



Welcome to Blueburbia

...and other landmarks on America's new map.

By RICHARD FLORIDA

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In mid-1959, my parents, Louis and Eleanor Florida, moved from the Italian neighborhood in Newark, N.J., where they were born, raised and married, to the nearby working-class suburb of North Arlington, toting along 1½-year-old me. They bought a new home for \$15,000—a two-family Cape Cod with a yard—and for the rest of their lives never stopped marveling at the good fortune that had brought them to their new suburban refuge. Around the same time—on July 24, 1959, to be exact—Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and Vice President Richard Nixon held a fierce, impromptu [debate](#) in the fully equipped kitchen of a model American suburban home that had been erected, incongruously enough, in Sokolniki Park in Moscow, as a part of a cultural exchange. The Soviet press had likened the house to the Taj Mahal, though Khrushchev professed to be underwhelmed by its panoply of labor-saving devices. “Don’t you have a machine that puts food into the mouth and pushes it down?” he asked sarcastically.

The subject soon shifted to global politics and nuclear weapons, but the indelible black-and-white impression that lingered was of the American dream made real: the single-family residence, complete with dishwasher, washing machine and TV, standing on a neatly landscaped plot of land in the suburbs—an aspiration that any wage earner, even a factory worker like my father, could reasonably hope to achieve.

Half a century later, America's landscape has changed in fundamental ways, with powerful implications for its politics. Inner-city neighborhoods—even once notorious ones such as Brooklyn's Red Hook, whose 1950s-era prostitutes, hoods and union toughs were brought to life in Hubert Selby Jr.'s searing novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, and which remained a hub of the drug trade through the 1990s—are being transformed into meccas of boutiques, art galleries and locally sourced restaurants. At the same time, blight and intransigent poverty are moving out to the suburbs, where [one-third](#) of the country's poor now reside. For all the attention paid to Detroit's bankruptcy, the Motor City is very much an outlier as American cities go. On balance, urban areas have been on an upward trend, while suburbs have struggled.

The political repercussions of this new economic map, while still emerging, are already enormous. America's increasingly affluent big cities and their close-in suburbs are becoming more progressive and Democratic, while its smaller cities and farther-flung exurbs grow increasingly conservative. But today's suburbs are not the affluent enclaves and working-class white hamlets that author Kevin Phillips saw as the key strongholds of the GOP's emerging "[silent majority](#)" back in the 1960s. Between de-industrialization and the housing market collapse, many such areas are less than thriving. Some are hotbeds of Tea Party radicalism; some have become as progressive as their core cities, if not more so. Where migrants are streaming into formerly lily-white areas, racial resentment and xenophobia are rising; in other suburbs, immigrants and minorities have become the majority. As a result, the key political fissure in American politics no longer runs across the country's swing states but zigzags through the rapidly growing ranks of what I call its "distress 'burbs."

Behind Washington's trench warfare—the gridlocked legislative process, the polarization of Congress—lies this fundamental demographic realignment. Where we once had two parties, each sprawled across the country, north and south, east and west, we now have two distinct coalitions defined primarily by density. The old dichotomies—red state/blue state, city/suburb—are just too simplistic to capture today's much more complex picture, which often as not is painted in shades of pink, purple and mauve. Welcome to America's new map.

Growing up in North Arlington, I walked to school, rode my bike, played sandlot baseball and touch football, and was the lead guitarist in the band my brother and I formed. For most of my life, the suburbs really were the locus of the American dream. Perhaps even more significant than their sprawling homes and lawns were their shopping malls, industrial parks and office campuses, which accounted for a growing percentage of the country's postwar economic output. Many suburbs eventually morphed into so-called edge cities—satellite centers where people could live, work and shop without having to venture into the blighted center city. I never set foot in Manhattan—just a few miles away—until I was in high school.



The author with his father and brother outside their home in North Arlington, N.J., around 1960.

The rise of suburbia parallels the rise of the automobile with amazing precision. In 1910, at the dawn of the automotive age, 21 percent of the U.S. population lived in central cities versus just 7 percent in the suburbs. The growth rate in suburbs began to outpace that of cities around 1940; by 1960, with the build-out of the highway system, the suburban and urban shares of the population were about equal, at around 30 percent. North Arlington's population exploded over this time, from fewer than 500 residents in 1910 to more than 18,000 people packed into an area just over two square miles—much of it given over to a cemetery—in 1970. By 2000, the suburban share of the U.S. population had reached 50 percent.

