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IMPROVING US AND EU IMMIGRATION SYSTEMS

# **Immigrants in the United States: How Well Are They Integrating into Society?**

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By Tomás R. Jiménez

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## Executive Summary

The United States is in the midst of its fourth wave of mass immigration, this one characterized by newcomers from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean. Even though immigration is a prominent part of the country's DNA, fears about immigrants' ability to integrate have accompanied each new immigration influx, and the current one has been no exception.

Integration is not necessarily a smooth process. It entails uncomfortable adjustments among immigrants, their descendants, and the host society in which they settle. However, just as previous waves of immigrants eventually found their way into the mainstream of American life (even those who were initially considered "unassimilable"), the recent inflow of immigrants is integrating reasonably well according to five main indicators: language proficiency, socioeconomic attainment, political participation, residential locale, and social interaction with host communities. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that US immigrants are learning the English language faster now than in the last wave of mass immigration at the beginning of the 20th century.

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*Immigrant integration in the United States is proceeding steadily, but unevenly. Remarkably, the process has unfolded almost entirely without the help of policy intervention.*

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When they first arrive, immigrants face some natural barriers to full social, economic, and political participation. The gap between them and the rest of society narrows over time, however, as immigrants and their children learn English, interact with members of host communities, and become involved in the political process. For the most part, full integration into the US society and economy takes more than one generation. The children of immigrants, regardless of their ethnoracial group, tend to outperform their parents in educational attainment, occupational status, wealth, and home ownership, narrowing the gap with US-born non-Hispanic whites. Residential segregation also decreases substantially between the first and second generations, and rates of intermarriage between ethnic and racial groups increase. Language proficiency — a virtual requirement for full participation in US society — improves dramatically, and by the third and higher generations virtually all those with immigrant backgrounds speak good English. Naturalization rates have risen since the early 1990s, although substantial numbers of permanent residents eligible to naturalize have not done so.

Progress among the United States' different immigrant groups is highly uneven, however. Latinos are not faring as well as those with Asian, black, and non-Hispanic white immigrant backgrounds. Residential segregation in the first generation is higher among Latinos than among Asians, for example, and this gap persists into the second generation. Latinos experience very rapid *improvement* according to several measures of social and economic integration across generations, but their progress has often not been sufficient to enable even third- and higher-generation Latinos to catch up their non-Hispanic white counterparts. Latino citizens also have relatively low rates of voter registration and voting.

In other words, immigrant integration in the United States is proceeding steadily, but unevenly. Remarkably, the process has unfolded almost entirely without the help of policy intervention. With the exception of refugees, immigrants receive relatively little federal funding for integration programs. This laissez faire approach to immigrant integration has in the past relied primarily on a strong labor market and high-quality public education to provide opportunities for integration. If this continues to be the preferred approach, the state of public education in areas of considerable immigrant settlement and the weakened US economy will be significant areas of concern in coming years. Equally, the size of the United States' unauthorized population is likely to remain a powerful barrier to social cohesion and full social, economic, and political integration until steps are taken to address it.





## I. Introduction

From the time that the United States became a country more than two centuries ago, immigrants from a variety of distant lands have continued to come to its shores to start their lives anew seeking political refuge, economic opportunity, and religious freedom. The fact that so many people in the United States trace their ancestry to immigrants has shaped the country's national self-understanding. American intellectuals, political figures, and rank-and-file citizens regularly refer to the United States as "a nation of immigrants." Arguably the most recognizable national symbol, the Statue of Liberty, is directly connected to immigration in the national consciousness.

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*Fears about the inability of immigrants to integrate have been present in the United States for as long as there have been immigrants.*

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Between 1880 and 1920, a period which saw the third great wave of immigration to the United States, more than 23 million immigrants became US permanent residents, mostly from European countries.<sup>1</sup> Today, the United States is in the midst of another wave of mass immigration, this time characterized by newcomers from Latin America (Mexico in particular), Asia, and the Caribbean. Still, the fact that immigration is a prominent part of the country's DNA is not reason alone to expect that the most recent waves of immigrants are experiencing integration, a process wherein immigrants and the communities in which they settle mutually adapt to one another. Americans consistently report that they would like less immigration, and polls show that a large proportion believes that today's immigrants are not as willing to integrate as immigrants of the past.<sup>2</sup>

Fears about the inability of immigrants to integrate have been present in the United States for as long as there have been immigrants. A century ago, there were widely held concerns that the religious, political, and racial attributes of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe would prevent them from ever becoming part of an American mainstream.<sup>3</sup> The integration of these immigrants and their descendants over time ultimately allayed these fears.<sup>4</sup>

As in earlier eras, today's immigrants show a remarkable ability to integrate and US society has, by and large, adjusted to newcomers. For the most part, integration today is happening organically in host communities despite a lack of comprehensive government policies that would aid immigrants' advancement. This process has not been universal, smooth, or conflict-free. There still are significant challenges to successful integration. And while the integration of today's immigrants may differ in form and style from the integration of previous waves of immigrants, the end result is still strikingly similar to the successful integration observed among past immigrant inflows.

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1 Department of Homeland Security (DHS), *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2009 data tables* (Washington, DC: DHS, 2010), [www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/LPR09.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/LPR09.shtm).

2 Pew Research Center for the People and The Press, *America's Immigration Quandary* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2006), <http://people-press.org/report/274/americas-immigration-quandary>.

3 John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955).

4 Richard Alba, *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1985); Stanley Lieberson, *A Piece of the Pie: Blacks and White Immigrants since 1880* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980).



## II. Immigrants in the United States

Each of the four major waves of immigration to the United States has had very different origins. From the colonial period to roughly 1880, in what was the first major period of US immigration, most immigrants came from northern Europe, especially England, Germany, and Ireland. Africans also came to US shores by force through the slave trade. Immigrants from China began migrating toward the end of this period. During the second period of mass immigration, which lasted from roughly 1880 to 1920, a massive wave of immigrants came to the United States, primarily from southern and eastern European countries, such as Italy, Poland, Russia, and Hungary, but also from Mexico and Japan. During no other period has the foreign-born population made up a larger share of the US population — just under 15 percent in 1890 — than during this third wave of immigration. World War I; restrictive immigration laws in 1917, 1921, and 1924 targeting Asians as well as southern and eastern European immigrants; the Great Depression; and World War II combined to bring this immigration boom to an end, ushering in a long period of low immigration that would last for decades. That immigration hiatus ended in the 1960s. With the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, the US Congress abolished national-origin quotas and distributed visas more equitably across the world. In addition to the new immigration laws, global economic integration, and subsequent US military involvement in Southeast Asia spurred a new wave of immigration that extends to the present day.

Today's immigrants arrive primarily from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean, a noticeable shift from the predominantly European origins of previous immigrants. Whereas eight of the top ten source countries of immigration were European in 1960, none of the top ten source countries are European in the contemporary period; all are Latin American or Asian.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, today's immigrants are incredibly diverse with respect to their socioeconomic background. They include some of the most educated and wealthiest, as well as the least educated and poorest new Americans. Immigrants from Asia and Europe tend to be more represented in the former category, while immigrants from Latin America tend to cluster in the latter category.

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Another distinguishing feature of the contemporary immigrant population is its geographic distribution. Until very recently, immigrants generally had settled in the traditional gateway states of California, New York, Texas, Florida, and Illinois. Beginning in the 1980s, changes in immigration and border policy and more favorable economic conditions in the Midwest and South led immigrants to settle in larger numbers in states that previously experienced little or no immigration.<sup>6</sup> Midwestern and southern states have seen an especially large influx of immigrants. In 1990, 66 percent of immigrants lived in the traditional gateway states and 34 percent resided in all other states. By 2005, the proportion residing in traditional immigration states shrank to 60 percent, while 40 percent were living in nontraditional immigration states.

A final distinguishing characteristic of today's immigrants is the large proportion that is unauthorized.

5 MPI Data Hub, "Ten Source Countries with the Largest Populations in the United States as Percentages of the Total Foreign Born Population: 1960," [www.migrationinformation.org/DataHub/charts/10.60.shtml](http://www.migrationinformation.org/DataHub/charts/10.60.shtml); and MPI Data Hub, "Ten Source Countries with the Largest Populations in the United States as Percentages of the Total Foreign-Born Population: 2008," [www.migrationinformation.org/DataHub/charts/10.2008.shtml](http://www.migrationinformation.org/DataHub/charts/10.2008.shtml).

6 Ivan Light, "How Los Angeles Deflected Mexican Immigrants to the American Heartland," *Migration Information Source*, October 2007, [www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=645](http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=645).



