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The Future of Red, Blue and Purple America

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Political polarization in the United States has a number of causes, ranging from media hype to gerrymandering to hyper-ideological elites to cultural "sorting" between the parties. But there is another key contributor that is frequently overlooked: demographic and geographic changes in the electorate that have altered the sizes of different population groups and even shifted their political orientations over time. These changes have helped produce the current deadlock between coalitions of roughly equal size and opposed outlooks. But these same changes—since they will continue to alter group sizes and political orientations in the future—could also provide the impetus for unlocking this polarization and policy gridlock in the future.

Here are the kind of changes that could determine whether the color-coded political alignments seen today are durable or whether they are likely to change—perhaps dramatically—in the next decade or two. Groups, such as Hispanics and Asians, are growing rapidly, while others, such as the white working class, are declining. Outer suburbs and exurbs are experiencing exceptionally fast population growth. Population migration favors some states and regions at the expense of others. Immigration is changing the face of communities far from the coasts, deep in the South and in America's heartland. Family structure is shifting, as married households with children decline and single and alternative households increase. Education levels continue to rise and

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the occupational structure of the country continues to shift away from manufacturing and unskilled work. Women play an increasingly strong role in every facet of the economy and society. A younger generation, whose attitudes are quite different from older generations and whose diversity is unprecedented, is on the rise. At the other end of the age structure, the baby boom generation is transforming the nature of the senior population. The ranks of highly observant Christian evangelical denominations are increasing but so are the ranks of the secular, the highly nonobservant, and those who practice nontraditional religions.

Some of the trends listed above are geographical in nature, but even those that are not will vary in level and intensity by geographic area. And geographic trends themselves vary in their effects on, and relation to, demographic groups. Therefore, a combination of demographic and geographic research is necessary when studying each of these individual trends and their likely effects on current political divisions. We need to understand not only how the populations, of say, Hispanics or of married households with children are growing and changing, but we also need to understand where these populations are likely to be living—which regions, states, metropolitan areas and communities *within* metropolitan areas (city, inner or outer suburb, exurb, etc.). Only in this way will we be able to decode the probable impact of demographic/geographic trends on our current regional and state political alignments.

A Stroll Down Memory Lane

It is nothing new that demographic and geographic changes are reshaping American politics and public policy. The evolution of American politics and policy since World War II has been intimately bound up with these kind of changes. After the war, for example, the anticipated wave of returning GIs led to the passage of the GI Bill. Among other things, the bill paid for higher education and provided GIs with low interest, zero down-payment home loans. These provisions, in turn, helped expand the public university system and accelerate the suburbanization of metropolitan areas, as returning GIs used their loans to buy inexpensive houses in the suburbs. Suburbanization then suburbanization.

The rapid advance of suburbanization in the years after World War II was quite extraordinary. Between 1940 and 1950, suburbs increased from 15 to 23 percent of the population, while cities remained flat at around 33 percent. By 1960, suburbs were up to 31 percent, with cities slightly declining to 32 percent. By 1970, there were, for the first time, more suburban residents (38 percent) than city residents (31 percent). By the 1990s, suburban voters were casting the majority of ballots in national elections.

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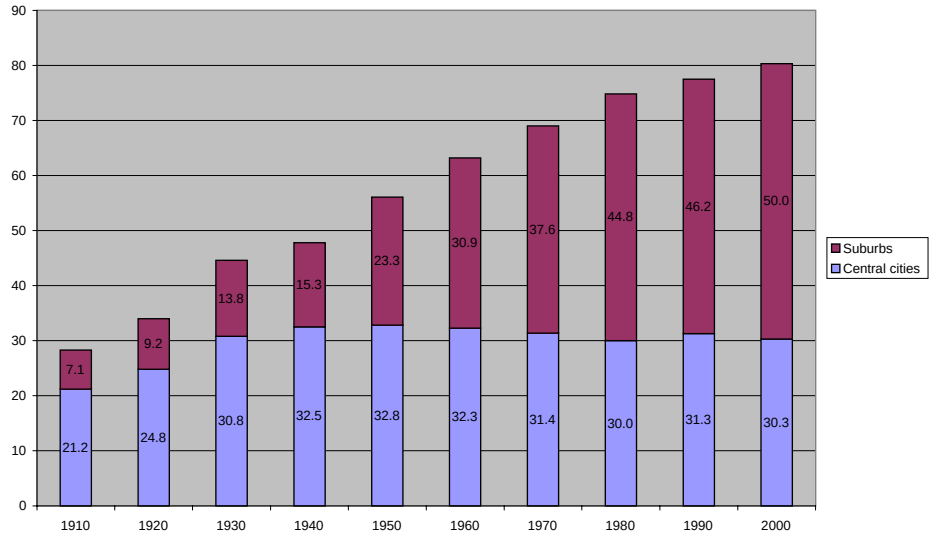
Figure 1: Percent of Total Population Living in Metropolitan Areas and in their Central Cities and Suburbs: 1910 to 2000



