# American Identity, Citizenship, and Multiculturalism

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**From Melting Pot to Multiculturalism**

In the early twentieth century, the playwright Israel Zangwill coined the phrase "melting pot" to describe how immigrants from many different backgrounds came together in the United States. In Zangwill's highly popular 1908 Broadway production, feuding Russian Jewish and Cossack families immigrate to America where they learn that hatred and intolerance have no place (Green, 1999). The "melting pot" metaphor assumed that over time the distinct habits, customs, and traditions associated with particular groups would disappear as people assimilated into the larger culture. A uniquely American culture would emerge that would accommodate some elements of diverse immigrant cultures, such as holiday traditions and language phrases, in a new context (Fuchs, 1990).

As Wattenberg observes, "Zangwill had found exactly the right metaphor to translate the urban immigrant experience into American Exceptionalism. If they would but suffer to be melted in the pot, then they would become just as American as anyone else" (2001). This "American model" of assimilation was reinforced by core values and ideals established by the country's original Anglo Protestant settlers that are embedded in the American Creed, which promotes the principles of liberty, equality, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire that underpin the U.S. Constitution. The model also embraced, as Wattenberg notes, the notion of American Exceptionalism, a phrased coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in the mid-19th century which assumes that the nation's extraordinary history and development warrants its special place in the world. American Exceptionalism is rooted in the conviction that the country's vast frontier offers boundless and equal opportunities for individuals to achieve their goals through hard work and self-sacrifice. As de Tocqueville put it: "For 50 years, it has been constantly repeated to the inhabitants of the United States that they form the only religious, enlightened, and free people.

They see that up to now, democratic institutions have prospered among them; they therefore have an immense opinion of themselves, and they are not far from believing that they form a species apart in the human race" (2001). Given the country's diverse cultural landscape, the American Creed and Exceptionalism serve as the focal point for American identity. As Lipset observes, being an American is an ideological commitment, and not a matter of birth (1996).

The idea that American identity is vested in a commitment to core values expressed in the American Creed and the ideals of Exceptionalism raises a fundamental concern that has been the source of considerable debate. Can American identity be meaningfully established by a commitment to core values and ideals among a population that is becoming increasingly heterogeneous?

Since the 1960s, scholars and political activists, recognizing that the "melting pot" concept fails to acknowledge that immigrant groups do not, and should not, entirely abandon their distinct identities, embraced multiculturalism and diversity. Racial and ethnic groups maintain many of their basic traits and cultural attributes, while at the same time their orientations change through marriage and interactions with other groups in society. The American Studies curriculum serves to illustrates this shift in attitude. The curriculum, which had for decades relied upon the "melting pot" metaphor as an organizing framework, began to employ the alternative notion of the "American mosaic." Multiculturalism, in the context of the "American mosaic," celebrates the unique cultural heritage of racial and ethnic groups, some of whom seek to preserve their native languages and lifestyles. In a sense, individuals can be Americans and at the same time claim other identities, including those based on racial and ethnic heritage, gender, and sexual preference.

Multiculturalism has been embraced by many Americans, and has been promoted formally by institutions. Elementary and secondary schools have adopted curricula to foster understanding of cultural diversity by exposing students to the customs and traditions of racial and ethnic groups. Government agencies advocate tolerance for diversity by sponsoring Hispanic and Asian American/Pacific Islander heritage weeks. The United States Post Office has introduced stamps depicting prominent Americans from diverse backgrounds.

Still, multiculturalism has been a source of significant societal and political tension. Substantial support for the "melting pot" assumptions about racial and ethnic assimilation persist among the mass public. Survey data indicate that 95% of Americans believe that the United States is "the world's greatest melting pot where people from all countries can be united in one nation" (Hunter and Bowman, 1996). A study conducted in June, 2005, found that 67% of respondents believe that immigrants should "adopt America's culture, language, and heritage," while only 17% believe that they should "maintain the culture of their home country." Seventy-nine percent felt that immigrants should be required to learn English before they are allowed to become citizens (Rassmussen Reports, 2005).

Attitudes supporting the "melting pot's" connection to the American Creed and Exceptionalism endure, as well. Almost 90 percent of Americans feel strongly that their nation is destined to serve as an example to other countries. They trust that the political and economic systems that have evolved are perfectly suited in principle to permit both individualism and egalitarianism (Hunter and Bowman, 1996). Exceptionalist sentiments were reinforced in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as the proportion of people saying that they considered themselves to be first and foremost Americans topped 90%. A study conducted in 2003 found that 83% of the country's residents consider their culture and traditions to be

"uniquely American" (Fetto, 2003). As Table 1 depicts, these trends differ depending upon an individual's ethnic heritage, as 90% of people of Eastern and Western European descent deem themselves to be quintessentially American compared to 33% of those of Asian ancestry.

