

PERSPECTIVE



This Mathew B. Brady photograph shows the ruins of Richmond, Va., during the Civil War in 1864. AP PHOTO

The truth about our second civil war

By ROBERT B. REICH

THE SUPREME COURT’S upcoming decision to reverse *Roe v. Wade* (an early draft of which was leaked Monday, May 2) doesn’t ban abortions; it leaves the issue to the states. As a result, it will put another large brick in the growing wall separating Blue and Red America.

Some say we’re on the verge of a civil war, but that’s not right. It won’t be a formal secession (we tried that once), but a kind of benign separation analogous to unhappily married people who don’t want to go through the trauma of a formal divorce. We are already quietly splitting into two Americas — one largely urban, racially and ethnically diverse, and young; the other largely rural or exurban, white, and older — each running according to different laws and with different sources of revenue.

The split is accelerating. Red ZIP codes are getting redder and blue ZIP codes, bluer. Of the nation’s total 3,143 counties, the number of super landslide counties — where a presidential candidate won at least 80% of the vote — jumped from 6% in 2004 to 22% in 2020.

Surveys show Americans find it increasingly important to live around people who share their political values. Animosity toward those in the opposing party is higher than at any time in living memory, as 42% of registered voters believe Americans in the other party are “downright evil.” Almost 40% would be upset at the prospect of their child marrying someone from the opposite party. Even before the 2020 election, when asked if violence would be justified if the other party won the election, 18.3% of Democrats and 13.8% of

Republicans responded in the affirmative.

While Red states make it nearly impossible to get abortions, they’re making it easier than ever to buy guns — even easier to carry concealed guns without a permit. They’re suppressing votes. (In Florida and Texas, teams of “election police” have been created to crack down on the rare crime of voter fraud, another fallout from Trump’s Big Lie.) They’re banning the teaching of America’s history of racism. They’re requiring transgender students to use bathrooms and join sports teams that reflect their gender at birth. They’re making it harder to protest; more difficult to qualify for unemployment benefits or other forms of public assistance; and almost impossible to form labor unions. And they’re passing “bounty” laws — enforced not by governments, which can be sued in federal court, but by rewards to private citizens for filing lawsuits — on issues ranging from classroom speech to abortions to vaccinations.

Blue states are moving in the opposite direction. Several, including Colorado and Vermont, are codifying a right to abortion. Some are helping cover abortion expenses for out-of-staters. When Idaho proposed a ban on abortions that empowers relatives to sue anyone who helps terminate a pregnancy after six weeks, nearly Oregon approved \$15 million to help cover the abortion expenses of patients from other states. Maryland and Washington have expanded access and legal protections to out-of-state abortion patients. One package of pending California bills would expand access to California abortions and protect abortion providers from

We’ll still be America. But we’re becoming two versions of America.

out-of-state legal action.

After the governor of Texas ordered state agencies to investigate parents for child abuse if they provide certain medical treatments to their transgender children, California lawmakers proposed making the state a refuge for transgender youths and their families. Another California proposal would thwart enforcement of out-of-state court judgments removing children from the custody of parents who get them gender-affirming health services. California is also about to enforce a ban on ghost guns and assault weapons with a California version of Texas’ recent six-week ban on abortion, featuring \$10,000 bounties to encourage lawsuits from private citizens against anyone who sells, distributes or manufactures those types of firearms.

The new separation extends even to government revenue. A little-noticed trend is toward a growing share of total government taxing and spending occurring in the states — thereby making Blue states (which are overall wealthier than Red states) more financially autonomous.

For years, the inhabitants of Blue states have been sending more tax dollars to the federal government than they get back (in the form of federal assistance to the poor, education, social services, and infrastructure), while Red states have been sending Washington fewer dollars than they receive back. But the significance of this Blue state subsidy to Red states

is declining as an ever-larger percentage of total federal and state taxes paid by the inhabitants of Blue states are being spent in such Blue States. (A record half of all government revenue is now raised and spent by state and local governments.)

We’re also seeing more coordination among Blue states. During the pandemic, Blue states joined together on policies that Red states rejected — such as purchasing agreements for personal protective equipment, strategies for reopening businesses as COVID subsided, even on travel from other states with high levels of COVID. (At one point, New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut required travelers from states with high positivity rates — Arkansas, Florida, North and South Carolina, Texas, and Utah — to quarantine for two weeks before entering.)

We are splitting more quickly than anyone imagined. But the split raises a host of questions. For one, what will happen to the poor in Red states, who are disproportionately people of color? “States rights” was always a cover for segregation and harsh discrimination. The poor — both white and people of color — are already especially burdened by anti-abortion legislation because they can’t afford travel to a Blue state to get an abortion. They’re also hurt by the failure of Red states to expand Medicaid eligibility under the Affordable Care Act; by Red state de facto segregation in public schools; and by Red state measures to suppress votes.

One answer is for Democratic administrations and congresses in Washington to prioritize the needs of the Red state poor and make extra efforts to protect the civil and political rights of people of color in Red states.

The failure of the Senate to muster enough votes to pass the Freedom to Vote Act, let alone revive the Voting Rights Act, suggests how difficult this will be.

