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# U.S. Immigration Is Down, Support Is Up

Immigration rate is far from its peak, but more Americans support it

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Opponents of immigration argue that America is undergoing the largest wave of legal immigration in American history, that it has lowered wages, and that Americans oppose this influx. But all of these views are incorrect. Immigration has been much lower than its historic peaks; there has been less competition from new workers in recent decades; and a growing majority of Americans oppose restricting immigration. Here are the facts:

- Today's immigration rate—the number of new immigrants each year as a share of the population—is half the rate that it was for a century from 1830 to 1929.
- Competition for jobs from new workers—immigrants *and* natives—has plunged. The labor force grew at nearly half the rate from 1981 to 2013 that it grew from 1948 to 1980, meaning more competition cannot explain tepid wage growth.
- Competition from new lower-skilled workers has dropped even more dramatically. Labor force growth from these workers declined by 68 percent since 1981.
- America saw 70 percent higher income growth for wage earners from 1948 to 1980 when labor force grew faster than from 1981 to 2013 when it slowed.
- Nearly 60 percent of Americans oppose reducing immigration. According to Gallup polling, support for immigration has nearly doubled since the 1990s.

Immigration restrictions will not make America more competitive or prosperous. Congress should look to the dynamic post-World War II period, when the growing American labor force was the envy of the world, and reform the legal immigration system, replenishing our aging workforce with new talent.

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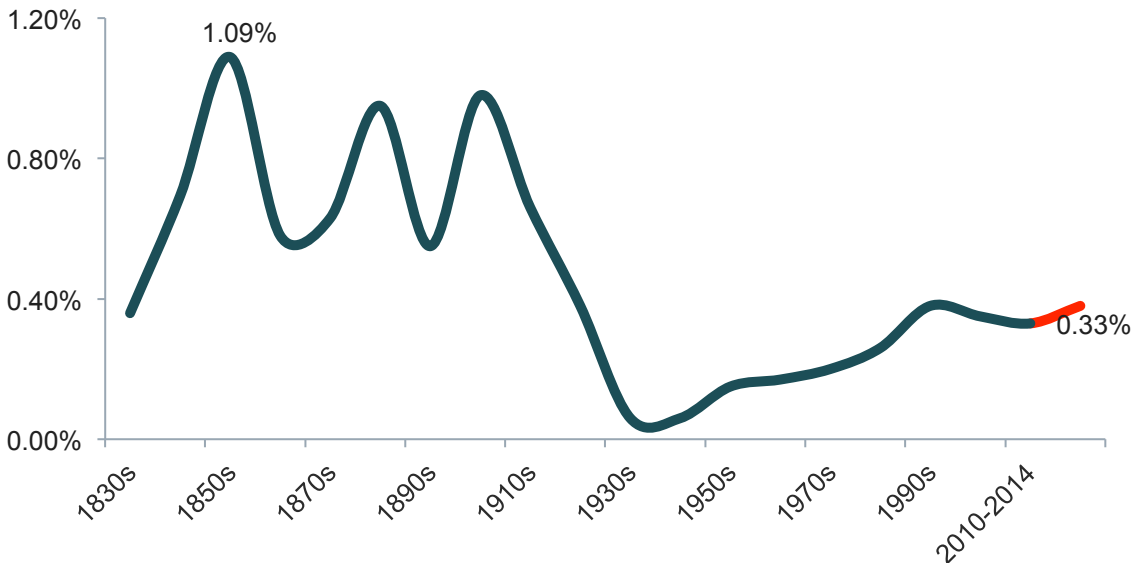
## LOWER IMMIGRATION

Central to recent criticisms of immigration is the idea that America is undergoing a historic wave of immigration. “The Census Bureau estimates that another 14 million immigrants will come to the United States between now and 2025,” Senator Jeff Sessions (R-AL) recently wrote in *The Washington Post*. “It is not mainstream, but extreme, to continue surging immigration beyond any historical precedent.”<sup>1</sup>

But Sen. Sessions misinterprets the data. Not only is immigration not “beyond any historical precedent,” it is far below its historic peak in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The best way to measure the level of immigration is not with the absolute number admitted, but with the number relative to the population of the country. It would be misleading to say, for example, that because America received five times the number of immigrants that Canada did in recent years, it has five times Canada’s level of immigration since America is a much larger country. Controlling for its population, the rate of immigration to Canada is currently about twice the rate of immigration to the United States.<sup>2</sup>

