

*The New York Times***Ross Douthat**EVALUATIONS

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The Great Assimilation Debate

Now that the immigration bill is actually [moving through the Senate](#), it seems worth returning to the debate over recent patterns in immigrant assimilation that I discussed [in a column](#) back in April. That piece made the point that while today's second-generation immigrants still seem to be making real gains compared to their parents, there's a fair amount of evidence showing a subsequent stall-out in advancement — both educational and economic, and particularly noticeable among the descendants of immigrants from Latin America — that leaves later generations stuck well short of full integration into the American middle class. If true, this would lend credence to the worry, [common among immigration reform skeptics](#) but apparently rarer among United States senators, that the accelerated pace of low-skilled immigration contemplated by the current legislation might be a recipe for ever-greater socioeconomic stratification.

But it's also possible that the apparent stall-out isn't actually real, for reasons discussed by my colleague David Brooks [in a column](#) early last month:

Some intelligent skeptics say that mobility is fine through the second generation but stalls by the third. It is indeed harder to rise in a more chaotic and fragmented society. But one of the country's leading immigration researchers, Richard Alba of the City University of New York, calls the third generation stall "a statistical illusion."

Much of the research that shows the effect compares today's third-generation immigrants with today's second-generation group. But the third-generation families originally came to the U.S. decades ago, at a time when segregation was prevalent, discrimination was high and immigrants were harshly treated. You'd expect those families to progress more slowly than families that came to more welcoming conditions a generation later.

This a plausible point, and there is actually a further reason why research comparing the present-day third generation to the present-day second generation might be flawed: Namely, the phenomenon of ethnic attrition, in which subsequent generations become less likely to identify with their ancestral identity, thus throwing off survey data that relies on ethnic self-identification to track immigrant assimilation. In [a recent column](#) on this subject, Reihan Salam noted that "the educational attainment of Mexican-Americans who don't identify as Mexican is higher than for those who do" — a pattern that suggests that third generation Hispanic attainment may be understated in studies that don't account for the fact that many of the most successful third-generation Hispanic-American just identify as, well, white.

So those are two possible reasons to think that today's new arrivals and their descendants are, as

my colleague [David Leonhardt](#) argued earlier this year, “following the classic pattern for American immigrants,” rather than gaining some ground and then stalling or slipping back. But now let me offer two counterpoints. First, not every study of immigrant assimilation compares today’s third generation to today’s second generation, or ignores the problem of attrition. “[Generations of Exclusion](#),” for instance, a major 2008 study from two U.C.L.A. sociologists, tracked Mexican-American assimilation longitudinally (that is, comparing patterns for adult immigrants in the 1960s to contemporary outcomes for their children and grandchildren), and found basically the same pattern as the cross-sectional analyses: “While Mexican Americans make financial strides from the first to the second generation,” the authors wrote, “economic progress halts at the second generation, and poverty rates remain high for later generations. Similarly, educational attainment peaks among second generation children of immigrants, but declines for the third and fourth generations.”

Second, Brooks’ key premise — that conditions have grown “more welcoming” for low-skilled immigrants from Latin America over the last two generations — is precisely what’s in dispute in this debate. Clearly conditions have improved along some of the indicators that he discusses, like overt racial discrimination. But in other ways the America of 2013 seems like a place where it might turn out to be much *more* difficult for the descendants of low-skilled immigrants to rise into the middle class than it would have been fifty years ago.

To make that more pessimistic case, just combine [this chart](#) showing the current American unemployment rate by education level with [this chart](#) showing how social mobility for the bottom 20 percent stacks up against other developed economies. Then factor in the pace at which second-generation immigrants seem to be joining [the retreat from marriage](#), and the way [Hispanic family structures are coming to resemble](#) those of the native-born underclass. Then throw in findings like these from [a new study](#) by Harvard’s George Borjas:

This paper uses data drawn from the 1970-2010 decennial Censuses to examine the evolution of immigrant earnings in the U.S. labor market. The analysis reveals that there are cohort effects not only in the level of earnings, with more recent cohorts generally having relatively lower entry wages, but also in the rate of growth of earnings, with more recent cohorts having a smaller rate of economic assimilation. Immigrants who entered the country before the 1980s typically found that their initial wage disadvantage (relative to natives) narrowed by around 15 percentage points during their first two decades in the United States. In contrast, the immigrants who entered the country after the 1980s have a negligible rate of wage convergence ...

Of course Borjas is notable among economists for his skepticism of immigration’s benefits to non-immigrants. And of course one can answer the case for pessimism with still other data points that offer more reason for optimism, like the [recent upward trend](#) in Hispanic high school graduation rates. We see through a glass darkly on these issues: It is hard to say with certainty what is happening with assimilation right now, and it is harder to say what will happen in the near-to-medium future.

But where reasonable people can disagree, reasonable policymakers should at least hedge their bets. And that's precisely what the legislation being considered in the Senate doesn't do. All the to-and-fro-ing about border security notwithstanding, this is a bill that doesn't seem to contemplate any **potential downsides** to increasing the pace of low-skilled immigration at a time when unemployment is rampant, wages are stagnant, and the native-to-immigrant ratios in our population is already headed toward historic highs.

That optimism makes it a very American piece of legislation, I suppose. But it doesn't make it wise.