

## Immigration to the United States: Recent Trends and Future Prospects<sup>+</sup>

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**Abstract:** Almost 13 per cent of the American population is foreign born, and if the children of the foreign born are included, about 1 in 4 Americans can be counted as part of the recent immigrant community. Although there is lingering prejudice and popular fears of immigrants, there is growing evidence that, on balance, immigrants make a positive contribution to the American economy and society. There is little evidence that immigrants have an adverse impact on the wages and employment of native born Americans. Moreover, immigrants and their children are disproportionately represented in a broad variety of scientific and cultural fields.

Key words: Assimilation, demography, immigration, policy, United States  
JEL classification: F22, J18, J21

### 1. Introduction

The United States is, once again, in the midst of an age of immigration. In 2010, there were 40 million foreign-born persons living in the United States (Grieco *et al.* 2012). Of the 220 million international migrants in the world in 2010—defined as persons living outside their country of birth—almost one in five were residents in the United States (UN Population Division 2013). An even larger number, upwards of 75 million persons in the United States—almost one quarter of the current resident American population—is part of the immigrant community, defined as foreign born and the children of the foreign born (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2010).<sup>1</sup>

In spite of lingering prejudice and discrimination against immigrants, most Americans are beginning to acknowledge the positive contributions of immigrants. These beliefs are partially rooted in the historical image of the United States as a 'nation of immigrants.'

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<sup>1</sup> The foreign-born refers to all persons who are born outside the United States or a United States territory. The Census Bureau defines the native born (the complement of the foreign born) as persons who are American citizens at birth. The terms foreign born and immigrants are used interchangeably here, but this is not technically true because many of the foreign born are in the United States as temporary workers or students.

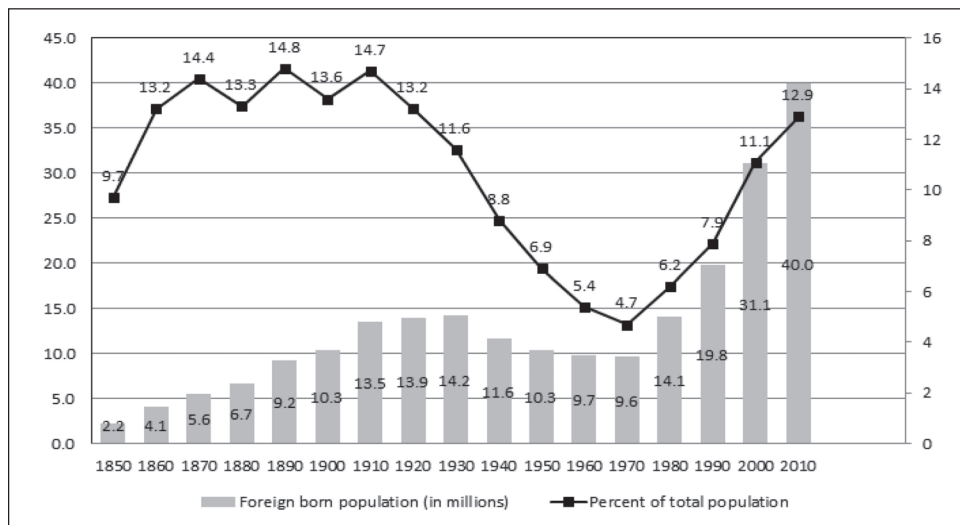
The story that America was populated by peoples seeking economic opportunity, fleeing injustice or oppression in their homeland, and hoping for a better life for their children has a strong grip on the American immigration. Moreover, there is a growing body of research that shows that most immigrants do assimilate to American society and that immigration has net positive impacts on the American economy, society, and culture.

In this paper, I survey the trends in immigration to the United States with a focus on the most recent period—the Post 1965 Wave of Immigration, named for the reforms in immigration law that were enacted in the late 1960s as part of the Civil Rights revolution. I also review recent research on the demographic, economic, social, and cultural impact of immigration on American society.

## 2. Trends in Immigration to the United States

Figure 1 shows the history of the absolute and relative levels of the foreign born population in the United States. The histogram—the solid bars—shows the numbers (in millions) of foreign born persons in the country from 1850 to 2012. The foreign born includes everyone who is born outside the United States, including students and workers residing here temporarily. This category also includes many undocumented immigrants—those residing in the country illegally. The curved line shows the ratio of foreign born persons to the total US population in each decennial census from 1850 to 2000 and the comparable figures for recent years from the American Community Survey.