In the same way, any fair comparison of America today with America’s past would control for the size of the country. The Census Bureau estimate cited by Sen. Sessions concluded that over the next decade, immigration to the United States will annually average 0.38 percent of the U.S. population.<sup>3</sup> As evident in Chart 1, this level is not beyond any historical precedent. In fact, immigration was this level or higher for an entire century from the 1830s to the 1920s.<sup>4</sup>

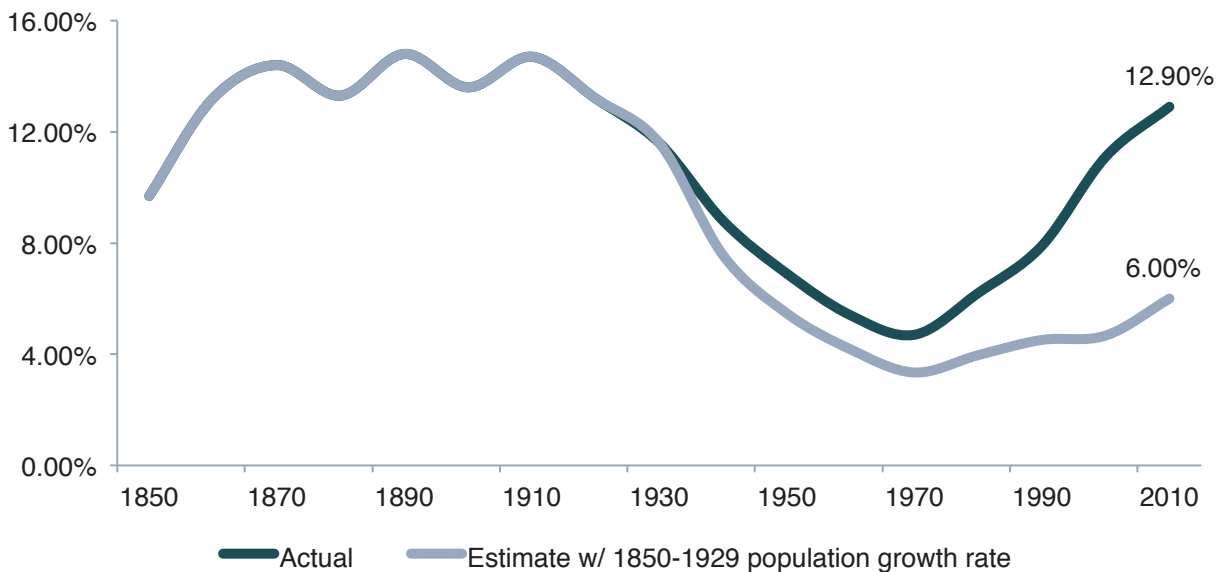
**Chart 1: Average Annual Rate of Immigration By Decade 1830-2014, Projected 2015-2024**



During this period, annual immigration averaged 0.64 percent of the population, fully twice the rate of immigration in the current decade. During the peak decade from 1850 to 1859, immigration reached 1.1 percent of the population, more than three times the current level. During the peak year in 1854, immigration topped out at 1.59 percent of the population, nearly five times the rate in 2014. By no measure is immigration today unprecedented. In fact, the level of immigration in 2014 was 50 percent below the historical average.

It is true that the foreign-born population in the United States has grown to its highest level as a share of the overall population since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but this is not due to an increase in immigration, but to a decrease in population growth, because of a drop in the native birthrate. The foreign-born population reached 12.9 percent in 2010 compared to 14.7 percent in 1910. But if the U.S. population had grown at the same rate from 1930 to 2010 that it grew from 1850 to 1929, the foreign-born share of the population would have been just 6 percent in 2010.<sup>5</sup> Chart 2 compares the actual foreign-born share of the population compared to its share if the birth rate had not declined.

**Chart 2: Foreign-Born Share of U.S. Population (1850-2010)**



The stock of immigrants as a percentage of the population is more than twice as high as it would be if the population had grown as fast as it did before 1930. In other words, the reason for the greater percentage of immigrants in the United States today is not due to a huge influx of immigrants entering the country, but to fewer Americans entering the world. The immigration “flood” is fiction.

