

A Comparison of Family and Employment Immigrants and
Possible Implications of a Shift toward Skilled Immigration
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If the United States were to move toward a more employment-intensive immigration system, the representation of women in the immigration flow will likely decline, immigrants will be older, there will be less country diversity, and more immigrant families will come already formed, instead of forming them in the United States. These implications should be considered when discussing the merits of skilled immigration.

The balance between family-based and employment-based immigration is one of the most debated issues in immigration policy. It is deemed an important topic in the impending discussions on immigration reform as the country ponders the type of immigration policy that best fits the needs and the character of the United States. Proponents of employment-based immigration argue that U.S. immigration policy must be better attuned with the economic interests of the country. What would the immigration flow would like if the United States were to move toward a more employment-based immigration policy?

Legal immigration to the United States is mainly based on a family relationships, either as immediate relatives of US citizens or family preference. The Immigration and Nationality Act gave prominence to the family in allocating visas. Nationality quotas and race-based exclusions were eliminated in 1965.¹ No major revisions occurred related to skill-based immigration until the Immigration Act of 1990. This Act increased the number of skilled immigrants from 54,000 to 140,000 and established priorities within employment-based categories.² Currently, employment-based immigrants are a very small share of all immigrants granted legal permanent residence. Between fiscal years 2009 and 2011, only between 12 and 14 percent of all immigrants were awarded legal permanent residence under employment visas, and this share includes the family members of the petitioned worker. Various proposals have being discussed by the President, Congress, and observers of immigration to increase the number of skilled immigrants. Offering legal permanent residence to U.S. foreign graduates in the science fields, increasing the per country employment quotas above the current 7 percent, and a labor commission that will gauge skills scarcity and adjust employment-based visas accordingly are some of the proposals discussed in the last few months.

Empirical assessments of the desirability of employment versus family-based immigration are limited by the paucity of data on how immigrants were admitted to the United States. Most data with information on place of birth do not contain information about how the immigrant was admitted to the United States, making comparisons between family and employment immigrants difficult.

This brief tries to fill this knowledge gap by compiling published data from the Department of Homeland Security Office of Immigration Statistics from 2002 to 2011 on class of admission of persons awarded legal permanent residence by age, gender, occupation, country of origin and marital status. These data can create a picture of how recently admitted employment immigrants compare to family immigrants

and if these characteristics have changed across time. This information can inform discussions about the merits of increasing employment-based immigration.

THE FLOW

Someone born abroad, not in a U.S. territory nor of an American parent, can reside legally in the United States by obtaining a legal permanent visa, commonly referred to as a “green card.” There are different categories of green cards, some of which are numerically capped. Most immigrants awarded green cards come as immediate relatives of U.S. citizens, through family preference, and as employment immigrants. Other immigrants come as refugees or asylees, diversity immigrants, and a few other minor categories.

