

# INTRODUCTION

## IS IMMIGRATION GOOD FOR AMERICA?

*Daniel T. Griswold*

The question of whether immigration has been good for America has been on the minds of Americans since the beginning of our republic and continues in the pages of this issue of the *Cato Journal*. As the United States enters another presidential election year, President Obama has been calling on Congress to enact immigration reform while his administration has been deporting record numbers of unauthorized immigrants. Meanwhile, Republican presidential candidates have been competing with each other to adopt the toughest positions to enforce existing law, including the completion of a fence along the entire 2,000-mile border with Mexico. Outside of Washington, legislatures in Arizona, Georgia, Alabama, and other states have enacted laws designed to make life more difficult for undocumented immigrants.

### The Economic Case for Immigration

Undervalued in today's discussion is the strong economic case for a more open policy toward immigration. Basic economic analysis and numerous empirical studies have confirmed that immigrants boost the productive capacity of the United States through their labor, their human capital, and their entrepreneurial spirit. Instead of competing head-to-head with American workers, immigrants typically complement native-born workers by filling niches in the labor market.

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Daniel T. Griswold is Director of the Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute.

Lower-skilled immigrants seek low-paying, low-status jobs that an insufficient number of Americans aspire to fill, providing more affordable goods and services to consumers while creating more rewarding employment opportunities for the native-born. Higher-skilled immigrants allow American companies to create new products and raise productivity by stimulating innovation. Immigrant workers make capital more productive, boosting investment, output per worker, and government tax receipts.

Today's immigration levels, while high in nominal terms, are well within the norms of American experience. A century ago, during the Great Migration, both the stock and the annual inflow of immigrants were significantly higher than today as a share of the population. Yet America assimilated those "huddled masses" of millions of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, who within a generation or two joined the great American middle class. Public anxiety back then over the "new races" coming to our shores bears a striking resemblance to anxieties over today's immigrant inflows from Asia and especially Latin America.

## Fundamental Questions

This special issue of the *Cato Journal* features articles from a dozen experts in the field of immigration examining the most controversial aspects of the issue. The authors weigh a number of relevant questions regarding immigration policy in the United States, such as:

- Why should we restrict immigration?
- What are the economic benefits of immigration, what are its costs, and what are the distributional effects?
- What would be the economic effects of an "amnesty" for unauthorized workers already in the United States?
- What is the demographic impact of immigration in an era of declining birthrates in the United States and other Western countries?
- How easy or difficult is it to immigrate legally to the United States?
- What has been the effect of immigration enforcement, on the border and in the workplace?
- Should we retain the doctrine of birthright citizenship as it has been interpreted in the 14th Amendment to the Constitution?
- Is immigration incompatible with a welfare state?

- What kind of reforms of current immigration policy would be most beneficial, and can market incentives be utilized to allocate immigration visas?

## An Overview

In the opening article, Bryan Caplan asks the basic philosophical question of why we restrict immigration. He examines the leading objections to a more open immigration policy, and concludes that, for each objection, there are “cheaper and more humane solutions” than restricting immigration.

The next three articles—by Gordon Hanson, Giovanni Peri, and Joel Kotkin and Erika Ozuna—examine the economics and demographics of immigration. Those articles analyze the ways that immigrants add to the productivity growth of the United States, through more plentiful and differentiated labor, and through innovation and entrepreneurial risk taking.

The next six articles examine the current U.S. immigration system—if that is the right word—and efforts to either enforce or reform it. Stuart Anderson describes the incoherent body of immigration law that has evolved and the surprisingly difficult path to becoming a legal immigrant to the United States. Pia Orrenius and Madeline Zavodny measure the implications of a general amnesty, or legalization, for the estimated 11 million people currently living in the United States without official authorization. Edward Alden critiques federal efforts to secure the U.S. border, especially after 9/11, while Jim Harper does the same for interior enforcement efforts, including the E-Verify program. Margaret Stock examines the legal barriers and unintended consequences of repealing the long-established doctrine of granting citizenship to those born on U.S. soil. Daniel Griswold responds to arguments that immigrants impose an unacceptable fiscal burden in a modern welfare state.

Concluding this issue are two articles pointing toward an immigration system that would expand opportunities for legal immigration. Raúl Hinojosa-Ojeda recounts the failure of two decades of an “enforcement only” policy and the economic arguments for comprehensive immigration reform that would not only legalize workers already in the country but also expand the future inflow of legal workers. Joshua Hall, Benjamin VanMetre, and Richard Vedder review the history of U.S. immigration policy, summarize the

economic case for immigration, and then outline an alternative system based on market incentives rather than government quotas.

Immigration is a subject that touches Americans deeply, for understandable reasons. We are a nation peopled almost exclusively by immigrants or those who are descended from immigrants. More than any other major nation, we are defined by our immigrant past, present, and future. Our hope in presenting this issue of the *Cato Journal* is that it will help Americans to understand that heritage more clearly and to move toward an immigration system that better serves our economic interests as well as our ideals as a free society.