

## **The New Suburban Swingers: How America's Most Contested Suburban Counties Could Decide the Next President**

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### **Introduction**

The upcoming presidential election represents a lot of firsts in electoral history: the first African American presidential candidate, the oldest presidential candidate, and the first female Republican vice presidential candidate, to name a few milestones. But the election will be a first in another important way: This election, more than any other, will be decided by suburban voters in the swing states.

Unlike earlier elections, where cities were strongholds of Democratic voters and suburbs were considered to be Republican territory; recent elections have shown a different pattern. While cities remain staunchly blue, suburbs are now contested territory—a change that most likely reflects the growing racial and income diversity of the suburbs. And because the next presidential election will be decided in a few key swing states, the most important counties in the country are the suburban counties in those states.

This brief analyzes presidential, gubernatorial, and Senate elections since 2000 and identifies the 94 most politically contested counties in the country. We also profile the current landscape of counties within three of the most contested swing states.

### The new suburban battleground

The American suburbs have grown remarkably large and complex in the last several decades. No longer are they mostly white, middle-class bedroom communities, even though this imagery of suburbia persists. In fact, many suburbs have greater racial and age diversity than their core cities. Misconceptions about suburbia carry over into politics. The simple split between Democratic-dominated cities and Republican-dominated suburbs no longer easily applies.

To understand just how far the old urban/suburban political dichotomy has eroded consider the case of Marin County, California. Marin is a suburban county north of San Francisco that is famous for a New-Age liberalism that is often derided by Republicans as not part of the “real America.” Yet as recently as 1976, the county voted heavily in favor of Republican Gerald Ford for president. Interestingly, Marin was already becoming known for being the nation’s center for New Age culture as was depicted in Cyra McFadden’s 1977 novel *The Serial: A Year in the Life of Marin County*. Despite its shift in lifestyle, Marin still voted similarly to Orange County, its famously conservative suburban twin in Southern California.

To examine how the changing nature of suburbia is impacting national elections, we developed a metropolitan classification system that describes the 416 counties in the nation’s 50 metropolitan areas with populations of at least 1 million in 2006. The typology, which identifies counties on a continuum of urban to exurban land

uses, relies on Census Bureau data regarding commuting patterns, land use, and growth.

There are five types of metropolitan counties: core, inner suburb, mature suburb, emerging suburb, and exurb. *Core counties* are densely populated central cities. *Inner Suburbs* are close-in suburbs that are densely built (90 percent of residents live in an urban area) and at least half of workers commute in to the central city. *Mature Suburbs* are dense (75 percent of residents live in an urban area), well-established counties whose populations are no longer booming. In *Emerging Suburbs*, at least 25 percent of the population lives in an urban area, and at least 5 percent commute back in to the central area. Most of their growth has occurred recently. In *Exurban Counties*, large-scale suburbanization is just beginning to take hold and they are most distant from the center.

Several patterns are evident in the results of the four national elections between 2000 and 2006. It appears that mature-suburban counties are closely contested places. Democrats won these places in all four elections—but just barely in two cases. Most mature-suburban counties were almost equally divided between the two parties. Inner-suburban counties, by contrast, appear more solid for Democrats. The party came close to losing these counties only once: in 2002. Emerging-suburban and exurban counties clearly remain in the Republican camp. Democrats failed to win these counties in any national elections since 2000. But Republicans cannot afford to let Democrats gain ground in these areas as they did in 2006. The nation’s biggest

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metropolitan areas are outpacing the nation in population growth. If Republicans do not remain at least competitive here (the GOP lost this vote in all four elections studied—but nearly tied once), they will have to make up for the losses in other places if they are to remain viable.

The recent congressional and presidential elections point to a new suburban politics, which reflects a changing metropolitan structure. It is likely that new density-based political strategies will factor into the 2008 presidential race. The metropolitan political battle line is not between city and suburbs but instead lies in the transition area between mature-suburban and emerging suburban counties. The Republicans count on strongly winning rural areas and then sweeping much of suburbia. The Democrats start at the core and work outward. The two armies meet in the middle—in suburbia.

