

## Nevada

(See the full report on four Intermountain West states by William Frey and Ruy Teixeira at [http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2008/08\\_intermountain\\_west\\_frey\\_teixeira.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2008/08_intermountain_west_frey_teixeira.aspx))

**A. The rapidly growing Las Vegas metropolitan area is the driver of both demographic and electoral change in Nevada.** The Reno metro is also having an impact, but it is distinctly secondary in magnitude. The relatively slow-growing Rural Heartland of the state lags far behind.

**B. Among Nevada's eligible voters, minorities and white college graduates are growing rapidly, leading to sharp increases in their shares of voters.** In contrast, white working class voters are growing very slowly and their share of Nevada's electorate is dropping precipitously.

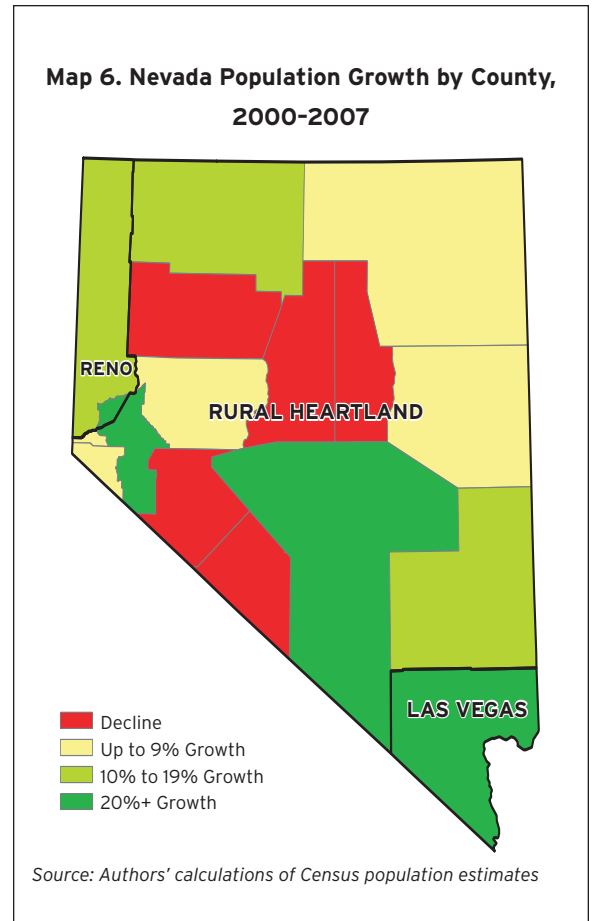
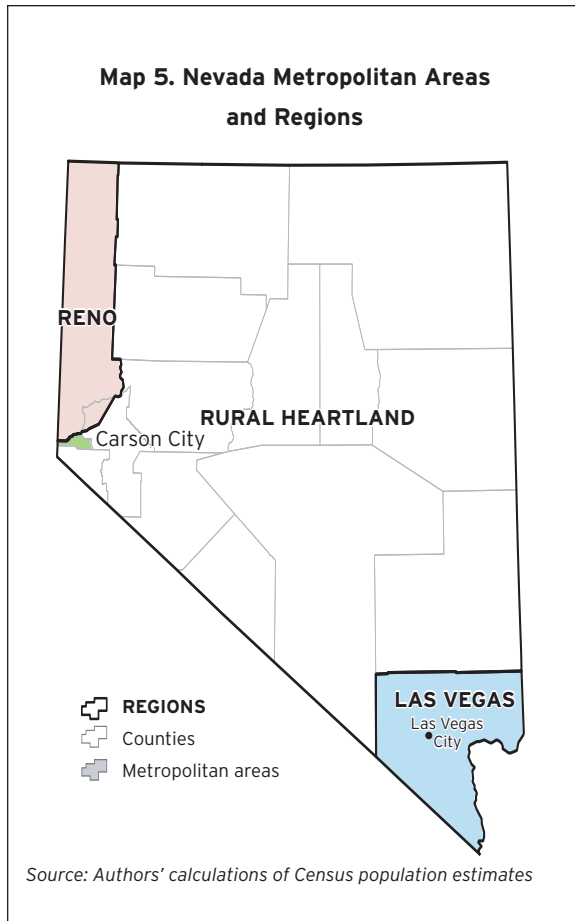
**C. Recent GOP victories in Nevada have featured solid support from white working class voters. However, this group has been moving toward the Democrats as it continues to decline as a share of voters.** White college graduate voters have also been supporting Republicans, but they too are moving toward the Democrats, as well as increasing as a share of voters. And the minority vote is increasing even faster, driven by its heavily Democratic Hispanic component.

