



Immigration into the United States of America: Impact and Attitudes (From the 17th Century to the Recent Period)

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Abstract:

Immigration into the United States of America fluctuated and became a serious issue. Different push and pull reasons resulted in the arrival of many immigrants, whether documented or undocumented, at the country. Although the immigrants benefited the American society, their inflow brought about a threat of unemployment, security, and of the loss of the American identity. The government attitudes towards immigration have changed over time, affected by the public reaction, the number of immigrants, and by their impact. This paper is concerned with immigration into the United States of America from the early seventeenth century to the recent period, and with its economic, intellectual, political, and cultural impact on society. It is also an attempt to analyze the U.S. attitudes towards immigrants and how these attitudes changed throughout immigration period. The method used in this paper is qualitative and quantitative.

Keywords: *Attitudes; identity; immigration; impact; policy; the United States of America.*

1. Introduction

After its independence in 1776, the United States of America received a number of legal and illegal immigrants who left their original homelands looking for religious toleration, political stability, or economic betterment. The U.S. immigration occurred in four waves, which made the country a nation of immigrants, a nation of nations, and a melting pot. The first wave started in 1607 when immigrants came mostly from Northern Europe, Africa, and Asia. The second wave began in 1880 when people still came from Europe, but mainly from the south and east. Others came from Mexico, Japan and the Arab world. The third wave which started in 1921 noticed a slowdown in the number of immigrants largely because of a change in the immigration policy. However, the fourth wave which began in 1965 till now experienced an immigration surge,

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during which people came chiefly from Asia and Latin America. Although a number of people advocated immigration, others opposed it and warned of the immigrants' disability to integrate. The immigrants were criticized for taking jobs away from the native residents, threatening social stability in the country, speaking a different language, following a different religion, and for other cultural differences. Their coming raised the issue of cultural diversity and its impact on the national identity, an issue that is still debated. The paper examines the history of immigration in the U.S.A. by describing the four immigration waves and provides detailed facts of the important reasons for immigration and the reaction towards it. It provides answers to questions such as: What were the main reasons for immigration? Why did immigration become a major issue in the U.S.A? How did the fourth wave alter the American society? What attitudes did the U.S. government take towards immigration? And how did these attitudes change through history?

2. Immigration Waves:

America¹ experienced four main immigration waves. The first wave began from the colonial period to 1880, when most immigrants came mainly from northern Europe, Africa, and Asia. In fact, in the early seventeenth century immigrants, led by the English and motivated by economic reasons, established Virginia as their first settlement. Other immigrants, known as Puritans, had escaped from religious persecution in their mother country and established six colonies in New England. By the eighteenth century, the English founded thirteen colonies which would later become known as the United States of America, where most of its inhabitants were British and Protestant. Another group of immigrants were forced to leave their African countries and act as slaves for the English settlers². The first African slaves were brought to Virginia in 1619 to supplement the insufficient labour force. By the 1800's, a group of immigrants coming from China settled in California to escape economic and political difficulties in their country. Like all the preceding immigrants, the Chinese maintained their culture, religion, and language. (Palmer, 2010: 54).

The second immigration wave started from 1880 to 1921, when immigrants still came from Europe but mainly from the southern and eastern countries such as

¹ The term « America » is used in this article as a synonym for the United States of America.

² The historians David Mauk and John Oakland suggest that “the people who established the colonies are considered founders rather than immigrants because they created the customs, laws and institutions to which later arrivals (the first immigrants) had to adjust.” (David and John, 2009: 56)

Italy, Greece, Hungary, and Poland. They also came from other places such as Mexico and Japan. A number of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants, who were mostly Christians, came into the United States during the early years of the twentieth century and settled especially in New York and Boston. The growth of industrialization in America that began in the nineteenth century motivated immigration, in a way that jobs in industries were available with a salary much better than the immigrants could earn at home. Adding to this, letters received from relatives and friends about the economic opportunities in America motivated people to leave their homelands .

