Accelerating “Americanization”: A Study of Immigrant Assimilation

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Executive Summary

Assimilation is essential for immigrants to succeed in the United States. And, at a time when the U.S. population is growing only because of foreign-born migration, it is more important than ever for native-born Americans and policymakers to be concerned about the success of immigrant (both authorized and unauthorized) populations in the United States.

This report documents how immigrants are faring relative to native-born Americans in several areas—including educational attainment, wage growth, occupational prestige, and marriage and family formation—and how states are competing for immigrants within the country. The findings suggest that there is space for both federal and state governments to “upskill” the existing immigrant population—making them more educated, competent in the English language, and economically productive—as well as future cohorts of immigrants who arrive in the United States.

I conclude the report with small changes that Congress can implement to make the U.S. immigration system favor more highly educated, entrepreneurial, and English-proficient immigrants, such as imposing minimum educational and language-proficiency levels on new immigrants in the family-based categories. Because immigrants constitute a significant portion of interstate migration, I also touch on how states might attract and retain more highly educated foreign-born residents, despite competition from other U.S. states, such as expanding access to English-language training and improving education.
Key findings on economic conditions:

- College-educated immigrants are economically better off than similar college-educated natives; the opposite is true among non-college-educated immigrant and native workers.

- Income inequality in the U.S. has grown in the last half-century, but to a much greater extent between immigrants than natives.

Key findings on English competency:

- The immigrant population of the U.S. has the greatest English proficiency since the U.S. Census Bureau began measuring the skill in 1980. Today, 57% of immigrants to the U.S. speak only English or English “very well.”

- Immigrants who have arrived since 2010, particularly those younger than 45, know more English and are better educated than any previous immigrant wave.

Key findings on education:

- Immigrants to the U.S. are the most educated they have ever been, and the share of immigrants with a college degree has matched that of natives since the 1960s.

- However, the share of immigrants who did not complete high school has fallen at a slower pace than among natives, suggesting that states can help this undereducated population gain more skills.

Key findings on family formation:

- While marriage rates have fallen steadily in the U.S., marriage rates among immigrants have done so to a much lesser extent.

- Lower birthrates are causing the family size among natives to fall. By contrast, family size of immigrants grew from the 1960s through the beginning of the twenty-first century. Only recently has the average immigrant family size begun to fall.

Introduction

When new immigrants arrive in the U.S., to what extent should Americans citizens expect them to assimilate to American culture, habits, and ways of living?

Properly understood, assimilation benefits both natives and newcomers. By taking in or being absorbed into the cultural tradition of the native population, newcomers are better able to communicate and integrate into society and workplaces, as well as make better use of public services. For example, learning the language of a host community enables immigrants to form personal and professional relationships that will help them and their families live happier and more prosperous lives. Natives benefit from these new friendships and associations, too. They may be more open and helpful to immigrants who show an interest in assimilation, and everyone in the country may be better off with the increased economic activity and positive social and civic relationships.
In part, immigration is a hotly contested political issue because Americans now disagree over whether immigrants should assimilate—and what that process even means.

Some progressives consider any expectation that newcomers assimilate as anti-immigrant and provincial. By contrast, some conservatives view too much difference as a source of disunity. They view assimilation as a prerequisite to new immigration and a goal of public policy.

This divergence is important because how Americans think about immigration and assimilation matters significantly for public policy. In late 2020, a Pew Research Center poll\(^1\) found that while 89% of Republicans and Republican-leaners thought that it was “very” or “somewhat” important to speak English to be “truly American,” only 65% of Democrats and Democratic-leaners did. Sharing American customs and traditions was important for 86% of Republicans, versus 59% of Democrats. Even though Pew found that large majorities of Americans want immigrants to assimilate through adopting the English language and American customs, this growing partisan divide of now 20+ points could signal problems for the future.

A summer 2023 poll from the Manhattan Institute can shed additional light on how Republican primary voters view assimilation.\(^2\) When MI asked GOP primary voters in Iowa, South Carolina, and New Hampshire what factor should be the most important in determining whether someone should be allowed to immigrate to the U.S., eagerness to integrate into American society was second only to immigrants not relying on public welfare. These voters wanted to make immigration easier for two groups: professionals with advanced degrees in STEM areas; and immediate relatives of U.S. citizens—the two groups most likely not to rely on public welfare and to have an easier time assimilating.

Regardless of partisan disagreement, we should understand how current immigrants are assimilating in order to design immigration policies that maximize the assimilation of future immigrants and to improve the prospects of immigrants already in the United States.

