

Opinion by Justin Gest

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How Biden promised to address immigration before taking office 00:57

Editor's Note: [Justin Gest \(@_JustinGest\)](#) is an associate professor at George Mason University's Schar School of Policy and Government. He is the author of "[The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality](#)" and, with Anna Boucher, "[Crossroads: Comparative Immigration Regimes in a World of Demographic Change](#)." The views expressed in this commentary are his own. [View more opinion on CNN.](#)

(CNN) — During four years in office, President Donald Trump reduced immigration admissions in every way that American law makes possible without congressional approval -- [cutting](#) refugee numbers, [deporting](#) law-abiding members of American citizens' families and then [finally halting](#) all entry to the US amid the pandemic for a period [before blocking](#) the issuance of new green cards. In 2020, virtually zero migration was no longer just a thought experiment; it was, at least for a period of time, policy.

As the US government [now grapples](#) with a backlog of asylum-seekers and immigrants at the southern border, a team of economists, demographers and I [modeled](#) what America would be like if those earlier policies were to continue hereafter. Commissioned by the bipartisan immigration advocacy group FWD.us, our independent research used the most recent US Census and economic data to project the outcomes of a variety of different policy scenarios -- one that cuts immigration to zero as Trump effectively did in 2020; one that cuts immigration admissions in half; one that extends recent levels; one that increases recent levels by 50%; and one that doubles recent levels.

The general trend in our modeling is clear: the more immigrants, the merrier.



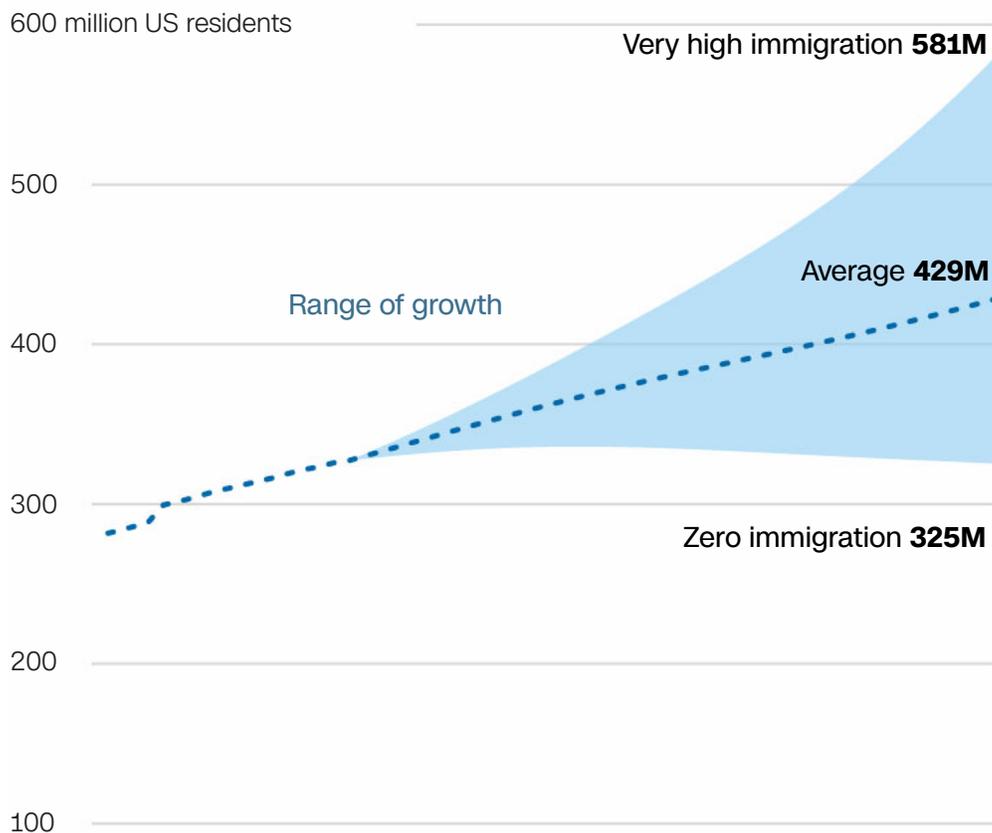
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If the US government welcomed more newcomers, within decades, the country could be younger, more productive and richer.

Justin Gest

2060 estimated population growth in the US

Using 2018 immigration data to estimate future population change in the United States, research from George Mason University shows that if the current rate of immigration remains steady, the estimated US population — including births, deaths and net migration — could approach 429 million by 2060.



Immigrants are both a primary source of American workers and population growth. According to 2019 figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, even though almost 14% of the US population is foreign-born, 17.4% of the US labor

So when immigration admissions are cut to zero, our population ages faster and shrinks. And because the US relies heavily on immigrant labor and innovation, when admissions are cut to zero, Social Security [quickly becomes insolvent](#) and our productivity stagnates.

