

## The Case for Freer Immigration

By David Bier\*

The United States should restore its traditional system of liberalized immigration. America's founders strongly favored a welcoming society to encourage both the wealthy and oppressed to join the new nation, and from 1776 to 1924, America did allow a virtually unlimited number of foreigners to immigrate legally to the United States.<sup>1</sup> By the early 1920s, Congress had enacted some qualitative limits—it banned, for example, criminals and people who couldn't support themselves. Except for the unfortunate exception of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, however, the United States had no permanent quantitative limits on how many people could come until 1925.

Today, the immigration system is the opposite of almost all other areas of law. In other legal contexts, all activity is legal except whatever the law specifically prohibits. Unlike those areas, immigration law starts with the premise that all immigration is illegal except that which the government specifically allows. Currently, America's traditional system continues only for the spouses, minor children, and parents of adult U.S. citizens, who may immigrate without limit. Everyone else has either no way to immigrate at all or has a quota with slots mainly given to other immediate family members of U.S. citizens (e.g. siblings) and legal permanent residents. These immigrants often wait more than a decade and sometimes two decades to immigrate.<sup>2</sup> In the future, the wait times will likely balloon beyond a half century for many immigrants.<sup>3</sup>

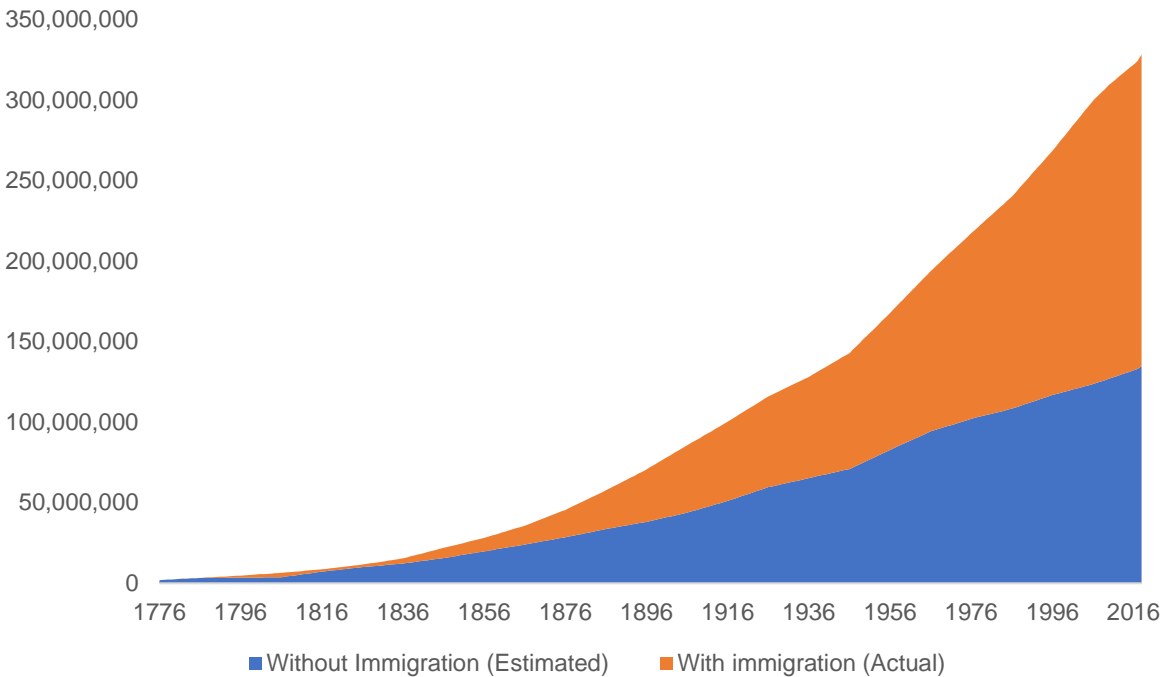
Almost all people who want to immigrate to the United States have no legal means to do so.<sup>4</sup> America's immigration system in 2018 is most reminiscent of alcohol sales under Prohibition, when alcohol was generally illegal with some exceptions—for medical, industrial, or religious purposes. Since Prohibition, it is generally legal with some exceptions. With immigration today, America is much closer to Prohibition than freedom. To drive this point home, consider that even the infamous Chinese Exclusion Act also contained a few exceptions just like current immigration law does. It is no exaggeration to say that America's laws today amount to a Worldwide Exclusion Act—greater equality but no less draconian.

### Benefits to the United States

No single benefit of immigration to America is more important than the fact that immigration greatly increases the number of Americans. Of course, America would not exist at all as a unified country without any immigration since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Even focusing on the period after 1776, about 100 million people have immigrated as permanent residents to the United States.<sup>5</sup> If George Washington, James Madison, and the other founders were nationalists—rather than classical liberals—and wrote into the Constitution a ban on all immigration, America's population today would be less than half—only about 135 million rather than 328 million (Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> In this scenario, America would have the ninth or tenth largest population in the population in the world, rather than the third.<sup>7</sup>

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**Figure 1: U.S. Population With and Without Immigration (Estimated), 1776 – 2018**

*Source: Joseph Chamie (2011) – extrapolated to 2018*

Setting aside the benefits to these new Americans themselves, America's larger population from immigration has strongly positive spillover consequences for those Americans who can trace their ancestry to the founding. By creating new Americans, immigration increases the size, influence, and power of America. Militarily, without the additional soldiers and laborers from immigration, the Union may have lost the Civil War.<sup>8</sup> America's decisive role in multiple fronts in World War II would have been impossible without the additional 70 million Americans who came from post-1776 immigration flows.<sup>9</sup> An America with a population much smaller than the Soviet Union would have struggled to serve as a liberal counterweight to the Evil Empire's global Marxist ambitions.

