



The Perils of America's Persistent Anti-Urban Traditions

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On November 8, 2016 rural and small town America took its revenge on metropolitan residents. Analysts picking through the electoral rubble point to plenty of plausible explanations for the outcome: Too many millennials tossed away their votes; Democrats did not sufficiently feel the pain of the white working class; many voters would not accept a women president; a hostile foreign government and the FBI Director meddled just enough to tip the Electoral College. Nevertheless, the basic U.S. electoral map looks much like it has over the last several cycles. The real political divide is between metropolitan America and everywhere else.

This basic political fault line emerged decades ago and continues to widen. It marks one of the country's central ironies -- that the United States is an urbanized nation inhabited by people who are deeply ambivalent about cities.

Anti-City Biases in an Ever-Urbanizing Nation

According to a Brookings Institution study a few years ago, roughly two-thirds of Americans live in metro regions of 500,000 or more, while only 15% live in areas defined as rural. Areas beyond the big cities are of course much more spread out on the U.S. map. Even as more than 2,500 U.S. counties voted Republican on election night while only 450 supported Democrats, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by almost three million votes. Even more telling, Clinton's 450 blue dots on the electoral map account for about 62% of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product.

Urbanization has proceeded since the very beginning of the nation. Even as Thomas Jefferson extolled the virtues of the yeoman farmer, many Americans were moving to cities because that's where more and more of the economic action was to be found. Still, Americans have long been loath to acknowledge the economic realities that guide their movement. In national mythology, "real America," to borrow from Sarah Palin's memorable quote, is small-town Main Street – or a home on the range. True America is what most Americans have left behind.

Anti-urbanism isn't just central to national imagination and mythology, of course. It is baked into the political structure. In the wake of the 2016 election, commentators have stressed that the Electoral College leads to the sharp overrepresentation of even the most depopulated rural areas at the expense of metropolitan residents. Voters outside big cities may complain that they have been ignored or passed by, but their political voice far exceeds their share of the population.

Anti-Urban Impulses

Anti-urban worries express themselves in two main ways, both on full display in 2016:

- Starting with Philadelphia in the 18th century, Americans cities have always embraced ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural diversity – and that was increasingly true as industrialization proceeded. As the first stop for many arrivals from Eastern Europe or the American south, turn-of-the-twentieth-century U.S. cities embodied the cosmopolitan ideal that Randolph Bourne celebrated in his 1916 essay "Trans-National America." But not all Americans were enthusiastic about cities filling up with Catholics from Italy and Poland, Jews from Russia and Lithuania, and African-Americans from Mississippi and North Carolina. Many, in fact, recoiled at all this heterogeneity. A century later many are similarly horrified at the latest arrivals to U.S. cities – as was evident from how powerfully the virulent anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric of the 2016 Trump campaign resonated with red state voters.

- Another aspect of American anti-urbanism involves ambivalence about the role of government. Faced with unprecedented, indeed chaotic growth, the early industrial cities relied on the actions of government to make life livable with paved streets, clean water, and sanitary sewers. Over time, 20th century cities made growing commitments to public parks, transportation, education, and housing. But anti-urbanists have always been suspicious of such “collective” commitments. As they see it, urban public facilities stand as antithetical to the basic, bedrock, true American values of self-reliant individualism and the supremacy of all things private. The 2012 Republican Party Platform, for example, denounced “sustainable development,” often associated with urbanist design principles, as nothing less than an assault on “the American way of life of private property ownership, single family homes, private car ownership and individual travel choices, and privately owned farms.”

The Ironies and Harms of American Ambivalence about Cities

The irony here is rich. No parts of the United States have benefited more from federal tax dollars than red states and rural areas – and such aid grew even during and after the New Deal of the 1930s. Although important New Deal programs addressed themselves to the failing urban industrial economy, FDR’s larger ambition was to “decentralize” cities by moving people and industry out into the hinterlands. This urge tied together the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the program to build a series of entirely new towns. According to Rexford Tugwell, FDR “always did, and always would, think people better off in the country.”

Today, most red states still get back considerably more in federal tax dollars than their citizens contribute – even as small towns and cities and rural areas often have economies disproportionately dependent on federally subsidized hospitals, government facilities, and businesses. Clearly actual stakes in public spending are not enough to make nonmetropolitan Americans support what they see as “big government.” As was true in the Brexit vote in Britain as well as in the U.S. 2016 election, voters in communities that truly need government spending can be animated by anger against metropolitan liberalism.

Widespread and deep-seated American ambivalence toward cities makes it hard to tackle urban problems, whether in Detroit or Cleveland or Philadelphia. But the consequences are more wide-ranging. Reluctance to think in public terms, to address the commonweal, flows in significant part from longstanding American proclivities to decry and escape from cities. If Americans are to forge a more effective politics for this century, they will have to outgrow anti-urban habits.