This report analyzes several culturally and financially significant characteristics of immigrants—proxies for assimilation—and how the immigrants with such characteristics have changed over time at the national and state levels.

One key measure analyzed in this report is how much English immigrants speak and how quickly they learn the language. Another measure is their education level and how it changes over time and how it changes relative to that of natives. These two measures are tightly bound to another characteristic: the income that immigrants earn relative to natives. In addition, the report analyzes other, less discussed, measures of assimilation, such as marriage and family size.

Many of these measures will not reflect whether immigrants become more similar to natives over time, but rather how the type of new immigrant coming to the U.S. is changing and how foreign-born individuals move between states. States may desire to “upgrade” their immigrant populations by lowering barriers to education, jobs, and English learning. Alternatively, states may want to attract more highly skilled immigrants, add barriers for low-skilled migrants, and compete only for immigrants who will be net-taxpayers. Therefore, understanding the characteristics of immigrant populations by state, over time, is useful for investigating interstate migration.
Immigrant Population Size in the United States

As of 2020, the immigrant share of the U.S. population was approximately 13.8%, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (Figure 1). This is the highest immigrant share since the early twentieth century; previous historical peaks were in 1890 and 1910, when the foreign-born share of the population reached 14.7%.

The overall immigrant share fell after 1910 because of several factors. World War I made transatlantic travel more difficult and greatly reduced immigration from Europe; Congress introduced ethnic immigration quotas in the 1920s; and the Great Depression reduced job opportunities for foreigners and natives alike. In 1970, the foreign-born share of the population fell to an all-time low of 4.7%. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act abolished the ethnic quota system and increased total limits on immigration (but left in place country-of-birth quotas), and the Immigration Act of 1990 further expanded legal immigration. Since then, there has also been a rapid increase in the number of unauthorized immigrants to the U.S., bringing the share of residents who are foreign-born to what it is today.

Figure 1

Immigrant Share of the U.S. Population, 1850–2020

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Note: The immigrant share of the U.S. population excludes those born on military bases or to American parents abroad.
But the increase in the immigrant share was not evenly distributed across the contiguous United States (Figures 2 and 3).\textsuperscript{9} In some states, the share even declined; at the same time, it more than doubled at the national level.

**Figure 2**

**Immigrant Share of State Populations, 1970 U.S. Census**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

**Figure 3**

**Immigrant Share of State Populations, 2021 Five-Year American Community Survey**

Source: American Community Survey
In the last half-century, the nation's share of the population that is foreign-born increased by about 9 percentage points (from 4.7% in 1970 to 13.8% in 2020). Just seven states experienced a higher growth than the nation overall: California, Nevada, New Jersey, Texas, Florida, Maryland, and Virginia (Figure 4). Five states even have lower foreign-born shares today than in 1970: Maine, North Dakota, Vermont, Montana, and Wyoming.

English Proficiency

The current immigrant population in the U.S. is the most proficient in English since 1980, when the census bureau began documenting this measure. Today, nearly 57% of immigrants speak only English or English “very well,” up from less than 50% in 2000 and 2011, and from less than 55% in 1980 (Figure 5). The recent increase in English proficiency is not due to previous waves of immigrants learning more English once they arrive in the U.S.; it is mainly driven by new, younger immigrants who are already proficient in the English language by the time they arrive.
When we break down English proficiency among immigrants whose native language is not English by decade of immigration and age at migration, we can observe a pattern: younger immigrants know more English when they arrive in the U.S. than older immigrants, and they also learn English faster. Younger people generally have an easier time learning a new language; what is surprising is that the young immigrants who began arriving to the U.S. in the 2010s are the most English-proficient immigrant generation ever to be measured (Figure 6).
Nearly 50% of nonnative English-speaking young adult immigrants who arrived in the 2010s reported speaking English “very well,” compared with 30%–35% of previous generations who immigrated at the same age since the 1970s. This young adult cohort includes only immigrants who came to the U.S. after they turned 18 and were 25–34 years of age by the census year after their arrival.

English proficiency also increased among 35–44-year-old new immigrants from about 30% in previous decades to nearly 45% in the 2010s. New immigrants 45 and older didn’t see much change in their English proficiency relative to past immigrant waves of the same age.

To emphasize this drastic change in the language skills of immigrants over time, consider that new immigrants between 25 and 34 are arriving to the U.S. with greater English proficiency than those who arrived at the same age and have spent three decades living here and learning the language (Figure 7).

