

BY WILLIAM H. FREY

## Regional demographic

shifts have always been a driving force in shaping American politics. And the latest numbers released from the 2000 census, along with the startling results of last November's presidential election, suggest that the political landscape is once again changing in profound ways.

At the center of this change is the rise of what I call the New Sunbelt as a distinct political force. In recent decades, the conventional wisdom of political geography pitted largely Democratic, liberal-leaning cities against primarily Republican conservative suburbs. For decades, big city mayors and urban legislators catered to their minority, blue collar and labor union constituencies, while suburban politicians favored the causes of their mostly white middle class – notably the causes of lower taxes and greater local autonomy.

To be sure, there were regional nuances coloring this political divide. The conservative solid Democratic South gave way to the conservative solid Republican South, even as it held onto a distinct regional social perspective. By the same token, Northeasterners held more distinctly liberal regional points of view that differed sharply from the predilections and voting patterns of their socioeconomic counterparts in the right-leaning South, more independent West and middle-of-the-road Heartland states.

Yet within each region, the division between city and suburb formed a bright-line

boundary. A suburban residence represented success for generations of families who aspired to a middle-class lifestyle they could share with neighbors who aspired to like values. This stood in contrast to the demographically heterogeneous urban polyglot – the very poor and very rich, minorities and immigrants, young professional singles and older retirees – all of whom lacked the desire or the wherewithal to locate in comfortable suburbs.

But the new census and recent election results suggest that suburbs are losing their collective identity. Largely middle-class white and African-American households are migrating from the old, congested, expensive suburbs of the Northeast and West Coast toward low-density communities of all sizes in the nation's Southeastern and less-urbanized Western states. Like the early suburbanites, these new regional migrants are looking for an easier lifestyle and co-residence with citizens who share their values and more middle-class political perspective.

At first glance, this migration might be seen as an extension of the long-term redistribution of population from the Frost Belt to the Sunbelt. But a closer look at the new census results, recent migration statistics and the

**BILL FREY** is a senior fellow at the Milken Institute specializing in demography.

November 2000 election suggests these movers are creating a new suburban-like category of states that can be termed the New Sunbelt. These states lie at the periphery of the historically prominent Sunbelt destinations: California, Texas and Florida. While these three states still attract migrants, they have become more urbanized. Their growth has been dominated by immigration from

abroad, rather than from other parts of the United States. This is especially the case for California, which in recent years has lost more domestic migrants than it gained.

New Sunbelt states have drawn their new residents from other parts of the U.S., drawing the younger middle class and affluent baby boomers who hold middle-of-the-road views on social and economic issues. Their



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exodus from suburbs of more cosmopolitan, liberal-leaning urban areas on the coasts will forge clearer divides – demographic, cultural and political – between the states of the New Sunbelt and the more congested Melting Pot states in the old Sunbelt and Northeast.

The 2000 census highlights the ascendancy of these New Sunbelt states in terms of population. The fastest growing states of the 1990s were Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Idaho and Georgia; each increased its growth rate significantly over the 1980s. North Carolina, another New Sunbelt star, increased its growth from 12 percent in the 1980s to 22 percent in the 1990s. Indeed, most of the New Sunbelt states accelerated their population growth substantially in the past decade.

The reapportionment of the House of Representatives in the wake of the new census also highlights their increased political importance. Seven of the 12 congressional seats that shifted between states went to the New Sunbelt: Arizona with two; Georgia with two; Nevada, Colorado and North Carolina with one each. The remaining five seats went to the

premier old Sunbelt states: Texas, Florida, California. This is down from a collective gain of 14 seats that these three states enjoyed after the 1990 census-based reapportionment.

