

Urban Inequality from the War on Poverty to Change We Can Believe In

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Goals for presentation

- Discuss how cities have evolved along four dimensions from 1960 to 2008:
 - Actual trends in urban problems, especially urban poverty and inequality
 - How scholars have understood and conceptualized these problems and trends
 - What Federal urban policies tried to do about them
 - How and where cities and their problems fit into the national political landscape

- Look at the interrelationships among these dimensions
 - Trends have taken some unexpected directions
 - Scholarship has followed rather than anticipated trends, missed some important causal factors
 - Scholarship has also not had much impact on policies
 - Finally, scholarship on urban issues has gradually become marginal to the major disciplines, though it may be poised for resurgence
- And reflect on how the current intellectual and policy ‘opportunity space’ resembles and differs from the Great Society era
 - The renaissance of many cities has reduced the national political polarization over urban/racial issues
 - Central cities played a key role in the Democratic victories in 2008 – but so did their suburbs

The eras under discussion

- Where things started out: 1946-1960
- The tumultuous 1960s: racial change and urban conflict
- The long reaction: 1968-2008
 - Urban decline, white flight; metropolitan polarization
 - Growth of newer cities, Sunbelt
 - Urbanization and aging of the suburbs
 - Shift of big city politics toward entrepreneurialism
 - Decline of central cities on intellectual, political agendas
- The Obama opening: 2008 to 2012, 2016

1. The beginning: 1946 to 1960

- The large old central cities peaked in terms of median real income and share of industrial production relative to suburbs and nation in the mid-1950s
- The massive northward migration of African Americans (and in some places Puerto Ricans or Mexican Americans) began to expand minority neighborhoods established in the WW I era
- Mass suburbanization of production and residence was emptying white working and middle classes from large old central cities
- Political elites defined the problem: slums and blight

How scholars defined the problem

The white and non-white citizens of the U.S. are being sorted out in a new pattern of segregation. In each of the major urban centers the story is the same: the better-off white families are moving out of the central cities into the suburbs; the ranks of the poor who remain are being swelled by Negroes from the South. This trend threatens to transform the cities into slums, largely inhabited by Negroes, ringed about with predominantly white suburbs. The racial problem of the U.S., still festering in the rural South, will become equally, perhaps most acutely, a problem of the urban North...

These population shifts bring with them profound economic consequences. Of first importance is a decline of parts of the central cities' business activity and associated property values. In almost every city the big downtown department stores are losing trade to the suburban shopping centers... The decline of the central-city department store is accompanied by a general deterioration of the downtown area... The slums, in other words, are spreading to the central business districts.

-- Morton Grodzins, *Scientific American* (October 1957)

Slum housing in the Chicago black belt, late 1940s



The policy responses: urban renewal, public housing, urban freeway construction

Lake Meadows (1958)
Cabrini Green (1942-1962)



Circle Interchange



2. The 1960s

- Rapidly growing black and (sometimes) Latino populations in the large old cities
- High levels of community organization in opposition to urban renewal, freeways, for minority empowerment
- Devastating urban riots in many cities
- Scholarship on cities also undergoes a revolution

Political and policy response

Aristotle said: "Men come together in cities in order to live, but they remain together in order to live the good life." It is harder and harder to live the good life in American cities today. The catalog of ills is long: there is the decay of the centers and the despoiling of the suburbs. There is not enough housing for our people or transportation for our traffic. Open land is vanishing and old landmarks are violated. Worst of all, expansion is eroding the precious and time honored values of community with neighbors and communion with nature. Our society will never be great until our cities are great...

So, will you join in the battle to give every citizen the full equality which God enjoins and the law requires, whatever his belief, or race, or the color of his skin? Will you join in the battle to give every citizen an escape from the crushing weight of poverty? Will you join in the battle to make it possible for all nations to live in enduring peace--as neighbors and not as mortal enemies? Will you join in the battle to build the Great Society, to prove that our material progress is only the foundation on which we will build a richer life of mind and spirit?

