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There is no “Indian Question”

BY NOAH SMITH · NOAHPINION · 7 OCTOBER 2026

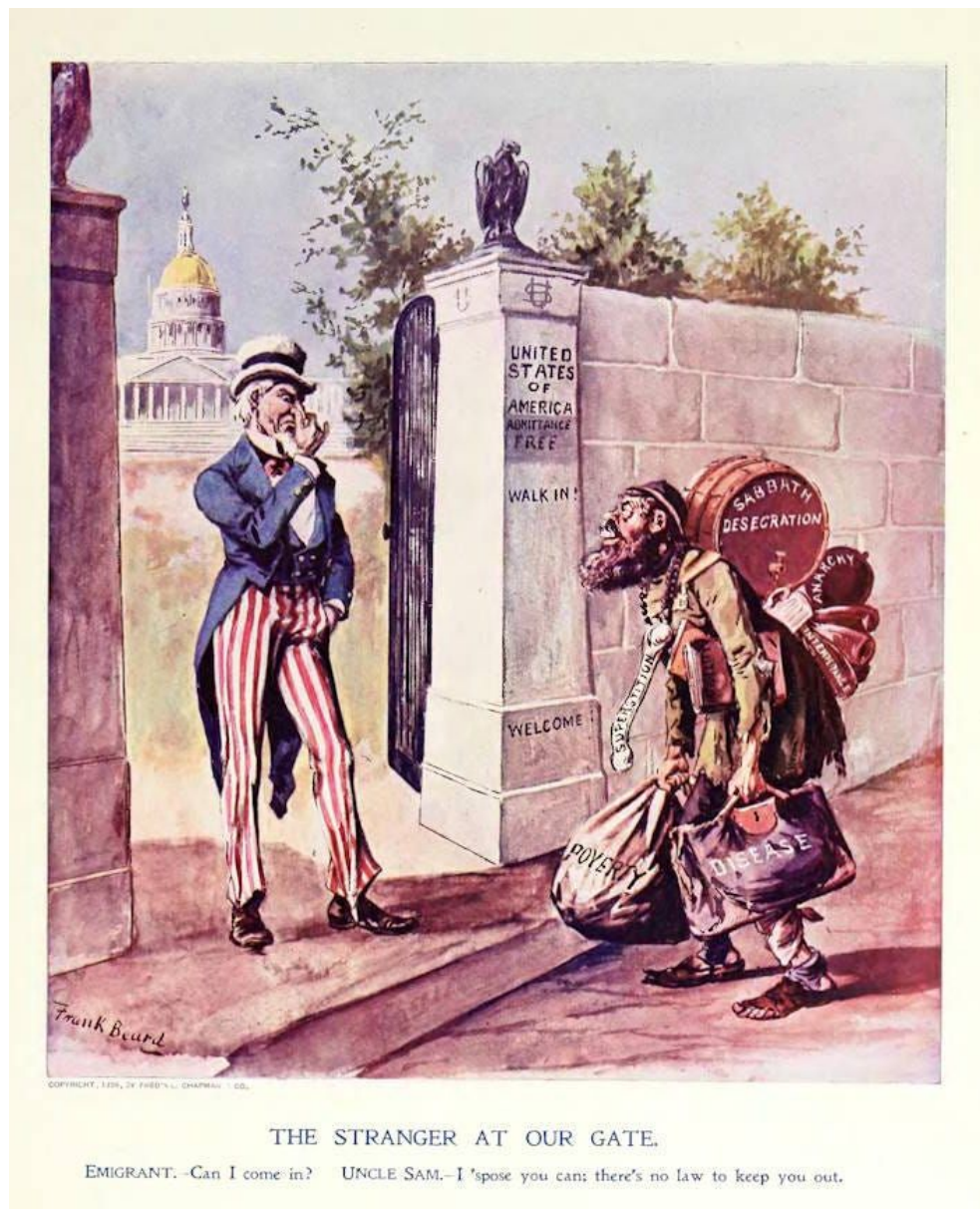


Photo via Wikimedia Commons

“Our nation was founded to perpetuate democratic principles. These principles are that each man is to be treated on his worth as a man without regard to the land from which his forefathers came and without regard to the creed which he professes. If the United States proves false to these principles of civil and religious liberty, it will have inflicted the greatest blow on the system of free popular government that has ever been inflicted. Here we have had a virgin continent on which to try the experiment of making out of divers race stocks a new nation[.]” — Teddy Roosevelt

