



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior**

## **Immigration**

Contributors: Victoria M. Esses, Joshua D. Wright, Clint Thomson & Leah K. Hamilton

Edited by: Fathali M. Moghaddam

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Immigration is the voluntary or involuntary movement of people to a new country in which they intend to settle for an extended period of time. Immigration is on the rise, and members of receiving nations have a variety of reactions to the arrival of immigrants. Immigration has a major impact on the individuals who relocate and on source and receiving nations. This entry provides an overview of immigration in the 21st century and considers the motivations and personality traits that may determine why individuals leave their country of origin to live somewhere else. It then turns to a discussion of the drivers of host nationals' attitudes toward immigrants and immigration and how discriminatory treatment of immigrants may occur. The final section provides a summary of the acculturation processes that may result from contact between immigrants and members of host societies.

## Overview

Immigration levels have reached historically unprecedented levels in recent years, often involving movement from less-developed countries to more-developed countries. It is estimated that there are currently around 232 million international migrants worldwide—approximately 3.2% of the world population—and these numbers are expected to continue to increase for the foreseeable future. A 2012 Gallup poll revealed that nearly 640 million adults (13% of the world's adults) would emigrate if given the chance, with 23% of those who would like to move indicating the United States as their preferred destination.

Immigrant-receiving nations differ markedly in their approach to immigrants and in their immigration policies. Some, such as Canada, see immigrants, particularly those who are highly skilled, as a valuable commodity and accept a large number of immigrants into the country each year on the basis of their potential economic contributions. Others, such as the United States, place more emphasis on family reunification, and their immigration policies focus more on how to avoid large numbers of “undocumented” or “irregular” immigrants. Still others, such as Germany, have historically denied that their country is an immigrant-receiving nation, and formal policies for accepting immigrants have been put into place relatively recently.

## Why People Migrate

Consideration of why people migrate has focused predominantly on the push and pull factors of immigration and the migrant personality.

### Push and Pull Factors of Immigration

The decision to migrate can be encouraged by push factors, pull factors, and network factors. Push factors are those that drive people from their home country, while pull factors are those that attract people to a new country. Network factors become important once a migration stream has developed.

Push and pull factors can be either economic or noneconomic. Economic push factors include unemployment, underemployment, or low wages. Migrants may also be pushed out of their home country by noneconomic political factors, such as by persecution or war. Other noneconomic push factors can include lack of educational opportunity or various safety concerns, such as high crime rates. Sometimes these push factors can be connected to volatile environmental conditions such as drought or flooding that might depress wages

through crop failure or lead to political instability and lack of safety.

Economic pull factors include employment opportunity, more stable economic conditions, and labor recruitment, such as temporary guest worker programs, while noneconomic pull factors include a safe environment, reuniting with family, or democratic governance. Global communication networks inform the international community about conditions and opportunities abroad and act as the connector between push and pull factors. For example, migrants may be motivated to leave their home country by high unemployment (push factor) and be encouraged to migrate to the United States by a guest worker program (pull factor). Once this stream of migration is formed, it continues to grow via formal and informal networks of information regarding wages and job opportunities. Regardless of what push, pull, and network factors are acting on migrants, individual differences may be important in determining who actually follows through with a desire to migrate.

### **The Migrant Personality**

Research on the migrant personality seeks to discover why some individuals, living in the same socioeconomic conditions, become immigrants, while others do not. The *migrant personality* may include resilience to anxiety and insecurity and more secure and dismissing attachment styles. A dismissing attachment style makes an individual more detached from social surroundings and more likely to emigrate, while a secure attachment style enhances psychological adjustment in the new country. Other aspects of the migrant personality are openness to experience and extraversion, which are positively related to one's intention to emigrate.

Some aspects of personality may be highly related to decisions to emigrate when conditions in the home country are poor. Irene Frieze and Man Yu Li argue that having an internal motivation to compete and achieve (i.e., achievement motivation) and an internal desire for leadership and control over others (i.e., power motivation) may be related to emigration when conditions block the fulfillment of these motivations. Alternatively, a desire to form and maintain relationships with others is related to choosing to stay in one's home country.

### **Factors Influencing Attitudes Toward Immigrants and Immigration**

Attitudes toward immigrants and immigration among members of a host society are important because they may influence support for immigration policies within a nation, the treatment and acceptance of immigrants, the success of immigration policies, the life outcomes for immigrants, and the degree of harmony or discord within a nation. Two important theories that have addressed attitudes toward immigrants and immigration are the *unified instrumental model of group conflict* proposed by Esses and colleagues and the *integrated threat theory of prejudice* proposed by Stephan and colleagues. Both theories aim to explain the variety of factors that may influence immigration attitudes, including those discussed in what follows.

