

Topics / Immigration in America / Immigration in America: Overview

In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote:

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

"He" refers to King George III of England. In this passage, Jefferson charged the king with attempting to keep the American colonies underpopulated, refusing to recognize the Naturalization Acts that gave citizenship to newcomers, and restricting westward settlement. The British policy of limiting and obstructing the free movement of people was one of the factors that led the 13 colonies to seek their independence. Immigration issues have been woven into U.S. history from the very beginning. They are no less controversial today than they were in 1776.



Between 1820, when the federal government began keeping records on immigrants, and 2005, over 70 million immigrants have entered the United States. The earliest immigrants were mainly British. However, in the 1840s, the potato famine in Ireland forced many thousands of Irish to come to the United States within just a few years. These immigrants were poor Catholics. Their arrival in large numbers was a shock to native-born, Protestant Americans. The Irish touched off a strong anti-immigrant movement. Other waves of immigrants followed. These newcomers were even more culturally different from the native population than the Irish and met with stiff prejudice and even anti-immigrant laws. Asians arriving in California and southern and eastern Europeans flocking to eastern coastal cities were not welcomed. More recently, many immigrants to the United States have been

Hispanic, mainly Mexican. This has touched off yet another round of debates on immigration.

Despite negative waves of feeling against immigration, Americans cannot deny that the majority of their ancestors came from somewhere else. The idea that we are an "immigrant nation" is part of our cultural identity. Until recently, the image of the United States was that of a "melting pot" into which the ethnic identities of millions of "new immigrants" were submerged until they were homogenized into the larger American culture. The melting pot would change their physical appearances, their names, their lifestyles, their tastes, their aspirations, their interests, and their allegiances. The goal was to remake Poles, Italians, Russians, Greeks, Jews, etc. into Americans. This process might take more than one generation. But the hope was that the children of immigrants would be fully assimilated into U.S. society by the time they were adults. The homogenization and assimilation image remained intact until relatively recently.



But it has gradually been replaced by a more pluralistic multiethnic image. Today, it is recognized that each immigrant group possesses some distinguishing characteristics that should be retained, and perhaps even adapted by their new homeland. This idea has gained ascendancy over the earlier belief that newcomers must blend into their new environment and lose their own distinctiveness. The United States no longer focuses exclusively on assimilation—it is more likely to stress pluralism, multiculturalism, and mixed strands coming together to form a new mosaic.

Immigrants still aspire to "success" as it has always been defined in the American Dream: money, financial security, owning one's own home, education for one's children, recognition from peers and neighbors and participation in larger community enterprises. But many no longer feel that they must give up their cultural ties to do it. "Hyphenated" Americans (e.g. Italian-Americans, Polish-Americans) living in ethnic middle and upper middle class neighborhoods are viewed today as part of the special qualities of U.S. society.

The new multiculturalism is not welcome in all quarters. One of the most persistent arguments against immigration is that with the arrival of so many newcomers who do not adopt American ways, American culture will become "diluted." However, the U.S. Constitution, the courts, the separation of church and state, the direct election of a president and the overall structure of government have not been disturbed by the waves of immigrants who have been coming to this country since the 1880s. Another frequently used argument is that immigrants take jobs away from native-born citizens. A 2006 national poll found that 52% of the American public believe that immigrants burden our country by taking jobs, housing and health care compared to 44% who believe immigrants strengthen our country due to their hard work and talents. The more recent debates on immigration focuses on illegal immigrants of whom there are some 11 million residing in the United States.

The immigration experience goes to the core of the American heritage, but the public has held ambivalent or negative views about any current group of immigrants. Responses to the basic question that has been asked on national polls for almost 50 years: Should immigration be kept at its present level, increased or decreased?



Bills that have been under consideration in both the House of Representatives and the Senate would bolster border control and toughen penalties against employers and others who hire or aid illegals. In 2006, a bill in the Senate sponsored by Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) and John McCain (R-Ariz.) would have allowed undocumented workers already in the country a six year work visa and an opportunity to gain citizenship if they learn English, pay fines and back taxes and meet other requirements. The bill would have also created a guest worker program for some 400,000 new immigrants a year. Meanwhile, a bill considered in the House did not include provisions for citizenship or a guest worker program. Both Senate and House bills failed to pass. In May 2006, President George W. Bush announced that National Guard troops would be deployed to the U.S.-Mexico border. After the plan went into action, the Bush administration insisted that the numbers of illegal aliens entering the United States had dropped dramatically. Although federal legislation on immigration has not moved swiftly, it seems unlikely that this issue will fade away any time soon, as evidenced by controversy surrounding Arizona's SB 1070 immigration bill. The 2010 law requires police to check the papers of anyone they suspect of being in the country illegally; opponents of the law raised concerns that the law would lead to racial profiling, while supporters of the law said it was necessary to stem the tide of illegal immigration.

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Further Reading

Desipio, Louis, and Rodolfo O. de la Garza. *Making Americans, Remaking America: Immigration and Immigrant Policy*. Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1998; Hing, Bill Ong. *Deporting Our Souls: Values, Morality, and Immigration Policy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Loucky, James, Jeanne Armstrong, and Larry J. Estrada, eds. *Immigration in America Today: An Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 2006.

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[back to top](#) **Entry ID: 913397**