

# CHANGE IS HARD

Managing Fear and Anxiety  
about Demographic Change and  
Immigration in Polarized Times

by **Suzette Brooks Masters**

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WELCOMING  
AMERICA



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*In 2017, with support from the J.M. Kaplan Fund, Suzette Brooks Masters began a strategy fellowship at Welcoming America to better understand how anxieties about demographic change, immigration and American identity can power the rise of authoritarian populists and ethnonationalists.*

*Over the last year and a half, she has shared her research findings with more than 100 colleagues to solicit their feedback and engage in invaluable dialogue with them about its implications for their work.*

*This research brief distills the literature on cultural anxiety about demographic change, immigration and American identity. It serves as a companion piece to Welcoming America's 10-year-anniversary [social cohesion series](#), which examines innovations in contact building, leadership and positive communications to foster greater belonging for all. This research synopsis is designed to spur and deepen an important and challenging conversation about how to bring our nation together and shape a more cohesive and inclusive America.*

*The author thanks the J.M. Kaplan Fund for making this research effort possible and Rachel Peric and Susan Downs-Karkos of Welcoming America for their support, guidance and editorial suggestions.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Suzette Brooks Masters** is a thought leader and strategist in the field of immigrant integration and social cohesion. She leverages a varied career in philanthropy, research, advocacy, program development and law to create innovative solutions to difficult problems involving the foreign-born. She advises foundations, nonprofit organizations, policy makers and corporations on how to respond to the significant demographic shifts that have transformed America after decades of immigration. Masters is a graduate of Harvard Law School, Cambridge University and Amherst College.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2017, as a strategy fellow at Welcoming America, I undertook a research scan to understand how the negative reactions in the U.S. to demographic change and immigration contributed to the rise of authoritarian leaders and ethnopopulism. I reviewed the vast and growing multidisciplinary literature on this topic and spoke with experts from across the political spectrum. My unique contribution was to reflect on the implications of those analyses for efforts to support immigrants as they adjust to life in America and ensure that immigration remains a central feature of American democracy in the future.

In brief, here are the key findings from my research review:

- **Immigration is a cultural and identity issue, not primarily one of policy.**<sup>1</sup> It needs to be addressed as such. Only discussing policy ideas governing who can enter and stay in the U.S. and under what terms doesn't speak to the complexity of the issue, nor address the cultural and other concerns of Americans living in communities in demographic flux.
- **Demographic change can trigger societal stress when not well managed.** Growing racial and ethnic diversity in the U.S. resulting from decades of immigration in all parts of the country has been met with increased cultural anxiety, especially among whites.<sup>2</sup> Relatedly, white alienation and a sense of grievance are on the rise, with many whites believing they are the subjects of racial discrimination and fearful of their loss of status as America closes in on becoming a majority-minority country. This drives them to identify as and behave like a racial minority. Trump's ethnonationalist and anti-immigrant platform appealed to these voters and now threatens many social and civil rights that are the cornerstones of our democracy.<sup>3</sup>
- **White nationalism is resurgent.** Many elected leaders have benefited from and fueled the rise of white nationalism in America. The rhetoric such elected leaders use legitimizes the expression of anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic sentiment in America, making more visible prejudices that would have been kept hidden or private in the past and shattering long-held social conventions. When such views are amplified at the highest levels of power, this leads to a marked increase in hate-driven violence and extremism.<sup>4</sup>
- **Growing polarization and partisan realignment threaten progress on immigration.** The immigration debate is deeply divisive and dominated by the extremes on both sides. They feed off one another, becoming increasingly strident and eliminating space for nuance, complexity and realistic solutions. Yet the majority of public opinion (about two-thirds) is at neither extreme.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Tyler T Reny, Loren Collingwood and Ali A Valenzuela, Vote Switching in the 2016 Election: How Racial and Immigration Attitudes, Not Economics, Explain Shifts in White Voting, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz011>; German Lopez, The past year of research has made it very clear: Trump won because of racial resentment, [www.vox.com/identities/2017/12/15/16781222/trump-racism-economic-anxiety-study](http://www.vox.com/identities/2017/12/15/16781222/trump-racism-economic-anxiety-study); Dan Balz, A fresh look back at 2016 finds America with an identity crisis, [www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-fresh-look-back-at-2016-finds-america-with-an-identity-crisis/2018/09/15/Oac62364-b8f0-11e8-94eb-3bd52dfe917b\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.ec287eb37179](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-fresh-look-back-at-2016-finds-america-with-an-identity-crisis/2018/09/15/Oac62364-b8f0-11e8-94eb-3bd52dfe917b_story.html?utm_term=.ec287eb37179)

2 Maureen A. Craig and Jennifer A. Richeson, On the Precipice of a "Majority-Minority" America: Perceived Status Threat from the Racial Demographic Shift Affects White Americans' Political Ideology, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0956797614527113>

