

“Demographic Exceptionalism” in the United States: Tendencies and Implications

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The idea that the American political experiment bears profound significance for all humanity is one rooted deep and long in American soil—it far predates the actual establishment of the United States of America (witness Governor John Winthrop’s famous “city on a hill” sermon in Massachusetts in 1630, nearly a century and a half before the American Revolution). By the same token, the notion that America was characteristically different from all of the societies from which its emigrant populations had been drawn (the “American difference”) was an early and continuing theme of discussion about United States, not only among the revolutionaries who created this independent federalist state in the late Eighteenth Century, but also among discerning observers and well-wishers from the Continent. The concept of “American exceptionalism” was in fact formalized by Alexis de Tocqueville in his opus *Democracy in America*, after his travels through the USA in the early 1830s.

For the most part, the concept of “American exceptionalism” has been applied to the political differences that separate America’s experience and behavior from that of states in the “Old World”: the USA’s striking absence of any socialist movement worthy of a name; the spirit of ‘manifest destiny’ long informing US foreign policy, and so on.¹ But America’s “exceptionalism” extends well beyond the realm of the explicitly political, and into the realms of the nation’s very rhythms of life. These surprising but very palpable tendencies may be described as “American demographic exceptionalism”.

Paradoxically, although the United States may well count as the “first new nation” (to borrow a phrase from Seymour Martin Lipset) to embark upon the project of democratic modernity, US demographic patterns have not homogenized with those of the world’s other industrial democracies. To the contrary: after several decades of seeming convergence in population patterns in the early postwar era, we have witnessed more than a generation of strong and stubborn “demographic divergence” in population profiles between the United States on the one hand and virtually all other OECD members on the other—with potentially even more dramatic divergences seemingly in store.

Two demographic tendencies separate the United States from virtually all developed counterparts in Europe and Asia. The first is childbearing patterns: at a time in which it is the norm for rich countries to report markedly, often astonishingly, low birth rates, fertility levels in the United States are very close to the level needed for long-term population replacement—which makes the USA peculiarly and insistently fecund for a contemporary affluent democracy. The second is immigration patterns: the USA’s

¹ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, (New York: W.W> Norton, 1996).

absorption of foreigners continues apace, with high and continuing inflows of immigrants from the “Third World”, but without (as yet) the symptoms of “cultural indigestion” that have troubled Western Europe of late.

US ‘demographic exceptionalism’ would be a fascinating academic side-note if America were today a tiny and distant state, as was the case in 1790. As it happens, however, the USA is now the world’s dominant power—and it is also the most populous of the developed societies: over twice as large as Japan, over three times as large as Germany, and over five times the size of France, Italy, or Britain. America’s exceptional demographic trends are of interest not only to demographers and sociologists, but to economists, strategists and policymakers looking at the international environment that beckons over the coming generation.

Exceptional American Fertility

From its earliest Colonial origins, childbearing was believed to be markedly higher in this frontier society than in the settled regions of Europe from whence most Americans traced their roots. This American fertility premium was noted and discussed by leading thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic—Malthus in Britain; Crèvecoeur in France; Benjamin Franklin in America (who offered the vision of Americans “swarming across the countryside like locusts”).

Those perceptions were grounded in demographic reality. The U.S. Bureau of the Census now estimates a “total fertility rate” (TFR) in 1800 for America’s “whites” of over 7 births per woman per lifetime, compared with contemporaneous rates around 5.7 in England and 4.5 in France.² Fertility levels were even higher for the USA’s African-American slaves: according again to the Census Bureau, the US black TFR for the 1850s was nearly 8—a level over 40 percent higher than for contemporary US whites.³

From this exceptionally high starting point, the United States moved more or less steadily over the course of the 19th Century through a “demographic transition” toward lower death rates and lower birth rates. By 1900 the United States was the world’s most modernized and affluent large country (excepting then only Britain)⁴, and with its “white” TFR by then down to 3.6, her “fertility transition” had progressed rather further than in most of her European counterparts (excepting again England, and of course, and also France, whose historical fertility transition, as French readers will know, was distinctive among the now-developed countries in its own way).

