

THE FACTS: INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANTS



INTEGRATION IS BETTER THAN ASSIMILATION.

When immigrants adapt to and borrow from another culture they may assimilate or integrate.¹ Assimilation implies a rejection of the immigrant's own culture.² Integration is more positive for both the immigrant and society than assimilation because the immigrant participates in the new culture while maintaining his/her own cultural identity.³

Successful integration can be measured by the level of language acquisition, access to and achievement in training programs and education, incorporation in the labor market and use of healthcare and other critical social services.⁴ Community attitudes, similarities between the cultures, and a supportive network made of members of the culture of origin will influence integration.⁵

INTEGRATION FOR TODAY'S IMMIGRANTS IS SIMILAR TO PAST GENERATIONS.

The immigration and integration stories of the current wave of immigration and the largest wave from 1890-1920 are remarkably similar. Today's complaints about Latino, African, and Southeast Asian immigrants are the same concerns voiced a century ago about Irish, Eastern European, German, Italian, Jewish, and Polish immigrants. For instance, critics claim that, contrary to past waves of immigration, today's immigrants are more tied to their home country than the United States. However, a century ago, 36 out of every 100 immigrants returned permanently to their homelands while today the number is only 23 out of 100.⁶ Similarly, multilingualism is nothing new for the United States. In fact, the proportion of non-English speakers in 1890 was 4.5 times as great as in 1990. A century ago, 600,000 students received bilingual instruction in German and English.⁷ Furthermore, the perception that certain cultures are incapable of assimilating has been a persistent idea. A century ago many native-born Americans complained that Italians, Poles, and Slavs and others could never assimilate.⁸

TODAY'S IMMIGRANTS ARE INTEGRATING.

Taking into consideration socioeconomic status, residential patterns, language, and intermarriage, experts are optimistic about how well immigrants are being absorbed into American society.⁹ Politically, Hispanics are participating in civic life at comparable rates as did the Italians and Irish in the last century.¹⁰ New immigrants are integrating via marriage. Of marriages involving a Hispanic or Asian person, nearly one-third cross racial lines.¹¹ As new immigrants arrive, well-established immigrants advance to full integration. The continual influx of new immigrants obscures the actual integration of other established immigrants.¹² Integration skeptics may also fail to consider the role that age, generation, and motive for migration have always played in acculturation. First-generation immigrants, particularly older immigrants and those who fled their countries involuntarily, tend to experience difficulties participating and adapting to the new culture. In addition, older immigrants and temporary migrants may have less incentive to integrate. Due to their limited future in the workforce, they may not benefit as substantially from investments in education or English acquisition.¹³ Younger immigrants integrate with greater ease as a result of earlier exposure to the new culture and less ingrained customs from their culture of origin.¹⁴

IMMIGRANTS TODAY ARE LEARNING ENGLISH AT THE SAME RATE AS PREVIOUS GROUPS.

Immigrants to the U.S. are highly motivated to learn English due to the high economic and social value of English acquisition.¹⁵ Linguists assert that, within three generations, immigrants are shifting from their native language to the use of English as the dominant language at the same rate or more quickly than previous immigrants.¹⁶ Experts explain that typically "(t)he immigrant generation makes some progress but remains dominant in their native tongue. The second generation is bilingual and the third generation speaks English only."¹⁷ 65% of immigrants over the age of 5 who speak a language other than English at home speak English "very well" or "well".¹⁸ For long-term immigrants, the number increases to 97%.¹⁹ Immigrants make a considerable effort to learn English. Nearly 1.2 million adults attended English as a Second Language classes in 2002-2003, representing 16% of the 7.4 million working age adults with limited English proficiency.²⁰ In many cities, inadequate funding has led to long waiting lists of immigrants seeking to enroll in adult English classes.²¹ Policies and investments in childcare and transportation can significantly affect participation rates in English as a Second Language classes.²²

THE U.S. DOES NOT NEED TO DECLARE ENGLISH THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE.

Official English legislation could limit language assistance and result in denying equal access to education, the electoral process, and other rights and opportunities guaranteed in the Constitution.²³ Merely legislating English as the national language does not facilitate newcomers' English acquisition but merely makes their lives more difficult.²⁴ Throughout the world, official language laws have led not to unity, but rather to animosity toward minority ethnic groups.²⁵

LATINO IMMIGRANTS DO NOT THREATEN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE OR U.S. CULTURE.

Linguists conclude that Spanish is not a threat to the English language or the Anglo majority in the United States.²⁶ Only about 2.5% of American residents speak Spanish but not English.²⁷ 57% of Latino immigrants believe immigrants have to speak English to be a part of American society, and 96% of Latino immigrants say it is very important that English be taught to children of immigrant families.²⁸ Therefore, it should not be surprising that only 7% of children born to Latino immigrants speak Spanish as their primary language, and by the third generation, virtually none of them do.²⁹ The United States is not becoming a bilingual country,³⁰ although linguists assert the importance of maintaining the native languages of bilingual children in today's age of globalization.³¹ As for the culture, Latinos are largely embracing the American Dream. A New York Times/CBS News poll indicates that nearly 70% of foreign-born Hispanics, including those with fewer than 5 years residence in the U.S., identify more with the United States than with their native country.³²

IMMIGRANTS FROM THE SAME BACKGROUND TEND TO SETTLE IN THE SAME NEIGHBORHOODS.

Immigrants who settle near others with similar ethnic backgrounds can more easily preserve their lifestyle, have control over their children, access community networks for support, and be represented politically.³³ Since family reunification is the predominant method to immigrate to the U.S., the law promotes clustering.³⁴ There is disagreement about whether ethnic enclaves facilitate or hinder integration. Some experts contend that immigrants are most likely to adjust well to a new culture when they are not isolated from their culture of origin.³⁵ Others point out fewer incentives to integrate if their shopping and employment needs can be met in their native language.³⁶ Most studies agree that the longer immigrants have resided in the U.S. and the higher their socioeconomic level, the less likely they are to live in an ethnically concentrated area.³⁷

INTEGRATION IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF COMMUNITIES AS WELL AS IMMIGRANTS.

Social inclusion is not automatic. Investments in public education, health care and transportation facilitate economic self-sufficiency and lead to integration.³⁸ To maximize immigrant integration, the broader community must commit to promoting civic engagement, providing youth and adult education programs, encouraging parental involvement in school, developing workforce and business opportunities, investing in neighborhoods and fostering cross-cultural communication and leadership skills.³⁹ Undocumented status traps immigrants "in a semi-criminalized shadow economy" with limited mobility, thus hampering integration.⁴⁰ A national policy to provide the undocumented population with an earned path to legalization would promote integration. In recent years, the responsibility to accommodate new immigrants has shifted to the suburbs and rural areas.⁴¹ The rate of immigrant population growth in the largest metro areas was 42% higher in the suburbs than in central cities.⁴² Strong community support systems are necessary in rural areas to avoid a marginalized immigrant population and frictions between new and long-term residents.⁴³ Regardless of where immigrants are settling, the communities they inhabit can expect greater social, political and economic returns from policies and investments that support integration.⁴⁴



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