3 Ashley Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

4 Leonardo Bursztyjn, Georgy Egorov and Stefano Fiorin, From Extreme to Mainstream: How Social Norms Unravel, [www.nber.org/papers/w23415](http://www.nber.org/papers/w23415); Griffin Sims Edwards and Stephen Rushin, The Effect of President Trump's Election on Hate Crimes, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3102652>

5 More in Common, *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape* [www.moreincommon.com/hidden-tribes](http://www.moreincommon.com/hidden-tribes)

## *What does the research suggest we should do?*

- **Protect democracy first.** Immigration is being used as the perfect wedge to divide Americans and weaken our pluralistic democracy. This creates a responsibility for its proponents to acknowledge that *how* we advance immigrant justice has an impact on how opponents of democratic pluralism and supporters of authoritarianism conduct their assault on democracy.
- **Learn from history.** America has seen this movie before, a century ago. We should devise solutions to the current stress caused by decades of immigration and rapid demographic change by modeling what good change management looks like and leading our communities and our nation through this difficult period of adjustment with honesty, nuance, respect and empathy.
- **Focus on narrative and culture change strategies.** Since the immigration debate is about culture and identity, we must engage in culture change work to promote norms, values and behaviors that affirm shared ideals of freedom and opportunity, as well as human dignity. We must also adapt the narrative to affirm unity and interdependence, create space for complexity, and connect immigration to broader aspirations about how to uplift all Americans.
- **Use framing to inoculate rather than alienate.** Immigration proponents may use narrative frames that unwittingly pit Americans against immigrants, thus alienating them. It's best to avoid deifying immigrants as better than Americans (immigrant exceptionalism), focusing too narrowly on immigrants rather than on shared identities or shared values (making it about them rather than us), elevating the value of diversity as an inherent good (promoting the notion that we are more different than the same), and making people who are immigrant agnostic or skeptical feel judged, irrelevant or ignored. It's preferable to use approaches that inoculate long-term residents against fear-based narratives.
- **Work side by side to build a more just America.** Efforts to build bridges and bonds must exist alongside and support longstanding efforts to build power for marginalized people and eliminate structures of oppression, including racism and inequality. These efforts need to actually shift the views and systems that uphold racism and othering.
- **Strengthen capacities to build bridges and promote social cohesion, community by community.** New funding streams need to support social cohesion all around the country at this critical time. In particular, organizations dedicated to bridging and dialogue work need to be funded and scaled, related efforts need to be expanded in social change and service organizations to influence their organizational culture and impact more broadly, and corporations and government need to recognize that this type of work merits significant engagement and investment.
- **Grow the base of support.** Supporters of immigration cannot win by staying on one pole of the ideological debate and relying on a small, activated base of supporters. They must compete for some meaningful segment of white Americans and immigrant skeptics, and fight the gravitational pull of white nationalism, which is targeting this population. There are no shortcuts around the hard work of listening to the public at neither pole.
- **Build relationships across difference.** Research shows that meaningful contact between long-term residents and newcomers improves the former's perceptions of immigrants or of people they consider "other" and that deliberative dialogue and deep listening are effective in changing opinions. Contact and dialogue work, along with robust multi-stakeholder civic and community engagement, are the foundations of strong, cohesive and resilient communities.

- **Invest in vulnerable places.** Rural areas, exurbs and suburbs that are more homogeneous are more prone to react with discomfort to demographic change, such as recent immigrant or refugee arrivals. This makes them more likely to feel the lure of xenophobia and white nationalism. It is precisely in these places that proactive investment and intervention are needed to address the anxiety about demographic change and immigration and push for the adoption of welcoming initiatives.

In these turbulent and consequential times, our efforts must weaken the gravitational pull of polarization and authoritarianism to realize the promise of an inclusive pluralism. In the face of disruptive change, we must lead with love—repair our social fabric; uplift resilient, inclusive communities; and build a society unified around an expansive vision for the future that centers our interdependence and connectedness. It’s a vision that opposes structural racism, white nationalism and inhumane policies, but does so in a way that invites our opponents in rather than just calling them out. This battle for the soul of America cannot be won by hunkering down, retreating to safe corners, homogeneous in-groups or self-reinforcing bubbles. It will be won by bravely entering new, unknown and perhaps hostile territory and persuading skeptics with authentic stories, shared values and mutual respect.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### This Moment Requires an Urgent Response

Globally, many Western democracies are experiencing unprecedented ideological and political challenges to their pluralistic ideals and growing diversity. The key wedge issues used to amplify societal divisions typically involve race, ethnicity, religion and immigration, all categories made salient because of othering, racism and other forms of discrimination. The events that typically trigger the backlash against pluralism or immigration are highly visible migration flows, as with Central Americans arriving on the U.S.-Mexico border or Syrian refugees fleeing to Europe, high levels of continued immigration by persons deemed “other” or, more broadly, a generalized fear that changing demographics threaten the dominance of existing majorities. The key point is that demographic change, particularly in the context of dramatic technological, environmental and economic change happening alongside it, is a potent disruptor being used to attack pluralistic democracy by encouraging dysfunction and polarization across a range of issues that depend on trust, a widely accepted social contract, and the ability of neighbors to work cooperatively. In the U.S., the reaction to sweeping demographic changes and the manipulation of this reaction by populist political leaders has led to virulently anti-immigrant, authoritarian policies from the highest levels, a rise in white nationalism and hate crimes, and an emboldened sense of white identity.