Of the roughly 38 million immigrants in the United States, nearly one-third are in the country without legal authorization.<sup>7</sup> Though the number of unauthorized immigrants dipped slightly with the onset of the Great Recession and increased immigration enforcement in recent years, the size of the unauthorized population is still near an historical peak.

### III. Dimensions of Integration

Integration is a process wherein immigrant newcomers and the communities in which they settle — both the individuals and institutions — mutually adapt to one another. Integration is also an endpoint reached when individuals only minimally perceive themselves and others in ethnoracial and national terms, when these attributes have, at most, a negligible negative impact on opportunities and life chances.<sup>8</sup>

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*From today's vantage point, it is easy to  
forget that integration for previous waves of  
immigrants took a long time.*

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In effect, integration is a culmination of everyday interactions between and among immigrant newcomers and host communities. These interactions produce measurable economic, political, and social patterns that indicate the degree to which integration is taking place. The state of integration takes into consideration how immigrant newcomers and their host communities are faring in their socioeconomic attainment, political involvement, and social interactions. Because integration has multiple dimensions, each has bearing on the other. For example, English language acquisition, an important aspect of integration in its own right, shapes socioeconomic status. Likewise, socioeconomic status is an important determinant of intermarriage.

From today's vantage point, it is easy to forget that integration for previous waves of immigrants took a long time. Immigrants who arrived in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries did not enter the country and quickly find their way into the mainstream of American life. Integration took generations to play out fully. For example, Italian immigrants were once regarded by many as an “unassimilable” group. Yet three generations after their arrival, their social, political, and economic integration was undeniable.<sup>9</sup> So, too, it appears is the case with the contemporary wave of immigrants. Thus, integration patterns can only be observed by examining changes over time, measured in years (for immigrants) and generations (for immigrant groups).

It is also important to keep in mind that integration is a function of the characteristics of both immigrants and their host communities. Socioeconomic status is determined by the sort of skills and financial resources that immigrants bring with them *and* the economic opportunities that exist in the host country, in this case the United States. Political participation, broadly defined, is shaped by the experiences that immigrants bring with them from their countries of origin *and* the host society's laws and institutions that determine formal and informal political belonging. And social interactions between immigrant newcomers and the host society hinge upon the ethnoracial and socioeconomic characteristics of immigrants and the rigidity of the host society's ethnoracial and class structure. Integration entails mutual change; as the characteristics of immigrants and their descendants change, so do the

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7 Michael Hofer, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan C. Baker, *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2009* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2010), [www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois\\_ill\\_pe\\_2009.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2009.pdf).

8 Richard Alba and Victor Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

9 Alba, *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity*.





characteristics of host society that determine integration.<sup>10</sup>

Though integration involves both immigrants and the host communities, the focus here is on how the contemporary wave of immigrants and their US-born descendants are faring along five key dimensions of integration: language, socioeconomic attainment, citizenship and political participation, residential locale, and social life.

## A. Language

English proficiency is a virtual requirement for full participation in US society. Americans also view English language use as a key component of national identity. A recent nationally representative survey showed that 94 percent of US residents believe that “being able to speak English” should be somewhat or very important in determining if someone is a true American.<sup>11</sup> It is perhaps no surprise, then, that English language use continues to be a flashpoint for debates about immigrant integration and cohesion. By all accounts, English fluency sets in over time.

Among first-generation immigrants, rates of English language fluency are uneven. Immigrants from Latin America have the highest proportion of Limited English Proficient (LEP) individuals (64.7 percent), followed by immigrants from Asia (46.6 percent), and Europe (29.8 percent).<sup>12</sup> Given that immigrants from Spanish-dominant countries make up the majority of the immigrant population, and immigrants from these countries thus have more opportunity to speak Spanish, Latin Americans have higher LEP rates. It is partly because of this fact that the descendants of Latin American immigrants maintain Spanish-language use alongside English language use more than immigrants from other regions of the world.<sup>13</sup>

Still, the shift to English among today’s immigrants and their descendants is unquestionably taking place. As Figure 1 shows, the more time that immigrants have spent in the United States, the more likely they are to speak English (in earlier cohorts of immigrants, a higher proportion speak only English or speak very well, while a higher proportion of later cohorts have weaker language ability).

In fact, immigrants today are learning English faster than the large waves of immigrants who came to the United States during the turn of the last century. Fewer than half of all immigrants who arrived in the United States between 1900 and 1920 spoke English within their first five years after emigrating while more than three-quarters who arrived between 1980 and 2000 spoke English within the first five years.<sup>14</sup> During their first 20 years in the United States, the more recent arrivals, including those from Spanish-dominant countries, also learned English faster than immigrants from the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup>

The shift from a non-English mother tongue to English is particularly striking when looking at language shift across generations. Figure 2 displays patterns of English-language ability across generations for selected ethnoracial groups. The proportion who speak only English or who speak English very well jumps to more than 80 percent by the second generation for all groups. By the third and higher<sup>16</sup> generations, close to everyone, regardless of ethnoracial group, reports speaking only English or English very well.

10 Alba and Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream*.

11 Deborah Schildkraut, “Defining American Identity in the Twenty-First Century: How Much ‘There’ is There?” *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 3 (2008): 597-615.

12 Calculated from the American Community Survey, three-year estimates (2006-2008); population includes individuals 5 years and older. Limited English Proficient (LEP) individuals report speaking English “well,” “not well,” or “not at all.”

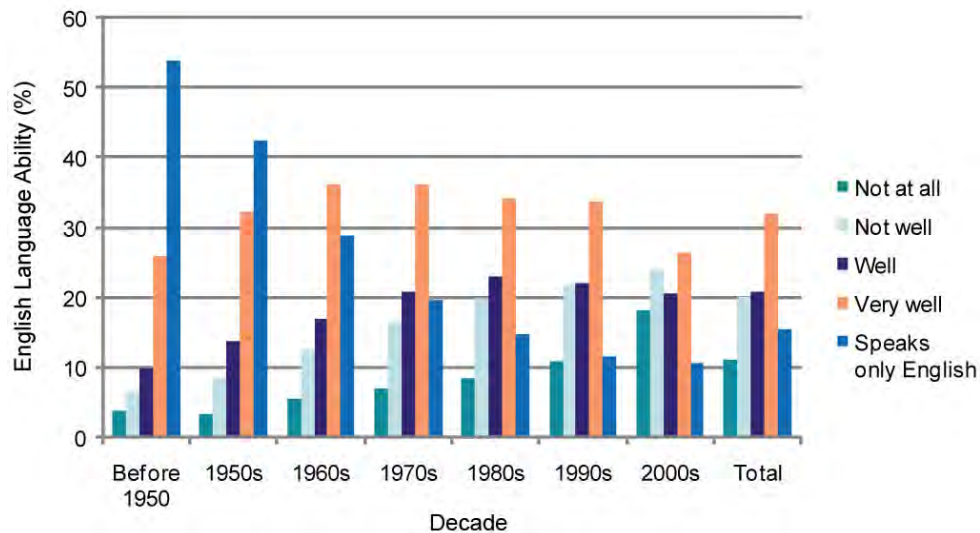
13 Richard Alba, “Bilingualism Persists, But English Still Dominates,” *Migration Information Source*, February 2005, [www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=282](http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=282).

14 Claude S. Fischer and Michael Hout, *Century of Difference: How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006): 43.

15 Ibid.

16 “Third-plus generation” included individuals who are US-born to US-born parents.

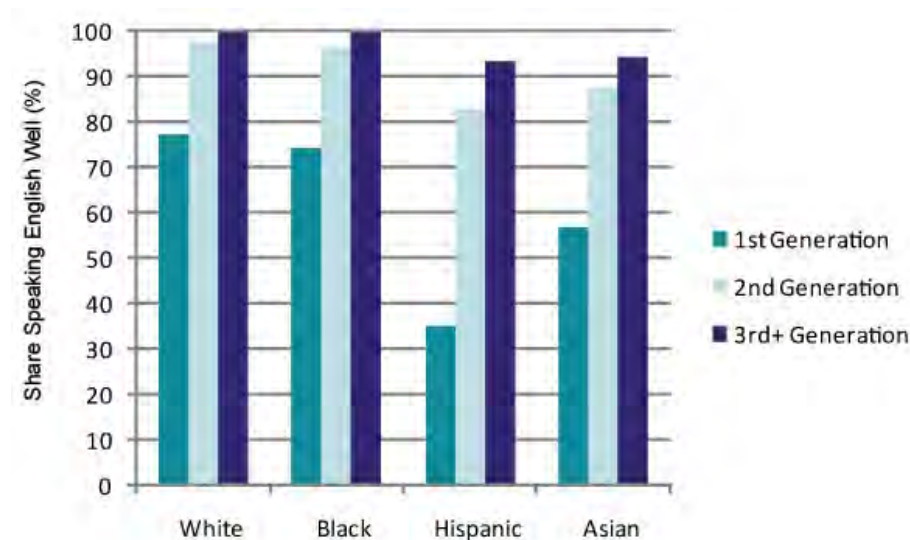
**Figure 1. Immigrants' English Language Ability by Decade of Arrival**



Source: Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 2006-08.