-- LBJ, "Great Society" Speech, May 22, 1964

3. The long reaction

- Republican presidents win office for 28 of 40 years based on metropolitan polarization and opposition to urban (black and Latino) liberalism
 - Nixon, Ford, Reagan (2), Bush Sr, Bush Jr
 - Two breaks from trend, Carter (1976-80), Clinton (1992-2000)
- Federal policy shifts steadily away from place-based aid to older cities to person-base aid and broader distribution to suburbs, newer cities
- Older central cities compelled to become more entrepreneurial, growth-oriented, experimenting with various forms of 'community revitalization'
- Clinton redefines/repositions Democratic party on urban issues - deracialization

This is not a photo-montage, it is a few blocks from my home in Park Slope, Brooklyn



4. The Obama moment

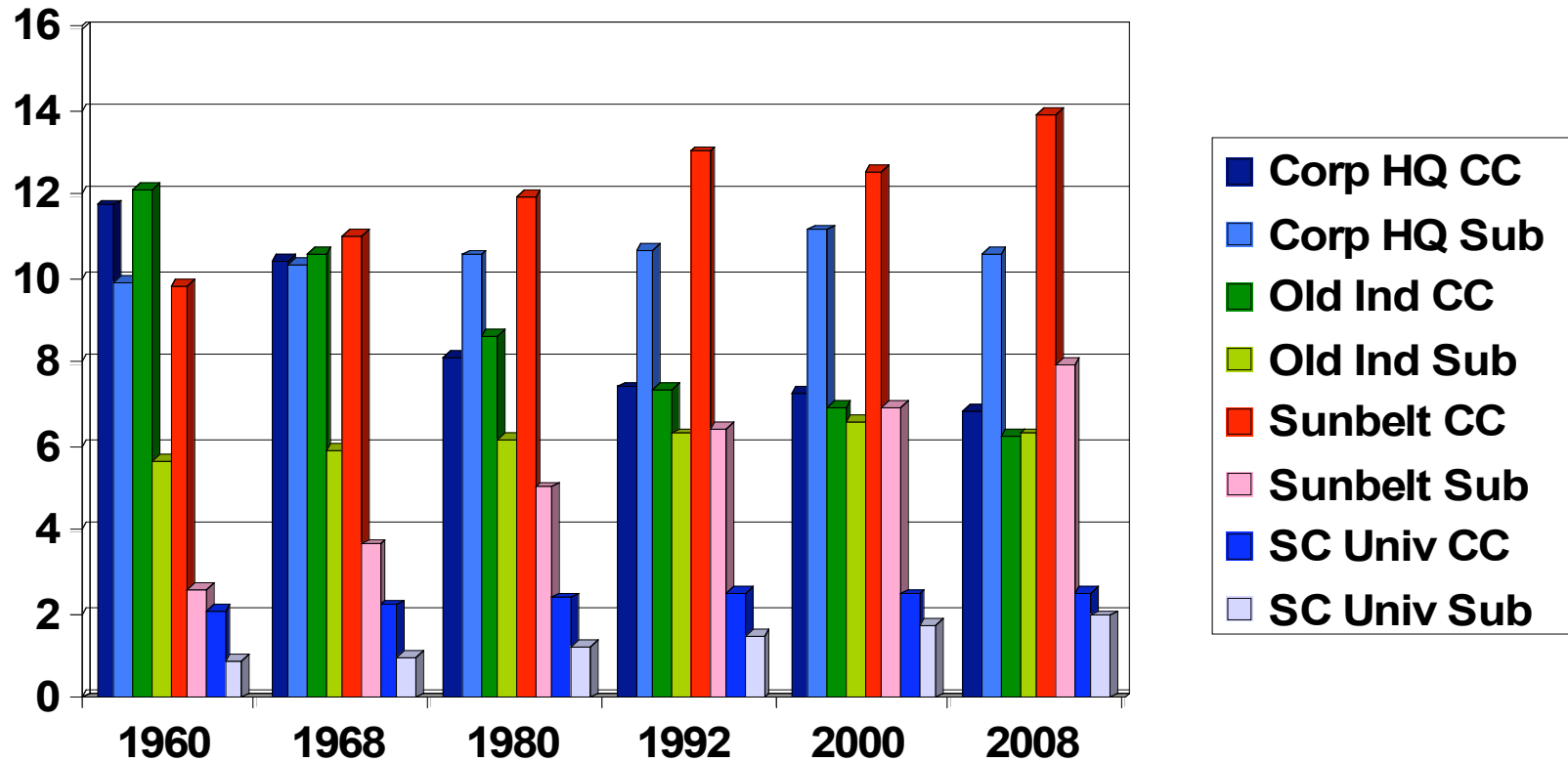
- An urban president
 - Community organizer, big city legislator
- Constructs a metropolitan urban electoral majority, but on the new terrain
- While confronting a profound economic and fiscal crisis, advances bold initiatives
 - \$787 billion in spending in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act
 - But what political consequences flow from its implementation?

