



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

## **U.S. Immigration Debate Is a Road Well Traveled**

**by Michael Powell**

They were portrayed as a disreputable lot, the immigrant hordes of this great city.

The Germans refused for decades to give up their native tongue and raucous beer gardens. The Irish of Hell's Kitchen brawled and clung to political sinecures. The Jews crowded into the Lower East Side, speaking Yiddish, fomenting socialism, and resisting forced assimilation. And by their sheer numbers, the immigrants depressed wages in the city.

As for the multitudes of Italians, who settled Mulberry Street, East Harlem, and Canarsie? In 1970, seven decades after their arrival, Italians lagged behind every immigrant group in educational achievement.

The bitter arguments of the past echo loudly these days as Congress debates toughening the nation's immigration laws and immigrants from Latin America and Asia swell the streets of U.S. cities in protest. Most of the concerns voiced today — that too many immigrants seek economic advantage and fail to understand democracy, that they refuse to learn English, overcrowd homes, and overwhelm public services — were heard a century ago. And there was a nub of truth to some complaints, not least that the vast influx of immigrants drove down working-class wages.

Yet historians and demographers are clear about the bottom line: In the long run, New York City — and the United States — owes much of its economic resilience to replenishing waves of immigrants. The descendants of those Italians, Jews, Irish, and Germans have assimilated. Manhattan's Little Italy is vestigial, no more than a shrinking collection of restaurants.

Now another wave washes over. Fully 38 percent of New York's 8 million residents are foreign-born, nearly the same percentage as a century ago.

"It would be easy to say the short-run costs of immigration outweighed the benefits," said Joe Salvo, a director at New York's City Planning Department. "But the benefits are longer term. We wouldn't be the superpower we are if we hadn't let them in."

Advocates of stricter enforcement argue that those who came a century ago were different because they arrived legally. Movies and novels depict customs agents at New York's Ellis Island

— that keyhole through which 16 million immigrants passed from 1882 to 1922 — examining immigrants and their papers with a capricious eye toward shipping back laggards.

Peggy Noonan, a former speechwriter for President Ronald Reagan, wrote about her Irish forebears in a *Wall Street Journal* column:

They waited in line. They passed the tests. They had to get permission to come.... They had to get through Ellis Island ... get questioned and eyeballed by a bureaucrat with a badge.

But these accounts are flawed, historians say. Until 1918, the United States did not require passports; the term “illegal immigrant” had no meaning. New arrivals were required only to prove their identity and find a relative or friend who could vouch for them.

Customs agents kept an eye out for lunatics and the infirm (and, after 1905, for anarchists). Ninety-eight percent of the immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island were admitted to the United States, and 78 percent spent less than eight hours on the island. (The Mexico–United States border then was unguarded and freely crossed in either direction.) “Shipping companies did the health inspections in Europe because they didn’t want to be stuck taking someone back,” said Nancy Foner, a sociology professor at Hunter College and author of *From Ellis Island to JFK: New York’s Two Great Waves of Immigration*. “Eventually they introduced a literacy test,” she added, “but it was in the immigrant’s own language, not English.”

At the peak of that earlier wave, 75 percent of immigrants landed in New York. Some, like Germans fleeing failed revolutions, sought democracy. Others, like the Jews fleeing Russian pogroms, sought safety.

But perhaps half of the Italian immigrants returned to Italy, often with cash to buy a farm or own a business. Greeks, too, returned in large numbers. “People complain about Mexicans coming for economic reasons, but they don’t realize how many earlier immigrants just sojourned here,” said Richard Wright, a geography professor at Dartmouth College. “The rates of return are staggering.”

When Congress enacted immigration quotas in the 1920s, it left the door ajar for Northern Europeans and Mexicans, whom even then American businesses sought as cheap labor. By contrast, in 1882 Congress enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act, barring the Chinese from U.S. shores. And when Congress contemplated a similar law for the Japanese, the government in Tokyo instead entered into an agreement with the United States to prohibit immigration and avoid international humiliation.

Still, European immigrants found plenty of backlash. Nativist sentiments ran strong, and white Protestant reformers championed English-language instruction and temperance, the latter reflecting the Establishment’s disdain for hard-drinking immigrants. The Germans set up 121 breweries in Brooklyn and Manhattan alone.

Politicians cast a wary eye at Kleindeutschland, the 300,000-person Little Germany in Lower Manhattan (no trace of the enclave exists today), and called on Germans to stop being “hyphenated” Americans. As Italians and Poles and Jews and Slavs poured into New York City, native-born Americans complained about the “mongrelization” of the “white race.”

