Red, Blue & Purple America
The Future of Election Demographics

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Editor

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"The Big Sort..."
Beyond Polarization?:
The Future of Red, Blue, and Purple America
Ruy Teixeira

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The 2004 election was cause for a countrywide case of cognitive dissonance. The election was one of the closest in history, nationally, with only a few percentage points difference between George W. Bush and John Kerry. In individual counties, however, the election was not close at all. In six of ten counties the margin for one party or the other was 20 percentage points or more. Almost half of American voters lived in a county where the local margin was a landslide, in a national election that teetered on a handful of votes in a single state.

Competitive Elections, Landslide Counties

The last five elections have been closer than in any comparable period in the last century. At the same time, an increasing number of counties have developed overwhelming, and stable, local majorities. This was not the way elections were decided immediately after World War II. From 1948 to 1976 the vote jumped around, but in close elections Republicans and Democrats became more evenly mixed, especially so in the 1976 contest (table 2-1). After 1976 the trend was for Republicans and Democrats to grow geographically segregated. In the electoral blowouts of 1964, 1972, and 1984, close to six of ten voters lived in landslide counties (those won by 20 percentage points or more).

During the 1976 contest between President Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, Americans were likely to live, work, or worship with many people who supported a different political party. Just over 26 percent of the nation’s voters lived in a landslide county. Then the country began segregating. In 1992 about 38 percent of American voters lived in landslide counties. By 2000 that number had risen to 45 percent. There was a difference between elections before 1976 and after. In the polarizing, and close, 1968 election between Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey, about 38 percent of voters lived in landslide counties. The share of voters in landslide counties in the last five competitive presidential elections has been higher than in the 1968 election. (Competitive elections are those won with less than a 10 percentage point margin.) Beginning in 1992 the percentage of people living in landslide counties began an upward progression. And by 2004, in one of the closest presidential contests in history, about 48 percent of voters lived in counties in which the election was not close at all.

Since 2000 there has been disagreement over whether rank-and-file citizens have deep cultural and ideological differences. Or is polarization only the province of political elites? A favorite argument against the notion that Americans are polarized is that division is the product of an imaginative and conflict-happy press corps that spends too much time with Washington partisans and not enough afternoons, as one critic wrote, “hanging out at big box stores, supermarket chains or auto parts stores talking to normal people.”

Table 2-1. Voters in Landslide Counties, Competitive and Noncompetitive Elections, 1948–2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Voters (type of election)*</th>
<th>National victory margin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>38.8 (competitive)</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>39.9 (noncompetitive)</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>46.6 (noncompetitive)</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>32.9 (competitive)</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>63.5 (noncompetitive)</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>37.2 (competitive)</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>59.0 (noncompetitive)</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>26.8 (competitive)</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>41.9 (noncompetitive)</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>55.0 (noncompetitive)</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>41.7 (competitive)</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>37.1 (competitive)</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>42.1 (competitive)</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>48.3 (competitive)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: http://uselectionatlas.org/

* Competitive elections are those with less than a 10 percentage point margin; noncompetitive elections are those with more than a 10 percentage point margin.
The geographic polarization that has developed in the last several decades, however, would appear to lend some backing to those who say Americans are more polarized. After all, Americans have had unprecedented physical and economic mobility. But these freedoms seem only to have increased, not lessened, a new kind of political isolation. On the other hand, Americans have been geographically segmented in their politics before—during the Civil War, for example. The fact that American counties have become more politically uniform over the past two decades could be inconsequential or not.6

Our purpose here is not to join the battle over whether America is divided or not. We are more interested in the phenomenon of a growing number of landslide counties in competitive elections. There is no disagreement that counties have become more politically homogeneous; the disagreement is over what this phenomenon means. In isolation, the clustering of like-minded voters in the majority of American counties may not matter. The phenomenon, however, is not isolated. There is, instead, a remarkable confluence of social, political, and economic trends—which began in the 1970s and continued on through 2004—that have tended to cause like-minded people to cluster and to exclude others who are different.

The neighborhood has not been the only social setting that became more homogeneous in the last quarter of the twentieth century. So have churches, as the moderate middle of American Protestantism began to lose members in the mid-1960s. “Overwhelmingly, people said the people they met in church were extremely homogeneous with them politically,” says the University of Pennsylvania political scientist Diana Mutz.4 Civic organizations, too, that once crossed boundaries of class, occupation, and politics have dissolved and have been replaced by organizations of advocacy. Marketers found Americans dividing into ever-smaller homogeneous groups. “Individuals will congregate in wandering, venturesome image tribes, held together by their pursuit of common ideas, common icons, common entertainment—linked, in other words, by nothing more than a sense of belonging,” predicted two prominent marketers in the early 1990s.5 New products and new advertising strategies have been shaped with these image tribes in mind, and the newest buzz term in the trade was tribal marketing.

As with these other endeavors, politics has also grown more segmented over the past thirty years. The political divisions we take for granted today did not exist in the early 1970s. Women then voted like men. How often a person went to church did not have political meaning. In 1976 there was not a rural-urban split. The average number of voters in Democratic counties in 1976 was slightly smaller than in Republican counties, but by 2004 the average size of a county voting for John Kerry was five times that of a county that supported George W. Bush. This was not simply a function of a switch in allegiances in the rural South. Rural Crook County and urban Multnomah County (Portland), both in Oregon, differed by only 2 percentage points in the 1976 presidential election. By 2004 the difference between the counties was 42 percentage points. Split-ticket voting began to decline in the late 1970s.6 Party affiliation began to strengthen.7 Voters became more partisan, and at the same time both individual income inequality and regional economic inequality grew. Communities were growing more politically homogeneous, and the whole of society was changing.

