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COMMENTARY

Hicks Nixed Slicks' Pick

By Sean Wilentz

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"It's the secular coasts versus the religious heartland," CNN's Tucker Carlson says of this year's election results. That sums up the conventional wisdom that right-wing Republicans would prefer that you believe and that too many of the rest of us do believe. The effete liberal coasts against the Real America. Situational morality against real morality. Relativism against Standards. Metrosexuals against the God-fearing.

Wrong.

The real electoral division isn't between the coasts and the heartland. It's between cities all over the United States and the rest of the country.

In every state in the Union, red states included, Sen. John F. Kerry performed disproportionately well in urban areas. Kerry actually carried, sometimes convincingly, cities in some of the deepest-red red states that are about as far from coastal secularism as you can imagine.

Missouri, for example, broke 54% to 46% for Bush — except the city of St. Louis, which voted overwhelmingly for Kerry.

Nobody ever really took seriously Kerry's chances of carrying Texas. But in El Paso, he won 56% of the vote. What is so "secular," so bicoastal, so effete about El Paso?

Alabama is supposed to be the buckle of the pro-GOP Bible Belt. But don't say that too loudly in Montgomery County, eponymous home to the state capital, which came in with a Kerry majority, as did Dallas County, home to the city of Selma, which voted for Kerry by a 60% to 40% margin.

From Richmond, Va., to Jackson, Miss., from Salt Lake City, Utah, to Columbia, S.C., the Democratic ticket either won outright or ran well ahead of statewide totals.

Now let us reverse the terms. New York is a huge blue state. On Tuesday, though, it was a sea of red, except for some tiny blue dots around New York City, Albany, bits of Long Island and a few other places. California, the quintessence of Carlson's secular coast, was also pretty solidly red, except for L.A., San Francisco and San Diego.

The California pattern may seem, at first glance, to suit the stereotype. Everybody knows about "San Francisco Democrats" and the fleshpots of L.A. But Memphis, Tenn.? Selma, Ala.?

The reasons for the city-country divide are obvious. Cities are home, disproportionately, to wage earners, civil service employees, racial minorities and immigrants — and those people are overwhelmingly Democrats. The cities are where those who are still hoping to cash in on the American dream pray and work — except for those domestic servants who commute

to the suburbs to clean the houses of those who have already cashed in on the American dream.

The cities are also, of course, the homes to all of those artsy intellectuals, entertainment industry elitists and limousine liberals whom the GOP and its backers like to demonize. But these liberal elite enclaves are tiny even within the cities where they are located. The minority and immigrant vote in Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx and Harlem dwarfs the numbers on Manhattan's Upper West Side and Greenwich Village. The same holds true, to say the least, of the secular liberal elite's grip on Montgomery, Ala.

The urban-rural split has been a perennial feature our political history. In 1896, the last time the national election map closely resembled that of today — with the Northeast and the West Coast seeming to go one way, and most of the rest of the country another — the Democrats were the party of the countryside and the Republicans the party of the city. Unlike today, the clash was explicit, pitting the agrarian values of populist Democrat William Jennings Bryan against the pro-business industrialism of Republican, William McKinley.

"Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country," Bryan proclaimed in the famous speech that gained him the nomination.

In 2004, there is a harder and even more inflammatory aspect to the split, usually mentioned only in code: divisions of race. Although most black Americans live in the South, and in non-metropolitan regions, the fact remains that our cities, in every area of the country, are as a rule more heavily African American than they were in Bryan's and McKinley's time. Not surprisingly, because blacks vote overwhelmingly Democratic, many of the bluest cities in the red states are those with the largest black voting presence. Richmond (58.1%), Memphis (61.4%) and Jackson (71.1%) rank among the top 10 cities with large and concentrated black populations.

By perpetuating the easy impression of a nation divided into coastal liberals and heartland conservatives, reporters and commentators are misleading themselves and their audiences about the actual political state of the Union. Without realizing it, they are also advancing the picture of the nation advanced by the GOP culture warriors, feeding the despair and paranoia of coastal liberals and writing off millions of Americans in every part of the country.

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