In closing: reflections on

- The changing terrain of urban and metropolitan inequality
- The changing metropolitan electoral terrain
- The changing intellectual terrain
- The changing policy/institutional terrain

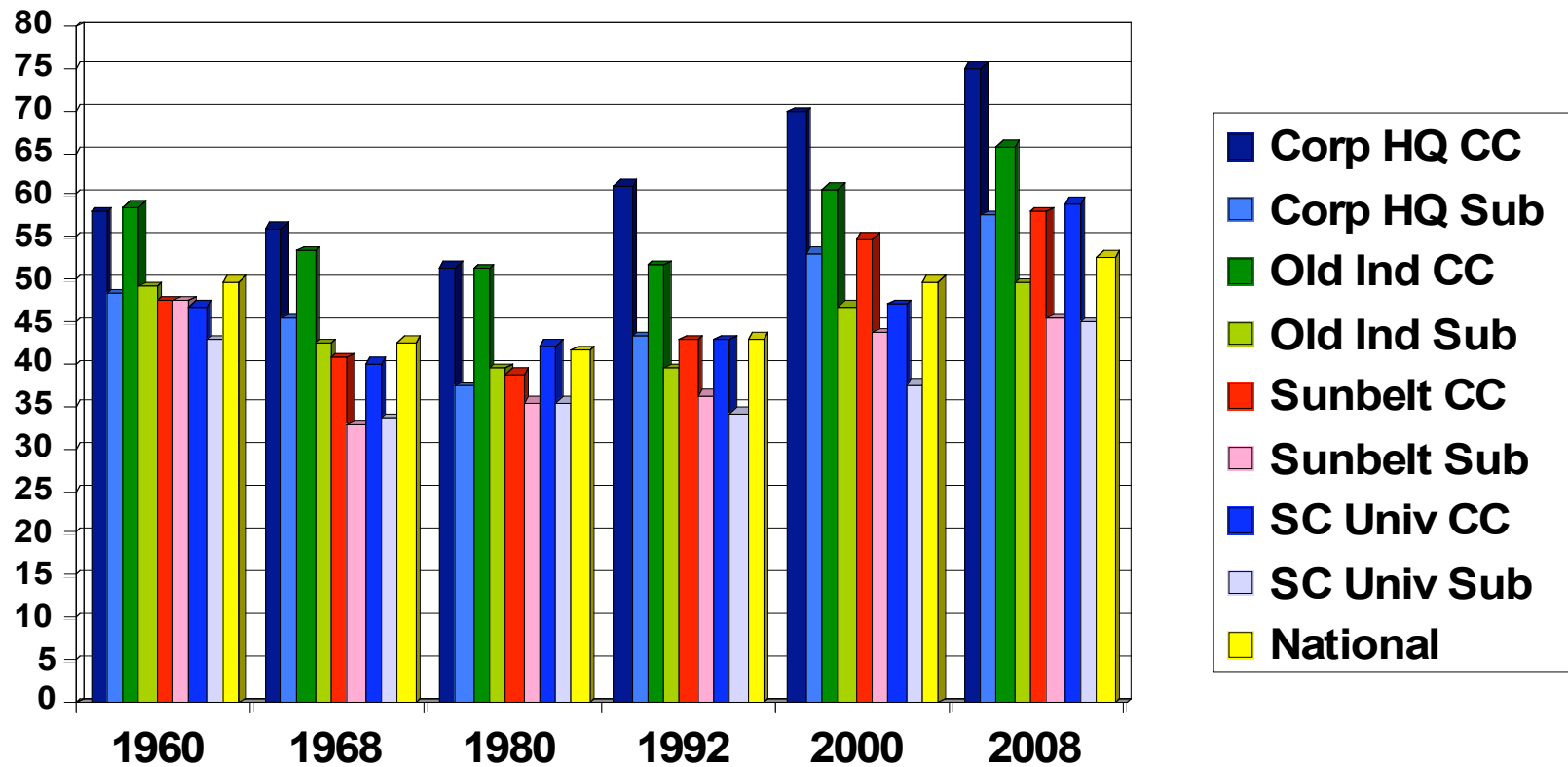
Urban Share of Presidential Vote, 1960-2008

(Metropolitan counties containing central cities versus outside of central cities)



