

THE NEW IMMIGRANTS / Is latest wave a drain or boon to society?

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Body

What once were private mutterings that immigrants are more a drain than a benefit to society have become bold public pronouncements.

Many politicians and ordinary citizens now say legal immigrants should be admitted only if they have good job skills, not because they happen to have a sister living in New York.

Some even say immigrants, arriving at near-record levels, are radically changing the ethnic and cultural balance of the country - and the country needs to change back.

The question before Congress and the people has become: Are immigrants still good for the country?

In a computer analysis of data on the 2.2 million people who became legal immigrants in 1991-93, USA TODAY illustrates how newcomers have changed the nation, bringing new colors and languages, a new vibrancy and vigor.

But the analysis also documents how densely immigrants from a few countries have clustered in some cities, bringing strained public budgets, community tension and, often, few marketable job skills.

Using current proposals to restrict immigration as its framework, the computer analysis finds:

-- If job skills replaced kinship as the basis for immigration, it would greatly alter who gets into the country. The immigrant stream would become more European and Asian, less Hispanic and Caribbean.

In 1993, for example, 52% of immigrants from Mexico - by far the largest immigrant group - identified themselves as laborers, excluding homemakers, retirees and students. That compared to 7% from China and 1% from India.

By contrast, 0.3% of Mexicans identified themselves as engineers, compared to 25% of Indians.

Overall, more than half the 1993 immigrants of working age report low-skilled or unskilled occupations.

-- If immigration of extended families had been restricted in 1993, 85% of the 880,014 people admitted to the USA would have gotten in.

Indeed, the analysis underscores the overwhelming family character of immigration. In 1993, almost two-thirds of immigrants were admitted solely because they were related - either closely or in an extended fashion - to someone already here.

-- If a small but growing minority of restrictionists gets its way, future immigrants would be far different from those who actually arrived.

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In 1993, about 80% of legal immigrants were from Latino, Asian, African and Caribbean countries, and just a few countries dominated the stream: People from Mexico, China, the Philippines, Vietnam and the Dominican Republic made up nearly 40% of all immigrants.

By comparison, 97% of immigrants who came 100 years ago were European or Canadian.

-- If immigrants came for jobs instead of kinship, they likely would be scattered across the USA.

Between 1991-93, however, the nation's immigrant clusters stood out. Selected ZIP codes in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami and Houston together averaged 206,000 new immigrants a year.

The cumulative effect of all these trends, experts say, has pushed so many social buttons that a nation of immigrants is wondering whether it should remain one.

There is "uneasiness over the scale of immigration," Nathan Glazer, a Harvard professor and immigration expert, says in a recent essay. "When this coincides with bad economic conditions, a majority of Americans will say, 'There is too much immigration.' "

Here is one fact: If immigration continues at the current rate of about 800,000 a year, more than 8 million newcomers will have arrived between 1990 and 2000 - the highest decade-long number since 1900-1910.

59% favor 'blending in'

For 30 years, since the 1965 Immigration Act opened the nation's doors to immigrants from around the world, the country's political and social culture has assumed that immigration is a positive force.

Many Americans are not feeling so generous these days.

"Now we're coming at (immigration) from a new perspective - what's in the best interest of American citizens," says Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, head of the House subcommittee on immigration.

His counterpart in the Senate, Alan Simpson, R-Wyo., echoes that view: "The national interest is the interest of the majority of Americans, not the interests of those seeking to come here or (their) relatives."

Smith and Simpson argue the United States should reduce overall numbers and admit only those "who will contribute to our economy and our society" - meaning those who are educated, job-skilled, English-speaking and quickly naturalized.

A USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll of immigrants - the first comprehensive, national poll of its kind - finds many immigrants agree.

"If we are not selective on immigrants, it will expedite the deterioration of this country," says David Chen, 30, an insurance adjuster in New York who came from Taiwan. "They have to be self-supportive."

Immigrants and natives also are in agreement about the need for immigrants to assimilate: 59% of both groups say "blending in" is better.

Luis Llanos, 25, a Colombian who immigrated in 1986 and now lives in New York, says he's eager to fit in.

"Some (immigrants) say they don't like it here, but I say to them, 'Nobody brought you here, you don't have to be here,' " Llanos says.

But there is a viable, vocal coalition of immigrant advocates led by Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., who say they'll fight to preserve the traditional view of immigrants.

"We live in a diverse world," says Kennedy, sponsor of the 1965 law. "The genius of America has been to take different traditions and draw on them (to) enhance the country."

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'Sense of loss of control'

In part, the drive to change the immigration system is a consequence of public resentment of unchecked illegal immigration, now estimated at about 300,000 people a year.

Few politicians can ignore the overwhelming passage last year of Proposition 187 in California, which denies illegal immigrants access to benefits, schools and health services.

"There is this sense of loss of control," says Bill Ong Hing, an immigration expert at Stanford University. "I don't think we have (lost control), but there's a sense of that."

