

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

THE 2020 ELECTION IN BLUE METROS AND RED STATES

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PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria. The podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. In this special edition of the podcast, my colleague Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press, talks with two of the authors of the new Brookings Press book that explores America's current political division from demographic and geographic perspectives.

David Damore, Robert Lang and Karen Danielsen are professors all the University of Nevada Las Vegas, are co-authors of *Blue Metros Red States: The Shifting of Urban Rural Divide in America's Swing States*. Damore and Lang join Finan for this episode of the podcast in which they address some of the factors that tend to make large metropolitan areas lean democratic while existing in a sea of rural areas that are largely Republican.

How do states like Pennsylvania, Georgia and Texas with both large urban areas and widespread rural areas express this red blue divide between rural and metropolitan places? Listen also to find out which two counties in America could indicate which way the election is going on November 3rd.

Damore is professor and chair of the Department of Political Science at UNLV and a non-resident senior fellow in governance studies at Brookings. And Lang holds the Lincy Endowed Chair in Urban Affairs and the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs at UNLV. And is executive director of Brookings Mountain West and The Lincy Institute.

You can follow the Brookings podcast network on Twitter @policypodcasts to get information about and links to all our shows including Dollar and Sense, the Brookings Trade podcast, The Current and our Events podcast. And now, here's Bill Finan with David Damore and Robert Lang.

FINAN: Thanks Fred, and welcome Dave and Ron.

DAMORE: Thanks for having us.

FINAN: Your book is a provocative analysis of red and blue America. That it's a far more than just that kind of a simple divide expect when it isn't as you'll point out later on. But I'd like to begin first with the whole red state blue state idea. Where did it come from?

LANG: Well, you know, the red state blue state idea has been around for a while. And this particular version of it, the idea of focusing in on the blue metros, came from a meeting that was held at Rice University with all the sunbelt centers that do public policy in the sunbelt.

And there seemed to be a general view from Georgia all the way through Arizona, Nevada that the big blue metro in states that are either swing states or slightly tilted red or slightly tilted blue have a contentious and complicated relationship with their state capital. And they also determine whether or not the president has those votes in the electoral college or the Senate or the governor's races, the statewide races wind up in the red or blue hand and that the balance of the state is much more conservative than the blue metros. So, hence the blue metros red state divide.

DAMORE: And a lot of this also was informed by our own lives here in Nevada. We're very much a blue metro and a red state and we actually began the book with an anecdote out of Nevada about a ballot measure that was passed to regulate private gun sales. The only county it passed in was Clark County which is where Las Vegas is and then it goes to the Republican controlled government at the time, they don't implement it. And then the Democrats get control after the 2018 election, that's the first sort of subsequent policy bill they end up passing.

FINAN: Your book looks at 13 swing states, states that will determine who gets elected president of the United States. And you set certain parameters for inclusion in that group of states. All states that have at least one metro area with a population exceeding 1 million and

where the 2016 presidential election was decided by 10 points or less. Why those two variables?

LANG: Well, I can take the first. And I think that the Brookings Metro folks would agree with this, people like Bill Frey. That there's something different about million plus metros that they tend to have some of the most important assets or really essentially all the key assets. When it comes to engagement with the global economy, you know, they have all the key airports, all the key ports. They have most of the country's patents. And when you get to the scale of a million people you tend to be diverse enough and you tend to have a kind of cosmopolitan feel.

That separates you from a metro of 70,000 which you can be a metro of 70,000 or even 250,000. So, just to finish that point, a place like Burlington, Vermont is a metro within Vermont but it's not that different than the rest of Vermont. Whereas, as Dave alluded to earlier, there's something quite distinct about the size and intensity, the density of Las Vegas and then the rest of a rural state like Nevada.

DAMORE: And then the 10 points was trying to get what we thought would be typical swing states, you know, the upper mid-west and those states, Virginia as well. But we also wanted to get some of the emerging ones in the sunbelt, so the Georgia, North Carolina which had gone back and forth last couple of cycles. Obama won in '08 and then the Republicans carried in '12 and '16.

But we also really wanted to get Texas in there because we think the dynamics in Texas are really fascinating with four big major metros. When you saw Clinton narrow the gap in '16 and you saw Beto O'Rourke in '18 almost knock off Ted Cruz there and, of course, now you see all this intensity about Texas with the potential to go blue.

FINAN: Right, yeah, I want to come back to that near the end. So, the 13 states that are in the book are Nevada, Texas, Georgia, Ohio, Michigan, let's see if can do this from memory.

