

IMMIGRATION

Throughout human history, circumstances have forced people to move and leave their homes behind. Sometimes there was no longer enough game to hunt. Sometimes their crops were failing because of persistent drought. Sometimes a neighboring tribe was stronger and threatened to exterminate them. To a great extent, history is the story of people on the move, for one reason or another.

With the rise of the modern state a few hundred years ago, national borders came into existence. Governments then began to regulate whether and which individuals and families could move into their country. Immigration became subject to law.

From its earliest beginnings, America has depended on immigration to expand its population. A larger population made our country a greater force in the world, both economically and militarily. New immigrants meant more workers, more consumers and greater national wealth.

The Immigration and Nationality Act, passed in 1965, established the current ground rules for immigration into the United States. The act sets four goals for immigration: unifying families, admitting skilled workers, protecting refugees and promoting diversity. The number of legally admitted immigrants living in America has grown from 10 million in 1965 to 47 million in 2020, with about a million new immigrants being admitted each year. Some Americans are happy with this situation. Some are not.

Business advocates support immigration, as they have often done in the past. Immigration increases the number of people competing for jobs, which drives wages down and business profits up. Similarly, many champions of economic growth embrace immigration.

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Since 1965, over half of U.S. population growth is due to immigration. And an increasing population of workers and consumers spurs growth in the economy.

Other supporters of immigration include people who have family or friends living in another country and want them to come join them in America. Many humanitarians welcome immigration as a way to relieve the suffering of people who live in adverse circumstances around the world. Finally, there are people who relish the increased ethnic and cultural diversity that immigration brings to our country.

Immigration also has its opponents. Advocates for working people see immigration as one of several reasons that blue collar wages have stagnated for many years, especially compared to the income of the wealthiest Americans. A study by the Rand Corporation in 1998 estimated that, if there were no immigration, incomes for African American men without a high school diploma would have been 10% to 16% higher. A reduction in immigration would mean fewer people competing for jobs. That in turn would drive wages up, a good thing for working people. At the same time, it would also drive prices higher for consumers.

In his book *The Righteous Mind*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt notes that people vary considerably in their comfort level with change and with people who are different from them. It should not surprise us, then, that not only in America but throughout the world, some people oppose immigration because they are uncomfortable with foreigners. Even people who don't feel that way personally have expressed concern that too much immigration might change our

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culture too quickly and erode the social cohesion or trust that keeps a democracy strong.

There are also people who are concerned that immigrants might receive more in public benefits than they contribute to society by paying taxes. However, in a November 2018 article on the PBS website, Gretchen Frazee says that immigrants “contribute more in tax revenue than they take in government benefits.” She cites a 2017 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine which found that immigration “has an overall positive impact on the long-run economic growth in the U.S.”

Finally, opposition to immigration sometimes comes from environmentalists. Americans on a per-person basis generate more of the greenhouse gases that cause climate change than citizens of other countries. For that reason, some people fear that by growing our population through immigration, we might make climate change worse. That may be true, but as we saw in earlier sessions, there are many other things we can do to reverse climate change.

As many commentators have noted, America has always been a country of immigrants. The decline of working class wages and incomes is a serious problem, one that government policy needs to address. Yet immigrants are helping to grow our country’s economy. Apart from the problem of stagnant wages for the working class, which has other causes and other solutions, there don’t seem to be compelling reasons to change our immigration system. As America brings more of the world’s ethnic and cultural diversity into itself, that can improve our ability to understand and relate to people who are

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different from us, both here and in other countries. And that is a good thing.