Note: "Speaks only English" category is comprised of individuals who reported speaking no other language at home.

**Figure 2. Proportion of Individuals Age 5 and Over Who Speak Only English or English Very Well, by Ethnoracial Group and Generation, 2004**



Source: Calculated from the Census Bureau March 2004 Current Population Survey (CPS).

Notes: "Speaks only English" category is comprised of individuals who reported speaking no other language at home.



These patterns hold even among Mexicans, currently the largest US immigrant group and the one that often stands out in debates about immigrant integration. For example, among people of Mexican ancestry in Los Angeles who are 25 years of age and older, roughly 25 percent of the second generation prefers to speak Spanish at home, while only 4 percent of the third generation and 3 percent of the fourth generation express the same preference.<sup>17</sup>

## B. Socioeconomic Integration

No other measure of integration is more important than socioeconomic attainment. The socioeconomic standing of immigrants and their descendants plays a central role in determining how they fare along other dimensions of integration, such as residential locale and intermarriage. The expectation for immigrant integration is that, with time in the United States, immigrants improve their socioeconomic standing. This improvement ought to be especially pronounced when examining patterns across generations if integration is taking place.

The question of socioeconomic progress of immigrants and their descendants is relative. We can only determine whether there is advancement among immigrants and their descendants by comparing to that of a benchmark, or “societal standard,” population. Social scientists normally use native-born, non-Hispanic whites as the societal standard since this is the population that generally experiences minimal or no negative socioeconomic consequences as a result of their ethnoracial identity and national origins. The societal standard is not static, however. Many of the social, political, and economic conditions that shape the intergenerational progress of immigrant groups also affect how well native-born, non-Hispanic whites fare over time. Tracking immigrant progress thus entails examining the achievement of second-generation children of immigrants relative to their parents, and relative to the pace of change between parents and children in the societal standard.

Socioeconomic progress has several related measures, including educational attainment, income, occupational status, and homeownership. Demographers Julie Park and Dowell Myers developed a way to compare immigrant-group socioeconomic progress with the societal standard along several measures.<sup>18</sup> Figure 3, created by Park and Myers, shows how second-generation individuals from four ethnoracial groups, age 25-44 in 2005, fared compared to first-generation immigrants in the same age range in 1980 (see blue line).

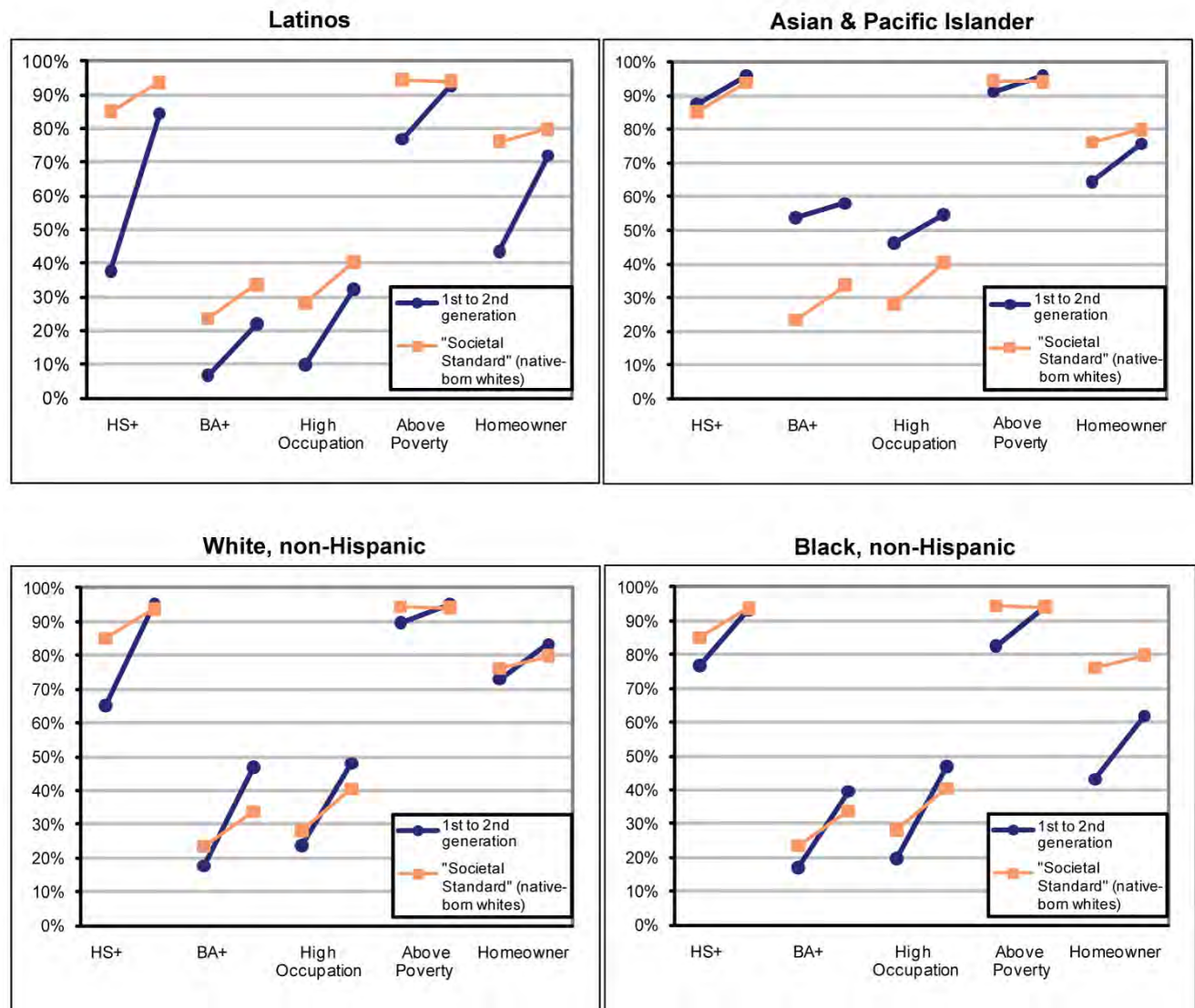
This data arrangement shows how second-generation youth advance relative to their parents, when they reach the same age in 2005 as their parents were in 1980.<sup>19</sup> The results demonstrate that the second generation from all ethnoracial groups does better than the immigrant first generation on all measures of socioeconomic progress. The progress that second-generation Latino and black individuals display compared to their parents is particular striking. For example, while less than 40 percent of Latino immigrants, ages 25-44, held a high school degree in 1980, roughly 85 percent of second-generation Latinos in that same age group had graduated from high school in 2005. Only 20 percent of non-Hispanic black immigrants, ages 25-44, were in a high-status occupation in 1980, but nearly half of the second generation of that same age was in a high-status occupation in 2005. And while Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants generally have high socioeconomic status to begin with, the second generation improves upon this high status along all measures.

17 Rubén G. Rumbaut, Douglas S. Massey, and Frank D. Bean, “Linguistic Life Expectancies: Immigrant Language Retention in Southern California,” *Population and Development Review* 32, no. 3 (2006): 447-60.

18 Julie Park and Dowell Myers, “Intergenerational Mobility in the Post-1965 Immigration Era: Estimates by an Immigrant Generation Cohort Method,” *Demography* 47, no. 2 (2010): 369-92.

19 Park and Myers do not have data linking parents to their offspring, and thus use synthetic cohorts to capture the individuals likely to be the children of the previous cohort. See Park and Myers, “Intergenerational Mobility in the Post-1965 Immigration Era” for a fuller explanation.

**Figure 3. Intergenerational Mobility Compared to Native-Born, Non-Hispanic Whites, 1980-2005**



*Notes:* Fitted values derived from statistically significant coefficients. Nonsignificant coefficients were set to zero. Educational and occupational attainment models controlled for age. Above poverty status controlled for age, sex, and marital status. Homeownership status controlled for age, sex, marital status, and area homeownership. HS+ refers to more than a high school education; BA+ means more than a bachelor's degree.