**D. Political shifts in Nevada since 1988 have moved the fast-growing Las Vegas and Reno metros, 85 percent of the statewide vote, sharply toward the Democrats. The relatively slow-growing Rural Heartland region, however, has remained overwhelmingly Republican.** GOP plans to hold the state must center on stopping the pro-Democratic trends in Nevada's two big metros or bank on generating even larger supermajorities in the Rural Heartland.

**E. Key trends and groups to watch in 2008 include the white working class, where the GOP needs to stop the erosion of its support; white college graduates, who are rapidly growing and have been moving toward the Democrats; and Hispanics, who have been driving the growth of the minority vote and vote heavily Democratic.** These trends will determine whether the Reno and, especially, Las Vegas metros continue their march toward the Democrats, a development which would almost certainly turn the state blue.

### ***A. The rapidly growing Las Vegas metropolitan area is the driver of both demographic and electoral change in Nevada.***

Nevada remains the fastest growing state despite experiencing a mini-slump in recent years as a consequence of the housing meltdown.<sup>11</sup> The Silver State grew 66% in the 1990s and another 27% this decade. It is a major magnet for tourists, retirees, in-migrating residents from other states, especially California, and immigrants from abroad. And while its number of electoral college votes, at five, is small - up from four after the 2000 census and up from the minimum three after the 1980 census-it is hotly contested. This is due to the thin margins of victory by George Bush in the 2004 election (+2) and in



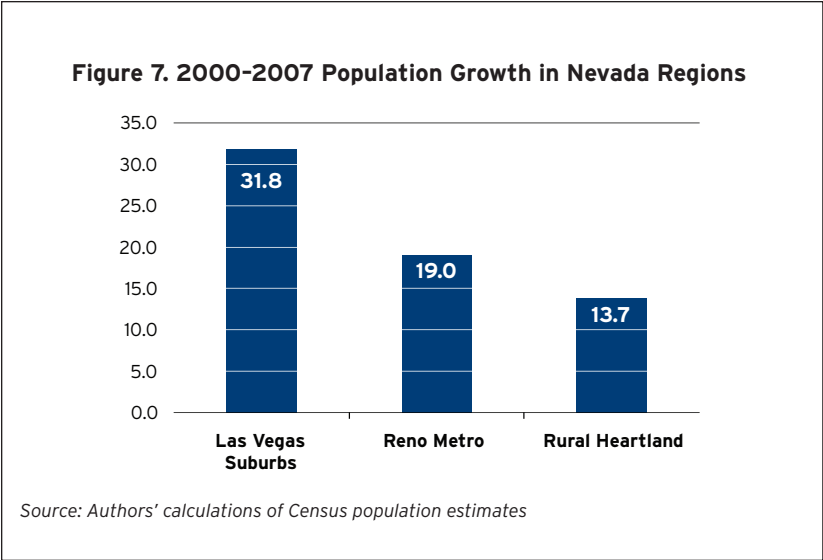
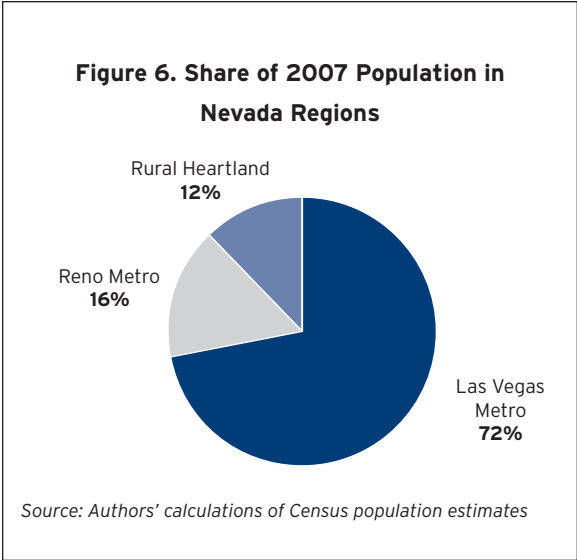
2000 (+4), and its tendency to go for a winner.

