

The unwelcoming nation: The paradox of the open society

THE UNWELCOMING UNITED STATES

The United States entered the 21st century as it had the 20th, wrestling with the question of immigration. Although illegal status had no role 100 years ago, nor did a single ethnic group concern the public as Mexicans do today, the core issues were the same: money and culture. The hostility that arose then, and has arisen again today, is an intensification of the American public's persistent inhospitality to immigrants, an unease apparent since the 18th century. Rather than welcoming immigrants, Americans have generally viewed foreigners with suspicion. Nonetheless, those who benefit directly from immigration—employers, politicians, immigrants and their American-born co-ethnics—have nearly always prevailed in maintaining policies quite tolerant of new entries.

FROM INHOSPITALITY TO OPEN HOSTILITY

At times the conventional state of inhospitality turns to open hostility. Sheer

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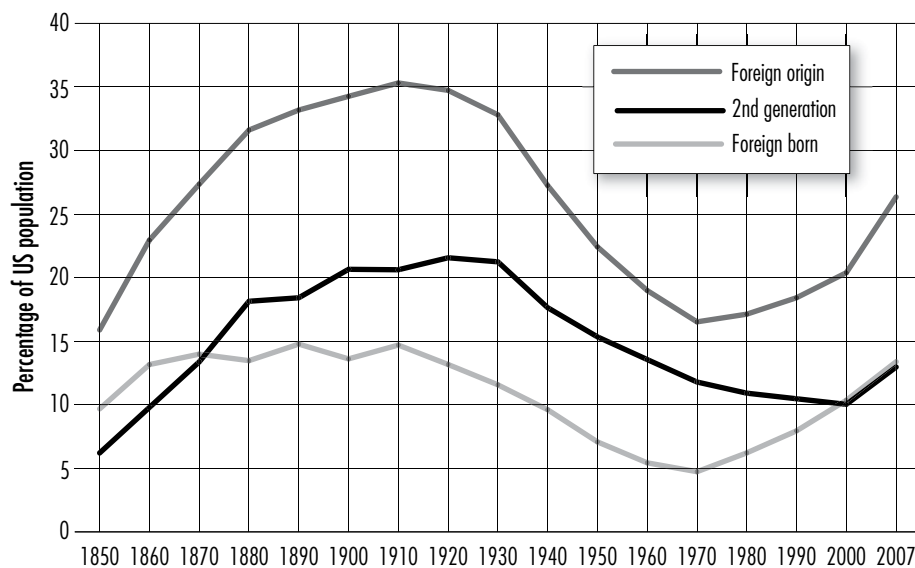
demographic pressures combined with sharp cultural challenges are necessary and near-sufficient explanations for such nativism. In fact, these pressures and challenges are more important than conventional scholarly explanations of xenophobia, which generally point to

religious bigotry, racism, reactionary impulses, and political manipulation. The major outbreaks of xenophobia in the United States occurred in the 1850s and in the early 20th century, and continue in the present. Figure 1 shows that these nativist periods correspond with sheer demographic pressure.

There are four impressive features in the display:

- the sudden arrival of an immigrant-based demographic regime in the 1850s following very low immigration rates until the 1840s;
- the still greater force of immigrants and their children in the late 19th century, reaching peaks exceeding one-third of the American population by the early 20th century;
- the drastic decline in immigrant-based demographic pressure after the 1920s, and a somewhat delayed second-generation decline, reaching a common low point in the late 1960s;
- the unmistakable return to immigrant and second-generation demographic pressures after 1970, with trajectories pointing toward the previous peaks.

FIGURE 1 Immigrants and their children, 1850–2007



THE CHANGING MIX OF ETHNICITY

Although the sheer size of immigrant flow matters, most studies of nativist movements point to the salience of new ethnicities and cultural conflict. As we have shown in previous work, the American colonies and the Early Republic experienced remarkable ethnic homogeneity among the free population. Even after relatively high immigration in the 1750s, more than 80 percent of free persons were of British Protestant background in the 1790s, and the subsequent 30 years produced little change. But the 1840s saw striking shifts not only in flow

but also in the ethnic background of foreigners. Figure 2 illustrates the changing mix of ethnicity. Immigrants are divided into three groups based upon national birthplace, and the years in which such nations were most important in the flow of immigrants: (a) those regions that dominated the streams in the period before 1895, primarily German, Irish, and Scandinavian immigrants; (b) those who dominated in the period from 1895 to 1921, primarily Italians, Jews, Slavs, and other groups from southern and eastern Europe; (c) those who arrived after the Second World War, the largest contingent from Mexico, but others primarily from Latin American and Asian countries.

