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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

IMMIGRATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICA

It came out of the 1960s. And like everything else in that fateful decade, it still echoes to this day. Along with civil rights and racial equality, new roles for women, gay empowerment, and the environment, there was one more watershed movement. Less noticed at the time but every bit as consequential was the first of a new wave of immigrants.

Alongside the civil rights acts and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, Congress passed, in 1965, a statute that upended our immigration laws. In the half century that followed, tens of millions of new arrivals began transforming this country.

The numbers alone are extraordinary. By 2020, an unprecedented forty-five million immigrants were living in the United States. Together with their children they totaled nearly eighty-six million, accounting for 26 percent of the nation's population. It's the equivalent of absorbing the entire population of Germany—and then some. They are more than one quarter of this country.¹

Their impact has been just as large. The tens of millions of post-1965 immigrants and their second-generation children represent an even bigger group than the baby boomers. With relatively little recognition, they have affected almost every part of the American experience, from the music we listen to and food we eat to the high-tech innovations we enjoy.

For most Americans the latest wave of immigration is a new experience. But the fact is that it is as American as apple pie. In 1910, an even higher percentage of Americans were immigrants than today. This was true in 1890, 1870, and most likely several times in the eighteenth century. First on the land from Europe were Spaniards (in the south and southwest) and English (in the east) as well as Africans, against their will, followed by, among others, Germans, Irish, Chinese, and Scandinavians, and at the turn of the last century, southern and eastern (often Jewish) Europeans. Today they are coming in large numbers from all over the world.

Like Canada and Australia, we are a settler society. But unlike people in Asia, Africa, or Europe, the majority of our ancestors lived—three centuries ago—not just in another country but on a different continent. Indeed, this country’s founding myth—the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving—celebrates an ocean voyage to a new, more hopeful land.

Look back and immigration is entwined with the evolution of American society in every era of our history. The first colonizers, in Plymouth and Jamestown, were immigrants. Alexander Hamilton, born on the island of Nevis, was among the founding fathers. Urban politics were fueled by immigrant and ethnic passions—from William Marcy “Boss” Tweed, of Scottish ancestry, to Fiorello La Guardia, the child of an Italian immigrant father and Jewish mother from Trieste, to John F. Kennedy’s grandfather “Honey Fitz,” the son of immigrants who came from Ireland. In World War II, the brain trust of the Manhattan Project producing the first nuclear weapons—Edward Teller and John von Neumann, Enrico Fermi, and Leo Szilard—were immigrants and refugees. Two of our three most recent presidents had a parent who was born abroad. Barack Obama’s Kenyan father met the future president’s mother in Hawaii on a student visa; our forty-fifth president’s mother, Mary Anne MacLeod, left a remote fishing village in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland in 1930 to immigrate to New York City, soon to marry Fred Trump, himself the son of German immigrants.

Throughout American history, immigration has driven fundamental changes in this country’s culture, institutions, and values. This was never simply a matter of immigrants becoming Americans; it was also

American society itself evolving as new people came to settle. Take two examples from the past: Judaism and Catholicism, once widely despised religions, became part of mainstream America thanks to the incorporation of earlier Russian Jewish and Irish and Italian Catholic immigrant groups. We no longer see ourselves as a nation of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants or WASPs.² In the realm of politics, the nineteenth-century Irish, with their storied Democratic Party bosses and powerful political machines, transformed big-city politics, leaving behind a legacy of effective ethnic turnout at the polls that is alive and well today. Interestingly, even our national myth of origin has changed. This country was always peopled by immigrants, but it is only since the 1960s that the phrase “nation of immigrants” became commonly and popularly used to celebrate the United States. According to historian Matthew Frye Jacobson, Ellis Island joined Plymouth Rock in our foundational myths.³

Post-1965 immigrants have made equally consequential changes to American society, though in different ways. These changes go to our culture and institutions. Three examples help to tell the tale. Race—or racial perceptions—have always been part of the immigration story, but the remaking of the racial order since 1965 represents a modern-day transformation. Immigration has not only changed the way Americans view racial and ethnic groups but also created a new and highly diverse on-the-ground national demographic reality. Immigrants and their children have played a part in politics before; now they have helped create new political party coalitions and may potentially reshape the broader political landscape. In the economy too, immigrants have always played an important role, but as this country has evolved into a service-driven economy, immigrants (especially highly educated ones) have been at the forefront of the high-tech revolution—think Google’s Russian-born cofounder Sergey Brin or eBay’s founder Pierre Omidyar, born in France to Iranian migrant parents. To be sure, not all the changes in the past five decades in which immigrants have been pivotal loom so large, but none of them are without interest and indeed importance for the narrative in this book.