The analysis presented here based on the following regions designated in **Map 5**, along with population and growth statistics shown in **Map 6** and **Figures 6 and 7**.

**1. Las Vegas** –Clark County, which is coterminous with the Las Vegas- Paradise NV metropolitan area, and with a population of 1.8 million. It is the fastest growing major metropolitan area in the US, with 86 percent growth in the 1990s and another 32 percent in 2000-2007. Las Vegas comprises almost three-quarters (72 percent) Nevada’s population, thus dominating the state’s electorate.

**2. Reno** – Washoe and Storey counties, coincident with the Reno-Sparks NV, metropolitan area. At 414,000 the population of this area is less than a quarter of the size of Las Vegas and constitutes 16 percent of the state’s population. It has grown at a robust rate of 19 percent since 2000.

**3. Rural Heartland** – consists of the remaining 14 counties in Nevada.<sup>12</sup> One of these counties, Carson City County, represents the third, much smaller metropolitan area in the state, with a population of 53,000. Most of the additional counties are either declining in population or modestly growing with



two exceptions: Nye County, which lies adjacent to Las Vegas and grew by 33 percent since 2000; and Lyon County which lies adjacent to the Reno and Carson City metros and has had a 50 percent growth rate this decade. The Rural Heartland comprises 12 percent of Nevada's population and registered an overall 2000-2007 growth of 13 percent.

The rapid growth of the entire state, especially Las Vegas and, to a lesser degree, Reno, suggests that a good deal of turnover has taken place in the electorate since the last presidential election.

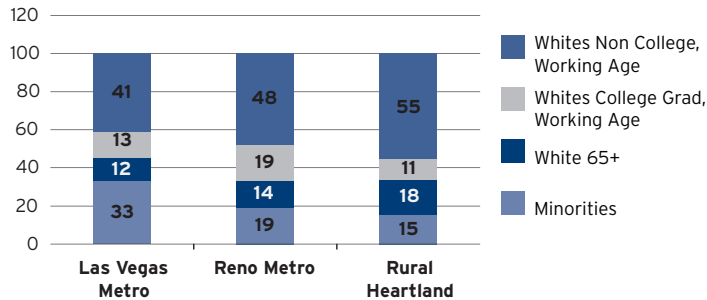
***B. Among Nevada's eligible voters, minorities and white college graduates are growing rapidly, leading to sharp increases in their shares of voters.***

A statewide perspective on Nevada's eligible voter population draws from statistics shown in **Appendix A and B**. Compared with the other Intermountain West purple states, Nevada has a higher ratio of white working class to white college graduate eligible voters, with the former outnumbering the latter by more than 3 to 1. Nearly three in 10 of its eligible voters are minorities, including 12 percent Hispanic, 7.5 percent black, 5.5 percent Asian and 3.2 percent other. Much of this "rainbow" includes spillover populations of Hispanics, blacks, and Asians from California as well as immigration to the state, heavily comprised of Mexicans and others from Latin America. Only about 12 percent of Nevada's eligible voters were born in the state; more than one fifth were born in California, 10 percent are foreign born, and 41 percent were born in a non Western state. Nevada has the most non-native electorate in the nation.

Compared with Colorado, Nevada's electorate is less well educated—45 percent have at most a high school education (compared with 34 percent in Colorado) and only 6.9 percent have postgraduate education (compared to 11.2 percent in Colorado). This is consistent with Nevada's employment make up which includes a high proportion of low skilled service industries.

The state's demographic profile shows a high level of working class whites. But 2000-2006 eligible voter

**Figure 8. Eligible Voters in Key Demographic Segments, Nevada Regions**



Source: Authors' analysis of US Census estimates

gains are changing this profile. Among the key demographic segments of eligible voters, minorities showed the greatest 2000-2006 growth with 45 percent. This is followed by 36 percent for working age white college graduates, compared to just 7 percent for the working age white working class. These trends have dropped the share of white working class eligible voters in Nevada's electorate by 6 points, while minorities have increased by 5 points and white college graduates by 2 points.

