

# The Civic and Cultural Assimilation of Immigrants to the United States

Jacob Vigdor<sup>†</sup>

---

<sup>†</sup> Email: [Jacob.Vigdor@duke.edu](mailto:Jacob.Vigdor@duke.edu). Address: 176 Rubenstein Hall, Sanford School of Public Policy, 302 Towerview Road, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708-0312.

# 1 Introduction

In 2005, the guardian of a venerable American institution, a prime tourist destination and pride of many a Philadelphian, was moved to take action against a perceived cultural threat. Joey Vento, proprietor of Geno's Cheesesteaks at the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> Street and Passyunk Avenue, placed a sign in his shop window bearing a bald eagle, an American flag, and the words "This Is America; When Ordering 'Speak English.'" Vento, the grandson of Italian immigrants to the United States, renewed a concern that had been raised a century before, when his own ancestors arrived, and a century or more before that, as a Protestant, English-speaking natives became home to growing numbers of Germans and Irish Catholics. The presence of newcomers has consistently raised concerns regarding threats to American cultural and civic institutions—the English language prominent among them.

The passage of time has proven many of these earlier worries unfounded. There is no significant German or Italian-speaking minority in the United States. The erosion of cultural differences between earlier waves of immigrants and the English-speaking mainstream offers little comfort to critics of modern immigration. Roughly half of all immigrants to the United States in more recent years speak a single foreign language—Spanish. This is a stark contrast to the era of European immigrants, when those speaking German or Italian were joined by large numbers of migrants from smaller European countries speaking more obscure languages, as well as many from the United Kingdom and Ireland who spoke English.

Are today's immigrants exhibiting less progress toward the cultural and civic mainstream than their predecessors of earlier eras? This basic question was addressed at some length in my 2009 book *From Immigrants to Americans: The Rise and Fall of Fitting In*. The basic answer

drew a distinction between immigrants from Mexico and nearby portions of Central America and those from all other parts of the world. On average, immigrants in recent decades learn English at more rapid rates than their predecessors of a century ago. Their progress towards U.S. citizenship, a major civic assimilation indicator, is slower, but largely because of changes to naturalization policy have extended waiting periods for legal migrants. These averages obscure important variation across groups as described above.

This chapter revisits and extends the analysis of *From Immigrants to Americans*. By virtue of its publication date, and the delays involved in releasing data on the immigrant population, that work did not account for what may ultimately represent a watershed moment in the history of immigration to the United States: the “Great Recession” of 2007-2009. After decades of continuous increase in the foreign-born population, the Great Recession brought immigration to a halt. Even in the recovery period that followed, immigration to the United States has not resumed its pre-recession trajectory. Migration from Mexico, in particular, has remained stagnant, while immigration from Asia has accelerated. The composition of newly arrived immigrants to the United States has been radically transformed. As will be shown below, newly arrived immigrants are better assimilated along multiple dimensions than their predecessors—even before accounting for the fact that immigrants are always least assimilated when they first arrive in the United States.

## 2 Why Assimilation Matters

Calls for immigrants to adopt the language and culture of the host country are often dismissed as xenophobic. The term “assimilation” has been rejected in some academic circles, for implying that one culture or set of norms is superior to all others and that immigrants ought to be judged

by the degree to which they conform to it. In more recent years, however, a more nuanced pattern of support for assimilation, at least along certain key dimensions, has emerged (Alba and Nee 2005). In part, this stems from the recognition that members of any ethnic group need not abandon their own culture or norms when they familiarize themselves with those of another group. A non-native English speaker, for example, generally does not forget his or her native language upon learning English, and is free to use that native language at home or in public interactions with members of their own ethnic group. Sociologists have also recognized the concept of “segmented” assimilation, meaning that immigrants can fully accept the political or linguistic norms of their host society while maintaining a degree of distinctiveness along other dimensions (Zhou 1997). These other dimensions might include religious practice, consumption habits, or selection of children’s extracurricular activities.

There is a sound economic rationale for promoting cultural assimilation (Lazear 1999). In competitive markets, transactions occur when buyers and sellers can mutually agree on a price for a good or service that leaves both parties better off. The process of arriving at a mutual agreement, however, depends critically on the ability of the parties to communicate with one another. The lack of a common language is an obvious barrier to communication. Other types of cultural differences might forestall mutually beneficial transactions as well. A seller might represent a culture where haggling over price is the norm, and therefore set a price that is higher than what he or she is minimally willing to accept. A buyer accustomed to a norm of paying the list price might see this high price, assume that it is non-negotiable, and walk away from a potentially viable transaction.

Either type of barrier to trade could conceivably be overcome with the assistance of a translator or facilitator familiar with the norms of both cultures. Such assistance is not typically

costless, however, and must often be arranged in advance. As such, the barriers that exist when buyers and sellers cannot effectively communicate with one another can be likened to a tax on the transaction. Like any other tax, the theorized effect is to reduce the number of transactions below that which would occur in a perfectly functioning market, reducing social welfare in the process.

For any member of a multicultural society, there are incentives to familiarize oneself with the norms and language of cultures other than one's own. The incentives are rooted in the promise of being able to more frequently conduct successful transactions with representatives of the other cultures. These benefits must be weighed against the costs of acquiring this familiarity.

It is straightforward to show, in an economic model, that the incentives to bridge cultural gaps are not strong enough to attain the "optimal" level of multicultural understanding. The cause is a classic externality problem. When one actor in the economy bridges a cultural gap, that actor will engage in more transactions, which increase surplus for herself and for her trading partner. The actor internalizes the benefit to herself, but not to a partner.

From a public policy perspective, then, there is a positive role for government to promote the adoption of a common language and norms governing market transactions. The most cost-effective manner of promoting this commonality is to encourage members of minority linguistic or cultural groups to adopt the culture of the mainstream. This strategy is not rooted in any notion of the supremacy of one culture over another, but rather simple mathematics. If our goal is to incentivize the adoption of a common language, society will spend the least on incentives if it offers them to those in the minority.

