

Working Their Way Up?

US Immigrants' Changing Labor Market Assimilation in the Age of Mass Migration

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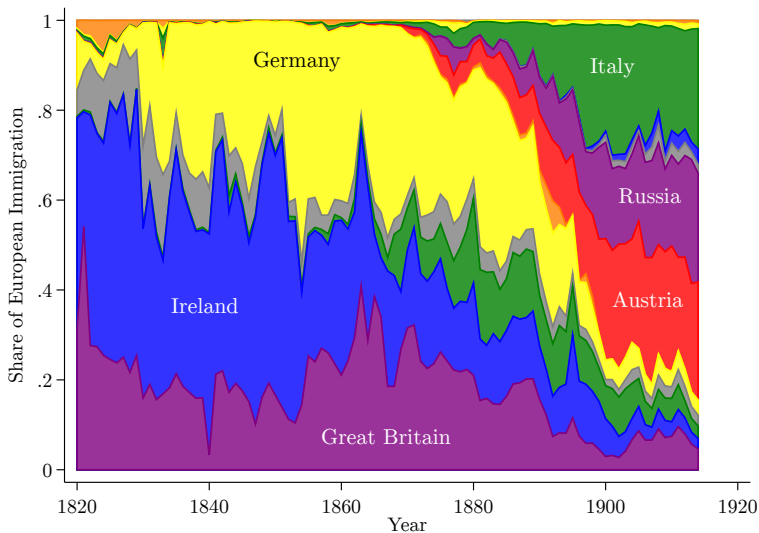
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The long reach of historical immigrants' experiences

All immigrants who can stand on their own two feet, be self-sufficient, pull themselves up by their bootstraps—again, as in the American tradition. My Italian-Irish heritage looks back at that. Most people in America look back at that. And that's what we expect going forward.

(Ken Cucinelli, August 13, 2019)

The long reach of historical immigrants' experiences



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Did immigrants “work their way up”?

- ▶ Economic assimilation during the Age of Mass Migration
 - ▶ Comparative view of entire Age of Mass Migration
 - ▶ Did assimilation patterns change over time?
 - ▶ Why did they change?

Data

- ▶ Symmetric 1850–1880 and 1900–1930 links
 - ▶ Non-southern white males
 - ▶ Aged 18-40 in initial year
 - ▶ Results robust to linkage method

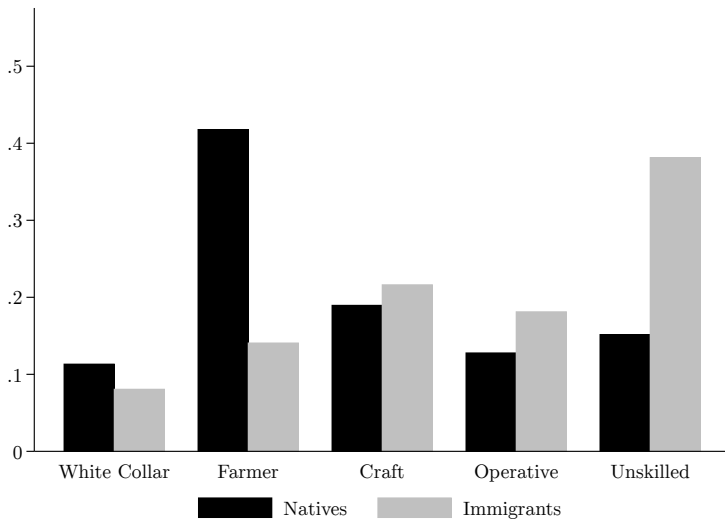
Data

- ▶ Symmetric 1850–1880 and 1900–1930 links
 - ▶ Non-southern white males
 - ▶ Aged 18-40 in initial year
 - ▶ Results robust to linkage method
- ▶ Focus on occupational status
 - ▶ Broad occupational categories (unskilled, farmer, etc.)
 - ▶ 1870- and 1900-based occupational rank

