

introduction

America's New Swing Region

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The United States is experiencing a period of rapid demographic change, and nowhere is the speed of change more rapid than in the Mountain West, which includes the states of Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah.* As this region has changed, its politics have changed as well. It should no longer be considered a reliably conservative and Republican area but rather a new swing region of the country. In the 2008 presidential election, Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico all went for Democrat Barack Obama, and these states are all sure to be hotly contested by the parties in 2012. It seems likely that Arizona will be added to that list in the near future.

How did this happen? How did a region where no state voted Democratic in any presidential election between 1968 and 1988, a region supposedly imbued with an unshakable libertarian ethos and a reverence for Reagan-style politics, become America's new swing region? The answer lies in ongoing processes that have dramatically increased the minority share of the region's population, brought in millions of new residents from outside the region, raised educational levels, replaced older with younger generations, and powered the rise of dynamic metropolitan areas where the overwhelming majority of the Mountain West population now lives.

*We do not discuss the smaller Mountain West states of Montana and Wyoming in this volume. When we refer to the Mountain West region in this book, we always exclude these states and focus on Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah.

In this volume, these processes of change are outlined in detail and connected directly to the shifting political terrain in the Mountain West. The chapters include

- a detailed examination of the political demography and geography of all six states (William Frey and Ruy Teixeira)

- an analysis of shifting voting patterns in five primary metros—Albuquerque, Denver, Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Salt Lake—that are the locus of growth and change in their respective states (Robert Lang and Thomas Sanchez)

- an assessment of race-ethnic changes in the Mountain West, especially the surge in the Hispanic population, and the political effects of those changes (Frey)

- a close look at the rising Millennial generation in the Mountain West and how it compares with both its counterparts in the rest of the country and older generations in its own region (Scott Keeter)

- a report on a unique 2010 survey of Mountain West residents in all six states, allowing comparisons across states of views on issue priorities; federal legislation like the health care, economic stimulus, and financial regulation bills; social issues like gay marriage; the role of government; the distinctive characteristics of Mountain West life; and much more (Karlyn Bowman and Teixeira)

- a detailed consideration of reapportionment and redistricting in the Mountain West and how their outcomes are being shaped by ongoing processes of rapid demographic and geographic change (David Damore).

Here are a few of the many findings from these chapters, selected to highlight the scale and dynamism of the changes transforming the Mountain West and its politics. In chapter 1, “America’s New Swing Region: The Political Demography and Geography of the Mountain West,” demographer William Frey and political scientist Ruy Teixeira provide detailed analyses of trends in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah. Trends are analyzed at the state level and by regions within states using specially created regions that permit analysis of eligible voter populations.

In Arizona, Frey and Teixeira find that the minority share of the state’s eligible voters, currently 31 percent, is rising fast (up 6 points over the 2000–10 period), while the working-age, white working-class (non-college-educated) share of eligible voters, currently 37 percent, is declining almost as fast. The rise of minority voters is sharpest in the Phoenix metro, where 66 percent of the state’s population resides.

While GOP candidate John McCain did carry Arizona in the 2008 presidential election, his 8-point margin would likely have been less without his

favorite son status, and it pales in comparison with the average 26-point margin Republican presidential candidates enjoyed in the 1968–88 period. This shift toward the Democrats has been strongest in the fast-growing Phoenix metro (a 19-point margin gain for the Democrats). Across the state, with the exception of the West region, higher population growth rates tend to correlate with increased Democratic voting.

In Colorado, the minority share of the state's eligible voters, currently 22 percent, is rising (up 3 points in the last decade), but so too is the share of working-age, white college graduates, up 2 points to 27 percent. In contrast, the white working-class share of eligible voters is declining very fast, down 6 points over the decade to 39 percent. The rise of minorities and decline of the white working class is sharpest in the Denver inner suburbs, while the rise of white college graduates is fastest in the city of Denver.

After voting Republican in every presidential election between 1968 and 1988, with an average GOP margin of 18 points, Colorado voted Democratic in 1992 by 4 points and again in 2008 by a margin of 9 points. The biggest gains since 1988 have come in the Denver inner suburbs (25-point margin gain), Denver city (29 points) and the Boulder metro area (38 points). Almost all Democratic-shifting counties over this period have grown in the last decade, while Republican-shifting counties tend to be a mix of growing and declining counties, especially in the East region.

In Idaho, Frey and Teixeira found that the minority share of the state's eligible voters, currently just 10 percent, is rising (up 3 points in the last decade) but—as in Colorado—so too is the white college graduate share, up 2 points to 18 percent. The white working-class share of eligible voters is declining fast, down 6 points over the decade, but at 55 percent, it is still very high. The rise of minorities and decline of the white working class are strongest in the Boise metro, where two-fifths of the state's population resides.

