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STREETS OF GOLD

America's Untold Story of
Immigrant Success



Debunking immigration myths

Painted on wall of Ellis Island Museum

“I came to America because I heard the streets were paved with gold. When I got here, I found out three things: First, the streets weren’t paved with gold; second, they weren’t paved at all; and third, I was expected to pave them.”

We use data on millions of immigrant families to rebuild the story of immigration from the ground up

Reassessing four immigration myths

Is it really true that:

1. There is an unprecedented flood of immigration today?
2. The Ellis Island generation rose quickly (“rags to riches”), but immigrants today are not as successful?
3. Immigrant families and their children are stuck in a permanent underclass?
4. Immigrants do not try to become American these days?

Big data on immigration

| District, Precinct, Block, etc. | PLACE OF ABODE. | | | NAME of each person whose place of abode on January 1, 1920, was in this family. Enter surname first, then the given name and middle initial, if any. Include every person living on January 1, 1920. Omit children born since January 1, 1920. | RELATION. Relationship of this person to the head of the family. | TENURE. | | PERSONAL DESCRIPTION. | | | | CITIZENSHIP. | | | EDUCATION. | | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|---|---|--------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|----------------------------|--|---|--------------------------|---|---|--------------------------|---------------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| | House number or farm, etc. (See instruc- tions). | Num- ber of dwel- ing house in order of vis- itation. | Num- ber of family in order of vis- itation. | | | Home owned or rented. | If owned, free or mortgaged. | Sex. | Color or race. | Age at last birth- day. | Single, married, widow, or di- vorced. | Year of immigra- tion to the United States. | Naturalized or alien. | If naturalized, Year of natural- ization. | Attended school any time since Sept. 1, 1919. | Whether able to read. | Whether able to write. | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | | | |
| 51 52 53 54 55 | 245 | 288 | 321 | Andrews Oleie | Wife | | | F | W | 26 | M | | | | | Yes | | | | |
| | | | | — George J. | Son | | | M | W | 3 1/2 | A | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | 7205 | 289 | 322 | Arnold Louis | Head | R | | M | W | 56 | M | SS | Na | 1890 | | Yes | Yes |
| | | | | | | | — Mary | Wife | | | F | W | 53 | M | | | | | Yes | Yes |
| | | | | | | | — Catherine | Daughter | | | F | W | 26 | S | | | | | Yes | Yes |
| — Louis | Son | | | M | W | 25 | S | | | | | Yes | Yes | | | | | | | |
| 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 | 7215 | 290 | 323 | Platt Hyman D. | Head | O | M | M | W | 57 | M | SS | Na | 1878 | | Yes | Yes | | | |
| | | | | — Arny | Wife | | | F | W | 40 | M | | | | | Yes | Yes | | | |
| | | | | — George A. | Son | | | M | W | 21 | C | | | | | Yes | Yes | | | |
| | | | | — Rose | Daughter | | | F | W | 23 | S | | | | | Yes | Yes | | | |
| | | | | — Bessie | Daughter | | | F | W | 18 | C | | | | | Yes | Yes | | | |
| | | | | — Clara | Daughter | | | F | W | 17 | S | | | | | Yes | Yes | | | |
| | | | | — Sidney | Son | | | M | W | 11 | A | | | | | Yes | Yes | | | |
| | | | | — Edward | Son | | | M | W | 9 | A | | | | | Yes | Yes | | | |
| | | | | — Matthew | Son | | | M | W | 7 | A | | | | | Yes | Yes | | | |
| | | | | — Joseph | Son | | | M | W | 5 1/2 | A | | | | | Yes | Yes | | | |
| 66 67 68 69 70 | 7217 | 291 | 323 | Buck Charles W. | Head | R | | M | W | 41 | M | | | | Yes | Yes | | | | |
| | | | | — Ella C. C. | Wife | | | F | W | 37 | M | | | | | Yes | Yes | | | |
| | | | | — Charles M. | Son | | | M | W | 14 | A | | | | | Yes | Yes | | | |
| | | | | 7217 | 291 | 324 | Calderson Joseph | Head | | | M | W | 26 | M | 1902 | Pr | | Yes | Yes | |
| | | | | | | | — Rose | Wife | | | F | W | 22 | M | | | | | Yes | Yes |
| 71 72 | | | | — Gustaf | Son | | | M | W | 3 1/2 | A | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | — Dorothea | Daughter | | | F | W | 1 1/2 | A | | | | | | | | | |

