

Washington County

Ozaukee County

Waukesha County

Milwaukee County

# THE RED THE BLUE

## **Political Polarization Through the Prism of Metropolitan Milwaukee**

by Craig Gilbert

The Pew Research Center recently called polarization the “defining feature of early 21st-century American politics.” It sketched out “what polarization looks like,” exploring a series of trends that have fueled the emergence of opposing camps in the U.S. electorate: everything from ideological conformity to partisan antipathy to people living in politically like-minded “silos” to activist voters on the right and left playing an outsized role in our political process.

There’s another way to see what polarization looks like: It’s to spend some time in metropolitan Milwaukee, a kind of ground zero in the American saga of red versus blue. In Milwaukee, you’ll find the country’s dividing lines in stark relief: red–blue, white–black, old–young, married–unmarried, churchgoing–secular.

## I. The Context

In metropolitan Milwaukee, you'll find two parties drawing their support from very different kinds of voters and very different kinds of communities; a place that has grown more politically segregated with almost every election since the 1970s; and a hotbed of political engagement, where turnout and partisan division have been rising hand-in-hand for decades. In short, in southeastern Wisconsin, you'll find the most polarized part of a polarized state in a polarized nation.

That's what we found in a project that I undertook recently at Marquette University Law School. Working in particular with Charles Franklin, professor of law and public policy, I spent six months examining the deep and growing political divisions in Milwaukee and Wisconsin. As the Law School's Lubar Fellow for Public Policy Research in 2013–2014, I teamed up with Franklin in an academic-journalistic joint venture.

This was the second time that the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and Marquette Law School had partnered on such a long-term reporting project. We published our findings in the newspaper and, working with Mike Gousha, distinguished fellow in law

and public policy at Marquette Law School, we held a joint conference exploring the topic; this essay is a further exploration.

Certainly I did not have a hard time selecting a topic for my fellowship. Polarization is the political story of our times. It dominates our fractious and at-times paralyzed national capital and our increasingly partisan and nationalized elections. Far from being an exception, Wisconsin has been more polarized over its governor than any state in America. And metropolitan Milwaukee, more specifically, may even be the most-polarized place in swing-state America: voters are not just strangers to each other in their politics but also increasingly live in separate worlds.

Polarization takes many forms. My research focused on two in particular. One is the growing gap between voters in the two parties. Partisanship and ideology have become increasingly aligned in American politics, with the Democratic Party losing its conservative wing (anchored in the South) and the Republican Party losing its liberal wing (anchored in the Northeast). Party lines have hardened in the electorate as the contrast between the parties has sharpened. The other form of polarization is the country's partisan geography, as states, counties, and neighborhoods have become more one-sided in their politics. Journalist Bill Bishop dubbed this phenomenon "The Big Sort" in a 2008 book by that name.

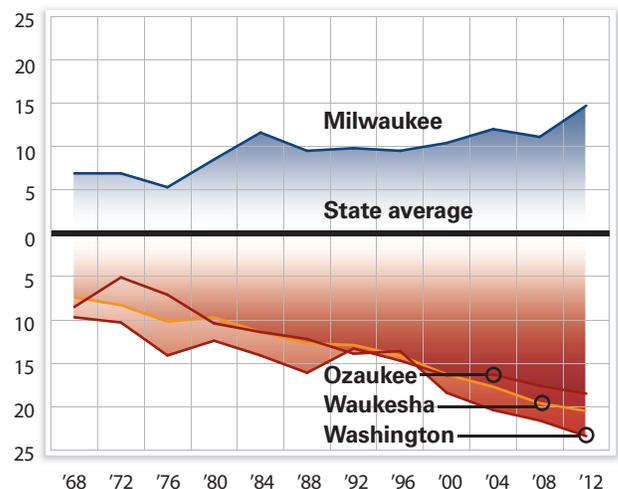
The sorting of America into like-minded enclaves is far from universal or complete, but it describes metropolitan Milwaukee to a tee. When you look at an election map of southeastern Wisconsin, you see a patch of dark blue flanked by fields of bright scarlet. For more than 40 years, the blue parts have been getting bluer, and the red parts have been getting redder; the chasm between them has been growing.

The sorting of America into like-minded enclaves is far from universal or complete, but it describes metropolitan Milwaukee to a tee.

### A growing chasm

Compared to the state as a whole, metropolitan Milwaukee's communities have been growing farther apart politically since the 1970s. The chart below is based on presidential voting and shows in percentage points the extent to which a county was more Democratic or more Republican than the statewide vote.

The four-county area's growing divide



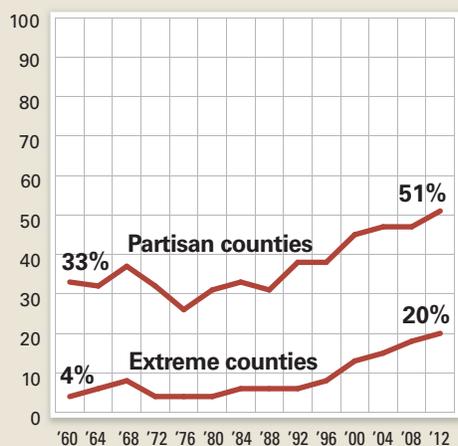
Source: State of Wisconsin

Journal Sentinel

## Across the country, voters cluster together

In the 2012 presidential race, the share of all voters who lived in a county that was 10 or more points redder or bluer than the United States as a whole (here labeled “partisan counties”) was 51 percent. The share of voters who lived in a county that was 20 or more points redder or bluer than the nation (here labeled “extreme counties”) was 20 percent.

### Percentage of U.S. voters living in one-sided counties



Journal Sentinel analysis of election data from Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections

Journal Sentinel

Only 1 in 8 voters in metropolitan Milwaukee lived in a neighborhood decided by single digits in the last presidential contest. Almost 6 in 10 lived in a neighborhood decided by 30 points or more.

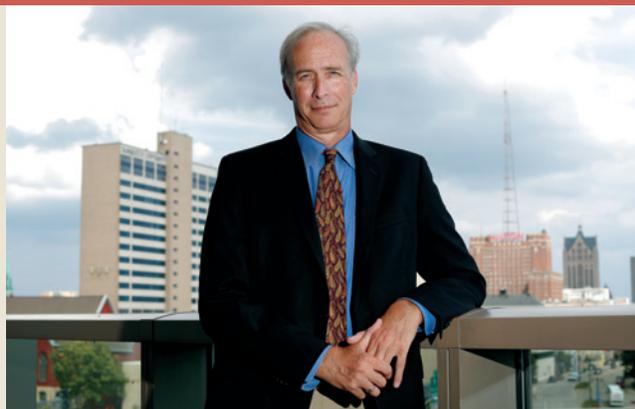
“There is no sense in trying to persuade anybody in southeast Wisconsin,” says Mark Graul, a native of the region who has run Republican campaigns for governor and president in the state. Rather, it’s just about “getting them to vote.”

The 2012 recall race for governor gives a sense of this. This recall election, less than a year and half into Governor Scott Walker’s term, was occasioned by roughly one million petition signatures in a state with fewer than five million voters. The petitions followed the state’s adoption of Act 10, which restricted the collective bargaining of most local and state government employees.

In the recall election itself, Walker prevailed by 7 percentage points—a larger margin than he had received in November 2010 against the same opponent (Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett). He got only 36 percent of the vote in Democratic Milwaukee County but won 73 percent of the vote in the rest of the four-county area: the “collar” Republican counties of Washington, Ozaukee, and Waukesha.

This was no fluke. In the presidential race five months later, President Barack Obama got 67 percent of the vote in Milwaukee County but just 32 percent of the vote in Washington, Ozaukee, and Waukesha. It was the biggest gap between urban and suburban counties in any top-50 metropolitan area except New Orleans. ▶▶

**Craig Gilbert** is the chief of the Washington Bureau of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. He served this past academic year as Marquette Law School’s Sheldon B. Lubar Fellow for Public Policy Research. His essay here builds upon the “Dividing Lines” series published in the newspaper. Special thanks to Enrique Rodriguez and Lou Saldivar of the *Journal Sentinel* for their work on the graphics that are part of this story.



## II. The Causes

Why are the partisan divisions in southeastern Wisconsin so extreme?