Family and employment immigration categories

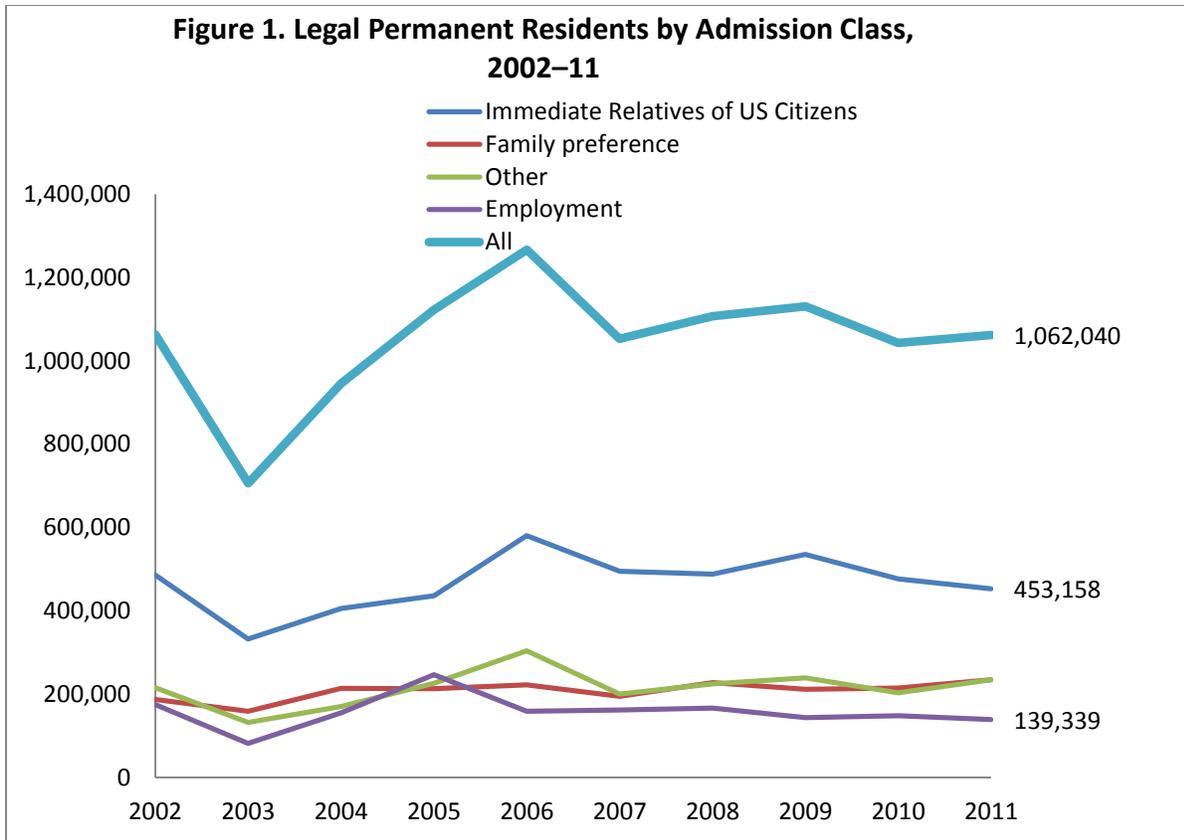
Immediate relatives: children under age 21, spouses, and parents of U.S. citizens.

Family preference: adult unmarried sons and daughters of U.S. citizens; children under age 21 and spouses of legal permanent residents; unmarried sons and daughters age 21 and older of legal permanent residents; married sons and daughters of U.S. citizens, along with their spouses and children; and siblings of U.S. citizens, along with their spouses and children.

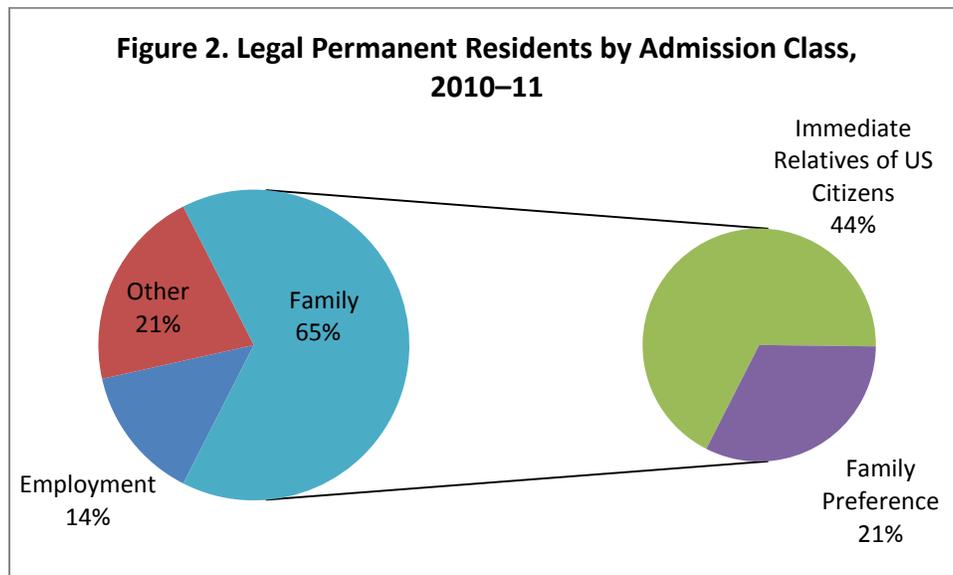
Employment: adults awarded green cards based on employers’ petitions for skilled workers or through the investors program, along with the investor or petitioned worker’s spouse and children.

