

The Most Common Arguments Against Immigration and Why They're Wrong

by Alex Nowrasteh





About the Author

Alex Nowrasteh is the director of immigration studies and the Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute. His work has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and the *Washington Post*, among other outlets. His peer-reviewed academic publications have appeared in *The World Bank Economic Review*, the *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, *Economic Affairs*, the *Fletcher Security Review*, the *Journal of Bioeconomics*, and *Public Choice*. Nowrasteh is the coauthor of the book *Wretched Refuse? The Political Economy of Immigration and Institutions* (Cambridge University Press).

 @AlexNowrasteh

What are the best counter-arguments to common complaints about immigration?

Immigration has been the most hotly debated public policy issue in the United States since Donald Trump entered the Republican primary in mid-2015. His campaign for president began with a speech about the evils of illegal immigration. He went on to support drastic cuts to legal immigration and promised to build a wall along the border with Mexico. During his time in office, he did almost everything in his power as president to reduce legal immigration, build a border wall, and increase immigration enforcement—with only the resistance of American cities and states,

unfavorable court rulings, Congress’s unwillingness to support his policies, and his administration’s own incompetence holding him back. A new Biden Administration has an opportunity to reverse the anti-immigration actions of the Trump Administration and expand legal immigration.

For more than a decade, my job has been to produce original research on the topic of immigration, to read hundreds of thousands of pages of other people’s research, and to debate opposing scholars in public and on various media. But the best preparation for the

current immigration debate was listening to the questions and concerns of Americans who don’t live in Washington, DC, or work in public policy. The major problem with “patriotic correctness” and “political correctness” is that many people rarely state their real objections to liberalized immigration for fear of being called racist, xenophobic, bigoted, ignorant, evil, or stupid. When the cost of asking questions and voicing objections rises, fewer questions and objections are raised publicly, but the underlying opinions don’t change; they merely remain

unanswered and can simmer.

This booklet attempts to answer the most common objections to immigration that I’ve heard throughout my career from policy wonks and academics as well as from ordinary Americans. Few people can devote years of their life to studying the most relevant public policy questions and evidence for any issue. However, as one who has had that extraordinary privilege, I’ve written this booklet that boils them down to the 15 most common objections and explains how I respond to them.

15 common myths about immigration



01

"Immigrants will take American jobs, lower wages, and especially hurt the poor."



02

"It is easy to immigrate here legally. Why don't illegal immigrants just get in line?"



03

"Immigrants abuse the welfare state."



04

"Immigrants increase the budget deficit and government debt."



05

"Immigrants increase economic inequality."



06

"Today's immigrants don't assimilate as immigrants from previous eras did."



07

"Immigrants are a major source of crime."



08

"Immigrants pose a unique risk today because of terrorism."



09

“The United States has the most open immigration policy in the world.”



10

“Amnesty or a failure to enforce our immigration laws will destroy the Rule of Law in the United States.”



11

“Illegal immigration or expanding legal immigration will destroy American national sovereignty.”

California

12

“Immigrants won’t vote for the Republican Party—look at what happened to California.”



13

“Immigrants bring with them bad cultures, ideas, or other factors that will undermine and destroy our economic and political institutions.”



14

“The brain drain of smart immigrants to the United States impoverishes other countries.”



15

“Immigrants will increase crowding, harm the environment, and [insert misanthropic statement here].”





Myth
01

“Immigrants will take American jobs, lower wages, and especially hurt the poor.”

FACT: Immigrants don’t take American jobs, lower wages, or push the poor out of the labor market.

This most common argument has the greatest amount of evidence rebutting it. Economists look primarily at two effects of immigration on the labor market: whether immigrants push natives out of jobs (also known as the displacement effect) and whether immigrants lower the wages of native-born Americans or other immigrant workers. First, the so-called displacement effect is small, if it actually affects native-born workers at all.¹ Immigrants are typically attracted to growing regions, and they increase the supply and demand sides of the economy once they are there. They expand employment opportunities for everybody.

Second, the debate over immigrants’ effects on American wages is confined to the lower single percentage points (Figure 1). The most

negative finding in the peer-reviewed academic literature was authored by Harvard University economist George Borjas. He found that immigrant competition lowered the wages of native-born American high school dropouts by a relative 1.7 percent from 1990 to 2010 (Figure 1).² Borjas also found that immigrants boosted the average wages of other native-born Americans, with an overall average net effect of increasing the wages of natives by about 0.6 percent. Gianmarco Ottaviano and Giovanni Peri came to similar results in studying the same period, with the exception that they estimated that the relative wages of native-born dropouts rose by about 1.1 percent (Figure 1).³ The major disagreement among economists who study this topic is over the relative 2.8 percentage point difference

in how immigrants affect the wages of adult native-born American high school dropouts, who comprise about 9 percent of American adults—that’s it.⁴

At worst, immigrants only negatively affect the wages of a small number of American workers while raising them for the rest.

Immigration increases the supply of workers in the economy, but the wage effects in Figure 1 are generally positive because many other changes occur with immigration that limit competition between natives and that increase demand for labor overall. There are five principal reasons behind the positive overall effect of immigrants on native-born American wages. The first is that immigrants and natives have different skill levels: 29 percent of immigrant

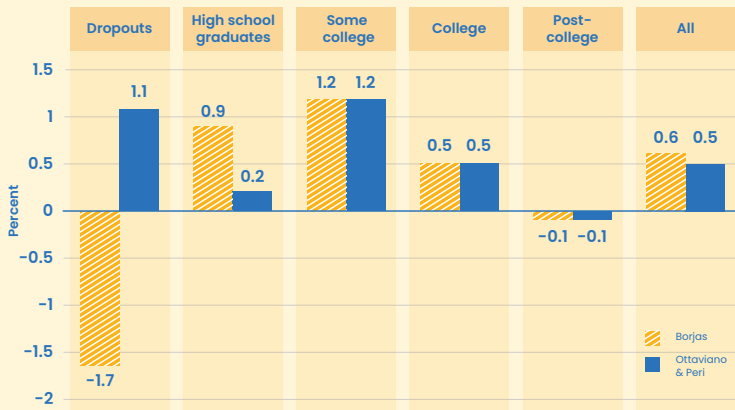


Figure 1. Long-run relative effect of immigration on wages of native-born citizens by education

Sources: Data from George Borjas, *Immigration Economics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 120; National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of Immigration*, Table 8-14, 2017, pp. 235–37; Gianmarco Ottaviano and Giovanni Peri, “Rethinking the Effect of Immigration on Wages,” *Journal of the European Economic Association* 10, no. 1 (2012): 152–97.

adults are dropouts, while only about 9 percent of native-born Americans are dropouts.⁵ As a result, there just isn’t much competition between

most Americans and most immigrants.

The second reason is that other differences, such as English language ability, mean that immigrants push some native-born workers into occupations where they can use their superior language skills while lower-skilled immigrants concentrate on manual labor occupations until they learn English. Communication-

oriented jobs are more highly compensated than are manual labor jobs, so the net effect on wages of Americans is slightly positive. In a restaurant, for example, low-skilled immigrants are busboys and dishwashers because they can’t effectively communicate with the customers, while low-skilled native-born Americans who speak English take the higher-paying jobs by becoming waiters and waitresses. Language differences incentivize each group to specialize and change jobs, which, as a result, raises wages for both.

The third reason is that immigrants are about twice as likely to start a business than are natives, **so immigrants often employ themselves and others**. The fourth reason is that investors increase the capital stock, which refers to the tools that help workers

produce goods and services, in response to a rise in population. More tools means that more workers can be employed to produce goods and services. The fifth and final reason is what economists call a scale effect, which is when a bigger economy increases demand for labor.