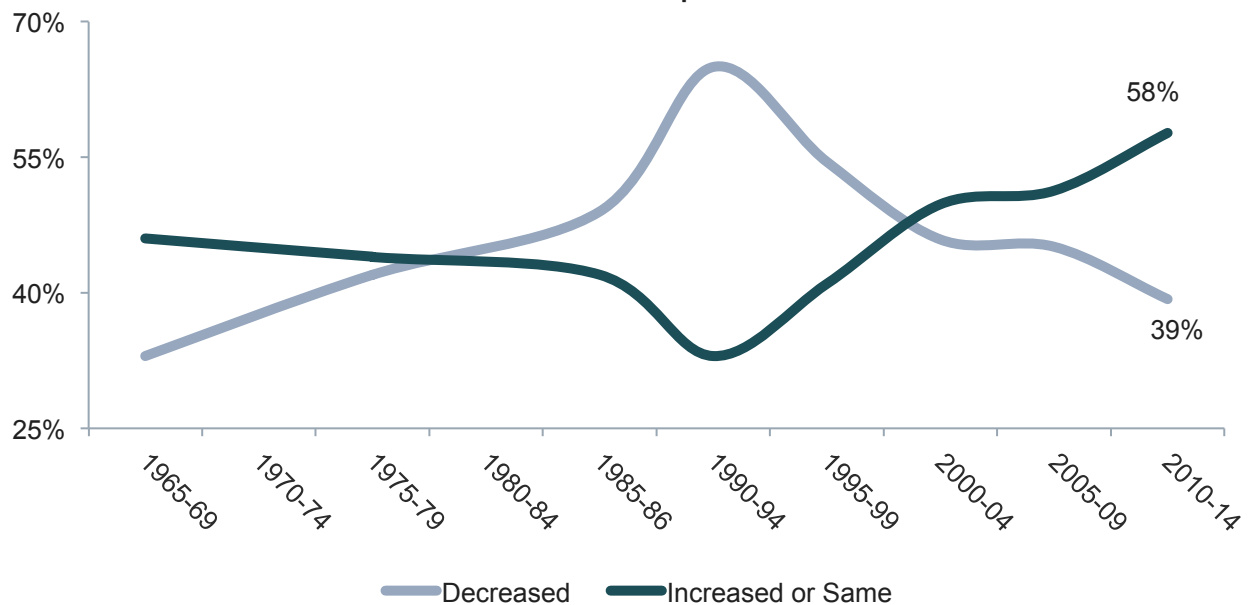
## PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR IMMIGRATION

Sen. Sessions further claims that the public is on his side in favor of restricting legal immigration. In his new “Immigration Handbook for the New Republican Majority,” he states, “We need make no apology in rejecting an extreme policy of sustained mass immigration, which the public repudiates.”<sup>6</sup> But he is wrong. The American public has never been more in favor of immigration than it is today.

Periodically since 1965, Gallup has polled the American public on their views on immigration. It is the longest running survey of the public’s views on immigration in the United States, and it is always asked in exactly the same manner: “Should immigration be kept at its present level, increased, or decreased?”

If Senator Sessions were correct that Americans reject the current policies and oppose immigration, opposition to immigration should have increased as immigration has increased since the 1960s. That was true from 1965 to 1995, but in the last 20 years, Americans have become increasingly more opposed to restricting immigration. Chart 3 combines those respondents who support the current level or want it increased. For the last five years, a large majority has opposed restricting immigration, 58 to 39 percent.<sup>7</sup>

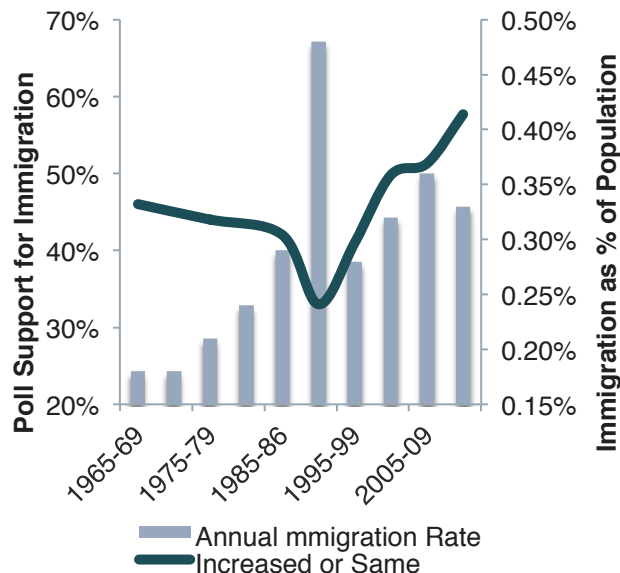
**Chart 3: Gallup Polling: Should Immigration Be Increased, Decreased, or Kept the Same Level?**



