

LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

- 1 People are naturally curious about each other, and when we meet people from different countries, we want to know many things:
 - What is life like in their country?
 - What kind of houses do they live in?
 - What kind of food do they eat?
 - What are their customs?
- 2 If we visit another country, we can observe the people and how they live, and we can answer some of these questions. But the most interesting questions are often the hardest to answer:
 - What do the people believe in?
 - What do they value most?
 - What motivates them?
 - Why do they behave the way they do?
- 3 In trying to answer these questions about Americans, we must remember two things: (1) the immense size of the United States and (2) its great ethnic diversity. It is difficult to comprehend the size of the country until you try to travel from one city to another. If you got in a car in New York and drove to Los Angeles, stopping only to get gas, eat, and sleep, it would take you four or five days. It takes two full days to drive from New York to Florida. On a typical winter day, it might be raining in Washington, D.C., and snowing in New York and Chicago, while in Los Angeles and Miami it is warm enough to swim. It is not difficult to imagine how different daily life might be in such different climates, or how lifestyles could vary in cities and towns so far apart.
- 4 The other significant factor influencing American life—ethnic diversity—is probably even more important. Aside from the Native Americans who were living

on the North American continent when the first European settlers arrived, all Americans came from other countries—or their ancestors did. (Incidentally,¹ some Native Americans are still members of separate and distinct Indian nations, each with its own language, culture, traditions, and even government.) In the 1500s, Spain established settlements in Florida, California, and the Southwest, and France claimed large territories in the center of the North American continent. But from the 1600s to the birth of the United States in 1776, most immigrants to the colonies that would form the United States were from northern Europe, and the majority were from England. It was these people who shaped the values and traditions that became the dominant, traditional culture of the United States.

A Nation of Immigrants

- 5 In 1815, the population of the United States was 8.4 million. Over the next 100 years, the country took in about 35 million immigrants, with the greatest numbers coming in the late 1800s and the early 1900s. Many of these new immigrants were not from northern Europe. In 1882, 40,000 Chinese arrived, and between 1900 and 1907 there were more than 30,000 Japanese immigrants. But by far the largest numbers of the new immigrants were from central, eastern, and southern Europe. The new immigrants brought different languages and different cultures to the United States, but gradually most of them assimilated² to the dominant American culture they found here.
- 6 In 1908, a year when a million new immigrants arrived in the United States, Israel Zangwill wrote in a play,

¹ *incidentally: by the way*

² *assimilated: became part of a county or group and were accepted by other people in it*

America is God's Crucible,³ the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming. . . . Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American!

7 Since Zangwill first used the term *melting pot* to describe the United States, the concept has been debated. In Chapter 8 we consider this issue in more detail, and trace the history of African Americans as well. Two things are certain: The dominant American culture has survived, and it has more or less successfully absorbed vast numbers of immigrants at various points in its history. It has also been changed over time by all the immigrant groups who have settled here.

8 If we look at the immigration patterns of the 1900s, we see that the greatest numbers came at the beginning and at the end of the century. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, there were as many as one million new immigrants per year, so that by the 1910 census, almost 15 percent of all Americans had been born in another country. In 1921, however, the country began to limit immigration, and the Immigration Act of 1924 virtually closed the door. The total number of immigrants admitted per year dropped from as many as one million to only 150,000. A quota system was established that specified the number of immigrants that could come from each country. It heavily favored immigrants from northern and western Europe and severely limited everyone else. This system remained in effect until 1965, with several exceptions allowing groups of refugees from countries such as Hungary, Cuba, Vietnam, and Cambodia into the United States.

9 Immigration laws began to change in 1965 and the yearly totals began to rise again—from about 300,000 per year in the 1960s to more than one million per year in the 1990s. By the end of the century, the United States was admitting more immigrants than all the other industrialized countries combined. In addition to legal immigration, estimates were that illegal immigration was adding more than half a million more people per year. Changes in the laws that were intended to help family reunifications⁴ resulted in large numbers of non-Europeans arriving, thus creating another group of new immigrants. By the late 1900s, 90 percent of all immigrants were coming from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia.