Figure 7 displays how an immigrant cohort’s English proficiency changed over time, as recorded by the decennial census. For immigrants who arrived in the U.S. in the 1970s, their first year tracked by the census is 1980; their second census year is 1990; and so on. Immigrants who arrived in the 2010s have been measured in only one census year: 2020.
The age groups are defined as immigrants who arrived in the selected decade over 18 years old and between the ages of 25 and 34 by the time of their first decennial census. For example, those in the 1970s cohort all immigrated between 1970 and 1979, were at least 18 years old in their year of entry into the U.S., and were 25–34 years old by the 1980 census. Therefore, the youngest migrant in this cohort would have immigrated at 18 in 1973 and be 25 by the 1980 census; the oldest would be a 33-year-old person who immigrated in 1979 and turned 34 before the 1980 census.

**Figure 7**

**English Proficiency over Time for Immigrant Cohorts That Arrived Aged 25–34, by Decade of Migration**

[Graph showing English proficiency over time for immigrant cohorts]

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Readers might assume that this trend of greater English proficiency among arrivals might be driven by a greater share of immigrants from India, a populous nation where the native language is not English but English is nonetheless widely taught. But no: English proficiency of young immigrants increased among all regions of origin since 2010, and the greatest increase wasn’t among Asians but among Europeans (Figure 8). Sixty-seven percent of young European immigrants speak English very well, excluding those whose native language is already English. About 65% of Asian immigrants and 25% of Latin American immigrants also spoke English very well.
When measuring the change in English proficiency by world region of origin, young Europeans today are nearly 30 points more likely to speak English very well than those who migrated in the 1970s; young Asians are 18 points more English-proficient than their 1970s predecessors; and Latin Americans are nearly 10 percentage points more proficient. But changes in immigrants’ world region of origin did not cause a rise in English proficiency; they slowed it down. Average English proficiency among new young immigrants finally increased in the 2010s, after Latin Americans increased their English proficiency.

Interestingly, since the 1970s, new immigrants from Europe and Latin America increased their English proficiency among every age group, while Asians did so only among those under 45 (Figure 9).

Keep in mind that these data include unauthorized immigrants, who are overwhelmingly from Latin America. This is likely the reason that Latin American immigrants, on average, show lower English proficiency. However, there is evidence of increasing English proficiency even among unauthorized immigrants.10
Moreover, new young immigrants going to every census region of the U.S. are more likely to speak English “very well,” so the rise in proficiency is not driven by a change in the intended or actual destination of immigrants (Figure 10). For the first time, most new young immigrants to the Midwest and the West of the U.S. speak English very well. And the former trend of reduced English proficiency for immigrants going to the South completely reversed in the 2010s.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
Young immigrants also began to learn English more quickly in the 2010s, including those who arrived in the U.S. a decade prior (Figure 11). This fact, alongside increased English proficiency being concentrated among young people from every region of origin, suggests that increased English proficiency is caused by a combination of domestic and foreign factors in American society after 2010. Especially after the fallout of the 2008 Great Recession, there was reduced demand for low-skilled labor while demand for high-skilled labor continued to grow,\textsuperscript{11} attracting immigrants who were more likely to speak English and have higher educational attainment. Additionally, the teaching of English expanded all over the world, increasing the pool of prospective English-proficient immigrants.\textsuperscript{12}
Educational Attainment

English proficiency isn’t the only measure by which new immigrants are assimilating. Immigrants today are also the most highly educated they have ever been. The share of immigrants and native-born Americans who are in their prime-age working years and have at least an undergraduate degree has been roughly equal every year since 1960 (Figure 12, Panel A). While about 9% of natives in this age group had college degrees in 1960, 38% do now. For immigrants, 9% of them had college degrees in 1960, and nearly 40% of them do now.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines prime working-age years as 25–54. This restriction is important because it excludes people too young to have a college degree and those who are old enough to retire early.

Although there is no gap in college attainment between the average immigrant and native, there is a growing gap at both the top and bottom ends of the educational achievement scale (Figure 12, Panels B and C). The share of prime-age natives who earned a graduate degree grew from 3.5% in 1960 to 14% in 2021, while the same share of immigrants grew from 5% to 18%. On the low end of the educational range, the gap between natives and immigrants favors the former. In 1960, 59% of prime-age immigrants did not complete high school, versus 50% of natives; now those shares have dropped to 18% and 5%, respectively. Therefore, the gap between the two groups is growing, even as immigrants are obtaining more education. The higher share of immigrants among those with lower levels of education is driven by unauthorized immigrants, beginning in the 1980s, who did not complete high school in their countries of origin.

Figure 12
Share of Natives and Immigrants, Aged 25–54, with Varying Levels of Education
These facts on the education of immigrants may paint a picture of a seamless assimilation into American society that has not changed over time. But they hide what is happening with newer immigrant cohorts.

