



When Demography Isn't Destiny

There's nothing inevitable about American immigrants joining the progressive coalition.

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Last April, Fox News host Tucker Carlson stirred controversy when he claimed that Democrats wanted lax immigration policies in order to import a “brand-new electorate” that would help them win elections. His critics accused him of boosting an old white-nationalist conspiracy about replacing white voters in the United States. Carlson countered that he didn't care about America's racial makeup. Indeed, in a segment that had aired the month before, he argued that the U.S. would be better off if Brown University's upper-middle-class student population were replaced with industrious Nigerian immigrants. But Carlson added that the Democratic Party clearly views immigrants as a rising voter bloc that it can use to power its agenda.

Neither Carlson nor his critics examined the assumption that immigrants are a natural fit in the progressive coalition. For years, progressives have prophesied that a more culturally diverse America would be a more Democratic America, with a grand coalition of African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans teaming up with liberal whites to put the Republican Party on a path to extinction. If anyone could have summoned this coalition into being, through opposition, it was Donald Trump, the president who made hardline stances on issues like immigration a cornerstone of his politics. Yet Trump actually increased his share of the minority vote in 2020. One exit poll suggested that he had received the highest share of the black vote of any Republican over the past 20 years. The GOP expanded its support among Hispanics, too, to its highest level since 2004.

Digging deep into neighborhood-level results, the *New York Times* unearthed some surprises. “Across the United States, many areas with large populations of Latinos and residents of Asian descent, including ones with the highest numbers of immigrants, had something in common this election: a surge in turnout and a shift to the right,” the paper noted. Much of this movement toward Trump occurred in heavily Hispanic communities in South Texas, many bordering Mexico. The liberal Democratic theory that a less-white America will be bluer politically appears less and less plausible. In fact, Joe Biden may owe his 2020 victory to shifts in the white vote.

This presents both an opportunity and a challenge for the Republican Party and conservatives more broadly. The 2020 election results suggest that they can find support among some immigrant communities, but the GOP is also home to America's immigration skeptics, who worry that progressives have judged the situation correctly—that as America grows more diverse, it will also become more socially and culturally liberal. But if the progressive narrative about immigrants and their political allegiance is flawed, then so, too, is the electoral basis for conservative skepticism about immigration.

In 1996, California had one of the most contentious ballot-initiative fights in its history. Proposition 209 gave voters the choice to end the state's system of racial preferences, used in the university system and elsewhere to extend opportunities to members of certain minority groups. The battle lines were clear: liberals overwhelmingly opposed Prop 209; conservatives supported it.

Voters went on to approve Prop. 209, and a *Los Angeles Times* exit poll conducted that year showed that white votes made the difference. Majorities of every other ethnic group opposed the referendum.

Last year, liberals organized to overturn Prop. 209 with Proposition 16, which would once again authorize the state explicitly to consider race in college admissions and public hiring. It's easy to see why organizers were optimistic about their chances. For one, California was much more Democratic in 2020 than it was in 1996: Joe Biden won the state with 63 percent of the vote, compared with Bill Clinton's 51 percent. The progressive narrative about demographic destiny provided even more reason for optimism. California was a majority-white state in 1996; by 2020, whites had become a minority, and Latinos a plurality, of residents.

Prop. 16's endorsers included virtually every top Democratic official in the state, including now-vice president Kamala Harris, as well as major corporations like Uber, Twitter, and Facebook. This was also the year of America's great racial reckoning, when liberals everywhere were openly encouraging institutions to transfer opportunities—even for cartoon voice actors—from whites to nonwhites.

Yet when the votes were counted, Prop. 16 had failed—and by a slightly larger margin than Prop. 209 succeeded in 1996 (57 percent in 2020 vs. just under 55 percent in 1996). California's increased diversity had done nothing to improve the proposition's chances. Even worse, polling conducted a few weeks before the vote suggested that just 37 percent of Latinos supported Prop. 16, only 3 percentage points higher than whites.

Though Prop. 16 supporters raised small sums of money compared with other referendum fights, they outraised the measure's opponents by more than 16 to 1. The opposition to Prop. 16 was made up of a ragtag group of grassroots activists. Many were immigrants who came to America because of its promise that hard work and ingenuity would determine their success, not the color of their skin. Take Ronald Fong, a California-based doctor who emigrated with his parents to the United States from Hong Kong in the 1960s. "The public school system actually was pretty decent," he said of the United States. "And there was a great deal of trust [among] my parents that the school system would educate us. And for the most part they did fine. It really

was that sort of, you know, ethics of hard work, and keeping your nose to the grindstone, good things would happen,” he explained.