Not every observer of immigration sees it this way. There is legitimate scholarly dispute about the depth of immigration’s impact. Sociologist

Alejandro Portes even argues that the basic institutional order in the United States has remained untouched by immigration, and that the fundamental pillars of society, including the nation's value-normative system, legal system, and class structure, have by and large remained intact.⁴ I believe that post-1965 immigration has been a prominent source of profound and far-reaching changes in this country's institutions, altering the social, economic, cultural, and political landscape in many significant ways. The chapters that follow will make this case.

In discussing how large-scale immigration of the past fifty years has been changing the United States, this book differs in a number of ways from other works that consider this topic. While some of them recognize that the immigration of recent decades has played an important role in changing American society, their focus is instead on how immigrants themselves have changed. Even the landmark volume *Remaking the American Mainstream*, despite its title, is almost entirely about how immigrants assimilate to America rather than the other side of the equation: how they remake it as well.⁵ The groundbreaking National Academy of Sciences report on immigrant integration into American society, published in 2015, is at pains to emphasize that integration is a two-way process, but again, the focus is on immigrants' experience with change as opposed to how the society itself changes in response to immigration.⁶ In general, the bulk of the copious scholarly literature on contemporary immigration to this country concentrates on the lives of the newcomers and their children, and how they have been adapting to and making their way in American society.

To the extent that scholars explore contemporary immigration's impact on American society, their accounts tend to be fairly narrowly drawn, covering only one particular domain or institutional sphere, such as race or the economy.⁷ The books that examine a range of institutional domains in some depth nearly always center on specific places, typically one city or one type of immigrant destination.⁸ There is virtue in a broad view that looks in depth at a number of key economic, social, and cultural spheres affected by immigration, not just one or even two, and encompasses the nation as a whole.

Nor, it should be obvious, is this book an anti-immigrant polemic. Perhaps the most prominent scholarly account of contemporary immigration's impact on the United States is the late political scientist Samuel Huntington's *Who Are We?*, whose theme is that immigration has been eroding America's national identity and core values; various conservative journalistic screeds, Peter Brimelow's *Alien Nation* among them, contend that contemporary immigration undermines the economy, social infrastructure, and national unity.⁹ The present book, it goes without saying, has a different orientation to immigration, but it is more than that. Although it highlights immigration's many contributions and positive impacts, it is not, it should be emphasized, a manifesto or treatise about whether immigration makes America great, to excuse this expression in the recent political climate.

The book's coverage is broad, but it does not of course include everything. The focus is on many of the ways immigration has been transforming the United States, from creating changes in how Americans think about race to playing a role in shifting political debates and party alignments. It considers immigration's impact on cities, towns, and suburbs as well as important aspects of the nation's economy. And it looks at immigration's effect on popular culture, from what Americans eat to the television programs and films they watch and novels they read.

As an interpretive synthesis of the existing literature, the book draws on a wide range of quantitative and qualitative studies. These include in-depth accounts of particular groups and places as well as census reports and surveys carried out by social science researchers. It is also informed by my own research and writings in a long career exploring immigration in the United States. The goal is to provide an analysis of changes that immigration of recent decades has wrought: to explain what these changes are, why they have occurred, and what their consequences have been. Although the focus is on contemporary immigration in the broad post-1965 period, the book reflects a deep concern with history, seeing changes today in light of those generated by immigration in previous eras.¹⁰ Immigration has long been an intrinsic part of American society; the changes it has stimulated have given the

nation an unmistakable and distinctive flavor and character—shaping, in truth, who we are.

1965 and After

Contemporary immigration is often referred to as post-1965 immigration, and for good reason. On October 3, 1965, at the foot of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed legislation revolutionizing the American immigration system. The bill he signed set in motion powerful demographic forces that are still shaping the United States today and will continue to do so in the decades ahead.¹¹ The law literally changed the face of America.

