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Charles Kenny: The U.S. has always been — and always will be — a nation of nations

From Hamilton to present day, there's a reason why our national motto is 'out of many, one.'

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Look no further than the founders to see that the United States has always been a nation of immigrants worried about immigration. Alexander Hamilton was born in the Caribbean, the “bastard, orphan” son of a Scotsman, as the lyric goes. Benjamin Franklin’s father and Thomas Jefferson’s mother were immigrants, as well. Yet all three were keen to close the door on many who wanted to come after. Franklin complained bitterly about **German arrivals** — they weren’t sending their best, he said. And the Italians and French were “too swarthy” to fit in. Hamilton and Jefferson added their own concerns: too slow to assimilate, with the potential to corrupt the national spirit.

In 1788, no less than George Washington **wrote** that he had “always hoped that this land might become a safe and agreeable asylum to the virtuous and persecuted part of mankind.” These words may ring hollow, coming from a slave owner 75 years before Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. But the spirit of America being a nation of nations has been central to our country since its inception. And the last two and a half centuries have demonstrated that migrants of every color and creed have been vital to American prosperity and wellbeing. That is truer today than ever. And it means that reforming the U.S.'s increasingly restrictionist immigration policies — toward refugees, those seeking asylum and those seeking greater economic opportunities — is an urgent priority.

About **1.7%** of the U.S. population identifies as American Indian or Alaska Native alone or in combination with another race. For the rest of us, all or nearly all of our forebears likely arrived in the Americas five centuries ago at most. We’re nearly all equally immigrants and all equally American. Despite that, throughout U.S. history, racists and nativists have tried to ban new arrivals on the grounds that they came from unsuitable stock: there were mass lynchings of Italian immigrants in the 1890s, for example. And all too often, lawmakers in Washington have joined in: the Chinese Exclusion Act of the 1880s, The Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917 and, more recently, the current administration’s exclusion of people from Muslim-majority countries. But, over and over again, fears that newcomers would fail to assimilate or end up as a burden on welfare systems have proven unfounded.

Immigration can sometimes carry costs to those already here — ask those people who were in the Americas before Columbus landed. But the last two centuries' worth of immigrants haven’t come to conquer or colonize. Today they come to participate in the world’s largest market economy and enjoy the relative liberty of a country still (mostly) wedded to the ideas of democracy, freedom of religion and speech, and justice under the law. A **recent survey** of Latino immigrants in the U.S., for example, found that 8 out of 10 came to this country for a better life

— a job or economic opportunity. Many also moved to join families or to live in greater safety. They come to be part of the melting pot, not to break it. And they make America immensely richer — financially, culturally and politically.

Almost half of the companies in the Fortune 500 were founded by immigrants or their children. And immigrants have started **more than half** of America's startup companies valued at \$1 billion or more. That immigrants create jobs is one reason why Gaetano Basso and Giovanni Peri of the University of California, Davis, suggest that rising migration in a region in the U.S. is associated with increased wages for those already there. Immigrants, undocumented and documented alike, pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits, so that each migrant makes a net fiscal payment to governments of over **\$250,000 over their lifetime**, according to the American Immigration Forum.

And, just as they always have, new Americans usually bequeath a better life to their children. Economist Leah Boustan and colleagues **have studied** over 100 years of immigration history and find a consistent pattern across immigrant communities over that whole period: Children of migrants have higher rates of upward mobility through income rankings than do the native born. There's no sign of "declining assimilation" to be found.

In fact, a 2019 Cato Institute **study** found that immigrants who have become citizens are prouder of being American than the native-born population, and they have more confidence in the presidency and Congress. Immigrants including Hamilton have served in **33 different cabinet-level appointments** through history. Today, immigrants account for 3% of members of Congress and their children provide **another 10%** (including Rep. Michael Burgess, Rep. Henry Cuellar and Sen. Ted Cruz from the Texas delegation). America is home to **more than 500,000** foreign-born veterans of the U.S. military. And an additional 1.9 million veterans are the children of migrants.

If you look at recent U.S. domestic terror incidents, it is not migrants who hold values antithetical to the American Dream. Or look at crime more broadly: it is not the foreign born who are responsible for violence and social breakdown. Migrants undocumented and documented alike *reduce* crime rates. Analysis by **Alex Nowrasteh** of the Cato Institute shows that in **Texas** in 2015, the homicide conviction rate for undocumented migrants was 75% that of natives, and for legal immigrants, the rate was 13% that of natives.

There are fears that America is full, or that hospitals or schools can't take the burden of more students or patients. But there is plenty of room for massively more people: Matthew Yglesias' new book, *One Billion Americans*, points out that even if we tripled the current population, the U.S. would only have the same number of people for each square mile as France does today. Meanwhile, for **U.S.-born students in high school**, there is little evidence that having immigrant peers affects a wide array of outcomes, either in adolescence or in adulthood, suggest the University of Wisconsin's Jason Fletcher and colleagues in a recent analysis. And the American health care system needs more migrants not fewer: Already, 29% of physicians working in the U.S. **are foreign-born**.

In fact, as U.S. birth rates continue to decline, bringing in migrants will be the only way we can sustain the taxes that pay for Medicare and Social Security and staff the retirement homes and golf courses that the country's aging population will need.

But looking across the Rio Grande, the undocumented flow of Mexican citizens is currently from the U.S. towards Mexico. And the combination of Trump administration policies as well as COVID-19 has slowed the inflow of new, documented migrants to a trickle. The immediate result, even in a time of mass unemployment, has been worker shortages in key industries including agriculture and construction. In the long term, we'll see a slowdown in innovation and entrepreneurship. It's increasingly urgent that we reverse course on policies that have turned back refugees and economic migrants alike.

According to **Pew Research Center**, more than 23 million immigrants will be eligible to vote in the 2020 presidential election, about 10% of the total electorate. That's up from 6% in 2000. Increasing power at the ballot box reflects migrants' increasing importance to the future of America.

However many generations of U.S. history lie behind them, voters in 2020 should be backing politicians who recognize new arrivals are the lifeblood of the country.