Critical Topics in an Aging Society

The Politics of a Majority-Minority Nation

Aging, Diversity, and Immigration

Juan Fernando Torres-Gil, PhD · Jacqueline L. Angel, PhD

“I am proud of this work and excited by how helpful it can be to policy makers and citizens alike who care about improving their communities.”
—Julián Castro, Former Secretary of U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
(From the Foreword)

“As the twin demographic shifts of population aging and diversity speed forward in America, it is hard to imagine a timelier or more needed work.”
—Paul Irving, Chairman, Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging
(From the Foreword)

This timely and critical book takes on a new phenomenon facing the United States and poses the stark question: Will the United States be prepared by 2050, when its older population doubles and we become a majority-minority society? In the authors’ response, scholars, policy leaders, and the public are provided with the background and information that connect these two trends to contemporary public policy debates. Written with clarity and expertise, this book illuminates the changes and challenges that face the nation by concisely addressing a wide range of topics, including immigration reform, the politics of aging, and health and retirement security, and provides a glimpse of how the “next America” might look.

The authors draw on current data about longevity, diversity, and the growing Hispanic population in particular, to unfold the social, cultural, policy, and political implications for an aging and diversifying population. With case studies and real-world examples, the book outlines and analyzes the possible impact of this phenomenon on issues such as governance, public benefits, the long-term care workforce, and national security, and builds a broader framework with which to understand them. With combined experience in academia, government, and policy advocacy, the authors tackle the dramatic changes occurring across the United States and offer a road map to not only understanding but addressing these challenges and opportunities with reason and responsibility.

KEY FEATURES:

• Presents the most current statistics and data on demographics
• Written by an interdisciplinary team with combined experience in academia, government, and policy advocacy
• Includes case studies and real-world examples to build a broader framework of understanding
• Addresses social, policy, cultural, and political challenges facing a rapidly changing population and offers rational and respectful responses

Juan Fernando Torres-Gil
Jacqueline L. Angel

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The Politics of a Majority-Minority Nation
Juan Fernando Torres-Gil, PhD (Brandeis University), has a multifaceted career that spans the academic, professional, and policy arenas. He is professor of social welfare and public policy at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), adjunct professor of gerontology at the University of Southern California (USC), and director of the UCLA Center for Policy Research on Aging. He has served as associate dean and acting dean of the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs. His research on issues of the politics of aging, diversity, and health and long-term care, as well as on public policy challenges of entitlement reforms and the aging of the baby boomer cohort, have included seven authored and coedited books and more than 100 other publications, including *The New Aging: Politics and Change in America* (1991), *Lessons on Aging From Three Nations* (with S. Carmel and C. Morse, 2006), and *Aging, Health, and Longevity in the Mexican-Origin Population* (with J. Angel and K. Markides, 2012). His professional and public policy experiences are extensive and include serving three U.S. presidents: He was appointed by President Jimmy Carter to the Federal Council on Aging, by President Bill Clinton as the first U.S. Assistant Secretary on Aging, and by President Barack Obama as Vice Chair of the National Council on Disability. In addition, he has served as Staff Director for the U.S. House Select Committee on Aging; a board member of various organizations, including AARP and Justice in Aging; and a cochair of the National Academy of Sciences’ Forum on Aging, Disability, and Independence.

Jacqueline L. Angel, PhD (Rutgers University), is professor of public affairs and sociology and a faculty affiliate at the Population Research Center and LBJ School Center for Health and Social Policy at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research, funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Institute on Aging (NIA), examines the relationships linking family structures, inequality, and health across the life course, with a special focus on the impact of health and retirement policy on minority aging, the Hispanic population, and older Mexican Americans. She is the principal investigator of the NIA Conference Series on Aging in the Americas: U.S. and Mexico. Dr. Angel has authored, coauthored, or coedited 80 journal articles, 30 book chapters, and 11 books and edited collections. These include *Family, Intergenerational and Post-Traditional Society and Latinos in an Aging World* (with R. Angel, 2017); *Challenges of Latino Aging in the Americas* (with W. Vega, K. Markides, and F. Torres-Gil, 2015); and *Handbook of Sociology of Aging* (with R. Settersten, 2011). Dr. Angel is a fellow of the Behavioral and Social Sciences section of the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) and a senior fellow at the Sealy Center on Aging, University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) School of Medicine. She is a recipient of several awards, including the Jacob Institute of Women’s Health Charles E. Gibbs Leadership Prize for the best manuscript (2011), GSA Senior Service Scholar Award (2012), and Family Eldercare Jackie LeLong Leadership Award (2013). In 2017, Next Avenue named her among its Top 50 Influencers in Aging.
The Politics of a Majority-Minority Nation
Aging, Diversity, and Immigration

Juan Fernando Torres-Gil, PhD
Jacqueline L. Angel, PhD
To the late Robert (Bob) Binstock, a wonderful mentor and role model whose endless support in both our careers taught us more than we could have ever imagined.

From the first author—To the three women in my life: my grandmother Andrea, my mother Maria de Jesus, and my wife Elvira

From the second author—To the two men in my life: my husband Ron and my son Matthew
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Over the past two decades, leaders across our nation, especially in big cities and their suburbs, have focused intensely on reaping economic benefits by making their communities attractive to young people. From Richard Florida’s (2002) seminal *The Rise of the Creative Class* to scholarly analyses about the pursuit of young, well-educated denizens, tremendous effort has been spent trying to understand the costs and benefits of improving quality of life for Gen Z, millennials, and even Gen Xers like me.

But what about our senior citizens—the fastest growing demographic group in our country?

Today, smart local and state governments, as well as the federal government and the private sector, are spending more time, effort, imagination, and resources creating policy and making investments to address the needs of a generation of Americans who are living longer—and often healthier—than previous ones.

As Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, I had the opportunity to visit 100 communities across 39 states, during which I saw many effective and creative housing efforts. One of the most memorable, by the Cleveland Housing Authority, was a public housing community established specifically for grandparents who had stepped into the role of parents to raise their grandchildren. Today, nearly 3 million grandparents are doing so, but you would hardly know it by the way we’ve built our housing communities—senior housing for individuals on the one hand and family housing for mostly working-age parents with children on the other. This community in Cleveland did what good policy and sound investment should: It addressed a need based on how people are living now, not just on how they used to live. As America’s senior population continues to grow rapidly, policy makers can benefit immensely from
examples like Cleveland’s. Now, more than ever, we must be willing to challenge old policy approaches and assumptions we took for granted in years past.

The Politics of a Majority-Minority Nation: Aging, Diversity, and Immigration by Torres-Gil and Angel provides context and a path forward as America grapples with how to boost quality of life for a population that is not only growing older but also becoming more diverse. I am proud of this work and excited by how helpful it can be to policy makers and citizens alike who care about improving their communities.

For no matter who we are or where we come from, we can all agree that our seniors are supremely deserving of our best efforts to make their quality of life golden indeed—and, in doing so, make America better than ever in this 21st century.

Julián Castro
Former Secretary of U.S.
Department of Housing and Urban Development

REFERENCE

Foreword

It is gratifying when a book proves to be more than just an interesting read. Some books truly elevate awareness, shine a light, inspire, and push. So it is with The Politics of a Majority-Minority Nation: Aging, Diversity, and Immigration. Juan Fernando Torres-Gil and Jacqueline Angel ask: Will we—the brown and the gray—regress, retreating to our corners and age and ethnic tribes, or will we move forward, overcoming our divides, connecting and collaborating, and embracing the upside of a diverse society with such potential to improve lives? As the twin demographic shifts of population aging and diversity speed forward in America, it is hard to imagine a timelier or more needed work.