What is driving increasing educational attainment among immigrants is a combination of greater educational gains of past immigrants already living in the U.S. and more highly educated new waves of immigrants (Figure 13). As with English proficiency, new young immigrants are the most highly educated immigrant cohort in U.S. history. But unlike English-proficiency gains, educational gains are not concentrated among new young immigrants. Older immigrants are also coming to the U.S. with more years of schooling and more college degrees. These gains are not exclusively post-2010; they have been gradual since the 1970s.
The rise in immigrants’ educational achievement may be due to several factors, including a U.S. economy that increased the returns of going to college, and foreign countries have educated their populations more over time. As discussed below, immigrants with college degrees not only earn more because they have degrees; their earnings gap with college-educated natives is smaller and even reverses within a few years of arrival.

Wage Assimilation and Rising Immigrant Inequality

Education and English proficiency are important insofar as they help immigrants succeed economically and socially in America. Indeed, rising education has contributed to a closing of the wage gap between immigrants and natives.
Among natives and immigrants who are in their prime years, 25–54, and who are employed full-time, the wage gap between the median working immigrant and native grew from 1960 until about 2010 and has since begun to close.

But it is not sufficient to observe only the median immigrant and native worker because there are important assimilation differences across the income distribution. The wage gap between an immigrant worker at the 75th percentile of the income distribution of immigrants and a native worker at the 75th percentile of income among natives is much smaller than at the 50th and 25th percentiles. This means that higher-income immigrants and natives have more similar wages than lower-income groups. This did not use to be the case. In the 1960s, immigrants and natives at the three wage percentiles had only minor wage differences, reflecting growing inequality among lower-income immigrants relative to natives (Figure 14). On the other hand, highly skilled immigrants earn more than comparably skilled natives. In fact, immigrants at the 75th percentile of the income distribution and above now earn more than natives in a similar position.

Figure 14

Ratio of Immigrant vs. Native Wage Gap, by Year and Income Distribution Percentile

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 15 takes another look at the difference between high-earning and low-earning immigrants through earnings ratios. Earnings ratios show how much more workers at the high end of the pay scale earn, compared with those at the lower end. The larger the ratio, the greater the difference in pay between groups. In 1960, the ratio of the 75th percentile to the 25th percentile for both immigrants and natives was about 2.4, meaning that those in the 75th percentile of the earnings distribution made 2.4 times as much as those in the 25th percentile. But by 2021, immigrants had a 75th–25th ratio of nearly 3.3 and natives had a 75th–25th ratio of only 2.6, showing much greater growth of inequality among immigrants than natives.
When we break down the immigrant–native wage gap by education level, we find that immigrant wage assimilation (nearing or surpassing native wages, by education level) is occurring only for college-educated immigrants (Figure 16).

However, the wage gap between college-educated immigrants and natives has not only closed; it has reversed. The median college-educated immigrant today earns nearly 15% more than the median college-educated native, and even more at the 75th percentile of income of each group.
Non-college-educated immigrants, by contrast, earn less than similarly educated natives at all points of the income distribution, and that gap grows wider each year (Figure 17).

**Figure 17**

**Earnings Ratio of College-Educated Immigrants vs. Natives, by Wage Percentile**

Therefore, we can suspect that the overall native–immigrant wage gap has reversed because college-educated immigrants are doing so much better than those who did not complete a degree. But this inequality could also reflect sorting by English ability, such that college-educated immigrants are simply more likely to speak English, and a greater share of immigrants without college degrees are those who never learned to speak English. This drives down average earnings for this group because of a composition change, meaning that group averages can mislead about how subgroups are doing (Figure 18).

The wage gap for immigrants who speak English very well but didn’t go to college did not change much during 1980–2011, while the gap including those who do speak English grew by about 10 points in the same period.
If non-college-educated immigrants earning less than similar natives is a compositional effect that is due to increased sorting by English proficiency, what is causing the reversion of the immigrant–native wage gap among the college-educated?

If merely rising English proficiency among college-educated immigrants were behind their rising earnings, then restricting the sample to those who know English should show a constant wage gap over time. For instance, this could happen if foreign professionals begin learning more English and can finally work in their fields, thus raising their incomes. But immigrant relative earnings have risen at all levels of income gradually since 1990 (Figure 19). Therefore, rising English proficiency is not behind their rising incomes for this group.
Clearly, rising initial relative wages are concentrated among new immigrants who arrived after 2010 (Figure 20). Initial relative wages are the first salaries that immigrants earn when they arrive in the U.S.; these tend to be lower than those of comparably skilled natives because employers tend to discount foreign job experience and educational credentials, relative to domestic experience and credentials.