Metropolitan Milwaukee combines in one political hothouse an unusual array of polarizing attributes: deep racial segregation; an intensely engaged (and sometimes enraged) electorate; and the Balkanizing effects of serving over the past decade and a half as one of the most fought-over pieces of political turf in America.

All these factors point in the same direction. Let's examine them one by one and then consider the effects.

### Segregation

Milwaukee is the nation's most racially segregated metropolitan area by several measures, with African-Americans concentrated in the city of Milwaukee and a few inner suburbs and virtually absent everywhere else.

Because blacks are overwhelmingly Democratic, because the Republican Party remains overwhelmingly

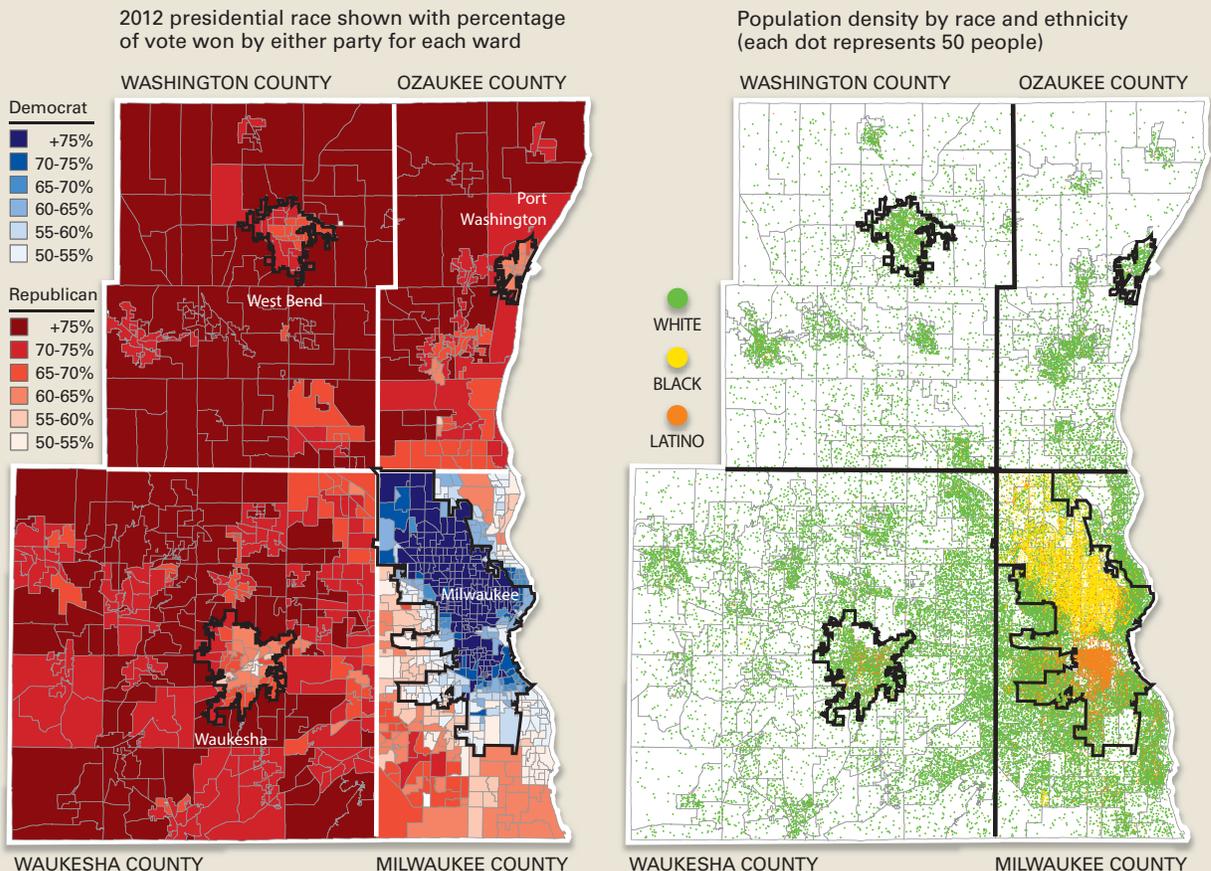
white, and because the gap has grown between how whites and nonwhites vote, racial segregation spells political segregation. The research of political scientist Katherine Levine Einstein, a Milwaukee native now at Boston University, shows that black-white segregation drives red-blue segregation in the country's major metropolitan areas.

But it's not just the partisan differences between blacks and whites at work here. It's also the political differences between whites who live close to the city and whites who live farther out. Call it the "density divide." The political distance between densely populated areas and less densely populated places has been getting bigger in America for decades. And while a big part of the phenomenon is demographic—Democratic-leaning minorities are concentrated in cities—part of it is simply attitudinal. Urban whites are more Democratic and more liberal than suburban and exurban whites.

The Pew research showed this as well. It found that liberals are much more likely to prefer living in ▶▶

### Segregation helps drive voting patterns

Race and ethnicity are big reasons for the partisan gap between Democratic Milwaukee County and the Republican WOW counties (Washington, Ozaukee, and Waukesha). Differences among white voters also contribute to the geographic divide. White neighborhoods in Milwaukee's inner suburbs are much less Republican than white neighborhoods in the outer suburbs.



## Polarization at the Local Level

by Heather K. Gerken

Having had the good fortune last year to do an “On the Issues with Mike Gousha” session on “how local should politics be?” with Craig Gilbert and Charles Franklin, I’m glad that Gilbert’s work on local politics continues apace. Gilbert’s arresting study reminds us that the problems of polarization aren’t confined to Washington. Academics are familiar with “The Big Sort,” to borrow Bill Bishop’s evocative phrase. But metropolitan Milwaukee presents such an extreme example of microlevel polarization that everyone should read this important study. Milwaukee, after all, may be a stand-in for where American politics are heading.

I’ll confess that I’m not nearly as disturbed by many of Gilbert’s findings as I suspect most people will be. As Gilbert himself notes, the ferocious politicking that we see in Milwaukee and Wisconsin has its upsides. Voters are engaged. Turnout is high. And elections have consequences; voting no longer means choosing between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Conflict is an underappreciated good in a democracy. It fuels politics, drives debates, and pushes policy making forward.

At the same time, polarization can undermine governance. Conflict is a political good—but so is compromise. In the olden days, we used to have both. But polarization has reached such extremes at the national level that Congress cannot address the everyday concerns of everyday people. Our policy-making system, with its many interlocking gears, cannot function without the lubricants of political compromise and party defections. Policy making in Washington has thus ground to a halt.



The Gilbert study’s most important contribution is its suggestion that divisive party politics undermine governance at the *local* level as well. Polarization has gummed up southeastern Wisconsin politics and made regional cooperation more difficult.

Now that Gilbert has shown that local politics suffer from the same disease as national politics, perhaps we should start comparing solutions as well. Work being done on polarization at the national level may help us identify solutions at the local level. It’s become a commonplace to say that our presidential system cannot function with the cohesive and disciplined parties that inhabit parliamentary systems. Some think that the solution is therefore to tamp down on polarization, returning us to the parties of old so that we can return to governance of old. On this view, we should strengthen the moderates in both parties, empower the leadership, and reward bipartisanship and crossing party lines.

Others are skeptical that the forces that generated today’s divisions can be so easily pushed back. Rather than convert our parliamentary parties into presidential ones, they argue, we should make our presidential system function more like a parliamentary one. On this view, we should eliminate veto gates like the filibuster, empower the executive, and make it easier for the majority party to govern unencumbered.

Presumably solutions to what ails metropolitan Milwaukee will fit the same rubrics, with one additional complication. Local politics play out across multiple overlapping jurisdictions (e.g., municipality, county, and state), which means there are even more institutions that need to start rowing in the same direction. Still, it’s possible that local communities of interest can help forge local coalitions even when national ones are impossible. Perhaps we can leverage shared problems and neighborly values so that the nation’s cities can function even if its Capitol does not. Or maybe we should adjust local policy making to the realities of local politics, enabling cities to move forward despite their divisions. Wherever this debate leads, Gilbert’s study is an important entry—not least because of its *facts*—and merits attention beyond Wisconsin.