But over the course of the past decade, this long-established pattern began to reverse. By 2011, America's major cities were growing faster than their suburbs for the first time since Americans were driving Model-T Fords. Big cities from New York to Seattle, Boston to San Francisco, became talent magnets, drawing large shares of more affluent college graduates to their downtown cores—a shift the urbanist Alan Ehrenhalt dubs “The Great Inversion.”

Real-estate prices provide another marker of the new urban tilt. For a long time, the suburbs were where the nation's most expensive homes and zip codes could be found. But today, the growth in housing prices in urban centers has outpaced that in the suburbs in 16 of the nation's 20 largest metros, according to a [recent analysis](#) by the economist Jed Kolko. These areas include not just the usual suspects—Boston, Chicago, New York—but also smaller cities such as Atlanta, Cleveland, Detroit, Miami and Phoenix.

Cutting-edge high-tech firms and industries are also moving downtown. For years following the rise of Silicon Valley, the presiding model for high-tech industry was “nerdistan”—a sprawling suburban campus surrounded by a vast parking lot. But over the past decade, nerdistan has given way to a new model of urban tech, and about half to two-thirds of high-tech venture capital is now being invested in urban centers. Roughly 500 new startups and billions of dollars in venture-capital investment have poured recently into lower Manhattan and Brooklyn, and Google has taken up shop in a billion-dollar-plus office in New York's old Port Authority. Twitter moved into a refurbished Art Deco building in downtown San Francisco, which has become the Bay Area's new tech hub, now topping Silicon Valley in its number of startups and venture capital dollars. Seattle's South Lake Union district has become a major technology center too, with Amazon's new headquarters at its hub. As the great urban theorist Jane Jacobs long ago realized, density, diversity and innovation go together.

The pattern of poor cities surrounded by affluent suburbs, set as an unalterable fact in the American mind since the 1960s, has shifted as well. While the poor continue to make up a

greater share of the population of cities than of suburbs, the ranks of the suburban poor are growing at five times the rate of those in cities, [according to](#) the Brookings Institution's Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube. In 2010, more than 1 in 4 American suburbanites was poor or nearly poor; all told, the suburbs today are home to an estimated 16.4 million poor people, compared with 13.4 million in cities. The metropolitan area with the largest share of young people who are neither in school nor working is San Bernardino, in the heart of California's Inland Empire, the iconic American suburbia of films and TV.

The suburbs are not just losing their hold on people; they're losing their hold on industry and commerce. When I was a boy, we used to do our family shopping in downtown Newark's great department stores—Bamberger's, Kresge's and Hahne's—even after we moved to the suburbs. Then, malls opened in places such as Woodbridge, Paramus and Menlo Park, and one by one those department stores were shuttered. Now it is suburban malls that are struggling. More than 200 large malls across the country have vacancy rates of 35 percent or higher. An estimated [1 in 10](#) of America's roughly 1,000 enclosed malls is expected to fail over the next decade.

Their collapse is an early indicator of the broader set of challenges now confronting the suburbs. Not so long ago they were safe havens from America's dangerous and dirty cities, where David Brooks's archetypal "[Patio Man](#)"—"the guy who wears khakis to work each day, with the security badge on the belt clip around his waist"—could rub shoulders with the people that Charles Murray termed "[the new upper class](#)." Now, writes Leigh Gallagher in [The End of the Suburbs: Where the American Dream Is Moving](#), the existential crisis facing suburbs is that "more and more Americans don't want to live there anymore."

That may be increasingly true, but it doesn't do justice to the change. The growth of the suburbs is no longer driven by people like my parents, fleeing the congestion and crime of the inner city, but by the [migration](#) of people from small towns and rural areas farther out, as well as by immigrants from foreign countries, more than half of whom bypass cities and settle directly in the suburbs of larger metro areas. At the same time, the post-industrial economy's winners—the members of the affluent creative class—are increasingly clustered in the cores of big cities and the closest-in, most densely developed suburbs. Working in fields such as technology, law, management, media, academia and medicine, this creative class numbers some 50 million, roughly a third of the U.S. workforce.

The old hole-in-the-doughnut pattern no longer holds. America's new geography is divided and fragmented, with wedges of concentrated advantage and massively concentrated disadvantage set alongside each other. Clusters of affluent creative workers spread out from city centers into suburbs along transit lines, congregating near major universities and areas with great natural amenities such as riverfronts and coastlines. Members of the lower middle class and the service class, the people who toil in low-paying, low-skill jobs such as food preparation, personal care and retail sales, which pay a third to a half of what creative-class jobs do, struggle to keep their footholds in rapidly gentrifying urban neighborhoods, or to hang on in housing projects and transit-poor areas of blight; many are pressed ever outward to the more affordable fringes, where opportunities are correspondingly fewer. The end result is that great and growing portions of the suburbs are experiencing the kind of economic distress that was once the exclusive province of