Historical perspective sheds important light on this turn of events, and arguably presaged its occurrence. Today, the foreign-born population in the U.S. stands at 45 million, representing nearly 14% of the population, a percentage not seen since the turn of the 20th century after the last great wave of immigration. In the early 1920s, pressure to restrict immigration continued to build after decades of high levels of immigration, which resulted in the highest percentage of foreign-born the United States has ever seen.<sup>6</sup> Between 1880

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Connor and Abby Budiman, Immigrant share in U.S. nears record high but remains below that of many other countries, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/30/immigrant-share-in-u-s-nears-record-high-but-remains-below-that-of-many-other-countries/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/30/immigrant-share-in-u-s-nears-record-high-but-remains-below-that-of-many-other-countries/)

and 1920, more than 20 million immigrants arrived, mostly from Southern, Eastern and Central Europe, and included millions of Italians and Jews,<sup>7</sup> ethnic and religious groups who were discriminated against and considered “other” at the time. The movement to restrict immigration culminated in the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, which established nationality quotas and dramatically reduced immigration.

The critical question today is whether, after more than 50 years of continuous high levels of immigration since the passage of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965 (which removed the nationality quotas and profoundly transformed American society by leading to its high and growing levels of racial and ethnic diversity), we are poised once again to shut the door to newcomers for decades to come, as we did in 1924. History also reminds us of the need for interventions at scale to transform “them” into “us” through immigrant integration and social cohesion programs to reduce the othering and discrimination immigrants face. This is a daunting challenge given how widespread recent immigrant settlement has been across the country, with newcomers planting roots in many places without a recent history of immigration. For a dramatic representation of the impact of immigration on America’s growing diversity, view Brookings demographer William Frey’s interactive data visualization, Diversity Explosion.<sup>8</sup>

Deep discomfort about growing diversity and continued immigration also helps explain how immigration evolved from a technical policy issue that benefited from bipartisan consensus to hotly contested ground in a culture and identity war—a war over what it means to be American. This seismic shift in context demands a critical reexamination of the assumptions underlying current approaches to advocating for more generous immigration and integration policies and how to ensure that those approaches do not trigger backlash or deepen the cultural and political divides that fuel authoritarianism and ethnonationalism.

Recent research underscores the complex and often conflicting views that many Americans hold on immigrants and immigration. While there may be broad support for particular policy interventions, that support does not translate into broad acceptance of immigrants as American, and therefore entitled to the rights and benefits of being American. Few Americans are committed to progressive immigration policies and willing to act on those beliefs, whereas immigration opponents are more passionate and action-oriented. Furthermore, about two-thirds of the public espouses neither the views of activists on the right or the left; rather it comprises what the research organization, More in Common, calls an Exhausted Majority, with more complex and at times conflicting views of the issue.<sup>9</sup>

When demographic change provokes a disruptive and destabilizing reaction, as it has in the U.S. and in other developed countries in recent years, it’s essential to manage the response to it well and devise and invest in interventions that promote greater understanding, empathy and social cohesion. This urgent moment requires new focus on how to advance immigrant inclusion and heal societal divides by listening to and engaging with both immigrants and receiving community members to reduce a perceived sense

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7 History.com editors, U.S. Immigration Timeline, [www.history.com/topics/immigration/immigration-united-states-timeline](http://www.history.com/topics/immigration/immigration-united-states-timeline)

8 Brookings Institution, Diversity Explosion: the cultural generation gap mapped, [www.brookings.edu/interactives/diversity-explosion-the-cultural-generation-gap-mapped/](http://www.brookings.edu/interactives/diversity-explosion-the-cultural-generation-gap-mapped/); Brookings Institution, Six maps that reveal America’s expanding racial diversity, [www.brookings.edu/research/americas-racial-diversity-in-six-maps/](http://www.brookings.edu/research/americas-racial-diversity-in-six-maps/)

9 More in Common, The Hidden Tribes of America, <https://hiddentribes.us/#the-exhausted-majority>

of threat, discover each other's assets and see their futures as intertwined.

