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“Three America’s: The Rising Significance of Regions

By William H. Frey*

For much of the twentieth century and especially in the Post-World War II decades, “moving to the suburbs” meant escaping the dense, heterogeneous urban polyglot in favor of a more bucolic and safe middle-class lifestyle to be shared with neighbors of similar backgrounds and values. It was a move from New York City to Long Island, or from downtown LA to the San Fernando Valley. Back then, the bright line distinction between the very different urban and suburban worlds could be traversed with merely a local move. Still, continued interaction between them, be it for commuting, shopping, or recreation, was required by residents of both.

Results from the 2000 Census show a fading of these local cultural boundaries in favor of increasingly sharp regional ones. These new regional divisions are being shaped by very different immigration and domestic migration flows that are creating the distinction between a ‘Melting Pot’ region, and what can be called ‘The New Sunbelt’-- national counterparts to the local, but now receding, ‘city-suburb’ dichotomy.

The states associated with these regions and a third one, the slow growing ‘Heartland’ region are depicted on Map 1. Each of these regions are taking on their own demographic personalities, a development that flies in the face of the conventional view that we are becoming a ‘single melting pot’ nation. Just as important is the emergence of

an entire region, The New Sunbelt, which is essentially taking on the attributes of classic suburbs which used to ring large cities in most of the country.

(US Map here)

The New Sunbelt

This distinct region might be characterized as ‘America’s Suburbs’ because of the demographic dynamics which are creating its growth. These thirteen states, located primarily in the southeast and west, comprise about a fifth of the nation’s total population and represent the fastest growing states outside of the Melting Pot. Collectively, their populations grew by twenty-four percent over the 1990s, compared to only thirteen percent for the nation as a whole. While most of the nation’s growth relies heavily on immigration and new immigrant minorities, the New Sunbelt states grew mostly by the domestic migration (from other parts of the U.S.) of whites and blacks. Over the 1990s, domestic migration contributions to the New Sunbelt outdistanced those of immigration by a ratio of five to one; and seventy-nine percent of the nation’s white population gain was absorbed by these thirteen states.

Contributing to these gains are today’s suburbanites—young Gen-Xers, especially those forming families, and younger well-off elderly, a group whose numbers will explode in the next decade. Although white Ozzie and Harriet families (married couples with children) are declining nationally, nine of the ten states which gained such families in the

1990s are located in the New Sunbelt, led by Nevada where they grew by twenty five percent.

At first blush, this phenomenon might seem to be an extension of the old Frost Belt-to-Sunbelt migration. However, it is important to make a distinction between these New Sunbelt states and the Old Sunbelt juggernauts, California, Texas, and Florida. The latter states contain some of the nation's largest urban immigrant gateways which contribute significantly to their population gains. Moreover, their growth, while still substantial, has peaked. New Sunbelt states draw domestic migrants with more suburban characteristics and their growth trajectories are still on the rise (See Fig 1., 'Selected New Sunbelt and Old Sunbelt states: Growth 1980s and 1990s'). The congressional reapportionment based on Census 2000 awards seven new seats to New Sunbelt states, compared to only five for California, Texas, and Florida (After the 1990 Census, fourteen new seats went to the latter three states, compared with only five for the New Sunbelt.)

(Figure 1 here)

It is, in fact, the region's suburban-like character which is attracting whites and blacks to the New Sunbelt. In large numbers, they are trading the pricey, congested commuting towns of more urbane metropolises in California and the Northeast, for the more peaceful family friendly communities in this emerging suburban region. The fastest growth, within the New Sunbelt, is occurring in outer suburban areas and exurban rural counties, as well as smaller metropolitan areas (See Fig 2., 'White Dispersal to the

Suburbs’). In fact, the fastest growing counties in the U.S. are largely white, and white-gaining counties on the peripheries of New Sunbelt metro areas, such as in Atlanta (See Map ‘White Growth, 1990—2000, Atlanta Metro Area).

(Figure 2 and Atlanta Map here)

The creation of this new suburban region is being shaped by migrants who are leaving other parts of the country. In their exodus from the more cosmopolitan, liberal-leaning urban areas on the coasts, the participants in this new suburban flight are sharpening the differences—cultural and political, as well as demographic—between the New Sunbelt and Melting Pot regions.