After initial earnings stayed constant for over four decades, new young immigrants are now seeing higher initial earnings than similar-aged native workers—about 10% higher. Other young immigrant cohorts are also experiencing faster wage growth, relative to natives. Immigrant cohorts over 45 did not experience this increase in relative earnings post-2010, suggesting that this is driven by higher education and English proficiency among young cohorts.
Figure 20

Initial Earnings Ratio of Immigrants Aged 25–34 vs. Natives, by Decade of Migration

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 21

Change in the Earnings Ratio of Immigrants Aged 25–34 vs. Natives, by Decade of Migration

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
If the sample is restricted to college-educated immigrants and natives, the wage gap did not change as much as the whole sample implies (Figure 22). Newer college-educated immigrant cohorts are earning more than natives, but the change is not as drastic. Additionally, rising initial earnings for immigrants in the 2010s are accompanied by rising relative earnings of all immigrant cohorts with college degrees in the 2010s.

**Figure 22**

*Initial Earnings Ratio of College Educated Immigrants, Aged 25–34, and Natives, by Decade of Migration*

Among those without a college degree, newer young immigrants are also closing the gap (Figure 23). Therefore, the average wage gap is not closing simply because newer immigrants are more educated; it is closing because all new immigrants are earning more than similar native workers. Education and English proficiency have likely contributed most to closing, and even reversing, the immigrant–native wage gap, but other choices, such as choice in occupation, seem to drive higher relative wages of immigrants beginning in the 2010s.
To show that occupational choices are behind greater immigrant earnings, I show the occupational “prestige” score of new young immigrants, aged 25–34, the census year after their arrival in the United States. After relative stability from the 1970s to the 2000s (and even a small decline), new young immigrants are entering occupations with much greater social prestige than those of past immigrants.

Occupational prestige, in this case, is a measure from the American Community Survey, based on 1960s surveys about the social standing, respectability, and status of various occupations. It is not a perfect measure, but it is useful in understanding whether immigrants are advancing on the social ladder, and not just monetarily.
As my MI colleague Robert VerBruggen showed earlier this year, the success of college-educated and English-speaking immigrants should guide how the U.S. selects legal immigrants, in order to maximize immigrant success. This report adds not merely that immigrants with higher education and better English ability do better than those without those attributes; on average, they are outearning natives of similar educational levels to a greater degree every year, driven by more positive immigrant selection among new young cohorts.

Marriage and Fertility

Though converging wages and similar education between natives and newcomers, as well as rising English proficiency, may suggest a success in immigrant assimilation, there are two ways in which immigrants in the U.S. are beginning to differ from natives that are a reason for celebration.

While marriage and fertility rates have fallen for natives in the U.S. since the 1960s, immigrant marriages and fertility have fallen at a much slower rate. Today, immigrants aged 25–54 are more than 14 percentage points more likely to be married than native-born Americans, and that difference has widened each decade since 1960 (Figure 25).
Figure 25

Marriage Rate and Difference of Prime-Age Immigrants and Natives Since 1960

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 26

Average Family Size and Difference of Immigrant vs. Native Prime-Age Heads of Household
The average family size—i.e., the self-reported number of blood-related family members in the household—increased for immigrants from the 1960s until the beginning of the twenty-first century because of the rising share of immigrants who were Hispanic, reflecting both greater fertility and cohabitation with grandparents in the same household (Figure 26).

Marriage and family structure are important considerations for policymakers because of the implications for social assimilation and economic success. Immigrants marry at higher rates and have larger families not likely as the result of a prosperous U.S. economy but, rather, selection. Marriage rates and family sizes are higher in the countries of origin of the foreign-born population in the U.S.; so those who immigrate are often already married and growing a family or have the expectation of doing so. Another reason for the higher immigrant marriage rate may be that one way newcomers can come or stay legally in the U.S. is by marrying a U.S. citizen or permanent resident; therefore, increased marriage may reflect a selection effect by this legal channel.

Interstate Migration and the California Paradox

The foreign-born population is affected by in- and out-migration and deaths, since the children of immigrants are, by definition, native-born. But a topic in immigrant assimilation that needs more study is where immigrants move after they first arrive in the United States.

Most interstate migration research focuses on total interstate migration or prime-age migration. More recently, there have been analyses about where parents of young children, even broken down by race, are migrating. But much of “domestic” migration is made up of foreign-born residents. Over 11% of all interstate moves in 2020–21 were by foreign-born residents, even excluding the new immigrants who arrived in those two years. Immigrants generally do not stay forever in...
the place where they first arrive in the United States. Understanding where immigrants go after they arrive in the U.S. may be the key to understanding why some are assimilating faster and for state policymakers.