Torres-Gil and Angel provide a rich and carefully researched offering of data and analyses. They do not shy away from controversy, nor do they sugarcoat the great challenges that lie ahead as the nation struggles to come to grips with increasing diversity. But the authors also offer hope: a compelling blueprint, a vision of a better America that provides opportunity to stakeholders of all ages and ethnicities and maximizes the value of its most valuable resource, its human capital.

We are all faced with choices. Some will enthusiastically adapt to a new demographic future. Others, afraid of a different-looking America, will seek to frustrate change. Those of us who see the possibilities and potential in rising above our age and ethnic distinctions are reminded of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s entreaty about “the fierce
urgency of now.” Torres-Gil and Angel have given us a handbook and called us to action. The rest is up to us, and it is time to get to work.

Paul Irving
Chairman, Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging
Chairman of the Board, Encore.org
Distinguished Scholar in Residence, University of Southern California
Davis School of Gerontology
This is a cutting-edge book for all those who care about the pressing issues of a nation becoming older while it becomes diverse. As a Member of Congress concerned with issues of our older Americans, the needs of a diverse and younger America, and the debates around immigration reform, I believe this book provides an important and factual context to understand why these debates are occurring and how, historically, this nation has faced similar dilemmas about demographic change.

This book’s central message is that we must prepare for our demographic destiny in 2050, when aging baby boomers will have doubled the number of senior citizens in our country, and when changing demographics will find the United States becoming a majority-minority society. The societal implications of these changes will require us all to move beyond the current debates about aging, diversity, and immigration and move toward the common concerns we all have, regardless of age, income, race, ethnicity, and how we all came to this great nation. The authors remind us that a social contract is possible if we focus on key questions, including the following:

Who will care for us?
How can we insure financial and health security for all?
Why must we invest in young immigrants and diverse populations to insure the solvency of public benefits (Medicare, Social Security, Medicaid, the Older Americans Act) for older Americans?
And how do we move toward the milestone of 2050 and become an even greater nation with a social contract that ensures a quality of life for all?
We may not agree with all the policy recommendations and positions presented in this book but we can agree that a national dialogue is needed to prepare for a nation becoming older and more diverse. By using the data, facts, and policy analysis of this book, we can have a more reasoned and constructive discourse about the future greatness of our nation and its responsibility to everyone, regardless of how and when they have arrived to the United States, whether in the last few years or early in the formative decades of the nation. This is an important book for our time and a must read for all who strive for a more unified society.

Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard (California)
Our nation is in the midst of a 21st-century adjustment. It is facing dramatic changes in all spheres: social, cultural, political, economic, technological, and, in particular, demographic. These changes are unsettling, in part because of the speed of transition. For example, we have seen significant changes over the past 50 years in how our country looks, acts, and responds to change. Our neighborhoods have changed in terms of color, language, ethnicity, and social class. Our place in the world is shifting from that of a sole superpower to one that is competing with other great powers. Jobs require dramatically different skill sets and education, and those without them are left behind.

However, two demographic changes epitomize what the United States must confront and respond to in this century: aging and diversity. For the first time in our history (and as a nation, we are not alone), many of us have a reasonable chance to live to be 100 years of age, and simultaneously, the United States will become a majority-minority nation during the lifetimes of most of us. This means that, within the next few decades, the working-age population that will support the retiring baby boom generation will increasingly become Latino, Asian, and African American with immigrants, refugees, and undocumented persons added to the mix. Latinos and other racial, ethnic, and immigrant groups already account for the majority in California and Texas, and they will comprise a growing proportion of the U.S. labor force that supports tomorrow’s retirees. If we do not respond proactively to these factual trends, and if Latinos and other groups are confined to the low-paying service sector—which also offers poor access to health and retirement security—race, ethnicity, and age will interact to reinforce disparities that may give rise to serious generational conflicts, or what we refer to as fractured solidarity.
This book attempts to address and elucidate these changes and provide a road map for responding to them in a rational way. In the first part of this new century, we are witnessing profound political debates that reflect the difficult path this nation must walk to wade through these demographic changes. These debates cover issues of economic disparities and the anguish of those left behind by global economic forces, climate change and environmental concerns, domestic and international terrorism, and the role of the United States in bilateral relations, as well as divisive political and social media rhetoric and dialogue—all of which create a heightened level of political polarization. Can we come together as a nation and unify around core principles and common vision? Can we negotiate a new social contract that is inclusive and respectful of diversity? These and other questions will define the challenges facing the United States through the midpoint of the 21st century.

Tellingly, the outcome of the 2016 presidential election highlighted the political divisions but in a manner that, perhaps for the first time, indicated that the electorate is also divided by age, race, and ethnicity. The immigration and economic priorities of a largely White and English-speaking older electorate were diametrically opposed to those of an increasingly young, diverse, and multilingual population. What do these generational and ethnic differences say for the nation when its non-Hispanic White population has fallen below the replacement level, the net growth is among diverse and immigrant groups, and we face, in the words of Ron Brownstein (2012, p. 10), “sustained competition and conflict between the brown and the gray”?

The next America, as the National Journal (2012) and Paul Taylor (2014) have so presciently described it, is about where this country is headed in the first half of the 21st century when diverse ethnic and immigrant groups represent our new demographic profile. Future scenarios could range from Brownstein’s (2010) allusions in “The Gray and the Brown: The Generational Mismatch” to intergenerational, interethnic, and interracial coalitions. The United States has an intriguing history going back to its founding in 1776, with dislocating changes due to social, economic, cultural, and demographic forces. And each time its political, civic, and social systems were forced to confront these difficult changes, they succeeded. Can we continue that pattern? Can we find a way to address diversity, aging, immigration, social and economic disparities, and civic cleavages?
As William Frey (2015, p. 19) states, “This is not the first time that the United States has had to incorporate new people into society. Almost always, doing so has made the country richer, more vibrant, and more economically successful.”

We subscribe to that optimistic narrative and hope this book will demonstrate why and how we face difficulties in confronting rapid social change and why, once again, the United States must adapt to a new demographic profile—all while maintaining the civic structures that have kept America great. This book is intended to be neither a primer on legislative, political, and policy action nor an academic tome, policy analysis, or advocacy book. Instead, we draw on empirical data and trends, our scholarly and policy expertise, and our professional and public service experiences to assess, understand, inform, and contribute to a thoughtful dialogue about what all this means and how we can prepare for the time (most likely around 2050) when the United States will see its older population double while becoming a majority-minority nation with Hispanics as its largest ethnic group.

The book does so by providing a context and a framework—the politics of aging, the economics of aging, diversity, and immigration—by which we can understand the larger forces of these demographic changes. It also does so by examining specific issues and telling personal stories that bring home what this means to individuals and their families and communities. We select key areas that highlight the common interests we all share in how we respond, whether through voting and electoral politics, grassroots activism for racial justice, or coalition building between young and diverse progressives and White conservatives in Rust Belt regions left behind by globalization. Whether we label ourselves as conservative, moderate, liberal, independent, or progressive; whether we feel we have benefited from education and technological advantages; or whether we feel the American Dream is behind us because of social, economic, and racial changes we cannot control, this book’s intent is to present an optimistic vision of moving forward.