Just as there are strong economic returns associated with accepting common cultural norms and language, there are clear returns to members of different ethnic groups accepting

common civic norms and institutions. At one extreme, the failure to support common civic norms and institutions can lead to violent conflict. The loss of life and destruction of property associated with violence constitutes a monumental economic cost. Although outright warfare between members of different ethnic groups might seem like a relic of a bygone era, or a phenomenon confined to developing countries today, the developed world has seen eruptions of ethnic violence in the not-too-distant past. Disaffected immigrant groups rioted in the suburbs of several French cities in 2005, and in Brussels the following year. Within the past decade, immigrants or the children of immigrants have been associated with violent incidents in Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Anti-immigrant protests have also turned violent in many countries.

The aversion of ethnic riots is not the only social benefit derived from immigrant acceptance of civic institutions. Governments bear the responsibility of providing public goods to the population, and the greater the proportion of residents sharing in the burden of providing those goods, the lower the cost to any one resident. National defense is the textbook example of a public good; the cost of providing defense is measured not only in terms of dollars but in service and sacrifice. On a more domestic level, government is charged with ensuring public safety. The burden of immigration on society is minimized when migrants exhibit a greater respect for law, reducing the strain on the criminal justice system.

Beyond these core responsibilities, governments in the developed world are also responsible for redistribution and the provision of social welfare. The possibility that immigrants might disproportionately burden the social welfare system has long worried immigration opponents. In a sense, then, immigrants can support the civic functions of the state by being net contributors to the social welfare system.

### 3 Previous Studies of Assimilation

Social scientists have adopted a range of methods and measures to track the progress of immigrants and their children as they acclimate to a host society. Ethnographers have immersed themselves in enclave neighborhoods (Gans 1962 and Margolis 2009). Sociologists have fielded large-scale surveys and followed up with interviews (Kasinitz et al. 2008). Economists and others have used data from various sources to study patterns of English language adoption, intermarriage, and naturalization. Neither type of study is perfectly suited to draw generalizations regarding the process of assimilation. Studies of individual ethnic groups or cities may reveal patterns that are context-specific. Data analyses are commonly based on simple cross-sectional comparisons of immigrants in differing circumstances; true longitudinal research designs are difficult to undertake with a migrant population as few datasets track individuals across national borders.<sup>1</sup> In spite of these limitations, the existing literature yields a set of consistent findings. First generation immigrants in the United States make some degree of progress toward the cultural and civic mainstream. The children of immigrants become very difficult to distinguish from native-born Americans as adults.

Empirical evidence supports the modeling of second language acquisition as a form of investment, where upfront costs are weighed against a future stream of benefits (Chiswick, 2008). Economists Barry Chiswick and Paul Miller, studying non-Anglophone immigrants in English-speaking nations, finds that the process of learning English proceeds most rapidly when migrants are younger, belong to smaller linguistic groups, have a smaller family network to rely

---

<sup>1</sup> One prominent exception is the Mexican Migration Project, which aims to track a set of Mexican citizens as they move back and forth across the U.S. border. See, for example, Espinosa and Massey (1997).

on, and lack access to sources of news in their native language (Chiswick and Miller 1996; 2001). The lack of a first-language network to acquire information increases the potential benefits of learning the host country language, and younger immigrants can look forward to a longer stream of benefits once they become multilingual. Most studies of immigrants and language ability use cross-sectional data, introducing the concern that apparent progress in learning the host country language might instead reflect selective return migration—the departure of immigrants who never speak English well. Espinosa and Massey (1997) use a longitudinal cross-national sample to show that migrants make real progress over time.

Intermarriage—the propensity to select a spouse outside one’s own ethnic group—is often considered the ultimate form of cultural assimilation. In both recent and historical data, intermarriage is very uncommon among first-generation migrants (Drachler 1920; Pagnini and Morgan 1990; Qian and Lichter 2001). Rates of marriage across ethnic groups increase dramatically in subsequent generations. When considering the cultural assimilation of the first generation, then, English ability is the dominant discriminating factor.

Just as the decision to learn English can be modeled as an investment decision, evidence supports the role of costs and benefits in the decision to become a naturalized citizen. The benefits of naturalization include eligibility for a range of career opportunities open only to citizens, the right to participate in government by voting or holding office, and immunity from future changes in immigration policy. The costs include preparing for the citizenship examination, and in some cases relinquishing citizenship in one’s country of birth. Multiple studies have established that immigrants naturalize more rapidly when the option of retaining birth citizenship is less attractive—because a migrant was born in a poor, oppressive, or war-torn country (Jasso and Rosenzweig 1986 and Chiswick and Miller 2008). Immigrants born in nations

recognizing dual citizenship are also more likely to become naturalized citizens (Chiswick and Miller 2008).

Once immigrants take the step of becoming citizens, additional questions arise regarding their political tendencies. As Bryan Caplan and Vipul Naik point out in their contribution to this volume, immigrants responding to the General Social Survey (GSS) are on average more economically liberal—as measured by questions eliciting favorability toward social insurance programs and regulation—and socially conservative than the native-born. The GSS does not necessarily capture a representative sample of the U.S. immigrant population, as it administers surveys only in English. Including non-English speaking immigrants in the sample might accentuate the dimensions of difference between immigrants and natives.

Bearing in mind that assimilation is a process that plays out over time and in some cases across generations, one might hypothesize that the political differences between immigrants and natives dissipate over time. One study, also using the GSS, found increasing degrees of national attachment among immigrants who had spent more time in the United States (Huddy and Khatib 2007). Immigration may also invoke countervailing political preferences in the native-born population, as suggested in literature reviewed by Caplan and Naik. It is instructive to note that the significant expansion of the American welfare state that began with the New Deal and extended through the Great Society coincided with the period of least overall immigration to the United States, suggesting that the effect of immigration on natives' support for redistribution swamps the effect of adding foreign-born citizens to the roster of voters.

