



Centrum Stosunków Międzynarodowych
Center for International Relations

Reports & Analyses

26/06

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Lessons from the U.S. Experience***

The Report has been published in cooperation with the German Marshall Fund of the United States within the project 'Transatlantic Security Challenges and Dilemmas for the European Migration Policy'.

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Immigrant Integration: Lessons from the U.S. Experience

As deserved as the United States' reputation may be as a nation of immigrants, American policies to promote the effective integration of immigrants into mainstream society have been haphazard at best. Except for a brief period in the early twentieth century, immigrants have been largely left to their own devices in finding pathways to economic, social, and political participation. However, a new record level of immigration—a foreign-born population of approximately 35 million, or about 12 percent of the total U.S. population—has drawn new attention to the question of how well America is doing in absorbing new immigrants, and of what policies will best promote the integration of immigrants.

“Integration” of immigrants today can be defined very much as “assimilation” was defined decades ago—before it took on the negative connotations that it now carries—by the sociologist Robert Park: “a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common culture.” In other words, the process does not involve the eradication of previous attitudes but instead a mutual accommodation.

U.S. views and expectations of how immigrants “become” American break down roughly into three schools of thought. The first, hewing to American values of individualism and laissez-faire, is that integration is practically “automatic”—that is, that immigrants will absorb American values and culture simply by living and working here. This model’s rejection of heavy-handed assimilation policies, combined with its inherent optimism in immigrants’ adaptability, appeals to pro-immigration camps. However, because it lays responsibility entirely on the immigrant, it also enhances the argument from the anti-immigration camp in favor of restricting immigration from cultures perceived to be incompatible with that of the United States. Indeed, a second school of thought holds that immigration from non-Western cultures—a designation that often includes Latin America, despite the Spanish underpinnings of Central and South American society—is inherently incompatible with the goal of retaining the essential character of the American nation. The third school focuses on shared responsibility on the part of immigrants and of the host society for creating the circumstances that lead to successful incorporation of the immigrant into society; unlike the other two approaches, it entails a two-way process.

Various views have prevailed at different intervals in American history, often in combination with each other. America’s past experiences have combined to shape the contemporary debates over

immigrant integration policies. The result has been an often conflicting set of policies and attitudes which, perhaps surprisingly, have still produced relatively strong indicators of how well immigrants—particularly the second and third generations—integrate. Nevertheless, deep skepticism among native-born Americans over how much immigrants want to become American indicate that integration policies still leave much to be desired.

The “Becoming American” Myth

The great myth in the United States is this: “To become American, you must strip away your past.” This myth ignores that prior to World War I, Americans held on to significant parts of their European heritage. The German language for example, dominated the publishing industry, where English lagged far behind. And ethnic societies took the lead in creating the social structures that helped new immigrants to find jobs, housing, and insurance—and to learn English and eventually apply for citizenship.

The imperative for Americans to distance themselves from their countries and cultures of birth has its roots in the early twentieth century as the result of the surge of migration from Southern and Eastern Europe, coupled with the onset of World War I in Europe. During the Great War, pundits derided the Old World as uncivilized, medieval, out of date, under the thumb of “greedy hereditary dynasties.”

Ironically, with immigration hitting new record levels, mainly from immigration from Latin America and Asia, concerns about immigrants’ ability to integrate into American society have come full circle. The fervor with which Americans once rejected “Europe” is long gone, and instead pundits and scholars like Patrick Buchanan and Samuel Huntington hold up European culture as the root of American identity.

The reality of the process by which immigrants have always integrated into American society depends not on the essence of the country or culture of origin. Instead, “becoming American” involves transforming the meaning of ethnic differences so that they no longer carry negative value judgments and simply become part of a shared experience. This is the essence of the old Melting Pot metaphor as expressed in Israel Zangwill’s 1908 play of the same name. In other words, the essential component of integration in America is the embrace of a shared ideal: a civic commitment to overcoming ethnic and, to some degree, class differences.

The culture wars of recent decades, however, have obscured this message in favor of a passive definition of the integration ideal to which Americans expect immigrants to subscribe. Most people born and raised in the United States typically describe the idea of “becoming American” as a process of giving up one’s previous identity, but they all too often are at a loss to describe what immigrants might be integrating *to*.