Discovering the Big Sort

Our initial research had nothing to do with politics. We were curious why a small group of cities, Austin among them, was growing so fast and so rich. Bill Bishop was working at the Austin (Texas) American-Statesman at the time, and Bob Cushing had recently retired from the sociology department at the University of Texas. In 2002 we began working with a consortium of researchers, sharing theories and data. What we found was that certain technology-rich and innovative cities were benefiting from a special kind of migration. There have always been patterns to migration and development, of course. White Appalachians took the “hillbilly highway” north to booming Cleveland and Detroit after World War II. These were migrations in response to economic hardship and opportunity. The movements we saw from 1970 to 2000 were different. The flows were selective, and they varied by personal characteristics, not broad demographic descriptions. And the places that people were moving to had little to do with the state they were in and most to do with the places themselves.

The country was sorting, or at least that is how we talked about it in our research group conference calls. In the 1990s, for example, 40 percent of the country’s more than 300 metropolitan areas lost white population. Whites were not moving from inner cities to suburbs, though. They were abandoning entire regions in favor of others. Blacks moved to one group of cities and whites to others. Young people left rural America and older manufacturing cities for places like Austin, Texas, and Portland, Oregon.

People with college degrees, for example, were “remarkably evenly distributed” among American cities in 1970.9 But by 1980 a decidedly un-American trend had developed. The economic landscape stopped flattening and grew “spiky.”10 In the last thirty years of the twentieth century, education levels
surged. In 1970, 11 percent of the population had at least a college degree. That figure increased to 16 percent in 1980, nearly 19 percent in 1990, and 27 percent in 2004. But as the national totals of college-educated people grew, the differences in this measure among cities was astounding. The percentage of adults with a college education increased in Austin from 17 percent in 1970 to 45 percent in 2004. In Cleveland, however, the change was only from 4 percent to 14 percent. Not only was Cleveland behind, but it was falling further behind. Schooling attracted schooling, as people with degrees moved to live among others with the same levels of education. By 2000 in sixty-two metropolitan areas less than 17 percent of adults had college degrees, and in thirty-two areas more than 34 percent had degrees. The differences were even more dramatic among the young. More than 45 percent of the twenty-five-to-thirty-four-year-olds in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, had a college degree in 2000; that figure was only 16 percent in Las Vegas. Segregation by education was particularly apparent in rural areas. By 2000 the percentage of young adults with a college degree in rural areas was only half that of the average city.

Education had always predicted city growth, but beginning in the 1970s that relationship strengthened. The cities that grew the fastest and were the richest were those in which people with college degrees congregated. (Fast-growing Las Vegas is an obvious exception.) As people sorted themselves into particular cities based on their education, the cities became segregated by income, too. Average wages in a city, which were converging in the 1970s, grew more unequal throughout the 1990s. The per capita income of the ten metropolitan areas with the best-educated residents rose nearly 2 percent a year in the 1990s. The per capita income of the ten cities with the least educated population grew less than 1 percent a year.

This was the "big sort" of the 1990s. Every action produced a self-reinforcing reaction: educated people congregated, creating regional wage disparities, which attracted more educated people to these richer regions. Educated people produced more patented ideas, and so the inequality in patent production increased among cities, which further increased the disparity in income. By 2000 "striking variation in average wages" was found across economic regions. America shattered. Prescription drug abuse mired southeastern Kentucky in a hellish kind of civic dysfunction, while Seattle thrived.

In 2002 twenty-one metropolitan areas produced more patents and technological production per capita than the national average. As expected, these areas had higher incomes and faster growth than cities with fewer patents or technology production. Young people went to these cities, and so did people with college degrees. These cities were certainly different economically and demographically, but were they different socially?

In 2000 Robert Putnam commissioned a survey of 30,000 people living in forty American communities. Putnam is the author of Bowling Alone, the book documenting the decline in civic organizations and life in the United States. His 2000 survey was designed to measure the nation’s civic well-being, so he asked people if they went to church, voted, volunteered, donated to charities, belonged to clubs, or attended discussion groups. Communities varied widely on their stocks of social capital. We looked at the survey results from the perspective of high-tech communities, and what we found was that cities in which people produced both patents and technology had entirely different social structures from those with more traditional economies. Bismarck, North Dakota; Birmingham, Alabama; and Baton Rouge, Louisiana all were brimming with many forms of social capital, but they produced few new marketable ideas and little technology. San Diego, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Silicon Valley all had bottom-of-the-barrel levels of social connections but high rates of innovation and growth—and high incomes. These cities scored high on only two of Putnam’s eleven gauges of social well-being: their residents registered a higher degree of interracial trust and were more inclined to engage in “protest politics.” They voted less than those in more traditional cities but signed more petitions and joined more demonstrations and boycotts.

