

# Mutual Benefits and Equity amid Racial Diversity: A Generational Strategy for Growing a Broader Base of Support for Social Equity

Journal of Planning Education and Research  
2015, Vol. 35(3) 369–375  
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DOI: 10.1177/0739456X15596579  
jpe.sagepub.com  


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## Abstract

A mutual benefits strategy is proposed to reduce political resistance to greater social equity. Growing racial diversity signals a new era, but emphasis on projected change provokes defensive reactions. The twenty-first-century demography also includes massive aging and a white voting majority until 2060, so benefits of equity should be detailed for the older generation. Those include better workers, taxpayers, and home buyers resulting from investment in the new generation. Emphasis on intergenerational mutual benefits bridges divides and can build support for a broader agenda of a shared future. The mutual benefits strategy could help curb the polarization widening in America.

## Keywords

politics and society, planning theory, demographic analysis, economic development

Rapid demographic change is drawing new attention to the need for greater equity between race and ethnic groups. The “next America” is signaled by the 2043 date when the Census Bureau has projected that the United States’ non-Hispanic white population will no longer comprise a majority of the U.S. population.<sup>1</sup> Equity planning is even more important in our diverse society because the growing price of inequality weighs upon us all (Stiglitz 2012).

An irony of growing diversity is that awareness of this trend may generate frictions strengthening the status quo at the very moment when greater equity is needed. The political lag accompanying demographic change enables the old guard to exercise majority control among voters long after population majorities have shifted, as will be described. Compounding reaction to the racial changes, a deep ethnocentrism shown to drive political opinion in America is activated more strongly under conditions of threat to entrenched groups (Kinder and Kam 2009).

This defensive reaction is likely a key factor in escalating the polarization afflicting America. Decades of experience with equity initiatives show that political resistance is the major obstacle blocking wider adoption of equity planning goals.<sup>2</sup> How might planners develop a strategy that can win cooperation by a broader swath of the electorate? Without a broad base of support and protection from electoral attack, local officials are understandably reluctant to pursue equity goals. In times of severe competition for limited fiscal resources, how can we win support of the taxpayers for necessary investments and fair resource allocations?

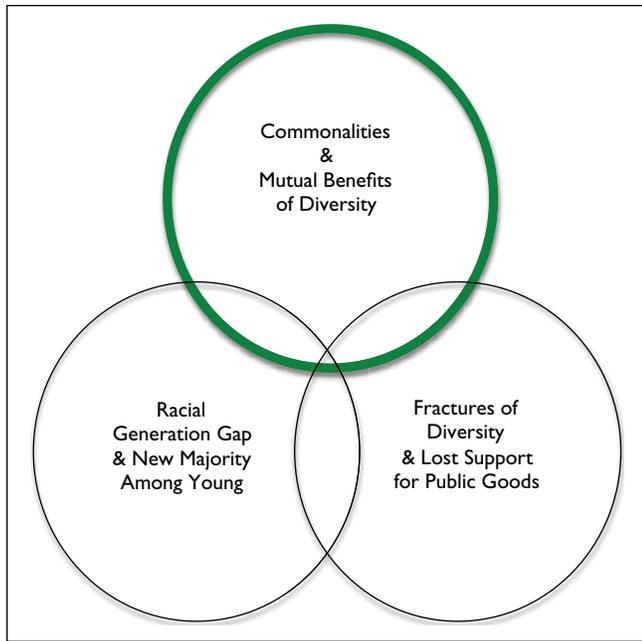
A strategy that emphasizes mutual benefits of equity holds essential promise. The formulation proposed here responds to twenty-first century challenges and opportunities. It spans racial divides by refocusing on generations, namely, by linking the interests of older (whiter) and younger, more diverse generations. Despite their declining population share, whites will retain a majority among voters for decades to come, as explained below. For this reason, winning the support of more white voters is crucial if planners are to gain traction for equity initiatives. If equity is good for all, how can that be better emphasized?

The mutual benefits strategy competes with messaging based on two other frames for representing racial change, one that emphasizes differences in racial mix between older and younger generations, and a second that highlights demographic fractures in political support for public objectives (Figure 1). The three frames for addressing race may all hold truth, and appear to overlap, but they pull in different directions. The racial generation gap, by itself, emphasizes disconnect between the older generation and the young who are the future, directing attention to a growing divide between their interests. In turn, the fractures-of-diversity frame emphasizes how perceptions of this growing racial divide

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**Figure 1.** Overlapping frames for addressing racial change and equity.

