

# What History Tells Us about Assimilation of Immigrants

By **Ran Abramitzky**

Immigration has emerged as a decisive—and sharply divisive—issue in the United States. Skepticism about whether new arrivals can assimilate into American society was a key concern in the 2016 presidential election and remains an ongoing theme in the public debate on immigration policy. This controversy is not new. The U.S. has experienced repeated waves of hostility toward immigrants and today's concerns echo alarms sounded often in the past. Both today and in earlier times, many in this country have viewed immigrants as a threat to the integrity of the nation's culture, fearing that foreigners among us somehow make America less American. Consider the following statement: Immigration “is bringing to the country people whom it is very difficult to assimilate

and who do not promise well for the standard of civilization in the United States.” The speaker was not Donald Trump on the campaign trail but Massachusetts Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge in 1891.

The immigration debate raises a fundamental issue: Are immigrants able to successfully integrate into American society by adopting the economic, social, and cultural norms of native-born Americans? Or are they likely to remain an alien presence inside our borders long after they settle here? This argument typically generates more heat than light. Many people have opinions on the subject, but relatively little empirical evidence is available on how fully and quickly immigrants assimilate into U.S. culture.

Leah Boustan of UCLA, Katherine Eriksson of UC Davis, and I have tried to fill part of this gap by looking at immigration during the Age of Mass Migration from 1850 to 1913, when U.S. borders were open and 30 million Europeans picked up stakes to move here. By the early 20th century, some 15 percent of the U.S. population was foreign born, comparable to the share today. If we want to know how today's newcomers will fare, we can find important clues by examining what happened to those who arrived on our shores during the greatest surge of immigration in U.S. history.

In our previous work on immigration, my co-authors and I looked at occupation data of immigrants who arrived during the Age of Mass Migration.<sup>1</sup> The classic narrative is that penniless immigrants worked low-paying jobs to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, eventually reaching equality of skills and income with natives. We found

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<sup>1</sup> Abramitzky, Ran, Leah Platt Boustan, and Katherine Eriksson. (2014). “A Nation of Immigrants: Assimilation and Economic Outcomes in the Age of Mass Migration.” *Journal of Political Economy*. 122(3): 467-506.

that story to be largely a myth. On average, long-term immigrants and natives held jobs at similar skill levels and climbed the occupational ladder at about the same pace. We did find considerable variation though. Immigrants from richer countries, such as England or Germany, often worked in higher-skilled occupations than natives, while those from poorer countries, such as Italy or Russia, often were in less-skilled occupations. But, regardless of the starting point, the initial gaps between immigrants and natives persisted throughout their lives. These findings provide useful data on the experiences of immigrants in the U.S. labor market. But it's important to stress that even immigrants who lag economically may successfully assimilate into American society.

Measuring cultural assimilation is a challenge because data on cultural practices—things like food, dress, and accent—are not systematically collected. But the names that parents choose for their children are collected, offering a revealing window into the cultural assimilation process.<sup>2</sup> Using 2 million census records from 1920 and 1940, we constructed a foreignness

index indicating the probability that a given name would be held by a foreigner or a native.

For example, people with names like Hyman or Vito were almost certain to be children of immigrants, while youngsters with names like Clay or Lowell were likely to have native parents. In this respect, children's names are signals of cultural identity. Giving a child an American-sounding name is a financially cost-free way of identifying with U.S. culture. Thus, we can trace the assimilation process by examining changes in the names immigrants gave their offspring as they spent more time in the U.S.

Our key finding is that for immigrants who arrived in the 1900s and 1910s, the more time they spent in the U.S., the less likely they were to give their children foreign-sounding names. Figure 1 shows that after 20 years in this country, half of the gap in name choice between immigrants and natives had disappeared. The shift in name choice happened at a roughly equal pace for sons and daughters and among poor and rich families.

However, the pace varied significantly depending on country of origin. Immigrants from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark were among the quickest to adopt American-sounding names, followed by Italians and

other Southern Europeans. Russians, including many Russian Jews, and Finns had the slowest rates of name-based assimilation. This convergence of names chosen by immigrant and native populations is suggestive evidence of cultural assimilation. But the fact that immigrants didn't fully adopt native naming patterns suggests that many valued retaining a distinct cultural identity.

Having an American-sounding name was a badge of assimilation that conferred genuine economic and social benefits. We looked at census records of more than a million children of immigrants from 1920, when they lived with their childhood families, through 1940, when they were adults.