More important than military power is America's economic and social influence around the world. Without immigration since the founding, America's economy would likely be about 50 percent smaller—a loss of nearly \$10 trillion in absolute terms.<sup>10</sup> Without immigration, it would have been much more difficult to push open markets from Mexico City to Beijing for trade during the post-war period. It is impossible to list every way in which Americans, acting apart from their government as prosperous individuals, have changed the world. Americans consistently lead the world in both Foreign Direct Investment and humanitarian aid, causing the world and America to be better and stronger for those efforts.<sup>11</sup>

America's social influence is much more difficult to measure but is also no less important. One case stands out as particularly compelling. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic popes repeatedly issued encyclicals condemning religious liberty and even the idea of individual

rights.<sup>12</sup> At the time, American protestant nativists condemned Catholic immigration, claiming that a massive wave of Catholic immigrants to America would fundamentally alter America's political institutions. In fact, the exact opposite happened. The massive wave fundamentally altered Catholic religious institutions.

American values quickly won them over, and American Catholics soon pressed their case to the Vatican. It was primarily through the advocacy of American Catholics that the Catholic Church finally declared its support for freedom of conscience in 1965. Indeed, it was an American priest John Courtney Murray who laid the philosophical and theological framework for this reversal and played the most important role in shaping the text of the Second Vatican Council's declaration in support of freedom of conscience.<sup>13</sup> Rather than Catholicism changing America, Americans had changed Catholicism. The Catholic Church's new position had truly global positive effects for America's diplomatic efforts as it pushed for religious liberalization across the globe.

Going forward, nearly all of America's population growth will result from immigration through 2035.<sup>14</sup> Permitting far more legal immigration would greatly increase American power and influence in the world.

## **Benefits to Americans**

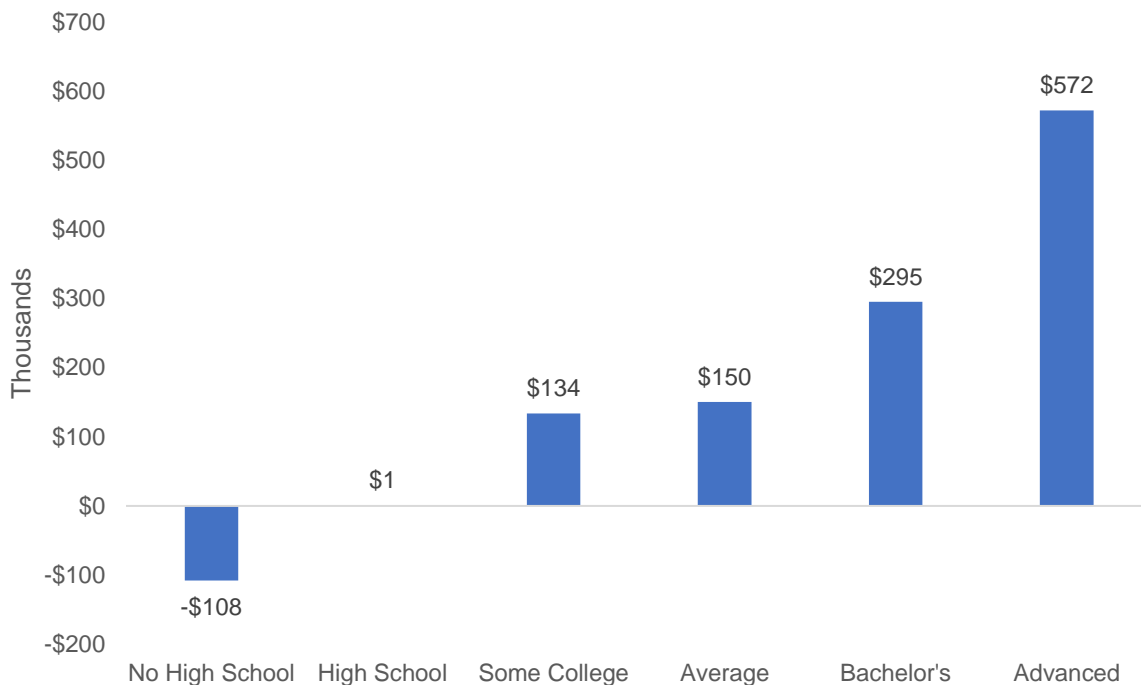
Immigrants benefit Americans directly in myriad other more direct ways. Talents and elements from around the world enhance America's food, music, movies, books, and sports. Few Americans would willingly endure the paucity of food options available in 1965, fewer still those of 1865. While opponents of immigration downplay the effect of immigration on television, sports, food, movies, music, and the like as relatively unimportant concerns, the reality is that Americans spend nearly a third of their waking lives enjoying these activities; and the benefits are almost unequivocally positive in these areas.

More fanciful still is the idea that Americana can enjoy these benefits without immigration. Without immigrants and their families to patronize emerging cuisines or new musical genres, for example, they would never catch on. Many of the great American innovations in these cultural areas—from food to music to sports—are a direct consequence of immigrants, and it is of little surprise that the cultural centers of America are the most ethnically diverse portions of the United States.

