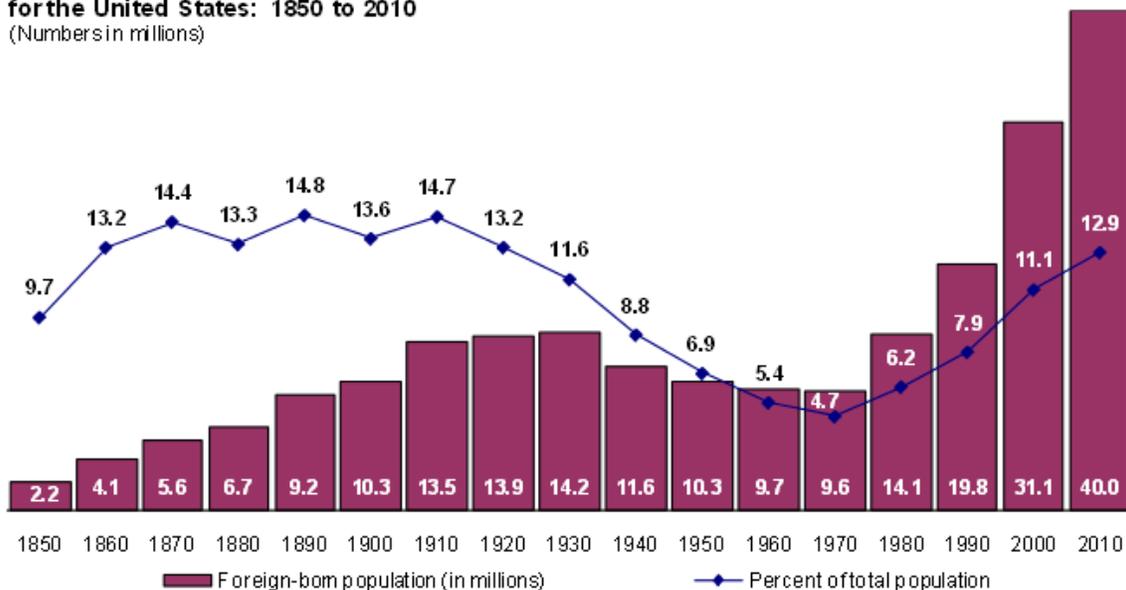


Mitchell's Musings 6-3-13: One of US?

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As readers will be aware, Congress is currently having difficulty in drafting an immigration bill. Perhaps it is not surprising that the issue should be contentious. As the chart below shows, as of the 2010 Census, the proportion of foreign-born individuals in the U.S. population was coming close to the peak values seen in the late 19th and early 20th century. In that earlier time, the political response – during the 1920s – was to curtail immigration sharply so that the proportion declined steadily for decades thereafter. The pattern reversed during the 1970s, after an immigration law liberalization of the 1960s. It has been on an upward trend ever since.

**Foreign-Born Population and Percent of Total Population,
for the United States: 1850 to 2010**
(Numbers in millions)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population, 1850 to 2000 (in Gibson and Jung, 2006), and American Community Survey, 2010.

Source: <http://www.census.gov/population/foreign/files/WorkingPaper96.pdf>

Although economists tend to think of immigration largely in terms of the effect on wages and its other labor-market impacts, the political debate often revolves about more emotional issues such as assimilation, loyalty, security, etc. These sorts of issues are playing out now in Washington, but they also played out in the debate preceding the crackdown on immigration in the 1920s. World War One – apart from its immediate effect in cutting off some immigration during the conflict – intensified the policy debate with a concern that immigrants might be loyal to Germany or its allies.¹

What brings that episode to mind was a collection of phonograph records from World War One that I accumulated in the late 1950s at around age 15 and which I am scheduled to donate shortly to the national World War One museum in Kansas City. (Long story.)

¹ Asian immigration had already been greatly curtailed.

These disks are acoustical (non-electronic) recordings² designed to drum up support for the war effort. They provide an insight into the atmosphere of that era including the concern of potential immigrant disloyalty and potential lack of assimilation.³ Most notably, the song “Let’s All Be Americans Now” is quite explicit:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWnlrc2FNX8>

*Peace has always been our prayer
Now there’s trouble in the air
War is [awesome (?)] everywhere
Still in God we trust
We’re not look for
Any kind of war
But if fight we must.*

*It’s up to you
What will you do?
England or France may have your sympathy
Or Germany
But you’ll agree
That now is the time
To fall in line
This war [must be won (?)]
So be true to your vow
Let’s all be Americans now.*

*Lincoln, Grant, and Washington
They were peaceful men each one
Still they took the sword and gun
When real trouble came.
And I think somehow
They are wondering now
If we’ll do the same.*

It’s up to you...

The fears stirred up by World War One were enhanced by a byproduct of the war – the creation of the Soviet Union – and concerns about communism and importation of

²Acoustical = recorded directly through a horn rather than through an electrical microphone.

³ The complete set is available at

<http://archive.org/details/WorldWarIPatrioticAcousticalPhonographRecordingsPart1>

<http://archive.org/details/WorldWarIPatrioticAcousticalPhonographRecordingsPart2>

<http://archive.org/details/WorldWarIAcousticalRecordingsPart3>

Listeners may find the lightheartedness and naïveté of the songs to be disconcerting. Their tone is somewhat surprising since, despite the shorter life expectancies of that era, there were still plenty of Civil War veterans around who were aware of what a major war entailed. When World War Two rolled around, the songs tended to be more restrained. World War One was a fresher memory.

radical, foreign ideologies into the U.S. Among the results were the “Palmer Raids” that followed heightened anxiety about domestic subversion and terrorism.⁴ [See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ap-KKWoiIk0>.] There are at least some parallels with current concerns about immigrant terrorists that arose after the attacks of September 11, 2001 and more recently after the Boston Marathon bombings.

