Democratic concentration in three of the four cities examined. In Portland, Oregon (Figure 5) and Austin, Texas (Figure 6), almost, if not all, grocery stores were situated within strongly Democratic precincts, with only two stores located in Moderate areas for Portland, Oregon and no stores being located in Republican areas for both cities (Table 4). Columbus, Ohio follows a similar pattern with 66 out of 86 stores (78%) being in Democratic precincts and the remaining stores located across Moderate precincts (Table 4 and Figure 8). These three cities suggest a strong association between Democratic voting and grocery store density in major urban areas.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma was the only city that presented a much different distribution compared to the rest of the cities. Out of the 42 stores identified, only 13 (31%) were in Democratic precincts, while 22 (52%) were situated in Moderate precincts and 7 (17%) were situated in Republican precincts (Table 4 and Figure 7). The percentage decrease for grocery stores in Democratic areas from Table 2 to Table 4 reflect variation in voting patterns in Oklahoma City relative to the other cities in the sample. An interesting observation to make is the significantly larger number of Republican precincts in Oklahoma City in comparison to the

other three cities (Table 1). This phenomenon can be explained by potential redistricting in the city and limitations to the number of the individuals residing in a precinct (State of Oklahoma, 2026). Overall, this observation does not impact the results of the thesis in any major capacity but is important to highlight.

Regarding locational decision-making, these findings reveal a more nuanced narrative of grocery retailers than what the original data might initially suggest. The concentration of grocery stores in Democratic precincts seem to be influenced more by the underlying socioeconomic and demographic characteristics within the geographic makeup in American cities rather than deliberately reflecting the political skew of the area, but the drastic change between the numbers show a shift in placement strategy for these grocery stores to choose to broaden their location choices beyond the dense Democratic areas for certain places. The variation across these four cities invokes questions about whether urban density is the more meaningful variable driving the spatial distribution of grocery stores compared to partisanship.

```python
import numpy as np
from scipy.stats import chisquare

# observed counts for Portland, OR
observed = np.array([0, 2, 43])

# expected proportions for Portland, OR
proportions = np.array([0.01, 0.26, 0.73])

# convert to expected counts
expected = proportions * observed.sum()

# chi-square test
chi2, p = chisquare(f_obs=observed, f_exp=expected)

print("Chi-square:", chi2)
print("p-value:", p)
```

Figure 9: Chi-Square Test Program Originally Written in Python Language

In order to understand the actual statistical significance of the relationship between political alignment and grocery store locations, a chi-squared test (Figure 9) was used to determine if there is a significant difference between the observed location distribution of the stores compared to what should be the expected distribution. The chi-square test was performed against null hypotheses:

- H_0: Grocery store location and city political affiliation are independent,

and the alternative hypothesis:

- H_1: Grocery store location and city political affiliation are associated.

Using the SciPy.Stats package on Python, a chi-square test was used to look at the distributed values in Table 4 and observe their expected values.

After running the test, the chi-square value was 120.96, indicating that there was a large difference between the observed data given by Table 4 and the expected data that the chi-square test calculated. The p-value of the chi-square test was 1.02×10^{-23}, which is significantly less than 0.05 or statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. These results would indicate a strong association between the grocery stores and the political affiliation of the geographical areas. The extremely low p-value, however, raises skepticism about the actual relationship between the two variables. For the chi-square test, it is important to be wary of misleading results due to varying sample sizes.

To look further into the data, a chi-square goodness-of-fit test was taken to test the observed grocery store counts within the labeled Democrat, Moderate, and Republican areas against the baseline distribution of the parties throughout the precincts. In this test, we are measuring the representation of the grocery stores in certain areas to see if there is an association between factors with the null hypothesis:

- H_0: Grocery store categories follow the political baseline in each city

and the alternative hypothesis:

- H_1: The distribution is different from the baseline.

After conducting the chi-square test for each city, the results of the test were recorded into Table 5.

	Chi-Square Value	P-Value
Portland, OR	26.57	1.69 x 10^-6
Austin, TX	21.33	2.33 x 10^-5
Oklahoma City, OK	0.97	0.613
Columbus, OH	86.84	1.38 x 10^-19

Table 5: Results of Chi-Square Test for Each City

The results of the chi-square test show interesting insights to the different relationships occurring between grocery store locations and the political baselines within each city. In the predominately Democratic-leaning cities (Portland, Austin, and Columbus), the chi-square values and the p-values show significant difference from the baseline, rejecting the null hypothesis that placement of grocery stores follow the political baseline in each city. The extreme statistical significance of the p-values indicates that there is an over-representation of Democratic grocery stores in those cities. For Oklahoma City, however, the chi-square test fails to reject the null hypothesis. This means that the observed grocery store distribution is reasonably consistent with the political distribution baseline of that city with no statistically significant deviation.