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communities where the houses are smaller and closer together and schools and shops are within walking distance. By contrast, conservatives greatly tend to prefer living in communities where the houses are bigger and farther apart, even though schools and shops are several miles away. For another difference, liberals place a much higher value on living in racially and ethnically diverse communities, while conservatives favor living among people of the same faith.

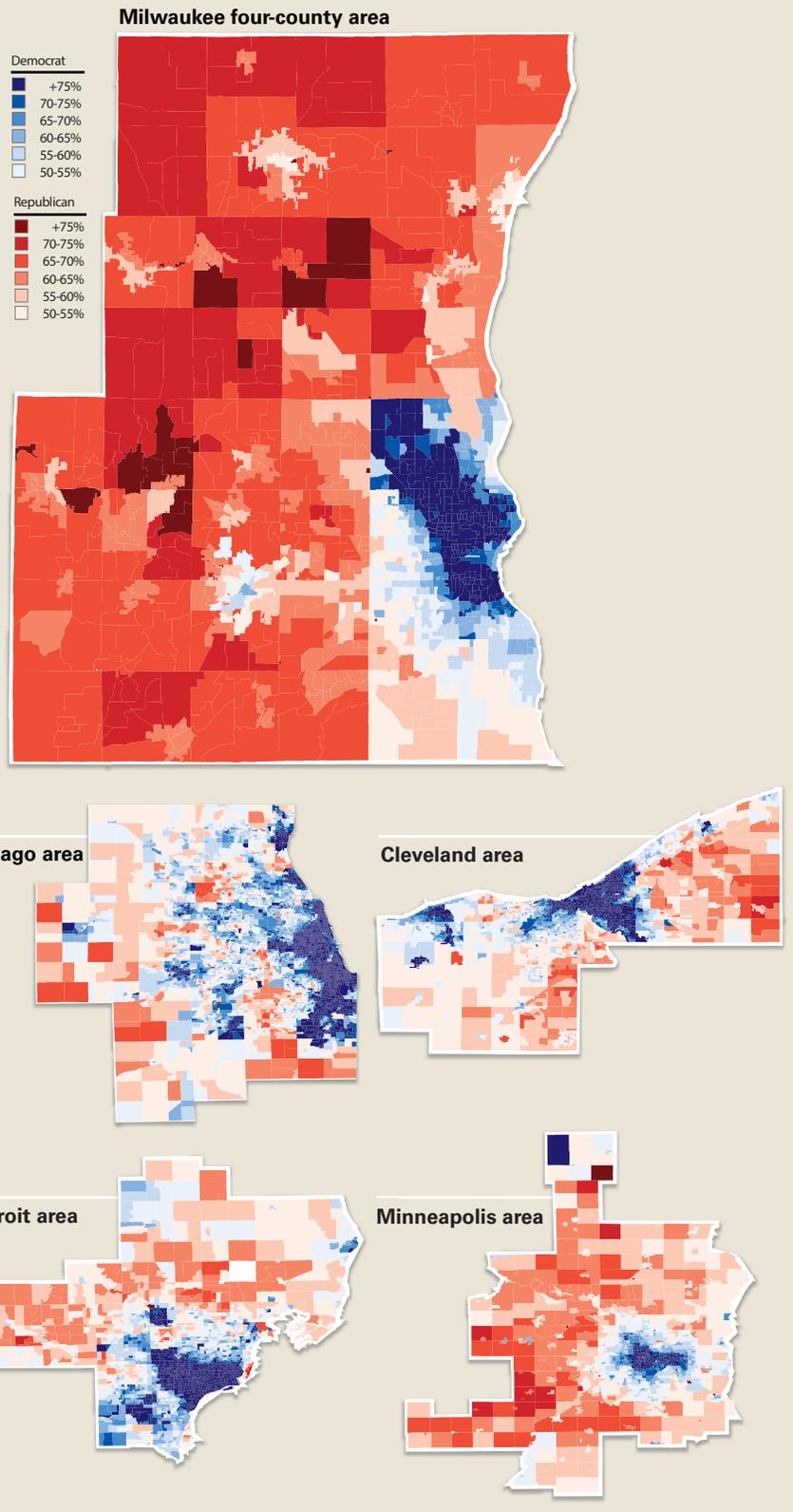
These kinds of lifestyle preferences are one ingredient in the stark red-blue geography of metropolitan Milwaukee, where almost every community has been getting systematically redder or bluer for several decades. How much self-segregating by voters is actually going on is hotly debated by scholars. But in Milwaukee, the *biggest* “sort” occurred decades ago, when white flight from the city helped populate the area’s outer suburbs with voters who were more conservative than the ones who remained behind.

And in Milwaukee, unlike many larger metropolitan areas such as Chicago and Detroit, a movement of minorities from the city has not followed that wave of white migration. Extremely low rates of minority suburbanization are one big reason that the urban-suburban partisan divisions are so pronounced in the region and one reason that metropolitan Milwaukee contains some of the most lopsidedly Republican counties of any large metropolitan area outside of the South. ▶▶

## Milwaukee stands apart

Metropolitan Milwaukee’s urban-suburban divisions are much starker than in most other Midwest metropolitan areas, separating not just individual neighborhoods and communities but whole counties. The borders between Democratic Milwaukee County and Republican Washington, Ozaukee, and Waukesha counties are easily visible just from voting patterns.

Note: Maps are based on the 2008 presidential race, the most recent one for which comparisons are available. Area maps are not presented to population scale.



## Polarization and the Infrastructure of Inequality

by Clayton M. Nall

Craig Gilbert's superbly researched and written series on polarization in the metropolitan Milwaukee area attributes the region's growing partisan segregation, in part, to its substantial economic and racial segregation. Yet from the report, one could persist in the belief that Milwaukee's economic and racial segregation emerged from citizens freely "voting with their feet": higher-income whites left for the suburbs while poor and minority residents decided to stay. In this whodunit, nothing (and no one) in particular is to blame for geographic polarization and its underlying inequalities. Racial and economic inequality appear alongside partisan polarization, but what caused all of this? In my work, I've repeatedly found that public policy bears much of the blame.

While many policies helped create a segregated metropolis, few have been as important as the extensive, federally financed freeway system built during the 1950s and 1960s. Federally funded highways were vital to the creation of Republican suburban "edge cities," such as Menomonee Falls and Brookfield. They have been a catalyst of ongoing suburbanization that, at least in Milwaukee, has disproportionately expanded the residential options of white and affluent suburbanites while doing little to improve the mobility of poor and minority Milwaukeeans.

My research has found that highways have added to the polarized political geography of American metropolitan areas. Since the early 1960s, suburban counties in which interstates were built became anywhere from 2 to 6 percentage points more Republican than comparable counties without interstates (depending on the region of the country). Metropolitan areas with denser highway networks also became more polarized, as measured by the urban-suburban gap in the Democratic vote. Highways did this, I have found, by shaping the racial and economic composition of suburbs.

Milwaukee is an archetypal example of this phenomenon at work. In a case study of the region, I found that Republican suburbs of the "WOW" (Washington-Ozaukee-Waukesha) counties owe their rapid growth to interstates. For example, Brookfield's Republican presidential vote tally tripled in the decade after the ribbon was cut on I-94. The pages of the *Milwaukee Journal* real-estate section from this era credit the "new I-94 expressway" with access to low taxes, good schools, and effective local services, all still a short drive to downtown Milwaukee. (Few of these suburban housing ads were, by the way, for multifamily housing.)

Interstate highways let the upper and middle classes move to new communities where they could reap the benefits of a "hidden welfare state" that favors suburban homeowners over other Americans. Much of the \$70 billion per year spent through the home mortgage interest deduction goes to suburban housing tracts along freeways. The American local home rule tradition, in turn, has let suburbs screen residents by socioeconomic status. Zoning ordinances that cap housing density, for example, indirectly keep out poor minorities and other Democratic-leaning groups that prefer rental housing. Low density similarly makes walking or taking transit to work untenable. Suburban communities can exclude low-socioeconomic-status citizens, while freeways permit their citizens free rein over the metropolitan area.

Political scientist Douglas Rae called the spatial divide between poor, immobile citizens in cities and affluent, mobile citizens in the periphery a "viacratic hierarchy": cities and suburbs aren't just separate (or, as the case may be, "polarized"); they're also unequal. Public policy, including generous support for the infrastructure supporting suburbanization, is a big reason why.

