

# Do Immigrants Benefit America?

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The successful melting-pot model of immigrant assimilation is being tested by political activists claiming multicultural rights and privileges.

Immigrants will not ruin America in the foreseeable future if we limit their numbers to under 500,000 a year, control the visa system, and better monitor the flow of illegals. But this does not mean we should close our borders, as Pat Buchanan and others want.

Immigration has made and remade this country. Not only do immigrants not ruin America but they have benefited it. The *Wall Street Journal* calls for high levels of immigration because it means more consumers, more workers, and a larger economy with new blood for the United States. Whereas Europe and Japan have aging populations and face shortages of tax money to care for their elderly, the United States, thanks to immigration, has a growing population and workers to do the jobs Americans don't want to do at low wages. Immigrant labor therefore keeps prices, supplies, and services available and cheap.

For most of its history, America has placed no restrictions on the arrival of newcomers. They came and left as they pleased. The individual states made no provisions either to hinder or to help. For assistance, immigrants called on kinfolk, friends, or churches. Most immigrants came from Europe.

In 1952 the McCarran-Walter Act allotted to each foreign country an annual quota for immigrants based on the proportion of people from that country present in America in 1920. This policy favored northern European immigrants but kept out southern and central Europeans. The next big change in immigration policy came in 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson abolished the national-origin quota system favoring Europe and adopted a system that favored the Western Hemisphere.

As immigration increased and the origins of immigrants changed, U.S. policies changed; the welfare state was enlarged and affirmative action and other programs benefited the new immigrants from Asia and the Western Hemisphere. Bilingualism and multiculturalism lessened the assimilation of the new immigrants in ways they had not influenced earlier arrivals from Europe.

Old- and new-style immigrants

The old-style immigrants were usually Europeans. Most of the new-style immigrants are from Asia, Mexico, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The newcomers have come more quickly and in greater numbers than previous waves of immigrants, especially through illegal entrance. They therefore have

a bigger impact on population growth, the economy, schools, and the welfare system. They are harder to integrate than earlier immigrants were because there are fewer pressures on them to assimilate and learn English. Instead, bilingual education, multiculturalism, and ethnic clustering slow up the workings of the so-called melting pot.

Does this matter? America successfully absorbed Irish, Germans, Poles, and Jews, but things have changed. In the past we had a confident core culture. America insisted that newcomers assimilate and learn English-- and they did. There was no bilingual education; there were no ethnic studies or affirmative action programs. The new immigrants are coming faster and in larger yearly numbers. These large numbers (one million a year plus 500,000 illegals) are proving harder to assimilate.

The new immigrants are arriving at a time when U.S. cultural self-reliance has eroded. Having learned from the civil rights struggle of black Americans, Mexican and Asian activists seek bilingual education and affirmative action for their own people while rejecting assimilation and Western culture. Latino activists demand ethnic studies programs in colleges and universities, group rights, and proportional representation in electoral districts, employment, the awarding of official contracts, and many other spheres of public life.

Latinos cluster in large neighborhoods to a greater extent than the foreigners who came here a century ago. Such clustering slows the learning of English and the rate of assimilation. Poor people who receive welfare benefits have fewer incentives to master English and adjust to the demands of American society. Latino immigrants, in particular, now make political demands of a kind not made by Sicilian or Greek immigrants a century ago. They are adopting the divisive and counterproductive stance of a racial minority. Their leaders demand privileges similar to those claimed for blacks.

In rejecting the melting pot concept, multiculturalists want to preserve immigrant culture and languages rather than absorb American culture. Those who oppose immigration hope to restrict the flow of migrants so as to better assimilate the newcomers and promote the melting pot process. Otherwise, multiculturalism could lead to political fragmentation and then disaster. Restrictionists predict a stark picture of America as a Bosnia of continental proportions with a population of half a billion and dozens of contending ethnic groups, all lacking a sense of common nationhood, common culture, or political heritage.

Political problems will be even harder to face if numerous unskilled, non-English speakers continue to emigrate. They will take low-paying jobs, thus exacerbating income inequalities and worsening the economic prospects of some black Americans, unskilled whites, and women. These new immigrants will be a burden on schools, hospitals, prisons, and welfare services. They could disrupt local communities by sheer force of numbers.

Bilingual education--helpful or harmful?

In the past, the children of immigrants were educated in English only, which assimilated them in one generation. Nowadays, with bilingual education being imposed on millions of students--with large numbers of Spanish-speaking immigrants arriving each year--the assimilation process is longer and less successful. Indeed, today's children will take three generations to assimilate.