New research by Borjas used the Mariel boatlift to examine how immigrants affected the labor market. The Mariel boatlift was a giant shock to Miami’s labor market, and it increased the size of its population by 7 percent in 42 days in 1980. The boatlift was caused by a sudden change in Cuban policy that allowed many Cubans to leave and go to Miami. The most famous dramatized representation of the boatlift was Brian De Palma’s 1983 film *Scarface*, in which Cuban criminal Tony Montana is put on a boat by Fidel Castro’s

government and sent to Miami, where he becomes a drug kingpin. Beyond providing the background for an entertaining film, the Mariel boatlift is a useful natural experiment for labor economists because Miami did nothing to cause Cuba to open its borders, but the city initially received all Cuban immigrants. Borjas's paper finds large negative wage effects of 10–30 percent, concentrated on Americans who had less than a high school degree.⁶

Borjas's Mariel boatlift study is one of the most referenced studies in the debate over immigration's effect on the labor market, but it is not as strong as it appears for several reasons. Many doubt Borjas's findings, and Borjas's responses leave a lot to be desired.⁷ Even if the Mariel boatlift had such a large and negative effect on

the wages of native-born high school dropouts in Miami, it had a large *positive* effect on the wages of natives who had only a high school education— to such a degree that the wages of all Miamians with less than some college education actually increased.⁸ The rapid recovery of Hispanic wages in Miami also produces some doubt as to Mariel's effect on native wages because Hispanics were the most likely to suffer wage declines from competition with new Cuban immigrants who had similar language and educational profiles.⁹

Economists Michael Clemens and Jennifer Hunt have the most devastating response to Borjas: His finding was due entirely to a different wage survey sample collected in Miami over the years when he observed the wage decline. Thus, the data collectors

made Mariel look as if it had a large negative wage effect by changing whom they surveyed.¹⁰ Correcting for that change in wage survey methodology dissipates the negative wage effects that Borjas discovered.¹¹

Borjas's Mariel boatlift finding is doubtful, but it's important to include because it is widely cited by immigration restrictionists. Although there is still disagreement about the effect of the Mariel boatlift on the wages of native-born Americans in Miami in an extreme quasi-natural experiment, there is no doubt that immigration has overall increased the wages and incomes of Americans nationwide, as Borjas found elsewhere.





Myth
02

“It is easy to immigrate here legally. Why don’t illegal immigrants just get in line?”

FACT: It’s very difficult to immigrate legally to the United States. Immigration law is second only to the income tax code in legal complexity.

It’s very difficult to immigrate legally to the United States. In most portions of American law, all activities are legal except those that the government specifically declares to be illegal. Immigration law is the opposite because the only legal immigration is that which the government *specifically* approves. All other immigration is illegal. Consequently, legal immigrants must fit into narrow, specific green card categories in order to enter—merely being a healthy noncriminal who doesn’t pose a national security threat isn’t enough. **There are very few ways to enter the United States legally**, and the entire immigration law is “second only to the Internal Revenue Code in complexity,” according to Rutgers law professor Elizabeth Hull. The pre-Ellis Island days when anybody could come

to America are long gone and replaced by a legal system that looks as if it were imported from the Soviet Union (Figure 2).

There are four basic categories of green cards. The first is for relatives of other legal immigrants and American citizens. The second is for a limited number of skilled immigrant workers sponsored by American firms. The third category is for refugees and asylum seekers. The fourth is called the diversity green card. It’s for 50,000 applicants with at least a high school degree from countries that send few immigrants to the United States, and it is allocated by lottery. In 2017, about 23 million people entered the lottery for 50,000 green cards.¹²

There is no green card category for low-skilled workers, which is why so many immigrants

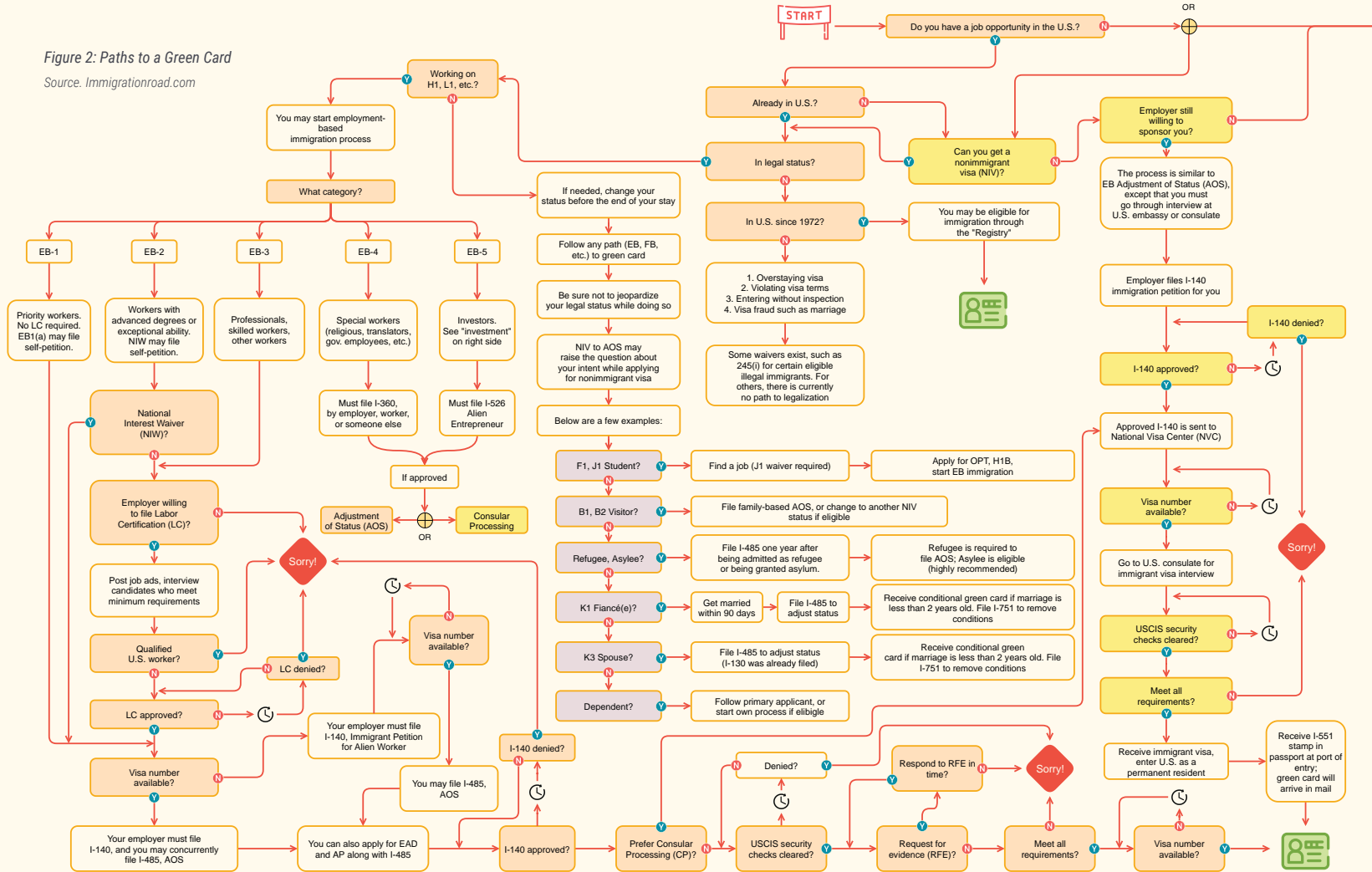
come here illegally; there is no way for them to enter lawfully. There are two temporary guest worker visa programs for seasonal workers in agriculture and other nonagricultural occupations, but they are highly regulated, expensive, and employer-sponsored. Furthermore, the nonagricultural work visa is numerically limited. Neither can lead to a green card. Slight expansions in the guest worker visa programs for Mexicans have resulted in many fewer Mexican illegal immigrants coming during recent years, but now illegal immigrants are seeking entry from countries that don’t have access to as many temporary visas.¹³

