

A Line in the Suburban Sand

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Suburbia is the most important place in American politics. That was true in the two presidential elections held so far in this decade, a pair of extraordinarily close contests that George W. Bush won, in the end, because he did a little better in the suburbs of a few battleground states.

But a *Congressional Quarterly* assessment of the demographics of all 435 congressional districts shows the pivotal role of the suburban voter extends much more deeply into the nation's electoral fabric — and that, in fact, two different camps of suburban voters are forming, with their politics moving in opposite directions.

For the first time ever, most House districts have a suburban majority. The congressional reapportionment and districting that occurred in the first half of this decade, combined with the population shifts during the 1990s that were reflected in the census of five years ago, mean that there are now 220 districts (51 percent) in which most people are residents of a suburb.

What that means is that candidates' appeal to suburban voters is among the most important keys to controlling Congress. And the Republicans' significant edge in suburban districts — they won three out of every five last November, and as a result hold a 48-seat advantage in suburbia in the 109th Congress — is the foundation upon which they have built and expanded the House majority that has now lasted more than a decade.

But an even closer look at the political makeup of suburbia, as found in *CQ's* study, suggests an even more portentous dividing line — between the constituencies that lie mainly in the rapidly developing suburbs that are sprawling outward to enlarge most metropolitan areas, and the longer-established and more slowly growing inner suburbs.

The newer, outer suburbs are almost all overwhelmingly white, wealthier than the rest of the country and conservative-leaning, traits that lend themselves to the Republicans' current dominance of their congressional districts. The inner suburbs have a more urban feel, both in their atmospherics and demographics, with more ethnic diversity and a greater range of income. The Democrats, whose strongest congressional base remains in the nation's 90 urban districts, also do well in neighboring inner suburbia, just not well enough to offset the GOP's looming advantage at the metropolitan edges.

With their huge and growing numbers, the suburban districts will be the battleground in the partisan fight for House control for the foreseeable future. "It's going to be who controls the suburbs," Dick Simpson, a political scientist at University of Illinois at Chicago, said succinctly when asked to predict the most important factor in forecasting which party would have the majority in the House.

For Democrats, that means that unless they figure out a strategy for breaching the outer suburban fortress, it will be a struggle to achieve the 15-seat net gain they would need to capture control in

the 2006 midterm election. And their prospects look bleak for a return to the kind of dominance they enjoyed during a House reign that ran from 1954 to 1994.

As former House Democrat Tim Roemer noted with discouragement in December, during his bid for the Democratic National Committee chairmanship that failed earlier this year, 97 of the 100 fastest-growing counties in the nation favored Bush over Democratic challenger John Kerry of Massachusetts last year. “You can’t be a competitive national party with that kind of map,” said Roemer, who represented the northern part of Indiana around South Bend from 1991 through 2002.

CHICAGO CONUNDRUM

A virtual tour of the Chicago metropolitan area underscores the point. A drive of about 30 miles west from downtown Chicago leads to the 14th District of Illinois, which is represented by House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert. The district ranges farther west into Illinois’ corn and soybean fields to pick up a few extra reliably Republican voters for Hastert, who was one of the architects of the state’s current congressional map. But most of its residents live in the social and economic orbit of Chicago.

They make the 14th a robust example of the nation’s fast-growing outer suburbia. Hastert’s home base is in Kendall County, where the population grew at a faster rate between 2000 and 2004 than in all but six other counties in the nation, according to Census Bureau estimates. The mainly white and well-to-do district is a GOP stronghold: Hastert won his 10th term last fall with 69 percent and Bush carried the district by 11 percentage points. That is the same margin by which Bush lost the entire state.

One district to the east, and closer to the big city, is the 13th District, anchored by the expansive DuPage County city of Naperville, where the population soared by 50 percent in the 1990s to more than 128,000. The territory may be a shade less conservative than Hastert’s. Its Republican representative, Judy Biggert, supports some abortion rights, for example. But it is no less Republican: Bush took 55 percent there last fall, too, while Biggert won her fourth term with 65 percent.

Keep driving east, however, and you’ll find yourself in the still-suburban 2nd District, where three out of every five people are black and the representative for almost a decade has been Jesse L. Jackson Jr., son of the civil rights activist. The 2nd is even more strongly Democratic than the 13th and 14th are Republican: more than six out of seven people voted for Jackson and Kerry last fall. The district still includes part of Chicago’s South Side, which once was its core. But as racial barriers were removed, many African-Americans left the inner city, first for close-in communities, such as Calumet City, Harvey, Dolton and South Holland, and increasingly to more upscale communities, such as Matteson and Olympia Fields farther south. The 2nd District’s lines followed, to the point that about three-fifths of its residents now live in the suburbs.