Indeed, the political fallout from demographic change could worsen before it abates. Destination countries in the West and receiving communities within them may experience greater hostility toward newcomers and people of color as they adapt to demographic change, as well as a political shift to the right.

Promoting social cohesion<sup>10</sup> is therefore a strategy to radically expand *who* is considered part of “us,” to find common ground and elevate what is shared while respecting all those sources of difference, and to address the unique barriers and opportunities that particular people and groups might face. Social cohesion is how to move forward in this time of unprecedented risk and fraying of our social fabric, to foster resilience, and celebrate bonded-ness and interdependence, to combat structural racism and inequality, and to fight the pull of polarization and authoritarianism.

This paper analyzes some key research on anxieties about demographic change, immigration and American identity and how those anxieties can power the rise of authoritarian populists and ethnonationalists. The research is listed in a topically organized bibliography at the end of this paper. It specifically includes work on the attitudes and voting patterns of one segment of the receiving community, members of the white majority, because they are fueling this rightward shift in the U.S., putting at risk hard-won societal protections and benefits. Although beyond the purview of my research, I note that the receiving community is multiracial and inclusive of prior immigrant communities, and holds complex views that also can serve to embolden anti-democratic forces. However, given the significant incumbent power of whites, I have chosen to focus particularly on this slice of the electorate because of their outsize sway on policies, norms and electoral politics. Engaging this segment of the population, whether to reduce harm, increase support for inclusion or mitigate the effects of radicalization, is critical for all those who care about building a successful, multiethnic democracy.

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## II. INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH: PROMISING APPROACHES

### Framing matters: The way we speak of immigrants, their contributions and their needs can persuade or alienate long-term residents.

The combination of demographic change that is poorly understood and too rarely addressed by community leaders (but magnified through polarizing national rhetoric) and feelings of alienation and resentment by members of the receiving community are the tinder on which nativist flames feed and spread. Even subtle

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<sup>10</sup> While there is no widely accepted definition of social cohesion, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) definition is one of the strongest: the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members by creating a sense of belonging, promoting trust, working to eliminate disparities and promote equity, and avoiding exclusion and marginalization, fostering opportunity for all. OECD, *Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World*. OECD Publishing, Paris, 2011, [https://doi.org/10.1787/persp\\_glob\\_dev-2012-en](https://doi.org/10.1787/persp_glob_dev-2012-en). It is also important to incorporate concepts of othering and belonging, as set forth in *The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging*, by John A. Powell and Stephen Menéndez, [www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/](http://www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/).

changes—listening to longer-term residents’ needs, articulating the difficulties all communities face as they transition to new demographics, not painting all immigrants and refugees as economic saviors with a superior work ethic and entrepreneurial drive—can help reduce alienation and resentment. But doing so requires sensitivity to and empathy for longer-term residents in a receiving community as well as for newcomer populations.

When newcomer populations are targeted or are seeking to address persistent challenges, it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that immigrants are members of a broader community that also has unmet needs. Trying to rebut negative stereotypes directed toward specific populations can lead immigrant supporters to engage in “immigrant exceptionalism,” by emphasizing the outsize benefits that immigrants confer through their economic contributions or their stories of adversity and need, for example. This approach can undermine efforts to establish a collective identity with receiving community neighbors, and can foster resentment, particularly when immigrants are perceived to be gaining special benefits or when other populations feel their needs or contributions remain unrecognized. Likewise, communications that commodify immigrants and their economic activity fail to address the cultural dimensions and fears that are driving toxic narratives.

Communicating instead *how* immigrants are integral parts of the community and share foundational values with neighbors may better advance a unifying “heart-driven” narrative about how communities can grow together, about how immigrants and refugees (“them”) become part of “us.” Ideally, we should communicate the benefits that immigrants and refugees, as well as their U.S.-born neighbors, bring to vibrant, cohesive and resilient communities, so that everyone can feel valued.

### **Local work matters: Intergroup contact, deep dialogue and bridging work rooted in respect and empathy are important tools to broaden support for immigrants and strengthen community cohesion and resilience.**

Social psychologists and pollsters alike remind us that differences can only be bridged under certain circumstances: People need to feel heard and respected before they can make themselves vulnerable and open their minds to other perspectives. The innate resistance and defensiveness to conversations about bigotry do not mean that you should never talk about racism, nativism, sexism, homophobia or other kinds of bias or hate, but those conversations should be designed carefully, enabling participants to be receptive to different viewpoints than their own.