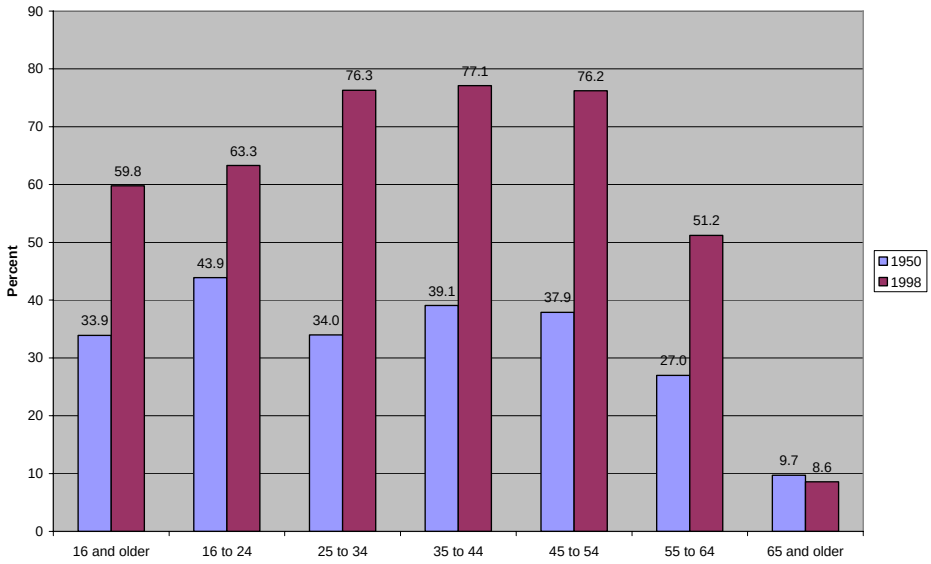
Source: Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, *Demographic Trends in the 20th Century*, US Census Bureau, November, 2002.

Another important postwar development was the rise of the baby boom generation—the roughly 76 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964.

Another important postwar development was the rise of the baby boom generation—the roughly 76 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964. Boomers' attitudes, especially toward the nature of authority, the roles of women and minorities and American foreign policy and the Vietnam War, had tremendous effects on American society and politics. Indeed, all the various "movements" of the sixties—civil rights, women's liberation, environmental, civil rights, gay liberation, anti-war— would have been inconceivable without their energies, as would the raft of legislation—from the Civil Rights Act to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency—that grew out of these movements.

A special note should be made of the women's movement and the structural changes that propelled it. In 1950, only a third of adult women were in the workforce. Women's labor force participation grew to 38 percent by 1960, 43 percent by 1970, 52 percent by 1980, 58 percent by 1990, and 60 percent by 1998. Among 25- to 34-year-old women—those who would be expected to leave the workforce after marriage—participation rates rose by an astonishing 42 percentage points from 1950 to 1998 (including a 21-percentage point increase during the 1970s alone). They also advanced within the labor force. In 1970, fewer than 10 percent of medical students were women and 4 percent were law students. By the early 1990s, more than 40 percent of first-year law and medical students were women[1]. Today, it's about half[2]. By the end of the twentieth century, 55 percent of all professionals were women[3].

Figure 2: Labor Force Participation Rates of Women by Age, 1950 and 1998



Source: Howard N. Fullerton, Jr., "Labor force participation: 75 years of change, 1950-98 and 1998-2025," *Monthly Labor Review*, December 1999.

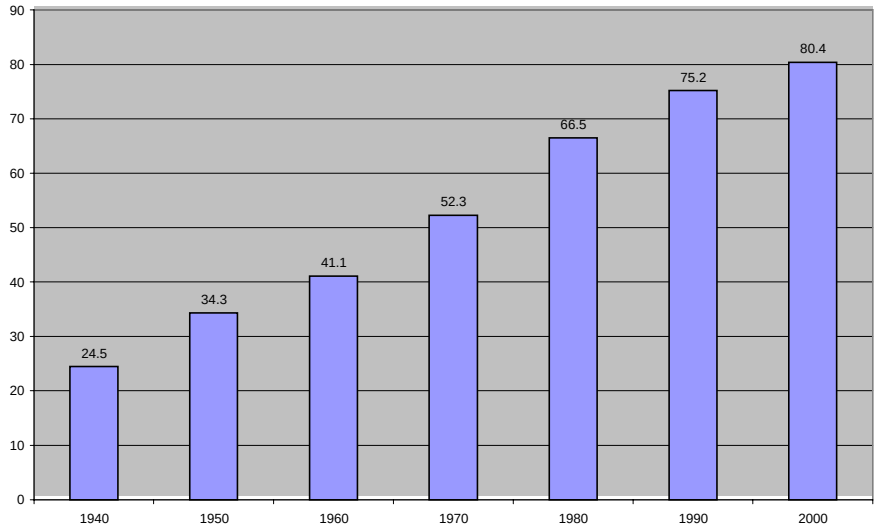
Educational credentials exploded in the postwar period.