Did high-tech cities really have different social structures than manufacturing towns? To find out, we compared—on a range of social capital measures—the 21 high-tech cities with the 138 cities with the least technology and the fewest patents. The cities were different:

—People in high-tech cities (compared to low-tech cities) were more interested in other cultures and places, more likely to "try anything once," more likely to engage in individualistic activities, more optimistic, and more interested in politics. Although volunteerism in these cities was increasing, it was less than in low-tech cities. Church attendance, community projects, and club membership were all decreasing.

—People in low-tech cities (compared to high-tech cities) were more likely to attend church, to be involved in community projects, to volunteer, and to be supportive of traditional authority. They were more family oriented, had more feelings of isolation and economic vulnerability, were more sedentary, and had more social activities with other people.

These two groups of cities seemed to be developing in radically different ways, moving along diverging trajectories. There were obvious distinctions in
the basic ways people were going about their lives, and these social distinctions seemed to have economic consequences. But were these differences also political? The survey asked people if they thought of themselves as liberal or conservative; people in high-tech cities were slightly more liberal than the nation as a whole before 1990, but since then they had become decidedly more liberal. Before 1990 people living in low-tech cities described themselves as slightly more liberal than the national average, but after 1990 an increasing number labeled their politics as conservative. Before 1990 people in high-tech cities were at the national average in terms of party identification. After 1990 these cities were Democratic strongholds. Manufacturing cities and rural areas moved in the reverse direction, growing more Republican. Not only were there differences, but those differences were increasing.

The same pattern appeared in presidential votes. We divided metropolitan areas into five groups, with descending levels of high technology and patents, and then compared how these groups of cities voted since 1980. In the earliest election, all of the groups voted much the same. The twenty-one high-tech regions were slightly more Democratic than the nation as a whole. Suburban cities adjacent to these high-tech areas (Galveston outside of Houston; Orange County outside of L.A.; Boulder outside of Denver) were slightly more Republican than the national average. But in 1980 the vote in all these areas approximated how the nation voted as a whole.

As time passed, though, voting patterns diverged. The high-tech group tilted increasingly Democratic, and in 2000 these cities voted for Al Gore, the Democratic nominee, at levels 17 percent above the national average. (Take out the Texas high-tech cities of Austin, Dallas, and Houston, and the remaining eighteen high-tech cities voted Democratic at a rate 21 percent above the national average.) Gore won the twenty-one high-tech cities and their adjacent metropolitan areas by 5.3 million votes. Bush made up this deficit (almost) in low-tech cities and rural America. The pattern reappeared in 2004, when John Kerry outpolled George W. Bush by more than 5 million votes in high-tech cities, in an election that the Republican won by more than 3 million votes.

These differences in regional well-being had life-and-death consequences. As the returns to knowledge increased and the educated migrated to a select group of cities, the economy of rural areas stagnated. With few local jobs or educational opportunities, rural young people increasingly joined the military; as a result, rural residents have died at disproportionate rates in Afghanistan and Iraq. By the end of October 2007 the death rates in Iraq for rural America were 50 percent higher than that for urban America. In prosperous cities, young people had other opportunities. In smaller towns, there was only the military recruiter. The death rates for Kokomo, Indiana, and Bismarck, North Dakota, were twelve times that for San Francisco.

**Digging Deeper: Three Tests of the Big Sort**

Opposites do not attract. Psychologists know that people seek out others like themselves for marriage and friendship. That the same phenomenon could be taking place between people and communities is not all that surprising to social psychologists. “Mobility enables the sociological equivalent of ‘ assortative mating.’”

The economist Charles Tiebout theorized in 1956 that people would pick and choose among communities to find a desirable array of local services at an acceptable level of taxes. People in Portland love their libraries and would be willing to pay taxes to keep them; people who prefer low taxes to libraries would not move to Portland. There would be millions of such “elections,” as people cast their votes with moving vans and apartment leases. According to Tiebout, the sorting would mostly be based on economics, as people sought their own balance between services provided and taxes charged. But he also imagined people making their decisions about where to live based on who would be their neighbors. In a footnote to his classic article, the economist allowed, “Not only is the consumer-voter concerned with economic patterns, but he desires, for example, to associate with ‘nice’ people.” Whether for low taxes or the right kind of neighbors, people would cast their ballots for a community with their feet.

There is no poll or survey that could tell us whether the country has undergone a massive Tiebout migration based on lifestyle, culture, and politics. Places did become more politically homogeneous, particularly over the last five elections, but nobody asked people their political leanings and then tracked them as they moved. Although “party identification and most other social identities are highly stable over time,” it could also be that places were becoming more politically homogeneous because people were changing their party allegiances once they moved. So we devised three tests to determine if the big sort was, in part, bringing together politically like-minded people.

**Test One: Does Like Attract Like?**

If counties have been collecting overwhelming numbers from one party or the other, majorities within counties should grow. The power of assortative migration would attract more Democrats to Democratic counties and more Republicans to Republican counties. Counties would tip toward one party,
and then they would keep tipping as they attracted more like-minded inhabitants. Some counties (346, to be exact) have voted for the same party in every presidential election between 1948 and 2004. In each election after 1948 more counties picked a side and stuck with it through the 2004 contest. Fifty-four tipped in 1952; 536 tipped in 1968. (Goodbye Democratic South!)