Education has been a contentious subject since the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Bilingual Education Act (1968) decreed that children should be instructed in their native tongues for a transitional year while they learned English but were to transfer to all-English classrooms as soon as possible. These prescriptions were ignored by bilingual enthusiasts. English was neglected, and Spanish-language instruction and cultural maintenance became the norm.

Bilingual education was said to be essential, allowing Hispanics to gain a new sense of pride and resist Americanization. The *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) case stands out as a landmark: after the decision, bilingual education moved away from a transitional year to a multiyear plan to teach the children of immigrants in their home language before teaching them in English. This facilitation theory imprisoned Spanish speakers in classrooms where essentially only Spanish was taught; bilingual education became Spanish cultural maintenance, with English limited to 30 minutes a day. As a result, Spanish speakers were literate in neither Spanish nor English.

Criticism of bilingual education has grown. Parents and numerous objective analyses have shown that it is ineffective, keeping students too long in Spanish-only classes and slowing the learning of English and assimilation into American society. High dropout rates have imprisoned Spanish speakers at the bottom of our economic and educational ladders.

Some members of the education bureaucracy, guided by the principle of cultural maintenance, want Hispanic-surname children to continue to be taught Spanish language and culture and English only as a second language. The extremists among them even want Spanish to be a second national language.

Linda Chavez, president of the Center for Equal Opportunity, accuses these advocates of bilingual education of being politicized and manipulated by cultural activists. The programs they favor have failed, she claims, and have undermined the future of the Latino children they were meant to help. Her criticisms are supported by the evidence. Latinos taught in bilingual programs test behind peers taught in English-only classrooms, drop out of school at a high rate, and are trapped in low-skilled, low-paying jobs.

As noted earlier, the problem began in 1974 when the Supreme Court ignored 200 years of English-only instruction in American schools and said that students who did not speak English must receive special treatment from local schools. *Lau v. Nichols* allowed an enormous expansion of bilingual education. For example, in 1968, the U.S. Office for Civil Rights began a small program to educate Mexican-American children; by 1996, it had expanded to an \$8 billion a year industry.

As the program grew, the initial objective to teach English to Spanish speakers for one or two years was perverted into an effort to Hispanicize, not Americanize, Spanish speakers. The federal program insists that 75 percent of education tax dollars be spent on bilingual education--that is, long-term native-language programs, not English as a second language. Asians, Africans, and Europeans are all in mainstream classes and receive extra training in English-as-a-second-language programs for a few hours a day. Hispanic students, in contrast, are taught in Spanish 70 to 80 percent of the time.

Some critics of bilingualism claim that the vast majority of Spanish speakers want their children to be taught in English, not Spanish, and do not want the federal government to keep up Hispanic culture and language. The bilingual bureaucracy at local and federal levels intends to Hispanicize students and thereby capture federal funds for schools. Meanwhile, other ethnic groups achieve higher academic scores, in part because they are mastering English, the language of the marketplace and higher education.

The old total immersion system still works best; the longer students stay in segregated bilingual programs, the less successful they are in school. Even after 28 years of bilingual programs, the dropout rate for Latinos is the highest in the country. In Los Angeles, the Latino students dropped out at double the state average (44 percent over four years of high school). Special English-language instruction from day one gets better results than Spanish-language instruction for most of the day.

A higher degree of proficiency in English should be required by applicants for naturalization in the United States. A citizen should be able to read all electoral literature in English--no more foreign-language ballots. Educators in publicly funded high schools who believe that their task is to maintain the immigrant cultural heritage should be opposed. Such endeavors are best left to parents, churches, Saturday schools, and the extended family.

The role of the public-school teacher is to instruct students in English and American culture and political values. English plays a crucial role in cultural assimilation, a proposition evident also to minority people who argue that Spanish-language instruction in the public schools will leave their children badly disadvantaged when they graduate.

There is, however, hope in the battle against bilingual education. In 1998 California passed Proposition 227, calling for an end to bilingual education. If bilingual education is limited to one or two years for non-English-speaking children, who are then taught only in English, the U.S. school system will be able to assimilate students to English as it did before 1965.

The issue of matricula consular

ID cards known as matricula consular are issued by the Mexican government. They do not give legal status to undocumented workers, but they do help integrate illegal migrants into U.S. society. Many U.S. banks now accept this document as identification for opening bank accounts. Mexican workers sent home \$10--11 billion in 2002. Over 800 police departments and 400 cities now recognize the card as valid ID, and 13 states accept the consular registration as sufficient documentation to obtain a driver's license. This is all well and good, but 13 states allow the use of a driver's license to vote. Obviously, states should require some other identification to prove citizenship and the right to vote.

As in many aspects of immigration, there are trade-offs. The matricula is a good thing for the undocumented worker, allowing him to remit money cheaply and safely to his relatives in Mexico. It allows him to get a driver's licence, thus ensuring that he is tested and capable of driving safely.