The media of the World War One era promoted such concerns. For example, the plot of the 1919-1920 silent film “Dangerous Hours” revolves around a naïve “true” American who is tricked by stealthy immigrants into involvement in their nefarious activities. He discovers they are involved in a bombing plot which he attempts to stop:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUCTE3KDAjw>

What seems different now is that Congress will either ultimately do nothing on immigration due to gridlock or it will enact some version of liberalization. Congress does not seem destined to produce some counterpart of the 1920s’ barriers to immigration although some increased border enforcement may well be part of a deal (if there is a deal). Being perceived as anti-immigrant seems now to have political penalties that did not exist in the earlier period.

That shift in public attitudes has characterized California politics and appears to have had more general spillover effects. In 1994, incumbent Republican Governor Pete Wilson faced running for re-election in the context of a depressed state economy and years of chronic state budget problems. He built a campaign based on support for Proposition 187, a ballot initiative that would have cut state services to illegal immigrants. TV ads for Wilson’s re-election can be seen at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0f1PE8Kzng>

Wilson won in 1994, as did Prop 187 (although the latter was largely voided through litigation). But thereafter, Republicans in California came to be seen as anti-immigrant and therefore anti-Latino. But Latinos constituted a fast growing voting bloc in the state. As the chart in the Appendix to this musing shows, California now has the highest percentage of foreign-born residents of any state (and the largest absolute number).

By 2010, Republican gubernatorial candidates in California were trapped by the necessity of being tough on immigration in their party’s primary and then trying to shift to a more centrist position in the general election. In that year, Republican Meg Whitman and her chief opponent in the primary competed in being tough on immigration. But when Whitman subsequently ran in the general election against Democrat Jerry Brown, she had trouble trying to shift her position as this confrontation with two AM talk-radio hosts illustrates:

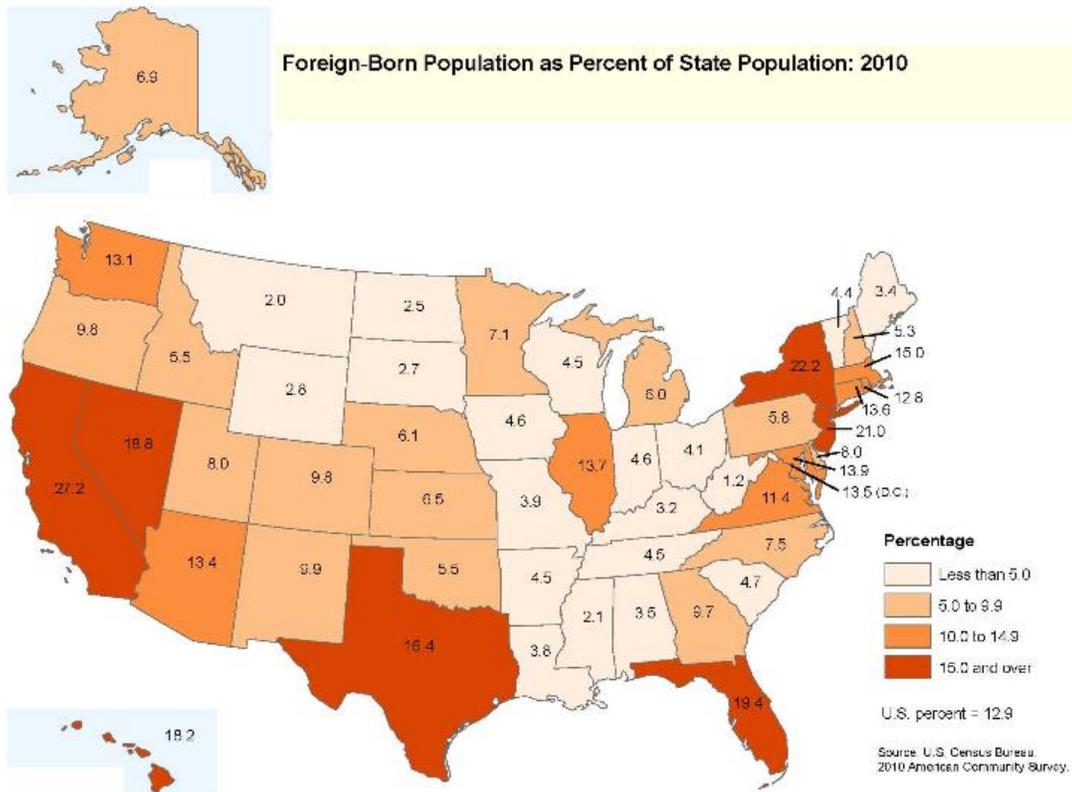
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXX46O7QE8k>

⁴ <http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/hist409/red.html>.

Ultimately, Whitman lost (badly) to Brown, enmeshed in a controversy over her firing of an illegal immigrant Latina housekeeper. At present, there are no statewide Republican officeholders in California and Democrats control the legislature.

In 2012, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney ran into similar immigration issue problems in his attempt to unseat incumbent Barack Obama. In that sense, the national political atmosphere on immigration is different today than what it was in the 1920s. The issues driving the immigration debate may be similar then and now, but the consequences seem different. On immigration policy this time around, it isn't back to the future.

Appendix



Source: <http://www.census.gov/population/foreign/files/WorkingPaper96.pdf>