Pennsylvania, Arizona, Florida --

DAMORE: Minnesota, Virginia, North Carolina, Michigan and Wisconsin. A large geographic span right across the different regions of the country.

FINAN: Right. So, it's wide-ranging. Can't be said that you had too small an end for this study.

LANG: And there's Boston. So, there's half of the metros above a million wind up in that mix of states, for example. So, 27 metros and there's 50 plus metros above a million depending on the week that the census provides the update. So, you have essentially half the large metros in that mix.

FINAN: So, what are some of the macro defining characteristics of the major metro areas that you've found that lead them to vote blue?

DAMORE: Well, the biggest one and this is something Rob had been working on for a while and some other folks and really sort of jump started the whole project with this notion that the more dense the population and the more diverse the population is the more Democratic it votes. And so, the idea of density versus diversity equals more Democratic voting.

But that's only a part of the story, right, because there's really a sociocultural element to it on particularly sociocultural issues whiz in and define the difference between the parties. You find that split between generally metros that are more liberal on social issues and the rurales and ex-urban areas tend to be much more conservative there. So, that was kind of our background. I don't know if Rob wanted to add on to that.

LANG: Yeah. And sometimes within the state, you see major national division boundaries. Like take for example Virginia, not far from where you are. Northern Virginia as is Eastern Pennsylvania, Philadelphia metro is part of the northeast corridor. And everything along

that line goes to Boston is liberal and is a kind of unified large scale east coast culture.

And then Western Pennsylvania or the sort of Ohio side of Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh is a much more conservative metropolitan area than people realize. And Southern Virginia not Eastern Virginia because Richmond and Norfolk and Virginia Beach have large African American populations that make them competitive for the Democrats.

But the diversity of Northern Virginia and the culture of Northern Virginia, what we call the diversity within diversity which is you're not just Black and White but you're also Latino and Asian. When you look at those kinds of metros and you look at South Florida, if you go over a couple of bridges around Vero Beach and you're in the south, you can drive out of the south by going to Miami.

And then you've got capitals like Tallahassee or Carson City in the case of Nevada that are far away. It's just hard to govern these places and it's hard to understand even in state politics the role they play in reshaping these states as far more progressive places than they've historically been.

DAMORE: And the other piece we wanted to capture in there was how the institutions matter. Obviously, everybody knows the electoral college and the U.S. Senate favor less populated states. They can get a little extra bump in those and that's how Trump ended up winning in '16 to some degree. Obviously, he wins Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin.

But the other thing we wanted to look at is things like home rule, redistricting processes, state budgeting processes and that's where state experts we interviewed for that were really, really helpful. Getting beyond sort of the descriptive data to get it to the nuts and the bolts as to how does your state really operate, right? Do these metros get clobbered in the state house or do they do okay? And you see a real mix across that and one of the big defining characteristics was

where's the state capital.

Right, so in the mountain west where we are, right, we're very far. Nevada is very, very far from its state capital. But our other two mountain west states, Arizona and Denver the big metro is the capital and it makes a real big difference about who is working in state government, how accessible state government is. So, that's a big part of what we wanted to bring into the analysis.

FINAN: So, conversely for the red areas, what are the macro features that lead them to vote red?

LANG: They tend to be more rural or small town and they tend to be far less diverse and they don't identify with metropolitan interests. That is that they're not engaged in building large scale infrastructure, running large scale urban school districts. And so, they have a kind of not oppositional but just disparate sense of what the state should be doing. And that goes for the state meaning the federal government as a whole and more particularly, their individual state.

And so, they're concerned with rural hospitals, they're concerned with some kinds of infrastructure. In the case of Virginia, you had to build an extension to the rail system out to Dulles Airport. There was pushback from rural counties going, you know, the state is going to put all these resources into Northern Virginia making it a more competitive place and more affluent and more full of college educated outsiders and what have you done for Southside Virginia lately? That's kind of the spirit that animates the non-metros in these states.

DAMORE: And if you look at sort of the long arc of things and this is some really interesting literature that our other co-author, Karen Danielsen came across, it's in chapter 2. It's we forget that the country was based on ruralism. Like all the government, all the institutions of government, it never really understood how where these cities and how to govern them.

So, there's this historical tension that goes back to once you start seeing Boston grow and Philadelphia grow but they're still doing it in this sort of rural framework and we've more or less carried forward those institutions. And now here we are in this place where, you know, these massive metro areas that when state constitutions were written and when the federal Constitution was written, nobody could have imagined and now we're trying to sort of govern these places with these really antiquated institutions.

