

PATTERNS OF ITALIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

Frank J. Cavaoli
Farmingdale State College, SUNY

From the colonial period to the present, Italians have migrated to the American nation, but that migration has been irregular. Throughout modern history Italy has been the source of emigration, especially to the United States. In recent years, Italy's population has stabilized and immigration to the United States is minimal. This essay will examine the irregular pattern of Italian immigration to the United States, its causes, and why and when it developed. American immigration policy will be examined as it affected Italian immigration. Interwoven in the text will be official census data accompanied by an analysis of that data. Finally, concluding commentary will be made concerning the degree of Italian (American) identity in the contemporary, diverse United States.

From its earliest foundation, and through continuous development, immigration has been the driving force that has characterized the history of the United States. The people movement to American shores remains a phenomenon that no nation can match. Immigration is a two-way process: “immigrants not only become incorporated into a new society, they also transform it. As they have become incorporated into American society, immigrants have made and remade America, and are still making her still.”¹

In contrast, emigration has characterized the history of modern Italy, especially to the United States, which is the focus of this essay. In recent years, however, Italian immigration to the United States has been declining, and the composition of these new arrivals has changed. (Italy's population has stabilized, simultaneously experiencing immigration from North Africa and Eastern Europe.) “Citizens of the world, today's Italian immigrants in America are well-educated, career-driven, and focused on preserving their traditions and language.” This unfolding trend differs from what occurred a century ago, when the poor marked Italian immigration to the United States, illiterate, and unskilled. The world then witnessed a massive flow of Italians from a heavily populated society dominated by regional and ruling class interests, and a government that ignored the needs of its people. These Italian immigrants were motivated for the same reasons that characterized nearly all immigrants who have migrated to the American nation: to

advance to a better life in a free society protected by a constitution in which the rights of the individual are supreme.²

Undergirding this view is British-born historian Henry Bamford Parkes' belief that

American civilization has certain unique features that differentiate it from any European country. The culture of the United States has been the product of two main factors: of the impulses and aspirations that caused men and women to leave their European homes and cross the Atlantic; and of the influences of the American Natural environment.³

American historian Frederick Jackson Turner also emphasized the importance of the frontier (environment) in the development of democratic institutions in the United States. The frontier transformed the European into a free American. He stated: "American democracy is fundamentally the outcome of the experience of the American people in dealing with the West." Thus, the environment, not heredity, shaped the individual.⁴

Today's immigrants from Italy, though far fewer than those who came here during the high tide of migration, arrive by jet plane, are better educated, retain their language, and are proud of their national heritage. However, like the earlier immigrants, they regard America as a "meritocracy," as a land of greater opportunity where cumbersome bureaucracies do not hinder advancement. Moreover, it is argued that today's Italian immigrant, because of economic, social, and political reasons, find it difficult to identify with the more than four million who arrived during the period of 1880 to 1920.⁵

In looking back to colonial America, though present and contributing to the rise of the United States and its culture, few Italians had settled in North America before 1820. Those who were here represented the elite classes of missionaries, travelers, teachers, artists, and other professionals. From 1820, when immigrants began to be counted, to 1880, Italian immigration increased progressively to a total of 81,249. This number, within six decades, was relatively small compared to what would follow. During the 1880 to 1920 era, 4,114,603 Italians arrived out of the total number of 23,465,374 immigrants who came to the United States. Within the years of 1901 to 1910 alone a record-breaking 2,045,374 Italians arrived out of the total of 8,795,386 of what was then new immigration. In the decade that followed, 1,109,524 Italians arrived. The source of this remarkable influx of hardworking Italians originated mostly from the overpopulated

mezzogiorno, the Italian south. These immigrants were poor contadini or peasants, traditional, and lacking sophistication. Agriculture in Italy was no longer profitable, methods of production were primitive, and taxes were oppressive. Their loyalty lay with their region (campanilismo), dominated by local dialects and practices; they lacked a sense of patriotism to Italy, which had achieved political unification as late as 1861. The harsh forces of social, economic, and political conditions pushed them to leave, and the attractive opportunities of a democratic and rapidly developing urban/industrial society pulled them to America.⁶ The Census Bureau considers anyone who is not born a U.S. Citizen to be foreign-born.

