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ELECTION 2000 SPECIAL EDITION

The New, Regional U.S. Politics

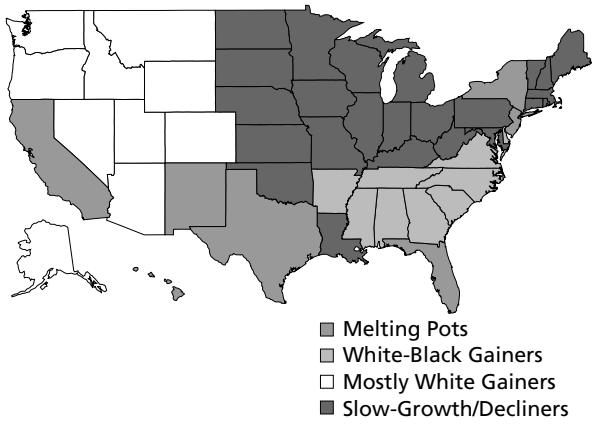
by William H. Frey

The results of the 2000 presidential election and those of several to come will be influenced by sharp regional shifts in America's voting population, shifts that began in 1990. These new voting blocs are shaped by the continued concentration of new immigrant minorities—Hispanics and Asians—into selected "melting-pot states"; by shifts of white middle-class suburbanites from large coastal metropolises to fast-growing parts of the "New Sun Belt" (states in the South Atlantic and western regions); by the return of African Americans to the South; and by the nonmigration of some of the most sought-after swing groups of voters that George Bush and Al Gore are vying for.

These trends are beginning to cement distinct regional differences in the demographic profiles of the country's voting population. While the new migration patterns may have a bigger impact on fast-growing destination states, they also affect stagnating states of origin by increasing the political clout of the groups left behind. In fact, three highly prized constituencies in the current election—white working wives, white "forgotten majority" men (the male half of the neglected white working class profiled in a recent book by political analysts Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers), and whites ages 65 and older—make up a

Continued on page 2

Voters on the Move



Source: Author's analysis of U.S. Census Bureau sources.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

PRB

Migrating Votes *Continued from page 1*

disproportionate share of the residual populations in slow-growing interior states that form the battleground for the contest ahead.

Melting-Pot States

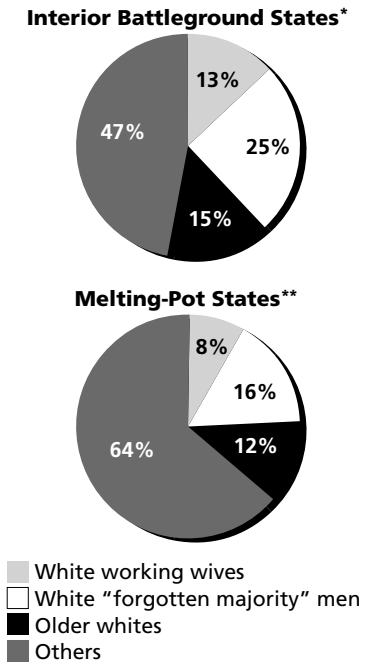
The most dramatic migration-related change in the nation's voting-age population since 1990 has been the influx of new immigrant minorities. Between Census Day 1990 and Election Day 2000, the combined voting-age populations of Hispanics and Asians will have increased from 19.9 million to 29.5 million. Four states—California, Texas, Florida, and New York—have garnered 61 percent of these gains and are now home to almost two-thirds of the combined Hispanic and Asian voting-age population. These states, combined with Hawaii, New Jersey, and New Mexico, are considered "Melting Pots" (see map on page 1) and represent constituencies that are very different from those in other parts of the country. Non-Hispanic whites constitute only 61 percent of the voting-age population in these states (compared with 74 percent of the voting-age population in the United States), while Hispanics and Asians make up 29 percent.

Although new immigrant minorities tend to vote in significantly lower numbers than do other members of the population, Bush and Gore are still paying attention to them, both symbolically—by speaking Spanish when visiting Hispanic neighborhoods—and in policy prescriptions for greater efficiency in the Immigration and Naturalization Service, improved public education, and increased support for family values. Both candidates are aware that the combined Hispanic and Asian share of California's voting-age population is projected to increase (from 40 percent in November to 52 percent in 2015).

Immigration is not the only factor increasing the visibility of Hispanics and Asians in these melting-pot states. New York, New Jersey, and California lost white voting-age population during the 1990s because white suburbanites in large, congested metropolises like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco chose to reside in smaller, less-populated communities. These moves continue to change the demographics of both origin and destination states.

How Shares of Key Demographic Groups Differ Across States

Voting-age populations, 1999



* Interior battleground states include Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Missouri.

** Melting-pot states include New York, New Jersey, Florida, Texas, New Mexico, California, and Hawaii.

Notes: White working wives are currently married white (non-Hispanic) women, ages 18 to 64, who work 20+ hours per week. White "forgotten majority" men are white (non-Hispanic) men ages 18 to 64 who are not college graduates. Older whites are (non-Hispanic) whites ages 65 and older.