The absolute number of the foreign born population rose rapidly from the mid-19th century through the early decades of the 20th century—popularly known as the ‘Age of



**Figure 1:** Foreign born population and percent of total population for the United States, 1850-2010

Source: US Bureau of Census, Census of Population, 1850-2000 (in Gibson and Jung, 2006), and American Community Survey, 2010.

Mass Migration.’ With the cessation of large-scale immigration after 1924, the absolute numbers of foreign born declined to below 10 million by 1970. With the renewal of immigration in recent decades, the number of foreign born persons has risen dramatically and is currently around 40 million.

The visibility of the foreign born—at work, in schools, and in neighbourhoods—is measured by the proportion of foreign born to the total population, that is, the curved line in Figure 1. It is to be noted that the contemporary presence of immigrants is actually less than it was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the foreign born constituted around 14 to 15 per cent of the American population. Then, during the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the figure dropped precipitously to below 5 per cent in 1970. With the renewal of mass immigration after 1965, the percent foreign born is currently 13 per cent of the total population. While this figure is high relative to the period from 1950 to 1970, it is slightly below the proportion of foreign born for much of American history.

The ‘Post-1965 Immigration Wave,’ was named for the 1965 immigration law that repealed the ‘national origins quotas’ enacted in the 1920s. These quotas were considered discriminatory by the children and grandchildren of Southern and Eastern European immigrants, and the 1965 immigration legislation was part of the reforms of the Civil Rights era. The advocates of reform in the 1960s were not pushing for a major new wave of immigration; they expected a small increase in the number of arrivals from Italy, Greece, and a few other European countries, as families that were divided by the immigration restrictions of the 1920s were allowed to be reunited (Reimers 1985: Chap. 3).

Family reunification and scarce occupational skills were the primary criteria for admission under the 1965 Act (Keely 1979). The new preference system allowed highly skilled professionals, primarily doctors, nurses, and engineers from Asian countries, to immigrate and eventually to sponsor their families. About the same time, and largely independently of the 1965 Act, immigration from Latin America began to rise. Legal and undocumented migration from Mexico surged after a temporary farm worker programme, known as the Bracero Programme, ended in 1964 (Massey, Durand and Malone 2002). There have also been major waves of immigration to the United States with the fall of regimes supported by American political and military interventions abroad, including Cuba, Vietnam, and Central America. Each of these streams of immigrant and refugee inflows has spawned secondary waves of immigration as family members have followed.

### **3. Characteristics of the Post-1965 Wave of Immigrants**

Most of the immigrants who arrived from 1880 to 1920 during the Age of Mass Migration were from Southern and Eastern Europe, including Italy, Germany, Poland, and Russia. Many of these ‘new’ immigrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were considered to be distinctly different from the older stock of white Americans in terms of language, religion, and in their potential for assimilation into American society. Popular opposition to immigration in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century led to the laws of the 1920s that sharply restricted immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. There were much smaller waves of immigration from China and Japan, but even stronger opposition ended Asian immigration in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

When the doors to immigration were opened again in the years after 1965, only small numbers of Europeans arrived. The major regions of origin in the Post-1965 Wave of Immigration are Latin America and Asia. More than 11 million—about 30 per cent of all immigrants (foreign born)—are from Mexico, one of the nearest neighbours of the United States. Another 20 per cent of immigrants are from other countries in Latin America, with the largest numbers from Central America and the Caribbean. Migrants from Puerto Rico are domestic migrants, not immigrants, since Puerto Rico is an American territory and all Puerto Ricans are American citizens at birth.

About one quarter of the foreign-born are from Asia, and the relative share of Asian immigrants has risen in recent years. One of the hallmarks of contemporary Asian immigration is its diversity—almost every country in Asia is represented in the American immigrant population. The largest Asian immigrant communities in the U. S. are from China, India, and the Philippines, but there are also considerable numbers from Vietnam, Korea, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand.

In the 1970s and 1980s, most 'new immigrants' settled in the West and East coast states, and a few other selected states, including Texas, Florida, and Illinois. About 40 per cent of all immigrants lived in California and New York. In the 1990s and 2000s, immigrants increasingly began settling in new destinations including smaller towns in the Midwest and Southeast. The majority of immigrants still live in California, New York, and other traditional destinations, but industries are attracting immigrant labour to many other regions. In addition to the high tech sectors and universities that attract highly skilled immigrants, less skilled immigrants are drawn to agriculture, food processing, and manufacturing industries that are often shunned by native born workers.