The Melting Pot

While it is true that America is becoming more diverse, this race and ethnic diversity is hardly spread evenly across the country. The nine states that comprise the Melting Pot region, are home to seventy-four percent of the nation’s combined Hispanic and Asian populations, but only forty-one percent of our total population. These states include the six with greatest 1990s immigrant gains (CA, NY, TX, FL, IL, NJ) as well as New Mexico, Hawaii, and Alaska, states with large and varied ethnic minorities. Collectively Melting Pot states grew by thirteen percent in the 1990s. This growth was dominated by immigrants and immigrant minorities, with Asians and Hispanics accounting for seventy-six percent of the gains, and other non-white, non-black races contributing to an

additional seventeen percent (including American Indians, other races, and mixed races). As a group, these states have shown a loss of whites over the 1990s, although individual states, Florida, Texas, New Mexico, and Alaska, showed white gains, which were nonetheless dominated by those of minorities. Population growth in the Melting Pot region is overwhelmingly attributable to immigration, and the children of these immigrants, as these states registered a collective decline of 3.3 million domestic migrants over the 1990s.

While it is true that most counties in the United States gained Hispanics or Asians over the 1990s, the heavy clustering of these groups in the Melting Pot region is still a fact of life. These states comprise seventy percent of the US foreign-born population and seventy-six percent of all Americans who speak Spanish at home, compared with only thirty-seven percent of the nation's native born population, and only thirty-four percent of those who speak only English at home. Fifty-five percent of the nation's mixed race married couples reside in these states.

The attraction and retention of immigrant minorities to this region has to do, in part, with our immigration policy which emphasizes family reunification and encourages migration to occur in chains, connecting co-nationals at both origin and destination. It also has to do with the establishment, in these areas, of real ethnic communities replete with their own institutions, small businesses, clubs, churches, and social networks that are not easily replicated in other regions of the country. For new ethnic minorities from Latin America, Asia, or elsewhere, a move to the suburbs or another community within

the Melting Pot region is much more comfortable than becoming a 'pioneer' in other parts of the country. It is for this reason that the suburbs in the Melting Pot region are becoming almost as multi-ethnic as the cities.¹ And it is for this reason, that cities and suburbs in the Melting Pot region will increasingly have more in common with each other than cities and suburbs in the New Sunbelt.

The remaining piece of the explanation for why the Melting Pot region is becoming more distinct lies with the out migration of its middle-class whites. During the 1990s, the greater Los Angeles region lost over 800,000 whites, the greater New York region lost over 600,000 and losses of somewhat smaller magnitude were observed in immigrant gateway metros, Miami, Chicago, and San Diego. These white losses are occurring in both the city and suburban communities in these areas and reflect more a 'flight from urbanism' than a flight from diversity. Yet, the nature of these white losses select out the same population groups that are moving to the New Sunbelt: young people, married couples, parents, and new retirees. This represents an ongoing displacement of the white middle-class core populations of suburbs surrounding the nation's largest urban areas which, for the most part, are located in the Melting Pot states..

The good news is that their city and suburban populations are being infused with new immigrant minorities which, by virtue of their younger ages and proclivity for more traditional families, will be contributing to a new sense of community in these areas. The 2000 Census shows that the large city with the highest percentage of 'Ozzie and Harriet' families is Santa Ana, CA where such families comprise forty-two percent of all

households. Close behind are Anaheim, CA, San Jose, CA, and El Paso, TX, where at least three out of ten households are traditional families.

The Heartland

The Heartland region is consists of the remaining twenty-nine states (including DC) that have in common relatively modest growth levels and populations that are largely white or white and African American. Heartland states comprise thirty nine percent of the US population. They include all northeastern and midwestern states that are not classed as ‘Melting Pots’, and selected southern and western states that are lagging in population growth. The least racially diverse of the three regions, it is eighty-one percent white and twelve percent black, where blacks are primarily located in the region’s industrial cities. Only about fourteen percent of the nation’s Asian and Hispanic 1990s gains came to the Heartland, but this small infusion of minorities helped to stem losses in several of its declining cities.

A large part of the Heartland has not attracted many migrants for decades. This is reflected in its older age structure and the fact that a high percentage of its population was born in-state (78% in Pennsylvania, compared with only 24% in Nevada) Its suburbs are more middle-aged and poised toward rapid “graying” in contrast to their counterparts in the New Sunbelt or Melting Pot regions, which have been attracting more Gen-Xers and

immigrants. This means that these states will have larger shares of Baby Boomers, now spanning their mid-thirties to early fifties, whose influence will be considerable on the Heartland's government decisions, consumer spending patterns, and politics. As we have seen in the November 2000 Bush-Gore election, several important 'swing states' are located in the Heartland, and this will serve to magnify the national visibility of issues espoused by its relatively older, whiter and more blue collar population.

How Sharp the Divide?

