

Lessons from the South's unique history of immigration



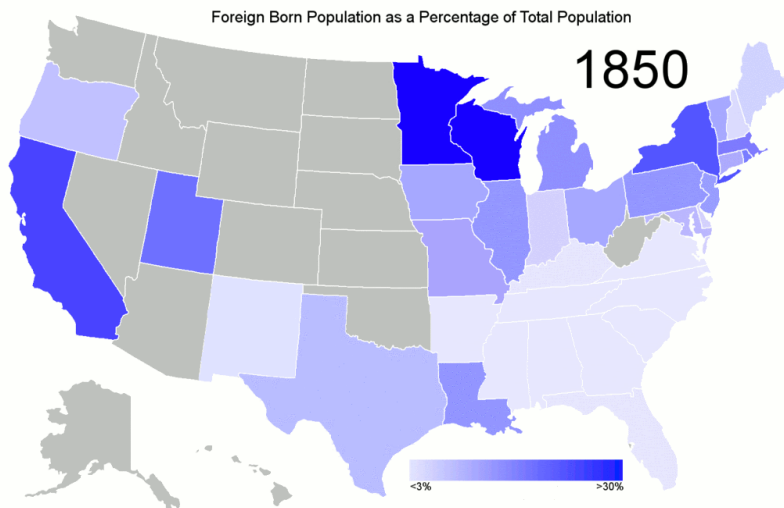
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Friday May 23rd, 2014

The growth of new immigrant -- especially Asian and Latino -- communities, and their impact on our demographic landscape, is a big national story. But when it comes to immigration, the South has a unique history, which continues to shape how Southern states address the issue.

This week I was in Nashville, Tennessee speaking to a gathering of [Grantmakers Concerned about Immigrants and Refugees](#), a group of thoughtful foundations and donors working to support and strengthen communities of international newcomers.

In my presentation about the South's fast-changing demographic and political landscape, I noted how the South's immigration history has been very different from much of the rest of the country.

Aside from parts of Florida, Louisiana and Texas, the South was largely bypassed in the waves of immigrants from Germany, Ireland and other countries starting in the mid-1800s. Earlier this year, a member at the reddit online community [made a GIF map](#) showing the change in the foreign-born population by decade from 1860 to 2010 in each state.



As the map shows, for decades immigration heavily affected every region of the country *except* the South. It wasn't until after changes in immigration law in the 1980s, and the next wave of immigration that accelerated in the 1990s, that Southern states became a leading destination for international newcomers.

What does this mean for the immigration debate today? One key lesson is that in the South, there isn't the same vocabulary and understanding of "the immigrant experience" for advocates to tap into when they are promoting support for new immigrant communities and policy reform.

In regions that have a longer history of immigration, pro-reform advocates have often successfully used stories and messages that remind the descendants of Europeans and other newcomers of their own families' struggles in a strange land. In the South, those stories may not strike the same chord.

That unique history, combined with the fast pace of demographic change, points to the importance of groups like [Welcoming America](#) in changing the immigration debate in the South.

The group began as a project of the [Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition](#) (TIRRC) in 2005, a state where the foreign-born population has skyrocketed by 400 percent since 1990. While some forward-thinking leaders embraced the change, the state also witnessed [a severe backlash from well-funded nativist and anti-immigrant groups](#).

Inspired by a "welcoming" campaign in Iowa, the Tennessee advocates realized they not only had to support and defend immigrant communities but could also help the Tennessee-born "receiving community" better understand why newcomers were arriving and how they could enrich the cultural and economic life of the state.

As described in a recent [New York Times profile](#), TIRRC and the Welcoming initiative -- which has now gone national, counting

30 cities with local campaigns -- organized community dinners, engaged churches and Rotary clubs and used media channels to tell the story of Tennessee's newcomers. As David Lubell, a founder of the Tennessee initiative who now leads the Atlanta-based Welcoming America, [told the Times](#):

People were only hearing negative things. But most of the immigrant population were there to make their families' lives better. They wanted to contribute to the community.

In other words, such efforts can help explain the immigrant experience in places like the South, where such demographic change is a more recent piece of the region's evolving culture and history.