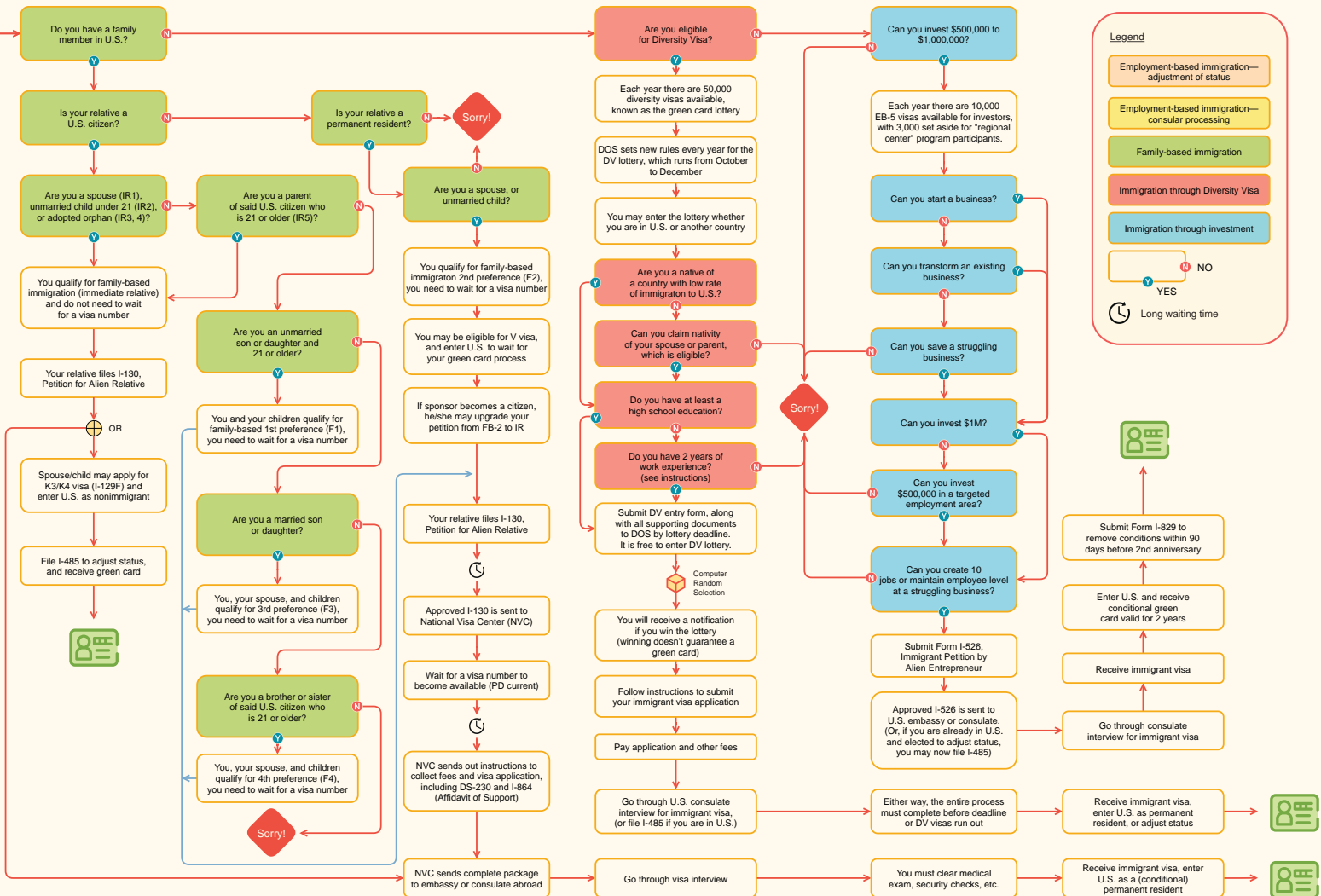
In 2017, about **23 million** people entered the lottery for **50,000** green cards.



Figure 2: Paths to a Green Card

Source: Immigrationroad.com







Myth
03 **“Immigrants abuse the welfare state.”**

FACT: Immigrants use significantly less welfare than native-born Americans.

The American welfare state spent about \$2.3 trillion in 2016: \$1.5 trillion on the entitlement programs of Social

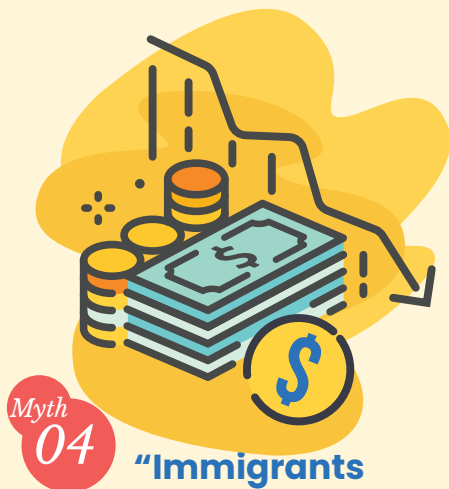
Security and Medicare and \$800 billion on the means-tested welfare programs intended for the American poor.¹⁴ **Most legal immigrants do not have legal access to means-tested welfare for their first five years here,** with few exceptions that are mostly designated on the state level and funded with state taxes. However, illegal immigrants have these exceptions: the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; emergency Medicaid; and state-level Medicaid in California. Altogether, such spending is minuscule. In 2006, illegal immigrant non-elderly adults consumed about \$1.1 billion in government healthcare benefits out of \$88 billion spent by governments in that year for that age group—a rate far below their share of the population.¹⁵

Means-tested welfare benefits account for only about 35 percent of all welfare benefits, while 65 percent is spent through the welfare entitlement programs of Medicare and Social Security. **Immigrants are also less likely to use welfare benefits than are native-born Americans,** and when they do use welfare, immigrants consume a lower dollar value of benefits.¹⁶ If native-born Americans used government benefits at the same rate and consumed the same value of benefits as immigrants, the welfare state would shrink by 43 percent, or by more than \$1.3 trillion.

Immigrants also make large net contributions to Medicare and Social Security, which are the biggest portions of the welfare state, because of their ages, ineligibility, and greater likelihood of retiring in other

countries.¹⁷ Far from draining the welfare state, immigrants have given the entitlement programs a few more years of operation before bankruptcy. Immigrants are not the cause of American welfare profligacy. If you’re still worried about foreign-born consumption of welfare benefits, as I am, then **it is far easier and cheaper to build a higher wall around the welfare state, instead of around the country.**¹⁸

Allowing in more legal immigrants with the strict welfare-use rules that are currently law, or even strengthening them, significantly lessens the fear that new immigrants will abuse welfare.



“Immigrants increase the budget deficit and government debt.”

FACT: Immigrants in the United States have about a net zero effect on government budgets—they pay about as much in taxes as they consume in benefits.