Idaho has voted Republican in every presidential election since 1964, typically by very wide margins. Unlike in Arizona and Colorado, the overall change since 1988 has been minimal—the GOP margin was 26 points in 1988 and 25 points in 2008. However, there have been countervailing changes within the state that have canceled one another out. The fast-growing Boise metro has seen a strong shift toward the Democrats since 1988 (14 points) while the much slower-growing Panhandle region has experienced an 18-point shift toward the GOP.

In Nevada, the fastest-growing state in the nation, the minority share of the state's eligible voters, currently 34 percent, is rising very rapidly (up 10 points in the last decade). The white working-class share of eligible

voters is declining just as fast, down 10 points over the decade. The rise of minorities and the decline of the white working class are sharpest in the Las Vegas metro area, where almost three-quarters of the state's population resides.

After voting Republican in every presidential election between 1968 and 1988, with an average GOP margin of 22 points, Nevada voted Democratic narrowly in 1992, by 3 points, and in 1996, by 1 point; it voted Democratic more authoritatively in 2008, by 12 points. The biggest gains since 1988 have come in the very fast-growing Las Vegas metro area (35-point margin shift toward the Democrats) and in the Reno metro (also a 35-point shift). The slowest-growing part of the state, the rural heartland, experienced the smallest shift toward the Democrats (15 points).

In New Mexico, Frey and Teixeira found that the minority share of the state's eligible voters, currently just over a majority (52 percent), is rising fairly rapidly (up 4 points in the last decade), with an almost equivalent decline in the white working-class share of eligible voters. The rise of minorities and the decline of the white working class are sharpest in the Albuquerque metro area, where 43 percent of the state's population resides.

After voting Republican in every presidential election between 1968 and 1988, though by a comparatively modest average margin of 14 points, New Mexico has voted Democratic in four of the last five presidential elections. The Democrats' largest margin, 15 points, came in 2008. The biggest gains since 1988 have come in the Albuquerque metro area, by far the fastest-growing area of the state (26-point margin shift toward the Democrats).

In Utah, the minority share of the state's eligible voters, currently just 12 percent, is rising moderately fast (up 3 points in the last decade), and, unusually, the white college graduate share is rising at about the same pace, up 3 points to 21 percent. The white working-class share of eligible voters is declining rapidly, down 6 points over the decade, but at 54 percent, it is still dominant. The rise of minorities and the decline of the white working class are strongest in the Salt Lake metro area, where two-fifths of the state's population resides, while the rise of white college graduates is strongest in the Ogden and North area.

Utah has voted Republican in every presidential election since 1964, typically by very wide margins, with an average GOP margin of 38 points in the 1968–88 period. By that standard, McCain's 28-point victory in 2008 represented some improvement for the Democrats, driven almost entirely by a substantial Democratic shift in the Salt Lake metro area (19-point margin gain since 1988). However, the rest of Utah, which is faster growing than

the Salt Lake metro area, has either remained the same (Ogden and North region) or moved slightly more toward the GOP (Provo and South).

The overall pattern of change is clear. Across the region, minorities and white college graduates are gaining while the white working class is declining rapidly. Typically, the shifts are sharpest in the large, dynamic metropolitan areas of the states in the region. And it is those metro areas that are playing the leading role in changing the politics of Mountain West states, turning Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico into accessible states for Democrats and moving Arizona rapidly in the same direction.

In chapter 2, “Metropolitan Voting Patterns in the Mountain West: The New and Old Political Heartlands,” geographers Robert Lang and Thomas Sanchez take a close look at the evolving politics of the region’s large metro areas. They point out that, counter-intuitively, the Mountain West is among the most urbanized areas in the United States, with an especially strong concentration of population in five rapidly diversifying “Mountain Mega” metro areas: Phoenix (66 percent of the state population); Denver (51 percent); Las Vegas (72 percent); Albuquerque (43 percent); and Salt Lake (41 percent). Population growth inside these metro areas, both overall and among minorities, is considerably outpacing growth outside.

Lang and Sanchez find that there was a consistent trend toward voting Democratic over the last decade in these metro areas, both in U.S. House elections (2000–10) and presidential elections (2000–08). Trends toward the Democrats have been noticeably more consistent within these areas than outside them, especially in House elections. The authors observe that while in 2000 all five metros voted Republican for the House, in 2010—a very good year for Republicans—only two of them did, and in one of them (Denver), the margin was a razor-thin .4 percentage points.

Lang and Sanchez conclude that the voting behavior of these five metro areas is shifting from its Republican foundations. In so doing, these areas have played a leading role in turning the “New Heartland” states of Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico into a critical swing bloc that has more electoral votes (20) than Ohio (18) and that could decide the next presidential election. Moreover, trends toward urbanization and diversification will reinforce these states’ swing status and likely add Arizona to the mix. Lang and Sanchez emphasize the centrality of rising Hispanic voters to this transformation. They remark: “These voters are to the New Heartland of the twenty-first century what white ethnic voters from southern and eastern Europe were to the Old Heartland in the twentieth century. They are now the potential deciding voters in any toss-up presidential election.”