The modern phenomenon of mass migration from Italy reached numerous worldwide destinations. Sources estimate that nearly 26 million Italians left their native land during the period of 1876 to 1976. At its height, Italy “hemorrhaged peasants,” according to Erik Amfitheatrof. The United States received the highest number of Italians. Luciano J. Iorizzo and Salvatore Mondello commented: “City streets in the United States became transplanted into Italian towns and provinces, where old parochialisms, including endogamy, flourished. This situation encouraged more and more Italians to set out for America.” The Italian government attempted—but failed—to stop this exodus. Robert F. Foerster chronicled and analyzed this movement, covering the period between 1876 and 1919 in his seminal study *The Italian Emigration of Our Times* (1919).⁷ Foerster was the first to give serious study of this movement through his Harvard doctoral dissertation, *Emigration from Italy with Special Reference to the United States* (1909).

The huge influx of southern, central, and eastern European immigrants caused concern within the host society, which wondered how they would assimilate. The newcomers settled in urban areas, which produced severe, crowded conditions at a time when the Jeffersonian model of an agrarian-rural society was highly valued by the host society’s influential groups. Jefferson, and others, argued that agricultural societies produced virtuous governments. On the other hand, cities were considered “moral cesspools” marked by corruption, materialism, and commercialism. Organized labor, dominant religious groups, racists, and others motivated by eugenics sought to protect the American system from this invasion of people they considered to be of “low moral character,” distinct from the people who came from northern and northwestern Europe. There had been pre-1860 movements driven by nativists, such as the Know Nothings, but attempts to exclude the new alien groups accelerated after 1880 and would lead to the restrictive immigration laws of the 1920s. Early successes on the part of anti-

immigration forces resulted in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and laws that barred anarchists, imbeciles, and others thought to be wards of society. Further, a bill that incorporated a literacy test passed either the Senate or the House 32 times, and on four occasions was passed by both bodies, only to be vetoed each time. Finally, the bill signed by President Wilson in 1917 provided a literacy test whereby no immigrant over sixteen years old who could not read English or some other language would be admitted to the United States. The literacy test discriminated against poor and uneducated immigrants. In an attempt to justify the literacy test, it was argued that only three percent of the old immigrants were illiterate, and that more than half of the immigrants from Sicily and Italy were illiterate.⁸

Contributing to the sentiment of nativism and arguments for immigration exclusion were the writings of social scientists that based many of their arguments on Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859). Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), the prominent English philosopher and sociologist, expounded on the pseudo-scientific belief of the "survival of the fittest," as developed from Darwinian biology. American intellectuals such as William Graham Sumner, George Bancroft, Herbert Baxter Adams, Francis Lieber, and John W. Burgess promoted the concept of Social Darwinism, which asserted that through the process of natural selection, Anglo Saxon, Nordic, and Germanic people were superior to Italians, Jews, Greeks, and Slavs. They alleged that the advanced gene pool of the old immigrants must be preserved. William Graham Sumner stated, "If we do not like the survival of the fittest, we have only one possible alternative, and that is the survival of the unfittest." Madison Grant wrote *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), which elaborated on this racist theory. Henry Cabot Lodge (1850-1924), the powerful legislator from Massachusetts, argued the dominance of the great "English racial strain" was being threatened by the new masses arriving at the nation's shores. He used his influence to formulate a restrictive immigration policy. Another leader, Francis A. Walker, President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, warned of the foreign peril causing labor unrest, the new immigrants could not be assimilated, and were "beaten men from beaten races representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence." The Dillingham Commission (named for Vermont Senator William P. Dillingham), created by Congress in 1907 as a result of public pressure, produced a forty-one volume report in 1911 on the "new" immigration that confirmed the biased view that northern and northwestern Europeans were superior to the southern, central, and southeastern Europeans.⁹ Among the latter, Italians were added to the prevailing opinion in

America that believed African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans were inferior.