*Source:* Park and Myers, "Intergenerational Mobility in the Post-1965 Immigration Era."





While it is one thing for the second generation to improve upon their parents' socioeconomic position, it is quite another for the second generation to catch up with — and in some instances surpass — the societal standard. When comparing immigrant progress to that of native-born, non-Hispanic whites, the picture is more mixed. Along virtually every measure, the second generation shows more dramatic improvement over and above their parents than does the societal standard. Among Latinos, however, the second generation does not reach parity with US-born non-Hispanic whites in spite of dramatic improvement over the first generation. Latinos close the educational and occupational gaps with their US-born non-Hispanic white counterparts, but US-born non-Hispanic whites have also made progress within generations, making it more difficult to catch up. Latinos have reached parity with the societal standard in the proportion of those living above the federal poverty level and have nearly reached parity in homeownership rates.

Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants were more advantaged than the societal standard on every measure in 1980, except for the percent above poverty and homeownership. The second generation of Asian and Pacific Islanders maintains this advantage in 2005, far outpacing the society standard in nearly all measures of socioeconomic attainment, except for homeownership. The same is true for white, non-Hispanic immigrant groups, who also outpace US-born whites in their rate of progress, overtaking them in the second generation. Black immigrants also show more rapid intergenerational mobility than the societal standard. With the exception of homeownership, the non-Hispanic black second generation either reached parity with or surpassed US-born whites in 2005, in spite of the relative disadvantaged position of the first generation 25 years earlier.

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Taken together, these findings suggest very rapid intergenerational socioeconomic mobility occurs within immigrant groups and that the second generation is, in many cases, exceeding the societal standard. Latinos are not faring as well, though there are signs of dramatic progress where poverty and homeownership are concerned. Since Latinos, especially Mexicans, have a long history in the United States, it is possible to measure intergenerational progress beyond the second generation. The Latino patterns observed in Figure 3 are applicable in later generations: While each generation of Mexican Americans born in the United States improves upon their parents' educational and income status, subsequent generations do not catch up with native-born, non-Hispanic whites, who are also experiencing improvement over time.<sup>20</sup> The lag in the fortunes of Mexican Americans is likely attributable to a combination of historical and present-day discrimination, the low socioeconomic status with which the immigrant generation arrived, and, as shown later, the effects of unauthorized status that marks the experience of many Mexican immigrants. Nonetheless, Mexican American socioeconomic progress across generations is best described as steady, if slow, progress.

### C. Residential Integration

Integration is also indicated by where people live in relation to one another. If, over time, immigrants and their descendants live in neighborhoods that are less defined by members of the same ethnoracial and national origin, then integration is generally considered to be taking place. At the same time,

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<sup>20</sup> James P. Smith, "Immigrants and the Labor Market," *Journal of Labor Economics* 24, no. 2 (2006): 203-33; Edward E. Telles and Vilma Ortiz, *Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008).

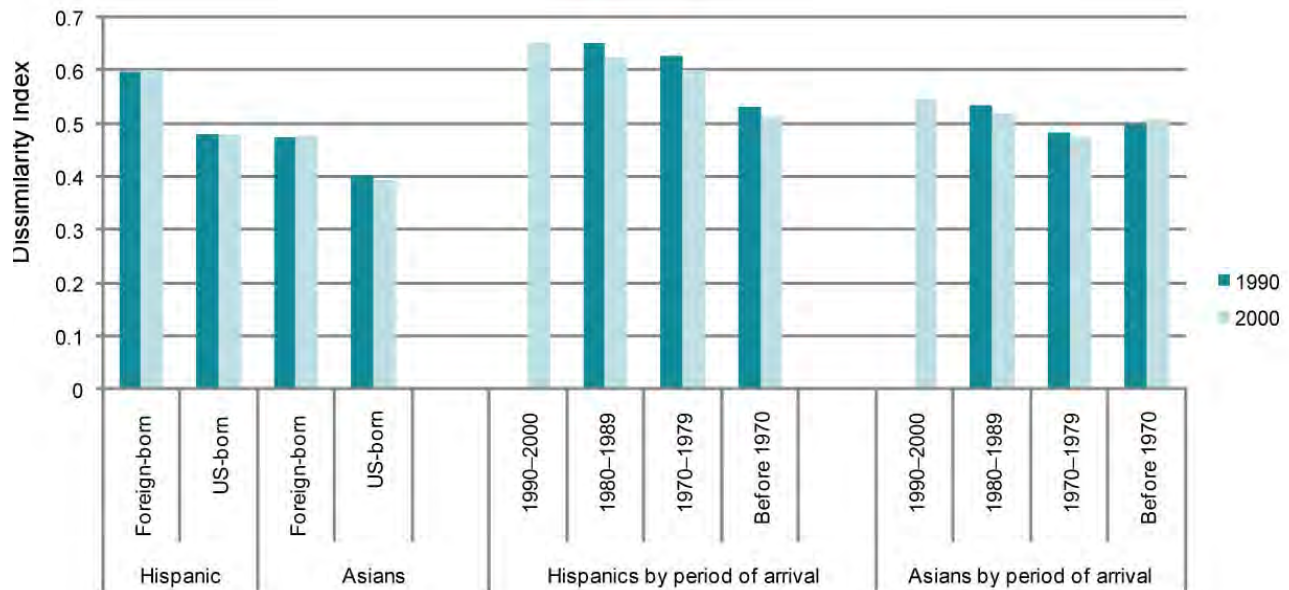


residential concentration has a voluntary component. It is common for immigrants to settle in places where there is a high concentration of conationals. Immigrants often are drawn to these places because they have some connection — a family member, friend, acquaintance — upon whom they can rely for help in finding a social and economic foothold. If high levels of ethnoracial residential concentration persist across generations, however, then it is likely the case that this concentration is more of a function of socioeconomic and social exclusion than individuals' choices.

The question of residential segregation among the contemporary wave of immigrants is more complex than among the large wave of European immigrants who came to the United States during the turn of the last century. Immigrants in the past usually concentrated in urban centers, and subsequent US-born generations transitioned into suburbs, which were expanding in the middle of the 20th century, the time period during which a large European-origin second generation came of age. In the contemporary period, however, many immigrants move directly to suburbs, skipping over central cities altogether.<sup>21</sup>

Do immigrants and their descendants, whether they live in central cities or suburbs, reside in more integrated neighborhoods over time? Figures 4 and 5 display a measure of residential segregation: dissimilarity index scores for Asians and Hispanics, respectively, from native-born, non-Hispanic whites in US metropolitan areas. The dissimilarity index shows how evenly people of different ethnoracial groups are distributed residually across neighborhoods within a metropolitan area. The index ranges between 0 and 1. Complete integration on the dissimilarity index is 0; complete segregation is indicated by a score of 1. Put another way, the dissimilarity index score is the percentage of people of a particular ethnoracial group that would have to change their residence in order for each neighborhood in the metropolitan area to have the same proportion of individuals from that group as the overall area.

**Figure 4. Asian Dissimilarity Index from Native-Born Non-Hispanic Whites by Nativity and Decade of Arrival, 1990 and 2000**



Source: John Iceland and Melissa Scopilliti, "Immigrant Residential Segregation in US Metropolitan Areas," *Demography* 45 (2008): 79-94.

Hispanic segregation from US-born whites is higher than among Asians, but their segregation has decreased more over time. For both Asians and Hispanics, the second generation is far less segregated

21 Richard D. Alba, John R. Logan, Brian J. Stults, Gilbert Marzan, and Wenquan Zhang, "Immigrant Groups in the Suburbs: A Reexamination of Suburbanization and Spatial Assimilation," *American Sociological Review* 64, no. 3 (1999): 446-60.



from US-born whites than the first generation, and overall levels of segregation changed little between 1990 and 2000. As both Asians and Hispanics spend more time in the United States, they generally become less segregated. Each immigration cohort experiences less segregation than the previous one, and segregation declined between 1990 and 2000 for virtually every cohort.