Before counties tipped, they were on average quite competitive politically. The difference between Republican and Democratic candidates over the years was just 2–3 percentage points in untipped counties. But here is the interesting part about the tipping phenomenon: once a county tipped, the vote spread kept growing. The average vote spread in presidential elections among tipped counties was an overwhelming 20 percentage points in most elections. This was particularly true for Republican counties, which saw the margins for Republican presidential candidates increase over time.

The numbers of people living in tipped counties have grown quite large. One half of U.S. voters live in counties that have remained unchanged in their presidential preference since 1980; 60 percent live in counties that have not changed since 1988; and nearly 73 percent live in counties that have not changed since 1992. In Orange and Los Angeles Counties, local majorities have been growing in recent years, a phenomenon found in most U.S. communities (figures 2-1, 2-2).

Could the tipping phenomenon be a function of migration? We found that Republican counties tended to become more politically concentrated than Democratic counties. This happened, in part it appears, because people migrating from Republican counties were attracted to other Republican counties to an unusual degree. Between 1995 and 2000, for example, 79 percent of the people who left Republican counties settled in counties that would not only vote Republican in 2004 but that were also likely to be Republican landslide counties. We do not know how individuals voted, but we do know that when people left counties that would vote Republican in 2004, they were two and a half times more likely to move to other counties that would vote Republican than would vote Democratic. (Democrats, on the other hand, migrated to both Republican and Democratic counties.)

Between 1976 and 2004, the gap between the parties increased in 2,085 counties; only 1,026 counties (33 percent) grew more competitive. California is the stereotypical blue (Democratic) state. But within California, seventeen counties grew more Democratic after 1976, and thirty became more reliably Republican. Only eleven (19 percent) became more competitive.

Test Two: Does Geography Matter?

Is it just our imagination or is Lubbock, Texas, really a very different place from Cambridge, Massachusetts? Or more generally, are there significant differences in the lifestyles and beliefs of people living in solidly Republican and solidly Democratic counties? To find out, we compiled evidence from polls conducted by the Pew Research Center from 1996 through 2004 and analyzed the results.
by how the counties voted in the 2004 election. We compared strong Republican counties (where Bush won by 10 percentage points or more) with strong Democratic counties (where Kerry won by at least 10 percentage points). We found the following three facts about marriage, income, and religion:

—In strongly partisan Republican counties 57 percent of the people were married. In strongly Democratic counties, 47 percent of the people were married.

—In Republican counties 21 percent of the people earned more than $75,000 a year. In Democratic counties, 29 percent earned that.

—In Republican counties 46 percent of the people said that they went to church at least once a week, and half described themselves as evangelicals. In Democratic counties, only 34 percent of the people went to church at least once a week, and 32 percent were evangelicals.

People of the same demographic type (union members, evangelicals, women) differed in their political beliefs based on where they lived. Less than half of the evangelicals living in Kerry-supportive counties supported the Iraq War. In heavily Republican counties, however, this same group supported the war three to one. Labor union members were against the war in Democratic counties but for it in Republican counties. (The gap was nearly 30 percentage points.) Women were against the war in Democratic counties and for it in Republican counties (by a difference of 23 points.)

Scott Keeter at the Pew Research Center did his own calculations with the 2004 data. Keeter looked at landslide counties and found differences on a range of opinions and ways of life. For example, 48 percent of the people living in Democratic landslide counties felt “strongly” that homosexuality “is a way of life that should be accepted by society.” Only 21 percent of the people in Republican landslide counties agreed. In Republican landslide counties, 49 percent believed “strongly” that homosexuality should be “discouraged by society,” compared to 27 percent in Democratic landslide counties. The two Americas, separated by county lines, disagreed significantly on the war in Iraq, the USA PATRIOT Act, and the use of military force in carrying out foreign policy. And, of course, in Republican strongholds half the people had guns in their homes; in Democratic areas, only 19 percent did.

Test Three: The Hindsight Experiment

If people really have been sorting themselves into two groups over the past three decades, then we ought to be able to look back and see some corresponding demographic trends. We ought to be able to take advantage of the fact that hindsight is 20/20 and find the shifts in population that correspond to the balkanized communities we live in today.

To use our 20/20 vision, we divided the nation’s counties into four groups based on the results from the 2004 election. One group was made up of landslide Democratic counties (those with a more than 20 percentage point advantage for Kerry and with a population of 63 million in 2006); the second group was made up of competitive Democratic counties (those for Kerry by less than 20 percentage points and with a population of 68 million); third were landslide Republican counties (more than 20 percentage points for Bush; 84 million people); and fourth, competitive Republican counties (under 20 percentage points for Bush; 87 million people). We examined these groups retrospectively, tracking them through time to see if and how their demographic composition changed. We knew where these counties ended up in the highly polarized 2004 election. We wanted to understand how they got there—and whether the counties in one group had anything more in common than how they voted for president in November 2004.

Here is the first calculation, a measurement that shows the vote between 1948 and 2004 for both landslide counties and competitive counties (figure 2-3). This measure displays the deviation in the vote in each party from the national average: above zero means the county group voted more Republican than the nation as a whole; below zero means the county group voted more Democratic. Before 1976 counties of both majorities jumped around. Beginning in 1980, though, they began to diverge, and they kept separating.
for the next quarter century. The division so evident in the 2000 and 2004 elections had been in the making for decades.

