

America's Demographic Gifts

Despite anxieties, the changes underway in the population, particularly those related to ethnic composition and aging, will renew and revitalize us.



The United States faces many challenges in the 21st century as it seeks to remain a superpower. Much is made of the country's social and economic disparities, underinvestment in infrastructure and ability to compete in the global economy. Yet, unbeknownst to many, the U.S. has a demographic gift that can renew its vitality and ensure that it remains a beacon for the world.

Like much of the world, the United States is aging. In 2015, every member of the baby boomer cohort (born between 1946 and 1964) was 50 years of age and over. This, in fact is a gift. This generation of aging baby boomers can, with a revised public narrative, be

a resource for the nation. With expanding longevity, a greater likelihood of aging with fewer disabilities and activism well into the last quarter of life, being older is not the burden or the stigma that it was in the last century. Older adults represent an opportunity that is just beginning to be understood.

In addition to the resource of older adults, what might America's greatest demographic gift be in the 21st century? It is diversity, immigration and the nation's majority-minority destiny. Herein lies the potential for renewed vitality. The combination of ethnic minority groups (for instance, blacks and Asians) and immigrants from around the

world (e.g., Armenians, Persians, Somalis, Middle Easterners and Russians) will make the United States a majority-minority nation by 2050.

But one group in particular will lead that charge and symbolize the tremendous advantage that the United States has over much of the world, including the European Union. Latinos—Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Central Americans, Mexicans—are this country's emerging minority group and in due time will be the largest ethnic minority group in the country, surpassing the African-American population. By 2030, the United States will be both older (with a doubling of the 65-plus population) and more

diverse. But we need not wait until then to see what this means and understand the opportunity.

My home state, California, reached the majority-minority milestone in 2015. In locales such as Los Angeles, this occurred many years before, and today Latinos are the majority there. Great fears and insecurities were raised in the 1980s and 1990s, when demographers documented these inexorable trends. Would California decline? Would it be balkanized and

character." The Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primaries, the least reflective of America's diversity, heightened such insecurities. But herein lie the seeds of our demographic gift. The Economist magazine's "Special Report on America's Latinos" of March 2015 gave perhaps the clearest picture of our bright future. It raised the provocative question: When will America wake up and realize the demographic opportunity of its Latino population?

Would California's economy and strengths—technology, education, trade and more—be forsaken as it gets "overrun" by immigrants and "controlled" by Latinos and Asians? Those fears never materialized.

resemble something out of "Blade Runner"? Would the state's economy and strengths—technology, education, entertainment, tourism, trade—be forsaken as it gets "overrun" by immigrants and "controlled" by Latinos and Asians?

Those fears never materialized. Today, California proudly claims its mantle as the seventh-largest economy in the world and proves that its diverse leadership and majority-minority population have been gifts bringing revitalization and renewal.

Yet in this season of presidential politics, the public narrative from many candidates carries the fear that illegal aliens, refugees and immigrants will overrun this nation and change the "American

reluctance to invest in social needs (e.g., education, training, health care) and the anti-immigrant political narrative might squander that demographic advantage and alienate these groups.

This prescient perspective from our British friends lends credence to the tongue-in-cheek statement that Tea Party activists should adopt members of the undocumented population. It will be precisely on the future productivity and tax revenue of the emerging Latino population and on a youthful majority-minority nation that Medicare, Social Security and our national budget will depend. Indeed, surveys show that many of those who are most uncomfortable with diversity are, in fact, most dependent on those public benefits.

With the future at stake, we can be diminished by our fears or elevated by our possibilities. If we educate and engage a diverse young population; if we ensure that all can age with health, dignity and purpose; if we encourage understanding and collaboration across race, ethnicity and generation, the days ahead will be very bright.

So let's celebrate America's demographic gifts and welcome a 21st century with a new mosaic that can refresh and spread the American dream while reinforcing the enduring strength of our democracy.



The United States will become a
majority-minority nation by mid-century