Among more detailed demographic attributes,

**Table 6. 2000-2006 Percent Change in Eligible Voters by Demographic Attributes: Nevada Regions**

Attributes	Las Vegas Metro	Reno Metro	Rural Heartland	Total State
<b>Key Demographic Segments</b>				
Minorities	49	32	27	45
Whites Age 65+	13	18	30	17
White, Working Age College Grads,	44	26	15	36
White Working Age Non College Grads	7	4	10	7
<b>Race-Ethnicity</b>				
White	14	11	15	14
Black	39	7	16	36
Hispanic	58	39	26	52
<b>Age</b>				
18-29	24	17	42	25
30-44	13	-9	-7	6
45-64	34	32	19	31
65+	24	23	28	24
<b>Education</b>				
HS grad or less	15	8	20	14
Some College	23	12	10	19
Coll Grads	53	30	21	44
<b>Industry of Worker</b>				
Manfg and Other Goods Production	33	26	29	30
Trade	24	11	9	19
Education and Health	41	28	24	36
Info, Financial and Prof. Services	49	14	29	40
Other Services	18	7	1	14

Source: Authors' analysis of 2006 American Community Survey

the greatest gains were shown for post-graduates, who increased by 52 percent and the holders of bachelors degrees who grew by 40 percent. Among industrial categories, those working in information, financial, and professional services increased the most, followed by those working in education and health services. Not surprisingly, in light of Nevada's booming growth, there were also large increases in manufacturing jobs and other goods producing jobs.

Overall then, Nevada's eligible voter population, while skewed heavily toward working class whites, has shown recent growth in white college graduates along with minorities. By region, these trends are especially strong for Las Vegas (**Figure 8, Table 6 and Appendix D**). Here working class whites comprise more than two-fifths of the electorate, minorities one-third, and white college graduates only 13 percent. Yet, from 2000-2006, the white college graduate electorate grew by 44 percent, and minority voters grew by nearly one half, but white working class voters grew by only 7 percent.

This contrasts with the Rural Heartland where working class whites outnumber white college graduates by 5 to 1 and where the latter group is not gaining appreciably. In fact, the fastest growing key demographic segments there are white seniors, followed by Hispanic-dominated minorities. This region remains the whitest of the three.

Turning to Reno's key demographic segments, we see a noticeably higher share of white college graduates than in Las Vegas or the Rural Heartland, with strong continued growth since 2000. But the fastest-growing group, just as in Las Vegas, is minorities, many of California origin.

Clearly the most dynamic part of the state in terms of overall population growth and potential shifts in key voting blocs lies in the Las Vegas metropolitan area. These shifts and the preferences of its many new voters will have a great impact on Nevada's next election.

***C. Recent GOP victories in Nevada have featured solid support from white working class voters. However, this group has been moving toward the Democrats as it continues to decline as a share of voters.***

With these demographic trends in hand, we now turn to how Nevadans have been voting in recent elections. **Table 7** displays some basic exit poll data from the 2004 presidential election. In 2004, Nevada voted Republican in the presidential election, just as it did in 2000, but by a smaller margin (2 points in 2004 vs. 4 points in 2000). Bush eked out his victory with 55 percent to 43 percent support from white voters, 77 percent of all voters according to the exit polls. This made up for his large deficits among the 7 percent of voters who were black (86-13 Democratic) and the 10 percent who were Hispanic (60-39 Democratic) voters.

Of course, white voters have been shrinking as a proportion of Nevada's voters over time. According to exit polls, they declined from 88 to 77 percent between 1988 and 2004, while minority voters went up from 12 to 23 percent, including a doubling of Hispanic voters from 5 to 10 percent. Hispanic voters

**Table 7. Nevada Voting by Selected Demographic Groups, 2004**

Group	2004 President		
	Democrat	Republican	Dem-Rep
White	43	55	-12
Black	86	13	73
Hispanic	60	39	21
Men	44	54	-10
Women	52	47	5
White Men	39	59	-20
White Women	47	53	-6
Single Women	58	41	17
Married Women	48	51	-3
HS Dropout	60	39	21
HS Graduate	52	46	6
Some College	47	52	-5
College Grad	46	52	-6
Postgraduate	45	53	-8
White Noncollege	43	56	-13
White College	44	55	-11
18-29	56	42	14
30-39	48	51	-3
40-49	44	54	-10
50-64	47	53	-6
65+	50	50	0
City over 500,000	51	48	3
City 50,000-500,000	52	47	5
Suburbs	50	48	2
City 10,000-50,000	31	66	-35
Rural	28	71	-43
Total	50	48	-2

*Source: Authors' analysis of 2004 Nevada exit poll*

have also increased their support for the Democrats over the time period, going from a 9 point deficit to a 21 point advantage.