Known as the Hart-Celler Act after its Democratic sponsors (Philip Hart, a senator from Michigan, and Emanuel Celler, a representative from New York), the law abolished the national origins quota system in place since the 1920s. That system heavily favored those from northern and western Europe; it drastically limited immigration from southern and eastern Europe as well as many other parts of the world, including Asian countries, which already had been subject to earlier statutory bars to admission.¹² After the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, Germany had an annual quota of fifty-one thousand and Great Britain just over thirty-four thousand, while Italy, which sent about two million immigrants to the United States between 1900 and 1910, had around four thousand and the entire continent of Africa slightly over one thousand.¹³ Overall, the combined effects of the restrictive 1924 law, Great Depression, and Second World War caused immigrant entrants to plummet from over seven hundred thousand a year in the first two decades of the twentieth century to less than seventy thousand a year from 1925 through 1945.¹⁴ By 1970, after decades of low levels of new arrivals, only 4.7 percent of the nation's population were immigrants, or slightly less than ten million people (see figure 1.1).¹⁵

The framework introduced by the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act defined the basic contours of the immigration system for decades, although there have of course been many modifications along the way. The law emphasized family ties with lawful permanent residents (known

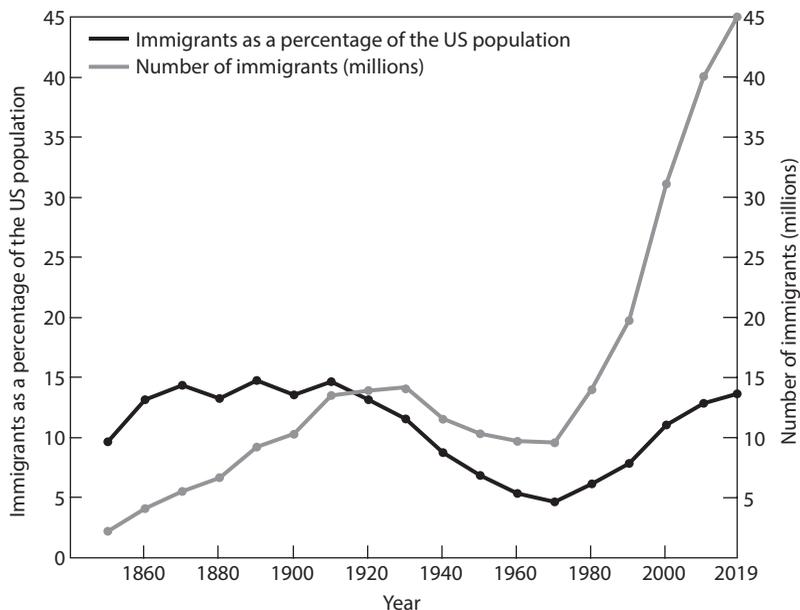


FIGURE 1.1. Number of foreign-born residents and their share of the total US population, 1850–2019. *Source:* Batalova, Hanna, and Levesque 2021.

informally as green card holders) and US citizens, and to a lesser degree, labor market qualifications, which were the basis for a minority of green cards awarded. As a Migration Policy Institute report sums it up, while the share varies from year to year, roughly two-thirds of permanent legal immigration in the past few decades has been on the basis of family relationships, with the rest divided among employment-based and humanitarian immigrants (refugees and asylees) as well as those arriving through the green card lottery—a program established by the Immigration Act of 1990, bringing in immigrants from countries underrepresented in US immigration streams. There are annual numerical limits on permanent legal immigration in most categories, although immediate relatives of US citizens—parents, spouses, and unmarried minor children—have been exempt from them.¹⁶

By eliminating national origins quotas, the 1965 act paved the way for sweeping changes. The United States “was in effect declaring,” as

sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee noted, “that it was prepared to accept newcomers from all over the world.”¹⁷ Never before has the United States received so many immigrants from so many different countries. Since 1965, immigrants have come in remarkably large numbers from every region across the globe—mostly Asia and Latin America, but also Africa and the Middle East. While European immigrants are part of the mix, there has been a decisive shift away from Europe as the dominant source of new arrivals.

