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SUBURBAN GATES SWING OPEN TO D.C.

By LAWRENCE C. LEVY

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If John McCain and Barack Obama want to see the sort of places that will seal their fates Nov. 4, they should arrive at Hofstra University today a little earlier than scheduled. And instead of using the time to memorize one more slashing sound bite, they should visit the 10th and top floor of Hofstra's main library, before hundreds of students show up to watch on big screen televisions the final presidential debate.

If it's a clear day, the nearly 360-degree view would allow the nation's next leader to see the new center of American life, the suburbs.

To the west, Obama and McCain would take in the office towers of the nation's largest city, New York, and much nearer, the lower rise buildings of its persistently poorest suburbs, the nearly all minority Hempstead Village.

To the south, the candidates would catch the sun sparkling off the Great South Bay, whose waters are often closed to shell-fishing and sometimes to swimming because of pollution.

To the east, they would see the water tower of iconic Levittown, the first of the post-World War II housing developments to be mass-produced from potato fields.

To the north, they would glimpse vestiges of the old Long Island -- the still thickly-wooded Gold Coast -- but with "McMansions" far outnumbering the fabled estates -- and with the pockets of poverty almost hidden beneath the colorful autumn canopy.

This is not my mother and father's suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s. So dynamic is the demographic change, the so swift are the social, political and economic shifts, that it's not even my children's suburbs of the 1980s and 1990s.

Although still among the wealthiest counties, suburbs are struggling with more and more urban-like problems. More than half the population, including a majority of its poor, now live there. But the federal government has failed miserably to help suburbs, as well as their central cities -- despite how much these metropolitan areas remain the nation's economic engines.

That's why if I could plant one question on the debate moderator's cue cards, one that otherwise would never be asked, it would be this:

"What would you do to strengthen the nation's metropolitan areas, especially its suburbs -- like the one where we are gathered -- that are growing older, poorer, more congested and polluted but less able to deal with their problems on their own?"

I certainly wouldn't be surprised if the candidates didn't have a clue to the enormous challenges of the changing suburbs. It's not their natural turf. And neither of them has said much about boosting the cities and their suburbs, the key -- as Brookings Institution research demonstrates -- to the nation's ability to compete globally.

But the "swing" suburbs have determined which party controls the White House for the past five presidential elections and, based on polls and other indicators, they're almost certain to do so this year.

So if McCain is to make a comeback, it will have to start and end in the suburbs, where a recent Hofstra National Suburban Poll showed he maintains a slight lead. If Obama is to win a transformational election, bringing red and purple states together into a Democratic landslide, he will do it in the suburbs of a half dozen or more states -- Ohio, Florida, Colorado, Nevada, Virginia, Missouri and even barely metro Iowa -- that George W. Bush won four years ago.

The winner will be the man who connects with suburbanites on an economy that has left them reeling in ways I've never seen in 35 years of writing about the suburbs. No longer insulated from economic stress, no longer fitting the sitcom stereotype of prosperous, pleasant places, they have suffered proportionally more home foreclosures than their city or rural counterparts and saw the equity in their homes -- most suburban families' biggest investment -- drop dramatically.

The Suburban Poll found that nearly 40 percent are "living paycheck to paycheck," that 50 percent know someone or have themselves recently lost a job, and 60 percent have seen their house values decline and have changed driving habits or cut back on other expenses to meet the rising cost of gasoline.

My only hope is that these numbers, and the pain behind them, are so stunning that they will prompt more profound changes in suburban living.

I'd like to believe that, even in some of the nation's most segregated communities, race will be less of a factor for voters than which candidate can best lead them out of the economic mess.

What a change it would be to hear the candidates talk in a sober, sophisticated way about the challenges of suburbia, particularly about what needs to happen in Washington so the federal government can help communities help themselves.

What a waste if Hofstra's basketball arena simply reverberates with partisan recriminations and ideological platitudes. What better place to reach suburban voters -- on a campus in the heart of America's oldest suburb, in a room filled with people who are experiencing, firsthand, the pain of sudden and dramatic change.

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HOFSTRA POLL:

A Hofstra University poll in late September looked at attitudes and life experiences among suburban residents, compared with those living in urban and rural areas. Here are some the results.

Are you satisfied with how the country is going?

Suburbs: 18 percent satisfied, 77 percent dissatisfied.

Urban and rural: 18 percent satisfied, 77 dissatisfied.

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Views on the Iraq war:

Suburbs: 48 percent say keep troops in Iraq, 49 percent say bring them home.

Urban and rural: 39 percent say keep troops in Iraq, 55 percent say bring them home.

Favor or oppose oil and gas drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska?

Suburbs: 61 percent favor, 30 percent oppose.

Urban and rural: 53 percent favor, 35 percent oppose.

Favor or oppose national health insurance, even if it means higher taxes:

Suburbs: 60 percent favor, 35 percent oppose.

Urban and rural: 61 percent favor, 33 percent oppose.

Have housing prices where you live gone up or down?

Suburbs: 15 percent say gone up a lot, 14 percent say gone up a little; 29 percent say gone down a little, 28 percent say gone down a lot.

Urban and rural: 22 percent say gone up a lot, 14 percent say gone up a little, 26 percent say gone down a little, 20 percent say gone down a lot.

Attitudes toward candidates:

Suburbs: 56 percent can identify with John McCain's background and values, 37 percent can't. 47 percent can identify with Sarah Palin's background and values, 37 percent can't. 47 can identify with Barack Obama's background and values, 45 percent can't. 35 percent can identify with Joe Biden's background and values, 41 percent can't.

Urban and rural: 46 percent can identify with John McCain's background and values, 45 percent can't. 42 percent can identify with Sarah Palin's background and values, 43 percent can't. 53 percent can identify with Barack Obama's background and values, 40 percent can't. 39 percent can identify with Joe Biden's background and values, 39 percent can't.

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