These structural changes reinforced shifting social norms about the role of women and led to the emergence of the "gender gap", as women began to see the Democratic Party as the party most supportive of these changes. In 1964, women began to vote slightly more Democratic than men. In 1968 and 1972, the trend grew. After subsiding for the 1976 election (when the Republican candidate was the pro-choice, pro-equal rights Gerald Ford), it reappeared in force in 1980. According to the CBS/*New York Times* exit poll, men supported Republican Ronald Reagan over Democrat Jimmy Carter by 55 to 36 percent—while women supported Reagan by only 47 to 45 percent. Gender gaps of that magnitude are now commonplace in American politics. In the 2000 presidential race, men supported Republican George Bush by 53 to 42 percent, while women supported Democrat Al Gore by 54 to 43 percent[4].

Dramatically increased levels of educational attainment were another critical change. In 1940, three-quarters of adults 25 and over were high school dropouts (or never made it to high school), and just 5 percent had a four-year college degree or higher. Educational credentials exploded in the postwar period. By 1960, the proportion of adults lacking a high school diploma was down to 59 percent; by 1980, it was less than a third; and by 2005, it was down to only 15 percent. Concomitantly, the proportion with a BA or higher rose steadily and reached 28 percent in 2005. Moreover, those with some college (but not a four-year degree) constituted another 26 percent of the population, making a total of 54 percent who had at least some college education[5]. Quite a change: moving from a country where the typical adult was a high school dropout (more accurately, never even reached high school) to one where the typical adult not only has a high school diploma but some college as well. This shift had tremendous effects on the character and

aspirations of voters, especially working-class voters.

Figure 3: Percent of the Population 25 Years and Over with a High School Diploma or More, 1940-2000



Source: US Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over: 1940 to 2000*.

A new wave of demographic and geographic change is currently washing over the United States.

A series of other demographic and geographic changes pushed the country in a very different direction than the baby boom-driven movements of the sixties. Identified by Kevin Phillips in his 1969 book, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, and by Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg in their 1970 volume, *The Real Majority*, these trends included: a growing middle class less dependent on unionized, blue-collar jobs; the movement of whites, especially in the working class, to the suburbs; and the increasing Sunbelt population. These trends among the electorate helped feed a reaction both against the excesses of the boomer-led movements and against the failures of the postwar liberal approach to government, which couldn't seem to cope with the great changes sweeping the nation.

Seven Trends That Will Shape the Future of Red, Blue and Purple America

Of course, demographic-geographic transformation didn't stop with the changes described above. A new wave of demographic and geographic change is currently washing over the United States and is sure to have profound effects on our future politics, just as earlier changes helped give birth to the politics we know today. Here are seven trends that seem likely to be particularly important to decoding our political

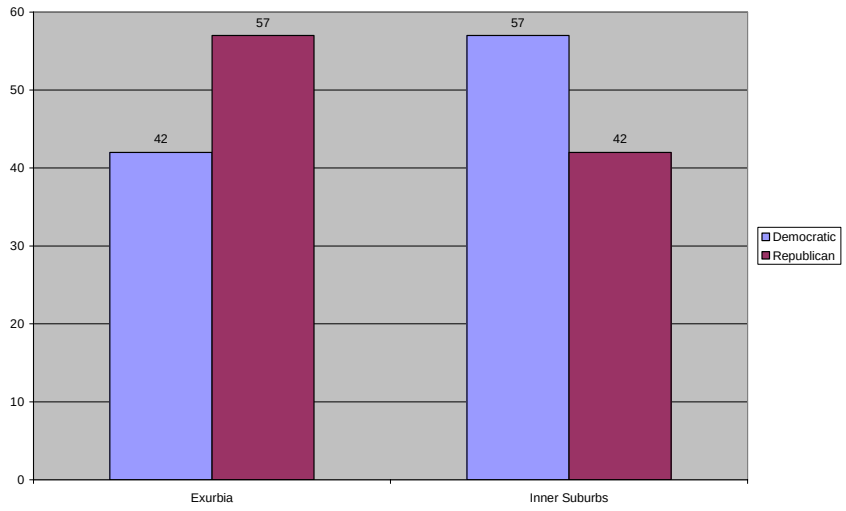
The views and preferences of the suburban majority are driving American politics.

future. They are sketched below, along with questions that need to be resolved about each trend and some possible political and policy implications of each trend.

The Rise of Exurbia and the Changing Face of the Suburbs

Exurbia[6], where population growth is exceptionally rapid (52 percent between 1990 and 2005, compared with only 11 percent in the innermost suburbs[7]), is changing the structure of America's suburbs. These exurban areas typically have a different political outlook than older suburbs around urban cores, which have been transformed by high density and a mix of cosmopolitan professionals and minorities. In the Washington, DC metro area, for example, these would include exurban Loudoun County, Va., compared to inner suburban Alexandria and Arlington counties. In Maryland, exurban Frederick County similarly compares to inner suburban Prince George's County. In 2004, Bush carried exurbia across the country by 57–42, while Kerry carried the inner suburbs by the exact same margin[8].

Figure 4: Presidential Vote, Exurbia vs. Inner Suburbs, 2004



Source: Author's analysis of 2004 county-level election data.

