

Dissonant Voices Inside the Border

Some Established Immigrants Want to Restrict Newcomers

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Under Yeh Ling-Ling's proposal for immigration reform, even she wouldn't be allowed into the country.

In 1980, Yeh arrived on U.S. shores on a visa sponsored by her sister. She went to work as a paralegal for an immigration law firm, helping file petitions for fellow foreigners to enter the United States. But then she started to notice the effects of immigration and population growth on the San Francisco Bay area.

"When I found out the cost of infrastructure, the cost of educating kids in America, I was shocked," said Yeh, executive director of the Oakland-based Diversity Alliance for a Sustainable America, a nonprofit organization that wants to reduce immigration. "There would be a tremendous drain on America. . . . Isn't it clear that immigration is not needed to boost the U.S. economy?"

Her view complicates a debate often framed in racial terms, with immigrants on one side and native-born, white Americans on the other. Yeh is ethnically Chinese, was born in Vietnam, raised in Cambodia, educated in Taiwan and France, became a U.S. citizen, and considers herself 100 percent American. As the latter, she says she owes it to her fellow Americans to tighten and secure U.S. borders so immigrants -- even ones like her -- can no longer come.



Yeh Ling-Ling, executive director of the Diversity Alliance for a Sustainable America and herself an immigrant, favors strict U.S. immigration policies. (By Thor Swift For The Washington Post)

In the camp to severely restrict immigration, there are many like Yeh. Last week, as thousands of mostly Hispanic protesters boycotted work and economic activity, a smaller number staged a news conference in Washington to deride their fellow immigrants under the newly named group "You Don't Speak for Me." And on Internet message boards, Asian computer programmers are speaking out against the temporary visas that made their very passage to the United States possible.

Analysts note that previous waves of immigrants have wanted to limit newer arrivals, often to avoid competition for jobs and housing. More than a century ago, Northern and Western Europeans, such as the Irish and Germans, decried the admission of Southern and Eastern Europeans. With the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, those later groups had tense relations with Asian and Latino newcomers. Now in a more heterogeneous United States, divisions don't necessarily break down by region of origin but by class and legal status, according to Louis DeSipio, a University of California at Irvine professor who has studied Latino movements.

"There is some thinking that the older immigrants went through some very difficult standards, and new, unauthorized immigrants are not doing that," DeSipio said. "The newest immigrants tend to

live and work around those who have immigrated in the recent past. They see the effects of immigration on neighborhoods and workplaces more than the average American."

According to a survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center last year, 23 percent of the 1,200 Hispanics surveyed thought unauthorized migration was hurting the U.S. economy and driving down wages. The center concluded the 23 percent was "a significant minority, concentrated among native-born Latinos."

A more recent poll of 800 legal immigrants, conducted by Bendixen & Associates of Miami and sponsored by New America Media, found that 23 percent thought undocumented immigrants should be deported. In an interview, pollster Sergio Bendixen still concluded that most immigrants have a positive view of immigration but said that African, Asian and European immigrants seemed less enthusiastic than Latinos.

And a Pew Research Center poll found that immigrants still have a more positive attitude toward migration than the country overall; 52 percent of the U.S. population said immigrants take away jobs, housing and health care, while 41 percent said they strengthen the country.

Beyond the economic impact, though, some immigrants accuse more recent waves of not properly assimilating.

Eight years ago, Claudia Garcia left Mexico to join her husband in California; they had met through a personal ad and married in Mexico. She adopted his last name, Spencer, learned his language, English, and eventually became a U.S. citizen.

"I realized that America had freedom, honesty," she said. "All these people, these illegals, are abusing this. Americans are giving them everything and they are incapable of saying, 'I broke the law.' Instead they are saying, 'I came to your country illegally and I want to wave my Mexican flag.' "

This year, the Spencers attended a city council meeting to oppose a day-laborer site. Copies of Claudia Spencer's speech circulated on the Internet, and an official with the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which wants to curb immigration, called her. She joined the local chapter of the Minuteman Project, a volunteer patrol along the U.S.-Mexican border. She started fielding calls and e-mails from fellow Hispanics who felt the way she did. Others called her a traitor.

"People sending me their messages, they are telling me that I am discriminating against my own people," she said. "No. If I love America, I have to assimilate. If you don't love America, you shouldn't be here."

On May 1, a day marked by protests nationwide, Spencer joined other immigrants at the National Press Club to send a message to the boycotters: "You don't speak for me."

Her solution to illegal immigration would criminalize employers who hire people unauthorized to work in the United States. "Once they don't have anyone to hire them, they are going back to their countries themselves," she said.

At the Diversity Alliance, Yeh said that only exceptional immigrants or the spouses of U.S. citizens and their minor children should be allowed to immigrate. She said black Americans are often the first displaced by immigrants. True to its name, the advisers and board of the group are a diverse lot, including immigrants, American Indians and black Americans, namely the former director of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Frank Morris.

In a debate often described as emotional, some critics of current immigration levels say they try to keep their ethnicities and countries of origin out of the discussion. George J. Borjas, a Harvard University economist, has been quoted more than 100 times in the past three months alone, usually in articles citing his research showing that immigrants depress wages for competing American workers. Less often mentioned is that Borjas was born in Cuba and came to the United States as a young boy.

"I'm an academic. I'm an economist," he said simply. "The reason I am working on this issue is not because of where I came from."

While the children of immigrants have staged rallies and walked out of class to defend immigrant rights, there are children of immigrants on the other side.

Caroline Espinosa works as the media coordinator for NumbersUSA, an Arlington organization that wants to reduce immigration. While stationed in the Philippines, her American father met and married her Filipina mother. Espinosa, whose husband is Mexican American, says she considers her diverse, multiracial family an example of the melting pot that America is supposed to be.

"My mother was very good about teaching us culture, and we went to the Philippines for visits all the time. She gave us what she considered Filipino values, but you can do that and still assimilate in the United States very easily," Espinosa said. "What you're seeing today is that there's less melting going on."