Immigration has long been central to Canada’s economic development and nation-building aspirations. During periods of economic growth, immigration policy, with its attendant legislation and regulations, has sought to regulate if not solicit the orderly inflow of labor to capital. Through the late 18th and well into the 19th centuries the majority of immigrants entering Canada were either farmers encouraged to settle the Canadian agricultural hinterland including, after the completion of the first transcontinental railway, Canada’s vast and fertile western plains, or wage laborers who worked on Canada’s canal and railway networks or in labor-intensive mining, forestry and nascent manufacturing sectors. During periods of economic slowdown and shrinking employment markets, the Canadian welcome mat for immigrants was withdrawn and immigration policy redirected to restricting the entry of job-seeking ‘foreigners’. The Canadian state’s heavy-handed use of deportation ensured that ‘unwanted’ immigrants would not crowd welfare roles or threaten stability through the spread of ‘mutinous’ ideologies (such as socialism) and practices (such as union organizing).

More recently, policy has shifted. Canada increasingly looks to temporary foreign workers to meet its seasonal and unskilled labor needs while encouraging the immigration of young, foreign-trained professionals and those with the entrepreneurial skills and investment capital necessary to generate both employment opportunities for Canadians and export markets for Canadian goods and services. And rather than close the door to immigration during times of economic downturn, Canada actively courts immigrants regarded as job creators rather than job takers. A shrinking working age population in Canada has led policymakers to loosen the connection between annual immigration flows and fluctuations in the business cycle. Tying immigrant admissions to direct investment on the part of immigrants entering through ‘business’ and ‘investor’ class programs has also allowed for a steady stream of admissions, averaging approximately 250,000 per year since the early 1990s.

Yet, in as much as today’s immigrant is also tomorrow’s Canadian citizen, immigration has been more than an economic policy. It has also been a population policy intrinsic to the Canadian nation building enterprise. The clichéd phrase ‘Canada is a land of immigrants’ rings true: Today approximately twenty percent of all Canadians are foreign born, almost twice the American percentage. In Toronto, Canada’s premier ‘gateway city’, the foreign born make up 45.7 per cent of the population. Accordingly, ongoing debate over the nature of Canadian identity raises questions concerning the criteria of immigration selection and, more specifically, in determining how the ‘right type’ of immigrant is to be admitted to Canada.

But what type of immigrant is the ‘right type’? The factors informing views on the ‘right type’ of immigrant today stand in sharp contrast to the pre-1960s era, when considerations of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and national origin factored heavily in the Canadian immigrant selection process. Whereas earlier Canadian policymakers defined Canada as a ‘white man’s country’ and used immigration to further
this ideal, World War II, the human rights movement and the discrediting of ‘scientific racism’ informed the move to an admissions system centered around education, skills and other, universal, forms of ‘human capital’. Underscoring Canada’s new non-discriminatory admissions policy, the evaluation of prospective immigrants shifted to a point system in which applicants were awarded points in categories such as education, employability, English and or French language fluency and Canadian family connections. Once an applicant has accumulated enough points, immigration permission was granted.

Humanitarian concerns, with regard to family reunification and refugees, also informed trends in postwar immigration policy; the 1976 Immigration Act, for example, included Canada’s first coherent ‘refugee policy’. According to the 1976 Act, immigration flows would be guided by economic need, ties of family (via sponsorship), and the resettlement in Canada of bona fide refugees from abroad and ‘in-land’ claimants who arrived in Canada through their own means.

Several other factors also continue to shape the direction of Canadian immigration policy. Canada has no land border with the developing world and is thus buffered against population spillover from poorer countries by vast oceans and the United States, Canada’s most important trading partner and only contiguous neighbor. This has meant that day-to-day enforcement of Canadian border protection has been less pressing a concern for Canada than for the United States and other immigration receiving countries that share borders with poorer neighbors. The occasional arrival of a boat carrying asylum seekers nevertheless provokes intense Canadian debate over the integrity of Canada’s borders and seemingly ceaseless efforts on the part of the federal government to restrict the rights of in-land refugee claimants. Nevertheless Canada’s acceptance rate for refugee claimants is relatively high by international standards.

