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Demography Special

Rise in anti-immigration sentiments in the United States

- While an anti-immigration debate had been building up in recent years, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks have clearly brought it to the front burner. This anti-immigration movement finds its intellectual support on both sides of the political spectrum.
- According to a popular economic argument, immigrants “steal American jobs”. Actually, they are contributing to U.S. economic growth: cities or states with a large immigrant population enjoy faster economic growth. It is also noteworthy that immigrants account for about one-third of the scientific workforce in Silicon Valley.
- Critics point to the immigrants’ failure to assimilate. However, given their strong desire to succeed, immigrant children work harder than their native-born classmates, usually earn better grades, and drop out less frequently.
- The security argument, although very potent, is totally irrational, given that many terrorists had proper visas or were American citizens. As a matter of fact everyone in the United States is an immigrant, in this generation or prior ones. Therefore, barring or greatly restricting immigration would be devastating and virtually unthinkable.

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This is not just a piece of analysis. This is a manifesto of a Polish immigrant to the US, a friend of mine. It is a letter to America and to Europe. It is something to be considered for the benefit of mankind. I am not shy to use these words.

Norbert Walter

Rise in anti-immigration sentiments in the United States

America, the land of immigrants, is undergoing a major re-evaluation of its attitudes toward immigration, which manifests itself by a distinct rise in anti-immigration sentiments.

Clearly, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks were a major factor contributing to this development. Public opinion polls revealed that the attacks greatly increased peoples' fears of foreigners. In one poll, two-thirds of the respondents said they wanted to stop all immigration until the war against terrorism was over. Congress is debating major changes in the immigration laws and regulations, such as tighter screening of visa applicants, intelligence sharing among federal agencies, introduction of tampering-proof travel documents, better tracking of foreign students, etc. The Justice Department is preparing mandatory registration and fingerprinting of all visitors from Muslim and Middle Eastern countries.

These efforts assumed heightened immediacy after recent revelations about unheeded warnings prior to the Sept. 11 attacks, as well as lack of cooperation between FBI and CIA. But the intensification of anti-immigration feelings actually predates the Sept. 11 events.

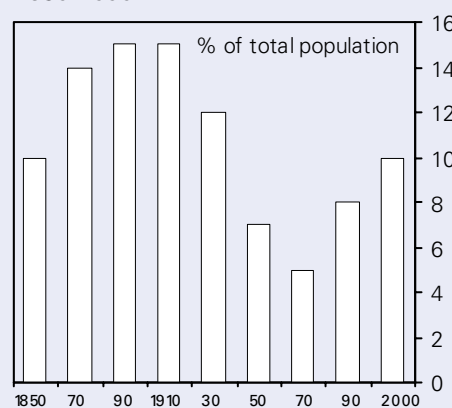
Protagonists of the anti-immigration debate

Whereas the recent rise in anti-immigration attitudes is attributable to the Sept. 11 attacks and their aftermath, they are not new nor unprecedented. Throughout its history, the U.S. has been exposed in varying degrees to anti-immigrant tendencies as consecutive waves of immigrants – whether political or economic – were entering the country, where they were not particularly welcomed by their predecessors who had already settled down. These tendencies intensified in the mid-1990s, which was to some extent paradoxical since they coincided with the economic boom. Also, while the number of immigrants entering the country has been rising (from about 250,000 per year in the 1950s to about 1 million now), the share of foreign-born people in total population has been actually declining in the long term. According to the latest census, 10% of U.S. population (28 million people) was foreign born in 2000. While rising over the past 30 years, the share was much lower than in peak immigration years in the late 19th and early 20th century (see chart).

