

Why Asian Americans are Becoming Mainstream

Victor Nee & Hilary Holbrow

Abstract: In contrast to earlier waves of immigration, the post-1965 Asian immigration to the United States has not spawned an exclusionist backlash among native whites. Rather, the new Asian immigrants and their children are rapidly gaining access to the American mainstream. Whether in integrated residential communities, in colleges and universities, or in mainstream workplaces, Asian Americans' presence is ever more the rule, not the exception. The success of so many Asian American immigrants suggests that race may not be as decisive a factor in shaping socioeconomic attainment as it was in the American past; civil rights reform has been incorporated in a more inclusive American mainstream. As a group in which those of legal status predominate, Asian Americans have enjoyed more open access to mainstream institutions, paving the way to their rapid assimilation.

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U ntil 1965, immigration from Asia served as the crucible for a politics of exclusion that involved both the legal framework and a social consensus backing a national-origin quota for immigration. In the mid-nineteenth century, the arrival of a sizable Chinese population in communities across the western states provoked widespread nativist sentiment and anti-Chinese hostility. Competition in labor markets spurred union-led protests and violent demands for the government to restrict Chinese immigration. The subsequent passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 effectively ended immigration from China, while Chinese residing in America were barred from naturalized citizenship. Japanese immigration to the West Coast, which followed the exclusion of Chinese laborers, incited similar mobilization of nativist sentiment and legislative politics, culminating in the Immigration Act of 1924. This legislation limited free immigration to the United States to those from Northern and Western Europe, with restrictive quotas set for Southern and Eastern Europeans. Immigration

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from Asia was closed down, and the rule of exclusion extended to a wide range of discriminatory legislation in the western states designed to drive Asians into racially segregated enclaves.

It took the emergence of a new political consensus born in the civil rights movement for the federal government to enact the watershed legislation that guided institutional change and extended equal rights and opportunities to nonwhite Americans. This civil rights legislation affirmed principles of open access to political and economic institutions for all Americans, regardless of race and gender. Concomitantly, Congress passed with bipartisan support the Immigration Act of 1965, an international counterpart to the far-reaching Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Immigration Act repealed national-origin rules and opened legal immigration to all countries.

Once legal immigration was open to all countries, documented entry was then directly connected with access to inclusive political and economic institutions. Immigrants with appropriate visa documents could enter the United States as permanent residents and, through a sequential transition culminating in approved application for naturalized citizenship, could gain access to mainstream American institutions.

In combination, these sweeping legal changes have reshaped American society. Though not anticipated by political elites in the 1960s, the new immigration law opened the way for mass immigration from Asia, and as a very unintended consequence, from Latin America as well. And in light of the rapidly changing demographic composition of the American population, immigration is once again inspiring national debate. There is again a rising tide of nativist backlash, especially in the states that share borders with Mex-

ico. The debate has focused on the new immigration from Latin America, the region sending the largest flow of immigrants, many of them unauthorized.¹

High-volume Asian immigration to the United States has now been continuous for nearly a half-century, constituting the longest lasting legal immigration from Asia in American history. In an exponential increase over the 1970 census count of 1.5 million, Asian Americans grew to exceed 17.2 million by 2010, making up 5.6 percent of the U.S. population.² This rapid increase is primarily due to continuous and now accelerating immigration, such that in 2010, foreign-born Asians outnumbered native-born Asian Americans by a ratio of two to one. Since 2008, 40 percent of new immigrants are Asian, up from 27 percent of new arrivals before 2005.³ If present population trends continue, the Asian American population has been estimated to grow to around 9.2 percent of the American population by 2050.⁴

Unlike previous waves of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the new Asian immigration has not spawned reactive nativist social movements and politics demanding the exclusion of Asians. Rather, Asian immigrants and the second generation are assimilating into the American mainstream more rapidly than earlier immigrants to the United States.⁵ Whether in integrated residential communities, in colleges and universities, or in mainstream workplaces, Asian Americans' presence is ever more the rule than the exception. What accounts for their success?