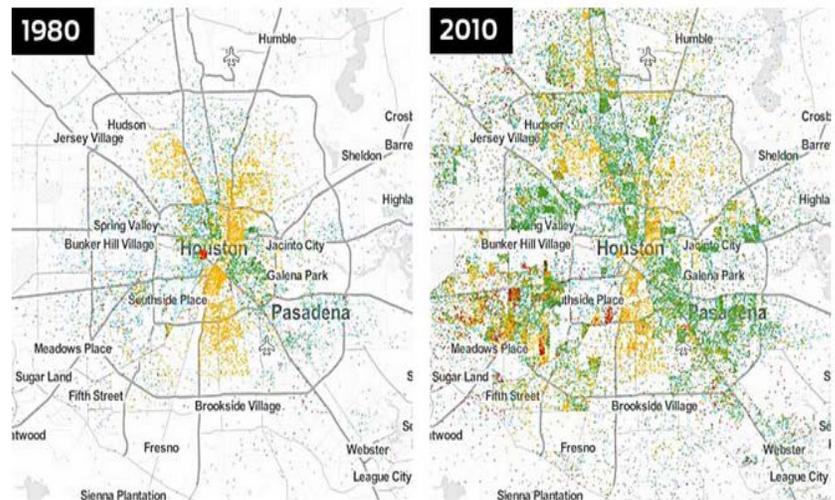
inner cities. Inevitably, their politics reflect their growing sense of hardship, disconnection and estrangement.



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America's urban centers have long been Democratic stalwarts. But the coalition has changed since unionized manufacturing workers, recent immigrants and minorities filled the party's ranks, while their bosses, invariably suburban commuters, voted Republican. The dense cores of the metros that John Judis and Ruy Teixeira dubbed "ideopolises" in their prescient 2002 book, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, are filled with creatives, and they vote blue in ever-greater numbers. These are David Brooks's "[bobos](#)" and Charles Murray's Belmonters—affluent professionals paying seven figures for riverfront apartments in repurposed downtown industrial lofts and for luxury condos in walkable suburbs such as Bethesda, Maplewood and, well, Belmont. Call them the Latte Liberals: The political demographer [Dante Chinni](#) measured the shift by creating a "Starbucks Index." Areas with the fastest expansion of the coffee franchise over the past five years — cities and close-in suburbs — overwhelmingly vote Democratic. "And if you use Whole Foods," Chinni says, "it's off the charts."

My colleague Ronald Brownstein of *National Journal* sees these trends culminating in what he calls the “[class inversion](#)” of American politics. Brownstein and I combined forces to track the voting patterns of the creative class across America’s 3,000-plus counties in the six presidential elections from 1988 to 2008. What [we found](#) was staggering. In 1988, Michael Dukakis won just slightly more than half (50.8 percent) of the vote in the 100 leading creative-class counties, mainly in and around America’s largest cities on the coasts, while taking roughly 45 percent of the vote in the 100 counties with the lowest creative-class share. By 2008, Barack Obama won nearly two-thirds of the vote in the 100 counties with the highest percentages of creative-class workers, compared with just 40 percent in the 100 counties with the smallest creative-class share.”



Over the past three decades, poverty has spread dramatically from city cores, as shown by these [Urban Institute](#) maps of Houston in 1980 (left) and 2010 (right). Each dot = 20 people with incomes below the poverty line. (Blue = White | Yellow = African-American | Green = Hispanic | Red = Asian)

The difference was even more striking in the 2012 contest. Republican nominee Mitt Romney won [more metro areas](#) than President Obama did, 214 to 150. But Obama swept the largest metros, taking more than 60 percent of the vote. Overall, the average Obama metro was home to more than 1 million people—more than double the size of the average Romney metro.

Size clearly matters, but the key factor is density. When blogger Dave Troy [looked at](#) the 2012 election, he found that 98 percent of the 50 densest counties in the United States voted for Obama, while 98 percent of the most sparsely populated counties voted for Romney. He even isolated the precise break point: “At about 800 people per square mile, people switch from voting primarily Republican to voting primarily Democratic. In other words, below 800 people per square mile, there is a 66 percent chance that you voted Republican. Above 800 people per square mile, there is a 66 percent chance that you voted Democrat.” Or, as the economist Justin Wolfers recently put it, “If you live near other people, you’re probably a Democrat; if your neighbors are distant, Republican.”