*Clayton M. Nall is assistant professor of political science at Stanford University.*



## Political competition and conflict

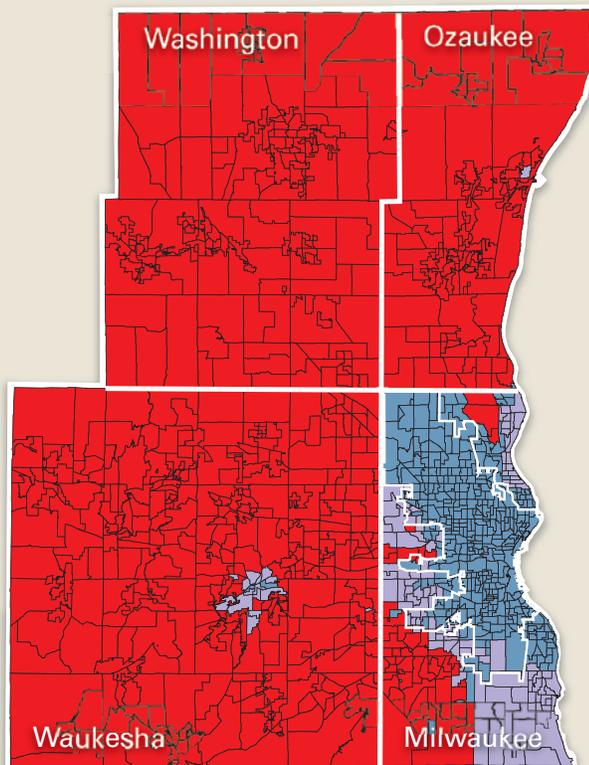
Milwaukee isn't the only big metropolitan area with racial and geographic divisions, but it combines those divisions with a distinctive political profile.

The profile has several aspects. Most of the nation's large metropolitan areas have either big powerful Democratic voting blocs or big powerful Republican voting blocs. Metropolitan Milwaukee has both. Most large metropolitan areas aren't in highly competitive states. Milwaukee exists in a perpetual political conflict zone. It is the number-one media market in a battleground state where both parties regularly spend massive amounts of time and money mobilizing their supporters.

### Competition is hard to find

Metropolitan Milwaukee is composed of very red and blue neighborhoods and not much in between. The four-county area comprises hundreds of wards, and only 12 percent of voters lived in wards decided by single digits in the 2012 presidential race. The municipalities with the narrowest vote margin were Wauwatosa, Greenfield, Whitefish Bay, West Allis, and Fox Point, all in Milwaukee County.

- Double-digit Republican wins
- Double-digit Democratic wins
- Single-digit wins by either party



Source: State of Wisconsin data on 2012 presidential race Journal Sentinel

Conflict and competition fuel polarization in several ways. Political scientists have found that election campaigns activate and reinforce voters' partisan inclinations. Campaigns are constantly reminding voters why they support one party and oppose the other. They are tirelessly proclaiming the partisan differences between the candidates. In Wisconsin, this ongoing trench warfare has produced two state parties that are extremely effective at identifying, speaking to, and turning out their troops.

The state has been a ferocious modern-day battleground in presidential elections and beyond. The Wisconsin presidential vote was decided by less than half a percentage point in both 2000 and 2004. More recently, the state went through the crucible of the labor wars and recall extravaganza of 2011–2012, an upheaval without any parallel in recent American politics.

So it's no coincidence that the state's partisan fault lines are especially deep today. The partisan gaps in how Wisconsin voters view their president and their governor are massive compared to what they used to be. They are larger than in most other states.

And the Marquette Law School Poll, led by Franklin, suggests that those partisan divisions are even bigger in metropolitan Milwaukee than in the rest of Wisconsin. In the combined counties of Washington, Ozaukee, Waukesha, and Milwaukee, in-depth polling by Marquette Law School over more than two years has shown Gov. Scott Walker with a 92 percent approval rating among Republicans and a 10 percent approval rating among Democrats. President Barack Obama has a 92 percent approval rating among Democrats and an 8 percent approval rating among Republicans.

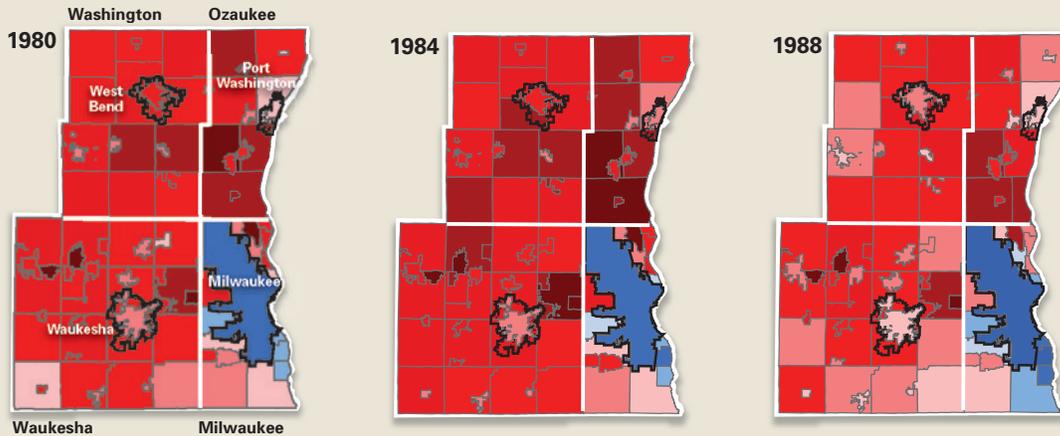
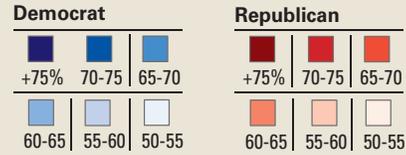
In short, for both Wisconsin and its southeastern population hub, fierce partisan polarization may be both a cause and an effect of an intense and sustained level of electoral competition in recent decades.

## Political engagement

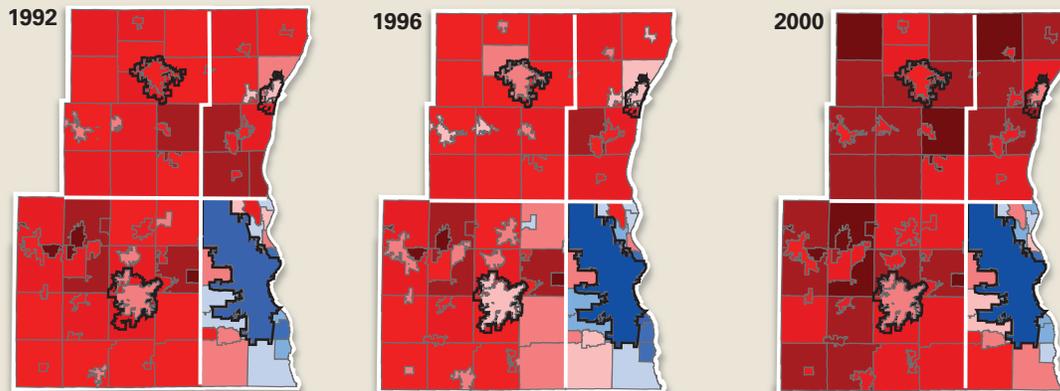
Wisconsin is not just a hotbed of partisan division. It is a hotbed of political activism. Many scholars believe that these two phenomena reinforce each other. The most partisan and ideological voters are the most likely to vote, volunteer, go to rallies, and give money, Marquette Law School's polling shows. And the most engaged voters tend to be the most partisan.

