

For a Nation of Suburbanites, Cars Are a Political Issue

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By Richard Minter

FOR THE FIRST TIME in American history, nearly half of the population lives in suburbs, and that simple fact is changing the nation's political priorities. If you live in a major city, your concerns are no longer at the top of the heap.

While the number of Americans living in cities stayed a flat 31 percent from 1975 to 1995, the number residing in suburbs grew from 37 percent in 1975 to 47 percent in 1995, according to U.S. Census Bureau reports.

"We expect the trend toward the suburbs to continue for the foreseeable future," says David Crowe, a vice president at the National Association of Home Builders.

Meanwhile, cities are losing their political clout.

The unprecedented population shift to the suburbs is only one factor. Urban residents, especially in New York, disproportionately tend to be members of minority groups and recent immigrants. These are groups that typically give less money to political campaigns on a per-capita basis and vote less on a percentage basis than their suburban counterparts.

Also, business owners and managers, a key building block of any political power base, are moving to the suburbs. Even Fortune 500 companies are now moving their headquarters to the suburbs, an unthinkable development only two decades ago.

If the suburbs are beginning to set the nation's political agenda, what can we expect to change? Some public-policy shifts are obvious.

Support for mass-transit subsidies and public-housing construction will probably wither.

Congress and the president will pay increasing attention to the issues that suburbanites say they care most about: improving education, curbing crime, and trimming taxes.

The suburban voter also has some surprises for the urban political observer. Perhaps the biggest surprise is the new political potency of cars.

Why? To be a suburbanite is to be almost always on the road, traveling to work, school, supermarkets and soccer games. Americans drove more than 2.4 billion miles in 1995, up from 1.5 billion miles in 1980, according to the American Automobile Manufacturers Association. Suburban life isn't really possible without a car. The sheer number of destinations in the average suburbanites day makes any other form of transportation unthinkable. Small wonder that nearly every adult member of the average suburban household either owns a car or wants to.

More than 19 million suburban households have two or more cars.

"There are more cars than there are drivers in the suburbs," says Alan Pisarski, a Department of Transportation consultant and author of "Commuting in America: The 2nd National Report."

The symbolic value of cars shouldn't be underestimated. Cars make you independent, as any teenager with a newly minted license can tell you.

Raising the cost of independence isn't popular in late 20th-century America.

The political power of the suburbs, and the suburbanite love of cars, has already been seen in last month's gubernatorial races in Virginia and New Jersey, two of the nation's most suburbanized states. Virginia's Gov.-elect Jim Gilmore called for ending the car tax, an unpopular twice-yearly levy on the value of one's car, and overwhelmingly defeated his Democratic opponent.

At state Democratic headquarters, there was little doubt about the cause of the historic Republican victory. "Gov.-elect Gilmore's task clearly is to eliminate the car tax. That's what this election was about," Democratic party spokeswoman Sue Wrenn told somber campaign workers on election night. (Gilmore's other theme was that suburban staple: education.) Meanwhile, in New Jersey, Governor Whitman eked out a narrow 1 percent victory against a challenger, state Sen. Jim McGreevey, who promised to trim the cost of the nation's most expensive auto insurance.

Gilmore's victory "will be the model for races around this country in 1998," predicts Jim Nicholson, chairman of the Republican National Committee.

Political strategists are meeting all over Washington to figure out how to apply the Gilmore model to the 1998 House and Senate races.

One idea being debated is ending the federal 19-cent per gallon tax on gasoline, which funds pork-barrel highway "demonstration" projects in a handful of districts and subsidizes mass transit. Most of the federal gas-tax revenue ends up in the Federal Highway Trust Fund, where it goes unspent. (The states separately tax fuel to fund highway construction and maintenance.) Slashing federal gas taxes would push fuel prices below a dollar per gallon in most states without affecting the quality of our nation's roads.

Like it or not, the suburban voter is now the driver's seat. To an increasingly suburbanized electorate, stopping the federal gasoline tax might be just the ticket to victory in the 1998 congressional races.

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