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As the crucial November elections approach, immigration has surged as a top voter priority. The latest Gallup Poll found it was cited as “the most important problem” by the highest share of Americans in over 40 years.¹ This mostly reflects growing anxieties among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, according to another major national survey. In just the past three years, the fraction on the right who prioritize immigration jumped by 18 percentage points.² Media reports of thousands crowding the U.S.-Mexico border and of busloads arriving daily in New York and other cities stoke public fears and political polarization. Many worry that today’s immigrant streams worsen joblessness, wage stagnation, tax burdens and crime rates facing native-born workers. In this brief article, I summarize what relevant economic research currently indicates about the validity of such concerns.

Jobs and Wages

Do new migrants worsen the job and earnings prospects of the native-born? For many – perhaps especially frustrated job seekers, as well as employed victims of pay paralysis – the answer may seem obvious. If there are a fixed number of job openings, then won’t more immigrant job applicants inevitably depress the


Foreign-born homeowners pay property taxes, as do renters whose landlords fold it into monthly charges. And immigrant workers hired by law-abiding employers pay income taxes as well. But recent legal migrants, like all the undocumented, cannot receive most state or federal benefits like Social Security. So much of their tax payments constitute a net gain to the public treasury.

Crime

Does increased immigration bring more crime? The latest public opinion polls suggest that Republican voters rank terrorism and crime fears far higher than respondents to their left, and often link these to immigration. Early this year, New York City Police Commissioner Edward Caban even claimed that: “A migrant crime wave is washing over our city.”

But the NYPD did not back up his claim with statistics. It is not unreasonable to predict that any sudden influx of 170,000 mostly poor individuals without jobs or permanent housing might generate some theft or other criminal behavior. But in fact, since migrant buses began arriving in April 2022, the city’s crime rate has remained relatively flat at an historically low level.¹³

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too-weak enforcement. The Biden administration took some 535 immigration-related actions in its first three years – more than any other presidency. These include creating a new border process to discourage irregular arrivals and narrow access to asylum, granting temporary protected status to qualified individuals fleeing Venezuela and a few other countries. But over that same period, some 2.3 million more migrants joined the legal limbo of slow-moving asylum applications and immigration court proceedings.¹⁵

Polls show very few Americans – Democratic or Republican – want “Open Borders.” But Congress has repeatedly failed to pass comprehensive immigration legislation for over three decades. So, how to fix the system and how many immigrants to welcome remain subject to fierce, time-consuming debate.

Nonetheless, a large body of research evidence challenges a common narrative about immigration’s alleged contributions to unemployment, low wages, taxes and crime. For all the short-term strains on New York and other cities trying to absorb newcomers,