Our method for following records over time



GENEALOGY DNA



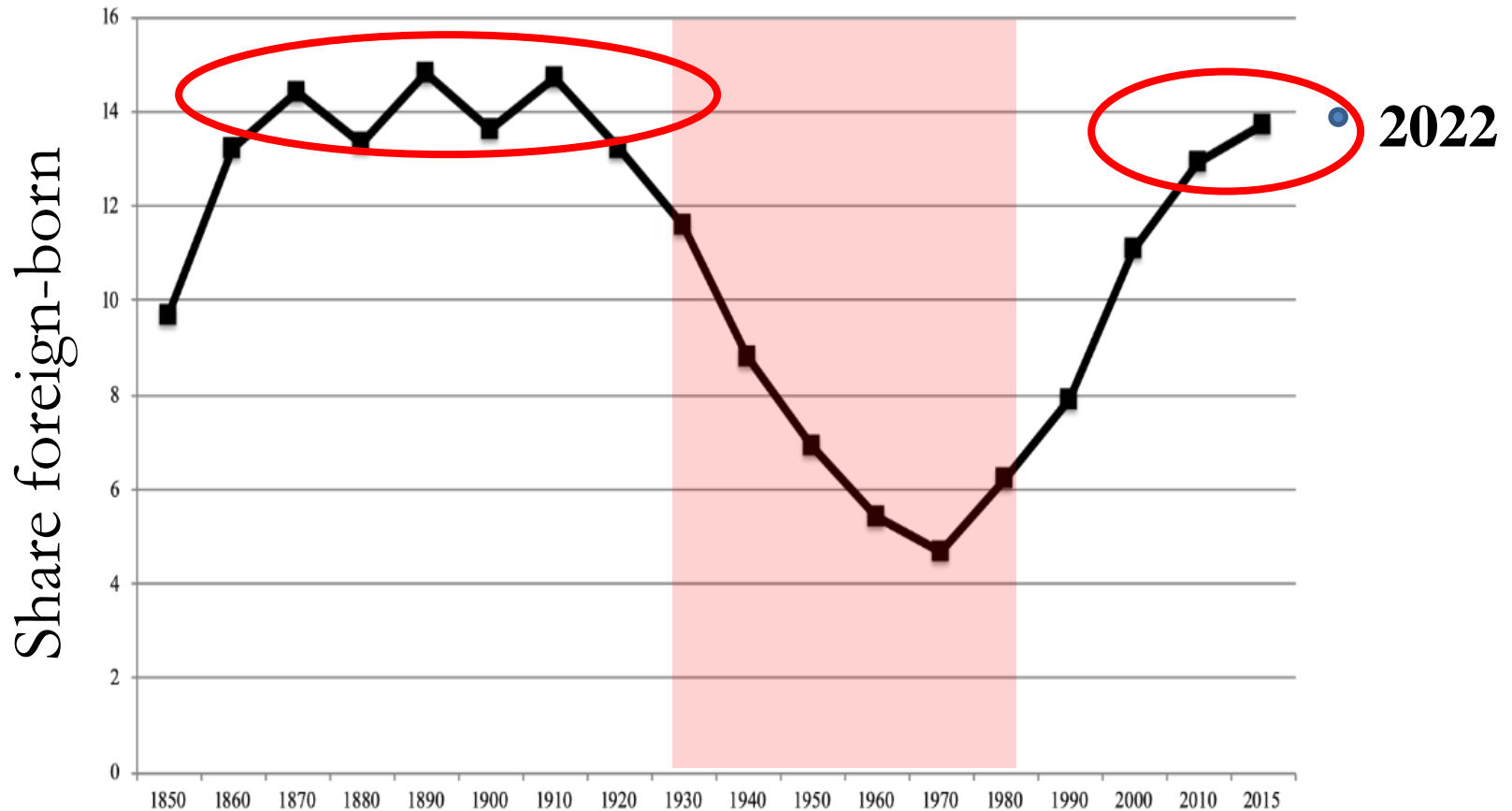
A booth at the 2013 RootsTech Family History and Technology Conference in March shows volunteers indexing in an effort to reach the goal of indexing 1 billion names. Photo by R. Scott Lloyd.

Volunteers digitized records

Link by first name, last name, age, state/country of birth

Working on extensions to consider spouse and parents' names, etc.

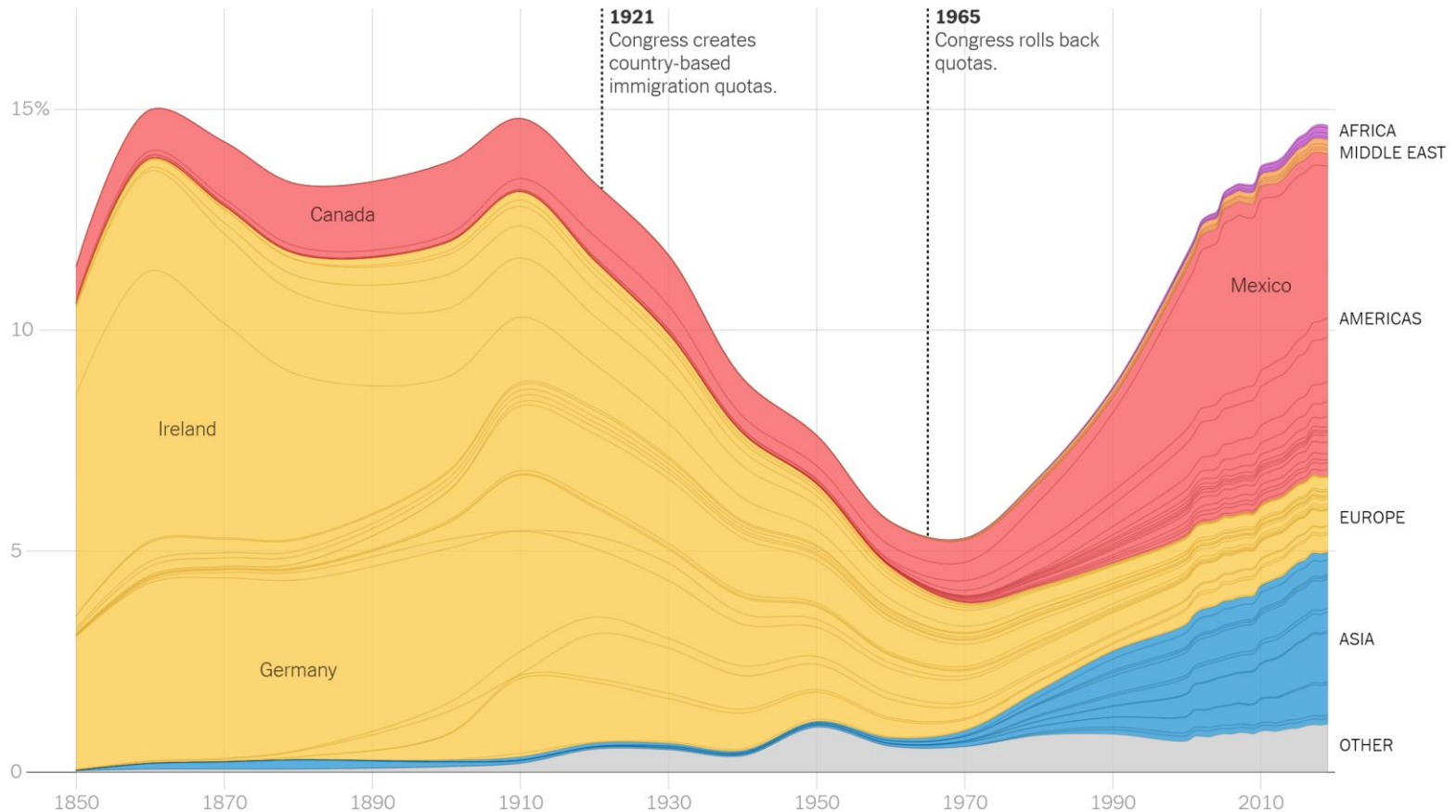
We are not in the midst of an unprecedented flood of immigration



