The Foreign-Born Population by U.S. Region, 1850-2016

Paul Jacobs, Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau

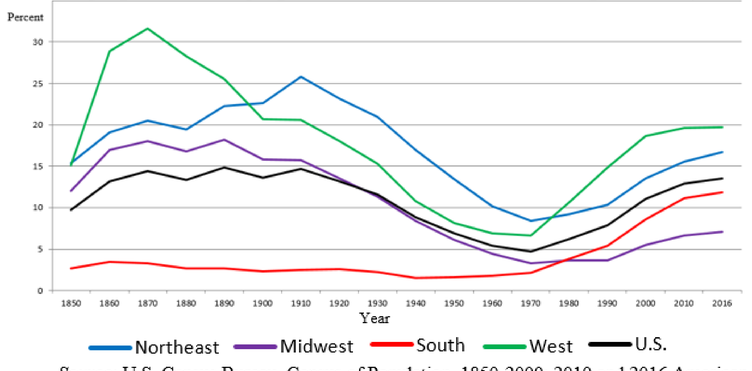
Presented at the Annual Southern Demographic Association of America. Durham, NC. October 10-12, 2018

Introduction

The foreign-born population of the United States has ebbed and flowed over the past 165 years. By 2016, 13.5 percent of the U.S. population was foreign-born, a level that rivaled historic highs. But what has changed considerably over time is who the foreign-born are and how much they have dispersed across regions of the country, according to U.S. Census Bureau research.

For example, the share who were foreign-born declined across all regions in the decades after the 1920 Census. Policies restricting the inflow and permanent settlement of foreign born as well as the Great Depression were major factors. However, after the 1965 Immigration Act made entry into the U.S. more accessible, there has been a rise in the number of foreign-born in the United States, driven by newcomers from Latin America and Asia.

Figure 1. Percent of Region's Population that is Foreign-Born: 1850-2016
(Data for 2010 and 2016 based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, non-sampling error, and definitions, see *www.census.gov/acs/www*)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population, 1850-2000; 2010 and 2016 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.

As a result, the percentage of foreign-born residents has increased in all four U.S. regions. Until 1980, the percent of residents in the South who were born in another country was well below that of other regions and the national average. By 2016, the percent of residents in the South who were foreign born was higher than in the Midwest.

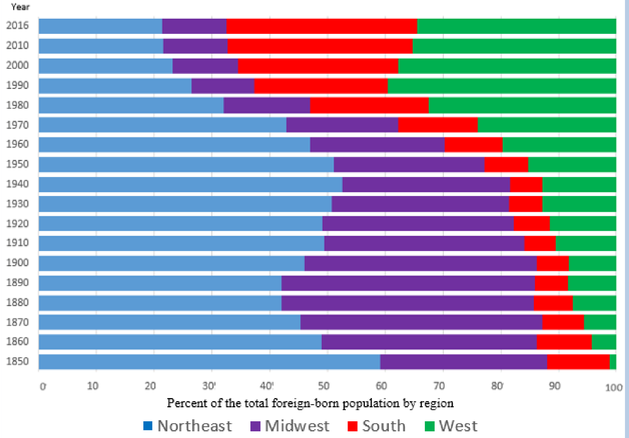
Throughout all years, the West has had either the highest or the second highest percentage of residents hailing from another country.

Historically in Northeast, Midwest

As shown below in Figure 2, the share of all foreign born living in the United States was historically concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest regions. Until 1940, over 80 percent of all foreign born in the U.S. resided in either of the two regions.

The foreign-born population eventually followed the rest of the U.S. population, expanding to the South and West. By 2016, more than two-thirds of the foreign born resided in the South or West. The share of foreign born living in the South has increased over time, while the share of foreign born living in the West increased for decades until peaking in 1990.

Figure 2. Share of Foreign-Born Population by Region of Residence: 1850-2016
(Data for 2010 and 2016 based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see *www.census.gov/acs/www*)



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While they are a greater share in all regions (Figure 1), the distribution of the foreign-born population has increased in the South and West, mirroring a similar pattern for the overall population (Figure 2). The relatively small share of foreign born residing in the West and the relatively high percentage of residents in the West being foreign born (as shown in Figure 1)is due to the region's small population during the early periods of analysis.

States With High Share of Foreign Born

The evolving geographic pattern of foreign-born settlement can also be seen at the state level. Table 1 shows that the top five states with the highest percent of foreign-born residents has shifted over time. States that frequently have the highest share of residents who are foreign born are New York (13 times), New Jersey (10 times), and California (9 times). Other states only made the top five list for a short period of time.