However, the years from 1921 to the 1960 have witnessed a slowdown immigration period. Circumstances combined to decrease the immigrants' number. (Jimenez, 2011: 3) The U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Restriction Act of 1921, also referred to as the Emergency Quota Act, to reduce the number of immigrants, stating that...:

no more than 3 percent of the number of persons from a nation living in the United States, as recorded in the census of 1910, could be admitted to the country in the forthcoming year... only about 357,000 people [are allowed to] immigrate to the United States during the 1922 fiscal year. (Porter, 2015).

The law, which lasted till 1965, limited the number of the Russian, Southern and Eastern European, and Asian immigrants into the United States, and gave preference to those coming from Northern, Central, and Western Europe³. It was a milestone in the U.S. immigration history, because it determined access to the country according to ethnic identity and national origin; in a way that only Northern, Central and Western Europeans were favoured because they had similar culture to that of the Americans. The Great Depression of 1929, a period of an

³ The law was enacted after the 1911 report published by the Dillingham Commission, in which it was concluded that southern and eastern European immigration into the nation, caused a future danger to the American culture.

Europe is geographically divided into six regions: Northern, Central, Eastern, Southeastern, Western, and Southern regions. Northern Europe consists of: Denmark, Estonia, the Faroe Islands, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden, the United Kingdom and Ireland, northern Germany, northern Belarus and northwest Russia. Central Europe includes: Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Switzerland. Eastern Europe includes: Russia, Romania and Moldova, Serbia, Latvia and Estonia, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Belarus, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia. Southeastern Europe consists of: Albania, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Slovenia, and Turkey (only East Thrace.) Western Europe consists of: Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Monaco, and Netherlands. Southern Europe consists of: Gibraltar, Southern and Eastern Spain, Southern France, Italy, the Adriatic coast of former Yugoslavia, Malta, Portugal, Andorra, Vatican City, and San Marino. (Wikipedia), (Kerry, 2018)

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economic slowdown, also helped to reduce the number of immigrants into America, whose social life was hard; in a way it was difficult to find a job, and the immigrants were the first to lose it. (Porter, 2015) In their study on immigration, the historians David Mauk and John Oakland affirm that the U.S. government sent about half a million Mexicans and twenty thousand Jewish children out of the country, fearing the hostility of the American citizens towards them.

Subsequently, the Second World War (1939- 1945) changed the immigration influx, particularly of the Japanese, who were seen as spies and as a result were not welcomed in America. For this reason, about one hundred fifteen thousand Japanese were forced to live in internment camps after their properties had been confiscated. (David and John, 2009: 66).

3. An Immigration Surge

Signs of change began to occur during the fourth immigration period starting from about 1965 until now. Different reasons, classified into push and pull, motivated the fourth wave immigrants to leave their native countries for the United States of America. The growth of world population, particularly of the Third World countries, and the lack of economic or political stability were the major push reasons that could be added to the pull of the U.S. technologically-advanced, powerful, and diverse economy. The change of the U.S.A. policy towards immigration, starting from about the second half of the twentieth century, was another decisive pull reason for the immigrants' arrival in increasing numbers .

In fact, the Congress passed the 1965 Immigration Act which terminated the 1921 national origins quota system and prohibited racial discrimination, so that people from all countries and nationalities had the opportunity to immigrate to the United States of America. Immigrants started to come mostly from Asia and Latin America⁴. The Asian immigrants, notably the Chinese and Koreans, were seen as successful who could work for long hours and invest their wealth in business. However, the Latino immigrants were mostly illiterate, poor, and undocumented. (George, 2012: 11) As shown below in figure 1, in the course of the fourth immigration period large numbers of people continued to flow into the United States of America. The largest immigrant groups, in order of size, were the

⁴ Latin America consists of countries of South America and North America (including Central America and the islands of the Caribbean Sea) south of the U.S.; the term is often restricted to countries where either Spanish or Portuguese is spoken. Roman Catholicism is still the chief religion in most Latin American countries. (Qtd. in Pappas, 2003: 1054)

Mexicans, the Chinese, the Filipinos, and then the Cubans. This contrasts with the preceding waves when immigrants came mostly from Europe.