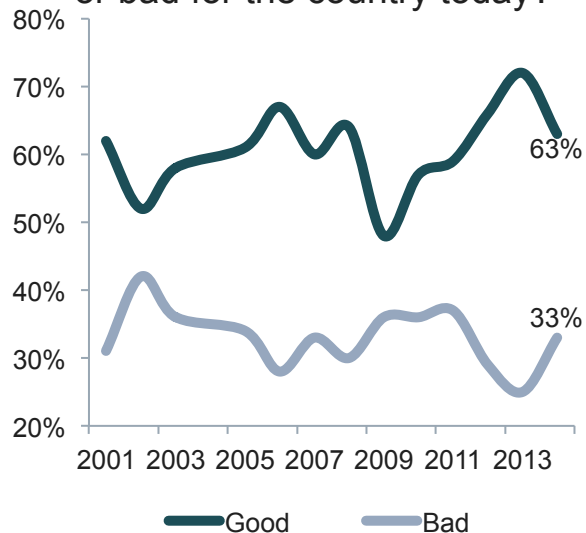
The increase in support for immigration is much more dramatic than this information alone would indicate. Because the level of immigration has also increased since 1965, those who support the “present level” are actually supporting a much higher level in 2014 than when the question was first asked in 1965. For a more accurate picture of the

support for immigration, it is necessary to control for the actual level of immigration that respondents support. Chart 4 compares the average amount of support for immigration and the overall level of immigration during each five-year period since 1965. Overall, support for immigration by this measure has grown by almost 200 percent since 1965.

**Chart 4: Gallup: Immigration Support & Immigration Rate**



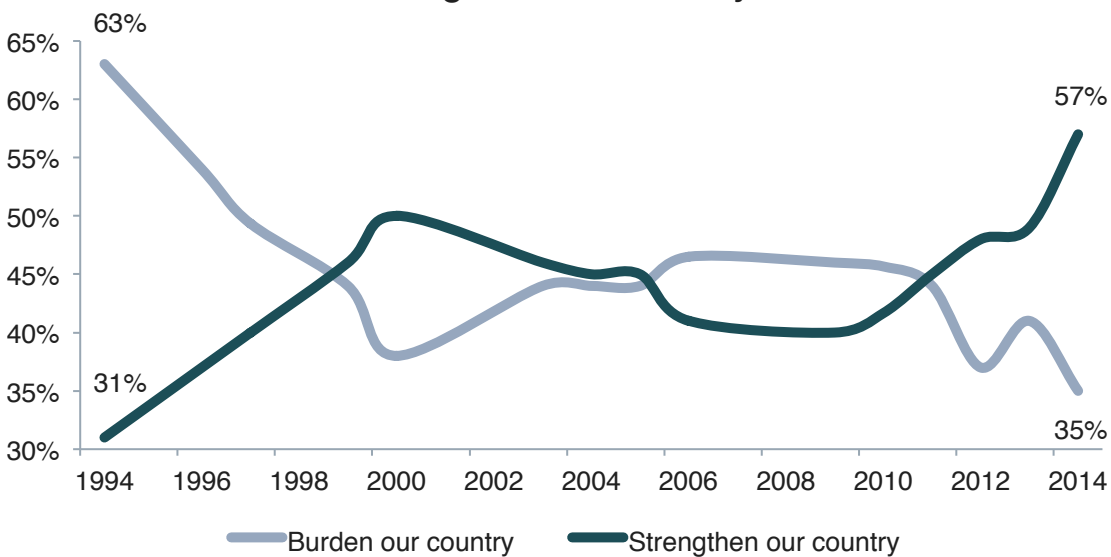
**Chart 5: Gallup: On the whole, is immigration good or bad for the country today?**