Immigrants returned the favor, giving voice to the alienation of the new arrivals. “I never thought of myself as American” as a child, Norman Podhoretz wrote in his 1967 book, *Making It*. “In Brooklyn there were no Americans; there were Jews and Negroes, Poles and Irishmen.”

Debates arose that still resonate. Radicals worried that immigrants depressed working-class wages, and there is evidence that this was so. Labor organizing took off most successfully *after* Congress moved to shut off the immigration funnel in the 1920s. “Because people kept coming in, union organizing efforts didn’t really take off until the 1920s and ’30s,” said Fred Siegel, a historian at Cooper Union College. The Establishment heaped scorn upon those who rallied for better wages. Immigrants, the *New York Times* editorialized in the late 19th century, should avoid “insane imitations of the miserable class warfare of Europe.”

“There was a great fear in that the European revolutions might come to the United States,” said James Green, author of *Death in the Haymarket*, an account of immigrant sentiment and labor unrest in Chicago in the 1880s.

Other worries seem now like artifacts from a forgotten age. For all that Americans worried about the primacy of English at the turn of the 20th century, most first-generation immigrants quickly shed native languages — in polyglot New York no single language could dominate. This remains true as the three largest immigrant groups — Dominicans, Chinese, and South Asians — share no language but English. (The vast Spanish-speaking Mexican influx into Southern California is another matter and potentially more problematic, as immigrants have less incentive to drop a shared language, say sociologists.)

By the 1950s, Germans, Irish, and Jews had abandoned immigrant enclaves. Although barriers of prejudice remained — Ivy League schools and white-shoe law firms in New York maintained stringent “Jewish” quotas well into the 1960s — the sons and daughters of these immigrants moved quickly into white-collar professions.

Italians, Poles, and Greeks took a much slower climb up the socioeconomic ladder. Like today’s Mexican immigrants, these earlier immigrants often came from rural lands and stressed work over education; sociologist Foner notes it was unusual for a child of Italian immigrants to finish high school. When in the late 1960s the City University of New York allowed any high-school graduate to enroll regardless of grades, Italians were the greatest beneficiary. Studies so far show a similar pattern for Mexicans: the second generation is doing better economically than the parents but not keeping pace with other ethnic immigrant groups.

“There was a lot of catching up for the Italians and Poles, and a lot of social costs which this imposed on the country,” said Christopher Jencks, a professor of social policy at the John F.

Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. “I don’t see any reasons the Mexicans can’t catch up, too, but three or four generations is a long time.”

In a pattern perhaps rooted in human nature, each generation of immigrants tended to look down on those who followed. Journalist Jacob A. Riis, a Danish immigrant, remarked upon this in his 1890 book, *How the Other Half Lives*. “The once unwelcome Irishman has been followed in his turn by the Italian, the Russian Jew, and the Chinaman,” Riis wrote, “and has himself taken a hand at opposition, quite as bitter and quite as ineffectual, against these later hordes.”

Lewis Fidler, portly and quick-witted, grew up in the 1960s in East Flatbush and Flatlands, working-class Brooklyn neighborhoods with a smattering of professionals. He recalls listening as Italian and Jewish neighbors — the sons and daughters of immigrants — sat on porches and worried about an influx of black immigrants from Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados. These newcomers, the adults insisted, would run down the neighborhood.

Now Fidler is a city councilman in much the same district, and East Flatbush and Flatlands remain working-class neighborhoods with a smattering of professionals. Except that his constituents are West Indians — the Italians and Jews have moved on.

The transition was in fact rough. Two decades ago, vacant stores, marijuana fronts, and chop shops for stolen autos pockmarked the avenues. Now restaurants with bright blue awnings boast of the best jerk chicken, and a public park is being renovated to add cricket fields.

“The old-timers can’t get over the fact that the bagel shop is now a roti shop,” Fidler said. “But we’ve got lots of young families, and all they want to talk about are the schools.”

Fidler, who is Jewish, is fine with that. “I run up bigger majorities in the West Indian precincts because the immigrants just want guys who deliver.”

*Michael Powell is a staff writer for the Washington Post. This article appeared in the May 8, 2006, issue of the Washington Post, © 2006, the Washington Post. Reprinted by permission.*

**This article was originally published in the November 2006 edition of *Freedom Daily*.**