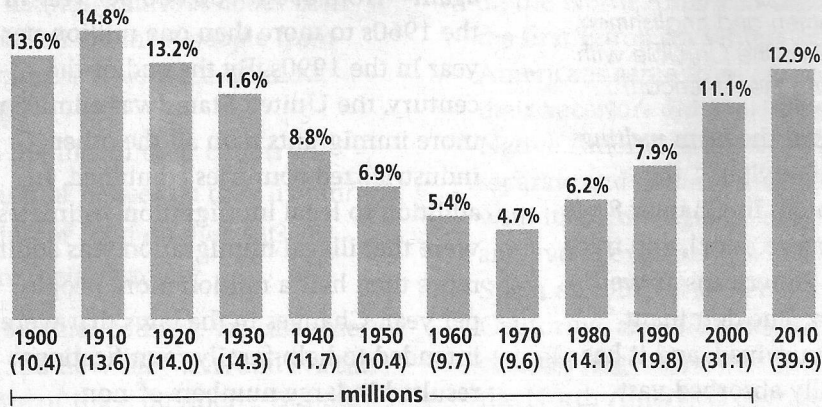
10 In the twenty-first century, the numbers of new immigrants have begun to approach the percentages of the early twentieth century. Between 1990 and 2010, the number of foreign-born living in the United States almost doubled from 20 million to 40 million, with about one-third arriving since 2000. These new immigrants accounted for about one-third of the total growth in population and have had an enormous impact on our country. By the year 2010, about 13 percent of all Americans were foreign born. Twelve states and the nation's capital had even higher percentages of foreign-born residents:

- California, 27 percent
- New York and New Jersey, each over 21 percent
- Florida and Nevada, each over 19 percent
- Hawaii and Texas, each over 16 percent

³ *crucible*: a container in which substances are heated to a very high level

⁴ *reunifications*: the joining of the parts of something together again

**FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION IN THE UNITED STATES
(PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION)**



PERCENTAGE OF FOREIGN-BORN BY REGION OF BIRTH

1900		2010	
Europe	84.9%	Latin America	53.1%
Latin America	1.3%	Asia	28.2%
Asia	1.2%	Europe	12.1%
All other	12.6%	All other	6.6%

Note: The regional categories shown above encompass many ethnicities. In 1990, for example, more than 80 ethnic divisions comprise "Europe."
Source: U.S. census data.

- Arizona, Illinois, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maryland, and the District of Columbia, each over 13 percent

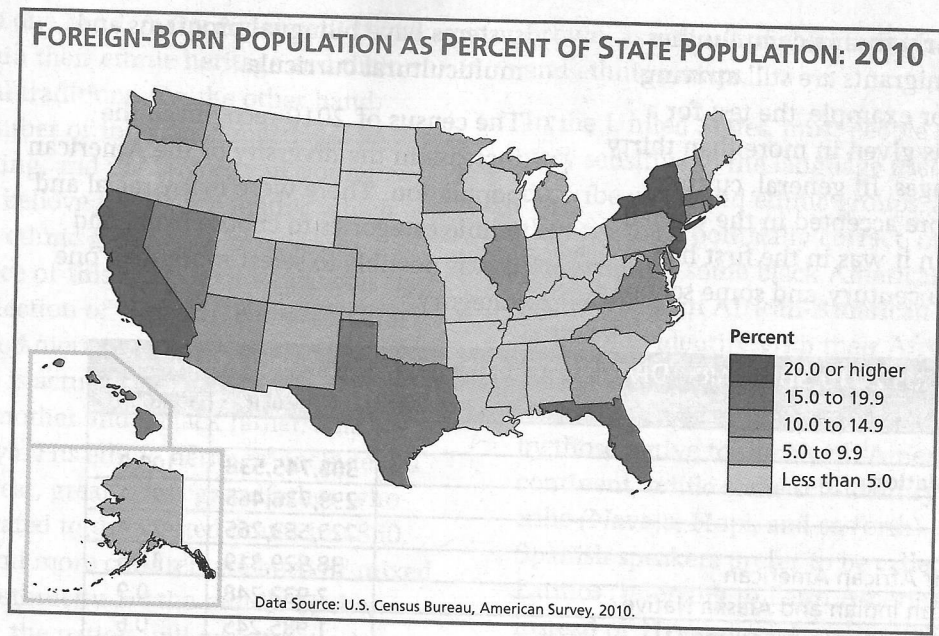
11 The twenty-first-century immigration patterns are continuing to change the color and the ethnic mix of the American population. First, the percentage of white Americans of European descent⁵ continues to decrease. Few Europeans are immigrating to the United States now, and many of those who came in the early 1900s have died. Their descendants have married Americans with ancestors from other countries, and many of these second- and third-generation immigrants no longer think of themselves as Irish or German or English.