The public debate over an immigration policy that began in the late nineteenth century finally concluded in the 1920s. In May 1921, President Warren G. Harding signed the first bill establishing a restrictive European immigration policy. It established for three years a quota system whereby the number of new immigrants permitted to enter was three percent of the number of people of that nationality already in the United States in 1910. This law restricted the annual number of immigrants to 357,802. Three years later, President Calvin Coolidge signed the National Origins Quota Act of 1924 that limited each country's annual quota to two percent of that national population in the United States in 1890. It effectively reduced southern, central, and eastern European immigration. (Special humanitarian legislation was adopted between 1952 to 1962 allowing 140,000 Italians to enter the United States from war-torn Italy.) In 1929, a new National Origins Act was adopted; the total number of immigrants was reduced to 150,000 to be distributed to the European nations in proportion to the national origins of the 1920 American population. The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 replaced the 1929 law over President Harry Truman's veto, but still maintained the national origins system by simplifying the quota formula to one-sixth of one percent of the foreign-born population in the 1920 United States Census. This quota system was replaced in 1965 when the new comprehensive immigration law was adopted that placed all nations on an equal basis and eliminated the national origins quota system.¹⁰

When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Reform Law on Liberty Island in New York Harbor on October 3, 1965, he said, "Today the golden door of immigration has never stood wider." President Johnson praised the leadership role that Italian Americans played in lobbying for this reform. Of course, Italians had the most to gain by eliminating the old system through the establishment of a more just law. World War II had devastated Italy, and its annual quota under the old system amounted to the low figure of 5,666. However, there were nearly 300,000 Italians on the immigration waiting list in 1965 hoping to enter the United States under the new law. The State Department indicated that 60,000 Italians would be admitted by 1968. After that period, the annual rate would be 20,000, which was the maximum rate for any one nation. The 20,000 figure did not include "special immigrants" classified as spouses, minor children, and parents of U.S. citizens. When Public Law 89-236 took full effect in 1968, the following annual figures from Italy represented a dramatic shift in favor of Italians migrating to the United States.¹¹

The Impact of 1965 Immigration and Nationality Reform Law:

1968	-	25,882
1969	-	27,033
1970	-	27,369
1971	-	22,818
1972	-	22,400
1973	-	22,300
1974	-	15,000
1975	-	11,000

Italian immigration peaked in 1970 as the law took full effect, but it gradually declined as demand was met. This general downward trend would continue to the present day, especially as Italy's economy prospered.¹²

An examination of the Italian foreign-born population in the United States from 1850 to 2000 provides a more sweeping pattern of Italian immigration. The following data, based on decennial counts, show the evolving increases of Italian immigrants (now more appropriately classified as Italian Americans) present in the United States from 1850 to 1930, and then a dramatic decline from 1960 to the year 2000. The years of 1910, 1920, and 1930 are clearly significant showing an upward trend into seven figures. The declining numbers in the years of 1960 and 1970, though still more than a million people, reflect the waning of the first significant generation of Italian immigrants.

Region and Country or Area of Birth of the Italian Foreign-Born Population:¹³

1850	-	3,679	1860	-	11,677
1870	-	17,147	1880	-	44,230
1890	-	182,580	1900	-	484,027
1910	-	1,343,125	1920	-	1,610,113
1930	-	1,790,429	1940	-	1,623,850
1950	-	1,427,580	1960	-	1,256,999
1970	-	1,008,533	1980	-	831,922
1990	-	580,592	2000	-	604,447

It is important to indicate that 1850—in the decennial census—was the first year that data were collected on the nativity of the population. From 1850 to 1930, the total foreign-born population in the United States increased from 2.2 million to 14.2 million, most of which came from Europe. On the other hand, from 1930 to 1950 the foreign-born population declined from 14.2 million to 10.3 million, or from 11.6 percent to 6.9 percent of the total population. The decline during this period was mainly caused by the Great Depression, World War II, and the implementation of the national origins quota laws. The foreign-born population then dropped slowly to 9.6 million in 1970, when it represented 4.7 percent of the total population. Since 1970 the overall foreign-born population has increased rapidly, mainly from Latin America and Asia. The foreign-born population rose from 9.6 million in 1970 to 14.1 million in 1980, to 19.8 million in 1990, and to 31.1 million in 2000. There was a 57 percent increase from 1990 to 2000. In 2000, more than 16 million foreign-born were from Latin America, representing 52 per cent of the total foreign born.¹⁴ The foreign born, as classified by the census bureau, are not United States citizens at birth. At the last decennial census in 2000, the United States population was 281,421,906. In 2006 the population passed the 300,000,000 mark.