Figure 1 shows the number of immigrants obtaining legal permanent residence by broad admission class. Most new immigrants (55 percent) were already living in the United States and obtained their green cards by adjusting their status. The number of immigrants dipped to 706,000 in fiscal year (FY) 2003. The decline could be attributed to a lower number of adjustments due primarily to new security requirements and shift of staff to other programs in the then newly created Department of Homeland Security.³ Since 2005, the number obtaining legal permanent residence has been over 1 million. The immediate relatives of U.S. citizens dominate the immigration flow; over 400,000 were admitted as legal permanent residents in FY 2011. Employment-based admissions are the smallest of the four categories shown in figure 1 (139,329 in FY 2011, including workers’ family members).

Figure 2 shows the share of 2010–11 legal permanent residents by admission class. Family immigrants (immediate relatives and family preference combined) accounted for 65 percent of the green cards awarded in those years. Employment immigrants (and their immediate family) were 14 percent of 2010–11 admissions.



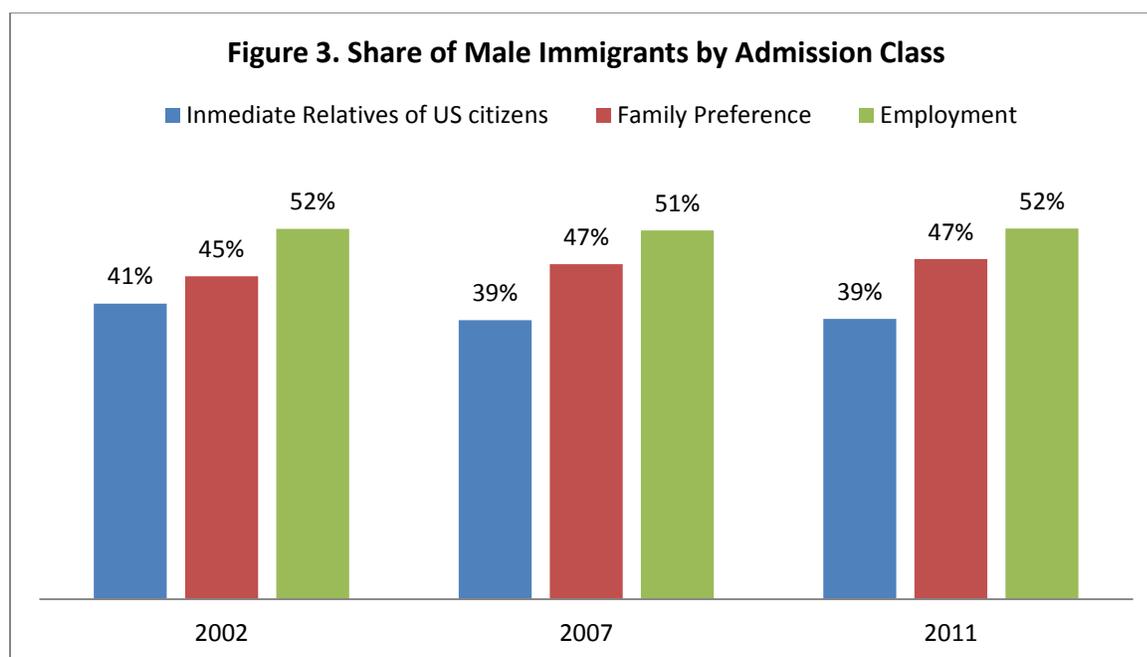
Source: Author tabulations based on data from the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics (various years).