Discussion

The results of the spatial data analysis reveal to us some interesting patterns to interpret. Throughout the analysis, the cities that were found to be predominately Democratic in both the Republican/Democrat split in Table 1 and the Republican/Moderate/Democrat split in Table 3 reflect a consistent pattern of their grocery stores being predominately located in Democratic areas as well. Additionally, the large chi-square values and statistically significant p-values show that the observed grocery store political distribution is dramatically different from the expected baseline and meaningfully skew towards Democratic areas. Some possibilities that could explain the Democratic lean in these cities could be the more diverse consumer demographic of the surrounding area or the higher urban density. These findings could also suggest that these cities have grocery markets to more strongly align with the Democratic political identities, as the higher location counts into Democratic areas showcases an investment for the grocery retail chains in creating more meaningful self-brand connections (SBC) with the corresponding market. To fully understand the impact of political identity on the grocery retail marketing strategy, we can examine the actual stores themselves that are located in these areas. By closely examining the type of stores that appear most frequently in each city, we can see the level of investment that these chains have put into their location strategies.

Through the Overpass Turbo API, information of each grocery store located in each city, which included name and address, was exported into comma-separated (CSV) format. Python was then used to read the CSV file and convert the data into a DataFrame format using the Pandas library. To find the number stores for each grocery retailer, the .value_counts() function was applied to the “name” column for each DataFrame to count the number of occurrences for each unique value in that column. This study took the top five most common grocery stores for

each city to create an overview of what the grocery store chain distribution looks like amongst these cities. Figures 10-13 show bar charts demonstrating the frequency of each store in the dataset.

