

Biting the Hands

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Poor Best

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Miami - Young professionals poured from sleek office buildings at lunch-time on a humid afternoon last week as sunshine glinted off the nameplates of the global law firms and the European and South American banks that cluster here in the international financial district along busy Brickell Avenue.

A few minutes later, just to the northeast, a line of trucks rolled into the Port of Miami as giant cranes unloaded red and blue containers from freighters bearing some of the nearly 8 million tons of cargo that annually crosses these docks. In midtown, patients from Latin America sought world-class medical care at renowned Jackson Memorial Hospital. Further to the northwest, in Hialeah and Doral, small manufacturers churned out medical equipment, engine parts, and dozens of other products destined for Brazil, Costa Rica, or Venezuela.

Those are only some of the ways that the world economy nourishes this bustling city's prosperity, "International tourism and banking, international trade, international services, international trans-shipments, health-related services: Our economy is inextricably tied to all of these," says Tony Ojeda, executive director of Miami-Dade County's International Trade Consortium.

This is the side of the international economic story that Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton obscured in Ohio with their spiraling denunciations of free trade. But many of America's most vibrant communities are benefiting enormously from their connections to the global economy. What's more, most of these communities, the places that would suffer most if America tried to wall out the rest of world, are becoming Democratic strongholds. This means that in seeking to retreat from globalization, Democrats are threatening the interests of voters and communities increasingly central to their electoral coalition. "The Democrats are in all the globally connected places," says Robert Lang, director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech University. "They are biting the hands that feed them."

Lang and his colleagues, in a paper dated March 21, identified the 20 American metropolitan areas most thoroughly integrated into the global economy. The researchers ranked the cities along four dimensions: the presence of global service firms (such as advertising, law, and financial services); whether the area has a major port; whether it has an international airport; and the value of exports that pass through it.

At the top of the list stand New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Miami. They are followed by Atlanta, Washington, Boston, Dallas, and Houston. The second 10 start with Seattle and Philadelphia and end with Phoenix and San Jose, Calif.

These globally connected cities retain many differences. But they generally share an expansive outlook marked by receptivity to foreign markets, foreign investment, immigration, and ethnic diversity. "They are the places where when you walk into a building, they have clocks set all around the world," Lang says. In the 1980s, as Hispanic immigration surged, a popular South Florida bumper sticker read, "Will the last American to leave Miami bring the flag?" Today, notes Ojeda, most Miami leaders of all races recognize "that our international [population] base has given us the economy we have."

Such attitudes help explain the Democratic advantage in the global cities. Lang found that in 2004, 15 of these 20 metropolitan areas backed John Kerry over George W. Bush. In nine, Kerry ran at least 10 percentage points above his national average. Those results reflect a larger political evolution: Whether measured by attitudes toward immigration or international alliances, Republicans are attracting more support from Americans who are skeptical of global influences, and Democrats are gaining strength among people (especially professionals) most open to the world. Over time, those voters may recoil from the hardening Democratic hostility to free trade.

That doesn't mean Democrats should ignore the economic distress in battered industrial communities such as Youngstown, Ohio. But the party is steering by the rearview mirror when it targets its policy solely at manufacturing workers who are leery of free trade. For Democrats, the challenge is to expand opportunity for those workers without undermining it in the communities that are thriving as America's bridges to the world. Obama and Clinton both failed that challenge in Ohio. Trying to revive Youngstown by damming the global currents lifting Miami and our other global cities has long been bad economics. Now, for Democrats, it's also bad politics.



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