The best-known organizations that are in the forefront of the anti-immigration movement (so-called restrictionists) are: Federation for Immigration Reform (FAIR), Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), and writers associated with a group called VDare¹. It is noteworthy that the restrictionist movement represents a broad spectrum of political and

Sept. 11 has brought the anti-immigration debate to the front burner

Foreign-born population of the US: 1850-2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

¹ VDare is named after Virginia Dare, the first English child born in America who was kidnapped as an infant and never seen again.



ideological groups. The oldest and the richest of these groups is FAIR, which operates mainly in Western states and has a distinct populist bent. Its activity concentrates i.a. on TV ads and highway posters opposing immigration, particularly from Mexico and other Latin American countries heavily represented in California. (Latin America is the birthplace of 51% of all foreign-born people in the United States – see chart).

CIS and VDare were created in the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, respectively, as an outgrowth of FAIR, to provide an intellectual input to the anti-immigration movement. They are more national in scope than FAIR and have actually eclipsed it in national recognition. They mostly aim at influencing elite opinion-makers in New York and Washington.

The main intellectual guru of the contemporary restrictionist movement is Patrick Buchanan, a right-wing journalist and writer, and former presidential candidate. His recent book, "The Death of The West: How Dying Populations and Immigration Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization," has been for several months on the best-selling list of Amazon.com and *The New York Times* Book Review. In his book, which is mostly a demographic analysis, Buchanan contends that because of falling birthrates and aging populations, in 2050 only 10% of the world's population will be of European descent, while the people of Asia, Africa and Latin America will grow sharply. This will, he says, swamp the territories of the developed countries and destroy their culture. This is, he claims, not a matter of prophecy but of mathematics.

Another prominent restrictionist on the right end of the political spectrum is Peter Brimelow, a former senior editor of *Forbes* magazine and founder of VDare. His main arguments are centered on the danger of immigration for the original U.S. Anglo-Saxon stock.

But the anti-immigration movement finds its intellectual support not only among conservatives. Also liberal writers and scholars, as well as those positioned in the middle of the ideological spectrum, provide clear albeit more measured voices in the anti-immigration debate. For example, a leftist-oriented sociologist, Christopher Jencks, emphasizes in his writings the negative effects of immigration on the environment. In particular, he believes that due to immigration U.S. cities would become soon unlivable and the suburban sprawl would decimate the environment, especially by dwindling water supplies and raising carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

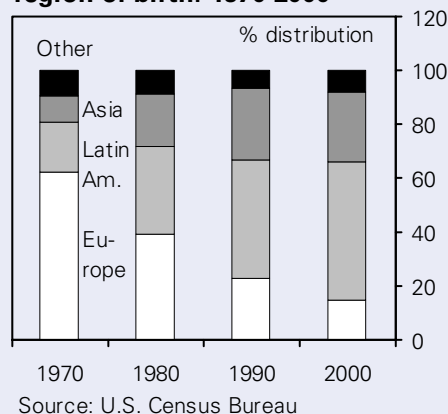
More objective but still anti-immigrant views presents in his writings Harvard's economist, George Borjas. Although he doesn't share the restrictionists' fear about immigrants taking over American jobs – a popular topic in the debate – he contends that immigration causes lower wages, and since immigrants consume more government services, they impose a fiscal drain particularly on local governments. Consequently, they are a burden to the American working class who must subsidize them with higher taxes. In addition, he appeals to ethnic groups by stressing in his writings particularly negative effects of rising immigration on the black population.

Main arguments of the anti-immigration movement

The discussion about immigration concentrates on four issues: economic, social, environmental, and security.

The traditional **economic** argument against immigrants is that they "steal American jobs." The intensity of this argument varies depending on the stage of the business cycle – it intensifies with rising

Foreign-born population by region of birth: 1970-2000



Intellectual support comes from both sides of the political spectrum

Popular economic arguments against immigration do not hold water

unemployment, and vice versa. The cyclical nature of the economic aspects of the immigration debate is best illustrated by recent experience regarding the flow of visa applications for highly skilled workers. The number of applications for these long-term visas dropped from 125,000 in the first quarter of 2001 to 55,000 in the first quarter 2002.