Back in 2000, the political scientist Robert Putnam famously decried the decline of American civic life in his book [Bowling Alone](#). But according to my analysis, a key indicator of how Americans think about politics today is whether they are driving alone. Commuters who took public transit, or who biked or walked to work, were far more likely to be Obama voters in the 2012 election. Metros where workers drove to the office solo—a key indicator of sprawl—went for Romney. Americans’ declining taste for the suburban life of long commutes and big shopping malls should be a warning light for Republicans, blinking bright red.

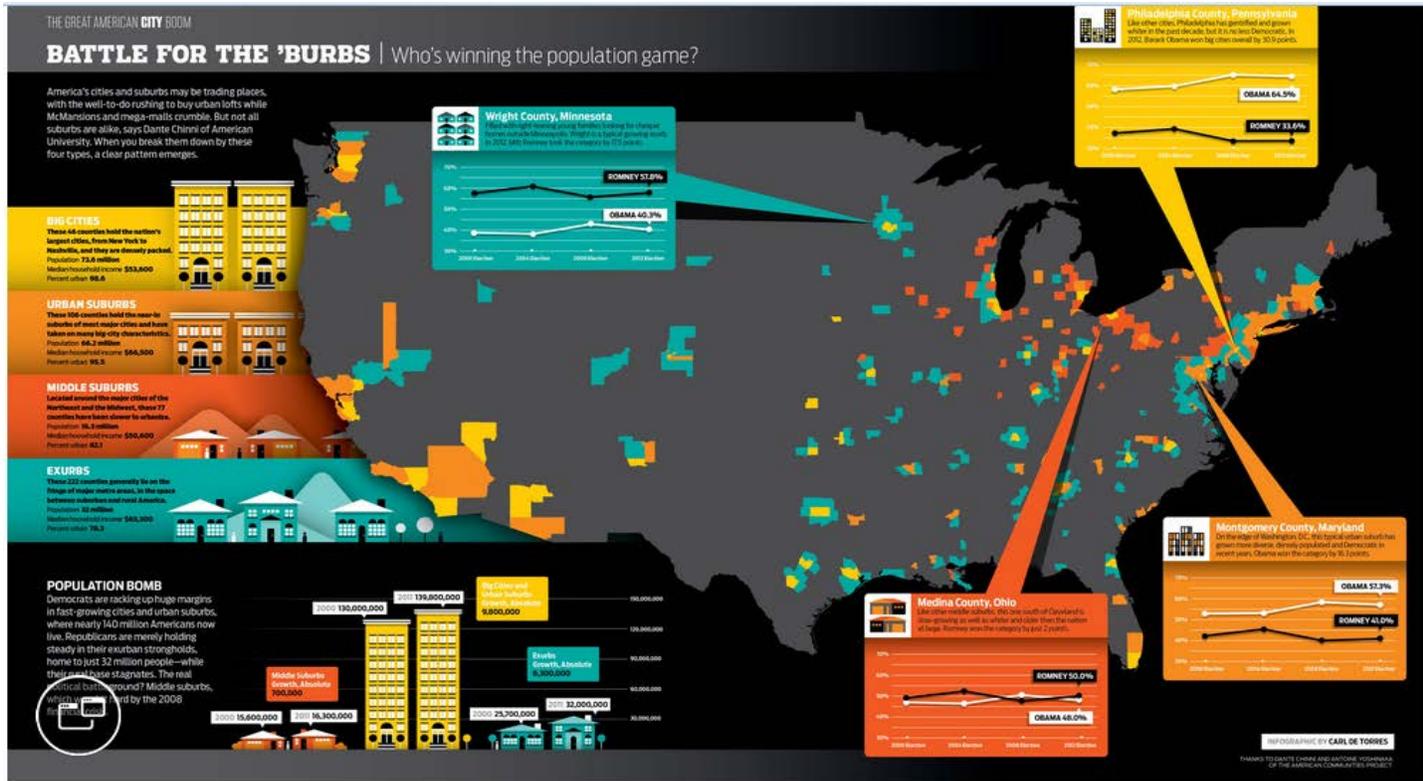
But not all suburbs are the same. When Chinni re-examined the 2012 election results through the lens of geography, he found that the closest-in, most urban suburbs—those right near the edge of city lines—went for Obama by a 16-point margin in 2012, 57 to 41 percent. Obama also won big cities by more than 30 points, 65 to 34 percent. Romney racked up substantial margins in exurbs, winning those areas by 18 points. The so-called middle suburbs—places such as Berks County, outside Philadelphia—are the real contested territory of American politics today. Romney carried those by 2 points in 2012, while Obama won them by a slightly larger margin in 2008.