Children with less-foreign-sounding names completed more years of schooling, earned more, and were less likely to be unemployed than their counterparts whose names sounded more foreign. In addition, they were less likely to marry someone born abroad or with a foreign-sounding name. These patterns held even among brothers within the same family. The data suggest that, while a foreign-sounding name reinforced a sense of ethnic identity, it may have exposed individuals to discrimination at school or on the job.

<sup>2</sup> See Abramitzky, Ran, Leah Platt Boustan, and Katherine Eriksson. (2016). "Cultural Assimilation During the Age of Mass Migration." Working paper, and references therein.

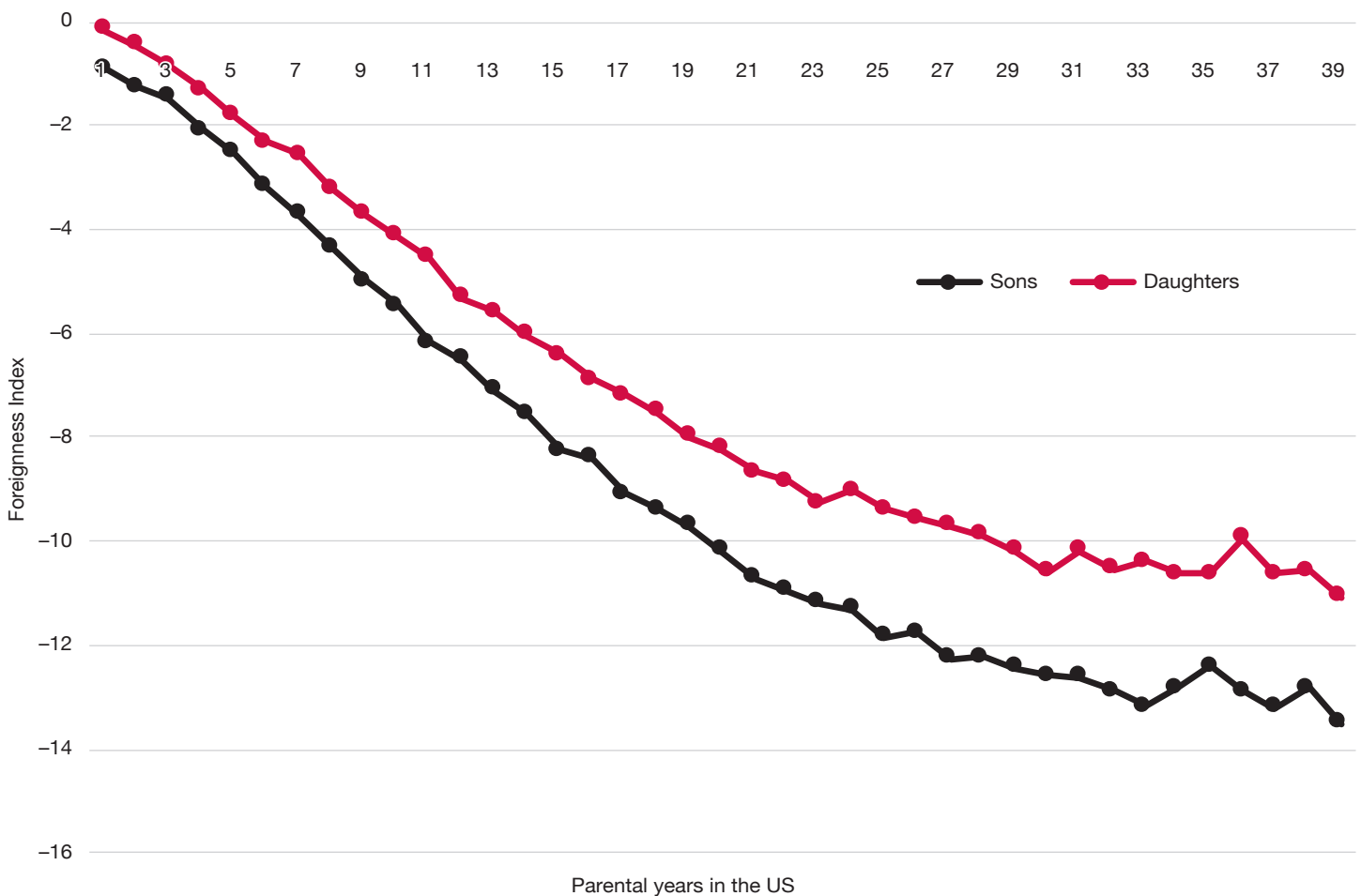
Other measures reinforce the picture of early 20th century immigrants gradually taking on American cultural markers. By 1930, more than two-thirds of immigrants had applied for citizenship and almost all reported

they could speak some English. A third of first-generation immigrants who arrived unmarried and more than half of second-generation immigrants wed spouses from outside their cultural group.