Over time, Asian-American immigrants like Fong came to believe that elite college admissions processes were designed to discriminate against them. They have sued institutions like Harvard, alleging that such schools are penalizing Asian applicants to balance student demographics. The campaign against Prop. 16 offered a chance to strike a blow against such a system.

Though Fong didn’t have much political experience, he reached out to others who felt similarly, both inside and outside immigrant communities. They set out to mobilize opposition to Prop. 16. “We did YouTube videos, we did a lot of . . . literal and figurative door-knocking,” he explained. “We had home-made signs, we tried to do car rallies as much as we could. It was . . . a bake sale and car wash mentality and tenacity in terms of getting our message out.”

Born and raised in southeast China, Wenyuan Wu grew up in a household supported by a single mother and maternal grandparents, who nurtured her throughout her childhood. In the early 2000s, she came to the United States to pursue graduate studies. Today, she serves as the executive director of Californians for Equal Rights, which organized the main opposition to Prop 16.

While many immigrants backed the group’s mission, Wu stressed in an interview that the group saw itself as fighting for principle above all. “From the perspective of an immigrant, or immigrants, I think that we were very proud and we were very privileged to spearhead the campaign last year against racial preferences,” she says. “It’s not because we were Asians, or because we were immigrants but it’s because we fundamentally agree with the principle of equal treatment.”

The late conservative British philosopher Roger Scruton once wrote of encountering a “peculiar frame of mind” across the Western world that “felt the need to denigrate the customs, culture, and institutions that are identifiably ‘ours.’” Scruton coined a word to describe this cultural self-loathing: “oikophobia.” While xenophobia means a distrust and disdain of foreigners, oikophobia means a fear of one’s own native land.

In the past few years, we’ve seen a surge of oikophobia among America’s opinion-making institutions. Politicians, the news media, the creative class, and heads of major corporations line up to describe America as a dark place beset with backward, racist, and sexist inhabitants who lack the enlightened attitudes of our peers in the developed world.

The conservative response to such left-wing disdain for America has often been “love it or leave it.” But conservatives have been less keen to adopt the flip side of this strategy: perhaps we should welcome those around the world who want to come here precisely because they love this country so much.

In 2018, Gallup released a set of global surveys asking people whether they wanted to relocate permanently to another country. Of the more than 750 million people whom Gallup estimated would like to move, about one in five (21 percent) preferred the United States as a destination.

The second-most popular country, Canada, was the chosen destination for 6 percent of respondents.

This number may surprise Americans who get their views of global attitudes from cable news and social media, which often serve as the propaganda arms of the country's oikophobic elite. But America's immigrants take a different view. A 2019 Cato Institute [study](#) found that three out of four naturalized U.S. citizens said they were "very proud" to be American—higher than the 69 percent of native-born Americans who said the same. A higher percentage of immigrants also believed that "the world would be better if people in other countries were more like Americans" (39 percent of immigrants shared this view versus 29 percent of natives). Almost 70 percent of native-born Americans said they were "ashamed" of some aspects of America; only 39 percent of immigrants agreed. These differences also show within minority communities. [Seventy-three percent of immigrant Muslims](#), for instance, told Pew they agreed that the "American people are friendly to Muslims," compared with 30 percent of native-born Muslims who say the same.

We can only speculate about why these differences exist, but it's important to recognize that immigrants have something most native-born people don't: a basis for comparison.

My own parents came to this country from Pakistan in the 1970s. They described America to me as a country with some of the kindest, most welcoming people in the world. As a child, I had a hard time believing them. But the more I traveled abroad myself and studied global problems, the more I came to the same conclusion.

Immigrants don't come to the United States just because they like the people. They largely come here to work, and many are a living testament to the American Dream. As a group of academics showed in one [2019 working paper](#), "children of immigrants have higher rates of upward mobility than their U.S.-born peers."

If you go to any major city in America, you're likely to see storefronts owned and operated by immigrants. A study by Harvard Business School professor William Kerr and others [found](#) that foreign-born individuals make up about 13 percent of the U.S. population but create about a quarter of new companies. Immigrants drive much of the innovation and entrepreneurship one finds in places like Silicon Valley. The Kerr study estimated that one out of every 11 patents developed in the United States is either invented or co-invented by individuals with either Indian or Chinese ethnicity living in the San Francisco Bay Area.