In chapter 3, demographer William Frey focuses on the role of minority, especially Hispanic, voters in Mountain West politics. He starts by reviewing the effects of race-ethnic change on the nation as a whole, in particular by comparing fast-growing with slow-growing purple states. Fast-growing purple states are located in the Mountain West (including Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada) and the Southeast, and they feature larger minority shares of eligible voters and much faster growth of minority voters than their slow-growing counterparts. Frey points out that in 2008 minorities delivered to Barack Obama seven states where minorities did not make the difference in 2004 and that five of these were fast-growing purple states.

Frey cautions that the political effect of rapid minority growth in purple states is blunted by the “translation gap” between the number of eligible voters and the total population. For example, 77 of 100 whites in the national population are eligible to vote, while just 42 of 100 Hispanics are eligible. This is because the Hispanic population is younger and, especially, because of the large share of noncitizens among Hispanics. The translation gap heavily affects the Mountain West purple states of Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico. However, as Frey also shows, the race-ethnic voter profiles of these states still feature significant shares of minority voters that are growing fast despite the translation gap.

That growth will have a considerable effect on the politics of these states, including the overall structure of public opinion. Drawing on a special survey of Mountain West residents conducted for this volume, Frey shows that in addition to favoring a far softer line on immigration, Hispanic residents are far more favorable to President Obama, far more supportive of the new health reform law, and considerably more supportive of increased government involvement in areas like schools, health, and the environment. Frey concludes that

as young minority residents advance to voting age and make up ever larger shares of eligible voters, candidates for national, state, and local offices will need to cater to their interests in government solutions for the economy, good schools, affordable health care, and the environment. With respect to the political effects of minorities’ increased electoral clout, “demography is destiny.” In the short run, however, politicians will have to strike a delicate balance between the interests of minority populations and those of the typically larger white, Republican-leaning population.

In chapter 4, survey researcher Scott Keeter examines the rising Millennial generation in the Mountain West and compares it with both its counterparts in the rest of the country and older generations in its own region. Drawing on a rich store of data from the Pew Research Center as well as the survey of Mountain West residents conducted for this volume, Keeter finds that just as Millennials in the rest of the country are, Mountain West Millennials are more politically liberal than older generations in a variety of ways. They are more supportive of activist government, the social safety net, regulation, environmental protection, and the Democratic health care reform legislation. They also are more accepting of same-sex marriage and interracial dating and marriage and significantly less likely than older people to identify with a religious tradition.

The attitudes and values of Mountain West Millennials tend to be very close to those of Millennials in the rest of the country, but they tend to differ from those of Millennials outside the Mountain West on party affiliation and voting behavior. That is, while Mountain West Millennials are indeed less Republican than their elders, as one would expect from their attitudes and values, they are nevertheless considerably more Republican than their generation outside the region. For example, while 18- to 29-year-olds outside the region favored Obama in the 2008 election by 67 to 31, 18- to 29-year-olds in the Mountain West favored him by only 51 to 47. With respect to party identification, 18- to 29-year-olds outside the region gave the Democratic Party a 49-to-31 advantage over the Republicans in 2011, while Mountain West 18- to 29-year-olds were split about evenly (39 percent Democratic/40 percent Republican).

Keeter points out that Millennials were a positive factor for Democrats in the Mountain West in the 2010 election, helping Harry Reid keep his Senate seat and voting significantly less Republican than their elders in the Arizona races for U.S. Senate and governor. But he expects the loyalties of this group to be hotly contested in the upcoming 2012 election, given the possible large role of at least three states—Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico—in a tight presidential contest and the fact that despite the seemingly liberal attitudes of Mountain West Millennials, they remain relatively open to GOP appeals.

Keeter concludes that while the region's Millennials will likely be more Democratic in their voting than previous generations, their political distinctiveness will be felt beyond the polling place. The Mountain West's libertarian instinct will survive in this generation, but it will go hand in hand with support for environmental protection and the regulation that accompanies

it. Mountain West Millennials will also be more welcoming to immigrants and less likely to become embroiled in “culture war” conflicts over social issues. In that respect, Keeter argues, even conservative members of this cohort may be more true to their Western roots and libertarian tendencies than older generations in the region.

In chapter 5, survey researcher Karlyn Bowman and Ruy Teixeira report on a unique 2010 survey of Mountain West residents in all six states covered by this volume. The survey found that healthy majorities of Mountain West residents see themselves as more likely than other Americans to have a number of characteristics, including a tendency to engage with the outdoors (ranked first) and to support renewable energy (ranked third). Consistent with that ethos, Mountain West residents felt—by more than a 2-to-1 majority regionwide and with strong majorities in every state—that their state was better off “investing in wind and solar energy solutions that will generate clean, renewable energy sources and jobs for years to come” than “investing in proven technologies like clean coal and nuclear energy sources because they are guaranteed to produce jobs now.”

