

Suburbia Seen As Key to Presidential Hopes

3/23/2016 6:40:00 AM, Dan McCue (/CNSNEWS/Search?Author=Dan%20McCue&doSearch=1)



(CN) - Forget all the talk about contentious brokered conventions and political rallies that devolve into outright brawls, when it comes to what's really going to decide the 2016 presidential election, there's no question it's going to come down to the nation's suburbs.

At least the contention of Lawrence Levy, executive dean of the National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University, and the longtime columnist on state and local politics for Newsday, a tabloid serving New York's Nassau, Suffolk and Queens counties.

"Every election has its controversies and uncertainties, but in the end -- for at least a generation -- it's been moderate 'swing suburbanites' who have decided who the next president of the United States may be," Levy told Courthouse News.

The problem, as the dean sees it, is that the way the primaries and caucuses are arranged, the suburbs and suburban issues get short-shrift until several contests have been decided.

And by that time, many candidates who might have been expected to do well in the suburbs have been knocked out of the race.

Levy contends the primary season and the general election are two vastly different animals, and very little occurs -- especially in the early primaries and caucuses -- that reflects the will of the voters "who are going to decide this thing in November."

As proof of his position, he pointed to earliest contested states: Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina.

"Iowa does have some suburbs around Des Moines, but they're not very big, and New Hampshire, if you look at the 1st Congressional District, has some suburban areas outside of Manchester, but these are not decisive areas in these states because they represent a very small portion of the overall population," Levy said.

"The same is true of South Carolina. There are suburban areas immediately outside of Charleston, but their influence is muted," he continued. "In primaries, for the Democrats, the decisive factor is typically the black vote in the central cities or deep rural areas ... and for the Republicans, it's white working-class voters -- and they are all over the place."

Indeed, Levy said, the first place suburbs play a meaningful role in the primary process is in Nevada, where prior to the housing market collapse, North Las Vegas was the fastest growing suburban community in the country.

But here's where analysis gets tricky. The way the contests are currently aligned, the balloting in Nevada and South

Carolina occurred at roughly the same time (The Democratic and Republican parties held votes in each state on separate days over a two-week period), and in terms of attention from the candidates, the Palmetto State dwarfed the Sagebrush State.

The reason is South Carolina was seen a bellwether for both sides. For Hillary Clinton it was the state to build her support in the black community, a strategy that eventually enabled her to win every state in the Southeast while almost uniformly garnering 80 percent of the black vote.

For the Republicans, South Carolina represented an opportunity to burnish their conservative, pro-military bona fides.

Of all the candidates -- and at the time, remember, there were eight in all, six Republicans and two Democrats -- the two that paid the most attention to Nevada were Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who essentially ceded South Carolina to Clinton, and Donald Trump, who enjoyed a big lead in South Carolina, and could afford to court voters in Las Vegas and Reno.

And neither was focused particularly on making their case to Levy's "suburban swing voters."

"So what you got in the early stages of the president race was some broad talk about national issues -- immigration, trade, bringing jobs back to the United States -- but not in a way that would resonate with the millions of moderate suburbanite that are out there," he said.

"Worse, by the time the races start to move on to where the suburbs are more influential -- something we'll see, particularly, in April, when New York and Connecticut and Rhode Island and Pennsylvania vote -- a lot of candidates are just blown away.

"That's a frustrating thing for people who consider the metro areas and their surrounding suburbs to be the economic engines of the country," Levy said. "Basically, by the time the suburbs get to have their say in the primaries, the early contests have eliminated candidates who might have done better if they'd only gotten to contest the bigger and more urban states."

The dean was asked what candidates he was referring to; among those who had already bowed out as he offered his assessment were former New York Gov. George Pataki and current New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, both of whom are well known in the Northeast.

"When he comes to Pataki, he just didn't have enough name recognition to resonate with voters in the rest of the country, but on paper, he should have played much better," Levy said. "After all, here was man who smoked the great liberal lion, former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo, at a time when Cuomo not only was considered invincible, but was also widely discussed as a possible Democratic presidential candidate."

Prior to challenging Cuomo, George Pataki had served as the popular two-term mayor of tiny Peekskill, N.Y., and won decisive victories in races for seats in the New York State Assembly and the state Senate.

Considered a decided underdog in his 1994 race against an incumbent, three-term governor, Pataki made up a double-digit deficit in the polls and narrowly defeated Cuomo by winning handily in the suburbs.

Pataki was re-elected governor in 1998 and 2002, and inevitably began to test the waters for a presidential run while still in office. Levy was among the reporters who accompanied Pataki on an early visit to New Hampshire.

"What I remember most about that period is Pataki would get up in front of a group in New Hampshire, and you could tell they weren't 100 percent sure who he was or why they wanted to listen to him," Levy said.

