



## The New Settlers of the Mountain West

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A new survey was released Tuesday regarding Americans' relocation choices – and it just so happens that, if its results are to be believed, it might be one of the most important current indicators of a coming change in America's politics that could shake up elections over the next decade in a way few political strategists are now pondering.

The study in question was produced by removals firm United Van Lines and tracks where Americans are moving to when they choose to up sticks. The short version is, like many of our forefathers a century or more ago, we're heading west, with five of the top 10 destinations situated in the Pacific Northwest or Mountain West – and a further sixth state right on the border.

According to the UVL survey, the top state for inbound movement was Vermont. But also among the top 10 were Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, South Dakota, Washington and Colorado. This matters for four big reasons.

First, traditionally, the Mountain West – while chock-full of potential swing states – has exerted little influence in presidential politics, largely because it is so sparsely populated. More people means that dynamic could be set to change, even if slowly, and that's especially the case since UVL's survey says that the Mountain West is the most popular destination for retirees. As every good political consultant knows, older people are the most bankable voters, so it's reasonable to expect the Mountain West's clout to increase as more AARP members haul their sofas and beds there.

For those of us with roots in the region, this is a great and welcome trend. As it stands, every four years, presidential candidates mostly *pretend* to care about Nevada, Colorado and sometimes Arizona or New Mexico – but spend relatively little time or money in these places because they're just not as vote-rich as, say, the Midwest. Sure, winning the Nevada caucuses helps a little bit with winning a nomination, or perhaps more critically, establishing momentum needed to ultimately prevail in a nominating contest. But victories are locked up elsewhere – in, say, Ohio or Wisconsin, both states that Presidents Trump and Obama won, greatly helping to deliver them the White House.

Coincidentally, both of those states are among UVL's top 10 outbound states. Residents appear to be ditching them, which means that increasingly, presidential candidates may, too – and not

just Hillary Clinton. This trend matters also because of the knock-on effect it could have in America's overall philosophical tilt – and also the philosophical tilt of the states in question.

Just as migration from liberal California has meant that inbound states like Arizona and Colorado have become more socially (and sometimes fiscally) liberal, movement from places like Illinois, Wisconsin or Ohio could mean more of a market for populist-style candidates, perhaps more socially conservative and accepting of government intervention, in a part of the country where traditionally, those notions have not sold well – and where both parties have gone out of their way to emphasize "leave us alone," limited-government ideas when running.

If that occurs, it would be good news for the Trumpite faction of the GOP. But it would represent a significant departure from the traditional, dominant politics of the region, at least in recent decades.

Former Gov. Bill Richardson famously helped navigate and deliver Democratic victories in the Mountain West in the mid-2000s by encouraging Democrats to position themselves as libertarian-ish: Fiscally conservative (or at least passing as such), socially more liberal and notably pro-gun. It's worth remembering that until former Sen. Fred Thompson entered the 2008 presidential race, Richardson boasted the best NRA rating of any name-brand candidate.

Govs. Brian Schweitzer and Janet Napolitano adopted Richardson's general image, and it helped them win in Montana and Arizona, too. (Though Richardson boasted a much purer fiscal conservative record; all three had surprisingly pro-gun records for Democrats, however.)

Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden is not of the Richardson mold, but he is a closet "favorite Democrat" among more libertarian-ish Republicans, because of his consistent work on civil liberties issues, including with the Senate's #1 libertarian, Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky. Does it help him keep winning? Odds are that it does.

Some of the bigger-name Republicans from the region have also boasted libertarian-ish credentials. Utah Sen. Mike Lee is one of a trio of libertarian champions in the U.S. Senate. Jeff Flake is another libertarian-ish Mountain West Republican (though admittedly, he won't be serving for much longer). Former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman, while widely regarded as a moderate Republican, actually boasted a record and stances more accurately described as libertarian-ish than anything else. Colorado Rep. Ken Buck, once branded as another cookie-cutter three-legged stool conservative, has recently been championing immigration legislation backed by the libertarian CATO Institute – a very Mountain West move.

An influx of voters from "rust-belt" states could dilute this type of politics. Or, if those going West are in fact attracted by the lifestyle that libertarian-ish policies have helped maintain and deliver in the Rocky and Cascades Mountain states, it could arguably provide a much-needed boon to those policies in terms of their nationwide standing.

If these states grow in population, and therefore clout, because they're attracting like-minded individuals from across the country there, we could see far stronger support in Congress for reining in government surveillance initiatives, curbing the War on Drugs, enhancing legal

immigration and free trade opportunities, pushing further deregulation and perhaps reining in government spending and taxation.

At the state and local level, you could see yet more support for initiatives like occupational licensing reform, lower taxes, less restrictive drug laws and reduced regulation in general.

Turning to presidential politics and its intersection with policy, more people living in the Mountain West probably means two things: More airtime and better play, on the national political stage, for some brand of libertarian-ish policies, whether they be left-libertarian or right-libertarian, but also better chances of libertarian-ish candidates hailing from the Mountain West prevailing in primaries – and therefore, those policies gaining more standing nationally.

Right now, the Mountain West is so un-populous that most former and prospective candidates from there, save Sen. John McCain and Sen. Barry Goldwater (both of whom had massive name ID for reasons totally unrelated to their Arizona-related service in the U.S. Senate), cannot gain footing in a presidential contest. Literally no one outside their region knows who they are, and only a teeny, tiny sliver of the population lives in their region.

Richardson couldn't get anywhere in 2008; Huntsman couldn't get anywhere in 2012; Schweitzer, rumored to be a potential Democratic contender, didn't even try running for president. For those of us with roots in the region who feel like our issues and perspectives are continually ignored by senators from Illinois, political celebrities from New York or former governors of Massachusetts (running with a record to match), it would make a nice change to see more focus on the Mountain West and more of the leaders we produce being promoted to higher office.

Vermont, the number-one state to which Americans are migrating, has already had a taste of this, with Sen. Bernie Sanders' surprise performance in the Democratic primary and former Gov. Howard Dean's performance in the 2004 Democratic primary and assumption of the chairmanship of the Democratic National Committee. It is also worth noting that inbound migration to Vermont could help some libertarian issues move to the fore, also – the state is far more favorable to gun rights than many of its New England neighbors and has produced politicians who are at least in tune with many libertarians on civil liberties and national security matters. On the flip side, the exodus from New Jersey, New York and Connecticut that UVL has identified could result in more gun control fans relocating to the Green Mountain State – and its reputation as a liberal enclave, except on the Second Amendment, might falter.

Still, you've got to think that when you move somewhere, it's a proactive choice to surround yourself with the culture, society and ethos of a place. Or at least it was for the original settlers of the Mountain West, who explicitly and intentionally ditched the East Coast, the South and the Midwest to pursue a new vision of America in which they could chase their dreams both with fewer helping hands *and* hurdles, more freely and less constrained by considerations of class, tradition, race, gender and social roles.

We're long past the era of pioneers, explorers and settlers now, but some of that spirit lives on in the Mountain West. UVL's survey indicates a lot more Americans are buying into it, and walking with their feet – or driving with their moving van.