Political scientist David Campbell of the University of Notre Dame points to two seemingly incongruous situations that foster voter turnout. For one, there are ▶▶

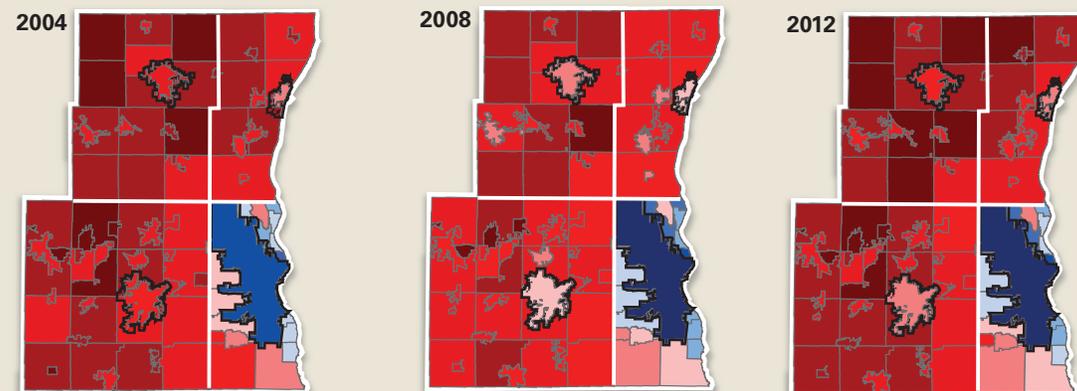
## Increasing polarization as seen in the presidential vote



In the 1980s, the red parts of metropolitan Milwaukee were not as red as they are today, and the blue parts were not as blue. Milwaukee's North Shore suburbs and Wauwatosa (just west of the city but inside the county) were still largely Republican.



By 2000, the three suburban counties had become more lopsidedly Republican, the North Shore of Milwaukee County was turning blue, and the gap between the city of Milwaukee and the outlying suburban communities was wider than ever.



In 2012, Washington, Ozaukee, and Waukesha were three of the highest-performing Republican counties in America, making metropolitan Milwaukee's urban-suburban voting gap among the biggest in the nation.

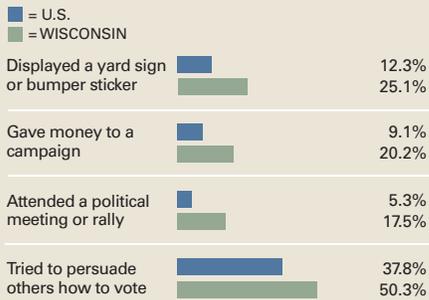
Source: State of Wisconsin voting data and election data provided by Clayton Nall of Stanford University

“highly competitive places politically, where you feel compelled to vote to advance your interests, because your vote is going to matter, and you are more likely to be contacted by a campaign,” he says. “Or you live in a place where elections aren’t competitive, but that means everybody has kind of the same view and same values.” In this second situation, these like-minded communities engender a sense of civic duty about voting.

### Local engagement rates high

Wisconsinites were much more engaged in politics than the average American in 2012, and not just when it came to voting. They were much more likely to participate in a variety of political activities, based on what registered voters in Wisconsin told the Marquette Law School Poll and how Americans answered similar questions in the American National Election Study.

Wisconsin vs. U.S. voters in politically related activities, 2012



Sources: Marquette Law School Poll in 2012; the 2012 American National Election Study. Journal Sentinel

Metropolitan Milwaukee has both kinds of places in great abundance. It is full of politically like-minded communities, where shared political values are nurtured. And it’s a seething hotbed of division and conflict, because southeastern Wisconsin is where the reddest and bluest communities in a warring battleground state converge.

“You have what you might call the perfect storm,” Campbell says. “You’ve got both the consensus and the conflict.”

In the last presidential election, Ozaukee County, bordering Milwaukee

County to the north, had the highest turnout of voting-age citizens—84 percent—of any county in the country with more than 50,000 people. Waukesha County, to Milwaukee’s immediate west, was tied for second at 83 percent. Washington County, to the northwest, was 11th (80 percent). Milwaukee itself had one of the highest turnouts of any big urban county in America (74 percent). Dane County, anchored by the ultra-blue city of Madison and less than 75 miles from downtown Milwaukee, barely trailed Ozaukee and Waukesha. (It was fifth in the entire country with 81 percent.)

Commentators wondered going into the election whether Wisconsin’s unflagging political wars and nonstop elections in 2011 and 2012 would wear out the state’s voters. Instead, these experiences produced record-breaking turnouts, especially in the state’s most partisan counties.

“You think, ‘Oh, engagement—that’s a good thing.’ But it can lead to people being more polarized,” says political scientist Alan Abramowitz of Emory University.

## III. The Consequences

How has polarization changed our politics?

Let us begin with voting patterns, which are dramatically different today from Wisconsin elections as recent as the 1980s and 1990s. More specifically, examining a quarter-century of exit poll data, Franklin and I found a systematic decline in both ticket-splitting (where people vote for candidates of different parties on the same ballot) and crossover voting (where Democrats vote for Republicans and vice versa).

Consider an instance of crossover voting from the past: In the Wisconsin U.S. Senate race of 1988, a third of self-described conservatives supported Democrat Herb Kohl on election day, even though he ran on a campaign platform of a 10-percent defense cut and a 10-point tax increase for people making \$200,000 a year. A quarter of self-described liberals supported his opponent, Republican Susan Engeleiter. One in four Republicans

voted for Kohl, and one in five Democrats voted for Engeleiter.

As for ticket-splitters, in 1988, one in four voters fell into this category, picking one party for Senate and the other party for president.

A quarter-century later, in 2012, when Democrat Tammy Baldwin defeated former Gov. Tommy Thompson to succeed Kohl in the Senate, just 1 in 17 was a ticket-splitter. In short, today, the share of voters who are “persuadable”—i.e., up for grabs—has shrunk.

### No voter fatigue

Voters here responded to the political wars of 2011–2012 by turning out in droves. In the 2012 presidential race, three of the top five turnout counties in the United States could be found in southern Wisconsin.

Top U.S. turnout counties as a percentage of voting-age citizens

1	Ozaukee (Wis.)	84.4%
2 TIE	Carver (Minn.)	82.9%
2 TIE	Douglas (Colo.)	82.9%
2 TIE	Waukesha (Wis.)	82.9%
5	Dane (Wis.)	81.2%
11	Washington (Wis.)	78.7%
34	St. Croix (Wis.)	74.7%
44	Milwaukee (Wis.)	73.7%
46	Sheboygan (Wis.)	73.3%
50	Racine (Wis.)	72.5%
	U.S. (nationwide)	58.0%

Turnout figures are for counties above 50,000 population. (Citizen voting-age population is not available for most smaller counties.)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Journal Sentinel U.S. Election Atlas, Elections Project

Campaigns have accordingly adjusted their priorities, putting more of their efforts into mobilizing their base and less into persuading undecided voters than they used to. “We keep jacking up the base,” says Democratic pollster Paul Maslin of Madison. “The campaigns are not even trying to appeal to the other side.” ▶▶

## Sorting Through Possible Evils of Political Separation—and Finding Not Much

by Richard M. Esenberg

As a politically active person who still hopes that some parts of life can be—if not wholly free of politics—at least ideologically demilitarized zones, political separation (*segregation* seems a misleadingly loaded word) is not something I'm inclined to encourage. But just what is the evil attendant upon Milwaukee's Big Sort?

Some might claim that political separation impedes regional cooperation. If the suburbs are filled with people who oppose certain types of urban policies (typically those that require taxing them to pay for initiatives to benefit the central city), then regional agreement on such policies will never be reached. Absent the imposition of the desired "cooperation" by the state or federal government, suburban residents will not pay for mass transit seen as primarily benefiting city residents or otherwise "share" their tax revenue. Recalcitrant exurbanites will continue to insist on large lots and more roads. And so on.

This is less an objection to political separation than it is to the difficulty of obtaining a particular policy outcome: If one doesn't desire the policy, then separation is not a problem. Those who oppose certain forms of regional cooperation cannot be outvoted and coerced into participation, so they must be convinced. If the idea is that greater investment in regional mass transit or "smart growth" planning is in everyone's best interest, then everyone (or at least a majority of those residing in each community) must be convinced that this is so. That's a tall order—not least because these claims of universal benefit are often untrue.

Lest this be seen as a death knell for the city or for urban policies favored by certain elites, let me suggest another view. Former Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist was fond of saying that no city can become or stay great through charity. He might have added that a great city cannot be built by restricting the ability of people to leave it or by imposing its policy preferences on its neighbors. It may be that the future of American cities is not as supplicants for regional largesse but as places that are attractive places to work and live in their own right. That end may be better served if cities must be responsive to markets and individual choice. It may turn out that the optimal evolution of a metropolitan area requires the liberty of those who live there more than it does the ability to impose the nostrums of planners.

