

Testimony of Gary Gerstle
James Stahlman Professor of History
Department of History
Vanderbilt University
Nashville, Tennessee

Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law

Hearing on Congressional Immigration Reform:
Becoming Americans—U.S. Immigrant Integration
May 16, 2007

Dear Madame Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I wish to thank you for the invitation to appear before your committee today and to discuss with you matters pertaining to immigrant integration, past and present.

Since its founding, the United States has arguably integrated more immigrants, both in absolute and relative terms, than any other nation. In the years between the 1820s and 1920s, an estimated 35 million immigrants came to the United States. Approximately 40 to 50 million more came between the 1920s and 2010s, with most of those coming after 1965. The successful integration of immigrants and their descendants has been one of the defining features of American society, and, in my view, one of this country's greatest accomplishments. Can we find descendants of the immigrants who came in such large numbers one hundred years ago who today do not regard themselves as Americans? We can probably identify a few, but not many. Even those groups once known for their resistance to Americanization—Italians, for example—today count themselves and are considered by others as being among the America's most ardent patriots. Throughout the nation's history, moreover, newer Americans and their descendants have contributed a dynamic quality to our society through their Americanization. As President Woodrow Wilson proudly told a group of immigrants in 1915: America was "the only country in the world that experiences a constant and repeated rebirth," and the credit went entirely to the "great bodies of strong men and forward-looking women out of other lands" who decided to cast their lot with America.¹

In my testimony today, I have four aims: first, to acquaint you with the so-called "new immigrants" who came by the millions to the United States one hundred years ago and who were widely regarded as lacking the desire and ability to integrate themselves into American society; second, to discuss with you how these immigrants and their children confounded their critics by

¹ Woodrow Wilson, "Too Proud to Fight," Address to Several Thousand Foreign-Born Citizens, After Naturalization Ceremonies, Philadelphia, May 10, 1915, *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Authorized Edition, The New Democracy: Presidential Messages, Addresses, and Other Papers (1913-1917)*, Ray Stannard Baker and William E. Dodd, ed., 2 volumes (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1926), Vol. I, pp. 318-322.

becoming deeply and proudly American; third, to lay out for you what I think a successful process of immigrant integration requires; and fourth, to suggest to you ways this earlier experience of successful integration can guide an exploration of the prospects of integrating immigrants who are living in America today.

My most important point is twofold. First, that the United States has been enormously successful in making Americans out of immigrants, even among immigrant populations who were thought to have cultures and values radically different from America's own. Second, immigrant integration does not happen overnight. Typically it takes two generations and requires both engagement on the part of immigrants with American democracy and an opportunity for them to achieve economic security for themselves and their families. If we approach questions of immigration today with a realistic and robust sense for what a successful process of immigrant incorporation requires, we have reason to be optimistic that America will once again demonstrate its remarkable ability to absorb and integrate foreign-born millions.

I. The "New Immigrants" of One Hundred Years Ago

An estimated 24 million immigrants came to the United States between the 1880s and the 1920s. They entered a society that numbered only 76 million people in 1900. A large majority of these new immigrants came from Europe, and they came mostly from impoverished and rural areas of eastern and southern Europe: from Italy, Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia, Greece, and other proximate nations or parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Few of these immigrants were Protestant, then the dominant religion of the United States; most were Catholic, Christian Orthodox, or Jewish. The integration process of these turn-of-the-century immigrants, however, was not quick and it was not easy. Indeed, the label applied to these immigrants—"the new immigrants"—was meant to compare them unfavorably to the "old immigrants" who had come prior to 1880 from the British Isles, Germany, and Scandinavia and who were then thought to have been the model immigrants: industrious, freedom-loving, English-speaking, and ardently patriotic. If I could parachute you, the members of this Subcommittee, into American society in a year when the "new immigration" was at its height—in 1910, for example, or 1920—you would encounter a pessimism about the possibilities of integrating these immigrants more intense than what exists in American society today. That the outcome was so positive and so at variance with the pessimistic expectations of 1910 or 1920 should caution us against giving ourselves over to pessimism today.

In the early years of the twentieth century, a majority of Americans were Protestants who cared deeply about the Protestant character of their society. Protestantism, in their eyes, had given America its mission, its democracy, its high regard for individual rights, and its moral character. These Americans worried that the largely Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish immigrants who dominated the ranks of the "new immigrants" would subvert cherished American ideals, and that the great American republic would decline or even come to an end.