Remittances are becoming the major vehicle for transferring money to poor countries. The United States may have to adopt more liberal immigration policies even in the face of domestic opposition to

illegal migrants. But there is a case for helping more migrants send money to relatives, thus reducing poverty in their own lands and keeping their families at home.

There are enough controls in effect to deter any terrorists coming from Mexico. To date, no terrorists have crossed the Mexican border, and no Latino has been involved in terrorist acts. The Mexicans are hard workers and do jobs Americans don't want to do. The antiterrorism crackdown on the Mexican border has caught no terrorists, but it has made life harder on the border. It has slowed trade, tied up traffic, and cost American taxpayers millions, if not billions, of dollars by slowing the movement of people, goods, and services.

What about Muslim immigrants?

Muslim immigrants are helpful to America; only a very small number of them are harmful. Immigrants from Korea, Canada, and the Middle East have a much higher self-employment rate and income than natives do. Most Muslims are good workers and employees. Many are on business or student visas, pay high tuition costs, and are important in graduate school programs. In fact, many stay on after schooling and take highly skilled jobs in the United States.

Only 48 Muslims have been identified as terrorists since 1993. Of those, 41 were approved by visas issued by an American consulates in Saudi Arabia--14 of the September 11 hijackers were Saudis. Seven who did not have visas sneaked into the United States and 4 arrived at a port of entry without a visa. An unknown number of terrorists have lived in this country illegally by overstaying a temporary visa.

Since September 11, Congress has enacted legislation to fight terrorism. This means that the visa system, especially for students, has been tightened. More of those who break immigration laws are being caught, and border controls are being strengthened. New measures have improved procedures for issuing visas to foreigners, tracking students and others while they are in the United States, and giving immigration authorities more power to arrest, detain, and deport illegal and legal foreigners, as well as those who have ties to terrorism.

This should be enough to prevent Muslim terrorists from entering and operating in America as the hijackers did so freely. The laws now in place can control Muslim terrorists and other illegals without needlessly disrupting the lives of the Muslims living, working, and studying here. A further tightening of control is required, however, on the Canadian border. In Canada, it is too easy to claim asylum status upon arrival. So-called refugees are able to stay on, raise money, plan terrorist operations, or slip into the United States across a 4,000-mile border.

What about the future?

What kind of a United States do Americans want for the future? Most Americans feel somewhat ambivalent about immigration--their own forebears may, after all, have come from abroad--even as they tell pollsters they want immigration reduced. Americans are particularly opposed to illegal immigration, although not to undocumented aliens as individuals.

Statisticians in the Census Bureau forecast that by 2050, Caucasians will barely form a majority, with Hispanics far exceeding black Americans as the largest minority. But these forecasts may be called into question. For instance, such predictions take little or no account of lower birthrates for immigrants or intermarriage with other social groups. The intermarriage rate is high both for Latino and Asian people in the United States; the rate, moreover, increases from one generation to the next.

The United States will certainly be more ethnically and racially mixed in the future. It is not sure, however, how this amalgam will be composed, especially as future immigration patterns may change in an unexpected manner. If the number of immigrants is reduced, bilingualism eliminated, and Americanization encouraged, there will be little danger to U.S. unity.

No economist or social planner can specify with confidence the ideal number of immigrants that the U.S. economy should accept each year. But if it is the U.S. political aim to assimilate immigrants into a single nation, annual immigration must be kept in bounds. We suggest not more than 2 per 1000 of the population during any one year. This would reduce the current level of immigration from one million annually to about 500,000 annually, not including refugees and skilled immigrants--still a generous quota. For political reasons, the United States should also ensure a diversity of immigrants, not allowing too many (perhaps not more than 10 percent of the total) from any one country in every single year.

Amnesties for illegal immigrants need to be halted to make clear that this is not a viable route to U.S. citizenship. Affirmative action programs should be terminated. Census categories such as Hispanic and Asian should be replaced by national origin classifications. English only should be required in the law, government, schools, and the political system. A transition year or two can be provided for those who do not speak English; then English only must be required in all academic courses, but training in foreign languages as a second language should also be encouraged. Becoming proficient in the language of America is a price that any immigrant should want to pay.

For the foreseeable future, America seems likely to remain the world's major destination for immigrants. Our history and traditions suggest that within a few decades, most of today's immigrants will be an integral part of a revised American community. But past success does not guarantee that history will repeat itself. There are concerns about the size and nature of today's immigration, especially about arrivals through the side and back doors. As the nation searches for an immigration policy for the twenty-first century, America--and the immigrants who are on the way--are embarked on a journey to an uncertain destination.

#### Additional Reading

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