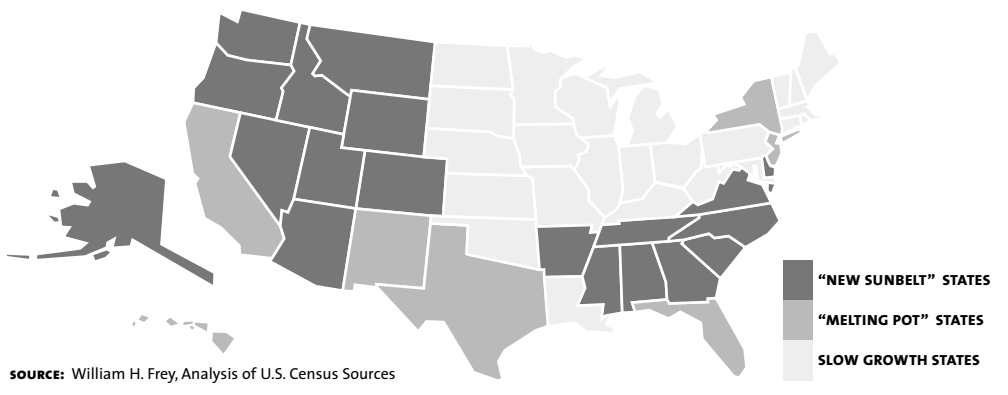
Moreover, in the recent presidential election all but three of the New Sunbelt states (Washington, Oregon, Delaware) favored the Republican candidate. Al Gore won most large Melting Pot states (California, New York and New Jersey, as well as New Mexico and Hawaii) and those in the slow-growing part of the country (Illinois, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Massachusetts and Connecticut as well as Maryland, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Maine, Rhode Island and Vermont).

Our own analysis strongly implies that recent population movement patterns are contributing to the new political geography. It suggests that different constituencies will emerge in regions that we classify as the New Sunbelt, the Melting Pot states and the Slow Growing states that are located largely in the Snow Belt.

## WHITE SHIFTS TO THE NEW SUNBELT

Since 1990, the white voting-age population

## THE NEW POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY



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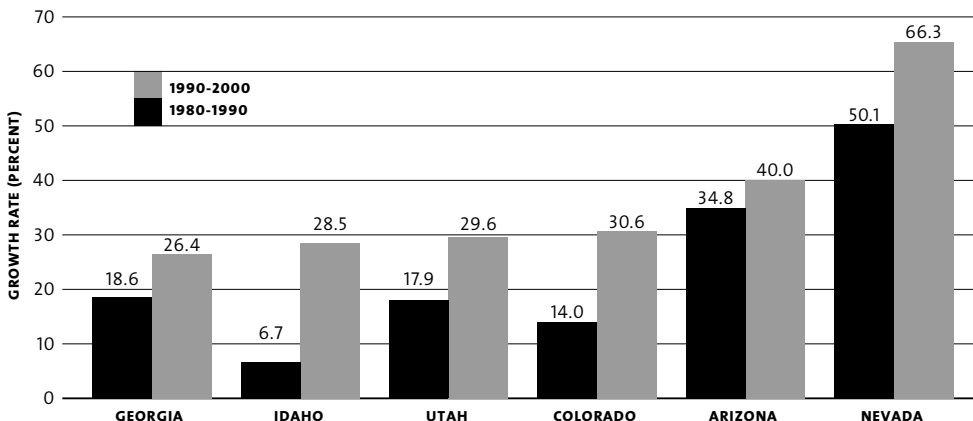
increased by more than 22 percent in each of these states: Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Arizona and Colorado. Thirty-six percent of the nation’s gain in this group took place in the non-California west. Georgia, the Carolinas and Tennessee increased their white voting aged populations by 5.5 percent, more than twice the national rate.

The voters added to these New West and New South states come from all parts of the country, but the dominant origins are California and metropolitan New York. Indeed, from 1990 to 1999, California contributed to 71 percent of the “rest of the West” net white migration gains, while New York and New Jersey contributed to 65 percent of net white migration gains for South Atlantic states. They infuse new destinations with suburban

demographic attributes that should reinforce middle-class moderate-conservative voting constituencies that already exist in those areas. The West is also noted for its attraction to young itinerant professionals who tend to be more independent – and libertarian – in their politics. A third group of new arrivals to both the West and Southeast are white retirees with some financial resources who, though economically conservative, like to be reassured about the solvency of the Social Security system.