The distribution of education among recent immigrants to the United States is bimodal. The largest group of immigrants, particularly those from Mexico and Central America, has less education, on average, than the native-born American population. Less education, however, is not equivalent to unskilled labour. Many immigrants without a high school degree are able to work in the skilled construction industry, nursing homes caring for the elderly, and in the service sectors in restaurants, hotels, and gardening.

At the other end of the educational continuum are the highly educated immigrant streams from Taiwan, India, Iran, and many African countries. Almost half of Asian immigrants have a university degree compared to only a third of native born Americans. Many of these highly skilled immigrants fill key niches in the high tech sector, higher education, and many professional fields.

#### **4. Popular Fears of Too Much Immigration**

Existing alongside the pride of having immigrant grandparents (or great-grandparents) in the 'nation of immigrants,' many Americans fear that the United States has more immigrants than the country can absorb and assimilate. There are widespread popular beliefs that immigrants take jobs that would otherwise go to native born Americans and that the wages of native born workers are depressed by the presence of immigrant workers. Beyond the economic argument, many Americans also think that the presence of immigrants, especially large numbers of immigrants from 'third world' countries, are a threat to American values, culture, and institutions (Bouvier 1992; Brimelow 1995; ; Huntington 2004). These sentiments have given rise to an anti-immigrant lobby that

includes political leaders, TV and radio talk-show pundits, social movement organisations, including public interest organisations that publish reports and policy briefs, as well as unauthorised militia groups that patrol the U.S. Mexican border, such as the 'Minutemen'.

Neither the presence of large numbers of immigrants nor the exaggerated claims about the negative impact of immigration are new phenomena. In 1751, Benjamin Franklin complained about the Germans in Pennsylvania and their reluctance to learn English (Archdeacon 1983: 20; Jones 1992: 39-40). Based on a campaign of fear about the political dangers of unchecked immigration, primarily Irish Catholics, the 'Know-Nothing' Party elected six governors, dominated several state legislatures, and sent a bloc of representatives to Congress in 1855. During World War I, Americans who wanted to retain their German-American identity were forced to be '100 percent Americans' and to give up their language and culture (Higham 1988: Chap. 8).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Chinese and Japanese migrants who worked as railroad and agricultural labourers were targeted by nativist groups who feared that Asian immigrants would harm the economic status of native workers and contaminate the 'racial purity' of the nation (Hing 1993: 22). The passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was the first major step toward a closed society. After the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, Japanese migrants became a new source of cheap labour on the West coast and Hawaii. Japanese immigration was targeted by the same groups that opposed Chinese immigrants.

Southern and Eastern European groups also faced an increasingly hostile context of reception as their numbers swelled at the turn of the twentieth century. A number of formal organisations sprang up among old line New England elites to campaign against the continued immigration of 'undesirables' from Europe (Higham 1988; Jones 1992: Chap. 9). After a long political struggle, Congress passed restrictive laws in the early 1920s that stopped almost all immigration except from Northwestern Europe.

## **5. Do Immigrants Assimilate into American Society?**

In spite of the fears that immigrants are resistant to learning English and refuse to join the American mainstream, there is a large body of social science and historical research which concludes that immigrants have, by and large, assimilated to American society (Alba 1990, Alba and Nee 2003; Duncan and Duncan 1968; Lieberman 1980). This does not mean that assimilation was painless, automatic, or immediate. For the first generation of immigrants who arrived as adults, the processes of linguistic, cultural, and social change were painful and usually incomplete. Immigrants tend to settle in ethnic enclaves, prefer to speak their mother tongue, and gravitate to places of worship and social events that provide cultural continuity with their origins (Handlin 1973; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Many immigrants do learn English and find employment in the general economy, but few feel completely part of their new society. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, evidence pointed to the slow and incomplete assimilation of the then 'new' immigrants (Pagnini and Morgan 1990).

With the passage of time, and especially following the emergence of the second generation, there was unmistakable evidence of assimilation among the descendants of early 20<sup>th</sup> century European immigrants. Acculturated through their attendance at

American schools, the children of immigrants did not share the ambivalence of their immigrant parents. The second generation spoke fluent English and was eager to join the American mainstream. By all measures, including socio-economic status, residential mobility, and intermarriage, they left behind the ethnic world of their immigrant parents (Alba and Nee 2003; Lieberman 1980). By the 1950s, patterns of suburbanisation broke down ethnic neighborhoods and intermarriage became more common (Alba and Nee 2003; Lieberman and Waters 1988).