Table 1
Percentage of Citizens Who Identify as "Purely American" by Ethnic Heritage

| | |
|---|---|
| East European and West European | 90% |
| Middle Eastern | 64% |
| Latin American | 61% |
| African | 54% |
| Asian | 33% |

Source: Maritz Marketing Research for *American Demographics*, 2003

Conflicts become especially pronounced when multiculturalism translates into policy initiatives, as some citizens believe that society has gone too far in fostering diversity (Simon, 2005) . Approximately half of Americans believe that too much effort and expense is directed at maintaining separate racial and ethnic practices, such as bilingual education (Fonte, 1996). A 2005 survey found that 64% of Americans believe U.S. schools should teach all students in English. Twenty-nine percent believe some schools should offer courses in different languages. A significant number of people disagree with promoting multiculturalism in areas, such as employment programs, that encourage hiring people from varied racial and ethnic backgrounds. Forty-four percent of Americans believe that immigrants are a burden on the country in the areas of employment, housing, and health care (Pew Research Center, 1999). The survey showed overwhelming opposition to letting illegal aliens obtain drivers licenses or receive government benefits such as Medicaid (Rassmussen Reports, 2005).

Among the most controversial statements against multiculturalism in America is Huntington's 2004 tome that poses the fundamental question, *Who Are We?* Huntington argues that the heavy and continuous immigration of Hispanics into the United States since 1965 may

result in major group conflicts. The recent influx of Hispanics, he alleges, is significantly different from earlier immigrant groups who were more likely to assimilate into the culture, learn English, become citizens, and adopt the dominant cultural values. Hispanics live in heavily concentrated, semi-isolated enclaves in California, the Southwest, and Florida. In these enclaves, they fail to develop educationally or economically, and experience growing poverty levels. Huntington suggests that these conditions, in conjunction with a political atmosphere that embraces multiculturalism, will likely lead to the establishment of a Spanish-speaking nation within the United States that stands in opposition to the dominant culture and value system.

Huntington's critics acknowledge that America's political and legal system, and the values underpinning that system, are the foundation of American culture and identity. They disagree with the contention new immigrants are unable to adopt these values on their own terms and in a way that is still consistent with core American ideals. Glazer argues that Hispanic's attitudes about family, church, and community are not at odds with these foundational principles, even though they may approach them from the perspective of Catholicism, rather than Protestantism. Further, he finds little evidence to support Huntington's assertion that Hispanic children do more poorly in school or learn the English language more slowly than other groups sharing similar socioeconomic conditions. Glazer concludes that, ". . . the capacity of America to change people, to make them Americans, is undiminished. It is simply being done in different ways, and it is making rather different Americans" (1997).

**A Statistical Profile of American Diversity**

A brief examination of trends relating to the composition of the American population can provide a context for discussions of issues of identity and multiculturalism. Data from the U.S.

Census reveal that the country's population is growing rapidly, and its racial and ethnic composition has been changing radically. Minority groups of the past and present are destined to become the majorities of the near future. Further, the diversity of cultures represented within racial groups in the United States is expanding. These developments have important implications for how citizens, especially younger generations, identify as Americans.

The country's overall population swelled to 281.4 million people in 2000, the year of the last decennial census. This tremendous growth represented a 13.2% increase (32.7 million people) from the 1990 census, the largest between census jump in history (Perry and Mackun, 2001).[1] The record increase surpassed demographers' and the Census Bureau's predications by over 7 million people. By 2004, the population had reached 285.7 million (Census Bureau, 2004), making the United States the world's third largest country behind China and India. This population growth is projected to continue, reaching 350 million by 2025 and 420 million by 2050 (Kent and Mather, 2002).

The primary factors accounting for the population gains are fertility/mortality and net migration. Natural increases due to the number of births exceeding the number of deaths account for 60% of the growth in overall population. The rising birth rate is in part the result of social and cultural changes in the 1990s that have made raising children more attractive and feasible for women and families. Women have experienced rising wages, better work benefits, and more widely available childcare. Further, more older women are choosing to give birth, as cultural stigmas have abated and medical fertility treatments have improved. The increase in the

[1] The population growth varied significantly by region, with particular areas of the country experiencing massive growth, while others remained relatively stagnant. Western states experienced the greatest growth rate (19.7%), followed by the South (17.3%). The Midwest (7.9%) and the East (5.5%) had far slower growth rates. The majority of the population (54%) lives in the ten most populous states (Perry and Mackun, 2001). For the first time in history, all states experienced population growth (U.S. Census, 2004).

number of racial and ethnic group members in the population also has contributed to the rising birth rate. Minority groups, including new immigrants, tend to have high fertility rates and come from cultures where large families and multiple children are the norm (Macunovich, 2002). Net migration–the fact that more people are moving into the country than are moving out–accounts for 40% of the population increase. The extent to which net migration contributes to the composition of the U.S. population may be underestimated due to the inability to account for illegal immigrants. Still, the relative contribution of net migration to rising population figures has increased notably since 1990 (Kent and Mather, 2002).

