



# Learning from Each Other

The Integration of Immigrant and Minority Groups  
in the United States and Europe

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Spencer P. Boyer April 2009





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# Introduction and summary

The United States and the European Union share much in common, including a similar religious and cultural heritage, strong democratic institutions, and a commitment to civil society. One thing they do not share, however, is a common set of political attitudes and attendant policies on how best to integrate immigrant and minority groups into their larger societies. Intriguingly, though, policymakers in the United States and Europe could learn a great deal from each other as they tackle this issue—one of the more important challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As this paper will demonstrate, our different views and actions on integration—derived from unique historical experiences—provide lessons for both sides of the Atlantic.

Both American and European societies struggle to find the proper balance between preserving valued traditions and incorporating individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds and beliefs. The tension can be high between those who are accustomed to, and wish to maintain, the cultural experience of the majority—often rooted in a common ethnic, religious, or political heritage—and those who do not fit within that framework. Economic anxiety, combined with political discourses that sometimes rely upon the rhetoric of exclusion and cultural difference, have the dangerous potential to undermine progress and open discourse.

Integration is not solely a social or cultural issue, but also one that has important public policy implications for both the United States and Europe. Demographic changes will present new challenges for European leaders as they are faced with aging workforces and too few taxpayers to support generous social programs. The United States will encounter similar trends with the upcoming retirement of the baby boom generation, although continued large-scale immigration, both legal and illegal, is staving off the immediacy of the impact. Ultimately, only those countries capable of effectively managing and harnessing the power of diversity in employment, education, and other areas are likely to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

How the United States and the European Union handle this demographic certainty is hugely important in another way. Poor integration carries with it security implications. Preventing the alienation, resentment, and potential backlash that can come when immigrant and minority groups are excluded from the societal benefits others enjoy are concerns on both sides of the Atlantic. At a moment when radical groups are increasing their efforts to recruit the disenfranchised in Europe, and could potentially do so as well in the United States, these concerns are particularly relevant.

While the risks to the United States and European Union are similar, there are distinct differences in how the United States and Europe look at these issues. While there are debates within the United States on the proper pathways to legal residency and how best to integrate immigrant and minority groups, there is an expectation among Americans of all backgrounds that most legal immigrants will one day be able to become American citizens. And practically no one in America today questions the right of a child born in the United States to become a citizen. Most tensions arise over how to stop the flows of undocumented immigrants.

The European Union also struggles with how to stem the tide of undocumented immigrants and how to view existing immigrants and other minorities. Additionally, there are disagreements in Europe about whether to grant citizenship to documented immigrant families who have lived in Europe for years, even generations. Citizenship in a number of European countries has often been about bloodlines and ethnic heritage, not location at birth.

The recent election of a biracial U.S. president—the son of a recent Kenyan immigrant father and mother from Kansas whose immigrant ancestors arrived in the United States almost 200 years ago—offers a unique opportunity for the United States and Europe to more seriously examine what each can offer the other in tackling ongoing integration challenges. This report explores the current integration efforts taking place in the United States and European Union, and offers recommendations for what the United States and Europe can do to be more effective in these undertakings. As the United States and European Union work to develop new federal and supranational policy tools and guidelines for addressing integration, respectively, there is much we can learn from each other.

Specifically, this report calls upon the Obama administration to:

- Signal a national commitment to improve integration through a more robust effort at the federal level. The president should establish a new National Office of Integration in the White House to coordinate between the various U.S. departments and agencies that are tasked with addressing socioeconomic hardships and lingering discriminatory practices, which are barriers to effective integration for both new immigrants and other minority groups.
- Start the process of integration at the first points of contact for the immigrant community. The Department of Homeland Security's efforts to create resources for newly arrived immigrants should be encouraged and expanded, and be included as part of the initial visa application process in U.S. embassies around the world. The Obama administration should also help provide local police and other agencies with the resources to communicate with non-English speaking newcomers in multiple ways—not just through the prism of law enforcement.



- Provide the resources to continue the integration process beyond the first point of contact. Providing civic orientation resources for new immigrants is an important first step, but more resources must also be provided to educators, employers, and government agencies to continue the process of integration beyond arrival, into the second generation, and beyond.

On the European front, the report recommends that the European Union:

- Work to translate the common vision for integration into enforceable national legislation at the state level. The European Union has been successful in creating highly structured, institutionalized programs for integration, but more work needs to be done to coordinate integration standards of member states, as well as monitor and enforce member state practices. The European Union should use the United States as a model for putting greater emphasis on helping member states strengthen antidiscrimination laws and enforce existing regulations.

## What do we mean by integration?

Traditionally, scholars have divided integration efforts into three primary categories or models:

- The multicultural model, which is based on a respect for cultural diversity and protection for the identity of the immigrant community.
- The assimilationist model, which has equality at its core but is based on the complete assimilation of immigrants into the dominant society.
- The separation or exclusionist model, which is characterized by rigid and restrictive immigration policies aimed at artificially maintaining the temporary character of an immigrant’s settlement.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays, however, these descriptions have largely lost their relevance due to changing political realities and social developments.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the lines between the traditional models have blurred as attitudes toward immigrants and minorities continue to evolve.<sup>3</sup>

These models, as designed, have significant flaws. The separation/exclusionist model isolates communities from the mainstream and stigmatiz-

es those who are viewed as apart from the majority. The assimilationist model requires that one know exactly what an immigrant or minority is supposed to assimilate into, which is often unclear in today’s complex and heterogeneous societies. And while the multiculturalism model has generally been viewed as the most appealing, it has many detractors in Europe, who view it as an unrealistic or even utopian goal of cultural and racial harmony.<sup>4</sup> These critics often point to the United States as a hopelessly segregated “multicultural” society.<sup>5</sup>

For the purposes of this report, we will deem successful integration as a process that includes, but is not limited to, the spread of educational and economic mobility, social inclusion, and equal opportunity for newcomers and minorities into the mainstream of a society. In contrast, poor integration often results in the formation of an ethnically segregated bottom class composed of immigrant groups and/or communities of color.<sup>6</sup> In addition, we will be focusing our attention on documented—rather than undocumented—immigrants in the report.

- Institute metrics to better assess progress toward integration. Europe’s resistance to collecting racial and ethnic data, while conducted out of an expressed desire to craft “color blind” policies, ultimately serves to obscure the needs of minority populations and their difficulties integrating into the majority society. The European Union should develop a performance report card on instituting diversity and antidiscrimination measures, similar to the accession progress reports it conducts for new members.
- Offer a more expansive view of citizenship. While the process of adapting to a new, multiethnic concept of identity cannot be directed from the top by EU policymakers, more can be done to facilitate the successful citizenship application process for its minority populations. Relaxing strict standards on who can pass through the citizenship process and expanding opportunities for dual citizenship will help broaden the national identity.

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