The fact that new regional distinctions are taking precedence over the older, local ones raises the question: Can these divides across regions be bridged as easily as those across local areas? After all, the picture being painted here is of one region (The Melting Pot) possessing the youngest age structure, the most multi-ethnic population, and likely to be the most economically vibrant in the global economy; a second region (The New Sunbelt) becoming more suburban and middle-class, with its residents choosing to live in safe, dispersed communities; and a third (The Heartland) having the least exposure to new immigrant minorities as it becomes older and whiter and more stagnant.

In some respects, these distinctions overlay the 'Red and Blue America' state map displayed by *USA Today* to depict the results of the Bush-Gore election. Subject to much discussion by pundits and the media,² a prevalent thesis holds that Blue America (who voted for Gore) represents a more individualistic, secular, and liberal lifestyle; whereas Red America (who voted for Bush) adheres to a more community and family-centered

religious and conservative way of life. It is tempting to apply these interpretations to our three regional categories. In fact, our Melting Pot region coincides closely with 'Blue America' since most of these states (Florida, Texas and Alaska excepted) voted for Gore. As a group, the residents of these states are culturally diverse, economically heterogeneous and would favor a larger government role, especially for education and programs directed to the less well off, not to mention support for affirmative action type initiatives.. The Melting Pot region is also more cosmopolitan and tends to attract the educated, some might say, culturally elite class that tends to be more agnostic with regard to the role of religion.

Yet, it would be difficult to square 'Red America' with our other two regions because the New Sunbelt, to an increasing degree, is comprised of refugees from the more urbane Melting Pot region. While they may be in quest of family-friendly neighborhoods and hold conservative suburban views on economic issues, their roots will make them take a more moderate stance on social issues such as abortion, gun control, and affirmative action. In this respect, they will pull more traditional "old south" and "frontier west" attitudes toward the center of the ideological spectrum. In fact, it is the Heartland which most closely fits the stereotype of Red America, given its whiter, older, and more socially conservative population. Still, suburbanites in several Heartland states surprised the pundits by voting Democratic in the November 2000 presidential election, even though they were seen as belonging to 'Red America', culturally.

Rather than reflecting these two Americas, I would prefer to cast the three regions as national counterparts to the well-known local distinctions: urban, suburban, and rural. The new regional white flight from Melting Pot to New Sunbelt regions is analogous to the older local white flight from the central city to its suburban ring. The difference is that, today, the mobility of both residents and jobs is much easier to accomplish; and for middle class Americans, lifestyle as well as economics is important in selecting a destination. Hence, while the Melting Pot region provides the intensity, ethnic diversity, and close contact that used to be associated only with cities; the New Sunbelt offers the peace, large lot sizes, and local control that have always attracted people to suburbs. Finally, the older more conservative rural areas of the past are now replicated by large swaths of the Heartland region.

What's missing in this new scenario is the opportunity that used to exist for day-to-day, face-to-face interaction between people from these different social worlds. Shoppers and theatergoers from the suburbs would have to interact with urbanites on a regular basis; children in growing young families would still be in close proximity to their grandparents who lived in rural areas or the city. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam refers to a 'sprawl civic penalty' that contributes to our overall civic disengagement.³ The fact that young couples, empty-nest boomers, and retirees will increasingly populate a region where sprawl is expanding rapidly, suggests that greater social isolation will result from this evolving trend. Moreover, the census trends discussed here reflect patterns that occurred prior to the September 11th terrorist attacks. On that day, white residents living in large cities or their suburbs were substantially more concerned about an attack in their

community than whites living in small towns or rural areas. (See Table 1) These new concerns about security may further reinforce an already strongly held white middle class preference for dispersed settlements.

(Table 1 here)

Within the Melting Pot states, however, there is already evidence of greater interracial dating and marriage, residential coexistence, and the propensity for second generation children to become proficient in English as well as in the language of their parents. “Melting” is indeed occurring within the Melting Pot regions, if not across the broader national landscape. These trends imply that an important national challenge for the present Century will be to find ways to bridge these new regional divisions between demographic communities with different lifestyles and values, but probably similar aspirations. National political parties, big corporations, religious and civic institutions as well as local governments will all be affected by this increasing social and geographic divide between urban and suburban America.

*William H. Frey is a demographer on the faculty of the University of Michigan Population Studies Center, and is a senior fellow at the Milken Institute in Santa Monica, CA. www.frey.demographer.org

¹ William H. Frey ‘Melting Pot Suburbs: A Census 2000 Study of Suburban Diversity’ *Census 2000 Series*, Center on Urban & Metropolitan Policy, The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC. June, 2001.

² Michael Barone. ‘49 Percent Nation’ *National Journal*, June 8, 2001 and David Brooks, ‘Are We Really One Country?: A Report from Red and Blue America’ *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2001 pg. 53—65.

³ Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone*. New York: Touchstone 2000