Unconditional Assimilation

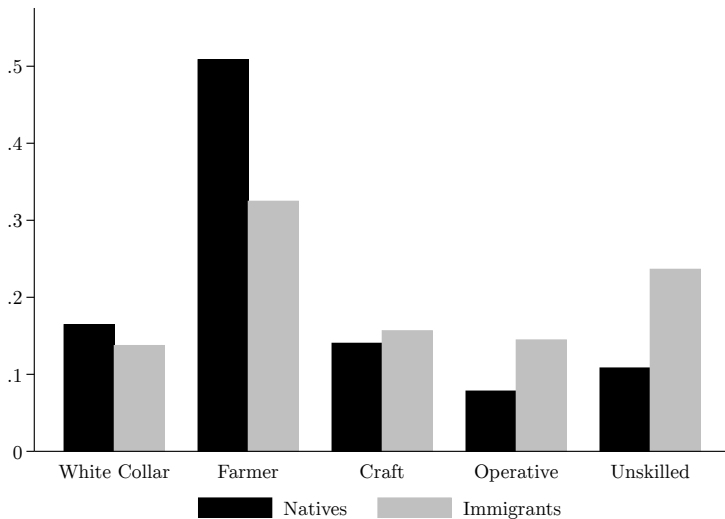
Unconditional Assimilation

1850



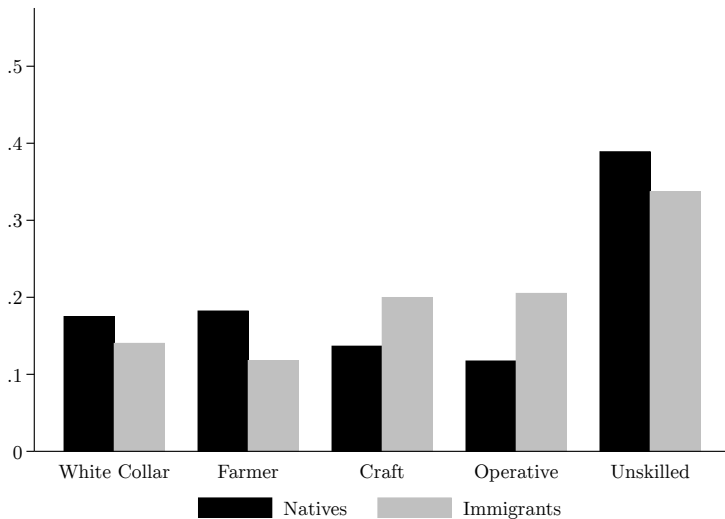
Unconditional Assimilation

1880



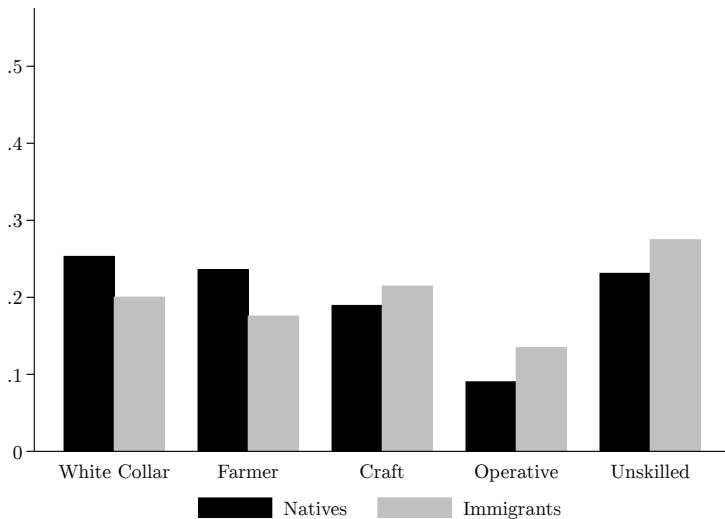
Unconditional Assimilation

1900



Unconditional Assimilation

1930



Unconditional Assimilation

<i>Variable</i>	1850–1880			1900–1930		
	(1) 1850	(2) 1880	(3) Diff.	(4) 1900	(5) 1930	(6) Diff.
Average Occ. Rank	−0.138 ^a (0.003)	−0.069 ^a (0.002)	0.069 ^a (0.002)	−0.015 ^a (0.002)	−0.035 ^a (0.002)	−0.020 ^a (0.002)

Unconditional Assimilation

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 - ▶ 19th c.: considerable catch up vs. natives
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 - ▶ Assimilation benchmark *does have* a historical basis
- ▶ Robustness
 - ▶ Second-generation natives
 - ▶ 20th-century recent arrivals (1890–1900)
 - ▶ Ages 18–30 only
 - ▶ Age-variant scores

Why did assimilation patterns change?