Today's immigrants, particularly those from Latin America, are dispersed throughout the United States, and large numbers now reside in the South and Midwest, regions that experienced very little immigration prior to the 1990s. Among immigrants who arrived to the United States between 1985 and 1990, just 10 percent of Mexicans, 8 percent of non-Mexican Latin Americans, and 20 percent of Asians settled in "new destination" states.<sup>22</sup> Among immigrants arriving just ten years later (between 1995 and 2000, 30 percent of Mexican immigrants, 16 percent of non-Mexicans Latin American immigrants, and 25 percent of Asian immigrants settled in new destination states.<sup>23</sup> Given the recent arrival of these populations in the new destinations, a picture of residential segregation is only beginning to take shape. Comparing residential segregation of Hispanics in new versus traditional destinations shows that residential integration in the former trails behind the latter: Hispanics in new destinations are much more segregated from whites (average dissimilarity score of 60) than in traditional immigrant destinations (average dissimilarity score of 45).<sup>24</sup> However, it is important to keep in mind that a second generation is just beginning to come of age in these new destinations. As they enter adulthood and start households of their own, these trends could begin to shift, and patterns of residential segregation may look more like patterns in traditional immigrant destinations in that the third- and later-generation descendants of immigrants become more residentially integrated.

#### D. Political Integration

Political integration has both formal and informal dimensions. Formal political integration consists of legal status and citizenship, as well as participation in the political process, which primarily includes voting and holding elected office. Informal participation includes membership of hometown associations and political activism.

##### I. Legal Status

Legal status — whether an immigrant is unauthorized, a visa holder, legal permanent resident, or citizen — is arguably the most important aspect of political integration, because it can subsequently determine other aspects of integration. Where formal political membership is concerned, the bulk of US immigrants are clustered in the extremes: they are either citizens or they are unauthorized immigrants. Among the 38 million foreign-born individuals in the United States in 2008, roughly 43 percent were naturalized citizens; 33 percent were lawful permanent residents (LPRs); 31 percent were unauthorized immigrants who either entered the United States without inspection or stayed longer than the time allowed for by their immigration visa.<sup>25</sup> Mexico is by far the largest source of immigration in each of the major immigration categories, making up roughly 16 percent of all foreign-born citizens, 27 percent of LPRs, and 55 percent of all unauthorized immigrants.<sup>26</sup>

22 New destination states are all states except for California, Texas, New York, Illinois, Florida, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Washington, Virginia, and Maryland.

23 Douglas S. Massey and Chiara Capoferro, "The Geographic Diversification of American Immigration," in *New Faces in New Places: The Changing Geography of American Immigration*, ed. Douglas S. Massey (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008): 25-50.

24 Daniel T. Lichter, Domenico Parisi, Michael C. Taquino, and Steven Michael Grice, "Residential Segregation in New Hispanic Destinations: Cities, suburbs, and Rural Communities Compared," *Social Science Research* 39, no. 2 (2010): 215-30.

25 Author's calculations from DHS Yearbook of Immigration Statistics data tables, various years, [www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/yearbook.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/yearbook.shtm).

26 Ibid.



## 2. Naturalization and Citizenship

The number of naturalizations among immigrants has risen over time. During the 1970s, an average of 141,000 LPRs naturalized each year. That annual average increased to roughly 205,000 in the 1980s, 498,000 in the 1990s, and 629,000 on average per year from 2000 to 2008. Between 2007 and 2008, the number of naturalizations spiked from 660,447 to 272,810, a 58 percent increase.<sup>27</sup> That figure came back down to 743,715 in 2009.<sup>28</sup> This increase was driven in part by a growing number of immigrants eligible to naturalize (the immigrant population has increased steadily since its lowest point in 1970, and the United States' 1986 legalization made approximately 2.7 million formerly unauthorized immigrants eligible for citizenship by the mid-1990s). The *rate* of naturalization has also risen since the early 1990s, perhaps as a result of reduced public benefits available to noncitizen permanent residents (due to 1996 welfare reform legislation), and looser restrictions on dual nationality in some important sending countries during the 1990s.<sup>29</sup>

It is not just that more immigrants are naturalizing, they are also naturalizing more quickly compared to the past. The median time spent in LPR status before gaining citizenship has fluctuated between seven and nine years over the last four decades, with North Americans (Mexicans and Canadians) spending the most time in LPR status (median range of 9-14 years).<sup>30</sup> Recent cohorts of LPRs are moving from LPR status to citizenship more quickly. According to a 2008 DHS report, "approximately one third of immigrants who obtained LPR status from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s naturalized within 10 years, whereas nearly half the immigrants who obtained status in the mid-to-late-1990s did so."<sup>31</sup> That same report shows that Mexicans and Asian-origin immigrants from the 1995 LPR cohort naturalized far faster than similar immigrants from the 1980 cohort.

Still, a large number of LPRs are eligible to naturalize but have not yet done so. While more than 1 million immigrants naturalized in 2008, more than 8 million LPRs were *eligible* to naturalize, comprising more than one-third of the total LPR population.<sup>32</sup> Among Mexican-born LPRs, more than 80 percent were eligible to naturalize (the equivalent of 33 percent of all LPRs eligible to naturalize). To put this figure in perspective, "If the entire Mexican-born population eligible to naturalize did so, it would double the number of naturalized US citizens born in Mexico and raise the share of naturalized citizens among the Mexican immigrant population to about 46 percent — in line with the naturalization rate among all immigrant groups."<sup>33</sup>

## 3. Voting and Voter Registration

If citizenship is a measure of political integration, then the US Constitution effectively guarantees a leap in political integration between the foreign-born first generation and the US-born second generation. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the US Constitution in 1868 granted citizenship to all persons born in the United States, and so all US-born individuals — regardless of their parents' nativity or legal status — are born US citizens.

27 Aaron Terrazas and Jeanne Batalova, "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States," *Migration Information Source*, October 2009, [www.migrationinformation.org/USFocus/display.cfm?ID=747](http://www.migrationinformation.org/USFocus/display.cfm?ID=747); Jeanne Batalova, "Spotlight on Naturalization Trends," *Migration Information Source*, August 2009, [www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?id=737](http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?id=737).

28 James Lee, *Naturalizations in the United States: 2009* (Washington, DC: DHS, 2010), [www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/natz\\_fr\\_2009.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/natz_fr_2009.pdf).

29 Michael Fix, Jeffrey Passel, and Kenneth Sucher, "Trends in Naturalization" (Brief No. 3, Urban Institute, September 2003), [www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310847\\_trends\\_in\\_naturalization.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310847_trends_in_naturalization.pdf).

30 Lee, *Naturalizations in the United States: 2009*.

31 Bryan C. Baker, *Trends in Naturalization Rates: 2008 Update* (Washington, DC: DHS, 2009), [www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois\\_natztrends\\_fs\\_2008.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_natztrends_fs_2008.pdf).

32 Ibid.

33 Aaron Terrazas, "Mexican Immigrants in the United States," *Migration Information Source*, February 2010, [www.migrationinformation.org/USFocus/display.cfm?ID=767](http://www.migrationinformation.org/USFocus/display.cfm?ID=767).



**Table 1. Reported Voting and Registration Among Native and Naturalized Citizens, by Nativity Status and Region of Birth: November 2008 (thousands)**

Nativity Status and Region of Birth	Total Citizen Population	Reported Registered		Not Registered		Reported Voted		Did Not Vote	
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
All US Citizens	206,072	146,311	71.0	59,761	29.0	131,144	63.6	74,928	36.4
Native Citizen	190,683	137,001	71.8	53,682	28.2	122,839	64.4	67,844	35.6
Naturalized Citizen	15,390	9,310	60.5	6,080	39.5	8,305	54.0	7,085	46.0
<b>Region of Birth</b>									
Europe	2,725	1,712	62.8	1,013	37.2	1,562	57.3	1,163	42.7
Asia	5,340	3,021	56.6	2,319	43.4	2,555	47.8	2,785	52.2
Canada	255	207	81.2	48	18.8	194	76.2	61	23.9
Latin America (including Mexico)	6,304	3,889	61.7	2,415	38.3	3,558	56.4	2,746	43.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>15,390</b>	<b>9,310</b>	<b>60.5</b>	<b>6,080</b>	<b>39.5</b>	<b>8,305</b>	<b>54.0</b>	<b>7,085</b>	<b>46.0</b>

Source: US Census Bureau, CPS, November 2008, [www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2008/tables.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2008/tables.html).

Note: Figures for Canada also include a small number of naturalized citizens from Bermuda.