INSIDE THE OUTER SUBURBS

Fortunately for Republicans, there are more districts like Hastert's than Jackson's. This is especially true in the fast-populating areas of the South and West — the so-called Sun Belt — where outer-ring suburban districts have been replicating most rapidly, to the benefit of the Republican Party.

In Georgia, for example, members such as Tom Price and John Linder represent the burgeoning suburban communities north of Atlanta. Their districts are so strongly Republican that both Linder and Price ran unopposed last November. This, says Robert E. Lang, the director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech in Alexandria, Va., is an illustration that “the Republicans really understand their turf in the exurbs” and have been doing the most to exploit it.

Linder is in his seventh term and is a former chairman of his party's national House campaign organization, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC). Like tens of thousands of his constituents, Linder is a transplant from another region. A graduate of the University of Minnesota at Duluth, he is now a longtime resident of another Duluth — this one in the thriving Gwinnett County suburbs east of Atlanta. Bush, who carried Georgia by 17 points last fall, prevailed in Linder's horseshoe-shaped district, which roughly follows the northern edges of metropolitan Atlanta, by 47 points.

Price is a freshman whose 6th District predecessors include such Republican stalwarts as Johnny Isakson, who held the seat for six years before his election to the Senate in 2004, and Newt Gingrich, the House Speaker during the four years after the 1994 GOP House takeover.

Price represents much of Roswell, a former cotton-milling center that is now a commuter suburb, and Alpharetta, which not long ago was mainly a farm town. It was the focus of a New York Times story this month — part of a series on class divisions in America — that focused on a married couple with three children as an example of a “relo” family, one of the many thousands who frequently relocate within and between metropolitan areas in search of job and economic advancement.

In most places in the nation, but especially in the Sun Belt, Republicans outperform Democrats among wealthier Americans. And most people moving to new subdivisions that are sprouting from what until recently were farms and fields have at least secured a good-sized nest egg. The median income of Price's constituents at the time of the 2000 census was \$75,611 — more than half again as much as the \$49,048 average of all the suburban districts' median incomes, and nearly double the \$39,715 average median of the nation's urban districts, where the Democrats predominate.

In the main, affluent voters want to hold on to their money, or at least share as little of it with the government as possible. “They tend to be more conservative, so [anti-tax positions] tend to work with them,” said Rep. Thomas M. Davis III of suburban Virginia — another former NRCC chairman — when asked what issues appear to motivate outer suburban constituencies like his own.

Mark Steven Kirk, a third-term Republican whose Illinois district is centered in the tony North Shore suburbs of Chicago, posits the outer suburbs include a number of entrepreneurs who believe they have, at least at some point, been put upon by government officials.

”In the exurbs, we have a very large number of people who are in sales or are part of family-owned businesses. And so they are directly interacting with the economy. They have terrible experiences with the IRS and other government regulatory agencies, and those terrible experiences pull them into the Republican Party,” says Kirk, whose mix of fiscal conservatism and social-issues moderation enabled him to win with 64 percent last year in one of the relatively few (14) Republican-held suburban districts that preferred Kerry.

Most outer suburbanites also are parents, with many trading long and taxing commutes to work for the amenities — bigger houses, more land, highly rated schools, safe streets, more organized sports and other extracurricular activities — that they desire for their families. Voting patterns in these districts appear to empirically confirm the data from public opinion polling over the past several years that has shown married voters strongly favoring Republican candidates.

Republican Rep. Mike Rogers also cites family orientation in characterizing the political attitudes in Michigan’s Livingston County, the suburb between Lansing and Detroit where he lives. “Families don’t worry about their children playing in the park at night,” he said, adding later, “These are Main Street conservatives. These are the people who get up every day and play by the rules. That is exactly what attracts them to the Republican Party.”

The strong strain of cultural conservatism seen in many of the newer, outermost suburban areas helps cement the GOP’s one-sided overall advantage in suburbia. One symbol of outer suburban life, particularly in the South and West, is the “megachurch,” often a Christian fundamentalist congregation with thousands of members. “With culture dictating political alignments now more than economics, that has resulted in many of the faster-growing outer suburban areas being more Republican,” says Davis, whose highly affluent and politically competitive district takes in both inner and outer suburbs to the west of Washington.