America, at the time, was also a deeply racist society. Black-white segregation was at its height. Chinese immigrants had been largely barred from coming to the United States in 1882 and Japanese immigrants were largely barred in 1907. A naturalization law stipulated that only those immigrants who were free and white were eligible for citizenship, a law that effectively

prohibited almost all East and South Asians immigrants from becoming citizens between 1870 and 1952. For a twenty year period in the early twentieth century, the U.S. government attempted to rule that several peoples from the Middle East and West Asia, including Arabs and Armenians, were nonwhite and thus also ineligible for U.S. citizenship. In 1924, Congress stopped most eastern and southern Europeans from coming to the United States because these peoples were also now thought to be racially inferior and thus incapable of assimilating American civilization and democracy. This is how a member of Congress (Fred S. Purnell of Indiana, R) described eastern and southern European immigrants in 1924: “There is little or no similarity between the clear-thinking, self-governing stocks that sired the American people and this stream of irresponsible and broken wreckage that is pouring into the lifeblood of America the social and political diseases of the Old World.” Purnell quoted approvingly the words of a Dr. Ward, who claimed that Americans had deceived themselves into believing that “we could change inferior beings into superior ones.” Americans could not escape the laws of heredity, Ward argued. “We cannot make a heavy horse into a trotter by keeping him in racing stable. We can not make a well bred dog out of mongrel by teaching him tricks.” The acts that Ward dismissed as “tricks” including the learning by immigrants of the Gettysburg Address and the Declaration of Independence.²

Given these attitudes, it is not surprising that many immigrants felt unwelcome in the United States. Nevertheless, America was then what it is today: a society for the enterprising, for those who wanted to raise themselves up in the world. Many immigrants perceived America as a land in which they could improve their economic circumstances. They worked endless hours to make that happen. But would America become for them more than a place to work? Would it become their home, a place where they would feel comfortable, where they would raise their families, where they could come to consider themselves—and be considered by others as—Americans? Many immigrants doubted that this would ever be the case. Many intended to make some money in the United States and return home. In the early years of the 20th century, it is estimated that the repatriation rates (those who chose to return home) among Italian immigrants ran as high as 40 to 50 percent. Among immigrants from the Balkans in the years prior to the First World War, it is estimated that as many 80 percent returned home. Those who did not or could not return to their original lands often sent remittances to their families in Europe. For many of these immigrants, becoming U.S. citizens and learning English were goals that were secondary to the primary challenge of earning a living and raising the standard of one’s family, either in the United States or one’s home country. Yet these immigrants and their children did become integrated into America and deeply committed to America. How and when did this integration happen?

II. Integrating the “New Immigrants”

Three factors are particularly important for understanding the integration of the “new immigrants”: learning to practice American democracy; the transition in immigrant communities from the first to second generation; and the achievement of economic security.

Practicing American Democracy: As anti-immigrant sentiment grew in America across the early decades of the 20th century, immigrants who had been reluctant to enter American politics

² Congressional Record, March 17, 1924, p. 4389.

now believed that they had no alternative but to become so involved, if only to protect their most basic interests. In the 1920s, they began to naturalize and then to vote in large numbers. Immigrants wanted to elect representatives who supported their freedom to enter the United States, to pursue a trade or occupation of their choice, and to school their children and raise their families in ways that corresponded to their cultural traditions and religious beliefs. They also wanted the government to end discrimination against immigrants in employment, housing, and education. Immigrants lost some major elections, as in 1928, when Herbert Hoover (R) defeated the pro-immigrant candidate, Al Smith (D), but they also scored some major victories, as when Franklin D. Roosevelt (D) won a landslide re-election in 1936 with the help of millions of new voters, many of them immigrant, casting their ballots for the first time. These immigrant voters believed that FDR was opening up American politics to immigrant participation in ways that few previous presidents had done. In response to this opening, these new immigrants and their children became an important part of the Democratic Party voting majority that would keep Democrats in the White House and in control of Congress for a majority of years between the mid-1930s and late 1960s.

Political parties were important in brokering the entrance of immigrants into American politics. The Democratic Party in particular played a pivotal role not just in registering immigrants to vote but in teaching them the practical arts of American politics—running for office, building constituencies, raising money for campaigns, getting out the vote, writing legislation and building coalitions. The “political boss” and “political machines” were central institutions in many American cities of the time, and both played important roles in bringing immigrants into politics. Although the national Republican Party was not as important as the Democratic Party in assisting immigrants, particular state and local Republican parties often were important players in this brokerage process.