While the white arrivals to both these New Sunbelt regions share middle-of-the-road values with the home-grown whites, their more cosmopolitan origins may make them more liberal on social issues and less opposed to gun control (in the West) or abortion (in

**GROWTH IN NEW SUNBELT STATES**



## **INSTITUTE VIEW**

the South). In the latter region, the influx of new suburban whites is accompanied by another new influx that should serve to moderate the social tenor of political discourse: the return of blacks from the North.

### **BLACKS GO SOUTH**

The 1990s represented something of a full-circle shift in black migration, countering the trend of most of the last century. More blacks from the other census regions (Northeast, Midwest and West) moved to the South than left the region. Between 1990 and 1999, the South picked up a net gain in black voting-aged migrants of 326,000 from the rest of the United States. Indeed, on Election Day 2000, 53 percent of the nation's black voting-age

population resided in the South. Several subgroups made up this movement: middle-class blacks drawn to the vibrant New South economies, working-class blacks who were turned away from manufacturing restructuring in the North, and black retirees who are more likely to relocate in southern communities than those in the West.

Yet, it is the increasing numbers of baby boomer professional blacks who will moderate the tone of both Republican and Democratic appeals on middle-of-the-road economic issues and away from the thinly disguised racial politics of the past. While African-American newcomers will certainly be receptive to traditional black Democratic constituency issues like affirmative action, the middle-class among these newcomers will



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also be receptive to more moderate proposals like targeted tax cuts, school vouchers and partial privatization of Social Security. By the same token, the new white migrants will be less likely to side with long-time residents on conservative cultural issues.

The reconsolidation of blacks in the South, along with in-migration of northern suburban whites, won't blur the South's distinct regional politics, but it will make these states more progressive. The Southern states we have classed as part of the New Sunbelt are emblematic of these new trends. On Election Day 2000, their voting-age population was 22 percent black, 74 percent white and less than 4 percent Hispanic and Asian.

**MELTING POT STATES**

Surely, the most dramatic migration-related change in the nation's electorate since 1990 was the infusion of new immigrant minorities. Between the last two censuses the combined voting-age populations of Hispanics and Asians increased by 9.6 million, to 29.5 million over all. Moreover, the impact of the increase was magnified by their concentration in a handful of states. California, Texas, Florida and New York garnered 61 percent of these gains and are now home to almost two-thirds of the combined Hispanic and Asian population. We call these states, along with New Jersey, Hawaii and

New Mexico, the Melting Pot states. Here, non-Hispanic whites represent only 61 percent of potential voters, while Hispanics and Asians constitute 29 percent of voting-age residents.



It is true that new immigrant minorities tend to vote in significantly lower numbers than the remaining population. Nonetheless, both George Bush and Al Gore paid attention to the changing demographics when visiting Melting Pot states – both symbolically, by speaking Spanish when visiting Hispanic neighborhoods, and in their policy prescriptions, by favoring reforms in the Immigration and Naturalization Service, improved public education and support for family values. Both

## **INSTITUTE VIEW**

were aware of California's drastic Republican-to-Democratic shift in state offices, which was attributed in part to the perceived anti-immigration sentiment of the former Republican governor Pete Wilson. The beat goes on: Hispanic and Asian share of the Golden State's voting-aged population is projected to increase from 40 percent in November 2000 to 52 percent in 2015.

Immigration is not the only cause for the

toral coalitions. One reason is that they are strategic states; despite George W. Bush's victories in Texas and Florida, most Melting Pot states are likely to tilt toward Democrats on liberal issues. Similarly, the changing demographics of the New Sunbelt states are likely to keep them in the columns of more moderate and conservative Republican candidates. The swing states are thus likely to include a number of what we label Slow Growing states.

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rise of Hispanic and Asian visibility in the Melting Pot states. New York, New Jersey and California exhibited a decline and out-migration of their white voting-age populations over the course of the 1990s. In large measure this reflects the exodus to the New Sunbelt, and this helps to cement differences in the constituencies of both groups of states.

