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Immigration Then and Now



Photo by Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Elisabeth Volmar, originally from Haiti, becomes an American citizen during a U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services naturalization ceremony at the Hialeah Field Office on January 12, 2018 in Hialeah, Florida. 150 people from different countries around the world took part in the Oath of Allegiance.

Letting Them In: America's Turbulent Immigration History

The nation's first immigration law, the Uniform Rule of Naturalization (signed into law in 1790), provided a comparatively easy road to immigration and naturalization than would be familiar to those attempting to navigate America's complex immigration terrain in the twenty-first century. As a small, fledgling nation, few saw the need for detailed immigration restrictions in 1790 and many politicians favored liberal immigration as a way to build the nation's workforce and to bolster the nation's defensive forces. The nation's first law was therefore rudimentary, requiring only that a person live in the nation for two years, be white and not a slave, and to declare an oath of allegiance in any official court. However, there were some who felt the new law would lead to a rapid influx of undesirables. Among these was James Madison, who said in a February 1790 debate on the topic:

When we are considering the advantages that may result from an easy mode of naturalization, we ought also to consider the cautions necessary to guard against abuses; it is no doubt very desirable, that we should hold out as many inducements as possible, for the worthy part of mankind to come and settle amongst us and throw their fortunes into a common lot with ours. But, why is this desirable? Not merely to swell the catalogue of people. No, sir, 'tis to encrease the wealth and strength of the community, and those who acquire the rights of citizenship, without adding to the strength or wealth of the community, are not the people we are in want of...¹

Conservative *National Review* columnist Michelle Malkin used Madison's speech over the 1790 Uniform Rule of Naturalization to argue that the perceptively liberal immigration attitudes of Barack Obama were contrary to what the oft-called "Founding Fathers" envisioned for the evolution of America. The goals of her essay are demonstrated by her final argument: "Put simply, unrestricted open borders are unwise, unsafe, and un-American. A country that doesn't value its own citizens and sovereignty first won't endure as a country for long."²

Malkin's essay provides a prime example of a flawed historical argument, not because her underlying opinions are necessarily incorrect, but because she suggests that the view of immigration held by Madison is more valuable than that held by former President Barack Obama, or that Madison's view of "American values" has more merit than the more progressive views favored by those with whom the author disagrees.

Consider that Madison was a dedicated slave owner who defended the institution and industry of slavery during his political career. It has been argued that the slave-owning politicians of the era, including the famed Founding Fathers, were products of their time and cannot be judged by the morality of the modern world,

but this is not entirely correct. The idea that slavery was immoral and violated principles of human rights and welfare was well established in 1790. There were many prominent abolitionist activists across the nation, and in Europe, whose views on the institution were well known to the founding fathers and reflected what today would be considered a more modern view of slavery. Madison and the Founding Fathers also knew that slavery provided a massive economic benefit and they were also privy to the views and desires of those seeking to justify the institution of slavery so as to protect the economic benefits it provided. In short, the Founding Fathers participated in this institution despite and knowing the moral issues at play. Few Americans outside the Alt-Right and America's white nationalists would promote Madison's view of slavery as an appropriate way to build the nation's wealth in the 2010s and so, is it appropriate to ask why Madison's ideas about immigration should be any more relevant to the modern debate than his ideas about slavery?

The Economics of Immigration Reform

Madison's thoughts on immigration also encapsulate the basic approach to immigration policy since; viewing residency in the United States as a privilege that should be offered primarily to those who have qualities seen as beneficial to the nation. While this approach may seem intuitively correct to many Americans, there is little agreement about which immigrants improve the nation. Madison imagined choosing from among the population of Europe only those with skills and beneficial qualities and yet Madison, like most of the Founding Fathers, wasn't an average person. He and most of the other founding fathers were wealthy elites whose social circles included the nation's wealthiest entrepreneurs. George Washington, for instance, was the richest person in the United States when he was elected president.³ What this means is that the priorities of the Founding Fathers might have been quite different from those of a local tinsmith living in the era. Throughout the history of immigration reform, the policies that have been put in place, in many cases, are driven by the perspectives of this elite class.

Until 1921, there were few restrictions placed on immigration from Europe and this led to what is called the "golden age of immigration," from around 1880 to the 1930s. It is a commonly accepted myth that immigrants came to the nation because of the allure of US society and the freedom of US culture, but this has rarely been the case. The United States, at its inception, was a country with vast, largely unexploited and unclaimed material wealth and it is precisely this wealth that drew immigrants to the country in the 1700s and continued to draw them in the 2010s. The goal for immigration activists, from the very beginning, was to restrict immigration in such a way as to maintain their own power and position in society.

In the early 1800s, American politics was dominated by white, Protestant men from western and northern Europe. These men led an anti-immigration movement that targeted Catholics and especially Irish Catholics, reflecting ancient European prejudices and the fear that the influx of persons of the Catholic faith would erode the power of the nation's Protestant elite. To popularize the idea that Catholics and the Irish were a threat, powerful politicians and pundits spread fantastic stories

about Catholic blood cults, child sex-rings, and other immoral atrocities. Many in the public embraced this view to the point that there were violent riots in America's cities, with mobs of Protestants attacking Irish or Catholic immigrants or churches. The famous 1844 anti-Catholic riots provide one example, fueled largely by unsubstantiated claims about Catholic immorality spread through the then Protestant mayor who feared the loss of his support base with waves of Catholic immigrants arriving in the city.⁴

The wealthy class also, at times, have determined immigration policy and the nation's second major anti-immigration movement, which targeted Chinese laborers, grew out of the tensions created when America's wealthy industrialists began bringing in Chinese laborers to fuel the construction of the railroad and westward expansion. White laborers, who saw themselves as "real" Americans, because they were white and born in the United States, were exploited by the elite class and many were angry about the state of the nation's economy and their inability to climb the economic ladder. Because of racial and ethnic prejudice, white laborers turned their anger on the Chinese and Irish laborers who they saw as competing with them for the same jobs. From the 1840s to the 1880s, the anti-Chinese movement became the nation's leading immigration issue, resulting ultimately, in Congress deciding to prohibit all Chinese (and later all Asian) immigration to the country.