The ability of immigrants to participate in politics and to feel as though their votes made a difference was crucial to their engagement with and integration into America. In the 1920s and 1930s, immigrants began to assert their Americanness and their right to participate in debates about America’s best interests. In the short term, this generated more political conflict than political consensus, as immigrant Americans often disagreed sharply with the native-born about what course to chart for America’s future, and whether (and how) to open up American workplaces, occupations, universities, and neighborhoods to the full participation of immigrants. But there can be no doubt that immigrant engagement in American politics, with all the conflict it entailed, worked to bind the native-born and foreign born together, and make both groups feel part of one American nation. And that engagement worked, too, to change America in ways that allowed Catholics and Jews to assert their claims on America and to assert that they had as much right to live in America, to speak on its behalf, and to access its opportunities as did long-settled populations of American Protestants.

Generational Transition: Equally important to the integration of the new immigrants was a shift in the balance of power within immigrant families from the first to second generation. This shift occurred sometime between the 1920s and the 1940s, as the immigrant generation aged and the second generation came into maturity. The children of immigrants (or those who had come to America as very small children) were comfortable with their Americanness in ways that their parents frequently had not been. Some of this second-generation Americanization occurred

invisibly, through the daily experiences of these children with American society—walking down the streets of their cities, scouring the ads in newspapers and magazines for alluring consumer goods, listening to the radio, going to the movies, playing sports, and discovering the latest innovation in American popular music. Popular culture in America has always been a great assimilator. Some of the second generation's Americanization occurred more formally, through institutions, most notably high schools (which significantly expanded their enrollments in the 1930s and 1940s) and the World War II military, which took more than sixteen million young Americans out of their homes and neighborhoods between 1941 and 1945, mixed them up with other young Americans from every region of the country, and then asked every one of them to give their life for their country.

Even prior to their entry into these powerful institutions, mother-tongue monolingualism had fallen dramatically among these young men and women. For the second generation, bilingualism or English monolingualism became the norm; the third generation, meanwhile, was almost entirely English monolingual. Most members of the third generation could not speak and not even understand the language of their grandparents. By this time, too, many private institutions in "new immigrant" ethnic communities—churches, synagogues, fraternal and charitable organizations, ethnic newspapers—had begun to see themselves as agents of Americanization, in part to keep the younger generation engaged with issues of concern to the ethnic community.

Economic Security: We should not underestimate the importance of economic security in persuading immigrants to cast their lot with America. The welfare of one's family was almost always a key consideration for the "new immigrants" of the early 20th century. While some immigrants found opportunities in America and prospered, many were stuck in low paying, unskilled jobs in American manufacturing and construction, with little promise of advancement and no security that they would be able to keep even these jobs. Many had to make do with wages that were chronically insufficient. Many lived with the fear that they would fail as breadwinners, that the American dream would never be theirs, and that their employers would toss them aside for yet younger and cheaper workers. When the Great Depression plunged the U.S. economy into crisis for twelve long years, this fear spread to the second generation who were trying to find their first jobs at a time when neither the private nor public sector was able to bring the nation's unemployment rate below 15 percent. In these dire circumstances, many immigrants and their children began to turn to collective institutions of economic self help, the most important of which was the labor movement.

Labor unions were Americanizing institutions during these years, convincing ethnic workers both that they had rights as American workers and that their ability to improve their circumstances would contribute to the overall well-being of American society. Labor movement advocates argued that wages must be raised to a decent level, that hours of work should not exceed human endurance, that the government must make some provision for those who lost their jobs through no fault of their own, and that those who had spent a life time at work should be rewarded by the government with an old age pension. The labor movement provided critical support for two of the most important government policies of the 1930s and 1940s, the Social Security Act and the GI Bill of Rights, both of which meant a great deal to the new immigrants and their children. One can make the case that the labor movement played a major role in

helping to lift immigrant workers and their children out of poverty and thereby in giving them a stake in the American dream.

To identify the labor movement as an important institution of immigrant incorporation is to venture onto controversial political terrain. But whatever one thinks of the proper role of labor unions, it remains the case that questions of economic security and opportunity must be part of our discussion of immigrant integration. An immigrant population that finds itself unable to move out of poverty or to gain the confidence that it can provide a decent life for their children is far more likely to descend into alienation than to embrace America.

