
OBSERVATIONS

America Sorts Itself

Terry Teachout

OF ALL the public statements made by various candidates for the Republican and Democratic presidential nominations, the two most revealing issued from Mike Huckabee and Barack Obama. Last December, Huckabee aired a TV ad in which he declared that “at this time of year . . . what really matters is the celebration of the birth of Christ.” Four months later, Obama, speaking at a fund-raising event in San Francisco, said that conservatively inclined working-class voters are “bitter” people who “cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.”

What was noteworthy about these statements was the clarity with which they reflected the cultural chasm that separates the two men who made them—as well as the seg-

TERRY TEACHOUT, COMMENTARY’S regular music critic and the drama critic of the *Wall Street Journal*, served as an editorial writer for the *New York Daily News* from 1987 to 1993. His *Rhythm Man: A Life of Louis Armstrong* is forthcoming next year from *Harcourt*.

ments of the electorate to which each was speaking. Huckabee, a Southern Baptist minister turned more-or-less conservative Republican politician, was appealing to evangelical Christians; Obama, a liberal Democrat who grew up in Indonesia and Hawaii and attended Columbia University and Harvard Law School, was appealing to secular up-market urbanites.

In framing their respective statements, each candidate, whether knowingly or not, invoked terms that might have been calculated in advance to antagonize the voters to whom the other was appealing. It is as though both were operating on the assumption that there is no middle ground in American politics. True, it is customary for a candidate to play to his base in the primary season, then tack to the center once he has secured his party’s nomination. But the “center” of American politics has been shrinking, and so has the difference between primary and general campaigns. Indeed, it may have become possible for serious candidates to aim their general-election campaigns almost exclusively at their bases—this is the so-called “51-percent strategy”—rather than

reaching out to undecided voters.

Up to a point, George W. Bush ran just such a campaign in 2004. If either presidential candidate should do so successfully this year, it will mean that identity politics, in which a voter’s political choices are best understood not as a set of rational responses to external circumstances but as a near-reflexive manifestation of his group affiliation, has come to dominate the American political process.

A quarter-century ago, identity-based campaigning was far less common, in part because in their internal composition the two major political parties were not so ideologically consistent as they are today. In 1980 it was possible—just—to be a conservative Democrat or a liberal Republican.

But the change in the political landscape goes deeper than that. Today, a voter’s decision to support one candidate over another may well have little to do with that candidate’s positions on specific issues. It is, rather, an ideological fashion statement, a declaration that one is a certain kind of person, whose tastes on a wide variety of cultural matters can be reliably inferred

from his political preferences—and vice-versa. “If you drive a Volvo and do yoga, you are pretty much a Democrat,” said Ken Mehlman, who managed President Bush’s 2004 presidential campaign. “If you drive a Lincoln or a BMW and you own a gun, you’re voting for Bush.”

The now-familiar phrases “latte liberal” and “NASCAR conservative” are expressions of this development. So is the widely read satirical web site *stuffwhitepeoplelike.com*, whose authors catalogue the cultural preferences of urban white liberals:

[W]hen white people have a nice new car such as a Prius or an Audi station wagon, the fear of losing resale value prevents them from applying more than one sticker. Therefore that one sticker must properly capture the essence of the car and the political views of the driver. The safest and most accepted choice for a sticker is always one that supports a Democratic presidential candidate (Ralph Nader is an acceptable substitute). As of February 2008, white law requires an Obama ’08 bumper sticker to be placed on the back of every Prius.

The prevalence of such cultural markers is no laughing matter, however, to the postmodern American presidential candidate for whom—to paraphrase the radical slogan of the 1960’s—the political is cultural. To the contrary, it is his bread and butter. In order to put together a winning electoral coalition, he must first of all find out what his kind of people like—and where they live.

IN THE wake of the 2000 election, commentators noted with surprise that the candidacies of George W. Bush and Al Gore had been regionally distinct in their appeal. Here is how I put it in a post-election essay for COMMENTARY:

Except for Alaska and New Hampshire, all 29 of the states won decisively by Bush are geo-

graphically contiguous, forming a vast L-shaped curve that sweeps down from the Rocky Mountains across the Great Plains, then through the Midwest and South. By contrast, except for California and Washington, most of the states won decisively by Gore are bunched tightly around the urban and industrial centers of the Northeast and the Great Lakes. . . . Gore won in urban and suburban America, Bush nearly everywhere else.¹

I went on to suggest, as others had before me, that the U.S. was splintering into “two geographically and culturally distinct units . . . that are competing for political control of the country as a whole.”² Moreover, the emergence of these two “nations,” I argued, was the result of a long-term “sorting process.” The “gradual segregation of the electoral map into two geographically discrete belts” was, as I saw it, the manifestation of a larger disintegration of America’s common culture.

