

## **POLITICS, POLICY, AND POPULATION CHANGE**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This paper examines the population changes that have occurred in the Chicago metropolitan area over the past two decades and shows how they have impacted electoral politics and public policy.

All of the components of the metro area — Chicago, the Cook County suburbs, and the five collar counties — experienced considerable population change over the past twenty years. The collar counties had the highest rate of population growth (46.7%), while the Cook County suburbs experienced only modest growth (2.3%), and Chicago suffered a net population loss (-3.6%). These differential rates of growth reduced the demographic importance of Chicago and Cook County within the metropolitan area. Moreover, this population change paralleled an equally important shift in the location of economic activities, as the suburbs gained and Chicago lost jobs.

The population and economic changes combined to alter the metropolitan area's diversity. In 1960 whites made up 85.2 percent of the area's total population, but by 2000 they were only 57.3 percent.

Chicago's heterogeneity increased over the two decades. The city's white population dipped sharply (-11.9%); its African-American population declined modestly (-3.2%); but its Asian and Latino populations nearly doubled. Over the same period, diversity grew in the Cook County suburbs, as the African-American, Asian, and Latino populations grew and whites declined both numerically and proportionately. In the collar counties, the white population continued to grow, but at a much slower pace than the African-American, Asian, and Latino populations.

This growth of minority populations within all of the subparts of the metro area have had clear implications for electoral politics. Regression analysis of voting trends shows that the Democrats gained strength throughout the area. And these pro-Democratic trends were steeper than for the state as a whole, so they can't be explained away as a reflection of forces operating statewide. Instead, as further regression analysis demonstrates, they were mainly the product of changes in the relative sizes of the population groups.

Rapid change in the Chicago metropolitan area's ethnic and racial mix has produced some instances of social tension and conflict. While such incidents have been more common than civic boosters care to admit, they pale in comparison to the communal and sustained violence that marked the racial transition in Chicago's neighborhoods in the 1950s and 1960s.

But so large an influx of newcomers, many of whom are young, with large families, and with limited capacity in English, has given rise to a number of policy issues. Some of these are bedrock issues, like drawing the boundaries for wards and legislative districts to give new groups proportionate representation in the political process. Others arise from the social characteristics and associated

interests of the incoming group, like school overcrowding in transitional neighborhoods and the need for public agencies to communicate with non-English-speaking residents. Still other policy issues reflect tension and conflict between newcomers and older residents. Housing, employment, and resolving the documentation problem are the most perplexing of these.

Although these and other issues sometimes array newcomers against older residents, to this point “immigrant bashing” — a staple of politics in earlier eras and in states like California — has not become an effective mobilizing tool in Illinois or in the Chicago metropolitan area. Preventing polarization on these types of issues will require ongoing public education efforts to demonstrate the value of immigration and the contribution the newcomers make to the region and to its economy.