By 1950s, the integration of the “new immigrants” and their children had been successfully accomplished. Most of the children and grandchildren of these immigrants were enthusiastic Americans. But the success of the process had taken forty to fifty years and had required immersion in the practice of American democracy, a transition in generational power from the first to the second generation, and the achievement of economic security.

III. Today’s Immigrants: Questions and Answers

Today’s immigrants are sometimes depicted by their critics as are far more different from “us” than were past waves of immigrants and as far less interested in integrating themselves into American society. The charge is also leveled that there are simply too many immigrants residing in America today for this country to absorb and integrate. Below I examine each of these beliefs in light of the background I have provided on the “new immigrants” who came between the 1880s and 1920s.

1) **Are today’s immigrants too different from “us?”** Immigrants today are different from earlier waves of immigrants in the diversity of their origins, in the diversity of their economic backgrounds, and in the fact that a majority are nonwhite. At earlier periods of U.S. history, most immigrants came from Europe. Today they come from every continent, with South America (and Latin America more generally), Asia, and Africa being the largest sources. Today’s immigrants are also more diverse in economic backgrounds than any previous wave of immigrants. In earlier waves, the immigrants were overwhelmingly poor and generally lacking in education. Such individuals are amply represented in the ranks of immigrants today, but so too are those who are highly trained professionals, managers, and small retailers who have decided that their skills will be more fully used and rewarded in the United States than at home, and that the opportunities for their children will be greater here as well. Thus the proportions of professionals and managers in the immigrant streams coming from the Philippines, India, Taiwan, and Korea regularly reach or exceed fifty percent. These immigrants are generally thought not to be “problem immigrants” and so they don’t form a significant part of our discussion about immigration today. But these kinds of immigrants are well represented in today’s immigrant population, especially among those groups who have come from East and South Asia. They are generally thought to be important contributors to America, and so they should be included in any overall assessment of current immigration.

Discussion of today’s immigrants generally focuses on those who are at the poor end of the immigrant spectrum. Poverty alone, of course, is hardly a distinguishing feature of today’s

immigrants, since past groups of immigrants were overwhelmingly poor. What does distinguish today's immigrant poor is that they are nonEuropean. Coming from nonEuropean cultures, they are sometimes thought by their critics to lack the cultural attributes—what we commonly refer to as the values of “western civilization”—that allowed earlier waves of poor immigrants to climb out of their poverty, to embrace America's creed of freedom and individualism as their own, and to become active contributors to American enterprise and American democracy.

The irony of this critique is that the “Europeans” held up as model immigrants of yesteryear were, at the time of their immigration, depicted much as poor nonwhite immigrants are today: as so racially and culturally different from Americans, as so different from the earlier waves of immigrants who had come from western and northern Europe, that they could never close the gap between who they were and what “we,” America, wanted them to be. Because they were allegedly unassimilable, the United States made a fateful decision in the 1920s to all but close its immigrant gates to eastern and southern Europeans. America was successful in barring them from entry, but it was wrong to believe that they lacked the ability to integrate themselves into American society. As I have argued in earlier sections of this testimony, the millions of eastern and southern Europeans already here did Americanize, and today we celebrate them as exemplary Americans. Why repeat that earlier mistake today and designate large sections of the world's population as inappropriate material for inclusion in America? To do so is not only to discriminate on the grounds of race but also to confess our own lack of faith in the promise and transformative power of American freedom.

2) Are today's immigrants too little interested in integrating themselves into American society? It is true that many immigrants today retain strong ties to their homeland and that many return home or aspire to do so. Technological innovations have made travel back and forth relatively easy, and the communications revolution has made it possible to stay in constant and instantaneous touch with one's family and friends back home. Many immigrants are not eager to relinquish the cultures they brought with them. Among adult immigrants who work in unskilled occupations where literacy is not important (construction, agriculture, landscaping, and personal services), some are slow to learn English. But these patterns are hardly novel. To the contrary, they are similar to patterns evident among the European immigrants who came at the beginning of the twentieth century. They are patterns that tend to be characteristic of immigrant groups in which recent arrivals form a large part of the immigrant population.

