

A More Divided Country

By Mel Lavine

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In 1948 Harry Truman traveled 21,928 miles on his famous whistle-stop campaign across the country by train. "I want to see the people," he explained.

"There were three major tours: first cross-country to California for fifteen days; then a six-day tour of the Middle West; followed by a final, hard-hitting ten days in the big population centers of the Northeast and a return home to Missouri...for fifteen days," David McCullough wrote in "Truman," his biography of our 33rd president.

McCullough quoted an old Truman friend, Charlie Ross, who remembered, “There were no deep-hidden schemes, no devious plans, nothing that could be called, in the language of political analysts, ‘high strategy.’” The president took his case to the country in what seemed a lost-cause against Thomas E. Dewey, the Republican candidate. In the end, Truman would defeat Dewey in the upset of the century.

In 1960 John Kennedy campaigned in 49 states, Richard Nixon in all 50 in a contest that Kennedy won with a razor-thin lead of 112,827 votes or 0.10% of the popular vote. Kennedy, however, won the electoral vote handily, 303 to Nixon’s 219.

In Sunday’s New York Times, Adam Liptak, who covers the Supreme Court for the newspaper, argues that in Tuesday’s presidential contest the race was viewed as just as close as in 1960 “but the candidates ...campaigned in only 10 states since the political conventions. There are towns in Ohio that had received more attention than the entire West Coast.” In effect, the current system “disenfranchises most Americans.”

In more recent years, according to the research, the tendency for people with a similar outlook is to live near one another. Thus the country is increasingly split between two Americas, the more conservative (Republican in the middle and south of the continent) and the more liberal (Democratic) on the coasts.

The notion of disenfranchisement is rooted “in the fact that almost every state chooses to

allocate its electoral votes on a winner-take-all basis. Thus, a candidate confident of winning or sure of losing a bare majority of a state's popular vote has no reason to expend resources there."

In 2008 voter turnout in the fifteen states that received most of the candidates' attention was 67 percent. In 2012 the focus has been on even fewer states. The difference, says Liptak, increases the chances of one candidate carrying the Electoral College, the other the popular vote, making for a more divided country.

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