

The next Americans

Immigrants don't destroy our national identity, they renew it.

By Tomás R. Jiménez, TOMÁS R. JIMÉNEZ is an assistant professor of sociology and a visiting research fellow at the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at UC San Diego. His research focuses on immigration,
May 27, 2007

BEHIND THE OUTCRY over the controversial immigration reform legislation making its way through the Senate lies an unsettling question for many Americans. Should the bill become a reality, an estimated 12 million unauthorized immigrants, the vast majority of whom are Latino, would become eligible for citizenship immediately, and opportunities for millions of others to follow them would be created. What effect will these permanently settled immigrants have on American identity?

Some critics of the legislation are already arguing that inviting millions of immigrants to stay permanently in the U.S. and become citizens will hasten the fading of a cohesive nation. They say that immigrants may become more interwoven into the fabric of the United States, but the ethnic patches to which they bind their identities will remain all too distinguishable from the rest of the American quilt.

How immigrants and their descendants see themselves will change over time, and they will simultaneously transform many aspects of what it means to be an American. This is undoubtedly an uncomfortable process, fraught with tension between newcomers and established Americans that can occasionally become explosive. But the real issue is whether the United States can provide opportunities for upward mobility so that immigrants can, in turn, fortify what is most essential to our nation's identity.

History is instructive on whether immigrants will create a messy patchwork of ethnicities in the U.S. About a century ago, a tide of Southern and Eastern European immigrants arriving on our shores raised fears similar to those we hear today. Then, as now, Americans worried that the newcomers were destroying American identity. Many were certain that Catholic immigrants would help the pope rule the United States from Rome, and that immigrant anarchists would destroy American democracy. Some eugenicists thought that the dark-skinned immigrants from Southern Europe would contaminate the American gene pool.

None of this came to pass, of course. The pope has no political say in American affairs, the United States is still a capitalist democracy, and there is nothing wrong with the American gene pool. The fact that these fears never materialized is often cited as proof that European-origin immigrants and their descendants successfully assimilated into an American societal monolith.

However, as sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee point out, much of the American identity as we know it today was shaped by previous waves of immigrants. For instance,

they note that the Christian tradition of the Christmas tree and the leisure Sunday made their way into the American mainstream because German immigrants and their descendants brought these traditions with them. Where religion was concerned, Protestantism was the clear marker of the nonsecular mainstream. But because of the assimilation of millions of Jews and Catholics, we today commonly refer to an American "Judeo-Christian tradition," a far more encompassing notion of American religious identity than the one envisioned in the past.

Immigrants are also redefining American identity today, though there are differences. For one, assimilation no longer exclusively means shedding all remnants of ethnicity and adopting a way of life largely identified with Anglo Protestants. For instance, it was not at all uncommon in the early 20th century for teachers to give young immigrant pupils a stern rap across their knuckles for speaking their parents' mother tongue in school. By contrast, multiculturalism and the value of diversity are now widely adopted.

Although some see this as undercutting a cohesive U.S., we nonetheless regularly celebrate, even if sometimes superficially, the various ethnic strands in our multicultural nation. Education, business and political leaders tout the virtues of diversity, and the world of commerce affirms ethnic identity through ethnically oriented marketing aimed at selling everything from laundry detergent to *quinceañera* celebration packages at Disneyland.

These differences from the past have not — and are not — reversing the course of assimilation, even if they have given it a new tone. There are notable signs that immigrants and their children are already adopting features of American identity as their own. Consider, for instance, language, a central front in debates over assimilation. The growth of non-English-speaking immigrant populations, particularly those that speak Spanish, and the explosive rise in commercial services and media that cater to them have led commentators such as Pat Buchanan to pronounce the coming of a polyglot society. But nothing appears to be further from the truth.

Even in Los Angeles County, where 36% of the population is foreign-born and more than half speak a language other than English at home, English is not losing out in the long run. According to a recent study by social scientists Rubén Rumbaut, Douglas Massey and Frank Bean, published in the *Population and Development Review*, the use of non-English languages virtually disappears among nearly all U.S.-born children of immigrants in the county. Spanish shows more staying power among the U.S.-born children and grandchildren of Mexican immigrants, which is not surprising given that the size of the Spanish-speaking population provides near-ubiquitous access to the language. But the survival of Spanish among U.S.-born descendants of Mexican immigrants does not come at the expense of their ability to speak English and, more strikingly, English overwhelms Spanish-language use among the grandchildren of these immigrants.

An equally telling sign of how much immigrants and their children are becoming "American" is how different they have become from those in their ethnic homelands.

Virtually all of today's immigrants stay connected to their countries of origin. They send money to family members who remain behind. Relatively inexpensive air, rail and bus travel and the availability of cheap telecommunication and e-mail enable them stay in constant contact, and dual citizenship allows their political voices to be heard from abroad. These enduring ties might lead to the conclusion that continuity between here and there threatens loyalty to the Stars and Stripes.

But ask any immigrant or their children about a recent visit to their country of origin, and they are likely to tell you how American they felt. The family and friends they visit quickly recognize the prodigal children's tastes for American styles, their American accents and their declining cultural familiarity with life in the ethnic homeland — all telltale signs that they've Americanized. As sociologist David Fitzgerald puts it, their assimilation into American society entails a good deal of "dissimilation" from the countries the immigrants left behind.

American identity is absorbing something quite significant from immigrants and being changed by them. Language, food, entertainment and holiday traditions are palpable aspects of American culture on which immigrants today, as in the past, are leaving their mark. Our everyday lexicon is sprinkled with Spanish words. We are now just as likely to grab a burrito as a burger. Hip-hop is tinged with South Asian rhythms. And Chinese New Year and Cinco de Mayo are taking their places alongside St. Patrick's Day as widely celebrated American ethnic holidays.

But these are not the changes to American identity that matter most. At its core, American identity is a shared belief in the United States as a land of opportunity — a place where those who work hard and display individual effort realize their ambitions. Today's immigrants, including the estimated 12 million that may soon become authorized, have the potential to fortify the idea of the United States as a land of opportunity. Their willingness to risk their lives to come here and the backbreaking work many of them do attest to their ambition.

But their capacity to refresh what is essential to American identity depends a great deal on our ability to stay true to its essence — to be a land of opportunity. This means that we should be, above all, concerned that the rungs on the ladder of economic mobility are sturdy and closely spaced.

If we are going to take on the formidable challenge of further integrating 12 million mostly poor immigrants, we have to provide better public schools, a more affordable college education, healthcare and jobs that offer a decent wage and benefits so that they and their children are able to rejuvenate the American dream. The real threat is not that immigrants will fail to buy into what's essential to American identity, but that we will fall short in providing them the tools to do so.