There are many issues we have in common as we wrestle with these unsettling forces, but we select a few to set the stage for a road map that can mitigate the tensions of aging, diversity, and immigration and enable us to reframe the public narrative about demographic changes. These issues address key questions that reveal the
common fate we all share in overcoming divisions. Who will take care of us (caregiving)? Who will pay the taxes (economic future)? Who will have the children to sustain entitlement programs (future workforce)? Will our children have a better future or face downward mobility (family)? To what extent can we learn from other regions of the world, particularly the Americas (global aging)? Finally, do we as a nation want to remain a superpower with all the sacrifices this position connotes, or will we settle into a second-tier status by mid-century (national security)?

Ultimately, this book is about what is possible, given our unique democracy. It attempts to assuage the great discomforts over rapid social change as currently evidenced by the aging of the population, immigration politics, and relationships among generations. Our hope is to provide a pragmatic road map for planning and responding proactively in the coming years.

Therefore, as two scholars concerned about our nation and its future, we are writing this book together for two main reasons: First, we share a deep commitment to democracy for all citizens in light of changing demographics. And second, we seek to create a policy road map that not only charts the future of the next America but also inspires mutual responsibility, respect, and trust in ensuring social justice in generations to come.

Juan Fernando Torres-Gil, PhD
Jacqueline L. Angel, PhD

REFERENCES


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ments of the politics of a majority-minority nation.

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my inspiration and motivation. We thank them both from the bottom
of our hearts.
Share

The Politics of a Majority-Minority Nation:
Aging, Diversity, and Immigration
The 21st century faces momentous changes and wrestles with compelling issues, including climate change, refugee flow, poverty, and inequality. But perhaps none are more compelling than demographic trends, which influence each of these other issues. Among the demographic changes facing the world and the United States in the 21st century, one in particular—the nexus of aging and diversity—highlights the extraordinary impact we will all face in the first part of this century. What might these changes mean for the United States and for everyone who is growing older in this country? What is it about the current political atmosphere in the United States that foreshadows a future of challenges and opportunities for a society that is becoming older and more diverse? And how might we respond to the unsettling changes of the first two decades of this new century?

The years of 2016 to 2018 were a period of particularly momentous crossroads in American life, with fears about terrorism and wars, conflicts over immigration and refugees, and insecurities about a nascent recovery from economic recession. The 2016 presidential election symbolized these tumultuous times and created an unprecedented level of political turmoil unseen in modern politics. The election of Donald Trump was a signature event but was just the tip of the iceberg in revealing deep undercurrents of concern about the fabric of civil society and political behavior in the U.S. democratic society.

These undercurrents revealed that great divisions exist in this country between those who have done well economically and those who feel they have been left behind; between ethnic and social groups...
that became newly empowered and those who became invisible; and between those who felt the United States was in decline and those who felt the country was on the upswing. Few were immune to these tensions, and all felt the winds of dramatic and unsettling changes. Trump’s election and the triumph of a Republican Congress in 2016 signaled that a large segment of the American public was willing to try something new, however dramatic and risky that change might be. Whether this political dynamic continues through another election cycle is uncertain, but it represents a momentous change that will have an impact far into the future.

We may ask: How does all this information relate to the issues of aging, diversity, and immigration that this book addresses? What do these issues mean for each of us, regardless of our circumstances or personal interests? The issues addressed in this book were at the forefront of the debates and tensions, regularly expressed via social media, throughout the last presidential campaign—from terrorism fears to blaming Mexicans and Muslims for job losses. The political reality is that it was largely White, working-class voters older than 50 who supported Republican congressional candidates and a presidential candidate who espoused a message that, however distasteful, revealed deep anxieties and insecurities by many about the future. These new realities were equally unsettling for those who felt a woman presidential candidate deserved to break the glass ceiling. The paradox in Trump’s election was that his support for seemingly liberal positions (e.g., protecting Social Security and Medicare) was at odds with the xenophobic and insular “America first” worldview that he openly espoused.

Yet the aftermath of the election is much more than insecurities and scapegoating certain groups and not solely about aging, diversity, and immigration. Rather, the ensuing 4 to 8 years, regardless of partisanship, is about a larger set of political and ideological schisms that will define the future of the United States over the next 10 to 20 years. The current political schisms brought to the surface reveal several structural forces that, if left unattended, may limit our ability as a nation to once again find common cause and mutual interest that would enable the United States to continue as an example of a successful model of economic, social, and cultural greatness. Moreover, these forces may fracture the politics of a soon-to-be majority-minority nation.
There are three great forces that we believe define the many challenges and opportunities facing everyone who lives in the United States: a politics of aging that includes generational tensions; conflicts over diversity and the need for immigrants; and the class divisions emanating from an economics of aging that may see greater poverty among the elderly. All these forces will make it difficult to reconcile the competing demands and tensions of a population that is becoming older and multiethnic and that faces a constant influx of legal and illegal immigrants and refugees. Whether we consider ourselves liberal, progressive, conservative, independent, Republican, Democrat, third party, or “refuse-to-state,” these forces will determine the quality of our lives and what we expect for ourselves, our families, and our communities in the coming years.

Figure 1.1 visualizes these three forces and the overall conceptual approach of this book. As we look to the future—sometime between 2042 and 2050—several trends will emerge from these forces: A politics of aging will influence national priorities and the nature of U.S. civic culture; immigration and refugee affairs will have a demographic impact; and the economics of aging and the growing vulnerability it causes will be felt by all. In a simplistic yet complex way, we may face duality by the midpoint of the 21st century: a more divided America or, as has been the case in previous times after a divisive period, a more unified nation—e pluribus unum—where we benefit

**FIGURE 1.1** The new politics of a majority-minority nation.
from both the productive capacity of older persons and the energy of emerging ethnic groups.

This conceptual approach leads to a central question for this century and for all generations: What type of society do we want in a nation that is becoming older and more diverse? Specifically, what role do we want the United States to play in global affairs as we transition to a new demographic profile; and what can we expect for ourselves, our children, and our nation in the 21st century? For more than 200 years, the United States has been an evolving example of democracy, tolerance, and inclusiveness, notwithstanding our many faults and mistakes. We became a superpower in the 20th century, giving the world a global leader with soft (e.g., values, lifestyles) and hard (e.g., military, economic) power, establishing a framework for other nations to emulate. Yet, once again, the United States must look inward and reassess how, and if, it can continue in this role and whether its evolution as a mature political democracy can endure. How this country manages this transition in the 21st century will be shaped in part by the three structural forces.

All of us will be impacted by the outcome of these forces, whether we feel economically secure today or anxious about our future. Whether we prefer to live in homogenous neighborhoods or seek out multiethnic regions, whether we reside in the Midwest and Southeast regions of the United States or along the coastal belts, or whether we choose to live traditional lives of family and intergenerational households or remain single and enjoy alternative lifestyles, we will not be immune to the momentous changes affecting this country today and in the future. For this book, we illustrate the relevance of these forces to all Americans by focusing on three groups that exemplify the influence of a politics of aging, immigration, and social and economic disparities: women, Hispanics, and millennials. While women have greater opportunities in life and more control over their destinies than they had during the past century, in an aging society they have special responsibilities for caregiving and will have greater life spans to feel the full impact of aging themselves. With greater life expectancy and higher fertility rates, Hispanics will be the nation’s largest minority/ethnic group and will reflect the United States’ geographic destiny with Mexico and Central and South America. Millennials, those who are now in their
20s and 30s and who represent a larger cohort than baby boomers, face the ultimate consequence of how well we respond to our current problems; and they also have the electoral ability to reshape politics in America.