Past and Present Efforts

The last time there was a concerted effort to present a set of information communicating important aspects of U.S. life was the Americanization movement in the early twentieth century. Rising nativism in the late nineteenth century prompted a response by both progressive Americans and ethnic fraternal benefit societies: an attempt to marshal education and social networks to facilitate the integration of immigrants into American society and thus prove the restrictionists wrong. Social reformers Jane Addams and Frances Kellor provided classes and support systems in “settlement houses” to help immigrants learn English and gain other skills. Kellor later led a business-government coalition to promote Americanization.

The early, constructive Americanization efforts soon took an unfortunate turn, first becoming paternalistic and later incorporating outright harassment of anyone who seemed too “foreign.” At the Ford Motor Company, Americanization classes took a turn for the bizarre, as adult “graduates” were made to participate in pageants, where they paraded behind a giant “melting pot,” much as school children might. Despite such shortcomings, Ford greatly helped immigrants pursue the American Dream through the “five-dollar day” policy to provide a livable wage and through programs to help its workers –most of whom were foreign-born—finance better housing.

World War I, however, brought an end to the benign Americanization era, which was replaced by an often heavy-handed focus on minimizing any “foreign” seeming activities. German-language presses closed, and many immigrant ethnic fraternal benefit societies were browbeaten nearly out of existence. During the 1920s, Congress passed laws dramatically restricting future immigration and thus decreasing the percentage of the population that was foreign born. World War II played a significant role in uniting many formerly disparate ethnic groups –although, of course, the internment of Japanese, German, and Italian immigrants created a significant, if temporary, setback for those groups.

By the time Congress liberalized immigration policy in 1965, allowing the foreign-born population to swell once again, the role that immigrants themselves had played in integrating later arrivals had largely been forgotten. “Americanization” had become synonymous with the excesses of the Ford

Motor Company's classes and with the forcible assimilation that entailed the widespread harassment of immigrants and laws banning foreign languages. Today, the word "assimilation" is anathema, having come (in many circles) to symbolize the complete embrace of Anglo-Saxon consumerist values and the eradication of previous culture and heritage.

Contemporary integration takes place across many institutions. The U.S. federal and state governments provide limited funding for civics education and English as a Second Language, which typically is subcontracted to private not-for-profit social service agencies. The public education system takes on a significant role through primary and secondary schools, where second-generation immigrants are educated and often play a key bridging role when their parents lag behind in learning English. Community colleges and vocational education programs also have recognized their importance in educating immigrants, who often make up significant portions of the student body. Private immigrant service organizations, as well as religious and community groups, provide some training and social networks as well.

As in Henry Ford's era, the workplace remains a crucial site where immigrants can gain the skills and support networks that are essential to success in a new society. Demand for labor is a driver of migration, making the workplace a central place where foreign- and native-born workers come into contact with each other. Because workers may not have the time to travel off-site to classes, the provision of on-site classes can make a significant difference in the level of skills attained. English language skills can enhance a worker's productivity. Other types of support—such as help with access to banking, health care, public education, and housing—also can boost productivity. Businesses thus have a vested interest in promoting the integration of immigrants into the workforce, economy and society. Nevertheless, so far such efforts have not been as well coordinated as they might be. One reason is that political tensions make businesses reluctant to draw attention to employing foreign born workers, many of whom may be working illegally. Increasing crackdowns on undocumented workers have made many companies hesitant to invest in an inherently unstable workforce that is vulnerable to deportation.

Recently, the U.S. government has made efforts to actively promote immigrant incorporation through public-information campaigns and a long-delayed revision to the test required of applicants for naturalization. Nevertheless, integration of a large sub-set of immigrants has been hampered by policies that have created an undocumented population of roughly 12 million. These immigrants – about one third of the foreign-born population—are barred from naturalizing and thus may never fully integrate into U.S. society. Their status in the shadows discourages them from any activities that might expose their status and limits the amount of time that they might be able to spent learning English.

How Is America Doing?

Despite a haphazard approach to integration, U.S. integration indicators are reasonably good. The most important measure of integration in the minds of Americans –the ability to speak English— shows that a significant percentage of immigrants do learn English, and even more make sure that their children do.