Bush carried men by 10 points, but lost women by 5 points; the same gender gap can be seen when comparing white men and white women, which Bush carried by 20 and 6 points, respectively. And Bush carried married women by 3 points but lost single women by 17 points.

Unusually, Bush's best education group were postgraduates, whom he carried by 8 points, followed by college graduates only (+6) and those with some college (+5). But he lost high school graduates by 5 points. By age, he lost young (18-29) voters by 14 points, while carrying all age groups between 30 and 64 and splitting seniors evenly. The exit poll also indicates he lost cities of 50,000 or more and the suburbs to Kerry, but ran far ahead in small cities and rural areas.

Turning to the white working class, Nevada white working class voters supported Bush over Kerry by 13 points. This is considerably less than Kerry's nationwide deficit of 23 points among these voters. Bush won white college graduates by a slightly smaller margin, 11 points, the same as Bush's nationwide margin among these voters.

Looking back to 1988, in that election Bush senior ran 29 points ahead of Dukakis among Nevada's white working class voters, so Kerry's 13 point deficit in 2004 represents a considerable swing to the Democrats among those voters. So does Kerry's 11 point deficit among white college graduates, as Dukakis lost those voters by 24 points in 1988. But white working class voters have also been shrinking as a proportion of voters, declining by 18 points as a share of voters, according to the exit polls, while white college graduates have increased their share by 7 points.

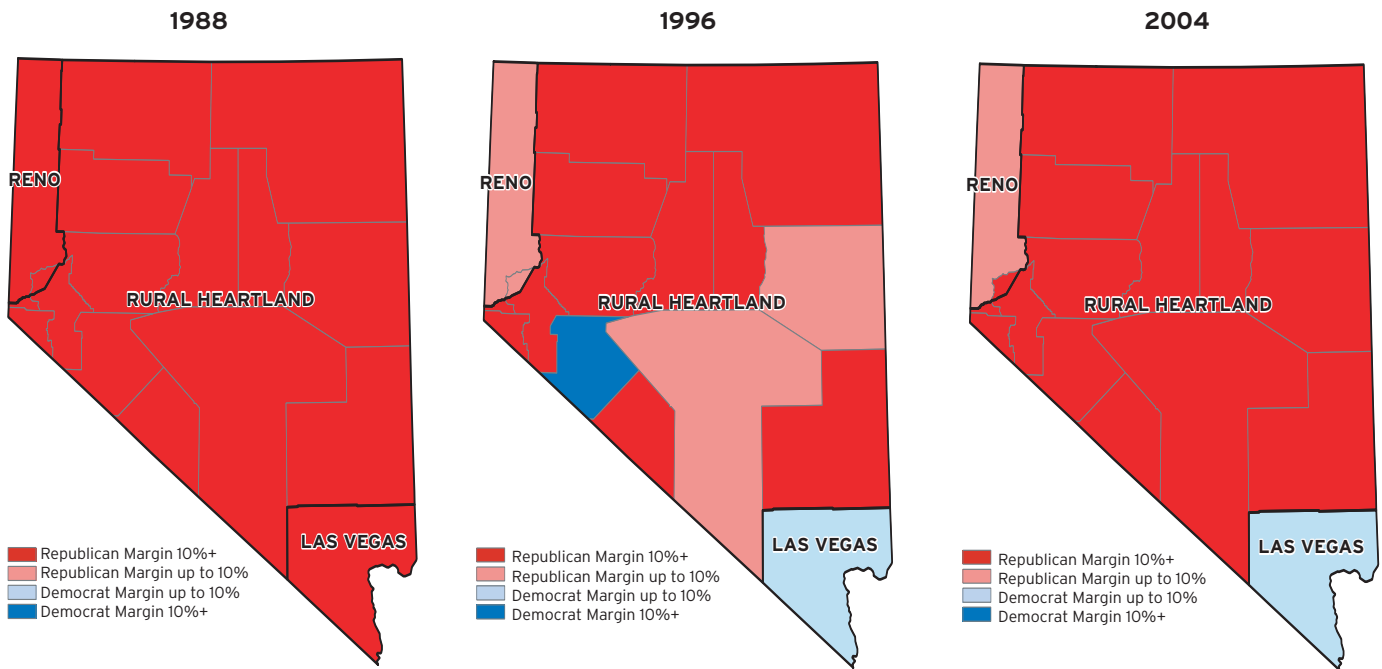
Bush's support among white working class voters varied dramatically by region of Nevada. Using the exit poll regions, which match up almost exactly with our Nevada regions (the Reno exit poll region doesn't include Storey County, which we include in our Reno region since it is part of the Reno metro), we find that Bush's white working class advantage in the Las Vegas and Reno regions was a fairly modest 7 points in each area. In the vast rural heartland of Nevada, however, his margin was an astronomical 38 points among these voters. It's worth noting that this margin is exactly the same as the GOP enjoyed in that region in 1988. In Las Vegas and Reno, however, the GOP's 2004 margins represent huge declines of 19 and 24 points, respectively, in white working class support.