The three forces highlighted in this book illustrate the complexity of responding to aging and diversity and overcoming the discomfort of moving through rapid social change. Understanding these structural issues is the precondition for addressing key questions: What do we do about these challenges? How can we move toward a more inclusive society that provides a common agenda for a 21st century that is undergoing momentous demographic changes? How might women, Hispanics, and millennials be the examples of the stake all Americans have in coming together? What might be a road map that helps us move toward the reality that, by 2050, the United States will be older and will have a majority-minority population? And how did we get to this point in time, where a largely White, older electorate chose a U.S. president who has openly disparaged groups that will be the next America?

THE POLITICS OF AGING IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A SET OF INCONVENIENT TRUTHS

As we move through this century, electoral politics will be shaped in part by those who are most likely to vote. And in an aging society, those who are most likely to vote are older persons. This creates a politics of aging, where elderly voters have more political influence in national, state, and local elections than younger voters. There are exceptions: In the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, Barack Obama motivated a greater number of younger people to vote for him; the only age cohort he lost was voters older than 65 (Binstock, 2009). However, in general, the older you are, the more likely you are to vote. And since voting matters in determining public policy, fiscal expenditures, priorities, and preferences, a politics of aging has major importance in making political and policy decisions.

Yet there is a set of inconvenient truths in understanding how the politics of aging will impact the United States as it gets older, faces diversity, and deals with immigration conflicts. One is that older voters, who are largely White, tend to be uncomfortable with
race, ethnicity, and immigration. This is not about racism or nativism but about the speed of change: The United States has seen a rapid infusion of legal and illegal immigrants in the past 20 years; and in many parts of the country, entire towns, cities, and regions have transitioned from largely White to multiethnic populations. This raises concerns about shifting values, traditions, and neighborhoods, and how people look, talk, and interact. Witness places such as the Southeast, where, in just the past 20 years, Hispanics have populated sections of Georgia and the Carolinas that for generations were largely homogenous, or the rural Midwest, where, in Iowa and Ohio, Hispanic and Middle Eastern immigrants and refugees have begun to alter downtown areas with their languages, food stores, and cultural celebrations. These tensions help to explain the discomfort with rapid cultural change brought on by the demographic move toward a multiethnic and multicultural society.

The diversity and tensions this demographic shift creates at the outset are heightened in electoral politics. In his landmark book Diversity Explosion, William Frey (2015) refers to this tension as the “cultural generation gap” and documents the shifting demographic trends, where the increasing share of ethnic and minority groups is still largely young—under 50—while the over-50 population will remain largely White and non-Hispanic for the foreseeable future. This will reverse in time, but White non-Hispanics will predominate in the electorate well into the 2030s, when Hispanics, Asians, Blacks, immigrants, and refugees grow in numbers and in age.

In his prescient article “The Gray and the Brown,” Ron Brownstein (2010) warned that this gap could raise electoral tensions if left unattended. In fact, his warning manifested sooner than expected in the 2016 election. In a telling commentary, Frey (2016) explained the startling outcome of that election as “the demographic blowback that elected Donald Trump.” With Whites accounting for 78% of voters older than 45 and 87% of voters older than 65, their larger turnout overcame the Barack Obama/Hillary Clinton coalition of minorities; women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people; and millennials. But how did this politics of aging come about? What might be the transformational changes in how we have historically viewed the needs of the elderly? And how might a paradigm shift occur, given that minorities are becoming the majority, and their
electoral clout, although still limited, may in time lead to a change from what happened during the 2016 election?

**A Historical Overview**

The politics of aging has a storied history. Noted political gerontologist Robert Binstock has provided a historical, analytical, and provocative understanding of the evolution of the United States’ response to the growth and political participation of the elderly (Binstock, 1995; Campbell & Binstock, 2011). His examination of voting trends (2006) lays out a common pattern of voting participation by older persons. In short, in presidential elections, the 65-and-older population can be expected to have a 64% to 70% voting rate, and those who are 45 to 64 years old can be expected to have a 64% to 71% rate. However, the voting rate drops to 32% to 50% for those who are 18 to 24 years old. Thus, if the 45-to-65-plus voting cohort is largely White, and the 18-to-24 cohort is majority-minority, we can expect tensions by age, race, and ethnicity. This voting pattern and these intergenerational and interethnic tensions also apply to nearly all state and local elections.

The historical evolution in the politics of aging began in the Great Depression, when older persons faced dramatic increases in poverty and insecurity (Torres-Gil, 1992). With the economic crisis facing families in the 1930s, older persons and children suffered greatly through the loss of savings, homes, and jobs, which were difficult to replace. The traditional safety net of family, church, community, and benevolent societies was insufficient to address these economic dislocations. But from the ashes of despair and neglect came a New Deal welfare state with its premier social safety program, the Social Security Act of 1935. This rescue by government led to lifelong loyalty to the Democratic Party and its presidential candidates by Americans who were youthful in the 1930s and 1940s. The Great Depression and the New Deal cemented a party loyalty that lasted almost throughout their lives. Not until 2008 did older persons—the old–old among the New Deal generation (those who were in their 70s and 80s by 2008) and the Silent Generation (born during the war years and reaching their 60s by 2008)—provide a plurality of votes for the Republican candidate, John McCain (Binstock, 2009). Obama, as a presidential candidate and then as the incumbent U.S. president in the 2012 election, won the votes of every age group except
those who were 65 and older (Arnone, 2016). By 2016, the age-based electoral shift culminated in a demographic blowback by older voters, giving Republicans the White House, Senate, and House of Representatives.

This evolution in the politics of aging, whereby older voters shifted loyalty from one political party to another, also gave us interest-group politics of older voters focusing on old-age concerns on behalf of all senior citizens. From the Ham and Egg movement of the 1930s (wherein the California Pension Plan Association called for a constitutional amendment granting $30 a week to every unemployed Californian older than 50) to the creation of more than 100 national organizations focused on aging concerns (Binstock & Quadagno, 2001)—including the AARP, a powerful lobbying organization in the nation’s capital—the politics of aging from 1930 to 2016 has led to a series of public benefits, policies, and preferences that give older persons a measure of income, health security, and social supports to supplant the roles of family and community. These movements and organizations have led to a proliferation of benefits and programs that are far more robust than what we provide for children and families in poverty. Among them are the Social Security program; the 1965 passage of Medicare (age-based health insurance) and Medicaid (a health safety net for the poor, including long-term care programs for poor elders); the Older Americans Act of 1965 (an aging network of community-based programs for older persons); special tax preferences that largely benefit older persons (e.g., the mortgage deduction); and professional organizations enabling gerontology and geriatrics to be recognized as educational and disciplinary fields (e.g., Gerontological Society of America, Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, master’s and PhD degrees in gerontology).