Although it is widely assumed that immigrants in the Post-1965 Immigration Wave are less likely to assimilate than those who arrived in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is growing evidence that the new immigrants, especially their children, are doing remarkably well (Alba and Nee 2003; Kasinitz *et al.* 2008). On average, second generation immigrants are less likely to drop out of high school and more likely to attend college than the average native born American (Hirschman 2001; White and Glick 2009). Intermarriage is also common: recent research estimates that one-third to one-half of second generation Hispanics and Asians marry outside of their community (Duncan and Trejo 2007; Min and Kim 2009). The children of contemporary immigrants are on track for assimilation and upward mobility at about the same pace as the descendants of earlier waves of immigration from Europe.

## **6. The Impact of Immigration on America**

There are widespread popular beliefs, including many influential voices within public policy circles, which argue that immigration is harmful to the economic welfare of the country, especially to native born Americans (Borjas 1994; Bouvier 1992; Briggs 1984; Brimelow 1995). The central claim is that immigrants, because they are willing to work for lower wages, take jobs from native born American workers. Competition from immigrant workers is expected to depress wages, especially in the low-skilled labour market (Borjas 1989). Finally, immigrants are thought to be an economic burden because they disproportionately receive public benefits, such as health care, schooling, and welfare without paying their fair share of taxes. These claims, however, are not supported by empirical evidence.

The definitive statement on the economic consequences of immigration was the 1997 report of the National Research Council (NRC) panel on the demographic and economic impacts of immigration, which drew on the theoretical and empirical research conducted by leading specialists in labour economics and public finance (Smith and Edmonston 1997; 1998, also see Card 1990; 2005). The major conclusion of the NRC report was that the net effects of immigration on the American economy were very modest. Immigration does expand labour supply and may increase competition for jobs and lower wages for native workers who are substitutes for immigrants, but immigration also expands total production (national income) and increases the incomes that accrue to native born workers who are complements to immigrants (Smith and Edmondson 1997: Chap. 4). Although some native born workers may compete for the same jobs as immigrants, many more may be complements to immigrants. This means that the arrival of unskilled immigrant labour may 'push up', rather than 'push out', many native born workers (Haines 2000: 202; Lieberman 1980: Chap. 10). Moreover, many native born

workers have direct or indirect income from capital through their savings, ownership of property, and as recipients of pension programmes.

The most likely reason for a lack of empirical support for the presumed negative impact of immigration is the questionable assumption that the only impact of additional workers (immigrants) on the labour market is through wage competition. The presence of immigrants has broader effects on economic growth, both locally and nationally, that leads to rising wage levels for native born workers. Among the potential mechanisms are increased national savings, entrepreneurship and small business development, a faster rate of inventive activity and technological innovation, and increasing economies of scale, both in the production and consumer markets (Carter and Sutch 1999). There is a long-standing hypothesis in economic history that high levels of immigration stimulates economic growth by increasing demand for housing, urban development, and other amenities (Easterlin 1968). A recent study found that immigration provided the necessary labour supply for the rapid growth of manufacturing during the American Industrial Revolution from 1880 to 1920 (Hirschman and Mogford 2009).

Another major economic issue addressed by the 1997 NRC report was the impact of immigration on the governmental fiscal system—the balance between taxes paid and the value of government services received (Clune 1998; Garvey and Espendshade 1998; Lee and Miller 1998; Smith and Edmonston 1997: Chaps. 6 & 7). The NRC researchers report that the average native born household in New Jersey and California pays more in state and local taxes as a result of the presence of immigrants (Smith and Edmonston 1997: Chap. 6). These results are largely determined by the lower wages of immigrants and the demographic composition of immigrant households, which tend to be younger and have more children than the native born population. The largest component of local and state government budgets is schooling, and immigrant households, with more children per household than native born households, are disproportionately beneficiaries of state support for schooling.