The other day, Chris Rufo of the Manhattan Institute and right-wing pundit Jonathan Kepperman (also known as “Lomez”) aired an episode of their podcast entitled “The Indian Question”:

The title of the episode seems to be a reference to “the Jewish Question”, a term in 18th and 19th century Europe for the question of how Jews should be treated in European society. That term, of course, became notorious when it was associated with the Nazis’ “Final Solution”, which was billed as being a final solution to “the Jewish Question”. I assume that Rufo and Keeperman chose this rather incendiary title in order to grab attention. Well, they succeeded.

The episode was motivated by a debate that’s been raging across social media for weeks. It was kicked off by Bo French, the Republican nominee for Texas Railroad Commissioner, who tweeted outrage at a group of Indian American kids attending a University of Texas football game. I already wrote about that controversy three weeks ago:

Jonathan Keeperman (“Lomez”) invited me on his podcast to share my views and debate him, so I did. Here’s the episode that resulted:

Rufo was busy, so it was just Keeperman and me.¹

Anyway, before I talk about the substance, I thought I should say something about the side debate of whether a liberal like myself should even go on right-wing podcasts like “Rufo and Lomez”. Throughout most of the 2010s, there was a popular notion that society should basically ignore and shun people like that, and that if we all simply shunned them, and pressured our friends and colleagues to shun them, they and their views would vanish from American society — or at least remain marginalized.

That approach failed. Anti-immigrant ideas didn’t remain marginalized — in fact, they took over the country, despite their continued unpopularity among the general American public. Are Rufo and Lomez pushing xenophobic ideas? Yes, of course they are. I’m not going to sugarcoat that fact just to be polite. But simply shouting “Those guys are XENOPHOBES!!” and keeping those guys out of polite society would be doubling down on a foolish, self-defeating strategy. The alternative was always to confront those viewpoints directly and defeat them in the court of public opinion, so that’s what I set out to do.

OK, anyway, on to the substance of the debate.

Keeperman and I began the debate by finding common ground. We both basically subscribe to the principle of nationalism — we believe that nation-states are exclusive clubs that exist for the benefit of their members, and that this is a basically good way to organize human society. We both think the United States of America is basically good — or at least, has been basically good throughout most of its history.

I explained my belief that liberal nationalism is the best ideology available — maybe for other countries, but certainly for the United States. All of our greatest successes as a country — victories in wars, successful policy reforms, integration of past waves of immigrants — have come from our use of the nation-state as a tool to promote individual rights, dignity, and empowerment. I told Keeperman that the Abundance Agenda is, at least implicitly, an expression of liberal nationalism — the movement is about creating abundance for *Americans specifically*, with the implicit premise being that Americans deserve abundance.

Keeperman disagrees about the liberal part, of course, but he does feel that he has the best interests of the United States in mind. His worry is

that immigration is stoking ethnic conflict in America, because recent immigrant groups — for example, Indians — are not assimilating into American society like previous groups did.

To me, assimilation has always been about *measurable behavior*. If the children and grandchildren of immigrants act culturally American — if they speak English, intermarry, give their kids typical American names, go to college football games, climb the income ladder, move out of enclaves, and so on — then they're assimilated. By all of these standards, the recent waves of immigrants — Mexicans, Chinese people, Indians, and so on — are assimilating just as fast as or faster than the East and South European wave did a century ago, or than the Irish and the Germans did two centuries ago.