**Competing Tensions in Public Policy**

This uneven social safety net has raised criticism about an ageist approach to the needs of the vulnerable. The politics of aging from the 1930s to this century has been an age-based policy approach and one that has been successful in reducing poverty among the elderly. And in many ways, it has given rise to the most successful social policy efforts by the United States. Yet this approach, in which eligibility for public benefits starts at a specific age (e.g., 60
for the Older Americans Act, 66 for full Social Security benefits for baby boomers, 62 for senior housing programs, 50 to join AARP), has increasingly come under criticism as old-age favoritism. Since the 1980s, questions have been raised about “greedy geezers,” the clout of “gray power,” and the issue of fairness across generations (Kotlikoff & Burns, 2004). The transparency of an “electoral bluff” (where politicians fear the supposed unified power of the elderly vote, when, in fact, that vote can be highly diffused) increasingly comes into question: Are older persons a monolithic group voting in unison? Do they have a special call on public benefits simply for being older (Binstock, 1995)? If older persons during the Great Depression were seen as the deserving poor, and if the cohort that came of age during the Great Depression, won World War II, and overcame the Cold War—a time when fascism, totalitarianism, and communism threatened the world—earning them the moniker the Greatest Generation, should their special entitlement to an age-based approach to public policy still hold? And what does the 2016 election—with older, largely White voters electing not just Trump as president but also a Republican Congress, whose leaders made clear a goal to diminish the social welfare safety net and dramatically alter Social Security and Medicare through privatization—say for the continuation of a politics of aging? In addition to Binstock’s warning about the electoral bluff, noted sociologist Bernice Neugarten warns that, over time, relying on age alone was unsustainable, and using need rather than age was a more pragmatic and fair approach to dispensing limited public resources for those who truly are in need (1979, 1983). Others (Campbell, 2003) suggest that providing public benefits to a select age group empowers that group at the expense of others. Have policy preferences for seniors led to political inequality, whereby newly emerging groups of young, diverse populations are at an electoral disadvantage? The answer to this question is at the crux of the politics of a majority-minority nation, whereby the politics of aging and increased diversity come to their full fruition by 2050.

We now face a pivotal moment as we move into the 21st century. We are on the cusp of a gradual swing from a largely White, over-50 voting base that supersedes the largely diverse, under-50 population to one in which immigrants, minorities, and racial groups will be the majority of both the U.S. population and the electoral base by 2050.
Meanwhile, we will have a cultural generation gap in politics, which can lead to greater tensions over race, ethnicity, and immigration. Or perhaps it can be the catalyst for rethinking the age-based policy approach of the politics of aging eras and even motivate U.S. policy makers to consider intergenerational and interethnic/interracial approaches to social and economic needs (Williamson, Watts-Roy, & Kingson, 1999). But for now, we must face a set of inconvenient truths before we can envision a road map that moves us forward in a more enlightened and fair approach to the conflicts over immigration and the dramatic social and economic disparities facing a nation becoming older—all of which have played a major role in the startling divisions evidenced in 2016.

These inconvenient truths are listed here:

1. Older voters continue to dominate electoral politics, but their votes are not always fair, evenhanded, or sensitive to the needs of younger and diverse voters. In short, they can be inward-focused and self-serving.
2. Older non-Hispanic White voters tend to show great discomfort with racial and ethnic groups, immigrants, and other minorities.
3. Increasingly, in referring to older White voters (those older than 50), we are referring to the fabled baby boomers, whose mythology portrayed them as liberal, progressive, and even radical in their youth but who have grown to be relatively conservative.
4. Relying on public policy approaches predicated solely on being old is no longer sustainable, or even preferential, especially given the growing budgetary deficits and national debts facing federal, state, and local governments.
5. To avoid greater intergenerational tensions and struggles between older White voters and young diverse populations aging in this country, we must devise a new politics of aging that becomes one of mutual self-interest based on social and economic needs and a common hope for a quality of life in longevity.

Finding a way to overcome the great divides in American society and to regain a mutual destiny where the great heterogeneity of the United States leads to common interests and mitigates polarizations and divisions will be paramount in the coming years. And the politics
of immigration and refugee issues heighten these divisions and force the body politic to address aging and diversity sooner rather than later. This is especially relevant given the demographic blowback of 2016 and the escalating tensions over illegal immigrants, including support by many Americans to build a wall between Mexico and the United States and to expel those who came to the United States as children illegally (i.e., the Dreamers), and blaming the civic ills, economic insecurities, and failure to provide a social safety net for all, regardless of age, on immigrants.

THE NEW REALITIES OF IMMIGRATION: WE MAY HAVE NO CHOICE

This brings us to the second major force affecting the future of aging and diversity in the United States: the inextricable and contentious topic of immigration. This issue pervades policy and political and social debates. It engenders disagreements, and yet it is the essence of what the United States has always been and most likely will continue to be in the 21st century. What is it about immigrants in this century that creates such polarization? Who are these “illegals” and refugees who seemingly cause such trepidation? And what does immigration say about this country’s journey toward a majority-minority demographic reality?

The subsequent chapters in this book address the policy and political implications of legal and illegal immigration and how it can sustain a social safety net and entitlement programs for cohorts growing older and more economically vulnerable. Chapter 6 examines in detail what replacement levels and fertility rates mean for the economics of aging. But first, it bears saying that today’s children are tomorrow’s workers and taxpayers; and in the first part of the 21st century, children in the United States are increasingly members of Asian, Hispanic, European, and Middle Eastern groups, as well as refugees from around the world.

Given this reality, it is helpful to clarify several aspects of the new realities of immigration. First, “illegals” are not just those from Mexico who cross the U.S. border surreptitiously. So much of the political narrative assumes that a mass of illegal immigrants is overrunning the U.S. border, from San Diego to Corpus Christi, Texas. The reality
is that Mexican immigration to the United States, particularly those arriving illegally, has approached parity with those who are leaving (Myers, 2012). In fact, in the past few years, more people—including U.S.-born Mexican Americans, legal residents, and undocumented immigrants—have returned to Mexico than those who have come to the United States. In part, this reflects the economic downturn of 2008 and stricter immigration controls (with the Obama administration deporting record numbers of illegal Latino immigrants). It is important to note that this also reflects the new reality that Mexico and much of Latin America (with important exceptions such as Central America) are improving the economic and social conditions of their citizens. And crucially, birth rates are declining in Mexico and much of South America, which are approaching zero population growth. Thus, parity between those who are coming to the United States from Latin America and those who are leaving may simply mean that Mexico and other Latin American nations no longer have a surplus of young people to send to the United States. What happens if the United States no longer has a surfeit of young, desperate, energetic “illegals” to take up America’s agriculture, retail, restaurant, and other low-wage jobs? Who replaces the workforce when native-born Americans refuse to work in places such as car washes, nursing homes, strawberry fields, and poultry farms?

Second, one must recognize that there are many ways to enter the United States without crossing illegally. And a wall does not limit options to manipulate the immigration system that is currently in place, although a wall, however distasteful to some, has proven effective in some locales (e.g., an electronic fence between Tijuana and San Diego, which has resulted in a dramatic drop in illegal crossings). There are many other ways to enter the United States without waiting years to apply legally via an immense backlog of immigration processes and refugee appeals. The EB-5 Immigrant Investor Program allows entrepreneurs and their spouses and children to obtain green cards if they create 10 permanent, full-time jobs for U.S. workers. San Francisco and Los Angeles are replete with affluent Chinese, Korean, and Southeast Asian populations who gained their foothold through the EB-5 program. Student visas, which allow people from other nations to live in the United States temporarily to pursue a full course of academic study, have enabled countless students from around the world to stay in the country well beyond
their allotted time frames due to the inability of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and its related agencies (e.g., the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, or ICE) to account for, and track, those visas. The H-1B program, designed so that foreign workers with specialty skills could fill jobs in the United States when qualified Americans are not available, is booming, with as many as 85,000 H-1B visas granted in 2016. The Diversity Immigrant Visa program (a lottery system created through the Immigration Act of 1990 that gives applicants from low-sending countries the chance to obtain permanent resident visas, or green cards) caused consternation in 2017 when a recipient from Uzbekistan used this avenue to enter the United States and later committed a deadly terrorist act in New York City. And now we face a so-called birth tourism where, anecdotally, pregnant Chinese women (and even pregnant Mexican women) arrive in Southern California solely to give birth so that their children will have U.S. citizenship, thus enabling them to eventually bring in other family members (Shyong, 2017).