Source: Author's own construction.

creates discord and can undermine support for common purpose, including support for greater equity.

The alternative frame of mutual benefits for generations refocuses on common interests and a shared future. It seeks to lower the barriers to advancing equity by linking the interests of generations across racial divides. It builds on planning principles to speak to the political middle on behalf of the neglected and disadvantaged, and on behalf of future interests.

## The Racial Generation Gap

### *Racial Transition in Population*

The changing racial makeup and growing diversity of the population of the United States has been a compelling trend driving attention to demographics (Frey 2014). In twenty-two states, people of color (all those other than white non-Hispanic) comprise greater than 30 percent of the population, according to the 2010 census. This diversity share fell below 20 percent in only seventeen states, eight of which were in the Midwest and three in northern New England (Myers 2013).

A racial generation gap forms because demographic change occurs first among young adults and their children who represent the new wave of social membership. Older residents who have risen to the top of the seniority structure represent the growth of the past and yet they hold the greatest decision-making power about the future. William Frey of the Brookings Institution (2014) has emphasized what he terms

a “cultural generation gap,” but we might simply recognize it as a racial generation gap, if Hispanics or Latinos are treated as equivalent to a racial group.

The gap has been growing, although it may be leveling off. As of 2012, 79.2 percent of seniors ages 65 and older in the United States were non-Hispanic white, but this was the case for only 52.6 percent of children under age 18. Thus, there is a difference of 26.6 percentage points between the white shares among seniors and children, while the gap was only 22.7 in the 2000 census. U.S. Census Bureau (2012) projections foresee the gap beginning to decline after passing a maximum of 27.4 in 2014.

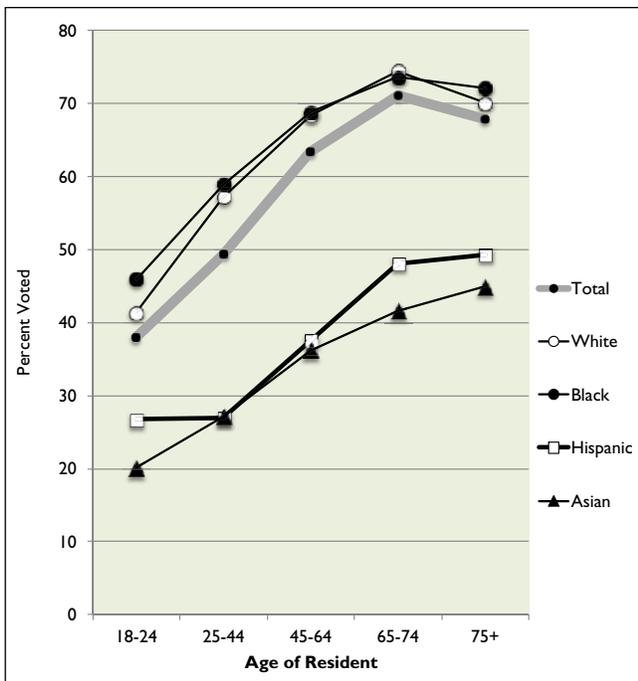
### *The Gap in Electoral Demographics*

Left largely unstated in this racial generation gap analysis is why it matters that seniors are disproportionately white compared to children. The implied significance is related to voting about services needed by the young. Even though planners and local service providers try to serve all residents equally, voters are able to command greater attention, and that could lead to racial inequity if voters are less likely to be members of racial minorities.

