

-FEATURE-**THE URBAN ARCHIPELAGO**by [The Editors of The Stranger](#)**It's the Cities, Stupid.**

There are two maps on this page.

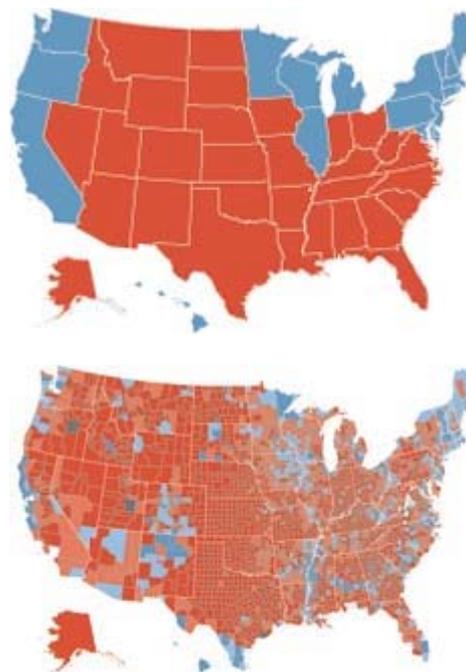
The one at the top should be familiar. It's one of those red-state/blue-state maps that have been tormenting Democrats, liberals, and progressives since November of 2000. Over the 36 days that George W. Bush and Al Gore fought for the White House in Florida, "red" and "blue" became metaphors for America's divided electorate. Red vs. Blue--Democrat vs. Republican; liberal vs. conservative; pro-life vs. pro-choice; gun-huggers vs. gun-haters; gay-huggers vs. gay-haters.

The red-state/blue-state map opposite shows the results of 2004's presidential election--red states won by George W. Bush, blue states won by John F. Kerry. But the red-state/blue-state map is misleading. If a Republican presidential candidate takes 50 percent of the vote plus 1 vote in any given state, the whole state is colored red (even worse, a mere plurality of voters can turn a state red when third parties are involved). The same goes for the Democratic candidate--corral the most votes, and the whole state is colored blue. But painting an entire state one color or the other creates a false impression, an impression that we believe is hampering the Democratic Party's efforts to pull itself out of its tailspin.

Take a look at the second map on the opposite page. This map shows a county-by-county



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red/blue breakdown, and it provides a clearer picture of the bind the Democrats finds themselves in. The majority of the blue states--Washington, Oregon, California, Illinois, Minnesota, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Delaware--are, geographically speaking, not blue states. They are blue cities.

And thank God for that. ([10/28/04](#))
By Dan Savage

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Look at our famously blue West Coast. But for the cities--Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego--the West Coast would be a deep, dark red. The same is true for other nominally blue states. Illinois is almost entirely red--Chicago turns the state blue. Michigan is almost entirely red--Detroit, Lansing, Kalamazoo turn it blue. And on and on. What tips these states into the blue column? Their urban areas do, their big, populous counties.

It's time for the Democrats to face reality: They are the party of urban America. If the cities elected our president, if urban voters determined the outcome, John F. Kerry would have won by a landslide. Urban voters are the Democratic base.

THE URBAN ARCHIPELAGO

It's time to state something that we've felt for a long time but have been too polite to say out loud: Liberals, progressives, and Democrats do not live in a country that stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Canada to Mexico. We live on a chain of islands. We are citizens of the Urban Archipelago, the United Cities of America. We live on islands of sanity, liberalism, and compassion--New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Seattle, St. Louis, Minneapolis, San Francisco, and on and on. And we live on islands in red states too--a fact obscured by that state-by-state map. Denver and Boulder are our islands in Colorado; Austin is our island in Texas; Las Vegas is our island in Nevada; Miami and Fort Lauderdale are our islands in Florida. Citizens of the Urban Archipelago reject heartland "values" like xenophobia, sexism, racism, and homophobia, as well as the more

intolerant strains of Christianity that have taken root in this country. And we are the real Americans. They--rural, red-state voters, the denizens of the exurbs--are not real Americans. They are rubes, fools, and hate-mongers. Red Virginia prohibits any contract between same-sex couples. Compassionate? Texas allows the death penalty to be applied to teenaged criminals and has historically executed the mentally retarded. (When the Supreme Court ruled executions of the mentally retarded unconstitutional in 2002, Texas officials, including Governor Rick Perry, responded by claiming that the state had no mentally retarded inmates on death row--a claim the state was able to make because it does not test inmates for mental retardation.) Dumb? The Sierra Club has reported that Arkansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Alabama, and Tennessee squander over half of their federal transportation money on building new roads rather than public transit.

If Democrats and urban residents want to combat the rising tide of red that threatens to swamp and ruin this country, we need a new identity politics, an urban identity politics, one that argues for the cities, uses a rhetoric of urban values, and creates a tribal identity for liberals that's as powerful and attractive as the tribal identity Republicans have created for their constituents. John Kerry won among the highly educated, Jews, young people, gays and lesbians, and non-whites. What do all these groups have in common? They choose to live in cities. An overwhelming majority of the American population chooses to live in cities. And John Kerry won every city with a population above 500,000. He took half the cities with populations between 50,000 and 500,000. The future success of liberalism is tied to winning the cities. An urbanist agenda may not be a recipe for winning the next presidential election--but it may win the Democrats the presidential election in 2012 and create a new Democratic majority.

