

Real America Versus Senate America

By Paul Krugman

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Some of us are more equal than others, and they like Trump.



A person voting in Medina, N.D. Hilary Swift for The New York Times

Everyone is delivering post-mortems on Tuesday's elections, so for what it's worth, here's mine: Despite some bitter disappointments and lost ground in the Senate, Democrats won a huge victory. They broke the Republican monopoly on federal power, and that's a very big deal for an administration that has engaged in blatant corruption and abuse of power, in the belief that an impenetrable red wall would always protect it from accountability. They also made major gains at the state level, which will have a big impact on future elections.

But given this overall success, how do we explain those Senate losses? Many people have pointed out that this year's Senate map was unusually bad for Democrats, consisting disproportionately of states Donald Trump won in 2016. But there was actually a deeper problem, one that will pose long-term problems, not just for Democrats, but for the legitimacy of our whole political system. For economic and demographic trends have interacted with political change to make the Senate deeply unrepresentative of American reality.

How is America changing? Immigration and our growing racial and cultural diversity are only part of the story. We're also witnessing a transformation in the [geography of our economy](#), as dynamic industries increasingly gravitate to big metropolitan areas where there are already large numbers of highly educated workers. It's not an accident that Amazon is planning to put its [two new headquarters](#) in New York and the Washington D.C. metropolitan area, both places with an existing deep pool of talent.

Obviously not everyone lives — or wants to live — in these growth centers of the new economy. But we are increasingly a nation of urbanites and suburbanites. Almost [60 percent of us](#) live in metropolitan areas with more than a million people, more than 70 percent in areas with more than 500,000 residents. Conservative politicians may extol the virtues of a “real America” of rural areas and small towns, but the real real America in which we live, while it contains small towns, is mostly metropolitan.

But here's the thing: The Senate, which gives each state the same number of seats regardless of population — which gives fewer than 600,000 people in Wyoming the same representation as almost 40 million in California — drastically overweights those rural areas and underweights the places where most Americans live.

I find it helpful to contrast the real America, the place we actually live, with what I think of as “Senate America,” the hypothetical nation implied by a simple average across states, which is what the Senate in effect represents.

As I said, real America is mainly metropolitan; Senate America is still largely rural.

Real America is racially and culturally diverse; Senate America is still very white.

Real America includes large numbers of highly educated adults; Senate America, which underweights the dynamic metropolitan areas that attract highly educated workers, has a higher proportion of non-college people, and especially non-college whites.

None of this is meant to denigrate rural, non-college, white voters. We're all Americans, and we all deserve an equal voice in shaping our national destiny. But as it is, some of us are more equal than others. And that poses a big problem in an era of deep partisan division.

Not to put too fine a point on it: What Donald Trump and his party are selling increasingly boils down to white nationalism — hatred and fear of darker people, with a hefty dose of anti-intellectualism plus anti-Semitism, which is always part of that cocktail. This message repels a majority of Americans. That's why Tuesday's election in the House — which despite gerrymandering and other factors is far more representative of the country as a whole than the Senate — produced a [major Democratic wave](#).

But the message does resonate with a minority of Americans. These Americans are, of course, white, and are more likely than not to reside outside big, racially diverse metropolitan areas — because racial animosity and fear of immigration always seem to be strongest in places where there are few nonwhites and hardly any immigrants. And these are precisely the places that have a disproportionate role in choosing senators.

So what happened Tuesday, with Republicans getting shellacked in the House but gaining in the Senate, wasn't just an accident of this year's map or specific campaign issues. It reflected a deep division in culture, indeed values, between the American citizenry at large and the people who get to choose much of the Senate.

This divergence will have profound implications, because the Senate has a lot of power, especially when the president — who, let us not forget, lost the popular vote — leads the party that controls it. In particular, Trump and his Senate friends will spend the next couple of years stuffing the courts with right-wing loyalists.

We may, then, be looking at a growing crisis of legitimacy for the U.S. political system — even if we get through the constitutional crisis that seems to be looming over the next few months.

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