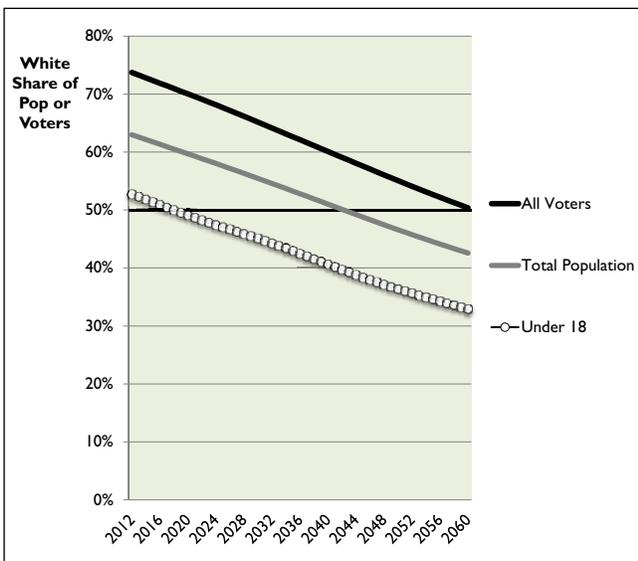
Consider how much the racial composition differs between the total population and those who voted in the 2012 presidential election. Whereas 52.6 percent of children under age 18 and 62.8 percent of all U.S. residents in 2012 were non-Hispanic white,<sup>3</sup> the white share rises progressively when we consider only those old enough to vote (66.0 percent), or those who are both citizens and old enough to vote (71.1 percent).<sup>4</sup> In the end, fully 73.7 percent of the voters were white.

Not only are there large disparities between the makeup of children, young adults, and the older, long-established generation, but older Americans also are much more likely to vote than younger residents. None of the children are eligible to vote, but differences in voting participation between younger and older adults persist in every racial group, as shown by a Census Bureau survey after the 2012 presidential election (File 2013). As shown in Figure 2, within every racial group, voting participation in the presidential election was nearly twice as great among those ages 65–74 as at ages 18–24. Even wider age gaps than these are typical in “off-year” or special elections about local government decisions. Thus, we see how the older population comes to exercise disproportionate weight in public decision making.

Looking ahead to 2043, the year when whites are expected to become a minority of the total population, I have projected what will be the makeup of voters.<sup>5</sup> If the current differences in voting participation rates by age and race continue, and given the expected change in population makeup, whites will experience a steadily declining share of children, total population, and voters (Figure 3). The share that is majority people of color steadily grows nationwide. However, whereas children under age 18 are expected to become majority



**Figure 2.** Percentage of population that voted in the 2012 presidential election, by age and race. Source: Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2012, Voting Supplement.



**Figure 3.** Declining percentage whites (non-Hispanic) among voters and population, projected from 2012 through 2060. Sources: Census Bureau 2012 population projections by age and race/Hispanic; voting projections by author are based on voting participation rates shown in Figure 2, as applied to Census Bureau age and race/Hispanic projections.

people of color in 2018, the voters will not arrive at that status until 2060. The conclusion is that the preferences of white voters, most of whom also will be older, will exercise

heavy weight in our democratic decision making for decades ahead, despite racial change among youth. The challenge is how to help older voters take a more generous and responsible view of younger people’s interests.

Demographic differences between voters and other residents are important because voters are motivated by perceptions of self-interest, which are often age-based. Leighley and Nagler (2013) report that voters are substantially more conservative on their economic views than nonvoters. Regardless of race, older voters may represent their age group interests rather than those of children. It deserves note that federal government spending is devoted largely to services (entitlement programs) for older Americans, whereas it is the state and local governments that are most responsible for delivering services to children and youth, including education, recreation, and safety (Isaacs et al. 2013).

Thus, the disparity of interests between the older voters and the younger population is both large and most acute at the governmental level where planners work. The racial generation gap aggravates this political disconnection. Rather than ignore this problem or wish it away, we should acknowledge it, analyze its details, and then develop a remediation strategy.

### Fractures of Diversity That Reduce Common Will

Left unattended, the generation gap can be corrosive of public goals. The alternative divisions-of-diversity frame highlights the erosion of support for public goods and shared services. This diversity effect is linked to generations and it amplifies the ongoing trend toward individualism and away from community, contrary to what prevailed in most decades prior to 1980 (Dionne 2012). The underlying predisposition toward ethnocentrism in public opinion (Kinder and Kam 2009) has often led to declining public will to support programs for the common good or for the disadvantaged. In a nation of growing diversity, we must learn how to mitigate this corrosive effect that divides, rather than unifies, based on diversity.

### Demographic Divisions of Interests

Evidence of fragmented support has been widespread. Poterba (1997) found that voting support for public schools is weakened in locales where the elderly share of the public is greater. This may be especially problematic in retirement areas where elderly have moved, leaving behind their younger relatives, as in the Arizona case. Without felt kinship to other residents in local areas, it is easier for them to act on individual interests that disregard the needs of others.

