

A Study on the Interaction Between U.S. Immigration Policies and Italian Americans

Yongli Wan

University of California, San Diego, USA
yowan@ucsd.edu

Abstract. The United States, as an important immigrant country, was one of the most significant destinations in the wave of immigration in the early 19th century and witnessed numerous complex interactions between government policy and the immigrant community. This paper mainly focuses on the relationship of Italian immigrants and U.S. policies, showing how political decisions and societal attitudes affect the Italian American community, and are simultaneously reshaped by Italian immigration. The study focuses on using the historical document and case analysis to trace the development from the late 19th century to the early 20th century Italian immigration in the United States. The discoveries reveal that the Immigration Acts have hindered the mobility of Italian immigrations, and the Emergency Quota Act brought assimilative pressure to the Italian American community, while Italian Americans play a crucial role in influencing the policy changes by community organizing, political participation, and so on. The study proves the bidirectional relationship between immigration communities and political policies, providing experience and lessons for contemporary Latino and Asian immigrants.

Keywords: Immigration, Italian American, Immigration Acts, Emergency Quota Act, Bidirectional Relationship

1. Introduction

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, a transnational population migration known as the Second Mass Migration Wave broke out worldwide. During this period, a large number of workers from Southern and Eastern Europe and parts of Asia flocked to industrialized regions such as North and South America. The United States, with its rapid industrialization process, relatively high wage levels and relatively lenient immigration policies, became one of the main destinations. Between 1880 and 1920, the United States received over 20 million immigrants, among whom the number of immigrants from Italy exceeded 4 million, second only to Germany and Ireland [1]. The vast majority of these immigrants came from the south and Sicily. They chose to cross the Atlantic Ocean in search of opportunities to escape agricultural backwardness, land shortages, poverty and social unrest.

After arriving in the United States, most Italian immigrants engaged in physical labor such as railway construction, mining, port loading and unloading, and formed Little Italy communities in New York, Chicago, and Boston. However, they also confront significant social discrimination and

institutional restrictions, being labeled as difficult to assimilate and often associated with images of poverty and crime. At the beginning of the 20th century, the US Congress successively introduced the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924, which based on the quota system of the country of origin, significantly restricted the number of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. Italy's annual immigration was even less than 2% of the total. These policies not only halted the continuation of large-scale immigration to Italy but also, to a certain extent, prompted Italian Americans to seek stability and development within American society.

It can be seen that the significant presence and multifield influence of Italian Americans in contemporary society. Whether it is important figures in the American political arena such as Nancy Pelosi, international pop icon Lady Gaga, or representatives in sports, business and academia, they have all demonstrated that this ethnic group, after experiencing early exclusion and restrictions, has deeply integrated into and influenced American society. This transformation significantly reveals the historical interaction of Italian American immigrants and U.S. immigration policies.

This study will adopt a method that combines historical document analysis with policy history research. By collating immigration statistics, analyzing the historical background and implementation effects of immigration laws, and integrating the sociological theories of immigration integration and ethnic boundaries, it will sort out the process of Italian American immigrants from marginalization to wide acceptance. The significance of the research lies in that, on the one hand, it can reveal the mechanism by which immigration policies play a role in shaping the changes in the social status of immigrant groups; On the other hand, by reviewing the historical experiences of Italian Americans, it can provide useful references and inspirations for contemporary immigrant groups when facing policy restrictions, social biases and cultural integration challenges. This not only helps the academic community deepen its understanding of the multicultural composition of the United States, but also provides historical references for the formulation of immigration policies and discussions on social inclusiveness.

2. Historical context

2.1. The large-scale immigration wave

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, Italy witnessed the largest overseas migration in its history. Economic hardship is the main reason. The southern and Sicily regions have long been plagued by poverty, agricultural decline, uneven land distribution, and limited employment opportunities. After unification, Italy, due to high taxes, political unrest, and foreign wars, made the lives of ordinary people even more difficult [2]. For many people, immigration is almost the only option to escape poverty and seek a future. The United States has become the top destination. Between 1870 and 1920, millions of Italians arrived in the United States, most of whom concentrated in northeastern industrial cities such as New York, Boston and Philadelphia, while some moved to California and the Midwest. Most of them are engaged in low-paying jobs such as construction, mining, manufacturing and agriculture, and have formed "Little Italy" communities in the city. These communities not only offer mutual assistance and a sense of belonging, but also play a significant role in preserving language and cultural traditions.