² Jean-Claude Chesnais, *The Demographic Transition: Stages, Patterns And Economic Implications*, (New York : Oxford University Press, 1992).

³ Susan B. Carter, *Historical Statistics of the United States : Earliest Times to the Present*, (New York : Cambridge University Press, 2006), Table Ab1-10.

⁴ Angus Maddison, *The World Economy : Historical Statistics*, (Paris: OECD, 2003).

After World War II, in the era of the developed regions' "baby boom", US fertility levels once again jumped above Europe's. According to the UN Population Division, America's TFR in the 1950s was over 3.5, whereas Europe's was under 2.7—just three-fourths the US level.⁵ But in the pervasive "baby bust" that was to follow, US fertility declined even more sharply than Europe's, dropping to levels that, if continued, would have presaged steady population decline in the absence of immigration. By 1976, America's "period" TFR was 1.74⁶-- lower than the fertility level of the EU-15 that same year, less than half of America's own level from the late 1950s, and 18% lower than the requirements for long-term population stability.

At that juncture, "modernization theory" seemed triumphant: socio-economic development appeared to have brought about a basic convergence in fertility trends (at sub-replacement levels) for the world's more developed regions. But a funny thing happened on the road to depopulation: America's reported fertility levels turned upward, since then persistently skirting the replacement level. In 1989, America's "period" TFR rose slightly above 2.0—and has remained in that neighborhood ever since. In the sixteen years from 1989 to 2004, America's TFR averaged 2.02 births per woman, suggesting a "net replacement rate" (NRR) of 98% from one birth cohort to the next.

America's limited but unmistakable upsurge in fertility over the past generation marks a striking and indeed dramatic departure from the march toward seemingly ever-lower levels of sub-replacement childbearing in almost every other developed society. In the first half of the current decade, according to UN Population Division estimates and projections, America's TFRs and NRRs were fully 50% higher than Japan's, and about 45% higher than the averages for Europe as a whole.

Europe's overall fertility levels, to be sure, may currently be depressed by the post-Communist "demographic shocks" that some former Soviet bloc countries (most notably, Russia) continue to experience—but even compared with the amalgam of Western European societies, the US-European fertility gap now looks like a yawning divide. By the calculations and projections of the US Census Bureau, America's TFR is currently over 35% than in "Western Europe" (the EU-15 plus Norway, Switzerland and the region's tiny republics, principalities and islands); and although current fertility levels within Western Europe differ from one society to the next, in some cases quite substantially, the region's overall fertility levels have clearly tended down over the past three decades, while America's have trended up. Such indeed is the distinctiveness of America's recent fertility trends that a wide divide has now opened between the USA and Canada—countries that, in many respects, were long regard as something like "demographic twins". [SEE FIGURE 1] In the year 2004—the latest year for which data are available—the TFR in the USA was 35% higher than in Canada (with a still greater fertility differential separating the USA and the French-speaking province of Canada).

⁵ United Nations Population Division, « World Population Prospects, the 2004 Revision », available online at <http://www.unpopulation.org>.

⁶ "Period" fertility rates are synthetic "snapshot" of childbearing patterns displayed by women of all ages in a given year—which is to say, they represent the fertility levels that would result from an indefinite continuation of the childbearing trends of a given and particular year.

How can we explain the fertility gap now separating the United States from practically the rest of the developed world? Possible factors might include two distinctive current American social phenomena already widely discussed in the USA and internationally: 1) America's increasingly multiethnic composition (due in large measure to high rates of net immigration, about which more shortly) and 2) the partly-related phenomenon of American teenage fertility levels, which are famously high in the USA in relation to other contemporary affluent democracies.⁷ Yet however plausible such factors may sound, they do not actually explain away most of the current fertility gap between the United States and Western Europe.

Consider teenage childbearing patterns: although America's high rates may be notorious within today's OECD societies, the fact of the matter is that US teenage birthrates fell by about one third between 1990 and 2004, even though the overall US TFR remained relatively high and steady. By the year 2004, moreover, teen births comprised just one tenth of all American births and about a tenth of America's overall TFR: meaning, in practical terms, that a *total* cessation of childbearing by women under 20 years of age would still leave US fertility levels over 20% higher than Western Europe's.