The views and preferences of the suburban majority are driving American politics. Much will ride on how the changing mix of residents in the different parts of suburbia shapes this majority. Issues to be considered include: whether the inner suburbs will continue to become more diverse and cosmopolitan; whether the relatively small size of exurbs compared to inner suburbs will change substantially; and whether exurbs will become less conservative as their rapid growth brings higher density and new types of residents. Such considerations will help determine the net effects of suburban growth in rapidly changing states such as Florida, Arizona, Colorado and Georgia, and more static

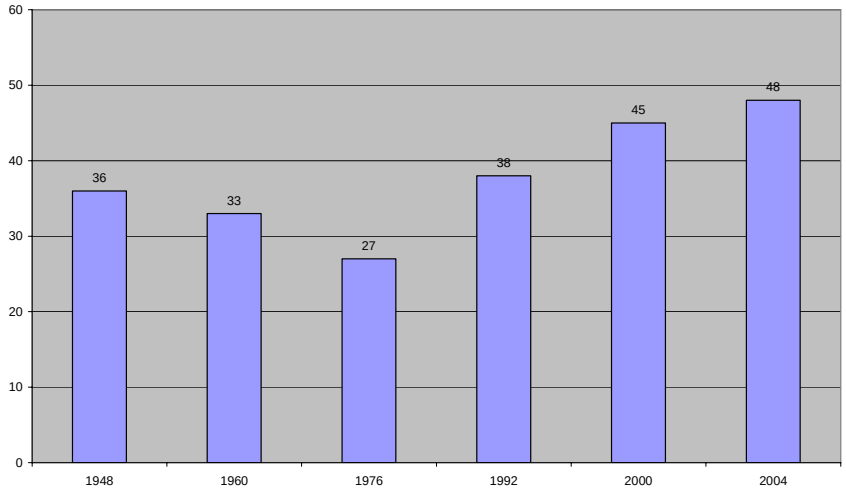
states such as Ohio and Minnesota, which nevertheless have some metro areas with fast-growing suburbs. Suburban growth in Colorado has, on net, probably made it less conservative, while the opposite is true in Georgia. This may point to key differences in the political effects of suburban growth in the West and South.

Do Birds of a Feather Flock Together?

This apparent geographical clustering of partisan preferences could be contributing to the political divisions we see today.

Are people likely to live in close proximity to those who look, act and think like them? There is considerable evidence that this is so. In the very close presidential election of 1976, just 27 percent of voters lived in "landslide counties"—counties where the winning presidential candidate had a margin of 20 percentage points or more[9]. That figure rose throughout the 1980s and 1990s, reaching 45 percent in the even closer election of 2000. That figure was topped in the 2004 election, when almost half the country's voters (48 percent) lived in landslide counties. Looked at another way, 60 percent of voters in the 2004 election lived in counties that had not changed their presidential party preference since 1988. One intriguing issue to be adjudicated is whether this phenomenon is due to people with like-minded ideas increasingly sorting themselves into communities or whether people are now more likely to adopt the ideas of others around them—or both, which would make the whole process self-reinforcing.

Figure 5: Percent of Voters Living in Landslide Counties, Selected Presidential Elections, 1948-2004



Source: Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing analysis of 1948-2004 county election data, cited in Bill Bishop, "The Great Divide," *Austin Statesman-American*, Dec. 4, 2004.

This apparent geographical clustering of partisan preferences could be contributing to the political divisions we see today and maintaining them in the future. Living with like-minded individuals strengthens existing political views and makes them less pervious to change. At worst, this trend could lead to states becoming aggregates of one-party

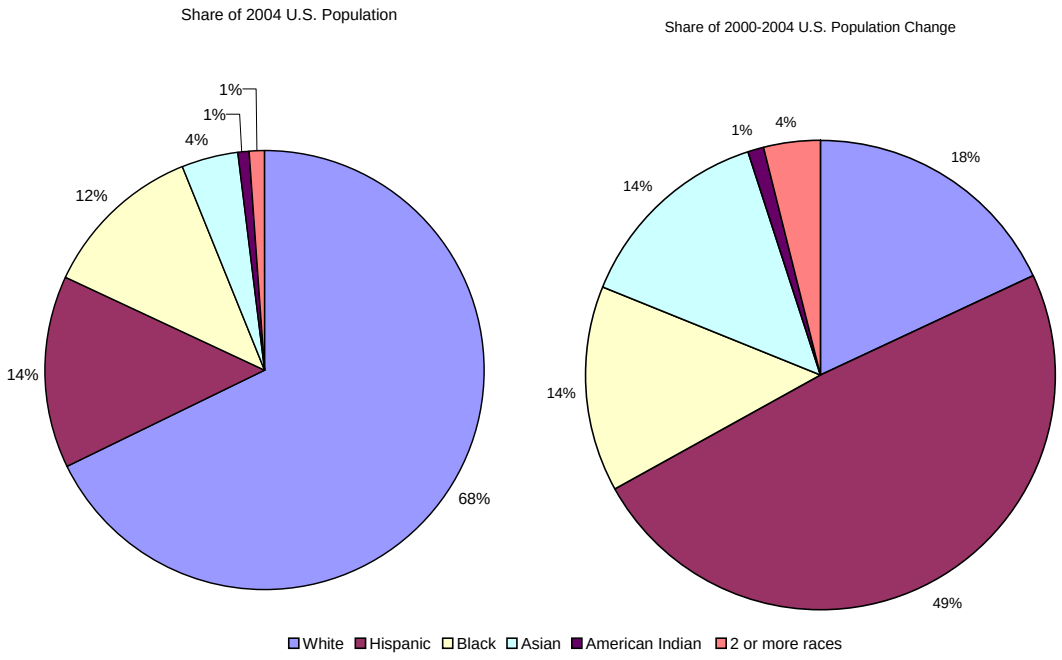
Immigration and differential fertility are changing the racial and ethnic mix of the United States.

communities. It would also make it that much easier for parties to manipulate redistricting and reliably stack districts with just enough of "their" voters to ensure dominance. This may enhance the desirability of redistricting reform.