"He would start by introducing himself, saying 'I'm the governor of New York and I got there by beating Mario Cuomo in a Democratic state.' All of sudden, people in the room were interested, and they would start leaning forward



to better hear what he had to say," Levy recalled.

"Then he'd say, 'And we did other things they said couldn't be done ... we lowered the income tax rate by 25 percent' -- and the audience would lean forward a little more -- Then he'd say, "And we restored the death penalty."

"And now they're saying, 'Holy Cow.' But in 2016, he just didn't have enough charisma or whatever you want to call that intangible -- that would enable him to break out of the pack," Levy said.

"As for Christie, and before that, in 2012, former New York City Mayor [Rudolph] Guiliani ... both of them seemed, at first, to have exactly the kind of personality and positions that would strong appeal to swing suburban voters ... but neither of them caught on," he said. "They just couldn't get past the threshold."

In 2016, what's unfolded in the Republican race for the nomination is a contest between Donald Trump and "everyone else," the everyone winnowed to Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas and Ohio Gov. John Kasich.

Give all the name-calling and everything else that's manifested itself in this race, one could be forgiven for wondering whether some of the candidates are even in the same zip code of an issues-oriented discussion.

Levy, however, maintained that despair is somewhat misplaced.

"They are talking about issues," he said. "Now, it may not be what you or I care about ... but that doesn't mean issues are absent from the discussion. Trump tends to deal with them in very sketchy ways, but he definitely talks about issues. He talks about immigration and he talks about trade and about military engagement overseas. Now again, it's more in slogans than anything else, but the voters who support him don't seem to want anymore ... they don't seem to need anymore.

"What's interesting about Trump, and the same thing can be said about [Sen. Bernie] Sanders -- the two so-called 'revolutionary candidates' who have done surprisingly well -- is how relatively poorly they've performed in suburban communities," Levy said.

"If either or both go on to be the nominees they will have a heck of a lot of work to do. I mean, let's just look at Trump for a moment. Even in states that he has won, he has done relatively poorly in suburban communities," he said.

As an example, the dean pointed to Virginia, which Trump won with 34.7 percent of the vote, but where Sen. Marco Rubio was a respectable second, with 31.9 percent of the vote.

"Look at the decisive suburbs in the state, the Ones that will tell you who wins the state in November ... places like Fairfax and Loudoun and Prince William counties," he said. "Rubio beat Trump in those counties, 40 percent to 30 percent. And the same thing applies to Sanders.

"Sanders lost Chicago, and therefore Illinois, because Clinton creamed him in the suburban areas of Cook County and other, comparable communities," Levy said. "He lost by a little bit in Missouri because she killed him in the suburban areas of St. Louis County and Jackson County, which is a suburb of Kansas City."

"If Sanders had done a little better in those areas, he wins those two states," he said.

The proof, Levy says, is Sanders' surprise win in Michigan.

"Sanders beat Clinton in Michigan because she underperformed -- not just in Detroit, which people made a big deal about, but also in Oakland and Macomb counties, which are contiguous to Detroit. I think she actually won MaComb by a couple of points, but she should have won by a lot more, based on the numbers by which she had been winning."

"So you see, even in state's he wins, he does relatively poorly in the suburbs," he added.

Speaking from his office in the heart of suburbia, Nassau County, N.Y., talk inevitably turned to the upcoming New York primary, which will held on April 19.

"It's hard to imagine a scenario where Hillary Clinton does not win," Levy said. "But there are areas in the state that Sanders will do very well in, even if he doesn't take the entire state.

"In New York, as in many other states, delegates are apportioned by congressional districts, and ... well, this next thing I am going to say is semi-scientific, but I'm going to say it anyway," he continued. "If you looked at map of New York State that had its counties identified by voter registration, what you'd see is that there are some counties that are very Republican in an otherwise overwhelmingly blue state.

"Now, it's my contention that the Democrats who live in those Republican strongholds tend to be -- are usually -- very Democratic," he said. "For instance, you may have a big upstate county that's very Republican and the only Democrats are students and professors at the local university. Sanders can get the majority of those voters and thus pick up a congressional district here and there. I don't think that will be enough for him, but we'll see."

"The thing about Hillary Clinton in New York is she did very well here as a senator," Levy said. "She was very popular, and her margin of victory increased in her only bid for re-election."

As for how the Republicans will perform in New York State, Levy said it depends -- a lot -- on what happens between now and then.

"If Kasich can show some momentum, pick up a state here and there, plus a consistent second place elsewhere, there are a lot of Republican voters in New York who might see him as an alternative to Trump," he said. "That said, every poll that's I've seen shows Trump is doing very well here."

"And look, he's well-known in New York. He's a fixture. He's a local boy. He's a favorite son. And things would really have to head south for him for him to lose New York -- but they never do. At least so far.