The Chinese Exclusion Act did not improve the plight of American workers, however, and, in each generation, new groups of immigrants were targeted for expulsion or as scapegoats for the economic ills of the time. In the 1930s, for instance, as the Great Depression led to vast unemployment and poverty, a lobby of white laborers and western politicians turned against Mexican migrants and immigrants, and their children. Over a million persons of Mexican descent were rounded up and expelled from the United States in the 1930s, about 60 percent of whom were born in the United States and so were American citizens. This "repatriation movement," as it was called, was illegal and unconstitutional and occurred only because the nation's economic elite used Mexican-Americans and immigrants as a scapegoat for the underlying economic tensions of the time.⁵

America's immigration history is and has always been a contest between economic interest groups. At times, anti-immigrant movements are fueled by laborers fearing that immigrants will take their jobs or reduce wages and, at other times, anti-immigrant movements are fueled by elite social leaders who fear that the influx of immigrants will weaken their position in society. Frequently, claims about the negative economic impact of immigration are overstated and based more on fear than fact, but these claims remain a cornerstone of anti-immigration movements into the modern age.

Immigration and Identity Preservation

The history of immigration to the United States is also about the preservation of American identity. Most of the nation's anti-immigration movements have come about because of racial, ethnic, or religious prejudice and the fear that an influx of non-white, non-Christian, or non-western/northern European persons would

change the nature of American society. Over the years, there have been anti-Catholic, anti-Asian, anti-Jewish, anti-Mexican, anti-Russian, anti-Socialist, anti-Communist, anti-disabled people, and even anti-poor immigration movements. In each case, the core issue is identity with those actively working to restrict immigration fearing that an influx of immigrants will change American society in unwanted ways.

From 1921 to 1965, US immigration policy was based on a quota system that provided a certain number of visas to people from each country. The number of visas allotted to each country was based on the proportion of people from that country living in the nation. The purpose of these laws was to preserve the nation's ethnic and religious composition. This system remained in place until a wave of liberal policies swept across the United States, fueled by the youth and student activists' movements, and the Civil Rights Debate. In 1965, the nation adopted a new policy that abandoned national quotas, opening up immigration, for the first time, to people of all races, religions, and ethnicities. When this occurred, opponents argued that the change was unfair, because it didn't prioritize the immigration of persons from countries that had "contributed" to the founding of the United States. Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina thus argued,

The people of Ethiopia have the same right to come to the United States under this bill as the people from England, the people of France, the people of Germany, and the people of Holland. With all due respect to Ethiopia, I don't know of any contributions that Ethiopia has made to the making of America.⁶

While Ervin might have been correct in claiming that few Ethiopian immigrants had then participated in the foundation of America, his views are clearly based, primarily, on racial prejudice. Consider that, even as Ervin spoke before Congress, there were more than 11 million descendants of African slaves living in the United States whose ancestors had also contributed to the foundation of America that Ervin attributed primarily to white, western and northern Europeans. What Ervin actually wanted was to preserve his own view of American culture, a society dominated by the culture he associated with white Europeans and their descendants. For an African American living in 1965, the arrival of Ethiopian immigrants would likely have appeared far less of a threat.

The end of the quota system did bring Ethiopians to the United States and, in fact, vastly increased the overall diversity of America. Waves of Asian, Arab, Polynesian, Latino, and African immigrants came from around the world, most settling in America's cities. To some, this increasing diversity was a good thing, enriching America's environment by providing new experiences and perspectives and adding to the unique cultural wealth of the nation. Others do not believe that diversity has made America a better place to live and there are some who are still fighting to maintain the dominance of America's white majority against what they see as the increasingly un-American influence of foreign arrivals. For every American like Sam Ervin who feared that Ethiopian immigrants would change the nation he had come to see as his, there is an American eating a meal in one of the nation's Ethiopian

restaurants who, at least in the most basic sense, is enjoying the fruits of the nation's 1960s liberalization.

When it comes to immigration and identity, there are no right and wrong answers, only perspectives. President Barack Obama's position, that immigration and diversity strengthen American society, can be bolstered by data on the impact of various immigrant groups or through evidence of the many cultural innovations that have come about because of America's unique mix of races and cultural elements, but it is still a matter of perspective. Similarly, Donald Trump and many other politicians in the same ilk throughout history, have proposed that immigration is a danger to American society and have downplayed or even rejected the idea that diversity and cultural blending is a positive force in American culture. This too is a matter of belief and perspective and not something that can be justified with data or evidence. The United States is a nation of immigrants and, though Americans have resisted immigration at every stage and in every era, American society as it exists is a product of this tense, turbulent blending of cultures, ideas, and perspectives. Whether America has become stronger and better over time, or has been degraded by this process, is something that each American decides for him or herself and that decision is fueled by each person's unique identity and imagined view of what their country is and should be.

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Notes

1. "Naturalization, [3 February] 1790," *Founders Online*.
2. Malkin, "Immigration and the Values of Our Founding Fathers."
3. Kertscher, "Were the Founding Fathers 'Ordinary People'?"
4. Hingston, "Bullets and Bigots: Remembering Philadelphia's 1844 Anti-Catholic Riots."
5. Wagner, "America's Forgotten History of Illegal Deportations."
6. Gjelten, "The Immigration Act That Inadvertently Changed America."