Race, Immigration and the Next American People

Immigration and differential fertility are changing the racial and ethnic mix of the United States. In the 1990s, the number of Hispanics grew by 58 percent and the Asian population grew by 59 percent[10]. Between 2000 and 2004, Hispanics accounted for half of the growth in the U.S. population. These trends have driven minority voters from about 15 percent of voters in 1990 to 21 percent today, and will produce a voting electorate that is about one-quarter minority by the middle of the next decade. Presently, with some exceptions—such as Bush's 40 percent support among Hispanics in the 2004 election—these rising constituencies tend to give the Democrats wide margins (69–30 percent among Hispanics and 62–37 percent among Asians in the 2006 congressional election). Blacks remain unwaveringly and almost unanimously Democratic (89–10 percent in 2006)[11].

Figure 6: U.S. Population by Race and Ethnicity, 2004



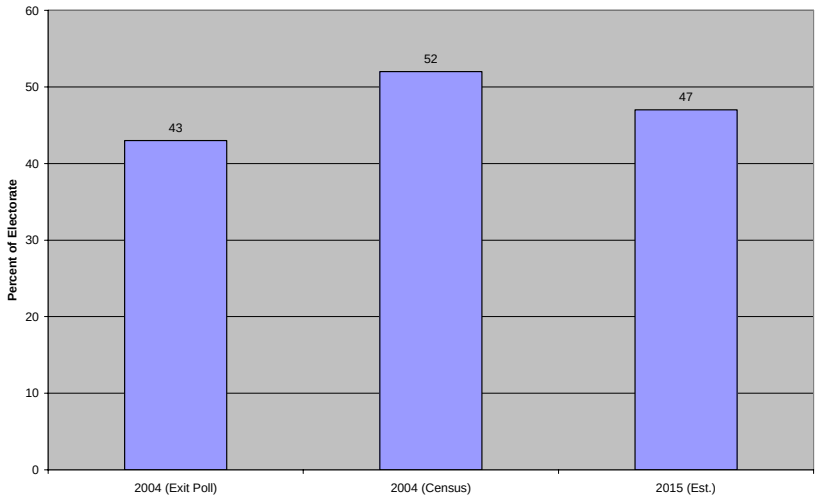
Source: William H. Frey, *Diversity Spreads Out: Metropolitan Shifts in Hispanic, Asian, and Black Populations Since 2000*, Brookings Institution, March, 2006.

These broad patterns exhibit quite a lot of geographic variation—which conceivably could increase in the future. Hispanics in Florida are quite a bit more conservative than those in California, as are suburban relative to urban Hispanics. Moreover, an increasingly large proportion of Hispanics are locating themselves in states like North Carolina and Georgia where their voting behavior tends to be influenced by the local political culture. Thus, a full appreciation of the political impact of racial-ethnic change needs to take into account the actual states where change is concentrated and where within these states the growth is distributed.

The Decline of the White Working Class and Other Shifts in the American Class Structure

There is no question the white working class is declining over time. But how fast is this occurring and what is the likely impact of this decline? Census data indicate that the white working class by one definition (those whites without a four-year college degree) is still around 52 percent of the electorate and, by the middle of next decade, will still be 47 percent. These voters gave Bush a whopping 23-point advantage in 2004. In the 2006 congressional election, the Republican advantage subsided to 10 points[12]. Will these voters continue to be bulwarks of the Republican coalition? They are upwardly striving, but sometimes struggling voters, very few of whom now work in blue-collar or manufacturing jobs and many of whom have at least some college education. There is some evidence that these voters, many of whom favored Republicans on socially conservative grounds, are becoming less inclined to vote on this basis, especially in critical states like Ohio and Colorado and are increasingly focused on effective routes to economic advancement.

Figure 7: Size of White Working Class, 2004 and Beyond



Source: Author's analysis of exit poll and Census data.

Changes in household structure and differences in fertility are reshaping American families in ways that were unimaginable a couple of generations ago.