The 2000 Census incorporated a number of innovations designed to better account for the racial and ethnic diversity of the American population. Respondents had the option of choosing one or more race categories to indicate their identities. The number of response categories was expanded from the five that have been asked traditionally to include more specific racial groups.[2] Of respondents who selected a single race, 77% were White (69% were White, non-Hispanic); 12% were Black or African American; 1% were American Indian and Alaska Native; 4% were Asian; less than 0.5% were Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and 5% were some other race. People of Hispanic origin may identify with any race. Fourteen percent of the population identified themselves as Hispanic. Two percent of the population chose to identify with more than one race. (See Table 2.)

[2] The basic categories are White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Hispanic, or Some Other Race. Hispanics can be of any race, and can further indicate if they are Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, or any other ethnicity.

Table 2
Population By Race and Hispanic Origin, United States, 2000

| | |
|---|---|
| White | 77% |
| White, non-Hispanic | 69% |
| Black or African American | 12% |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 1% |
| Asian | 4% |
| Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander | .5% |
| Some Other Race | 5% |
| Hispanic or Latino | 14% |
| One Race | 97.6% |
| Two or More Races | 2.4% |

Source: U.S. Census 2000

The racial and ethnic composition of the United States has been changing dramatically in recent decades, a pattern that is expected to accelerate in the future. The Hispanic and Asian populations are increasing at far higher rates than the general population. In 2000, 35.2 million people identified themselves as Hispanic, which represented a 61% increase over 1990 figures (21.9 million). By July, 2003, the total number of Hispanics reached 39.9 million, which accounted for more than half of the 9.4 million residents joining the nation's population since the 2000 Census. Due to innovations in the way that Asian identification was ascertained in the 2000 Census, it is difficult to measure exactly how quickly this population is growing. The 2000 Census identified 11.9 million Asians; depending upon the method used, the population grew either by 3.3 million, representing a 48% increase, or 5 million, indicating a 72% increase. The latter method would make Asians the faster growing population group in the nation (Reeves and Bennett, 2004). The Census Bureau projects that the nation's Hispanic and Asian populations will triple by 2050, and non-Hispanic Whites will constitute 50% of the population, down from 69.4% in 2000. The Hispanic population would increase to 102.6 million, an increase of 188%, representing nearly one fourth of the total population. The Asian population is expected to

increase at an even faster rate of 213%, growing to 33.4 million and constituting 8% of the total population. The non-Hispanic White population would grow to 210.3 million, an increase of 14.6 million or 7%.

The Hispanic and Asian populations in the United States are increasingly diverse. Hispanics in the 2000 Census represented over twenty different nationalities, with Mexicans (59%), Peurto Ricans (10%), and Cubans (4%) comprising the largest contingents (Guzman, 2001). The Asian population consisted of people identifying with twenty-five nationalities, with Chinese, Filipinos, and Asian Indians accounting for 57% of all Asian respondents (Barnes and Bennett, 2002).

The number of foreign born people living in the United States increased by 57% between the 1990 and 2000 censuses. In 2000, the 31.1 million people born outside the country constituted 12% of the population. More than half come from Latin American and a quarter from Asia. (See Table 3). Forty percent of these people were naturalized citizens (Malone, et al., 2003). By 2000, one in five U.S. births was to foreign born parents (Strauss and Howe, 2000).

Table 3

Country of Origin of Foreign Born in the United States, 2000

| | |
|---|---|
| Latin America | 52% |
| Asia | 26% |
| Europe | 16% |
| Other Areas | 6% |

Source: 2000 U.S. Census

The number of people living in the United States and speaking a language other than English also has increased in recent decades. Among people at least five years old, 19 percent

spoke a language other than English at home, with Spanish spoken by 61 percent of these respondents. Forty-five percent of those who spoke another language reported that they did not speak English "very well."