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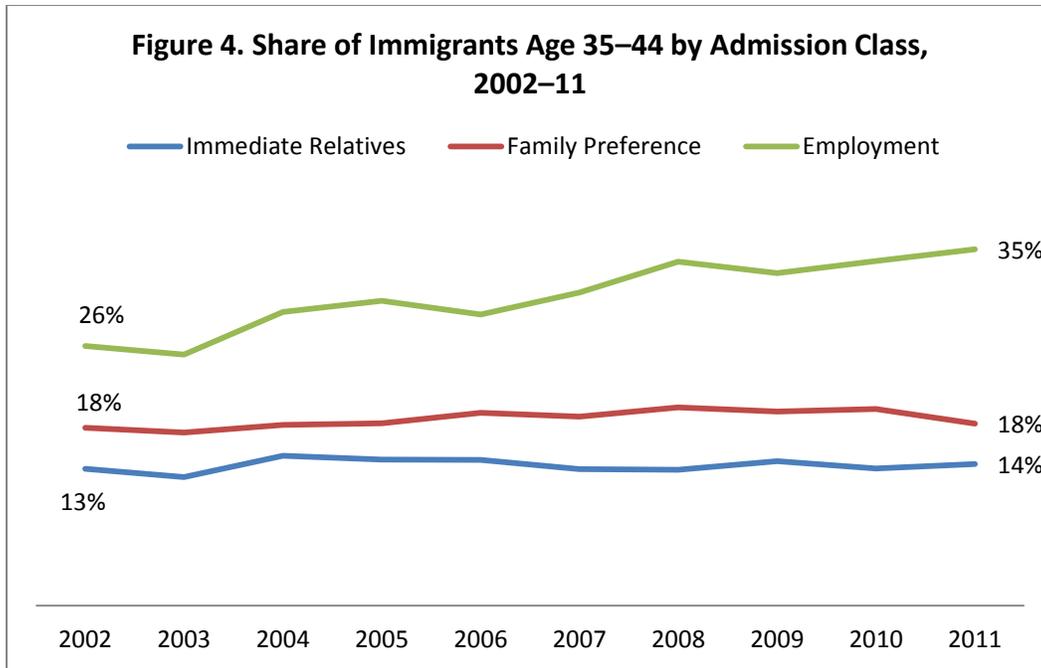
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Figure 3 shows the gender composition of the different admission categories. The category with the highest share of males is employment immigrants (52 percent). Only 39 percent of the immediate relatives of U.S. citizens are male. These percentages have remained stable over the past 10 years. The higher proportion of male employment immigrants is indicative of the gender dimension of employment migration. Even today, in many employment-immigrant-sending countries, women have limited access to higher education.⁴ In addition, their occupational choices are narrow with less women on the highly skilled jobs. Women may also be less able to link to U.S. employers to sponsor their admission. Increasing employment-based immigration will likely mean more immigrants will be male.