### **How we identified the most contested political terrain: the nexus of swing states and swing counties**

If the most contested parts of metropolitan America are its suburban counties, then the most contested counties in the nation are those suburban counties in swing states. To identify which counties were the most important swing counties in the country, we developed two-pronged approach. To be included on the list of the top-contested counties in the country, a county had to be in a state identified through polling a swing state. It also had to be a county in one of the largest 50 metropolitan areas *and* have at least one of the following characteristics:

- Had a less than 10 percent margin in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections
- Switched from voting Democrat in 2000 to voting Republican in 2004, or vice versa
- Had a less than 10 percent margin in the 2006 senate or gubernatorial races

Based on polling, the list of contested states (that also include one of the country's large metropolitan areas) includes the following: Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin. In addition, we identified the most contested county in each of these states, based on average election margins. (Note that some important swing states, such as Iowa, are not included in this list because they do not contain a major metropolitan area.)

### **Where are the top swing counties in the country?**

Based on our criteria, there are 94 swing counties in the country. The majority of the swing counties on the list are suburban—out of the list of nearly 100, only two core counties are swing counties (see Figure 1). Likewise, the inner suburbs, which are the closest cousins to core counties, only had five representatives on the swing county list. The largest group of swing counties is the emerging suburbs, who account for 42 of the 94 swing counties (45 percent). While in the U.S. as a whole, mature suburban counties are often the most contested places, it appears that in swing states this role is most often played by emerging suburbs

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**Figure 1. The Swing Counties by Metropolitan Type**

Metropolitan Type	Number of Counties	Metro Type Share of Swing Counties
Core	2	2%
Inner Suburb	5	5%
Mature Suburb	15	16%
Emerging Suburb	42	45%
Exurb	30	32%
<b>Total</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>100%</b>

The majority of swing counties are located in Midwestern metropolitan areas (52 percent of them), but every region of the country has representation on the swing county list. The South has 24 percent of the swing counties, the West has 13 percent, and the East has 11 percent.

Based on the swing index, the most contested counties are the suburbs of metropolitan areas such as Cincinnati, Detroit, Kansas City, Portland, OR, Richmond, VA, St. Louis, and Washington, DC. Nearly all of the top swing counties are suburban with the exceptions being Columbia County, OR and Caroline County, VA. Half of the top 12 counties are classified as Emerging Suburbs, which as mentioned before, where we found the greatest number of swing counties (see Figure 2). Figure 3 shows the top swing counties in each of the selected states.

### Views from Swing Counties

Lawrence has travelled to many of the swing counties in the weeks leading up to the election and offers the following observations.

### *Hamilton County, Ohio (Inner Suburb)*

Ohio remains the state that most analysts believe will again, as it did in 2004, decide the election. And if it does, suburban areas in Hamilton County are likely to hold the key for the winner. It is McCain's to lose and that's just what area Democrats believe will happen – demographic changes helping to turn it “blue” for the first time since Lyndon Johnson won in 1964. The changes have affected not only presidential but congressional politics. The 28<sup>th</sup> CD, which was drawn for a Republican, is up for grabs. Richard Nixon won 65 percent of the Hamilton vote in 1972 while George W. Bush just 52 percent in 2004 – reflecting his margin statewide. Meanwhile, gubernatorial candidate Ken Blackwell nearly lost his home county in the 2006. As more white, prosperous voters continue to move from Cincinnati's inner ring suburbs, the three exurban counties beyond have become even more important to the GOP. The party's strategy is to hold Obama as close as possible in counties like Hamilton, appealing to blue collar white voters, then running up large margins in the exurbs with the very voters – or their children – who moved farther out to still Republican enclaves.

### *Arapahoe County, Colorado (Mature Suburb)*

Although many suburbs around the country migrated from Republican to Democratic or toss-up years ago, Arapahoe and surrounding counties in the volatile 7<sup>th</sup> CD are relatively new swingers. The same can be said for the state, which is now considered competitive in large part due to the shift in suburban Denver. Almost immediately after the successful Democratic convention and

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**Figure 2. Swing Counties with Most Contested Races 2000-2006**