These findings suggest that over time immigrants' sense of separateness weakened and their identification with U.S. culture grew stronger. The gradual adoption of American-sounding names appears to have

**Figure 1.**

Immigrants selected less foreign names for children after spending time in US, (Dependent variable = F-index)



Notes: Data from 1920 complete-count Census. Sample includes children aged 0-18 who were born in a non-southern state and are living with their parents. Households must have a foreign-born head and the spouse (mother) must be less than 43 years old (N (sons) = 2,130,352; N (daughters) = 2,081,724).

been part of a process of assimilation in which newcomers learned U.S. culture, made a commitment to build roots in this country, and came to identify as Americans.

Some may have arrived with a strong desire to assimilate, but little knowledge of how to do so. They may not even have known which names were common in the U.S. Others may not have cared about assimilating at first, but eventually felt the urge to blend in. In both cases, as time went by, they may have started to navigate the dominant culture with greater ease. Their children may have attended schools with children from other cultures and have spoken with American accents.

What does this tell us about the assimilation process? We can imagine that after many years in the U.S., immigrants, like natives, become baseball fans, eat hamburgers, and watch fireworks on the Fourth of July. To be sure, their connections with their countries of origin are not obliterated. Instead, they may come to see themselves as hyphenated Americans, but Americans nonetheless.

What's more, policies that attempt to force cultural assimilation on immigrants may backlash. Fouka

(2015) finds that German immigrants in states that introduced anti-German language policies during World War I responded by choosing visibly German names, perhaps as a show of community support.<sup>3</sup>

Concerns about the economic effects of immigration go hand in hand with fears that immigrants will remain a culturally foreign presence in our midst. How immigration affects the income and living standards of natives and how newcomers contribute to the U.S. economy are hot-button issues. My research partners and I are in the process of investigating these questions. Based on the existing literature and our own research, we hypothesize that the economic impact of immigration today may be different from the effects during the Age of Mass Migration.<sup>4</sup> In the early 20th century, foreign-born and native workers competed for the same low-skilled jobs and immigrants may have driven down wages of those born here. Today, the competition between immigrants and natives may be less important because immigrants

<sup>3</sup> Fouka, Vasiliki. (2015). "Backlash: The Unintended Effects of Language Prohibition in U.S. Schools after World War I." Manuscript.

<sup>4</sup> See Abramitzky, Ran, and Leah Platt Boustan. (2016a). "Immigration in American Economic History." NBER Working Paper No. 21882, and references therein.

tend to cluster in a limited set of occupations at the top and bottom of income distribution.

The historical evidence presented here should be considered with care. Today's immigrants differ markedly in ethnicity, education, and occupation from those who came during the Age of Mass Migration. Over the past half century, the U.S. has experienced a second wave of mass migration with characteristics that set it apart from what took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The contemporary migration wave is highly regulated, favoring those with money, education, and skills and drawing migrants primarily from Asia and Latin America. Selection of immigrants today is often positive, meaning those who come here are more highly skilled than their compatriots who stay in their countries of origin. In the past, immigrants were sometimes negatively selected, meaning they were less skilled than those who stayed behind. Finally, legal immigration now is accompanied by a large undocumented inflow, which complicates efforts to study immigration effects.

*Continued on Back Flap*

Much work remains to be done to understand the cultural and economic dimensions of immigration and the differences between the past and the present. My research colleagues and I recently got access to California birth certificate records, which will allow us to compare immigrants from current and historical periods to see whether assimilation patterns are similar.

Overall though, lessons from the Age of Mass Migration suggest that fears immigrants can't fit into American society are misplaced. It would be a mistake to determine our nation's immigration policy based on the belief that immigrants will remain foreigners, preserving their old ways of life and keeping themselves at arm's length from the dominant

culture. The evidence is clear that assimilation is real and measurable, that over time immigrant populations come to resemble natives, and that new generations form distinct identities as Americans.

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