

THE
TRUTH
ABOUT
IMMIGRATION

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**THE
TRUTH
ABOUT
IMMIGRATION**

**WHY SUCCESSFUL
SOCIETIES WELCOME
NEWCOMERS**

ZEKE HERNANDEZ



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To Kendra, whose belief in me has been a constant
since I moved to this country.

To Lucas, Matias, Nicolas, Jonas, and Vivian—
the most beautiful outcome of my move.

To my parents, Nelly and Roberto,
whose courageous moves opened the world to me.
And to all the movers, and those who welcome them.

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INTRODUCTION

“**You know you’ll** be taking a scholarship, a job, and a girl from a deserving American, right?” An American friend told me that as I was agonizing over the hardest decision of my life: should I move to the United States or stay in my home country?

I was twenty-one years old and had just finished a two-year service mission in Buenos Aires. Those years, between 1999 and 2001, were the run-up to the deepest economic crisis in Argentina’s history. The misery I saw in the city’s infamous *villas* (its poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods) made a deep impression on me. Tough men weeping because they couldn’t feed their families. Youth driven to addiction and crime for lack of opportunity. Worried women holding hungry babies. I came to love those long-suffering and resilient people.

The experience changed me. I returned home with an intense desire to help improve the economic fortunes of people in my corner of the world. But I also had the rare opportunity—at least for someone like me—of studying in the US on a scholarship.

The two paths seemed irreconcilable.

I’m from Uruguay, a small country wedged between Brazil and Argentina. The year I was born, my father started working for our church. Not as a minister, but in an office job managing financial records. When I was four, he was transferred to Central America, where we spent six years in Costa Rica and Guatemala, followed by three more in Argentina. My father didn’t get paid much, but the job came with one perk that would shape the rest of my life: attending English-speaking schools that were otherwise unaffordable.

Learning English paved the way for me to apply for college in the US. When I returned home from Argentina with a letter of admission and a

full-tuition scholarship, my family and friends were certain that studying in America was a no-brainer. Few kids where I grew up could even fathom such a chance. But I had serious doubts about whether migrating was the right thing to do. The usual concerns about leaving loved ones behind and building a new life gave me pause.

But more than anything, the morality of immigration gnawed at me. Would I be stealing something from that deserving American my friend mentioned? Was I copping out by choosing a cushy life in America instead of taking the harder path of staying behind to make a difference in the lives of people like those I'd met in Buenos Aires? Was my purpose manifested in being born and raised in Latin America, or in the rare chance I'd had to learn English and now study in the US?

Emigrating would likely be good for me, but would it hurt others—both from where I'd leave and where I was going? It was, on a personal scale, the same raging debate we're having about immigration in America and everywhere around the world these days.

The fact that I had the luxury to agonize over the morality of my decision is evidence that mine was a relatively privileged migration case. While I didn't come from a wealthy family, I wasn't fleeing violence, political persecution, economic distress, or any other condition that left me little choice or might have tempted me to cross the border illegally.

After weeks of back-and-forth, I decided to make the move. It was a close call, but I reasoned that I would have a greater impact if I got a top-notch education in America and returned home. I wouldn't be an immigrant, after all, just an international student for a few years.

Famous last words!

Nearly twenty-five years later, I'm still living in the US and I've written this book about the remarkably positive benefits of immigration. Not for immigrants like me but for the societies that welcome them.

Any book on immigration invariably raises questions about the agenda of the author. So a little bit about me. I'm a professor at an Ivy League university, which to some may suggest an automatic liberal bent. I'm also a committed Christian who married young and has five children, which may indicate a conservative inclination. I've voted for both Democrats and Republicans, but I'm not a member of either party. My views align with different parties on different issues. And on immigration specifically, my initial belief was that it was probably better for im-

migrants than for the native-born. In short, I don't fit a particular mold or stereotype.

But more important than external appearances is the unexpected personal and intellectual journey that's culminated in this book. The truth is, I'm an accidental migration scholar. I never intended to dedicate my career to the topic. I came to study it via an indirect route—one that gives me a unique perspective.

After finishing my bachelor's and master's degrees in accounting and working at a large technology company, I decided it was time to tackle the question I'd started asking in Argentina: what creates economic prosperity? Seeking an answer, I pursued a PhD in business, where I learned theories of the economy rooted in both economics and sociology.

Months into the program, I stumbled onto a simple realization: standard models of economic growth didn't take sufficient account of the movement of people. If they considered immigration at all, it was as a sideshow—something individuals may or may not do to improve their personal well-being. It wasn't something fundamental to how societies operated economically.