Given the key role that demographic anxiety has played in the rise of populist leaders, one important strategy involves reaching out to immigrant skeptics to weaken their racial or other biases through frank, empathetic dialogue and by investing in capacity building around racial equity. In these situations, labeling them “racist” is counterproductive.<sup>11</sup> In fact, promoting empathy may be the best approach to combating racism and racial resentment. This is difficult, long-term engagement work, particularly in an era of highly polarized politics.<sup>12</sup>

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11 German Lopez, Research says there are ways to reduce racial bias. Calling people racist isn’t one of them, [www.vox.com/identities/2016/11/15/13595508/racism-trump-research-study](http://www.vox.com/identities/2016/11/15/13595508/racism-trump-research-study)

12 German Lopez, The past year of research has made it very clear: Trump won because of racial resentment, [www.vox.com/identities/2017/12/15/16781222/trump-racism-economic-anxiety-study](http://www.vox.com/identities/2017/12/15/16781222/trump-racism-economic-anxiety-study)



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Another recent study on how to combat anti-transgender attitudes also sheds light on promising strategies to reduce cultural anxiety related to demographic change. The study, authored by David Broockman and Joshua Kalla, looked at how simple conversations can help combat anti-transgender attitudes. In the research, people canvassed the homes of more than 500 voters in South Florida. The canvassers, who could be trans or not, asked the voters to simply put themselves in the shoes of trans people—to understand their problems—through a 10-minute, nonconfrontational conversation.

The hope was that the brief discussion could lead people to reevaluate their biases, and it did. The canvassers did more listening than usual and the results of the canvas exceeded expectations.<sup>14</sup>

There are now multiple deep canvassing projects underway across the U.S. to improve perceptions of immigrants, including several in the Midwest and the South led by People’s Action, a group working with Broockman and Kalla on developing a solidarity narrative to fight the scarcity mentality so prevalent in rural America.

In addition to this type of targeted individual outreach, deliberate and structured intergroup dialogues can also be useful, although both types of efforts are difficult to sustain and execute at scale. Interventions such as these can be effective in reducing subconscious racial and other biases and racial anxiety by challenging stereotypes, treating people as individuals rather than relying on group labels, engaging in role playing and story exchanges, and increasing contact between people of different races.<sup>15</sup>

Katherine Cramer, a University of Wisconsin political scientist and author of *The Politics of Resentment*, did exhaustive research on the use of dialogues to build empathy and bridge divides in medium-sized cities, summarized in her 2007 book, *Talking about Race: Community Dialogues and the Politics of Difference*.<sup>16</sup> She describes dialogue as a form of public talk in which the emphasis is on listening to and understanding others, not on reaching a decision.

She argues that intergroup dialogue creates precious “bridging social capital,” through relationships that bridge divisions across social groups, such as immigrants and the U.S.-born, or whites and people of color. One of her key findings is that dialogues are important because they reconcile the desire to respect diversity with the desire to come together as a community. In this way, organized community forums address community problems and help define community identity.

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13 Linda R. Tropp, Dina G. Okamoto, Helen B. Marrow, et al, *How Contact Experiences Shape Welcoming: Perspectives from U.S.-Born and Immigrant Groups*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/0190272517747265>

14 David Broockman and Joshua Kalla, *Durably reducing transphobia: A field experiment on door-to-door canvassing*, <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/352/6282/220>

15 Rachel Godsil et al, *The Science of Equality*, <https://perception.org/publications/science-of-equality-vol-1/>

16 Katherine Cramer Walsh, *Talking about Race: Community Dialogues and the Politics of Difference*, University of Chicago 2007.

Dialogues and other forms of structured intergroup contact are critical to healing our communities' deep divides. The challenge is to do so constructively, over time and at scale, mindful of local context. For additional insights about effective intergroup contact interventions, consult the research compiled by the organization Civil Politics and the guides to productive conversation reviewed by the Weave initiative at the Aspen Institute.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, despite the promise of these interventions, a recent Coventry University study (the “Coventry Study”) identified few instances of purposeful, deep cross-racial engagement and coalition building in the five U.S. cities where they conducted their research. Such efforts were neither on the immediate agenda of most of the study’s key informants nor on those of the hundreds of members of the white working class who were interviewed for the study. The Coventry Study authors found:

There is a need to increase organizational capacity and know-how, with special emphasis being placed on organizations and individuals who operate across boundaries—that is, organizations and individuals who have credibility and reach with white working-class communities but can work with communities of color for mutual advantage.<sup>18</sup>

They believe that building this new set of skills among a new generation of community leaders and organizers who can cross these boundaries effectively is essential to ensuring a more cohesive country in the future and that it will require giving a voice to people of color and white people who feel “politically marginalized, culturally isolated, and economically vulnerable.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Timing and geography matter: We can limit anti-immigrant backlash by targeting vulnerable places, those less touched by demographic change in the past that are experiencing it now.**