Prior studies of assimilation, in summary, have taught us much about how the process works in general, and suggest that conclusions about the process tend to concord across dimensions studied. This pattern supports the approach outlined below, which aggregates

information along multiple dimensions to a set of summary index measures. The advantage of this approach is that summary measures can be computed with both recent and historical data, permitting a direct comparison of assimilation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries—a perspective not represented in prior literature, with the exception of Perlmann’s (2005) comparative analysis of Italians and Mexicans, which is of course limited to those ethnic groups.

## 4 Measuring Past and Present Assimilation

The discussion above suggests several methods of assessing the degree of immigrant assimilation. Along cultural dimensions, one could assess immigrants’ English-speaking ability, and perhaps devise a questionnaire to measure familiarity with American cultural and marketplace norms. A questionnaire could also help determine migrants’ familiarity with American civic institutions, as well as asking questions about a range of civic behaviors from becoming a naturalized citizen, to participating in elections, serving in the military, or holding an elected position of leadership in the community.

The challenge associated with drafting a new questionnaire to assess civic and cultural assimilation is that it is impossible to administer that questionnaire to immigrants of a decade ago, let alone a century. Without comparable information on past generations of immigrants, it is impossible to answer the question posed at the start of this chapter: whether today’s immigrants progress towards the mainstream more or less rapidly than their predecessors. While there have been no systematic surveys collecting information on all the above-mentioned assimilation indicators over the past century, the United States Census provides an alternate source of information on certain indicators.

The Census, administered to the entire American population every ten years since 1790, has always collected information on respondents' birthplace as well as information on year of arrival in the United States, citizenship, English-speaking ability, military service, and marital status. This last item can help determine whether an immigrant is intermarried, which has long been considered an indicator of cultural assimilation. The Census ceased collecting this detailed information following the 2000 enumeration, but in its wake the American Community Survey has provided data for a 1% sample of American households annually.

A simple method of assessing assimilation, then, is to track specific indicators such as English-speaking ability or naturalization rates over time. As a summary measure of cultural or civic assimilation, this chapter will present an assimilation index, which can be interpreted as the degree of distinction between the native- and foreign-born populations at any given point in time.

The assimilation index begins by using data on a random sample consisting of 50% natives and 50% immigrants. Using information on a series of indicators drawn from the Census, the data are used to estimate a statistical model that predicts whether an individual is foreign-born on the basis of the indicators. Some indicators, such as lack of citizenship, perfectly predict whether an individual is foreign-born. Not all citizens are native-born, however. When immigrants and natives are very distinct from one another, this statistical model will have strong predictive power—it will make very few errors in guessing whether an individual is born abroad. In cases where the model can perfectly predict where an individual was born, the assimilation index takes on a value of zero. As the two groups become more similar, the model will make errors more frequently. At the extreme, in a scenario where all immigrants were naturalized citizens, spoke English fluently, and approximated native behavior along other dimensions, the

model would do no better than random guessing. In this case, the assimilation index would take on a value of 100.

The assimilation index can be computed for the entire foreign-born population, or for subsets of the population drawn along various lines. It is often instructive, for example, to consider the assimilation of members of specific immigrant groups, those living in certain metropolitan areas, or those who report arriving in the United States during a specific interval.

The index of cultural assimilation incorporates four data points on every individual represented in the data: their ability to speak English, their marital status and whether they are married to a native-born spouse, and the number of children in their household. The index of civic assimilation considers past or present military service and citizenship.

## 5 Indicators of Civic Assimilation

Figure 1 shows information on the civic assimilation of immigrants in the United States, tracking the civic assimilation index from 1980 through 2011 for five cohorts of immigrants: those arriving in the United States in the late 1970s, late 1980s, late 1990s, between 2001 and 2005, and between 2006 and 2010. Because the civic assimilation index relies largely on a measure of citizenship, and immigrants are automatically flagged as foreign-born when they are not citizens, this measure can be thought of roughly as measuring the rate of immigrant naturalization over time.

Across the board, successive waves of immigrants to the United States have exhibited low levels of civic assimilation upon arrival. This should not come as much of a surprise, since for the duration of this time period legal migrants have faced a minimum waiting period of five years before becoming naturalized citizens. The waiting period begins when an immigrant attains

legal permanent residency—a green card. As wait times for green cards can themselves last more than a decade, the vast majority of immigrants observed one to five years after arrival are ineligible for citizenship.

Over time, the naturalization rate progresses. For those immigrants who had spent 30-35 years in the United States as of 2010, a clear majority had elected to become United States citizens. This high rate of citizenship may in part reflect the impact of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), which would have awarded legal status to those members of this cohort that entered the country without it. It is important to note that the Census has never collected information regarding whether immigrants are in the country legally; as responses to the survey are self-reported and not verified with any documentation it is unclear whether a question about legal status would produce useful responses.

The next cohort of immigrants studied, who entered the country in the late 1980s, would not have been eligible for amnesty under IRCA. Nonetheless, recent data reveal that a majority of this cohort had elected to become citizens as of 2010. To complete the naturalization process, members of this cohort would have had to pass a civics examination. Members of this cohort born after 1960—the vast majority, as immigrants typically come to the United States as young adults—would have had to complete a separate examination assessing their English language abilities. Members of the cohort who arrived in the United States without legal status would be ineligible to become citizens. Taking these factors into consideration, it is clear that a strong majority of immigrants in this cohort who meet the eligibility requirements elect to complete the naturalization process. While acceptance of American civic institutions is not necessarily a requirement for naturalization, familiarity with those institutions is expected in the civics exam. Applicants who take the exam may be asked to name their U.S. Senator or representative,

identify the office third in line for the presidency after the Vice President (and the current holder of that office), name two cabinet positions, identify a power of government belonging to the states, and identify two ways that an American can participate in democracy. The required degree of familiarity with American civic institutions, in short, exceeds that of many native-born citizens. A recent Gallup poll, for example, revealed that only 35% of respondents could name their U.S. Representative.<sup>2</sup>

More recent cohorts of immigrants exhibit civic behavioral patterns that mimic their predecessors. Among those arriving in the late 1990s, for example, the civic assimilation index reached approximately 33% as of 2010, indicating that at least a third of the group had naturalized within 10-15 years of arrival. This closely matches the rate posted by the late 1980s cohort as of the 2000 Census. It falls somewhat below the figure seen in the late 1970s cohort, but the role of IRCA in enabling undocumented migrants to naturalize would be a plausible explanation for the difference. Immigrants entering the United States after 2000 have generated less naturalization data to date, but early indications are that their behavioral patterns will match those of their predecessors as well.