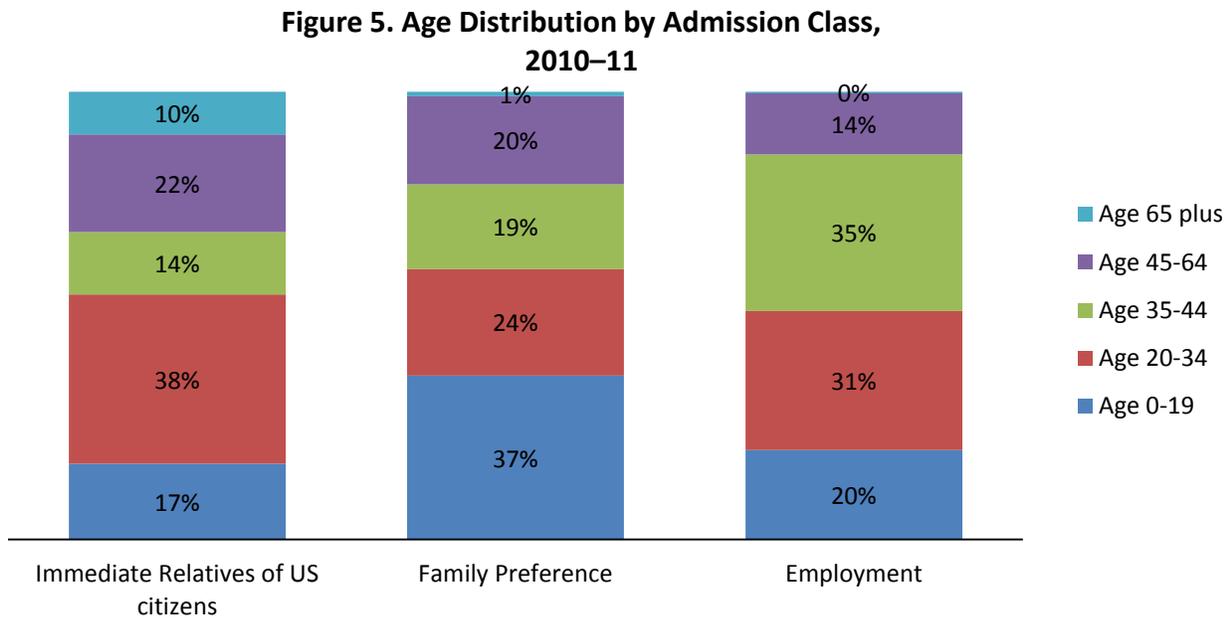


Source: Author tabulations based on data from the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics (various years).

Age at arrival to the United States is an important aspect in the economic integration of immigrants. Age at arrival relates to immigrants' language acquisition, school achievement, earnings growth, and even fiscal impacts. In 2011, 35 of employment immigrants were age 35 to 44, compared with 18 percent of family preference immigrants and 14 percent of immediate relatives (figure 4). The share of employment immigrants in this age group has been increasing over the past decade, while it has remained stable in the other two groups. Family preference immigrants tend to be the youngest admission class: 37 percent were 0 to 19 years old in 2010–11 (figure 5).