Another problem with using this poll as the only measure of support for immigration is that it fails to control for those who wish to restrict only illegal immigration. Unfortunately, there is no long-term polling specifically on *legal* immigration. But since 2001, Gallup has asked, “On the whole, do you think immigration is a good thing or a bad thing for this country today?”<sup>8</sup> Throughout the period, as Chart 5 shows, Americans have favored immigration, even taking into account illegal immigration, with support averaging over 60 percent.<sup>9</sup>

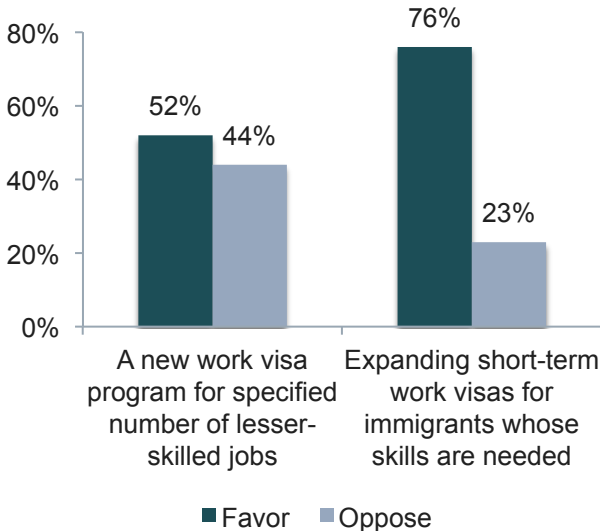
Pew Research Center has done a similar poll periodically since 1994, which confirms the idea that Americans are becoming more welcoming to immigrants and more opposed to restricting immigration. It asked, “What statement comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right? Immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents. Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing, and health care.” As in the Gallup polling, Americans have changed from 63 percent viewing them generally as a burden in 1994 to 57 percent viewing them generally as one of America’s strengths in 2014.<sup>10</sup>

**Chart 6: Pew Poll: Do immigrants burden or strengthen our country?**



Separating out supporters of “increased” immigration from those who support the “present level,” Gallup’s polling shows that the percentage of Americans who favor more immigration has also grown since the 1990s, from an average of only 7 percent from 1965 to 1999 to almost a quarter in 2014. This fourfold increase is significant, but again, it is not the full picture. The question fails to take into account those who want illegal

**Chart 7: Gallup Poll (2013): Do you favor or oppose...?**



immigration lower, but legal immigration higher. Again, there is little historical data, but in 2013, Gallup did poll provisions in the Senate immigration reform bill (S. 744) which would increase employer-based immigration. As Chart 7 shows, a strong majority of Americans favored more visas for both workers in general (76 to 23 percent) as well as lesser-skilled workers in particular (52 to 44 percent).<sup>11</sup>

Sen. Session also claims that increased immigration is only supported by “Washington pundits” and “trendy CEOs.” But the view that only rich people support immigration is likely flawed. The result of focus groups conducted by the research group Penn

Schoen Berland for the business group ImmigrationWorks USA found that it was

actually lesser-skilled Americans who were most supportive of lesser-skilled (or “low wage”) immigrants. Their direct experience working with such workers and in immigrant-heavy industries made them see their importance. “College-educated participants were more likely to blame the labor shortage on lower-skilled Americans who say they are too good for these jobs,” the research group concluded.<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, these small focus groups are by no means conclusive, but the experience of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century actually supports this view. Labor unions that represented skilled industrial workers and craftsmen agitated for cutting off immigration in the 1920s despite the fact that the vast majority of new immigrants were unskilled and did not compete with them, as historian Aristide Zolberg has noted.<sup>13</sup> The opposition was class-based. Today, it seems likely that many lesser-skilled Americans who work alongside lesser-skilled immigrants may actually recognize their value better than wealthy politicians in Washington, D.C.