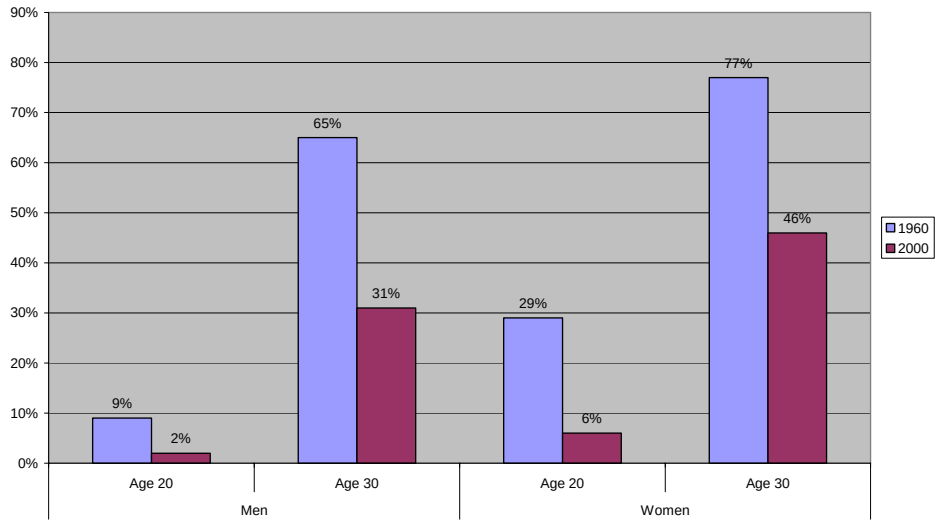
This trend could have important political implications and will put the Thomas Frank thesis (described in his book *What's the Matter with Kansas?*) to the test. In his book, Frank argues that these economically stressed voters—whose interests logically lie with the Democrats—are hopelessly befuddled by "fake" cultural issues and only capable of being jolted out of their lethargy by fire-breathing populism or perhaps large-scale unionization. (However, the decline and transformation of the white working class is surely one reason for the current weakened state of American unions.)

Another key development in the American class structure is the rise of a mass upper middle class. This trend could further complicate the potential audience for Frank-like politics and pose a challenge for both parties. In the 2006 election, 23 percent of voters had household incomes over $100,000, and these voters favored Republicans, though not overwhelmingly (52 to 47 percent)[13]. As this group gets larger—a complicated mix of affluent, liberal-leaning professionals and managers, small-business owners and mid-level white-collar workers who are decidedly less so—its political leanings will become increasingly important in shaping American politics.

The Changing American Family

Changes in household structure and differences in fertility are reshaping American families in ways that were unimaginable a couple of generations ago. Consider these dramatic trends: Married couples with children now occupy fewer than one in four households, a share that has been cut in half since 1960[14]. The average age of first marriage has gone up from the early 20s in 1970 to 28 years old for men and 26 years old for women today[15]. Currently, by age 30, only 46 percent of women and 31 percent of men have finished school, left home, gotten married, had a child and reached financial independence from their parents. In 1960, 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men had reached those standard markers of adulthood by age 30. Unmarried households now constitute a majority of American households[16]. Single women (who are unmarried, widowed or divorced) have recently become a majority of all adult women[17], and single working women are close to a third. These trends intersect in increasingly important ways with political behavior. Married voters are far more likely to vote Republican than are unmarried voters, eclipsing the effects of the celebrated gender gap. In the 2006 congressional election, married voters slightly favored Republicans (50–48 percent), while unmarried voters favored Democrats 64–34 percent. There was little difference by gender within these categories: married women favored Republicans by 50-48 percent, while married men favored them 51-47 percent. Similarly, unmarried women favored Democrats 66-32 percent, while unmarried men favored them 62-36 percent[18].

Figure 8: Percent Completing Transition to Adulthood in 1960 and 2000 Using Traditional Benchmarks (leaving home, finishing school, getting married, having a child and being financially independent)



Source: Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., et al., "Growing Up Is Harder to Do", *Contexts*, Summer, 2004.

It is important to "look under the hood" of these various changes and assess whether and at what rate they are likely to continue. As these trends become more widely distributed and accepted, will they presage an abatement of the culture wars in the future? Perhaps it's not so odd that a current front-runner for the GOP presidential nomination has been twice divorced and was formally the housemate of a gay couple. It is also key to look at geographic variation in this demographic transition. Which communities are experiencing these changes most intensely and which are likely to resist them? In all likelihood, these are not the same communities.

