

COMMENTARY

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VIRGINIA'S SUBURBS >> CHANGING HUE

Spotsy, Stafford: Next red counties to turn blue?

DURING 2008 and 2012, Virginia voters had the unusual experience of being a battleground state in presidential elections. From the almost-

COMMENT >>

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daily candidate visits to the barrage of television advertising, campaign emails, and fliers, presidential candidates cared what the voters of this state thought like never before.

Much of the candidate attention in both years focused on the Northern Virginia swing counties of Prince William and Loudoun. Now that the Democrats have won those counties two presidential elections in a row, expect the 2016 presidential campaigns to focus even more intensely on the Fredericksburg area.

Even as recently as the 2000 presidential election, Republicans could count on capturing more than 60 percent of the presidential vote in less suburbanized counties like Stafford and Spotsylvania. In these two jurisdictions, the two most populous counties in Washington's outer ring suburbs that favored Romney last month, Obama received about 45 percent and 43 percent, respectively. (Fredericksburg is both smaller and less Republican than its two neighboring counties. Even so, Obama's 62 percent vote share in the city was far

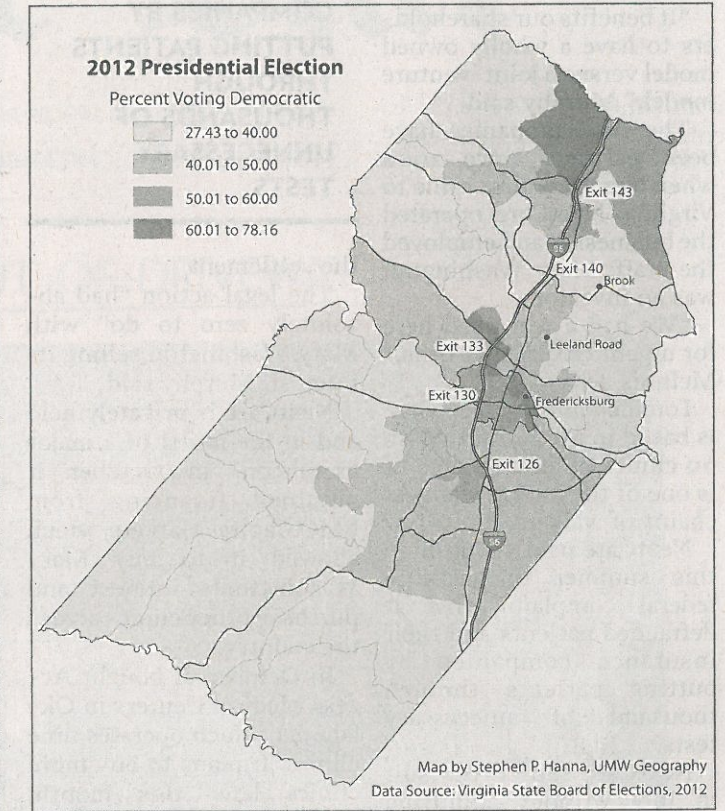
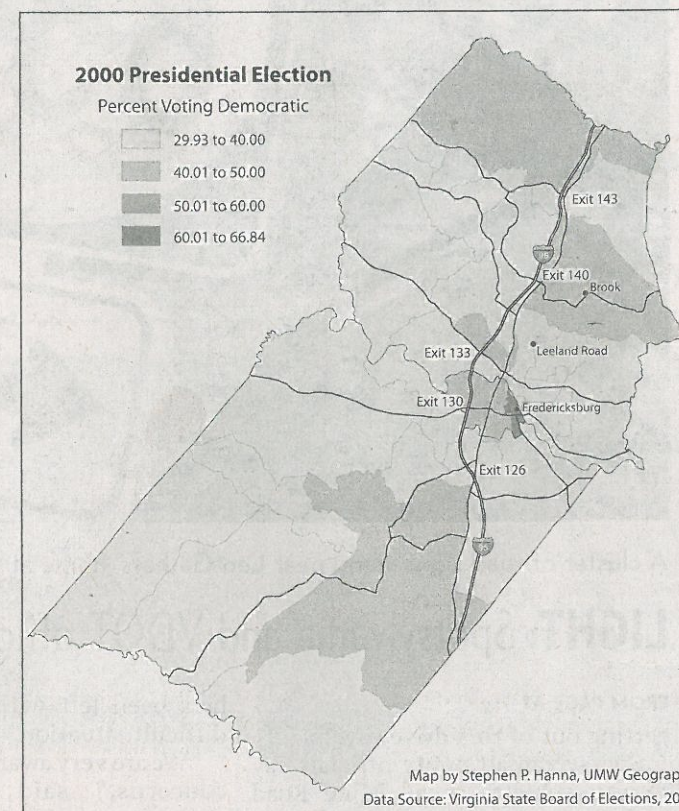
above Al Gore's narrow 50.3 percent citywide victory in 2000.)

Republican declines were registered in traditionally conservative suburbs across the state. In Chesterfield County outside Richmond, one of the state's most conservative large counties, Obama received 45 percent of the vote, more than 10 points above Gore's share in 2000. Virginia Beach also went for Romney, but Obama's 48 percent showing there was well above Gore's 41.6 percent.

The waves of suburban settlement that helped fuel the GOP's advantage during recent decades often involved voters buying new single-family homes on large tracts of land. These new suburban residents were generally conservative, just like their rural neighbors who had long called these growing counties home.

Republicans need large margins in outer-ring suburban counties, coupled with GOP victories in most rural communities, to overwhelm the heavily Democratic base in the commonwealth's largest cities and the jurisdictions closest to Washington. Republicans now face being swamped by the latest wave of suburban migration, which is making Stafford and Spotsylvania look more like Prince William every election cycle.

Compared to earlier waves of suburbanites, these newer transplants tend to be younger, more multicultural, and less conservative on



social issues. Many cannot afford—or at least tend not to want—large houses. Instead, many favor townhouses closer to the highways and mass transit. These new residents are, in short, the sorts of voters who turned once-Republican counties like Henrico, Albemarle, and Fairfax away from the GOP.

Mapping the 2000 and 2012 presidential election results by precinct demonstrates this trend. In 2000, Al Gore received minimal support outside Fredericksburg's Ward 4. Twelve years later, however, President Obama won clear majorities

in precincts clustered along Interstate 95 and within short drives of Virginia Rail-Express stops.

While conservatives may take comfort in the sizable acreage of Stafford and Spotsylvania that remain solidly Republican, these areas—like the reliably red rural counties and states on national maps—are not the fastest growing nor are they the most populous areas. The precincts with some of the greatest population increases—including those along Interstate 95, Garrisonville Road, and U.S. 17—are notably more Democratic

than they were a dozen years ago.

The aggressive Democratic get-out-the-vote efforts of recent years may explain some of these trends in our area. After all, the Democrats did not really focus on Virginia's electoral votes until four years ago. Republicans, though, also have scaled up their voter-contact operations in the state.

Stafford and Spotsylvania, like Virginia and the country as a whole, are not lands of permanent majorities. Both parties have shown themselves sufficiently flexible to win their share of elections

over the years. When the state's suburban winds blew to the right, the Democrats tried to respond. Now that the suburban winds are shifting, the Republicans may have to make their own course corrections to continue to compete for Virginia's highly prized 13 Electoral College votes—and to hang onto those narrowing majorities in Stafford and Spotsylvania.

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