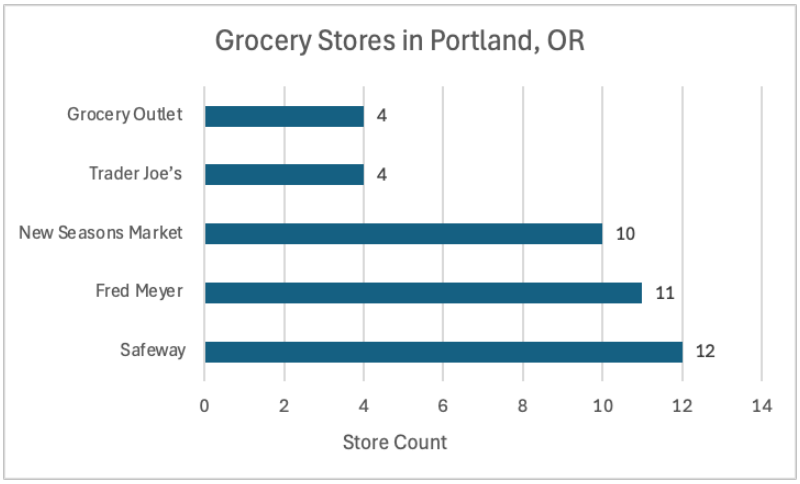

Figure 10: Top 5 Grocery Stores in Portland, OR

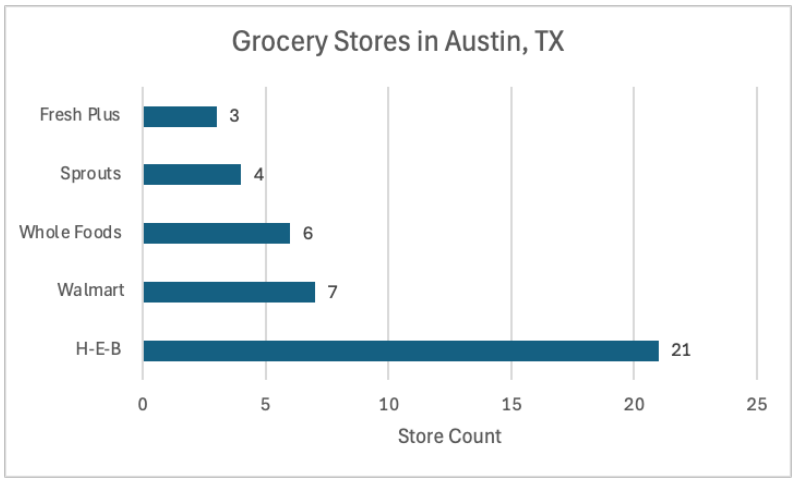

Figure 11: Top 5 Grocery Stores in Austin, TX

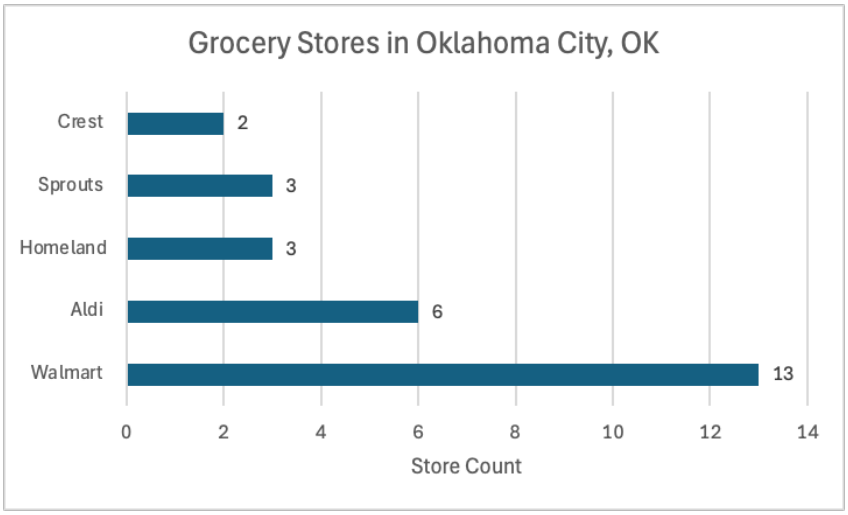

Figure 12: Top 5 Grocery Stores in Oklahoma City, OK

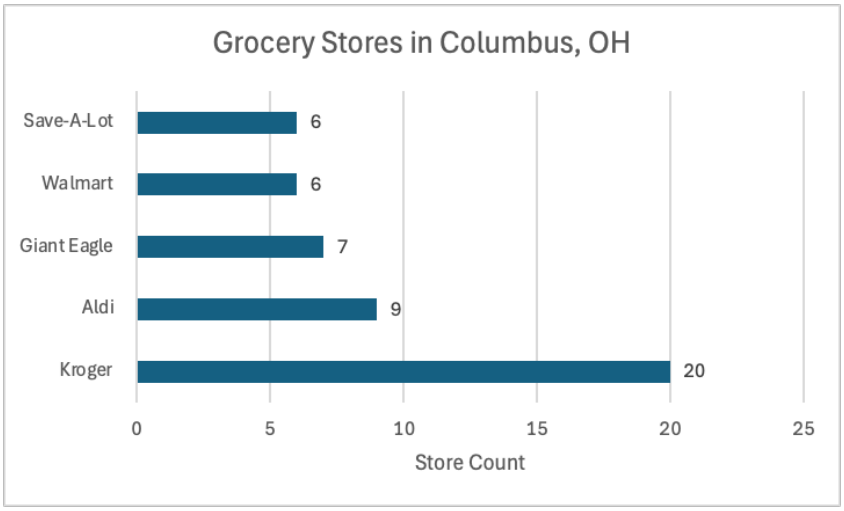

Figure 13: Top 5 Grocery Stores in Columbus, OH

To gauge a deeper understanding of the behavior of grocery retailers in the wider context of each city, we can use specific grocery stores as case studies to observe the patterns in their decision-making. Looking at the number of stores in each city Figures 10-13, there is a large discrepancy between first and second place, highlighting the level of investment these chains have put into their locations. Interestingly, the three cities that have the largest number of locations and the biggest differences between first and second place come from the same three Democratic-leaning cities.