Despite potential imbalances in the net transfer of revenues at the local and state level, an accounting of the federal fiscal system shows that immigrants (and their descendants) contribute more in taxes than they receive in benefits (Smith and Edmonston 1997: Chap. 7). Just as the age structure of immigrant households makes them disproportionately the beneficiaries of public education, the relative youth of immigrants also means they are less likely be beneficiaries of Social Security and Medicare (and Medicaid for many of the institutionalised elderly). Immigrants also help to relieve the per-capita fiscal burden of native born for the national debt, national security, and public goods, which are major federal expenditures that are only loosely tied to population size. An intergenerational accounting that counts the future taxes paid by the children of immigrants concludes that immigration helps, rather than hurts, the nation's fiscal balance (Lee and Miller 1998; Smith and Edmonston 1997; Chap. 7).

### *6.1 The Role of Immigration on the Advancement of Science, Technology and Higher Education*

Scientific progress is a major source of modern economic growth, increasing longevity and other features of modern development that enhance the quality of life in the United States. It is frequently claimed that American economic development has been fostered



by government investments in scientific and technological innovation in the industrial sector, as well as in universities and research institutes. How might immigration also affect scientific progress? Perhaps the most direct link is the migration of scientists from other countries and the high educational attainment of immigrants and their children.

Albert Einstein, perhaps the most eminent American scientist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a refugee from Nazi Germany. There are many other examples of distinguished scientists, researchers, academics, and entrepreneurs who arrived in the United States as students who pursued their talents in American universities and/or industry, including Enrico Fermi, Edward Teller, and Hans Bethe, the fathers of the atomic age, Elias Zerhouni, former director of the National Institutes of Health, and Andrew Grove, Jerry Yang, and Sergey Brin, the engineering entrepreneurs who led the American transition to the digital age. From 1990 to 2004, over one-third of US scientists who had received Nobel Prizes were foreign born (Wulf 2006; also see Smith and Edmonston 1977: 384-385).

The impact of immigration on the development of science in the United States is more than the story of a relatively open door for immigrants who are exceptionally talented scientists and engineers. Over the last four decades, American universities have played an important role in training immigrants and the children of immigrants to become scientists. Foreign students have become increasingly central to American higher education, particularly in graduate education in engineering and the sciences. After graduating with advanced degrees from American universities, many foreign students return to their home countries, but a significant share is attracted to employment opportunities in American universities, laboratories, and industries. Many of the foreign students who have become permanent residents or US citizens go on to make important contributions to the development of American science and engineering.

Several recent studies have found that foreign-born scientists and engineers are playing a critical role in American universities, laboratories, and scientific industries (Stephan and Levin 2007; Sana 2010). Foreign-born scientists and engineers are also over-represented among members of elected honorific societies such as the National Academy of Engineering and National Academy of Sciences, and among the authors of highly cited academic papers (Stephan and Levin 2007). During the last decades of the twentieth century, immigrant entrepreneurs formed a significant contingent of all founders of US high-technology start-ups, particularly in Silicon Valley (Saxenian 2001). One recent study estimates that one in four technology firms started in the United States between 1995 and 2005 was founded by at least one foreign-born entrepreneur (Wadwha *et al.* 2007).

### *6.2 The Impact of Immigrants on the Evolution of American Institutions*

All other things being equal, most societies, communities, organisations and cultures tend to resist change, especially from outside sources. The truism that 'people prefer that which is familiar' is reinforced by persons with authority, power, and status, who generally shape cultural expectations to revere conformity more than innovation. This pattern, an 'ideal type' to be sure, is especially common in traditional rural areas, among multi-generational families, and in religious and cultural organisations.

There are, of course, many exceptions to this pattern, especially during eras of rapid technological and social change, wartime, and other times of catastrophe. The simple



proposition of cultural continuity helps to explain the generally conservative nature of intergenerational socialisation and the ubiquity of ethnocentrism—beliefs that value insiders and traditional culture more than outsiders. In traditional (and in many modern) societies, immigrants are feared because they might potentially challenge the existing social arrangements as well as familiar cultural patterns.

All things have not been equal during much of American history. The United States has received about 75 million immigrants since record-keeping began in 1820. This relatively open door was due to a confluence of interests, both external and internal. As modernisation spread throughout the Old World during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the (relatively) open frontier beckoned the landless and others seeking economic betterment. These patterns culminated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when more than one million immigrants arrived annually—a level that is only being rivaled by contemporary levels of immigration. American economic and political institutions also gained from immigration. Immigrant settlement helped to secure the frontier as well as to provide labour for nation-building projects, including transportation networks of roads, canals, and railroads. During the era of industrialisation, immigrant labour provided a disproportionate share of workers for the dirty and dangerous jobs in mining and manufacturing (Hirschman and Mogford 2009).