Source: Abramitzky/Boustan, *JEL* (2017)

Europeans in the past, diverse immigrant backgrounds today

Share of the U.S. population that was born abroad



Sources: Ran Abramitzky, Leah Boustan

Immigrant families are not stuck in a permanent underclass

- What happens to children of immigrants vs. US-born raised in households with similar income?
- Focus today on the 25th percentile
- Use linked Census data for past and tax records for present (from Opportunity Insights at Harvard)

Immigrant Sons Have Higher Economic Mobility Today, Too

Second-generation immigrant sons raised in poor families have attained higher adult incomes than poor boys with native-born fathers, continuing the historical pattern.

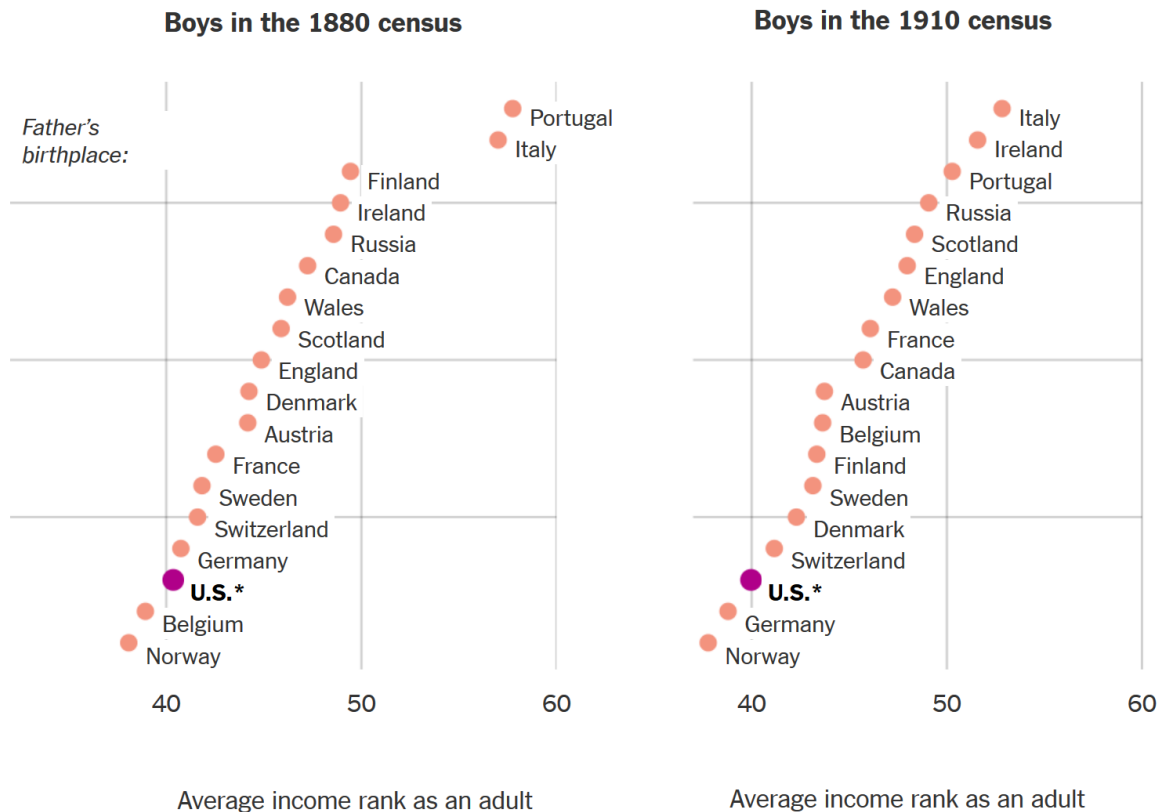


Daughters

Sons of Immigrants Climb Higher on the Economic Ladder

The average boy raised at the 25th percentile goes on to earn more than his parents. But the

THE UPSHOT | Children of Poor Immigrants Rise, Regardless of Where They Come From



