

# Blue metros in a divided America

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) October 29, 2020



If you were to take a look at the map of the United States through the lens of our current political polarization, you would notice some unmistakable patterns in blue and red.

Whether you were to view a map showing the recent winning presidential or congressional candidates at the county level or by congressional district, the Democratic (blue) victors would be largely clustered in and around metropolitan areas, while the successful Republican (red) candidates would more likely be found in the exurban and vast rural expanses of the country.

It was with this reality in mind that a team of authors, based in a large metro in what had been a traditionally “red” state, took on their project to examine how changing demography and internal migration are leading to shifts in state and national politics.

Based in a major “blue” metro (an area with 2 million-plus population and a newly minted National Football League team), authors David F. Damore, a professor and chair of the political science department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, along with Robert E. Lang and Karen A. Danielson, both professors in the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs at UNLV, completed their book, “Blue Metros, Red States,” earlier this year.

Both Damore and Lang are also affiliated with the Brookings Institution, the publisher of their study, and I had a chance to hear them (via Zoom) discuss their findings in a session moderated by Ruy Teixeira, a visiting fellow at Brookings.

This description of the book sets the context for the discussion: “Democratic-leaning urban areas in states that otherwise vote Republican form an increasingly important trend in American politics, one that will shape elections and policy for decades to come. ‘Blue Metros, Red States’ explores this phenomenon by analyzing the demographic shifts, voting patterns, economic data, and social characteristics of twenty-seven major metropolitan areas in thirteen swing states that will ultimately decide who is elected president and the party that will control each chamber of Congress.”

The authors’ own home state of Nevada was cited as an extreme example of the great urban-rural divide that exists in the country. The state capital, Carson City, an antiquated 19th-century town,

hosts a legislative body that meets every two years and a state workforce, very few of whom ever venture to Las Vegas.

This governmental structure is not well equipped to address the current needs of a major metropolitan area. A similar historical anomaly is found in Florida, where Tallahassee was established as the state capital, conveniently located between the major population centers of Jacksonville and Pensacola – that is, before South Florida was ever developed. Indeed, it was noted that Tallahassee is closer to Chicago than it is to Key West.

## **New patterns**

But changes are coming to the states that were studied, many in the Sun Belt, due to a variety of factors. In Arizona, the Democratic-leaning metro areas of Phoenix and Tucson are being transformed through a combination of migration from California and generational change as older white residents give way to a younger, often Latino, population.

Look for similar patterns, whether in Georgia, with an increasingly diversifying population in Greater Atlanta, or in the Charlotte and Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill metro areas of North Carolina. Even the smaller metro areas, such as Asheville, North Carolina, are contributing to the changing political culture of these swing states.

At one point in the discussion, Lang offered a shorthand summation of what is being played out in so many metropolitan areas: Density + Diversity = Democrats. He mentioned the example of the Denver area, including such suburban communities as Lakewood or Aurora, with access to light rail. Any of these more walkable, transit-accessible communities are contributing to the greater concentration of Democratic-leaning voters.

Once you reach the outer suburbs, dominated by single-family, detached homes and large acreage, you have almost certainly arrived in strong Republican enclaves.

These observations, of course, do not serve to predict the outcomes of elections, whether in swing states or elsewhere in America. Those outcomes still depend on the particular candidates, the messages they present, and the ability of their supporters to muster the votes.

Still it is worth heeding this summation of the book's insights. "The battle for the political allegiance of the growing and thriving metropolitan areas of the Sunbelt will be one of the central stories in the 2020s. [This new study] offers the definitive field guide to the electoral battlefield that may tilt the competition between red and blue America for years to come."

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