How do the naturalization rates of modern immigrants compare to those of the largely European immigrants who entered the United States during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries? Figure 2, drawn from *From Immigrants to Americans*, shows that the 30-year naturalization rate of just over 70% exhibited by late-1970s migrants to the United States is nearly identical to the naturalization rate posted by late-1890s migrants as of the 1930 Census. While it is true that IRCA may have artificially boosted naturalization rates for this cohort, it should be noted that the

---

<sup>2</sup> The poll was conducted in May 2013. See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/162362/americans-down-congress-own-representative.aspx>.

migrants of the late 1890s entered under an open borders policy—so long as they were of European origin—and were eligible for citizenship within five years of entry. Moreover, the English language requirement for citizenship was not implemented until 1906, implying that many immigrants in this cohort would have been able to avoid linguistic barriers to naturalization. In terms of civic behavior, then, modern immigrants show behavior quite similar to those of earlier generations.

Although average rates of naturalization have remained remarkably steady over time, the average clearly does not apply to all groups. Undocumented immigrants are categorically prohibited from becoming naturalized citizens of the United States, and are thereby prevented from engaging in many other forms of civic behavior as well. To assess the prospects for future civic assimilation, it is necessary to contemplate the future course of illegal immigration to the United States, a topic of further discussion below.

## 6 Indicators of Cultural Assimilation

Figure 3 shows the progression of cultural assimilation for the same set of cohorts studied in the preceding section. Just as newly arrived immigrants are the least assimilated in terms of civic indicators, largely by law, cultural assimilation tends to start at a relatively low level and increase as immigrants spend more time in the United States.

Unlike civic assimilation, for which trends appear fairly stable across cohorts, there are important differences between immigrants arriving more than a decade ago and the most recent arrivals. For immigrants arriving in the late 1970s or late 1980s, progress toward cultural assimilation appears slow for the first decade before accelerating to some extent. The rate of cultural assimilation for late 1990s arrivals appears more rapid than that of earlier cohorts, and

the progress of immigrants arriving between 2001 and 2005 is more rapid still; in fact the latter cohort actually overtakes the former right around the time of the 2008 “Great Recession.” The migrants of the 2006-2010 period, first observed in 2010, show the same high level of cultural assimilation as their predecessors, above that of migrants who had arrived a decade earlier. The level of cultural assimilation displayed by today’s newest migrants took the previous generation of migrants to the United States—those arriving thirty years earlier—nearly twenty years to achieve.

The dramatic rise in cultural assimilation among the most recent cohorts of immigrants reflects the change in immigration to the United States brought about by the Great Recession. The recession eroded job opportunities for workers in many sectors of the economy, but relatively low-skilled work in the construction and manufacturing sectors took a disproportionate hit. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of jobs in the construction industry fell by more than one million in the decade between 2002 and 2012. Employment in the manufacturing sector fell by more than three million. These job losses are more dramatic in light of the fact that, from an official standpoint, the Great Recession occupied less than 20% of the decade.

The loss of employment opportunities in low-skilled sectors played a significant role in driving down the rate of net migration to the United States. Immigrants unable to find work opted to return to their homelands. Other potential migrants reacted to the lack of opportunity by electing not to arrive in the first place. Those migrants who persisted, or who chose to arrive in the wake of the recession, were drawn disproportionately from the more educated, higher-skilled segment of the workforce.

The cultural assimilation of contemporary immigrants compares quite favorably, on average, to that of immigrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Figures 4 and 5 track the English language ability of two cohorts of immigrants to the United States for roughly thirty years each. The first cohort entered the country between 1896 and 1900. Over half these migrants were deemed unable to speak English by Census takers in the 1900 Census. Over time, the average language skills of immigrants in this cohort improved. Some portion of this improvement reflects learning; another component likely reflects return migration among those who had greater difficulty in adjusting to American society.

Comparing English ability over long periods using Census data is complicated by the fact that the method of assessing ability changed over time. Between 1930 and 1970, the Census had switched from using in-person enumerators to mail surveys. English ability was no longer assessed in person, for the most part, but reported by respondents themselves. Moreover, language ability was no longer coded as a simple yes-no question. Instead, immigrants were permitted to rate their English ability on a five-point scale separating those who spoke English at home, at one extreme, from those who could not speak English at all in the other.

With these caveats in mind, the data show that the cohort of immigrants arriving in the late 1970s had much better English skills than their predecessors of the 1890s. Recalling that these migrants themselves would be upstaged by their successors arriving in the years after 2000, particularly after the onset of the Great Recession, it is reasonably safe to say that the English skills of newly arrived immigrants to the United States are better now than they have been at any point in at least one century, and possibly two.

Is this trend toward a more-assimilated immigrant population permanent? Five years after the recession's conclusion, there is no evidence of a resurgence of immigration from Mexico, the

nation providing the highest share of low-skilled migrants to the United States for the past fifty years. The relatively weak American labor market helps to explain this trend, but economic and demographic factors in Mexico have contributed as well. World Bank data show that inflation-adjusted growth rate in per capita GDP in Mexico has doubled the rate in the United States over the past quarter-century. At the same time, Mexico's birth rate, the main driver of population growth, has plummeted to the point of parity with the United States. The World Bank projects that Mexico's population growth rate between 2000 and 2050 will be scarcely a quarter of the rate posted between 1950 and 2000. With economic growth bringing greater opportunity and a population slowdown implying fewer workers to compete for those opportunities, it may well be the case that the period of rapid Mexican migration to the United States is complete.