Perhaps more importantly though, we find that even recent levels of legal immigration -- the [approximately 1 million](#) people per year that the US has traditionally granted permanent residence over the last few decades -- are not enough for the country to maintain historic rates of productivity. It is only through increased immigration that the United States can achieve a sustainable working-age population, economic growth and a solvent Social Security system.

Of course, American society is not a factory. Immigrants bring with them different cultures, attitudes and preferences. And some of those differences do not sit well with parts of the population. Some Americans are [already responding](#) to current levels of demographic diversity with [nativism](#) and "America First" [nationalism](#).

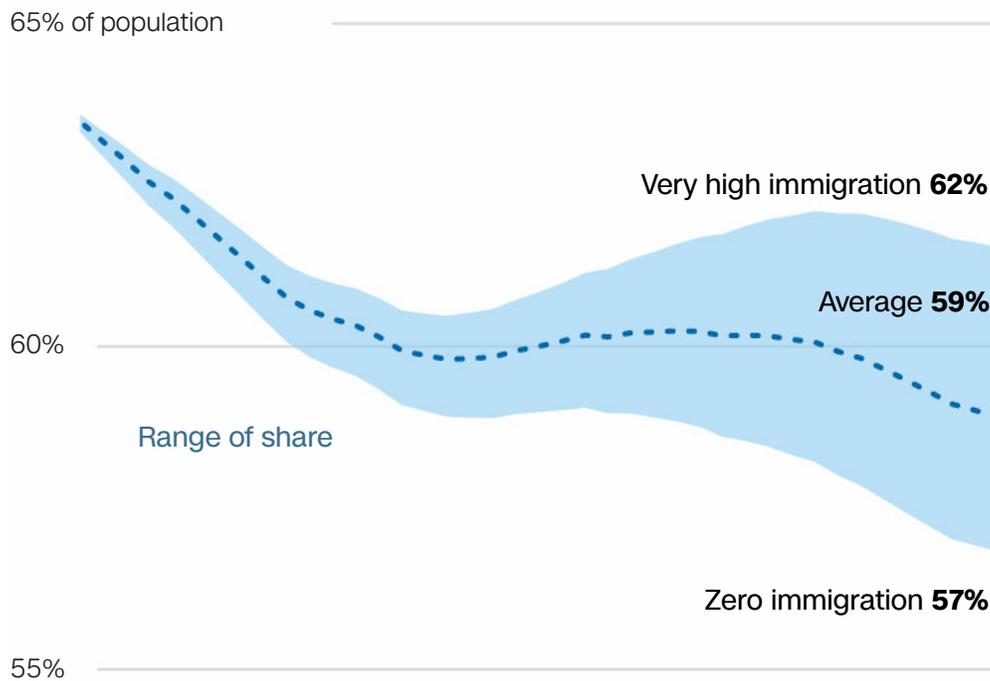
However, this research demonstrates that more immigration is in the best interests of national survival. We should think of immigration policy not just as a humanitarian obligation or a legacy of our past, but actually as a way to secure the country's future.

Welcoming newcomers is as pro-America as it gets.

According to our research, by 2060, the share of the population between 18 and 65 -- working-age -- is projected to be nearly 62% in the scenario that doubles the current annual number of immigrant admissions. If immigration is cut to zero, it would be less than 56%. While this difference may seem small, it significantly affects the balance between workers and the elderly -- who are less likely to work or contribute to the tax base, and more likely to draw on government benefits and services. Where there were only 25 elderly persons per 100 working-age people in 2018, by 2060, we can expect nearly 50 elderly persons per 100 working-age people in the case of zero net migration, but only 30 in the scenario involving doubled admissions.

Projections show decline in working-age residents in US

Using 2018 immigration data to estimate future population change in the United States, research from George Mason University shows that if the current rate of immigration remains steady, the estimated share of working-aged residents would drop 4% points.



The zero-immigration scenario predicts real GDP of only \$32 trillion by 2060, more than 27% lower than if recent trends were to continue. Were Congress to maintain the current mix of visas but double annual admissions, the US would increase economic growth by over 40% relative to the scenario that extends 2018 baseline trends.

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Meanwhile, increased immigration is one way to sustain current expenses associated with Social Security payments. In 2018, Social Security payments accounted for about a quarter of all federal spending, and this share would stay the same if immigration admissions were doubled. However, if current trends were to continue, this share would rise to about 31% in 2060. And if immigration were cut to zero, Social Security payments would eventually consume 35% of the federal budget -- squeezing other federal programs.

The bottom line: policy matters. The [choices](#) Congress and the White House make today drive the demographic composition of our country and engineer our economic future.



stabilize their lives and secure their survival are actually critical to our nation's survival, too.

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