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by ruy teixeira

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Don't Think Rural, Think “Micropolitan”

Most of the counties in the United States lie outside of metropolitan areas (roughly two-thirds). These nonmetropolitan counties are typically thought of as rural by most people. But all rural areas are not the same—many have an urban, if small, core that dominates a central county and to which people in surrounding counties may commute. These areas have recently been designated “micropolitan areas” by the Office of Management and Budget to differentiate them from other nonmetropolitan areas. Here is the Economic Research Service on [the basic definition of micropolitan areas](#):

Office of Management and Budget (OMB) was urged by various sources in the last decade to delineate the entire land surface of the country into areas, and not leave the territory outside of metro areas as an undifferentiated residual. As a partial response, OMB designated micro areas using the same procedure as that for metro areas. Any nonmetro county with an urban cluster of at least 10,000 persons or more becomes the central county of a micro area. As with metro areas, outlying counties are included if commuting to the central county is 25 percent or higher, or if 25 percent of the employment in the outlying county is made up of commuters from the central county. Because they are county-based and include outlying areas, the total area population

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reaches well beyond 50,000 for many micro areas. The inaugural set of 560 micro areas includes 674 counties and ranges in size from 13,000 (Andrews, Texas) to 182,000 (Torrington, Connecticut).

Micro areas contain just under 60 percent of the nonmetro population, with an average of 43,000 people per county. In contrast, the 1,378 “noncore” counties, with no urban cluster of 10,000 or more residents, average just 14,000 people.

It is these micropolitan areas that include the bulk of the rural population, as mentioned above, even though they are only about a third of rural counties and include only about a quarter of rural land area. They tend to be more economically dynamic and, of course, are far denser than other rural counties, with about a third of micropolitan residents actually living in the principal cities of these areas (the corresponding figure for metropolitan areas is not so much higher, about 40 percent).

Much more fascinating detail on micropolitan areas, as well as the entire new system of metropolitan classification promulgated by OMB, may be found in this excellent report from the Brookings Institution, [“Tracking Metropolitan America into the 21st Century: A Field Guide to the New Metropolitan and Micropolitan Areas.”](#)

Are there political implications to this? Sure. If Democrats want to improve their performance in rural areas, that must principally be about doing better in micropolitan areas. Three-fifths of the rural vote and three-fifths of Bush’s gains in rural areas in 2004 were in micropolitan areas. And micropolitan areas, by virtue of their relatively high density and significant urban populations, should be more cosmopolitan and more open to Democratic appeals than the thinly populated, nonmicropolitan areas that make up the rest of rural America.

What Happened in the South in Bush’s 2004 Election Victory?

On the most straightforward level, of course, what happened in the South (defined as the eleven states of the old Confederacy plus Kentucky and Oklahoma) was that it provided Bush with rock-solid support, as he carried all thirteen states, including the most contested one, Florida. That was central to his election victory.

Digging deeper into the data, though, a number of interesting patterns emerge that go far beyond that undeniable fact.

1. While the South did move in Bush’s direction in the 2004 election, it moved about the same distance, in terms of percentage points, as the rest of the country.
2. In the 2000 election, however, the South did move more in Bush’s direction (twelve points) than the rest of the country (seven points). In 1996 Bill Clinton actually split the southern vote with Bob Dole, 46–46.

3. In the 2004 election, despite the fact that Bush did not disproportionately increase his percentage point margin in the South, 58 percent of his gains in vote margin came from the South, reflecting disproportionately high turnout increases in a number of those states.

4. Bush's biggest gains by far in percentage point margin in the south in 2004 were in micropolitan (see above) and non-micropolitan rural areas, not metro areas, which showed only a modest shift toward Bush. And, since 1996, the Republican presidential margin in the south has increased by 29 points in non-micropolitan rural areas, by 26 points in micropolitan areas and by only 12 points in metro areas.

5. Since 1980, the south's share of the national popular vote has increased by 5 points. That has been entirely within southern metro areas; the vote share of southern micropolitan and non-micropolitan rural areas remains unchanged.