12 Second, in the early 2000s, more than half of all new immigrants were from Latin America, resulting in large concentrations of Spanish speakers around the country,

particularly in California, Florida, Texas, Arizona, and other southwestern states. Hispanics now represent the largest minority in the United States (16%), larger than the number of African Americans (13%). With their growth in numbers has come a growth in political and economic influence. Presidential candidates now consider how to win Hispanic votes, and there are more than 6,000 elected Hispanic leaders nationwide. There has been a rise in Hispanic-owned businesses and Spanish-language media. Perhaps the largest impact is in the schools, where more than 20% of the children are Hispanic.

13 The numbers of Hispanic-Americans will probably continue to grow because many of them are young adults or children. However, the number of new Hispanic immigrants has declined. In 2000, they made up more than 50% of all new immigrants, but the number fell to

⁵ descent: family origins, especially in relation to the country where one's family came from



about 30% in 2010. Because of the poor economy, a number of immigrant residents returned to their home countries in Latin America. Due to tighter border restrictions, the number of illegal immigrants fell, and the total population of Hispanics living in the United States may have actually declined.

14 The immigrants from Asian countries are also contributing to the new American mix. According to the 2010 census, for the first time there were more Asian immigrants than Hispanic. Today, more than 35 percent of all first-generation immigrants are from Asia, and they now make up about 6 percent of the total population of the United States. If this trend continues, Asian immigrants will have an increasing impact on the American culture. As the minority non-white population of the United States continues to grow, the white majority grows smaller. In 2011, for the first time, there were more minority babies born than white majority babies. The white majority will probably fall below 50 percent sometime between 2040 and 2050. Already, several states and many of the nation's largest cities are

“majority minority.” This means more than half of the population are members of minority groups.

Cultural Pluralism in the United States

- 15 One of the critical questions facing the United States today is what role new immigrants will play in their new country. To what degree will they choose to take on the traditional American values and culture? How much will they try to maintain their own language and cultural traditions? Will they create an entirely new culture based on some combination of their values and those of the traditional American culture?
- 16 Historically, although the children of immigrants may have grown up bilingual and bicultural, for a number of reasons many did not pass on their language and culture. Thus, many grandchildren of immigrants do not speak the language of the old country and are simply American by culture. However, in parts of the country with established communities that share a common language or culture, bilingualism⁶ and biculturalism continue.

⁶ *bilingualism: the ability to speak two languages equally well*

This is particularly true in communities where new immigrants are still arriving. In California, for example, the test for a driver's license is given in more than thirty different languages. In general, cultural pluralism⁷ is more accepted in the United States today than it was in the first half of the twentieth century, and some school

systems have bilingual programs and multicultural curricula.

