In American Politics, Geography Is Destiny

by Mitchell Moss

John Kerry’s defeat in the Presidential election should not have come as a surprise. During the past 70 years, there have been only two Presidents elected from the Northeast or New England: Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 and John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1960. Since the Depression, Americans have consistently favored candidates from the South and West, regardless of political parties. In Presidential politics, political geography is destiny.

New York politicians, with their easy access to the media, consistently dream about their prospects for national office. In 1964, former Mayor Robert Wagner thought he might be the Vice Presidential nominee, a position that went to Hubert Humphrey. Former Mayor John Lindsay made an ill-fated run for the Democratic nomination in 1972. Former Queens Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro ran as Walter Mondale’s V.P. candidate in their failed 1984 bid. Mario Cuomo encouraged speculation about his Presidential plans when he almost filed papers to run in the 1992 New Hampshire primary. Even former Staten Island Congresswomen Susan Molinari, the keynote speaker at the 1996 Republican National Convention, thought she might be tapped for the Vice Presidential nomination. And current New York Governor George Pataki campaigned across the nation for George W. Bush, in part to gain exposure among Republican Party heavyweights.

Clearly there is no limit to the ambitions of New York politicians, and yet there is also no future for them in national office. The same can be said for politicians from Massachusetts. Not only has the nation’s population shifted to the South and West, the cultural values of the Northeast and New England are increasingly driven by a zest for secular over spiritual values, and commercialism over community, that the rest of the nation considers offensive and threatening.

With the exception of Herbert Hoover, every President from Rutherford Hayes to Roosevelt was from the Northeast or Ohio. In fact, Ohio was once the principal source of Presidential candidates, not just a decisive source of electoral votes. But in the past half-century, California and Texas have produced the most Presidential candidates: Nixon started out as a Congressman and Senator from California, before being selected as Dwight Eisenhower’s running mate in 1952. Nixon did move to New York after he lost his 1962 bid to be governor of California, but his political team was largely drawn from California (Robert Finch, Murray Chotiner, H.R. Haldeman), and he established a summer White House in San
Clemente, Calif. Texas Senator L.B.J. was chosen by John Kennedy to be his Vice Presidential nominee in 1960 in order to deliver Texas to the Democratic ticket; he went on to trounce Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater in 1964. Two-term California Governor Ronald Reagan won in 1980 and 1984, while George Herbert Walker Bush, the son of Connecticut Senator Prescott Bush, moved to Texas—where he failed in two bids for the Senate but won a House seat and established his business connections—before serving as Reagan’s Vice President and defeating Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis for the Presidency in 1988. His son, George Walker Bush, served as governor of Texas before defeating Al Gore in 2000.

Only two Democrats have won the Presidency since 1976: Jimmy Carter, a governor of Georgia, who defeated Gerald Ford, a Michigan Congressman who was appointed to the Vice Presidency after Spiro Agnew was forced to resign from office; and Bill Clinton, the governor of Arkansas, who in 1992 defeated the first President Bush (with Ross Perot taking almost 20 percent of the vote) and then won re-election in 1996, when he ran against Bob Dole, a Senator from Kansas.

What’s striking is that Americans have consistently rejected candidates from the Northeast, regardless of political party. Governor Tom Dewey of New York lost in 1944 and 1948; other notable Republicans, such as New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller and former Pennsylvania Governor Bill Scranton, sought but failed to get the Republican nomination. The only New Yorker to hold national office in recent decades was Rockefeller. His Presidential aspirations were consistently rejected by the Republican Party, but he was chosen by Ford to be his Vice President, then dumped from the ticket in favor of Bob Dole in the 1976 election.

In recent years, the only New Yorkers to be put on the Republican ticket were former Congressmen from the Buffalo–Western New York area: Bill Miller in 1964 and Jack Kemp in 1996. And Buffalo is culturally and economically tied more to the industrial Midwest than to the Northeast. The last Massachusetts politician to be nominated on a Republican ticket was Henry Cabot Lodge, who ran with Nixon in 1960.

Even the Democrats have realized that the Northeast and New England are poor incubators for Presidential candidates. Ed Muskie, Paul Tsongas, Ted Kennedy, Bill Bradley and, more recently, Howard Dean were all unable to compete successfully for the Democratic Presidential nomination. And the failure of Mike Dukakis in 1988 should have been a warning that success in Massachusetts politics does not transfer to the national level. John Kerry, like Mr. Dukakis, was too cerebral and too liberal, values that are compatible with Massachusetts but not with the rest of the nation.

Al Gore presented himself as a Southerner, but he didn’t even win his home state,
since he was correctly perceived as someone raised in Washington, D.C.’s Fairfax Hotel and educated at Harvard. Though elected to the House and Senate from Tennessee, Mr. Gore was more a product of Washington society than of the South.

The best decision that George Herbert Walker Bush ever made was to move to Texas. Though Mr. Bush’s father was a Wall Street investment banker who was subsequently elected to the U.S. Senate from Connecticut, his son moved to Texas, where he established the political and financial ties that have nurtured his own and his son’s careers.

Politicians learn how to communicate with voters early in their careers, when they discover what it takes to satisfy interest groups and what positions drive voters to the polls. A successful politician from the Northeast, regardless of party, faces intense pressures from groups supporting abortion, gay rights, gun control and minority rights.

Compare this with the Midwest or the South, where voters want to cut taxes, protect the right to bear arms and reduce the regulation of business.

It’s striking that so much attention is now being given to the Presidential aspirations of two New York politicians: former Mayor Rudy Giuliani and U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton. Mr. Giuliani, who brought crime down dramatically, was also a supporter of gay rights and pro-choice policies. Since Sept. 11, 2001, he has acquired a new political persona as "America’s Mayor" and as a leader in the fight against terrorism. Although Mr. Giuliani’s speech to the Republican National Convention was very well received, it is not clear whether his early positions will be acceptable to voters nationwide. And to succeed beyond New York, Senator Clinton will need to overcome conservative attempts to label her an ultra-liberal, despite her pro-military votes on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

New York is the nation’s financial and cultural capital, and Massachusetts is home to the nation’s leading colleges and universities, but these states are poor breeding grounds for nationally ambitious politicians. The values that are essential for success on the East Coast—intellect over faith, fashion over tradition and career over family—are precisely those that the nation’s voters reject.

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