Moreover, the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 enabled Cubans to have something no other Latin American group has: an automatic pathway to citizenship and immediate eligibility for welfare programs (e.g., Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income) if they arrive illegally to the United States. Not until early 2017 did President Obama attempt, through executive order, to eliminate this special privilege. Refugees obtain asylum if the U.S. State Department authorizes it for people from a region that meets U.S. foreign policy objectives (historically regions that support anti-communist regimes, such as the Hmong people fleeing the Vietnam War and Nicaraguans fleeing leftist governments) or for humanitarian reasons (e.g., Syrians, Haitians; Pew Research Center, 2015).

The third, and perhaps the most important, reality is that the United States has faced waves of immigration and migration throughout its history and has, in most cases, had a constant fear-acceptance syndrome in which just about every group has faced a demographic backlash until time and stability eased the fears and insecurities of those who came before them. Our earliest history has the first Anglo and English settlers to New England wary of a later influx of Scotch-Irish, who subsequently fled to the Appalachian Mountains to create their own unique brand of Americanism (Barone, 2013). Later, English aristocrats, building a plantation and slave-owning society,
avoided Yankees and built a thriving Southern economy until the Civil War ended that way of life. Waves of Irish fleeing the potato famine from the 1840s to 1860s gained their foothold in urban areas, creating a strong Catholic culture. Later arrivals from protestant Germany and Europe created conflicts with these Irish Catholic communities. All these groups had one thought in common: Each feared that newly arrived racial, ethnic, religious, and social cultures would supersede their way of life. This constant tension between old and new arrivals continued unimpeded into the 20th century and moved westward, from Chinese, who were brought to the West Coast to build the railroads and service the California Gold Rush, to Filipinos and Japanese, who were brought to Hawaii to build the sugarcane plantations, to Mexicans fleeing their revolution in the early 1900s. Stories like these continue into this century, albeit under different circumstances. And lest we forget, migration has also produced tensions, with Blacks leaving the South for northern urban cities, people leaving the frigid Midwest for sunny California, and workers traveling across the nation for new and better jobs. These migratory streams continue to define the U.S. history of immigration and migration (Bayor, 2016).

How might this short overview inform how we approach aging and diversity in the United States? And how can we respond in a manner that moves us toward a more inclusive and constructive road map of social policy and political change? Two thoughts come to mind: the speed of change and the legitimate concerns about fairness and transparency in accommodating newcomers.

Part of what makes “illegals” and “foreigners overrunning our country” such viscerally potent concepts is a legitimate concern about the speed and magnitude of immigration, legal and illegal. As Michael Barone vividly asked, “Will the recent surge of newcomers tear the U.S. apart?” (2013, p. C1). In the past, after each wave of foreign immigration, there was a period of stability that allowed for newcomers to become Americanized (i.e., acculturated to U.S. civil society) and for social institutions to adjust (e.g., teaching English to immigrant children). Today, we are in an unsettled situation of what many in the United States see as a massive immigration of people arriving within a comparatively short period. By 2013, for example, the U.S. immigrant population reached a record 41.3 million. In a 3-year period—2010 to 2013—legal and illegal immigration grew by
3.3 million. And the primary sending regions were no longer Mexico and Latin America, but Asia, the Caribbean, and the Middle East (Camarota & Zeigler, 2014). During this period, the number of immigrants from Europe declined.

This dizzying pace of immigration could not help but cause both discomfort for many U.S. citizens and happiness for those who made it to this country. This pace can best be told by looking at particular regions, such as the city of Monterey Park, California, which is emblematic of rapid cultural change (King, 2016). In 1970, it was largely an upper middle-class, White suburb bordering Los Angeles. By the 1980s, a curious pattern emerged: Chinese realtors were advertising this bedroom community as the “Chinese Beverly Hills of Los Angeles”; and by 1990, racial conflicts erupted over a rapid influx of Chinese purchasing homes and businesses and replacing English-language signage with Chinese-language signs. From these cultural eruptions emerged a city council with increasing representation for this Asian community. Monterey Park went from largely White to evenly Chinese and Hispanic in the 1990s and mostly Asian today. And its diverse political leadership is reflected on the city council, in the state legislature, and in the U.S. Congress, with Chinese and other Asians amply represented. In turn, Monterey Park led the way for the San Gabriel Valley (where the city is located) to also have an Asian majority, which experienced an economic renaissance after the 2008 recession. Today, most Angelenos view immigration, the Asian influx, and multiracial marriages as positive; and California, as a majority-minority state, has moved in the same attitudinal direction.

California, then, has already lived through the immigration turmoil we currently face throughout the United States, especially in the Midwest and Southeast (Nagourney, Lovett, & Goel, 2014). What occurred in Monterey Park (and throughout California) in the 1980s and 1990s (replete with anti-immigrant legislation, including opposition to bilingual education and proposals to prohibit public benefits for undocumented immigrants) can now be seen in places such as Maine, Georgia, Ohio, and Indiana (Appelbaum, 2016; Bidgood & Seelye, 2016). This Ellis Island of Hispanic and Asian immigration—California, Oregon, and Washington State—is now settling and no longer provides affordable housing, low-wage work, and first-generation illegal communities that offer invisibility to today’s undocumented immigrants. The West Coast has successfully incorporated
these groups and become ethnically gentrified. The opportunities for immigrants from throughout the world are now in the low-cost, “virgin” territories of the Southeast and Midwest—places that allow a start for those who are just beginning the difficult economic climb as foreigners but without the affluence or ability to “game” the DHS system. And once again, we see what occurred throughout U.S. history, particularly in California: tremendous discomfort and backlash to new cultures, languages, signage, and diverse social and cultural traditions, which are alien to long-established American residents. In 2016, this was a paramount concern, with Donald Trump’s supporters cheering his messages of “Make America Great Again” and “build the wall.” Where this trend leads is uncertain; and whether it will follow the past saga of fear and, later, acceptance remains to be seen. But if history is the prologue, then the epilogue for the Midwest and Southeast—places that voted heavily for the Republican Party in 2016, in part due to fears of “illegals” and refugees who voters feared might bring terrorism—may play out as it did in California. This may be “the next immigration challenge” (Myers, 2012): convincing the rest of the country that a multiethnic state or region can, in fact, become vibrant and economically prosperous with multicultural relationships that reinforce the 200-year history of traditional American values within the framework of a constitutional democracy. Michael Barone shares this optimistic forecast in responding to his question on the impact of heavy immigration: “From the beginning, America was made to unite citizens, even those with deep differences” (2013, p. C1).

Yet, in the new politics of immigration, we may find that we have no other choice but to find a way to accept, integrate, and acculturate these new groups, if for no other reason than the fact that native-born Americans are not reproducing, which raises another unsettling question: “What will a white, minority U.S. look like” (Nashaw, 2012)? Later in this book, we discuss how to change the public narrative from one of fear to one of acceptance, yet one that also accounts for the legitimate concerns about proper behavior, accountability, playing by the rules, and respect for U.S. laws and the Constitution. We are at a point where polarization of views creates barriers to understanding various ideologies and attitudes about immigration. Those older White voters who want a wall are not all necessarily nativists. Many sincerely feel that we have uncontrolled borders,
and that everyone should play by the same rules. What this really means vis-à-vis a new immigration policy and an aging society is explored further in Chapter 5.