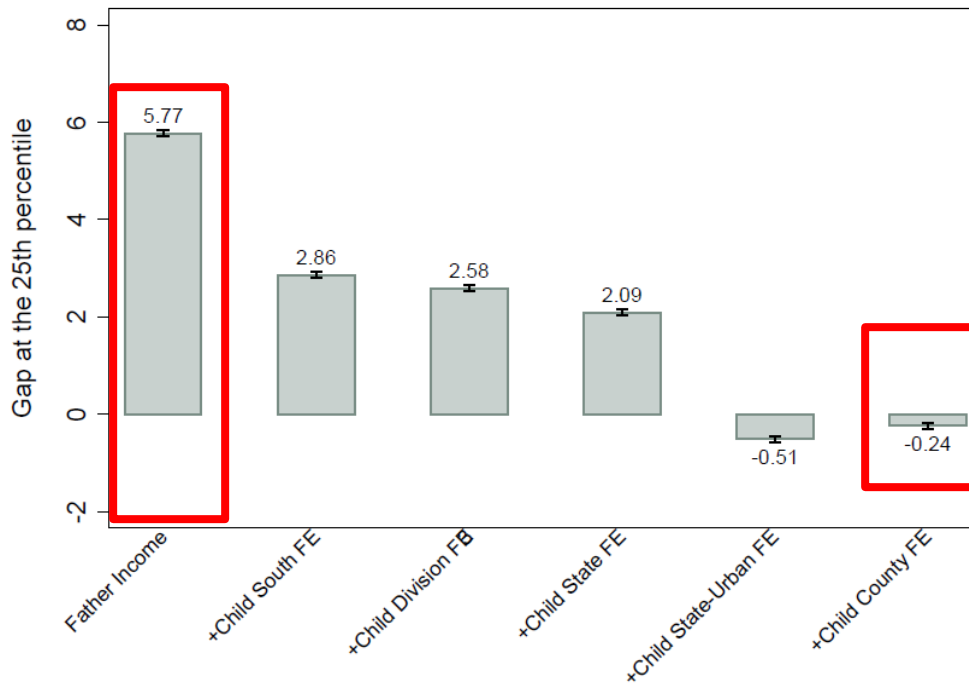
* U.S. data compares only white boys. Adult income ranks are estimated using occupation and demographic data in later census years.

Source: Analysis of Census data by Ran Abramitzky, Leah Boustan, Elisa Jácome and Santiago Pérez

How did children of immigrants catch up?

One important factor: Immigrant parents are more likely than US-born to move to areas that offer upward mobility

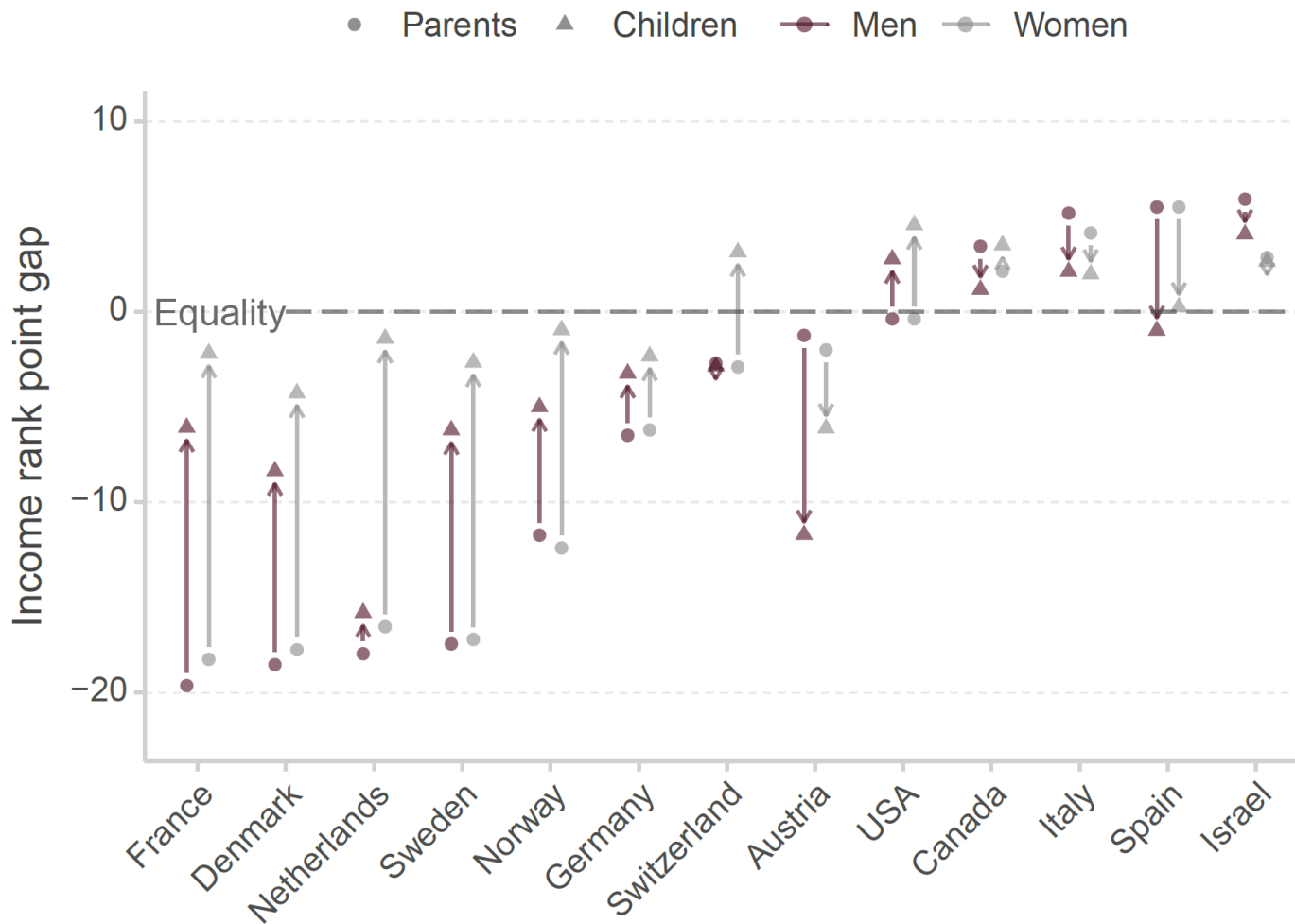
(b) 1910–1940 Cohort



Does destination country matter?