If we want to develop an accurate picture of the progress of integration (or lack thereof), we should not be content to take snapshots of a group at a particular point in time. We should want to supplement those snapshots with an examination of immigrants across time and across generations. Studies done by social scientists are beginning to supply us with this kind of data, and they are revealing patterns of integration that are similar to those associated with European immigrants a hundred years ago. For example, among the children of Latino immigrants, the rates of Spanish monolingualism (those who speak only Spanish) are very low and the rates of English-Spanish bilingualism are very high. Moreover, English monolingualism has made surprising inroads among the children of Latino immigrants, so much that some Latino parents worry that their children are losing touch with their cultural roots. These patterns become even more pronounced among third generation immigrants. The patterns of language loss and

acquisition among today's immigrant generations, in other words, seem to be similar to those that shaped the lives of the European immigrants who came one hundred years ago.³

Successful integration depends not simply on language and generational transition but on immigrant engagement with American democracy and on the experience of economic opportunity, advancement, and security. Some social scientists have argued that institutions that were once so important in involving past generations of immigrants in American politics (political parties) and for helping them to achieve economic security (the labor movement) have either so changed in nature or have become so weak that they can no longer perform a similar function with today's immigrants. There is some truth to this argument, although the events of the past two years have demonstrated both that political parties still retain the capacity to mobilize immigrants and that labor unions, in cities such as Los Angeles where they remain strong, can still play an important role in promoting immigrant economic interests. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the successful integration of today's immigrants requires either that these older institutions find ways to broaden their involvement with immigrants or that other institutions step forward to engage immigrants in the practice of American democracy and to assist the poor among them with the pursuit of economic opportunity and security. Among Latino immigrants, the Catholic Church has demonstrated that it can become an important mechanism for immigrant integration. Ideally, institutions that assist immigrants in the pursuit of economic opportunity will bring them into alliance rather than conflict with the native-born poor.

3) Has the number of immigrants coming to America reached such a numerical level that integration has become impossible? In absolute terms, the number of immigrants is at all time high: approximately 35 million. A few years ago, the number arriving in a single year passed one million and topped the previous one year record that had been recorded in the early years of the twentieth century. In proportional terms, however, we have not yet reached the immigrant density that prevailed in America in the early twentieth century. The million who were arriving annually in those years were entering a society that possessed between one-fourth and one-third the population of America today.

It is possible, of course, for a society to reach levels of saturation whereby the numbers coming overwhelm mechanisms of integration. Saturation can be a national phenomenon or one that affects a particular region or city. Current immigrant density in the United States, however, is not at an all time high. Moreover, it is wrong to assume that demography is destiny, and that, for the sake of integration, we must close the immigrant gates once a pre-selected immigration density index is reached. If we can put in place mechanisms or institutions that broaden immigrant immersion in the practice of American democracy and broaden the access of poor immigrants to economic opportunity and security, then we can have every reason to believe that the integration of this wave of immigrants will be as successful as the last one was. The process

³ Ruben G. Rumbaut, "Assimilation and its Discontents: Ironies and Paradoxes," in Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz, and Josh DeWind, eds., *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience* (Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), pp. 182-185; Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Stories of the Immigrant Second Generation* (University of California Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 2001), pp. 118-128; Tamar Jacoby, "The New Immigrants: A Progress Report," in Jacoby, ed., *Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What It Means to be American* (Basic Books, 2004), pp. 23-24.

will take time and we should expect it to be complex and contentious. But it can yield success, proving yet again the remarkable ability of America to take in people from very different parts of the world, to make them into Americans, and to allow them an important role in defining what it means to be an American.

Gary Gerstle's writings on questions of immigration and ethnicity in the twentieth century United States include the following:

Books:

E Pluribus Unum? Contemporary and Historical Perspectives on Immigrant Political Incorporation (Russell Sage Foundation, 2001), coedited with John Mollenkopf

American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth-Century (Princeton University Press, 2001)

Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960 (Cambridge University Press, 1989)

Articles:

"Immigration Nation: A Guide for the Perplexed," *Dissent* (Winter 2007), 113-118

"The Political Incorporation of Immigrant Groups: An Historical Perspective on the American Experience," in Philippa Strum, *American Arabs and Political Participation* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2006), 27-40.

"The Immigrant as Threat to American Security: A Historical Perspective," in John Tirman, ed., *The Maze of Fear: Security and Migration after 9/11* (The New Press, 2004), 87-108

"Immigration and Ethnicity in the American Century," in Harvard Sitkoff, ed., *Perspectives on Modern America: Making Sense of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 275-295.

"Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans," *Journal of American History* 84 (September 1997), 524-558.