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Ferguson, Black Town, White Power

EFF SMITH AUG. 17, 2014

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POLITICS, wrote the political scientist Harold Lasswell in 1936, is about “who gets what, when, and how.” If you want to understand the racial power disparities we’ve seen in Ferguson, Mo., understand that it’s not only about black and white. It’s about green.

Back in 1876, the city of St. Louis made a fateful decision. Tired of providing services to the outlying areas, the city cordoned itself off, separating from St. Louis County. It’s a decision the city came to regret. Most Rust Belt cities have bled population since the 1960s, but few have been as badly damaged as St. Louis City, which since 1970 has lost almost as much of its population as Detroit.

This exodus has left a ring of mostly middle-class suburbs around an urban core plagued by entrenched poverty. White flight from the city mostly ended in the 1980s; since then, blacks have left the inner city for suburbs such as Ferguson in the area of St. Louis County known as North County.

Ferguson’s demographics have shifted rapidly: in 1990, it was 74 percent white and 25 percent black; in 2000, 52 percent black and 45 percent white; by 2010, 67 percent black and 29 percent white.

The region’s fragmentation isn’t limited to the odd case of a city shedding its county. St. Louis County contains 90 municipalities, most with their own city hall and police force. Many rely on revenue generated from traffic tickets and related fines. According to a study by the St. Louis nonprofit [Better Together](#), Ferguson receives nearly one-quarter of its revenue from court fees; for some surrounding towns it approaches 50 percent.

Municipal reliance on revenue generated from traffic stops adds pressure to make more of them. One town, Sycamore Hills, has stationed a radar-gun-wielding police officer on its 250-foot northbound stretch of Interstate.

With primarily white police forces that rely disproportionately on traffic citation revenue, blacks are pulled over, cited and arrested in numbers far exceeding their population share, according to a recent [report from Missouri’s attorney general](#). In Ferguson last year, 86 percent of stops, 92 percent of searches and 93 percent of arrests were of black people — despite the fact that police officers were far less likely to find contraband on black drivers (22 percent versus 34 percent of whites). This worsens



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inequality, as struggling blacks do more to fund local government than relatively affluent whites.

By contrast, consider the city: After decades of methodically building political power, blacks in St. Louis City elected a black mayor in 1993 and black aldermen or alderwomen in nearly half the city's wards, and hold two of three seats on the powerful Board of Estimate and Apportionment, which must approve all city contracts. Well-established churches, Democratic ward organizations and other civic institutions mobilize voters in black wards. But because blacks have reached the suburbs in significant numbers only over the past 15 years or so, fewer suburban black communities have deeply ingrained civic organizations.

That helps explain why majority-black Ferguson has a virtually all-white power structure: a white mayor; a school board with six white members and one Hispanic, which recently suspended a highly regarded young black superintendent who then resigned; a City Council with just one black member; and a 6 percent black police force.

Many North County towns — and inner-ring suburbs nationally — resemble Ferguson. Longtime white residents have consolidated power, continuing to dominate the City Councils and school boards despite sweeping demographic change. They have retained control of patronage jobs and municipal contracts awarded to allies.

The North County Labor Club, whose overwhelmingly white constituent unions (plumbers, pipe fitters, electrical workers, sprinkler fitters) have benefited from these arrangements, operates a potent voter-turnout operation that backs white candidates over black upstarts. The more municipal contracts an organization receives, the more generously it can fund re-election campaigns. Construction, waste and other long-term contracts with private firms have traditionally excluded blacks from the ownership side and, usually, the work force as well.

But there's a potential solution that could help Ferguson reinvest in itself and also help African-Americans compete for a bigger share of the pie: consolidation with surrounding municipalities, many of which face similar challenges. The St. Louis region has seen some preliminary support for the idea, with resistance concentrated in smaller political units whose leaders are loath to surrender control.

Consolidation would help strapped North County communities avoid using such a high percentage of their resources for expensive public safety overhead, such as fire trucks. It could also empower the black citizens of Ferguson. Blacks incrementally gained power in St. Louis City in part because its size facilitates broader coalitions and alliances. Another benefit of consolidation is the increased political talent pool. Many leaders just aren't interested in running a tiny municipality.

In shrinking cities, politics is often a nasty, zero-sum game. But consolidation could create economies of scale, increase borrowing capacity to expand economic opportunity, reduce economic pressures that inflame racial tension, and smash up the old boys' network that has long ruled much of North County.

When the state patrol and the national television cameras leave Ferguson, its residents will still be talking about how they can move forward. And they may be ready to expand the conversation so that it's not just about

black and white, but green.

[Jeff Smith](#) is an assistant professor of urban policy at the New School and a former Missouri state senator from St. Louis.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on August 18, 2014, on page A19 of the New York edition with the headline: Black Town, White Power. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown Jr., an 18-year-old black man, was fatally shot by 28-year-old white Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson in the city of Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. Brown was accompanied by his 22-year-old friend Dorian Johnson. Wilson said that an altercation ensued when Brown attacked Wilson in his police vehicle for control of Wilson's gun until it was fired. Johnson said that Wilson initiated a confrontation by grabbing Brown by the neck through his car window... In Ferguson, Black Town White Power. The County Map That Explains Ferguson's Tragic Discord. Now we're in North St. Louis County, and it gets crazy with a patchwork quilt of tiny towns. The house is from 1911, when it was a gravel road in unincorporated St. Louis County. The 2-story McDonough building (developed by a realtor who had his offices under the steel lettering) went up in 1955 in what had become Jennings, MO in 1947. Because all around Ferguson, once-White towns have been left to rot. It's a precisely repeating pattern from St. Louis City in the 1950s to this very day. You can see the physical downfall of dozens of towns as the race population switches from majority-White to majority-Black. As the article In Ferguson, Black Town, White Power so aptly put it, the racial power disparities in Ferguson are not just black and white but also green. Ironically, we are not the ones with the green, and the system as it is built will prevent us from changing that for a very long time. With primarily white police forces that rely disproportionately on traffic citation revenue, blacks are pulled over, cited and arrested in numbers far exceeding their population share, according to a recent report from Missouri's attorney general. In Ferguson last year, 86 percent of stops, 92 percent of searches and 93 percent of arrests were of black people despite the fact that police officers were far less likely to find contraband on black drivers (22 percent versus 34 percent of whites).