- ▶ Changing source countries?
 - ▶ Early 20th century perceptions of decreased assimilation
 - ▶ Major argument for immigration restriction
 - ▶ Attributed to changing source countries

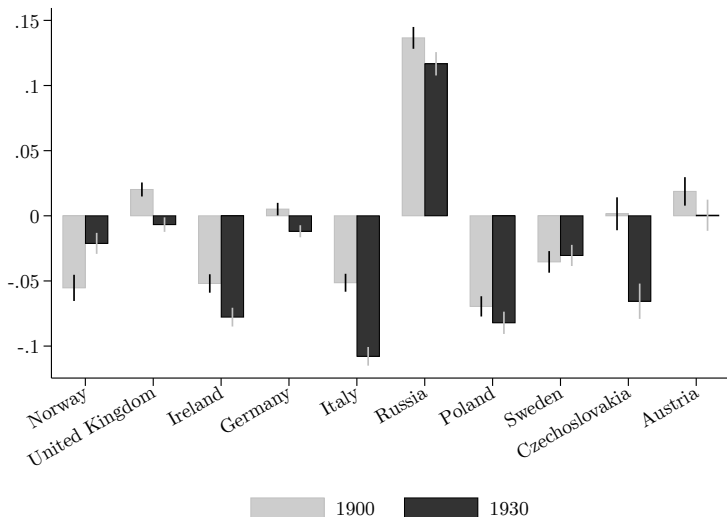
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1850–1880



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1900–1930

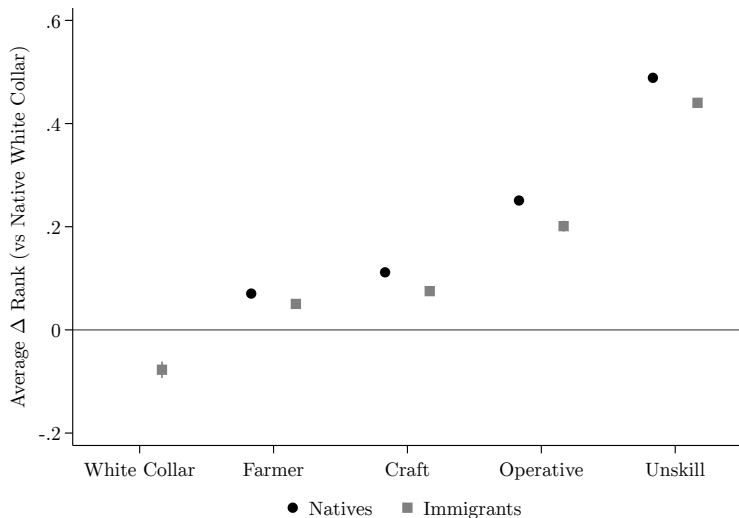


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- ▶ US structural transformation

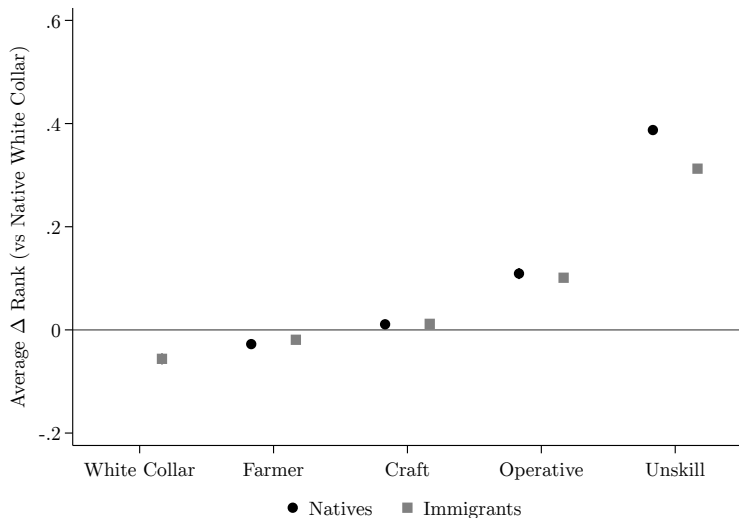
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- ▶ Main conclusions
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- ▶ Important given the weight of these immigrants' perceived experiences in modern immigration debates
- ▶ Main conclusions
 - ▶ Considerable assimilation in the 19th century
 - ▶ Little in the 20th century
 - ▶ Driven by structural transformation of US economy
- ▶ Historical benchmark is oversimplified
- ▶ Immigrants' upgrading a product of when they arrived