***D. Political shifts in Nevada since 1988 have moved the fast-growing Las Vegas and Reno metros, 85 percent of the statewide vote, sharply toward the Democrats. The relatively slow-growing Rural Heartland region, however, has remained overwhelmingly Republican.***

**Maps 7A-7C** show how these patterns of support have played out geographically. For 2004, 1996, and 1988, they color-code each county by its margin for the victorious presidential candidate (deep blue for a Democratic victory of 10 points or more, light blue for a Democratic victory of less than 10 points, deep red for a Republican victory of 10 points or more, light red for a Republican victory of less than 10 points).

Looking at the 2004 map, it's almost all bright red, indicating Bush carried the county by 10 points or more. That's because Bush carried every county in the vast rural areas of Nevada by at least that margin. In fact, as shown in **Table 8**, he carried the Rural Heartland by a whopping 33 percentage points.

Maps 7A-C. Nevada County Presidential Voting, 1988-2004



Source: Authors' calculations of election data

Table 8. Democratic Margins for Nevada Regions, 1988 and 2004

Region	Democratic Margins		
	1988 President	2004 President	Change, 1988-2004
Las Vegas	-16	5	20
Reno	-22	-4	18
Rural Heartland	-34	-33	1

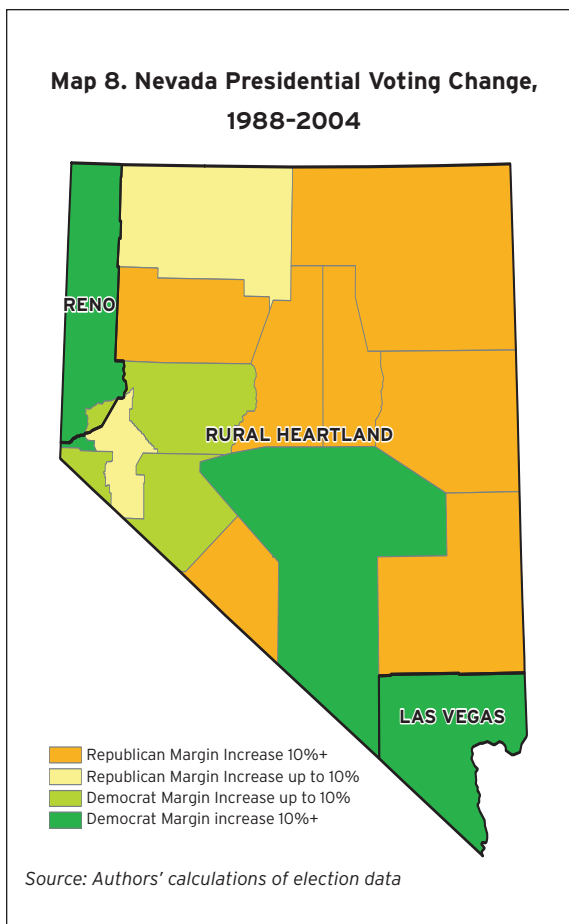
Source: Authors' analysis of Nevada election returns

But the other two regions are quite a different story. Bush carried the Reno region by a mere 5 points, including Washoe County by 4 points (hence its light red color). The Reno region accounted for 19 percent of the vote in 2004. And the Las Vegas region (Clark county), with 66 percent of the vote, went for Kerry by 5 points (hence its light blue color). Between them, these two relatively small regions cast 85 percent of Nevada's vote and made the state very close despite the sea of bright red that covers most of the map.