Immigrants to the United States also carry with them social capital that improves the United States in other ways. Immigrants are more likely to work than the U.S.-born population,<sup>15</sup> to participate in religious organizations,<sup>16</sup> to get married,<sup>17</sup> and to have children.<sup>18</sup> These qualities are the main reason why—even though they have lower levels of formal education than the U.S.-born population—immigrants are less likely to commit crimes and end up incarcerated. This is especially true of legal immigrants, but also true of illegal immigrants.<sup>19</sup> This social capital helps explain why areas with high concentrations of immigrants saw disproportionate declines in crime during the 1990s' immigration boom.<sup>20</sup>

The overall effect of immigrants on government budgets is also positive. Every study finding major net costs due to immigration does so first by focusing on snapshots in time rather than the cost of immigrants over their whole lifetimes and second by including the U.S.-born children of immigrants but only while they are children, not while they are taxpaying adults.<sup>21</sup> According to the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) definitive 2016 report, the average net present value of a recent immigrant to the United States is positive between \$77,000 and \$279,000 over an entire lifetime.<sup>22</sup> The average of its three budgetary projections is positive or neutral for immigrants of all education levels, except high school dropouts (Figure 2). Even there, it found that high school dropouts who enter as young people before the age of 25 are fiscally positive and that dropouts during their working years are fiscally positive.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 2: 75-year Net Present Value of Recent Immigrants to All Levels of Government**



*Source: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2016)*

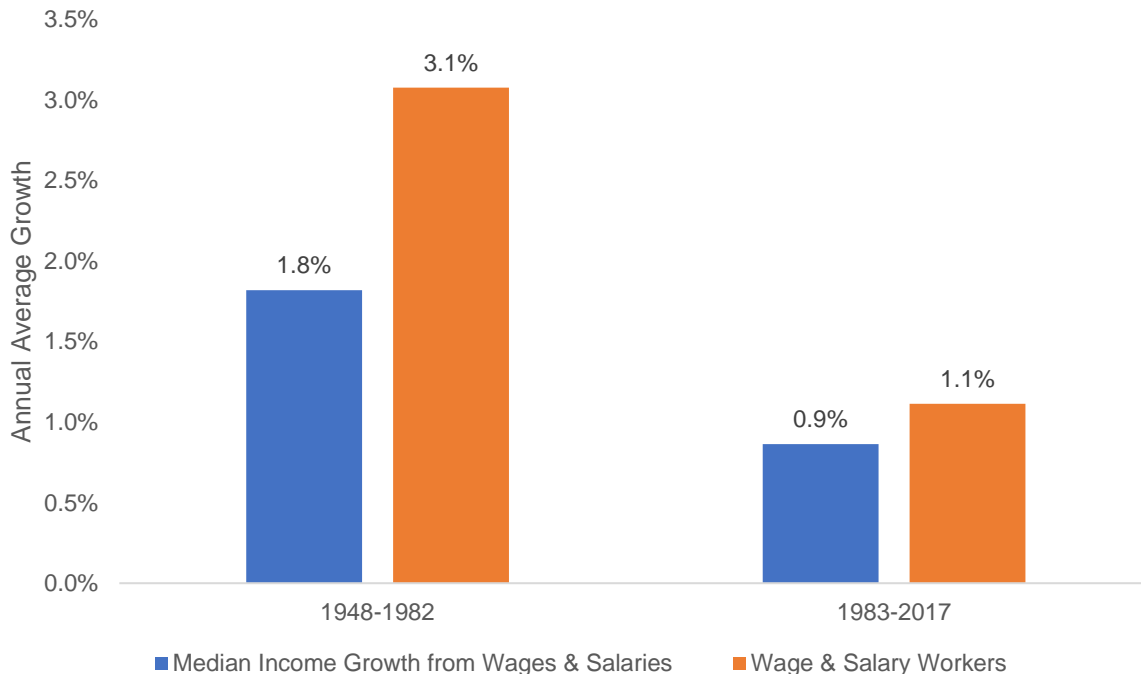
Importantly, the NAS estimates are just an individual accounting exercise and do not estimate how these lowest immigrants affect the broader economy in ways that increase tax revenue. A large body of research shows, for example, that unskilled immigration pushes U.S.-born Americans to obtain higher levels of education.<sup>24</sup> Every U.S.-born American who finishes high school saves the U.S. government between \$201,000 and \$359,000 in net present value, far more than the cost of an immigrant high school dropout.<sup>25</sup> The NAS's calculations also fail to factor in how the lowest skilled immigrants can increase the wages and productivity of higher skilled workers who, in turn, pay more taxes. More construction workers, for example, increase the demand for American civil engineers. More domestic workers permit more highly educated women to enter the labor force.<sup>26</sup> These indirect effects could, in many specific cases, turn the

fiscal calculation positive even for the immigrant dropouts. In any case, the best option to deal with these costs is to further restrict access to the welfare state, not access to the country.

Academic economists agree that immigrants make Americans wealthier, a consensus also supported by common sense. If immigrants made the initial residents poorer, then *any* new workers would make the existing workforce poorer. It was the classical liberal economist Jean Baptiste Say who first slapped down this understanding. He reasoned that any merchant would prefer a bustling metropolis to a desolate town because, “though in no fear of a competitor, he could sell but little, because little was produced [in the desolate town]; whilst at Paris, Amsterdam, or London, in spite of the competition of a hundred dealers in his own line, he might do business on the largest scale. The reason is obvious: he is surrounded with people who produce largely in an infinity of ways.”<sup>27</sup>

Say’s reasoning was that new workers are not just “supply,” but also demand, supporting better jobs for existing residents elsewhere in the economy. Some people wrongly believe that each new worker must reduce the number of jobs for existing workers in the economy. Economists even have a name for this error: the lump of labor fallacy—the premise that there is a fixed amount of work to be done within an economy. But more workers translating to more unemployment is easily disproven. The labor force in the United States has nearly tripled since World War II, but rather than tens of millions of unemployed people, the unemployment rate has hardly changed.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, during the 35-year period from 1948 to 1982, the number of wage earners grew at three times the rate it did in the following 35 years, yet annual median income growth for wage earners was still more than twice as high during that period (Figure 3).<sup>29</sup>

**Figure 3: Annual Growth in Real Median Income from Wages & Wage Earners**



Source: Census Bureau (2017)

Government monopolization provides a useful comparison to immigration restrictions. A monopoly benefits the owners of the business protected from competition so long as the rest of the economy is still generally competitive. They can extort inflated prices from consumers on the goods that they sell, while these same business owners enjoy competitive prices on the goods that they buy. A few benefit, while everyone else loses. But if the entire economy is organized into monopolies, a monopoly ceases to benefit even the monopolists—everyone extorts everyone else to the detriment of all. In the same way, domestic construction workers might benefit from a ban solely on foreign construction workers. But as soon as *all* workers receive protection from competition, the benefit dissipates.