Figure 2 shows that the pressing cultural question in the 19th century was the capacity of the American population to accept immigrants from northwestern Europe, many of them Catholic. By 1910, different sources began to crowd out these immigrants, with Poles, Russians, Italians, and Jews making up about one-third of arrivals. In 1880, only 4 percent of the immigrant population were drawn from southern and eastern Europe. By 1920, over 40 percent were. This cultural “contamination” sparked the restrictionist movement of the early 20th century. A shift of even greater magnitude can be seen by 1980. In 1920, less than 10 per-

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cent of all immigrants hailed from Latin American and Asian nations—in 1990, over 70 percent came from those regions. These immigrants, and undocumented Mexican immigrants in particular, provided the targets for the nativist movements of the late 20th century.

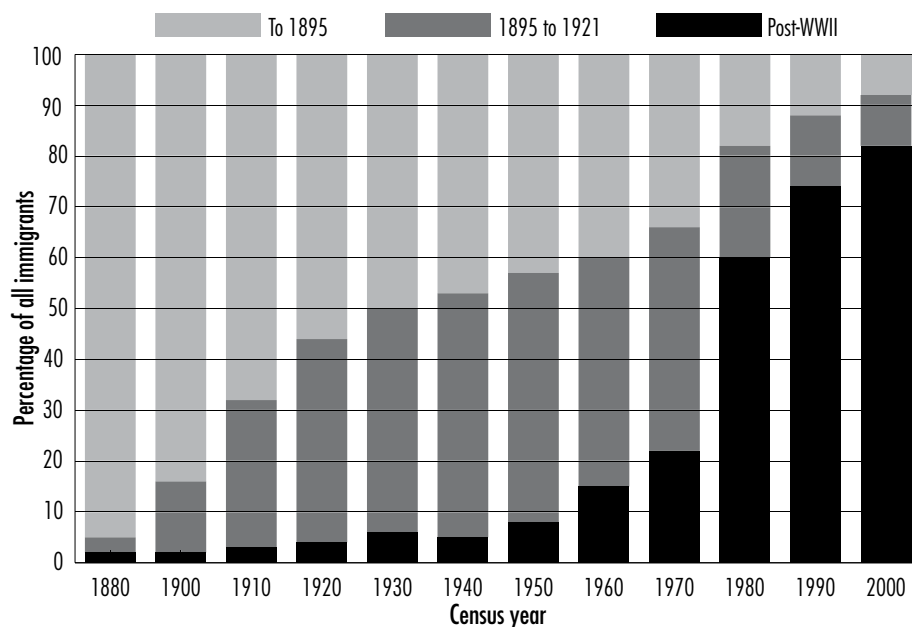
NATIVIST CAMPAIGNS AND AMERICAN INHOSPITALITY

Nativist campaigns have been sparked by unusual demographic forces, but they rely on a permanent foundation of inhospitality that belies the reputation of the United States as a welcoming nation.

Animosity can be found at almost any point in American history and in a variety of forms. Reaction to the immigration of Germans in the 1750s sparked famous remonstrances by Benjamin Franklin and less-well-known anxieties on the part of leading figures such as Thomas Jefferson. Well before the massive onslaught of poor Irish immigrants, Samuel F.B. Morse and others decried the arrival of Catholics into the Protestant republic. Hostility toward Catholics was a regular feature in American life throughout the 19th century, leading to the American Protective Association and other organizations designed to reduce the impact of this immigrant religion. Racism helped the well-known, violent reaction to the Chinese on the West Coast to succeed where other movements failed, but antagonism toward immigrants in general was broad. Telling evidence for widespread antipathy can be found in an unusual survey taken in the mid-1890s. In 1895, 1896, and 1897, the Kansas Bureau of Labour and Industry asked wage earners whether they favoured or did not favour the restriction or absolute suppression of immigration. About 95 percent of the workers supported restriction or outright elimination of immigration, a percentage that barely changed even if the respondents were themselves immigrants. Some 60 percent of immigrant workers favoured restriction and 40 percent full suppression.