Get used to the pattern. It appeared over and again as we evaluated other demographic measures. The distribution of people with bachelor's degrees or higher, for example, shows that landslide Democratic counties have been gaining on this measure (figure 2-4). Republican counties, on the other hand, gained the most in church members. Democratic counties, in fact, lost churchgoers (figure 2-5). All county groups gained foreign-born residents, but by 2000, 21 percent of the population in Democratic landslide counties was foreign-born, compared to just 5 percent in Republican landslide counties (figure 2-6).

In 1970 each of the four county groups was home to about a quarter of the nation's white population. (Republican landslide counties actually had a slightly smaller percentage of the total white population than did Democratic landslide counties.) Over the next thirty years, however, whites became more concentrated in Republican counties (figure 2-7). And Democratic counties, especially Democratic landslide counties, lost shares of white population. By the time of the 2000 census, only 18 percent of the nation's white population lived in Democratic landslide counties, while 30 percent of the white population lived in counties that provided Republicans with landslide margins in 2004. The real white flight of the past two generations has been whites moving to communities that were becoming staunchly Republican.

Everywhere we looked we found differences in migration patterns that related to the vote. One final example: we tracked the average per capita incomes of people moving into and out of our four county groups. Those moving from out of state into Republican landslide counties in 2003 had average per capita yearly earnings of $22,939. Those moving from out of state into Democratic landslide counties had average per capita yearly earnings of $30,492.
People were sorting by race and place of birth, by income and education, by belief, race, and religion. The numbers of people moving were large, about 4 percent of the population each year moves from one county to another. And the consequence of this shuffling, separation, and segmentation was an increasing political homogeneity in communities. That we could see, too. Before the 1970s about half of all voters lived in counties won by their political opponents. After 1976 that percentage steadily dropped, sinking to less than 40 percent in 2004. This was especially evident in Republican counties. In the first seven elections after World War II, about half of all Democratic voters lived in Republican counties. After 1976 this percentage dropped. By 2004 only 34 percent of Democratic voters lived in Republican counties.

**The Big Sort in Action: The Case of the Colorado Twist**

Traditionally Republican Colorado has become increasingly Democratic over the years. In 2004 John Kerry cut Bush’s margin of victory there to half of what it had been in 2000. A Democrat won the U.S. Senate seat in 2004, and the party swept both houses of the state legislature. Democrat Bill Ritter won the governor’s race in 2006 based in large part on his promotion of alternative energy. Ron Brownstein of the Los Angeles Times, writing in 2006, found that the language of politics in the state had shifted. People were more concerned with government services than with low taxes or abortion.

“The whole rhetoric has changed in the past four or five years,” a Democrat in Denver told Brownstein.

Colorado has become more Democratic overall, but not all of Colorado. Some parts of the state are just as Republican as they have been at any time in the past half-century. Over the past two decades, however, people from other states have flowed into Colorado. When we tracked these migrants, we learned that the Colorado counties with the highest inflows of people from other states were also the counties in which support for Democratic presidential candidates has been growing. The counties least affected by migration from other states had actually grown slightly more Republican since the 1980s. In addition, these politically opposite parts of Colorado were attracting people from entirely different places. The people moving to the fast-growing counties around Denver were three times more likely to have come from blue counties outside Colorado than the people moving to the slower-growing (and heavily Republican) counties along the Kansas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska borders. The county that sent the most people to Colorado between 1981 and 2004 was deeply Democratic Los Angeles County, California.

Migration is helping to turn Colorado purple, but since the big sort works at the community level—and although the state as a whole grew more politically mixed—the divisions between Republican and Democratic areas within the state widened. Colorado’s story is of a statewide narrowing of the gap between the parties but also of expanding cultural and political divisions within the state. In that sense, Colorado is a microcosm of the nation, where government is being called on to meet the demands of communities that have less and less in common. It is a chore made harder by the peculiar psychology of like-minded groups.

**The Social Psychology of a Landslide; or, What Was the Matter with Ohio?**

Just as there are no data that directly link the politics of people who move to the increasing partisanship of counties, there are no data that reveal whether individuals in these like-minded communities are growing more extreme in their thinking. In fact, one of the criticisms of our stories in the Austin American-Statesman was that even in communities with large partisan majorities there are still plenty of people there with opposite opinions. Even the most partisan county is diverse politically.

It is not the purpose of this essay to delve into the psychology of groups. But it is worth noting that years of political research have found that
communities with landslide majorities have a different kind of politics than those with mixed outcomes. The anecdotal evidence is easy to find. The chair of the local Democratic Party in a strong Republican county in the Texas hill country told us about the time his group prepared a float for the annual July 4 parade through the center of town. “We got it all decorated,” Gillespie County’s George Keller recalled, “but nobody wanted to ride.” Nobody wanted to risk the stigma of being identified as a Democrat in an overwhelmingly Republican area. “Thank goodness we got rained out,” Keller said of the orphaned float. A Republican county commissioner living in a Democratic precinct in Austin moved to a more Republican address after his car was egged one night. “You really do recognize when you aren’t in step with the community you live in,” he told us. Another political minority talked of remaining silent in book groups when the conversation turned to politics. A woman told a New York Times reporter she moved to a Dallas exurb instead of to Austin because, “Politically, I feel a lot more at home here.”