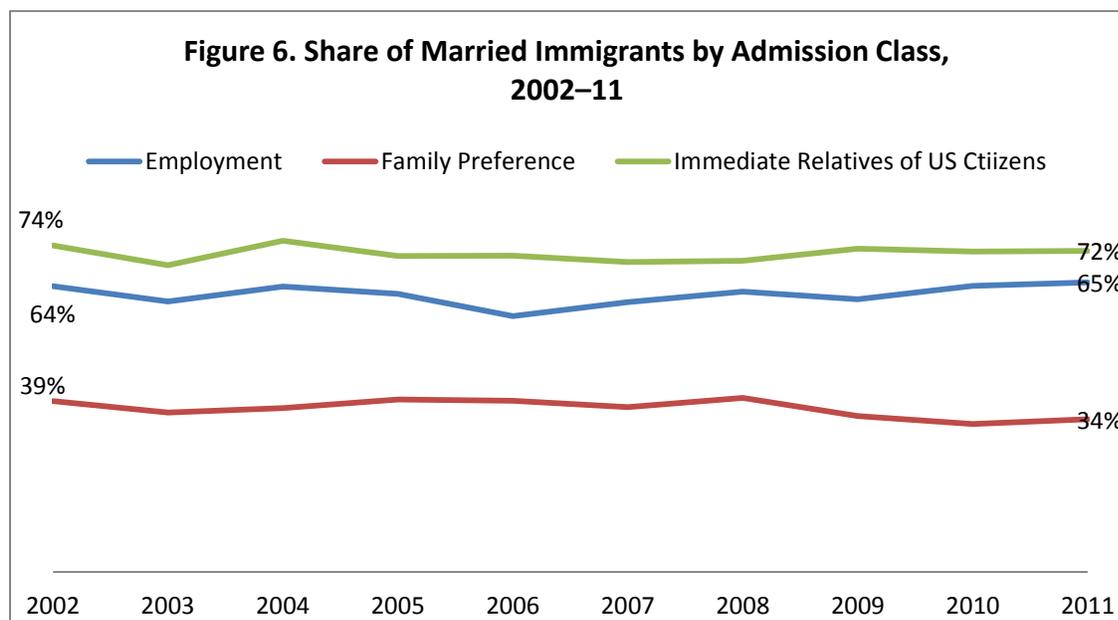


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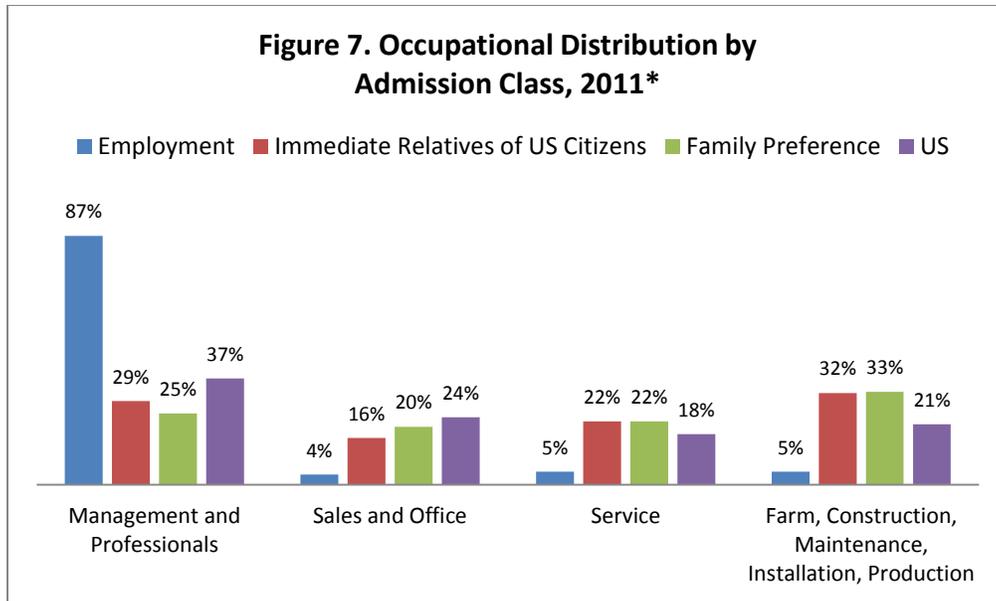
Marital status can also be used to compare immigrants by admission category. Marital assimilation has been a historically important aspect of immigrant integration⁵. Looking across admission classes, the married share is highest (72 percent) among immediate relatives of U.S. citizens (figure 6), partly by design; after all, this category is for spouses, children, and parents of U.S. citizens. Sixty-five percent of employment immigrants and 34 percent of the family preference were married when entering the United States. Since 2008, the share married has declined among family preference immigrants but increased or stayed the same among employment and immediate relative immigrants.



Source: Author tabulations based on data from the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics (various years).

OCCUPATIONS

The occupations of immigrants awarded legal permanent residence in 2011 are shown in figure 7. Since discussions about employment-based immigration are related to the needs of the U.S. labor market, this figure also shows the occupations of the U.S. population as a whole. These are the occupations reported at the moment of getting the green card. Not surprisingly, employment immigrants are much more likely to be in managerial and professional occupations than the other admission classes and the general U.S. population. Family and immediate relative immigrants produce a higher share of service, farm, construction, and maintenance workers than the U.S. population as a whole. Overall, family and relative immigrants produce more workers at the lower echelons of the occupational distribution than the general U.S. population. Compared to natives, fewer newly admitted seem to be entering sales and office occupations.



Source: Author tabulations by the author based on data from the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics (various years).

*Only persons who reported an occupation in are included in these figures.