But that didn't match what I'd seen growing up. My formative experiences hinted that national prosperity and human mobility go together. My family's moves exposed us to new ideas and possibilities, in contrast to the poor people I'd lived among who didn't have the option of moving. And on a grander scale, people's moves seemed to go hand in hand with the flow of ideas, capital, and talent so central to the models of economic growth I was learning.

It made me wonder. What if immigration was a feature and not a bug in economic models? What if it was central to everything that makes for successful societies: jobs, investment, innovation, cultural vitality, national security?

That simple idea kicked off nearly twenty years of research that continues to this day. As a professor of management at the Wharton School, I've led studies on how immigrants impact the investments, strategies, and performance of companies—with critical implications for immigration policy and economic growth. As I pursued my own research, I discovered remarkable work by others showing that immigration affects a host of crucial economic and social outcomes. The bottom line: immigrants are net positive contributors to everything that makes a society successful.

But that bottom line—so strongly and clearly supported by evidence—is

surprisingly different from the dominant narratives in our public conversation about immigration.

Those narratives paint immigrants as either villains or victims. The villain story tells us that immigrants pose a threat—to our economy because they steal our jobs, to our way of life because they change our culture, and to our safety and the rule of law because of their criminality. The victim argument, in contrast, tells us that we have a moral obligation to help the poor huddled masses of Emma Lazarus's poem and lift them up at our own expense if that's what it takes.

An analysis of congressional speeches over decades shows how pervasive these two narratives are.¹ The dominant themes in anti-immigrant speeches focus on terms like "crime" and "threat," while pro-immigrant speeches feature words like "victims" and "families." You come across the same language in news outlets and around the Thanksgiving table.

I believed both arguments as I was agonizing about whether to move to the US. I worried that I would be the villain who stole a scholarship, a job, and even a romantic partner from that deserving American. At the same time, I felt gratitude that the US had extended such a generous invitation to a person with my disadvantages. My appreciation was not misplaced.

But with all due respect for the idealism and morality of the victim argument, it's weak. It tells people that immigration is good for immigrants, but it doesn't tell them how much natives benefit from it as well. The villain argument is more effective, albeit factually wrong, because it makes a case for how immigration directly affects the native-born. It causes outrage and mobilizes voters.

Most books about immigration perpetuate either the victim argument or the villain argument. They either tell heroic stories about individual immigrants' success or spin arguments about how that success comes at the expense of the host nation. Both types of books are obsessed with how immigrants enter our country—for economic, family, or humanitarian reasons, legally or illegally. But they're short on what immigrants *do* for the rest of us once they're here.

This book, in contrast, is all about how immigrants actually affect you and your community. And no matter how conservative or progressive your views tend to be, I'll bet the results will surprise you.

Simply put, the evidence shows that without immigration we would have a "swamp society" that stagnates because it lacks inflows of novel

ideas, talent, motivation, and investment. Immigration ensures that we live in a “lake society” with a healthy renewal of those critical inputs.

For years, I kept expecting someone to write the go-to book on immigration—the one with everything you’ve always wanted to know in one place. The facts and the data were plain to see. Excellent books and research articles contained pieces of the puzzle. It was just a matter of assembling them. My expectation increased as the events of the recent past—rising nationalism, a global pandemic, chaos at the border—brought arguments about immigrants to a fever pitch. Surely it was just a matter of time before someone added clarity by painting the full picture.

In an effort to steer the conversation away from the victim and villain narratives, I started presenting my findings to a range of audiences: academics, alumni associations, business leaders, congressional staffers, church groups, journalists, Rotary Clubs, and students. In talking with them, I saw how deeply uninformed most people are about immigration, no matter their politics. I also saw that they were open and even thankful to have someone set the record straight.

Presenting to those audiences made me wonder if we academics weren’t partly to blame for the public’s ignorance about such an important topic. We’re good at producing rigorous research, but we fall short when it comes to sharing it with the world. We often bury our most exciting discoveries in obscure journals and couch them in confusing jargon. Because we’re so specialized, we don’t bother to connect the dots. One of us might study the social integration of immigrants, another the relation between immigration and crime. Still others might write about the effects of immigration on jobs, innovation, or investment. A good book narrowly focused on one of those issues might come out now and again. But we rarely talk to each other across disciplines, let alone link our findings into a coherent and accessible narrative.

This book is my attempt to do just that by providing you the full story, assembling the pieces I’ve gathered in nearly twenty years of research.

I want to challenge you to get beyond the simplistic villain/victim framing. That framing is advantageous to politicians who grossly distort the impact of immigrants in order to rally their bases. In the absence of a coherent narrative backed by rigorous evidence, those political distortions work really well to garner votes. But this book will show that our society suffers tremendous costs by allowing our immigration policies to be hijacked by the uninformed.