Add to that the uncertainty caused by the economic restructuring of the '90s, both in high and low level jobs.

In Atlanta, for example, seeing sizeable immigration for the first time, an undercurrent of tension has developed over fears about jobs.

Some "see immigrants as a threat to their job opportunities," says Jeffery Tapia, director of the Latin American Association. "When you're looking to survive, anyone who's a newcomer is seen as a threat."

But the impetus for change also may be based on a change in the immigrants themselves.

Today, Europeans make up just 18% of the immigrant stream, with 54% of newcomers from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean.

Most of these immigrants are not white, and some advocates say restrictionism is, at base, racism.

"A lot of their (arguments) are code words for, 'We don't want Mexicans or Asians,' " says Karen Narasaki of the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium.

A few restrictionists are blunt.

"Why this many? Why these particular immigrants? These questions are never addressed," says journalist Peter Brimelow, author of *Alien Nation*, a controversial book about "America's immigration disaster."

But these questions are being addressed by the national Commission on Immigration Reform, which this month called on Congress to cut immigration to 550,000 a year, largely by eliminating some categories of immigrants and reducing others.

Many want a 'time out'

Even assuming some change in immigration is necessary, there's no consensus on what kind. The various factions overlap on some important details but strongly disagree on others. Conservatives and liberals can be found on the same side:

-- The Alien Nation faction argues there are too many immigrants and too many of the "wrong kind" - instead of skilled, white Europeans. They want a "time out" in immigration, and the highest priority to go to newcomers with skills.

Brimelow argues that immigration has changed the the country "in a radical and rapid way unprecedented in history."

"Americans have the right to insist the government stop shifting the racial balance," he says.

Republican presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan supports this view, as do most restrictionist groups.

-- Another faction argues that the system is mostly working, and the number of immigrants is acceptable, but that not enough is being done to "Americanize" them.

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House Speaker Newt Gingrich is in this camp, along with GOP leaders Bill Bennett and Jack Kemp and many Democrats in Congress.

-- Yet another faction favors even more generous immigration policies. Kennedy is a major voice here, along with a throng of advocacy groups. House Majority Leader Dick Armey, R-Texas, also is a philosophical ally.

"I'm hard-pressed to think of a single problem that would be solved by shutting off the supply of willing and eager new Americans," says Armey.

So far, President Clinton comes down somewhere in the middle, and backs the commission's proposals.

'We have to discriminate'

The profusion of immigration issues is bewildering, but these are some of the points of contention:

The numbers. Because the commission is so influential, its recommendation for a relatively modest one-third reduction in the number of immigrants is likely to be adopted.

"Between the total restrictionists and the total open-border people, that's where we'll steer the boat," says Simpson.

Chain migration. The bulk of immigrants are spouses, children, grandchildren, siblings and parents of citizens or legal permanent residents. And once immigrants arrive, they may sponsor more relatives.

Wei Ming Wong, 41, an immigrant living in Los Angeles, can tick off 12 relatives who came to the USA thanks to one sister. "There is no one left" in Hong Kong, Wong says.

Cutting this chain migration is at the heart of the commission's proposals. It recommended immigration priority go to nuclear families - spouses and minor children - and that the door be shut to siblings, their families and adult children.

These recommendations probably will be adopted by Congress.

Immigrant skills. Critics argue that immigration would best serve the nation if admissions were weighted on the basis of skills.

"We have to discriminate among people who want to come," says George Borjas, an economist at the University of California, San Diego, and a Cuban immigrant. "Choosing high-skilled workers is better."

Accepting that, the commission wants to eliminate 10,000 immigration slots now set aside for unskilled workers; Congress is likely to agree.

Immigrants and welfare. People cannot immigrate if they are likely to become a public charge. But courts have ruled that sponsorship "contracts" aren't enforceable.

Even advocates agree that's a huge loophole, and Congress is virtually certain to plug it. "We're going to look at sponsorship, set additional responsibilities," says Kennedy.

In addition, bills in Congress would cut off non-citizens from Supplemental Security Income - a program that provides aid to the poor and disabled. Non-citizens now make up about 30% of all SSI recipients.

The debate over all these aspects of immigration will begin in earnest this summer, and most experts are betting that the nation's door will close somewhat - but not entirely.

"The U.S. is largely what it is today because of our ability to draw and assimilate new peoples," says Arthur Helton, immigration expert at the Open Society Institute. "That has . . . resulted in displacement and conflict from time to time, but without it, we would not be America."

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Should immigration levels...

All <u>Immigrants</u>		
Decrease	65%	30%
Stay the same	24%	44%
Increase	7%	15%

Should immigrants be encouraged to...

All <u>Immigrants</u>		
Blend into American culture	59%	59%
Maintain own culture more	32%	29%
Both equally	4%	10%

Notes

3-DAY SPECIAL REPORT; THE NEW IMMIGRANTS; A changing nation now may close the door; Critics want to focus more on skills, less on family ties; See related stories; 02A, 10A; See info box at end of text.

Graphic

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