## 7 Do Immigrants Strengthen or Weaken American Institutions?

It is difficult to maintain the argument that the largely European immigration to the United States that occurred prior to the 1920s weakened American civic and cultural institutions. The children and grandchildren of Southern and Eastern European immigrants have blended into society, sometimes retaining vestiges of their ancestral cultural identity but showing no tangible signs of forming an underclass of disaffected Americans. The acceptance of cultural pluralism in American society permits individuals to celebrate their identity as, for example, Italian-Americans or Polish-Americans. In the United States, cultural identity is not bound up with nationality.

There is a strong contrast to this pattern visible in many European nations at present. From North Africans in France to Turks in Germany to Middle Eastern immigrants in Scandinavia, experiences in nations where ethnicity has long been tied to nationality have

differed markedly. Figure 6 shows the result of an exercise using national Census data from nine nations to compute assimilation indices. The indices consider a common set of factors observed in all datasets, encompassing civic, cultural, and economic factors. Only two nations in the set post assimilation values that exceed those in the United States. One is Canada, a nation that like the United States has long disassociated ethnicity from national identity. The second is Portugal, a special case as many individuals coded as foreign-born individuals residing in that nation are ethnic Portuguese born in colonies such as Angola and Mozambique who returned to their native land when those colonies attained independence.

The greater assimilation of North American immigrants, relative to those in Europe, can be thought of as representing the existence of a unique cultural institution—immigration itself. In addition, variation in national policies undoubtedly plays a role. In the United States, for example, native-born children of immigrants—even undocumented ones—are entitled to citizenship. This is not the case in many European nations. The wait for citizenship, long as it is in the United States, can be far longer in Europe. Canada’s standard three-year waiting period might help explain why its immigrants top the assimilation scale. And while economic assimilation is best thought of as a distinct dimension from the cultural and civic factors analyzed here, the greater rigidities brought about by European labor market regulations in many cases lock immigrants out of the labor market. In the United States, unemployment is significantly less common among immigrants than natives; in European countries the reverse is often true.

The notion that immigrants constitute a threat to cultural or civic institutions in Europe, but not the United States, is born out with several additional observations. As noted above, any European nations have witnessed ethnically based rioting, either by immigrants motivated by

their second-class status or by natives engaging in anti-immigrant demonstrations. Voters in European countries have reacted to immigrants' presence by passing referenda—such as Switzerland's notorious ban on minarets—that has never been seriously discussed in the United States.

As I argued in *From Immigrants to Americans*, there are two basic sources of motivation for migrants who choose to come to the United States. Some migrants leave their homeland to escape persecution or to pursue greater political freedom. This narrative of American history dates back to the pilgrims and the Mayflower and extends fully to the present, with significant populations of Cuban and Vietnamese immigrants who fled rather than be subjected to communist regimes. Native reactions to these politically or religiously motivated migrants have typically been placid. These migrants pose little threat to American institutions because, at root, they chose this nation because they value its institutions—most obviously its commitment to political and religious freedom.

Economically motivated migrants, whose primary motivation is at least perceived as a desire to earn more money than they could at home, have long inspired greater worries in the native population. In recent times, Mexican and Central American immigrants fit the mold, but the Irish immigrants escaping famine in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and Eastern and Southern European immigrants of the early 20<sup>th</sup> sparked a comparable if not more virulent backlash. Then as now, these immigrants raised concerns that their allegiance to American values and institutions was inherently weak, and that as permanent residents of society they might disrespect or actively work to undermine them.

With each prior worrisome immigration wave, concerns about lack of fealty to American institutions were coupled with a fear that the wave of migration would have no end.

Economically motivated migrants have typically come from nations undergoing what is known as the demographic transition. In nations with a primitive public health infrastructure, mortality rates from infectious disease tend to be high, and families generally factor this high mortality risk into fertility decisions. As sanitation and health care infrastructure improve, mortality declines. When parents fail to anticipate or recognize these mortality decreases, maintaining high fertility rates, the result is a population explosion. The explosion usually corrects itself in time, as fertility rates drop.

The association of emigration with the demographic transition explains why every wave of European migration to the United States—from Ireland and Germany in the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Scandinavia in the late 19<sup>th</sup>, and so forth—came to an organic end. Had immigration restrictions not been imposed in the 1920s, migration from Southern and Eastern Europe would have organically declined as well. Perhaps for this reason, the perceived threats posed to American institutions by economically-motivated immigrants have consistently failed to materialize.

As noted above, the demographic transition in Mexico is now complete, as fertility rates have fallen dramatically over the past generation. In fact, the transition is now complete in virtually all parts of the world, with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa. African migration to the United States has increased in recent decades, however the most common destination for African migrants is continental Europe rather than North America, for the simple reason that it is less costly to travel there.

Given these demographic trends, it would appear safe to conclude that the threat to American cultural and civic institutions posed by recent migrants to the United States, undocumented though many of them may be, is minimal. Like all waves of immigrants before

them, these newcomers are dwindling in number and in the long run they will all succumb. Their children, citizens when born here, will be educated in American schools and thereby socialized to understand and value American history, government, and culture, just as the children of European immigrants were in previous centuries.

## 8 Assimilation and Immigration Reform

At this juncture of American history, Congressional leaders are contemplating a series of immigration reform measures that might include improvements in border security, alterations to the number and type of visas issued each year, and most controversially a program of regularizing the immigration status of those who entered the country illegally. In mid-2013, the Senate passed a comprehensive immigration reform bill. Legislative efforts stalled in the House, where a Republican leadership sympathetic in many ways to the cause of immigration reform encountered opposition from more conservative members of the party.

The discussion above carries implications for each of the three major topics of debate in immigration reform. On the topic of border security, a review of demographic trends in Latin America suggest that the need for stricter enforcement will continue to dissipate as stronger economic conditions—and slower population growth—in Mexico and Central America reduce the incentive to emigrate. It is unclear whether improvements in border security can be reliably quantified—we can count the number of individuals apprehended, but by definition it is much more difficult to know how many cross the border undetected. In theory, stronger border security could result in stronger immigrant assimilation, as illegal immigrants tend to have fewer pre-existing economic or social ties. But in a world where illegal immigration dwindles for

completely unrelated reasons, it is unclear whether border security truly stands to make a difference.

