

America's rural-urban divide nurtures wannabe state-splitters



What's behind a new wave of secessionism

Illinois has only one true metropolis, the city of Chicago. It does, however, have another Metropolis, a pretty little town of around 6,000 people on the border with Kentucky which rather implausibly claims to be the hometown of Superman. And in Metropolis they would rather not have the metropolis. In 2020, 70% of voters in Massac County, which contains Metropolis, opted in a non-binding referendum for the rest of Illinois to separate from Cook County, which contains Chicago and many of its suburbs. That helped start an unlikely state-splitting movement.

This November Massac was joined by seven more counties. Of Illinois's 102 counties, 33 have voted to tell their governing boards to consider leaving the state. Most, like Massac, are rural places with small populations. But among the new secessionists is Madison County, a suburb of St Louis in next-door Missouri, with 265,000 people. In all, the separatist counties are now home to more than 800,000 people, just over 6% of the population of Illinois.

Why separate? The reason is simple, says Loret Newlin, the organiser of the Illinois Separation Referendum movement, which gathers signatures to get the question onto county ballots: "Our votes don't count." Cook County, with 5.1m people, has 40% of Illinois's population. Those elsewhere in the state, especially in the south, feel dominated by laws passed for residents of the Windy City. "The only way for people outside of Cook County to get their voice back is to have a separate state," says G.H. Merritt, of New Illinois, a rival group which wants much the same thing.

"You have regions that are much different from Chicago and we are outnumbered," says Kurt Prenzler, the Republican chairman of the Madison County Board. Of six statewide elected officials in Illinois, only the treasurer is not from the Chicago region. Mr Prenzler in fact opposed the ballot proposal—he says breaking up Illinois is unrealistic. But he says he is not that surprised that 56% of people in his county voted for it. He points in particular to the covid lockdowns ordered in 2020 as something that supercharged anger with representatives from Chicago. Voting to secede is "a way of speaking up", he sighs.

Both Ms Merritt and Ms Newlin insist their campaign is non-partisan. Yet this rural-urban divide aligns with the state's politics. Just 14 of 102 counties voted for Kamala Harris over Donald Trump, but statewide almost 55% of the voters did. Democrats have a supermajority in the state legislature created in part by drawing maps that string together urban areas outside Chicago into lots of Democrat-leaning districts while rural Republican voters are concentrated together. Democrats hold 14 of the state's 17 seats in the House of Representatives, too. A generation ago, rural interests could sometimes unite with suburbanites against the Democratic Chicago machine, notes John Mark Hansen, of the University of Chicago. No longer.

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