

At Odds Over Immigrant Assimilation

Whether the U.S. Government Should Offer Encouragement Is Debated

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Washington Post, Tuesday, August 7, 2007; A01

Hernan Ruiz, a concrete finisher with a gray streak in his dark hair, shot up his hand during a recent citizenship test prep class at a sunny [Silver Spring](#) community center. Called on to answer a question about who elects the U.S. president, the [El Salvador](#) native carefully pronounced "electoral college," a response he might need to know for his official transformation into an American.

After 22 years in the United States, Ruiz said, he feels like one.

But he knows that not everyone sees people such as him -- an immigrant who prefers to speak his mother tongue -- that way. To this, he responds that the U.S. government should demand that newcomers know English -- and help them learn it.

"This country was founded by immigrants. There should be a lot of cultures," Ruiz, 48, said. "But at the base is the government."

Ruiz's idea lies at the heart of a question that has recently entered the national immigration debate, one some researchers say is important as new trends challenge old integration patterns: Should the government encourage assimilation?

The Bush administration is taking steps to do that. The Task Force on New Americans, created by executive order last year, recently presented initiatives that supporters say will help immigrants "become fully American."

Among the government initiatives is a Web site to direct immigrants to information on benefits, English classes and volunteer work. Another site offers resources for English and citizenship-test teachers. More than 12,000 copies of a tool kit containing civics flashcards and a welcome guide in English and Spanish have been distributed to libraries. This fall, the government has scheduled eight regional training conferences for civics and citizenship instructors. The task force is to deliver more recommendations to [President Bush](#) after convening discussions on assimilation with immigrant advocates, teachers and local officials around the nation.

Immigrants "need to come here and feel as American as the founding fathers," Emilio T. Gonzalez, director of [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services](#) at the [Department of Homeland Security](#), said at a news conference announcing the efforts.

Social scientists emphasize that assimilation has never been a first-generation process. They rely on such measurements as language, education, economic mobility, intermarriage and geographic distribution to assess assimilation -- the test of which is not a loss of ethnic identity, but parity with the majority. The massive wave of immigrants a century ago made few gains, but its grandchildren were integrated.

The modern immigrant wave arrived after laws were relaxed in 1965, so evidence of its generational progress remains incomplete, said Tomas R. Jimenez, assistant sociology professor at the [University of California at San Diego](#). But researchers

say the newcomers and their offspring seem to be following the broad historical pattern, although Mexicans are progressing more slowly. English acquisition is occurring at the same or a faster rate, said Rubén G. Rumbaut, a sociology professor at the [University of California at Irvine](#).

Although adult immigrants generally have a hard time learning English, their children are commonly bilingual. "By the third generation, it's over. English wins. Even among Mexicans in Southern California," said Rumbaut, whose research has found that more than 95 percent of third- and later-generation California Mexicans prefer to speak English at home.

Still, there are indications that the assimilation equation has changed, researchers said.

Thirty percent of immigrants are here illegally, about double the rate 15 years ago. Illegal status limits economic mobility and public benefits. Fear of being deported -- particularly as tensions boil over illegal immigration -- means "you're not likely to go out and integrate much beyond what you must," said Michael Fix, co-director of the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute's National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy.

Drawn by demand for low-skill labor, immigrants are increasingly settling in smaller cities and rural areas, and those doing so are more likely to be poor, non-English-speaking and illegal. It is unclear whether that quickens integration by forcing contact with U.S. natives at the local park or slows it because the receiving communities have little experience bringing immigrants into the fold, Fix said.

Communications and travel revolutions have enabled immigrants to keep closer ties to their homelands, perhaps creating more transnational identities. Unlike in the 1920s, when foreigners were all but prevented from immigrating to the United States, today's immigrants keep coming, and most speak one language: Spanish. That means generations can maintain contact with ancestral cultures and tongues.