The question of altering the magnitude and composition of legal immigration flows carries very strong implications for assimilation and the support of American institutions. On the one hand, some Representatives have voiced support for expanded guest worker programs. By design, guest worker programs treat immigrants purely as workers, rather than potential civic or cultural contributors to American society. Assimilation is not expected of guest workers, who presumably will return to their native countries as the need for their temporary labor recedes. Guest worker programs would have key roles in the American economy filled by a class of residents without a political voice, and consequently with no stake in the preservation of American institutions.

At the other end of the spectrum, some voices in the immigration debate have called for an expansion in the number of visas and legal permanent residency slots, particularly for highly skilled workers. Skilled immigrants, most of whom originate in developed or rapidly developing countries, pose something of a conundrum in terms of assimilation. On the one hand, more educated immigrants tend to blend into American culture more easily. They typically arrive fluent in English, and possess a familiarity with cultural norms that in many cases was built through years of study at American universities. On the other, highly skilled immigrants often display lower degrees of civic assimilation. Immigrants from Canada and Europe tend to naturalize at low rates. The United States expects naturalized citizens to renounce their loyalty to other nations. For refugees escaping a despotic regime, this is typically not an issue. Among immigrants who would enjoy the benefits of a generous social welfare system upon return to their home country, incentives are more mixed. Skilled immigration may well be good for the

American economy, but the implications for civic institutions and discourse are less clear. From the perspective of civic assimilation, visas and green cards based on family ties—often derided by those who hope to maximize the economic benefits of migration—might yield the strongest dividends.

Amnesty, and in particular offering undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship, could have a clear direct impact on assimilation. As noted above, the amnesty offered by IRCA appears to have had exactly such an effect. By removing uncertainty regarding immigrants' future in the United States, amnesty would introduce incentives to undertake various forms of investment in American institutions, from learning English to voting and serving in the military.

The experience of IRCA, which most decidedly did not result in an end to illegal immigration in the United States, points out one possible concern with a renewed offer of amnesty. It could, in theory, embolden a new generation of undocumented immigrants, who would again foment concern regarding threats to American civic and cultural institutions. The most potent response, cognizant of economic and demographic trends in sending nations, would be “what new generation of undocumented immigrants?” Evidence suggests that the era of undocumented migration to the United States may in fact be coming to a close, whether we change our laws or not.

## 9 Conclusion

Fears that immigration threatens American cultural and civic institutions are not new; these fears predate the establishment of the nation itself. History has proven these institutions—the predominance of the English language, support of basic capitalist economic principles, and the American system of Federal government—quite resilient. The ability of American institutions to

withstand profound shifts in the nation's ethnic composition has contributed to the severing of ethnicity from national identity. The ability of American society to culturally and civically assimilate new ethnic groups is itself a form of institution.

While there are reasons to think of contemporary migration from Spanish-speaking nations as distinct from earlier waves of immigration, evidence does not support the notion that this wave of migration poses a true threat to the institutions that withstood those earlier waves. Basic indicators of assimilation, from naturalization to English ability, are if anything stronger now than they were a century ago. Moreover, just as earlier waves of migration came to an end once the sending countries had completed the demographic transition, there is evidence that the rate of migration from Mexico has exhibited what will be a permanent decline.

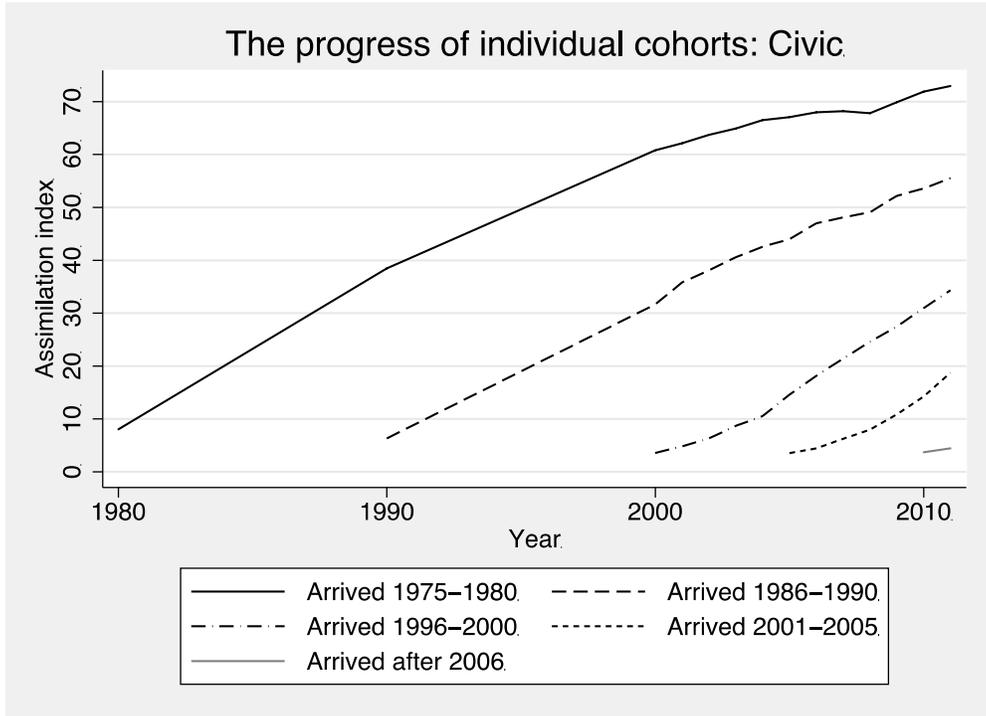
The worldview most conducive to supporting restrictions on immigration is one where the host country possesses finite wealth, and newcomers threaten to not only demand a share of that wealth but arrive in numbers sufficient to change the rules by which it is distributed. This worldview is difficult to reconcile with a reality where human capital has supplanted natural resources and physical capital as the most important determinant of wealth. It is even more difficult to reconcile with a reality where the civic institutions that incentivize the investments that produce capital are the very things that motivate immigrants to arrive in the first place.