In the 1890s, immigration from southern and eastern Europe rose sharply, and the middle and upper classes began to take a more and more hostile view toward the newcomers. Congressional votes on immigration measures in the early 20th century reflect strong popular opposition, and the National Origins Acts of the 1920s clearly enjoyed overwhelming support. By the 1930s, when opinion polls first became available, the unanimity of public opinion was manifest. Americans rejected by more than 70 percent even the most compelling cases, refugee children fleeing from Nazi Germany. Currently, polls show Americans strongly opposed to any increase

FIGURE 2 Immigrants by period of origin



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in immigration, with about 50 percent favouring a decrease in the numbers allowed to enter the country.


OPEN DOORS AND CLOSED MINDS?

Despite the consistent antipathy to immigration, and the intermittent rise of intensely hostile movements, politicians and policy-makers have kept the doors relatively open. How can this contradiction in a democracy be explained? Gary Freeman offers a model for the contemporary period that we think works admirably throughout American history. Freeman argues that the benefits of tolerant policy are highly concentrated: they accrue almost entirely to employers, to the immigrants and their co-ethnics, and to political parties who rely on these ethnic constituencies. The first two clients have good reason to pay the necessary costs to pressure politicians vigorously. The politicians who accede to their requests have good reason to expect cash from one and votes from the

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other. America's 18th-century founders refused to accept the possibility of permanent interest groups and so created a winner-take-all system and a national, elected executive. The combination consistently produces two national parties. Each competes for all votes, in a competition that has broadened the suffrage and has, except in unusual cases, prevented high barriers to immigration because parties are reluctant to antagonize business owners or alienate voters of immigrant origin.

The costs of tolerant immigration policy are diffuse, felt indirectly in lower wages for workers and increased taxes to pay for the public services that immigrants use, and directly by the cultural threat in every society into which im-

migrants arrive. The cultural reaction becomes intense only when the probability of encounter is high (when immigration levels rise rapidly) and the cultural distinctiveness acute (when ethnicities change). Both costs are felt locally, rather than nationally. However, not only is immigration policy set at the federal rather than the local level, but the American party system is vertically integrated. Parties must succeed at a national level in order to persist at a local level. National platforms and coordinated party efforts in Congress thus normally do not include immigration restriction. In the 1850s, the early 20th century, and the current period, anti-immigration sentiment and thought became unusually intense and widespread, and the two major parties were still reluctant to respond. The result in each era has been third-party movements, initiatives, and radical proposals that circumvent the party system. This may be the past waiting to happen again. 

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been having trouble keeping investors in the country since 2001, when China came aboard.

In theory, industrial salaries should also have risen as a result of NAFTA. Even though they did, slightly, in the maquiladora industry after 1994 when NAFTA went into effect, they started to drop again after 2001. In the manufacturing industry, salaries suffered sharp declines after the 1982 crisis, and again in 1995, never recovering their former levels. What this means for the United States and Canada is that, in lieu of growing industrial employment and salaries in Mexico, the excess population migrates north, competing directly with northern workers. There is, however, a solution to this regional conundrum that would benefit the entire region: returning to the original NAFTA proposal to create a regional subcontracting system that would go beyond the assembly of goods

in Mexico, helping certain branches of the Mexican manufacturing sector reconvert into producers of some of the parts for the maquiladora industry, thereby stimulating both employment growth and salary gains.

NAFTA discourages imports from non-member countries by charging tariffs on them, while allowing duty-free entry of North American goods. Under NAFTA rules, this was supposed to be the case in the maquiladora industry as well, but things changed. Mexico was supposed to start charging its general tariff on temporary imports from "third parties" for assembly in the maquiladoras and re-export to the United States. This would have represented a significant change from the old system in which maquiladoras imported duty-free and only paid duties in the United States when the final consumer goods were imported. The obligation to pay extra

tariffs could have stimulated production of intermediary goods in Mexico; however, the transition period before duties would have to be paid ended January 1, 2001. As it turned out, this was too short a time span for substitute production to get under way in Mexico, especially considering the context of Mexico's 1995 financial crisis, which dried up all credit and threw the manufacturing industry into a downward spiral.

Therefore, the maquiladora industry was faced with paying additional Mexican tariffs on imported "third-party" intermediary goods or with importing through the United States, where tariffs are low but additional transport costs would incur. The end result of either option compromised the industry's competitiveness, which led Mexico to a different strategy: reducing its general tariffs on all these "third-party" intermediary imports to the same level as the US tariff,