FINAN: Yeah, I really liked that chapter actually, that historical overview drawing on other literature. One thing that I took away on the red areas is that they also, and correct me if I'm wrong on this. The point that you make is that they're less racially and ethnically diverse than metropolitan areas and that also plays a role.

DAMORE: Absolutely. And you also have less foreign born there and other key sort of metric on diversity there. There's a long interaction with the other, if you will, tends to sort of bring more acceptance and you just have very different social interactions in rural America versus urban America.

You tend to be within the same type of folks with the same world view, you have much longer relationships, long withstanding that reinforces these norms and these beliefs here. It's much less sort of fluid and open then you might see in a metro society. And that also plays into who you're interacting with and who you see on a daily basis.

FINAN: So, one of the central points in the book too that you bring up is the idea of the urbanized suburb, something that the Trump campaign has been looking at closely obviously. The Biden campaign too in light of what happened in 2016 with Hillary Clinton.

LANG: Suburbs that are like Arlington and Fairfax and even at this point Loudoun County are trending with the central cities. If Biden wins it's that he penetrates a much greater share of

suburban Philly then Clinton did. So, she wins center city Philly, she wins the city of Philadelphia proper and then when you go into a couple of counties out there, she's not in trouble but she's not winning them by the numbers that you'd need to offset the conservative surge in central and Western Pennsylvania.

The difference here is that Biden seems to be really strong in the exact suburbs that help deliver the U.S. House of Representatives in the 2018 mid-terms to the Democrats. And so, from Trumps election on, all subsequent elections including state elections in states like Kentucky and Virginia, New Jersey and then the mid-terms in particular you see this urbanized suburb which is a denser, closer in, has rail, has mixed land uses, has the kind of diversity that you see in the central city. Those suburbs are now fully aligned with the center of the region and that's emerged over the last 15 to 20 years. and it's solidifying and it looks to be something more of a permanent advantage to the Democrats then the sort of back and forth you see in a typical election year on issues.

FINAN: So, this may be an unfair question to throw at you but you note that the book was completed before COVID was unleashed on the country. Are there any effects that might have had on your analysis, any preliminary effects that would lead you to have some different conclusions at all?

LANG: Not much and I'll tell you why. The book is a structural book so it's relevant after the election as much as it before. We include current events and this is a major one. You know, obviously this reshaped the race in many ways, including the fact that the chief executive of the country now is stricken by the disease. So, for sure this was something that we probably would have written a little more about as part of the state of play leading into the election. But in the longer term, this did nothing but just highlight some of the differences that we spoke

of. Like we mention it to the small extent we do, we say this is where the urbanized suburbs which is a major theme of the book began identifying because they're as big as cities. They're the size of St. Louis or Pittsburgh. They start -- Arlington, Texas starts to identify with Dallas and with Fort Worth in the sense that it's a big enough city where a governor for a state like Texas says, well you don't need masks.

And in rural Texas where 9 million people live like essentially almost a Michigan is wrapped around the triangle, the Texas triangle of the big cities in Texas. That place is fine, they're okay outside there in Odessa, they're okay out in West Texas. But the mayors inside the big metros who are even often Republican's again identifying with the fellow Democrats who are pushing back on state government and saying, actually we'd like to have a mandatory mask order.

So, what you really do see is the difference between the blue metros, red states as far as something as basic as public health. And that's an area we didn't explore because public health doesn't just jump out there as one of the areas of concerns. But in the case of COVID, it's so sharp that it creates that distinction.

DAMORE: Yeah, and I'd just add to that. And you saw those same dynamics play out in Arizona, Georgia, Florida where you had red state governors essentially going against the blue metros and the blue metros saying hey, this isn't working for us, you're really doing us much harm. Now obviously if you look at where you have the biggest outbreaks, they tend to be in Republican dominated states. Tend to be less urbanized populations as well.

FINAN: The book is a long term structural analysis of this major change that's occurring in the United States. But we're 30 days out from November 3rd at this point, approximately, so I have to ask you these questions because the book tees up on them in many ways too.

You focus on the states that will determine the fate of the electoral outcome on November 3rd. And I want to ask you about the three of them that appear at this time to be the most pivotal, Florida, North Carolina and Pennsylvania. But before I do that, I want to ask you what you say to those who point toward Texas and Georgia right now as possible blue wins?

LANG: The states like Georgia and Texas are kind of aspirational states if you're the Biden campaign in that they're the way Indiana was if you think about 2008. Obama was able to flip a state that no one even saw coming in that case. And if you win by 8 or 9 points in the popular vote, 7, 8, 9 points, you end up picking off states. The electoral college which in a close race tends to favor the Republicans in a more blow out race could also deliver some unexpected results.

