



Don't fear shift to a blended society; it's always been here, SMU historian says



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The concern in some quarters over the impact that Latinos are having on U.S. society has always been a head-scratcher for me.

If you grew up watching U.S. sitcoms and old movies from the 1940s on TV, listening to **Elvis Presley** and **Vikki Carr** on the radio, and eating greasy hamburgers at a favorite drive-in on Lemmon Avenue in Dallas, you wouldn't think twice about who you are.

But in some quarters of the country, the growth of the U.S. Latino population sometimes seems to generate a fear of becoming a blended society — of more than one language being spoken and more than one skin color being the norm.

"The fact is, we've always been a blended society," said **Neil Foley**, who joined the Southern Methodist University faculty this academic year, holding the Robert and Nancy Dedman Chair in History.

His lecture this week on "'The Hispanic Challenge' and the 'Mexicanization' of America" couldn't have been more timely, as a bipartisan group of U.S. senators works on hammering out a comprehensive immigration reform bill by next month that will affect as many as 11 million Latino immigrants.

"What has the American Southwest been if not a blended society since the beginning?" Foley said. "Yes, the color will change, the food will change, and we'll hear more Spanish."

He doesn't see it as a negative, though, as the late political scientist **Samuel Huntington** did when he wrote almost a decade ago that Hispanic immigration "threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages."

Foley saw it as an example of many non-Hispanic Americans simply not understanding Hispanic culture.

Many Americans assume that if you have an English surname and light skin, as does Foley, you grew up maybe eating corned beef and cabbage.

But Foley's mother's family was from Chihuahua, Mexico, and his father's from Ireland. He grew up eating enchiladas, tacos, sopapillas and tamales at home in Virginia.

Increasingly, many Latinos share a blended family and culture similar to Foley's.

In the past, he said, the demographic shift had been due more to the fact that Mexican immigration would replenish itself every decade. Now, with Mexican immigration down to net zero, according to national studies, he doubts we'll ever see the same type of immigration as in the past.

Still, some Americans are worried about Latinos changing American culture, especially "if you believe that it's a 'core Anglo-Protestant culture,' as Huntington did," Foley said.

But with at least a quarter of the U.S. population now being Catholic, he said, he sees no similar worry over the spread of Catholicism.

And the idea that Mexican immigrants come here to live on federal assistance holds no logic.

"They didn't come up here to stand on a street corner and beg for money," he said. "They can do that in Mexico."

No, being a blended society is actually quite normal for us, he said.

"I'm an optimist about America's future and its core values of freedom and tolerance. And these are what unite us all."

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