It is commonplace to portray Asian Americans as a model minority. Sociological accounts of Japanese American assimilation, for example, emphasize that through acculturation, the *nisei* second generation adopted the cultural attri-

butes of the Anglo Protestant majority group, which then led to their assimilation into the American mainstream after World War II.⁶ During that war, Japanese Americans responded to racial prejudice and internment by exemplifying the American creed, evidenced in the patriotism and sacrifice of *nisei* soldiers on the battlefields of Europe. Retelling a variant of the model minority story for the new Asian immigration relies on a ready-made conceptual template identifying group-level attributes that enable the group's acceptance and entry into the mainstream.⁷ Various accounts invoke "Asian values" such as a reverence for learning, emphasis on the family, or dedication to hard work as the explanation for Asian Americans' high levels of educational and professional attainment.

What is overlooked in model minority accounts and in narratives of discrimination is the fact that institutional mechanisms – the forces that set the rules of the game – play a significant role in explaining differential patterns of socioeconomic attainment and assimilation of immigrants and their children. In light of the long history of racial discrimination and exclusion of Asians, it took the institutional changes of the civil rights era to restart high-volume immigration from Asia, and to extend legal rights to all Americans. This has enabled and motivated the economic and social assimilation of Asian immigrants and their children.⁸

Although Asian immigrants include many different national-origin, cultural, and ethnic groups with considerable socioeconomic diversity, a shared distinguishing feature of new immigrants from Asia is that they have overwhelmingly entered through legal channels. Only an estimated 8 percent are undocumented, in sharp contrast to nearly 43 percent of the foreign-born from the Americas.⁹ A geographical explanation is more plausible than a

model minority account – it's much harder to cross the ocean than to walk across a border. Accordingly, formal rules governing immigration have played a far greater role in shaping the flow of Asian immigrants and their subsequent experience than has been the case for immigration from Mexico and Central America. While immigration law specifies the initial selection mechanisms, entry through formal channels also provides immigrants with the benefits and protection of equality of rights and other civil laws.

In a democratic polity governed by the rule of law, legal equality matters not only *because of*, but also *despite* the persistence of racial prejudice embedded in cultural beliefs, informal norms, social networks, and organizations.¹⁰ This is because the rule of law is widely accepted and supported as a bedrock assumption by ordinary Americans, despite frequent outbursts of partisan politics and contentious differences over the content of specific laws. Although most Americans may not have agreed with the content of congressional civil rights legislation, once those initiatives were enacted as law, institutional mechanisms implemented the changes over time and worked them into the American mainstream.

A centerpiece of the civil rights era legislative struggle was the passage of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which specified the rules of equal employment opportunity to address institutionalized discrimination in the workplace against women and minorities. The law was the product of a protracted battle by committed social activists that sought equal treatment in the American mainstream – in education, public accommodation, government programs, politics, and other domains of civic life.¹¹ Through a process of cumulative causation, a long-term battle for equal employment opportunity induced changes in cultural beliefs that

led to greater corporate and public acceptance of these laws. Though racial and gender stereotypes persist and can influence hiring decisions, a self-reinforcing compliance with Title VII in corporations, public agencies, and nonprofit organizations has helped open mainstream institutions to women and minorities.¹²

Studies that contrast differential patterns of socioeconomic attainment and outcomes of assimilation without taking into account the relative proportion of documented and undocumented newcomers in an immigrant group confound the persistent influence of legal – or illegal – status with the putative effects of discrimination and cultural difference. Causal factors that influence mode of incorporation are both complex and subtle in the manner they interact and combine to shape the economic and social assimilation of immigrants. But in and of itself, legal – or illegal – status clearly has potentially far-reaching effects on incorporation into U.S. society.

Whereas immigrants who enter the United States through legal channels benefit from the civil rights era legislation that extends to racial minorities equal rights and formal access to economic and social institutions of the American mainstream, undocumented immigrants do not benefit from the same open access to these institutions. They are significantly disadvantaged in this and other respects.

First of all, in illegal entry, the de facto selection mechanism recruits labor migrants particularly likely to have low levels of formal schooling and skill. Professional and technical immigrants with university education are unlikely candidates for entry without a proper visa, for they would not be able to find more gainful employment without documentation in the United States than what they could find in their native society. This is not the

case for unskilled laborers with little formal education. Such workers do not risk lower returns on their human capital through undocumented border crossing.¹³ But low-skilled immigrants face particular difficulties in America's twenty-first-century knowledge-based economy, with far-reaching implications for inequality.¹⁴

Second, illegal border entry leaves immigrants vulnerable to exploitation in informal labor markets, where they can become locked into dead-end and irregular jobs.¹⁵ Undocumented immigrants typically try to avoid contact with mainstream political and economic institutions and instead concentrate in unregulated labor markets, controlled by co-ethnic labor contractors, in order to lower the risk of discovery by authorities. Accordingly, the wage growth for illegal immigrants is low compared to that for natives or legal immigrants.¹⁶ Furthermore, undocumented immigrants lack the access to legal recourse that documented immigrants possess.