The aspect of assimilation that Keeperman worries about most is *national identity* — the degree to which the children and grandchildren of immigrants feel bound up in a shared community and a shared identity with countrymen of different backgrounds. I agree that this is extremely important; many of the benefits of the nation-state, like the ability to provide public goods and welfare states, come from this sort of shared identity. It also probably leads to greater toleration of minorities (including immigrants). All of those goals should be very important to liberal nationalists.

Lomez — who is not a liberal, but cares about national cohesion nonetheless — worries that identity assimilation is lacking in the modern day. He argues that today's immigrants retain their old-world allegiances much more strongly than the immigrants of a century ago — that second-generation Indian Americans in Texas still think of themselves as Indians rather than as Americans, and so on.

We do have lots of surveys about this, in fact. There's a clear pattern — immigrants tend to identify more as their ethnicity than as "American", but later generations are more likely to identify as "American". Here's a survey showing that third-generation Asian Americans are a lot more likely to identify as just "American":

Asian immigrants more likely to identify with their ethnicity than U.S.-born Asians

% of Asian adults who use ____ most often to describe themselves



Note: The "Regional Asian" category includes those who report using labels such as East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian or some other regional Asian group label most often to describe themselves. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer or gave other answers not shown.

Source: Survey of Asian American adults, conducted July 5, 2022-Jan. 27, 2023.

"Diverse Cultures and Shared Experiences Shape Asian American Identities"

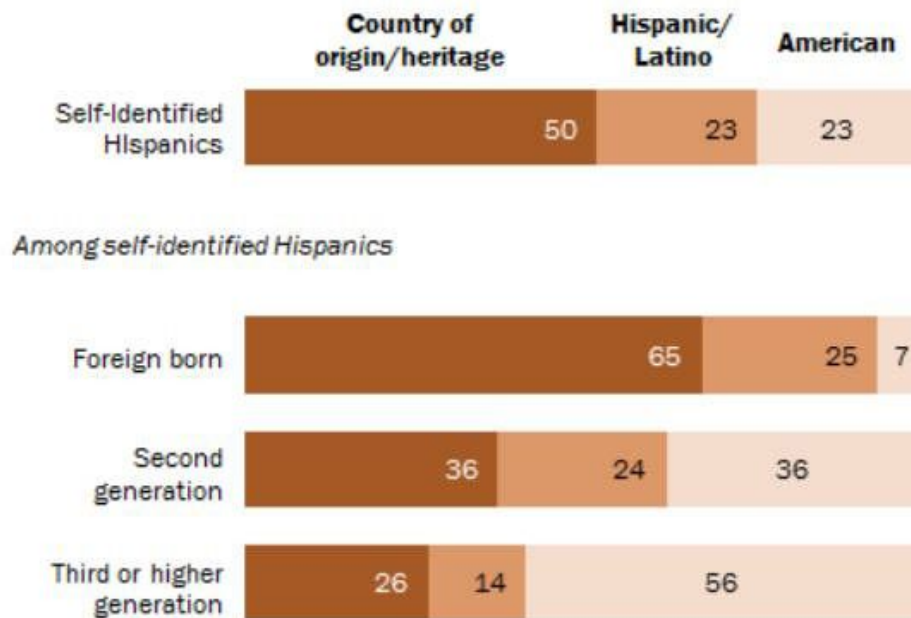
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Pew

We see the same pattern even more strongly among Hispanics:

Nationality labels used most often among Latinos to describe their identity

% of self-identified Hispanics saying they describe themselves most often as ..



Note: Self-identified Hispanics are those who say they are Hispanic. Self-identified non-Hispanics are those who say they are not Hispanic or Latino but say they have Hispanic ancestry or heritage. Voluntary responses of "Don't know," "Refused," "Depends" and "Other/Refused to lean" not shown.

