Immigrants turn Utah into mini-melting pot; Frustrations are starting to grow for some as one of the USA's least diverse states undergoes a transformation

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Body

SALT LAKE CITY -- In the shadow of the Mormon faith's majestic headquarters, the fountain at the center of the Gateway Plaza outdoor mall is a popular backdrop for weddings. On a scorching day, Hispanic and Anglo children run side by side through the pulsating sprays of water.

Marriage and kids: They're the pillars of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), which dominates many facets of life in ***Utah***. But diversity?

Immigration is changing the complexion of communities across the USA. As it sweeps through ***Utah***, traditionally ***one*** of the ***least*** ***diverse*** and most conservative ***states*** in the nation, its impact is particularly dramatic. About 98% white until 1970, ***Utah*** is becoming a ***mini-melting*** ***pot***.

While conservative Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives are pushing to tighten borders and make illegal ***immigrants*** felons, factors unique to ***Utah*** are attracting Hispanics to this reddest of red ***states***. Among them: the Mormon Church's philosophy of outreach and its embrace of large families.

These influences have helped give the ***state*** a reputation of being warm and welcoming to ***immigrants***. ***Utah*** allows the undocumented to drive legally with a "driving privilege card." They can attend public colleges and universities and pay in-***state*** tuition. Minorities -- mostly Hispanics -- make up 16.5% of the population, up from 8.8% in 1990. They could reach 20% by 2010. Hispanics are driving the growth among minorities here. The ***state***'s black and Asian populations also are ***growing*** but more slowly.

The changes are visible -- and audible. Sounds of up to 70 languages reverberate in school hallways, cantinas are sprouting in the suburbs, and Spanish-speaking religious congregations are multiplying -- scenes that are more Los Angeles and Miami than Salt Lake City.

"Word has gotten out that it's a place where ***immigrants*** are welcome," five-term ***Utah*** Republican Rep. Chris Cannon says.

Utahans in 2004 gave President Bush his biggest margin over Democrat John Kerry in any ***state*** -- 72% to 26%. How can ***one*** of America's most conservative places be so receptive to ***immigrants***?

"The LDS faith believes you can be conservative and yet be compassionate," says Marco Diaz, past chairman of the ***Utah*** Republican Hispanic Assembly, which tries to attract more Hispanics to the party. "Help thy neighbor and love thy neighbor and still try to be fiscal conservatives."

How long ***Utah*** will embrace this philosophy remains to be seen. ***Frustrations*** are mounting over rising dropout rates and classrooms crammed with non-English speakers. Pressure to cut benefits to undocumented residents and crack down on employers who hire them is ***growing***. About 100,000 of ***Utah***'s foreign-born residents -- about half -- are here illegally, says Pamela Perlich, senior research economist at the University of ***Utah***.

Diaz says time may be running out on the ***state***'s welcome mat.

"Never have we seen so much uproar on immigration," Diaz says. "A lot of Utahans want some change. ... There's a feeling from constituents that something needs to be done."

Worldwide mission

Utah has been overwhelmingly Mormon since Brigham Young and thousands of followers settled in the Great Salt Lake Valley in the mid-1800s after fleeing persecution 1,300 miles away in Illinois. ***Utah*** remains mostly Mormon -- about 62% -- but that share of the population is declining.

The ***state*** ranks 34th in population at 2.5 million. It's insular, yet cosmopolitan.

Utah boasts ***one*** of the highest rates of adult residents who have passports and speak more than ***one*** language. Brigham Young University teaches more advanced foreign-language courses than any other U.S. university. About 85% of its seniors speak a second language.

That's the Mormon influence.

"This is a missionizing church," says Jan Shipps, a scholar of Mormonism at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. At age 18 or 19, Mormons "receive a call to go on a mission and spend two years at their own expense making converts." They learn a foreign language and go abroad. "They experience another culture," she says. "That tends to make ***Utah*** ... a very cosmopolitan place."

Two forces at play are causing some tension in ***Utah*** and within the church, says Kathryn Daynes, a BYU assistant professor of history. "Latter-day Saints ... want to reach out on an individual level, but politically, they're very conservative."

Family values and the church's worldwide proselytizing and mission work in Latin America have attracted ***immigrants*** and potential converts to ***Utah***. The church offers English classes throughout the ***state***. It has held dinners for Hispanic leaders and has 114 Spanish-speaking congregations in ***Utah***.

Church leaders generally have avoided commenting on the immigration debate and declined to be interviewed for this story.

They reacted in May, however, to comments by CNN commentator Lou Dobbs, an outspoken advocate of strict enforcement of immigration laws, on the eve of Mexico President Vicente Fox's visit to ***Utah*** and other ***states***.

Dobbs said the Mormon church "has a vigorous enthusiasm for as many of Mexico's citizens as they possibly could attract to the ***state*** of ***Utah***, irrespective of the cost to taxpayers."

The church's website called Dobbs' statement unfounded. It said the church has more than 1 million members in Mexico and owns nearly 1,000 buildings there but "does not encourage them to move to ***Utah*** or anywhere else."

