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A changing Philly could be key to Pa. primary

William Douglas | McClatchy Newspapers

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PHILADELPHIA — South Philadelphia's Ninth Street Italian Market isn't as Italian as it used to be, and that may affect Pennsylvania's politics as Democrats prepare to vote in next Tuesday's presidential primary.

Sure, you can still get a healthy scoop of water ice, a fine linguine and salty prosciutto at the shops and booths along the narrow street made famous by movie boxer Rocky Balboa's training jogs through it.

But these days you also can grab a good burrito from a Mexican restaurant or a juicy pomegranate from an Asian greengrocer, all a reflection of dynamic change in a city that's often failed to live up to its motto as the City of Brotherly Love.

"You would have sections of Philadelphia that were one ethnicity: Polish, Irish, Italian, black," said Harry Crimi Jr., a third-generation butcher at the market's family-owned Cappuccio's Meats. "It's different now. It's all mixed."

Change is the buzzword in Philadelphia and its suburbs as Pennsylvania's Democratic primary approaches. Its neighborhoods have become more diverse, thanks largely to a 14 percent boost in its foreign-born population, according to Census Bureau figures, and to a strong migration of New Yorkers lured by cheaper housing and a civilized rail commute to their Big Apple jobs.

"You've got the influx of yuppies gentrifying the place, you've always had places like (upscale) Society Hill and there's a much more diverse community in South Philadelphia," said G. Terry Madonna, a political science professor at Franklin & Marshall University in Lancaster, 83 miles to the west. "It's a city in transition."

Change also has spilled into Philadelphia's bedroom communities, from the blue blood Main Line to blue-collar sections of Bucks County. Democratic voter rolls have swelled in the suburbs to the point that Montgomery County, once a Republican bastion of Main Line mansions, has a Democratic majority by voter registration for the first time in memory.

"The old guard was very conservative," said Robin Lebovitz, a 59-year-old Malvern resident. "Now you have different people coming in in large quantities. My neighborhood is a real United Nations in terms of ethnicity and religion. Twenty-five years ago, we, as Jews, would not have been here."

It's the Philly suburbs — Bucks, Montgomery and Delaware counties — where Sens. Hillary Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois will slug it out for the lion's share of new voters, who political experts say could be the deciding factor in the statewide primary.

"They are a composite of everything: folks who have lived there a long time, folks who moved there to work in the high-tech business in Montgomery County, some who moved from South Philly and some who moved in from out of state," Madonna said.

With the exception of a few pockets, the city of Philadelphia itself remains solidly Democratic, home to about 700,000 of the state's 3.2 million Democrats. About 46 percent of the city's Democrats are African-American, 44 percent are white and 10 percent are Latino.

But the mix of new residents and growth in young registered voters is changing the city's electorate, making it more liberal and looking to shed the machine-style politics that's long ruled the city, according to Don Kettl, a University of Pennsylvania political science professor.

Kettl and other Pennsylvania political analysts say that the change should benefit Obama. He should win the city decisively, largely on the strength of African-American votes in North and West Philadelphia and white support from Center City and the college campuses of University City.

Clinton's support lies in predominately Roman Catholic and conservative areas such as South Philadelphia, traditionally Italian, and Northeast Philadelphia, an Irish stronghold.

"There's a soft and slow transition here, but a clear transition from old-style Philly politics, which could help Obama and pose some problems for Clinton," Kettl said. "The old political rules and notions of the city and the region do not apply."

Kettl points to the election of Michael Nutter as the city's new Democratic mayor. Nutter, an African-American, won by getting almost unprecedented support from Philly's white voters. He's backing Clinton.

"I was the candidate that no one expected to win: A reformer could not get elected in the city because of 'The Machine' or whatever," Nutter said.

Nutter took charge of a city that's on the move — as evidenced by an ever-growing Center City skyline that now towers over William Penn's hat atop City Hall, once downtown's tallest point — but still troubled by deep-rooted problems.

The influx of new residents hasn't kept pace with the steady exodus of old ones. About 10,000 people per year move out of Philadelphia in frustration over violent crime — the city had 392 homicides last year — and an underperforming public school system.

The departures have dropped Philadelphia, long the nation's fourth-largest city, to sixth-largest, now below Houston and Phoenix, according to census data.

Still, many longtime Philadelphians are sticking it out, hoping that Nutter's plans for more aggressive policing, lower taxes, attracting more residents and repairing a broken school system will bear fruit.

"I love the city; I love the neighborhood," said Domenick Crimi, who works at Cappuccio's Meats with his father and brother and lives across the street from the shop. "I can't imagine being anyplace else than the Philadelphia metropolitan area."

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