An examination of the 2003 count of the foreign-born population provides a similar picture of this development.

Foreign Born by World Region of Birth, 2003:¹⁵

Latin America:	53.3%
<i>Caribbean:</i>	10.1%
<i>Central America:</i>	36.9%
<i>South America:</i>	6.3%
Asia:	25.0%
Europe:	13.7%
Other:	8.0%

The civilian non-institutional population (those not living in college dormitories, prisons, etc.) in 2003 included 33.5 million of foreign born, representing 11.7 percent of the United States population. Because of its favorable geographical position, weak economy, and political upheavals Latin America provided 53.3 percent, while Asia was next with 25.0 percent. Europe, which has been the traditional source of immigration, accounted for a low of 13.7 percent of foreign born. With multiculturalism in vogue, sustained as the nation's official policy, the socioeconomic and cultural impact is becoming more evident on

American society. If these trends continue, will the Judeo-Christian, Roman-Greek, Anglo-Saxon tradition, which has produced western civilization, be maintained or modified within its basic framework in the future?¹⁶

The United States Constitution has required the implementation of the decennial census in order to obtain population counts for congressional apportionment. Originally, no data were collected on place or area of birth. It must be emphasized that in the 1820 and 1830 decennial censuses, enumerators were asked to designate individuals who were aliens (foreigners not naturalized) although no specific questions were asked on citizenship status. Questions concerning an individual's place of birth have appeared in all of the decennial censuses since 1850, which is the basic source of information on the foreign-born population.¹⁷

This background information leads to another approach in analyzing the patterns of Italians entering the United States. The following comprehensive table, covering the years from 1820 to 2004, offers a clearer perspective. Based on available data by decade, the table shows "Italian Immigration to the United States as Recorded by Country of Birth and Country or Region of Last Residence." United States immigration law defines immigrants as "persons lawfully admitted for permanent residence in the United States."¹⁸

Italian Immigration to the United States as Recorded by Country of Birth and Country or Region of Last Residence: 1820-2004:

1820:	30	1931-1940:	68,028
1821-1830:	409	1941-1950:	57,661
1831-1840:	2,253	1951-1960:	185,491
1841-1850:	1,870	1961-1970:	214,111
1851-1860:	9,231	1971-1980:	129,368
1861-1870:	11,725	1981-1990:	67,254
1871-1880:	55,759	1991-2000:	62,722
1881-1890:	307,309	2001:	3,377
1891-1900:	651,893	2002:	2,837
1901-1910:	2,045,877	2003:	1,904
1911-1920:	1,109,524	2004:	2,495
1921-1930:	455,315		

An important point to be considered here is that many immigrants returned home to Italy in the early years of the twentieth century, but the exact number is not known. In a rare and comprehensive

study on the subject, Betty Boyd Caroli reported that “more than one and one-half million Italians returned to their home country between 1900 and 1914 after a brief period of temporary residence in the United States.” It was assumed that no duplication of the same individuals occurred because of repeated journeys. Her conclusion was based on data from Italian documented sources.¹⁹

With due consideration of return migration, the total Italian immigration recorded by the census by region and selected country of last residence during the years of 1820 to 2004 amounted to 5,446,443 people. Note the continuous increase beginning in 1850 through 1910, especially when more than a million Italians arrived in the decades of 1901 to 1910 and 1911 to 1920. The decline in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s resulted from the effects of the new American immigration restrictions, the Great Depression, and World War II. Conversely, conditions in the post-World War I period such as the rise of nationalism accompanied by the rise of the dictators in Europe also contributed to the drop in the movement of people. As indicated above, the increased numbers of Italian immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s resulted from special humanitarian legislation regarding assistance to refugees and displaced persons, as well as the more humane American immigration policy established in 1965. The numbers drop in the 1970s, but still remain in six figures. Since the 1970s, there has been a downward trend in Italian immigration, caused by an evolving improvement in the social, economic, and political conditions in the homeland. In fact, the most recent four years of the new twenty-first century have witnessed a trickle of Italian immigrants entering the United States. Perhaps contemporary conditions in the United States such as the burden of being a world power and being a post-industrial society might be other reasons for Italians to view America as not being as attractive as it once was.