Third, the many disadvantages that come with undocumented status are inevitably passed on by immigrant parents to their children, adversely influencing the second generation's prospects for schooling and assimilation.¹⁷ Not only do the children of poorly educated parents start out their lives at relative disadvantage compared to most Americans, but even in households with greater cultural capital, the constant danger of deportation disrupts children's school and family life. Further, parents' immigration status may block the children's access to public institutions and resources useful to their education and well-being. Children of unauthorized immigrants are much more likely to live in poverty, and less likely to have health insurance, for example, than children of documented immigrants and the native born.¹⁸ Illegal entry thus has a long-lasting

influence on the second-generation children.

Lastly, a very high ratio of undocumented immigration casts a long shadow of illegitimacy and stigma on even legal immigrants of the same ethnicity.¹⁹ Although more than 1 million illegal immigrants from China, the Philippines, India, South Korea, and Vietnam also contribute to the Asian immigrant population of more than 17.2 million, the great majority of Asian newcomers enter the United States as legal immigrants, and they define the dominant profile of Asian immigration.²⁰ Suppose the opposite were true, and undocumented Asian immigrants by far exceeded the number of legal immigrants. This scenario would suggest a very different profile for the immigrant group – in terms of public perception, in terms of immigrant characteristics, and in terms of opportunity in American society.

Asian Americans are the most educated ethnic group in the United States, with mean education levels that have risen rapidly over the past decades. In the 1970 census, 20 percent of Asian Americans reported that they had earned college degrees, but by the 2010 census, the college educated rose to 52 percent, including both native and foreign born.²¹ This rise is even sharper than that for native-born whites, and demonstrates the scale and impact of human capital immigrants from Asia after 1965.²² Of these new immigrants, Asian Indians are the best educated, with a remarkable 70 percent of the first generation being university educated. Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Filipino immigrants also stand out with college graduation rates at around 50 percent, still well above the U.S. mean.²³ The trend in recent years is toward still higher levels of education among new arrivals, with a full 61 percent

of recent Asian immigrants holding bachelor's degrees.²⁴

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These remarkably high levels spring from the selectivity and incentives embedded in the rules, guidelines, and priorities of U.S. immigration laws, as well as the allure of an advanced degree in the United States. None of the Asian societies contributing to the flow of immigrants have anything close to the percentage of professional and technical workers with college and postgraduate education as foreign-born Asians in the United States. Many of the best educated, best prepared, and most motivated from these countries choose to come to America because of opportunities secured by equal opportunity laws and the sequential process of work permissions, green cards, and naturalization that grants immigrants the benefits of these legal protections. Outside the framework of legal immigration and the normative regime emerging from the civil rights movement, such high levels of educated immigrants would be unthinkable.

Although Asian Americans make up only 5.5 percent of the workforce, they are disproportionately concentrated in the core technological occupations, where there is a persistent shortage of skilled labor.²⁵ It is commonplace for high-tech firms to recruit skilled workers and engineers from the Asian foreign-student population in American universities. These workers are vital to the high-tech sectors where America's innovative edge creates an advantage in the global economy; high-tech industry leaders and research universities constantly lobby for legislation that will enable a high flow of human capital immigrants to meet this demand.

Asian immigrants are not just valuable employees – they are also job creators. Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York City, called for bipartisan support in

the presidential election season for new legislation to make it easier for immigrants to secure visas. He underscored the selectivity for entrepreneurial talent linked to immigration, pointing to a new study showing that immigrant entrepreneurs start up 28 percent of new firms in the United States, which employ one in ten workers in the American economy.²⁶ Asian entrepreneurs are an important contributor to this total. For example, in Silicon Valley, 17 percent of the high-tech start-up firms in the last two decades of the twentieth century were led by Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs.²⁷

One comparative advantage of immigrant entrepreneurs in high-tech start-ups is that they typically have business know-how and strategic connections in their homeland as well as in the United States.²⁸ Chinese and Indian immigrant entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley are brokers who occupy “structural holes,” bridging gaps between independent regional clusters of resources and markets.²⁹ Their language competencies, cultural capital, and transnational-network ties enable immigrant entrepreneurs to function as “visible hands” in the globalization of the knowledge-based economy.

