

# Minnesota's urban-rural divide is no lie

"612 values" don't connect in other parts of the state, and it's not clear that Democrats understand that.

By Lawrence R. Jacobs | JULY 26, 2019 — 5:57PM

Free-lunch season. That's how I think of the weeks before and after elections, when I often deliver geeky PowerPoint presentations about Minnesota politics to businesses and civic groups.

Here's one of my themes: Democrats and Republicans are colonizing different parts of our state. Democrats are locking down votes in and around cities while Republicans are cleaning up in rural areas.

You may be nodding as you recall red and blue polka-dotted election maps you've seen of Minnesota.

It's all part of the deep political divide across America — often an urban/rural divide — that grew still deeper after the searing ("Send her back!") attacks by President Donald Trump on four women of color elected to Congress, including U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar of Minnesota.

My talks last fall gave me a personal feel for America's partisan anger. When I described Minnesota's divisions to Minneapolis audiences before and after the 2018 midterms, I was instructed by progressives that the urban/rural split is a Republican lie.

With predictable academic stiffness, I pointed to my charts and maps as proof. Wrong, I was told. Middle- and lower-income voters in the two regions share the need for health care, housing, and an easing of economic inequality. What I am presenting, my critics insisted, is in fact evidence of failed DFL leadership rather than of a meaningful divide among voters. An able politician would bring urban and rural voters together in a coalition.

Fair enough, to a point. Strong campaigns by U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar and Gov. Tim Walz have won in rural areas where few Democrats succeed these days. On the other hand, the past dozen years of state legislative races reveal an unmistakable trend.

Despite capable DFL candidates, Republicans won legislative seats on the Iron Range as well as in the west and south. Urban areas have become darker blue; but in outstate towns like Albert Lea, Willmar and Faribault in the south, and Beltrami in the north, Republicans turned once safe DFL seats or closely competitive seats into secure red districts.

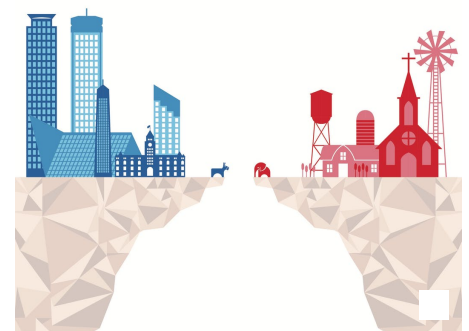
When I talk to people in greater Minnesota, most report that it's city/country economic disparities, rather than shared concerns, that dominate their thinking.

And they warn that Minneapolis's spotlighting of racial identity and the rooting out of "white privilege" dangle like "low-hanging fruit" for Republican campaigns in rural districts.

Let's start with the economics.

"We're getting shafted," reported a county commissioner from greater Minnesota. "Jobs are not here for long, but we still have to pay taxes while prices and taxes keep rising."

The common outstate conclusion that "no one cares about us" is reinforced by impressions of Minneapolis prosperity — "everywhere there are cranes and help-wanted signs for jobs that start at \$15 per hour" says one observer, compared with aging Main Streets and fragile, lower-paying employment opportunities outside the metro area.



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Hard data confirm disparities. Compared with greater Minnesota, the seven-county metro area has more higher-paying jobs that contribute to a “huge disparity in pay,” according to a nonpartisan researcher on rural Minnesota.

Widespread frustration over “paying taxes that aren’t spent here” partly results from greater Minnesota’s large geographic areas. While metro spending is concentrated, state money beyond the urban region is spread thin to cover the many miles of roads and to bring essential services to a large number of sparsely populated counties.

This visceral sense of being “shafted” reveals itself in this mortifying pattern: Minnesota farmers and miners draw food and minerals from the earth, which then enrich processors and retailers in the Twin Cities. Most of the money made from agriculture was reaped in the Twin Cities even though the crops were grown in rural communities.

Meanwhile, a biting second divide emerges from the Minneapolis campaigns against “white privilege” or “privilege” of other kinds.

Here’s a sample: A Minneapolis official accused residents who support retaining green spaces of engaging in “white pastoralism.” Cards announcing “Your homeowner privilege is showing” were distributed last year to owners of single-family homes who questioned the introduction of triplexes into low-density neighborhoods they may have lived in for decades and paid the heavy taxes to do so.

City Council members called for large crowds in 2015 to “speak out against white supremacy and white privilege” in response to a shooting at a police station.

Quick clarification. The issue, for me, is not whether to confront racial prejudice. Discrimination has etched a deep and shameful scar in Minneapolis. For decades after the early 1950s, the sale of homes to people of color was effectively barred in certain parts of the city. The effects remain: The restricted neighborhoods mostly stayed white, and people of color were prevented from enjoying the increased wealth amassed in these properties as they gained value.

Activists and the media have also tracked racial disparities in the conduct of the Minneapolis Police Department for some time.

All of this is true and, yet, the accusatory calling out of “white privilege” is at odds with the progressive strategy to unite “One Minnesota.”

“The progressive left’s language of equity,” a prominent person of color explains, “alienates whites who don’t see themselves in the picture and [who] then move to the right.”

My conversations with county commissioners and others in greater Minnesota steamed with resentment.

“There’s no white privilege,” I was frequently informed. “I’ve had to work for whatever I have.”

