As Americans, we like to pat ourselves on the back for welcoming immigrants. But the “give me your tired, your poor” refrain periodically wears thin. And this time, the nativist impulse is not just a border phenomenon: even interior states from Colorado to Georgia have proposed legislation that penalizes new arrivals. Why have immigration politics turned “minuteman” ugly?
One explanation is that familiarity breeds conflict. As recently as 1990, just six states – California, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey and Illinois – were home to nearly three-quarters of all immigrants, and in only 17 states did immigrants comprise as much as 5 percent of the population. Since then, the immigrant population has more than doubled outside the six magnet states; immigrants now represent more than 5 percent of the population of 29 states, and more than 10 percent in 15 of them.

Some of the friction is also due to demographic disconnect. Immigrants may be taking poorly paid construction, service and retail jobs that would otherwise go begging in fast-growth states. But unlike earlier waves, they are moving to small towns and suburbs, where clashes of culture and language can easily be inflamed. Thus, much of the new hostility is bubbling up in whiter parts of the nation’s heartland, rather than in established polyglot regions, which have long benefited from immigrants’ presence.

Don’t despair, though: If history is a guide, these new destinations will adapt and eventually become more welcoming to immigrants – and prosper as a consequence.