



## IMMIGRATION FACTS

# Cycles of Nativism in U.S. History

As a nation of immigrants, the United States has also been a nation of nativists. At times we have offered, in Tom Paine's words, "an asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty" from all parts of the world. At other times Americans have done the persecuting--passing discriminatory laws against the foreign-born, denying their fundamental rights, and assaulting them with mob violence, even lynchings. We have welcomed immigrants in periods of expansion and optimism, reviled them in periods of stagnation and cynicism. Our attitudes have depended primarily on domestic politics and economics, secondarily on the volume and characteristics of the newcomers. In short, American nativism has had less to do with "them" than us.

Fear and loathing of foreigners reach such levels when the nation's problems become so intractable that some people seek scapegoats. Typically, these periods feature a political or economic crisis, combined with a loss of faith in American institutions and a sense that the national community is gravely fractured. Hence a yearning for social homogeneity that needs an internal enemy to sustain itself: the "alien." Nativists' targets have reflected America's basic divisions: class, race, religion, and, to a lesser extent, language and culture. Yet each anti-immigrant cycle has its own dynamics.

**ALIEN AND SEDITION ACTS.** Few immigrants arrived in the nation's infancy, but among them were European radicals who caused great alarm among the ruling Federalists. Worried that excessive democracy posed a threat to property and stability, the Adams administration regarded politically active immigrants as subversives, not to mention partisan adversaries--most were aligned with Jefferson's Democratic-Republican clubs. In 1798, Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, giving the President arbitrary powers to exclude or deport foreigners deemed dangerous and to prosecute anyone who criticized the government (used mainly to imprison immigrant editors and pamphleteers). A new Naturalization Act sought to limit immigrants' electoral clout by extending the waiting period for citizenship to 14 years.

**PROTESTANT CRUSADE.** Immigration grew sharply in the 1830s-40s and became increasingly Roman Catholic, with the arrival of large waves of Irish and Germans. Simultaneously a Protestant revival flourished in a climate of economic change and insecurity. Evangelists demonized Catholics as "Papists" who followed authoritarian leaders, imported crime and disease, stole native jobs, and practiced moral depravities. A barrage of such agitation led Protestant workingmen to burn the Ursuline Convent near Boston and to riot in several cities--30 were killed and hundreds injured in Philadelphia in 1844. By the mid-1850s the nativist American Party (a.k.a. "Know-Nothings") won six governorships and controlled legislatures in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and California. They enacted numerous laws to harass and penalize immigrants (as well as newly annexed Mexicans), including the first literacy tests for voting, which were designed to disfranchise the Irish in particular. Attacking the "un-American" foreigner served as a diversion for those unwilling to acknowledge America's own irreconcilable difference--slavery versus abolition--which also split the nativists themselves. As sectional conflict sharpened, Know-Nothingism faltered; by 1860, the party had virtually collapsed.

**CHINESE EXCLUSION.** Nativists in the West singled out Chinese immigrants for violence and legalized discrimination, claiming that white wage-earners could never compete with "coolies" willing to live in squalor. The nativist Workingmen's Party led a movement for a new state constitution in 1878-79, which adopted provisions banning Chinese from employment by corporations or state government, segregating them into Chinatowns, and seeking to keep them from entering the state. One delegate to the constitutional convention summed up the prevailing mood: "This State should be a State for white men . . . We want no other race here." Under pressure from California and other Western states, Congress passed the nation's first wholesale immigration restriction, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

*Our progress in  
degeneracy appears to*

*me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal, except negroes." When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes and foreigners, and Catholics." When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty--to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.*

Abraham Lincoln

**RETURN OF ANTI-CATHOLICISM.** Wealth and poverty both intensified during the post-Civil War era, setting the stage for class conflict between unregulated capitalists and a militant labor movement led largely by immigrants. Amid the violent strikes of the 1870s-80s came predictions of an apocalyptic struggle between American democracy and the forces of European socialism. The American Protective Association organized as a secret society dedicated to eradicating "foreign despotism," and that, in the public mind, included Catholics. One of its campaigns sought to ban German-language instruction, then wide-spread in the Midwest, as a way to harass parochial schools. But the idea back-fired after Illinois and Wisconsin adopted such laws in 1889, prompting immigrant voters to turn incumbent Republicans out of office.

