

Immigration Is Defying Easy Answers

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Body

New **immigration** and the political reaction against it are nearly as old as the United States itself. Yet the **immigration** surge of the last decade has awakened tensions of unexpected intensity that have pervaded the presidential campaigns of both parties and stirred voter anger across the country.

In 1960, census figures show, the largest national group of immigrants was the Italians, accounting for 13 percent of the foreign-born. Today, Mexicans account for one-third of all immigrants. Spanish-speakers make up nearly half of the 37.5 million foreign-born people in the country. Young Latino immigrants have brought Spanish to states that had had little exposure to it, like Iowa and North Carolina.

In addition, never before have illegal immigrants settled here in such numbers -- an estimated 12 million. Almost 70 percent of those immigrants are Spanish-speaking, coming from Mexico and Central America, according to the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan research group.

Coinciding with the mood of apprehension following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the new **immigration** has provoked more than the traditional suspicion that foreigners are taking jobs from American workers. For many voters in the primary races, **immigration** has become an urgent national security concern and a challenge to the American identity.

The new **immigration** also sharpened the rift between the federal government and the states. Across party lines, frustrated voters accuse the Bush administration of failing to secure the southern border against intruders, of being lax on employers hiring illegal immigrants and of preaching assimilation without providing resources for local schools where Spanish-speaking students are enrolled.

President Bush's failed effort to push an **immigration** package through Congress foreshadowed the divisions on the campaign trail. Republicans are split about how to proceed, and Democrats are treading carefully, fearful on the one hand of alienating voters in places like Iowa who are fed up with illegal **immigration** but concerned on the other about missing what they see as an opportunity to win the allegiance of the fast-growing Hispanic population.

The next president will still face the tricky task of negotiating not just the politics of the issue, but also some concrete realities. While border fences and **immigration** raids have discouraged some illegal immigrants from coming and encouraged some who are here to go home, millions of illegal workers have had families here and put down roots, and are not going to disappear.

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