In spite of the national tradition of mass immigration, new arrivals have rarely received a welcome reception. The conservative backlash against immigrants has been a perennial theme of American history. During the Age of Mass Migration, the negative reaction against immigrants was not simply a response from the parochial masses, but also a project led by conservative intellectuals. Long before immigration restrictions were implemented in the 1920s, there was a particularly virulent campaign against the 'new' immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. Most of these immigrants were Catholics and Jews—religious and cultural traditions that were thought to be in conflict with the traditional ascendancy of white Protestants of English ancestry.

As most Northeastern and Midwestern cities became dominated by immigrants (both first and second generations) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, many elite old-stock American families and communities created barriers to protect their 'aristocratic' status and privileges against newcomers (Higham 1988). Residential areas became 'restricted,' college fraternities and sororities limited their membership, and many social clubs and societies only allowed those with the right pedigrees and connections to be admitted (Baltzell 1964). Barriers to employment for minorities, especially Jews, were part of the culture of corporate law firms and elite professions (Auerbach 1975: Chap. 2). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many elite private universities were notorious for their quotas for Jewish students and their refusal to hire Jews and other minorities (Baltzell 1964: 336; Karabel 2006). In some cases, these quotas persisted until the 1960s.

Given this history, how were immigrants and their children able to make such impressive achievements to American science, arts, and culture? Part of the solution to this puzzle is that immigrants, and especially their children, were pulled into self-employment and new sectors of the economy where there was less discrimination. As noted above, prestigious organisations that celebrated tradition tended to be closed to outsiders. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century was an era of rapid demographic, economic, and

technological change. Rapid social change creates more flexibility and openness for outsiders to be absorbed into mainstream institutions.

The market for cultural and artistic performances was greatly expanded with the growth of cities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A significant share of the urban population, the potential consumers of art and culture, were of immigrant stock. The most important development of this era was the motion picture industry—a new form of the performing arts. In the 1920s, immigrant risk-takers, primarily Eastern European Jewish immigrants, transformed the fledgling motion picture industry with the development of large Hollywood studios. Although the new Hollywood moguls sought to create movies that appealed to mass audiences and ignored any hint of ethnicity or religion, their presence may have minimised traditional prejudices and discrimination among those who worked in Hollywood. Irving Howe characterised the openness of the performing arts (and sports) to talented outsiders:

... “the (entertainment industry) brushed aside claims of rank and looked only for the immediate promise of talent. Just as blacks would later turn to baseball and basketball knowing that here at least their skin color counted for less than their skills, so in the early 1900s, young Jews broke into vaudeville because here too, people asked not, who are you? but, what can you do?”

This openness is reinforced in fields and professions where talent and accomplishment are clearly recognised and visible, including professional sports and universities. Prior to World War II, competition was restricted in many institutions with barriers to admission and hiring. Professional baseball was closed to African Americans and elite universities restricted the admission of Jews and other minorities. In spite of these tendencies, many American institutions have become more open and meritocratic over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Baseball and other professional sports were integrated before most other institutions, including public school education. In recent decades, American professional sports have become more global, with a growing participation of talented international players. This trend is driven, in large part, by competition. Sports fans want winning teams, and large audiences increase revenues. The owners and management of sports teams respond to market pressures by recruitment of talented players from other countries. Similar processes are at work in universities and scientific organisations. More talented researchers generate more grants, more patents, and more commercial applications of scientific discoveries. The global search for talented graduate students and researchers by elite American universities and research organisations is driven by competitive pressures that have accelerated in recent decades. Other fields where merit is relatively easy to measure, such as in classical musical performance, have also become part of a global employment market.

There are similar competitive pressures in many American corporations and business for talented employees, but there are certainly wide variations depending on the pace of technological change, international market competition, and the ability to measure merit. Traditional manufacturing sectors of the economy, automobiles for

example, may focus more on continuity, advertising, and efficiency than technological innovation. Other sectors, such as the electronic and computing industry are more at the forefront of technological innovation and international competition. It seems likely that these more competitive sectors, perhaps exemplified by Silicon Valley, would be the most meritocratic and willing to hire outsiders—immigrants and foreign students who have the necessary skills.