Those who manipulate public opinion create fear of newcomers by telling us lies about their similarities and differences. They claim that immigrants compete economically with locals because of their *similarities*, such as wanting the same jobs as native workers. They also claim that foreigners fail to socially assimilate because of their *differences*, including their unassimilable cultures.

But you'll see that it's exactly the opposite! Newcomers bring enduring economic benefits because of their differences and integrate successfully to our communities because of their similarities.

In the first set of chapters, I'll cover the economic side of immigration. Most conversations on immigrants and the economy begin and end with the controversial question of whether newcomers take jobs from native workers. We'll definitely cover that. But the economic case for immigration is much broader and much more positive. For example:

- Most people link immigrants with jobs (usually negatively). But almost nobody links immigrants to investment, which is critical for job creation. You'll understand how the immigration-investment-jobs triangle is essential for our prosperity.
- Many acknowledge that skilled immigrants contribute to “highbrow” innovations via patents or tech start-ups. But in fact, they're just as critical to “lowbrow” innovations that affect the things you do and consume every day. You'll see how both types of innovation are intertwined.
- Many worry that immigrants deplete public coffers. But evidence shows that the short-term costs of welcoming newcomers are an investment that more than replenishes those coffers.
- There's growing support for programs to bring in highly educated immigrants. But other kinds of immigrants (including those with less education) are also essential for natives to upgrade their skills and get better jobs—not to mention the investment, innovation, and fiscal gains I just listed.
- The differences immigrants bring are scary to many, but they turn out to be critical for our economy to diversify and remain on the cutting edge.

The second set of chapters takes an unflinching approach to every hot-button social issue associated with immigrants—cultural assimilation,

illegal immigration, the border, crime, and a lot more. Those chapters will also turn traditional thinking on its head. You'll see that:

- The immigrants who most successfully assimilate are those who *preserve* rather than abandon their original culture—which in turn renews and strengthens our own national culture.
- You're much safer with more rather than less immigration. The real national security and crime problems arise from keeping immigrants out.
- Our difficulties welcoming newcomers are rooted in psychological biases that a small band of politically motivated groups manipulate. Thankfully, there are scientifically proven ways to overcome those biases and difficulties.
- The perennial problem of illegal immigration is largely of our own creation. It prevents us from obtaining all the benefits immigrants create. There are practical, commonsense fixes to our system that can virtually end the problem.

In doing the research for this book, I was continually struck by how much of our thinking about immigration—and the entire system we've set up to manage it—is based on fear. The villain narrative lives on the unfounded fear that immigrants will hurt us economically and culturally. The victim narrative is fed by fear that we aren't fulfilling our moral duties toward needy outsiders. And to those we could add recent fears that growing our population and economy harms the environment and accelerates inequality.

Decisions based on fear never work. As you'll see throughout the chapters, we have a clear historical precedent to prove that: the 1924 National Origins Act, which slammed the door on immigrants from most of the world for forty years based on the same fears we have today. Our current immigration mess—exactly a hundred years later—is a direct legacy of that disastrous decision. We have compelling evidence that the 1924 law decimated America's capacity for innovation, investment, and job creation. It also impoverished the nation's cultural vitality, produced unintended national security risks, and led to many of the border problems that still plague us.

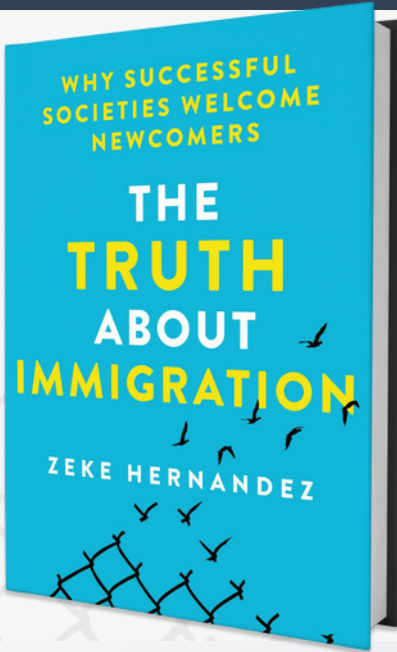
We're at risk of repeating the same mistake, with all of the same costs, if we fail to grasp what the evidence so clearly shows.

We need an entirely new system based on factual optimism rather than unfounded fear. As the facts I will present in this book prove over and over again, successful societies welcome newcomers.



That's the truth about immigration.

If you liked this, you'll love the book.



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