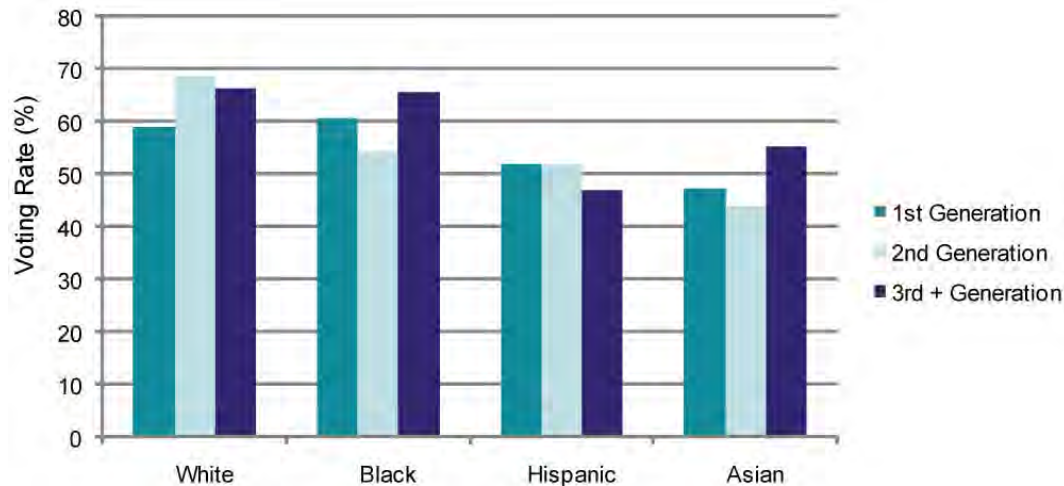
In a democracy, perhaps no right of citizenship is more essential than voting. Where voting is concerned among immigrants, observing rates of voter turnout among naturalized immigrants makes sense since, with a few exceptions,<sup>34</sup> citizenship is a requirement for voting.

Overall, naturalized immigrants lag behind the native-born citizen population in their rates of participation in the electoral process. Among naturalized immigrants, voter registration rates are much lower than the rate for native-born citizens: about 61 percent compared to 72 percent in the November 2008 election (see Table 1). Significant variation remains within the naturalized population. Canadian naturalized citizens are registered at a rate of 82 percent, while only 57 percent of naturalized immigrants from Asia are registered. Registration rates for immigrants from Latin America, the largest source region for US immigration, stands at 62 percent.

Registration is a first step toward participation in the electoral system, but not all registered voters actually show up to vote on election day. As is the case with registration rates, wide disparities in voting rates persist between registered naturalized immigrants, 54 percent of whom voted, and registered US-born citizens, 64 percent of whom voted. Disparities exist among registered naturalized immigrants from different regions of the world: Canadians turn out at rates higher than any native- or foreign-born group, while every other immigrant group votes at rates lower than the native-born population. Naturalized Asian immigrants have an especially low rate of turnout: less than half show up at the polls.

<sup>34</sup> Some US municipalities permit noncitizens to vote in local elections.



**Figure 5. Voting Rates by Ethnoracial Group and Generation, 2008 Presidential Election**

Source: Author's calculations from the 2008 CPS, November Supplement

Looking across generations, notable differences in voting rates exist between and among immigrant groups. Figure 5 displays the proportion of all US citizens age 18 and over who voted in the 2008 presidential election by generation and ethnoracial group.

Whites and blacks of all generations in 2008 generally had higher voting rates than Hispanics and Asians. Among non-Hispanic whites, second- and third-plus generation individuals were more likely to vote than first-generation immigrants. Among blacks, the first and third-plus generations were more likely to vote than the second generation, which had a voting rate of more than 50 percent.<sup>35</sup> This “second-generation decline” in voting among blacks could be due to the fact that the second generation is still fairly young, and voting rates tend to increase with age. Hispanics voted less after the second generation. While first- and second-generation Hispanics voted at the same rate (52 percent), less than half (47 percent) of third-plus generation Hispanics voted. Asian first-generation immigrants slightly outpaced the second generation in voting rates (47 percent versus 44 percent), while the third generation displayed higher voting rates than either group (55 percent). As with blacks, the Asian second generation tended to be concentrated in the younger portion of the age distribution, which may account for why their voting rates are lower than either the third or first generation. Still, Asian voting rates lag behind that of other groups, a particularly puzzling pattern given that they tend to be more educated and more financially secure (attributes linked to higher voter turnout) than individuals from other ethnoracial groups. One potential explanation for their low voter turnout is the lack of a strong, organized effort on the part of civic institutions to mobilize Asian-origin voters, especially immigrants.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. Informal Political Participation

Individuals can be politically engaged without being involved in the formal electoral process and even without formal political membership. Migrants often participate in hometown associations (HTAs), through which they direct resources and attention to both sending and receiving communities. Recent research suggest that participation in HTAs does not come at the expense of engagement in US politics, but rather reinforces political engagement in the US context,<sup>37</sup> providing an opportunity for unauthorized immigrants and noncitizens to become politically engaged in spite of a lack of formal legal membership.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, US-born children of immigrants who are not of voting age have shown some propensity to participate

35 US Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2008, November Supplement.

36 Janelle Wong, *Democracy's Promise: Immigrants and American Civic Institutions* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

37 Alejandro Portes, Cristina Escobar, and Renelinda Arana, “Divided or Convergent Loyalties?: The Political Incorporation Process of Latin American Immigrants in the United States,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 50, no. 2 (2009):103-36.

38 S. Karthick Ramakrishnan and Celia Viramontes, “Civic Spaces: Mexican Hometown Associations and Immigrant Participation,” *Journal of Social Issues* 66, no. 1 (2010):155-73.





in the informal political process, especially when it comes to protesting immigration laws that have the potential to disproportionately impact their foreign-born parents. During the 2006 mass immigrant-rights protests, many second-generation youth were catalysts who helped engage their unauthorized parents in demonstrations, displaying a political socialization that flows from children to parents.<sup>39</sup>

## E. Social Integration

Immigrant integration also includes a set of social processes that are related to, but act independently of other more “objective” measures, such as educational attainment and English-language acquisition. Belonging in US society means that social barriers related to ethnoracial and national origin become only minor factors in how individuals perceive and treat one another.

### I. Intermarriage

A key indicator of these social barriers is intermarriage. When individuals marry each other without regard to ethnoracial or national origin, it indicates that the social boundaries between groups are highly permeable. Intermarriage is a function of both the characteristics that people prefer in a marriage partner and the opportunities that they have to meet potential spouses from ethnic origins other than their own. Intermarriage rates are thus determined, in part, by other dimensions of integration — socioeconomic attainment, residential location, English language acquisition, and migration patterns that shape opportunities to interact with individuals from other ethnoracial and national origins.

By all accounts, the United States remains a country where people of different ethnoracial and national origins have frequent interactions and form romantic partnerships. Intermarriage rates in general have increased over time. In 1980, just 3.2 percent of all marriages and 6.7 percent of new marriages (those within the last 12 months) were between people of different ethnoracial groups. By 2009, those proportions increased to 8 percent and 14.6 percent, respectively.<sup>40</sup>

Intermarriage for individuals with ancestry from the two largest sending regions of the world – Asian and Latin America – tend to increase dramatically after the first generation (see Figure 6).

More than half of all US-born Asians wives (both first- and second-generation) married non-Asians between 1994 and 2007, and roughly 4 in 10 first- and second-generation Asian husbands married someone from another ethnoracial group (see Figure 6). The percentage of Asian wives and husbands married to an individual from another ethnoracial group is slightly less in the third generation than in the second, but nonetheless quite high for both groups. It is important to note that intermarriage rates for third-generation Asians accelerated during the first decade of the new millennium compared to the 1990s, while rates for the second generation have declined. This change in intermarriage patterns is almost entirely due to an immigration-driven increase in the Asian population, which provides more opportunities for first- and second-generation individuals to marry members of the same ethnoracial group.<sup>41</sup>

