

IMMIGRATION AND  
POPULATION:  
IS IT TIME TO CLOSE THE  
GOLDEN DOOR?



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The immigration policy of the United States should reflect a comprehensive vision of Americans' values about how we want to live with other Americans and with the rest of the world. I am not going to present that comprehensive vision because I think that is something we have to work out in the political process. The goal of my talk is much more modest. I would like to make three factual observations about immigration to the United States. For each factual observation, I suggest a consequence for policy and action. I make no claims to cover all the important, urgent issues.

My three factual observations have titles: rich and poor; immigration and birth; and space and time. Let me summarize the three sets of facts and consequences first and then give details.

First, rich and poor. Facts: In many respects,

there are two distinct worlds on the planet, a rich world and a poor world. Many people migrate from the poor world to the rich world in search of a more prosperous life. Consequence: If the rich world wants to reduce the pressure for immigration to the rich world, the rich world should promote the future prosperity of the presently poor world.

Second, immigration and birth. Second facts: Currently the population of the United States grows by about 2.6 million people a year. Of this annual increase, about 1.1 million is the excess of immigration over emigration. The balance of 1.5 million is the excess of births over deaths. It is estimated that about 1.5 million births in the United States each year result from unintended pregnancies, both mistimed and unwanted. Consequence: If the growth of the United States population and the well-being of parents and children are concerns, then improving couples' ability to assure that every pregnancy is intended could have effects at least as large as reducing the number of immigrants.

Third, space and time. Third facts: Decisions about how many and which people shall immigrate are made federally, but most immigrants live in a few states and in a few jurisdictions within those states. Local jurisdictions, including Vail, lack authority to control the size or composition of the immigrant population. Consequence: One economic argument for continued immigration is that the long-term national benefits outweigh the short-term local costs. If so, then there should be attention to the possibility that the federal and affected local governments could share control of immigration, its short-term local costs and its long-term national benefits.

Now I would like to go back and give some supporting details, beginning with the rich and the poor. One-fifth of the world's population has an average annual income of roughly \$19,000 per person. These 1.2 billion people of the rich countries

live in Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. The remaining 4.7 billion people of the poor world have an average annual income of \$1,100 per person. Now if you do the arithmetic, this means that roughly 80 to 85 percent of the world's income is received by the top 1.2 billion. The bottom 1.2 billion get about one and a half percent of the world's income. The ratio of income per person between the top fifth and the bottom fifth is about 60 to 1.

The population of the rich countries increases by about one tenth of one percent per year. If this growth rate were continued—and it will not be but let us pretend it were—and if the poor economies did not develop into rich economies, then the population of the rich world would take more than 500 years to double in size. The population of the poor countries grows at 1.8 percent per year. If this growth rate were continued—and it will not be—and if there were no development of poor economies into rich economies, then the population of the poor countries would double in 38 years.

The implications of these differences in growth rates surprise some people. If the rich and poor countries continued to grow at their present rates for a typical lifetime of 76 years, and if there were no development of poor countries into rich countries, then the population of the poor countries would grow 400 percent in one lifetime. That is the result of doubling in 38 years and then doubling again. Meanwhile, the population of the rich countries would increase by roughly eight percent.

People in poor countries live shorter lives on average than those in the rich countries. For example, the average infant born in a poor country has a chance of dying before age one — roughly six percent — that is more than seven times higher than that of an infant born in a rich country.

Despite higher death rates, poor countries' populations grow faster than rich countries' because

birth rates in the poor countries are much higher. The average woman in the rich countries has 1.6 children in a lifetime at current birth rates. The average woman in the poor countries has 3.4 children in the course of her lifetime at current birth rates. Because of the higher birth rates, the poor countries have a much higher fraction of young people and a much lower fraction of old. In 1996 the poor countries had 35 percent of the population under the age of 15 versus 20 percent in the rich countries. Since most migrants are young adults and their families, the poor countries will have huge numbers of people in the coming generation in the age groups most likely to migrate.

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The population density of poor countries—that is, the number of people per square kilometer of land—is 2.5 times higher than it is in the rich countries: 55 people versus 22 people per square kilometer. Only 36 percent in the poor countries live in cities versus 74 percent in the rich countries. What is the consequence of that? The rural areas have almost 38 people per square kilometer in poor countries, but fewer than six people per square

kilometer in rich countries. In other words, the rural areas of poor countries are about six times as densely settled as the rural areas of rich countries.

A Presidential Commission on immigration from Mexico suggested that a long-term approach to the problems raised by immigration from Mexico is to help Mexicans build the economy and society of Mexico so that the incentives to move north are diminished. I believe the same conclusion applies to immigration from any of the economically less developed countries.