- 17 The census of 2010 recognized the increase in the diversity of the American population. There were many racial and ethnic categories to choose from, and it was possible to select more than one category.*

CENSUS 2010 SUMMARY: DIVERSITY OF THE AMERICAN POPULATION

SUBJECT	NUMBER	PERCENT
RACE		
Total population	308,745,538	100.0
One race	299,736,465	97.1
White	223,553,265	72.4
Black or African American	38,929,319	12.6
American Indian and Alaska Native	2,932,248	0.9
American Indian, specified [1]	1,985,245	0.6
Alaska Native, specified [1]	100,522	0.0
Both American Indian and Alaska Native, specified [1]	869	0.0
American Indian or Alaska Native, not specified	845,612	0.3
Asian	14,674,252	4.8
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	540,013	0.2
Some Other Race	19,107,368	6.2
Two or More Races	9,009,073	2.9
Two races with Some Other Race	2,464,690	0.8
Two races without Some Other Race	5,800,628	1.9
Three or more races with Some Other Race	176,026	0.1
Three or more races without Some Other Race	567,729	0.2
HISPANIC OR LATINO		
Total population	308,745,538	100.0
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	50,477,594	16.3
Mexican	31,798,258	10.3
Puerto Rican	4,623,716	1.5
Cuban	1,785,547	0.6
Other Hispanic or Latino [2]	12,270,073	4.0
Not Hispanic or Latino	258,267,944	83.7
RACE AND HISPANIC OR LATINO		
Total population	308,745,538	100.0
One race	299,736,465	97.1
Hispanic or Latino	47,435,002	15.4
Not Hispanic or Latino	252,301,463	81.7
Two or More Races	9,009,073	2.9
Hispanic or Latino	3,042,592	1.0
Not Hispanic or Latino	5,966,481	1.9

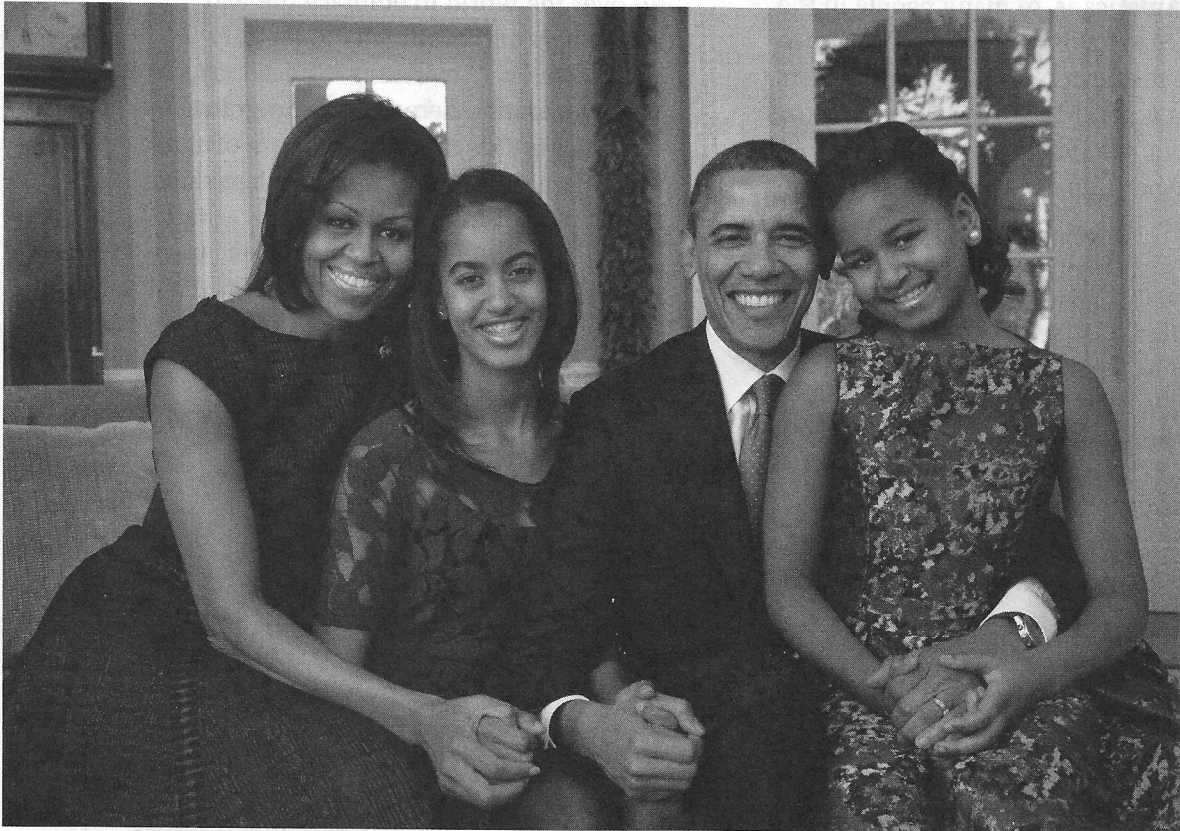
⁷ cultural pluralism: the principle that people of different races, religions, and political beliefs can live together peacefully in the same society