And the institutions that prompted assimilation in the early 20th century -- labor unions, a manufacturing economy, the military draft and political parties that once held sway in many cities -- are weakened or gone, researchers say. Today's labor economy fills some, but not all, of the void.

"Historically, certain institutions have been very important in terms of bringing immigrants into American life around issues of politics, American democracy and jobs," said Gary Gerstle, a [Vanderbilt University](#) history professor. "Immersion in American culture [alone] doesn't bring you those things."

What these trends mean is unclear. Some researchers say assimilation will occur anyway; others sound alarms.

"We are dramatically less able to digest immigrants successfully and turn them into Americans" than before, said [Mark Krikorian](#), executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which favors reduced immigration levels. "The consequences are a kind of balkanization."

John Fonte, director of the Center for American Common Culture at the right-leaning Hudson Institute, predicts a "long-term decay" of American identity.

Fix said the trends do not indicate that the nation is on "the threshold of a culture war." But the possibility of a permanent underclass -- if immigrants' descendants do not advance economically or educationally -- is too great to leave to chance, especially in an economy that increasingly demands higher skills, he said.

For that reason, he and other scholars say, assimilation policy should be as much a part of the immigration debate as rules on who comes and goes -- and the federal government should get far more involved. They call for a national integration office to set and measure goals and serve as a liaison for local governments and organizations that do the bulk of work with immigrants. Aggressive, professional English programs also are a key, Fix said.

So is more money, Jimenez said. According to the Migration Policy Institute, the federal government spent about \$2.5 billion on major initiatives directed at the nation's 35 million immigrants in fiscal 2005, most of which went to refugee and migrant worker programs. In 1986, the government gave \$4 billion to states to offset costs associated with legalizing 2.8 million immigrants in 1986. The federal task force has spent \$1.5 million, officials said.

"A lot of people will see any government involvement as a sort of cultural engineering. Folks on the left won't like it because of that, and folks on the right won't like it because it's spending money on immigrants," Jimenez said. "To the folks on the left, I'd say this is about creating economic opportunity. And to folks on the right, this is about securing the future of the United States."

Krikorian said the government is right to step in, but "unless we dramatically reduce the inflow of people from abroad, this kind of effort is just trying to wipe the ocean up with the sponge."

As director of the African Resources Center in the District, Abdul Kamus tries to teach immigrants the virtues of democracy. He bristled at the idea of a federal task force on assimilation. But he said organizations such as his -- on which he said he has spent his retirement money -- need more funding and help.

"There are not enough ESL classes. I would suggest to Americans, if they really want to help immigrants quote-unquote assimilate, they should teach a family English," Kamus said.

Assimilation patterns mean little to Mulu Zemikel, 49, even though her life fits into some of the traditional ones.

The [Eritrea](#) native immigrated more than two decades ago with no English skills. She and her husband settled in what was then an ethnic enclave for Ethiopians and Eritreans, [Adams Morgan](#), where they opened an Eritrean restaurant that served fowl, a fava bean chili, to crowds of compatriots.

Today, the enclave's population has dispersed to the suburbs. Her customers include Americans who have discovered fowl, Zemikel said. Her three U.S.-born children are fully American, she said -- except that they are more "disciplined." Zemikel, a U.S. citizen, picked up her fractured English from them. She uses it to communicate with the restaurant's Salvadoran and Mexican cooks.

No government program directly aided Zemikel's integration. If anything made her embrace her new country, she said, it was the diversity that worries some critics.

Americans "want all the people -- black, yellow, green, Chinese," Zemikel said. "In other countries, they don't want them, like, equal."

At the Silver Spring citizenship class, Alcides Orellana quietly filled out his workbook. He is 34 and emigrated from El Salvador at 17. His conversational English is rocky, but his hobby of studying U.S. history on the Internet has made him fluent in such American mottoes as "freedom for all."

He knows few other immigrants who go to such lengths, but government assimilation projects might help, he said.

"If you live in America," Orellana said, "you have to be American."