

The New Migration Equation

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At first blush, it might seem curious that Gov.-elect Arnold Schwarzenegger's recent campaign focus on lowering taxes seemed more strongly targeted on people moving out of California—mostly native-born, middle-class suburbanites—than to the service needs of the state's steadily growing immigrant population.

Yet Schwarzenegger can hardly be blamed for being confused—or for sounding like other politicians struggling to gain purchase in America's shifting demographic landscape.

Citing new census statistics that show California is losing many more within-U.S. migrants than it is gaining, Schwarzenegger has vowed to reverse the flight of middle-class residents to rapidly developing surrounding states, like Nevada and Arizona, with wide-open spaces and lower costs.

But his concerns are not new. They echo those raised by postwar big-city mayors who bemoaned the inevitable suburbanization of that era's white middle class, which created sharp and enduring social and economic differences between cities and their suburbs. Those politicians also were befuddled by enormous changes that they did not fully understand.

And, indeed, this parallel between the experience of California's recent out-migration and that of postwar suburban flight reflects a more general, national migration dynamic which is forging new and demographically distinct regions, whose differences may well supersede those that separated post-war cities from their suburbs.

This dynamic finds, on the one hand, large flows of domestic migrants pouring out of highly urbanized states to create a mostly suburban, middle-class "New Sunbelt" region. At the same time, immigrants continue to flow into the ethnically diverse, more urban "Melting Pot" states, almost unaware of the former out-movement and its causes.

Meanwhile, a residual cluster of "Heartland" region states, mostly unaffected by either migration flow, is increasingly defined by its relative stagnation.

The New Sunbelt—13 states in the nation's West and Southeast of which Nevada, Arizona, Georgia, and North Carolina are prime examples—is the present-day counterpart of America's suburbs.

It contains one-fifth of the U.S. population but is growing almost twice as fast as the rest of the nation (it grew by 28 percent vs. 15 percent over the 1990-2002 period), in large measure thanks to suburban-like in-migrants: white middle-class families, singles and retirees; the Southeast, they are joined by a returning black middle class.

In each case, the new migrants are trading the pricey, congested commuting towns of the more urban metropolises in California and the Northeast for more peaceful, family-friendly 21st-century Levittowns in the sprawling suburbs and exurbs of places like Atlanta, Las Vegas and Phoenix.

In essence, they are making long-distance moves to achieve the suburban dream that no longer exits for them in Connecticut, New Jersey or Orange County, Calif. While immigrants and Hispanics in search of low-wage service and construction jobs are beginning to follow, the inflow to the New Sunbelt is dominated by mostly white and black households with middle-class incomes and good educations.

The New Sunbelt, it should be said, does not include the "old" Sunbelt meccas of California, Texas and Florida. Instead, these make up part of the nation's churning, bubbling "Melting Pot" region. These nine states—which include such other immigrant gateways as New York, New Jersey, and Illinois (with Chicago)—constitute America's most urban super-region.

Like big cities of the past, they are the primary destinations of new immigrants and immigrant minorities. Collectively, they house 70 percent of the nation's foreign-born population but only 37 percent of its native-born. More than three-quarters of all Hispanics and two-thirds of all Asians live in these states, where bilingual speakers and interracial marriages are commonplace.

Immigrants continue to flock to the region's longstanding ethnic enclaves, institutions, and social networks—a biproduct of immigration laws that emphasize family reunification and foster chain migration. So while middle-class whites and some minorities are leaving for the New Sunbelt, immigrant minority Hispanics and Asians are spearheading the growth of the Melting Pot's cities and suburbs

More of these immigrants have low incomes and skills than the migrants who are leaving. Consequently, large parts of the Melting Pot are acquiring another attribute of the postwar big cities: a two-tiered economy.

I have termed the remainder of the country, its third mega-region, America's "Heartland." This swath of 29 slow-growing states (including the District of Columbia) in the Northeast and much of the nation's midsection has not gained much from migration in decades.

Its suburbs and rural areas are mostly white and aging, and blacks constitute the primary minority in its cities. Still, the small but growing immigration flows to the region have served to stem the decline of some of its city populations and counter some of its "brain drain" to other regions.

The Heartland is the least diverse and dynamic of the three regions, but contains nearly two-fifths of the nation's population and an even larger share of its elderly and aging baby boomers.

In short, America's new migration patterns cannot be ignored. They are blurring the once-sharp local distinctions between cities, suburbs and rural areas in favor of increasingly significant regional ones.

Long-distance migration flows are fueling growth in New Sunbelt states that offer affordable new housing in safe, dispersed settings with more local control, ingredients that have always attracted Americans to the suburbs.

Yet the Melting Pot states that they are leaving are not emptying out. They are the prime beneficiaries of the nation's rising immigration levels, infusing these states with urban diversity and a vibrancy that has long been associated with cities. Compared to these regions, the aging Heartland appears to be standing still, isolated from the dramatic changes occurring elsewhere.

And so it is understandable that Arnold Schwarzenegger may have misunderstood his true constituency—or at least part of it.

Migration and the shifting new demographic realities they are generating are shaping and reshaping new regional constituencies that can be associated with the culturally diverse but economically polarized Melting Pot; the middle-class, family-oriented New Sunbelt; and the largely white, older and baby boomer-dominated Heartland.

When viewed from this perspective, regional preferences on a range of issues such as affirmative action, taxes, schools and subsidies for prescription drugs fall neatly into place—and are certain to confound hopeful presidential candidates looking to gain broad national support.

At the same time, state officials, particularly in the two most dynamic regions, will need to take heed of the rapid shifts in their constituencies. Despite Gov.-elect Schwarzenegger's concern about the out-migration of would-be Golden Staters, for example, that train is already leaving the station.

The demographic future of California and a cluster of other Melting Pot states rests with continued immigrant growth, not with continued white middle-class preferences.

Over time these states' crucial challenges will be those of educating future generations of New Americans. Over time their opportunities will be those of forging economic links with the global economy.

Demography is destiny, and for California this means immigration. More so than the big cities of the past, Governor Schwarzenegger's state is well-positioned to survive middle-class flight—especially if the new governor realizes he should pay his closest attention to the people moving in.

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