2.2. Stereotypes and racial discrimination

Although Italian immigrants have contributed to the urbanization and industrial development of the United States, they generally encounter discrimination. The prevailing "scientific racism" at that

time regarded Italians as “inferior whites”, especially immigrants from the south, who were labeled as backward, ignorant and violent [2]. This notion has been widely spread in the media, political and academic discourse, deepening their marginalization. The media and mass culture have also reinforced the negative impression of Italians. Immigrants are often depicted as a poor, dirty and crime-linked group, with the image of the Mafia being particularly prominent. Prejudice has even escalated into violent incidents. In 1891, a large-scale lynching occurred in New Orleans, where 11 Italians were executed for false accusations. This was one of the most serious ethnic massacres in American history, highlighting the strong anti-Italian sentiment in society. Institutional exclusion also follows. In the 1920s, the US Congress passed the Immigration Quota Act, significantly restricting the entry of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. This not only reflects economic protectionism, but also embodies deep xenophobia. Italian immigrants have thus long been confined to the position of “outsiders” struggling to survive amid discrimination and institutional obstacles. However, as time went by, Italian immigrants gradually took root in the United States. Through family, religious and community networks, they have built resilient spaces, creating opportunities for social mobility for future generations. “Little Italy” is not just a symbol of their isolation from the mainstream society but also an important starting point for their integration into the United States. Despite facing numerous difficulties, Italian immigrants eventually transformed marginalization into the foundation for future generations to integrate into the mainstream.

3. Exclusion and restrictions: from quotas to assimilations

3.1. The Johnson-Reed immigration act of 1924 and the quota act

The experiences of Italian immigrants in the United States have largely been subject to both institutional and cultural exclusion. First of all, from a legal perspective, the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 is the most representative turning point. This law strictly limits the number of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe through a “country quota system”, among which the annual quota granted to Italy is much lower than that of the Nordic and Western European countries [3]. This regulation not only significantly reduced the inflow of new immigrants to Italy, but also cut off the opportunity for family reunification, and further solidified the image of Italians as “unpopular” and “difficult to assimilate” in public opinion [4]. It can be seen from this that the immigration policy of the United States is not only a tool for population control, but also an institutionalized means of discrimination, directly incorporating racial and ethnic prejudice into the law.

3.2. The “americanization” movement and assimilation pressure

Secondly, at the cultural level, Italian immigrants are confronted with intense assimilation pressure brought about by the Americanization movement. Schools, factories and public institutions often require immigrants to abandon their mother tongue and traditional customs and fully embrace English education and Anglo-American values. For Italians, this means having to suppress the use of the Italian language, downplay the Catholic faith and weaken the cultural rituals of the family and community [5]. This kind of assimilation ostensibly helps immigrants integrate into American society, but in essence, it is a form of cultural discipline: only by giving up their original cultural identity can they gain limited acceptance in social and economic life. Therefore, the

Americanization moment can be regarded as a kind of “soft exclusion”, which does not take the form of law but forces immigrants to change themselves through daily education and social norms.

3.3. Ambiguity in racial classification

Finally, at the level of racial identity, the status of Italians has always been shrouded in ambiguity. Legally, they are classified as “white”, thus avoiding the same direct exclusion as Asian or African Americans. However, at the social level, Italians often encounter racialized stereotypes being regarded as born criminals, radicals or “backward” Europeans [6]. This identity as a “marginal white person” places them in a middle ground where they are neither completely excluded nor fully accepted. With the changes in the social structure of the United States after World War II, Italians were gradually included in the category of “mainstream whites” [6]. However, this historic change precisely indicates that racial classification in the United States is not fixed but rather a social structure that dynamically adjusts in response to social and political conditions.

To sum up, whether it is the legal discrimination under the quota system, the discipline in cultural assimilation, or the ambiguity of radical identity, all reveal the multiple exclusions and restrictions that Italians have experienced in American society. This not only reflects the control and suppression of specific groups by the U.S. immigration policy, but also reveals the institutional obstacles and identity predicaments that immigrants must constantly deal with during the integration process.

4. Responses and changes of the Italian community to policies

4.1. Community self-organization and political participation

Facing institutional restrictions, Italians have built a solid community network through self-organization. The church not only assumes religious functions but also serves as an important platform for social mutual assistance and political mobilization [7]. Furthermore, various mutual aid societies have provided economic and legal support to migrants, helping them maintain their livelihoods and dignity in unfamiliar societies. As the second generation of Italians grew up, they gradually entered the middle class by improving their educational level and professional status, laying the foundation for broader social and political participation [8].

4.2. Policy advocacy and legal challenges

By the middle of the 20th century, Italians gradually shifted from passive defense to active policy advocacy. They actively participated in trade unions and local politics and supported anti-discrimination issues during the civil rights movement [9]. Some Italian American lawyers and politicians have even directly participated in legal challenges against employment discrimination and racial segregation. Although their own discriminatory situation improved after the war, their support for legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 demonstrated that they were both victims in history and active participants in promoting the expansion of American democracy.

4.3. Changes in identity recognition

In the process of responding to exclusion, the identity of Italians has undergone a significant transformation. At the beginning of the 20th century, they were regarded by society as “not completely white”, with ambiguous and marginalized identities. However, with the improvement of economic status, the increase of political participation and loosening of ethnic boundaries, they

gradually achieved the transformation from “Italian” to “White American” [10]. This transformation not only implies obtaining a mainstream position in the social structure, but also brings about the weakening and assimilation of ethnic culture. In the context of the diverse society in the United States, this identity reshaping reveals that ethnic identity is not fixed but rather a product of the interaction among policies, the economy and society.

