



# United or divided?

In recent years  
some dramatic,  
uneven shifts  
have turned the  
United States  
into a nation that's  
harder to know  
in depth... and  
harder to govern



by Dennis Redmont

**I**n the course of 2011, Americans will wake up and look at themselves in the mirror one morning and suddenly realize their faces and places have drastically changed in the past decade.

The middle class will feel their pockets and find that their median household income has dropped seven percent lower in 2009 than in 2000 and that those lines on their faces are more deeply etched, because they are working harder.

Many young people, who are more racially diverse than ever, will wonder why they are less educated, and why their parents moved out of expensive locations to some of the more affordable states, like Nevada.

Everyone will also look around and find the foreign-born population has grown 24 percent since the past census in 2000, to about 7.4 million. Hispanics and their other immigrant brothers will find out that they look younger than other Americans but more racially diverse.

Baby boomers will find their peers are retiring in large numbers.

Furthermore, everyone will look around to see America's neighborhoods have become more integrated last year than during anytime in at least a century, as a rising black middle class moved into fast-growing, wide areas in the South and the West.

These seismic changes are the product of the first nationwide census in a decade since 2000, which has analyzed some of the dramatic, uneven shifts which have turned the United States into a nation that's harder to know in depth—and harder to govern.

## Seismic changes

Back in 1910, the population of the American West was only beginning to boom. For example, the population of Washington State had risen by 120 percent over the 10 preceding years. There were only 1.1 million people living there one century ago. And only 2.4 million people lived in all of California, about the same population of Manhattan at the time.

One hundred years later, the population of the West has risen tenfold, to 72 million, as part of a shift revealed by the census.

If you set a pivot in the middle of the USA, you'd see the country has tilted heavily down and to the left of the map over the past 10 years, as people moved from North to South and from East to West. Population growth was fastest, by 35 percent, in Nevada, followed by Arizona (25 percent), Utah (24 percent), and Texas (21 percent). In the meantime, the northeastern states were stagnant.

These displacements reflect social and economic changes. The decline of heavy industry and the rise of light manufacturing and services have led to a shift away from the industrialized Northeast.

Aging of the population also fueled

➔ growth in the South, as retirees moved there in search of warmer weather, while air conditioning and other advances made it easier. Finally, the discovery of natural resources such as oil and mines, typically in North Dakota, attracted new settlements, after years of stagnation. Concurrently, the path of Eni's own activities and of its staff throughout the United States has not been significantly different, following the natural resources.

Eni became one of the main producers of hydrocarbons in the Gulf of Mexico to extract oil and gas from offshore platforms, besides drilling in Texas oilfields. Furthermore Eni located its American headquarters in Houston, and created alliances with an independent gas producer in North Texas. Eni was also a pioneer in exploration and development in Alaska, where the North Slope region is once again coming into new production after years of exploration and development.

The composition and location of Eni's own people also followed a similar pattern, with a deep and vast mix of nationalities, ethnic origins and new locations, shifting closer to the resources. They include nationals from Italy, Venezuela, Ecuador, Egypt, Indonesia and Belgium.

Meanwhile, the nationwide "rebalancing" of this new breed of Americans has also been accompanied by a slowdown in the overall rate of population growth, which rose by 9.7 percent, compared to two-digit growth in

past decades. Nevertheless fertility has remained much higher than in other industrialized countries like Europe and Japan, while immigration has remained high.

#### The political consequences

The heavy political consequences are already visible over the horizon. The census will be used to reapportion seats in the U.S. Congress, and in turn to the Electoral College, based on the new individual state counts. And that, in turn, will influence the congressional and the Presidential race for 2012, with Republican-leaning states from the "Sun Belt" gaining more influence at the expense of Democratic-leaning "Rust Belt" states.

As an example: Texas will win four new seats, Florida will also gain two, while New York and Ohio will each lose two. Other losers include Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts and New Jersey, meaning one less congressman from each state where Democrats had high popularity rates. In "The Nine Nations of North America," a book written in 1981 by Joel Garreau, a writer for the "Washington Post," the author suggested that North America, in order to be understood, could be divided into nine regions, or "nations," which have distinctive economic and cultural features. He argued that conventional national and state borders were largely artificial and irrelevant, and that his "nations" provided a more accurate way of understanding the true





nature of North American society. "Forget the borders dividing the United States, forget the bilge you were taught in sixth grade geography about East and West, North and South, forget the maze of state and provincial boundaries...."

