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American metropolis

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POSTED: Wednesday, November 14, 2012, 3:01 AM

By Steven Conn

If last week's election had a moral, as we have been hearing from all quarters, it is that America's demographics are changing swiftly and dramatically. The country is less white, and Protestants are no longer a majority. While the Obama campaign tapped into this new America, the Republican Party, with varying degrees of hand-wringing, is discovering that there are simply not enough old white guys left to decide national elections.

But if you look at one of those blue- and red-coded maps of the United States, especially at the county level, you'll notice an equally important shift: The country is becoming more and more metropolitan. Indeed, according to the Brookings Institution, roughly 65 percent of Americans now live in metropolitan areas of at least 500,000 people.



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The implications for electoral politics are enormous. This explains how that electoral map can look mostly red even though President Obama won a substantial majority of electoral votes. The red covers mostly sparsely populated rural sections of the country; the blue areas are smaller, but they are concentrated in the places where nearly two-thirds of us now live. And those metropolises are deciding elections in a growing number of states.

Take Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania is a prime example. Though some continue to call it a swing state, it has not been carried by a Republican presidential candidate since 1988. That's largely because of the large numbers of votes Democrats receive in the Philadelphia metropolitan area.

It also helps explain why Nevada and Colorado are trending toward Democrats. The demographic and economic centers of gravity in both places are increasingly in their respective metropolitan areas.

The correlation is clear: In metropolitan areas, Democrats dominate; out in the countryside and in small towns, Republicans do much better. So Virginia, whose growth is increasingly centered in the Washington suburbs, voted for Obama. States without such dynamic, dominating metropolitan regions - like Kansas and Montana - voted for Romney.



This can also help us understand why Florida and Ohio seem to be perpetual toss-ups. Both have several small and medium metro regions, but neither has a dominant one. It is worth noting, however, that as the Columbus, Ohio, region has grown over the last 20 years, this once reliably Republican stronghold has voted more and more Democratic. The same may eventually prove true in Florida as Tampa, Orlando, and Miami continue to expand.

It hasn't always been this way. As postwar suburbs grew during the 1950s and '60s, urban Democratic voters became suburban Republican ones. Suburban growth coincided with an ascendancy of the GOP in the 1970s and 1980s. That many of these new suburbanites were part of the "white flight" phenomenon meant that the Republican "Southern strategy" pioneered by Richard Nixon, and perfected by Reagan and the Bushes, played well in Northern suburbs, too.

Individualist fantasies

Things have changed in the last 20 or so years. Many of those suburban areas are more ethnically and racially diverse than they were a generation ago. And many of those suburban Republicans are moderates who are rejecting a party that has moved sharply to the right. They want Dwight Eisenhower, not Michele Bachmann.

And maybe something about the experience of metropolitan life resonates with the Democratic agenda. In these denser, more heterogeneous parts of the country, perhaps people live more easily with difference and diversity, which may foster more tolerance

on all kinds of social and cultural issues.

People living in metropolises may also be more likely to see themselves as dependent on complicated systems and networks, many of which require government to remain functional. It's hard to cling to "rugged individualist" fantasies when you live and work in a metropolitan area.

Over the past several years, Republicans have alienated many Hispanic, female, and gay voters, and they were punished for that at the polls last week. But for more than 30 years now, Republicans have also turned their backs on metropolitan areas and the cities that sit at their centers. Unless they begin to speak to those voters again, they will find themselves disconnected from a growing share of the electorate.

In 2008, Sarah Palin addressed a crowd in a small North Carolina town as representing "the real America." The remark wasn't merely offensive; it was fundamentally wrong. Today, the real America is metropolitan.

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