County	State	Metro Area	MI code	Average election margins (%)
Clackamas	OR	Portland-Vancouver-Beaverton, OR-WA MSA	Emerging Suburb	1.80
Caroline	VA	Richmond, VA MSA	Exurb	3.02
Suffolk	VA	Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News, VA-NC MSA	Emerging Suburb	3.31
Jefferson	MO	St. Louis, MO-IL MSA	Mature Suburb	4.19
Columbia	OR	Portland-Vancouver-Beaverton, OR-WA MSA	Exurb	4.60
Oakland	MI	Detroit-Warren-Livonia, MI MSA	Mature Suburb	4.86
Hamilton	OH	Cincinnati-Middletown, OH-KY-IN MSA	Inner Suburb	4.89
Clay	MO	Kansas City, MO-KS MSA	Emerging Suburb	5.24
St. Clair	MI	Detroit-Warren-Livonia, MI MSA	Emerging Suburb	5.31
Macomb	MI	Detroit-Warren-Livonia, MI MSA	Mature Suburb	5.36
Washington	OR	Portland-Vancouver-Beaverton, OR-WA MSA	Emerging Suburb	5.54
Prince William	VA	Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV MSA	Emerging Suburb	5.63

**Figure 3. Most Contested County in Each Swing State by Metropolitan Type**

State	County	Metro area	Metro type
Colorado	Arapahoe	Denver	Mature Suburb
Florida	Orange	Orlando	Mature Suburb
Michigan	Oakland	Detroit	Mature Suburb
Minnesota	Anoka	Minneapolis-St. Paul	Emerging Suburb
Missouri	Jefferson	St. Louis	Mature Suburb
Nevada	Clark	Las Vegas	Emerging Suburb
New Hampshire	Rockingham	Boston	Emerging Suburb
Ohio	Hamilton	Cincinnati	Inner Suburb
Oregon	Clackamas	Portland	Emerging Suburb
Pennsylvania	Westmoreland	Pittsburgh	Emerging Suburb
Virginia	Caroline	Richmond	Exurb
Wisconsin	St. Croix	Minneapolis-St. Paul	Exurb

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Obama's open-air speech before 80,000 – many of whom were said to have traveled from the suburbs – candidates of both campaigns made visits to the suburbs. Obama spent two days in the suburbs, Palin one. Both came to Golden; famous as the home of Coors beer, this fast growing suburb became a crossroad for presidential politics. The region will be influenced by heavy advertising on Denver stations, but Republican and Democratic operative say they plan to fight door to door in the suburbs. The McCain phone bank in Arapahoe County has set a goal of 7,500 personal contacts a day. Those provide information for one-on-one meetings. One GOP operative told a local TV station, "People start tuning out the TV ads, the radio spots the auto dial phone calls. What really breaks through is when a voter talks to a neighbor." Not to be outdone, Democratic Party Chair Pat Waak boasted about a volunteer in Grand Junction contacted 1,000 homes by himself in one weekend. Both campaigns are going after unaffiliated voters, who slightly outnumber registered Republicans and Democrats.

### *Anoka County, Minnesota (Emerging Suburb)*

Two weeks after McCain and Palin left the St. Paul convention with a resurgent campaign, they returned to Minnesota and held a rally at Anoka County Airport – the center of the GOP's effort to win the state for the first time since 1972. It was his fourth trip to Minnesota since June. If McCain is to win the state, according to recent polls, he must win in a once solidly Republican county that has become more competitive with increasing suburbanization. The lingering enthusiasm over the convention – and perhaps curiosity about Palin – contributed to a crowd of 13,000 that spilled out of a large hangar and waved red, white and blue pompoms for hours. Polls

show that McCain is running most strongly among women who live in the suburbs. And it was this poll finding that likely inspired the rally's location in Anoka County, a moderate income suburb that has swung in recent elections between the major parties and sometimes in favor of third-party hopefuls. The GOP was rewarded with a large turnout of young women with children. The GOP is certainly putting their money with their hopes are: McCain spent \$472,000 on Minnesota TV ads from Sept. 6 to 13 compared with \$18,000 by Obama. That's on top of the priceless free local publicity McCain and the Republicans reaped from the national convention.

### **Keep Your Eye on the Suburbs**

We suspect that the voting behavior of the swing counties mentioned in this note will be good predictors of the presidential election outcome. Among other issues, the current economic crunch is having a profound impact on suburban home values and foreclosure rates, as well as high energy costs for transportation and home heating. The financial well-being of the suburban voting block, especially the independent minded voters there, will tip the scale one direction or another on November 4<sup>th</sup>.

After the election, we will rerun this data to see what the verdict was in the swing counties. We will follow up then with a fuller census note assessing the state of play in these critical places by including the 2008 data.