

This land is my land: a history of nativist attitudes in america

[Business](#)



Donald Trump's slippery tongue seems to be getting him into all sorts of trouble lately, but it doesn't seem to be taking a toll on his presidential campaign the way many media and political watchdogs have predicted. Interestingly, his comments are helping him in the polls. And, believe me, that's no mistake. Contemporary attitudes in America have been following a frightening trend in recent years. The same puzzling phenomenon has been watched, studied, and analyzed by sociologists, anthropologists, and historians for the last few decades in Western Europe as well. This disturbing new-brand of xenophobia is nothing foreign to the history of the United States.

In fact, it's the resurrection of a homegrown, wildly vicious and toxic attitude known as nativism. American nativism traces its history back to the 1830s and '40s when the first waves of Roman Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Germany first arrived on the shores of the new nation. Unbeknownst to many of these impoverished people, America would not be a warm and welcoming land of opportunity. There wouldn't be "streets paved with gold," but rather, disease, starvation, and unemployment. Upon entrance into New York, Boston, and Philadelphia's largest immigrant enclaves, new arrivals were greeted with dilapidated and dangerous tenement houses, streets infested with bodily waste and manure, scanty health facilities, and corrupt city bosses.

These tremendously inadequate neighborhoods soon became breeding grounds for growing resentment and disgust in immigrant communities. Further fanning the flames of vexation and hostility were nativist politicians and community leaders who disseminated ignorant and hateful information

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about the culturally- and religiously-diverse immigrants to many skeptical and uneducated native-born Americans. Among them was Henry Bowers, who founded the American Protective Association in 1877 to put a stop to all immigration. Lyman Beecher and Samuel Morse were nativist writers who fantasized that the Catholic church had been using “poor, unschooled immigrants” to “destroy the freedom of religion in the U. S. by uniting church and state.

” Fearful that the new immigrants would refuse to assimilate, become violent, and pledge their allegiance to the Roman papacy, nativist leaders and their followers deliberately used anti-Catholic rhetoric that promoted violence against the new immigrants. Jobs were denied specifically to Irish immigrants; signs glued in store windows declared: “No Irish Need Apply.” Bloody riots and protests erupted in major American cities, leaving countless numbers of men, women, and children dead. Churches were set aflame, houses were destroyed, store-windows smashed. Cities were chaotic rubbles of matter and blood.

On the West Coast, Chinese and Japanese immigrants were targeted as well. Thousands were forced to work inhuman hours on the Transcontinental Railroad in the blistering heat because they couldn’t find any other jobs. In San Francisco, Chinese immigrants formed immigrant neighborhoods to protect themselves from nasty vigilantes who throbbed with anger at the sight of a “chink” walking down the city streets. Women and children were tied to the perimeters of their neighbors for fear that they would become the next victims of assault or rape. Immigrant communities were battered by the

resentment of native-born Americans whose fears were being played on by Nativist leaders and political machines. The Know-Nothing Party (also known as the American Party), in particular, made immigration a national issue during election years.

During the 1840s and '50s, the Know-Nothings gained a mass following among native-born Americans who feared Catholics, Jews, and Asians. In the election of 1856, the Know-Nothing Party ran Millard Fillmore for president. Though he ended up in last place, Fillmore still received close to 900, 000 votes out of approximately 4 million. The party could have continued to grow if not for its refusal to take a stand on the slavery issue, which most Americans felt was more important than the fear of Catholics and immigrants. By the early 1860s, the Know-Nothing Party was dead.

Years after the Know-Nothings were dead, American nativism and xenophobia continued to grow. It existed under the surface of the more obvious slavery issue, but was addressed very little until the end of Reconstruction. During the 1880s, a resurgence of immigration from eastern and southern Europe and East Asia resurrected nativist sentiment. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Gentleman's Agreement of 1907 produced widespread applause from members of anti-Asian movements in the West. The Immigration Restriction League of the 1890s, founded by five Harvard alumni, advocated for literacy screenings and other tests as a method for choosing the most "desirable" immigrants. Immigration restrictions at the turn of the nineteenth century were the harshest in American history. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 not only barred Chinese

immigrants from entering the country, but also “ convicts, paupers, and the mentally incompetent.” It also taxed each immigrant 50 cents for entry into the country. Though hard to imagine, the 1890s would be an even worse decade for immigration. Only the most ambitious, and the most “ American” immigrants would be admitted.

However, the severe restrictions on immigration would be lightened at the beginning of the twentieth century after an economic depression ravaged the entire country and businesses began seeking more cheap labor. In fact, immigration leapt from a measly 3. 5 million in the final decade of the nineteenth century to a whopping 9 million by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. New immigrants poured in from countries more diverse than any other wave of immigration in American history, coming from Poland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Russia, Greece, Hungary, Canada, and Latin America. Of course there was a continued flow of people coming in from northern and western European countries, but they were in the far minority. Rapid change was stirred at the beginning of the Great War in 1914.

The U. S. government, concerned about upholding national security measures during wartime, initiated the first widely restrictive immigration policy in the twentieth century. Many of the policies put into effect in 1917 became stepping stones for the Immigration Act of 1924. The first significant change in immigration policy was a new literacy test for immigrants 16 years or older, designed to test his or her basic reading and comprehension proficiency in a language.

The second provision of the act was an increase in the entry tax, then at \$8 per head (but only for persons 16 years old and up), for all immigrants wishing to set foot on American soil. The last measure of the 1917 Immigration Act was that it prohibited immigrants coming from the “ Asiatic Barred Zone,” or simply, any country in Asia other than Japan and the Philippines. Heavy restrictions on immigration was followed up in the following decade by the Immigration Act of 1924 — also known as the Johnson-Reed Act. It was yet another measure used by some government bureaucrats and nativist sympathizers to resurrect ancient fears based on religion and race. This law, signed into effect by President Coolidge, limited the number of immigrants allowed to enter the U. S.

based on a national origins quota. The 1924 quotas allowed the federal government to issue immigration visas to a minute two percent of the “ total number of people of each nationality in the United States” as per the 1890 census — excluding all immigrants from Asia. Nativist sentiment was infused in American culture, spurred on by world wars and conflicts until midway through the twentieth century, when immigration was once again, open to persons of all races and religions who demonstrated the knowledge and global citizenship to make a life for themselves and their families in America. Though grassroots groups continued to foment anti-Catholic, anti-black, anti-Jew, and anti-Asian sentiment throughout the twentieth century, those statements of hate would become fewer and quieter, until most Americans failed to perceive them at all. Today, when Donald Trump says Mexican immigrants are “ bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime” and that “ they’re rapists,” he’s promoting the same hateful and ethnocentric rhetoric that was

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used by paranoid nativists like Henry Bowers, Lyman Beecher, and Samuel Morse to gin up support for their ignorant hate campaigns.

Immigrants have come to the United States from all over the world. That is what makes our country so unique and beautiful. We ARE a melting pot of different colors, cultures, and creeds. If there is anything exceptional about our country, it is that we are a nation of unmatched diversity. If we can learn to live harmoniously, respectfully, and compassionately, the great democratic “ American experiment” will have succeeded against all odds.