## **MORE WORKERS MEAN MORE INCOME**

Sen. Sessions’ argument against legal immigration relies heavily on the view that recent increases in immigration since 1980 are to blame for lower wages. “What has happened to the labor market since 1980?” the senator said in Senate floor speech last year, continuing:

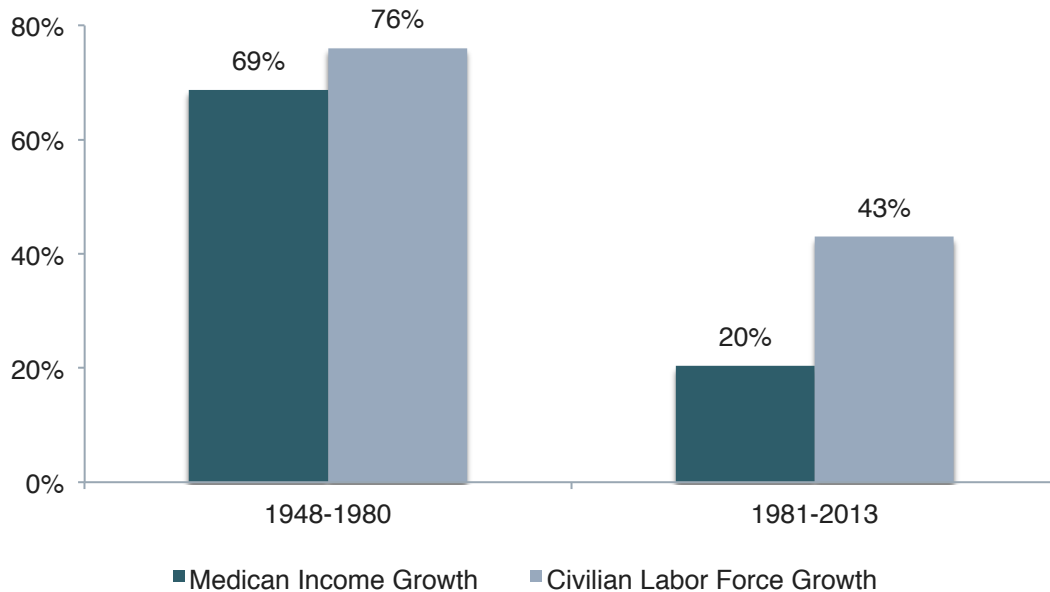
From 1980 through 2013, the immigrant population tripled from 14 million to more than 41 million. The sustained large-scale flow of legal immigration, overwhelmingly lower-wage and lower-skilled, has placed substantial downward pressure on wages... Only an adjustment in policy will change this trajectory, just as policy was changed early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to allow labor markets to tighten.<sup>14</sup>

But his basic assumption—that labor markets are being flooded with new workers—is wrong. Sen. Sessions’ sole focus on immigrants misses the bigger picture of the labor market, which is composed of both immigrants and native-born workers. After factoring in the number of native-born workers entering the labor force each year, labor markets have tightened considerably since 1980. Since 1980, more immigrants began joining the labor force at the same time fewer Americans were being born. The lower birthrates resulted in lower rate of increase overall from new workers, foreign and domestic.

Since 1980, America has had less competition from new workers entering the labor force than before 1980. In the 33 years from 1948 to 1980, the labor force grew by 76 percent,<sup>15</sup> and median income for wage and salary workers shot up by almost 70 percent.<sup>16</sup> In the following 33 years from 1981 to 2013, the labor force grew just 43 percent—almost half the earlier amount—yet median income rose only 20 percent. Since new job-seeking has declined since 1980, new job seekers—foreign and

domestic—cannot explain the lower income growth. Policymakers should look for other explanations.

**Chart 8: Median Income Growth and Civilian Labor Force Growth**



The labor force has not been rapidly expanding in the last few years either. From 2006 to 2015, the labor force grew by just 4 percent, compared to 23 percent in the ten years from 1966 to 1975.<sup>17</sup> In fact, this decade has seen the weakest growth in the labor force since the government began collecting statistics on it in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> The reality is that America is experiencing an abnormal dearth of new workers, not a historic influx.

Advocates for restricting immigration might argue that the lower growth rate could be due to Americans being displaced from the labor force by foreign-born competitors. But the data at the most basic level simply do not support this conclusion. In fact, from 1981 to 2013, America had a significantly higher labor force participation rate (66 percent) than during the 1948 to 1980 period (60 percent).<sup>19</sup> Just because more immigrants started working did not mean that fewer Americans did.