For these reasons, economists agree that labor force growth boosts general productivity, wages, and wealth for most U.S.-born Americans. Today, the economic debate revolves solely around whether immigration might have temporarily reduced the wages of high school dropouts *relative* to the wages of other workers nationally by less than 2 percent—the worst finding of anyone in the field.<sup>30</sup> Most other economists find no effect or a positive one, even for these lowest skilled workers.

Within this academic debate, the economist with the most pessimistic conclusions is Harvard's George Borjas. While he finds that the 10 percent of the U.S.-born labor force who have dropped out of high school lose a little, he also concludes that the other 90 percent with high school degrees or above receive relative wage increases from unskilled immigration. Moreover, Borjas agrees with other economists that the overall effect of immigration on U.S.-born Americans, including those with a high school degree or less, is positive.<sup>31</sup> In any case, because the United States has progressive taxation and a welfare state, the benefits to the 90 percent are taxed and redistributed to the 10 percent.

The Americans who have most directly profited from immigration are those who have immigrated here and their descendants. Some opponents of immigration want to calculate immigration's benefits to Americans while ignoring the Americans who—without unrestricted immigration—would not exist *as Americans*. This is like calculating reproduction's benefits to Americans while ignoring the Americans who—without unrestricted reproduction—would not exist at all. Because naturalized citizens and their descendants are as much Americans as those whose ancestry dates to the founding, the net effect of immigration to Americans must compare the possible 2 percent drop in relative wages for U.S.-born high school dropouts to the 200 to 2,000 percent increase in absolute wages for these new Americans.<sup>32</sup> Whether economic or social, the net effect of immigration to Americans overall is positive.

## **Costs of Enforcement**

Today's restrictive immigration policy imposes enormous costs on all Americans. Agencies responsible for immigration enforcement spend nearly \$20 billion annually—a fiscal cost of immigration rarely considered by proponents of restriction.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, arbitrary quotas on legal immigration, by their very nature, violate the individual rights of Americans to associate, contract, and trade with people born in other countries. Just as arbitrary restrictions on free speech violate the rights of not only the speaker to speak but also the rights of the listeners

to hear, so arbitrary restrictions on free movement violate the rights of both the mover and all those who would wish to interact with them. Indeed, these secondary victims of restrictions on speech or movement far outnumber the principal targets.

During the Holocaust, immigration laws prohibited the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) from aiding Jews fleeing the Nazis. Far from having corrected this mistake, America's immigration laws are fundamentally the same as those that existed in the 1930s. HIAS still cannot, on its own initiative and with its own resources, sponsor refugees to come to the United States. The tragedy of the Holocaust, where the United States indirectly aided the Nazi genocide, repeats itself on a smaller scale over and over each decade. While America has no moral duty to put out fires in every region of the globe, it does have a moral duty not to block its fire escapes or, in the case of HIAS, its firefighters.

America's immigration laws also routinely break apart American families, businesses, and friendships—separating parents from children, friends from friends, workers from employers. The U.S. government, for example, deports between 70,000 and 90,000 parents of U.S.-citizen children every year.<sup>34</sup> Amer Adi, for example, immigrated *legally* to the United States, lived peacefully in this country for 40 years, started several businesses that employed dozens of Americans, and was still deported to Jordan in 2018 solely because the United States did not believe that his marriage to a U.S. citizen decades earlier was genuine.<sup>35</sup> His example illustrates just how intrusive our immigration laws have become, inquiring even into the private sentiments of its citizens. The damage to his U.S.-citizen wife, children, and employees simply never enters the equation for most restrictionists.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some U.S. shop owners voluntarily instituted “No Irish Need Apply” policies. Since 1986, America's laws have essentially institutionalized a similar practice by criminalizing the hiring of immigrants without government permission, a policy primarily aimed at banning employment for many Mexican workers. This is another example where immigration law jettisons America's legal and ethical norms. Indeed, immigration laws often discriminate based on nationality, religion, and gender. They regulate the types of speakers that Americans may listen to. They impose what amounts to cruel punishment: permanent banishment from family and home for technical violations of the law.

To enforce restrictive immigration laws, the U.S. government has continually had to impose greater and greater costs to the liberties of Americans. Border Patrol was given extra-constitutional powers to detain and interrogate Americans without probable cause even in places far distant from the border. It may stop planes, buses, and trains in the entire state of Florida to demand people's papers.<sup>36</sup> Agents have set up permanent checkpoints in the Southwest where Americans must pass through every single day. They live under constant surveillance, whether from permanent camera installations or from Predator drones. The government repeatedly seizes Americans' private property for its border fences. Some Americans literally live on the Mexican side of the fence and must knock at their own country's gates to be admitted.<sup>37</sup>

After forcing businessmen to police their employees in 1986, the government has increasingly pressured them into using a national surveillance program known as E-Verify,

which checks names and Social Security Numbers against federal records. While E-Verify has failed to cleanse the workforce of unauthorized immigrants, the flawed system has wrongly held up the jobs of a half a million legal workers and resulted in the loss of a job for more than 100,000.<sup>38</sup> As awareness of E-Verify's flaws grows, restrictionists now openly advocate adding a biometric component, creating a biometric national identification system that could be used to surveil and regulate access to almost anything—including guns, bank accounts, health insurance, and anything else that requires proof of citizenship or identity.