The strongest Democratic voting base across the nation is among minorities, especially African-Americans and non-Cuban Hispanics. But most outer suburban districts have few ethnic minority residents. Price’s constituency is 83 percent white and Linder’s is 82 percent white, compared with an average 73 percent in all the suburban districts and 69 percent nationally. This is a factor hardly restricted to the South: More than nine out of 10 people are whites in both of the suburban districts that envelop Pittsburgh. And both seats are held by Republicans, Melissa A. Hart and Tim Murphy.

SOME SEATS IN PLAY

Despite the handicaps that Democrats face in such districts, there are a small number of success stories they can point to as models for changing the dynamic in outer suburbia. There are, for example, 12 Democrats today representing suburban districts that Bush carried in 2004.

Among them is Melissa Bean of Illinois' 8th District, which includes well-heeled suburbanites northwest of Chicago and decisively supported Bush's re-election. Its ideological leanings are not much in question, but Bean unseated 35-year Republican incumbent Philip M. Crane for two reasons: She successfully portrayed the incumbent as having lost interest in parochial affairs while spending an inordinate amount of time on international travel. As importantly, she portrayed herself as a Democrat different from the national stereotype — the president of a technology consulting firm who cited Adam Smith, the 18th century Scottish proponent of capitalism, and Milton Friedman, the conservative modern-day economist from the University of Chicago, as among her influences.

Her mix of fiscal conservatism, focus on constituent service and more liberal views on social issues will be tested in the 2006 election, though, as several Republican candidates already have lined up to run.

Another suburban member with a "Bush-Democratic" constituency — and who also seeks to succeed politically by striking a posture of fiscal conservatism and social moderation — is Dennis Moore, whose district encompasses the Kansas suburbs of Kansas City. His election in 1998 was the first for a Democrat in that district in four decades; he has since won by consistent if narrow margins.

The landslide margins that Bush and GOP congressional candidates tended to rack up in the Republican-leaning suburban districts were matched by the dominance of Democrats in many of the inner suburbs. It is not surprising then, that among the handful of Republican-held districts that are politically competitive are areas that bridge the inner-outer suburban divide, some of which have significant urban elements. [*What has reinforced this divide between urban and suburban?*]

House Republicans have so far managed to maintain their control of these suburban districts — and even outperform the Republican president in those locales — by fielding candidates who emphasize centrist, independent-minded political views that do not dovetail completely with the strongly conservative direction set by Bush and the party's congressional leadership.

In the 14 suburban districts where voters "split" their ballots last year by voting for a House Republican but favoring Democrat Kerry for president, the House members are Kirk of Illinois; Michael G. Fitzpatrick, Curt Weldon, Jim Gerlach and Charlie Dent of Pennsylvania; Rob Simmons, Christopher Shays and Nancy L. Johnson of Connecticut; E. Clay Shaw Jr. of Florida; Michael N. Castle of Delaware; Bob Beauprez of Colorado; James T. Walsh of New York; Anne M. Northup of Kentucky; and Dave Reichert of Washington.

Most of these members do not reflexively vote the party line: Shays, Simmons, Kirk and Castle are among the half-dozen House Republicans who most frequently differ with their GOP colleagues.

Most of them are in the political center on social issues, as are many suburban voters. Castle, who won a seventh term last year with 69 percent in the state's at-large district even as Kerry was easily prevailing, is chief sponsor of a House-passed bill that would allow federal funding

for research on some stem cell lines derived from surplus embryos. Eight of the 14 suburban Republicans from Kerry-voting districts voted for the bill, which Bush says he would veto.

”Our candidates have been able to adapt pretty well,” said Davis, whose own district — the nation’s most affluent, with a median household income of \$80,397 — favored Bush by less than 1 percentage point last year.

Davis noted that Reichert, a former county sheriff from the suburban Seattle 8th District of Washington, and Fitzpatrick, a former county commissioner from the suburban Philadelphia 8th District of Pennsylvania, are both freshmen who brought their longtime political service to bear against neophyte Democratic candidates in 2004. “Republicans have done a better job, I think, in selecting their candidates in these areas,” Davis said.

Kirk also cited Reichert’s district, as well as his own, as examples of how their district’s economic orientations enable them to overcome Democrats’ appeals to their voters on other issues.

”You represent my area, you represent the No. 1 and No. 2 exporters, Boeing and Motorola employees,” Kirk said. “Or, for example, Dave Reichert’s district, it’s Microsoft. So we’re very connected to the world economy, and therefore advancing U.S. markets, making sure we win the war on terror and making sure that trial lawyers don’t strangle the U.S. economy here at home are unifying themes for us.”

