



America Needs More Open Immigration

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For anyone looking out on the world from the new Biden White House, America's challenges can only seem extraordinarily daunting.

Even if it could be taken in isolation, the public health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic would gravely test any administration. But, of course, the coronavirus challenge cannot be resolved in isolation. Beyond its immediate public health dimensions, the pandemic has created an enormous economic crisis for a United States whose status as a global leader has never looked so compromised in the postwar period.

For Washington, the pandemic has also spawned a fiscal crisis, with the Treasury Department obliged to outlay trillions of dollars in order to compensate for demand lost to the stop-and-go shutdown of the nation throughout a year of hapless mismanagement and confusion under the Trump administration. Like all debt, this emergency stimulus spending will eventually need to be paid back. It comes, moreover, on top of a towering mountain of existing American debt. However tempting, arguments about the low present costs of deficit borrowing are no guarantee that coming generations will find financing it comfortable or even feasible.

Beyond such uncertainties, COVID-19 has provoked doubts worldwide about whether in the next stage of the 21st century, the American example—or even electoral democracy more broadly—still have much to offer the world. And for Joe Biden's administration, and presumably for the next several administrations in Washington, the United States will face a formidable challenge from a great power that seems increasingly eager to position itself as a direct alternative: China.

It is obvious that there are no easy solutions to any of this. But all of these problems nonetheless come together in surprising ways in a single nexus that the American governing class has failed so far to comprehend—and that is immigration. Opening the United States to dramatically more people from other countries will constitute an important and unavoidable piece of any solution to any of these challenges. And yet, expanded immigration has never occupied the center stage of policy discussions on any of them so far. Why? Because of a failure of the American imagination largely bound up in longstanding notions about race that have driven the country's identity politics—namely that the United States is, or should be, a nation in which the descendants of European immigrants predominate.

Any attempt to address this situation must begin with an understanding of the radical shrinking of the place of immigration in American life. Under the Trump administration, which from the outset was vehemently opposed to it, legal immigration became more restricted than it has been

at almost any time in American history. Less commonly imagined, though, is the fact that even before Trump, among wealthy countries, America already ranked among the least welcoming of legal immigration. According to [a recent report by the Cato Institute](#), in fact, per capita legal immigration into the country in the 2010s was down by two-thirds compared to a century ago, and is now flirting with zero.

Demographers expect the 2020 census to reveal the 2010s to have been the decade with the smallest population growth in American history. Not coincidentally, these same years saw [the number of people over the age of 55 in the country grow by 27 percent](#), a rate that is 20 times the growth seen in the collective population under 55.

So just how does this relate to the nexus of problems facing the Biden administration and others after it? In the United States, as in any population, it is in people over 55 that we see a concentration of hugely expensive chronic diseases, from diabetes to Alzheimer's. A decade beyond this age threshold is the point when Americans are eligible to retire with full Social Security benefits. These two facts combine to place enormous demands on national resources that will inevitably make financing health and retirement benefits much more difficult than in recent decades. Much the same is true with other public services, including national defense and sustained leadership in scientific research, along with many other perceived benefits of American life.

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By replenishing the American population with working age and even younger people, and thereby restoring demographic growth, immigration can help address all of these things and more. Most fundamentally, imbued with the same kind of energy exhibited by every previous generation of immigrants, these new arrivals will contribute powerfully to restoring American fiscal health—and with it, keep alive a sense of national promise and possibility.

As dramatic as this narrowly fiscal influence could be, though, immigration could make an even more dramatic difference on America's future competition with China. According to [a study published last year in The Lancet](#), the British medical journal, China's population will peak in 2024 and then rapidly decline due to the avalanche of aging now sweeping the country, along with shrinking fertility rates. In 2100, the study predicts, there will be a ["mere" 732 million Chinese](#), meaning the country will have roughly halved in size from the near present. Based on current projections, the U.S. population won't peak until 2062, reaching 364 million. But with dramatically different immigration policies in place, there is no reason the United States should peak then at all. This is a clear but widely ignored source of American advantage.

The United States, in other words, can try to sustain its global leadership by investing in its usual defense outlays and weapons systems, with all of the risks of conflict they conjure, while also exacerbating its existing fiscal challenges—or it can leverage its unmatched ability to absorb newcomers. Concretely stated, through a strong recommitment to openness, America can change its economic fundamentals more than any advanced nation. It has the size, the space and the history of diversity and of broad immigration to do so. China, by sharp contrast, has little prospect of radically opening up and absorbing new people—given its relatively uniform sense of identity, built around the Han ethnicity; little tradition of immigration or assimilation; a language widely considered very difficult to master; and with serious crowding in the eastern

parts of the country, outside of the mountains, tundra and desert that predominate much of the rest of China.

China's growing power relative to the United States right now, moreover, is largely bound up in the relative sizes of their populations. Collectively speaking, Chinese are not now, nor are they likely to be in the decades ahead, anywhere near as rich on a per capita basis as Americans. At present, the gap is roughly six-fold. China is nonetheless soon expected to surpass American wealth in the aggregate, though, because of its huge population. After four decades of strong economic growth, China is approaching the point where, if you multiply its still modest per capita income against its overall population of 1.4 billion, you get a number fast approaching America's own GDP.

The relative power of the two countries, however, is by no means limited to these considerations, whether measurements of wealth, military strength or scientific achievement. It is also bound up in less tangible things, having to do with influence and the degree to which a society is admired by others and even emulated. And here, too, a dramatically greater American opening to immigration could play a major, if still widely unappreciated role to its advantage.

For all the tarnish and doubt that America has heaped on its own image in recent years, one aspect of the American Dream, as it were, clearly remains alive: the desire of people from all kinds of other horizons to migrate to the country. As considerable as the benefits of this migration are to countries throughout the rich world in an era of demographic decline and aging, openness to immigration is not solely doing good for oneself. If the United States could lead the world's advanced economies by its own example in opening itself up to much greater immigration, it would seriously transform the prospects of many poorer parts of the world for the better.

Just as mobility is a factor vital to the overall economic health of any nation, the mobility of the human population at large is important for humankind's prospects overall. Like it or not, increased migration from less to more developed parts of the world is a trend that will only gain momentum in the decades ahead—with Africa, especially, set to experience an enormous population surge and associated outward migration.

Yet successive American leaders have entirely ignored this opportunity, despite the country's own history of immigration. The United States wouldn't just benefit from waves of new citizens and the work they would perform and taxes they would pay. More open immigration would also help create vital bridges with the rest of the world—with strong, two-way traffic not only for migrants, but for business and investment, education, cultural enrichment and also, plausibly, for the growth and reinforcement of democracy itself.