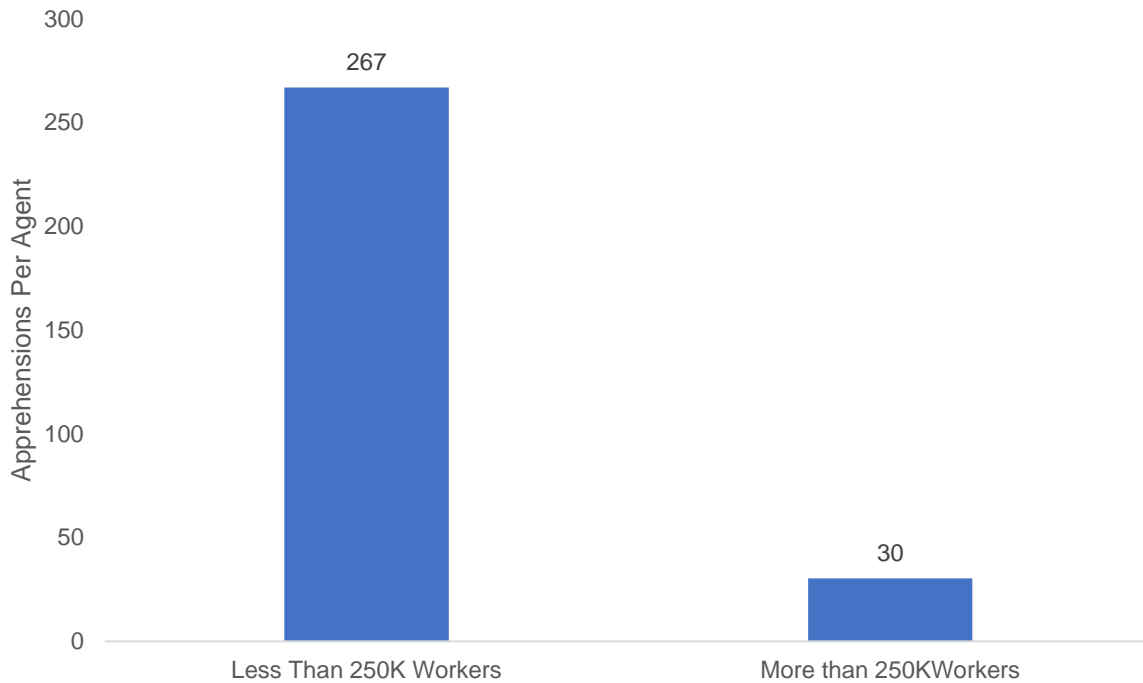
Every enforcement failure has only added new social maladies that previously never existed. First, sneaking across the border was limited to criminals and gangs. Then, when immigration was largely banned in the 1920s, Americans immediately made the connection to Prohibition, labeling illegal immigration “bootlegging in people.”<sup>39</sup> They recognized that illegal immigration was a function of immigration prohibition, just as bootlegging was a consequence of Alcohol Prohibition. Before 1986, illegal employment hardly existed as a concept, but once hiring certain workers was banned, illegal employment suddenly added a new black market on top of the black market in illegal residence. The introduction of the I-9 photo identification requirement created yet another black market in photo IDs. The creation of E-Verify layered on a black market in Social Security Numbers as well. In this sense, immigration policy keeps creating black markets laid on top of other black markets—each market an invention to deal with stricter immigration enforcement.

For most of U.S. history, illegal immigration from Mexico existed primarily as cyclical process where workers would come for a few months to work seasonal jobs and return home. In the 1990s, however, when the government constructed a system of fences and hired thousands more Border Patrol agents, the government began to force migrants to cross through the mountains and deserts. Thousands of migrants died as a direct consequence.<sup>40</sup> Rather than ending illegal immigration, these policy changes caused the successful crossers to stay in the United States permanently simply because it was too costly and risky to cross every year.<sup>41</sup> As a result, the illegal resident population surged. Harsh enforcement of restrictive immigration policies have only exacerbated their social costs at great expense to immigrants and U.S. citizens alike.

The best answer is not to enact informal policies of non-enforcement as the last administration attempted, but instead to repeal the restrictive provisions that led to the problems, just as the 21<sup>st</sup> amendment repealing Prohibition fixed the mistake of the 18<sup>th</sup>. Even when these anti-legal immigration policies have simply been relaxed, and large numbers of guest workers are admitted, these problems have dissipated dramatically. In fact, there is an inverse relationship between lesser-skilled guest workers admitted legally and the number of apprehension of border crosser per Border Patrol agent—the best proxy for illegal entries. Since 1949, apprehensions were 87 percent lower in years with greater than 250,000 lesser-skilled guest workers entering than other years (Figure 4).<sup>42</sup> Congress can do much to reduce the costs of enforcement by increasing legal options for foreign workers.



**Figure 4: Apprehensions Per Border Patrol Agent During Years with More or Less Than 250,000 Lesser-Skilled Guest Workers, FY 1949 – FY 2018**



*Sources: Immigration and Naturalization Service; TRAC Immigration; Customs and Border Protection; Immigration and Naturalization Service; Department of Homeland Security*

## Benefits to the World

The economic and social gains to the world derived from immigration are among the most important and most well-documented reasons to favor a much freer immigration system. The consensus among economists is that immigration restrictions currently cut worldwide productivity in half or, stated positively, that the elimination of those restrictions would roughly double the world's annual production—a gain of about \$78 trillion in 2018.<sup>43</sup> No single policy would do more to increase worldwide economic growth than opening labor markets in developed economies.

