

Immigrants do a great job at becoming Americans

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Immigration has a lot of economic benefits and few economic costs. Immigrants pay for native-born Americans' retirement, start companies and make the U.S. a desirable destination for investment, while not taking away jobs or depressing wages of the native-born.

But people care about more than dollars and cents — culture is important. Immigration skeptics, including a few on the political left, often fret that immigrants won't adapt to American culture. But they shouldn't worry. The great American assimilation machine continues to work as designed.

First, restrictionists misunderstand the nature of assimilation. Many seem to have an image of newcomers imitating the native-born, conforming perfectly to local traditions and customs. But this never has been the reality. In the 19th and 20th centuries, when religion was the key marker of culture, immigrants to the U.S. rarely converted. Despite heavy discrimination and even violence against Catholics, Catholicism became the plurality religion throughout much of the country. Instead of mass Catholic or Jewish or Orthodox Christian conversion, what happened was the notion of American identity simply expanded to include all of these denominations.

Assimilation, therefore, is really a process of integration — many cultures becoming one culture. *E pluribus unum*. American parents of all races can expect their children to know how to use chopsticks and to celebrate Cinco de Mayo, just as older generations of Americans embraced German Christmas trees and Italian pasta. Cultural preservationists on all sides might be unhappy with this, while cosmopolitans will rejoice. But no matter what you think of cultural evolution, it's important to realize that integration is nothing like the submissive, conformist abandonment of all ancestral culture that some nativists wrongly imagine prevailed in the past.

The real question is: Is integration still happening? The answer seems to be a resounding yes. If anything, recent immigrant groups — Hispanic- and Asian-Americans — are integrating even more quickly and completely than the previous waves from southern and eastern Europe did a century ago.

In the past, research has focused narrowly on linguistic adaptation. And here, Hispanic-Americans — by far the biggest of the recent immigrant waves — have been adopting English just as quickly as earlier immigrant groups.

But cultural integration goes way beyond language. It involves so many things -- customs, traditions, attitudes and modes of social interaction -- that it's hard to measure. But one very good indicator is intermarriage rates. There's no act of integration deeper or more long-lasting than choosing to spend your life with someone from a different ethnic, racial or cultural group. And here, we see that recent immigrant groups have been intermarrying at rapid rates.

A recent Pew survey found the share of Americans who marry someone of another race or ethnicity has risen steadily and now stands at 17 percent. That trend has only accelerated in recent years, possibly because of the prevalence of online dating. But for Hispanic- and Asian-Americans, the rates are much higher. Almost four out of 10 U.S.-born Hispanics marry someone of a different ethnicity, and for U.S.-born Asians, the number is 46 percent. The overwhelming majority of those marriages are to white Americans.

Intermarriage also allows us to test the hypothesis that multiculturalist rhetoric — common on liberal college campuses — will slow the rate at which immigrant groups integrate. In fact, Americans with a bachelor's degree — who have, presumably, been exposed to much more multiculturalism — intermarry at a 19 percent rate, while for Americans with a high-school degree or less, the number is only 14 percent. This gap has grown in recent years, suggesting that multiculturalism has done little to impede integration, and might even have contributed to its acceleration.

The final fear that many immigration skeptics have relates to politics. There is a worry that voting will break down along racial lines, balkanizing the country into hostile ethnic blocs. The 2016 election, with its charged racial rhetoric and stark voting divides, certainly did little to quiet those fears.

But in many areas, this divide is far less in evidence. In Texas, Republican senatorial candidate John Cornyn won the Latino vote in 2014, and Republican gubernatorial candidate Greg Abbott won a respectable 44 percent. In 2004, George W. Bush appeared to be making inroads with Hispanics, winning 40 percent, while Asian-Americans broke Republican as recently as 1996.

Meanwhile, a recent study by Alex Nowrasteh and Sam Wilson of the Cato Institute found that on the issues, immigrants and their descendants tend to hold many of the same views as native-born Americans. On issues such as welfare spending, Social Security, environmental protection, income redistribution and marijuana legalization, immigrant positions are very similar to those of the native-born — and by the third generation, practically indistinguishable.

So on politics, too, integration is the reality for recent immigrant groups.

In other words, not only are the economic fears of immigration skeptics unjustified, but the cultural anxieties are as well. Recent waves of immigrants have integrated into American culture — changing it and being changed by it — just as quickly and completely as their European predecessors. American culture is doing what it always has done — taking diverse peoples and forging a single polity from the disparate parts.