The same processes of competition certainly affected the development of Hollywood, Broadway, and many other American performing and cultural arts. Audience preferences may have tended toward familiar cultural content, but there was undoubtedly strong market pressure for 'quality', however defined. There was also considerable room for innovation in artistic and cultural performance in a pluralistic society with relatively few cultural touchstones. Immigrants and their children played important roles in the development of culture and art in 20<sup>th</sup> century America, just as they have in science and academic institutions.

My contention is that the presence of immigrants and their offspring has helped to 'push' American institutions in the direction of increasing openness and meritocracy. This has not always been a smooth or conflict-free process. When Jewish students appeared in large numbers in leading American universities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were deemed rate-busters who upset the traditional college student culture, which de-emphasised too much study or serious scholarly interests.

The growing number of talented Jewish students, mostly second generation immigrants, certainly raised the standards at universities that did not discriminate. As universities began to compete for faculty and graduate students during the post-World War II era, the quota restrictions eventually disappeared (Karabel 2006). Elite colleges and universities still retain legacies of non-merit based admission systems, including programmes to privilege children of alumni. There is also evidence that Asian American students have not been admitted in numbers proportional to their test scores (Espenshade and Chung 2005), but these current practices are only a shadow of those of earlier times. The point is not that universities are completely meritocratic, but that they have become more meritocratic with increasing competition and acceptance of talented 'outsiders.'

Greater openness to hiring and promotion on the basis of merit has become an integral part of many American institutions in recent years. The reputation of the United States as a land of opportunity for those with ambition and ability—a theme in many Hollywood movies—made the country a beacon for prospective immigrants. In addition to raising the international stature of the United States, the participation of talented immigrants and their children has likely made American scientific and cultural institutions more successful.

## 7. Conclusions

Contemporary immigration to the United States, upwards of one million new arrivals per year, is not exceptional. In fact, the relative share of immigrants—about 13 per cent—is a bit lower than the 14 to 15 per cent that characterised much of American history prior to the 1920s. Absorbing large numbers of newcomers has costs as well as benefits. The costs are immediately apparent, but some of the benefits take longer to appear. Schools,

hospitals, and social service agencies may have to arrange for translation services and other special programmes for immigrants. But most of the costs of these adjustments are paid by immigrants and their families. Immigrants have given up the familiarity of home in their quest for more rewarding careers and greater opportunities for their children. Immigrants must also contend with a receiving society that is ambivalent, and sometimes hostile, to their presence.

Contemporary immigrants do adapt and assimilate to American society—probably as fast as earlier waves of immigrants. Assimilation is not instantaneous, and, for adult immigrants, the process is never complete. But for their native born children, and for those who arrive in the United States as young children, assimilation is a natural process that reflects immersion in American schools and culture.

Immigrants and their children, however, are not the same as native born Americans. In addition to the many obvious characteristics, such as language, religion, and cuisine, they generally differ on social and educational characteristics. For the contemporary period, immigrants are over-represented both among college graduates and those with less than 12 years of schooling relative to native born Americans (Portes and Rumbaut 2006: Chap. 4). Immigrants are also not representative of the society from which they come (Feliciano 2005a; 2005b; Model 2008). In contrast to popular images, immigrants are not drawn from the least successful ranks of their home societies, but are generally well above average in terms of their education and other skills.

Perhaps the most important contribution of immigrants is their children. Many immigrants have made enormous sacrifices for their children's welfare, including the decision to settle in the United States. Immigrant parents often have to work in menial jobs, multiple jobs, and in occupations well below the status they would have earned if they had remained at home. These sacrifices have meaning because immigrant parents believe that their children will have better educational and occupational opportunities in the United States than in their homelands. Immigrant parents push their children to excel by reminding them of their own sacrifices.

These high expectations for the children of immigrants generally lead to high motivations for academic and worldly success (Hao and Bonstead-Burns 1998). A large body of research shows that the children of immigrants do remarkably well in American schools. Holding constant their socio-economic status, the second generation obtains higher grades in school and above average results on standardised tests, is less likely to drop out of high school, and is more likely to go to college than the children of native born Americans (Fuligni and Witknow 2004; Perreira, Harris and Lee 2006).

In addition to measures of socio-economic assimilation, immigrants and their children are over-represented in a broad range of rare achievements, including Nobel Prize winners, top scientists, American performing artists, and other contributors to the American creative arts. They have broadened our cultural outlook and sometimes, have even defined American culture through literature, music and art.