The infrastructure and institutions in the developed world allow workers to more fully reach their potential. Because wages are based on the marginal productivity of the worker, workers receive enormous wage gains simply by relocating to the United States. Haitians, for example, receive a wage gain of more than 1,000 percent in the United States even when they work in the exact same jobs as they did in their home country.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, four out of five Haitians who have ever escaped poverty—defined as \$10 per day or less in income—did so by immigrating to the United States.<sup>45</sup> Once again, no policy would do more to reduce poverty around the world than freeing up legal immigration.

The social benefits of immigration to the world are no less substantial. Removing immigration restrictions not only gives people the freedom to move but also because they move to freer countries, they also gain more of every other freedom—freedom of religion, speech,

association, property ownership, etc. It is impossible to list every way in which immigration frees people from all manner of despotism. In America, unlike in despotic states, people can freely follow their religious beliefs; women can attend schools, own property, and open businesses; whites can marry blacks; sexual minorities can live without fear; and residents can criticize and even mock their government officials.

These freedoms are not just restricted in much of the world—in many countries, attempts to exercise them result in the death penalty, either by the government or by private actors with tacit government approval. Around the world, about 170 million immigrants have moved from less free to more free countries.<sup>46</sup> For dozens of nationalities, the only freedom that any of them has ever experienced was through relocation.

Not only does immigration free them personally, there is evidence that their co-nationals whom they leave behind often benefit, as the emigrants transmit liberal values back to their home countries and their governments subsequently attempt to stem the exodus through political reforms.<sup>47</sup> Here are a few noteworthy cases: mass migration motivated reforms in Sweden and Ireland in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to address the economic and political causes of emigration;<sup>48</sup> Mexican remittances from the United States helped end the PRI's century-long stranglehold on Mexican politics by creating an independent source of revenue for basic public goods, leading to Mexico's first non-PRI president in 2000.<sup>49</sup> Cape Verde ranks at the top of Sub-Saharan African freedom indices due to its high rates of return migration of workers from the United States and Portugal who demanded institutional reforms.<sup>50</sup>

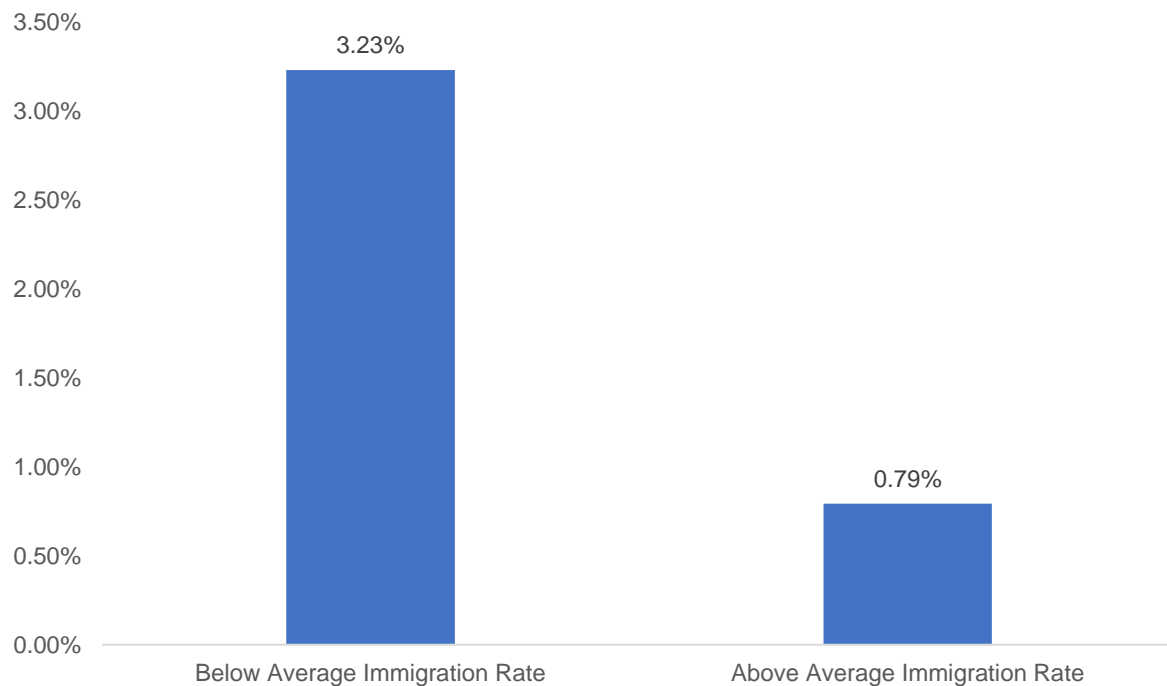
The greatest risk from immigration is that immigrants will spread the dysfunctional institutions in their home countries, undermining the sources of prosperity in the developed world. But the evidence does not support this conclusion.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, a 2015 paper in the journal *Public Choice* found that larger immigrant populations in 1990 predicted larger increases in economic freedom.<sup>52</sup> This result comports with the predictions of political theorists in the classical liberal tradition from James Madison to John Stuart Mill who believed that open viewpoint competition would produce better outcomes than government-enforced homogeneity.