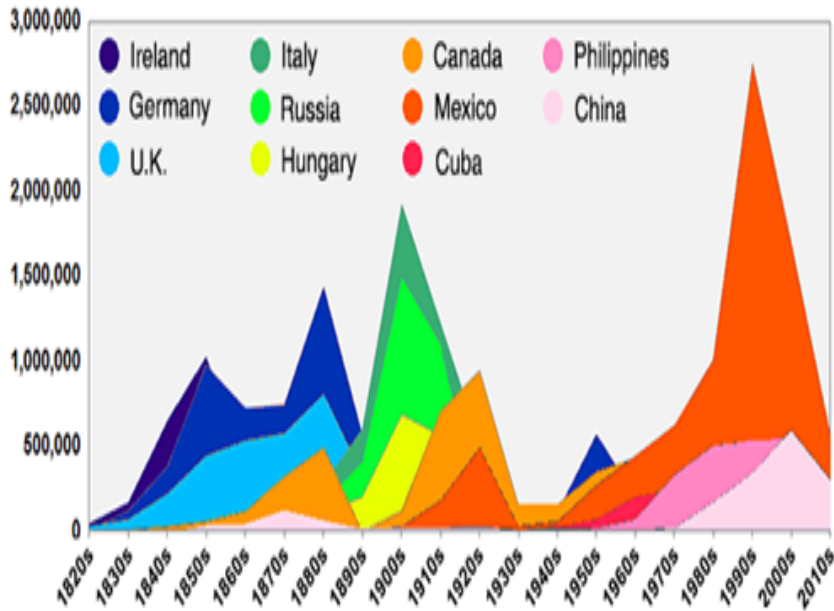


Figure 1. U.S. Immigration Flow by Country (<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/two-centuries-of-us-immigration-in-one-mesmerizing-graphic>, 2016.)

It is recorded that in 2017, the U.S. immigrant population made up twenty seven percent of the whole population, which means that more than eighty million people resided in the country at that time. The Latino immigrants, particularly the Mexicans, predominated in a way that they reached more than twenty percent in 2016. The prominent states which received a big number of immigrants included successively California, Texas, New York, Florida, and New Jersey. The Mexicans resided mainly in California with a percentage of thirty seven, and in Texas with twenty two percent. (Paul, 2017: 20- 27) This big number of immigrants was classified into three categories. Figure 2 shows that in 2015, there were more than forty seven million authorized immigrants in America including naturalized citizens, temporary legal immigrants- such as students, tourists, and

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temporary employees-, and lawful permanent residents, also called green card holders⁵. The remaining eleven million immigrants were undocumented residents.

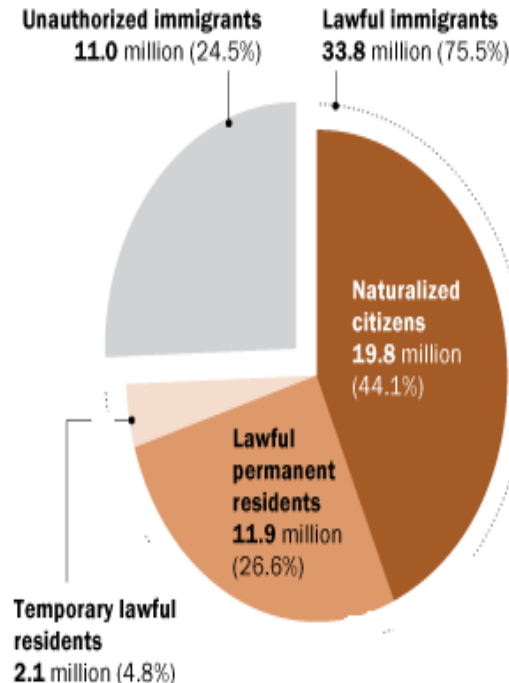


Figure 2. Foreign- born Population Estimates, 2015 (<http://www.pewhispanic.org>, 2018).