Demographic change impacts individual communities differently. A growing body of research sheds light on the conditions most likely to lead to backlash against newcomers and people of color. Academics agree that it is the pace of change relative to the composition of the receiving community that matters most. Simply put, if a place is already quite diverse, making it more diverse matters less. Even significant inflows of diverse newcomers will be perceived as less threatening because the community has already adapted to greater diversity. By contrast, in a relatively homogeneous location, even small absolute numbers of newcomers, such as refugees, can be disruptive and activate cultural anxiety. Harvard social scientist Ryan Enos demonstrated this effect using an experiment that simulated demographic change in a very white suburb of Boston. His research confirmed that the newcomers’ arrival quickly increased exclusionary attitudes by the resident white population, but that the process was a dynamic one and, over time, the receiving community adjusted to the presence of the newcomers and became more tolerant.<sup>20</sup>

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17 Jesse Graham, Interventions to Improve Intergroup Relations: What Works, What Shows Promise, and What this Means for Civil Politics, [www.civilpolitics.org/content/interventions-to-improve-intergroup-relations-what-works-what-shows-promise-and-what-this-means-for-civil-politics/](http://www.civilpolitics.org/content/interventions-to-improve-intergroup-relations-what-works-what-shows-promise-and-what-this-means-for-civil-politics/); Aspen Institute, Weave Initiative, <https://aspeninstitute.org/programs/weave-the-social-fabric-initiative/tools-for-weavers/>

18 Harris Beider, Stacy Harwood, Kusminder Chahal, The Other America: White working class views on belonging, change, identity and immigration, <https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/publications/the-other-america-white-working-class-views-on-belonging-change-i> (the “Coventry Study”), p. 11.

19 Coventry Study, p. 11.

20 Ryan D. Enos, Causal Effect of Intergroup Contact on Exclusionary Attitudes, <https://www.pnas.org/content/111/10/3699>

In another example, researcher Eric Kaufmann shows that in Britain and the U.S., immigration is significantly more important as a trigger for whites living in neighborhoods that have recently undergone rapid ethnic change than for whites in demographically stable places. This echoes the wider academic literature: Although established local minority populations reduce white hostility to immigration through inter-ethnic contact, local minority growth increases white opposition in around 90% of studies.<sup>21</sup> This builds on the 2010 work of Daniel Hopkins in which he develops the “politicized places hypothesis” that focuses on how national and local conditions interact to make immigrants threatening. Hostile political reactions to neighboring immigrants are most likely when communities undergo sudden influxes of immigrants and when salient national rhetoric reinforces the threat.<sup>22</sup>

There can be significant overlap between the communities that are most homogeneous and rural America. In addition, rural voters may also feel resentment towards urban dwellers and elites. In *The Politics of Resentment*, based on numerous encounters with rural Wisconsin residents, Katherine Cramer identified some key beliefs held by the people she interacted with: intense resentment towards their urban counterparts; frustration with government and decision makers whom they believe ignore their concerns and disrespect them, which leads them to favor less government; and a deep sense of grievance, which Cramer calls “redistributive injustice,” animated by the belief, true or not, that they are not getting their fair share of resources and attention.<sup>23</sup>

The Midwest embodies the divides Cramer highlights above, and has become a flash point on immigration. It manifests the characteristics academics point out are likely to trigger heightened levels of cultural anxiety. Specifically, the Midwest is home to more homogeneous receiving communities (with many Midwest states exhibiting lower levels of diversity relative to other parts of the country), recent increases in the foreign-born population, depopulation (which leaves a whiter, older population behind that will be more activated by changing demographics), economic dislocation and sharper racial divides. This research highlights the importance of working in rural America and the Midwest to manage these active fault lines, since these locations are more likely to be initially unreceptive to non-whites as they acclimate to growing diversity.<sup>24</sup>

## **Inclusion efforts can engage receiving communities, strengthen a sense of unity and reduce divisions.**

During the period of adjustment when in-group/out-group tensions will be highest, it is important that leaders help receiving community members and immigrants to see themselves as part of a common in-group, and work proactively to incorporate both newcomers and longtime residents into their changing community.

Welcoming initiatives are a promising way both to alleviate concerns stemming from rapid demographic change by giving the community a greater sense of agency, and to shape a more inclusive community

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21 Eric Kaufmann, *Immigration and White Identity in the West: How to Deal with Declining Majorities*, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-09-08/immigration-and-white-identity-west?cid=mfa-article\\_reminder-09142017](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-09-08/immigration-and-white-identity-west?cid=mfa-article_reminder-09142017)

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23 Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*, University of Chicago Press, 2016.