5. The historical experience and contemporary significance of policy interaction

5.1. How policies shape the destiny of ethnic groups

The history of Italian Americans clearly demonstrates how policies have profoundly shaped the destiny of the ethnic group. The immigration quota system in the 1920s not only cut off the inflow of new immigrants but also restricted the opportunities for family reunification and social mobility, leaving many Italian families trapped in low-level labor positions for a long time. This structural restriction puts them in a disadvantaged position in social class and causes unequal transmission between generations. Meanwhile, the assimilation pressure brought about by the “Americanization Movement” demands that Italians abandon their mother tongue and culture in exchange for limited social recognition. From this, it can be seen that policy is not merely an administrative measure to regulate population mobility, but also a crucial factor in determining whether an ethnic group can obtain education, employment and social status.

5.2. How ethnic groups influence policies

However, Italians are not passive recipients. Through community organization and political mobilization, they gradually transformed their original weakness into a force influencing policies. Churches, mutual aid societies and associations not only offer economic and cultural support, but also serve as bases for political participation. With the rise of the second generation, they entered the middle class through educational and career advancement, and gradually accumulated political capital. In the mid-20th century, the political power of the Italian community could not be ignored. They not only formed a key voting group in local politics but also promoted anti-discrimination and civil rights legislation across the country. This process indicates that ethnic groups are not passive targets of policies but can, through organized actions and intergenerational accumulation, in turn drive changes in the policy environment.

5.3. Comparative implications for contemporary immigrant groups

The historical experience of the Italian community holds significant implications for contemporary immigrant groups, especially Latinos and Asians. On the one hand, the stereotypes, language barriers and institutional restrictions they encounter bear a striking resemblance to the situation of today’s new immigrants. On the other hand, the intergenerational rise, community mutual assistance and political participation demonstrated by the Italian community offer a referenceable path for contemporary immigrants. This indicates that although policies may create obstacles in the initial stage, if the immigrant group can continuously accumulate strength in the fields of education, economy and politics, it is possible to win a broader space in the future social structure. Historical experience reminds us that the integration of immigrants is not only the result of individual efforts, but also the outcome of the interaction among policies, social attitudes and group actions.

6. Conclusion

This thesis mainly explores the interactive relationship between Italian Americans and the immigration policies of the United States, with a focus on analyzing how the legal quota system, cultural assimilation movements, and ethnic identity ambiguity jointly shape the social situation of Italian Americans. Through the examination of the interaction between Italian Americans and immigration policies, it can be found that this is a two-way historical process. On the one hand, policies restrict their social mobility through legal and cultural regulations, keeping them in a marginalized position for a long time. On the other hand, Italians have not remained in a passive position. Instead, through community networks, intergenerational efforts, and political participation, they have gradually changed their social status and promoted policy adjustments. This historical case shows that immigration policy is not a one-way constraint mechanism, but rather the result shaped in the continuous game between the state and the group. The transformation of Italians from "suspected outsiders" to "mainstream whites" reveals that ethnic identity and social status are not static but can change along with social conditions and group actions.

However, there are still certain deficiencies in this thesis. For instance, in terms of research methods, it mainly relies on literature reviews and secondary analyses of historical data, without integrating quantitative data or oral histories of immigrant groups, thus limiting the detailed depiction of individual experiences and intergenerational differences. Looking ahead, relevant research can focus on several directions: First, by integrating quantitative census data with micro-community archives, to more accurately depict the social mobility trajectories of Italians at different times; Second, conduct cross-group comparisons of the experiences of Italian Americans with those of contemporary Latinos and Asian immigrants to explore the universal mechanisms of policy and ethnic interaction; Thirdly, from the perspectives of cultural studies and identity politics, further analyze how ethnic identity has been reshaped in different historical contexts. Through these new research approaches, not only do we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the historical experiences of the Italian community, but also provide deeper academic support for the formulation of contemporary immigration policies.

References

- [1] The Great Arrival, Italian, Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History. Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress. Library of Congress. (n.d.). The Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/italian/the-great-arrival/>
- [2] Connell, W. J., & Pugliese, S. G. (Eds.). (2018). *The Routledge History Of Italian Americans*. Routledge.
- [3] Ngai, M. M. (2014). *Impossible subjects: Illegal aliens and the making of modern America*-updated edition. In *Impossible Subjects*. Princeton University Press. 23-37
- [4] Higham, J. (2002). *Strangers in the land: Patterns of American nativism, 1860-1925*. Rutgers University Press. 264-280
- [5] Bodnar, J. (1985). *The transplanted: A history of immigrants in urban America*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 190-210
- [6] Guglielmo, T. A., & Salerno, T. J. (Eds.). (2003). *Are Italians White? How race is made in America*. New York, NY: Routledge. 1-15, 29-45
- [7] Vecoli, R. J. (1969). *Italian immigrants in rural and urban America*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 217-230
- [8] Alba, R. (1985). *Italian Americans: Into the twilight of ethnicity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. 77-95
- [9] LaGumina, S. J. (1999). *Wop!: A documentary history of anti-Italian discrimination in the United States*. Toronto, Canada: Guernica. 145-162
- [10] Alba, R., & Nee, V. (2003). *Remaking the American mainstream: Assimilation and contemporary immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 125-140