But generally, the link between the economic situation and the anti-immigration feelings has been greatly weakened in recent years. The rise in unemployment from the 3.9% low to the 6% high during the last two years has not materially raised anti-immigration voices. On the other hand, the major increase in the restrictionists' activity coincided with the greatest economic boom in recent history. It must have been other than economic reasons for that intensification. Moreover, it is a statistically established fact that cities and states with large immigrant population have generally faster economic growth than those that do not attract many immigrants.

Another anti-immigration argument in the debate is that foreign-born people are usually poorer and less educated, and therefore they use more government services than native-born Americans. Their educational level, occupational skills and income are indeed lower than those for native Americans (see charts). But it doesn't necessarily follow that they are a burden to society. While it is true that at the state and local levels, immigrants may be using e.g. more welfare and public education funds, on the national level, they contribute more in income and payroll taxes than they take out. This particularly applies to illegal immigrants who pay payroll taxes that contribute to the Social Security trust fund, but many never claim Social Security benefits.

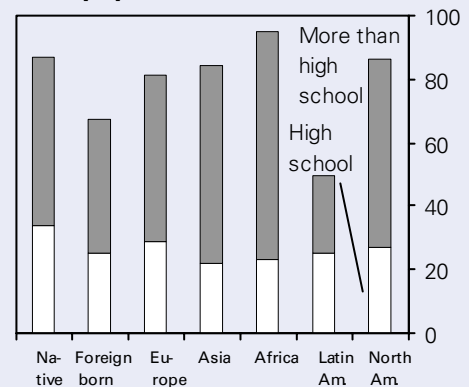
One can make the case that in many respects immigrant workers do not compete with, but complement, the native workforce by taking jobs that native-born Americans wouldn't take. This applies to both the uneducated immigrant workers, such as farm workers, bus boys, nannies, gardeners, etc. at the lower end of the labor force, and the highly educated – doctors, nurses, engineers, computer programmers and other professionals at the high end. It is noteworthy that immigrants account for about one-third of the scientific workforce in Silicon Valley.

On balance, foreign workers contribute to U.S. economic growth. The economic pie does not remain constant so that immigrants only participate in its distribution. The pie is rising and immigrants also contribute to the rise. The stellar performance of the U.S. economy in the 1990s was not only due to growing productivity but also to rising labor force, which together raised potential growth of the economy to 3½%–4% annually.

While in the decade of the 1990s, U.S. population rose by 13%, immigrant population rose by 44%. At 11.6% of the labor force, foreign-born workers constitute an important but not a decisive factor in the total workforce. Despite the fact that growth in immigrant population during the 1990s has been much higher than that of total population, U.S. economic output rose not only in absolute and relative terms, but also per capita.

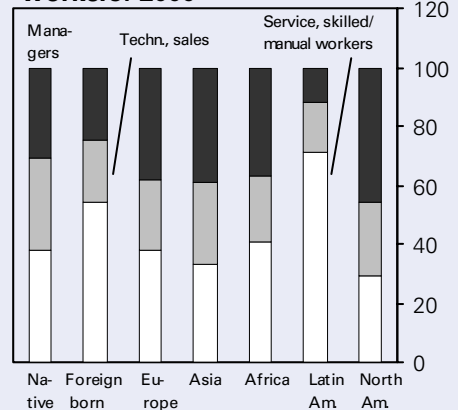
The **social** aspects of the anti-immigration movement center on the issue of assimilation. The restrictionists claim that large numbers of immigrants fail to assimilate into American society, refuse to learn English and to adopt American culture and values. Part of it can be ascribed to U.S. social trends that have emerged in recent decades among the liberal elites that dominate some U.S. universities and the media, namely fostering bilingual education, multiculturalism, political correctness, widespread criticism of American history and the political

High school completion or higher by region of birth of the foreign-born population: 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Occupational distribution by region of birth of foreign-born workers: 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau



system. But despite these obstacles, sooner or later immigrants assimilate into the American society. Recent polls demonstrated that by the third generation, even among Hispanics (who are most prone to using their native language), only 1% say they are using more or only Spanish at home.