## References

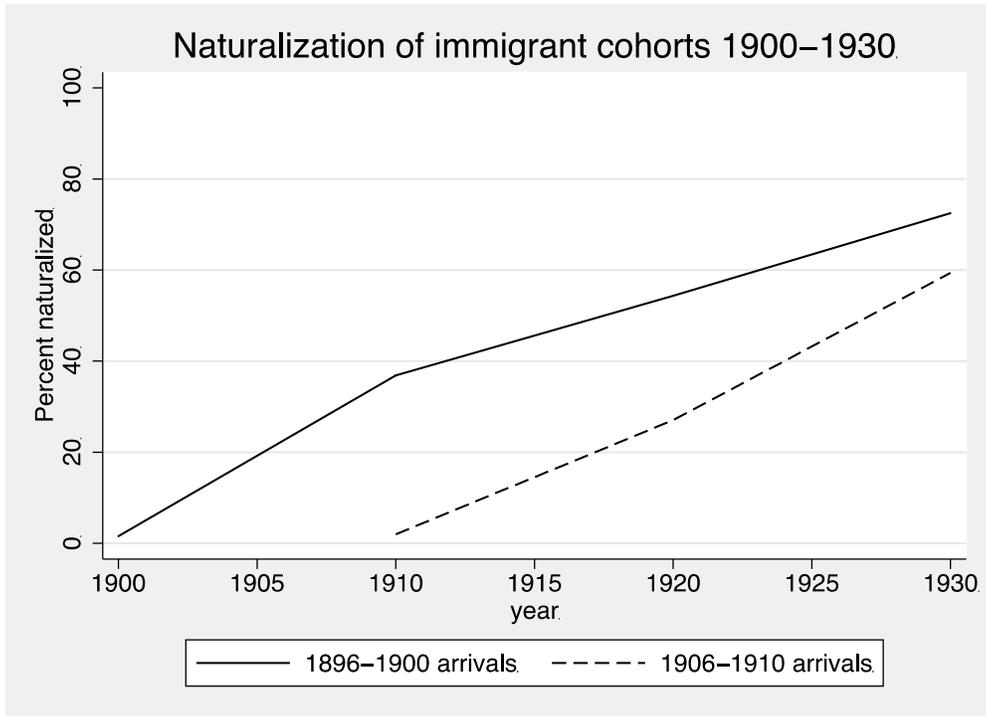
- Alba, Richard and Victor Nee. 2005. *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. Harvard University Press.
- Chiswick, Barry. 2008. "The Economics of Language: An Introduction and Overview." IZA Discussion Paper #3568.
- Chiswick, Barry and Paul Miller. 1996. "Ethnic Networks and Language Proficiency among Immigrants." *Journal of Population Economics* 9: 19-35.
- Chiswick, Barry and Paul Miller. 2001. "A Model of Destination-Language Acquisition: Application to Male Immigrants in Canada." *Demography* 38: 391-409.
- Chiswick, Barry and Paul Miller. 2008. "Citizenship in the United States: The Roles of Immigrant Characteristics and Country of Origin." IZA Discussion Paper #3596.
- Drachler, Julius. 1920. *Democracy and Assimilation: The Blending of Immigrant Heritages in America*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Espinosa, Kristin E. and Douglas S. Massey. 1997. "Determinants of English Proficiency among Mexican Migrants to the United States." *International Migration Review* 31: 28-50.
- Gans, Herbert. 1962. *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans*. The Free Press.
- Jasso, Guillermina and Mark Rosenzweig. 1986. "Family Reunification and the Immigration Multiplier: U.S. Immigration Law, Origin-Country Conditions, and the Reproduction of Immigrants." *Demography* 23 (3): 291-311.
- Kasinitz, Philip, Mollenkopf, John H., Waters, Mary C. and Jennifer Holdaway. 2008. *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age*. Harvard University Press.

- Lazear, Edward. 1999. "Culture and Language." *Journal of Political Economy* 107 (6) S95-S126.
- Margolis, Maxine L. 2009. *An Invisible Minority: Brazilians in New York City*. University Press of Florida.
- Pagnini, Deanna and S. Philip Morgan. 1990. "Intermarriage and Social Distance among U.S. Immigrants at the Turn of the Century." *American Journal of Sociology* 96 (2): 405-32.
- Perlmann, Joel. 2005. *Italians Then, Mexicans Now: Immigrant Origins and Second-Generation Progress, 1890 to 2000*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Qian, Zhenchao and Daniel Lichter. 2001. "Measuring Marital Assimilation: Intermarriage among Natives and Immigrants." *Social Science Research* 30: 289-312.
- Vigdor, Jacob L. 2009. *From Immigrants to Americans: The Rise and Fall of Fitting In*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Zhou, Min. 1997. "Segmented Assimilation: Issues, Controversies, and Recent Research on the New Second Generation." *International Migration Review* 31 (4): 975-1008.