Immigration has struck a nerve this year in ***Utah***. When up to 25,000 people marched in a pro-immigration rally here in April, "I think it frightened people," says Maria Garciaz, executive director of Salt Lake Neighborhood Housing Services, a non-profit group that finances and builds affordable housing on the increasingly ***diverse*** west side of Salt Lake City.

Incumbent congressman Cannon, who narrowly won the Republican primary in June, says, "The whole race was about immigration." His opponent was political newcomer and millionaire real estate developer John Jacob, who

favored sending illegal ***immigrants*** home before giving them a chance at citizenship and punishing employers who hire them.

Cannon is far from liberal on the issue. He voted for a bill that would make helping illegal ***immigrants*** a crime and illegal residency a felony. But he supports President Bush's proposed guest-worker program. Cannon and Jacob are Mormon.

"It's better for America to be proud of America and not take harsh views of the world," Cannon says. "I hope ***Utah*** is ***one*** of these places where we dampen the harshness."

Frustration is rising, however. The ***Utah*** Minuteman Project, whose mission is "to secure our homeland" from ***immigrants*** here illegally, is pushing to repeal driving privilege cards and in-***state*** tuition for undocumented ***immigrants***.

"Schools are an issue, highway crowding is an issue and the crime rate has gone way up," says Alexander Segura, ***Utah*** Minuteman board chairman. "It's issues like that that people are just fed up with."

A new baby boom

Immigrants didn't flock here until the late 1990s as the ***state*** began preparing to host the 2002 Winter Olympics. Through much of the 1990s, non-agricultural jobs in ***Utah*** ***grew*** twice as fast as in the nation as a whole. A housing boom feeds the surge. Construction jobs ***grew*** 12.4% in 2005 and are expected to jump 15.3% this year.

About two-thirds of ***Utah***'s new ***immigrants*** came from abroad and the rest from other ***states***, mainly California. The ***state***'s Hispanic population soared to about 270,000 in 2005, up 33.1% since 2000. Hispanics contributed about a quarter of the ***state***'s growth in the 1990s.

Utah has long had unusual demographics. It has the highest share of married households of any ***state***, the youngest marrying age, the highest birth rate, the largest average household size and the youngest median age. The ***state*** is on its third post-World War II baby boom and is bracing for another ***one*** because of ***immigrants***.

Hispanic fertility rates in ***Utah*** not only exceed those of non-Hispanic whites here but also those of Hispanics nationally and even of women in Mexico, says Perlich, the University of ***Utah*** demographer.

Many ***Utah*** ***immigrants*** are recent arrivals who come from rural Latin America where birth-control education is non-existent. They're now in a ***state*** where large families are the norm and birth control is not part of the public discussion.

Immigrants come first for jobs. Many are lured by the lifestyle.

Rosalia Gutierrez, 32, came from Mexico 15 years ago. She is not a Mormon but enjoys the serenity the family-friendly church instills across the ***state***. "It's a nice place," says Gutierrez, a mother of three who works for a container manufacturer. "It's calm and peaceful."

Immigration has created new challenges for the ***state***, from multilingual classrooms to more unwed teenage mothers.

Public school enrollment increased by 30,000 in the 1990s and another 30,000 in the past two years, says ***state*** demographer Robert Spendlove. "We're projecting increases of 150,000 in school-age population in the next 10 years."

Minorities account for about 75% of the school enrollment growth since 2000 and Hispanics for 58%.

The ***Utah*** ***State*** Office of Education has formed an English-language learning task force. The first "newcomer school" will open in Ogden this year to help children adapt while they learn English.

"It gives the child a fighting chance to do well," says Patti Harrington, ***state*** superintendent of public instruction. She says there's no political support to fund programs to help ***immigrants***, such as teaching non-English speakers.

Centro de la Familia, a 30-year-old agency here, changed its focus from mental health and runaway youths to education to help counter high Hispanic dropout rates.

Immigration also is reshaping Midvale, a working-class Salt Lake City suburb with downtown signs in Spanish from the Tortas and Tacos stand to Comunidades Unidas, a community center.

Inside, men, women and children mill about brightly decorated rooms. They're here for prenatal care, diabetes education and other health and social services. The volunteers are friends and neighbors. Peer education works best when up to 80% of the people the center serves are undocumented, says Sabrina Morales, executive director and a native of Guatemala.

Claudia Gonzalez, mother of two, came to ***Utah*** in 1999 from San Diego. She cleaned houses, got referrals from the center and eventually volunteered. Now, she's the program director.

Midvale Mayor JoAnn Seghini created the Community Building Community program that brings volunteers and local agencies together to help ***immigrants***. "Immigration is always going to be part of America," Seghini says. "Once they're here, they're us. And once they're us, we're in it together."

Graphic

GRAPHIC, B/W, Robert W. Ahrens, USA TODAY, Sources: Census Bureau

National Vital Statistics Report

Pamela Perlich, senior research economist with the Bureau of Business and Economic Research at the University of ***Utah*** (Bar graph)

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