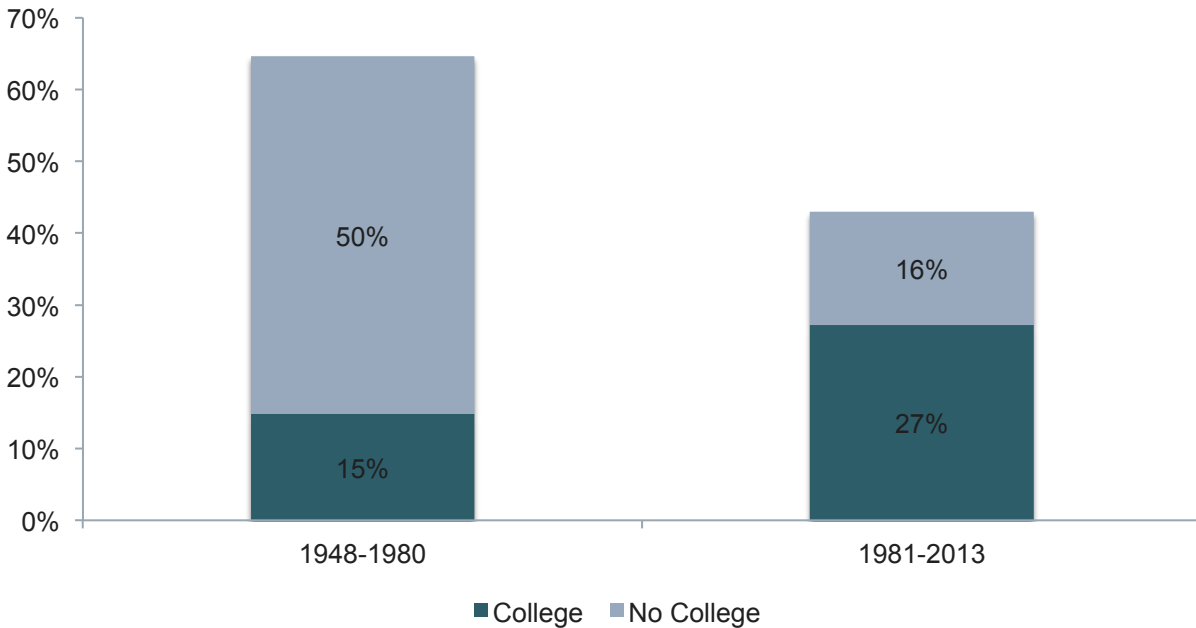
Senator Sessions sticks the blame for lower wage growth on “lower-skilled” workers in particular, implying perhaps that the American workers of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s were not lower-skilled. But this view is also mistaken. From 1948 to 1980,<sup>20</sup> workers without a college degree accounted for 71 percent of the increase in the labor force. From 1981 to 2013, the numbers were reversed: 63 percent of the increase came from college graduates.

New college graduates by themselves grew the labor force by 21 percent from 1948 to 1980 and by 27 percent from 1981 to 2013. Labor force growth from college graduates



has hardly shifted, meaning that the lower labor force growth was almost entirely due to fewer workers without a college degree. In fact, 98 percent of the decline in labor force growth since 1980 came from a lower rate of entry of lesser-skilled workers into the workforce, exactly the “low wage” workers that Sen. Sessions blames for the wage stagnation. If competition from new “low wage” workers is down, blame for lower wage growth must lie elsewhere.

**Chart 9: Labor Force Increase by Education**



Nor is an influx of high school dropouts hurting wages. Despite being a disproportionate share of foreign-born workers compared to native-born workers (12 percent compared to 7.5 percent in 2013),<sup>21</sup> the number of high school dropouts has plunged in absolute terms. Their ranks also fell between 1947 and 1980, but 1981 to 2013 actually witnessed twice the annual rate of decline in the number of high school dropouts in the United States.<sup>22</sup> In other words, not only is competition from “low wage” workers not increasing, it is falling faster than ever.

## CONCLUSION

Proponents of restricting immigration are wrong to claim that America is undergoing the largest wave of immigration in its history. The rate of immigration today is much lower than it was for a century from 1830 to 1929. They are also wrong to claim that Americans want to stop immigrants from coming to the United States. Long-term polling data show that a growing majority of Americans support immigration to the United States. An even greater number supports increasing lawful immigration to the United States.

Moreover, advocates for less immigration are wrong to blame greater labor force competition for lower wage growth. In fact, wage growth was higher when more people were entering the workforce following the baby boom. Immigration restrictionists have already achieved their goal of tighter labor markets, but with negative results. Congress should look back to the earlier era of robust labor force growth as a model and reform the immigration system to allow workers a legal avenue for entry to the United States.

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