

The Hispanic Population's Rapid Growth

Context and considerations from TSC Editors

The rise of the Hispanic population in the United States has been remarkably rapid—so rapid, in fact, that before 1970 the Census Bureau did not even include a question about Hispanic ethnicity. To estimate the Hispanic proportion of the population in the years before the question was standardized, the Minnesota Population Center has pieced together information on each Census respondent's birthplace, parental birthplace, surname, and other predictive traits. Its estimates are incorporated into the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, available at usa.ipums.org, which is used here. (See Ed Rubenstein's article, which follows, on the implications of this dramatic transformation.)

In 1930, after the Great Wave of immigration was over and the Great Depression had begun, the Hispanic proportion of the U.S. population stood at approximately 1.8 percent. (For perspective, more Americans at the time spoke Yiddish at home than Spanish.) Many Hispanic Americans had ancestral roots in the U.S. going back to the 1846-1848 war that saw Mexico cede what would become the American Southwest. Others arrived from Mexico during the Great Wave, but formal and informal restrictions on Mexican immigration kept the numbers fairly low. During the Depression, there was little immigration at all, and the Hispanic population actually dropped to 1.6 percent by 1940.

After World War II, legal and illegal immigration from Mexico began to pick up steam. As late as 1970, however, there was little indication that a major demographic transition was coming. The Hispanic population stood at 4.1 percent, and the landmark immigration reform passed five years earlier was supposed to regulate immigration from Latin America. The family reunification provisions of that reform, however, would prove to be a boon for chain migration, and illegal immigration continued apace.

By 1980 Hispanics were 6.5 percent of the population, and President Reagan would call for an "amnesty"—the term supporters used at the time—for illegal immigrants. That amnesty, passed in 1986, may be the key driver of Hispanic population growth. In addition to offering millions of previously illegal immigrants a permanent home in the U.S.—leading to a sharp increase in the Hispanic American birth rate—the amnesty enabled legalized immigrants to initiate the chain migration of their extended families. By 1990, Hispanics were 8.8 percent of the population.

Of course the amnesty did not stem the flow of ille-

gal immigrants, and President George H.W. Bush signed a bill that expanded legal immigration as well. In 2000, Hispanics made up 12.5 percent of U.S. residents. Now "the Hispanic vote" became a common topic for talking heads, and both political parties stepped up their outreach efforts. The next two presidents, Bush and Obama, would both call for a new amnesty, now renamed "a path to citizenship." As of the last Census in 2010, Hispanics were 16.4 percent of the population. The most recent data from the American Community Survey (a yearly mini-Census) put the number at 17.1 percent.

Even as the Hispanic-American population has grown, its diversity has not necessarily increased. In 1970, about 6 in 10 Hispanics claimed Mexican ancestry, while a majority of the rest were either Puerto Rican or Cuban. Today the Mexican portion has actually grown to about two-thirds of the Hispanic population, while Puerto Ricans and Cubans are still the second- and third-most represented. The difference today is that the latter two groups have proportionally declined somewhat, while Guatemalans and Salvadorans have increased. The representation of Central Americans will likely continue to grow, evidenced by the young adults from the region who have recently surrendered themselves to the Border Patrol in the hopes of obtaining a *permiso*.

The Census Bureau predicts that Hispanics will be 19 percent of the population in 2020, and the proportion will steadily increase by one to 1.5 percentage points every five years, leading to a projection for the year 2060 of 28.6 percent. Note that these projections do *not* include the effect of increased birth rates and chain migration that might result from President Obama's executive amnesties.

The transformation of the American population over the past 50 years has been remarkable. Americans born in the middle of the twentieth century have seen Hispanics go from a demographic afterthought—just a small community primarily confined to the Southwest and a few urban enclaves in the Northeast—to the largest minority group in the nation. Whatever one thinks about this transformation, it is clear that Americans never voted for it. There was no collective decision made in 1960 to structure immigration policy so that Hispanics would quintuple their proportion of the population within a half century. What other demographic surprises await us in the coming decades? Without control of our borders and a firm sense of what we want from our legal immigration system, no one knows. ■