### **Perceived Economic Costs and Contributions**

Over the past few decades, there have been repeated debates as to whether immigrants contribute economically to their new society or are a drain on resources and compete for jobs with those who are native born. A specific answer to this question may depend on the immigration policy of the host nation, the type of immigrants who are arriving, the form that the host economy takes, and demographic and economic characteristics of the host economy

over time. For example, many immigrants to Canada are accepted under the economic class of immigration and are thus specifically selected to fill labor market needs. In contrast, the majority of immigrants to the United States are accepted based on a family reunification model, so concerns about the economic contributions of these immigrants may be greater. In addition, when economic times are challenging and unemployment rates are higher, the costs of immigration may be seen as larger than the benefits.

Irrespective of the *actual* economic contributions of immigrants, an important factor in determining attitudes toward immigrants and immigration among members of a host society is the *perceived* economic contributions and costs of immigration. Immigrants who do not do well economically are likely to be seen as a drain on social services (e.g., welfare), leading to negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. Perhaps less obviously, immigrants who do well economically may also be seen as a threat to the economic conditions of the host society because their successes may at times be seen as coming at the expense of nonimmigrants. These “zero-sum beliefs”—beliefs that the more immigrants obtain, the less is available for nonimmigrants—lead to negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. This means that some members of the receiving society may perceive immigrants negatively regardless of whether immigrants succeed or fail economically. Fundamentally, it is the belief that immigrants are taking resources from members of the receiving society that drives these negative attitudes.

Such a belief may be more or less likely to be part of the dominant discourse within a country, may be more or less likely to be promoted by the media, and may depend on individual difference variables, such as social dominance orientation. Research has shown that individuals who are higher in social dominance orientation (i.e., support inequality in society and believe in group hierarchies) are especially likely to see the world in general and to see relations with immigrants in particular as zero sum in nature. As a result, they are especially likely to hold negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration.

### Perceived Threats to Safety and Health

Two other types of threats that can be associated with immigrants are threats to physical safety and threats to the health of members of the receiving society. Concerns about threats to safety posed by immigrants have become more prevalent since September 11, 2001, due to the salient association between immigrants and terrorists caused by media depictions of the terrorist attacks at that time. It is now the case that immigrants, particularly those from Near and Middle Eastern countries and Muslims, are more likely to be viewed with suspicion and hostility. Most recently, many Western nations have been resistant to accepting large numbers of refugees fleeing conflicts in Syria and Iraq because of safety concerns and host members' fear that they may be harboring terrorists and criminals. Indeed, the recent arrival of millions of refugees to Europe from the Near and Middle East and the purported migrant riots in European cities on New Year's Eve 2015 have led to a backlash against Muslim refugees in the European Union and the rise of anti-immigrant groups and political parties.

Concerns that immigrants may carry infectious diseases have influenced immigration policies throughout history and to the present day, despite the fact that immigrants are no longer a major vector of disease. Nonetheless, when the association between risk of disease and newcomers is salient in the media, irrespective of whether the risk is genuine, this may result in dehumanization of immigrants and the promotion of negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration.

### **Perceived Cultural and Value-Related Costs and Contributions**

In addition to potentially being seen as a threat to tangible resources, immigrants are at times seen as threatening the culture and values of members of the host society. Just as some people may see tangible resources as zero sum in nature, some individuals may also see more symbolic outcomes as zero sum. As a result, they may believe that if immigrants are allowed to maintain their practices and values, this means that the culture and values of the host society are weakened. These zero-sum beliefs about culture and values are particularly likely to be held by individuals who are higher in social dominance orientation (more likely to believe in hierarchy and inequality) and lead to negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. Just as with tangible resources, the belief that immigrants threaten the dominant culture and values may be more or less likely to be part of the dominant discourse within a country and may be more or less likely to be promoted by the media. In recent years, the claim that immigrants are a potential threat to the dominant culture and values of host countries has become particularly prevalent within European discourse, resulting in increased support for restrictive immigration policies.

### **The Framing of National Identity**

How national identity is defined within a particular country and by specific individuals within that country plays an important role in determining whether immigrants are seen as beneficial or detrimental. Two important forms of national identity are nativist/ethnonational and civic/cultural national identity. The nativist form is based on descent or long-term residency and sometimes on being a member of the dominant religion. This narrow construal of the national in-group is closely tied to ethnonational identity, which is defined by kinship bonds and a common ethnic heritage. In contrast, the civic/cultural form of national identity derives from a voluntary commitment to the laws and institutions of the country and on the feeling of being a member of the national group. Countries with a history of promoting a nativist/ethnonational national identity (e.g., the United Kingdom) are more likely to have restrictive immigration policies and to reject immigrants as members of the national in-group. In contrast, countries that have a history of promoting a civic/cultural national identity (e.g., Canada) are more likely to have relatively open immigration policies and to accept immigrants as members of the national in-group soon after their arrival.

Definitions of national identity may change over time. For example, it has been demonstrated that in times of national crisis and threat, the psychological boundaries defining the national in-group tend to narrow and nativist sentiments tend to increase, resulting in more negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. In addition, large-scale immigration, particularly from new and unfamiliar source countries, can increase concerns about national identity and nativist beliefs so that negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration become evident. Thus, narrow definitions of national identity and unfavorable views of immigrants and immigration may be mutually reinforcing.