In 2000, U.S. national census data shows that 83 percent of the foreign-born population above five years old speak a language other than English at home. Nevertheless, 65 percent of them speak English “very well” or “well.” Only 23 percent spoke English poorly, and 12 percent spoke none at all. Among their children, 79 percent of first-generation Mexican children and 88 percent of Chinese speak English well or very well. Among second-generation Hispanics, 92 percent speak English well or very well; among Asians, 96 percent are proficient in English. As the sociologist Richard Alba has written, “English hardly seems endangered. Not only is competence in English close to universal among the U.S.-born children and grandchildren of today’s immigrants, but even among those groups where bilingualism persists, the predominant pattern by the third generation is English monolingualism.”¹ Furthermore, in surveys taken by the Pew Hispanic Center, Latino immigrants are more likely than natives to believe that immigrant children should learn English, a value held by 92 percent of Latinos surveyed. The demand for English is reflected in long waiting lists for classes in major immigrant destination cities.²

Similarly, for intermarriage –another key indicator, second-generation data shows that immigrants are integrating relatively well. Nearly half of Asian women and about one-third of Hispanic women with one foreign-born and one U.S. born parent marry outside of their ethnic group. “High levels of intermarriage demonstrate and accelerate the fading of cultural and social boundaries between immigrant descent groups and the larger American population,” a team of University of Illinois researchers reported.³

On yet another indicator, among all Hispanic families, home ownership was 49 percent in 2005 – much lower than the 72 percent registered among all other households, but still a respectable

¹ Richard Alba. “Bilingualism Persists, But English Still Dominates.” Migration Source, February 1, 2005. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=282>

² Pew Hispanic Center Fact Sheet: “Hispanic Attitudes Toward Learning English.” June 7, 2006. <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/20.pdf>

³ Gillian Stevens, Mary E. M. McKillip, and Hiromi Ishizawa. “Intermarriage in the Second Generation: Choosing Between Newcomers and Natives.” Migration Source, February 1, 2005. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=444>

figure. Among U.S. born Hispanics –largely representing the second and third generation—the number is 60 percent.⁴

The percentage of immigrants who become citizens has changed dramatically in seesaw fashion in recent decades. While in 1970 some 64 percent of legal immigrants had naturalized, by 1996 that number had fallen to 39 percent (quite possibly representing the large influx of immigrants legalized after the 1986 amnesty, who had only relatively recently become eligible to naturalize). By 2002 –following a set of restrictive laws denying benefits and some rights to non-citizens— the number was up again to nearly 49 percent. With legal immigrants representing only about two-thirds of the foreign-born population in the U.S., the naturalization rate for all immigrants is significantly lower.

Finally, U.S. immigrants are geographically diffuse, another indicator that suggests that they are integrating, not segregating themselves. Once concentrated heavily in hubs like New York, Florida, Texas, and California, immigrants are moving to suburbs and non-traditional cities. States like North Carolina and Nebraska, neither of which has been thought of as an immigrant “hub,” are among the fastest-growing immigrant communities.

Although indicators of immigrant integration are largely reassuring, U.S. public opinion does not always reflect that Americans are aware of immigrants’ desire to become part of mainstream society –and relative success in doing so. A July 2006 Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll asked 900 voters nationwide the following question: “In general, do you think immigrants who come to the United States today join society and give to the country or stay separate from society and take from the country?” Some 41 percent of respondents felt that immigrants joined and gave to society –only slightly more than the 36 percent of respondents who felt that immigrants stayed separate and take from the country. (Another 17 percent said “it depends” and 6 percent were unsure.)

The need for better attention to resources to promote the integration of immigrants is evidenced by the mixed perception by native-born Americans of immigrants’ inclinations to join American society, the fact that demand for English classes is going unmet, the lack of coordinated workplace resources for immigrant integration, and the mixed performance on naturalization. Clearly, although to some extent the “automatic” model of integration has come into play, a concerted effort to building on the “shared responsibility” model –without the pageants—could yield benefits.

⁴ Timothy Ready. “Hispanic Housing in the United States 2006.” Institute of Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame. June 2006 http://www.nd.edu/~latino/research/pubs/Esperanza_Web.pdf

Center for International Relations

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