Over the last fifty years political scientists have found that large political majorities do have strong effects over those in the minority. They squelch dissent and embolden majorities. The political scientist Warren Miller used survey data to examine the 1952 presidential vote (Eisenhower versus Stevenson) in counties with overwhelming party majorities.39 He found that the presence of large partisan majorities had the effect of dampening turnout among citizens in the political minority. Rather than buck the majority and risk social sanction, citizens in the minority simply stayed away from the polls. Minority parties suffered in lopsided counties, while majority parties increased their turnout—a self-reinforcing social mechanism that Miller feared could damage the country’s two-party system.

A nearly even mix of Republicans and Democrats increases voter turnout, according to the Notre Dame political scientist David Campbell.39 People are more interested in the election in this situation and are motivated to campaign for their candidates. In landslide counties, however, there is an entirely different social dynamic. Political minorities in heavily majority counties not only avoid the voting booth but also withdraw from all forms of public life. Campbell has found that political minorities in communities with large majorities are even less likely to volunteer for civic causes. People in the majority do vote in large numbers, but not because they feel that their vote is important to the outcome. Instead, they simply want to support the community, to show allegiance to the majority. A vote becomes more an affirmation of the group than an expression of a civic opinion. “In places where people share opinions you are more likely to find tighter norms,” Campbell told us. “And that’s because, to put it bluntly, in these communities people can enforce norms. So if you haven’t voted, you feel a little bit ashamed.”39 Or as James Gimpel, J. Celeste Lay, and Jason Schuknecht write, “The political segregation and partisan balkanization of neighborhoods promotes a polarization of viewpoints that is intolerant of internal dissent among adherents of a particular party.”31

The overwhelming attention given to political celebrity—and political conspiracy—in our time has obscured the politics of place. After all, if people simply respond to the faults, successes, and leadership of political elites, then increasingly homogeneous neighborhoods do not matter. But politically like-minded regions practice a different kind of politics than do places with a greater mix of allegiances. A person’s politics are affected by that person’s neighbors. Here’s one example:

In the early 1960s the political scientist John Fenton wondered why working-class voters in Ohio supported Republicans, a political act that was against their economic interests.32 Fenton explained this phenomenon by looking at the shape of the state’s neighborhoods. Upper-class voters lived in tightly knit, geographically compact communities. Physical proximity made it easier for them to maintain political cohesion and to vote as an ideological herd. In Ohio’s large number of midsize cities, however, there was no corresponding critical mass of workers. Working-class voters were dispersed. “In Ohio you had a fairly even distribution of these working-class voters across the state,” explained University of Maryland’s James Gimpel, the scholar today who has done the most work on the political effects of migration.33 “And because they lived among farmers and clerks and ditch diggers, they were not as inclined to vote so monolithically.” In nearby Michigan, Gimpel said, working-class voters lived close to one another, and their geographic proximity powered their ideological and political intensity.

In Ohio, however, workers were spread out, and the effect of this diffusion, John Fenton wrote more than thirty years ago, was profound:

The postman did not talk the same language as his account-ant neighbor, and the accountant was in a different world from the skilled workman at Timken Roller Bearing who lived across the street. Thus, conversation between them usually took the form of monosyllabic grunts about the weather. . . . The disunity of unions and the Democratic party in Ohio was a faithful reflection of the social disorganization of their members.”34
Thomas Frank, in 2004, bemoaned the failure of Great Plains residents to vote in their economic interests and asked, in the title of his book, what’s the matter with Kansas? Frank’s answer is that manipulative Republicans, who offered intelligent design rather than a living wage, had duped the working-class voters of his home state. And thin-blooded liberals, who had gotten above their populist upraising, had abandoned Democratic principles. John Fenton asked a similar question forty years earlier: what’s the matter with Ohio? He arrived at an explanation that did not depend on either gullibility or duplicity. Fenton found that the way people lived, and the communities they lived in, had shaped their political lives.

Communities shape our political thinking, too. Years of social psychological experiments have shown that like-minded groups over time become more extreme in the way they are like-minded. It is true for fraternity boys, French students, and federal appeals court judges. In 2005 several professors conducted an experiment to see if the mere discussion of political issues in like-minded groups would result in increased polarization. They recruited sixty-three Colorado citizens, ages twenty to seventy-five, half from Boulder and half from Colorado Springs, for an experiment in the effects of political discussion on a homogeneous group.

In 2004, 67 percent of the people in Boulder County voted for John Kerry, and 67 percent of the people in El Paso County (Colorado Springs) voted for George Bush. The authors picked liberals from Boulder and conservatives from Colorado Springs and then measured the individual opinions of these citizens about three issues: global warming, gay marriage, and affirmative action. True to form, the Boulder citizens were initially more liberal on these three issues than participants from Colorado Springs. The authors then divided the citizens from the two cities into batches of six, making ten groups, five from each city. The groups were then asked to discuss these three issues, to deliberate, and then to come to a consensus on the same questions each participant had been asked about individually.