Furthermore, a common interest among all immigrants has always been a strong desire to succeed. As indicated by Tamar Jacoby, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, immigrant children work harder than their native-born classmates, putting in on average about two hours of homework a night, compared with the "normal" 30 minutes². Later in their educational path, they usually earn better grades and drop out less frequently. Although many immigrants start at the bottom, most eventually join the middle class and many are doing better than native-born Americans. The final proof of their successful assimilation is the makeup of American society – a conglomeration of consecutive waves of immigrants over the past 350 years.

The **environmental** arguments of the restrictionists are the least convincing and to a large extent anachronistic. Some of them contend that immigration is bad for the environment since it depletes natural resources and pollutes the ecology. They bring up pre-historical arguments that Indians crossing the Bering Strait some 13,000 years ago depleted the continent's fauna by overhunting, only to be decimated many centuries later by the diseases brought in by the Europeans.

These are far-fetched arguments. There is an inherent contradiction between civilization and environment, and there is no evidence that immigrants contribute more to polluting the ecology than native-born Americans.

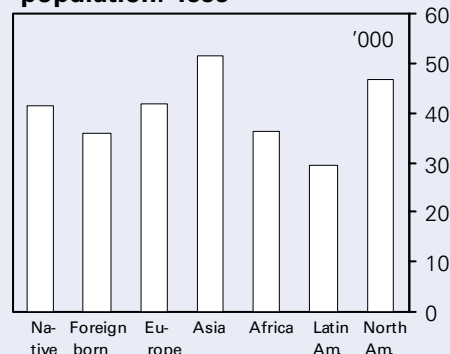
The **security** issue in the immigration debate is the newest one. This is an issue that might have the greatest impact on curbing immigration. It is closely related to the Sept. 11 attacks, the subsequent warnings about near certainty of future attacks, the revelations regarding the lack of cooperation and coordination between the main intelligence and security agencies. All these developments created a general sense of insecurity in the nation combined with a fear of foreigners.

This is a totally irrational, but a very potent argument. Experience of the last year showed that most of the actual or potential terrorists were in possession of valid American visas. Many lived and studied in the U.S. for long periods of time, some were American citizens. Barring all foreigners from entering the U.S. would have been sheer nonsense; it would make more harm than good without improving security. But if the restrictionists were to succeed in their anti-immigration fervor, it would mostly be because of the security aspects.

Official immigration policy

While the anti-immigration movement has been spreading in recent years among intellectuals and increasingly appealing to the labor unions and environmental groups, it didn't score much success on the political front. Its views have not percolated yet to Congress and have not influenced so far congressional deliberations, which focus mostly on more efficient implementation on existing immigration policies rather than on changing them.

Median household income by region of birth of foreign-born population: 1999



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Security argument is totally irrational, yet the most potent in the discussion

² Tamar Jacoby "Too Many Immigrants?" — *Commentary*, April 2002.

The Republican party, which had backed immigration opponents in the mid-1990s in California, is now firmly behind President Bush, who both during his election campaign and early in his presidency, was the leading advocate of liberalizing, not restricting, immigration laws. But as the 18-month period of Bush's presidency has demonstrated, he is a flexible politician, so he may change his views. No doubt, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and recent revelations about the U.S.'s lack of preparedness for these attacks may well change the official attitudes toward immigration. It is widely expected in political circles that the immigration issues will play an important role in the forthcoming midterm elections and the presidential election in 2004.

There is little doubt that U.S. immigration policy requires a major overhaul. The agency responsible for the implementation of that policy – the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) – is one of the least efficient federal agencies. Reportedly, four million authorized immigrants are waiting for their paperwork to be processed. The INS, now a part of the Justice Department, would be subordinated to the new Department of Homeland Security, according to President Bush's proposal. At the same time that the official policy is to control and limit the flow of legal immigrants, hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants are entering the country every year, without much difficulty, as a cheap labor force. It is estimated that about one-quarter of all foreign-born people living in America are illegal immigrants.