As for fertility differences by ethnicity in the United States, these are real enough—but it is also easy to exaggerate their moment. With the single, albeit highly significant, exception of Hispanic-Americans, fertility levels for US minorities have by and large been converging with those of the non-Hispanic “White” majority. [SEE TABLE 1] Indeed: average fertility levels for Asian-Americans are almost identical to those for “Anglo” Americans, and Native Americans levels are now lower. While birth rates remain higher for African-Americans than for Anglos, the current black-white differential (of just 9%) is in fact the lowest in at least 150 years (i.e., since the era of slavery in the South). The Hispanic-Anglo fertility gap, for its part, is mainly a matter of the high reported birth levels for Mexican-Americans (whose calculated TFRs currently touch 3.0). Some other Hispanic Americans register fertility levels fairly close to Anglo levels (e.g., Puerto Ricans), or actually below them (Cuban-Americans).

In proximate terms, the single most important factor in explaining America's “high” fertility level these days is the birth rate of the country's “Anglo” majority—who still, it is worth noting, account for roughly 55% of the country's births. Over the past decade and a half, the TFR for non-Hispanic White Americans averaged 1.82 births per woman per lifetime—sub-replacement, to be sure, but well over 20% higher than corresponding

⁷ Another possible, somewhat technical, factor is what demographers call the “tempo effect”. Since “period” TFRs are a sort of social snapshot, they may misrepresent long-term fertility trends if mores about the timing of childbearing are undergoing significant change. In the United States in the 1970s, we now know, “period” rates dropped sharply in part because American women were deciding to delay childbearing—they ended up having their average of two children, but at later ages than their parents. There is a head debate among demographers today about just how much of a “tempo effect” Europe may experience in the years ahead. If European countries do enjoy a substantial “tempo effect”, this would of course narrow the transatlantic fertility gap. For obvious reasons, however, this is for now a question that cannot as yet be answered.

national fertility levels for Western Europe today—and even higher if one were to compare “Anglo” TFRs with the TFRs of Western Europe’s native born populations.

One may of course object that treating Western Europe as a single unit obscures the diversity of fertility patterns within this collectivity, and fair enough—but fertility levels for America’s Anglo population also happens to vary by state, and the contrast between the two at the regional level is instructive. [SEE FIGURE 2] In the year 2000, France reported the highest fertility of any EU member—yet matched against the TFRs of “Anglos”, France’s TFR would have ranked it in the bottom half of US states.

Conversely, America’s New England region consistently reports America’s lowest levels of Anglo fertility—yet if White New England were a European country, its fertility level would be distinctly above the EU-15 average. Present-day Turkey may seem fearsomely prolific to some Europeans contemplating the prospect of a Turkish accession to the EU, but Turkey’s current TFR of somewhere around 2.0 would be utterly unexceptional in White America today: in much of the American West, in fact, Turkey’s current childbearing profile could scarcely be distinguished from that of native-born Anglo locals.

What then accounts for Anglo America’s unexpectedly high and stable propensity to reproduce? Carefully tailored pro-natalist government policies certainly cannot explain it: the USA has none! Washington, to the contrary, is known within the OECD for the stinginess of its taxpayer-supported programs for mothers and children. By the same token, US labor patterns do not seem especially “family-friendly”; indeed Americans work longer hours and enjoy less vacation time than any of their European friends across the Atlantic. And a run-through of the checklist of other possible economic and/or policy explanations for the growing fertility gap between US Anglos and Western European is similarly unsatisfying.

It may be that the main explanation for the US-Europe fertility gap lies not in material factors, but rather in the seemingly ephemeral realm of values, ideals, attitudes, and outlook. It is fairly well established through public opinion surveys, for example, that Americans tend to be more optimistic about the future than their European counterparts: a disposition, one might easily surmise, that could weigh on the decision to bring children into this world. Similarly, the proportion of Americans reporting that they are “proud” to be Americans invariably registers at higher levels than the corresponding soundings in Europe: all other things being equal, such patriotism or nationalism may also plausibly be imagined to conduce to additional births. Perhaps most portentously, survey data indicate that the USA is still in the main a believing Christian country, with high percentage of households actively worshipping on a monthly or even weekly basis. In striking contrast to Western Europe, which might provocatively (but not unfairly) be described as a post-Christian, post-secular territory these days, religion is alive and well in the USA—the most modern, developed and affluent of the modern world’s developed affluent societies still seems to be stirred, animated and moved by the basic Judeo-Christian religious texts.