Economists have also found that greater ethnic diversity in U.S. cities, metropolitan areas, or counties is associated with lower rates of spending on productive public goods such as education and roads. Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly

(1999) explain this as the effect of “ethnic fragmentation” on commonality of preferences. Similarly, in a set of historical, international comparisons, Lindert (2004) found a long-term trend toward reduced spending on public services in nations that have experienced greater diversity. The legendary tax revolt in California is said by some political observers to be motivated in part by growing diversity not welcomed by older voters (Schrag 1998). Finally, Robert Putnam’s (2007) findings have been widely reported, and criticized, about the effects of immigration and diversity on reducing social capital—namely, a decline in trust, reciprocity, and solidarity.<sup>6</sup>

The takeaway from this overall body of scholarship is that, for lack of countervailing measures to rebuild solidarity and shared identity, there is a risk that growing diversity could undermine the sense of shared purpose and community obligation. That surely is a threat to support for equity planning.

The challenge for community planners is how can we design a counteractive strategy that restores the lost social cohesion required for advancing shared public purposes amid growing demographic change? We note that Putnam has postulated two kinds of social capital—*bonding* capital among individuals of similar origin and identity, and *bridging* capital that establishes linkages across dissimilar groups.

This suggests that fractures may have opened because of the decline in ethnic (or religious or other) homogeneity that once supported community through bonding by similarity. In our contemporary era of growing diversity, what is needed as a replacement is bridging capital that spans demographic divisions to mitigate any fragmentation of interests. Planners should focus on how to cultivate greater bridging capital for integrating interests in communities.

### Guarding against Activation of Ethnocentric Defenses

Before a bridging solution can be successful, it would help to minimize triggering defensive reactions that widen the political gaps. The ethnocentrism of white voters that filters most political views is intensified under conditions of perceived threat (Kinder and Kam 2009). The paradox is that over-dramatizing racial change in a desire to call for greater equity could actually raise, not lower, barriers to greater racial equity. White majority voters may be reacting to an exaggerated threat of loss, goaded by long-range projections, as found in a study by Alba, Rumbaut, and Marotz (2005). In turn, those voters were most hostile to present-day equity initiatives.

Political responses to perceived threat often are to erect exclusionary barriers to preserve current majority privilege. Fear of racial replacement leads to political division and poses a particular challenge to Democrats, according to Brownstein (2013): “[this] pinpoints the party’s greatest risk: its inability to convince most whites they will benefit from activist government.” In this view, the chances of gaining support for equity planning are dimmed unless the narrative

of change includes benefits for the white voting majority. Those benefits of diversity are real and they should be articulated much more prominently.

### Mutual Benefits from a Generational Life-Cycle Strategy

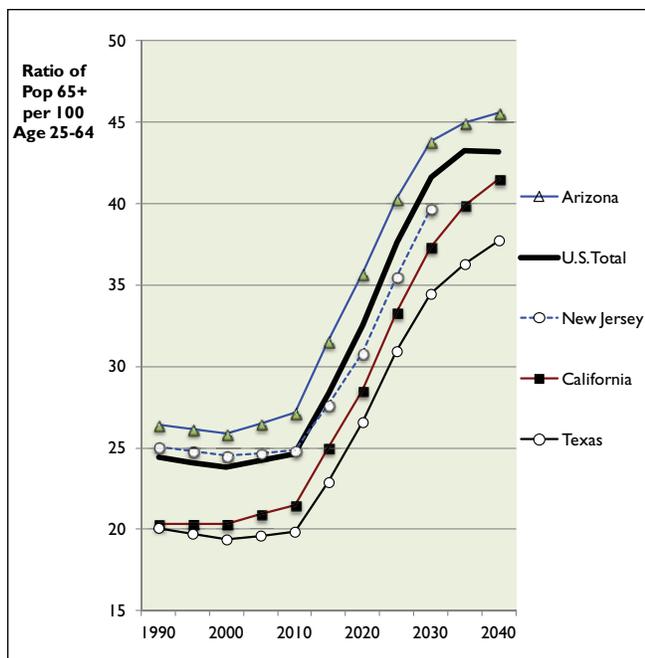
An emphasis on mutual benefits shared between generations and across racial divisions could prove helpful in bridging divides. The novel element of the proposed generational life-cycle strategy, originally developed with regard to immigrants in Myers (2007), is to first direct attention to the massive problems of an aging society. Of some political advantage, older voters who are predominantly white are especially sensitive to these problems, and they might welcome hearing how the racially diverse, younger generation represents a solution, albeit only partial, to their problems. Framed in this way we can begin to invent options for mutual gain, a core principle for “getting to yes” (Fisher and Ury 1981).