In addition to construal of national identity, forms of attachment to one's nation also influence immigration attitudes. In particular, individuals who are higher in nationalism—believing that their nation is superior to all others—hold more negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. In contrast, individuals who are higher in patriotism—expressing pride and love for their nation—do not hold such attitudes.

### **Discrimination Toward Immigrants**

Negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration are likely to lead to acts of discrimination. Historically, immigrants to new countries have experienced a variety of forms of discrimination, including blatant acts of violence and exclusion. Today, the discrimination that immigrants face is often more subtle but continues to limit their life choices. This discrimination may affect all phases of the immigration and integration process, from restrictive immigration policies to limits on citizenship to more subtle discrimination in everyday encounters. Subtle discrimination may manifest in crucial aspects of immigrant settlement and integration, including in securing housing, in having one's skills and credentials recognized, in educational opportunities, and in accessing social services. As with other forms of subtle bias, this discrimination is most likely to be evident when justifications other than prejudice are readily available. For example, research has shown that employers may discount the skills of an immigrant applicant due to prejudice while using the uncertainty of foreign qualifications as a seemingly legitimate justification for this behavior. Whether blatant or subtle, discrimination may have a severe impact on immigrants and limit the contributions that they can make to their new country.

## Acculturation

Acculturation refers to the changes that occur following contact between individuals of different cultures. Acculturation differs from "assimilation" because acculturation encompasses the changes that occur for both immigrants and host societies as a result of contact, while "assimilation" has been employed under the assumption that immigrants will become more like the host society over time and across generations.

### Acculturative Changes

Acculturation changes can be both short and long term. Typically, it is thought that immediate, short-term experiences can lead to long-term outcomes. For example, navigating a cross-cultural transition can expose a newcomer to a variety of new experiences. Similarly, interacting with unfamiliar individuals on a daily basis could present challenges for hosts. As such, both hosts and immigrants may modify their behavior in the short term. Depending on both individual and contextual factors, it could be either easy or difficult to adjust one's behavior in light of the social and environmental changes that occur during the acculturation experience.

The term *adaptation* describes the long-term changes of acculturation. There are two primary forms of adaptation: psychological and sociocultural. Psychological adaptation refers to the long-term changes in an individual's well-being that result from the acculturation experience. Psychological adaptation has been shown to be associated with acculturative stress. That is, experiencing a greater challenge navigating changes during acculturation may lead to outcomes such as depression or anxiety. Sociocultural adaptation refers to a person's ability to negotiate social interactions in the context of acculturation. Strong sociocultural adaptation abilities can involve the acquisition of new language skills or customs one previously did not have and are thus useful during acculturation. These have primarily been investigated from the perspective of newcomers, including immigrants, sojourners, and international students. However, they may also be applicable to host nationals experiencing large influxes of settlers from different cultural backgrounds.

### Acculturation Strategies

Acculturation strategies are based on beliefs about how an acculturating group should acculturate and can be adopted by both the host group and the immigrant group. In both cases, they are based on beliefs about how the immigrant group should acculturate. Attitudes people hold on two particular issues form the basis for preferred acculturation strategies—attitudes toward contact with the host culture and attitudes toward the maintenance of an immigrant group's heritage culture. Thus, immigrants can endorse high or low desire for contact with hosts and high or low desire for the maintenance of their own culture. Research has demonstrated that integration, the strategy that includes both high desire for contact and high culture maintenance, has been associated with the most positive psychological outcomes. Other acculturation strategies for immigrants include assimilation (high contact desire, low culture maintenance desire), separation (low contact desire, high culture maintenance desire), and marginalization (low contact desire, low culture maintenance desire). For hosts, marginalization is replaced by the term "exclusionism" (low contact desire, low culture maintenance).

Theory on host acculturation strategies suggests that there can be a bidirectional relationship between state immigration policies and hosts' desired acculturation strategies for immigrants. Furthermore, a mismatch between the host society's desired acculturation strategies for immigrants and the strategies adopted by immigrants can lead to negative intergroup outcomes. For example, if host members endorse a separation strategy and immigrants wish to integrate, this can create tensions between the two groups in the host nation.

Developed nations increasingly have a need for immigrants in order to contribute to their labor markets and to boost their diminishing populations. Thus, the discourse of immigration within these countries is changing from a discussion of "tolerance of immigrants" to a discussion of the "need to attract and retain immigrants." As a result, questions of immigration must now focus on how to optimize the contributions of immigrants to their new countries and promote positive relations with members of the receiving societies for the benefit of all.

**See also** [Assimilation](#); [Citizenship](#); [Conflict Theory, Realistic](#); [Discrimination](#); [Ethnicity](#); [Media Framing](#); [Multiculturalism](#); [Nationalism](#); [Patriotism](#); [Prejudice](#); [Refugees](#); [Social Dominance Orientation](#)

Victoria M. Esses Joshua D. Wright Clint Thomson Leah K. Hamilton

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#### **Further Readings**

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