The effects of deliberation are not encouraging for those who look to rational community discussion as an antidote to polarization. The ten groups discussed the three issues and came to a consensus in twenty-five of thirty discussions. In nineteen of these twenty-five, however, the consensus of the group was more extreme than the prediscussion opinions of the individuals had been. Boulder residents came to agreements on the three issues that were more liberal than the answers they had given as individuals. Colorado Springs citizens, once in their like-minded groups, grew more conservative. Before the discussion, “there was considerable overlap between many individuals in the two different cities. After deliberation, the overlap was much smaller.” Peoples’ initial beliefs had been amplified by exposure to like-minded others. They had grown more polarized after only two hours of discussion. As in hundreds of other group polarization experiments, each like-minded collection of people became more extreme after discussion. Moreover, the differences within the groups narrowed. Discussion did not spark free thinking. Instead, each homogeneous community concluded its deliberations in greater conformity. People who were already like-minded grew more alike after discussing politics with their neighbors even as, within the group, they grew more extreme.

Of course, at times we meet and talk with those having differing political opinions. But less often than we might think. In a comparison of citizens from twelve countries, Americans were the least likely to discuss politics with someone holding a different view. Americans who are poor and nonwhite are more likely than the rich and the white to be exposed to political disagreement. Citizens with the most diverse political discussion mates are those who have not graduated from high school. Those with the most homogeneous political circles have suffered through graduate school.

And how does this play out in our like-minded churches, our homogeneous clubs, and our one-class neighborhoods? Well, do we really need a pollster or a political scientist to tell us? Just look around.

### The United States of “Those People”

The effect of growing local majorities is doubled-edged: local majorities use their powers to address every conceivable issue or problem and to enact the will of their like-minded constituencies in local law and regulation in what has been an explosion of federalism. On the national level, congressional members come to Washington with unassailable majorities; as a result, the number of moderates in Congress (both House and Senate) has been declining for the past three decades. Both phenomena are the result of the big sort. The undeniable homogenization of congressional districts does not appear to be a function of redistricting. It is, instead, a product of communities growing more like-minded over time. The federal system and more than a few state legislatures have been slowed to the speed of cold syrup, as a Congress balkanized by a politically lopsided geography has lost the means and the will to deal with issues that demand trust and compromise.

We expect these trends to continue, because we expect the sorting to continue. What we are describing, after all, is not a whim or the result of some
particularly manipulative political strategist. The sorting of people into communities of interest is a perfectly natural phenomenon: given the choice, people choose to live around others like themselves. That is not likely to change. This does not mean that communities will remain aligned just-so with political parties. Eventually, issues or events will arise that will create cross-cutting relationships where, today, few exist. Old coalitions will be replaced by new ones, and the map’s colors will change. Eventually.

That has not happened yet. In the early part of the 2008 primary season, presidential candidates hopscotched among the states where they found particularly strong tribal affinities. It is not surprising that Senator Barack Obama would find an enthusiastic crowd in technology-rich Boise, a city that has more in common with Austin than any other Idaho city. Similarly, Obama won hip and turquoise Taos but lost to Senator Hillary Clinton by 20 percent-
age points just a county or two over. Governor Mike Huckabee found particular success in the exurbs, communities rich in large churches. The campaign has revealed splits within parties, but there have not been any new alignments between parties. White evangelicals are not drifting away from the Republican Party (despite stories about the evangelical crackup). Republicans and Democrats still have different views on almost every issue. (The gap between Republican and Democratic opinion on progress in the Iraq War increased throughout 2007, according to the Pew Research Center.) A poll conducted for the Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California in 2007 found that “When it comes to TV networks, it’s quite likely that if conservatives like it, liberals hate it. And vice versa.” In New Hampshire pollsters found “the swing voter is vanishing,” according to the Washington Post, as increasing percentages of voters favored one party or the other. And sure enough, in New Hampshire exit polls, 69 percent of Republican voters wanted a candidate as conservative as—or more conservative than—George W. Bush. Meanwhile, 65 percent of Democrats were “angry” with the president, with another 28 percent merely “dissatisfied but not angry.” This is not a likely recipe for the end of political conflict.

The general election this year is looking a lot like 2004, when the Bush campaign realized that, in fact, the swing voter had vanished and that money would be better spent on turnout than on persuasion. This time, however, both parties will have the latest data that will allow them to target likely voters in even the most hostile communities. Parties will conduct campaigns in communities where their opponents have landslide majorities, but it will not be a frontal assault. Targeting allows parties to pluck out the lonely Democrat in a cul-de-sac of Republicans or the misplaced McCain supporter in my neighborhood in Austin. All of the campaign strategies developed over the last few years—from refinements in canvassing to target marketing to the use of social networks in delivering a candidate’s message—are aimed at reassuring people who have protected themselves from discordant opinion.

There is certainly a heartfelt desire among voters for the partisanship to end. But it is hard to know exactly what this means. The University of Nebraska political scientist Elizabeth Theiss-Morse describes part of the widespread frustration with politics and politicians. She has conducted focus groups in Omaha and found people confused by the consensus they experience in their neighborhoods versus the conflict they see at large in the nation: “People said many times, ‘Eighty percent of us agree. We all want the same thing. . . . It’s those 20 percent who are just a bunch of extremists out there.’ It didn’t matter what their political views were. They really saw it as us against this fringe. The American people versus them, the fringe.” And yes, the fringe was associated with a place. Often the good Nebraskans would conclude in frustration, “Those people in California are really weird.” In the national focus group of this presidential year, we see a lot of people calling for an end to partisanship and sense that all of us are confounded by “those people” with the weird political beliefs. We see far less indication that groups separated by the economy, education, and culture are finding a sudden common cause in national politics.