### A Top-Heavy Generational Structure

The aging of the baby boomers is producing the nation’s first experience with a top-heavy age structure. A unique feature of twenty-first-century demography is that, after decades of little change, the ratio of seniors ages 65 and older to prime working age Americans (ages 25 to 64) is about to rise dramatically.<sup>7</sup> What leaves us so unprepared is that the senior ratio was virtually constant from 1980 to 2010 at 24 seniors per 100 working age. Analysis of Census Bureau projections suggests this ratio will now rise to 41.6 by 2030, a better than *two-thirds increase in just 15 years*. Similar upturns are expected in all states, because the aging baby boomers are located everywhere in the nation (Figure 4).

The sharp increases in our top-heavy generational structure are proving a major challenge. Among the major consequences are projected increases in social security and Medicare costs, the so-called “entitlements,” which together will consume a dominant share of the federal budget, leaving much less discretionary revenue for things like transportation or community development (Congressional Budget Office 2013). The top-heavy age structure also leads to problems in finding workforce replacements for legions of baby-boomer retirees or locating home buyers who can absorb the many homes placed on the market by baby-boomer sellers (Myers and Ryu 2008).

The opportunity for equity planning is that in so many different ways, members of the aging baby boom generation, who are predominantly non-Hispanic white, will be dependent on a younger generation. Composed of roughly half people of color, this younger generation will struggle to support the weight of so many added seniors. Greater equity is needed today if young people are ever to assume their generational responsibilities. Older voters cannot afford to



**Figure 4.** Rising senior ratios in the U.S. and selected states (population ratio defined as ages 65+/ages 25–64 × 100). Sources: Decennial census data; Census Bureau 2012 projections for U.S.; projections to 2030 or 2040 supplied by agencies of selected states.

neglect the young and need to help them achieve their full potential.

### *The New Shortage and Increased Value of Children and Young Adults*

It is only a small step to the conclusion that the soaring senior ratio implies young people are relatively more scarce and, hence, more valuable. Children under the age of 10 have been dwindling in number, absolutely declining in seventeen states, and in all fifty states they are failing to keep pace with the soaring numbers of seniors who will depend on them when they grow to be adults. Fortunately, public discussions have begun to focus on the key involvement of young people in issues of poverty, inequality, and future mobility. Improvements for children and their families are now being recognized as crucial to addressing economic inequality, as shown in statements by the President’s Council of Economic Advisors (Furman 2015) or in new work by Robert Putnam (2015).

What is added here is the simple claim that the relative *shortage of number of children* creates new urgency to help them grow to be more productive adults, if they are to carry out their generation’s adult roles.<sup>8</sup> Improvements for poor families are crucial, because children growing up with parents in poverty are handicapped in school and have lowered prospects as future workers, tax payers, and consumers (Heckman 2006; Holzer et al. 2008). Greater social spending on poor families needs to be recognized less as charity and

more as vital investment in the future (Stiglitz 2012). In this sense, equity has been claimed as a superior model for economic growth (Blackwell, Kwoh, and Pastor 2010).

In the new era of children’s shortage, the greatest upside potential is found in new programs to help families that have been most neglected. We have a new opportunity to build consensus for equity: greater resource investment in the disadvantaged young is in the best interests of older voters. There are mutual benefits to be gained from greater equity. It is a virtual certainty that children will repay investments by growing up to be workers, new taxpayers, business patrons, and even home buyers.

### *A Shared Life-Cycle with Mutual Benefits*

A focus on aging through the life cycle, and a shortage of the young, holds potential to break down the polarization of deeply divided interest groups by emphasizing commonalities and reciprocity over time. The life-cycle perspective underscores that people’s interests are not frozen in time, that in fact everyone’s interests change as they pass through their life course. And each age group has a different role to play. The simple aging process lays a foundation for greater appreciation of the contributions brought by the diverse, younger generation while addressing the urgent needs of seniors that are multiplying in the future.