The 1965 law ended the immigration admissions policy established in the 1920s that had ensured that the United States was primarily reserved for European immigrants. In the first half of the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of immigrants living in the United States were from Europe. In 1960, 75 percent of foreign-born residents were born in Europe; by 2018, the figure was 11 percent. In the same period, those born in Latin America and the Caribbean went from 9 to 50 percent of the foreign-born population, and with the 1965 law’s elimination of the severe barriers against Asian immigration, Asians rose from 4 to 28 percent. Sub-Saharan Africans, virtually invisible among foreign-born residents in 1960 at four-tenths of 1 percent, had grown to 5 percent in 2018.¹⁸

The change in the top five source countries for immigrants living in the United States reveals the same pattern. In 1960, these were Canada, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom; in 2018, Mexico, China, India, the Philippines, and El Salvador headed the list. Mexicans have stood out as by far the largest foreign-born group for many decades, accounting for a quarter of the immigrant population in 2018, although the Mexican inflow slowed in the early twenty-first century given, among other things, an improving Mexican economy, a long-term drop in Mexico’s birth rates, and stepped-up US border enforcement. In fact, from 2009 to 2014 more Mexican immigrants returned to Mexico than migrated to the United States. At the same time, there has been an increasing tilt toward Asian immigration, with more Asian than Hispanic immigrants having arrived in most years between 2010 and 2018.¹⁹

The change in source countries following the 1965 law was not a deliberate policy choice. Far from it. It was a case of unintended consequences,

unforeseen by the authors and major supporters of the act who thought that its family reunification emphasis would favor the entry of European immigrants who had close relatives here, and not significantly alter the racial and ethnic composition of the nation's population. As Muzaffar Chishti and his coauthors tell the story in commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the act, the prioritizing of immigrants with relatives already in the United States was a last-minute concession to influential conservative members of Congress allied with the House immigration subcommittee chair, who believed it would better preserve the country's predominantly European base.²⁰ They were wrong. In the years following the passage of the law, Europeans' interest in immigrating to the United States fell flat while it grew among people in non-European countries, many of them emerging from the end of colonial rule.

For millions of people facing limited economic opportunities in the Global South, the United States has held out the prospect of jobs, higher wages, and better living conditions. "Jamaica," one man told me when I was doing research in a rural community in the late 1960s, "is a beautiful country, but we can't see our way through."²¹ In the Jamaican case, harsh realities in this small, resource-poor economy, plagued by high levels of unemployment and underemployment, and a population with needs and aspirations for standards of living that cannot be fulfilled at home, have spurred many to leave for the United States. Jamaica is not alone; variations on these themes have played out in many other countries of origin as well. In addition, political conditions in many places around the world, including oppressive governments and brutal civil wars, have driven people out of their homelands. So has everyday violence and the ravages of climate change. Loosened emigration controls in some source countries, perhaps most notably China, which opened its doors to large-scale exit in the late 1970s, also had a role in rising immigration to the United States. Once begun, migration tends to have a snowball or multiplier effect; network connections lower the costs, reduce the risks and uncertainties, and raise the benefits of moving to the United States.²² By allocating most green cards on the basis of family connections, US immigration law reinforced and formalized the operation of migration family networks: as new immigrants from countries around the world

established themselves in the United States, they became a channel for additional immigration through sponsoring family members.

The 1965 act and subsequent legislation had a dramatic effect on the number of immigrants entering the United States as well as where they have come from.²³ After the passage of the act, admissions of lawful permanent residents soared, increasing from around 250,000 a year in the 1950s and 330,000 in the 1960s to 450,000 in the 1970s and 600,000 in the 1980s. For almost all the years between 2001 and 2019, the United States annually issued about 1 million green cards to new lawful permanent residents.²⁴ In 2019, the nation had, at least until that year, the largest foreign-born population since Census records have been kept; by then the immigrant share of the US total (13.7 percent) had nearly reached the record high of 1890 (14.8 percent) (see figure 1.1).²⁵

Refugees and asylees are a minority, though noteworthy, portion of permanent legal immigration: 13 percent of those obtaining green cards between 2013 and 2017. Individuals are granted refugee status or asylum, and given the right to live in the United States permanently, by demonstrating that they have experienced or have a well-founded fear of persecution. Legally, the difference between an asylee and refugee hinges on the person's physical location. Asylum is granted to people already in the United States, and refugee status to people vetted abroad and approved for resettlement. Large numbers of refugees were admitted in the 1970s and 1980s as a consequence of the Vietnam War, and over 100,000 a year in the early 1990s, many from the former Soviet Union; the numbers declined afterward, with most in the twenty-first century coming from Asia and Africa. Altogether, about 3 million refugees have been resettled in this country since 1980, with slightly more than 600,000 admitted between 2010 and 2020. The number granted asylum is smaller, averaging around 25,000 a year between 2007 and 2018.²⁶