"Consider, instead, the way America really works. It is nine nations each with its capital and distinctive web of power and influence...These nations look different, feel different and sound different from each other...Most importantly, each nation has a distinctive prism through which it views the world."

These Nations were:

1. New England (including parts of Canada)
2. The Foundry (the declining industrial areas of the Northeast)
3. Dixie (the former Confederate states in the Civil War)
4. The Breadbasket (the Great Plains)
5. The Islands (the South Florida area and neighboring Caribbean)
6. Mexamerica (Southern California, Texas and New Mexico)
7. Ecotopia (the Pacific Northwest upward from San Francisco)
8. The Empty Quarter (most of Alaska, Nevada, Utah and Colorado)
9. Quebec

For many years, and still today, this distribution scheme has been a reference model for those who studied the United States and its constantly changing social and demographical geography.

But this was not the whole picture. Human behavior had to be fac- ➔



AUSTIN - DEMONSTRATORS FROM THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT. MANIFESTANTES DEL MOVIMIENTO DE TEA PARTY.

toored into the new equation. Two decades later (2000) in "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community", Robert Putnam, a sociologist who had analyzed the Italian regional systems for two decades, detected the following social trends in his own country.

#### Bowling alone

Americans were becoming increasingly disconnected from their family, friends, neighbors, and their democratic structures.

Americans were even "bowling alone." In other words, more Americans were still bowling than ever before, but they were not bowling in leagues or teams. Putnam showed how changes in work, family structure, age, suburban life, television, computers, women's roles and other factors, contributed to this decline of

togetherness at the "micro" level.

Putnam warned that Americans' stock of social capital - the very fabric of Americans' connections with each other - had plummeted, impoverishing lives and communities. With this, the "declining social capital" lead to the continued and growing distrust in government, explaining the general low voting turnouts or the rise of the recent "Tea Party movement." The "Tea Party" became the standard-bearer against a government seen as spendthrift and invasive.

This trend triggered lower attendance percentages (a 58% drop) at club meetings; family dinners suffered a 43% drop and even having friends at home declined by 35%, Putnam found. But one more factor was working its way through the demographic shifts. "The Big Sort," a book writ-

ten in 2008 by the Texas journalist Bill Bishop (in collaboration with sociologist Robert Cushing), was becoming the landmark story of how America has come to be, nowadays, a country of swelling cultural division, economic separation, and political polarization. Going far beyond the simplistic red state/blue state divide, Bishop marshaled original data and incisive reporting to show how Americans have "sorted" themselves geographically, economically, and politically into like-minded communities over the last three decades.

This is the "Big Sort," the self-selection of people into increasingly like-minded communities at microscopic levels of society. This did not necessary mean that people were "bowling together," but maybe they were just living more closely together with their group affinities. So paradoxically, the more diverse America becomes, the more locally homogenous it becomes.

#### More divided

States are now more divided. The division between rural America and urban America has grown wider. People have just kept "sorting"! Bishop proclaimed, "Americans have clustered in communities of sameness, among people with similar ways of life, beliefs and, in the end, politics."

Bishop's claim was that the local landslide effect has been largely the result of "demographic resorting," in effect relegating the concept of



“the melting pot” to the old history books. In Bishop's view, re-sorting is what happens when individuals in a society become more affluent, better educated and freer to make their own personal and political choices. But he also believes that the “Big Sort” has been a form of escape. As the country attracts more and more immigrants, and as large metropolitan areas become multiracial and multilingual, people feel a strong desire to retreat to the safety of smaller communities where they can live among those who look, think and behave like themselves. But that does not necessarily mean that activities take place together. “Americans,” Bishop writes, “lost their sense of a nation by accident in the sweeping economic and cultural shifts that took place after the mid-1960s. And by instinct they have sought out modern-day recreations of the 19th-century ‘island communities’ in where and how they live.”

It is thus along these contradictory and paradoxical paths of “united” and “divided” that the USA will travel in the next decade.



**Dennis Redmont,** currently an executive at the Council for the US and Italy, served as Rome-based Director for the Associated Press in the Mediterranean Region.