Related to the welfare concern is the argument that immigrants consume more in government benefits than they generate in tax revenue. The empirics on this argument are fairly consistent: **immigrants in the United States have about a net zero effect on government budgets.**¹⁹ A new model published by the National Academies of Sciences in its massive literature survey of the economics of immigration finds that age is the most important factor in estimating whether a new immigrant will be a net fiscal drain or a contributor to government coffers, followed by education. The least educated immigrants have a better effect on government coffers if they arrive when they’re younger rather than being older. The most educated immigrants have a negative effect if they arrive after age 64 but an average

positive fiscal effect if they arrive at a younger age.²⁰ The model also finds that Americans with a low level of education impose a larger fiscal burden than do immigrants with the same education level.

It seems odd that so many poor immigrants don’t create a larger deficit, but many factors explain that result. The first is that higher immigrant fertility and the long-run productivity of those people born in the United States generates a lot of tax revenue. The second is that immigrants grow the economy considerably and increase tax revenue overall. The third is that many immigrants come when they are relatively young but not young enough to be in public schools for as long as natives are; thus, they work and pay taxes without consuming hundreds of thousands of dollars in public school costs

and welfare benefits first—meaning **they are more likely to immediately pay taxes without receiving benefits.**

Besides making the economy bigger and increasing tax payments (not rates) as a result, between 50 percent and 75 percent of illegal immigrants comply with federal tax law.²¹ States that rely on consumption or property taxes tend to garner a surplus from taxes paid by illegal immigrants, while states that rely on income taxes do not because it is much easier to avoid paying income taxes than property or sales taxes.



Myth
05

“Immigrants increase economic inequality.”

FACT: Maybe. The evidence on how immigration affects economic inequality in the United States is mixed—some research finds relatively small effects, and some finds substantial ones. The standard of living is much

more important than is the income distribution.

The argument that immigration is increasing economic inequality within nations is getting some attention. Although most forms of economic inequality are increasing among people within nations, global inequality is falling and is at a historic low point, likely as a result of rapid economic growth in much of the world over the past generation.²²

The evidence on how immigration affects economic inequality in the United States is mixed—some research finds relatively small effects, and some finds substantial ones. The variance in findings can be explained by research methods: there is a big difference in outcomes between a study that measures how immigration affects economic inequality only

among natives and another study that includes immigrants and their earnings.²³ Both methods seem reasonable, but the effects on inequality are small compared to other factors. A more recent finding is that immigrants increase wealth inequality by their effect on the price of real estate in American cities. **About a third of the real estate price increase from 1970 to 2010 in American cities can be explained by the increase in immigration.**²⁴

Frankly, I don’t see a problem if an immigrant quadruples his or her income by coming to the United States and by increasing economic production here while it barely affects the wages of native-born Americans and increases economic inequality as a result. The standard of living is much more important than is the earnings

distribution, and every group in this situation either wins or is unaffected.

Although most forms of economic inequality are increasing among people within nations, global inequality is falling and is at a historic low point.



Myth
06

“Today’s immigrants don’t assimilate as immigrants from previous eras did.”

FACT: Immigrants to the United States—including Mexicans—are assimilating as well as or better than immigrant groups from Europe over a hundred years ago.

A large amount of research indicates that immigrants—including Mexicans—are assimilating as well as or better than previous immigrant groups.²⁵ The first piece of research is the National Academies of Sciences’ 2015 book *The Integration of Immigrants into American Society*.²⁶ It’s a thorough summary of the relevant academic literature about immigrant assimilation. The bottom line: **assimilation is never perfect and always takes time, but it’s going very well.**

The second book, *Indicators of Immigrant Integration* 2015, analyzes immigrant and second-generation integration on 27 measurable indicators across developed nations. This report finds more problems with immigrant assimilation in Europe, especially for those

from outside the European Union, but the findings for the United States are quite positive.²⁷ One of the main reasons immigrants in Europe don’t assimilate as well is that European countries have more labor market regulations that make it particularly difficult for lower-skilled immigrants to find jobs, thereby slowing both economic and cultural assimilation.²⁸ Another major reason is that **the process of assimilation is a two-way street.** Immigrants and their descendants must take up most of the customs, mores, and values held by long-settled natives. The natives must accept the immigrants; their children; and some of their particular customs, religions, and habits as part of the cultural fabric of the country. This two-way street is more well traveled in the United States than in European

nation-states that are defined by ethnic, linguistic, and cultural features that reach back millennia and that are more difficult for outsiders to join.

The third work, by University of Washington economist Jacob Vigdor, compares modern immigrant civic and cultural assimilation to that of immigrants from the early 20th century.²⁹ If you think early 20th-century immigrants and their descendants assimilated successfully, Vigdor’s conclusion is reassuring:

“While there are reasons to think of contemporary migration from Spanish-speaking nations as distinct from earlier waves of immigration, evidence does not support the notion that this wave of migration poses a true threat to the institutions that withstood

those earlier waves. Basic indicators of assimilation, from naturalization to English ability, are if anything stronger now than they were a century ago.”

Ethnic attrition, which is when immigrants and their descendants shed their identification with an ethnic or country-of-origin identity, does complicate how social scientists measure immigrant assimilation. Through intermarriage and time, the more educated descendants of Hispanic immigrants are less likely to identify as Hispanic, which biases the analysis of assimilation over the generations when the research relies on ethnic self-identification. Because more educated and higher-earning Hispanics are more likely to marry outside their ethnic group, their children are

much less likely to identify as Hispanic. Thus, the descendants of Hispanic immigrants who successfully economically assimilate are less likely to self-identify as Hispanic by the second, third, and subsequent generations. That progression also means that the descendants of Hispanic immigrants who are less educated and have lower incomes are less likely to marry outside of their ethnicity, and their descendants are more likely to identify as Hispanic. Thus, studying how self-identified Hispanics have assimilated in subsequent generations will not produce an accurate estimate of how all of the descendants of immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries have assimilated.

Adjusting for ethnic attrition by tracking the outcomes of the descendants of all Hispanic immigrants shows rapid

and continual assimilation over the generations that is comparable to the immigrant assimilation trends from the Age of Migration that ended a century ago.³⁰ If you think that immigrants and their descendants during the Age of Migration from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Scotland, Sweden, Switzerland, and Wales assimilated just fine, then you shouldn't be worried about the immigrants from Mexico, China, and India today who are assimilating as well or more rapidly.

For those who believe that immigrants assimilated more smoothly in the past, the plethora of ethnic and anti-Catholic riots during the 19th and 20th centuries, the nativist Know-Nothing movement,





and the anti-assimilation organizations such as the National German-American Alliance are a useful tonic to weepy nostalgia. The United States has a long history of anti-Catholic bigotry, which was part of the nativist movement because most immigrants were Catholic at the time, and many Americans considered Catholicism an alien religion fundamentally at odds with the values of a free society. Before the American Revolution, Guy Fawkes Day was known as pope Day, and on that occasion, Americans burned effigies of the pope. George Washington bucked the opinion of other Founding Fathers such as John Jay and Alexander Hamilton when he ordered the Continental Army to celebrate St. Patrick's Day in an effort to make the Catholics in his army feel more welcome.³¹

Catholics were the majority of immigrants to the United States beginning in the mid-1800s.