One way to find out where successful immigrants go is to compare where they move relative to natives, especially those in their prime working years.

During 2011–21, the native noninstitutionalized (i.e., not imprisoned or in nursing-home facilities), prime-age population fell in 30 out of 50 states because of a combination of natural aging and low fertility as well as interstate migration (Figure 27).

Despite a growing immigrant population nationally, 10 states also lost immigrant prime-age residents, even after accounting for new immigrants arriving from abroad. Chief among the losers of prime-age immigrants were California, New York, and Illinois, with large losses also in New Mexico and South Dakota (Figure 28). These five states lost 6%–11% of their prime-age immigrant populations during 2011–21.
People of prime working age are in the period of life in which they are most likely to work, earn the most in income, and constitute most of the taxpaying population. To measure why some states experienced a decrease in the prime-age immigrant population despite an influx from other countries, I add up the total in-state and out-of-state migration of foreign-born prime-age residents of each state during 2011–21, using census data. To be counted, an immigrant must have immigrated at least the year prior to the survey, so that those who simply moved as soon as they arrived in the U.S. are not counted. By adding up all the inbound and outbound moves between states for a decade, we can observe trends rather than one-year effects.

In absolute terms, the state that lost the most immigrants to other states in the last 10 years is New York, which lost almost 310,000 prime-age immigrant residents to other states (Figure 29). California lost a net 135,000 prime-age immigrants to other states, and Illinois lost almost 65,000. Incredibly, 23 states had a net loss of prime-age immigrants to other states. These domestic migration figures exclude immigrants who arrive directly from abroad and stay in the state where they arrive, but at least for New York, California, and Illinois, foreign migration has not been enough to offset out-of-state migration.
While New York, California, and Illinois lost prime-age immigrants both in absolute numbers and in net interstate migration, Texas, Colorado, Washington, and Florida gained the most (Figure 30). Texas gained more than 200,000 net immigrant prime-age residents from other states during 2011–21.
After adjusting for population, the picture is not too different. New York still leads, with a loss of nearly 78 prime-age immigrants per 100,000 total residents in a span of 10 years (Figure 31). Colorado, Nevada, and Washington are states that attracted the most prime-age immigrants from other states relative to their population size, and Arkansas is in fifth place for growth, right behind Texas.

Figure 31
Rate of Net Interstate Migration of Prime-Age Immigrants in the Top and Bottom Five States, 2011–21
But looking simply at the rate of domestic net migration of immigrants hides important differences in the behavior of college-educated and non-college-educated immigrants.

The states that gained or lost immigrants also tended to gain or lose college-educated immigrants. For instance, New York lost nearly 150,000 college-educated prime-age immigrants to other states over 10 years, about half of all the immigrants the state lost. Texas gained more than 108,000 prime-age college-educated immigrants and more than 96,000 non-college-educated immigrants from other states. But there was one major exception to this pattern; even though California lost a net 135,000 prime-age immigrants to other states, the state gained more than 80,000 college-educated, prime-age immigrants over the same 10 years. This implies that California’s immigrant losses are exclusively of immigrants who did not complete college.

California is one of only six states that lost non-college-educated prime-age immigrants while gaining college-educated ones, alongside Arizona, Utah, Mississippi, Virginia, and Maine (Figure 32). California’s paradox is likely driven by the fact that the cost of living is ballooning in the state, at the same time as opportunities for highly educated workers abound. This environment is leading to a sort of immigrant “gentrification” such that immigrants with lower earnings and education are pushed out, while Silicon Valley and Golden State universities keep attracting college-educated immigrants from other states with high enough salaries.
Net Domestic Migration of College-Educated, Prime-Age Immigrants in the Top and Bottom Five States, 2011–21

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

The policies that often attract native-born Americans to a state, such as lower taxes and a better business environment, also attract immigrants. But these policies may not attract highly skilled immigrants exclusively. These pro-economic-growth policies may also attract immigrants with little education, who might have a greater reliance on public welfare programs. The “California paradox” is a paradox because certain policies that increase the cost of living and make life worse for residents—including American citizens—also mean fewer poorly educated immigrants, yet not necessarily fewer immigrants with higher education.

On the other hand, midwestern and Great Plains states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, Missouri, and the Dakotas have attracted non-college-educated immigrants while they hemorrhage college-educated ones.