The immigration system developed after 1965 also includes those with nonimmigrant visas. They are here legally, but only have temporary visas, which in 2016, were held by an estimated 2.3 million foreign nationals living in the United States.²⁷ A great many have come for limited periods as international students and exchange visitors (about 780,000 visas issued in 2018). Others are temporary workers, whose numbers

grew substantially between 1997 and 2018.²⁸ These include agricultural workers (nearly 200,000 visas issued in 2018, mostly to Mexicans) and high-skilled professionals in the H-1B program, which has allowed firms to petition for foreign workers with at least a bachelor's degree or the equivalent for "specialty" occupations for up to six years (although some have gone beyond the limit while waiting for a green card). Officially, the annual cap is 85,000, but additional visas have been approved in recent years; most H-1B workers are Indians, and most are in computer-related fields.²⁹

Not all immigrants of course are legal residents. A remarkably high number are undocumented, who either entered without inspection, typically across the southern border with Mexico, or arrived at an airport or other port of entry with a temporary visa, but then overstayed the required departure date ("overstayers"). Despite all the attention to unauthorized border crossers, the fact is that overstayers made up an estimated 44 percent of the overall undocumented population in 2016, and most of the undocumented who entered between 2010 and 2017.³⁰ In total, the number of undocumented immigrants living in the United States was estimated at about 11 million in 2018, somewhat lower than the peak of around 12 million in 2007, but up from an estimated 3.5 million in 1990.³¹ To put it another way, about one out of four immigrants in the United States is undocumented.

This situation is unprecedented.³² Large-scale undocumented immigration is a new phenomenon. In earlier eras, there were so few restrictions on European immigration that hardly any European immigrants were unauthorized. To be sure, specific exclusion laws barred the entry of the Chinese as early as 1882. But until the 1920s, there were no numerical limits on European immigration or immigrant visas that had to be secured from the United States prior to arriving. At the turn of the twentieth century, European immigrants came by boat, and most got through the ports of entry easily because they already had been screened, mainly for disease, by steamship companies before embarking.³³ Of the more than 12 million immigrants who landed at Ellis Island between 1892 and 1954, only 2 percent were excluded from entry. Today, if you do not have proper documentation from American authorities,

you cannot legally live and work in the United States. Getting this documentation is not easy. Those aspiring to become lawful permanent residents, for example, often lack the family or employment relationships that would make them eligible to apply.³⁴ Even if eligible, the annual numerical limits on green cards in most categories mean that in many countries where the desire to come to the United States is especially strong there is a long wait to get one—for Mexicans in some categories it was more than twenty years in 2019 and over a million were waiting.³⁵ As a result, many have arrived or remained without proper documents.

A growing share of the undocumented have been living in the United States for a long time. In 2017, a whopping two-thirds of undocumented immigrant adults had been in the United States more than ten years.³⁶ Paradoxically, this increase is partly due to beefed-up border enforcement. By making reentry more difficult, dangerous, and expensive, increased border enforcement ended up lengthening stays in the United States; in the case of Mexican workers, many who would have returned to Mexico periodically instead decided to settle in the United States and send for their families.³⁷ Although the number of undocumented Mexican immigrants has declined since 2007, Mexican immigrants still represent the largest proportion of undocumented, or about half in 2018. Mexico not only shares a nearly two-thousand-mile border with the United States but the 1965 act and later amendments created new restrictions on immigration from Mexico, which had not been included in earlier national origins quotas. Before 1965, Mexicans only faced qualitative restrictions, such as perceived illiteracy or lack of prearranged employment, not numerical limits. Indeed, legal Mexican immigration was considerable in the 1950s and early 1960s. Moreover, the Bracero program, which was established in 1942 and brought in several million Mexican agricultural workers on temporary work contracts, ended in 1964, closing off a major avenue for Mexicans to work legally, even if not permanently, in the United States.³⁸ Even though Mexicans dominate the undocumented population, other origin countries stand out too; three in Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—and three in Asia—India, China, and the Philippines—together were estimated to be the source of a quarter of all the undocumented in 2018.³⁹