It is not hard to imagine how the religiosity gap between America and Europe would translate into a fertility gap. Unfortunately, the proposition is devilishly difficult to test.

Although the USA is (in the taxonomy of the great sociologist Pitirim Sorokin) a “quantophrenic” society, hungry for all manner of facts and figures, an Executive Order of over three decades standing has all but forbidden the federal government’s gathering of statistics on the religious affiliation of US citizens. (French readers will appreciate that they are in a similar situation, albeit for different reasons.) Consequently, there are virtually no official national data for the United States that would permit a rigorous testing of the hypothesis that America’s unusual disposition to religiosity is directly related to her also unusual disposition to childbearing. Although America is clearly an outlier among developed countries with respect to both religiosity and fertility, assertions that attempt to connect those two factors on the basis of broad, aggregate observations and trends runs the risks of committing what statisticians call “ecological fallacy” (i.e., mistakenly associating two actually unrelated phenomena for want of examining the relationships revealed at the level of the individual). Consequently, the proposition that Americans are more fertile because they are more devout must be treated as just an intriguing speculative surmise—at least for now.

Exceptional American Immigration Patterns

The United States is historically a nation populated overwhelmingly by immigrants and their descendants. Immigration—both officially authorized and extra-legal—remains a central feature of the country’s demographic life. The scale of undocumented or illegal immigration into the United States in recent years was suggested by the US 2000 census count, which tabulated six million more inhabitants than the “intra-census projection” had prepared US officials to expect!

Western Europe, to be sure, has experienced its own influx of newcomers over the past generation—but in both relative and absolute terms, the influx of migrants to the United States continues at a distinctly higher tempo. By the estimates and projection of the US Census Bureau, net migration into Western Europe over the past decade (1996-2005) averaged roughly 740,000 persons a year—making for a rate of about 1.9 per thousand in comparison to the existing settled population. For the United States, by contrast, the corresponding figures are an average of about 980,000 a year and a rate of 3.5 per year. There are some developed societies whose net immigration rates today are higher than America’s—Australia, Canada and New Zealand, for example—but no large country today has a rate even close to the USA’s. Indeed: while the USA accounts for one fourth of the population of the so-called “developed regions” (including Eastern Europe and Russia), it accounts for nearly half of the area’s annual net migration.

In purely arithmetic terms, America’s high flows of net immigration explain much of the country’s steady and continuing population growth. Currently, about a third of the US annual demographic increase can be attributed to the net immigration of that given calendar year. But of course immigrants and their descendants account for an even greater share of that annual change: and depending upon how far back we set the benchmark, we could end up ascribing virtually all US population growth to immigrants

and their progeny. One particularly apposite benchmark might be the year 1965, when US immigration laws were decisively liberalized, and much higher, more geographically diverse quotas were established to supersede the restrictive immigration legislation enacted in 1924.

Estimating the precise proportion of population growth in the USA since 1965 due to immigrants and their descendants is a little more tricky than one might first assume; to my knowledge, no published work has offered such calculations. Fortunately, however, Dr. Jeffrey Passel of the Urban Institute in Washington DC, a specialist on US immigration patterns, has examined this question: his unpublished estimates suggest that over half (about 53%) of the USA's population growth in the period since 1965 can be ascribed to immigration, broadly viewed.⁸ Since America's population has grown by over 100 million persons over that interim—from about 194 million in midyear 1965 to just under 300 million at this writing—this would mean that post-1965 immigrants and their descendants account for well over 50 million of the inhabitants of contemporary America—more than one sixth of its residents.