A changing racial and ethnic mix is also part of the story. According to Chinni, in 2011, the white population in urban suburbs dipped below 70 percent for the first time, while the Hispanic population reached 17.3 percent, up from 12.7 percent in 2000. “When whites tip below 70 percent, Republicans lose,” says Republican pollster Bill McInturff. While Romney won almost 60 percent of the white vote, nearly 3 out of every 4 Hispanics voted for Obama in 2012. The GOP’s strongholds, meanwhile are increasingly white. House Republicans represent 63 percent of all whites and only 38 percent of all nonwhites, according to an analysis by the [Cook Political Report](#).

These broad trends clearly favor the Democrats. More Americans live in big cities and close-in suburbs than in far-off exurbs and rural areas. And those blue areas are often growing faster than red ones.

But if urban growth is clearly good for Democrats, when you start to look at the places hit hardest by the economic crisis, the picture is much less clear. According to an analysis of several recent presidential elections by University of Southern California political scientist Jefferey Sellers, today’s equivalent of swing states are the distress ’burbs that have grown considerably in number since the economic crisis. The most disadvantaged suburbs in red states have increasingly turned blue, Sellers finds, while the most disadvantaged suburbs in blue states have turned red.

I’ve seen the volatile politics of suburbs play out in, of all places, Toronto, where I now live. A city with an ethnic mix that looks like a U.N. General Assembly meeting, Toronto has been more progressive than any city in the United States. It is an economically thriving region, attracting more than 100,000 new residents a year, with more high-rise buildings under construction than in Boston, Chicago, Miami and New York combined. Once dubbed “New York run by the Swiss,” it annexed its inner suburbs a couple of decades ago in a move to increase the efficiency of its government services. But over the past several years, mounting anxiety in those hard-hit areas outside the core has upended its politics.



BATTLE FOR THE BURBS | Who's winning the population game? [\(Click to enlarge\)](#)

Rob Ford, Toronto's current mayor—whose purported run-ins with booze, drugs and more make Anthony Weiner's and Eliot Spitzer's foibles look like a walk in the park—was elected mayor in 2010 by a coalition of blue-collar whites and a diverse array of new immigrants. They reside largely in those distressed areas that deeply resent downtown Toronto—not, as would have been the case in my parents' day, because the city is so poor and disadvantaged, but because it is so rich.



VIDEO: Toronto's embattled Mayor Tom Ford admits to smoking crack.

A Canadian version of a Tea Party populist, Ford campaigned on putting the downtown elites in their place: ripping out bike lanes, cutting taxes and declaring war on waste and the “grave train” of public spending. He beat his closest opponent by nearly 12 percentage points, winning huge majorities in the distressed areas outside the core. Not only does Ford continue to hold office despite a court order to vacate and several ongoing scandals, but many have also predicted he will win a second term.

North Arlington, N.J., where I grew up, offers another cautionary note—things change and partisan alignments can be fluid. I remember it as a solidly blue-collar ethnic Democratic redoubt during my childhood. But, not surprisingly for a place that began as a catchment for white flight, it had become Reagan Republican turf by 1980. Today it is a dense inner suburb, home to roughly 6,000 people per square mile, with a median household income of just over \$70,000. Although it is still overwhelmingly white, its Hispanic population has doubled since 2000. All these things should push it into the Democratic camp, and in fact Democrats do outnumber Republicans, 34 to 18 percent (independents or undeclared voters make up the rest). But the story is not that simple: While North Arlington went decisively for Obama in 2012, it also voted for Republican John McCain in 2008, as well as Republican Chris Christie for governor in 2009.

Christie has been able to tap into the simmering anger of America's new suburban battlegrounds. His success in liberal New Jersey makes him an attractive potential candidate for the party in 2016—assuming he can win the nomination, of course. Ultimately, he will have to walk a razor's edge, paying more than lip service to the national GOP's rural and exurban agenda, while at the same time winning back some of the immigrant and minority votes for which the Republicans no longer compete. But his big margins in a state as dense as New Jersey; his appeal to voters in the distress 'burbs, with targeted issues such as his campaign against property taxes; and his ability to lure independents, moderates, immigrants and minorities, could conceivably open up new electoral terrain for the Republicans. Or at least allow them to reclaim old terrain they have ceded in recent years.

If Christie can pull off this trick, he will be doing so in the midst of a massive economic shift, of which the catastrophe of 2008 was a signal and a sign. Such structural changes in America's economy and economic geography have always reverberated through our politics. Neither party, it seems to me, has yet to acknowledge how much the country has changed — to paraphrase Brink Lindsey's observation, both parties want to bring back the 1950s, but the Democrats want to work there and the Republicans want to live there.

The suburban idyll of the 1950s is long gone. It's time for American politics to come to grips with that all-important fact.

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