**A Personal Revelation**

*Our Towns* (Fallows & Fallows, 2018) is a revealing portrait of the “real America” where, in fact, fear is giving way to acceptance throughout America’s small towns and suburbs, which are newly introduced to diversity and immigration. And in my own personal journey, I came face to face with the rapid social changes facing the Midwest. On Labor Day weekend 2016, my family traveled to Indianapolis, Indiana—the heartland of America. It was our first trip to this area, and we were to celebrate the first birthday of a grand-nephew whose paternal grandparents lived in the area. Our niece (and goddaughter), a Mexican American, married a young, non-Hispanic White man from Indiana. His parents were wonderful and gracious hosts, inviting us to their farm and regaling us with life in this lovely rural setting just outside a bustling midsize city. I took an additional week to visit friends in Dayton and Canton, Ohio—both new areas for me. During my road trip, a revelation began to intrude on my progressive, West Coast views of politics and policies: I was beginning to understand why so many people in this area were supporting Donald Trump as president of the United States and—in an even greater revelation—why he could win. In short, what I found in this homogeneous, rural part of the Midwest was that these people were deeply worried about their children and the lost opportunities to find good jobs. They were also fearful of the low home values and the severe drug addiction plaguing their farms, towns, and cities. They were worried that their right to own guns would be taken away. They sensed that other parts of the country were doing well, while their communities were left behind. Most telling, they feared that other groups—including “illegals,” Blacks, gays, Mexicans, refugees, and feminists—had a special call, if not stranglehold, on the nation’s attention. And they felt that, while these groups appeared to be receiving special preferences, federal largesse, public welfare, and attention from liberal and Hollywood elites, folks in their part of the country had become invisible, and their troubles were forgotten by the rest of America. In short, they felt like “strangers in their own land” (Hochschild, 2016). I began to see why Trump’s message,
however flawed the messenger, could take hold. This revelation disturbed me, not so much because of what I might see as misguided views but because the folks I met during my road trip through Indiana and Ohio were decent, kind, compassionate, and sincere. They were not racist or mean. On a subsequent visit to celebrate the grandnephew’s second birthday, I found that undocumented Mexicans and other Latinos had already discovered this “virgin” territory. In fact, between 2000 and 2015, the number of Mexicans in the Indianapolis area increased from 15,000 to 30,000, taking their first step in changing this homogeneous community (Stockman, 2017).

What might this tell us, then, about the coming nexus of aging, diversity, and immigration? However we respond to the reality that we will need immigrants in a new society, we must address not only the forces of a politics of aging that requires a new paradigm incorporating the new realities of immigration but also the overarching concerns faced by all Americans, which give rise to the great social and economic divides.

THE ECONOMIC REALITIES OF AGING: THE GREAT DIVIDES

No issue permeates the future of an aging society becoming majority-minority more than the economic cleavages from the 2008 recession and the continuing disparities of wealth and income since the 1970s. Without dramatic intervention in the public and private sectors, these economic divides will lead to severe consequences as baby boomers—and their children—move into old age. This is the third structural force that will define the consequences and problems (e.g., increasing poverty, isolation) and illuminate the opportunities we will encounter as we move through this century.

Much has been written, assessed, and discussed about the increasing gaps between the rich and the poor and about a declining middle class. But the connections between these economic realities and aging and diversity are less understood. What are the economic implications when a larger proportion of the U.S. population is 65 years of age and older (all baby boomers will reach age 65 by 2029) and when, by 2050, the United States will look like California: majority-minority and dependent on immigrants for economic productivity? A short answer: We may see a reversal of the post–World War II
social policy successes, when poverty among the elderly dramatically declined. We may see increasing financial vulnerability among retirees and the elderly due to insufficient retirement savings and the demise of defined benefit plans, such as pensions. This may lead to a renewed politics of aging for sustaining the last vestiges of a social safety net: unemployment compensation, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicaid, and all programs benefitting the very poor and the disabled. This renewed politics of aging may have a selfish tint, with older people voting for old-age programs only; or it can be inclusive, with older people voting for universal benefits for all persons, regardless of age. Perhaps we may see an opportunity for intergenerational and interethnic coalitions by older Whites, younger Hispanics, and newly arrived refugees and immigrants, all facing dire economic circumstances.

We have arrived at a moment when financial anxiety should not be a mystery, despite a recovery from the Great Recession of 2008. In The Great Risk Shift, Hacker (2006) foretold the consequences of post-1970 economic patterns, wherein the social welfare state of the 1930s and 1960s moves inexorably from government to the private sector and eventually to personal responsibility. This movement toward autonomy, privatization of public programs, and a greater role for market forces reflects the best of American values of individualism, self-reliance, and freedom. But it also creates greater risks for those who are unable to succeed in this more competitive environment. The growing economic insecurity faced by American families and individuals belies national data that report economic strength and provides clues as to why so many Americans in 2016 felt they faced a bleak future of financial insecurity, despite impressive economic output and declining joblessness. Hacker (2006) describes the shift from unions and pensions to entrepreneurship and 401(k) plans; from retiree health insurance to the vagaries of the private health insurance market; from careers in manufacturing and legacy industries (e.g., airlines, steel, automotive) to offshoring jobs; and from middle-income careers requiring a high school degree to the information-and-technology age for those with creative and technical skills and education. All these factors lead to risky jobs, risky families, risky retirement, and risky health care, whereby individuals, families, and communities face greater economic vulnerability.
In the classic book *Aging Nation*, Schulz and Binstock (2006) connect the dots and describe what this risk shift means for the economics and politics of growing older in America. The opportunities we have in the United States for actuarial success, for enjoying longer life spans, and for the opportunities that come with longevity (e.g., encore careers, added years for creativity, longer enjoyment of retirement and grandchildren, new adventures in travel and entertainment, moving to the “Best Cities for Successful Aging” (cited by the Milken Institute, 2017) are threatened by the demise of the social welfare programs from the New Deal of the Great Depression (i.e., federal intervention in alleviating poverty) and the New Frontier of the 1960s (i.e., entitlement programs for the elderly). In the book, Schulz and Binstock decry the “phony threat of population aging” by merchants of doom: politicians who warn that the aging of the baby boomers will bankrupt Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, thus declaring that these entitlement programs must be reduced in scope and budget and privatized, giving individuals greater responsibility for retirement savings, health care costs, and planning for old age. These are the same policy proposals that emanated from the 1980s with the Reagan administration and the 2000s with the George W. Bush administration; and they are now returning in the Trump presidency with a Republican Congress. *Aging Nation* alerts us to a potential reigniting of a politics of aging with older persons who are motivated by fear, anger, and anxiety. Whether the new realities of a politics of aging among the baby boomer cohort lead to lobbying for new taxes for their specific needs (i.e., ageism) or to a new social contract for all ages, income levels, regions, ethnicities, and races remains to be seen. In their article “The Economic Meltdown and Old Age Politics,” Polivka and Estes (2009) refer to reframing the politics of aging as the growing crisis of economic disparities among the elderly that most likely will confront the United States by the 2020s—the very time when ethnic, immigrant, and minority populations start establishing their electoral political muscle as they grow older and increase their political participation, creating new and unforetold political tensions of aging and diversity.