In the United States, government need not enforce ideological purity because U.S. institutions and culture are already attractive to newcomers, and immigrants quickly adopt mainstream political views. While there are differences between noncitizens and U.S.-born citizens on some issues, the General Social Survey reveals virtually no statistically significant differences between naturalized citizens and U.S.-born citizens on support of U.S. institutions, patriotism, and major policy questions, except for immigration.<sup>53</sup>

U.S. naturalized citizens do tend to vote for the Democratic Party—partly because they assimilate into the largely urban areas where they live and partly because Democrats court them. As a consequence of the American political system, however, the Democratic Party (like the Republican Party) largely adopts centrist positions, and at least in the 2016 Democratic presidential primaries, naturalized citizens appear to have supported the candidate more closely aligned to the center.<sup>54</sup> However, despite this political orientation, immigration appears to boost the Republican Party more. Indeed, Republicans have controlled a House of Congress 87 percent

of the years in which the immigrant population exceeded 10 percent of the U.S. population, while not controlling either House in 83 percent of the other years. At the same time, the periods with higher immigration rates adopted more conservative fiscal and economic policies—essentially slowing the growth in government (Figure 5).<sup>55</sup>

**Figure 5: Annual Growth in Federal, State, Local Government Spending as a Percentage of GDP – Years With Above and Below Average Immigration Rates (1820-2018)**

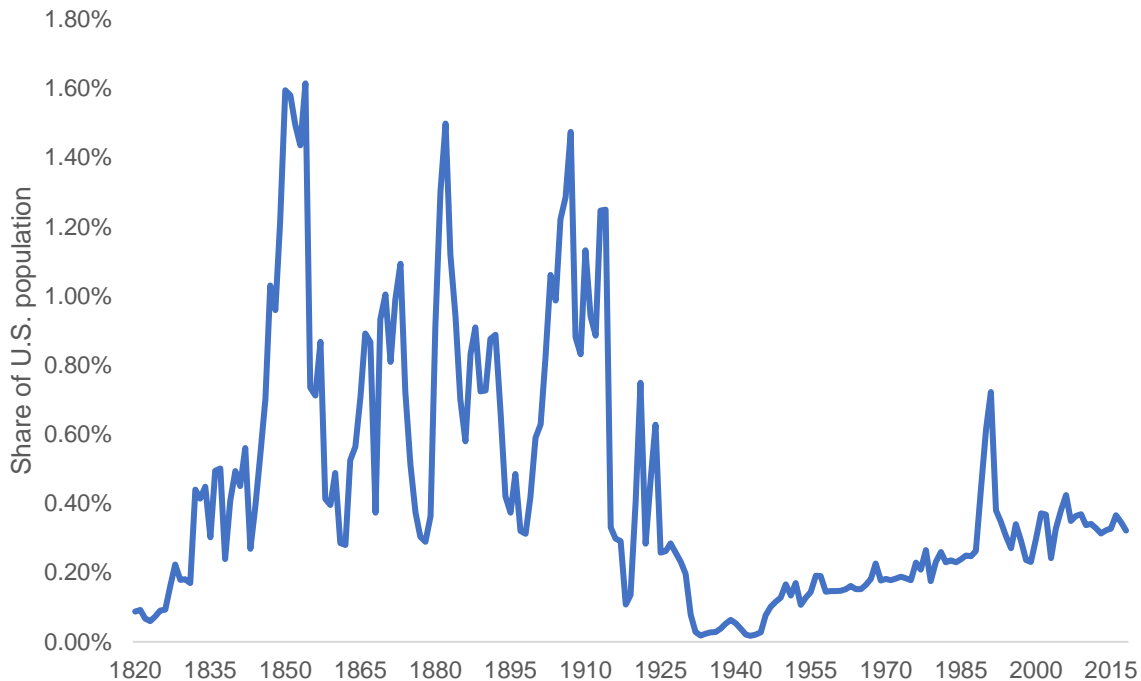


*Sources: Department of Homeland Security; U.S. Government Spending; Historical Statistics of the US, Colonial Times to 1970 (Immigration rates are new legal permanent residents as a share of U.S. population)*

Regardless of one’s partisan viewpoint, immigration has a small positive effect on the quality of institutions in both destination countries and sending countries. This would build upon, rather than detract from, the dramatic increases in wealth and freedom that freer immigration guarantees for the world.

## Feasibility of Freer Immigration

The United States can sustain a much higher level of immigration than it currently does. In 2017, the United States permitted a rate of permanent legal immigration equal to just 0.34 percent of its population.<sup>56</sup> Prior to 1925, immigration—as a share of the U.S. population—was double this rate (Figure 6).<sup>57</sup> During several years, immigration reached four or five times today’s rate. Thirty states have had a foreign-born share of the population higher than today’s national average, geographically including every subregion of the United States except one.<sup>58</sup> Fourteen states have had foreign-born shares of the population fully double today’s national average.