That disintegration in turn had been accelerated by the rise of “information-age capitalism,” whose sophisticated marketing techniques were now being embraced by a new generation of media-savvy, demographically conscious politicians. The result:

Today, a young voter who opposes gun control, or supports public-school vouchers, will quickly see that there is no place for him in Democratic Nation, no matter how his parents may have voted in bygone days. So instead of choosing a party out of familial loyalty, as once was generally the case, he will end up choosing it out of cultural convictions—just as he is more likely to settle in a community where his next-door neighbor shares those convictions.

TO THE extent that my 2001 essay was noticed by other commentators, it was mostly dismissed as an exercise in alarmism. Andrew Sullivan,

among others, had already contended that the geographical divide between the parties was factitious: “What’s that blue [i.e., Democratic] sliver meandering up the Mississippi? Look at the bluish enclaves in New Mexico, Wisconsin, Louisiana, and Tennessee. Check out the red inland counties of California.” A year later, David Brooks, while acknowledging that the divide was real, nonetheless claimed that the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 had “neutralized the political and cultural leaders who tend to exploit the differences” between the two nations. Thus, in Brooks’s view, “although there are some real differences between Red and Blue America, there is no fundamental conflict. There may be cracks, but there is no chasm.”

By 2004, though, the cracks were widening again, and the two-nations thesis had become a staple of political analysis. In a *New York Times* column titled “Age of Political Segregation,” Brooks acknowledged that younger “information-age workers” now tended “to cluster in places where people share their cultural, aesthetic, and, as it turns out, political values. . . . Once you’ve joined a side, the information age makes it easier for you to surround yourself with people like yourself.”

Brooks, it seems, had changed his mind after reading a series of articles published in 2004 by Bill Bishop, a reporter for the *Austin American-Statesman*. Drawing on the statistical analysis of Robert G. Cushing, a sociologist at the Uni-

¹ “Republican Nation, Democratic Nation?,” January 2001.

² For an early analysis of the phenomenon, see Tod Lindberg, “The Broken Arc,” in the *Weekly Standard* for November 25, 1996. My own essay was immediately inspired by the work of Michael Barone, who in a pre-election article in *U.S. News & World Report* had observed that while Clinton-era Democrats had made significant gains in the “vast suburban sprawls” of America’s major metropolitan areas, the “fast-growing counties beyond metro-edge cities, with [their] family-size subdivisions and megachurches,” were becoming “heavily Republican.”

versity of Texas, Bishop had concluded (in Brooks's summary) that

the number of counties where one party or another has a landslide majority has doubled over the past quarter-century. Whole regions are now solidly Democratic or Republican. Nearly three-quarters of us . . . live in counties that are becoming less [politically] competitive, and many of us find ourselves living in places that are overwhelmingly liberal or overwhelmingly conservative.

The consequence of this self-sorting, according to Brooks, was that "every place becomes more like itself, and the cultural divides between places become stark."

Which brings us to this year's race, in which, as Brooks has noted, the cultural divides have become so sharp that they have been reflected for the first time within the two major parties themselves. Thus, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton competed for the loyalty of a Democratic electorate that turned out to be as deeply split along cultural lines as was the larger voting public, with Obama appealing mainly to blacks and well-to-do urbanites, Clinton to older women and working-class voters. Obama, Brooks wrote in April,

has won roughly 70 percent of the most-educated counties in the primary states. Clinton has won 90 percent of the least-educated counties. . . . Social identity is everything. Demography is king.

A WEEK AFTER Brooks's latest exercise in cultural demography appeared in the *Times*, Bill Bishop and Robert G. Cushing published *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*.³ In this book, an expansion of Bishop's *American-Statesman* articles, the two authors offer exhaustive documentation of their original thesis that Americans "have clustered in communities of same-

ness . . . whose inhabitants find other Americans to be culturally incomprehensible."

The "communities of sameness" explored by Bishop and Cushing range from the very liberal neighborhoods of South Austin, Texas, to the very Republican county of Okanogan, Washington. In recent years, these communities have grown far more sharply defined in their political and cultural identities—partly because living in a homogeneous community reinforces one's existing attitudes, partly because such communities tend to attract like-minded emigrants.