Sharing a continent with the United States has also meant that a northward flow American immigrants has been part of the Canadian immigration narrative. In addition to post-American Revolution Loyalists and those who secreted themselves north along the Underground Railway following American passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, as many as 800,000 settlers from the United States, mostly farmers, took up lands in the Canadian west, ‘the last best west’, during the years that straddled the last century, and approximately 30,000 American draft resistors found haven in Canada during the Vietnam War. A reverse flow out of Canada and into the United States has also taken place. Among those who immigrated to the United State were Canadian born and previous immigrants to Canada. Canada’s function as a way station for immigrants intending to settle in the United States has long preoccupied Canadian policymakers, compelling them to adapt policies designed to better compete against the lure of the United States. In the nineteenth century, this included promises of ‘free land’ to those willing to settle in the western frontier. Today relatively generous citizenship laws and privileged access for wealthy immigrants serve a similar purpose.

Canadian immigration policy also reflects immigration’s regional impact. Until World War II, policy was designed to stream immigrants into agriculture and rurally-based extractive industries. Since World War II the vast expansion of Canadian urban
industrial and service sectors has led to the retooling of immigration policy to better serve the needs of an urban society and a ‘knowledge economy’. While many urban centers have seen an influx of immigrants, almost half of all post-war immigrants arriving in Canada have settled in the greater Toronto area. Furthermore, while immigrants remain unevenly spread across Canada, under Canada’s federal system of government, issues of immigrant selection and provision of immigrant settlement services are a jurisdictionally shared responsibility between the federal and provincial governments. Accordingly, policies regarding the selection, settlement and integration of immigrants are now a function of federal-provincial agreements the specifics of which vary from province to province. As a result, the provinces are playing a much more decisive role not only in matters relating to immigrant settlement – long an area of provincial concern – but also in selection.

While responsibility for selection and settlement policy is shared among the provinces and federal government, the federal government retains its preeminent status as regards citizenship. Here too changing circumstances, ideologies and norms have influenced the course of policy. A distinctively Canadian citizenship has only been in place since the passage of the 1947 Citizenship Act; prior to this Canadians were legally designated British subjects resident of Canada and, in the spirit of British subjecthood, British subjects immigrating to Canada could cast votes in Canadian elections and run for office regardless of whether they had naturalized in Canada. Naturalization regulations and practices also reflected the racial prejudices that so defined immigration policy. As was true of admissions, the full privileges of naturalization were withheld from individuals, especially Asians, deemed undesirable as a consequence of their race, ethnicity and country of origin.

The establishment of Canadian citizenship in the postwar era marked a move away from racial discrimination in naturalization, making residency, knowledge of French and/or English, and familiarity with Canada’s history and political institutions the determinants of citizenship. The 1977 Citizenship Act went several steps further in this liberalizing direction, allowing for the toleration of dual citizenship and decreasing the citizenship residency requirement from the five years stipulated under the 1947 Act to three out of four years prior to the submission of a citizenship application. Canada’s liberal citizenship regime has led to a very high naturalization rate, topping 84 per cent. By contrast, the United States’ naturalization rate is 40 per cent.

Explanations of Canada’s high naturalization rate have cited the importance of Canada’s settlement strategies, specifically its policy of official multiculturalism. Introduced in 1971 in response to European immigrant groups’ demands that their contributions to Canada be recognized as distinctive and equal to that of Canada’s founding French and English ‘charter’ groups, multiculturalism has helped define Canada as a bilingual country with no overarching national culture. The aims of the policy have included providing limited state support for groups wishing to provide ethno-specific cultural services to their members, through social services, ethnic media, ‘heritage’ language training and the arts. This ‘preservationist’ dimension of the policy is counterbalanced by the policy’s integration-oriented aims, which include reducing
barriers to immigrant and ethnic participation and assisting in the acquisition of competency in one or both of Canada’s official languages. Multiculturalism’s link to citizenship acquisition lays in its encouragement of relationships between the Canadian state (at its various levels) and immigrant and heritage groups. These ties facilitate information exchange, while also signalling a more general acknowledgment of the value of pluralism to Canada.

