theguardian

A divided empire: what the urban-rural split means for the future of America

Cities have long been the backbone of the Democratic party, and rural regions the heartland of Republicanism – yet Donald Trump's election has exposed these divides like never before. Will US metropolises increasingly turn into city-states?

Demonstrators in New York protest against Donald Trump in front of Trump Tower in November. Photograph: Kena Betancur/AFP/Getty Images

David Uberti

Monday 9 January 2017 07.07 EST

Sitting in a downtown Cleveland coffee shop in early December, Julie Goulis is still in shock. "Some of the soul-searching I've been doing after the election has been about how I can understand people outside of my bubble," she tells me. "I was so ashamed Ohio went for Trump."

Like many US cities, Cleveland is overwhelmingly progressive in its politics and traditionally elects Democrats at all levels of government, despite hosting the 2016 Republican National Convention. But partisan divisions in the United States increasingly correlate with geographic differences, leaving many cities like Cleveland as liberal bubbles distinct from the vast conservative American hinterland. The looming inauguration of president-elect Donald Trump has left many city dwellers grappling with just how distant much of their country seems.

I meet Goulis in Tremont, a neighbourhood overlooking the Cuyahoga River as it cuts through Cleveland's revived downtown district. After an influx of European immigrants in the late 1800s, Tremont was a thriving and diverse working-class community for the first half of the 20th century, before it gradually atrophied alongside the local steel business in a familiar post-industrial spiral. Goulis, a freelance copywriter who grew up in a town about 40 miles west of Cleveland, moved here 12 years ago in search of a more walkable and diverse community. "I reject the suburbs," she says.

In the years since the housing market bottomed out, Tremont and other pockets of Cleveland have witnessed a tenuous revitalisation thanks to newcomers seeking city lifestyles and new investment in 21st-century industry. Meanwhile, other neighbourhoods, particularly communities of colour, continue to suffer from the long-term effects of deindustrialisation, disinvestment and systemic racism. The dichotomy is familiar in many American cities.

Still, economically and racially diverse metropolitan areas stand as one in American politics. In Ohio, progressive urban centres like Cleveland and Columbus put up fierce opposition to Trump, who carried the state by running up huge margins in exurban and rural regions. The election only accentuated this divide in political culture, bringing a national spotlight to urban-rural tensions that have long simmered at the state level.

"I love Cleveland, but I've always considered it separate from Ohio," Goulis says. "I just feel different than my friends far out in the suburbs and the rural areas. We just have different ideas about what makes a good life."

A Trump campaign sign in Pennsylvania's Rust Belt region.
Photograph: Mark Makela/Getty

Such conflicting perspectives stretch back to the foundation of American democracy. Urban areas - places of dense social diversity - have long been the backbone of the Democratic party, coalescing around a stronger safety net, liberal social policies, climate science and more open immigration laws. Outer suburbs and rural regions, meanwhile, are a bastion for conservative

Republicans, with largely white communities rallying around traditional values, lower taxes, fewer regulations and a more static notion of American culture.

But the trends driving these divisions have quickened in recent decades, particularly during an uneven economic recovery in which many small towns were devastated and a few megacities roared back.

These kinds of demographic and economic factors that deepen the political divergence largely mirror those in liberal cities and more conservative countrysides in Europe, as the UK's Brexit vote demonstrated. In the US, the election of Trump has ushered these urban-rural divides on to the national stage like no other time in modern history.

Nowhere has the reaction been more stark than in New York, Trump's stomping ground and America's cosmopolitan flagship. Thousands of New Yorkers took to the streets in the days following his election in November, shutting down main thoroughfares as they chanted slogans like "New York hates Trump". A wall on the Union Square subway station was covered until recently with myriad neon post-it notes displaying both rants and inspiration: "No human is illegal", "Save Our Country", "The Future is Female". Occasional protests continue outside of Trump Tower in Midtown Manhattan, where the president-elect has been working to form his government.