As shown in the 1988 map—when Republicans carried the state by 21 points—there was no county in that election, including Clark and Washoe, that did not give the GOP at least a 10 point margin. Hence, the map’s uniform bright red color. But in 1996, Clinton carried the state by a percentage point and broke down the monochrome color scheme. We see the emergence of Democratic strength in Clark (now light blue) and the decline of Republican strength in Washoe (now light red). In addition, Storey County, part of the Reno metro, and two counties in the Rural Heartland, became light red and one Rural Heartland county even became dark blue. The Rural Heartland counties slip back to bright red by 2004 but, as discussed, the hugely important shifts in Clark and Washoe remain in place.

**Map 8** provides a visual representation of where political shifts in Nevada took place over the 1988-2004 time period. Counties that are dark green had margin shifts toward the Democrats of 10 points or more, light green counties had margin shifts toward the Democrats of 10 points or less, orange counties had margin shifts toward the Republicans of 10 points or more and light yellow counties had margin shifts toward the Republicans of 10 points or less.

The Rural Heartland counties present a mixed picture with Nye County, the mushroom-shaped county adjacent to Clark, showing a strong pro-Democratic trend and three other counties in western Nevada showing moderate pro-Democratic trends. But most of the rest of the Rural Heartland counties are orange, indicating a Republican margin gain of 10 points or more. The net of these trends was to leave the Rural Heartland region in 2004 (a 33 point GOP advantage) almost exactly where it was back in 1988 (a 34 point Republican advantage).



The Reno and Las Vegas regions were once again a different story, with Las Vegas shifting toward the Democrats by 20 points and the Reno area by 18 points. Given that these regions contribute 85 percent of the state’s vote, these shifts are clearly of great significance.

It’s also interesting to compare the political shifts in Map 8 to the population growth map (Map 6). The only declining (red) and relatively slow growth (yellow) counties in Nevada are located in the Rural Heartland where GOP strength has remained steady. Overall, this region’s growth rate is the slowest of the

three (14 percent since 2000). But Las Vegas, where the biggest Democratic shift has taken place, shows by far the highest growth rate of the three regions (32 percent). And Reno, which has seen almost as large a Democratic shift, is also growing strongly (19 percent).

Given these population growth patterns, it seems doubtful that the GOP can maintain its current hold on the state without pushing back the pro-Democratic trends in the state's two big metropolitan areas. The Rural Heartland's population is simply too small and growing too slowly to provide an adequate bulwark against Democratic advance.

***E. Key trends and groups to watch in 2008 include the white working class, where the GOP needs to stop the erosion of its support; white college graduates, who are rapidly growing and have been moving toward the Democrats; and Hispanics, who have been driving the growth of the minority vote and vote heavily Democratic.***

Despite the shifts discussed above, the GOP has managed to win the last two presidential elections in Nevada. The Republicans' ability to keep the state in their column will depend greatly on the demographic groups and trends we have reviewed in this report. Here are some things to watch out for in the 2008 election.

One critical question is whether the white working class continues its trend toward the Democrats. If it does, this will be a serious blow to the GOP's efforts to hold the state. The blow would be especially serious if white college-educated voters, who are steadily increasing their share of the electorate, also continue their movement toward the Democrats. Such a double whammy would make GOP success in 2008 challenging.

Also critically important is whether Hispanics, whose numbers are growing so rapidly, translate their burgeoning numbers into an increasing share of Nevada's voters. Given their high levels of support for the Democrats in the 2004 election (which appears likely to continue in this election), the greater their turnout, the better for the Democrats. High turnout among single women and young voters would also benefit the Democrats.

In terms of regions, it's mostly about the Las Vegas and Reno metros. The rapidly growing Las Vegas metro was 5 points Democratic in 2004. Since the Las Vegas metro is two-thirds of the Nevada vote, a larger Democratic margin there in 2008 will give the GOP a very big hole to dig out of. As for the Reno metro, it contributes about a fifth of the Nevada vote and, despite the long-term pro-Democratic trend, still voted 5 points Republican in 2004. The GOP needs to keep that margin where it is and ideally increase it. But if the Reno metro should vote Democratic in 2008, that combined with Las Vegas' trends, would likely turn the state blue.