But Blue states have a potential role here. They should spend additional resources on the needs of Red state residents, such as Oregon is now doing for people from outside Oregon who seek abortions. They should prohibit state funds from being spent in any state that bans abortions or discriminates on the basis of race, ethnicity, or gender. California already bars anyone on a state payroll (including yours truly, who teaches at UC Berkeley) from getting reimbursed for travel to states that discriminate against LGBTQ people (as of now, that list includes Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Montana, North Carolina, South Carolina, North Dakota, South Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia).

Where will all this end? Not with two separate nations. What America is going through is less like a civil war and more like Brexit — a lumbering, mutual decision to go separate ways on most things but remain connected on a few big things (such as national defense, monetary policy, and civil and political rights). We’ll still be America. But we’re becoming two versions of America. The open question is analogous to the one faced by every couple that separates — how will we find ways to be civil toward each other?

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Can Bob’s \$10 million buy a strategy? He certainly needs one.



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WELL, IT IS NOW official. Democrats have awarded Ned Lamont with the nomination to seek re-election, while Republicans backed Bob Stefanowski to take him on in a rematch of the 2018 gubernatorial election. Lamont won by three percentage points the last time.

There was little drama, at least at the top of the ticket, when the two major parties held their nominating conventions last weekend. Stefanowski and Lamont already have had TV campaign ads up for weeks. Lucky us.

The big challenge for Stefanowski is how to position himself in a way that convinces a majority of voters to fire Lamont after one term. Right now, I do not see any effective way Stefanowski can do so. Lamont’s biggest challenge is not screwing up and giving his opponent an opening.

How hard is it to beat an incumbent governor? You have to go back to 1954 to find the last time it happened in Connecticut. Democrat Abraham Ribicoff defeated Republican Gov. John Davis Lodge. Disruptions caused by the construction of the Connecticut Turnpike under Lodge’s watch had turned off voters. But the legislature did name it the Governor John Davis Lodge Turnpike. That was some solace, I suppose.

Lamont is probably happy there is not a Ned Lamont Toll System.

A Sacred Heart University poll released April 22 showed Lamont winning 48% to 30% if the election were held today. While that margin is certainly inflated, I don’t reckon that the poll is as far off as critics claim in suggesting the race is really a tight one.

The opinion I held in February is unchanged: Lamont begins the race a solid favorite. If anything, the outlook for his re-election, and for the Democrats to maintain their legislative dominance in Connecticut, has improved.

The standard tactic you can expect from any Republican gubernatorial candidate in Connecticut is to attack the incumbent Democrat and his party, which controls the



SARAH GORDON/THE DAY

Republican Bob Stefanowski in 2018.

legislature, for fiscal mismanagement and high taxes.

And Stefanowski did so in his nomination acceptance speech.

“Connecticut is the definition of a failed state — billions and billions of debt with absolutely nothing to show for it,” he said.

But how much traction can he, and state Republicans, get from that claim when that Democratic legislature just approved a state budget that includes about \$600 million in income, property tax, and gasoline tax cuts? At the same time the budget invests in social services and early childhood development, keeping

the party’s core constituencies happy. And they happen to be good policies.

This budget is possible because after years of Connecticut confronting deficits it has, during the Lamont administration, accumulated a historically unmatched \$4.8 billion surplus. Even with the planned tax cuts, and investing \$3.6 billion toward the state’s underfunded pension plans, the budget reserve is projected to remain a healthy \$3 billion.

Meanwhile, a state unemployment rate that stood at 11.4% in May 2020 is 4.6%.

Given all that, Stefanowski’s “failed state” rhetoric sounds out of touch. It will play well

with the Republican base, but to win in Connecticut a Republican needs to expand well outside the base and I have seen no signs of Stefanowski doing so.

Republicans could argue, and have, that the tax cuts should be deeper or different. In his ads, Stefanowski references a cut in the sales tax, but offers no specifics. Democrats can counter they cut taxes, not talked about doing so.

General resentment over rising inflation and high gas prices could be trouble for any Democratic incumbent, given that the party has majority control both in Washington and Hartford. But I do not believe many voters blame politicians at the state level for inflation.

You can expect Stefanowski and the political action committees supporting him to continue to paint the Lamont administration as scandal ridden. Yet that “scandal” centers largely on one man, Konstantinos Diamantis, who Lamont fired as the deputy secretary of the Office of Policy and Management after reports that he had steered school construction contracts. Some poor decisions by the Lamont administration enabled Konstantinos’ alleged misbehavior, but the governor cut out

the cancer and there are no signs of the scandal expanding to become a threat to his incumbency.

Added to the Republican challenge in the state is the leaking of Justice Samuel Alito’s draft opinion. If adopted by Supreme Court’s conservative majority, it would toss out *Roe v. Wade* and allow states that so choose to again outlaw abortions, while also opening the door to a federal ban.

This threat to legal abortion could well turn out more young and other marginal voters this November, folks who tend to show up for presidential elections but not off-year ones. That, too, would be to the benefit of Connecticut Democrats.

Stefanowski, who accumulated his wealth as a corporate CEO for various companies, has pledged to spend \$10 million of his own money to defeat Lamont, who is also rich and self-funded. It should be interesting to see what winning strategy Stefanowski can invent with that money, because right now I don’t see that he has any.

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