Source: Pew Research Center 2015 National Survey of Latinos (Oct. 21-Nov. 30, 2015). "Hispanic Identity Fades Across Generations as Immigrant Connections Fall Away"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Pew

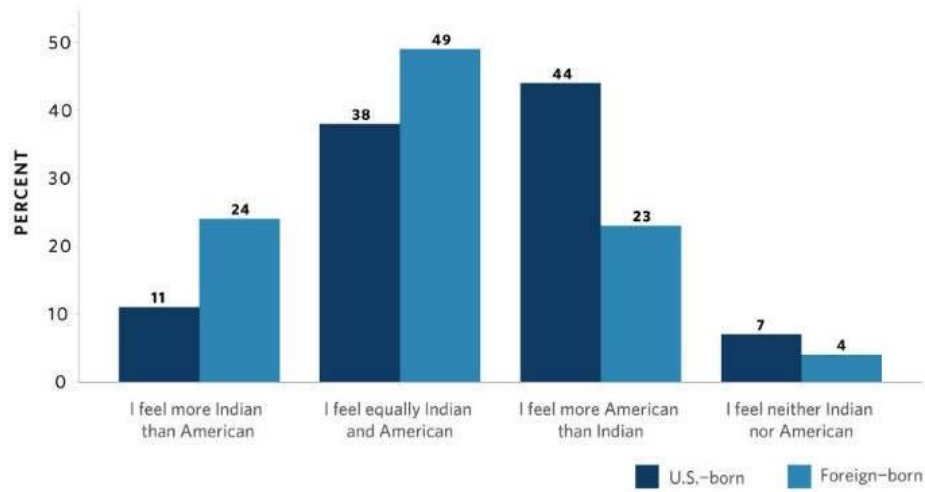
Second and third generation immigrants are also a lot less likely to describe themselves as "global citizens".

Now, these could be generational effects — people identifying more as "American" as their families stay in America for longer — or they could be cohort effects. It's possible that due to identity politics, plummeting patriotism, or to the ability to connect with co-ethnics abroad on the internet, recent cohorts of immigrants are less likely to want to identify as "American".

In fact, we have some evidence that this is happening for Indians, specifically. In 2020, the Indian American Attitudes Survey found that the second generation was a lot more likely than the first (i.e., immigrant) generation to identify as "more American than Indian":

FIGURE 13
Weighing Indian and American Identities, by Place of Birth

Which of the following best describes your identity?



N = 1,200 U.S. adult residents

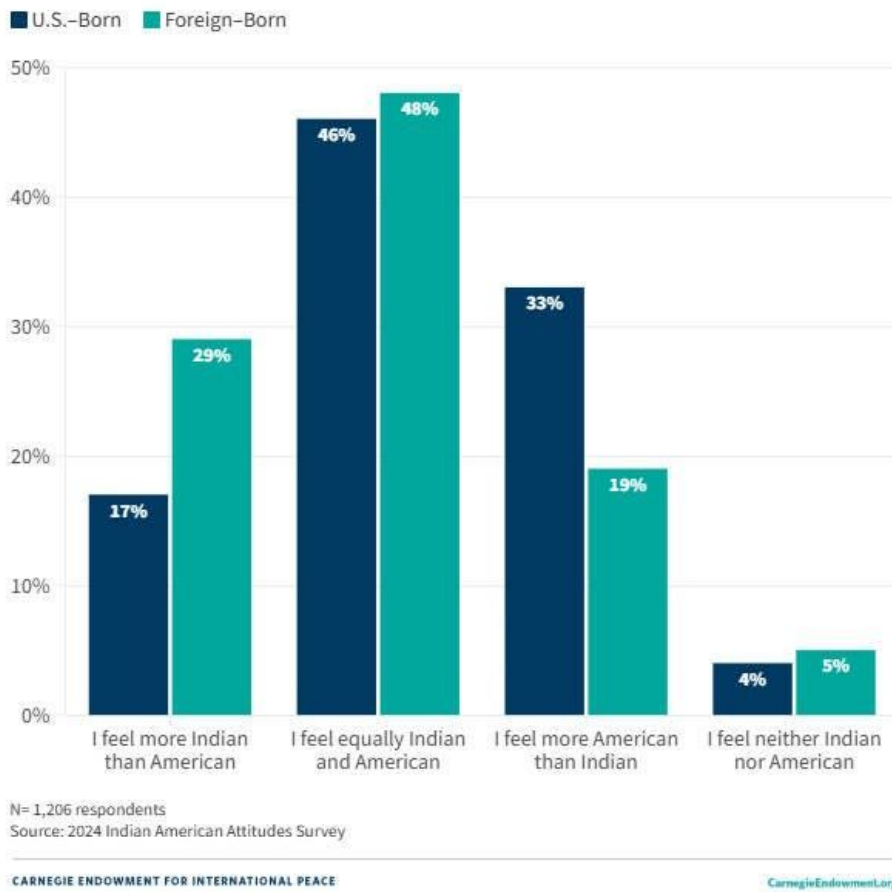
SOURCE: 2020 Indian American Attitudes Survey.