- Is upward mobility slower in Europe? If so, why?
- Boustan, Jensen, et al. 2025 with 37 co-authors
- Substantial cross-country difference in income of immigrant *households* – but children of immigrants move up everywhere, daughters faster than sons

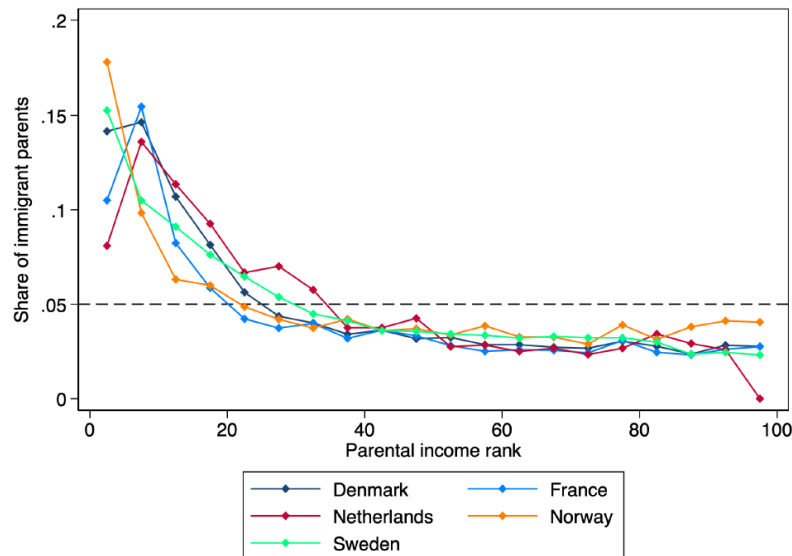
Figure 1: Income rank gaps between immigrants and the local-born, first generation (parents) and second generation (children)



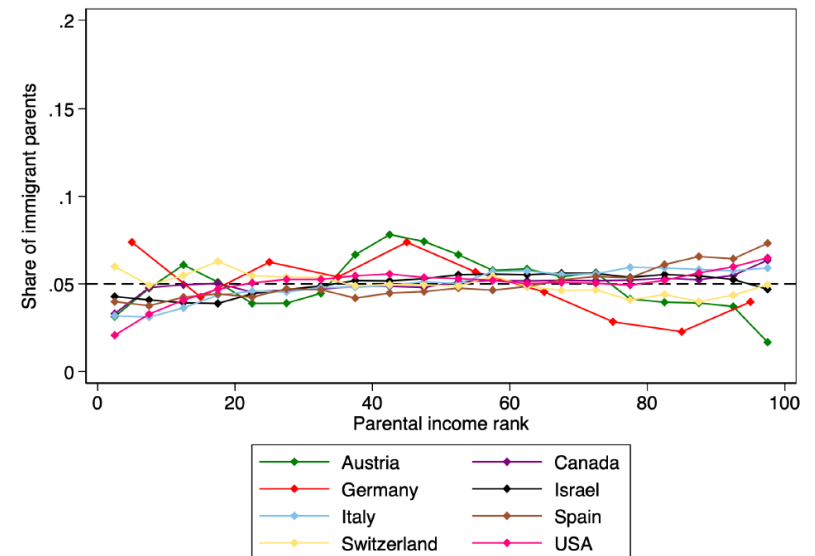
Let's focus on case of France – 2-7 rank point gap for children of immigrants... WHY?

(1) Children of immigrants raised in low-income households

(a) Over-representation in lower ventiles

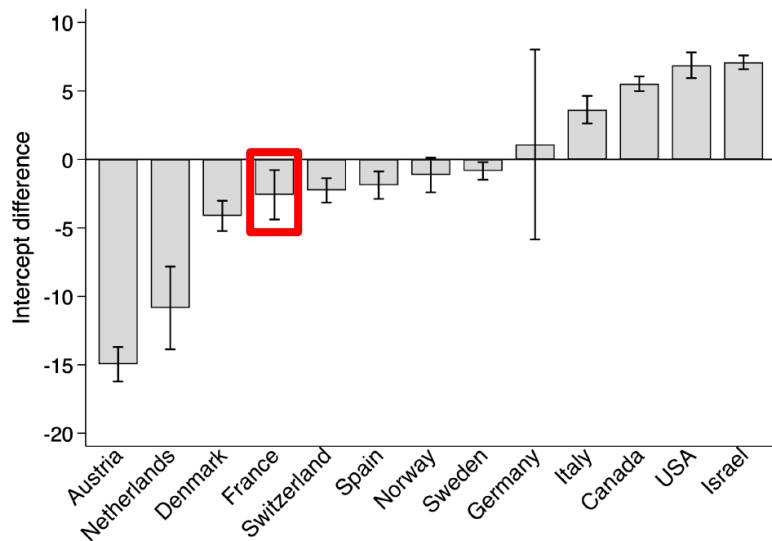


(b) Near equally distributed

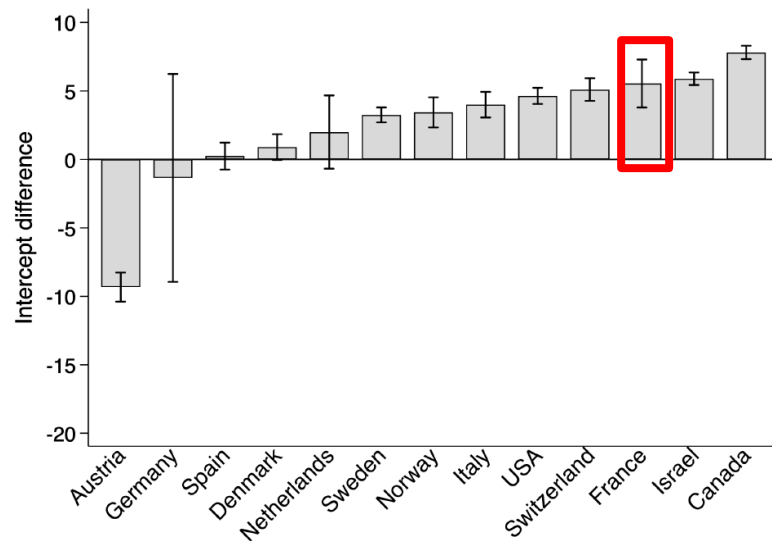


(2) Controlling for parental income: low income for sons and high income for daughters