Following a meeting there with Trump in November, Democrat New York mayor Bill de Blasio told reporters that Trump's harsh proposals on immigration "flew in the face of all that was great about New York City, the ultimate city of immigrants, the place that has succeeded because it was open for everyone". De Blasio and other urban Democrats have already pledged to remain as so-called "sanctuary cities" that provide some protections for undocumented immigrants.

The New York progressive has organised a coalition of mayors into a pro-immigration reform group called Cities for Action, and in December officials urged the Obama Administration for action before Inauguration Day. Trump, in response, has vowed to curtail federal funding to sanctuary cities, setting up another fault line should he pursue his hardline campaign promises.

This dynamic - a liberal metropolis pushing back against more conservative governments - has long played out at the state level. Politicians from New York City consistently clash with representatives from suburban Long Island or upstate New York, a largely rural region peppered with occasional post-industrial towns that tends to vote Republican. The result is a centrist state government in which de Blasio frequently clashes with state elected officials over his avowedly liberal urban agenda.

Hundreds of New Yorkers marked International Migrants Day by marching to Trump Tower, pledging to defend immigrant New Yorkers against the president-elect's policies. Photograph: John Moore/Getty Images

In Ohio, where a Republican legislature has repeatedly cut taxes, reduced municipal revenue sharing, and slashed statewide services, residents in some cities have voted in favour of new local levies and additional social programmes. “From a policy perspective, we are seeing some real divergence,” says Amy Hanauer, executive director of the thinktank Policy Matters Ohio.

The November presidential election saw this state-level dynamic play out on the national stage like never before. Hillary Clinton rode a wave of support in urban areas - winning 88 of the country’s 100 most populous counties - en route to a popular vote lead of nearly 3 million. Perhaps more striking is that the mere 15% of counties she carried nationwide accounted for 64% of the country’s aggregate GDP, according to a Brookings Institution analysis.

Trump portrayed himself as a foil to the urban liberal elite, even if the stereotype belies continued stagnation of the urban working class. He spoke of cities as dystopian hellscapes while railing against the global-facing industries that fuel their massive economic output, including finance, tech and media.

“The political divide sets up a false, zero-sum game between urban areas and rural areas, where investment and benefit for one is viewed at the expense of the other,” says Alan Berube, a senior fellow at Brookings.

Anti-urban backlash

Americans have had such political disputes stretching back to the nation’s founding. Thomas Jefferson, who envisioned the United States as an agrarian democracy, warned that, “when [people] get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe.” The electoral college, which allowed Trump to win the presidency despite a sizeable loss of the popular vote, was established partly to prevent populous states from gaining too much power.

In the early 20th century, anti-urban backlash targeted crime and unhealthy living conditions as cities ballooned into overcrowded manufacturing hubs. That sentiment took on an anti-government flavour following the failure of misguided urban renewal policies, and then a racist tinge once many white Americans fled to the suburbs. Urban political corruption and financial mismanagement have only deepened tensions.

"Taken together, anti-urbanism adds up to an unwillingness to acknowledge the urban and metropolitan nature of American society and the refusal to embrace the essentially collective, rather than individual, nature of urban life," writes historian Steven Conn, author of Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the Twentieth Century.

But Brookings' Berube sees cause for optimism in bridging the urban-rural divide in specific locations. "The states where there is more progress and potential," he says, "are those where the pie is growing and people see that their communities are positioned OK, and don't see themselves in a pitched battle for every last employment opportunity and investment dollar."

One example might be found in the Sun Belt, where Austin's long record of voting Democrat makes it a blue dot within Texas's sea of red. The state capital's unofficial motto, "Keep Austin Weird", was coined nearly two decades ago as an impromptu ode to local funkiness in the face of breakneck economic growth.