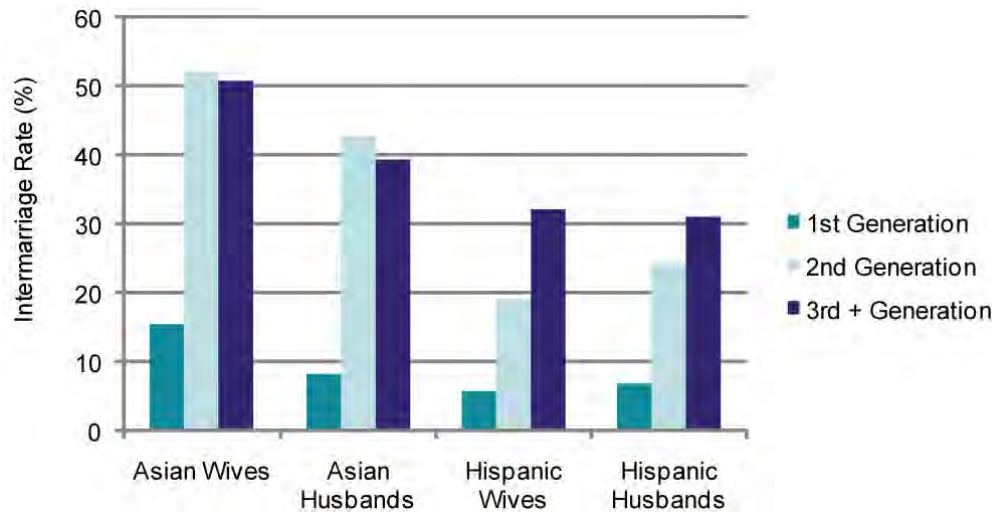
Hispanics display lower intermarriage rates than Asians in all generations, but show a linear increase in intermarriage rates over time. There is some gender asymmetry in the intermarriage rates, but it is far less than among Asians. It is not surprising that Hispanics have lower intermarriage rates overall, given the large size of the Hispanic population. Nonetheless, with more than 3 in 10 third-generation Hispanics marrying non-Hispanics, marital integration appears to be proceeding apace across generations for America’s largest ethnoracial group.<sup>41</sup>

39 Irene Bloemraad and Christine Trost “It’s a Family Affair: Intergenerational Mobilization in the Spring 2006 Protests,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 52, no. 4 (2008): 507-32.

40 Jeffrey S. Passel, Wendy Wang, and Paul Taylor, *Marrying Out: One-in-Seven New U.S. Marriages is Interracial or Interethnic* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2010), <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1616/american-marriage-interracial-interethnic>.

41 Daniel T. Lichter, Julie H. Carmalt, and Zhenchao Qian, “Who Marries Immigrants? Generational Differences in Marital Endogamy,” (paper presented at the Population Association of America annual meeting, New Orleans, LA, April 17, 2008).

**Figure 6. Intermarriage Patterns of Asians and Hispanics by Generation, Ages 18-34, 1994-2007**



Source: Daniel T. Lichter, Julie H. Carmalt, and Zhenchao Qian, "Who Marries Immigrants? Generational Differences in Marital Endogamy" (paper presented at the Population Association of America annual meeting, New Orleans, LA, April 17, 2008); US Census Bureau, CPS, various years.

Note: Weighted percentages.

## 2. Perceptions of Belonging

Integration also has a perceptual dimension that reveals how individuals perceive what it means to be an American. The United States is a self-styled "nation of immigrants," but this was not always the case. Historians have documented how immigrant groups, such as the Irish, Italians, and Russian Jews, were regarded as outsiders during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but found that over the course of generations their status changed, and they came to be seen as part of the fabric of American ethnic groups that make up this immigrant nation.<sup>42</sup>

The contemporary wave of immigrants is once again stretching popular conceptions of American national belonging. Survey research shows that many individuals regard the country's immigrant tradition and diversity as central to defining national belonging. Table 2 displays selected findings from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Americanism survey, a nationally representative survey of US residents taken in 2004.<sup>43</sup>

Few believe that a specific race or ancestry defines American identity: Only about 10 percent and 17 percent think that "being white" and "having European ancestry," respectively, should be very or somewhat important in making someone a true American. Nearly three quarters believe that "carrying on the cultural traditions of one's ancestors" should be somewhat or very important, while 97 percent believe "respecting other people's cultural differences" and 93 percent believe that "seeing people of all backgrounds as American" should rank high in making someone a true American.

These data reflect fairly expansive and accommodating beliefs about the role that ethnoracial origins should play in American identity. If individuals believe that there is a salient feature of American cultural belonging, it is speaking English: 94 percent believe so. US residents also endorse a legalistic understanding of American identity, with 94 percent believing "having American citizenship" should be somewhat or very important in making someone a true American. To be sure, individuals still believe that blending into the larger society is essential for national belonging (nearly three-quarters rank it high), but

42 Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

43 Schildkraut, "Defining American Identity."



it appears that blending into an American mainstream entails some maintenance of ancestry and tradition as nearly the same proportion hold cultural tradition in the same esteem. It is also important to note that conceptions of American identity are not static. Policy changes and movements for more restrictive or more accommodating immigration laws can tilt public opinion. But even large and highly publicized events appear to produce ambivalence among Americans. For example, according to a 2010 poll, a large majority of Americans favor a fairly restrictive Arizona immigration law that expands the role of local law enforcement in enforcing federal immigration laws.<sup>44</sup> However, this same poll also shows that large majorities of Americans would support a bill that offered a pathway to legal residency for unauthorized immigrants who have been living and working in the United States, and who have no criminal record.

**Table 2. Beliefs about the Content of American Identity, 2004 Survey**

Identity Item	Percent Who Believe That Identity Item Should Be Very Or Somewhat Important In Making Someone A True American
Being born in America	51.3
Being a Christian	34.9
Having European ancestors	17.4
Being white	9.9
Thinking of oneself as American	93.2
Feeling American	90.1
Carrying on the cultural traditions of one's ancestors, such as the language and food	72.7
Respecting other people's cultural differences	96.7
Blending into the larger society	73.4
Seeing people of all backgrounds as American	92.7
Being able to speak English	94.1
Having American citizenship	93.7

Source: Deborah J. Schildkraut, "Defining American Identity in the Twenty-First Century: How Much 'There' is There?" *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 3 (2008): 597-615.

The compatibility of these two ideas is on full display in major metropolitan areas, where immigration has contributed to growing ethnoracial diversity. In popular immigrant destinations such as Los Angeles, New York, San Jose, and Miami, diversity may be the new normal. Recent research in these areas shows that living near and working with members of other ethnoracial groups has become an unremarkable part of everyday life, somewhat belying the idea of ethnoracial *difference* underlying concept of "diversity."<sup>45</sup> Of course, it remains to be seen whether this same conception of belonging will take hold in newer immigrant destinations in the Midwest and South, where immigration-drive diversity is a newer phenomenon.

44 CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll. Poll taken July 16-21, 2010, [www.pollingreport.com/immigration.htm](http://www.pollingreport.com/immigration.htm).

45 Philip Kasinitz, John Mollenkopf, Mary Waters, and Jennifer Holdaway, "Becoming American/Becoming New Yorkers: The Second Generation in a Majority Minority City," *Migration Information Source*, October 2006, [www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=440](http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=440).



## IV. A Role for Policy?

Immigrant integration in the United States is proceeding steadily, if unevenly. Remarkably, the process has unfolded almost entirely without the help of policy intervention. The United States historically has taken two broad approaches to immigrant integration: the first reserves a role for policies that actively encourage integration; the second is a *laissez faire* approach that relies on an absence of policy intervention.

The more proactive approach to immigrant integration first appeared on a large scale with the Americanization Movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Faced with large numbers of immigrants arriving primarily from eastern and southern Europe, communities throughout the country engaged in a massive effort to integrate and, in some instances, forcibly turn immigrants into “Americans.” Programs coordinated by public- and private-sector organizations provided English-language training, civics classes, and symbolic displays of patriotism — all aimed at expediting the removal of “Old World ways” and the adoption of a singular American identity.

In the contemporary period, refugees are the only category of immigrants to benefit from an active, coordinated integration policy. Refugees have access to an expansive web of government agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) tasked with facilitating their integration. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the US Department of Health and Human Services heads refugee integration by providing funds for, “among other benefits and services, cash and medical assistance, employment preparation and job placement, skills training, English-language training, social adjustment, and aid for victims of torture.” The reach of these programs is limited to the 15 percent of the immigrant population annually admitted as refugees or asylees. The other 85 percent have no access to assistance aside from a small amount of funding for English-language acquisition and some workforce training provided by a patchwork of programs that together do not constitute a coherent integration policy.

An active approach to integration is taking hold in some US locales. Although restrictionist legislation at the state and local levels garners a great deal of attention, state governments have been more successful at passing integration-oriented legislation: 19 percent of the immigration-related bills passed by US state legislatures in 2007 expanded the rights of immigrants, while only 11 percent contracted immigrants’ rights.<sup>46</sup> Just as some state and local governments have initiated efforts to enforce restrictive immigration policies, other locales have developed immigrant policies aimed at achieving fuller belonging for immigrant newcomers. State, county, and local governments sponsor programs to help LPRs become citizens, cultivate leadership within immigrant communities, provide English language acquisition, and develop better relations between law enforcement and immigrant populations. Some of these efforts are partnerships with local NGOs that help implement integration policies.<sup>47</sup>

The federal government has taken small steps toward forming an immigrant integration policy. The Bush administration created within US Citizenship and Immigration Services an Office of Citizenship, which works to “provide federal leadership, tools, and resources to proactively foster immigrant integration ... [and] engage and support partners to welcome immigrants, promote English language learning and education on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and encourage U.S. citizenship.” In these efforts, the Office of Citizenship has played a relative minor role, with its most visible initiative being a website ([www.welcometoUSA.gov](http://www.welcometoUSA.gov)) that provides information intended to help immigrants learn English, become citizens, and become civically engaged.