Table 1: Top Five States by Share Foreign Born, 1850-2016
(Data for 2010 and 2016 based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see *www.census.gov/acs/www*)

		State Rank									
Year	Foreign Born (U.S.)	1		2		3		4		5	
2016	13.5%	California	27.2%	New York	23.0%	New Jersey	22.5%	Florida	20.6%	Nevada	20.0%
2010	12.9%	California	27.2%	New York	22.2%	New Jersey	21.0%	Florida	19.4%	Nevada*	18.8%
2000	11.1%	California	26.2%	New York	20.4%	Hawaii	17.5%	New Jersey	17.5%	Florida	16.7%
1990	7.9%	California	21.7%	New York	15.9%	Hawaii	14.7%	Florida	12.9%	New Jersey	12.5%
1980	6.2%	California	15.1%	Hawaii	14.2%	New York	13.6%	Florida	10.9%	New Jersey	10.3%
1970	4.7%	New York	11.6%	Hawaii	9.8%	New Jersey	8.9%	California	8.8%	Massachusetts	8.7%
1960	5.4%	New York	13.6%	Massachusetts	11.2%	Connecticut	10.9%	Hawaii	10.9%	New Jersey	10.1%
1950	6.9%	New York	17.4%	Massachusetts	15.4%	Connecticut	14.8%	Rhode Island	14.4%	New Jersey	13.2%
1940	8.8%	New York	21.6%	Massachusetts	19.9%	Rhode Island	19.5%	Connecticut	19.3%	New Jersey	16.8%
1930	11.6%	New York	25.9%	Massachusetts	25.1%	Rhode Island	25.0%	Connecticut	23.9%	New Jersey	21.0%
1920	13.2%	Rhode Island	29.0%	Massachusetts	28.3%	Connecticut	27.4%	New York	27.2%	Arizona	24.1%
1910	14.7%	Rhode Island	33.0%	Massachusetts	31.5%	New York	30.2%	Connecticut	29.6%	North Dakota	27.1%
1900	13.6%	North Dakota	35.4%	Rhode Island	31.4%	Massachusetts	30.2%	Minnesota	28.9%	Montana	27.6%
1890	14.8%	North Dakota	44.6%	Minnesota	35.9%	Montana	32.6%	Nevada	32.1%	Arizona	31.5%
1880	13.3%	Nevada	41.2%	Arizona	39.7%	Dakota	38.3%	Minnesota	34.3%	California	33.9%
1870	14.4%	Arizona	60.1%	Idaho	52.6%	Nevada	44.2%	Montana	38.7%	Wyoming	38.5%
1860	13.2%	California	38.6%	Dakota	36.7%	Wisconsin	35.7%	Minnesota	34.1%	Utah	31.7%
1850	9.7%	Wisconsin	36.2%	Minnesota	32.5%	California	23.5%	New York	21.2%	Utah	18.0%

Note: Data shown for 1860 and 1880 for "Dakota" are for the Dakota Territory and include North and South Dakota. South Dakota and North Dakota were formed from Dakota Territory and admitted as states in 1889.
Data from years 1950-2000 are based on sample data and are subject to survey error.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population, 1850-2000; 2010 and 2016 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.
*The percent foreign born in Hawaii is not statistically different from Nevada.

North Dakota made the list in 1890 and 1900. Florida, ranked fourth in 2016 in terms of the share of residents who are foreign born, first made an appearance on the list in 1980. Nevada is somewhat unique in that the Silver State was among the top five states in share of residents who are foreign born in the three censuses after joining the Union in 1864. It reemerged in 2010 as one of the top states.

The distribution of the foreign-born population at the state level continues to evolve, as the current top destination states receive a smaller share of new arrivals opening the possibility of newer states making the top five list.

Mix of Migrants Unique to Place and Time

Table 2 shows the top five countries of birth for the foreign born in 1910 and 2010. Regional variation in 1910 show that persons born in Germany were the largest group in each region except the Northeast, where immigrants from Russia, Italy, and Ireland were most numerous. Those born in England appeared in the top five groups of foreign born only in the West, while immigrants from Mexico appeared in the South but not in other U.S. regions.