Recommendations

Select Better Immigrants

We should celebrate that recent immigrant cohorts are the most highly educated, the most proficient in English, and the highest paid in U.S. history. But we can do better. Congress can make small tweaks to immigration law to favor more highly educated, entrepreneurial, and English-proficient immigrants.

These changes include:
• Accelerate the visa applications of immigrants who pay an additional fee by expanding premium processing for all immigration forms, as I described in a recent report on reducing immigration backlogs.\textsuperscript{21} This expedition would make the legal process quicker for all applicants at no cost to taxpayers, with the indirect benefit of allowing wealthier immigrants to have their cases decided more quickly. Given the limited number of immigrant visas and the first-come, first-served system to allocate them, a fee-based expedition process would also guarantee a spot ahead of others.

• Exempt highly paid immigrants from the Department of Labor’s burdensome PERM process to obtain employment-based visas, as I proposed in a previous Manhattan Institute report.\textsuperscript{22} This would create a faster lane for highly paid employment-based immigrants, prioritizing the more highly compensated immigrants in the competition for a very limited number of employer-sponsored immigrant visas.

• Congress should create a pilot program that awards immigrant visas based on points to immigrants for their English ability, education, age, and earnings.

• Congress could effectively “upskill” the existing immigrant flow by imposing a minimum English-proficiency requirement on family-based immigrants. Specifically, Congress could require a minimum Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score, just as U.S. colleges require for international students.

• Congress should impose a minimum educational requirement on all immigrant visas for adults, such as high school graduation. This requirement is already in place for winners of the diversity visa lottery\textsuperscript{23} and would encourage prospective immigrants to learn English and acquire skills and education as they wait in line for family visas abroad. Those who do come to the U.S. would be preparing themselves—and the American communities they join—for success.

### Lift Up Existing Immigrants

Selecting new immigrants who have the potential for greater assimilation is not policymakers’ only tool with which to improve immigrant outcomes. The biggest potential gains are found in helping immigrants already in the United States. Americans of all political persuasions should support helping the existing immigrant population gain more useful skills, including English-language comprehension. Otherwise, immigrants may be permanently stuck in a sort of underclass. Conservatives should enthusiastically endorse the idea of helping immigrants assimilate, which may encourage immigrants to be proud to be in the U.S. and grateful for the opportunities that the nation gives them. This help will likely make immigrants less dependent on public services. Progressives should be eager to reduce inequalities between immigrants and natives by breaking down the barriers that immigrants face because of lower education and lower English competency.

The U.S. has always excelled at assimilating immigrants intergenerationally.\textsuperscript{24} However, the U.S. does not excel at assimilating low-education, non-English-speaking adults—but only their children and grandchildren raised and educated in the United States. We can do more for these adult immigrants and, in turn, create far more opportunities for their children. One way to do this is English as a Second Language training for adults.

There is compelling evidence that government-funded language-training programs for adult immigrants are effective and even pay for themselves. In Massachusetts, one study found that English-language training for adult immigrants increased their annual earnings by over $2,300 annually and over $55,000 in take-home pay over the working life of an average participant. The authors of this study estimate that immigrants who participate in the program end up paying
more in taxes, such that they pay back the cost of their training within 20 years.\textsuperscript{25} Furthermore, free English training increased voter registration, showing that this measure leads not only to economic assimilation but also to civic assimilation.

The Massachusetts study is possibly the best evidence available because admission to the program was through a random lottery, enabling researchers to conduct a randomized control trial. The two groups' outcomes were examined for over a decade.

Language training has also worked abroad, specifically in Denmark, where Danish courses for refugees increased their employment rates, reduced the likelihood that they would commit crimes, and induced them to invest more in their own education.\textsuperscript{26} Another study of refugee language training in Denmark found that the children of the refugees also benefited, ultimately completing high school at higher rates. Boys of these refugees were also less likely to commit crimes.\textsuperscript{27}

Another politically controversial element to assimilation is the subject of unauthorized immigration. A large portion of the non-English-proficient immigrant population are illegally present in the U.S. either because they crossed the border without authorization or overstayed a visa. The majority of this population will likely never be deported and, on average, they have been in the country for over a decade.\textsuperscript{28} There are real economic gains for native-born Americans from helping this population learn English, earn more income, and thus pay more in taxes. Not only will this benefit the native-born American adults but also the American children raised by unauthorized immigrants.

Many conservatives might balk at the idea of helping unauthorized immigrants in any way, but should support targeting language training to legal immigrants, including immigrants in refugee programs or on family-based visas who are here legally. On the other hand, policymakers in Democratic states who seek to help the unauthorized immigrant population by expanding welfare or public benefits programs should follow the example of Massachusetts and dramatically expand English language training rather than make the unauthorized population dependent on state welfare programs.