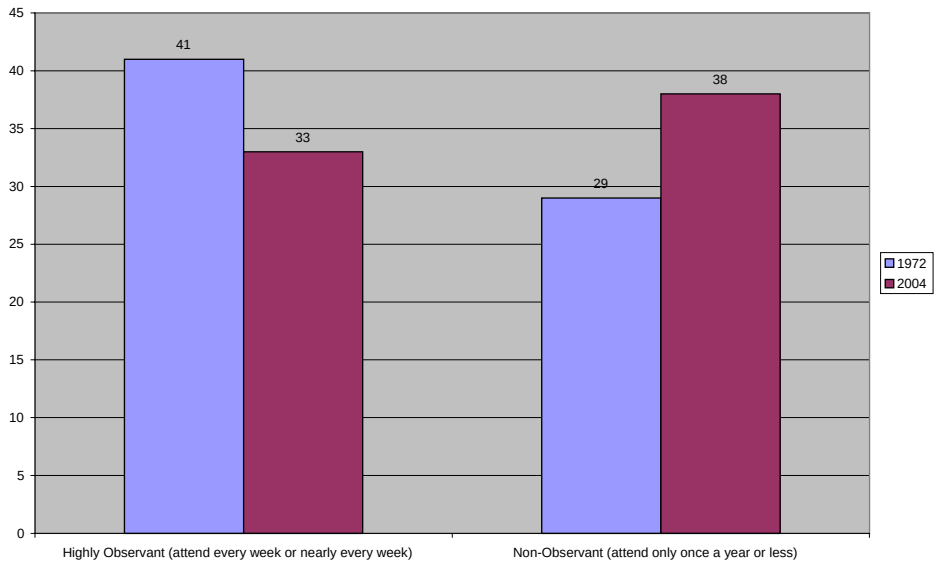
The emerging "class gap" in marriage and traditional family formation is a subject that deserves special scrutiny. Since about 1970, the rates at which the affluent and well-educated marry and divorce have diverged significantly from those among the less affluent and less educated. Those near the top of the class structure are significantly more likely to marry and significantly less likely to get divorced. This is making the traditional, stable marriage with children increasingly the provenance of the well-educated, who, oddly enough, tend to have less traditional social attitudes. The working class, which tends to have more traditional social attitudes, is less able to realize its goal of a traditional, stable family. This could pose an important challenge for both political parties, particularly in seeking the support of these working-class voters.

More Secular, More Evangelical ... or Both?

Depending on what you read or what data you look at, you might come to two diametrically opposite conclusions about Americans' religiosity: that we're becoming more secular and becoming more evangelical and observant. On one hand, the fastest-

growing Christian denominations by far are evangelical. More conservative denominations are growing faster than liberal or mainline ones, some of which—United Methodists, Lutherans (Missouri Synod), Presbyterians, Episcopalians—are actually declining. On the other hand, the purely secular are increasing rapidly, more than doubling during the 1990s to 15 percent of the population[19]. Moreover, trend data from the University of Chicago's General Social Survey indicate a shift toward less religious observance over the last three decades. In 1972, 29 percent said they attend church once a year or less, a figure that had risen to 38 percent by 2004. Conversely, in 1972, 41 percent said they attended once a week or nearly every week, a figure that had slipped to 33 percent by 2004. It seems plausible that these figures mask a situation in which trends in religion and religious observance have very different net effects depending on what part

Figure 9: Change in Religious Observance, 1972-2004



of the country—or even which particular state—you're living in.
Source: Author's analysis of University of Chicago General Social Survey data, 1972 and 2004.

Famously, a sharp political division between the most and least religiously observant has accompanied these trends, emerging in the 1990s in full force. By the 2004 election, it was a chasm. In that election, white evangelicals supported Bush by a staggering 78–21 percent. Those who attended church more than weekly supported Bush by 64–35 percent; and those who attended weekly supported Bush by 58–41 percent. At the other end of the spectrum, those who said they attended a few times a year supported Kerry by 54–45 percent; and those who never attended favored Kerry by 62–36 percent[20]. It is critical to understand how and why this gap emerged, which led to the injection once again of religious issues into political debate, and the prospects for its continuation.

Another generational change is the rise of the Millennials, whose size eclipses even the boomers' and whose members dominate the ranks of young voters.

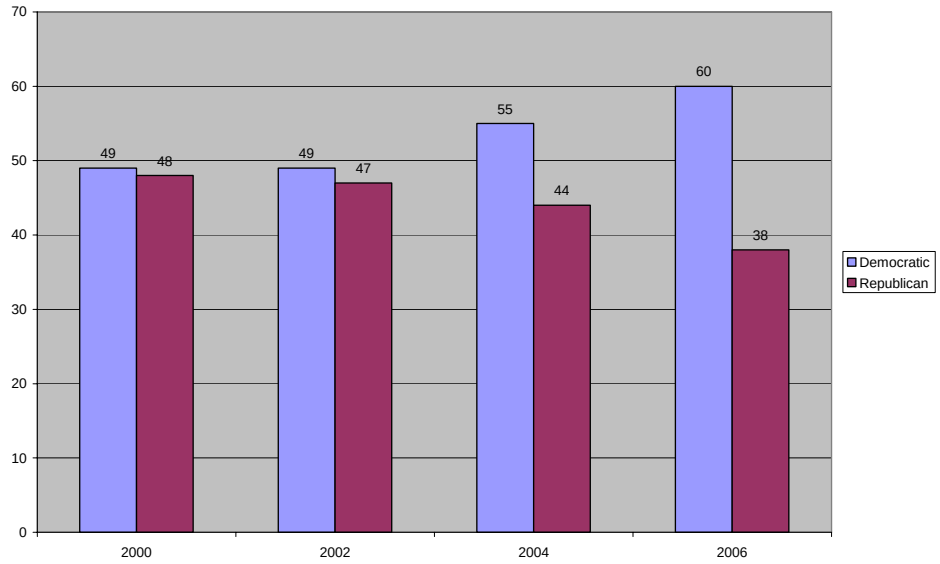
The Aging of the Boomers and the Rise of the Millennials

The first boomers have just hit 60, the leading edge of a wave that will transform the nation's senior population. Boomers had a tremendous effect on American society, pioneering the movements of the sixties—a legacy that continues to be contested territory in American politics. As boomers—now 40 percent of American voters[21]—come to dominate the ranks of seniors, replacing the GI and Silent Generations, they will significantly impact debates on social issues in America, not to mention debates on entitlements and other programs benefiting seniors.