*For the 2010 census, people were allowed to check as many ethnic and racial categories as they wished. This chart is the U.S. government's presentation of the very complicated census information that resulted. The chart reflects the difficulties in determining ethnic and racial identities of Americans. For further information, visit the government website www.census.gov.

18 On the one hand, many Americans try to maintain their ethnic heritage and their cultural traditions. On the other hand, the number of interracial marriages is increasing, and the majority of young people believe it does not matter which race or ethnic group they marry into. Evidence of this racial acceptance was the 2008 election of Barack Obama, the first African-American president. President Obama is actually bi-racial, the son of a white mother and a black father, a native of Kenya. His ethnic heritage⁸ includes an Irish great, great, great grandfather who immigrated to the United States in 1850. More and more children are born of mixed race or ethnicity. By the middle of the century, the nation will probably no longer have a white majority; some say the color of most Americans will be beige, or light

brown, as a result of the mixing of races and ethnic groups.

19 In the United States, most people are very sensitive to the language used to describe racial and ethnic groups, and they try to be politically correct, or "P.C." For example, some black Americans prefer the term African-American instead of black to identify with their African heritage. The terms Native American and American Indian are used interchangeably by those native to the North American continent, while some self-identify by tribe (Navajo, Hopi, and so forth). Some Spanish speakers prefer to be called Latinos (referring to Latin America) instead of Hispanics (referring to Spain), while others prefer to be identified by their country of origin (Cuban-American or Cuban, Mexican-American, Chicano,



President Barack Obama and his family

⁸ *heritage: that which belongs to you because of your birth*

or Mexican, etc.). Since the census uses a variety of terms, we will also use the terms white, Native American or American Indian, black or African-American, and Hispanic or Latino.

20 In spite of all this diversity, there is still a tie that binds Americans together. That tie is a sense of national identity—of being an American. Incidentally, when citizens of the United States refer to themselves as Americans, they have no intention of excluding people from Canada or Latin American countries as residents of the American continents. There is no term such as United Statesians in the English language, so people call themselves Americans. Thus, what is really a language problem has sometimes caused misunderstandings. Although citizens of Latin American countries may call the people in the United States North Americans, to many people in the United States this makes no sense either, because the term North American refers to Canadians and Mexicans as well as citizens of the United States. (NAFTA—the North American Free Trade Agreement, for example, is a trade agreement among Canada, the United States, and Mexico.) The word *American*, then, is used in this text as the nationality of the people who live in the United States of America.