Compared with other societies, the United States is generally regarded as unusually competitive and places a high premium on progress and innovation. This dynamic characteristic may well arise from the presence of immigrants and on the evolution of American institutions and identity. The size and selectivity of the immigrant community means that immigrants (and/or their children) are competing for entry into colleges,

jobs, and access to prestigious positions and institutions. Not all institutions have been open to outsiders on an equal footing with insiders. In particular, high status organisations often give preference to persons with the right connections and social pedigree. But institutions that opened their doors to talented outsiders—immigrants and their children—probably gained a competitive advantage. Over time, greater openness and meritocratic processes may have become a force that shaped the evolution of American institutions in the arts, sports, science, and some sectors of business. In turn, the participation of outsiders may have reinforced a distinctive American character and culture that values not ‘who are you?’ but, ‘what can you do?’

Because immigrants have to constantly work at learning the system, they are intensely curious about American culture. For the most talented, this leads to a level of creativity beyond the normal boundaries that has left its imprint on American music, theater, dance, film, and many other realms of artistic endeavour. Finally, American institutions – schools, universities, businesses, sports teams, and even symphony orchestras, are meritocratic and seek talent wherever they can find it. The United States is a competitive society that values progress and success. This dynamic characteristic has partly been created through the presence of immigrants, which has pushed the country to value skills and ability over social pedigree.

The fear of cultural conservatives is that immigrants will change American character and identity. Yet, the definition of American identity is elusive. Unlike many other societies, the United States does not have an identity tied to an ancient lineage. Given the two wars against the British in early American history (in 1776 and 1812), the founders of the new American republic did not make English origins the defining trait of American identity; rather it was acceptance of the Enlightenment ideas expressed in the founding documents of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights (Gleason 1980; Vecoli 1966). Even though these ideals were belied by the continuing stain of slavery, a civic identity rather than ancestry has been the distinctive feature of American ‘peoplehood’ from the very start. This trait combined with *jus soli* (birthright citizenship)<sup>2</sup> has slowed, if not stopped, efforts to define Americans solely on the basis of ancestral origins. Another reason for the broad definition of American identity is that the overwhelming majority of the American population, including white Americans, is descended from 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century immigrants. Demographic estimates suggest that less than one-third of the American population in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century were descended from the 18<sup>th</sup> century American population (Edmonston and Passel 1994: 61, Gibson 1992).

Yet, there have been recurrent struggles to redefine American identity in terms of ancestry. The first naturalisation law passed by Congress in 1790 limited citizenship to whites. The broadening of American citizenship to include African Americans, American Indians, and Asian immigrants were epic battles. The short-lived, but remarkably successful ‘Know-Nothing’ political movement called itself the American Party to highlight

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<sup>2</sup> The fourteenth amendment to the Constitution (adopted in 1868) defines citizenship as consisting of: “All persons born or naturalised in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.” Subsequent Supreme Court rulings have interpreted the citizenship clause to include the native born children of foreign nationals.

the ancestral origins of its adherents. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe were pouring in, some old stock Americans founded organisations such as the Sons of the American Revolution, Daughters of the American Revolution, and similar groups to celebrate their ancestral pedigrees and to distance themselves from recent immigrants. The national origin quotas of the 1920s were a clear victory for those who feared dilution of the white English Protestant composition of the American population. The current anti-immigrant sentiment also expresses a fear that American identity will be lost, yet it is unclear that a universal contemporary American identity exists. Although the English language is considered to be central, English Protestant ancestry is not emphasised. There is too much diversity, even within the white population, to focus on specific ancestral origins.

In an often quoted remark, Oscar Handlin, the famous historian, observed that after searching for the place of immigrants in American history, that immigrants are American history. The American experiment in nation building is, in large part, the story of how immigrants have been absorbed into American society and how immigrants have enlarged and transformed America. Immigrants settled the frontier; they participated in constructing canals, roads and railroads, and contributed significant manpower in many American wars. Immigrants provided much of the manufacturing labour for the American industrial revolution as well as a disproportionate share of the contemporary highly skilled scientists and engineers that are central to the modern electronic and biomedical economy. Most interestingly, immigrants and the children of immigrants have been among the most important creative artists who have shaped the development of the cultural arts, including movies, theatre, dance, and music.

Immigration is, perhaps, the most distinctive feature of American identity. Immigration has had a disproportionate effect on the demographic size, ethnic diversity, culture, and character of American society. Immigrants and their children have assimilated to America, but they have also shaped American institutions in ways that have allowed strangers to participate on a relatively open playing field.

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