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for all. Welcoming America works with a number of communities seeking to advance a welcoming agenda through a variety of approaches that emphasize multi-stakeholder community engagement and whole-of-community approaches.<sup>25</sup>

Studies also show that local efforts to welcome newcomers tend to make all members of a community feel welcome, regardless of race, with one exception: white conservatives. These findings suggest that integration and welcoming policies have direct and indirect effects that can promote national unity, community by community. They accelerate the integration of newcomers and improve the sense of belonging of most other residents. However, separate interventions engaging white conservatives are also essential in the process of adapting to demographic change.<sup>26</sup>

Integration efforts are another important frontier, simultaneously helping immigrants advance and reducing anxiety by receiving community members. In her 2016 paper, Ariela Schachter used a survey experiment to examine how native-born, non-Hispanic white Americans reacted to immigrants and their descendants as they achieved social mobility, an important new area of research. Schachter found that strong English language skills, a key integration and economic advancement tool for immigrants and refugees, also improved perceptions of immigrants by U.S.-born residents.<sup>27</sup> Thus, integration initiatives that help immigrants adjust to life in America may also reduce biases against them.

### III. RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Charting a Way Forward

We do not yet know how long this post-2016 era of immigration restriction will last. But we cannot ignore the lessons of history nor the strains our pluralistic society is currently experiencing in the face of demographic and other disruptive changes. What we do know is that our future will be shaped by how well our communities and our nation manage these changes and the destabilizing reactions to them.

Today's challenges require a new paradigm that prioritizes unity, shared purpose and belonging; that emphasizes what connects us rather than what divides us; and that rejects the binary "us" versus "them" narrative. In this moment of great suffering and polarization, and of significant demographic change, there is an urge to retreat to one's "tribe" and echo chamber, to find common cause through fighting common enemies, and to become rigid and unbending in one's beliefs. But in the words of John A. Powell, this

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*Today's challenges require a new paradigm that prioritizes unity, shared purpose and belonging; that emphasizes what connects us rather than what divides us; and that rejects the binary "us" versus "them" narrative.*

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25 In a new publication, Building Cohesive Communities in an Era of Migration and Change, Welcoming America sets forth strategies to strengthen communities and address divides. [www.welcomingamerica.org/content/building-cohesive-communities-era-migration-and-change](http://www.welcomingamerica.org/content/building-cohesive-communities-era-migration-and-change)

26 Yuen J. Huo, John F. Dovidio, Tomás R. Jiménez and Deborah J. Schildkraut, Local policy proposals can bridge Latino and (most) white Americans' response to immigration, <http://pnas.org/content/early/2018/01/09/1711293115>

27 Ariela Schachter, From "Different" to "Similar": An Experimental Approach to Understanding Assimilation, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0003122416659248?etoc=>

“breaking” behavior won’t lead to “bridging,” and it won’t knit us together as a society. Powell challenges us to build bridges and relationships in a transformational way to co-create the society we aspire to live in.<sup>28</sup>

From fostering contact between individuals to developing community-wide welcoming initiatives and sustained conversations across difference, to creating new narratives that reduce othering and polarization, all of these strategies must be pursued urgently to address the root causes of hate and division, restore pride in American ideals of equality and opportunity, and enable love to conquer fear. While we continue to dismantle structures of oppression and inequality, we can also engage more allies in this work with a bridging spirit. In so doing, we broaden the “we” and preserve pluralism and democracy.

Below are some recommendations for a path forward.

### *Expand narrative and culture change strategies.*

- **Acknowledge that the immigration debate is about culture, identity and the future, not the fine points of policy.** Advance visions of abundance and interdependence to combat a scarcity, zero-sum mentality that fuels resentment. Engage in culture change work to promote norms, values and behavior that affirm shared ideals of freedom and opportunity as well as human dignity.
- **Adjust the narrative to affirm unity and a shared vision.** Avoid alienating approaches such as immigrant exceptionalism and polarizing demographic predictions. Make common cause with other groups facing similar challenges and emphasize the connections between immigrants and their neighbors in daily life.
- **Complicate the narrative<sup>29</sup> about immigrants and demographic change and embrace the messy middle where most American public opinion resides.** Create the space to permit nuance, dissonance and independent thinking by the Exhausted Majority. Be authentic and truthful about the stresses of demographic change for newcomers and for receiving community members. Spend more time in places experiencing disruptive change, and have uncomfortable and authentic conversations.
- **Speak the truth and get out of immigration policy silos.** Acknowledge the realities of lived experience by newcomers and long-term residents alike. Provide leadership in managing the disruptive change and do so expansively, so no population segment feels ignored or left behind. Look for opportunities to couple immigration and integration policy with broader policies to promote opportunity and mobility for all Americans. Immigration should always be connected to and paired with strategies that help all Americans unlock opportunity in this time of great technological, generational and demographic change (e.g. workforce, housing, environmental and education policies).

### *Build cohesive communities.*

- **Facilitate difficult and courageous conversations.** Mutual vulnerability is essential. Polarization is seductive and a dangerous echo chamber. It’s important to engineer experiences and cultivate relationships that challenge preconceived notions, confirmation bias and out-group dehumanization and othering even though and especially because they are uncomfortable.