Nativists and Know-Nothing politicians responded by inspiring political movements and riots against Catholics and immigrants in major cities from the 1830s through the 1850s. One of the most infamous riots was “Bloody Monday,” in Louisville in 1855, when nearly 100 Catholics, many of whom were immigrants, were injured and more than 20 were killed. Anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant riots rocked New York in 1831, Boston in 1834, Philadelphia in 1844, and St. Louis in 1854. John Hughes, the archbishop of New York and the most prominent Irish-American Catholic at the time, warned that “if a single Catholic church is burned in New York, the city will become a second Moscow,” in reference

to Napoleon's destruction of that city. **The largest mass lynching in American history was of 11 Italian immigrants in New Orleans in 1891**—for which President Benjamin Harrison publicly apologized to the Italian government in his message to Congress in 1892. This prejudice didn't really fade until Catholic John Fitzgerald Kennedy ran against Richard Milhous Nixon in the 1968 presidential campaign, won, and governed without being controlled by the pope.

Catholics were not the only ones persecuted among immigrant groups. The 1885 Rock Springs massacre of 28 Chinese immigrant workers by unionized white workers was a dark stain on the history of the American West.³²

In spite of the violence and anti-immigrant hostility in the

19th and early 20th centuries, the descendants of those immigrants assimilated, and Americans gradually accepted Catholicism as part of the religious fabric of the United States. Despite the occasional terrorist attack inspired by nativism, such as the 2019 shooting in El Paso, Texas, by an anti-immigrant white nationalist, modern cultural assimilation looks heavenly compared to the maelstrom of the 19th century, when lynching and riots figured quite prominently alongside assimilation.³³ Immigrant assimilation is always messy, and it looks bad when you're in the thick of it—as we are right now. However, the trends are positive.

Even though the evidence of immigrant assimilation should comfort skeptics, some have proposed massive new

government programs to help expedite assimilation. However, evidence from the early 20th-century Americanization Movement suggests that efforts, such as outlawing the use of foreign languages in public or private schools, jingoistic propaganda campaigns aimed at recent immigrants, or forced classes in American civics, will fail, or they could even backfire and make new immigrants and their descendants less culturally and patriotically American.³⁴

That is what happened with the Germans. In the early 20th century, the National German-American Alliance actively opposed the assimilation of German immigrants within the United States and discouraged the learning of English while representing that dominant immigrant group.³⁵ German Americans reacted most negatively to anti-German

Americanization policies during World War I—to such an extent that they walled themselves and their children off from American society, which slowed the pace of assimilation.³⁶ Immigrant assimilation is too important to leave in the hands of bureaucrats or other social planners who ignore the “if ain't broke, don't fix it” principle. Government involvement rarely improves anything and often makes its intended target worse; the government should not interrupt something as important as assimilation.





Myth
07

“Immigrants are a major source of crime.”

FACT: Immigrants, including illegal immigrants, are less likely to be incarcerated in prisons, convicted of crimes, or arrested than native-born Americans.

This myth has been around for more than a century. Government commissions and academic papers about immigration and crime found no relationship between crime and immigration in 1896, 1909, 1931, 1994, or more recent years.³⁷ **Some immigrants do commit violent and property crimes but, overall, they are less likely to do so.** Cities with more immigrants and their descendants tend to have less crime.³⁸

The most contentious debate regarding this issue concerns whether illegal immigrants are more likely to be criminals than are native-born Americans or legal immigrants. It’s important to clarify that merely **being an illegal immigrant in the United States is not a crime**, but rather a civil infraction. Crimes are punished with jail

time, while civil infractions are remedied by correcting the infraction. In immigration law, correcting civil infractions means deportation, which is not technically a punishment under American criminal law. To be clear, there are immigration offenses that are technically crimes and that are punished with short jail terms, but being an illegal immigrant present in the United States is not one of them.³⁹

It is difficult to know whether illegal immigrants are more likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans are. All immigrants have a lower criminal incarceration rate, and there are generally lower crime rates in the neighborhoods where they live, according to the near-unanimous findings of the peer-reviewed research.⁴⁰ That research combines legal and illegal immigrants to calculate

a crime rate for all immigrants, but the modern debate is over the crime rates of illegal immigrants.⁴¹ Most people believe that legal immigrants have lower crime rates than do native-born Americans. Measuring illegal immigrant crime rates is challenging for several reasons.

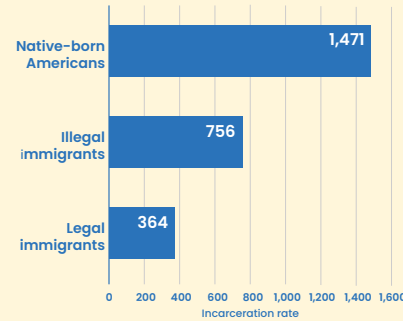
First, the American Community Survey does not ask which inmates in adult correctional facilities are illegal immigrants. Second, **49 states do not record the immigration statuses of those in prison or convicted of a crime.** Until recently, those data limitations allowed pundits such as Ann Coulter to say anything about illegal immigrant crime without fear of being fact-checked.⁴² Third, a wealth of circumstantial evidence is not consistent with a higher illegal immigrant crime rate. Fourth, a growing

body of peer-reviewed research has confirmed that illegal immigrants are less crime-prone than are native-born Americans. Fifth, the databases kept by the government to determine who is illegal and who isn't are woefully inadequate, meaning that they will likely need to be reorganized to actually reveal the information required.

Michelangelo Landgrave, a doctoral student in political science at the University of California–Riverside, and I estimated illegal immigrant incarceration rates by using the same residual statistical method that demographers use to estimate the number of illegal immigrants in the United States, but we applied that method to the prison population.⁴³ We found that **illegal immigrant incarceration rates were about half those**

of native-born Americans in 2017. In the same year, legal immigrant incarceration rates were also half those of illegal immigrants (Figure 3).

The state of Texas provides valuable data about criminal conviction rates of illegal immigrants. Unlike every other state, Texas keeps track of the immigration status of convicted criminals and the crimes that they committed. Texas is a good state to study because it borders Mexico, has a large illegal immigrant population, is a politically conservative state governed by Republicans, had no jurisdictions that limited its cooperation with federal immigration enforcement in 2017, and has a reputation for strictly enforcing criminal laws. If anything, Texas is more serious about enforcing laws against illegal immigrant criminals than are other states.



But even in Texas, illegal immigrant conviction rates are about half those of native-born Americans—without controls for age, education, ethnicity, or any other characteristic (Figure 4).⁴⁴ The illegal immigrant conviction rates for larceny, sex crimes, and almost all other crimes are also below those of native-born Americans—even for the worst crime of homicide (Figure 5). The criminal conviction rates for legal immigrants are the lowest of all.

Figure 3. Incarceration rates by immigration status in 2017, per 100,000

Source: Michelangelo Landgrave and Alex Nowrasteh, "Criminal Immigrants in 2017: Their Numbers, Demographics, and Countries of Origin," Cato Institute Immigration Research and Policy Brief no. 11, March 4, 2019.

Note: Rates are per 100,000 residents in each subpopulation.

Consistent with the Texas research, crime along the Mexican border is much lower than in the rest of the country; homicide rates in Mexican states bordering the United States are not correlated with homicide rates in adjacent American states. **El Paso's border fence did not lower crime**, and Texas criminal conviction rates remain low (but not as low) when recidivism is factored in.⁴⁵ Police clearance rates are not lower in states

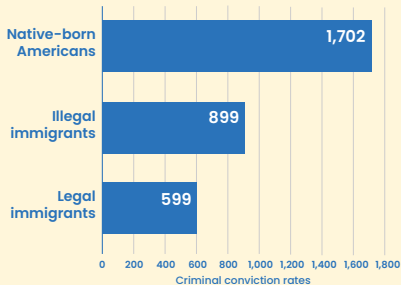


Figure 4. Criminal conviction rates by immigration status in 2017, per 100,000

Sources: Alex Nowrasteh, "Criminal Immigrants in Texas in 2017: Illegal Immigrant Conviction Rates and Arrest Rates for Homicide, Sex Crimes, Larceny, and Other Crimes," Cato Institute Immigration Research and Policy Brief no. 13, August 27, 2019; author's analysis of data from the Texas Department of Public Safety, the American Community Survey, and the Center for Migration Studies.