According to official estimates, as of 2003 the foreign-born population of the United States totaled over 33 million, close to 12% of the country's total population—and in many of America's leading urban centers, the proportion of immigrants is now considerably higher. According to the 2000 census, for example, 22% of the population of Chicago was foreign-born; corresponding proportions exceeded 30% for Boston, 35% for both New York and San Francisco; and 40% for Los Angeles. Since less than a fifth of these migrants originated from Europe, Canada, or Australia, America's new wave of immigration is overwhelmingly "Third World". Over one fourth of America's foreign born, for example, now come from Asia. An overall majority (an estimated 52%) of the newcomers are Latin American, with Mexican-born immigrants accounting in turn for the majority of these Latinos. The Census Bureau estimates that over 9 million Mexican-born men, women and children live in the USA today—and that over half of them are unauthorized to be in the United States.⁹

America's latest wave of immigration has certainly exacerbated, and possibly enflamed, some domestic tensions—and has stimulated an undeniable measure of "nativist" political backlash. (Witness the current proposals in Washington for erecting what would be the world's largest fence, a gigantic thousand-plus mile barrier to seal off the US-Mexico border!) In the post-9/11 America, furthermore, the idea that 7 million or more people have entered the country without official authorization (as current Census estimates suggest) is now inescapably regarded by the public through the prism of national security.

⁸ Dr. Jeffrey Passel, Urban Institute, personal communication August 2006.

⁹ US Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2006*, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), Tables 7, 42, 44, 45; *idem*, "Table FBP-1: Profile of Selected Demographic and Social Characteristics, 2000—People Born in Mexico", available electronically at <http://www.census.gov/population/cen2000/stp-159/STP-159-Mexico.pdf>.

Yet when all is said and done, America’s new wave of immigrants can be seen as assimilating tolerably well—in the pattern of earlier historical migrations to the USA. Despite the high concentration of relatively poor, and poorly educated, immigrants in big cities, America’s urban areas have not as yet become tinderboxes for violent unrest by the foreign-born—a conspicuous contrast with modern-day Europe.¹⁰ Furthermore, despite alarms and warnings that “some” immigrants (i.e., Mexicans) are failing to assimilate or are positively resisting assimilation, the weight of evidence seems to point in just the opposite direction. (A recent study in Southern California, for instance, suggests that Spanish-speaking at home among Mexican Americans declines steadily from one generation to the next—and at a pace similar to that witnessed for the decline of foreign “kitchen talk” in America’s highly successful Korean and Chinese immigrant communities.¹¹)

The United States, to be sure, has experienced anti-immigrant paroxysms in the past (such as the one resulting in America’s 1924 Immigration Act). Economic historian Jeffrey G. Williamson has argued that the last great US clamp-down on immigration was decades in the making, bringing to a flashpoint tendencies that had been building from the 1890s. This was an era, Williamson recalls, characterized by rising economic differences, high volumes of migration, significant pressure on wages for low-skilled native-born Americans, and gradually increasing political calls for immigration restrictions.¹² In this earlier era, Williamson argues, America’s radical cut-back in immigration was finally catalyzed by a “triggering event”: namely, World War I. Williamson’s analysis is compelling precisely because so many of those same social, economic, and political tendencies can be seen gathering in the United States today. It also begs the question: can one now imagine a new “triggering event” of a similar anti-immigration policy?

The Future of American “Demographic Exceptionalism”

American fertility and immigration trends cannot be forecast with any great accuracy over the coming generation (no more so than for any other developed country). If American “demographic exceptionalism” should continue for another decade or so, however, its consequences could be truly profound.

Just what such “exceptionalism” would portend may be seen in Figure 3, which compares US Census Bureau projections for the USA and Western Europe for 2025. [SEE

¹⁰ One may note, of course, that the United States has a much smaller foreign-born population of Arabs and Muslims than does Western Europe—true enough. Even so, the assimilation of first-generation immigrants of Islamic heritage seems to be progressing more successfully in the United States than in Western Europe on the whole. Cf. “Look out, Europe, they say: why Muslims find America easier than Europe to blend into”, *The Economist*, June 24, 2006.

¹¹ Rubén G. Rumbaut, Douglas S. Massey, and Frank D. Bean, “linguistic life expectancies: Immigrant language retention in Southern California”, *Population and Development Review*, September 2006, pp. 447-460.

¹² Jeffrey G. Williamson, *The Political Economy of World Mass Migration: Comparing Two Global Centuries*, (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute Press, 2005).