Contemporary immigrants also stand out for the great diversity of their socioeconomic as well as national backgrounds. Although Europeans who came at the turn of the twentieth century included a sizable number who had worked in skilled trades in the old country, the bulk were low-skilled workers with little or often no formal education; professionals and the highly educated were scarce. On average, eastern, southern, and central European immigrants at that time had a little more than four years of education compared to eight years for the native born.⁴⁰ Today, many immigrants are still poorly educated and low skilled; in 2019, 26 percent of immigrants twenty-five years and older in the United States lacked a high school diploma. However, 33 percent had a bachelor's degree or higher, almost the same as US-born adults. In recent years, the share of immigrants with these academic credentials has risen significantly among the newly arrived—up to 48 percent among the foreign born who entered the country between 2014 and 2019. It is no exaggeration to say that never in the history of US immigration has such a large proportion of new arrivals been so highly skilled and educated.⁴¹

Road Map

The story of how immigrants and their families have been transforming America is complex and sometimes surprising, so much so that a road map is helpful in describing the plan of the book. Chapter 2 begins with the subject of race. Perhaps no change produced by the post-1965 immigration is as dramatic, profound, and far-reaching as the transformation of the nation's racial composition as well as ideas about race and ethnicity. How and why have East Asian Americans gone from the “yellow peril” to “model minority”? What explains the normalization and widespread use of the Hispanic and Latino labels? How has immigration affected the meaning of Whiteness? Is it having an impact on perceptions of Blackness? I also peer into the future: Can the analysis of recent changes as well as those in the more distant past help identify forces that may create additional transformations in the racial order in the decades to come?

Chapter 3 turns the focus to cities, towns, and suburbs, where the huge growth in the immigrant population has given rise to astonishing levels of ethnic and racial diversity, to say nothing of a host of other, sometimes unexpected changes. Immigration has fueled population growth in urban America, given a new vitality to many cities and parts of rural America, and even helped account for decreases in urban crime. Recent arrivals have always been drawn to ethnic neighborhoods, but what new features have become prominent in these neighborhoods today? In another development, how has immigration contributed to the decline of all-White neighborhoods in metropolitan America? Contemporary immigration has also led to changes in the institutional landscape in communities around the country, bringing new religions, and providing the impetus for innovative programs and policies in many mainstream local institutions.

Chapter 4 moves on to the economy. The many millions of new immigrant workers have been a force for change and innovation, fueling growth in the American economy, and helping to shape the development of businesses and whole industries. Among the topics I explore are how immigrants have played a role in the success and dynamism of the remarkable new high-tech sector, reinvigorated many businesses and created entirely new ones, and helped many service industries expand, even stimulating a demand for workers in some fields.

Popular culture, a topic given short shrift in the scholarship on immigration, is at the center of chapter 5. Once again, immigrants are remaking what we think of as our uniquely American culture. If earlier Jewish and Italian immigrants brought us bagels and pizza, today's newcomers have made salsa and tacos standard fare as they have introduced a wide range of new tastes and cuisines. In virtually every area of popular culture—from music, dance, and film to theater, television, and literature—immigrants and their children have been introducing new themes or reviving old ones in original ways, and inventing new styles and cultural forms. At one and the same time, they have broadened mainstream American culture while also often creating new multiethnic mixes.

Chapter 6 attempts to unravel the multiple ways the post-1965 immigration has helped transform electoral politics in the early

twenty-first century. Not only has immigration emerged as a major focus of national political debates and campaigns; overt anti-immigrant rhetoric became a staple in the strategies of many Republican politicians, most notably Donald Trump, who gave it a legitimacy in political discourse at the highest levels. Immigration's impact has been felt as well in the reshaping of both the Democratic and Republican Parties' electoral coalitions—a shift with consequences in practically every corner of the political landscape. And a very different type of change stems from ethnic succession. Political figures with roots in the post-1965 immigration who have begun to win elected office are not simply new faces in old places but also have frequently introduced changes in the political sphere. Electoral politics of course is a fast-moving target, and among the many questions for the future is how the demographics stemming from immigration, including further shifts in the racial and ethnic composition of the electorate, will lead to additional changes in the political arena in the years ahead.

The concluding chapter has three main goals. One is to consider what we have learned about the impact of post-1965 immigration on this country. A second goal is to reflect on how—and why—the United States is distinctive in its recent experience with immigration-driven change as compared to western European countries. Finally, I raise questions about what may be in store in the future, with an eye, in particular, to the potential effects of the devastating coronavirus pandemic and recession. As millions of the US-born second generation grow up and enter adulthood, and as new arrivals settle in this country, they are destined to produce additional societal changes in the decades to come. In a time-honored fashion, we can expect immigrants as well as their children to continue to serve as a building block of the nation, molding and remolding it in new and sometimes unexpected ways.

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