A more direct objection to political separation is that it increases political polarization within representative bodies. If legislators are increasingly elected from politically homogenous districts, then they may be less willing—or able—to compromise. As a result, "nothing gets done."

But compromise is not always a good. Doing something is not always preferable to doing nothing. Whatever is least objectionable—or splits the difference between radically different approaches—is not always best. It may be more important to resolve foundational differences than to pretend they don't exist.

Nor is it clear that a legislature composed largely of representatives from competitive districts with precarious political futures will make better policy, or even get "more done," than one with members from safe but ideologically disparate districts. Perhaps being elected from a district that is a biannual battleground promotes sagacity and courage, but count me as doubtful.

Our current Congress is often portrayed as uniquely gridlocked and unable to deal with our most pressing issues. But it has been ignoring many of these issues—think of the deficit and entitlements—for the past 30 years, including periods when it was much less polarized than it is today.

Finally, one might reasonably fear that political separation will lead to increased polarization within the electorate itself. If we rarely encounter anyone who does not think like us, then we may be less able to appreciate good arguments from the other side. We may be more likely to see our political opponents as embodying some combination of "evil" and "ignorant."

I'm more sympathetic to this concern. I spend much of my professional life as an advocate for a particular ideological perspective, and yet even I think that some of my friends (and foes) wildly overstate what is at stake in our political wars. But, fortunately, not more than a handful of us really believe that politics is a sufficient reason to hate our neighbor. In any event, it's not self-evident that living next door to a "wing nut" or "moon bat" would lead to potlucks and book groups. We increasingly live in a world in which our web of associations extends beyond, and is not based upon, where we live. To the extent this is true, residential separation is not as harmful—nor its reduction as potentially beneficial—as we might imagine. While Robert Putnam's work focuses on ethnicity, it suggests that we are less likely to engage with those we see as unlike us—even when they live across the street.

The bad news is that there is not much we can or ought to do about political separation. The good news is that it may not much matter.

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## Why Partisanship Bothers Us

By John J. Pauly

In conjunction with Craig Gilbert's thoughtful study of political polarization in the Milwaukee metropolitan area, it is worth asking why hard and determined forms of partisanship so unnerve us.

As a student of journalism and media, I want to probe the meanings that Americans attribute to their experience of political division. Partisanship, especially these days, does not want for defenders. Indeed, the country's liberal tradition seems to invite it, emphasizing the need for robust competition between ideas in politics and for unrestrained competition in the marketplace. These commonplaces of American life, in turn, encourage partisan individuals to style themselves as sincere and authentic in their public performances. A willingness to engage in tough-minded, agonistic argument has come to be seen as a sign of moral virtue, a principled refusal to yield to untruth.

And yet . . . we do worry about intense forms of partisanship, and for good reason. We know from our personal and historic experience how easily an unwillingness to listen, withhold judgment, or compromise can undermine the common good. True believers unsettle us because their certainty makes us wonder what they would be willing to do in order to get what they want. Moreover, each generation carries in its head a parable about partisanship run amok—a story about how the Civil War nearly brought the union to ruin, how Vietnam destroyed family comity, or how a gubernatorial election put mild-mannered Wisconsinites at one another's throats.

In a *New York Times* opinion piece last fall, the Canadian writer and politician Michael Ignatieff eloquently summarized the dangers to democracy from this state of affairs. Ignatieff spoke to the importance of distinguishing adversaries from enemies. "An adversary is someone you want to defeat," he wrote. "An enemy is someone you have to destroy." Liberal democracies depend upon the goodwill of adversaries. Ignatieff argued that appeals to civility will not diminish the current spirit of enmity, and he urged the sort of structural changes that other Western democracies use to minimize gridlock, including campaign finance rules, open primaries, and impartial redistricting commissions to avoid gerrymandering.

Let me add two observations specifically about polarization.

First, polarization has created a tragic mismatch between the problems facing southeast Wisconsin and the political tools at hand to solve those problems. The conflicts over water for Waukesha, high-speed rail, public university funding, the Affordable Care Act, and school vouchers offer a preview of what lies ahead. Every significant challenge confronting us, from economic development to public health to environmental protection to inequality, requires a regional response. And yet we have poured all our political energy and imagination into branding, mobilization, and fund-raising rather than into the arts of deliberation. We think so little of governing that we now consider it normal that candidates running for public office plainly express their distaste for government. Faced with a stalemate that they themselves have created, the national parties generate preposterous bills with no chance of passage. Easier to create talking points for the next election than to do the work for which they were hired.

Second, polarization creates its own problems for journalists. I am grateful to live in a community where the legacy newspaper remains committed to public service, including in innovative ways such as the relationship between the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and Marquette University Law School that made Gilbert's study possible. But how much can we expect of journalism in the absence of the structural changes that Ignatieff and others recommend? Whatever its blind spots, exclusions, and prejudices, the American daily newspaper that emerged after World War I believed in the reasonableness of the political system. What happens when the political system no longer puts much faith in its own reasonableness? And in the new digital media environment, wracked by its own forms of fractiousness, how might journalists who hope to speak on behalf of the common good find their feet?

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To characterize it differently, the formula for winning statewide elections has changed. “When I was running for governor, I intentionally went out in the black churches . . . , into the union halls . . . , to the Democratic festivities,” former Republican Gov. Tommy Thompson says. “I did that because I wanted to bridge the gap. That kind of politics isn’t in vogue any more. . . . [For me] it was, ‘How do I expand from 69 or 70 percent to 75 percent?’ People now say, ‘How do I get to 50 percent plus one?’”

Thompson won Milwaukee County three times and Dane County once during his one-sided reelection victories of the 1990s. The idea of that happening today is unthinkable.

Candidates today are less interested in, and much worse at, attracting votes from the other party. They are more interested in and often much better at racking up landslide margins among their own party’s voters. That has altered the way political coalitions are put together and made it harder for people in both parties to cross partisan lines to achieve consensus or compromise.

It goes hand in hand with the trend of rising partisan antipathy. Partisan polarization is not a product of growing fondness among voters for their own party but, rather, of growing dislike for the other party. In Wisconsin, major statewide politicians once routinely got favorable ratings from a significant minority of voters in the other party. Today they get almost no support from voters in the other party.

Our increasingly polarized geography affects not only campaigns but also governance. In a place such as metropolitan Milwaukee, it represents a huge barrier to regional cooperation on policies from water to housing to transportation. Milwaukee has a long history of urban-suburban conflict, but those divisions are now compounded by partisan differences, too.

The matter goes beyond Wisconsin. Nationally, one party (Democrats) has a huge urban base. The other (Republicans) has very little urban presence. This has big implications for the two parties’ agendas and ensures sharp partisan division over issues that break along urban-suburban-rural lines, from mass transit and urban infrastructure to social spending to voting rules to immigration.

The divergence in the two parties’ coalitions also helps explain why Republicans and Democrats have gotten so good at winning different kinds of elections. Consider Wisconsin’s recent election history. Why is the party that utterly dominates state government

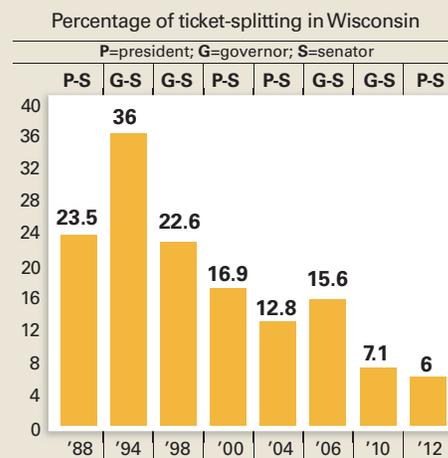
(Republicans) incapable of winning a presidential campaign in Wisconsin? Why did the party that swept top-of-the-ticket races for Senate and president in 2012 (Democrats) lose the majority of the state’s legislative and congressional races?

How could the same state in the space of two years elect the political odd couple of Tammy Baldwin and Ron Johnson to the U.S. Senate? How could the same state in the space of five months vote for Scott Walker and Barack Obama?