Another generational change is the rise of the Millennials, whose size eclipses even the boomers' and whose members dominate the ranks of young voters. According to one standard definition, 80 million Americans today are Millennials (birth years 1978–1996). By 2008, the number of citizen-eligible Millennial voters will be nearing 50 million. By the presidential election of 2016, Millennials will be one-third or more of the citizen-eligible electorate and roughly 30 percent of actual voters[22]ignoring possible increased turnout rates among Millennials in the future, which could make their weight among voters higher). Moreover, the Millennials' share of voters will rise steadily for several decades as more and more of the generation reaches middle age.

There is considerable evidence that this generation is distinctive in a number of ways that could affect American politics. These include, but are not limited to: relatively high levels of civic engagement and voting; an optimistic attitude about possibilities for economic and social advance; very high levels of tolerance for racial and sexual differences, as well as nontraditional attitudes on most social issues; opposition to the Iraq war and high support for international engagement; lower levels of drug abuse and teen pregnancy (compared to previous generations); higher levels of non-Christian and secular religious practices; higher levels of racial-ethnic diversity; very high levels of technology adoption; and unusually close relations to their parents. A third of this group is the product of divorce, and combined with skepticism of both big government and business, they are an unusually self-reliant generation. This intriguing mix of attitudes will certainly affect American politics, as Millennials become an increasingly larger part of the voting pool. Now they seem to be leaning Democratic. In the 2006 congressional election, the first election in which almost all 18- to 29-year-olds were Millennials, they supported Democrats by a 60–38 percent margin. Millennials have also consistently given Democrats a double-digit lead on party identification in polls. But it is too early to say whether these Millennial voters have definitively settled on one party or another, not to mention the fact that a good portion of this generation is still not of voting age. In the end, the rise of the Millennials is likely to take politics in new directions that challenge both parties.

Figure 10: Youth (18-29) Congressional Vote, 2000-2006



Source: Author's analysis of 2000-2006 exit polls.

Detailed analysis of each trend described above will be available in February 2008 as part of a joint Brookings-American Enterprise Institute project, *The Future of Red, Blue and Purple America*. The project has commissioned seven papers—one on each trend—which will be presented at a daylong conference on February 28, 2008. Papers will be published online and will appear in a Brookings Press book due out in fall 2008.

1 Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, "On the Pill: Changing the Course of Women's Education", Milken Institute Review, second quarter, 2001
2 Alvin P. Sanoff, "Competing Forces", Prism, October, 2005
3 US Bureau of the Census, "Occupations: 2000", Census 2000 Brief, August, 2003
4 Author's analysis of 2000 VNS national exit poll.
5 Data for 2005 from Current Population Survey Census Educational Attainment Historical Table A-1 at http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/education/cps2006/tabA-1.xls
6 I base my definition of exurbia on a typology developed by Robert Lang and Thomas Sanchez of Virginia Tech's Metropolitan Institute (MI), who broke down the 417 counties in the top 50 metro areas in the US (where over half the total population lives and population growth since 1950 has been heavily concentrated) into five categories: core; inner suburbs; mature suburbs; emerging suburbs; and exurbs. As it turns out, counties like Loudoun county, VA, Douglas county, CO, Anoka county, MN and Warren county, OH, which are poster children for the exurban phenomenon as commonly understood by most political and social observers, are more properly categorized as emerging suburbs rather than true exurbs. To reflect that common understanding, I define exurbia here to include both counties categorized as exurbs by the MI typology and those categorized as emerging suburbs.
7 Author's analysis of 1990-2005 Census population data.
8 Author's analysis of 2004 county-level presidential election returns.
9 Based on the two party vote—third and minor parties are excluded from these calculations.
10 Author's analysis of 1990-2000 Census population data.
11 Author's analysis of 2004 and 2006 NEP national exit poll data.
12 Author's analysis of 2004 and 2006 NEP national exit poll data.
13 Author's analysis of 2006 NEP national exit poll data.
14 Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, Demographic Trends in the 20th Century, US Census Bureau, November, 2002, Table 15
15 US Bureau of the Census, "Estimated Median Age at First Marriage by Sex, 1890 to present", Historical Table MS-2 at http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/ms2.xls
16 Maxim Kniazkov, "For the First Time, Unmarried Households Reign in U.S.", USA Today, October 15, 2007.
17 Sam Roberts, "A Majority of U.S. Women Are Living Spouse-less", New York Times, January 16, 2007.
18 Author's analysis of 2006 NEP national exit poll data.
19 CUNY Religious Identification Survey, 2001.
20 Author's analysis of 2004 NEP national exit poll data.

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Lisa Bonos
Gladys L. Arrisueño

21 Author's analysis of 2004 Current Population Survey Voter Supplement data.
22 Author's analysis of Census population projections.

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