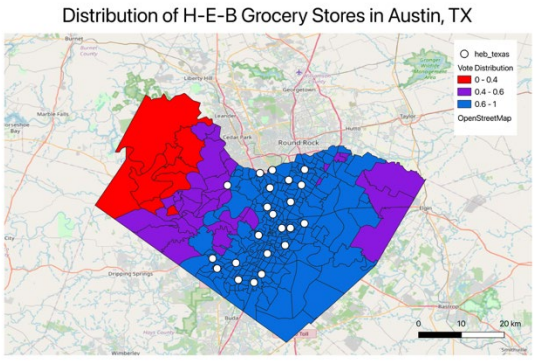

Figure 14: H-E-B Stores in Republican/Moderate/Democrat Distribution in Austin, TX

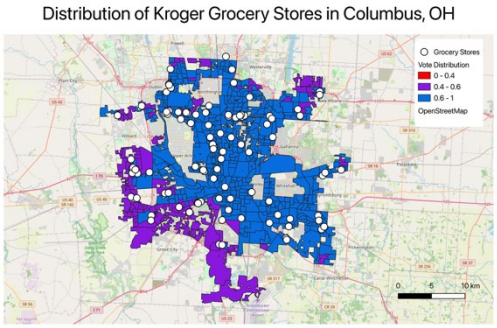

Figure 15: Kroger Stores in Republican/Moderate/Democrat Distribution in Columbus, OH

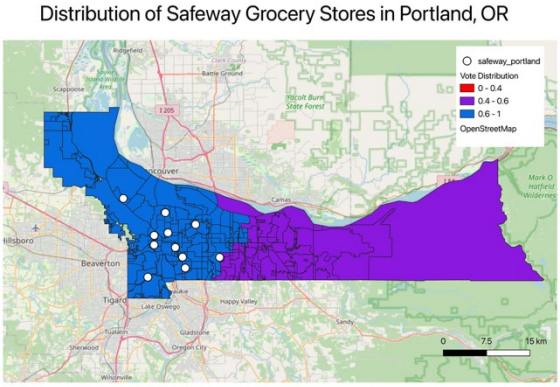

Figure 16: Safeway Stores in Republican/Moderate/Democrat Distribution in Portland, OR

Looking at location strategies of the top stores in each of these cities in Figures 14-16, the distribution of these grocery stores for Portland, Austin, and Columbus follow a similar pattern where the stores are predominately located within the Democratic-leaning center of the city. There is a bit more variation in Austin (Figure 14) and Columbus (Figure 15) where there are a few stores located in the Moderate areas of the city in the periphery of the city. A case could be made that the reason why these grocery stores are situated in predominately Democratic areas is because these areas already have a high population density and a large market, but we can observe Oklahoma City as a counterexample to this claim.

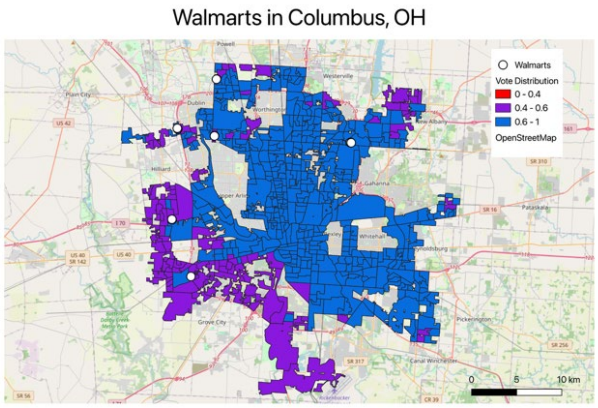

Figure 16: Walmart Stores in Republican/Moderate/Democrat Distribution in Columbus, OH

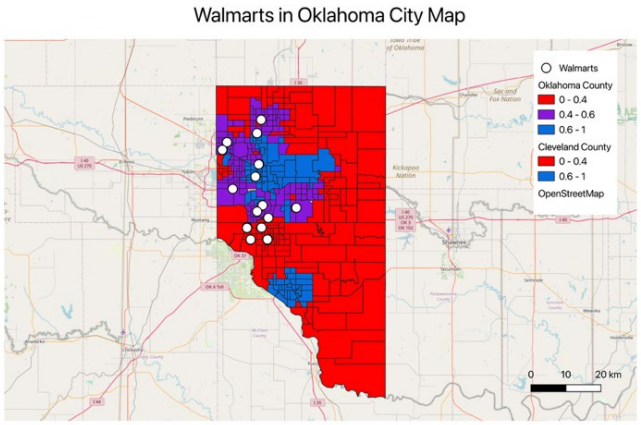

Figure 17: Walmart Stores in Republican/Moderate/Democrat Distribution in Oklahoma City, OK

