

NATIONAL ORIGIN OF THE U.S. POPULATION (selected countries)	
ANCESTRY	POPULATION IN MILLIONS
German	46.4
Mexican	34.6
Irish	33.5
English	24.8
Italian	17.3
Polish	9.4
Scottish	5.4
Norwegian	4.4
Scotch-Irish	3.0

Source: U.S. Census Bureau – 2015 American Community Survey

Immigration and ‘Rathole’ Countries

by Richard W. Rahn

Many people in poor places try to migrate to richer places — and so it has always been. But some poor places become rich places and immigration flows change as a result. There are many examples of “rathole” countries changing policies and becoming rich, and relatively rich countries becoming ratholes as a result of corruption and/or socialism (e.g., Venezuela).

If a country has an open-border policy as did the U.S. before the 1880s, then large numbers of poor people migrate to the richer country, which, at some point, causes resentment for both good and bad reasons among the native-born population.

After the Spanish introduced the potato to Europe, which they discovered in Peru, a number of northern European countries began to grow massive amounts because it could provide more calories on a parcel of land than any other food. The Irish became the most dependent on the potato, which enabled their population to grow rapidly.

In the 1840s, a “blight” struck the potato crop, leading to widespread destitution and starvation. Millions fled the Emerald Isle, often indenturing themselves to pay for passage. Because so many Irish were poor and uneducated, they were negatively stereotyped as “pugnacious, drunken, semi-savages.” Multitudes of cartoons depicted the Irish as small, ugly, simian creatures armed with liquor.

But most Irish quickly assimilated into the broader American culture and became successful in a variety of endeavors, to the point that most Americans are proud of their Irish heritage. Meanwhile, Ireland changed, going from a country of more than eight million in the 1840s to a country of 4.7 million today, and, on average, it has a higher per capita income than America. More than 33 million Americans claim Irish heritage, which is seven times the present population of Ireland.

Because America was an English colony, speaks English, and largely adopted English legal and cultural institutions, many incorrectly assume that those with English ancestry are the largest nationality group in the U.S. Even though there was a steady flow of English immigrants to the U.S. during the 17th-20th centuries, things were never that bad in England to cause a huge wave of migration to America.

There are almost twice as many Americans who claim German ancestry than English. Germany (which was not yet a unified country until 1871 and was politically unstable) had a system of primogeniture, where the eldest son would inherit the family farm. Second, third, and so on sons would get nothing and faced a life of poverty.

The alternative was to acquire enough money to book passage to the U.S. and then “homestead” to acquire their own farm, which millions did from the late 18th to the 20th century. The Germans who arrived were, in general, not as poor as the Irish, were better educated, and most quickly assimilated into the American culture.

President Trump asked why the U.S. was not receiving more Norwegian immigrants. The answer is simple — because of oil wealth, the average Norwegian is now much richer than the average American. This was not always so. During the 19th century, Norway (and Sweden) were hit with a number of crop failures, and were poverty stricken.

By moving to the U.S., the Norwegians could gain title (by homesteading) to much more productive land. From 1825 to 1925 approximately one-third of the Norwegian

population moved to the U.S., a higher percentage than any country but Ireland.

The English had engaged in a series of conflicts with the Scots going back many centuries; the result was that many Scots fled to America. The English also had a policy of encouraging English and Scottish emigration to Northern Ireland, which ultimately resulted in larger numbers of them resettling in the U.S. — particularly in Appalachia and the American South, where they were known as the Scotch-Irish. (The term “redneck” became a shorthand to refer to farmers of Scottish and Irish ancestry who had settled in the sunny American South.)

There are now more Americans claiming Scottish ancestry than there are Scots in Scotland, and many more who claim to be Scotch-Irish than there are people in Northern Ireland.

Without some reasonable controls on the nation’s borders, the U.S. will always be overrun with more people than can be easily absorbed. The obvious solution is to move to a merit-based immigration system like those that have been adopted in Australia, Canada, etc., where the focus is on the individual and not on the country of origin.

The purpose of government is to protect person and property and ensure liberty. When it comes to immigration, this means bringing in people who will add to the general level of prosperity and civil society, and denying entry to those who are members of criminal gangs or are likely to be welfare charges. Few Americans would deny these statements — yet, too many in the swamp-dwelling political and media class are more interested in fomenting political discord than providing solutions.

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