For Democrats, it's the cities, stupid--not the

rural areas, not the prickly, hateful "heartland," but the sane, sensible cities--including the cities trapped in the heartland. Pandering to rural voters is a waste of time. Again, look at the second map. Look at the urban blue spots in red states like Iowa, Colorado, and New Mexico--there's almost as much blue in those states as there is in Washington, Oregon, and California. And the challenge for the Democrats is not just to organize in the blue areas but to grow them. And to do that, Democrats need to pursue policies that encourage urban growth (mass transit, affordable housing, city services), and Democrats need to openly and aggressively champion urban values. By focusing on the cities the Dems can create a tribal identity to combat the white, Christian, rural, and suburban identity that the Republicans have cornered. And it's sitting right there, on every electoral map, staring them in the face: The cities.

The urbanites. Howard Dean had it wrong when he tried to woo the "Pickup Truck with Confederate Flag" vote. In fact, while Kerry won urban areas by a whopping 60 percent--that actually represents a 15 percent drop in urban support from 2000 when Gore won the election. The lesson? Democrats have got to tend to their urban base and grow it.

In cities all over America, distressed liberals are talking about fleeing to Canada or, better yet, seceding from the Union. We can't literally secede and, let's admit it, we don't really want to live in Canada. It's too cold up there and in our heart-of-hearts we hate hockey. We can secede emotionally, however, by turning our backs on the heartland. We can focus on our issues, our urban issues, and promote our shared urban values. We can create a new identity politics, one that transcends class, race, sexual orientation, and religion, one that unites people living in cities with each other and with other urbanites in other cities. The Republicans have the federal government--for now. But we've got Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Chicago, Los Angeles,

San Diego, New York City (Bloomberg is a Republican in name only), and every college town in the country. We're everywhere any sane person wants to be. Let them have the shitholes, the Oklahomas, Wyomings, and Alabamas. We'll take Manhattan.

EMBRACING URBAN SELF-INTEREST

To all those who live in cities--to all those depressed Kerry supporters out there--we say take heart. Clearly we can't control national politics right now--we can barely get a hearing. We can, however, stay engaged in our cities, and make our voices heard in the urban areas we dominate, and make each and every one, to quote Ronald Reagan (and John Winthrop, the 17th-century Puritan Reagan was parroting), "a city on a hill." This is not a retreat; it is a long-term strategy for the Democratic Party to cater to and build on its base.

To red-state voters, to the rural voters, residents of small, dying towns, and soulless sprawling exburbs, we say this: Fuck off. Your issues are no longer our issues. We're going to battle our bleeding-heart instincts and ignore pangs of misplaced empathy. We will no longer concern ourselves with a health care crisis that disproportionately impacts rural areas. Instead we will work toward winning health care one blue state at a time.

When it comes to the environment, our new policy is this: Let the heartland live with the consequences of handing the national government to the rape-and-pillage party. The only time urbanists should concern themselves with the environment is when we are impacted--directly, not spiritually (the depressing awareness that there is no unspoiled wilderness out there doesn't count). Air pollution, for instance: We should be aggressive. If coal is to be burned, it has to be burned as cleanly as possible so as not to foul the air we all have to breathe. But if West Virginia wants to elect

politicians who allow mining companies to lop off the tops off mountains and dump the waste into valleys and streams, thus causing floods that destroy the homes of the yokels who vote for those politicians, it no longer matters to us. Fuck the mountains in West Virginia--send us the power generated by cleanly burned coal, you rubes, and be sure to wear lifejackets to bed.

Wal-Mart is a rapacious corporation that pays sub-poverty-level wages, offers health benefits to its employees that are so expensive few can afford them, and destroys small towns and rural jobs. Liberals in big cities who have never seen the inside of a Wal-Mart spend a lot of time worrying about the impact Wal-Mart is having on the heartland. No more. We will do what we can to keep Wal-Mart out of our cities and, if at all possible, out of our states. We will pass laws mandating a living wage for full-time work, upping the minimum wage for part-time work, and requiring large corporations to either offer health benefits or pay into state- or city-run funds to provide health care for uninsured workers. That will reform Wal-Mart in our blue cities and states or, better yet, keep Wal-Mart out entirely. And when we see something on the front page of the national section of the *New York Times* about the damage Wal-Mart is doing to the heartland, we will turn the page. Wal-Mart is not an urban issue.

Neither is gun control. Our new position: We'll fight to keep guns off the streets of our cities, but the more guns lying around out there in the heartland, the better. Most cities have strong gun-control laws--laws that are, of course, undermined by the fact that our cities aren't walled. Yet. But why should liberals in cities fund organizations that attempt, to take one example, to get trigger locks onto the handguns of NRA members out there in red states? If red-state dads aren't concerned enough about their own children to put trigger locks on their own guns, it's not our problem. If a kid in a red state finds his daddy's handgun and blows his

head off, we'll feel terrible (we're like that), but we'll try to look on the bright side: At least he won't grow up to vote like his dad.

We won't demand that the federal government impose reasonable fuel-efficiency standards on all cars sold in the United States. We will, however, strive to pass state laws, as California has done, imposing fuel-efficiency standards on cars sold in our states.

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