And while there is general agreement that politicians should compromise more, most Americans feel like it is the other side that should give in. A January 2007 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center found, according to its title, broad support for political compromise in Washington. But Pew found that “the problem with questions of political compromise is that peoples’ answers will always be relative—compromise is fine when it is the other side that is doing the compromising.” So 77 percent of Republicans believe that Democratic leaders should work with President Bush, 78 percent of Democrats believe that Republican leaders should work with Democratic leaders, and 42 percent of Democrats say their own leaders should work with the president. Politicians are still rewarded more for their ideological steadfastness rather than for their willingness to find accommodation. They will be rewarded for compromising when cross-cutting issues break through the rigid boundaries of what each party considers permissible political thought.

The generational appeal of Barack Obama reveals what will certainly change the politics of partisanship and geographic segmentation. We found in our research among the young—and especially those in what has come to be called the emerging church—a reluctance to adopt a black and white
attitude about politics. "What bothers us is, when we look at it, the issues seem way more gray," one young minister in Louisville, Kentucky, told us. "When it comes to politics, they seem extremely gray, and extremely complicated." The minister speaks for his generation, according to J. Walker Smith, president of the marketing firm Yankelovich Partners. The members of the next generation are seeing politics and political conflict in a different way. We will have to wait to find out if their neighborhood choices will follow their vision.

Notes

1. In all the calculations here, third-party votes are excluded. Including third parties changes the numbers discussed here but does not alter the trends.
3. See Philip Klinkner, "Red and Blue Scare: The Continuing Diversity of the American Political Landscape," Forum 2004 (forum.com); and Edward Glaeser and Bryce Ward, "The Myth and Realities of American Political Geography," Discussion Paper 2100 (Harvard Institute of Economic Research, 2006). Klinkner had three primary objections to the first part of what became a ten-part series in the Austin American-Statesman in 2004 (www.statesman.com/metrostate/content/special reports/greatdivide/index.html). First, he said our math was wrong. On this he was mistaken: he failed to see that we included only Democratic and Republican votes in our calculations. Now we all agree on the results. Second, Klinkner found the results in line with historical trends and therefore unremarkable. But we believe increases in the "segregation index" of about 50 percent over thirty years, given the mobility of our times, to be remarkable enough to be worth exploring. Finally, Klinkner wrote that even if a large number of counties were becoming more politically homogeneous, there is still political diversity in every U.S. community. But a large amount of political science and social psychological research has consistently discovered that heavy political majorities affect the culture and politics of communities.
8. We held regular phone conferences with Richard Florida and Kevin Stolarick, then at Carnegie Mellon University; Gary Gates, then at the Urban Institute; Terry Nichols Clark, at the University of Chicago; and Joe Cortright, a Portland, Oregon, economist. Richard Florida was writing The Rise of the Creative Class at the time. Gary Gates was doing research on the distribution of gays and lesbians in the United States. Terry Clark was collecting string for his book The City as Entertainment Machine. And Joe Cortright was beginning research on the movement of young people, which would appear in his report "The Young and Restless in a Knowledge Economy."
11. This and the following information from Glaeser and Berry, "The Divergence of Human Capital," p. 11.
15. They are San Diego, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Jose, Phoenix, Denver, Boston, New York, Seattle, San Francisco, Albuquerque, Washington, Rochester (Minn.), Boise, Portland (Ore.), Raleigh-Durham, Austin, Atlanta, Houston, and Dallas.
17. To measure this difference, we used the DDB Needham Life Style survey, conducted by the advertising firm DDB Worldwide of Chicago.
18. Our explanation for these social differences in cities is the same one employed by Rich Florida and Joe Cortright: loose social structures encourage economies based on ideas and the easy transfer of information. Florida, "The World Is Spiky"; Cortright, "The Young and Restless."
20. David Myers, interview with author.
22. Ian McDonald, while allowing the scarcity of evidence, found that, "in general, the empirical tests shown here imply that new migrants most resemble the non-migrant electorate in their new locations. These results complement the argument that migration has tended to geographically sort electoral preferences, and thus homogenize the preferences of local constituencies." See McDonald, "Voters Like Us: Domestic


24. There were nineteen surveys and more than 31,000 interviews in this collection of Pew Research Center polls.

25. Scott Keeter, analysis provided to author.


29. David E. Campbell, "What You Do Depends on Where You Are: Community Heterogeneity and Participation," paper prepared for the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, April 15, 2004; see also David Campbell, Why We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape Our Civic Life (Princeton University Press, 2006).

30. David Campbell, interview with author.

31. James G. Gimpel, J. Celeste Lay, and Jason E. Schuknecht, Cultivating Democracy: Civic Environments and Political Socialization in America (Brookings, 2003), p. 120.


33. James Gimpel, interview with author. Also see Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht, Cultivating Democracy.

34. Fenton, Midwest Politics, pp. 150–52.


37. Ibid. The authors devised a simple ten-point scale (ranging from very strongly agree to very strongly disagree) that participants marked in answering three questions, one each about affirmative action, global warming, and gay marriage. The average difference in the answers given by individuals from Colorado Springs and individuals from Boulder was 4.59 before deliberation. After deliberation, however, the difference between the groups had grown to 6.24.

38. Ibid., p. 3.


