

The Democrats must woo a new demographic

By WILLIAM FREY

The result of the US presidential election suggests it is the Bush Republican party that is building a bridge between America's past and future. In doing so, it appears to be expanding "Red America" to include both old and new voters. The Democrats, meanwhile, are being painted into a stagnant demographic corner, stuck mostly on the nation's coasts and Midwest cities in an electorate that was thought to be split 50-50.

Like many observers, I was taken in by early reports of unprecedented turnouts, envisaging armies of young Howard "Deaniac" disciples and newly registered Hispanic citizens leading the charge for John Kerry. But this turnout proved far more varied than initially thought, reflecting stronger Republican than Democratic organising efforts.

Just as Donald Rumsfeld, US defence secretary, drew a distinction between Old and New Europe, it is fair to make a similar distinction within the US. This "old-new" divide in the US is as much demographic as it is regional and will take on more significance than the familiar "red-blue" American dichotomy in future elections.

The red-blue distinction applies most aptly to the more established parts of the demographic landscape, pitting largely religious and rural-suburban populations of central "fly-over" states against the more secular, cosmopolitan coastal states. As with 2000, the "battlegrounds" in these more mature regions were the industrial rustbelt states whose older, blue-collar, white electorate was torn between conservative social values and patriotism (played to by George W. Bush) and the quest for economic stability with social security and healthcare (played to by Kerry). In the more solid red and blue states, conservative or liberal social values held sway, with predictable wins by George W. Bush and Mr Kerry.

But to stay in the hunt in "Old America", the Democrats needed all Al Gore's 2000 blue battleground states, plus Ohio. Certainly Ohio seemed within reach, given its economic woes. But it appears the Democrats lost there to the cultural conservative line, with older, white voters and married women voting overwhelmingly Republican. Ohio's old Democratic labour constituency and large urban black population were unable to make up the difference. Nationally, however, Mr Kerry gained 90 per cent of black votes compared to just 10 per cent for Mr Bush, according to exit polls.

Still the greatest hope for each party's future lies less in the Old America of the Great Plains and industrial midwest, but in the

fast-growing Sunbelt states of the south-east and west. Since the elder Bush was elected president in 1988, 27 electoral college votes have shifted to these states and they now account for 59 per cent of national growth in eligible voters since the last presidential election.

At first blush, Sunbelt state growth appears to be fuelled primarily by younger Republican constituencies: white middle-class families along with affluent retirees. These newcomer suburbanites should welcome the Republicans' conservative economic pitch of tax-cuts, school vouchers, and the like. By joining home-grown, conservative constituencies of the religious right, it is not hard to see why most of the south and the non-coastal west will continue leaning Republican. In Georgia, for example, more than 60 percent of voting whites, suburbanites and households earning \$50,000-plus favoured Mr Bush, according to exit polls; and from those concerned with issues of terrorism, moral values, and taxes as priorities, he gained more than 75 percent.

Yet there are also Sunbelt battlegrounds which are the main hope for Democratic expansion in the growing "New America". States such as Florida, Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico are not only receiving middle-class white suburbanites and retirees but large influxes of Hispanics and young "Generation X" types fleeing the costly housing markets of coastal blue states such as California and New York. These groups are a large part of America's demographic future and natural constituencies for Democrats. Mr Kerry's strong showing with 18-30 year-olds -- who made up only 17 percent of all voters but voted 56 percent for Mr Kerry against 43 per cent for Mr Bush -- is a hopeful sign, though his weaker showing than Mr Gore among Hispanics needs assessment. Yet the election also highlighted the Democrats' need to make their pitch more palatable to small-town and suburban citizens. Image, also, is important, as Mr Bush has effectively shown. And the Democrats might consider limiting their association with celebrities and therefore their Hollywood image.

Certainly the Bush-Republican triumph should be seen in the context of the war on terrorism, on which many voters decided not to change course. But it is also a warning to Democrats to pay just as much attention to New America as to their old, familiar constituencies.

*William Frey is a demographer at the Brookings Institution and research professor at the **University of Michigan** Population Studies Center.*