(a) Absolute mobility, sons (higher for immigrants = above zero)



(b) Absolute mobility, daughters (higher for immigrants = above zero)



Why have attitudes toward immigration polarized in the US?

- We classified speeches in the Congressional Record on two dimensions: immigration related (yes/no) and pro-neutral-anti
- Started with a sample of 5,000 speeches classified by hand and then scaled up with large language model
- Card, et al. PNAS 2022

Polarization begins by 1980s and complete by 2016 (conditional on 20+ speeches)

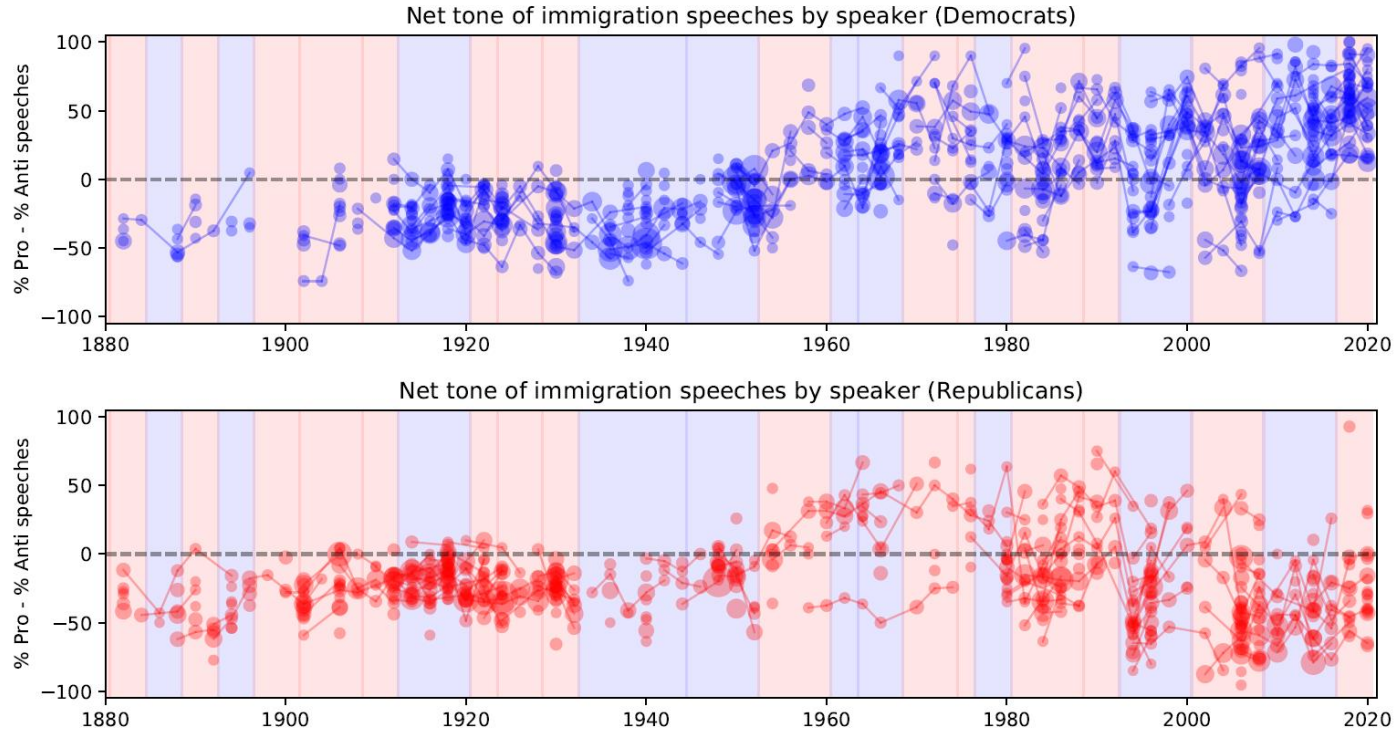
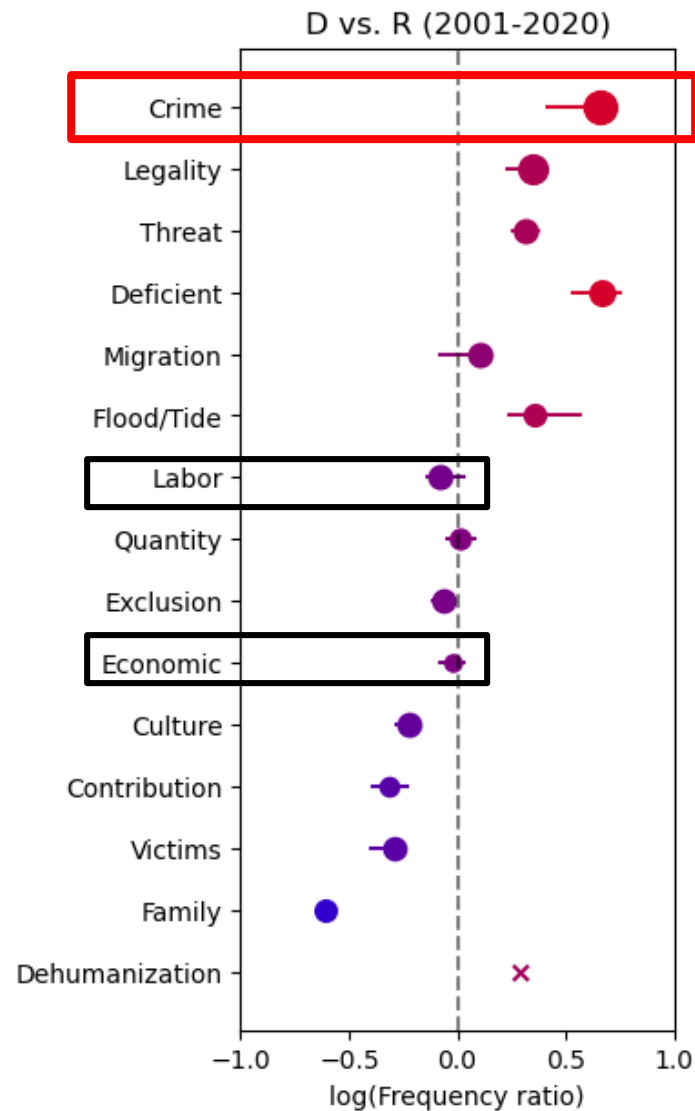