Source: Carnegie Endowment

But by 2024, that pattern was somewhat weaker, with more U.S.-born Indian Americans identifying as “more Indian than American” and “equally Indian and American” than four years prior:

Figure 10. Weighing Indian and American Identities, by Place of Birth

Which of the following best describes your identity?



Source: Carnegie Endowment

This is just two survey snapshots, a few years apart. It would be helpful if we had had good longitudinal surveys asking people about American identity versus ethnic identity for decades. But we don't, so we're left to worry and speculate.

Without longer-term data, my guess is that this identity shift — to the degree that it's real and not just survey noise — is a short-term response to political conditions. Indian Americans had full access to the internet in 2020, and they were just as able to talk to ethnic Indians in India or Australia or Canada. Identity politics — including institutions such as ethnic clubs at universities — had been around for decades, and the sentiment behind it was probably at its height in 2020.

Instead, my bet is that we're seeing a reaction to the rise of the MAGA Right itself. It was in 2024 — right before the second survey wave — that anti-Indian attitudes became extremely popular among the online Right. 2024 is also when it became clear that a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment was sweeping the nation. My guess is that stronger ethnic identification among Indian Americans was probably a reaction to the perception that a substantial part of America was attacking Indians.

Keeperman — like other rightists I’ve talked to — seems to think that immigrant groups assimilate only under *aggressive pressure* from the majority. The model I usually hear is that of German Americans in World War I, who were the subject of feverish forced-assimilation campaigns — pressured to change their names, stop speaking German, and profess allegiance to America. In his discussion with Rufo, Keeperman argued that vocal anti-Indian racism was part of a “hazing process”.

My argument is that this is exactly *backwards*. Ethnic identity is *fundamentally defensive in nature*. Identity groups are like gangs — if you no longer feel like a part of the big gang (the nation), you’re probably going to turn to a smaller gang (your ethnic group) for protection and support. For this reason, forced-assimilation campaigns can suppress visible expressions of ethnic difference, but they strengthen ethnic identity itself.

There’s plenty of evidence to support this. Although forced-assimilation campaigns in WWI made some Germans change their names, they caused Germans as a whole to intermarry less and to volunteer less in World War II. Anti-Hispanic rhetoric tends to increase Hispanic identification, and perceived discrimination makes Hispanics more likely to identify with their ethnicity.

This pattern is likely to play out again, with the new rightist fad for anti-Indian bigotry. Bo French’s tweet, and the outpouring of support it received from the grassroots Right, is going to make some Indian Americans question whether America really accepts them — and whether they might have to turn to other Indians for support rather than their countrymen of other races.

Rufo and Keeperman’s “Indian Question” podcast is, of course, only going to make things worse. When your race’s mere existence in America is being described as a “question” by a senior fellow in the Manhattan Institute, you naturally tend to get a bit apprehensive — and a bit defensive. In the last ten minutes of my debate with Keeperman, I got very vehement and animated about the counterproductive nature of the anti-Indian rhetoric.