The professional attainments and educational backgrounds of many Asian immigrants provide the second generation with a head start in socioeconomic attainment and assimilation.³⁰ As parents, they have high educational expectations for their American-born children, and their high socioeconomic status means that lateral mobility suffices for their children to achieve higher mean educational attainment than non-Hispanic whites. Not surprisingly, second-generation Asian Indian and Chinese human capital immigrants are overrepresented in selective colleges and universities, where they accumulate the cultural capital and network ties that fast-track

their assimilation into the American mainstream.³¹

Further, within many Asian ethnic communities, the sheer volume of human capital immigration has a spillover effect in the high educational expectations of immigrant parents with less formal education.³² When the ethnic community is well-educated on the whole and when undocumented immigrants are a small proportion of the overall immigrant group, random interactions with coethnics are more likely to yield information identifying open-access pathways to legitimate opportunities for their native-born children.³³

For example, while 50 percent of Chinese immigrants have earned at least a bachelor’s degree, over 17 percent lack high school diplomas, showing a subgroup of poor, and in some cases illegal, working-class immigrants. By the second generation, however, Chinese Americans are among the best educated of the Asian ethnic groups, with 61.5 percent of U.S.-born Chinese completing college education.³⁴ A study of the immigrant second generation in New York City reports that working-class Chinese parents in Chinatown, where undocumented immigrants generally reside, have been surprisingly effective in placing their American-born children in good public schools.³⁵

These young people – the American-born children of post-1965 immigrants – are coming of age. They and the generation of Asian Americans who came to America as children (generation one-and-a-half) are entering the workforce in ever-larger numbers, well positioned to meet the growing demand for skilled and professional workers in the U.S. knowledge-based economy.³⁶ Relatively few are taking the low-skilled service jobs where their immigrant parents sometimes found employment. In New York City, the children of Chinese immigrants

for the most part are not in the low-status jobs in Chinatown.³⁷ Instead, with native-English language competence and cultural capital, second-generation Asian Americans are moving into occupational fields outside the tech industry, where Asians have historically been underrepresented, including law, media and arts, community services, and even the military. Although Asian American representation in these occupational fields – except for media and the arts – remains lower than the overall Asian share of the workforce, the native-born Asian population is significantly overrepresented in these sectors.³⁸

The rapid integration of the second generation clearly shows an American mainstream where institutions have become more inclusive. In the post-civil rights era, cultural beliefs and norms supporting diversity in workplaces are becoming self-reinforcing expectations. Analysis of earnings likewise demonstrates the far-reaching effects of institutional change on employment and the economy. In the 1950s, U.S.-born Japanese American and Chinese American men respectively earned 37 percent and 44 percent less than comparable native whites.³⁹ Today, this historical earnings gap has all but vanished. In part because many Asian Americans work in highly remunerative fields, native-born Asians from the largest ethnic groups earn incomes that surpass those of whites. This is not only an artifact of Asians' high educational achievement, but also a reflection of the vast progress toward equal pay for equal work guaranteed under the law. In sharp contrast to the 1950s, native-born Asians' incomes are at parity, or nearly so, with whites of similar occupation and human capital.⁴⁰

Although first-generation immigrants (with the notable exception of Indians) earn lower personal incomes on average than native-born whites, this fact does

not point to discrimination as much as to subtle human capital differences between immigrants and natives. Poor English skills, lack of connections, insufficient knowledge of U.S. society, and the mismatch between a foreign education and the expectations of U.S. employers can all adversely affect newcomers' employment opportunities and wages. When immigrants' place of education is taken into account, the apparent earnings disparity vanishes.⁴¹ This, along with the near parity achieved in the second generation, shows that institutional changes in education and the economy have moved American society away from the historical exclusion of and harsh discrimination against Asian Americans.

The assimilation of Asian immigrants is testament to the institutional changes that link civil rights and immigration reform. On one hand, immigration law and policy have enabled millions of well-educated Asians to immigrate legally to this country; on the other hand, inclusive institutions mandated by civil rights legislation have lowered barriers and paved the way for these immigrants to enter the mainstream of civil society. The success of Asian immigrants and their children in a new era of high-volume immigration suggests that institutional changes of the civil rights era have led to a more inclusive and open American society – at least for those whose legal status enables them to access mainstream institutions.