Fig. S10. Tone of immigration speeches by speaker. Each dot shows the net tone of immigration speeches by a speaker for a single session of congress in which they have at least 20 such speeches, with size indicating the number, and lines connecting the dots for each speaker.

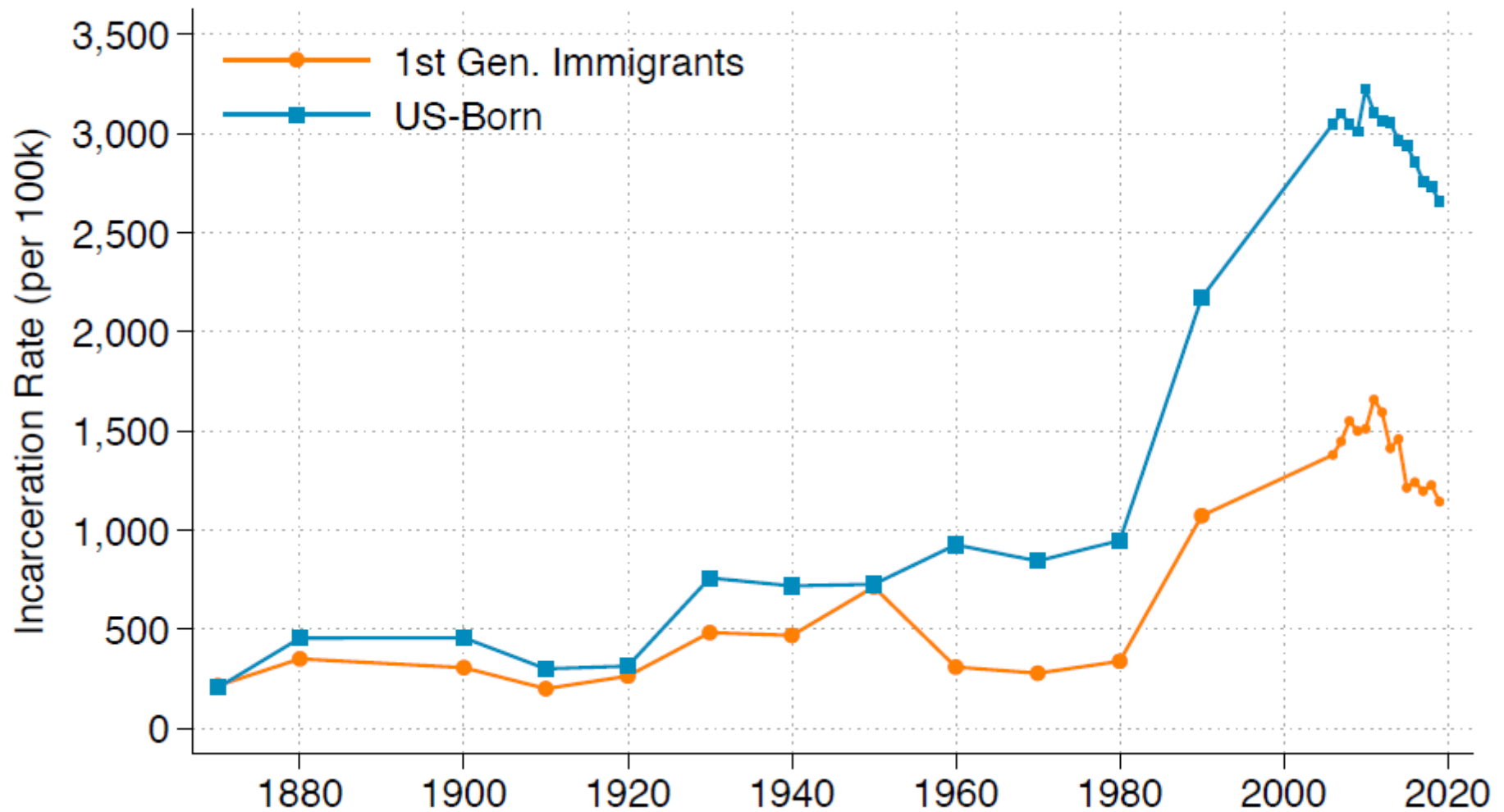
Partisan gap in topics for immigration speeches