The second-ranked characteristic on the list was having to deal with the effects of immigration, and here too the survey found evidence that the issue tied the region together. Across the region and in five of the six states, immigration was the area where the most residents wanted to see more federal government involvement. And across the region and in every state, majorities of Mountain West residents felt that the new Arizona immigration law was either about right or did not go far enough. Nevertheless, residents across the region and in every state also felt that immigrants make a positive contribution to the country and supported a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants.

The survey also found some evidence of a libertarian bent, especially on gun rights, consistent with Mountain West residents’ view of themselves as being skeptical of federal government power. But other findings from the survey confounded the libertarian stereotype, as strong majorities across the region said that they wanted more federal and state government involvement in areas like protecting the environment, promoting renewable energy sources, cracking down on crime and drugs, guaranteeing quality public education, and creating jobs. The last two areas were also the top two issues—overall and in most states—that residents wanted their state elected officials to address. Regional residents also supported the idea that government regulation of business is necessary.

Moreover, Mountain West residents did not appear to be as tax sensitive as would be suggested by the libertarian stereotype. Regionwide and in every

state, majorities or pluralities felt that their federal taxes were “about right” and said that they did not mind paying federal taxes “because we each have a responsibility to contribute to the common good and to support those who can’t support themselves.”

Bowman and Teixeira note that the ongoing process of demographic change in the Mountain West should produce gradual shifts in public opinion across the region, given the internal demographics revealed by the poll, especially the differences between the Millennials and older generations, between minorities and whites, and among whites, between college-educated and working-class residents. Shifts include more support for government involvement in areas like education, energy, and the environment; less tax sensitivity; warmer attitudes toward immigrants and a path to citizenship for illegal residents; more support for free trade; and less support for socially conservative positions such as opposition to gay marriage. But they stress that the public opinion profile of the Mountain West will remain complex and contradictory, even in the relatively liberal states of Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico, which will be heavily targeted by the parties in 2012. They conclude that the region confronts the parties with “very challenging political terrain where nothing should be taken for granted and where conventional stereotypes about the Mountain West should be treated very, very cautiously.”

In chapter 6, political scientist David Damore takes a detailed look at the redistricting and reapportionment process in the Mountain West and at how outcomes are being shaped by ongoing demographic and geographic change. Damore notes that in the last decade no region in the United States experienced the magnitude of demographic and geographic change that swept through the Mountain West. The diversification and increased density of Mountain West populations have favored Democrats, turning a traditional Republican stronghold into a partisan battleground.

But will these changes be reflected in the reapportionment and redistricting processes set in motion by the 2010 census? That is where things start to get complicated. These processes are of Byzantine complexity, and there are many political and legal channels through which parties can influence outcomes. Thus, the extent to which demographic and geographic change is embodied in reapportionment and redistricting is highly contingent on partisan and legal maneuvering and is vigorously contested, as Damore shows for the outcomes of the 2001 redistricting process. Damore expects the final outcomes of the 2011 process to be just as vigorously contested, if not more so, because the issues raised by demographic and geographic change are sharper.

Further muddying these waters is the fact that while Democrats made considerable progress in the region over the decade, a good chunk of their gains was lost to the GOP in 2010. Particularly pertinent to the redistricting process was the Democrats' loss in 2010 of unified legislative and executive control in two states (Colorado and New Mexico), leaving them without unified control in any state. Republicans now have unified control in three states (Arizona, Idaho, and Utah) while three states have divided control (Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico). As Damore notes, "the Democrats' ability to use reapportionment and redistricting to solidify their gains in 2011 is likely to be limited; it is the Republicans who are better positioned to minimize the effects (at least temporarily) of the demographic forces working against the party in the region."

But Damore does believe that regardless of which party gains an advantage in a state's redistricting process, the real and undisputed loser will be rural interests. These interests have been overrepresented for too long, and their position is no longer sustainable under any process. Urban interests are on the rise, and ranching interests (in Idaho and Utah) and mining interests (in Colorado and Nevada) are likely to see their influence wane. Damore believes that the void created by the decline of rural legislators will be filled by minorities, particularly Hispanics. The question now is "whether all of these politicians will be taking office with a 'D' next to their names or whether some will be elected as Republicans."

All the chapters in this volume tell different aspects of the same story. This is not, as it were, your father's Mountain West. The demographic and geographic changes detailed throughout the volume have made the Mountain West the new swing region of the United States, a new reality that is unlikely to change anytime soon. Indeed, these studies suggest that the process of change will continue to unfold in this decade and that the contests between the parties will become only more intense and widespread.