According to *The Big Sort*:

[W]e discovered that people who left counties with large numbers of evangelicals rarely moved to counties dominated by Democrats. People who left counties with a high proportion of evangelicals largely moved to counties of like faith. Similarly, we found that when people moved from Republican counties, they were very likely to settle in other Republican counties.

And what has been the result of this culturally driven emigration? Bishop and Cushing claim that today's Americans have put themselves at risk of transforming their country and their culture beyond recognition:

We have created, and are creating, new institutions distinguished by their isolation and single-mindedness. We have replaced a belief in a nation with a trust in ourselves and our carefully chosen surroundings. . . . [W]e approach public life with the sensibility of customers who are always right.

One of the most striking aspects of *The Big Sort* is that while Bishop, the principal author, is a self-acknowledged liberal, the book scrupulously avoids partisanship, seeking instead to offer an objective description and analysis of the "sorting process" that I sketched in COMMEN-

TARY seven years ago. But the picture it paints is even starker today than it seemed in 2001.

A growing body of social-science research indicates that people who live exclusively or primarily among those with whom they agree on most things are likely to hold more extreme cultural and political opinions. As for the fate of those who do not share the prevailing views of the communities in which they reside, the evidence, according to Bishop and Cushing, is equally clear-cut:

Nearly 60 years of social-psychological research confirms that as political majorities grow within communities, minorities retreat from public life. Majorities have their beliefs reinforced by seeing and hearing their inclinations locally repeated and enhanced. Self-reinforcing majorities grow larger, while isolated and dispirited minorities shrink.

THAT AMERICANS of different cultural and political inclinations are "sorting" themselves geographically, with each set of inclinations reinforcing the other, now appears to be beyond argument. But what might it be like to live in a country that has sorted itself in this way?

While *The Big Sort* offers anecdotes rather than answers, Bishop's reportage is disturbing in its implications, not least because it suggests that Democrats and Republicans who no longer live together are more likely to demonize one another out of sheer ignorance. Other statistical evidence points to a similar conclusion. In a recent survey co-sponsored by the *Economist* and the Hoover Institution, 62 percent of self-identified Democrats described Republicans as "closed-minded," 55 percent as "hypocritical," and only 26 percent as "patriotic." As for the Republicans surveyed, they present a virtual mirror image: 64 percent described Democrats as "hypocritical," 59 percent as "closed-minded,"

³ Houghton Mifflin, 370 pp., \$25.00.

and only 19 percent as “patriotic.”

What such results suggest is that the two political parties will find it increasingly difficult to make common cause on major issues—and that party leaders will be significantly less disposed to try. Indeed, if one party should manage to take control of both Congress and the White House, as the Republicans did in 2002 and the Democrats may do this November, its base-conscious leaders will be all the more likely to adopt a confidently militant line. This is, needless to say, a recipe for legislative paralysis.

All of this casts Barack Obama’s widely discussed remarks about the “bitterness” of small-town conservatives, as well as Mike Huckabee’s Christmas-for-Christians message, in a different light. A quarter-century ago, no seasoned politician would have dreamed of saying what Obama said, even if he thought it was true. In fact, reporters old enough to remember those days

were astonished by Obama’s tactlessness. Karen Tumulty, *Time*’s national political correspondent, described it as “a graceless move to characterize an entire demographic group—and vital voting bloc—as irrational and bigoted.”

But Tumulty came of age when politicians of both parties still sought to carve their majorities out of the middle of the political spectrum. Not so Obama. He partakes of the postmodern political sensibility, and his Ivy League education and upper-middle-class experience have had the effect of isolating him from the working-class “Reagan Democrats” whom Hillary Clinton courted so assiduously and effectively in the second half of the primary season. By the same token, Mike Huckabee, who grew up in Arkansas and was educated at Ouachita Baptist University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has spent the whole of his life in Red America.

Might the candidacy of John McCain, who at present seems to be appealing to a more demographically diverse cohort of American voters than either Obama or Huckabee, refute the two-nations thesis advanced in *The Big Sort*? Perhaps. But if McCain wins in November, it will almost certainly be with a share of electoral votes disproportionate to his smaller share of the popular vote. And in any case, McCain represents a style of politics more typical of a man born in 1936 than of one born in 1961 (like Obama) or 1955 (like Huckabee).

Unlike John McCain, Obama and Huckabee are identity politicians—and pure products of the Big Sort. For this reason, their otherwise dissimilar ways of thinking may have more to tell us about the rancorous political ways of a country made up of two increasingly separate nations, one whose younger citizens are more and more likely to have known only their own kind.



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