The answers to these questions are rooted in our polarized political landscape.

### The decline of ticket-splitting

Ticket-splitting has declined dramatically in Wisconsin since the 1980s. The share of voters who voted for different parties in major races on the same ballot (president and U.S. senator in some years, governor and U.S. senator in others) topped 20 percent before 2000 but sank to 6 percent in 2012.



Source: Analysis of Wisconsin exit polls by Journal Sentinel and Marquette Law School  
Journal Sentinel

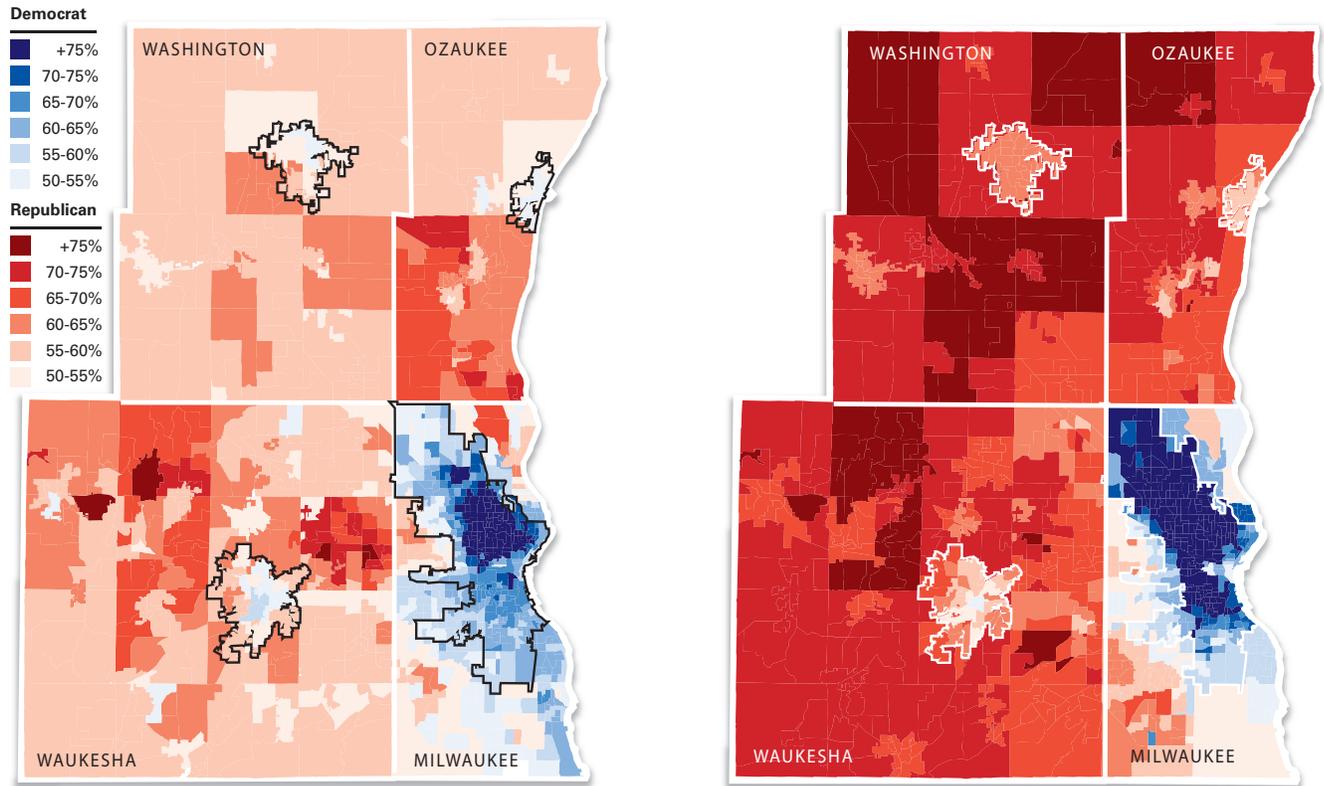
The GOP’s struggles in recent presidential elections stem in large part from its inability to compete in the nation’s most populous places. Republicans are on the wrong side of the density divide. They haven’t won a major statewide election on a presidential ballot in Wisconsin since 1984. In the last two presidential races, Obama won the state’s biggest counties (Milwaukee and Dane) by such huge margins that the GOP had no prayer of making up the difference in the state’s smaller counties.

“Unfortunately, we have become a party that can’t lose a midterm and can’t win a presidential,” says Reince Priebus, the Wisconsinite who chairs the Republican ▶▶

## Two Senate races just 20 years apart: One juxtaposition shows the growth of polarization

In 1992, Russ Feingold beat Bob Kasten amid significant crossover voting. By 2012, when Tammy Baldwin beat Tommy Thompson, crossover voting had virtually disappeared, and communities on both sides had grown more partisan. To be sure, the relative size of the blue and red swaths can be deceiving: For Milwaukee County's population in 2012 was 954,000; the combined population of Washington, Ozaukee, and Waukesha counties was 612,000. At the same time, the point is not the size of the swaths but the growing homogenization within the respective swaths.

### Senate voting maps are by ward



1992: RUSS FEINGOLD (D) vs. BOB KASTEN (R)

2012: TAMMY BALDWIN (D) vs. TOMMY THOMPSON (R)

Source: State of Wisconsin

Journal Sentinel

National Committee. Priebus says that his party won't succeed long term at the presidential level unless it does better with minority voters and has a year-round "massive presence in Hispanic, African-American, and Asian communities across the country."

But in midterm races, key pieces of the Democrats' urban coalition—blacks, Latinos, young voters—turn out at lower rates, and the intensity of the GOP's older, whiter, high-turnout base comes to the fore. Republicans have won six of the state's last eight races for governor.

This gets us to Tammy Baldwin and Ron Johnson, the most politically disparate pair of same-state senators in the country. Johnson got elected by a smaller, more-conservative midterm electorate (2010); Baldwin won on a presidential ballot that attracted a larger and less-conservative pool of voters (2012).

Our polarized geography has big consequences for congressional and legislative races, too. But in this case, it deeply disadvantages Democrats, whose

voters are so concentrated in urban areas that many of their votes are wasted in 90-percent-blue districts. The Republican vote is more efficiently distributed across more districts.

In some states, including Wisconsin, this problem has been made worse for Democrats by gerrymandering. In a sign of how tilted the state's current lines are, Barack Obama carried Wisconsin by seven points in 2012, even as Republican Mitt Romney won a majority of not just the eight congressional districts in the state but also the far-more-numerous legislative districts.

We have a political landscape that favors Democrats in presidential races and Republicans in congressional races, increasing the odds of getting divided government and exacerbating the consequences when we get it. The nation's polarized geography is also taking its toll on political competition. In the most populous and most polarized part of Wisconsin (metropolitan Milwaukee), almost no truly competitive ▶▶

## Polarization or Social Control in Metropolitan Milwaukee?

by David R. Papke

As a person who has always considered the City of Milwaukee to be home, I find Craig Gilbert's study of political polarization in the metropolitan area to be both thorough and illuminating. His research indicates that when it comes to Republican and Democratic voting patterns, the area has become more polarized than any area outside of the American South. What's more, the political polarization very strikingly correlates with race, ethnicity, education, and population density. Republican voters reside largely in middle- and upper-class suburbs in Washington, Ozaukee, and Waukesha counties, while the impoverished and working poor reside and vote in the City of Milwaukee's Democratic inner city.

When we reflect on what has come to be, it is important that we not take the polarization to be simply a naturally occurring phenomenon and thereby overlook the political agency involved—that is, the way some socioeconomic groups attempt to contain and control other socioeconomic groups. Polarization has taken place in part because local and state governments have used law and legal arrangements to push socioeconomic groups apart, to assign poorer citizens to certain areas, and to reduce the clout of these citizens at the polls.

