

The Metropolitan Structure of National Politics: The MetroAmerica Votes and Metropolitan Cultural Survey Project

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Since the fall of the New Deal in 1968, scholars have paid special attention to the decline of those mass aggregating forces, such as religion, unions, and sub-national party structures, which were understood to have enabled the development of the New Deal and of the coalitions that preceded it. In the decades that have followed, the failure of either party to forge a lasting majority, along with continued the decline of traditional mass aggregating forces, have led some to proclaim the dawn of a post-structural era in American politics, which is characterized by the fragmentation of the national electorate and by the stylistic appeals of personally oriented campaigns, rather than by the declining party structures within they operate. And yet, it seems that the American polity has become more intensely partisan in recent years. If this is true, then it must be time to look for new sources of structure in the American political system. Many have looked to growing regional distinctions to explain intensifying divisions in the political perspectives and preferences of national electorates. These efforts are often expressed in terms of the “red state/blue state” dichotomy. Others, such as CNN’s Bill Schneider, have shown us impressive interactive maps that illustrate interesting associations between the interests, perspectives, and preferences of constituencies as they are spread across the nation’s major urban regions. Taking a cue from Schneider and others, and building on the author’s continuing work in the Detroit region, the author proposes a national study of relationships between varieties of urban places and the nationally relevant political preferences and perspectives of their residents in an effort better to explore regional and national electoral and political cultural structures and trends. This study will gather voting returns tallied for all localities that have populations of 10,000 or more and are located within twelve of the nation’s largest urban regions for every national and local election from 1960 to 2008. The resulting dataset will include contextual information from decennial Census reports, and spatial coding files for all of the places represented in the study. Additionally, the study will include a survey of the political attitudes and actions of numbers of the residents of these regions. Individual responses will be coded by the respondent’s locality. Together, these components will allow in-depth explorations of urban regional voting patterns and political perspectives and preferences, as they will enable scholars to draw critical connections between the two. The project promises to bring the study of urban political geography to the very center of our efforts to understand American electoral and cultural politics. A brief review and update of the author’s Detroit Election Study will be offered in the context of the presentation.