**AMERICANIZATION CAMPAIGN.** By the turn of this century, public attention began to focus on the poverty, disease, and crime rates of immigrant ghettos, as well as the cultural distance between newcomers and native-born. Around 1890, the source countries of immigration had begun to shift from Ireland, England, Germany, and Scandinavia to Italy, Greece, Poland, Hungary, and Russia. In 1911, a federal commission issued a 42-volume study of the foreign-born population alleging that the "new immigrants" were less skilled and educated, more clannish, slower to learn English, and generally less desirable as citizens than the "old immigrants." An alarmed establishment responded with a campaign to "Americanize" these Eastern and Southern Europeans, seeking to change their cultural traits, civic values, and especially their language. The U.S. government's Bureau of Americanization encouraged employers to make English classes compulsory for their foreign-born workers. Most states banned schooling in other tongues; some even prohibited the study of foreign languages in the elementary grades.

**TRIUMPH OF ANGLO-SAXON RACIALISM.** Labor strife following World War I, often led by foreign-born activists, brought on a backlash culminating in the Palmer Raids of 1920, in which the FBI deported "alien subversives" without trial. The hysteria strengthened the hand of those who had argued all along that Americanization was futile because Eastern and Southern Europeans could not--indeed, should not--be assimilated because they were genetically inferior. Anglo-Saxon heredity was credited for the American genius for self-government. Letting in "lower races" would thus threaten not only the nation's gene pool but its democratic institutions and "way of life." Congress embraced this reasoning in 1921 and 1924 legislation creating the national-origins quota system.

**ENGLISH ONLY MOVEMENT.** An end to racial quotas in the 1965 *Immigration Reform Act* opened the United States to Third World peoples and brought an explosion of demographic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Americans who felt unsettled by these changes found a symbolic target for their discontent: "bilingualism." In the early 1980s they launched a movement to restrict the language of government--and, in some cases, the private sector--to "English only." The campaign won broad support among Americans who merely hoped to stir the melting pot, to encourage immigrants to learn English "for their own good." But the legislative means were punitive and mean-spirited, seeking to terminate essential rights and services in other languages from 911 operators to driver's license exams.

**CALIFORNIA SETS A NATIVIST TREND.** In the early 1990's, America entered another period of anti-immigrant activism, with increasing complaints about the costs of diversity. The political conditions driving the new nativism were historically familiar: economic stagnation (in California), a widening gap between rich and poor, concerns about crime and moral breakdown, rising racial tensions, the dissolution of community ties, and widespread cynicism about social and political institutions. Anti-immigrant activists successfully capitalized on public fears. In California, voters approved Proposition 187 which would have forced public agencies, such as schools, law enforcement, social service agencies, and health care facilities to determine the immigration status of those they serve (or arrest), deny services to those they suspect (or confirm) are undocumented, and report them to the INS. (The initiative was tossed out by the courts.) Congress enacted sweeping legislation toughening immigration enforcement laws and cutting government benefits to non-citizens. The nativist successes spurred a backlash among new Americans. Naturalization rates reached historically high levels. New Americans voted in record numbers, punishing those responsible for anti-immigrant legislation.

**NATIVISM IN THE NEW MILLENIUM.** The 2000 Census confirmed America's unprecedented diversity. After years of sustained economic growth, many Americans feel comfortable with this diversity, but some, reacting to immigrants who have by-passed traditional gateway cities to settle in traditionally white rural and suburban communities, are uncomfortable with the changing demographics. Anti-immigrant groups have capitalized on this discomfort with negative advertising sometimes targeting pro-immigrant politicians. Meanwhile, as the birthrate of natives declines, the economic well-being of cities and states becomes increasingly reliant on the influx of new immigrants. Census data confirmed that cities where immigrants settled grew and prospered; others were left scrambling to find ways to attract newcomers. Nativists, reacting against the increasing immigrant population, have tried to blame immigrants for suburban sprawl and environmental

degradation.

**SOURCES:**

David Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).  
 Ellis Cose, *A Nation of Strangers: Prejudice, Politics, and the Populating of America* (New York: Morrow, 1992).  
 James Crawford, *Hold Your Tongue: Bilingualism and the Politics of "English Only"* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992).  
 Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States Since 1950* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988).  
 Oscar Handlin, *Race and Nationality in American Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1957).  
 John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*, 2d ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988).  
 Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Revised August 2001. Originally prepared by [James Crawford](#) for the National Immigration Forum

---

**National Immigration Forum 2001**

