

We the People

The United States 250 Years ago or just 50

In 1776, “we the people” were 2.5 million folks, mostly newcomers. No one imagined that the referent of that simple phrase would remain constant over time, but the changes have been especially dramatic in the last 100 years and keep accelerating. By 1920 we had passed the 100 million mark; by 50 years ago there were over 200 million of us and the most recent census—2020—put the figure at 331 million. By midcentury we are expected to climb above 400 million.

“We the people” have undergone similar demographic volatility in our racial/ethnic mix and percent foreign born. The foreign-born slice of our population in 1970 was under 10 million, or 4.7% of our population, the lowest percentage of all time. Today that figure is nearly 15%, over 45 million, and the representations of Hispanics and Asians are far different than they were 50 years ago.

BY ALLEN R. SANDERSON



“We the people” have also managed to get increasingly older over the years. Back in 1970 the median age was 28. Today it is about 39, and the percentage of our population over 65 continues to grow. As our population ages and shrinks, it has put pressure on the labor force—fewer people will be working—and more will be drawing government transfers—Social Security and Medicare benefits. (And don’t forget about our collective national debt commitments we are bequeathing, now just over \$31 trillion.)

“We the people” have not only added far more than 100 million of us in the last 50 years, we have spread ourselves out geographically. Of the 10 largest cities in the US in 1970, only 5 of them remain in the top 10 today (and only three of the largest 10 from 100 years ago still remain), and we have continued to follow Horace Greeley’s alleged exhortation by moving westward: half of our 20 largest cities today are in just three states—AZ, CA, TX.

As “we the people’s” numbers approach 350 million and the world’s population creeps ever closer to 8 billion, twice its 1970s level, it is notable that there are fewer and fewer concerns about the overpopulation of Malthus or the Zero Population Growth movement and book *The population Bomb* by Paul Erlich, relics of the early 1970s. The earlier estimates of the earth reaching 10 billion inhabitants by 2050—or ever—seem overly optimistic—or pessimistic—and far off the mark.

“We the people” have not only seen dramatic demographic shifts internally in the last fifty years, but staggering technological advances have changed our lives and the way we live them even more dramatically, lowering the costs of transportation and communications such that the world has become a much smaller place. Think apparel and automobiles. That Oregon start-up of Bowerman and Knight officially became Nike, Inc. in 1971, but the overwhelming share of athletic shoes come from abroad, and over 40 percent of new cars sold in the US are foreign-made.

Or think where “we the people” get our news and opinions. No longer do we turn to and rely primarily on local daily newspapers and street-corner conversations, or even the nightly newscasts from three major networks. Now our major news sources are newsfeeds, blogs, posts, and podcasts from a seemingly infinite number of companies, governments, channels, apps, and other outlets of highly variable quality and reliability, all streamed 24/7 to our iPhones or laptops. The internet, still not even 40 years old, has allowed the creation of social (or antisocial and unrepresentative) media platforms we turn to constantly and seem wedded to: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, Reddit, TikTok, Whatsapp, LinkedIn, and Pinterest. And our privacy? “We the people” are an open book to the masters of these technologies.

“We the people” are currently concerned by our nation’s political and social discord and polarization aided and abetted, if not caused, by our ubiquitous social media. But we should not forget that as a country we were born through discord and disagreements and that have never been absent from our history. 50 years ago Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew started—but did not finish—2nd terms in 1973, the Vietnam War and civil-rights tensions were still with us, as was the Watergate break-in, that era’s political scandal. In 1972 the Supreme Court rendered its *Roe v. Wade* decision, and “Title IX” became academic and athletic shorthand in higher education and a constant source of litigation ever since. Today “we the people” seem divided on the very legitimacy of our foundational institutions in all three branches of our government.

Economic changes represent starting points for understanding the economics and politics “we the people” will face in 2023 and beyond. But equally important may be technological “advances” that threaten the very fabric of our unity and democracy. The future of the United States depends upon our meeting these challenges and opportunities together with some measure of respect and dignity. □