"Here's the thing though: for Trump, it's not about merely winning states anymore. He's already established the perception that he is a winner, that he is a frontrunner ... right now it's a delegate game for him," Levy said.

"So the thing to really with Trump going forward, is the margin of victory in states where delegates are handed out proportionately and how many he walks away with," the dean continued. "Trump can win New York, but not come out with a significant net gain in delegates over his opponents. That's the danger for him as the convention grows nearer.

"Trump has got to perform at least at the level he performed at in the earlier states -- and win California, which I think is winner-take-all, to be able to go to the convention with a majority. Every delegate matters," Levy said.

Talk of Trump as New York's favorite son candidate in the Republican race leads to a discussion of what real New Yorkers think of the Republican establishment's desire to stop the candidate in his tracks.

"If you're talking about 'real' people, I don't know that I talk to enough of them to tell you what they think," Levy said, breaking into laughter. "A lot of my friends are very engaged in this, and they are probably on the edges of the establishment.

"That said, I do know that professional Republicans here in New York fear that having Trump on the ticket will cost them up and down the ballot, adversely impacting everything from congressional races to the state legislature, and even things like even-year local elections and local judgeships," he said.

"Think about that for a second. Here in New York, candidates for judgeships don't campaign like candidates for other elective offices. Their elections tend to reflect the prevailing winds," he said. People don't really know them.

"As a result, if the Republicans are rocking nationally and statewide and the brand is shiny, then Republican judicial candidates would expect to do well. If not, then Democrats will win, but they're at mercy of the top of the ticket, and right now, many of them are afraid."

So what are the dominant "suburban issues" in 2016?

"Pocketbook issues play big everywhere, but biggest in suburbs," Levy said. "The suburbs are where you have the highest level of homeownership. ... where you have the highest level of small business ownership. Because of this investment in the communities, people in the suburbs are willing to spend and tax themselves to death for things that effect the value of their homes and businesses - schools, roads, environmental health and great hospitals.

"The other thing you need to consider when looking at the suburbs is that a large proportion of those voters are baby boomers, another name for which is the 'sandwich generation,'" he said. "These are people who are not only worried about the value of their homes, which is usually their largest investment ... they are also worried about their children paying for college, about their children getting their first job and so forth, and they are worried about their parents, who are now octogenarians and nonagenarians, and who might face long-term care issues."

"What does this tell you about the suburban voter and what makes them unique?" Levy asked, clearly on a roll. "My feeling is that these are people, by and large, who don't hate government.

"They may be conservative, but they nevertheless see government as, at least, a necessary evil, and sometimes, as an active partner," he said. "Think about it. What entity in the country, or the world for that matter, is going to help them with these big ticket items that concern them? It's government."

According to Levy, the mistake the Republican establishment has made -- for a generation -- is that suburbanites are anti-tax and anti-government.

"Like I said, suburbanites tax themselves to death in voting for school budgets that will maintain the quality for their schools, which in turn maintain the value of their homes," he said. "What that tells you is forget the anti-government rhetoric ... suburbanites will support candidates, of either party, if they believe that person is in sync with their values and are delivering value."

"What's frustrating for the suburbs is the lack of attention they receive. And even more so, the lack of understanding -- from both major parties," Levy said. "There's a myth that the suburbs are all wealth and wellness, that "Leave It to Beaver" persists and that once you get out to the suburbs it's all homogeneously prosperous and problem free.

"The reality is the suburbs are feeling a lot of pain. There are enormous problems," he said. "All of the ground zeros of the subprime mortgage crises were in the suburbs.

"The great recession started with the collapse of the housing market," he continued.

"At the same time, you have all of this infrastructure that is, all of a sudden, crumbling. Remember, the original suburbs were all built immediately after World War II. They are 60 or more years old. And the reality today is that the sewers and the roads are crumbling. They need to be replaced," he continued.

"The problem is the suburbs, by their nature, are a fragmented landscape. They are a collection of little towns and villages that don't have the wherewithal to deal with problems of this magnitude. It's very hard to deal with big regional issues the way a city can if the mayor and the city council are in sync," he said.

"The other thing about suburbs is that a lot more than the state of the infrastructure has changed," the dean said. "There are now more poor people in the suburbs than there are in central cities. You have more new immigrants in the suburbs than in the central cities. And you have many of the problems of crime and poverty that people fled the cities to escape."

All of these are issues Levy believes the last candidates standing will have to pivot to once the conventions are over, and all roads lead to the 58th quadrennial presidential election on Tuesday, Nov. 8, 2016.

"The suburbs are full of smart people," he said. "You can't BS them. What that means is when the candidates talk about education, they have to realize that it's a different conversation than they are going to have with voters in the cities. They'll have to understand -- and act accordingly -- that when they talk about the environment; it's heard in a different way in the suburbs that it is elsewhere, and it needs to be addressed in a different way. You can't just get by with slogans."

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