I would like to turn next to births and migrants. The population of the United States increases annually by about 2.6 million people per year. This increase is equivalent to adding one Manhattan a year, or the 1990 population of Colorado in 15 months. As I said earlier, about 1.1 million of the annual increase is the excess of immigration over emigration. (That number is partly guesswork because it includes undocumented immigrants.) In addition, about 3.9 million births a year subtracted by 2.4 million deaths a year adds 1.5 million people annually.

Where do the 3.9 million births come from? Sex. Currently about 5.5 million women in the United States become pregnant each year. Some of these pregnancies are intentional, but more than half are not. When women were asked in 1987, 43 percent reported that their most recent pregnancy was intended. Fifty-seven percent reported that their most recent pregnancy was either mistimed—that is, they would have had it later—or unwanted at any time.

If we apply those percentages to current pregnan-

cies, then 2.4 million births a year resulted from intended pregnancies. About 3.1 million pregnancies are mistimed or unwanted. A little more than half of those, or 1.6 million, are aborted. Thus 1.5 million pregnancies a year result from unintended pregnancies. Undoubtedly, many children of unintended pregnancies get the loving welcome and the material resources from their parents which they deserve. But,

undoubtedly, many do not. The adverse consequences of unintended pregnancies for many children and parents are well documented and are a matter of concern regardless of the consequences of those births for population growth.

When people worry about the contribution of immigration to American population growth, I think they should consider the 1.1 million net immigrants per year along with the 1.5 million births per year that result from unintended pregnancies. They should take a comprehensive, rather than a narrow, look at how best to enhance the well-being of the American population.

Third and last, some comments on space and time. Globally, about 125 million people, or two percent of the world's population, reside outside the country of their birth. The U.S. has more immigrants than any other country. In 1996, 24.6 million foreign-born people were 9.3 percent of the estimated U.S. population. Of these 24.6 million, 61.1 percent entered and remained in the United States between 1980 and 1996.

Generally immigrants are highly concentrated. In 1996, nearly half of U.S. immigrants lived in

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only two states: California (8 million immigrants made up 25.1 percent of the state population) and New York (3.2 million immigrants made up 17.7 percent of the state population). Other states with at least a million foreign-born residents in 1996 were Florida (15.2 percent of the population), Texas (11.2 percent), New Jersey (14.6 percent), and Illinois (9 percent). The consolidated metropolitan area of Los Angeles had 27 percent foreign-born; the county of Los Angeles had 33 percent; and the city of Los Angeles had 38 percent foreign-born. If local governments are providing a national benefit by serving immigrant populations, then means of equitably distributing the costs of those services should be considered.

The National Academy of Sciences recently completed a major study of immigration called "The New Americans." The charge to the National Academy of Sciences from the U.S. Congress focused on the economic, demographic and fiscal impacts of migration. The National Academy found that, under certain possibly controversial assumptions, a typical immigrant eventually makes a positive contribution to the U.S. economy but it takes a long time for the balance of economic costs and economic benefits to turn positive.

If one combines this finding with the undisputed spatial concentration of immigrants, one obtains a picture of concentrated short-term local costs and diffused long-term national benefits—a mismatch in

space and time. Federal decisions about immigration could be distorted if they do not take full account of local impacts.

If the Congress had wanted an objective, comparative analysis of all the demographic sources of economic gains and losses, it would have commissioned the National Academy of Sciences to carry out the same economic analysis for a newborn child resulting from an intended pregnancy, for one resulting from a mistimed pregnancy, and for one resulting from a pregnancy unwanted at any time.

The demographic and economic effects of immigration can be measured nationally with existing statistical systems. The environmental and cultural effects of immigration mainly occur locally, prove much more difficult to measure quantitatively, and are usually overlooked in demographic and economic analysis.

In 1950, the United States had about 150 million people. Today, it has about 260 million people. In the lifetimes of our children, depending on choices that we and they make, the population could grow by another 100 or 200 million. Changes of that magnitude have environmental and political consequences. For example, the National Forest system registered 10 times as many recreational visitor days per year in the early 1990s as it did in 1950. Part of that increase resulted from population growth, part from rising affluence, and part from cultural changes.

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As another example, in 1790 when there were 13 states, 26 senators, and 3.1 million American citizens, there were roughly 120,000 Americans per senator. Today, with 100 senators and 260 million Americans, there are 2.6 million Americans per senator—20 times as many. We need to understand much better the political, civil, and social consequences of diluting the relation between the average individual and his or her political representatives.

The cultural impacts of immigration go far beyond inter-ethnic tensions in cities or the flight of native-born people from immigrant concentrations. They include the environmental, political,

and civil consequences of massive population growth, partly driven by immigration.

To sum up, I believe we need to view immigration in a more comprehensive framework that recognizes the three elements I have described, along with many others. First, the gap between rich and poor is an irresistible engine of migration. Second, immigration and birth are twin sources of population growth. Third, the gaps in space and time between the costs and the benefits of immigration make it difficult for decision-makers to get accurate and complete signals about all the economic, environmental and cultural impacts of immigration and other sources of population growth.

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