**Interstate Competition**

Earlier, this report cited a contradiction—the “California paradox.” A state can effectively “upskill” its foreign-born population by raising the state’s cost of living and driving poor, less educated, and non-English-speaking immigrants out of the state—while still attracting highly skilled ones. But what is the difference between California and, say, New York or Illinois (states that implemented similar policies to California’s and yet also experienced net outflows of highly skilled immigrants)? It may be that Silicon Valley, the most concentrated tech cluster in America, is a much more immigrant-heavy and immigrant-dependent job hub than the main places of industries—such as finance—in other high-cost states.\textsuperscript{29} So the California Paradox is likely just a unique fact of California and one that may not last forever.

Nevertheless, states can implement targeted policies to retain highly educated immigrants. They can encourage immigrants to enroll in and graduate college by lowering tuition rates for foreign-born applicants who agree to stay within the state and work for a certain number of years after graduation. This could take the form of a forgivable student loan, similar to programs that encourage graduates to teach for five consecutive years in underserved primary and secondary schools within a state.\textsuperscript{30}

Ultimately, state policymakers should expand what they consider part of their immigration policy toolkit. By considering economic policy, quality-of-life measures, and educational systems, they will change the type of immigrant that their state attracts, even if legal immigration policies
remain unchanged. Changing the type of immigrant that their state attracts will affect the relative success and assimilation of immigrants already in the U.S., and maximizing immigrant success can maximize states’ success, especially as states compete for immigrants in creative ways.

Conclusion

Immigrants in the U.S. are, on average, the most assimilated in terms of language and educational attainment as they have been since at least the 1970s. By many measures, including English proficiency and wage growth, immigrants are assimilating faster and coming to the U.S. more “pre-assimilated” than in past decades. This means that immigrants are arriving with fewer educational and communication barriers, and the barriers that do exist are being surmounted more quickly than in the past. New immigrants are also earning higher initial wages relative to natives than past immigrant cohorts, and their earnings are growing faster. But by one important measure, that of marriage and children, immigrants are becoming more different from natives over time, as marriage rates and fertility among native-born Americans have collapsed at a much faster rate than among immigrants.

While progress in assimilation is good news, the gains are concentrated exclusively among college-educated immigrants and immigrants who speak English very well. We should be concerned about increased immigrant inequality, as a result of previous immigrant generations (especially unauthorized immigrants) having little to no education and no advancement in their English ability. Even among legal immigrants, many of those who come through family sponsorship may not have the necessary English skills to communicate effectively in the workplace. This reduces their job opportunities and fuels negative views about immigration, and it is a cost for taxpayers.

The U.S. has more immigrants within its borders than any other country in the world. The immigrant population must succeed if the U.S. is to succeed as well. Bipartisan desire for immigrants to integrate into American society is in the best interests of the civic and economic future of the United States. That’s why we must select future immigrants who assimilate faster and support the immigrants who are already living in the U.S. based on the two tools we know can integrate immigrants into American society: education and English proficiency.

About the Author

Daniel Di Martino is a PhD candidate in economics at Columbia University and a graduate fellow at the Manhattan Institute, where he focuses on high-skill immigration policy. Born and raised in Venezuela, he came to the U.S. in 2016. He has appeared many times on national TV, including Fox News and CNN, and has written for USA Today and National Review. Di Martino speaks regularly on college campuses and at high schools. He is the founder of the Dissident Project and a board member of Young America’s Foundation.
Endnotes


5 “Chapter 1: Purpose and Background,” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Sept. 27, 2023.


7 “Chapter 1: Purpose and Background,” USCIS.


9 Alaska and Hawaii are excluded from the following analysis due to small sample size and for graphic purposes.


14 See, e.g., “Over the past four decades, global higher education enrolment increased from 32.6 million in 1970 to 182.2 million students in 2011, 46% of which was in the East and South Asia region in 2011. … Most middle- and low-income countries in the region have made much progress in widening access to Bachelor’s degree programmes.” UNESCO Institute for Statistics, “Higher Education in Asia: Expanding Out, Expanding Up,” 2014, p. 16.
In fact, there's evidence that, at least in Germany, foreign-born residents tend to move more often than natives. Matthias Schündeln, “Are Immigrants More Mobile than Natives? Evidence from Germany,” IZA Discussion Paper No. 3226 (December 2007).


See, e.g., “Student Loan Forgiveness Programs for Teachers: The Ultimate Guide,” UpSolve, no date.