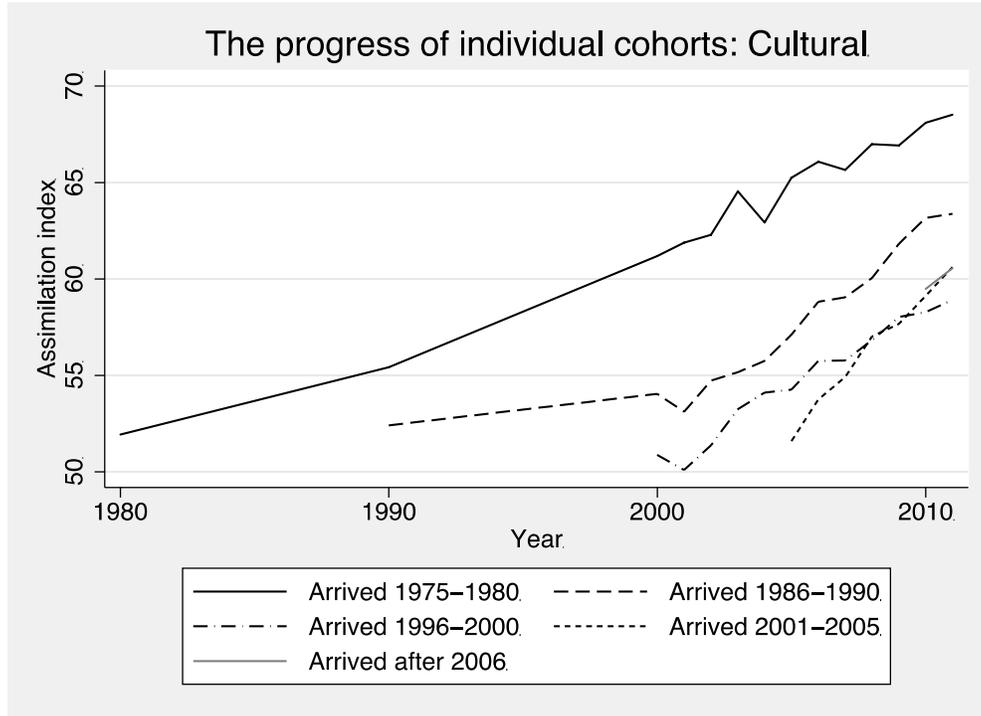
**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**

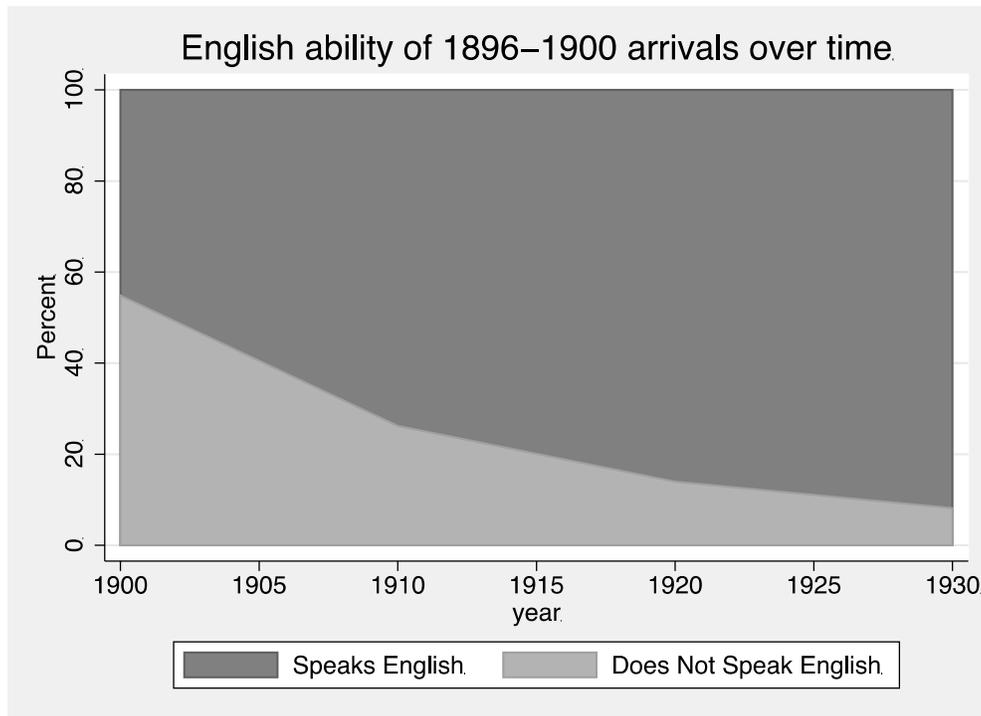


Figure 5

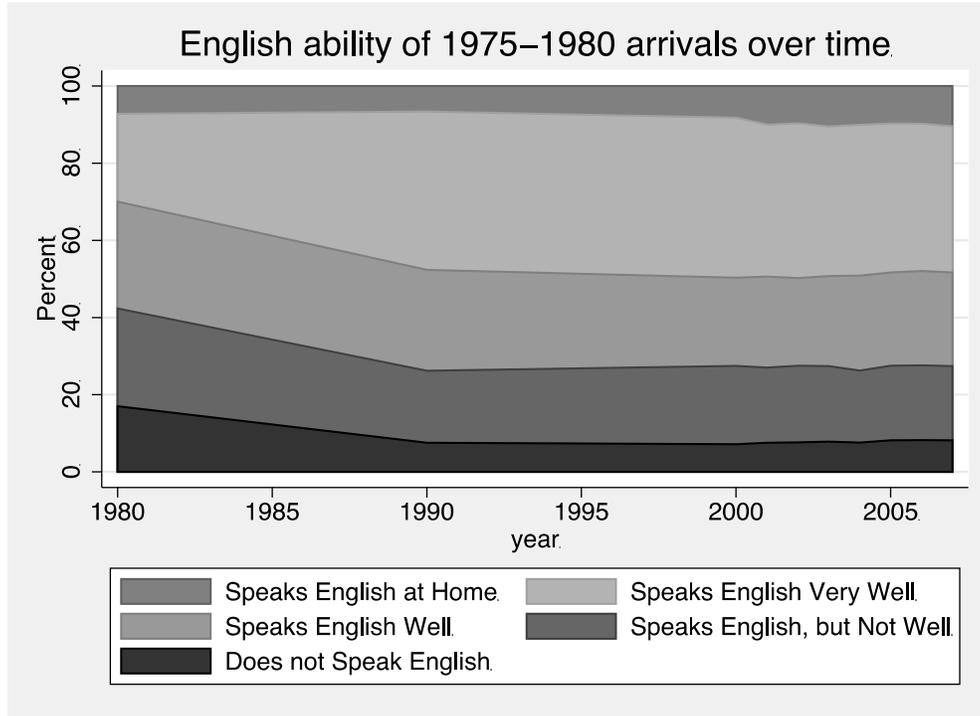


Figure 6