New results on immigrant incarceration rates, 1870-2020

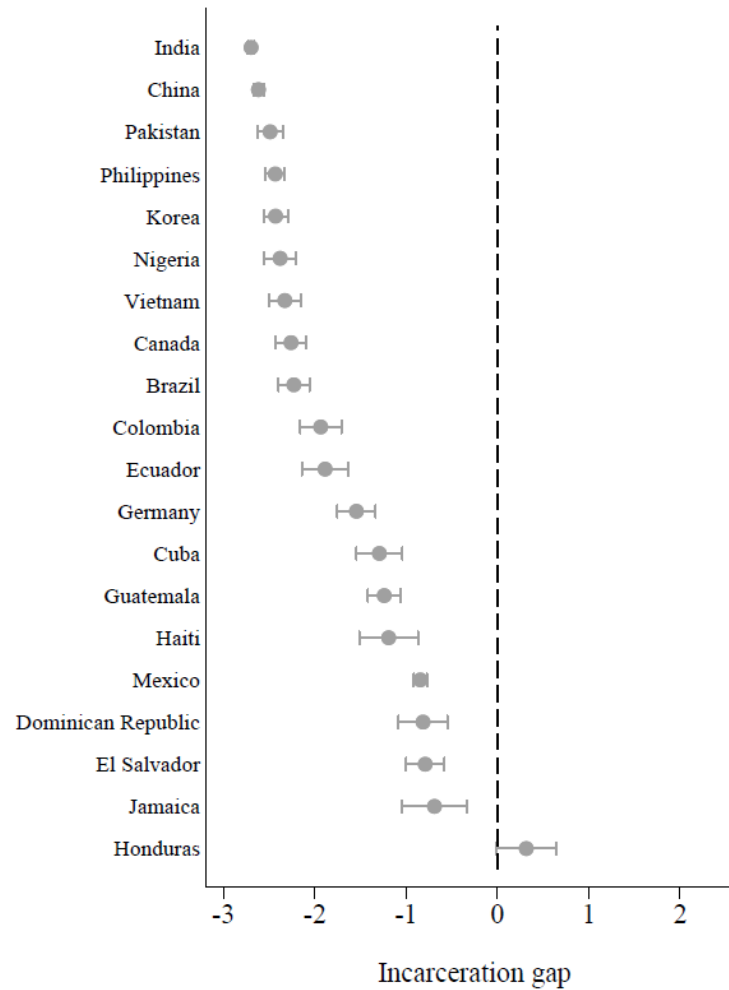
- First long-run series on incarceration comparing immigrants to US-born
- Census group quarters data on ‘correctional facilities’

Never been an era in US history when immigrants more likely to be incarcerated than US-born



True for all immigrant groups (Top 20 sending countries today)

(d) 2019

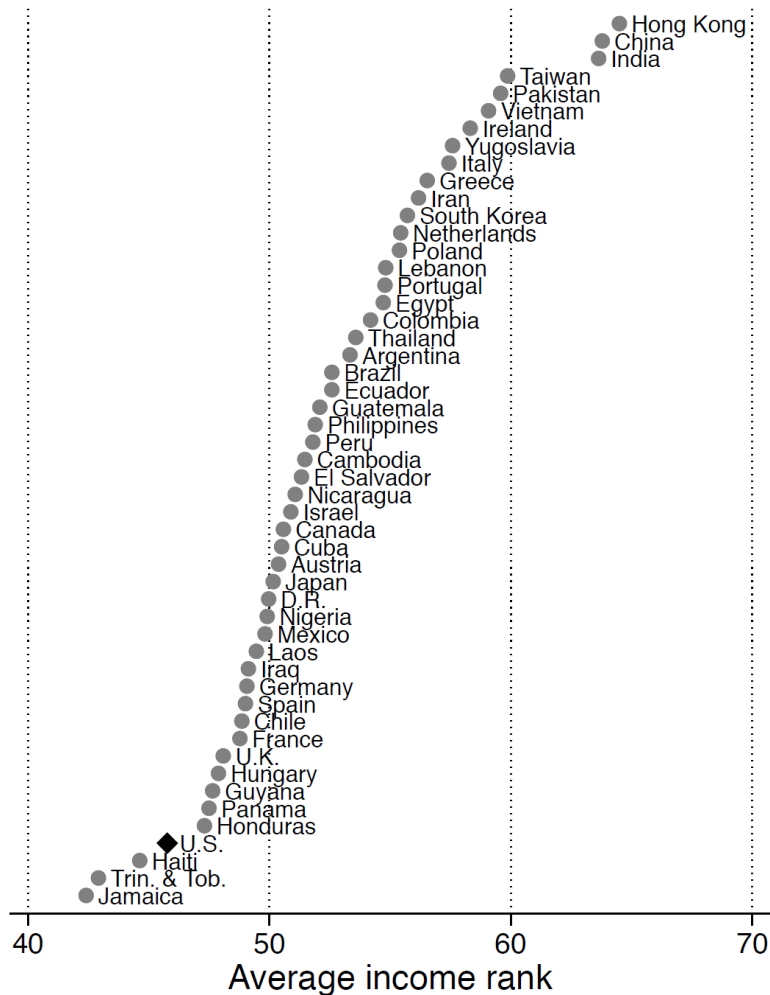


Immigration policy with a long view

- American Dream just as real now as it was 100 years ago but upward mobility takes time (2nd generation)
- This moment is first in US history with large number of pro-immigration politicians... but views are polarized
- Data and evidence might sway the middle? Fears about immigration and crime do not fit the facts

Children of poor immigrants: Sons vs. daughters [\[back\]](#)

(c) Opp. Insights: 1997–2015 Cohort, Sons



(d) Opp. Insights: 1997–2015 Cohort, Daughters