**Figure 6: New Legal Permanent Residents as a Share of U.S. Population, 1820-2018**

*Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2016, 2018)*

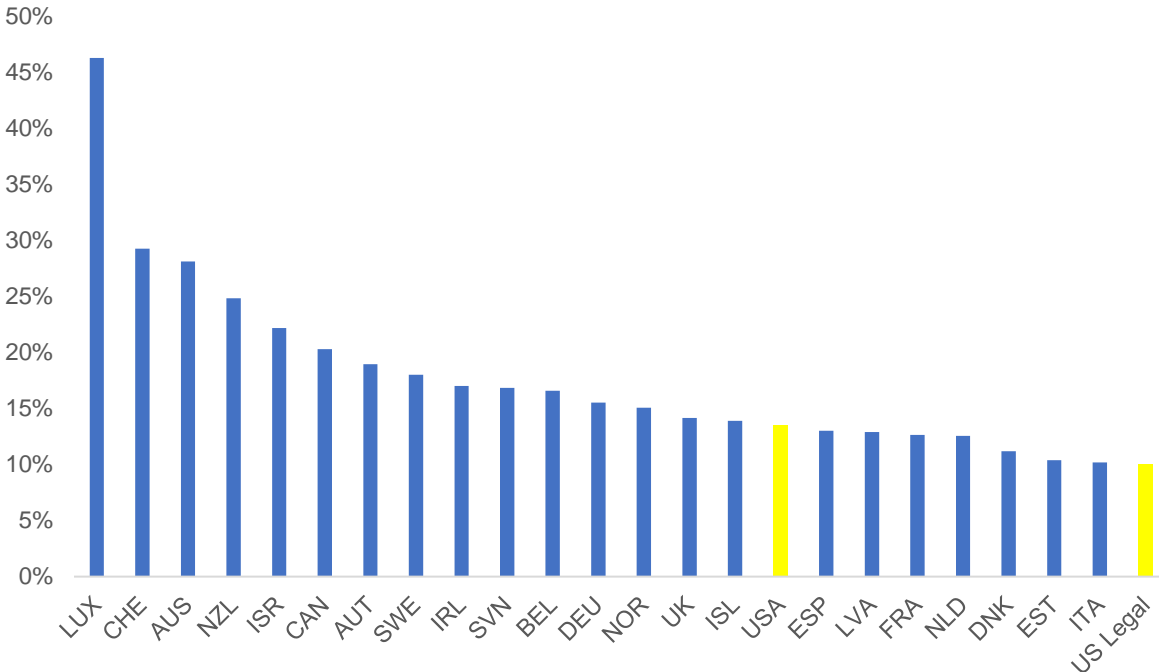
These states did not collapse or lose their American identity. Indeed, most of these higher immigrant populations occurred when the average immigrant was coming from far less democratic countries than the average immigrant today. Back then, less than a third of immigrants came from full democracies—based on data from the Polity Project—while a majority did during the wave of immigration starting in 1976.<sup>59</sup> From 2012 to 2016, fully two-thirds of U.S. immigrants came from full democracies.

Many developed countries currently have legal immigration rates that rival or exceed America's historic highs, including but not limited to Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.<sup>60</sup> In fact, the United States ranks in the bottom third of the wealthiest 50 countries in the world for both its net immigration rate and its foreign-born share of its population.<sup>61</sup> Overall, more than 60 countries have higher foreign-born shares of their populations than the United States. Canada and New Zealand both have foreign-born shares greater than 20 percent of their populations (Figure 7).<sup>62</sup> Nearly 30 percent of the populations in Australia and Switzerland are foreign-born. In stark contrast, America's current foreign-born share is less than 14 percent with about a quarter of it without legal status—its legal share is barely 10 percent.

Many of these countries also permit higher rates of noneconomic immigration than the United States. Family-sponsored immigration is higher in Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Norway, Luxembourg, and Switzerland.<sup>63</sup> Immigration—including substantial lesser-educated immigration—is perfectly compatible with developed market economies. Recent legal

immigrants to the United States, for example, have had the same education level as legal immigrants to Canada.<sup>64</sup>

**Figure 7: OECD Countries With Largest Foreign-Born Populations**



*Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – 2017 or most recent*

Congress should start by ending the quotas on the current family- and employer-sponsored system. This reform would have increased legal immigration by about 16 percent since 1992 when the current quotas came into effect.<sup>65</sup> Without wait times and a larger immigrant population, it would be reasonable to expect legal immigration under this policy to rise a bit further: to the point where the United States permits a rate of immigration around the average of most developed countries.

Ultimately, however, Congress should gradually repeal the post-1924 immigration system. It should reverse the presumption in favor of exclusion, and it should return to a system of qualitative limits—barring only criminals, terrorists, and people who abuse the welfare state—but otherwise leaving Americans free to associate, contract, and trade with peaceful people from around the world. Americans—not government bureaucrats—should determine the level of immigration. It should be each individual acting in a free market who decides immigration policy, not federal officials believing that they alone can micromanage America’s demographics, population, and labor markets.

## Conclusion

Nearly all immigrants who would want to move to the United States have no legal ability to do so. America’s closed immigration system fails to reflect American traditions of a free

market economy and equality under the law. Freer immigration has dramatically expanded the world economy and improved the lives of millions of people. No policy could and does do more to increase economic growth, reduce poverty, and bolster freedom around the world than allowing immigration. For America, immigrants have created a much more powerful country—militarily, economically, and socially. A more welcoming society spread American values—not just to the people who moved but also to those who stayed behind—and has allowed a defense of those values whenever and wherever a defense was needed. America will be a much stronger force for good in the world if it frees immigrants to join this nation.

Immigrants greatly improve the lives of Americans. Their cultural contributions create new forms of entertainment, food, and music, all of which enhance some of the most meaningful experiences of Americans' lives. Foreigners build up social networks in this country that are the health of civil society—they work more, marry more, reproduce more, engage in religious activities more, and commit fewer crimes. They generally pay more taxes than they receive in benefits and increase wages for almost all U.S.-born Americans. Immigration creates new Americans who see their incomes double or triple overnight.

Enforcing the current restrictive system hinders the rights of Americans to associate, contract, and trade as they see fit. It dictates who businesses must hire and fire. It tells consumers from whom they can buy, while separating American families. The current system forces individual Americans to act contrary to their fundamental values—discriminating against people born in other countries in their business practices and watching refugees who they are trying to bring to safety die in wars and genocides throughout the world.

America's restrictive system has spawned or greatly exacerbated various social maladies—illegal immigration, illegal residence, illegal employment, document fraud, identity theft, separation of families, and deaths along the border—all of which built upon the fundamental problem of restricting legal movement. Each of these problems would almost entirely end if the prohibitions on immigration were significantly relaxed.

Americans currently live under the equivalent of immigration prohibition. The U.S. legal system has sustained annual rates of immigration four or five times the current rate, and most states have existed with much higher shares of foreign-born population. Many developed countries have rates as high or higher than America's historic rates. Congress can free up the immigration system with the knowledge that a much more expansive immigration flow is not only compatible with a developed economy—but it is also an important component of one.

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