

O, Give Me a Home Where the Like-Minded Roam

By **Bill Bishop and Richard Florida** March 23, 2003

When Dixie Chicks lead singer Natalie Maines told an audience in London she was "ashamed" that President Bush came from Texas, she had no reason to think her words would cause country music stations in parts of the United States to boycott the trio's latest album and their best-selling hit single, "Travelin' Soldier."

It wasn't just that she was caught up in Europe's antiwar spirit; something more profound is in play here. Maines lives and works in artsy, liberal Austin. Her remark wouldn't cause a ruckus among the like-minded transplants who have moved there in droves over the past two decades (including Maines, who hails from the decidedly less liberal West Texas city of Lubbock). The revolt of radio stations in more traditional places such as Birmingham and Kansas City forced Maines to issue an apology and taught her a lesson that the major parties also are learning: Place matters more than ever in today's political geography.

Ever since the disputed 2000 presidential election, it's become fashionable to talk about America as a "50-50 nation," divided precisely between Republicans and Democrats, and dramatized by the red and blue states of the TV networks' political maps. But this bipolar description doesn't adequately explain the seismic shift that's taking place in American politics, culture and economics. Researchers have charted a new migration pattern: More and more people are moving to places that are already home to lifestyles or attitudes similar to their own.

This sorting out is creating what University of Maryland political demographer James Gimpel calls a "patchwork nation." For much of the last century, the nation's politics has been dominated by geographic splits -- North and South, rural and urban. Now, society is changing at a more molecular level. City by city, even neighborhood by neighborhood, our politics are becoming more concentrated and, consequently, more polarized. We may live in a 50-50 country, but our cities are largely 60-40 or even 70-30 -- whether it's about a presidential election or what to do in Iraq.

It has become increasingly likely that people live near those who share similar views of the world. As a result, the political middle ground evaporates. Regions pull away from each other economically and politically, and the widening distance makes it increasingly difficult to find civility, much less consensus, in national debate. That explains why some neighborhoods have "No War" lawn signs sprouting from nearly every yard, while others show only "Support Our Troops" messages.

Many people say they are moving to a city that "feels right," not necessarily the one with jobs that pay the most. They are finding the city that offers economic opportunity and the kind of culture they want -- and for many, culture comes first. So

Austin attracts liberal-minded software developers, while conservatively inclined tech geeks head for Dallas. White, New-Age potters pack U-Hauls and take the winding road to Asheville, N.C., while the black population of the Atlanta metropolitan region increased by 460,000 in the '90s, nearly double the number of any other metro area.

Local culture is inextricably intertwined with local economy, and while it is impossible to tell which is the most compelling force at this point, it's clear that this new migration began with a change in the way regional economies develop. When Detroit, Pittsburgh and Cleveland blossomed in the last century, their factories required large numbers of unskilled laborers. Hundreds of thousands of workers -- Southern field hands, immigrants, Appalachian coal miners -- left their homes for the booming urban manufacturing centers.

Over the past several decades, our cities have once again been transformed. But unlike the earlier migration, this one has taken place between cities and relies on highly skilled and creative people. Today's fastest-growing metropolitan areas have expanded by becoming magnets for talent, fueling the development of places such as Austin, Atlanta and Raleigh-Durham, N.C., in the South; Minneapolis and Chicago in the Midwest; Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle in the West; and New York, Boston and Washington in the East.

We have been working with statistician Robert Cushing, a retired professor from the University of Texas and a consultant to the Austin American-Statesman, to examine Austin's growth. Cushing studied Internal Revenue Service data for the tax years 1992 to 2000, and found that taxpayers moving to Austin had significantly higher incomes than those who left. For example, a family moving to Austin from Kansas City in the 1990s earned \$8,000 more than families moving in the other direction. Austin's advantage held with most cities. During that period, the difference between families coming and going from Charlotte was \$5,000; from Louisville, \$20,000; from Detroit, \$12,000; from Sacramento, \$10,000, from Hartford, Conn., \$20,000; from Allentown, Pa., \$37,000.

If income is a measure of talent, Austin won mightily. From 1992 to 2000, according to Cushing, Austin gained \$4.3 billion in income in this net trade with the rest of the country. Not surprisingly, the number of people in the Austin metro area with a college degree or higher increased by 81 percent during that period.

Thousands of young people -- the so-called Generation X -- abandoned their hometowns and headed for Austin and other new meccas. More than a third of U.S. cities lost members of Generation X in the 1990s. Pittsburgh, Syracuse, N.Y., Buffalo, Cleveland, Springfield, Mass., Youngstown, Ohio and Dayton, Ohio, all lost shares of people ages 20 to 34 in 2000. Austin was a prime beneficiary of this mass movement of the young and talented.

As creative people concentrated, cities took radically different economic trajectories. Austin grew by more than half in the 1990s. Even though there have been dramatic layoffs in some old-line high-tech firms, such as computer chip manufacturing, there are more software firms in Austin now than two years ago. The Cleveland Plain Dealer, meanwhile, describes a "quiet crisis" in its local economy, and the Indianapolis Star writes about Indiana's "state of decline."

The changes in the economy are easier to document than the shifts in the nation's cultural geography. Yet both stem from the same movement. Social solidarity has become as much of an attraction for a city as coffee hangouts, six-figure salaries and

houses with curb appeal. People are moving to the neighborhoods that ratify their social and cultural view of the world.

This social congealing has had political consequences. In 1980, there wasn't a significant difference in how high-tech and low-tech cities voted in the presidential election. By 2000, however, Cushing found that the 21 urban centers with the most tech productivity voted Democratic at rates 17 percent above the national average, while lower-tech cities and rural America went Republican. That pattern held true in California, the most Democratic of states. Of the state's 25 metropolitan areas, George Bush won the 14 lowest-tech metro regions, and the non-metro areas, by 210,000 votes. Al Gore took the 11 higher-tech metro areas by more than 1.5 million.

The new political division doesn't fall along traditional economic lines. These high-tech cities are both increasingly Democratic and increasingly unequal in terms of income. In the 20 metro areas with the greatest income disparities -- including San Jose, Raleigh-Durham, New York, Washington, Boston and Austin -- Gore won 56.6 percent of the vote compared with Bush's 39 percent.

No wonder the pieces of our politics don't match. Democrats consider themselves champions of working people and of economic, environmental and social justice, but their constituency is strongest in the centers of high-tech growth that have the highest levels of economic inequality and the least amount of blue-collar manufacturing.

Republicans, on the other hand, boast that they cultivate the entrepreneurial, wealth-generating edge of capitalism, but they draw their support from rural Americans and from cities with relatively higher levels of economic equality, larger proportions of old-style manufacturing and less-than-vibrant economies.

The parties are playing catch-up, shaping policies to fit both old supporters and their new economic and regional constituencies. Republicans juggle faith-based initiatives and tariff protections for steel. Democrats support abortion rights and environmental protection -- but they are mum on income inequality, and, prodded by Hollywood interests, they have promoted copyright extension.

With Iraq, we can see the patchwork nation at work. Governments in 14 of the 21 cities with the most high-tech production adopted resolutions against the war. Austin is the only city in Texas to have passed one.

At some point, the war will be over. The fragmentation of our politics, and our culture, will last far longer.

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