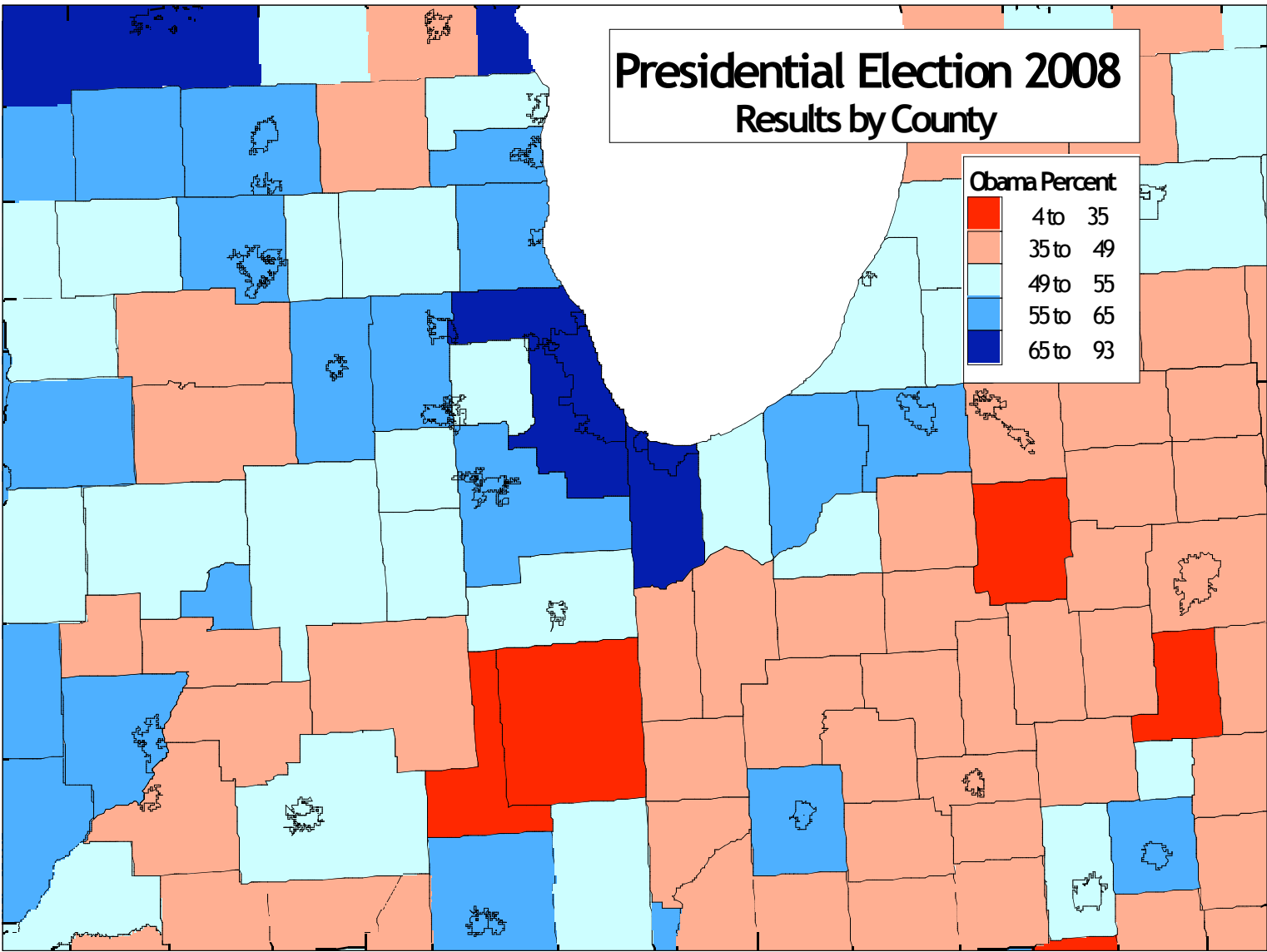
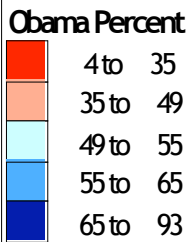
Democratic Share of Urban Vote, 1960-2008

(Metropolitan counties containing central cities versus outside of central cities)



Presidential Election 2008

Results by County



Scholarship, Policy, and Politics

- Trends have taken some unexpected directions
- Scholarship has followed rather than anticipated trends, missed some important causal factors
- Scholarship has also not had much impact on policies
 - Deconcentration and metropolitan approaches a possible exception
- Finally, scholarship on urban issues has gradually become marginal to the major disciplines, though it may be poised for resurgence