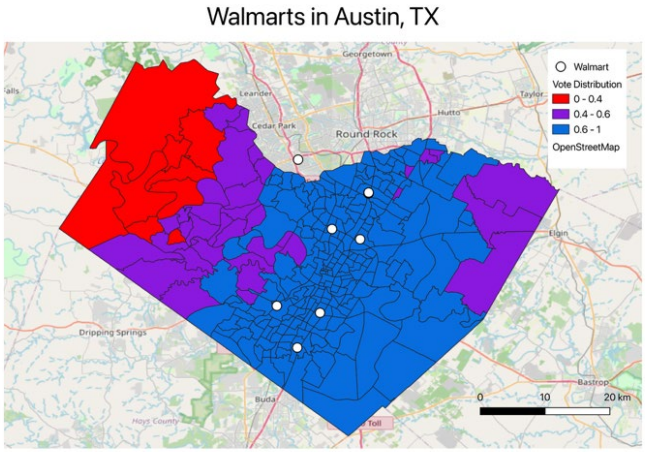

Figure 18: Walmart Stores in Republican/Moderate/Democrat Distribution in Austin, TX

The most common store in Oklahoma City is Walmart, which is currently dominating the grocery market retailing industry in the United States with its 21% share. Due to its extreme prevalence in the U.S., it would be expected for Walmart to have a location throughout major urban areas in order to capture the largest market possible. Contrary to that expectation, Walmart stores were not found to be in the top 5 of any other cities looked at in this study and instead emerged in varying quantities and in different areas. In the study, Walmart was found to have an overwhelming presence in Oklahoma City, with having the most stores (total of 13) in the city. In Austin and Columbus, their presence starts to dwindle as they fall into the second and fourth spot respectively, while in Portland, the retail giant is nowhere to be seen in the entire dataset of grocery stores in the city. The spatial distribution of the stores also varies from city to city as well, with the Walmart stores in Oklahoma City being located near the center of the city and being spread across Democratic, Moderate, and Republican precincts (Figure 17), while Austin (Figure 18) and Columbus (Figure 16) show the stores being more spread out across the Democratic and Moderate precincts and positioned towards the periphery of the county lines.

Speculations

Trying to compare the location strategy between the most common grocery stores of each city seems random at first glance, but taking into consideration the corporate sociopolitical activity (CSA) of each company reveals an interesting pattern. The CSA of each store is identical to each other with similar support shown towards topics like sustainability and supporting the local communities. One major difference is in these stores' outward support for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practices in the workplace. Walmart infamously rolled back their DEI initiatives in 2024, including not renewing their racial equity center established five years beforehand and stopped participating in the Human Rights Campaign’s annual benchmark index

for measuring workplace inclusion for LGBTQ+ employees. In comparison, Fred Meyer, H-E-B, and Kroger still maintain their DEI policies on their website. This does not fully tell us that Walmart is a Republican store or even that the other stores are Democratic, but it shows a consistent deviation between the rest of the dataset. This pattern suggests that Walmart's marketing and location selection strategy in Oklahoma City reflects a more Moderate to Republican local environment, furthering the SBC established in the area already. The consistent results from the analysis of the location strategies of these grocery stores lead us to associate politics as one of the several overlapping influences that shape location strategy, with variations coming from differences in consumer preferences but overall aligning with the political ecosystem in the area.

Limitations and Future Steps

While the conclusion of the study identifies an association between grocery store placement and political affiliation, there are several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results of this analysis. The dataset of the entire study only observes a sample size of 4 cities that were selected based on their differing political environments, potentially introducing selection bias into the analysis. Therefore, this dataset cannot fully reflect the grocery store location patterns across the United States.

The categorization of political identities was also simplified into broad categories, which does not reflect the full scope of political attitudes locally and nationally. Breaking down political identities as Republican, Moderate, or Democratic is not representative of the vast political ideologies and identities that make up the American public.

As a result, the findings of this study should not be taken as a holistic conclusion on the relationship between brand marketing strategies and political identities but be interpreted as

exploratory correlations between the marketing decisions that grocery stores make in context of political attitudes. Future studies can potentially include external factors such as socioeconomic status and population density into their research to get a wider interpretation of the extent in which these factors affect grocery store locations and compare it against the results of this study to gauge a more accurate view of how partisanship can influence marketing tactics.

Conclusion

Although this thesis could not completely validate the hypothesis that grocery stores located within politically extreme areas show greater political alignment than those in politically competitive areas, the results and discussion of this paper were able to invoke some interesting developments in the conversation of political signaling within marketing strategies. The contradicting answers found in the results of the chi-square tests suggest further investigation into the relationships involved with the decision-making behind store locations. Overall, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of political consumerism and suggest that further exploration can provide additional insights for management and marketing applications of grocery store brands.

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