4. U.S. Immigration between Promotion and Opposition

A number of immigration supporters believe that immigration has a positive economic, intellectual, political, and cultural impact on the United States of America. Immigrants, whether documented or undocumented, provide a labour force for the industrialization. The historian Lemay predicts that: «by 2025 ...20 percent of the [U.S.A.] population will be more than 65 years old...more working people will be needed to support them and maintain the Social Security System through payroll taxes». (Lemay, 2014: 41) Accordingly, with the retirement of a number of American workers and the slowdown in the birth rate, the U.S.A.'s only solution for the future lack of the labour force is through immigrants. The

⁵ Green Card is a visa given to the immigrant to legalize his/her residence, so that he/she will have the right to live and work in the United States. After five years, the green card holders become naturalized residents with their full rights, including as an example the right to vote and benefit from social services. (Paul, 2017: 233)

latter could accept jobs that are badly paid and not favoured by a number of Americans, such as working in transportation, restaurants, and construction. The immigrants contribute to economy when they pay taxes, buy goods and use social services. (Lemay, 2014: 41).

Additionally, certain immigrants, mainly the skilled, are able to have a remarkable impact on the American science. As LeMay has noted that in the late of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty first century, more than twenty percent of the technology was started by non-Americans. Famous companies such as Google, Yahoo, and Facebook were founded by immigrants or American- born children of immigrants. (Lemay, 2014: 42).

Immigration, too, has a positive effect on the U.S. political life. For instance, people of African, Latino, and Asian origin supported President Barack Obama in the 2012 presidential elections. The historians Teixeira, R. and Halpin, J. report that :

In 2012 President Obama won re-election with 50.9 percent of the popular vote and 332 Electoral College votes... President Obama achieved victory by carrying 93 percent of African American voters, 71 percent of Latino voters, 73 percent of Asian American voters, and only 39 percent of white voters.... (Teixeira, R. and Halpin, J. 2012: 01)

Culturally speaking, immigration contributes with cultural variation, since people come into the American society from different races, which helps introduce new ideas, as an example, in cooking. Another relevant cultural impact is on world television, in a way that prominent Hollywood actors and film producers as Salma Hayek and Jim Carrey were Mexican and Canadian immigrants respectively. (Le May, 2014: 45).

However, immigration opponents see that the growing number of the newcomers has a negative impact on the U.S. society, because the immigrants refuse or find it difficult to integrate and conform to the American culture. The critics focus on a number of issues such as economic costs, social consequences, and the change in the American identity. The first impact of immigration is the intense competition for jobs between the American natives and immigrants. According to LeMay, fifty five percent of people surveyed think that the inflow of immigrants is a threat to the American population because the foreigners take jobs away from the domestic residents.

Social consequences, mainly an increase in the crime rate, endanger peace in the U.S.A. Research on crime proves that there is a relationship between the recent increase in the crime rate in the American society and the growing number of immigrants, mainly of the undocumented immigrants. It lists a number of

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crimes such as robbery, murder, and terrorism, which are generally committed by poorly educated immigrants. (47- 52).

In addition to the economic and social fears, immigration critics also raise the issue of the American identity. Immigrants- who come with different culture, language, and religion- will certainly influence the American way of life. The American Professor Samuel P. Huntington believes that the American identity was formed by people who should not be named immigrants but settlers coming from Anglo Saxon background and Protestant culture. He inquires: «Would America be the America it is today if in the 17th and 18th centuries it had been settled not by British Protestants but by French, Spanish, or Portuguese Catholics?» (Paul, 2017: 35) This suggests that in Huntington view an American is different from the other immigrants or aliens in the fact that he is an Anglo-Protestant, an English speaker, and of a northern European origin. Yet, the American national identity, according to him, started to lose its significance during the fourth immigration wave because of three chief reasons: the 1960's Civil Rights Movements, the enactment of the 1965 Immigration Act which both prohibited racial discrimination, and the Latino immigration into the country, particularly the Mexican immigration. The latter is controversial, fearsome, and different from the preceding immigration groups, because the Mexicans are reluctant to assimilate into the American life, and prefer to identify themselves as Mexican citizens in America and not as Americans. This is due to the fact that the Mexican immigrants come from a neighbouring country, which helps them remain in regular contact with their homeland and their relatives, and easily immigrate illegally into the U.S.A. In addition to the short distance between the two countries and the illegal inflow of the immigrants, Pr. Huntington states another factor of language that distinguishes the Mexicans from the other immigrants. Unlike the latter, the Mexicans insist on keeping their native language and teaching it to their children. This means that they ignore the American identity and develop instead an ethnic one. (Paul, 2017: 38- 51).

