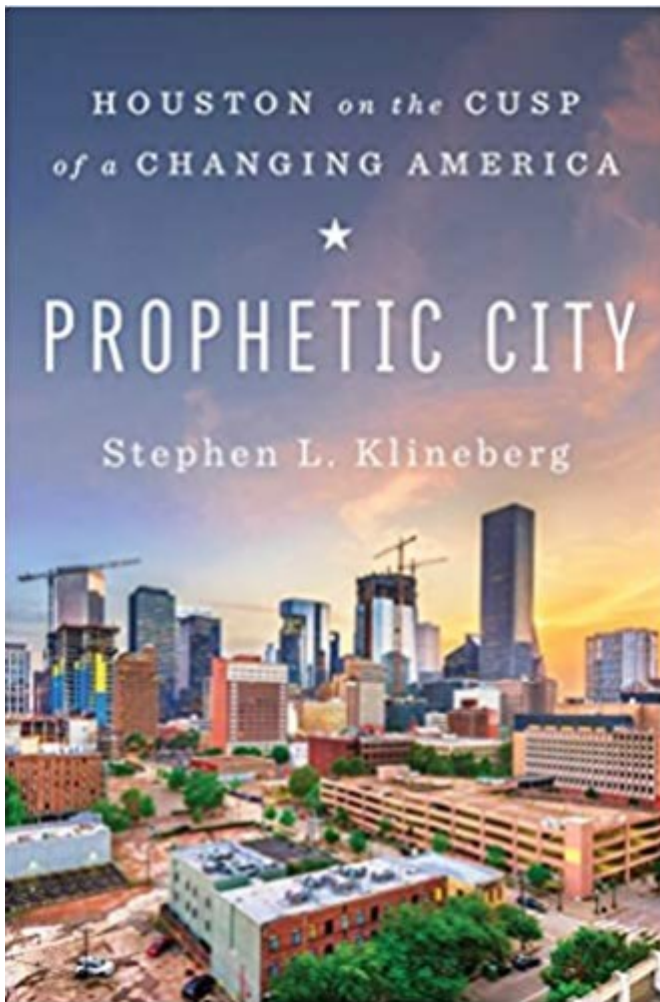


Will all American cities soon look like Houston?

Its residents are the most diverse in the US. For decades, sociologist Stephen Klineberg has tracked their views.

by [Mindy Roll](#) in the [February 24, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Prophetic City

Houston on the Cusp of a Changing America

By Stephen L. Klineberg

Simon & Schuster

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I love Houston. I was born there, and I was genuinely grateful to return there after nearly 20 years away. I still get a thrill driving through the middle of the city: the soaring downtown skyline, the expansive bayous, the remarkable restaurant scene, the world-renowned medical center, the well-regarded theater and museum districts. Even with its oppressive humidity, massive mosquitos, never-ending freeways, and constant flooding, most Houstonians I know, whether native or transplant, say the same thing: Houston is the best-kept secret in Texas. So I was more than a bit biased when I opened the pages of sociologist Stephen Klineberg's book about the city.

I was also confused: Why would anyone outside the city of Houston be interested in reading this book? After all, as Klineberg notes, Houston enjoys a terrible reputation across the United States. It ranks low on nearly every list related to perception and desirability. Even Houstonians agree. Klineberg quotes one resident who commented several years ago on a website meant to promote the city: "If Houston were a dog, she'd be a mutt with three legs, one bad eye, fleas the size of Corn Nuts, and buckteeth. Despite all that, she'd be the best dog you'd ever know." Houston has always had an image problem.

But Houston holds another interesting title, one that makes this book not only intriguing but useful for non-Houstonians. Houston is the most diverse city in the nation, with no ethnic majority and nearly one in four residents of foreign birth. There is little doubt that this trend will continue to grow—nationally as well as locally. In fact, Klineberg argues that by 2050, all of America will look like Houston.

Herein lies the value of this work. For those wanting a peek into what their own city—and indeed, our nation—will look like in 30 years, a careful study of Houston offers that glimpse. As Klineberg notes, "Houston is America on demographic fast-forward. This city is where, for better or worse, the future of our nation is going to be worked out."

That future begins with understanding exactly where we are now, which Klineberg illustrates well. Each year since 1982, Klineberg has surveyed Houstonians' perceptions and opinions of their city through the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University. As Houston transitioned from a majority-White city to a city with no ethnic majority, Klineberg and his students asked Houstonians about a number of issues, including economic outlook and opportunity, immigration and culture, social issues and urban amenities, and demographic transformations. Most of the survey questions have remained the same over the last four decades, with a few added or removed each year.

Klineberg believes Houston is the only city in America to be tracked in such an extensive and long-standing way. "We have been watching the world change," he writes of his project. But how exactly has the world changed, and what can Houston show the rest of us?

One of Klineberg's most interesting observations is that over the last several decades Houstonians have quietly become more welcoming of diversity, more optimistic about the gifts immigrants bring, more open to equal rights for all people, and more convinced that the city will only thrive if expanded opportunities for education and training are given to the disenfranchised. More Houstonians have come to believe that the city's problems will be best solved through robust public education that lifts children out of poverty and prepares them to succeed in college and beyond. Klineberg notes that in a southern city in a red state, these findings are particularly surprising.

He also notes that these findings do not match public perceptions of the city, the state, or its residents. This mismatch is significant, Klineberg argues. It means that the challenge is no longer to convince residents of the need for change and expanded opportunity (which, in a city famous for being antiregulatory, is itself shocking). The current challenge is for innovation to match desire: in short, to actually make things happen.

Klineberg concludes that Houstonians are ready and looking to local government, innovative nonprofit organizations, and Houston's famously generous business sector to lead. Will it come to be? Can we become a people more committed to the common good, even and especially when that good is diverse? Klineberg argues that the jury is out, not just in Houston but nationwide.

Of the many insights in Klineberg's work that struck me, the one that has most stayed with me is the quiet, almost unseen shift in public perception of both the promise of diversity and the desire for a better common life. Forty years ago, most Houstonians scorned this. The bootstraps mentality of the last century, however, has given way to a growing desire for opportunity for all, even (and especially) assisted opportunity.

Is Houston an outlier in this regard, a city whose people are simply more welcoming, generous, and optimistic than most? As much as I love this city, I do not think so. I think these quiet shifts speak to a deepening sense of our shared humanity and our growing readiness to receive the many gifts of living in a diverse community.