It's true that some lower-income immigrants may be drawn to the Democrats because of that party's greater support for welfare spending. Conservatives have to adopt policies that reward work and make it easier to start and maintain stable families while also emphasizing the downsides of the Democrats' policies. A [recent television interview](#) with a Latino man who voted in the recent Virginia gubernatorial primary demonstrates how such voters might respond to these appeals. "I believe that Biden turned me into a Republican," Juan Pérez said. "Biden is destroying the economy, inflation is through the roof, and everything is terrible."

The more that Republicans can promote access to meaningful work and decent wages as an alternative to Democratic welfare policies, the more they'll be able to win over voters like Pérez.

Indeed, two exit polls suggested that Virginia’s governor-elect Glenn Youngkin, a Republican, had won the majority of that state’s Latino population. Later analysis cast doubt on the outcome, but in any case Democrats’ hold on this voting bloc might be loosening—a trend also suggested in New York City’s mayoral election, where Democratic victory margins among not only Latino but also Asian voters shrank from previous cycles.

Not only do immigrants tend to be proud Americans and extremely hard-working; immigrant communities also tend to be sympathetic to conservative social values. Take the abortion issue. Polling has long shown that Hispanics tend to be more pro-life than Americans as a whole; this has often been ascribed to their Catholic tendencies. But Hispanics are particularly opposed to abortion even among fellow Catholics. One study found that a slight majority (53 percent) of white Catholics believe that most or all abortions should be legal; among Hispanic Catholics, 52 percent believed abortion should be illegal in most or all instances.

A more culturally diverse America may also mean an America with stronger bonds between children and their parents. A 2014 AARP survey estimated that about 22 percent of the general population of adults between the ages of 45 and 55 are involved in caring for their elders; among Hispanics, this jumps up to 34 percent. Among Asians, the number is 42 percent.

Leonard Sax, a family clinician who has studied parenting for years, has noticed that the children of immigrants are beginning to outpace the children of native-born people in various areas, including being less anxious and less prone to criminal behavior. This marks a reversal from the traditional consensus on the children of immigrants—that cultural barriers render them less fortunate than their nonimmigrant peers. Sax refers to this phenomenon as the “immigrant paradox.”

“The more American a kid tends to be, the more likely they are to do poorly,” he told me in an interview. The qualities that Sax identifies as benefiting immigrant children include stronger families, less permissive parenting, and a culture that promotes respect. In other words, immigrants tend to be more culturally conservative.

In 2018, a group of Texas Republicans led a campaign to unseat Tarrant County GOP vice chair Shahid Shafi from his position. His crime? Shafi was a devout Muslim. But the state GOP rallied to Shafi’s defense, and figures including Texas land commissioner George P. Bush and Senator Ted Cruz pushed back, helping Shafi retain his position. I reached out to Lisa Grimaldi Abdulkareem, a friend of Shafi’s also targeted for removal in 2018 because she was married to an Iraqi Muslim man. “I believe it speaks volumes of the Tarrant County GOP wanting to embrace diversity and be more inclusive,” she told me of the Republican effort to defend her and Shafi. She noted that her husband is currently overseas as a military contractor and that local Republicans have consistently checked in on her to see if she needs support while he is away.

This story demonstrates that there’s nothing inevitable about Republican hostility to diversity and immigration. Indeed, some conservative operatives have long suspected that America’s immigrant communities could be a solid base for right-leaning politics. One of them is Daniel Garza, executive director of the LIBRE Initiative, which works to mobilize Hispanic-Americans to support conservative values.

Garza closely monitored the 2020 elections, observing the shift to the right among Latino-heavy communities in energy-rich South Texas, which helped keep the state in the Republican column. “I think what you saw [in 2020] was Latinos flexing their muscles and saying we can shape our own priorities and our own policy views, thank you very much,” he told me. He credited issues such as GOP support for domestic energy production with helping to pull the Latino vote rightward.

None of this is to argue that there aren't real tradeoffs to immigration that conservatives should consider when crafting policy. Compelling research shows, for instance, that immigration can depress American wages. But conservatives should recognize that they have much more in common with the average immigrant than they do with an eighth-generation Swedish-American majoring in gender studies at Oberlin College. As Republicans look to rebuild their party, they would be doing themselves a disservice by turning away the world's immigrants, who love this country as much as they do.