FIGURE 3] These Census Bureau projections assume a gradual improvement in life expectancies in both regions. More critically, they posit an increase in both Western European and American TFRs (to 1.62 and 2.18 in 2025, respectively) and a slight absolute decline in average annual net migration inflows for both regions (to about 700,000 and 900,000, respectively). One may of course quibble with these assumptions, and some reputable demographers do (the United Nations Population Division's "medium variant", for example, envisions a drop of US TFRs to under 1.9 by 2025). In any case, the projections highlighted in Figure 3 vividly illustrate the longer-term implications of US "demographic exceptionalism", if that phenomenon should indeed continue.

In demographic terms, Western Europe and the USA would be strikingly different places two decades hence. Western Europe's total population would be shrinking, despite continuing immigration, while America's would still be growing by about 2.8 million a year. Western Europe would be much "grayer" than the US, with a median age of 46 years (as against the USA's 39 years) and nearly 23% of all people 65 or older (versus 18% in America). In this future world, children under 15 would make up just one seventh of Western Europe's population, whereas they would account for nearly a fifth of the US populace, and whereas senior citizens (65+) would outnumber children (<15) in Western Europe by a ratio of roughly 160 to 100, the US would still have more children than seniors.

In absolute terms, although Western Europe's total population would still exceed America's by around 50 million (400 million versus 350 million), all of that differential would accrue from older age groups (50-plus), with the disproportion especially notable for among septuagenarians and octogenarians. For the under-25 population, on the other hand, Americans would outnumber Western Europeans.

(This projected tableau, it is worth emphasizing, relies less on surmise and conjecture than might first be assumed, even though the world it describes is nearly twenty years distant. The overwhelming majority of Americans and European who will inhabit their respective regions are already alive, living there today. The 20-to-25-year-olds of 2025, we may note, are already here on earth, having been born in the years 2000 through 2005; by the US Census Bureau's estimates and projections, births in the US exceeded those in Western Europe for the first time in the year 2004.)

America's prospective demographic divergence, however, impends not just against Western Europe, but rather against the entire developed world. By these same Census Bureau projections for 2025, America's population growth rate would be the very highest in the more developed regions—and America's median age would be (apart from fascinating exceptions like Albania) virtually the lowest. In these projections, moreover, the USA would be the only developed country with over 5 million citizens to be home to more children than senior citizens—and the only developed country *at all* whose working-age population (15-64) would still be growing!

To the extent that population structure in and of itself can be said to influence economic performance, America's "exceptional" demographic profile could be seen as conferring some modest developmental advantages upon US society. All other things being equal, America's relatively youthful population should experience less pressing burdens from pension and health costs in the years ahead than the rest of the world's (more elderly) developed democracies. A growing labor force, for its part, offers opportunities for innovation, start-up, and re-allocation of productive resources that are plainly harder to seize in the context of a declining workforce. The best-educated elements of any developed country's workforce tend to be its youngest entrants—but while that group stands to shrink relatively and absolutely throughout the developed regions as a whole over the next two decades, America's pool of young manpower will almost certainly continue to grow.

Beyond population composition, absolute numbers also matter in international affairs. America's aggregate population size has some incalculable, but nonetheless genuine, bearing on the country's global predominance today. The US is the world's third largest country today (after only China and India), and projections suggest it will remain Number Three in the decades immediately ahead. But with its exceptional and robust projected population growth, America is poised to account for an increasing share of the now-developed countries' population. Whereas the ratio of Americans to Russians today is just over 2-to-1, by 2025 that same ratio may be almost 3-to-1. In Census Bureau projections, there are 3.6 Americans for every German today but there would be 4.4 in 2025. There are five Americans for every Italian today, but there would be six in less than two decades. And so on. All other things being equal, such trends might seem to some extent to reinforce US international predominance (even though the divergence in demographic profiles between the US and the rest may also portend an era of diminishing affinities between the US and her historical Western allies.)

Assessing the implications of trends that have yet to unfold is, to be sure, only speculation. But as these projections should indicate, US "demographic exceptionalism" is not only here today, but it may be here to stay for a long time. It is by no means beyond the realm of the possible that America's demographic profile will look even more "exceptional" a generation hence than it does today.

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