July fourth provides a moment when Americans consider our nation's founding as well as how our ancestors came to this country, that is, about our personal "founding" as Americans. We celebrate our forebears' search for a better life, how they worked long hours to overcome hardships, and how they and their children became Americans.

That storyline often overlooks the fact that immigrants were usually unwelcome. Even when government policies invited people to come to America, migrants were frequently treated as outsiders. Newspapers, politicians and even average citizens often railed against large groups of newcomers who threatened the American way of life.

At different times, these negative attitudes have been directed at people of various nationalities: the Irish, Italians and Poles, the Scots and the Chinese, the Japanese and the Germans, and more recently the Hmong, the Hispanics and peoples from the Arab and Muslim world.

In the end, this unwelcoming attitude formed another difficulty to overcome. And for those whose families have been here several generations, their triumph over that particular adversity belongs to their July fourth story. This holiday, more than any other, celebrates our identity as Americans; it comprises a moment when we set apart our differences and celebrate "our" country, those who founded it, and those who have protected it.

The problem of immigration is not solely one of nationality and of the transition from belonging to the country of one's origins to membership in the new country. It is also one of religion. Immigrants often came with their own religious beliefs and practices. And unlike their national loyalties, immigrants and their children usually kept their religion rather than change it.

America's freedom of religion helped with that in the legal area, but not elsewhere. This country's discrimination against immigrants and their offspring makes that clear, especially following the waves of immigration before 1930. If we could not keep them out of our country, then the response was often that we could keep them out of our other institutions.

Religion made that exclusion possible. At the start of the 20th century, Catholic children were effectively excluded from public schools by Protestant insistence on using the King James Bible in them, which Catholics viewed as anti-Catholic. Major educational institutions, such as Yale and Princeton universities, enforced restrictions against admitting Jews into the 1950s and the 1960s. And many men's clubs, some even into the 1980s, did not allow Catholic or Jewish members.

These attitudes have changed over recent decades, and those changes have finally reached the Supreme Court, which for most of this nation's history was exclusively Protestant. If Elena Kagan is confirmed as a justice, as expected, then there will be no Protestants on the court. Instead, there will be six Catholics and three Jews.

There does not appear to be any major objection to this outcome. Instead, many editorial essays note this lack of controversy and see it as a sign of our nation's maturity. I agree in part.

There is another explanation. The Protestant political coalition has fallen apart. One side predominantly consists of evangelicals (and conservatives) while the other side stems from the mainline churches (and liberals). The split has largely come over social issues, especially abortion and homosexuality.

Instead of working together to bring in Protestant candidates, they can only agree on non-Protestant candidates, and for different reasons. To lay this out in over-simplified terms: Catholics are acceptable to the evangelical side because Catholicism in general holds similar social views. Catholics are OK for the mainline side because that side is more welcoming of differing views.

Similarly, the stereotype of Jews' politics is that they hold liberal views (even though many do not) which makes them acceptable on the mainline side. Jews tend to be less acceptable to the evangelical wing, but that faction's strong support of Israel usually mitigates that opposition.

Thus immigrants and their descendants move from being defined in terms of nationality to being defined in terms of religion. That redefinition may permit discrimination, but also provides a fit into our country's freedom of religion, which leads to greater acceptance. In the end, ultimate acceptance may come through political maneuvering.