Color Them Competitive

Only three states switched their allegiance between the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. When George W. Bush first ran for the White House, he won New Hampshire but lost New Mexico and Iowa. Four years later, he lost New Hampshire but won New Mexico and Iowa.

Even though the margins in those states, plus a dozen others, were razor-thin, the fact that 47 states ended up in the same party's column in back-to-back presidential elections suggests a certain amount of stability in Electoral College voting patterns. But, if they’re stable, will they remain so in a country whose recent presidential balloting has been so evenly divided?

Three weeks before Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, Horace Busby, a longtime adviser to President Johnson who later became a first-rate political analyst and the author of a terrific political newsletter, The Busby Papers, declared that there was a "Republican lock on the Electoral College." Indeed, the GOP won five of the six presidential elections from 1968 to 1988, losing only in 1976 with the election of Jimmy Carter as a direct result of the Watergate scandals and the pardon of President Nixon.

Busby's theory dovetailed nicely with that of another enormously talented political-operative-turned-analyst, Kevin Phillips, who had been a key strategist in Nixon's successful 1968 presidential campaign. Phillips noted that not only population had shifted from Democratic strongholds in the Frost Belt of the Northeast and Midwest to the more Republican Sun Belt of the South and Southwest but also political power had shifted toward the Sun Belt in both Congress and in the Electoral College. Today, this is conventional thinking; then, it was new grist for the mill.

Initially, the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 seemed as if it, too, could be written off as an exception to the rule, because his success was largely due to a recession and to President George H.W. Bush's apparent preoccupation with foreign policy at the expense of domestic and economic problems.

But Clinton's relatively easy re-election in 1996 belied that theory. Clearly, something had happened, and this new trend was reinforced by the split decision of 2000, with Democratic Vice President Gore narrowly edging then-Gov. Bush of Texas in the popular vote. But a mere 537 votes put Florida in Bush's column and enabled him to squeeze into the White House with a majority of Electoral College votes. Then, in 2004, Bush's narrow 51 percent to 48 percent majority of the popular vote further bolstered the idea that Democrats had learned to pick the GOP's lock on the Electoral College.

The U.S. population continues to shift from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and Southwest, with corresponding shifts in the number of House seats and thus Electoral College votes. Although that trend would certainly seem to help Republicans, we are also seeing changes in voting tendencies that complicate political calculations.

Top strategists in both parties have identified 11 states as moving away from whichever party long dominated them.
Seven that had been reliably Republican -- Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, and Virginia, which have a combined 66 electoral votes -- are becoming less so.

Just four states -- Louisiana, Minnesota, West Virginia, and Wisconsin, with a total of 34 electoral votes -- are getting less Democratic. This amounts to a net shift of 32 electoral votes away from the GOP.

And given that non-Hispanic whites are now a minority of the Texas population, they eventually will be a minority of Lone Star State voters. Unless Republicans unexpectedly become dramatically more popular with Texas Hispanics or African-Americans, that state will become less reliably Republican within the next two or three presidential elections. Because Texas has 34 electoral votes, the prospect of its being in play would be terrifying to the GOP.

In short, as soon as 2008, we may be looking at many more purple states than we saw in 2000 or 2004.