This admittedly dire forecast is not meant to assume a gloomy and alarmist future. There is much good about what lies ahead for our country, such as the inherent technological, industrial, and productive strengths of the U.S. economy and its continuing ability to
win the global and national trade and economic competition. Rather, this view of a world where the next generation of elders may be in a precarious economic and retirement condition not seen since the 1930s is meant to create a context within which we can acknowledge the challenges facing the economics of aging and the resultant great divides. And there are several challenges that we must address if we are to have a road map leading to intergenerational and interethnic/interracial harmony. The seeds are apparent. For example, for the first time in many decades, the supposed inevitability of increased longevity is showing signs of reversal (Bernstein, 2016). Data have revealed a recent decline in life expectancy—something not seen since the early 20th century. For whom, and why? Surprisingly, not among Blacks, who continue to gain years (Tavernise, 2016), nor among Hispanics (Vega, Markides, Angel, & Torres-Gil, 2015), who enjoy the highest life expectancy rates compared with Whites and Blacks, but among non-Hispanic White males. The lack of affordable, quality health care (notwithstanding the Affordable Care Act), chronic conditions brought on by poor health and economic circumstances (e.g., obesity, smoking, alcoholism), the drug addiction plague (e.g., methamphetamines, opioids) facing rural and suburban areas of the country, and lack of employment have given White males in particular a new set of risks and dangers.

This phenomenon has a regional characteristic. The United States faces the dual realities of an advanced industrial state and a set of “developing countries”: certain regions in the Southeast and Midwest with increasing social, health, and economic disparities (Kaplan, 2016). States such as Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, West Virginia, Tennessee, and Texas have counties with severe poverty, marking them as “developing countries.” This contrasts with the “rich nations” of California, Alaska, Colorado, and Virginia—states with higher numbers of affluent counties. This geographic analysis of poverty and location should not be overgeneralized, since all states have pockets of poverty and affluence. But it demonstrates the dramatic disparities of wealth and poverty among the states. These disparities can also be seen in coastal lifestyles (Brownstein, 2016). Increasingly, we see geographic bubbles along the Pacific and Atlantic coastal belts. From Seattle to San Diego, for example, we see a coastal belt of wealth and unparalleled economic, social, and cultural opportunities, with people enjoying the full bloom of
technology, entertainment, creativity, home equity values, and favorable employment. Yet not far from this privileged coastline—in places such as Eastern Washington State, Eastern Oregon, and California’s Central Valley and Inland Empire—are the rural and suburban realities of low wages, declining employment and industries, lessened opportunities for the young, and increasing isolation and poverty of the elderly. It is not surprising that the coastal elites find it difficult to understand why so many Americans in the Midwest, Southeast, and rural areas of their own states would vote against the progressive platforms of the Obama and Hillary Clinton political camps.

This set of economic divides trumps all else. Without a road map to mitigate these divides and address the wealth gaps between those who can benefit from, and game, the new economic realities and those who cannot, we may find greater resentment and political retribution in the coming years. In particular, millennials face a “fading American Dream” (Glaeser, 2011). They question the value of costly college education and face high student debt, are forced to live with their parents into adulthood, and wonder if they will ever receive a Social Security check, much less save for retirement or receive a pension in old age. Their numerical superiority (78 million to 80 million) and the potential increase in voting rates as they age may give them the ability to push a politics of aging that benefits them as an aging cohort that values diversity, inclusiveness, immigrants, and alternative lifestyles. It can also be a cohort whose politics of aging moves us beyond age, race, and income as impediments to an inclusive civic culture.

TOWARD A NEW POLITICS OF A MAJORITY-MINORITY NATION

This introductory overview suggests that the second decade of the 21st century represents a crucial turning point in American civic life as reflected in the deep political divisions of the 2016 election, subsequent Trump presidency, and a crossroads reflected in the aging of the United States. The debates about the nature of immigration and the inevitable demographic move toward a majority-minority society exacerbate this crucible and this crossroad.

What this means for each of us is fraught with personal and visceral feelings. For some, it represents the dawning of an energized
nation benefiting from progressive ideals of multiculturalism and an infusion of the youthful entrepreneurship of immigrants and refugees. For others, it means a decline in the past greatness of the United States and foregoing the values and ideals that defined the American way of life in the past century. Yet more relevant to the politics of a majority-minority nation is where we go in the future as a country, as a set of diverse communities, and as individuals growing old. How do we regain a sense of common purpose? How do we overcome divisions and move beyond ideology, age, race, income, geographic regions, and personal views of politics and politicians? We need a road map for surviving and overcoming the deep divides of this century.

Before we can arrive at the potential solutions and guideposts of this road map and move forward toward practical answers to the many tensions in American life, this book posits that the three structural forces presented in this chapter must be understood and addressed. Again, those forces are:

1. A politics of aging, defined as an older (over 50), largely White electorate that has diametrically different views about budgetary, policy, and cultural issues than the emerging diverse, younger populations of immigrants, ethnic groups, and minorities. This cultural generation gap is reflected in “The Gray and the Brown” dichotomy (Brownstein, 2010): an emerging, under-50, Hispanic population with limited voting strength competing with the high participation rate of the over-50 electorate. How to reconcile the differences in the politics of aging is crucial if we, as voters, are to move beyond polarization and somehow find a common agenda, whereby older White voters and younger diverse groups come together.

2. Continued conflicts and debates about immigrants and immigration flows (including refugees to the United States) that require resolutions if our nation is to continue its historic integration of individuals from around the world. The irony is that most of the American public is open to some form of immigration reform that might include a pathway to citizenship. In fact, most corporate and other private-sector elites favor a continued immigration flow. Yet the emotional views about “illegals” and “potential terrorists among refugees and immigrants,” as well
as a deep concern that those coming to the United States abide by our laws and democratic values, continue to make immigration a volatile issue that is too easily demagogued by politicians, pundits, and nativists of all ideological stripes. Somehow, we must find an avenue for meaningful immigration reform, addressing sincere convictions about being American and doing so in time to account for declining fertility levels of native-born Americans.

3. Social and economic disparities that will continue to divide this country in many ways, along income, educational, racial, geographical, technological, and ethnic lines. Until we develop economic strategies to mitigate these disparities and reduce the dramatic gap among the affluent, the poor, and those struggling to remain in the proverbial middle class, all other efforts to move toward an older and more diverse country will flounder. These divides will only worsen as baby boomers move into their fourth quarter of life and find that they are more economically insecure and vulnerable than their parents and grandparents were.

Figure 1.1 provides a visual view of how these three forces come together to either exacerbate tensions in American civic and political life or move us toward a road map that can mitigate these conflicts and give the United States a renewed social contract that enables elected officials, policy elites, and ordinary citizens to see their self-interests in supporting ideas, proposals, and legislation that bring together all groups and individuals, regardless of age or race, toward a set of mutually supporting goals and visions. This e pluribus unum is the counterweight to a divided America.

The subsequent chapters move toward this road map by first providing the demographic data and other information that document the facts behind the aging of a majority-minority nation and the inescapable truths behind the three forces depicted in Figure 1.1. Later chapters select a few policy and civic concerns that everyone can visualize and by which they can internalize their anxieties about growing old in a country facing rapid demographic changes. The final chapter presents the broader concerns about the decline—or renaissance—of the United States and what that means for the next generation as they live out their lives in the 21st century.
REFERENCES