Table 2: Top Five Countries of Birth for Foreign Born by Region, 1910 and 2010
(Data for 2010 based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see www.census.gov/acs/www)

Northeast

1910		2010	
Russia	1,086,195	Dom. Rep.	713,251
Italy	963,186	China	661,469
Ireland	950,192	India	512,923
Germany	825,200	Mexico	486,235
Canada	670,986	Jamaica	343,272

Midwest

1910		2010	
Germany	1,347,948	Mexico	1,335,978
Austria	433,743	India	328,428
Russia	393,675	China	230,110
Sweden	391,668	Poland	181,142
Canada	372,261	Philippines	159,216

South

1910		2010	
Germany	161,492	Mexico	3,904,373
Mexico	128,396	Cuba	918,423
Italy	78,144	India	510,771
Russia	71,401	El Salvador	497,722
Austria	50,579	Vietnam	384,355

West

1910		2010	
Germany	168,996	Mexico	5,984,517
Canada	134,916	Philippines	1,123,286
England	132,076	China	921,280
Italy	117,462	Vietnam	627,491
Sweden	106,806	El Salvador*	478,338

Note: Data for China includes Taiwan and Hong Kong.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1910 Census Vol. I., General Report and Analysis, Chapter 7 Country of Birth for the Foreign Born Population; American Community Survey, 2010.
*The number of foreign-born persons from Korea is not statistically different than from El Salvador.

The foreign-born population in each U.S. region continues to show diversity in 2010. For example, the foreign born from the Dominican Republic appear in the top five places of birth only in the Northeast, where they are the largest immigrant group. Cubans are among the top five foreign-born groups in the South, while the foreign born from Poland make the top five in the Midwest. A comparison of the top five immigrant groups living in each region in 1910 and 2010 shows that the composition of foreign born has changed drastically. No country of origin listed among the top five foreign-born groups in a given region in 1910 ranks among the top five countries of origin in *any* region in 2010, with the exception of Mexican-born in the South. How the origin of the foreign born changed over the course of a single century is due largely from different national policy, as well as the shifting conditions in countries of origin.

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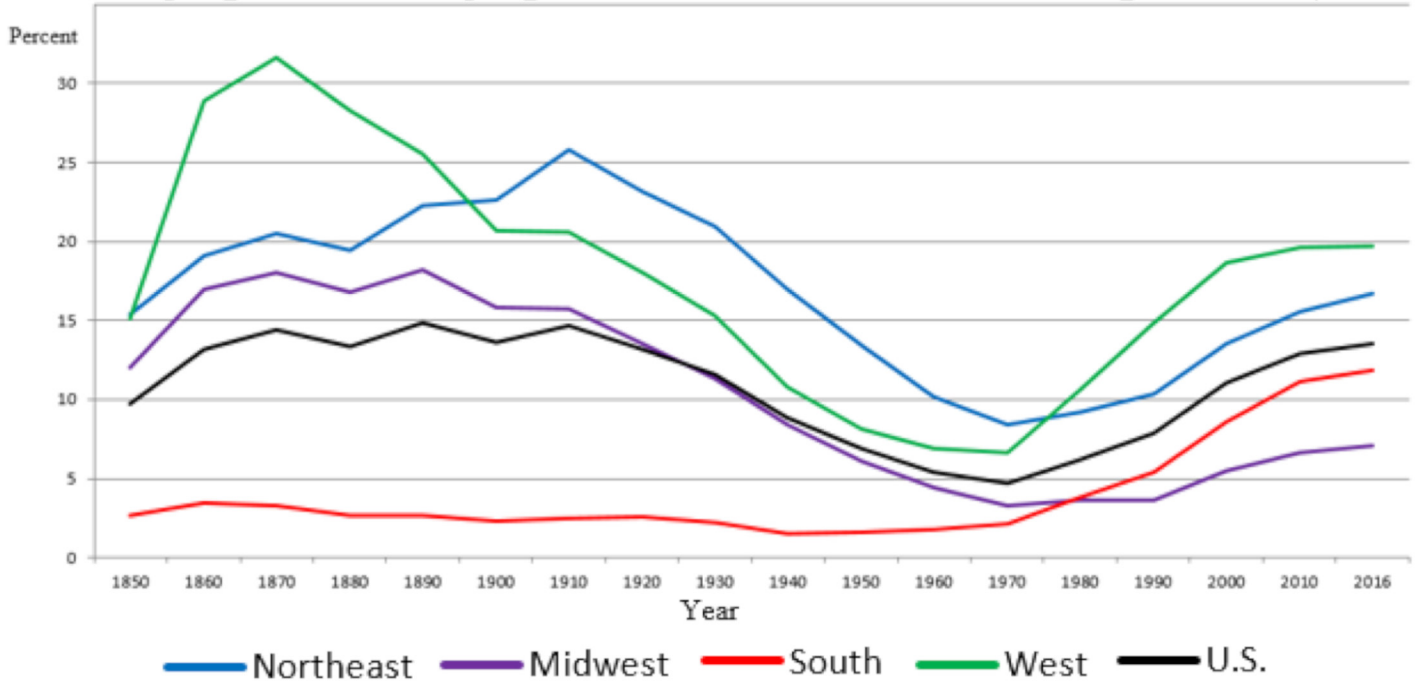

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The foreign-born population eventually followed the rest of the U.S. population, expanding to the South and West. By 2016, more than two-thirds of the foreign born resided in the South or West. The share of foreign born living in the South has increased over time, while the share of foreign born living in the West increased for decades until peaking in 1990.

