

America's Immigration Story: Still the Melting Pot

By Everett C. Ladd

For some years now, the press has told the American immigration story largely in terms of problems: the sheer numbers of immigrants; the "threat" to jobs of native-born Americans; whether the melting pot will hold this time around; whether "melting pot" is even the right metaphor or objective.

All this hand-wringing is unfortunate... and misleading. It's misleading, in the first instance, because it's so ahistorical. America is built on succeeding waves of immigration. The immigrant experience not only hasn't weakened or fundamentally altered the country—it has strengthened and renewed it. This isn't pious hope, but empirical reality. It's possible, of course, that this time the nation may not hold in its historic form. But since it has held every previous time, the preliminary judgment surely must go to those who expect it will again. For one thing, current immigration isn't unusually high by past standards. Indeed, it's the immigration level of 1950-1970 that's aberrational. The percentage of resident population that is foreign-born is smaller today than in any preceding decade prior to 1950.

To be sure, in preceding eras immigration inspired much tut-tutting, and sometimes worse—nasty nativist reactions. That only makes current coverage even more ahistorical. We have been through it so many times before, we should have learned by now that anxieties—including legitimate ones—arise about the future of a nation to which so many Americans are so committed. But the historical record gives us reason for considerable confidence about how the current experience stage.

The English philosopher and commentator, G. K. Chesterton, visited America in 1921 and a year later published a famous assessment of the country's immigrant experience. He noted that the US had been engaged in an experiment—"the experiment of a democracy of diverse races which has been compared to a melting-pot." [*What I Saw in America*, 1922, p. 8.] Then, he got to the heart of the matter, more

cleanly and clearly than most analysts have: "But even that metaphor implies that the pot itself is of a certain shape and a certain substance; a pretty solid substance. The melting pot must not melt." It had shown no signs of melting, Chesterton thought. Its original form, which could be traced back to the nation's founding, was still firm.

The confusion to which many have succumbed as they've witnessed successive waves in our immigration involves a misunderstanding of America's

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substance. Were it based on ethnicity, there would indeed be problems as the ethnic mix changed. Were America primarily an ethnic entity, large-scale immigration could easily transform it. In fact, the US isn't a different nation than it was in 1790, and we need understand why.

America is an idea—a set of beliefs about people and their relationships and the kind of society which holds the best hope of satisfying the needs each of us brings as an individual. Were this idea unsuccessful in the marketplace—were later arrivals, or any large segment of the population, to lose confidence in the idea—the pot would melt. America might not cease to be a nation, but it would cease to be that of historic form. The simple empirical fact, however, is that the American idea remains wildly attractive.

This has been demonstrated anew by a fine survey taken by the Gallup Organization (for CNN and *USA Today*)

of a large cross-section of foreign-born Americans. The Gallup study tells an immigration story far different from much of the current commentary. Immigrants say that they came to America seeking economic opportunity and freedom for themselves and their children, and that they have not been disappointed. They say they've encountered some discrimination, but that on the whole they have been welcomed. *They affirm traditional American values and display even more optimism about the American experiment than much of the native-born population.* All this isn't surprising, of course; the allure of the experiment brought so many here in the first place.

Census data also reveal flaws in the current telling of the immigration story. They document that current immigration is not high by historic standards, and that the US has gained much in immediate socio-economic terms. Looking at educational background, foreign-born Americans resemble almost exactly the native-born populace in the proportions having college degrees. They resemble the native-born, too, in income levels. Some newcomers start low in income and education, of course, but the US is a magnet drawing people of already substantial attainment. Indeed, if the Census data raise any concern, it's that we are too much the beneficiary of a massive "brain drain."

Like any country, the United States has social problems in ample measure. Our immigration story, though, is one of great success. Our "experiment of a democracy of diverse races" lays fair claim to being one of history's great successes, as well as the defining element of the American nation. Where prudent reforms are in order we should make them. But as we do so, we shouldn't lose sight of our extraordinary success.

In the essay which follows, Lydia Saad of the Gallup Organization discusses some important findings of Gallup's new survey of immigrants. We then present six pages of survey data.