As the sources of immigration to Canada shifted away from Europe to Asia, the Middle East and Africa, multiculturalism has increasingly taken on an anti-racist dimension. The entrenchment of multiculturalism in section 27 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and the 1988 Multiculturalism Act have given it further heft and allowed its principles to inform the direction of policy and practices (in hiring, approaches to diversity, etc.) among Canadian governments at every level and across regions. As a result, core Canadian institutions, including the nation’s educational, health and legal systems have become more pluralism sensitive. While multiculturalism has also been subject to criticisms since its inception (among Quebecers who felt the policy compromised their status as a founding nation and others who argued it weakened bonds of solidarity and encouraged value relativism), it remains popular among Canadians, many of whom see it as an essential element of Canadian national identity. The notion that Canada is a mosaic as opposed to an American-like melting pot has become a national credo.

This is not to say that the goals and principles of multiculturalism have been realized, claims to Canada’s status as an immigration ‘utopia’ notwithstanding. The economic integration of immigrants has worsened of late, as regards employment, earning potential, poverty and social integration. Paradoxically this has occurred despite Canada’s success in attracting the most well educated and skilled immigrants in its history. While credentials and experience accumulated abroad assist immigrants’ in gaining admission to Canada, they are heavily discounted by Canadian employers and professional organizations; as a result, many immigrants have been forced to accept employment far below their qualifications and expectations – the cliché of the immigrant doctor driving a cab is, sadly, all too common in Canada’s major cities. Efforts to eliminate this state of affairs have been slow, but initiatives from the federal and provincial governments with regard to foreign credential recognition and training programs aimed at providing Canadian experience to foreign trained workers are being applied, often with the cooperation of professional licensing bodies and employers.

Poor results in the labor market may also be due to persistent racial discrimination. Indeed, surveys note that ‘visible minorities’ (a Canadian term used to designate ‘persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour’) are more likely to be subject to discrimination and, in the second-generation, report a weaker sense of Canadian identity than their non-visible minority peers. Hence, multiculturalism’s anti-racism dimension appears to have come up short.

As many visible minority groups are also non-Christian minorities, debate over the donning of religious attire in public institutions, such as schools and courts, have
taken on a racial dimension and provoked consternation despite Canada’s status as an
officially multicultural country. While some commentators have called for ‘striking’
multiculturalism from Canada’s ‘national vocabulary’, others have noted that
multiculturalism was never intended to stand in for policies concerning economic
integration and religious accommodation. As Canada is likely to remain a major
immigrant receiving country, further policy innovation will be needed to address these
and other concerns into the future.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Abu-Laban, Yasmeen and Christina Gabriel. Selling Diversity: Immigration,
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Banting, Keith and Will Kymlicka. “Canadian Multiculturalism: Global Anxieties and Local

Bloemraad, Irene. Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United


Kelley, Ninette and Michael Trebilcock. The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian
Immigration Policy, 2nd ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010

Knowles, Valerie. Strangers at Our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy,

Reitz, Jeffrey. “Canada: Immigration and Nation-Building in the Transition to a Knowledge


Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos is an assistant professor of political science in the
department of Social Sciences at the University of Toronto Scarborough and the School
of Public Policy and Governance. He has published on the politics of immigration and
citizenship policy in Canada, Germany and the United States.

Harold Troper is a professor of history in the Department of Theory and Policy Studies
at the University of Toronto. He has published widely on the history of immigration,
issues of ethnic identity and inter-group relations in Canada.