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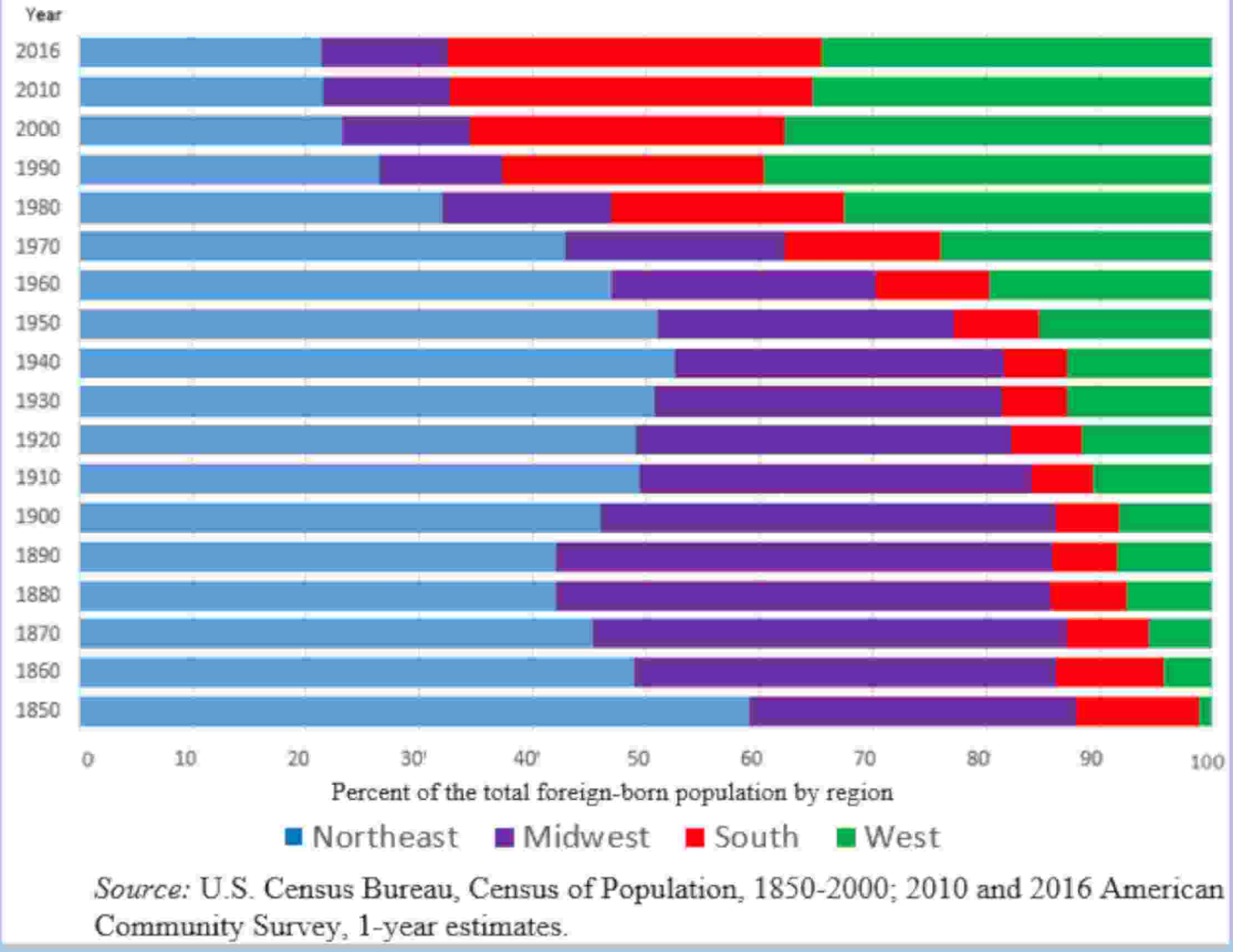

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