

Immigration and Cities in the Twentieth Century

For more than 150 years, the United States has grappled with the opportunities and problems associated with immigration. Nearly 100 million immigrants arrived between 1840 and 2000, with most newcomers since 1880 settling in urban areas. My dissertation explores the often interrelated phenomena of immigration and the evolution of cities in twentieth-century America. The first two chapters address the Age of Mass Migration (1850–1914) and the millions of European immigrants who came to the United States during this period. This historic movement of people altered both the American electorate and the policy preferences of the native population. I begin by investigating how these immigrants became integrated into the American political system. I then turn my attention to the native political response to this immigration and assess the impact of the Americanization Movement, a series of state laws intended to force immigrant children to learn English and assimilate. I close by considering the role of immigration along with other demographic forces in shaping the population distribution across cities and suburbs in the second half of the twentieth century.

The first chapter of my dissertation asks how early twentieth-century immigrants, largely from undemocratic European states, first became politically mobilized in the United States.¹ This period serves as a particularly useful laboratory for studying immigrant political mobilization. The United States maintained a nearly open border to European immigrants until 1921, freeing the analysis from interference from legal obstacles to becoming an American citizen that exist today. Cities in the early twentieth century invested substantial resources in infrastructure improvements and public health, and immigrant groups could compete for consideration in the allocation of funds if they became citizens, registered to vote, and translated their numbers into credible voting blocs.

I investigate how immigrants responded to the incentive to become politically mobilized by focusing on the choice of foreign-born individuals living in city wards to become naturalized American citizens. This empirical approach relies on the observation that citizenship was both optional and obtainable for European immigrants until 1921.² Furthermore, becoming a citizen was necessary only to obtain the right to vote, not the ability to work or receive public benefits. The census recorded the naturalization status of all foreign-born individuals in 1900 and 1910, so using citizenship choice as an indicator of political engagement allows me to use rich microdata in the analysis, thereby avoiding aggregate regressions of voter turnout or microdata with very limited geographic identifiers such as the National Election Survey.

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¹ A revised version of this chapter is Shertzer (2013).

² Unlike in the present day, there was no notion of illegal immigrants who were barred from political participation because they could not become citizens. Asian immigrants were allowed to work in the United States but not to obtain citizenship, and consequently I focus on Europeans in my study.

I focus on the political mobilization of cohesive ethnic groups within city wards, constructing a panel data set of 106 wards in four cities (Boston, Chicago, the Manhattan borough of New York City, and Philadelphia) that were comparable over 1900 and 1910. Each of these wards was represented by a locally elected alderman who served on city council and was thus able to provide favors and consideration from the city government. In order to accurately measure the size of ethnic groups at the ward level, I collected 100 percent samples of the population of each city from a genealogy website. There is substantial variation in the distribution of immigrants across wards with groups of Czechs, Greeks, Italians, Poles, and Russians each comprising as much as a third of the ward electorate.

I show that immigrants were the most likely to initiate citizenship proceedings when their group comprised about 20 percent of the ward electorate, a relative size that was likely to be decisive in local elections. Graphically, the relationship between political mobilization and relative size is an inverted U-shape with the peak located around one-fifth electorate share. The presence of established social networks also mattered for mobilization; there is little evidence of coalition-driven group behavior for immigrant enclaves composed almost entirely of very recent arrivals. I also show that the main nonlinearity in relative group size is driven by the political mobilization of immigrants in wards where the Democratic Party likely needed their vote to win elections.

Americans with nativist sentiments were alarmed by the presence of the new immigrant masses. Legislators perceived unassimilated newcomers to be a threat: their Catholic and Jewish faiths, low literacy rates, inability to speak English, and general unfamiliarity with American customs and democratic government all appeared a danger to society. The second chapter of my dissertation (joint with Adriana Lleras-Muney) addresses the impact of the Americanization Movement, the diverse attempts of states to force immigrant children to learn English, attend school, and assimilate into American society.³

In contrast to the largely literate non-South native white population, in 1910 about 23 percent of the foreign born over 10 years of age were illiterate (Edwards 1923). Poorly educated immigrants were seen as vulnerable to exploitation by political parties since they “lacked any conception of democracy and willingly would submit to the authoritarian yoke that had bound them in Europe” (Ross 1994, p. 12). Furthermore, nativists could not rely on the existence of public schools to Americanize immigrant children. Poor parents often placed their children in the labor force or enrolled them in parochial schools where classes were taught in their native language.

We collected data on the passage of English-only laws between 1910 and 1930 and make use of previously collected laws on compulsory schooling and child labor during the same period. Previous work has examined the effects of compulsory schooling and child labor laws on the educational attainment of natives and found that this legislation had positive but modest effects on their education (Goldin and Katz 2011; Lleras-Muney 2002). However, no existing work documents whether these laws affected immigrants as legislators intended. We ask if the set of education laws affected immigrants and natives differentially and whether English laws affected immigrants at all.

Using the 1910, 1920, and 1930 censuses we assess how these laws affected the enrollment, literacy, employment, and English fluency of children. We find that that English-only laws did in fact increase the literacy of immigrants during this period, particularly for recently arrived children from non-English speaking countries and

³ A revised version of this chapter is Lleras-Muney and Shertzer (2012).

those of illiterate parents, but these laws did not by themselves or in combination with compulsory schooling laws affect the school enrollment or employment of immigrants or natives. Their effects were also modest in magnitude. We also find that compulsory schooling laws and continuation school laws had a large impact on the enrollment of immigrants. The effects we estimate are about twice the size of the effect these laws had on natives.

Although cities were growing throughout the first half of the twentieth century, central urban areas lost population to the suburbs after 1950. The third chapter of my dissertation (joint with Leah Boustan) asks how the changing demographics of the American population may have buttressed city populations against further decline.⁴ The share of the metropolitan population in the United States living in a central city fell from 58 percent in 1950 to 36 percent in 2000, with the balance residing in the suburban ring. Suburbanization intensified residential segregation by race and income, hastened the contraction of the urban tax base, and augmented disparities in access to education and other locally provided public services (Baumol 1967; Benabou 1996; Fischer 2004).

Alongside these forces favoring suburbanization, a series of countervailing changes in the demographic composition of the metropolitan population bolstered the size of central cities. This paper identifies four such shifts: the growing share of the metropolitan population living in a household with a foreign-born or African American household head; the declining share in households headed by a veteran of the Armed Forces; and the declining share of households containing a child under the age of 18. We also consider the life-cycle mobility of the large Baby Boom cohort from city to suburb (and back again) but find that it did not have a quantitatively meaningful effect on residential patterns.

Central to our argument is the claim that demographic characteristics help to determine residential location. However, the causal relationship could go in the other direction as well, with residential location influencing mutable characteristics like family size and veteran status. We therefore employ instrumental variables to identify the causal effect of having an additional child or serving in the military on place of residence. In particular, we instrument for household size with the occurrence of twins on either the first or the second birth (Angrist and Evans 1998). We identify the effect of military service by comparing cohorts who came of age during and just after the mass mobilization for World War II (Bound and Turner 2002; Fetter 2012; and Page 2008).

In the final section, we use the estimated determinants of living in the central city to consider a series of demographic counterfactuals. Overall, we find that, absent these changes in demographic composition, the share of the metropolitan population living in the central city would have declined by an additional 10 to 32 percent from 1960 to 2000. However, these demographic changes were only strong enough to partially reverse but not to overcome the strong economic and social forces in favor of suburbanization.

⁴ A revised version of this chapter is Boustan and Shertzer (2011).

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