Note: Rates are per 100,000 residents in each subpopulation.

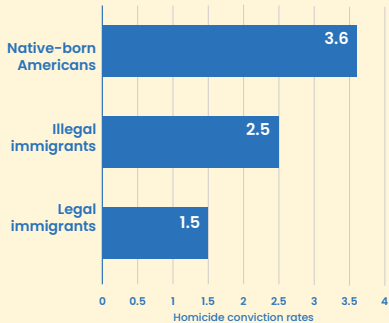


Figure 5. Homicide conviction rates by immigration status in 2017, per 100,000

Sources: Alex Nowrasteh, "Criminal Immigrants in Texas in 2017: Illegal Immigrant Conviction Rates and Arrest Rates for Homicide, Sex Crimes, Larceny, and Other Crimes," Cato Institute Immigration Research and Policy Brief no. 13, August 27, 2019; author's analysis of data from the Texas Department of Public Safety, the American Community Survey, and the Center for Migration Studies.

Note: Rates are per 100,000 residents in each subpopulation.

with many illegal immigrants, meaning that immigrants don't just commit their crimes and run back across the border.⁴⁶ Furthermore, arrest rates for illegal immigrants are as closely correlated with their conviction rates as the arrest rates for native-born Americans are correlated with their conviction rates.⁴⁷

In peer-reviewed journals, sociologists Michael Light and Ty Miller found that **a higher illegal immigrant population does not increase violent crime rates.**⁴⁸ Those two researchers teamed up with Purdue sociologist Brian C. Kelly to look at how higher illegal immigrant populations affected drug arrests, drug overdose deaths, and driving under the influence (DUI) arrests. They found large and statistically significant associated reductions in drug arrests, drug overdose deaths,

and DUI arrests when looking at a larger illegal immigrant population and no statistically significant relationship between increased illegal immigration and DUI deaths.⁴⁹

The preceding paragraphs will not console a victim of illegal immigrant crime—and it shouldn't. To those victims and their loved ones, their pain is not diminished by knowing how unlikely it was to happen to them. There will be criminals in any large group of people, and there are some infuriating and shocking incidents such as the killing of Kate Steinle in San Francisco in 2015.⁵⁰ The public seems to understand that the actions of a comparatively small number of illegal immigrants do not mean that they are more crime-prone than are native-born Americans, which is what matters the most when debating public policy.

A 2016 Pew poll found that only 27 percent of Americans thought that illegal immigrants were more likely to commit serious crimes than were native-born Americans, while 67 percent said they were less likely.⁵¹ Among Republicans, 42 percent said that illegal immigrants are more likely to commit serious crimes and 52 percent said they are less likely. A Quinnipiac poll in 2018 revealed that only 17 percent of voters thought that illegal immigrants committed more crimes than did native-born Americans, and 72 percent of voters thought that illegal immigrants committed less crime.⁵²

Part of the reason that American voters might not be so concerned with illegal immigrant crime overall, but might be very concerned in specific cases such as the killing

of Kate Steinle, is that **most illegal immigrant criminals probably victimize other illegal immigrants.** Of the homicides in 2018 where the relationship between the murderer and the victim is known, about 80 percent of murderers knew their victims.⁵³ The relationship between victim and murderer could be even higher for illegal immigrants as they try to avoid problems with Americans while living and working in the black market. Americans tend to care more when native-born Americans are murdered by illegal immigrants than when an illegal immigrant murders another illegal immigrant.





Myth
08

“Immigrants pose a unique risk today because of terrorism.”

FACT: The annual chance of being murdered in a terrorist attack committed by a foreign-born person on U.S. soil from 1975 through the end of 2017 was about 1 in 3.8 million per year.

Terrorism is not a modern means to wage war. A large number of bombings and terrorist attacks occurred in the early 20th century, many of them committed by immigrants, labor unionists, socialists, and their fellow travelers.⁵⁴ Today, **deaths from terrorism committed by immigrants are greater than they were a century ago, but the risk is still low.** Overall, immigration is not correlated with terrorist attacks, and the risk of being murdered in an attack committed by a foreign-born terrorist is also small.⁵⁵ For instance, the annual chance of being murdered in a terrorist attack committed by a foreign-born person on U.S. soil from 1975 through the end of 2017 was about 1 in 3.8 million per year (Table 1). More than 98 percent of the people murdered by foreign-born terrorists on U.S. soil were murdered on

Visa category	Terrorism deaths per visa category	Annual chance of being killed
All	3,037	1 in 3,808,372
Tourist	2,829.4	1 in 4,087,787
Student	158.8	1 in 72,838,750
Lawful permanent resident (LPR)	17	1 in 680,354,517
K-1	14	1 in 826,144,771
Asylum	9	1 in 1,285,114,088
Unknown	4.8	1 in 2,409,588,916
Refugee	3	1 in 3,855,342,265
Visa Waiver Program (VWP)	1	1 in 11,566,026,795
Illegal	0	0

9/11, and the attackers entered on tourist visas and one student visa, not immigrant visas.

Table 1. Terrorism deaths per visa category and annual chance of being murdered, 1975–2017

Source: Alex Nowrasteh, “Terrorists by Immigration Status and Nationality: A Risk Analysis, 1975–2017,” Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 866, May 7, 2019.

The risk of foreign-born terrorism on U.S. soil has also increased fears over the government's vetting system for new immigrants and travelers, prompting President Trump to temporarily ban travelers and immigrants from certain countries.⁵⁶ But according to Cato Institute immigration policy analyst David Bier, there have been few vetting failures since 9/11. From 2002 through 2016, only one radicalized terrorist entered the United States for every 29 million visa or status approvals.⁵⁷ Only one of the post-9/11 vetting failures resulted in an attack on U.S. soil, meaning that a single deadly terrorist entered as a result of a vetting failure for every 379 million visas or status approvals from 2002 through 2016. That is a very low risk, especially compared with the pre-9/11 vetting system.





Myth
09

“The United States has the most open immigration policy in the world.”

FACT: The annual inflow of immigrants to the United States, as a percentage of our population, is below that of most other rich countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

More immigrants come to the United States legally each year than to any other country. However, the annual inflow of immigrants as a percentage of our population is below that of most other rich countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development because the United States has such a large population. For instance, annual immigrants to the United States account for about 0.31 percent of the American population, while the equivalent figures for Canada and Australia are 0.74 percent and 1.1 percent, respectively.⁵⁸ **The percentage of our population that is foreign-born is about 13.5 percent—**below historical highs in the United States, less than half of what it is in New Zealand and Australia, and well below that of Canada.⁵⁹ America does a good job of assimilating immigrants,

but other countries assimilate immigrants well and allow much more legal immigration.





Myth
10

“Amnesty or a failure to enforce our immigration laws will destroy the Rule of Law in the United States.”

FACT: America’s current immigration laws violate every principal component of the Rule of Law. Enforcing laws that are inherently

capricious and that are contrary to our traditions is inconsistent with a stable Rule of Law.

For a law to be consistent with the principle of the Rule of Law, it must be applied equally, have roughly predictable outcomes based on the circumstances, and be consistent with our Anglo-Saxon traditions of personal autonomy and individual liberty. Our current immigration laws violate each of those principles.