Source: Author's analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data.

Whites Move to the New Sun Belt

Migration to the Sun Belt is an old story. What's new in the past decade is a large component of nostalgic white suburbanites who seek more traditional suburban communities no longer available in the expensive, congested suburbs of the Northeast or in California coastal metropolises. Many of these suburbanites from New York head to Southeast coastal states, and many from California head to the western states. Since 1990, the white voting-age population has increased by more than 22 percent in Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Arizona, and Colorado. Thirty-six percent of the nation's gain in the white voting-age population took place in the non-California West. Georgia, the Carolinas, and Tennessee increased their white voting-age populations by more than twice the national rate of 6 percent.

The new residents of these "New West" and "New South" states have come from all parts of the country, but largely from California and metropolitan New York. They have brought with them a host of "suburban" demographic attributes that should reinforce middle-class, moderate conservative voting constituencies in the new areas. The West has also attracted young, itinerant professionals who tend to be political independents. The third group for both the West and the Southeast is made up of white retirees who, while probably economically conservative and somewhat financially stable, like to be assured of the solvency of the Social Security system.

While the white newcomers to the New Sun Belt may share some suburban, middle-of-the-road values with the whites who have grown up in these states, the more cosmopolitan origins of the former may make them more socially liberal on issues such as gun control (in the West) or abortion and religion (in the South). In the South, the influx of suburban whites has been accompanied by another influx that should moderate the tenor

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Continued on page 6

White Voters Exercise Staying Power *Continued from page 2*

of political discourse on social issues: Blacks have been moving back to the South.

Blacks Return to the South

Currently, 53 percent of the nation's black voting-age population resides in the South. Between 1990 and 1999, the South received a net gain in black voting-age migrants of 326,225 from the rest of the United States. The newcomers are a mixed group: middle-class blacks drawn to the booming New South economies; working-class blacks who turned away from manufacturing restructuring in the North; and retirees who preferred to relocate in southern communities than in the West. While most African American newcomers will be receptive in November to issues such as affirmative action, those in the middle class are apt to be receptive to targeted tax cuts, school vouchers, and partial privatization of the Social Security system.

The reconsolidation of blacks in the South, combined with the influx of northern suburban whites, will keep the South a distinct but more liberal region than in the past. Recent Republican-to-Democratic gubernatorial shifts in Alabama, South Carolina, and Mississippi can be attributed in part to the votes of these new migrants. The states categorized as "White-Black Gainers" in the map are emblematic of these new trends. On Election Day, their voting-age population will be 74 percent white, 22 percent black, and less than 4 percent Hispanic and Asian.

Minimum Growth, Maximum Impact

There are states in the interior of the country whose gains in voting-age populations have been relatively modest, but the swing voters in these states are important for the upcoming election. (See states shown as "Slow Growth/Decliners" in the map on page 1.)

These states have larger shares of older, middle-income, and white populations than other parts of the country. Three particular groups of swing voters with a large presence in these states are white working wives, white "forgotten majority" men, and older whites. The first two groups have long been taken for granted by Democrats and Republicans. According to Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers, authors of *America's Forgotten Majority*, these groups seem to have gotten lost in the shuffle as attention was paid to more upscale "soccer moms" in the 1992 and 1996 presidential races. This time around, though, both major presidential contenders are courting these swing voters by emphasizing "compassionate" policies or a willingness to fight for working-class families. Both candidates are also courting white older people, who consistently vote in large numbers. Candidates assure them that Social Security will remain solvent and that they will not have to bear high prices for prescription drugs.

The shares of these three groups in the combined voting populations of key "battleground states"—Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Missouri—show the groups' inflated political clout, compared with other states and with the country as a whole. Together these three groups made up 53 percent of the voting-age population of these states in 1999. In contrast, the groups constituted only 36 percent of the voting-age population of melting-pot states and only 46 percent of the total U.S. voting-age population.

Because of the two-year lag in translating Census 2000 results into congressional seats (and Electoral College votes), the 2000 election offers states a final chance to cast electoral votes based on their 1990 populations. For most of the six battleground states discussed above, this is a bonus; Pennsylvania is likely to lose two electoral votes and Ohio, Illinois, and Wisconsin are likely to lose one each in the reapportionment that will take place after the 2000 census. Thus, voting residents of the states, and especially white working women, "forgotten majority" men, and older whites, will have a disproportionate impact when selecting the next president.

All Politics Is Regional

It's clear that new demographic divides have emerged across the country. More so than in the past, presidential candidates' speeches, public service announcements, and debates are seen nationwide and must try to bridge those divides. No wonder the candidates craft their messages carefully to appeal to and not offend important groups in these different regions. Who could not agree with a candidate espousing to be "a uniter and not a divider"? Or with one who is not afraid to champion traditional family values through frequent public displays of affection with his spouse? In the politics of the future, with the regions becoming more demographically distinct, presidential campaigns will become ever more careful balancing acts. ■

WebExtra!
Additional graphics and statistics for individual states can be found on PRB's website: www.prb.org.