

U.S. Immigration

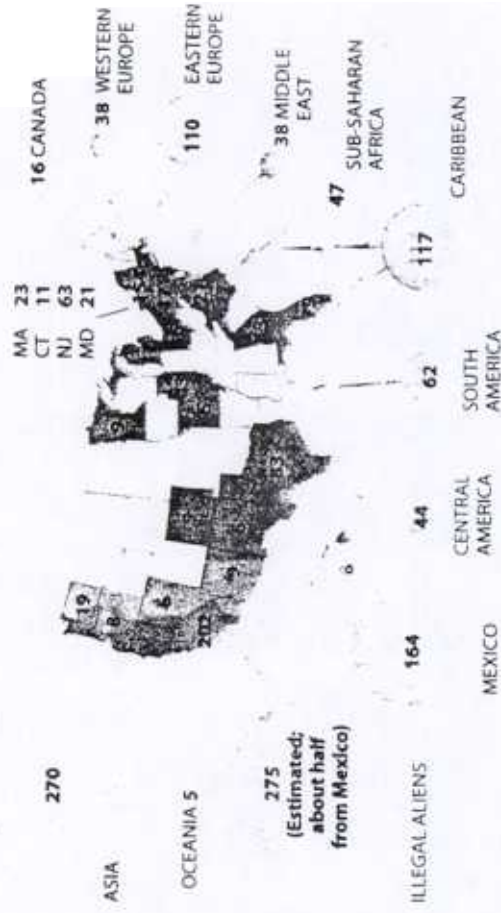
From the founding of the republic to the mid-1920s, U.S. immigration was largely unrestricted, but shortly thereafter Congress passed legislation severely limiting entry from all regions except northwestern Europe. Beginning in 1965 and continuing thereafter, it passed a series of more liberal laws, including the Immigration and Reform Act of 1986, under which 2.7 million illegal aliens, mostly from Mexico, were given legal immigrant status. The new laws not only promoted diversity but also opened the door to the longest and largest wave of immigration ever—27 million since 1965, including illegal entries. Until now, the two largest waves had been from 1899 through 1914, which reached 13.6 million, and from 1880 through 1898, which reached 8.6 million. Not all immigrants stay: in recent years, emigration has been about 220,000 annually.

In 1996, a more or less typical year, there were 916,000 legal immigrants plus an estimated 275,000 who came illegally. Favorite immigrant destinations were California, where one third went, and the New York metropolitan area, which drew about one in six. As a group, immigrants are less skilled and younger than the average American. Of the legal immigrants, 65 percent entered under family reunification programs and 13 percent under employment-based preference programs; 14 percent were refugees or asylum seekers. From 1990 through 1998,

an average of 460,000 immigrants became citizens.

There is sharp disagreement over immigration policy. Some, like Virginia Abernethy of Vanderbilt University, say that high immigration threatens American labor and the environment; Roy Beck, Washington editor of *Social Contract*, says it contributes to "demographic Balkanization." But the late Julian Simon of the University of Maryland believed that immigration is beneficial, because an increase in population raises the number of creative minds and hence the pace of innovation. And then there are those who, like historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., feel that "any curtailment of immigration offends something in the American soul."

On at least two points virtually everyone agrees. The first is that the U.S. population will grow enormously, absent a drastic reduction in immigration. A big drop in immigration does not seem imminent in view of pressures from many ethnic groups, which generally support a heterogeneous society, and from employers who depend on low-wage labor. The U.S. Census Bureau's latest projection, which assumes a continuation of recent immigration and emigration levels over the next half a century, puts the U.S. population at 394 million in 2050. Of the 122 million increase between now and then, 80 million would be added because of immigration. The pros-



STATES WHERE MOST IMMIGRANTS SETTLE

REGIONS WHERE IMMIGRANTS ORIGINATE

SOURCE: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Numerals indicate number of immigrant in thousands. Map shows states with at least 5,000 legal immigrants in 1996. Circles show immigrants by country of birth.

pects beyond 2050 depend on a variety of factors, among them population growth in developing countries, incomes in developing countries relative to those in the U.S., the availability of alternative host countries, and the cost of transportation to the U.S. Of these, only population can be predicted with even a moderate degree of confidence.

The second point of agreement is that the U.S. will become increasingly more diverse. In 1980 the U.S. was 80 percent Anglo—that is, non-Hispanic white. It is now

72 percent Anglo, and by 2050, according to Census Bureau projections, it will be 53 percent. California and New Mexico are now slightly less than half Anglo, and by 2015 Texas will also be a minority Anglo state. There is much apprehension that continued immigration of Mexican nationals will lead to dominance of the Spanish language in the Southwest. Such fears seem to be overblown, for several studies show that most second-generation Mexican-Americans speak fluent English.

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