A further examination of Italian immigrants who were naturalized during the fiscal years from 1995 to 2004 confirms the low and static trend of Italians in the United States:²⁰

Naturalized Italian Immigrants: 1995-2004:

1995	-	4,065	2000	-	4,436
1996	-	5,117	2001	-	2,987
1997	-	2,445	2002	-	2,621
1998	-	2,522	2003	-	1,849
1999	-	4,393	2004	-	2,295

Within this ten-year period, 1996 was the only year that produced more than 5,000 naturalized Italians (5,115), while the year 2003 produced the smallest number (1,849).

Historically, European countries and Canada have been the leading countries of the foreign-born in the United States. From 1850 to 1960 Europe and Canada produced the most foreign-born population, with the only exceptions of Mexico (1850-1860) and China (1860-1880). In 1980, 1990, and 2000 Mexico became the leading country of birth of foreign-born. Previously, the leading countries were Ireland (1850-1870), Germany (1880-1900), and Italy (1930-1970). The following table lists

**Italy's Position Among the Ten Leading Countries
of Foreign Born in The United States in Selected Years:**

1850	-	Tenth
1880	-	Not Listed
1900	-	Sixth
1920	-	Second
1930	-	First
1940	-	First
1950	-	First
1960	-	First
1970	-	First
1980	-	Fourth
1990	-	Seventh
2000	-	Not Listed

Italy ranked first from 1930 among the foreign born, but dropped to fourth in 1980 and seventh in 1990. Italy did not make the list in 2000. The only two traditional foreign-born populations in the 2000 census in this category were Canada (eighth) and Germany (tenth). The other leading foreign-born populations in this census originated from Mexico, China, Philippines, India, Vietnam, Cuba, Korea, and El Salvador.²¹

Further, according to the Annual Reports of the U.S. Immigration Service, in the period covering the years 1968 to 2000, Italy is not listed among the leading fifteen nations that produced the greatest number of immigrants. The leading fifteen sources of U.S. immigration for these years are as follows: Mexico, Philippines, China, Vietnam, India, Korea, Dominican Republic, Cuba, USSR, Jamaica, United Kingdom, El Salvador, Canada, Haiti, and Colombia. In this period a total of 21,925,586 immigrants arrived.²²

In contrast to this trend, the number of Americans who identify themselves as having an Italian heritage has been increasing. According to the 1980 census, 12.2 million persons identified themselves as having an Italian ancestry, or 5.4 percent of the total population. The 1990 census counted 14,664,550 Italian Americans. Ten years later 15,723,555 persons identified themselves as having an Italian ancestry. That number amounted to 5.6 percent of Italian Americans to the total population of 281,421,906. Therefore, from 1990 to 2000, an increase of 1,059,000 people claimed to be Italian Americans.

Further, in its American Community Survey, conducted in 2004 and 2005 and released November 4, 2006, the United Census Bureau recorded a total Italian ancestry population of 16,817,286. This remarkable increase, following the 2000 decennial count of Italian Americans, amounted to 1,093,731.²³ In fact, the increase would be higher if persons living in such institutions as nursing homes, military barracks, permanent housing for the homeless, correctional facilities, college dormitories, etc., were included.²⁴ Ironically, as Italian immigration has declined, their presence, through self-identification census reports, has increased. This fact may be attributed to the acceptance and promotion of diversity and multicultural policies and programs throughout government and society and the media. Since Italian Americans are not a protected class under civil rights laws—except within the City University of New York’s Calandra Institute—they feel compelled to assert themselves to gain the social and material benefits that society has to offer. Another explanation may suggest that Italian Americans have advanced so far in society politically, economically, and socially that they share a confidence and pride in proclaiming their ethnic heritage.