Another trend worth noting is that the United States population consists of a significant proportion of young people, even as the post World War II baby boomers mature and the median age has risen slightly to 35.9 years. Younger age groups constituted a substantially higher proportion of the population in 2000 than in 1990. The ten to fourteen year age group, in particular, grew 20% between censuses. In 2000, 26% of the population, 73.2 million people, were under the age of 18. Seventy-three percent of this group were elementary to high school aged (5 to 17 years old), 8 % were preschoolers (3-4 years old), and 19% were infants and toddlers (Meyer, 2001). There were distinct age-based differences based on racial and ethnic identification. The median age for people who identified with two or more races was thirteen years young than the media age for those who identified with a single race.[3]

**Generation Y and American Identity**

The complexities of American identity can be illustrated by examining Generation Y, also labeled Echo Boomers and the Millennium Generation by scholars and market researchers, and Generation Yes by its own members. This group, characterized as those born between approximately 1980 and 1995, numbers almost 60 million and is the largest generation since the post World War II Baby Boomers. It embodies many of the traits that go hand in hand with the population trends described above. It is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in American history, with one third identifying with a race other than Caucasian, compared to 85%

[3] 98% of the 2000 Census population identified with a single race.

of those age 65 and older who consider themselves to be White (Howe and Strauss, 2000). Table 4 depicts differences in the racial composition of American generations since the early 1900s.

Table 4
Generation by Race

| | White | Black | Asian | Hispanic |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Generation Y | 61% | 15% | 4% | 17% |
| Generation X | 63 | 13 | 5 | 17 |
| Baby Boomers | 73 | 12 | 3 | 10 |
| WWII Gen | 80 | 9 | 3 | 7 |
| WWI Gen | 86 | 7 | 2 | 4 |

Source: Greenberg, 2005, from the 2000 U.S. Census

Although this generation's ethnic and racial diversity is its trademark, ancestral background is not an overwhelming factor in establishing members' sense of personal identity. As Table 5 demonstrates, ethnic origin and race rank equally or slightly lower than political beliefs as factors contributing to the personal identities of Generation Y. Family, religion, and sexual preference are the most important factors. While 46% of Asian and 33% of Hispanic immigrants in this cohort say that they have experienced discrimination, far fewer report that they feel like outsiders in this county (Asian 28%; Hispanic 22%).

Table 5

Source of Personal Identity for Generation Y
(% Reporting the Source as "Very Important")

| | |
|---|---|
| Family | 54% |
| Religion | 39% |
| Sexual Preference | 36% |
| Your Gender | 30% |
| Your Job | 27% |
| Your Generation | 27% |
| **Political Beliefs** | **23%** |
| Your School | 22% |
| **Your Ethnic Origin** | **22%** |
| Where You Live | 21% |
| **Your Race** | **19%** |

Source: Greenberg, 2005

There is little evidence to suggest that this diverse group is abandoning core American values. Rather, it supports these values, and appears to be putting its own, novel stamp on the American Creed. Members strongly embrace the values of freedom, equality, and individualism. They exhibit greater tolerance for nonconformity than previous generational cohorts, and express more progressive political views on hot-button social issues. As Table 6 depicts, Generation Y is substantially more willing to accept homosexuality and to believe that immigrants strengthen the country than older cohorts. This group overwhelmingly (84%) believes that immigrants share American values of democracy and freedom. Generation Y advocates strongly for the freedom to express themselves as individuals and for the right to determine their place in society. A majority believe that the American Dream means, "doing whatever I want" (Greenberg, 2005).

Table 6
Tolerant Positions on Issues

| | Gen Y | Gen X | Baby Boom | WWII- Older |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Homosexuality should be accepted | 60% | 54% | 50% | 39% |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Immigrants strengthen the country | 60% | 51% | 49% | 42% |

Source: CIRCLE, 2002

In an updated version of Exceptionalism, this generation is willing to experiment with new models of community building. They are young people living in an era where new frontiers, especially on the communication front, are opening, while existing communities offer new opportunities. Generation Y is well-integrated into diverse social networks. While they reject established institutional frameworks for political and social engagement, they have stronger personal networks than their predecessor, Generation X. They live in a complex world where their community can be the peers they encounter in their neighborhoods as well as those they engage online. Rather than remaining ensconced in enclaves of similar individuals, members of Generation Y are skilled networkers, both in terms of face-to-face contact and cyber relationships. Considering issues of identity and community has become a meaningful part of their socialization experience through the educational process, their participation in community service projects, and in peer interactions.

**Conclusion**

American identity has been a contested notion since the nation's founding. Because of its immigrant heritage, American identity has been associated with a commitment to an ideology and an acceptance of core values moreso than a sense of shared ancestry and history. The challenge of answering the question of what it means to be an American has perhaps never been as great as in the present, as the country faces a monumental shift in the composition of its population. It is clear that American identity and citizenship is being reconfigured by immigration and multiculturalism.

American political culture has historically been an adaptive culture, and it appears that this tradition will continue. The preliminary examination of the orientations of the nation's most recent generation to come of age politically, Generation Y, seems to indicate that young people generally are accepting of core American values, and perhaps will be responsible for recasting them in light of changing demographic, social, and cultural trends. The alarm bells sounded by Huntington are likely unwarranted.

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