### **SLOW GROWING STATES**

Much attention has been paid to the dominant-destination states for immigrants, white suburbanites and African-Americans. Still, there is a broad swath of states in the interior of the country whose population gains have been relatively modest or nil. The voting-age population of each has grown slower than the national rate of 11.4 percent between the 1990 census and Election Day 2000.

These slow-growing and declining states were important in the last election and will remain important to building winning elec-

Further, key demographic segments that were recently designated to be important "swing voter" groups have a disproportionate weight in these states. This is because the demography of Slow Growing states exaggerates the importance of groups who have not moved to faster-growing parts of the country. Thus, they are home to older, whiter and more middle-income populations than other parts of the country.

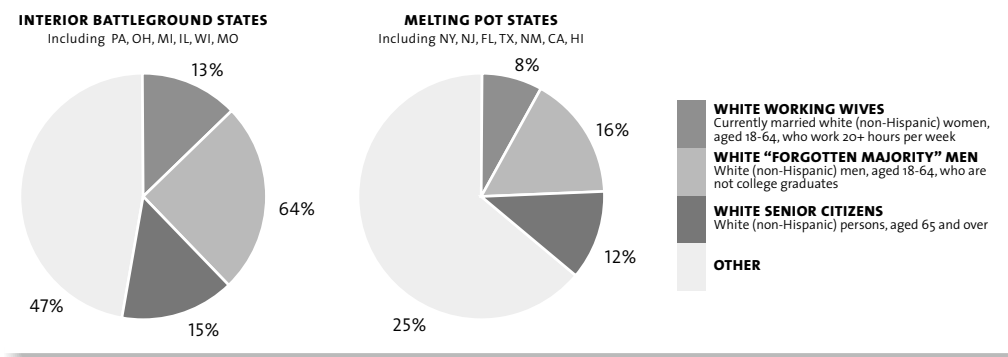
Swing-voter groups with a large presence in these states include white working wives, white "forgotten majority" men and white seniors. According to Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers, authors of *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters* (Basic Books, 2000), these groups seem to have been lost in the shuffle as more attention was paid to upscale "soccer moms" in the 1992 and 1996 presidential races. Major presidential contenders court these groups by emphasizing "compassionate" policies or a

willingness to fight for “working class families.” White seniors, the third group, tend to vote in disproportionately high percentages. Their vote was also courted by both candidates in 2000 – hence the high profile of Social Security and Medicare prescription drug insurance.

From a demographic perspective, the sig-

are shaping new demographic divides now emerging. The directed destinations of middle-class and upscale white suburbanites to the New Sunbelt, the migration of blacks to the South, the clustering of new ethnic minorities in Melting Pot states, and an expanded number of interior Slow Growing states with increasingly older, whiter populations,

**HOW SHARES OF KEY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS DIFFER ACROSS STATES (VOTING-AGED POPULATIONS, 1999)**



nificance of all three groups is inflated because they reside in swing states from which disproportionate numbers of younger, minority or more upscale groups have moved away. This can be seen by looking at the share of each of these three groups in the combined voting populations of six “battleground” states (Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin and Missouri) in the 2000 election. Together, the three groups represented 53 percent of the voting-aged population of these states. By contrast, they constitute only 36 percent of the voting-aged population of Melting Pot states and only 46 percent of the total United States voting-age population.

**THE NEW REGIONAL POLITICS**

Recent migration and immigration patterns

are creating regional divides with distinct sets of constituencies and issues. More than in the past, presidential candidates’ speeches, public service announcements and debates are seen nationwide, and they play quite differently in one area from another.

No wonder the presidential candidates were careful in crafting their messages so as not to offend important groups within different regions. Who could object to a candidate claiming to be “a uniter and not a divider”? Or one who is not afraid to display traditional family values, via frequent public displays of affection with his spouse? In the politics of the future, with the regions becoming more demographically distinct, national presidential campaigns will become ever more delicate balancing acts. **M**