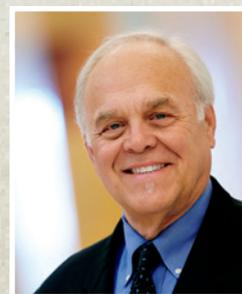
This effort dates back to the decades following World War II when local suburbs tolerated and sometimes encouraged the use of racially restrictive covenants. Researchers have found racially restrictive covenants in 16 out of 18 suburbs in Milwaukee County. In Wauwatosa, a suburb immediately to the west of the City of Milwaukee (and whose eastern edge is within four miles of downtown Milwaukee), 51 subdivisions composing one-third of the suburb's land prohibited African Americans from renting and buying property. The covenants in Milwaukee County remained important through the 1970s, and, as a result, the African-American population moved and expanded primarily along a vector running northwest from the original inner city to the county line, always within the city limits.

In the present, the enforcement of such racially restrictive covenants is unconstitutional, but suburbs can keep out people they take to be undesirable through exclusionary zoning. Such zoning cannot explicitly invoke race, but it can make it difficult for the urban poor to locate affordable housing in the suburbs. Exclusionary zoning is not common in older, fully developed suburbs such as West Milwaukee or Shorewood, but newer "second-ring" suburbs can and do use zoning designations related to lot size, number of bedrooms, and so forth to prevent the construction of inexpensive rental housing of the sort that the poor might be able to afford. As a result, they have no choice but to remain in the inner city.

Not to be outdone, the state government in recent years has taken steps to allow more-affluent potential Republican voters to move to certain areas while in the process leaving poorer Democrats even more concentrated in other areas. One recent legal change, for example, eliminated the requirement that City of Milwaukee employees live within the municipality. This sprang middle-class employees from the city that issues their paychecks. Republican Governor Scott Walker was the greatest champion of the change. He hails from the suburbs to the west of the city and, of course, relies on the huge turnouts of white Republican suburbanites in Washington, Ozaukee, and Waukesha counties at election time.

My general point is that what at first glance looks like polarization starts to look like social control upon further reflection. For decades, white middle- and upper-class suburbanites have been sealing off their communities and consigning the poor and working poor to the inner city. To quote the Italian leftist and highly regarded political theorist Antonio Gramsci, "Bourgeois hegemony is not automatic but rather achieved through conscious political action and organization."

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legislative or congressional districts exist. Across the country, there are fewer competitive counties and fewer competitive states, all of which means a shrinking presidential playing field.

Polarization is decreasing state and local competition in two ways. One is the trend toward politically one-sided places, which results in fewer partisan battlegrounds. The other is the decline of ticket-splitting and crossover voting, which makes election outcomes in those one-sided districts and states increasingly predictable.

Individually, these trends aren't fatal to competition. Party-line voting isn't inimical to competition when the electorate in a state or district is evenly divided. And one-sided states or districts can experience competitive elections when significant numbers of voters cross over to support candidates in the other party. But when neither condition is present, when the electorate is both one-sided and very partisan in its behavior, general election outcomes are baked into the cake.

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## COMMENT

### Polarized Regions: Race, Political Segregation, and Metropolitan Policy Consequences

by Katherine Levine Einstein

Craig Gilbert's excellent reporting reveals a deepening political divide in metropolitan Milwaukee, with Democrats and Republicans increasingly residing in separate geographic enclaves. The trends that he unveils are not limited to metropolitan Milwaukee: my own data analysis of all of the nation's metropolitan areas (more than 300) finds that metropolitan political divisions have, on average, steadily increased since the late 1980s. This increasing polarization in Milwaukee and beyond has important implications for politics and public policy, many of which Gilbert highlights in his reporting. It yields the election of more politically extreme representatives, with mayors and state legislators responsive to just one side of the political spectrum. In addition, rising political segregation—where Democrats live with other Democrats, and Republicans with other Republicans—potentially creates a more extreme mass public, as individuals reside in echo chambers devoid of opposing views. Finally, greater metropolitan political polarization hampers regional cooperation across a number of important policy arenas; it is this latter consequence that is the focus of my research.

The fact that political segregation hinders coordination between municipalities is both surprising and politically important. A long strand of political science research has found that greater metropolitan cooperation is in the interests of both urban and suburban residents. For urban residents, the regional coordination of services can yield better mass transit links, allowing for easier access to jobs in booming suburban economies. It can offer affordable housing in communities with better government services and economic opportunities. And greater regional cohesion potentially can lead to tax-base sharing, providing less-affluent communities with more fiscal resources. In the Minneapolis metropolitan area, for example, the Metropolitan Council oversees a limited tax-base sharing program that redistributes local tax revenues from more- to less-affluent municipalities.

Regional cooperation is not, however, simply a boondoggle for urban residents. Suburbanites can similarly benefit from mass transit by using it to avoid traffic congestion. While *sustainability* has become a loaded term in conservative circles, regional smart-growth planning is potentially quite beneficial to residents in outlying suburban communities, protecting their property values from diminishment due to unregulated development. And greater metropolitan cooperation can benefit all residents by helping reduce the negative externalities that emerge when metropolitan municipalities compete with one another for developers.

By dividing local residents, political polarization prevents these mutually beneficial coalitions from emerging, with metropolitan jurisdictions unable to find common ground. Gilbert's reporting cites several examples from the Milwaukee metropolitan area, and my own research systematically documents the issue nationally. Using interviews with dozens of local officials, archival documents, and data analysis, I find that more-politically-polarized places exhibit more-fragmented mass transit systems: in particular, they tend to be

There was a time a few decades ago when political scientists worried out loud about Americans' disengagement from politics. Fueling these worries was a trend of declining presidential turnouts.

There was also a time when they worried that American voters were non-ideological to a fault. In a highly influential paper published 50 years ago, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," Philip Converse of the University of Michigan argued that very few voters have a well-formed belief system. Most voters don't have consistent positions on

issues, he found in his study of public opinion. And most don't have a coherent ideology. Political scientists found themselves asking, "If voters don't know what they think or want, how does representative democracy even work?"

Today not too many scholars or commentators or political observers worry about this. But whether the benefits of the political awareness, passion, and engagement of voters in a state such as Wisconsin outweigh the costs of their fierce and often bitter divisions is not clear. ■

disproportionately clustered in central cities, with no suburban links. Moreover, when suburban communities in polarized places do provide transit, they offer few, if any, easy transfers to the central city system. More generally, more-politically-polarized regions struggle to plan together, with planning documents reflecting less coordination across different political jurisdictions. My research on publicly subsidized housing suggests similarly fragmented policy outcomes in politically polarized places: higher levels of political segregation seem to spur a larger number of public housing authorities, controlling for other demographic characteristics. Having a large number of housing authorities in turn presents a major coordination challenge for metropolitan policy makers and advocates hoping to implement a more regional approach to publicly subsidized housing.

We know, then, that politically polarized places such as Milwaukee struggle to promulgate potentially valuable regional partnerships. What's more, the *kinds* of places that are politically segregated lend a particularly disturbing bent to the relationship between political polarization and metropolitan policy outcomes. My research finds that the most powerful predictors of political segregation are the proportion of a metropolitan area that is black and the residential segregation of blacks from whites. Specifically, my statistical analyses suggest that metropolitan areas that are more black and segregated exhibit far higher levels of political polarization. These two variables explain a whopping 70 percent of the variance in metropolitan political segregation. This relationship remains when statistically controlling for virtually all metropolitan demographic characteristics. It is thus unsurprising that Milwaukee, as the nation's most racially segregated metropolitan area, experiences such high levels of political polarization.

Social scientists have long known of the tight link between racial segregation and the concentration of the poor into isolated neighborhoods. This powerful connection means that racially segregated communities tend to suffer from a variety of the ills associated with concentrated poverty, including worse schools, higher crime, the spatial mismatch of employment opportunities, poor housing stock, and lower-quality public services. Putting this reality together with this essay's earlier observations yields a depressing result: if racially segregated places tend to be both politically segregated and disproportionately impoverished *and* if political segregation hinders regional cooperation, then the places most in need of metropolitan coalition-building are the least able to implement these valuable regional partnerships.

To move past these divisions, we need to think beyond voluntary regional partnerships to address policy challenges in the nation's most politically polarized metropolises. Among the more politically polarized places featured in my analysis, I find that some combination of entrepreneurial community and business leaders, unelected bureaucrats insulated from electoral pressures, and federal or state officials can, at times, circumvent local political cleavages. Nonetheless, even with these solutions available, political polarization remains a stark obstacle to potentially beneficial regional coalitions, particularly for the metropolitan areas that need them most.

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