SENDING COUNTRIES

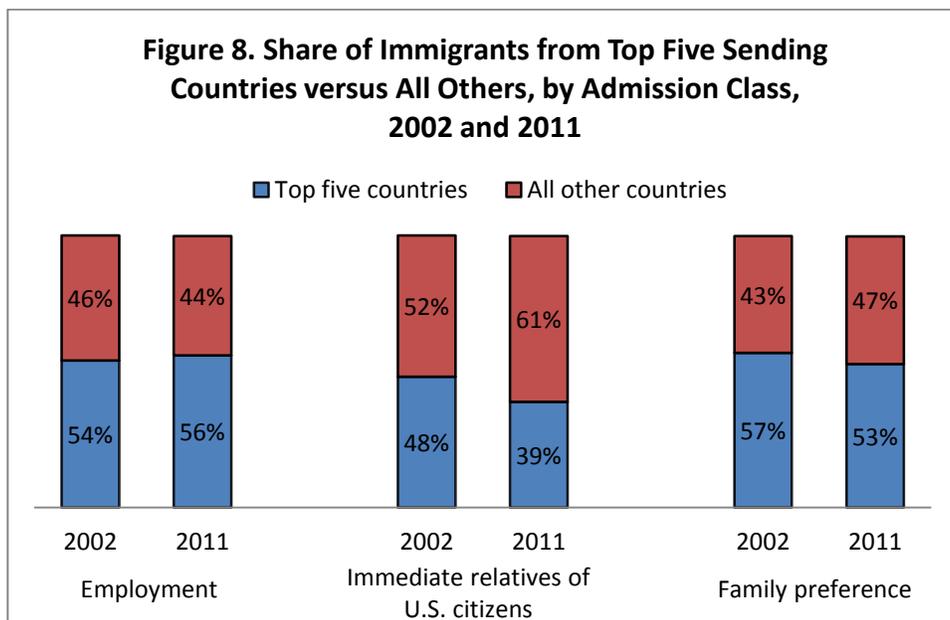
The ten countries that dominate each of the three major admission categories are listed in table 1. India, China, Mexico, and the Philippines are among the top countries in all three categories; in fact, the table contains only 18 different countries. Nevertheless, rankings vary by admission class: countries like Mexico and Dominican Republic, which send many immediate relatives and family immigrants, send few employment immigrants.

Diversity in country of origin and, consequently, in ethnicity can be gauged by the concentration of immigrants in the top five sending countries (figure 8). Employment immigrants are the most concentrated and hence the least diverse; plus, their concentration has increased over the past decade. Fifty-six percent of all employment immigrants came from the top five sending countries in 2011, compared with 54 percent in 2002. The immediate relatives of U.S. citizens are the least concentrated by country of origin (39 percent), and their concentration in the top five countries has declined (from 48 percent in 2002). The concentration of family preference immigrants also has declined since 2002. Taken together, these figures indicate that family immigrants have become more ethnically diverse while the country diversity of employment immigrants has declined.

Table 1. Top Ten Sending Countries by Class of Admission

		Immediate Relatives of US			
Employment		Citizens		Family Preference	
All countries	139,339	All countries	453,158	All countries	234,931
India	31,911	Mexico	83,945	Mexico	43,567
China	15,949	Philippines	28,160	Dominican Republic	24,546
Korea, South	12,184	China	23,812	Philippines	19,947
Mexico	9,196	Dominican Republic	21,004	Vietnam	19,156
Canada	8,899	India	19,838	China	17,061
Philippines	7,008	Colombia	13,821	India	12,840
United Kingdom	5,268	Jamaica	12,661	El Salvador	8,113
Brazil	2,385	Vietnam	12,404	Haiti	8,030
Pakistan	2,302	Haiti	10,851	Bangladesh	7,766
Japan	2,202	Peru	8,676	Jamaica	5,922