The failure of U.S. immigration policy is particularly evident at the U.S./Mexico juncture. One of the underlying reasons for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was to curb illegal immigration from Mexico by creating industrial facilities there through U.S. direct investment. As succinctly said at that time by then Mexican President Salinas, "I don't want Mexicans leaving the country anymore, only our products."

It didn't happen that way. Granted, U.S. investment in Mexico played a big role in the country's economic development and the increase of its standard of living. Moreover, population growth in Mexico has been slowing rapidly, to a large extent due to the beneficial effects of NAFTA. (The Mexican fertility rate has dropped over the past three decades from an average of 6.5 children per mother to 2.5.) But it didn't affect much illegal immigration from Mexico.

Evidently, the magnetic pull of the American economy is so strong that it attracts a lot of Mexican immigrants (80% of U.S. farm workers are Mexicans), even though NAFTA created a lot of jobs inside Mexico. A facilitating factor was that, especially during the economic boom of the 1990s, American businesses welcomed Mexican immigrants, both legal and illegal, to fill in jobs native Americans were not willing to take.

An important weakness of the U.S. immigration laws is that they are somewhat antiquated. They are based mainly on the principle of family unification by giving visa preferences to families of existing legal immigrants rather than to people who bring skills and education to the country, as it is generally practiced in Canada. This has its historical background. Early waves of immigrants were mainly political immigrants – people fleeing their homelands due to religious and political persecution. Political immigration dominated during long stretches of the 19th century, and then in the 1930s and during the Cold War as people were seeking freedom from Nazism and Communism. The principle of family unification was appropriate for this type of immigration.

Administration does not seem to be in favour of tight rules

But immigration regulations require major overhaul

Contrary to expectations NAFTA did not curb illegal immigration from Mexico

Immigration law focuses on family unification rather than immigrants' skills and education



It was only later in the 19th century and most of the 20th century that economic immigration became the prevalent one, as people were looking for better life, when the skill and education factors came to the fore. To be sure, the preferential treatment of families of existing immigrants is more humane but not necessarily appropriate in the present reality. It is certainly more costly, and it fuels the anti-immigration movement.

Concluding remarks

The rise in anti-immigration attitudes is not an exclusive American phenomenon. It has emerged also in Europe, as recent political trends in such countries as Austria, Denmark, France and Holland clearly demonstrate. There are two main factors fuelling anti-immigration feelings in Europe – job competition and the rise in crime. No doubt, globalization has enhanced the importance of these factors and contributed to their emergence. It is no accident that immigration issues were at the top of the agenda of the European summit in Seville.

However, the importance and dimension of anti-immigration sentiments in Europe and America are quite different. The European countries are largely homogenous societies. The inflow of foreign workers began when they became affluent so that native workers were unwilling to perform various menial jobs. Foreign-born workers serve as an important complementary factor, but they have never really climbed the social ladder. They have not assimilated into native societies, even though by now several generations of immigrants are present in many European countries.

Totally different is the situation in the United States where actually everybody is an immigrant, in this generation or prior ones. The U.S. is a melting pot that created a new society – out of many, one (*e pluribus unum*, as inscribed on one-dollar coins). Barring or greatly restricting immigration in Europe would be simply harmful for the economy. In America, it would be devastating and virtually unthinkable.

It is impossible to predict how the immigration debate would develop, what would be the changes in the immigration laws and their implementation, what impact these changes might have on the U.S. economy, on political developments and the whole social fabric of the nation. One thing seems certain – they will all play a very important role in coming years.

Despite the recent developments and all the fears and apprehensions of the post-Sept. 11 era, I do not expect any drastic cuts in immigration to the United States. What is likely to happen, though, is the rise in isolationist attitudes in the U.S., as a by-product of the immigration debate. Isolationism is creeping up anyway in response to the constant America-bashing by European politicians and the media. As history shows, American isolationism has been always harmful, both for the U.S. and Europe. It is really regrettable that the governments on both sides of the Atlantic don't pay enough attention.

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Anti-immigration attitudes are not an exclusively American phenomenon

As almost everyone in the US is an immigrant, a greatly restrictive immigration policy is virtually unthinkable



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