

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## ***One Billion Americans: A Contrarian Liberal Argues for Mass Immigration***

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September 12, 2020

Matt Yglesias's *One Billion Americans: The Case for Thinking Bigger* announces itself with a loud and audacious title meant to catch one's attention. But the substance of the book consists of a bundle of meliorist policy solutions that aim for an America that, at the cusp of the 22nd century, will be bigger, better, and bolder. This is fundamentally a liberal nationalist book, with an argument delivered softly, but firmly. It presupposes that American leadership and dominance is good and that the rise of China will not lead to an age of harmonious benevolence. If a China that gradually grows wealthier on a per capita basis challenges the United States, Yglesias argues, Americans need to match China on a population basis.

Like Yglesias himself, the book is a synthesis of stylistic bluster and moderate banality. An alumnus of *Think Progress* and a cofounder of *Vox*, he has an unimpeachable orthodox liberal pedigree in partisan politics (with the exception of voting for Mitt Romney for governor of Massachusetts!). But on matters of policy, Yglesias is an unpredictable thinker, willing to fly in the face of tribal norms, sometimes with caprice, but in other moments with a clear aim in mind. A chapter title illustrates this fact: "More and Better Immigrants." Most liberals agree heartily that America needs more immigrants, but they would likely demur at the bold statement that some immigrants are better than others. Of course, the reality is that all Yglesias is alluding to is that there are many points-based immigration systems, such as the one north of the border, in Canada, which favors the young, talented, and educated. The policy is not controversial, but the contemporary Left does not approve of ranking immigrants based on their social or economic utility to a nation. The punctilious attention to sensitivity in language in mass media often curtails candid discussions of policy options, even if those options are substantively not controversial.

In *One Billion Americans*, Yglesias is quite candid, though sometimes aware that his fellow liberals may need a softer persuasive touch. To reach the goal of hundreds of millions of more Americans, one needs two things, more babies and more immigration. Yglesias espouses moderate pro-natalist policies reflecting public opinion, which suggests that most people want larger families. He proposes that that outcome, largely familiar, be achieved through a moderate targeted expansion of the welfare state, in particular with upfront payments to young couples. Aware that much of the readership of *One Billion Americans* might be suspicious of pro-natalism, he attempts to explicitly mollify their concerns that the policy is somehow a Trojan horse for white nationalism. Similarly, a much larger population with American consumption

levels would present a conundrum for environmentalists. Here Yglesias argues that environmentalist catastrophism is simply wrong on the facts, while Green New Deal–style radicalism is a policy nonstarter. Though this sort of rhetoric aimed at ingroups is rare online today, *One Billion Americans* harkens back to a time when policy discussions were not tribal melees. Yglesias on a Twitter thread is very different from Yglesias the author.

Of course, when it comes to issues where *One Billion Americans* present policies less palatable to conservatives, Yglesias is more likely to take the gloves off. As it seems that increases in native birth would not achieve the goal of a census size of 1 billion, he proposes increased immigration. Though still written with Yglesias’s voice, the sections on immigration could have been drafted by a Cato Institute intern. The standard economic literature that immigration increases aggregate wealth, and has minimal impact on low-wage workers, is presented as uncontroversial and unchallenged, despite a nominal nod to restrictionists such as George Borjas. *One Billion Americans* also does not accept the challenge of the cultural and social assimilability of so many new Americans, glossing over objections with a few asides and benign neglect. The fundamental target of the argument laid out in the book is economic and cultural power, not a coherent cultural vision of what America in 2100 might be outside of the usual liberal democratic bromides.

An immediate objection to *One Billion Americans* is that the USA cannot support so many people on its landmass, even with environmental objections set aside. But Yglesias points out that America would have the population density of France, a nation with bucolic rural spaces as wilderness in the hinterlands. Though one cannot deny the math of this argument, it is clear that the new Americans would not distribute themselves randomly across the nation. Rather, Yglesias anticipates that many would live in urban areas, and to address the issue of housing supply he proposes a program of the massive building. If much of *One Billion Americans* is novel, the chapters on housing and transportation reflect a predictable and expected wonkish liberalism that overlaps with some aspects of conservative anti-zoning urbanism. Though Yglesias may not want too many Asian-style megacities, it seems clear he believes that land-use policies favored by urban liberals are preventing these areas from realizing their full potential. He argues that dense massive cities are engines of economic growth and power and that increasing their size through mass immigration would be beneficial to the project of keeping America the most powerful nation in the world.

In many of the specific details, *One Billion Americans* will not convince, and may even anger, those who read it. Yglesias outlines a program, of mass migration into the American nation-state, that would transform this country in ways he does not even begin to explore. Still, this is a book that should be taken seriously, because it reiterates the proposition that this is a special nation whose hegemony has been good for Americans and non-Americans. Whether you agree with the medicine of mass immigration, the aim in *One Billion Americans* is to revive and strengthen America, not dissolve it. That is an argument that should be noncontroversial but has become somewhat taboo in elite cultural left circles. For that reason alone Yglesias deserves to be engaged, because on the fundamental issue of whether American is good, he is firmly in the traditional mainstream.