Keeperman argued that assimilation only worked so well in the 19th and 20th centuries because of “ethnogenesis” — we took a bunch of disparate European groups and made them all “White”. But I don’t think this is quite right. Yes, assimilation succeeded because of ethnogenesis, and yes, “White” ethnicity became more salient. But the ethnicity we tried to create in the 20th century was actually something else. It was “American”.

Attempts to create an “American” ethnicity date at least back to Teddy Roosevelt.² These intensified in the New Deal years, and during and after World War II. This effort partially failed. Black Americans never became part of the “American” ethnicity, for a variety of reasons — geographic and legal segregation, linguistic differences, pervasive anti-Black racism, the memory of slavery, the rise of Black Nationalism, and so on. But for other racial minorities — Asians, Hispanics, and Middle Easterners — it partially succeeded.

The idea that the efforts of FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, LBJ, and other liberal nationalists of the mid 20th century were all about creating *White* identity is a recent conceit; if you read anything from the time period, you

realize that this wasn't the goal, even if it was one of the lasting results. To understand the mood of the time, you should listen to the patriotic song "Ballad for Americans", by Paul Robeson, which was sung at the 1940 Republican national convention.³ Here's a key excerpt:

Now hold on here.
What are you trying to give us?
Are you an American?
Am I an American?
I'm just an....
Irish, Negro, Jewish, Italian,
French and English, Spanish, Russian,
Chinese, Polish, Scot, Hungarian,
Litvak, Swedish, Finnish, Canadian,
Greek and Turk and Czech,
And double-check American!
And that ain't all!
I was baptized Baptist, Methodist,
Congregationalist,
Lutheran, Atheist, Roman Catholic,
Orthodox Jewish, Presbyterian,
Seventh Day Adventist, Mormon, Quaker,
Christian Scientist,
And lots more!
You sure are something!
Our country's strong, our country's young,
And her greatest songs are yet unsung,
From her plains and mountains,
We have sprung to keep the faith
With those who went before.
We nobodies who are anybodies believe it.
We anybodies who are everybodies have no doubts!

This mood is utterly absent from both the modern Right and the modern Left. On the Right, there is no attempt at ethnogenesis — only perpetual fragmentation, suspicion, and finger-pointing. Here is what I wrote in my post three weeks ago:

It's this pathological inability to understand alliances and coalition-building that will ultimately doom the New Right. Like the far Left, this is a movement built to exclude and divide and splinter — both because of the querulous personalities of rightists themselves, and because of the intransigence of a racial ideology that abhors any impurity. If they ever managed to see off the Hispanics and the Asians, the rightists would start in on the Greeks and the Italians, and so on. There's no victory in sight — only eternal conflict. These are not nation-builders; they are nation-dismantlers.

Meanwhile, the progressive movement has tried its hand at ethnogenesis — POC and BIPOC were both essentially attempts to create new racial categories defined in opposition to the White category. But these attempts

fell apart. And there hasn't been an attempt to create a broadly shared American ethnicity, because the modern progressive movement is also obsessed with purity, exclusion, and tent-shrinking.

But if we are going to flourish as a nation, the project of creating an American ethnicity is essential. The rightist approach — bullying non-white people until they meekly suppress any evidence of their backgrounds — will backfire spectacularly. In fact, it is already backfiring. Instead, the right approach is the liberal nationalist one — to allow or even encourage people to value their roots, while also emphasizing that they're all one unified people now. When it comes to assimilation, a big tent beats a small one, and carrots work better than sticks.

That's why there is no "Indian Question". There is only the question of what sort of nation America is to be. We must pick up the discarded project of our 20th century forebears, and make it work completely this time.

1

This made me sad, both because I wanted the chance to challenge Rufo in person over his promulgation of the "Hatians eating cats" rumor in 2024, and I thought it would be deliciously ironic to have a podcast in which two Jews and a second-generation Italian American with a Southeast Asian immigrant wife debated whether Indians belong in America. Oh well, maybe next time.

2

For a good history of Teddy Roosevelt's racial ideas, I recommend the book *American Crucible*, by Gary Gerstle.

3

And, interestingly, at the Communist Party convention!