Yet several of these incumbents are regularly targeted for defeat by Democratic strategists, who view their politically flexible districts as among their strongest potential pickups. For example, Shays’ Connecticut 4th District, a suburban area northeast of New York City, is trending more Democratic than Republican. Despite his independent-minded ways, Shays last year barely outran Democrat Diane Farrell, who held the incumbent to 52 percent and is expected to seek a rematch next year.

Gerlach faces a likely rematch with Democratic lawyer Lois Murphy, who last year held him to a 2 percentage-point victory in Pennsylvania’s 6th, a district that reaches northwest from the Philadelphia suburbs of Montgomery and Chester counties to take in part of the city of Reading.

Simmons, whose eastern Connecticut 2nd is the second-strongest pro-Kerry district held by a House Republican, is regularly a Democratic target. And Colorado’s 7th, the suburban Denver district Beauprez is leaving open to run for governor, is a quintessential swing district that the incumbent first won in 2002 by a 121-vote margin.

INSIDE THE BELTWAYS

The inner suburban territories where Democrats have found the most consistent inroads in many cases developed decades ago, and many have their share of urban ills, such as decaying infrastructure.

”Over time, they’re becoming more like cities,” William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution, said of inner suburbs.

Like a large city, many of these inner suburban districts are geographically compact. Of the 30 most densely populated suburban districts, all but five voted for Kerry. The same 25 districts also voted for House Democrats. Conversely, Bush won 28 of the 30 suburban districts that have the lowest population density.

Many of these areas used to vote Republican, back when they were more traditional suburbs. But as Republicans focus primarily on their political base in the fast-growing outer suburbs, many inner suburbs are voting Democratic — or are moving in that direction.

These areas also are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. The inner suburbs are represented in the House Democratic leadership by Caucus Chairman Robert Menendez, the highest-ranking Hispanic in congressional history, whose 13th District in New Jersey takes in older suburbs near New York City, such as Union City and Perth Amboy, as well as parts of urban environs such as Jersey City and Newark. It is a majority-minority district and heavily Democratic: Kerry took 68 percent of the vote, his second-best showing among New Jersey’s districts.

Another inner suburban district with a Hispanic incumbent is California’s 34th, represented by Democrat Lucille Roybal-Allard; her constituents have a median household income of \$29,863, 39 percent lower than the average for all suburban districts.

Mainly black inner suburbs across the nation include those in Prince George’s County, Md., where the huge Democratic voting margins sustain 4th District Democratic Rep. Albert R. Wynn, and DeKalb County, Ga., east of Atlanta, which provides most of the population to the 4th District represented by Democrat Cynthia A. McKinney.

A mid-decade redistricting plan that Georgia Republicans enacted this year, and which is pending legal clearance, would strengthen the GOP leanings of the 11th District represented by Republican Phil Gingrey. This move was made by the state legislature’s Republican majority in part because Gingrey’s current district includes some suburbs near Atlanta that are rapidly filling up with Democratic-voting African-Americans.

Despite the increased Democratic margins in urbanized inner suburbs, Lang argues that the party is winning there “by default.” Democratic leaders, he said, have failed to articulate a “reinvestment policy for inner suburbs” and still adhere to an “inner-city strategy.”

The only exception Lang sees is Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, who last month introduced a bill that is designed to revitalize suburban communities.

It would be an error, though, to suggest that the Democrats’ strength in inner suburbia is all about minorities and low-income communities. California’s 14th District, a Silicon Valley bastion represented by Democrat Anna G. Eshoo, has one of the highest median household annual incomes in the nation, \$77,985.

Some of these districts are quite affluent and mainly white; they tend to attract culturally liberal residents who like a more urban lifestyle, but don't want to deal with the hassles of living in the heart of the core city.

"The cities are moving out to the suburbs, and with it, they've become more multi-ethnic, they've become more secular; you have more gays, you have groups that traditionally are Democratic groups," said Davis, whose boyhood hometown of Arlington, Va., well fits his description. "Those people tend to be more liberal in their cultural value system and that translates into Democratic votes."

Davis' district borders two others — both represented by Democrats — that have high proportions of residents with a graduate or professional degree. Maryland's 8th, represented by Democrat Chris Van Hollen, leads in that category. Just across the Potomac River is Virginia's 8th District, which ranks third in that category and is represented by Democrat James P. Moran.

To make a serious dent in the Republicans' all-important suburban advantage, though, Democrats must figure out a way to convince those well-off and well-educated folks living well beyond the Beltways that they have their best interests at heart, too.

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