The strategy that has dominated the approach to immigrant integration in the United States since the 1920s can best be described as *laissez faire*. Rather than relying on an organized and unified governmental strategy, this *laissez faire* approach depends on a combination of immigrants’ motivation,

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46 MPI Data Hub, “State Responses to Immigration: A Database of All State Legislation”.

47 See, for example, Santa Clara County’s (CA) Immigrant Relations and Integration Services; Illinois New Americans Integration Initiative; Littleton (CO) Immigrant Integration Initiative.



economic expansion, and a robust public education system to achieve integration. As immigrants and their descendants receive better jobs, move to more affluent neighborhoods, join the military, and attend college and graduate school, they find themselves interacting with members of other ethnoracial and national-origin groups in such a way that social boundaries based on race, class, and religion diminish.

## Challenges to Integration

The laissez faire approach to achieve integration generally has worked in the United States because of the existence of high-quality public education, legal protections from discrimination, and tight labor markets that allowed for gainful employment and economic mobility. But its functionality may be threatened by the precarious state of public education, immigration policies that leave far too many in an unauthorized status, and the economic downturn.

Public education has traditionally been an engine of integration. Schools provide training for immigrants and their descendants to successfully pursue economic aspirations, producing social and political forms of integration. Schools can also be a socializing mechanism that affords children the opportunity to interact with members of other ethnoracial groups, thereby breaking down social boundaries that are defined in ethnoracial terms. In locales with large immigrant populations, such as California, New York, Florida, and Illinois, overcrowding, high teacher turnover, and chronic underfunding have stressed public schools, however, thereby hurting prospects for successful integration. The situation is particularly worrisome in California, home to more immigrants than any other state. In California, immigrants and their children depend on a struggling educational system to fulfill their socioeconomic aspirations.

### I. The Impact of Unauthorized Status

Perhaps the most significant impediment to successful immigrant integration is the precarious legal circumstances under which immigrants get their start in the United States. A substantial number of unauthorized immigrants live social and economic lives that are well rooted in the United States. Nearly 7 in 10 unauthorized immigrants are in the labor force, and unauthorized immigrants make up at least 10 percent of the workforce in California, Florida, Arizona, Nevada, New Jersey, and Florida. A large number of unauthorized immigrants are living in households with children, further rooting them in the United States. Nearly half of unauthorized immigrants live in households with their own children under 18 years of age, and nearly half of all households headed by an unauthorized immigrant are made of couples with children.<sup>48</sup>

The legal circumstances under which immigrants live in the United States have a significantly negative impact on their integration. Low levels of formal education and a lack of English-language ability, combined with the impact of legal status *per se* means that unauthorized immigrants earn substantially less than legal-resident immigrants and the US-born population, and they are more likely live below the poverty line and lack health insurance.<sup>49</sup> Immigrants' unauthorized status often limits the kinds of jobs that they are able to obtain to those that are poorly paid, dangerous, and offer little job security. In some industries, such as manufacturing, agriculture, and construction, employers prefer unauthorized immigrant workers precisely because they see these workers as compliant and willing to accept low wages.<sup>50</sup> The fact that unauthorized immigrants are far less likely than the rest of the US population to have health insurance only compounds the ill effects of dangerous, low-paid work.

48 Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2009), <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=107>.

49 Ibid.

50 Laura López-Sanders, "Is Brown the New Black? Latino Immigration and Native Labor Replacement in the Contemporary South" (paper presented at the American Sociological Association annual meeting, Sheraton Boston and the Boston Marriott Copley Place, Boston, MA, July 31, 2008); Roger Waldinger and Michael I. Lichter, *How the Other Half Works: Immigration and the Social Organization of Labor* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).





Legal status also has a dampening effect on the integration of the estimated 1.5 million children under 18 years of age who are unauthorized.<sup>51</sup> Federal law permits these children to attend public schools through high school. Only small numbers of the estimated 65,000 unauthorized immigrants who graduate from high school annually make it to college.<sup>52</sup> Only ten states offer instate tuition to unauthorized immigrant students, and there is little, if any, government financial aid available for these students. Without the ability to work legally, and with the full burden of college tuition, it takes a staggering effort for unauthorized college students to find their way to graduation day. A post-high school degree improves their job prospects only marginally, since federal law prevents their legal hiring. Qualitative research shows that as a result, as unauthorized youth become aware of their legal status and its negative implications for their educational and employment prospects, they have lower aspirations for their own mobility and, in some cases, see little point in making an effort in school because they come to see their educational success as irrelevant in a labor market from which they are legally excluded.<sup>53</sup>

The negative impact of being unauthorized can persist beyond the first generation, affecting the integration of US-born children of unauthorized immigrants. According to findings based on survey data collected in Los Angeles, US-born Mexican Americans with fathers who entered the country without authorization and were still unauthorized at the time of the survey, were 25 percent more likely to drop out of high school, 70 percent less likely to graduate from college, 13 percent less likely to prefer English at home, and had earnings 30 percent lower than those whose fathers became authorized.<sup>54</sup> Another study using the same data shows that, when taking into account factors known to affect educational attainment, US-born Mexican adults whose parents arrived without authorization and remained unauthorized achieve more than a full year less schooling than individuals whose parents were authorized.<sup>55</sup> Parental legal status poses a challenge to the US-born children even if these children enter professional positions. Qualitative research indicates that many adult children of unauthorized immigrants find it difficult to gain an economic foothold because they devote substantial economic resources to help parents cope with the vagaries of healthcare, the job market, and housing.<sup>56</sup>

## 2. The Economic Downturn

Compounding the issue is a strong likelihood that the economic downturn has exacerbated the challenges to integration. Unemployment rose rapidly during the recent recession, especially among Hispanic immigrants. Poverty rates have increased significantly faster for immigrants than for the US born. At the same time, pressure on state and local government budgets is likely to reduce the resources available for the nation's already limited immigrant integration efforts. In particular, a lack of school funding only hampers the ability of schools to be resources for socioeconomic mobility.<sup>57</sup> This lack of funding, combined with an anemic job market which makes it more difficult for immigrants and their children to pursue their economic aspirations, may dampen other forms of integration.

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51 Passel and Cohn, *Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States*.

52 Jeffrey S. Passel, "Further Demographic Information Relating to the DREAM Act," (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2003), [www.nilc.org/immlawpolicy/dream/dream\\_demographics.pdf](http://www.nilc.org/immlawpolicy/dream/dream_demographics.pdf).

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## V. Conclusion: The Road Ahead for Integration

With or without comprehensive policies, immigrant integration is proceeding in the United States. Though the pace of integration varies depending on the origin of immigrants and the places in which they settle, the master trend today looks strikingly similar to patterns of integration among the major wave of European immigration to the United States that took place a century ago. Integration is not necessarily a smooth process. It entails uncomfortable adjustments among immigrants, their descendants, and the host society in which they settle. Nonetheless, these adjustments appear to be taking place among all parties involved.

The United States has a successful track record of integration in spite of having no integration policy (refugee programs being the exception). The laissez faire approach to integration has worked because the United States traditionally has had a strong system of public education and because economic expansion has allowed immigrants and their descendants to pursue their economic aspirations, which, in turn, facilitates integration along multiple dimensions. If the laissez faire method continues to be the preferred approach, then the state of public education in areas of considerable immigrant settlement and the stagnating economy are significant areas of concern.

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Another impediment to integration is the unauthorized status of nearly one-third of the foreign-born population. Being unauthorized hampers the integration of both immigrants and their US-born children, and the ill effects of unauthorized status follow these children even as they enter adulthood. Though some politicians have framed a potential legalization program as an opportunity to bring unauthorized immigrants “out of the shadows,” legalization also has significant bearing on integration across generations.

The boundaries that circumscribe how Americans view belonging in the United States are clear: speaking English is a virtual requirement, as is possession of the appropriate legal status. But within these boundaries, Americans are able to imagine a national community with multiple origins and varied traditions. As immigrant newcomers, established populations, and American institutions work through the bumpy process of integration, the flexibility to re-imagine what it means to be American is perhaps the United States’ greatest asset in bringing about successful integration.



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