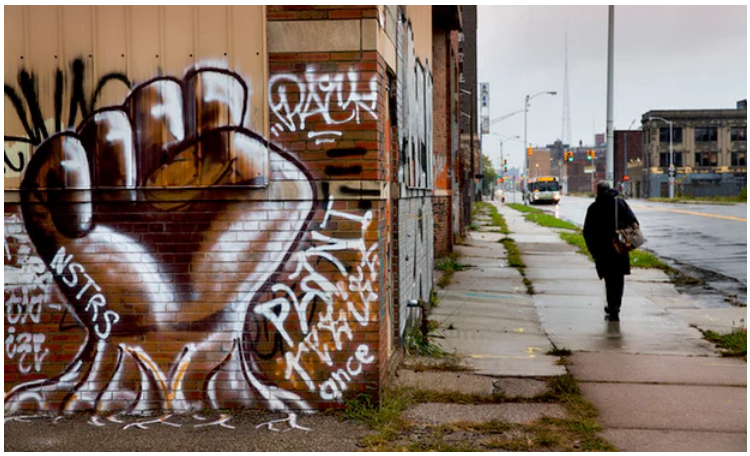
Anti-Trump demonstrators gather in Austin, Texas. Photograph: Tamir Kalifa/AP

Since then, the university town and live music mecca has emerged as one of 21st-century America's tech centres. And its liberal social culture, which is rare in the overwhelmingly conservative Lone Star State, has remained a selling point as multinational giants such as Google set up shop, highly educated millennials flood in, and new high-rises spring up. The influx of young professionals has added a generational dimension to the differences between city and state, though it doesn't necessarily follow the usual party lines.

"That push-pull happens every legislative session, and it's something that everybody has come to expect," says Austin mayor Steve Adler, speaking generally of the Republican-controlled state government. "In those instances, Austin tries to first reinforce the liberty argument, which is to say the city government is the level of government that is closest to the people ... Our economics and our people are a little bit different - though not necessarily better - than other cities."

But the ascendent Austin, which is home to the seat of state government, may have more political clout than some of its urban counterparts across the country. In Michigan, ancestral home of the American labour movement, state Democrats have lost much of their power to dictate the state policy agenda - and it's unlikely the balance of power will shift any time soon. States draw their own federal and state political maps after each decennial census, many of them putting governing parties in control. It's no surprise, then, that new boundaries in Michigan and other states tilt the odds in the governing parties' favour.

This has come at a pivotal time for Michigan's largest city, Detroit. In 2013, residents watched as the state installed an emergency financial manager to bring the city back from the brink of financial collapse. The official guided Motown through bankruptcy, though his appointment arguably disenfranchised local voters from having a say in government.



'Largely black residential neighbourhoods still suffer from the long-term effects of Detroit's urban crisis.' Photograph: Barry Lewis/Corbis via Getty Images

Such moves carry an ugly connotation. In Detroit, as with so many other American cities, racism cannot be dissociated from politics and development. Black workers were barred from enjoying the full fruits of Detroit's manufacturing heyday, while black prospective homebuyers were prevented from pursuing the American dream of single family home-ownership. White flight wrought demographic devastation, with the city's population falling from about 1.9 million in 1950 to 700,000 today.

Even now, largely black residential neighbourhoods still suffer the long-term effects of this urban crisis, despite the nascent resurgence of downtown Detroit. And to Jonathan Kinloch, a businessman and activist, the election made clear that many Americans haven't even begun to grapple with that history.

"This was a test here in Michigan, in many black people's opinions, of how far we've come," Kinloch says. "The message that black people heard coming from Donald Trump, and what suburban and rural white folks heard, were two different messages. This set race relations back a long way."

A man riding a wave of implicitly anti-urban populism will now lead an increasingly urban country. His pledge to repeal Obamacare would disproportionately affect low-income and minority communities. Ben Carson, his pick to lead the Department of Housing and Urban Development, has no government or housing policy experience, once described poverty as a choice, and in 2015 compared an Obama administration fair housing rule to "mandated social-engineering schemes". And Trump's hardline stances on trade and immigration stand against the philosophical underpinnings of urban economies and culture.

The new president will assume power over diverging urban and rural Americas after accentuating the very things that separate them – a blunt departure from the once-lofty rhetoric of his predecessor. In a hyper-partisan environment in which Republicans control both houses of Congress and a vast majority of state governments, the question now is to what extent America's metropolises will wall themselves off – new city-states in a divided empire.

Follow Guardian Cities on Twitter and Facebook to join the discussion, and explore our archive here

Topics

Cities

Hillary Clinton Donald Trump Ohio Cleveland features