The new social contract formed of these generational relations may be timeless, but it is newly grounded in the urgencies of massive aging (Myers 2007). Planners might use this fundamental dynamic to promote stronger cohesion, reciprocity, and responsibility in the communities where they work. From this base, support for equity planning is a much smaller, more comfortable step by more advantaged majority voters in the community.

### **Conclusion**

Ongoing demographic change means that people of color make up the majority of children and, soon, young adults, and thus they will be predominant beneficiaries of youth investment. Given current racial disparities in resources and outcomes, greater investment in young people of color, and their families, holds the greatest upside potential for meeting future societal needs. The racial distribution of outcomes should be closely monitored to ensure that disproportionate needs in fact are being served, as in the “equity scorecard” method of Dowd and Bensimon (2014). But it is the promise of greater overall improvements—including for elders—that will help motivate support by older voters. This is the new twenty-first-century opportunity for promoting greater social equity. Advocates work to raise awareness and apply pressure, but equity planning will succeed soonest when advocates cause the community to embrace it as vital to the interests of the mainstream.

The racial majority framing often used to describe demographic change is damaging in this respect, because it

conveys images of a zero-sum perspective (groups sum to 100) and encourages a competitive viewpoint of winners and losers. Dramatization of the racial change in order to gain attention—without highlighting benefits to be gained by older whites—runs the risk of raising a sense of threat and spurring greater resistance. This is especially true when overzealous use is made of projections of *future* racial change as if that had immediate consequence, which is then interpreted as a *present* threat by older white voters. Without counteraction, diversity-as-fragmentation is an expected result.

The mutual benefits strategy avoids these pitfalls by keeping the interests of the voting majority more central to the narrative from the beginning and by elevating the generational frame over the racial one. This centrist strategy still argues for disproportionate benefits to people of color, but the argument launches from the urgent importance of strengthening the next generation. By these means, the mutual benefits strategy hopes to advance the common good in a consensual and accelerated manner.

More broadly, community planning as a whole could benefit from this rebuilding of a sense of common purpose through generational connections. Fragmentation and political polarization have progressively eroded support for shared community efforts. However, renewed belief in connectedness and shared destiny can be forged on the basis of simple relations of age and generation. The resulting narrative of interconnections and mutual benefit becomes an element of social capital that can pay dividends in support of all shared endeavors.

### Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the USC Price School of Public Policy. Rosaline Tio provided excellent research assistance.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. See the project findings under this heading from the Pew Research Center (Taylor 2014) or the National Journal political website of this title directed by Ronald Brownstein, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/next-america>.
2. The pioneering work of Davidoff (1965) built upon the legal process of justice, but in the halls of administration, equity was much more difficult to prioritize. Krumholz and Forester (1990) concluded that the future of equity planning is uncertain and largely dependent upon the political context within which planners work. Similarly, Metzger's (1996) review of

the state of equity planning concluded with the critical challenge of figuring out how to operate within a restrictive political environment. In a later study of equitable approaches to economic development, Krumholz (1999) stressed the need for greater electoral support, but he also highlighted the influence planners can have on elected officials by framing issues and negotiating alternatives with equity in mind. More recently, in a study of rebuilding in New Orleans after Katrina, Talen (2008) reports a frustrating lack of support for equity goals by elected officials, business leaders, and residents. She concludes that equity planning requires political support and public engagement and that equity planners must help educate all stakeholders involved on equity objectives.

3. Data for total population and children in 2012 from the American Community Survey.
4. Data drawn from the Census Bureau report on voters and nonvoters in the 2012 election, summarized in File (2013), with detailed tables Table02\_1 and Table02\_3 online: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2012/tables.html>.
5. Projections were constructed by taking per capita voting participation rates by age and race, as reported by File (2013) for the 2012 presidential election, and weighting these by the population numbers projected by the U.S. Census Bureau (2012).
6. Putnam's (2007) thesis has drawn substantial criticism for its theoretical assumptions and interpretations of immigration (Portes and Vickstrom 2011). Despite its great influence, Putnam's notion of social capital has become the focus of broader criticism, as well, such as by DeFilippis (2001) in the realm of community development.
7. Details about the age ranges used in the senior ratio and its differences from demographers' traditional "old age dependency ratio," as well as its strategic advantages over other measures of aging, can be found in Myers (2012).
8. Resources for demonstrating the children's shortage and their newfound importance in states and local areas can be found here: <http://www.usc.edu/schools/price/research/popdynamics/research-children.html>

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