Charges of white privilege, one rural researcher explained, are understood in rural Minnesota as “metro privilege — many people [here] are struggling to find and keep a job and make ends meet.”

In short, the focus on racial identity in Minneapolis may be widening the urban/rural divide. Nearly everyone I spoke with in greater Minnesota let loose with the same exasperation: “Minneapolis is out of touch with reality.” Or, less politely: “You guys are nuts.”

One well-placed state leader bluntly diagnosed the state’s political malady and its source: “The urban/rural divide is a serious problem, and Minneapolis is the cause.”

“The attention to white privilege is a cultural marker of 612 values that does not resonate positively,” said a student of rural Minnesota. It shines a spotlight on racial identity in a region that is mostly “unfamiliar with diversity and the inclusionary language used in the metro.”

Quick sidebar: Although some outstate areas welcome immigrants, refugees, and people of color, many parts of Minnesota remain 95% white. Even as people of color have moved in large numbers to Willmar, Worthington, Pelican Rapids and Walnut Grove, nearby townships remain overwhelmingly white, with residents having little personal familiarity with racial and ethnic diversity.

It's no surprise that Republicans have been eager to make use of the outstate hostility to "Minneapolis values." A leader at the Capitol waved off complaints that the GOP is shamefully playing the "race card."

"Fair game," he retorted. "Politics is a contact sport, and this is the political price of Minneapolis liberals."

Rural Democratic politicians brace for the next election when they expect the GOP and its allies to quote Minneapolis officials lashing out at "white privilege" to "weaken the DFL" and to taunt DFL candidates: "Are these your values?"

"I feel despair," sighed a rural DFLer, who anticipated the GOP pitch to his voters: "We're more like you. Minneapolis values hurt you."

A veteran Republican strategist was hopeful that "white privilege adds to our arsenal," helping to demonstrate that "Minneapolis liberalism is off the charts." It helps us paint the metro as "its own left enclave that greater Minnesota can't comprehend," the message maker said.

If you're not convinced that the left's loud agenda on racial equity is politically harmful, let me remind you of how Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign targeted it and won over voters who had supported Obama.

According to Ballotpedia, 206 counties across the U.S. voted for Trump after supporting Obama in both of the latter's presidential campaigns. Racial resentment was a driver, according to independent researchers.

And by the way, almost a tenth of the counties that Trump flipped in 2016 were in Minnesota.

As I've thought about the rural resentment against "Minneapolis values" and the political openings it creates for Republicans, I've been struck by an irony: Minneapolis progressives are focused on racial identity to correct past wrongs against people of color and indigenous citizens. And yet, they exhibit a curious blind spot about triggering white identity. The left talks about using economics as a bridge between urban and rural voters but curiously underrates the potency of cultural issues in dividing Minnesota.

I came to politics during the late 1960s and 1970s and felt the roller coaster of America's struggles over race. My hope for our country was lifted by the passage of the historic civil-rights legislation but dipped when racial discord ignited cities and tore apart towns. My faith in America's promise started to rise again in the 1990s. Bill Clinton was elected from the South and brought to the White House his strong bonds with African-Americans, prompting the literary giant Toni Morrison to describe him as the first black president. George W. Bush ran as a "compassionate conservative" who favored immigration reform and invested money and his time in strengthening U.S. relations in Africa. The election of Barack Obama in 2008 rang the bells of freedom. His defeated opponent John McCain poignantly hailed his election as "historic" for inspiring Americans "who had once wrongly believed that they had little at stake or little influence in the election of an American president."

Inequalities remained, of course, but there seemed a broad recognition that they needed to narrow and a broad commitment to turning the page on America's ugly past.

Are we now doomed to return to deep racial divisiveness, fanned by partisan expediency and the insularity of some who advocate for equity?

Not if we commit to being in relationship with people outside our communities and to finding language and policies that embrace people across our differences. The "I Have a Dream" speech by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. applauded the "marvelous new

militancy” of African-Americans while also counseling against “distrusting all white people,” because many have “come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny.”

Promising opportunities to realize a shared destiny are sprouting up in Minnesota. Mayors, businesses and civic leaders in southern parts of the state reversed the declining population and economic health of their towns by welcoming people of color from all over the world to fill job openings and remake their communities.

Last year in Marshall, I listened intently as a business owner explained that he’d come to understand that keeping his Somali workers meant rooting out discrimination — and going a step further to “see my business and town through their eyes.”

That success in our southern towns is now attracting the interest of other parts of Minnesota. A rural expert projects that “more diversity is also coming to northern Minnesota to fill job openings” and that at first “residents in these communities may not like it.”

We need language that calms this anxiety and projects an optimistic picture of renewal that will benefit the new as well as the longstanding residents.

Affordable housing in the metro area will require billions of dollars, and the Metropolitan Council states the obvious — local governments can’t afford it. (Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey struggled to come up with \$50 million.) Up steps Wells Fargo’s \$1 billion pledge for additional affordable housing. Embracing the search for shared destiny welcomes public/private alliances as a building block.

Gov. Tim Walz ran on creating “One Minnesota” and won the 2018 election. But the challenge remains. We need to find a language of fellowship, to build alliances and welcome creative policy that will anchor Minnesota’s future in our shared destiny: greater opportunities and fairness in the days to come.

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