Since it appears that these rapidly growing metro areas in the south have been significantly less susceptible to Bush's appeal than the micropolitan and non-micropolitan rural areas of the south, it is undoubtedly these metro areas that hold the key to a southern comeback for the Democrats.

Social Security: Son of “That Dog Won’t Hunt”

Hart/McInturff poll of 1,008 adults for NBC News/Wall Street Journal, released February 17, 2005 (conducted February 10–14, 2005)

That pesky public! The more it hears about Bush's proposal on Social Security, the less it seems to like it and the more it seems to reject the whole “ownership society” concept that Bush has attempted to tie into the proposal.

Consider these findings from the latest NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll.

1. After all of Bush's scaremongering, only 17 percent of the public is willing to term Social Security's financial situation a crisis.

2. Notwithstanding Bush's stumping for his proposal in the past two months and all the coverage in the press, the percentage believing we should make some adjustments but leave the “Social Security system basically as is” has risen from 39 to 50 percent, while the percentage saying we should change the Social Security system “to allow people to invest some of their Social Security taxes in private accounts” has declined from 45 to 40 percent.

Similarly, over the past two months, Bush has not been able to push beyond 40 percent the number who think it is “a good idea . . . to change the Social Security system to allow workers to invest their Social Security contributions in the stock market,” while the number thinking it is a bad idea has remained steady at 50–51 percent.

Not only that, of those who think this change is a bad idea, 60 percent say their position is “completely firm and unlikely to change.” That is just the reverse of the situation with those who

think the change is a good idea, in which case 68 percent say they are “open to changing their mind.”

3. How committed are people to the idea of private accounts? Four times as many give primary importance to keeping the system from running short of money (49 percent) as give precedence to creating investment accounts (12 percent).

4. How interested are people in the ownership society approach? By 61–32, the public says Congress should place the most emphasis on “providing guarantees for the future” in Social Security and health care rather than “giving people more responsibility and personal control.”

5. How to save money in the Social Security system? Only two proposals tested by NBC/WSJ garnered majority support: limiting the benefits that are paid out to wealthy retirees (64 percent) and, intriguingly, gradually increasing the Social Security payroll tax (51 percent).

Guess those RNC talking points are not quite doing the job!

Once Again on the Party ID Question

Last week, I wrote about the latest controversy around partisan distribution in polls and their apparent relation to outlier results, like Gallup’s 57 percent approval rating for Bush in its February 4–6 poll. Mark Blumenthal of *Mystery Pollster* has now plunged into the controversy with an excellent analysis, “**On Outliers and Party ID**,” of the various polling issues raised by this problem. Here is an excerpt from his analysis, in which he recommends some eminently sensible changes to polling practices and coverage that I heartily support.

Unlike pure demographic items like age and gender, party ID is an attitude which can change especially from year to year. . . . The problem is that partisan composition of any sample can also vary randomly—outliers do happen. Unfortunately, when they do we get news stories about “trends” that are really nothing more than statistical noise. . . .

The conflict leads to some third-way approaches that some have dubbed “dynamic weighting.” **I discussed these back in October**. The simplest and least arbitrary method is for survey organizations to weight their polls by the average result for party identification on recent surveys conducted by that organization—perhaps over the previous three to six months. The evolving party identification target from the larger combined sample would smooth out random variation while allowing for gradual long-term change (see also **Prof. Alan Reifman’s web page** for more commentary on this issue).

. . . the party ID numbers ought to be a standard part of the public release of any survey, along with cross-tabulations of key results by party identification. Gallup should be commended for releasing data on request even to critics like [Steve] Soto, but it really should not require a special request.

Also, when a survey shows a sharp shift in party identification, news coverage of that survey should at least note the change—something sorely lacking in the stories on CNN and in USAToday about the [Gallup] February 4–6 survey.

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Public Opinion Watch covers newly released polls, as well as key newspaper and magazine articles that make use of polling data. If you've ever wondered what to make of the blizzard of survey data covered in the newspapers—and whether the newspapers themselves know what they're talking about—you'll want to check out this feature on a regular basis. Each edition will combine noteworthy findings and trends from the latest polling data with analysis of the misinterpretations and misrepresentations to which polling data are so often subject. This and other publications can be found at The Century Foundation Web site:

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