The legal status of immigrants at the point of entry is significant in explaining their socioeconomic attainment and assimilation. To contrast differential patterns of socioeconomic attainment and assimilation in immigrant groups without considering the relative proportion of documented and undocumented immigrants is to confuse the persistent influence of documentation, or lack thereof,

with the putative effects of societal discrimination. “Downward” or “segmented” assimilation should not be attributed solely to discrimination and historical ethnoracial hierarchies, but also to endogenous selectivity in undocumented entry and the attendant economic and legal barriers that result from violating the rules of the game.

The predominance of nonwhite immigration since 1965 has led some to focus on race as a decisive factor in the incorporation of immigrants and their children. In *Who Are We?*, the late political scientist Samuel Huntington conjectured that America is becoming a society in

which ethnoracial boundaries harden, leading to a balkanized American future. But the mainstream success of so many Asian American immigrants suggests that race may not be such a decisive factor in shaping socioeconomic attainment as it was in the American past, and that assimilation still is as characteristic of the course of contemporary immigration as it was for earlier immigration from Europe. In an increasingly inclusive mainstream, the significance of race has declined considerably. Rather, patterns of legal and illegal entry are more consistently determinative of immigrant access to mainstream opportunities.

ENDNOTES

- * Contributor Biographies: VICTOR NEE is the Frank and Rosa Rhodes Professor of Sociology at Cornell University, where he is also Director of the Center for the Study of Economy and Society. His publications include *Capitalism From Below: Markets and Institutional Change in China* (with Sonja Opper, 2012), *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (with Richard Alba, 2003), and *The Economic Sociology of Capitalism* (edited with Richard Swedberg, 2005).

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- ³ Nathan P. Walters and Edward N. Trevelyan, “The Newly Arrived Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 2010” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, November 2011), <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/acsbr10-16.pdf>.
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- 9 Calculated from U.S. Department of Homeland Security estimates of illegal immigrants and U.S. Census Bureau estimates of the foreign-born population; see Michael Hoefer, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan C. Baker, "Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2010" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, February 2011), http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2010.pdf; and Elizabeth M. Grieco et al., "The Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2010" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, May 2012), <http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acs-19.pdf>.
- 10 Alba and Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream*.
- 11 Paul Burstein, *Discrimination, Jobs, and Politics: The Struggle for Equal Employment Opportunity in the United States since the New Deal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
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- 13 Over 29 percent of illegal immigrants never graduated from high school, compared to 12 percent among legal immigrants; and only 15 percent of illegal immigrants have college degrees, compared to 35 percent among legal immigrants. See Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, "A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Hispanic Center, April 14, 2009), <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2009/04/14/a-portrait-of-unauthorized-immigrants-in-the-united-states/>.
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- ²¹ Table 1, "Educational Attainment of the Population 18 Years and Over, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 2010" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2010/tables.html>.
- ²² Not all ethnicities share these human capital characteristics. Reflecting the legacy of America's war in Indochina, Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, and Hmong refugees have also settled in the United States. In the first generation, the educational profiles for these groups are not only lower than those of other Asian immigrants, but also lower than that of the United States as a whole.
- ²³ From authors' analysis of PUMS data; Steven Ruggles, J. T. Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0*, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2010 [Machine-Readable Database] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010), <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/>.
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- ²⁶ "Open for Business: How Immigrants are Driving Small Business Creation in the United States," The Partnership for a New American Economy, August 2012, <http://www.renewoureconomy.org/index.php?q=open-for-business>.
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³⁶ The professional and white-collar jobs left vacant by retiring baby boomers open up vacancy chains; see Richard D. Alba, *Blurring the Color Line: The New Change for a More Integrated America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).

³⁷ Kasinitz et al., *Inheriting the City*.

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⁴⁰ John Iceland, "Earnings Returns to Occupational Status: Are Asian Americans Disadvantaged?" *Social Science Research* 28 (1999): 45–65; Sakamoto et al., "The Declining Significance of Race among American Men during the Latter Half of the Twentieth Century"; and Chang Hwan Kim and Arthur Sakamoto, "Have Asian American Men Achieved Labor Market Parity with White Men?" *American Sociological Review* 75 (2010): 934–957.

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