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28 john a. powell, transcript of speech at 2019 Othering & Belonging Conference, [www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/z8K5KiAPIAh2UWtpYzeqZc46dLG6SIMiYCF9VDiguensT\\_I5tN9DS65uvsdsejkg\\_eIJ7jTeT7G\\_U5pTVJONdjs?loadFrom=SharedLink](http://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/z8K5KiAPIAh2UWtpYzeqZc46dLG6SIMiYCF9VDiguensT_I5tN9DS65uvsdsejkg_eIJ7jTeT7G_U5pTVJONdjs?loadFrom=SharedLink)

29 Amanda Ripley, Complicating the Narratives, <https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/complicating-the-narratives-b91ea06ddf63>

- **Engineer valuable and sustainable forms of contact across difference.** Establishing sustainable ways to bring communities together across difference that affirms their shared humanity and shared love of community is an essential way to create trust, change perceptions and combat dehumanization and othering. Bridging that brings together white people and people of color is particularly important. However, there is currently very limited capacity to do this work. It urgently needs to be resourced at scale, and that may require the creation of new entities to engage in this work and/or the shifting in focus or priorities of existing organizations.
- **Build strong, cohesive, resilient communities that stress bonded-ness and interdependence.** That means working in alliance with others, developing “muscle memory” for solving problems together in an inclusive way, and working with diverse populations in receiving communities to build broad support for inclusive policies that give immigrants and other members of the community a voice and a stake. These efforts will create the resilience needed to manage disruptions such as immigrant and refugee arrivals, hate crimes, demagogues or divisive policies.
- **Intervene early and continue to grow investment in vulnerable places.** Receiving community members in certain types of places are more likely to feel cultural anxiety than others: homogeneous (i.e. majority white) areas beginning to experience greater demographic diversity, mostly through the arrival of immigrants and refugees. Because of the unique triggers that diversity causes in these contexts, it is important to anticipate them and to prepare for their emergence, and to invest in proactive and sustained work in the places most at risk to get ahead of the hate and misinformation.
- **Lean into welcoming initiatives.** Integration and welcoming policies have direct and indirect effects that can promote national unity, community by community. They accelerate the integration and well-being of newcomers and improve the sense of belonging of most other residents.
- **Promote integration that reduces alienation and increases belonging.** Where possible, advance policies that help immigrants and refugees integrate while also reducing anxiety among receiving community members. English classes are a classic example of such a win-win integration measure.
- **Support efforts to address interpersonal and structural racism.** The changing demographic landscape of the U.S. provides an opportunity to reflect on the extent to which communities are unwelcoming not only for newcomers, but for individuals who have long been excluded and marginalized in American society. By recognizing this, and speaking directly to the role of race and racism, we can holistically address the root causes of racism and othering, both interpersonal and structural. Organizations serving immigrant communities should apply a racial equity lens and consider the role of racial bias in their work, and larger diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging efforts should consider the challenges facing immigrant communities.

*Build and support the infrastructure needed to operationalize this work.*

- **Attract new donors and actors.** Expanded philanthropic support is needed for social and community cohesion at this critical time. Currently, building relationships and trust, the essential foundation for a well-functioning democracy, rarely receives resources at the same level as policy, advocacy or organizing. This must change in order to engage in this work at scale, supporting organizations dedicated to bridging and dialogue work, and efforts within organizations working with immigrant and long-term residents alike that want to bring an intentional focus on inclusion and cohesion.

- **Obtain government funding and assistance to scale this work.** The federal government has an important role to play in encouraging and incentivizing inclusion and cohesion strategies at the local level. The governments of Canada, Germany and New Zealand are making such investments, recognizing their role in fostering inclusion, belonging and cohesion. Taking such an approach in the U.S. would require dedicated high-level engagement on these issues by federal agencies and the White House and provision of funding and technical assistance at scale to accelerate the propagation of local inclusion and cohesion efforts.
- **Transform places of work and organizational culture.** Employers are also on the front lines of this work—advancing diversity, equity and inclusion work and using their powerful platforms for building social cohesion among diverse employees. As such, they have an important role to play in fostering community and belonging, modeling good practices and setting a standard for companies to adopt more broadly. Thus, companies and their foundations should become powerful change agents and important sources of financial support for this work.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The persistent attacks on people of color, immigrants, Muslims, Jews and LGBTQ communities have caused tremendous pain, further fractured our social fabric and laid bare deep fault lines around race, religion, gender and identity more broadly. We need a fresh approach and a bolder vision to explain how America is changing in a way that makes possible the full integration of newcomers while minimizing the activation of resentment by longtime residents; that brings all racial groups, including whites into the conversation; that moves beyond a narrative of shared oppression and grievance to one of shared hope; and that fuels optimism about what America is becoming. Armed with insights from research and a rich array of opportunities for experimentation, we can develop meaningful interventions to heal the deep divides in our society and chart a positive path forward.

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