5. Government Attitudes towards the Immigration Surge

Fear of immigration pushed people to ask the U.S. government to change its policy towards the immigrants in order to minimize the risk of the immigration impact. Responding to complaints, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act was passed to increase the number of border patrol agents, and punish employers who would recruit illegal residents. Additionally, since the late years of the twentieth century, the U.S.A. has been putting a fence along the U.S.- Mexican borders to restrict immigrants' access to the country. The fence installation began

exactly in 1993 when President Bill Clinton commanded to build a barrier between America and Mexico. (Paul, 2017: 67- 69) An E- Verify website was also created four years later to stop immigrants, particularly the undocumented, from working illegally by checking «the identity and employment eligibility of ... employees by ... matching information provided by employees ... against records available to the Social Security Administration (SSA) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).» (E- Verify).

Furthermore and as a result of the continuous flow of the Mexican immigrants to the country, the border patrol became a primary concern of the U.S. government during the twenty first century. In 2006 and again in 2011, President George Walker Bush signed a law to complete the 1993 fence; however, only 651 miles of fences were put out of nearly 2000 miles. Failure to finish was mainly due to the high cost of building the fence, which would approximately reach \$25 billion. (Paul, 2017: 70- 71) Therefore, the Congress decided to appoint a number of soldiers to patrol the borders using ground radar and road blocks to decrease the entrance of unauthorized immigrants. The fence's construction has continued during the presidency of Barack Hussein Obama and Donald Trump. The latter is following a strict immigration policy mainly against Muslim immigrants. He initially banned, on September 2017, the entrance of immigrants from Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Iran, Somalia, Sudan, and Libya into the country to protect it from what he called terrorism. Five months later, the President also ordered to end the green card lottery which had already been established by the Immigration Act of 1990, and not to provide all immigrants with welfare services- such as healthcare, schooling, and financial support- during their first years in the U.S.A. (112, 161) Trump's latest order, of November 2018, was to separate children from their parents in order to discourage illegal crossing, notably from Mexico. (Michelle, 2018: 29).

Conclusion

The United States of America experienced four immigration periods, marked by the growing number of people coming from different places. Conditions in their mother countries played a decisive role in pushing people to leave for America. A prominent reason was economic, exactly to work and better their social status. Although they succeeded in making their own life in a foreign country and in contributing to the economic, intellectual, political, and cultural life; the immigrants were criticized for endangering the American society. Their immigration became an issue because during the first three periods, immigrants were mostly Europeans who could have shared certain characteristics such as

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language, culture, or religion with the Americans and therefore found it easier to integrate into the American society; but throughout the fourth period immigrants came mainly from Asia and Latin America, a non- Anglo Saxon background. Consequently, a number of immigrants segregated themselves from the U.S. culture and preferred to preserve theirs. Opponents see that because the immigrants have been socioeconomically diverse and a number of them have lived illegally in America; their entry has adverse costs such as job competition, increased criminal behavior, and a transformation in the values of the native population. The great number of arrivals will certainly influence the American society and change the American identity, which is represented by customs, language, religion, history, and norms. The American government facilitated immigration into the country by opening its doors to different categories of people, including as an example students, tourists, employees, and green card holders. Yet, immigration policy started remarkably to change and become more restrictive especially during the late years of the twentieth century. This was primarily due to the inflow of immigrants during the fourth period and the rise of immigration opposition. Consequently, two most important legislations were made by the U.S. Congress: the construction of borders between U.S.A. and Mexico to stop unlawful crossings, and the green card lottery ending which reduced the immigrants' number into the country .

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