Georgia is a little closer, I think, than Texas. The three states you mentioned, Pennsylvania is the most pivotal because if you win that state, you win the rest of the mid-west and then you win the expected Nevada, Colorado, Virginia. You take the old coalition that even somebody way back when like Gore could win in 2000 or Kerry could win in '04. You're 278 electoral votes. You don't really need actually Florida.

What Florida is a sign that if you win it the way Obama did in 2012, Obama had over 300 electors without Florida. He got 330 electors plus after Florida. It came in two weeks later, thank God we weren't waiting for it, but Florida is perennially like that. The more interesting thing is I think if you pick up an Arizona it's probably blue hereafter. I bet Arizona is a hard state to flip back after it goes blue.

Whereas some of these states are easy flips back. Like if you win North Carolina, I wouldn't get too comfortable with North Carolina in 2024, it's more contested. And so, the difference is between states that are trending all the way into blue and those that are moving into

a luminal status where they're going to be red and blue. Like in Virginia in '08, Obama won Virginia, it's never been retrievable since.

DAMORE: We have a piece coming out on the FICSA (phonetic) blog looking at Pennsylvania in a little more detail. Pennsylvania is an interesting state, right, because as Rob alluded to earlier, you have this sort of eastern side very much aligned with the northeast corridor. And what you saw there in '18 even in the '19 county commission races is those Philly suburbs are now no longer Republican territory, all right they're trending heavily Democratic.

Whereas if you go on the other side of the state in Pittsburgh, Trump won the Pittsburgh metro by 5 points. Romney had won it by 2 on that the whole metro, not Pittsburgh proper there. But until you're seeing there's a merging east west split in Pennsylvania where the long time had been that the two metros were sort of more liberal and were the anchors to the Democrats with the sort of Republican area in the center.

Now you're really seeing the sort of, I mean, we saw this in the 2019 county commission races the Democrats picked up some of these suburban Philadelphia counties they hadn't held for decades. In some cases, what since the Civil War I think in one of them. And then on the other side of the state, right, the Republicans end up winning one of the counties in the Pittsburgh metro that they hadn't won in a while. So, you see this sort of east west split that again, we tie that back into the social cultural differences between the eastern western part of Pennsylvania.

When you read the Florida chapter, the Florida chapter is just fascinating. It's like 57 different states in there and there's so much going on in there. But we sort of end up on the Jacksonville metro as sort of the tipping point in Florida. We separate it from the panhandle and it really seems to me that if the Democrats can win in Jacksonville, they've had a really mixed record in the Jacksonville metro, that's probably going to push Florida.

LANG: Dave just mentioned that we zeroed in on the Jacksonville metropolitan area as critical. Because Jacksonville is the last million plus metro that was reliably still putting big numbers up for the Republicans. And it's fading because Jacksonville is gaining all kinds of diversity from Asia and Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican's are not just moving to the corridor. So, that's one county that we'd like to track in Florida and if you win Jacksonville, there's not enough panhandle left on the other side to probably tilt Florida back to the Republicans. If the Democrats win out Jacksonville strongly, there isn't enough rural parts of Florida left to maintain the balance in the state for the Republicans.

Ditto Maricopa which is about two-thirds of all Arizonians. It's a county that for years has been red. It's where Barry Goldwater came from. It's identified with conservative politics historically. It's different than Tucson which has always been more liberal, always much more a college town. If Biden wins Maricopa by big numbers add that to Tucson and Pima County, that's it. You win Arizona, you win Florida, it's game over for the Republicans.

DAMORE: The other thing we found in the book is every state has got a slightly different story, right, within our sort of macro theme. But, you know, you look at a state like Colorado, right, where everybody thinks oh it's blue because of Denver. Yeah, it's blue because of Denver but you also see these pockets in what Rob refers to as the cappuccino west. That has to offset the big conservative smaller metro in that state. So, there's really interesting dynamics in every one of these states but you still see the general red state blue metros framing.

FINAN: Yeah, just one thing I wanted to point out with the book that is authored is the rich description of each state you cover that's more than just a simple red blue distinction that you're making here. And Rob, I'm going to use your cheat sheet for the night of November 3rd to help me through it.

But again, let me thank you both for coming by today to talk about your new book with Karen Danielsen too. *Blue Metros Red States: The Shifting Urban Rural Divide in America's Swing States*.

DAMORE: Thanks for having us.

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria podcast is made possible only with the help of an amazing team of colleagues. My thanks to audio engineer Gaston Reboredo, Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press who does the book interviews. Marie Wilkin, Adrianna Pita and Chris McKenna for their collaboration and Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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