Through arbitrary quotas and other regulations, the immigration laws are applied differently according to people’s country of birth. The outcomes are certainly not predictable, and they are hardly consistent with America’s traditional immigration policy and our conceptions of liberty.

For the Rule of Law to be

present, good laws are required, not just strict adherence to and government enforcement of bad laws. An amnesty is an admission that our past laws have failed, that they need reform, and that the cost of enforcing them in the meantime exceeds the benefits. Hence, there have been numerous immigration amnesties throughout American history, such as in 1929, 1958, 1965, 1986, 1997, 1998, and 2000.⁶⁰

Enforcing laws that are inherently capricious and that are contrary to our traditions is inconsistent with a stable Rule of Law, which is a necessary but not sufficient condition for prosperity and liberty. **Enforcing bad laws poorly is better than enforcing bad laws uniformly** despite the uncertainty that the action generates. In immigration, poor enforcement of our

destructive laws is preferable to strict enforcement, but liberalization is still the best option. Admitting that our laws failed, granting an amnesty for lawbreakers, and reforming the law would not doom the Rule of Law in the United States—they would strengthen it.

“**An amnesty is an admission that our past laws have failed, that they need reform, and that the cost of enforcing them in the meantime exceeds the benefits.**”



Myth
11

“Illegal immigration or expanding legal immigration will destroy American national sovereignty.”

FACT: Different immigration policies do not reduce the U.S. government’s

ability to defend American sovereignty.

By not exercising control over borders through actively blocking immigrants—users of this argument warn—the U.S. government will surrender a vital component of its national sovereignty.⁶¹ Rarely do those users explain to whom the U.S. government would actually surrender sovereignty. Even in the most extreme open immigration policy imaginable (totally open borders), national sovereignty is not diminished if we assume that our government’s institutions chose such a policy. How can that be?

The standard Weberian definition of a government is an institution that has a monopoly (or near monopoly) on the legitimate use of violence within a certain geographical area. It achieves this monopoly by

keeping out other competing sovereign governments. Our government maintains its sovereignty by excluding the militaries of other nations, by stopping insurgents, and by interrupting the plans of terrorists. Keeping out nonstate actors who do not intend to commit violence that would replace or overthrow the state is not necessary for the continued existence of the U.S. government.

U.S. immigration laws are not designed primarily to keep out foreign armies, spies, or insurgents. **The main effect of our immigration laws is to prevent willing foreign workers from selling their labor to Americans who wish to voluntarily purchase it.**

Such economic controls do not aid in maintaining national sovereignty; thus, relaxing

or removing them would not infringe on the government’s national sovereignty any more than a policy of unilateral free trade would. If the United States were to return to its 1790–1875 immigration policy, foreign militaries crossing U.S. borders would still be countered by the U.S. military. Allowing the free flow of nonviolent and healthy foreign nationals does nothing to diminish the U.S. government’s legitimate monopoly on the use of force.

A historical argument can be made that free immigration and national sovereignty are not in conflict. From 1790 to 1875, the federal government placed no restrictions on immigration. During much of that period, various states imposed restrictions on the migration of free blacks and likely indigents through outright bans, taxes, passenger regulations, and

bonds. States did not enforce many of those restrictions, and the Supreme Court struck down the rest of them in the 1840s. However, the **open immigration policy did not stop the United States from fighting three major wars: the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, and the Civil War.** The U.S. government's monopoly on the legitimate use of force during that time was certainly challenged from within and without, but it maintained its national sovereignty even with near-open borders. Those who claim the U.S. government would lose its national sovereignty under a regime of free immigration have yet to reconcile their claim with America's past. To argue that open borders would destroy American sovereignty is to argue that the United States was not a sovereign country when

it had open borders during the presidential administrations of George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and others. We do not have to choose between free immigration and U.S. national sovereignty.

Furthermore, national sovereign control over immigration means that the government can do whatever it wants with that power—including relinquishing it entirely. It would be odd for restrictionists to argue, as they apparently do, that sovereign states should have complete control over their borders but that they cease to be sovereign states if their borders are too open. After all, I am arguing that the U.S. government should allow for more legal immigration, not that the U.S. government should cede all its immigration power to a foreign government.





Myth

12

“Immigrants won’t vote for the Republican Party—look at what happened to California.”

FACT: Republican immigration policies pushed immigrants away, not the other way around.

This is an argument used by some Republicans and conservatives to oppose liberalized immigration. They point to my home state of California as an example of what happens when there are too many immigrants and their descendants: Democratic Party dominance. *The evidence is clear that Hispanic and immigrant voters in California in the early to mid-1990s did turn the state blue, but that was as a reaction to California’s GOP declaring political war on them.*⁶² Those who claim that an immigration-induced change in demographics is solely responsible for the shift in California’s politics must explain the severe drop-off in support for the GOP at exactly the same time that the party was using anti-immigration propositions and arguments to win the 1994 election.

They would further have to explain why Texas Hispanics are so much more Republican than those in California are. Nativism has never been the path toward national party success and frequently contributes to their downfalls.⁶³ In other words, whether immigrants vote for Republicans is mostly up to how Republicans treat them. Republicans should look toward the inclusive and relatively pro-immigration policies and positions adopted by their fellow party members in Texas, at least prior to the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and their subsequent electoral success rather than trying to replicate the foolish nativist politics pursued by the now almost-extinct California Republican Party. Although some Texas Republicans have changed their tone on immigration in recent years, they have focused primarily

on border security rather than forcing every state employee to help enforce immigration law as the California GOP tried to do in 1994. My comment here assumes that locking people out of the United States because they might disproportionately vote for one of the two major parties is a legitimate use of government power—I do not believe that it is.

“In other words, whether immigrants vote for Republicans is mostly up to how Republicans treat them.”



Myth
13

“Immigrants bring with them bad cultures, ideas, or other factors that will undermine and destroy our economic and political institutions. The resultant

weakening in economic growth means that immigrants will destroy more wealth than they will create over the long run.”

FACT: There is no evidence that immigrants weaken or undermine American economic, political, or cultural institutions.

This is the most intelligent anti-immigration argument, and it would be the most convincing if the evidence supported it. Economists Michael Clemens and Lant Pritchett lay out an enlightening model of how immigrants from poorer countries could theoretically weaken the growth potential

of the countries that they immigrate to.⁶⁴ Their model assumes that immigrants transmit anti-growth factors to the United States in the form of lower economic productivity. However, as the immigrants assimilate, those anti-growth factors weaken over time. Congestion could counteract that assimilation process when there are too many immigrants with too many bad ideas, thus overwhelming assimilative forces. Clemens and Pritchett are rightly skeptical that this is occurring, but their paper lays out the theoretical point that immigration restrictions would be efficient by balancing the benefits of economic expansion caused by immigration with the theoretical costs of degradation in economic growth.