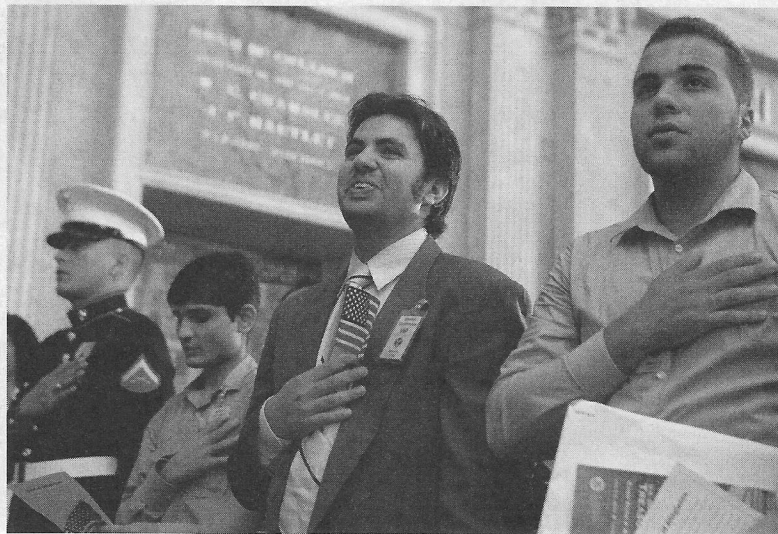
Making Generalizations About American Beliefs

21 What, then, can we say about Americans? What holds them together and makes them feel American? Is it possible to make generalizations about what they believe? It is, but we

must be cautious about generalizations. As we talk about basic American beliefs, we must remember that not all Americans hold these beliefs, nor do all Americans believe these things to the same degree. The ways in which some Americans practice their beliefs may also differ, resulting in a great variety of lifestyles. What we attempt to do is to define and explain the traditional, dominant cultural values that have for so many years attracted immigrants to the United States.

22 It is important to know that today there is much talk about American values and what they really are. Much of the debate is over *moral*, or religious values. In this book we are not discussing moral values. Instead, we are describing *cultural* values—the cultural engine of the country. These cultural values have defined the United States and caused people from all over the world to embrace the way of life here and eventually to identify themselves as “Americans.” Indeed, by the third generation here, most immigrants have lost the language and culture of their grandparents and they think of themselves as just plain “Americans.”

Immigrants being sworn in as new American citizens



23 Throughout this book we will be drawing on the wisdom of a famous observer of the American scene, Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville came to the United States as a young Frenchman in 1831 to study the American form of democracy and what it might mean to the rest of the world. After a visit of only nine months, he wrote a remarkable book called *Democracy in America*, which is a classic study of the American way of life. Tocqueville had unusual powers of observation. He described not only the democratic system of government and how it operated, but also its effect on how Americans think, feel, and act. Many scholars believe that he had a deeper understanding of traditional American beliefs and values than anyone else who has written about the United States. What is so remarkable is that many of these traits of the American character, which he observed nearly 200 years ago, are still visible and meaningful today.

24 Another reason why Tocqueville's observations of the American character are important is the time when he visited the United States. He came in the 1830s, before America was industrialized. This was the era of the small farmer, the small businessman, and the settling of the western frontier. It was the period of history when the traditional values of the new country were being established. In just a generation, some forty years since the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, the new form of government had already

produced a society of people with unique values. The character traits Tocqueville describes are the same ones that many Americans still take pride in today. He, however, was a neutral observer and saw both the good and the bad sides of these qualities.

25 This is a book about those traditional basic American beliefs, values, and character traits. It is not a book of cold facts about American behavior or institutions,⁹ but rather it is about the motivating forces behind the people and their institutions. It is about how these traditional basic beliefs and values affect important aspects of American life: religion, business, work and play, politics, the family, and education.

26 We invite you to participate in this book. We will describe what many Americans think and believe, but you will have an opportunity to test these descriptions by making your own observations. As you read about these traditional basic values, think of them as working hypotheses¹⁰ which you can test on Americans, on people of other nations, and on people of your nationality. Compare them with your own values and beliefs and with what is most important in your life. Through this process, you should emerge with a better understanding not only of Americans, but also of your own culture and yourself. It is by studying others that we learn about ourselves.

⁹institutions: large organizations, especially ones dedicated to public service

¹⁰hypotheses: ideas that are suggested as an explanation for something but that have not yet been proven to be true