



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on June 2, 2023

Why Democrats Dominate the Cities

While many who follow American politics take it as a given that the Democratic Party is the party of the cities, this is an assumption that neglects much of the nation's history. Rather than merely treating Democrats' control over major urban areas as a given, however, it behooves Republicans and the political Right in general to examine why Democrats have been able, over time, to so completely pull the cities into their column. This will open up the door for Republicans to develop strategies to break the now-infamous "blue wall" that gives Democrats such an edge in state and federal elections.



Luis Miguel

Back in 2019, Derek Thompson of *The Atlantic* wrote an [insightful article](#) titled "How Democrats Conquered the City." In his piece, Thompson explains that Democrats' modern virtual monopoly over city politics, no matter in what state, was a gradual process that took place because Democrats deliberately courted the urban vote to expand their voter base.

Recall that, originally, the Democratic Party, as it was created by the supporters of Andrew Jackson, was the party of southern and western farmers. By contrast, the faction that eventually became the Republican Party was the party of northern industrialists and merchants.

It's true that Democrats always held power in some cities. For instance, New York City's Tammany Hall political machine had been synonymous with Democratic politics since the 19th century. Nevertheless, it was not originally a given that Democrats were in power in major urban centers. As Thompson notes, Republican political machines held enormous influence in cities such as Philadelphia and Chicago.

Really, then, it was initially more of a local battle. Republicans might dominate in one city, while Democrats might rule in another.

But the catalyst that sparked the trend toward blue walls in the cities was the labor movement.

In reality, Republicans could just as well have captured the vote of workers and the alliance of the unions. However, because the Republican Party was closely tied to the interests of the bankers, the merchant class, and the big industrialists, they consequently took an adversarial role against organized labor.

Moreover, Democrats' synchronization with workers was more "natural" in the sense that the party was already — by being the party of the South and the populists — in a position of enmity with the industrialist and banking classes. Because southern farmers and northern workers had a common enemy, namely the captains of industry, the latter found something of a "natural home" in the Democratic Party. Democrats used this to their advantage.

Thompson notes that the presidential campaigns of Democrats Al Smith in 1928 and Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 were "inflection points" that reshaped the electorate. Both of those men were governors of New



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York. Smith, in particular, strongly identified with workers, being an Irish Catholic who came from a humble, working-class background himself. And while Roosevelt came from a wealthy family of political insiders, he leaned heavily into socialist policies in order to appeal to the working class.

The result was a powerful coalition that united southerners, farmers, western populists, and urban workers into what we now call the New Deal Coalition — a coalition so effective that it gave Democrats the presidency in seven out of nine elections (1932–1948, 1960, 1964) and control of both houses of Congress during all but four years from 1932–1980.

However, Democrats' newfound dedication to the urban working class ultimately caused the coalition to break up, as it found itself embracing black workers who moved from the South to northern cities. While partnership between urban black and white southerners held up for a time, it inevitably unraveled amid the Civil Rights movement.

As Thompson relates:

Miles away from New Deal negotiations in Washington, however, millions of black Americans were forcing the third inflection point as they moved from the rural South to cities, especially in the North and Midwest. During the Great Migration, from 1900 to 1960, the black percentage of the populations in South Carolina and Florida declined by more than 20 percent. In that same time period, the African American share of Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago rose from less than 2 percent in each city to more than 20 percent of the population.

Black voters pushed urban Democrats in these northern cities to protect their labor and voting interests.

By the early 1960s, the Democratic Party was an unstable coalition, balancing the support of black urban workers with that of southern segregationists from whom they had fled. With the Civil Rights Act, signed by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, Democrats effectively renounced their southern flank. Out of 20 southern Democratic senators, just one—Ralph Yarborough, of Texas—voted in favor of the bill. In 1968, Democrats won less than 10 percent of the once-dependable white southern vote while sweeping the urban manufacturing cores of the Northeast and the Midwest, from Worcester to Wichita.

Nixon and Republicans employed their famous “Southern Strategy” to scoop up the southern and rural voting blocs who felt they were getting left behind by the Democratic Party.

Since then, rural America has gradually come to be Republican, while Democrats have ruled in the cities, even as the demographics of cities have continued to change from white blue-collar workers to multicultural, college-educated white-collar and tech workers.

If Republicans want to cut into Democrats' blue wall, they must think in terms of voting blocs and place a renewed emphasis on the working and middle classes.



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