Empirical evidence does not point to this effect existing either. In a recent academic



paper, my coauthors and I compared economic freedom scores with immigrant populations across more than 100 countries over 21 years.⁶⁵ Some countries were majority immigrant, while some had virtually no immigrants. We found that **the larger a country's immigrant population was in 1990, the more economic freedom increased in the same country by 2011.** Immigrant countries of origin did not affect the outcome. Those results held for the United States nationally but not for state governments. States with greater immigrant populations in 1990 had less economic freedom in 2011 than did those with fewer immigrants, but the difference was small. The national increase in economic freedom more than outweighed the small decrease in economic freedom

in states with more immigrants. Additionally, large and sudden movements of immigrants into specific countries resulted in vast improvements in the economic freedom score.⁶⁶ **Large immigrant populations also do not increase the size of welfare programs** or other government programs across American states, and there is a lot of evidence that more immigrants in European countries can actually decrease support for big government.⁶⁷

Although this anti-immigration argument could be true, it seems unlikely to be so for several reasons. First, it is very hard to upend established political and economic institutions through immigration. Individual immigrants change to fit into the existing order rather than vice versa. Institutions are ontologically collective—my

American conception of private property rights would not accompany me in any meaningful way if I went to Cuba. Local institutions are incredibly robust under a model called the Doctrine of First Effective Settlement whereby the first institutions established in an area persist unless the original settlers, their descendants, the assimilated immigrants, and their descendants are all virtually and quickly replaced by newcomers with different institutions.⁶⁸ In other words, it would take a rapid inundation of a local area by immigrants and a replacement of natives to upend institutions in most places—similar to what happened during the settlement of the American West.

The second possibility is immigrant self-selection: those who decide to come here mostly

admire American institutions or have opinions on policies that are very similar to those of native-born Americans. This appears to be the case in the United States, where immigrants arrive with opinions very close to those of native-born Americans and then have even more similar opinions by the time they naturalize.⁶⁹ As a result, adding more immigrants who already broadly share the opinions of most Americans will not affect policy.

The third explanation is that foreigners and Americans have very similar policy opinions.⁷⁰ This hypothesis is related to those just described, but it indicates an area where Americans may be unexceptional compared to the rest of the world. According to this theory, Americans are not more supportive of free markets than are most other people; we

are just lucky that we inherited excellent institutions from our ancestors.

The fourth reason is that more open immigration can make native voters oppose welfare or expanded government services because they believe immigrants will disproportionately consume the benefits (regardless of the fact that poor immigrants actually underconsume welfare compared with poor Americans). In essence, **voters hold back the expansion of those programs on the basis of a belief that immigrants may take advantage of them.** As Paul Krugman aptly observed, “Absent those [immigration] restrictions, there would have been many claims, justified or not, about people flocking to America to take advantage of [New Deal] welfare programs.”⁷¹

As the late labor historian (and immigration restrictionist) Vernon M. Briggs Jr. wrote, “This era [of immigration restrictions from 1921 to 1968] witnessed the enactment of the most progressive worker and family legislation the nation has ever adopted.” None of those programs would have been politically possible to create amid mass immigration. Government grows the fastest when immigration is the most restricted, and it slows dramatically when the borders are more open.⁷²

Even Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels thought that the prospects for a working-class revolution in the United States were smaller because the immigrant workers were divided by a high degree of ethnic, sectarian, and racial diversity.⁷³ That immigrant-led diversity may be why the United

States never had a popular worker, labor, or socialist party.

The theory that immigrants could worsen our economic and political institutions, thus slowing economic growth and killing the goose that lays the golden eggs, is one of the most potentially devastating arguments against liberalized immigration. Fortunately, the academic and policy literature does not support this argument, and there is some evidence that immigrants actually improve our institutions.



country, enriches the immigrants, and helps (or at least does not hurt) those left behind.

The empirical evidence on this point is conclusive: the flow of skilled workers from low-productivity countries to high-productivity nations increases the incomes of people in the destination country, enriches the immigrants, and helps (or at least does not hurt) those left behind. Furthermore, remittances that immigrants send home are often large enough to offset any loss in home country income through emigration. In the long run, the potential to emigrate and the higher returns from education increase the incentive for workers in the developing world to acquire skills that they otherwise might not have, thereby increasing the quantity of human capital. Instead of

being called a brain drain, this phenomenon should more accurately be called a skill flow. **Economic development should be about increasing the incomes of people** and not the amount of economic activity in specific geographical regions. Immigration and emigration do just that.⁷⁴



“The brain drain of smart immigrants to the United States impoverishes other countries.”

FACT: The flow of skilled workers to rich nations increases the incomes of people in the destination





Myth
15

“Immigrants will increase crowding, harm the environment, and [insert misanthropic statement here].”

FACT: People, including immigrants, are an economic and environmental blessing and not a curse.

The late economist Julian Simon spent much of his career showing that people are an economic and environmental blessing, not a curse.⁷⁵ Despite his work, numerous anti-immigration organizations today were funded and founded to oppose immigration because it would increase the number of Americans who would then harm the environment. Yes, seriously—that was the driving motivation of the late John Tanton, who was the Johnny Appleseed of modern American nativism.⁷⁶

Concerns about overcrowding are focused on publicly provided goods or services such as schools, roads, and heavily zoned urban areas. Private businesses do not complain about crowding because they can boost their profits by expanding to meet demand or by charging higher prices. If

crowding were really a problem, then privatizing government functions so that owners would have an incentive to rapidly meet demand is a cheap and easy option. Even if the government does not do that, and I do not expect it to do so soon, the problems of crowding are manageable because having more immigrants also means having a larger tax base.

Reforming or removing local land-use laws that prevent development would also go a long way to alleviating any concerns about overcrowding.

Although we should think of such issues on the margin, would you rather be stuck with the problem of crowding as suffered in Houston or the problem of not enough crowding as in Detroit?



Conclusion

These arguments against immigrants are the main ones usually debated. There are others that people use in opposition to immigration, but many of those revolve around issues of “fairness”—a word with a fuzzy meaning that differs dramatically between people and cultures. Arguments about fairness depend entirely on feelings and, usually, on a misunderstanding of the facts, a misunderstanding that can be corrected by reference to any of the earlier points.

This document’s responses to the common complaints about immigration are short, quick, and consistent with the evidence regarding immigration and its alleged negative impact on the United States. One can, of course, disagree with a pro-

immigration policy position after being confronted with such facts, but that person must come up with entirely different arguments.



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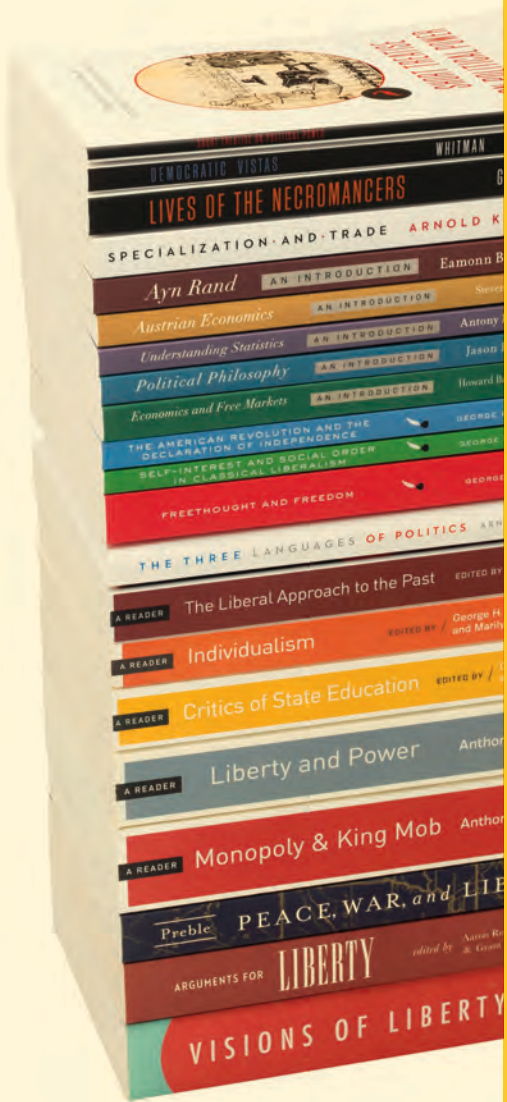
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