In the decades of the 1980s and the 1990s, Italy’s share of immigration by country of last residence remained relatively static at 1.0 percent, 67,254 and 62,722, respectively. At the same time, Mexico’s immigration in 1981 to 1990 increased from 1,655,843 (22.6 percent) to 2,249,421 (24.7 percent). In the year 2000 more immigrants came from Mexico than from the next four countries combined.²⁵ As larger numbers of immigrants arrive from Asia, the Caribbean, and South and Central America, Italian-American influence, along with that of other European immigrant groups, may be eclipsed in government policies and programs. In fact, since the 1960s the growing number of immigrants—both legal and illegal—has resulted in changes in the size and ethnic composition of the American population, results that directly impact the role and position of Italian Americans.

Scholars of recent immigration have developed new concepts such as “transnationalism” and “diasporic citizenship” in attempting to comprehend the realities of the modern people movement. With revolutionary advances in transportation and communications, immigrants can now maintain a dual loyalty and linkage between the old country and the American host society, leading to economic, political, and social interaction between the two. Exchange of money, participating in home country elections, and emotional attachments characterize behavior of recent arrivals to the United States. It must be admitted that transnational sentiments and ties with the old country can also be applied to Italian immigration to the United States a century ago, when a high rate of return migration occurred and other relations were maintained, despite cumbersome and costly communication and transportation facilities. A further consideration for understanding return migration and resistance to assimilation among Italian and other immigrants was the lack of acceptance by the host society.²⁶

It is clear that Italians have provided an uneven pattern of immigration to the United States. This pattern can be seen in their minimal but important presence during the American colonial period, followed by a small flow of the number of Italians until 1880. The high tide of immigration occurred in the period of 1880 to 1920, reaching over two million during 1900 to 1910, and over one million from 1911 to 1920. In the 1930s and 1940s, Italian immigration dropped below six figures. From 1950 to 1970 their numbers increased, but a declining trend began in 1971 and has continued to this day. In addition, Italian immigration patterns have been influenced by conditions in Italy.

Today, the population in Italy has stabilized at 58,147,733 (2007). Once a nation honoring family life, Italy now has a remarkably low population growth rate: 0.01%. Its birth rate stands at 8.54 per 1,000 births, among the lowest in the world. In fact, comparing Italy within a listing of 217 nations worldwide concerning this birth rate, Italy ranks near the bottom at 213. Nevertheless, its geographical location has allowed an influx of migrants from northern Africa and eastern Europe. The United States Census Bureau’s Population Division International Programs Center (*The World Almanac and Book of Facts*, 2008, pp.786-787; 845-846.) has projected Italy’s population to drop to 56,234,163 in the year 2025, and to drop to 50,389,841 in the year 2050. If these projections hold true, Italy, even as a receiving nation, will not be able to replace its declining birth rate in order to maintain its population. The Italian diaspora will have ended, and its glorious language and culture will experience decline worldwide.

Despite the small number of Italians currently arriving in the United States, there has been an increase in the American population who claim an Italian ancestry. It has been argued that Italians have entered the “twilight of ethnicity” whereby they are becoming more like what was once the dominant white Anglo Saxon culture through intermarriage, education, and economic and political success. What ethnicity remains is identified as “symbolic ethnicity” and “recreational ethnicity,” rather than an authentic link to the old-world heritage. However, with the recent arrival of millions of Hispanics and Asians, with the widely promulgated and promoted programs of diversity and multiculturalism (essentially meaning non-white and non-European), Italian Americans and their organizations are demanding to be heard and respected in their struggle for power and recognition. If history is any guide, these countervailing forces may resolve themselves in the future, as they have been resolved in the past. The United States is flexible and adaptable. The assimilative process will continue, because of the benefits that are available to all in the American democratic process. Will this process be complete? At the same time, ethnic groups with their agendas will continue to play a role in a society that recognizes group identity. How these forces will play out and whether ethnic retention or assimilation will prevail only time will tell. To put it another way: Will Italian Americans merge into a new ethnic group called *European Americans*, quite distinct from the recent immigrant arrivals from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia? Or will they retain their predominant cultural heritage?²⁷

Notes

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