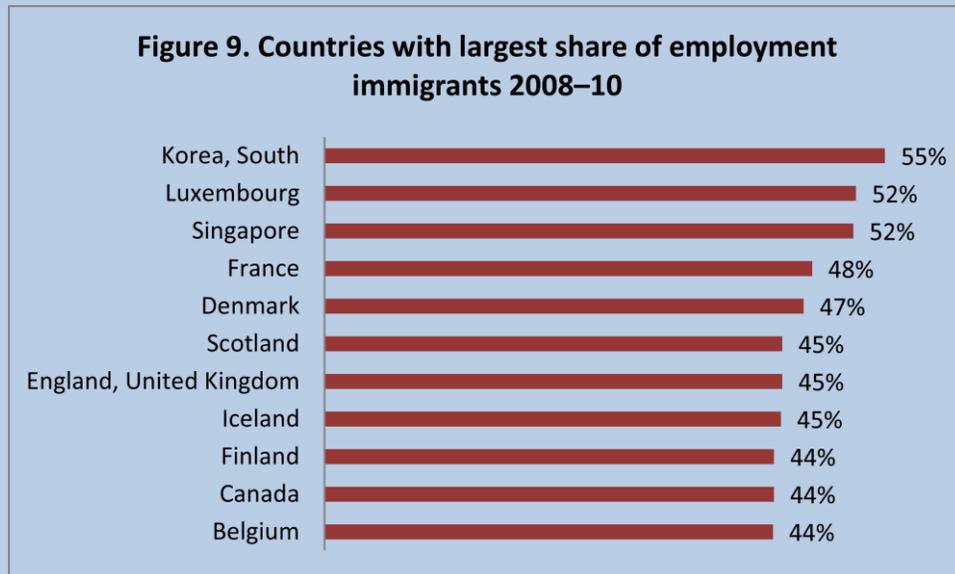
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What countries have the highest share of employment immigrants?

The countries that send the most employment immigrants to the United States are not the same countries whose immigrants are most likely to come through employment. Figure 9 shows the countries with the largest share of employment immigrants among those awarded green cards. Over half of all immigrants that were awarded legal permanent residence between 2008 and 2010 from South Korea, Luxembourg, and Singapore were employment immigrants. All countries in figure 9 except three (South Korea, Singapore, and Canada) are from Europe.



IMPLICATIONS

Discussions about the merits of increasing skilled or employment-based immigration must bring into the picture how such a change could affect the characteristics of the immigration flow. The size of these changes cannot be ascertained without specific proposals. This brief discusses a few dimensions along which the characteristics of the immigration flow could change with more employment-based immigrants.

The most obvious way in which the characteristics of the immigration flow could be affected is on the occupational profiles of immigrants. More employment-based immigrants mean more workers in the professional occupations. But there are other implications as well. A shift toward employment visas could mean that more families will come already formed rather than being formed in the United States. Newcomers will arrive to the United States at older ages. These changes could have implications for the integration trajectory of immigrants. Increasing employment-based visas also has exclusionary overtones. Immigration policy is by necessity exclusionary: it decides who comes in and who is kept out. However, certain limitations were rejected when changes to the Immigration and Naturalization Act

eliminated racial and country quotas in 1965. Women would be disparately affected as employment immigrants tend to be men. Ethnic diversity could also be impacted, concentrating the immigration flow in a few sending countries.

NOTES

¹ The 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act already had provisions for family-based immigration, but it also affirmed the nationality quotas. The 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act also eliminated the Asian exclusions in favor of very limited numerical quotas for immigrants from Asian countries. See “Milestones, 1945–1952: Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952,” Department of State, Office of the Historian, <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/ImmigrationAct>.

² “Immigration Act of 1990,” Encyclopedia of Immigration, published February 14, 2012, <http://immigration-online.org/592-immigration-act-of-1990.html>.

³ See Deborah Meyers and Jennifer Yau, “U.S. Immigration Statistics in 2003,” Migration Policy Institute, November 2004, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USFocus/display.cfm?ID=263>.

⁴ The Asia-Pacific Human Development Report: Power, Voice and Rights A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific (2010), United Nations Development Programme Table 20, reports much lower gender-related development index for India, China, the Philipines than more more advance economies of Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

⁵ See Zhenchao, Q., and D. T. Lichter, “Measuring Marital Assimilation: Intermarriage among Natives and Immigrants,” *Social Science Research*, 30, no. 2 (2001): 289. doi:10.1006/ssre.2000.0699